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Security Policy Options for Japan in Three Time Frameworks

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Abstract. This paper examines security policy options for Japan at the present stage that may be worth considering in the short term, the midterm, and the long term, respectively. Hence, the aim of the paper is to examine foreign policy security options for Japan in the foreseeable future. While providing a comprehensive overview of the Japanese foreign and security policy at the present stage, the article employs the case study methodological framework to analyze Japan's foreign policy objectives in case of Tokyo's relations with the most critical partners in the Asia-Pacific Region — namely, the United States, China, Russia, ASEAN, and Taiwan. Examining the origin and further development of the QUAD, the authors highlight the absence of ASEAN members and India's hesitation to institutionalize the grouping, while analyzing the Russia-Japan relations they focus on common interests in security cooperation, as well on its limitations. As a result, in the short term, the expansion of the Japan-US alliance to the Indo-Pacific region is the most plausible option. However, without involving the ASEAN countries, the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy can only add Australia and India to the existing Japan-US alliance. In the midterm, an alliance with Russia may be, with some serious limitations, geographically a natural option. In the long term, Japan might need to find a proper place in a China-centered order in East Asia. Therefore, the authors conclude that the relative decline of US influence in East Asia is unavoidable in the coming decades, Japan must adjust or even reconsider its security policy.

Keywords: Japan, China, Russia, US, Indo-Pacific, FOIP, Japan-Russia relations, QUAD

Authors' contribution:

Toyoda Tetsuya — The paper concept and Introduction and Conclusions, “Japan's Place in Pax Sinica” parts.

Vaseneva Ekaterina — The “The QUAD as a failure of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy” section and literature review.

Takahama Ryo — The “Russo-Japanese Alliance?” section, case study analysis and literature review.

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Потенциальная стратегия Японии по обеспечению национальной безопасности

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Аннотация. Исследуются стратегические опции политики в области обеспечения национальной безопасности Японии на современном этапе, которые целесообразно рассмотреть в краткосрочной, среднесрочной и долгосрочной перспективе соответственно. Цель исследования — анализ стратегических планов внешней и оборонной политики Японии в обозримом будущем. Всеобъемлющий обзор японской политики в области обеспечения безопасности на современном этапе опирается на сравнительные методы и case study для анализа внешнеполитических целей Японии в рамках отношений Токио с наиболее важными партнерами в Азиатско-Тихоокеанском регионе: США, Китаем, Россией, АСЕАН и Тайванем. Рассматривая возникновение и дальнейшее развитие Четырехстороннего оборонного формата (QUAD), авторы подчеркивают отсутствие в нем членов АСЕАН и нерешительность Индии в вопросе институционализации группировки. Анализ российско-японских отношений акцентирует внимание на общих интересах в сотрудничестве в сфере безопасности, а также на его ограничениях. По результатам анализа авторы приходят к выводу, что в краткосрочной перспективе расширение японо-американского альянса в Индо-Тихоокеанском регионе является наиболее вероятным вариантом. Однако без привлечения стран АСЕАН стратегия Свободного и открытого Индо-Тихоокеанского региона (FOIP) может лишь расширить участие Австралии и Индии в рамках существующего альянса Япония–США. В среднесрочной перспективе сотрудничество с Россией может быть, но с некоторыми серьезными ограничениями, географически естественным вариантом. В долгосрочной перспективе Японии, возможно, придется столкнуться с вызовом поиска места в китаецетричном международном порядке в Восточной Азии. Авторы делают вывод о неизбежности относительного снижения влияния США в Восточной Азии в ближайшие десятилетия, в связи с чем Япония должна скорректировать или даже пересмотреть свою политику безопасности.

Ключевые слова: Япония, Китай, Россия, США, Индо-Тихоокеанский океан, QUAD, японо-российские отношения

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Introduction

China's tremendous economic rise since the 1990s has profoundly changed international relations in East Asia. China's GDP, which was only 11 % of Japan's GDP in 1989, has become 281 % of the same in 2019 [1]. With its abundant financial and human resources, the Chinese government is building up a formidable arsenal to “resolutely safeguard its national sovereignty and territorial integrity” with the understanding that “the South China Sea islands and Diaoyu Islands are inalienable parts of the Chinese territory” [2]. The Chinese government has already taken assertive actions in the South China Sea starting with the forcible takeover of Scarborough Shoal in 2012 and the recent construction of military bases on the Spratly islands [3]. In June 2021, the members of G7 declared that they “remain seriously concerned about the situation in the East and South China Seas and strongly oppose any unilateral attempts to change the status quo and increase tensions” [4].

The Japanese government recognizes such a situation in thinly veiled words in its *Diplomatic Bluebook 2021*:

“The balance of power in the international community is shifting dramatically due to the rise of emerging countries, among other factors. Inter-state competition, in which states seek to shape an international order to their advantage as well as to increase their influence, is emerging more prominently. Meanwhile, the universal values are under increasingly severe attacks, with the COVID-19 crisis being used to attempt to change the status quo, and there is growing uncertainty over the existing order [5. P. 16]”.

The power that uses the COVID-19 crisis “to attempt to change the status quo” is the Chinese Government, reaping, indeed, the greatest benefit from the pandemic. While most countries around the world are suffering from economic damage in the wake of the pandemic, China's GDP saw a growth of 2.3 % in 2020 and is expected to grow by 8.5 % in 2021 (as of June 2021) [6]. We are witnessing the accelerated process of China's domination of the regional economy in East Asia, which comes necessarily with military domination. How should the Japanese government deal with the “growing uncertainty” in the coming years or decades with China's ascendancy in East Asia

The answer to this question may depend on which time framework we refer to. The answer in the short term is provided by the *Diplomatic Bluebook* mentioned above, according to which “the Japan-U.S. Alliance has become more solid than ever before” and “[t]he two countries are working closely to resolve regional and

international issues, including those regarding North Korea, and to maintain and promote a ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)’[5, p.21]. The efforts to expand the alliance from bilateral relations to the Indo-Pacific security cooperation have led to the QUAD cooperation of the US, Japan, Australia, and India; with the conspicuous absence of ASEAN countries. If the Indo-Pacific region has been conceptualized as if to block the southward expansion of the Chinese military, the formation of the QUAD without China’s southern neighbors is problematic.

As for the security policy option in the midterm, we will examine if there is any viability for the idea of Russo-Japanese security cooperation. If the territorial dispute remains unsettled between Moscow and Tokyo, building a security partnership between the two nations is unimaginable. The so-called Russian “special military operation” in Ukraine and Japan’s economic sanctions in response made it even less acceptable to the public opinions in both nations in the short term. However, in the mid-term, a settlement of the territorial dispute, which will take time long enough to let both sides lose sight of the 2022 crisis in any way, can bring security cooperation between the two governments into perspective.

In the long term, China’s domination in East Asia is much anticipated, simply because it is eleven times more populous than Japan. For Japan’s security interests, it must be included in the theoretical exercise of setting up a regional security framework with China at its center. Is it altogether impossible for Japan to cooperate with China on security issues or is it possible under certain circumstances and conditions? The political and economic futures of both China and India, not to mention that of North Korea, remain unforeseeable. However, it is not entirely absurd to imagine that the Chinese government would accept the universal values of democracy and the rule of law in the future, even though it is also quite possible that the Chinese political system might take the other direction. What we do here is not more than a theoretical exercise, which should help us understand what cooperation we need to seek with the Chinese government and other governments in the region.

The QUAD as a failure of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy

As mentioned above, the Japanese government is currently pursuing the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy in cooperation with the US, which was initiated by former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and given momentum by the Trump administration.

Origin of the FOIP concept

The first instance of formulating the FOIP concept is usually traced back to Prime Minister Abe’s speech held in Kenya in August 2016, in which he claimed that Japan had the “responsibility of fostering the confluence of the Pacific and Indian

Oceans and of Asia and Africa into a place that values freedom, the rule of law, and the market economy, free from force or coercion, and making it prosperous”[7]. Three months later, Prime Minister Abe visited India and briefed Prime Minister Modi on the FOIP Strategy [8].

The US government warmly welcomed Japan’s initiative and clarified its anti-China nature in December 2017, in its National Security Strategy paper, signed by US President Donald Trump:

“A geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of world order is taking place in the Indo-Pacific region. (...) China presents its ambitions as mutually beneficial, but Chinese dominance risks diminishing the sovereignty of many states in the Indo-Pacific. States throughout the region are calling for sustained U.S. leadership in a collective response that upholds a regional order respectful of sovereignty and independence [9]”.

In other words, Japan and the US share a vision, if not a strategy¹, that they should defend the sovereignty of nations in the region and the rule-based free and open maritime order against China’s hegemonic ambition².

Absence of ASEAN members

If the FOIP strategy is to defend “the sovereignty of many states in the Indo-Pacific” against Chinese dominance, the direct beneficiaries of this strategy should be the small and medium countries in Southeast Asia; however, those very countries have not shown much support for it, to say the least. After formulating the concept in the National Security Strategy paper, the ASEAN 10 governments only cautiously took note of the “recent initiatives, including the Indo-Pacific concept” at the ASEAN summit in April 2018[14]. Despite some rhetorical support in bilateral meetings with Japanese or US envoys³, ASEAN members have carefully avoided confrontation with China by not committing themselves to an anti-China strategy⁴.

Without ASEAN participation, what was conceived as the FOIP concept turned out to be a mere revival of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), a strategic dialogue between the US, Japan, Australia, and India. It was originally

¹ It should be noted that the Japanese government since 2018 is talking more of the Indo-Pacific "vision" than the Indo-Pacific "strategy." For the change in tones in Japanese discourses, see [10, p. 25; 11, p. 95;12].

² For the development of the concept under the Trump administration, see [13].

³ For example Prime Minister Hun Sen of Cambodia "welcomed and expressed support for Japan’s new initiative [for] Free and Open India and Pacific Strategy" at his meeting with Prime Minister Abe on 7 August 2017 [15] and Prime Minister Thongloun of Laos promised "to participate actively in the discussions in ASEAN" on the cooperation under the proposed Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy on 12 June 2018 [16].

⁴ For example, Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi cautioned that "the concept should not be used as a containment strategy"[17].

initiated by Shinzo Abe during his relatively brief premiership in 2006–2007 and was phased out unceremoniously after Abe's resignation in September 2007 and sinophile Kevin Rudd's election as the Australian Prime Minister in December same year. Ten years later, during the expanded ASEAN meeting in 2017, Shinzo Abe, Narendra Modi, Malcolm Turnbull, and Donald Trump agreed to revive the QUAD to deal with China's threat in the South China Sea. It was no accident that it was revived on the occasion of an ASEAN meeting as the region of Southeast Asia connects the Pacific and the Indian oceans, and their participation is indispensable to make the FOIP a meaningful entity. However, the QUAD cooperation is yet to attract ASEAN countries to rally with their anti-China cause[18;19;20].

India's hesitation and the QUAD's future

The QUAD members held their first joint military drill ("Malabar") in September 2007, though it was quickly abandoned with the change in political leadership in Japan and Australia. When Australia's return to Malabar was discussed in 2018, the Indian government showed hesitation at that time. It took more than a year to finally agree to hold a military drill with HMAS Ballarat of the Royal Australian Navy in November 2020 in the Arabian Sea.

With the inauguration of Joe Biden in January 2021, the future of the QUAD has become uncertain. For the moment, President Biden's policy against China seems not much different from that of his predecessor. In the *Interim National Security Guidance*, published in March 2021, the Biden administration declared to "support China's neighbors and commercial partners in defending their rights to make independent political choices free of coercion or undue foreign influence"[21]. We are yet to see what policy Biden will take in the course of his term(s) of office, even if the human rights issues in the Xinjiang province may make a post-Trump détente impossible⁵. Both Australia and India have divided public opinions regarding their attitudes towards China, and their foreign policies have seen much oscillation between pro-China and anti-China directions[23;24]. We may see further development of security dialogues between the four governments in the coming years, but it will not be easy to involve ASEAN countries in this strategy. Even among the four existing members, it might never reach the level of a military alliance. Besides, the formation of an Australia-UK-US trilateral partnership, AUKUS, for information and technology sharing in September 2021 reminded us of the uniqueness of English-speaking nations' collaborative relations as we have seen with the operation of ECHELON (also called Five

⁵ On 6 December 2021, Press Secretary Jen Psaki of the White House announced that "The Biden administration will not send any diplomatic or official representation to the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics and Paralympic Games given the PRC's ongoing genocide and crimes against humanity in Xinjiang and other human rights abuses" [22].

Eyes), the surveillance program of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States⁶. With the rise of AUKUS, we already see a relative decline of attention paid to QUAD.

Russo-Japanese Alliance

From the geopolitical perspective, there are some natural reasons for Moscow and Tokyo to cooperate, as well as considerable limitations.

Geographical destiny in historical perspective

Back in the early 20th century, soon after the Russian empire established its first outposts in the Far East, the Russian and Japanese empires clashed over the Korean peninsula. However, after the Treaty of Portsmouth in 1905, the two empires concluded a series of treaties to strengthen their cooperation, only to be interrupted by the communist revolution in 1917. After the long years of Soviet rule, the Russian government sought cooperation once again with Japan. In 1992, President Yeltsin formulated his East policy and advocated for a Northeast Asian multilateral security consultation mechanism[27]. More notably, the Six-Party Talks (the framework of North and South Korea, China, Russia, Japan, and the US for discussion on North Korea's nuclear development) conducted from 2003 to 2009 were initially suggested by Russia in, as early as, 1994[28]. Along with the strong motivation for the multilateral approach, Russia has shown eagerness to establish good-neighborly relations with Japan since Yeltsin's presidency. Despite the Northern territorial issues, he signed with Japanese Prime Minister Morihiro Hosokawa the Tokyo Declaration, a mutual agreement for negotiation toward the conclusion of a peace treaty. Yeltsin also proposed the Japan-Russia strategic partnership in 1997. Clearly illustrated by Yeltsin's rapprochement with Japan, "Russia does not perceive Japan as a major security threat and believes that robust security and political dialogue with Japan on regional issues in East Asia holds strategic importance"[29].

Common interests for a possible Russo-Japanese alliance

Three elements are often cited as reasons for security cooperation between Japan and the Russian Federation.

One reason is the North Korean issue. It is hoped that Moscow may be able to exercise a restraining influence on Pyongyang. The leaders of both governments have been confirming for multiple times that they will coordinate their actions

⁶ For Echelon (Five Eyes), see, for example, [26].

closely for the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula is a “common goal for Japan and Russia”[30]. It should be also noted that in an interview with Russian News Agency TASS, Japanese foreign minister Taro Kono emphasized that “for the solution of the North Korean problem, Russia has a very important role to play as a permanent member of the UN Security Council and also a member of the Six-Party Talks”[31]. Of course, Russia does not have the leverage that the Soviet Union once had, but it seems to Japan that Russia can still play a constructive role in dealing with the North Korea issue [32, p. 868.].

Second, Japan’s motivation to incorporate Russia into its security framework reflects the desire to prevent Russia’s relations with China from becoming too close. James Brown, for example, states that “although Russia on its own is not a serious threat to Japan, the formation of a consolidated China-Russia bloc would represent a major concern”, as well as points out that “Beijing and Moscow share a hostile view of the US-led global system that is so vital to Japan”[32, p. 869]. Japan’s fears of the emergence of the land-power giant are emphasized in the White Paper published by Japan’s Ministry of Defense, according to which the two states “have a common view on promoting the multi-polarization of the world and the establishment of a new international order”[33]. Japan’s anxiety about the emerging security threat intensified in August 2015 when “Russia and China conducted their largest naval exercises in the Sea of Japan to date, while in 2016, joint drills were carried out in the South China Sea”[32, p. 870]. Their entente may be a serious challenge to the US-led international order; thus, Japan may become anxious to neutralize the China-Russia united front by establishing strategic cooperation with Russia in the security realm.

It is also crucial for Russia to strike a balance between strategic competition and cooperation with China, especially in the fading US-led international order. Anna Kireeva pointed out that “the reason for stepping up Russian policy in this area is the fact that, despite close political and military cooperation with China, it is the role of one of the stakeholders in the polycentric order, rather than a hierarchical China-led order in Asia, that is more consistent with Russian interests in this part of the world”[29].

Third, another plausible explanation for Japan’s interest in security ties with Russia is the desire to ensure energy security. According to the Federation of Electric Power Companies of Japan (FEPC), “oil still accounts for about 40 % of Japan’s primary energy supply, and more than 80 % of imported oil comes from the politically unstable Middle East” [34]. For its energy security, Japan started looking to the North in search of an alternative source. According to the US Energy Information Administration (EIA), the import of LNG from Russia accounts only for 9 % in 2019[35], but Brown emphasizes that Japan is “interested in the development of the northern route, which runs above Russia’s Arctic coastline”. He insists so because “this route becomes increasingly

ice-free,” and hence, “it offers the potential for additional energy resources to be supplied to Japan, either from sources in the Russian Arctic itself or shipped from the Atlantic [32, p. 872].”

Limitations

We have examined above why Japan-Russia security cooperation may be beneficial to both countries. It is the case that Russia is potentially a reliable security partner. That being said, with a sober look at the current international and domestic situations in both states, it seems too optimistic that a diplomatic breakthrough will come into reality even in the midterm, say, in ten or twenty years.

Even if the territorial dispute is ever to be resolved, there are serious doubts about the benefits of Russo-Japanese cooperation. First of all, Russia’s influence is limited. As Andrei Lankov pointed out, if Pyongyang shows some signs of friendship with Moscow, it is with an expectation for the latter to act as a mediator with the West. However, since the Crimean crisis in 2014, Moscow lost much of its political leverages, and Pyongyang largely lost interest in heeding advice from Moscow[36].

Second, unlike in the 1990s, Russia today does not see Japan as the top priority in Asia, which means that Russia will not pursue further security cooperation with Japan at the risk of jeopardizing China-Russia relations. Certainly, there is a mutual desire to maintain stability in the Asia-Pacific, including Northeast Asia, but Russia considers “China to be too important both politically and economically to risk angering Beijing for the sake of ties with Japan”[32, p. 877].

Third, the consideration of energy transactions is interesting both for Russia and Japan but may not be essential in the overall bilateral relations. Recently, the Vladivostok LNG project was expected to deepen mutual trust through long-term, pragmatic energy cooperation, but after the resignation of Prime Minister Abe, we are yet to see any sign of a breakthrough. Regarding bilateral cooperation in the energy sector, Hirofumi Arai claims that “external and internal conditions have changed significantly, making it more difficult for the two governments to identify a project that would serve as a new symbol of cooperation”[37].

In addition, apart from the international factors, domestic constraints in both states prevent the bilateral relations from taking a step forward. According to Gilbert Rozman, public opinion in Japan and Russia stands in the way of signing a peace treaty and fully normalizing relations more than seventy years after WWII ended [38, p. 11].⁷ Both Abe and Putin were obsessed with reconstructing their own national identity during their terms, with criticisms from patriotic nationalists

⁷ Rozman’s claim is based on 4 countries’ Joint Public Opinion Survey conducted in Japan, U.S., China, South Korea in 2015. See [39].

that any territorial compromises are not acceptable. The domestic oppositions are blocking the peace treaty and security ties between Russia and Japan; thus, it may not be realistic for the two governments, for another couple of decades, to meet each other halfway.

Japan's Place in Pax Sinica

Few people have ever seriously examined the possibility of Japan's alliance with China. In doing so in this paper, we should consider the following three factors: Japan's security interests, the Taiwan question, and the possibility of regional collective security with China at its center.

1. Japan's security interests reconsidered

There are two major issues in Japan's security policy: namely, the development of nuclear missiles in North Korea (North Korea issue) and the possible takeover of the Senkaku Islands by China (Senkaku issue). The security of navigation in the South China Sea and the West Indian Ocean are also important, but not as much as the North Korea issue or the Senkaku issue, as they do not threaten the Japanese territory directly.

Since the Sino-Japanese diplomatic crisis in September 2012, Chinese activities in Japanese territorial waters around the Senkaku islands have intensified [40]. Consequently, Japan and the US have reiterated their firm commitment to the alliance. The Trump administration gave Japan reassurance that the Japan-US Security Treaty should apply to China's attack on the Senkaku islands [41]. Immediately after the election of Joe Biden to the presidency, Prime Minister Suga made a phone call on 12 November 2020 to confirm "his [Joe Biden's] commitment that Article 5 of the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty applies to the Senkaku Islands" [42]. In May 2021, Japanese Ground Forces conducted the first large-scale joint exercise with the US and French forces, apparently to enhance their capabilities to face possible Chinese landing on the Senkaku Islands [43].

However, the US commitment is not unconditional or unlimited. The US government remains neutral as to the question of sovereignty over those islands. When the US Defense Department spokesman, John Kirby, made an off-camera statement that "we hold with the international community about the Senkakus and the sovereignty of the Senkakus, and we support Japan obviously in that sovereignty," — that is, the US government supports the Japanese claim of sovereignty — he officially corrected his unofficial statement three days later. He admitted that "there is no change to U.S. policy regarding the sovereignty of the Senkaku Islands" and regretted his own error in overstepping from official neutrality [44]. The US commitment to the defense of the Senkaku Islands is conditioned by the legality of Japanese territorial sovereignty there, and once it changes its opinion on international law, the US government may change its attitude at any moment without violating its treaty obligations.

China already has the largest navy and the largest army in the world, which are now going through the process of modernization supported by its economic growth⁸. If the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy overweighs the US navy in the near future, the US government would have scant reasons to keep its commitment to Japan's defense over a possible clash over the Senkaku islands at the cost of US interests. If Japan can ever solve the Senkaku dispute in its favor, it would be only through diplomatic negotiations and/or a judicial settlement in the International Court of Justice or other judicial forums.

As for the North Korean issue, the question is not whether the US government maintains its commitment to the common defense against North Korea. It will certainly do so as long as the dangerous regime remains in power in Pyongyang, as North Korea's nuclear development poses a direct threat to the US national security. Building up an anti-ballistic defense system in Japan contributes to the US national security⁹. The question for Japan, however, is whether the US is the most important partner to deal with the North Korea issue. Even under the current conditions, China may have more leverage over Pyongyang through its economic and political connections than Washington does through military coercion.

In short, of the two major security issues Japan faces, the US cannot be a great help on the Senkaku issue, and China can offer more help than the US on the North Korean issue. If we focus on only these two questions, a security cooperation with China may be worth a consideration.

2. The Taiwan question

One serious impediment to Japan's security cooperation with China is the question of Taiwan. The defense of Taiwan has been the central question in the Japan-US alliance since the conclusion of the Japan-US Security Treaty for "the maintenance of international peace and security in the Far East" (Article 1 of the 1951 Japan-US Security Treaty). The concept of the Far East was kept after the revision of the treaty in 1960 in the preamble and articles 4 and 6 as "a common concern in the maintenance of international peace and security in the Far East" (Preamble of the 1960 Japan-US Security Treaty). After the treaty was revised in 1960, the Japanese government issued a statement to clarify the geographical scope of the Far East, which covers "the area around Japan north of the Philippines including the areas under the administration

⁸ The US Department of Defense recognized that "The PRC has numerically the largest navy in the world with an overall battle force of approximately 350 ships and submarines, including more than 130 major surface combatants [while the U.S. Navy has only 293 ships]" and that "the People's Liberation Army Army (PLAA) is the largest standing ground force in the world, with approximately 915,000 active-duty personnel in combat units" [49, P. 43, 40].

⁹ For example, National Security Strategy, *supra* note 10, claims that "The United States is deploying a layered missile defense system focused on North Korea and Iran to defend our homeland against missile attacks" [9, p. 8].

of the Republic of Korea (South Korea) and the Republic of China (Taiwan)”[46]. The Japan-US alliance was established not only for Japan’s defense but it was also for Taiwan’s defense.

After the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the PLA attacked Taiwan twice in the 1950s¹⁰. The 1955 Sino-American Mutual Defense Treaty lost effect after the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the US in 1970, but the latter maintains its commitment to Taiwan’s defense with the Taiwan Relations Act, in which the US declared “to provide Taiwan with arms of a defensive character” and “maintain the capacity of the United States to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security, or the social or economic system, of the people on Taiwan” (Section 2(b) 5 and 6).

For the Sino-Japanese Joint Communiqué in September 1972, the legal status of Taiwan was hotly debated between the Chinese and Japanese governments. The outcome was the text of Article 3 of it:

Article 3. The Government of the People’s Republic of China reiterates that Taiwan is an inalienable part of the territory of the People’s Republic of China. The Government of Japan fully understands and respects this stand of the Government of the People’s Republic of China, and it firmly maintains its stand under Article 8 of the Potsdam Proclamation.

Even though there may be various interpretations for this ambiguous text, the Japanese government has never been engaged in direct support for Taiwan’s defense since then. However, after the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1995–96, Tokyo and Washington issued New Guidelines for Japan-US Defense Cooperation in 1997 to enhance the “mutual cooperation planning in situations in areas surrounding Japan”. The vaguely formulated “situations in areas surrounding Japan” is generally understood to include possible Chinese attacks against Taiwan.

Recently, the Covid-19 pandemic has brought international attention to Taiwan’s undue isolation. The World Health Organization (WHO)’s refusal of Taiwan’s participation in its activities, under the influence of the Chinese government over its Director-General, elicited reactions from many countries. In August 2020, the Trump administration sent Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar to Taiwan, the first visit by an American official since 1979. In January 2021, the Biden Administration pledged “to assist Taiwan in maintaining a sufficient self-defense capability” [47]. Moreover, as a result of the Japan-US Summit held on April 16, the problem of Taiwan was mentioned in the Joint Statement, which has never happened before since the 1970s [48].

¹⁰ In the First Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1954–1955 the nationalists abandoned the Tachen Islands, but during the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1958 the nationalists resisted the communists’ shelling on the Kinmen islands with support of the U.S. Navy.

Security cooperation with China is utterly incompatible with the Japan-US alliance, and Japan cannot develop security cooperation with China until Taiwan is conquered by the PLA or the Chinese government acknowledges Taiwan's own sovereignty, or perhaps the end of China's communist regime.

3. Regional collective security with post-communist China

We do not know what will happen in a couple of decades in China. Even if the Taiwan question should be settled in one way or another, and a Sino-Japanese security cooperation becomes possible, it may not necessarily be in Japan's interest in the long term because of political instability in China. China's domestic politics is marked by the 2009 Ürümqi Massacre and the 2019–2020 Hong Kong protests. Despite tremendous efforts by the Communist Party for social cohesion and security both in urban and rural areas, economic growth has created a huge gap between the rich and poor and haves and have nots in the country. Once the communist regime should be overthrown, any kind of support for the Communist Party may be viewed as unfriendly acts against the people. The Japanese government should start considering whether security cooperation with communist China should contribute to its good relations with post-communist China.

In 1959, former Japanese prime minister Tanzan Ishibashi visited China and proposed regional collective security with China, the Soviet Union, Japan, and the US. Since 1994, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) has been fostering security dialogue in the region including North Korea. In 2007, the Six-Party Talks set up a working group for a joint Northeast Asia peace and security mechanism. In addition, there have been several attempts to create a multilateral security framework in East Asia, which may be impractical as long as the most powerful country in the region finds no interest there. However, once China overcomes its problems with Taiwan and democratic legitimacy, there may be room for multilateral security cooperation, which would allow China and other countries in the region to economize most of the budget they are spending now on military equipment. Japan should find a better place in such a framework than in the New Cold War between Beijing and Washington.

Conclusions

There is no single right answer to Japan's security conundrum. It is all about China, but it gives a complicated set of questions as Japan's relationship with China takes different shapes in different time frameworks and is very uncertain in the long term. The arguments we have developed above are just a reconfirmation of government policies in the short term and maybe mere speculations in the mid and long terms. But the policy in the short term makes full sense when it is put

in a longer historical context, and the policies in the mid and long terms can be better discussed in the extension of the current policy.

Japan's national security has been dependent on the US for nearly seventy years since the end of the post-WWII occupation in 1952. The alliance has stood the test of time and proved very successful. However, its validity cannot last forever. With the accelerated rise of China in the post-COVID-19 era, the Japanese government should explore its security options in consultation with the governments in East Asia and the Indo-Pacific and democratic discussion with its citizens.

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