

# MOVING TARGETS

## TRENDS IN JAPAN'S FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICIES

edited by **Axel Berkofsky** and **Giulia Sciorati**  
introduction by **Paolo Magri**





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**ISPI**

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Via Antonio Boselli, 10 – 20136 Milan – Italy  
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MOVING TARGETS. TRENDS IN JAPAN'S FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICIES  
Edited by Axel Berkofsky and Giulia Sciorati

First edition: March 2024  
Cover image by Francesco Fadani

Print ISBN 9791256001118  
ePub ISBN 9791256001125  
Pdf ISBN 9791256001132  
DOI 10.14672/56001118

ISPI. Via Clerici, 5  
20121, Milan  
[www.ispionline.it](http://www.ispionline.it)

Catalogue and reprints information: [www.ledizioni.it](http://www.ledizioni.it)

*This Report followed a single-blind review process.*

*The authors' opinions contained in this Report are strictly personal and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the other contributors and of the ISPI.*

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# Introduction

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In December 2022, Japan announced it would drastically increase its defence budget by 2027. It was a wake-up call for the whole region: Japan, which had kept somewhat of a steady expenditure on defence in real terms between 1990 and 2021, was gearing up for a world of heightened tensions and rivalry in the Indo-Pacific Region. Defence spending in the region witnessed a substantial increase across the board, most noteworthy – like in previous decades – in China. But in 2022 Japan governed by Prime Minister Fumio Kishida too has opted to significantly bolster its investments in defence and national security. If carried out in full, this would be Japan's version of Germany's (less than perfect) "Zeitenwende" in the military field, announced by Chancellor Olaf Scholz after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. If all goes to plan and the envisioned increases continue to pass both chambers of the country's parliament, Japan's defence expenditure in 2027 would reach up to US\$100 billion, almost double of what Japan is spending today, in turn making Japan the world's third largest defence spender. As anticipated, all of this takes place because of the elephant in the room: China, which in 1990 spent around half of what Japan was spending on defence, started to outstrip Japan by the early 2000s and is now believed to be spending on its armed forces roughly six times Japan's current expenditure.

While geography puts Japan on the frontline (one of its southern islands is just around 110 km away from the Taiwanese mainland), China's military rise alone is not enough

to understand the current trends in Japan's security and defence paradigm shifts. After its defeat in World War II, Japan agreed to host tens of thousands of US troops (currently 54,000) on its territory. At the same time, it adopted a "pacifist" constitution, which, much like Italy's constitution, outlaws war as a means to settle international disputes and commits Japan to never maintain "land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential". At the time (back in 1946 and 1947), the US-occupied Japan did not have much say in the matter: General Douglas MacArthur drafted and *de facto* obliged the government, parliament and the Japanese Emperor to endorse and adopt a US-imposed constitution. While the war-renouncing constitution served the country very well over the decades, it has also contributed to what the literature describes as Japan being a "reluctant realist power". More recently, however, a complex interplay of rising nationalism and historical revisionism has been playing a part in the push to allow for the re-emergence of a more assertive Japanese foreign and security policy – of course, within the larger context of the East Asian security dilemma amidst a rising China.

This Report analyses the present and future of Japan's security and defence policies. Within the mentioned context of a rising China, resulting in expanded containment policies from Japan. Tokyo has, in fact, broadened its defence ties not only with the US, but also with India, Australia, and Taiwan. However, China remains Japan's biggest trading partner, meaning that Tokyo will continue to have to strike a balance between assertive security and defence policies, while also maintaining business and trade relations with China.

In the first chapter Ryoko Nakano argues that Japan's diplomatic evolution is based on the nuanced interplay of economic, cultural, and historical factors, influencing the country's image from a peace-loving and cultured nation to a more assertive power in the Asia-Pacific region. Beginning with its post-World War II economic growth, Japan strategically used economic development to forge international relations.

Simultaneously, the nation emphasised cultural diplomacy to cultivate trust and friendship among its Asian neighbours. However, in response to China's global ascendancy, particularly under the right-wing nationalist Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Nakano argues, Japan underwent a significant shift, asserting its position on sensitive historical issues. The chapter explores how Japan's diplomatic strategies, influenced by its historical baggage and regional dynamics, navigate the delicate balance between cultural power, economic influence, and historical reconciliation in the Asia-Pacific region.

Marco Zappa explores the historical evolution of Japan-China relations, highlighting policymakers' dual focus on China as a vital trade partner and a security concern. Initially rooted in the Cold War, the *seikei bunri* principle justified economic engagement but faced challenges in the mid-1960s. In the course of post-World War II normalisation, a pragmatic shift occurred, emphasising non-ideological Japanese-Chinese economic cooperation. Recent regional geopolitical tensions led to a resurgence of Japan's inclination to securitise relations, challenging a pragmatic non-political approach towards trade and investment relations with China. The chapter concludes that economic security now shapes political decisions, aligning Japan with US strategies in the Asia-Pacific.

The Giulia Sciorati's chapter presents the analysis of 145 statements dedicated to Japan and China-Japan relations from the spokespersons of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. The chapter reveals complex bilateral dynamics shaped by historical grievances, territorial disputes, and broader issues of self-representation. Sciorati argues that, while China emphasises good neighbourliness and cooperation, historical grievances, particularly those regarding wartime atrocities and the Yasukuni Shrine, create a "hero-enemy" juxtaposition. Environmental responsibility emerges in criticism of Japan's post-Fukushima actions, portraying China as dedicated to ecological stewardship. Geopolitical aspects, including the so-called Taiwan Question and regional territorial

disputes in the East and South China Seas, underscore China's vision of stability, developing an inner-Chinese discourse that positions the country as a responsible party in diplomatic interactions.

Axel Berkofsky thinks it is time for Japan and Taiwan to formalise the already ongoing bilateral exchanges and talks on defence. Such defence talks unsurprisingly aim at equipping the two countries with the instruments and procedures to deter and, in the case of a military crisis, counter a Chinese attack on Taiwan. The gloves are increasingly off both against the background of regional policies in general, and in the light of the frequent intrusions into de facto Taiwanese-controlled airspace in particular. There is – sometimes more, sometimes less – talk about a Japanese version of a Taiwan Relations Act, and the more Beijing increases its military pressure onto Taiwan and others in the region, the easier it will be to convince Japanese policymakers and the electorate that committing Japan to defend Taiwan is necessary. In the face of all this, Berkofsky argues, Japan's "One-China-Policy" might be up for revision someday soon.

In the final chapter, Jagannath Panda addresses the complexity of the Indo-Pacific region, exacerbated by China's territorial aggression, conflicts in West Asia and Ukraine, and the erosion of multilateralism. Despite ASEAN's perceived ineffectiveness, the forum, Panda argues, remains crucial to the region's economic and security architecture. The rising global powers Japan and India have sought to further engage and interact with ASEAN, especially in the aftermath of the Ukraine invasion. Both nations displayed major power ambitions, with Japan aiming to unite the Indo-Pacific against Chinese hegemonic endeavours, while India maintained diplomatic dexterity, not isolating its historical partner Russia. The chapter explores the dynamics of ASEAN centrality and its relevance for building a strategic axis with Japan, examining the similarity between India, Japan, and ASEAN.

*Paolo Magri*  
*ISPI Executive Vice President*

# 1. Japan's Strategy of Influence: History, Culture, and Heritage

Ryoko Nakano

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Pursuing a desirable international order that serves their interest holds significant strategic importance for all nations. A robust military has traditionally been considered crucial to state survival; however, the ability to craft a conducive strategic landscape holds even greater significance in effectively constraining the aggressive behaviours of other nations. The emphasis on creating a preferred environment extends into the realm of the international economy, where safeguarding resources and labour, as well as the global market, rank among the most notable concerns for many nations operating under global capitalism. Especially during a crisis, securing energy, food, and resources for survival and development are paramount concerns, particularly for states heavily reliant on external resources due to their industrial and economic circumstances.

Japan is no exception. In the US-led international system, Japan has achieved economic growth while limiting its military capability to the publicly acceptable level of “self-defence” under its 1947 constitution. As the concept of comprehensive security appeared in the aftermath of the 1972 oil shock, how to secure natural resources has remained a significant item on the agenda for resource-poor countries like Japan.<sup>1</sup> In the wake of Russia's assault on Ukraine in February 2022, a crucial mission

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<sup>1</sup> Sogoanzenhoso Kenkyu Groupu, *Sogoanzenhoso Senryaku (Strategy of Comprehensive Security)*, Tokyo, Okurasho insatsukyoku, 1980.

for the Japanese government has been to ensure the security of the global supply chain and to unite international efforts in upholding existing national borders through the preservation of the international legal framework.<sup>2</sup> Japan's political tensions with China – a significant supplier and client for Japanese firms – have led the Japanese government to aim to overcome its vulnerability by contributing to the capacity building of other Asian countries via patrolling open sea lanes and diversifying supply chain partners.<sup>3</sup>

Creating a desirable order cannot be done in one day or by a single measure. As Japan's National Security Strategy (2022) points to the importance of “comprehensive national power,” including the power of diplomacy, economy, technology, and information,<sup>4</sup> all kinds of instruments are necessary to create and maintain international order. Building on this notion, this chapter focuses on the cultural domain and asks the following questions. First, what strategies does Japan employ to cultivate its desired international milieu and position itself there? Second, how does Japan respond to forces directed against its efforts?

To answer these questions, I focus on Japan's culture-related foreign policy, particularly the heritage controversies and competition in the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). How to treat WWII history, particularly the legacy of Japanese military aggression, has occasionally posed obstacles for Japan when it tries to assume a more prominent role in Asia. This historical issue became increasingly complex during the international/regional power transition. Focusing on recent cultural heritage controversies, this study explores the dynamics of Japanese politics, memory, and culture. The study's scope also extends

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<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry of Japan, [White Paper on International Trade](#), 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Y. Todo, “Japan's Post-COVID-19 Approach to Supply Chains”, *East Asian Forum*, 3 July 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Cabinet Secretariat of Japan, “[National Security Strategy \(NSS\). English Version](#)”, 2021.

to Japan's foreign policy vision as a sociopolitical act to shape a desirable international order for Japan. Considering that culture means a set of values, beliefs, norms, and practices under which knowledge is produced and shared among the people, reimagining a sociocultural space for interconnectivity and cooperation is crucial to making a world order.<sup>5</sup> By focusing on Japanese cultural diplomacy and foreign policy, this article aims to explain Japan's strategy of influence to form a collective mindset and safeguard national interests.

The remainder of this chapter is divided into four sections. The first section provides a historical context detailing Japan's efforts to rebuild and regain its esteemed position on the global stage following its defeat in WWII. The second section explores Japan's handling of historical issues, the complexities arising from differing regional perspectives on history, and the shortcomings of its cultural heritage diplomacy. The third section underscores the multifaceted challenges faced by China's ascension within the international cultural sphere. Finally, the chapter concludes by assessing Japan's limitations and potential as a regional cultural power.

## **Shaping the Image of Postwar Japan After 1945**

Following its defeat in WWII, Japan has undergone a significant transformation in reshaping its international image and reputation. During the era of Imperial Japan (1868-1945), the nation colonised its neighbours and launched aggressive wars against China and Western powers. The wartime experiences

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<sup>5</sup> Although this chapter does not intend to take the entire (cultural) foundation of knowledge production in scope, discussions on culture and geoculture in the field of International Relations is relevant here. See C. Rues-Smit, *On Cultural Diversity: International Theory in a World of Difference*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018; and A.B. Tickner and O. Wæver, "Introduction: Geocultural epistemologies", in A.B. Tickner and O. Wæver (eds.) *International Relations scholarship around the world*, London and New York, Routledge, 2009, p. 1-31.

of Japanese nationals in and outside Japan essentially created a shared aversion to war and military activities that was institutionalised in the new constitution, including the “renunciation of war” clause. Building on the public aspiration for peace, the intellectual ambition to rebuild Japan as a cultured nation also gained prominence.<sup>6</sup> However, in the 1950s and 1960s, the Japanese government focused more on the economy than culture in diplomacy. When Japan embarked on diplomatic initiatives for establishing relationships with newly independent Asian countries, the primary purpose was to secure natural resources for Japanese economic development. Moreover, building relationships with Southeast Asian countries was deemed diplomatically advantageous to enhance Japan’s standing as a representative of Asia in negotiations with the United States: Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi (1957-60) travelled to Southeast Asian countries before he met with the US president.<sup>7</sup>

However, reclaiming a respected position in Asia was a bumpy and gradual road. Even in Southeast Asia, where political and industrial elites were generally receptive to Japan’s economic support and initiatives, the public had profound scepticism regarding the former invader. As Japan’s economy flourished, it sought resources and labour forces in Southeast Asian nations to fuel its manufacturing sector. This economic engagement led to criticism, with terms like “economic animal” and “economic imperialist” directed at Japan. Tensions escalated in the 1970s, resulting in riots in Indonesia and Thailand against Japan’s perceived dominance, reminiscent of Japan’s military power in Southeast Asia during WWII.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> N. Aso, *Public Properties: Museums in Imperial Japan*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> A. Suehiro, “The Road to Economic Re-entry: Japan’s Policy toward Southeast Asian Development in the 1950s and 1960s”, *Social Science Japan Journal*, vol. 2, no.1, April 1999, pp. 85-105.

<sup>8</sup> S. Yamakage, “Quo vadis, Asiae? Changing Japan-ASEAN Relations and the Future of Asian Regional Architecture”, in Lan Pen Er (ed.), *Japan’s Relations with*

Reflecting on what went wrong, Prime Minister Takeo Fukuda (1976-78) played a pivotal role in improving Japan's image and focusing on cultural and social relationships. During his tour of the member states in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), he delivered a speech that came to be known as the Fukuda Doctrine (1977). This doctrine underscored Japan's dedication to peace and emphasised its desire to be considered an equal partner to ASEAN nations. The doctrine also portrayed Japan as a nation committed to nurturing mutual trust and confidence through deep, heartfelt understanding. This aspiration extended beyond politics and economics to encompass social and cultural dimensions. As a progressive shift occurred, Japan aimed to connect its international assistance to nurturing people-to-people connections. Following this line of thought, Japan increased its engagement in UNESCO, financing the establishment of UNESCO/Japan's Funds-in-Trust for the Preservation of the World Cultural Heritage in 1989.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Japan brought in the concept of human security as one of the Official Development Assistance (ODA) principles in 2003.<sup>10</sup> Through these endeavours, Japan worked to reshape its image and contribute positively to regional development and cooperation.

Japan's transformation since 1945 has seen it evolve from its wartime past to actively shaping a new identity on the global stage. This shift involved diplomatic efforts, economic engagement, and a commitment to cultivating friendly relationships founded on mutual understanding and cooperation. Throughout this period, Japan learned the importance of maintaining a low profile and not showing any assertiveness to remind others of the legacy of its militaristic, expansionist past. Nevertheless, as the second-largest economic power in the world at that time,

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*Southeast Asia*, New York and London, Routledge, 2012, pp. 123-40.

<sup>9</sup> N. Akagawa, *Heritage Conservation and Japan's Cultural Diplomacy: Heritage, National Identity and National Interest*, London, Routledge, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, Economic Co-operation Bureau, "Japan's Official Development Assistance Charter", August 2003.

Japan was keen to promote further regional cooperation and economic integration, exemplified by the formation of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum under the slogan of open regionalism. Moreover, after the end of the Cold War, Southeast Asian political leaders started welcoming Japanese involvement in regional policy-security matters in a new strategic environment.<sup>11</sup> With a certain level of confidence in having earned the trust and friendship of other Asian nations, Japan initiated the establishment of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) as a novel regional platform to enhance security dialogues among Asian states and persuaded the US to accept this idea.<sup>12</sup> In other words, Japan readjusted its foreign and security policy strategy to create a preferable regional environment and opened a new chapter of multilateral diplomacy in the 1990s.

## **Reshaping the Image of Contemporary Japan and the Memory of WWII**

When Japan launched its multilateral diplomacy in the new security landscape of the post-Cold War era, it simultaneously deepened its engagement in UNESCO's World Heritage platform. Japan vigorously promoted its natural and cultural heritage to raise the country's visibility as a cultural synthesiser, preserving both its unique Japanese identity and universal appeal.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, Japan took significant steps to underscore its role in Asia by reshaping the World Heritage platform. Having Japan's nomination of the "Buddhist Monuments in the Horyu-ji Area" assessed by the International Council on Monuments

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<sup>11</sup> B. Singh, "The Evolution of Japan's Security Role in Southeast Asia", *The Round Table*, vol. 99, no. 409, 2010, pp. 391-402.

<sup>12</sup> T. Yuzawa, *Japan's Security Policy and the ASEAN Regional Forum: The Search for Multilateral Security in the Asia-Pacific*, London and New York, Routledge, 2007, pp. 45-48.

<sup>13</sup> M. Lincicome, "The UNESCO World Heritage Convention and Japan's Pursuit of International Cultural Legitimacy," *Japanese Studies*, vol. 40, no.1, 2020, pp. 1-20.

and Sites (ICOMOS) and UNESCO's World Heritage Committee,<sup>14</sup> the question emerged over the authenticity of wooden buildings that required replacement materials for maintenance. Japan seized on this as an opportunity to rethink the Eurocentrism inherent in the World Heritage criteria, such as the concept of Outstanding Universal Value (OUV), and hosted a conference for a group of international heritage experts who were critical of Eurocentric elements in OUV. Those scholars emphasised the importance of cultural contexts, culminating in creating the Nara Document of Authenticity in 1994.<sup>15</sup> With the emerging notion of Asian cultural heritage, the Japanese government also initiated the establishment of a new Intangible Cultural Heritage programme in 2003. Japanese financial contributions to support the programme and the leadership of UNESCO's Director-General, Koichiro Matsuura, a former Japanese diplomat, demonstrated Japan's aspiration to serve as Asia's foremost cultural powerhouse in international cultural cooperation and institutionalised programmes.

However, Japan's moral position faced a significant setback during the 1990s due to the emergence of the "comfort women" issue.<sup>16</sup> This matter, which the Japanese government had

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<sup>14</sup> According to Herb Stovel, ICOMOS Secretary General from 1990 to 1993, "the Japanese feared that their practice in periodically dismantling significant wooden structures would possibly be seen as unauthentic if judged from within a Western framework". H. Stovel, "Working towards the Nara Document," in K.E. Larsen (ed.), *Conference on Authenticity in relation to the World Heritage Convention, Nara, 1-6 November, 1994, Proceedings, UNESCO World Heritage Centre, Paris, 1995*, pp. xxxv.

<sup>15</sup> M.S. Fraser, "From Venice 1964 to Nara 1994: Changing Concept of Authenticity?" in M.S. Fraser, W. Lipp and A. Tomaszewski (eds.), *Conservation and Preservation: Interactions between Theory and Practice*, Vienna, Polistampa, 2010, pp. 115-32.

<sup>16</sup> G. Jonsson, "Can Memories of the Japan-Korea Dispute on 'Comfort Women' Resolve the Issue?," *International Journal of Korean Studies*, vol. 23, no. 2, Fall/Winter 2019, pp. 64-80. For comfort women issues, see S.C. Soh, *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2008; Y. Yoshimi, *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military during World War II*, Trans. Suzanne O'Brien, New York,

neglected for an extended period, suddenly received a spotlight after a Korean victim spoke out publicly in both South Korea and Japan about her experience working as a sex slave under Japanese military rule. Civil society advocacy groups in both countries demanded an apology and compensation from the Japanese government for the victims of the Japanese military's abduction, trafficking, and detention. During this period, the conservative ruling party (Liberal Democratic Party of Japan) was experiencing a decline in influence. While the Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoichi Kono issued a statement in 1993 recognising Japan's involvement in the issues surrounding comfort women, it was Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama (1994-96), a socialist leader in a coalition government, who issued an apology and tried to pass a parliamentary resolution on WWII to address the matter. However, those statements fell short of creating a domestic consensus.<sup>17</sup>

Following the return of the conservative party to power in 1996, counterarguments gained prominence. Backed by the Japan War-Bereaved Families Association and various right-wing organisations such as Nippon Kaigi (Japan Conference), Prime Ministers Ryutaro Hashimoto (1996-98) and Junichiro Koizumi (2001-05) made visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, where class A war criminals of the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal are also commemorated. Those visits invited significant uproar from China and South Korea, who regard the shrine as a symbol of glorifying Japan's past militarism and failure to atone for it appropriately. As a result, the country's moral standing was compromised in neighbouring nations. Despite the positive reception of Japanese pop culture, such as anime and manga in Asia, historical issues continued to tarnish the image of Japan as a non-repentant state.<sup>18</sup> From 2005 to 2012, frequent leadership

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Columbia University Press, 1995.

<sup>17</sup> R. Mukae, "Japan's Diet Resolution on World War Two: Keeping History at Bay", *Asian Survey*, vol. 36, no. 10, October 1996, pp. 1011-30.

<sup>18</sup> N.K. Otmazgin, "Contesting Soft Power: Japanese Popular Culture in East and Southeast Asia", *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, vol. 8, 2008, pp. 73-101.

changes made it difficult for the government to approach this issue decisively. Even the United States, Japan's important security ally, presented a summoning attitude to Japan over the comfort women issue.<sup>19</sup> However, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (2006-07) failed to make a clear apologetic comment, contributing to Japan's image decline as an unrepentant country.<sup>20</sup> The following administrations likewise neglected to rectify this issue and gave the impression of an indecisive Japan. This was particularly the case under the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), which pursued a conciliatory approach aligned with the postwar Japanese traditions of avoiding confrontation and upholding the nation's image as a peace-loving country. While Japan promoted a Cool Japan campaign as a national branding strategy, the government almost totally failed to touch on the sensitive issue of history. Moreover, despite its original intention to improve ties with China, the DPJ, in power from 2009 to 2012, did not manage Japan's relationship with China decisively. In 2010, tensions flared when a Chinese fishing boat collided with a Japanese coast guard vessel, leading to Japan's arrest of the Chinese captain without prior notice to China. Subsequently, in 2012, Japan's acquisition of three of the Senkaku or Diaoyu Islands, which China perceived as the "nationalisation" of Chinese territory, escalated the territorial dispute into a full-blown conflict. Anti-Japanese demonstrations erupted in China as a result.

After Abe returned to power for the second time in December 2012, the government's previously hesitating attitude changed. Under Abe, Japan reinvigorated its effort to reinforce its public diplomacy sector and increased its budget for strategic communications. It also launched a new programme for

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<sup>19</sup> The US House of Representatives passed a resolution about comfort women in 2007, calling on the Japanese government to acknowledge its responsibility for the comfort women victims and on the Japanese prime minister to officially apologise.

<sup>20</sup> N. Onishi, "Abe Only Partly Successful in Defusing 'Comfort Women' Issue", *The New York Times*, 29 April 2007.

network-based public diplomacy to adjust to the age of globalisation and digital revolution.<sup>21</sup> Concerning China, once Abe regained the Prime Minister's office, Japanese diplomats and officials of the Foreign Ministry were encouraged to work to project Japanese opinions to the world. This stance was aligned with Abe's 2013 statement that "Japan is not, and will never be a tier-two country".<sup>22</sup> One notable incident symbolising the Abe administration's assertiveness and willingness to engage in verbal fights was a public exchange between the Japanese and Chinese ambassadors to the United Kingdom in a 2014 op-ed published in the UK newspaper, *The Daily Telegraph*. The Chinese ambassador attempted to link the territorial issue with Japan's perceived moral shortcomings, likening Japan to "Voldemort", the evil character of the Harry Potter series.<sup>23</sup> This analogy stemmed from Japan's leaders' controversial visits to the Yasukuni Shrine. In a departure from its traditional reluctance to engage in international disputes, the Japanese ambassador to the UK also contributed a letter to the *Telegraph*, saying that the one who let "loose the evil of an arms race and escalation of tensions" was the Voldemort, suggesting that China was the evil country.<sup>24</sup>

In a similar vein, Abe's Japan took an active stance against a transnational civil society campaign aiming to build a memorial statue dedicated to comfort women. Although the comfort women issue was not limited to Koreans, the Japanese government sought to reduce the transnational debates to a state-level bilateral dispute between Japan and South Korea, and exerted diplomatic pressures on countries, including the

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<sup>21</sup> W.A. Stanislaus, "Japan house: Tokyo's new public diplomacy push", *The Diplomat*, 22 July 2017.

<sup>22</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Japan is Back", by Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan, 22 February 2013 at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).

<sup>23</sup> X. Liu, "China and Britain won the war together", *The Telegraph*, 1 January 2014.

<sup>24</sup> K. Hayashi, "China risks becoming Asia's Voldemort", *The Telegraph*, 5 January 2014.

Philippines and Germany, not to build a comfort women statue.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, Abe's Japan promoted a historical narrative of Japan's modernisation and industrialisation in UNESCO at the expense of its relationship with South Korea. As transnational perspectives of memory have emerged in the age of globalisation, Japanese understanding of its successful modernisation can be easily contested by those in other countries. For some Japanese, places like Hashima or Gunkanjima (Battleship Island) signify pieces of the nation's coal-mining history; for Koreans, however, it is where their ancestors were forced to work under Japanese military rule.<sup>26</sup> Although Japanese officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs anticipated adverse reactions from South Korea and a more extensive transnational civil society network over Japan's nomination of Meiji Japan's industrial heritage, including Hashima as World Heritage, the Abe cabinet gave them the go-ahead.<sup>27</sup> At the 2015 World Heritage Committee meeting, in which Japan and South Korea were the representatives of the Asia-Pacific region at that time, the delegates of Japan and South Korea eventually agreed that South Korea would not object to the inscription. In return, Japan would acknowledge the relation of the site to forced labour issues and exhibit such information for those who visit the site. However, the

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<sup>25</sup> R. Ushiyama, "'Comfort Women Must Fall?' Japanese Governmental Responses to 'Comfort Women' Statues around the World", *Memory Studies*, vol. 14, no. 6, 2021, pp. 1255-71.

<sup>26</sup> The forced labour issue is one of the critical historical issues between Japan and South Korea. The Japanese government claims that what Koreans describe as "forced labourers" are drafted workers who received payment for their work, but Koreans disagree. See S.W. Park, "The Politics of Remembrance: The Case of Korean Forced Laborers in the Second World War", in G.W. Shin, S.W. Park, and D. Yang (eds.), *Rethinking Historical Injustice and Reconciliation in Northeast Asia: The Korean Experience*, London and New York, Routledge, 2007, pp. 55-74. For Hashima, see D. Palmer, "Gunkanjima / Battleship Island, Nagasaki: World Heritage Historical Site or Urban Ruins Tourist Attraction?", *The Asia-Pacific Journal / Japan Focus*, vol. 16, iss. 1, no. 4, January 2018.

<sup>27</sup> R. Nakano, "Mobilizing Meiji Nostalgia and Intentional Forgetting in Japan's World Heritage Promotion", *International Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2021, pp. 27-44.

opening of the Industrial Heritage Information Centre in 2020 resulted in severe protests from South Korea, as it presented only testimonies that denied the existence of the forced labour issue.<sup>28</sup> Because this behaviour was deemed insincere, South Korea and UNESCO demanded that Japan keep its promise.<sup>29</sup>

Abe's charm offensive policy elicited diverse responses both within Japan and on the global stage. Japanese right-wing nationalists praised it as bolstering Japanese pride and dignity.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, most policy experts perceived his actions negatively impacted Japan's international reputation and ability to create a desirable international environment. UNESCO even called for Japan to take appropriate measures in response to these concerns, suggesting a significant responsibility on Japan's part.

## Facing Globalising China in UNESCO

While Abe's Japan tended to reduce the historical issues to unreasonable criticism from South Korea and China, this tactic became increasingly unsustainable once the critical voices became globally shared. From this viewpoint, the global power shift involving China extending its worldwide reach and influence was a game changer. Having replaced Japan as the second largest economic power in the world, China started

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<sup>28</sup> E. Boyle, "Shifting borders of memory: Japan's Industrial Heritage Information Centre", *Journal of Cultural Heritage Management and Sustainable Development*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2022, pp.19-31.

<sup>29</sup> In 2023, the World Heritage Center in UNESCO recognised Japan's efforts to fulfill the promises by creating a new memorial space in the Information Center to commemorate the deceased miners including Koreans, while it also encouraged Japan to continue a dialogue with concerned parties.

<sup>30</sup> Koko Kato, the primary advocate for the Sites of Japan's Meiji Industrial Revolution who oversaw the information centre for the Sites in Tokyo, praised former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe as an incredible individual devoted to Japan's national interests. She highlighted his unwavering perspective on history and the nation as commendable qualities. S. Shimbun, "[Masatsu Osorenu Shisei, Hikitsuge](#)" ("Keep a Fearless Stance, Unafraid of Encountering Friction"), 10 September 2022.

investing heavily to grow its influence in United Nations organisations. As China's interactions with international society have grown, the country has also drawn insights from countries like Japan and other prominent soft power players, devising innovative methods to enhance its global standing and connections.

Among these endeavours, UNESCO stands out as the most emblematic organisation in which China has notably elevated its involvement and collaboration. After Xi Jinping became the President of the People's Republic of China in 2013, he chose UNESCO as the first UN organisation to visit. China's financial contribution to UNESCO's annual budget has reached around US\$65 million, the largest among the member states after the US withdrawal from the organisation in 2019.<sup>31</sup> China has also obtained several top management positions in UNESCO, such as Xing Qu as Deputy Director-General and Qian Tang as President of the UNESCO International Bureau of Education.<sup>32</sup> Through the lens of escalating power dynamics, these occurrences can be interpreted as the culmination of China's transformation from a passive observer to a proactive contributor within UNESCO, particularly the World Heritage Committee. It is also an expression that Xi's China promotes not simply its economic relationship but cultural and social relationships with other countries.

Under the gradual but steady increase of China's presence in UNESCO, one of the most symbolic cases for Japan to sense the decline of its soft power *vis-à-vis* China was the inscription of the "Document of Nanjing Massacre" in UNESCO's Memory of the World programme in 2015.<sup>33</sup> Although the inscription

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<sup>31</sup> This might change as the US decided to return to UNESCO in 2023.

<sup>32</sup> G. Guo, "Should China Now Lead UNESCO?", *The Diplomat*, 22 September 2017; and H.Y. Nam, "The UNESCO Unveiled", *Investigative Journalism Reportika*, 2023.

<sup>33</sup> The Nanjing massacre (or what Japanese sometimes call the Nanjing incident) is a critical issue between Japan and China, because China's description of what happened in the city of Nanjing in 1937 made Japan's wartime aggression as

was not due to China's influence but to decisions made by the expert committee of UNESCO's programme, it created a strong impression among Japanese right-wing nationalists that China's historical narrative and interpretation of the Nanjing massacre was prevailing worldwide.<sup>34</sup> Japan intervened in UNESCO's Memory of the World programme to prevent any assessment of another politically sensitive documentary collection for Japan, "Voices of Comfort Women", nominated by a civil society group network.<sup>35</sup> Even so, the weakening of Japan's diplomatic power was felt as the inscription of the Chinese document in the MOW register was irreversible.

Furthermore, in a more subdued and indirect manner, China's promotion of its transnational pre-modern heritage has elicited concerns within Japan. Under the leadership of Xi Jinping, China has undertaken a deliberate endeavour to link its contemporary image with its historical legacy by incorporating pre-modern cultural sites and monuments into the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).<sup>36</sup> Through active engagement with UNESCO's initiatives on studying and preserving the Silk Roads, China has sought to construct a public perception of itself as a "civilisational state", celebrating cultural diversity, open borders, and global interconnectedness while asserting its central role in world affairs.<sup>37</sup>

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synonymous with Germany's Holocaust. For Japan, China's description is far too exaggerated than what the historical evidence informs. See D. Yang, "Convergence or Divergence? Recent Historical Writings on the Rape of Nanjing", *The American Historical Review*, vol. 104, no. 3, June 1999, pp. 842-65.

<sup>34</sup> R. Nakano, "Japan's demands for reforms of UNESCO's memory of the world: the search for mnemonical security", *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, vol. 34, no. 4, pp. 590-607.

<sup>35</sup> K.H. Suh, "History Wars in the Memory of the World: The Documents of the Nanjing Massacre and the 'Comfort Women'", in R. Edmondson, L. Jordan, and A.C. Prodan (eds.), *The UNESCO Memory of the World Programme: Key Aspects and Recent Developments*, Switzerland, Springer, 2020.

<sup>36</sup> T. Winter, *Geocultural Power: China's Quest to Revive the Silk Roads for the Twenty-First Century*, Chicago IL, University of Chicago Press, 2019.

<sup>37</sup> T. Winter, "Civilisations in dialogue? UNESCO and the politics of building

China's emphasis on its centrality in this context may be seen as inevitable, given its possession of numerous monumental structures associated with the Silk Roads. However, for Japan, as the owner of the eastern Silk Roads heritage and a longstanding supporter of UNESCO's Silk Roads projects, China's strong focus on its position and connections with the western routes is alarming. In the Chinese historical and cultural landscape, Nara, the ancient capital of Japan, was quickly forgotten; somehow Nara was not included in the Chinese Silk Road map presented during a subregional workshop on the World Heritage serial nomination for Central Asian Silk Roads in 2007.<sup>38</sup> Although this did not impose an immediate threat to Japan's physical security, discussions among heritage experts and foreign ministry officials ensued regarding the necessity for diplomatic efforts to ensure Japan's inclusion in UNESCO's Silk Road programme.

Japan's interest in and support for the Silk Roads heritage predates China's. Just as UNESCO was attracted to the Silk Roads theme as a symbol of East and West cultural connections, Japan was also drawn to the transregional history of the ancient trade routes that commoners and tradespeople crossed over time.<sup>39</sup> When Japan entered a new era of international exposure and engagement during Imperial Japan, Japanese historians and cultural intellectuals started exploring their nation's history and cultural ties with continental Asia. A comprehensive report in 1957 entitled "Research on Japan's Contribution to the History of Eastern and Western Cultural Interactions", submitted for UNESCO's Major Project for the Mutual Appreciation of Cultural Values between the East and West, showcased the significant presence of Japanese academics in the field of Silk

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East and West relations", *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2022, pp. 259-73.

<sup>38</sup> R. Nakano, "A Geocultural Power Competition in UNESCO's Silk Roads Project: China's Initiatives and the Responses from Japan and South Korea", *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, 2022.

<sup>39</sup> Winter (2022).

Roads archaeology and history during that era.<sup>40</sup> While the enchanting imagery of the Silk Roads thrived through museums, various forms of entertainment, and artistic creations, post-war Japan attributed significant importance to the Silk Roads as a cherished legacy of peace and humanity. In 1988, as it grew more conscious of its global standing, Japan took an active role in UNESCO's ten-year project, "Integral Study of the Silk Roads: Roads of Dialogue" expeditions, with one of the expeditions centred around Osaka as a key destination. This involvement demonstrated Japan's commitment to exploring and preserving the heritage of the Silk Roads in other countries, including China.<sup>41</sup> UNESCO/Japan's Funds-in-Trust for the Preservation of the World Cultural Heritage, a fund that Japan deposited with UNESCO in 1989, has also become the primary financial source for the conservation and restoration of sites and monuments related to the Silk Roads.

However, Japan has not leveraged its cultural assets and historical knowledge to construct a Japan-centric historical narrative of transnational connectivity like China. Part of the reason is related to the negative legacy of WWII. As discussed earlier, Japan avoided an assertive posture in diplomacy not to provoke the memory of Imperial Japan. Successive Japanese governments except Abe's adopted a conciliatory approach and soft language to position themselves and shape a preferred international order designed to serve Japan's interests. Another reason is a structural problem that prevents the government from leading its cultural diplomacy. While the Ministry of Foreign Affairs deals with its diplomatic part, such as negotiation

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<sup>40</sup> Japanese National Commission for UNESCO, *Research in Japan in History of Eastern and Western Cultural Contacts: Its Development and Present Situation*, Japanese Commission for UNESCO, 1957.

<sup>41</sup> F. Jing, "Serial transnational world heritage nomination of the Silk Roads", in R.C.-H. Lin, Y. Peshkov, and N. Turekulova (eds.), *Central Asian Serial Nominations: Central Asian Silk Roads*, UNESCO World Heritage Centre, pp. 5-7; and Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Preservation of the World Cultural Heritage Projects through UNESCO Japanese Funds-in-Trust", 2021.

and communication with other state parties in UNESCO, the Cultural Agency in the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology selects and manages heritage matters. Japan's promotion of the Meiji industrial heritage, which presented nationalistic elements of the Abe administration, was an exceptional case in which the central government created a new committee dedicated to industrial heritage.<sup>42</sup> However, this attempt was rather inward-looking and damaging to the diplomatic relationship with other countries. While the popularity of Japanese culture continues to mark Japan's tourism and cultural exchange, it only has a limited impact on Japan's effort to create a desirable international order that serves Japan's interests.

For now, the Sino-Japanese rivalry over Silk Road heritage assistance and conservation does not culminate in conflicts. The current situation is more like the two countries' international assistance running in parallel to achieve the same objective: to project a good image of the country and increase the country's presence in target areas through heritage conservation activities. Because this is not a direct battle or zero-sum game, there is even a chance to collaborate to conserve the Silk Road's heritage in the future. Nevertheless, Japan is alarmed by China's new Silk Roads initiatives because this rivalry has broader implications beyond a mere leadership question over the Silk Roads heritage and UNESCO. Japan is losing its global edge as China does what Japan used to champion.<sup>43</sup> As China's international cultural assistance surpassed Japan's, Japan can no longer claim itself as the leading cultural power in Asia. Xi Jinping's emphasis on people-to-people relationships also detracts from Japan's long-standing image as a friendly nation, a focus that has been central since the Fukuda Doctrine.

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<sup>42</sup> Nakano (2021).

<sup>43</sup> K. Schulze, "Risks of Sameness, the 'Rise of China' and Japan's Ontological Security," in S. Maslow, R. Mason, and P. O'shea (eds.), *Risk State: Japan's Foreign Policy in an Age of Uncertainty*, Farnham and Burlington, VT, Ashgate, 2015, pp. 101-16.

Under the current circumstances, the most effective strategy for Japan is to support other historically significant countries and regions that possess the Silk Roads heritage to prevent the domination of the Sinocentric historical narrative in the world. Japan's strength exists in the rich ground of anthropological knowledge and experiences in heritage restoration and protection, as well as its academic connections with heritage experts and historians in other countries. Compared to China's top-down use of the Silk Roads heritage and Sinocentric transnational narrative to promote its national interests, Japan can balance out China by supporting the expert-level initiatives of Central Asian countries to nominate other routes of the ancient Silk Roads. The recent project on Central Asia's Silk Roads heritage nomination, supported by Japanese Funds-in-Trust, signals such an ambition.<sup>44</sup>

Moreover, Japan needs to find a way to differentiate what is unique about Japan and shape a desirable international environment for the country. In this sense, Abe's Japan may have damaged its international reputation by persistently pursuing its national narrative in cultural heritage promotion. Still, it scored high in developing a new vision of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs presents the FOIP as a broad geographical space that connects two continents (Asia and Africa) and two oceans (the Pacific and Indian Oceans) in which freedom, the rule of law, and the market economy, free from force or coercion, is respected.<sup>45</sup> In this vision, Japan is positioned to promote quality infrastructure development, trade, and investment and enhance this landscape's business environment and human

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<sup>44</sup> For example, see UNESCO, "Silk Roads World Heritage Serial and Transnational Nomination in Central Asia: A UNESCO/Japanese Funds-in-Trust Project"; UNESCO, "Expert Meeting launches Phase III of the UNESCO/Japan Funds-in-Trust Project: Support Silk Roads World Heritage Nomination(s) Process", 23 February 2022.

<sup>45</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Free and Open Indo-Pacific", 24 April 2023.

development. While China promoted an alternative paradigm of globalisation rooted in a discourse of civilisation, peace, and harmony, Japan reasserted its commitment to international law and multilateralism – a core legacy of the Westphalian state system. This emphasis distinguished Japan from China and brings a certain appeal to other Asian countries that are sceptical of the Western discourse of human rights and democracy due to their colonial experiences under Western imperialism.<sup>46</sup>

## Concluding Thought

Since 1945, Japan has developed its image as a peace-loving, cultured nation while maintaining a conciliatory approach to other countries to shape a favourable international environment. As its economy experienced significant growth, Japan strategically leveraged economic development as a primary means of building good relations with other countries, but its focus on culture to cultivate trust and friendship among its Asian neighbours became crucial to Japan's ascendance to a more prominent role in the Asia-Pacific region. However, considering China's recent ascendance on the global stage, the Japanese government, particularly under right-wing nationalists like Abe, began adopting a more proactive stance in asserting its position even over the sensitive issues related to Japanese wartime aggression. This shift sought to rekindle a leading national image reminiscent of the Meiji era. Consequently, Japan under Abe displayed an unprecedentedly strong posture in response to critical voices from China and South Korea regarding cultural heritage linked to WWII memories.

Japan and China appear to be following a similar historical trajectory. Both nations initially rose to economic prominence and then established themselves as nations with rich cultures and traditions, striving to overcome the negative perception of

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<sup>46</sup> R. Nakano, "Japan and the liberal international order: rules-based, multilateral, inclusive and localized", *International Affairs*, vol. 99, no. 4, July 2023, pp. 1421-38.

being mere economic exploiters. However, a key distinction lies in how China has managed to stake its claim on the transregional heritage discourse, positioning it as an integral part of global civilisations. In contrast, Japan's historical baggage, notably its regional "co-prosperity" sphere associated with military and political expansion, has hindered its efforts. China's unique advantage lies in its ability and cultural resources to emphasise the interconnectedness of the Chinese nation with the world, based on the historical narratives of the ancient Silk Roads. China's multifaceted approach, bridging geopolitical, geoeconomic, and geocultural domains, has culminated in a powerful historical narrative centring on China. This narrative carries more weight than Japan's cultural attempts to shape a historical narrative of its nation.

Nonetheless, Japan plays a distinctive role in shaping the regional international order through its vision of the FOIP. This vision offers developing countries an alternative perspective on the significance of supporting a rules-based international order. As a democratic nation that aims to overcome its historical baggage, Japan strongly emphasises the importance of international law and sovereign equality, cautioning others that adherence to the rule of law is the only means to safeguard independence and prevent conflicts. In the cultural realm, Japan's engagement in UNESCO carries broader and long-term implications for its global posture. To garner support from other nations in shaping a more favourable international environment, Japan's strategy to uphold its moral authority must exemplify a law-abiding, transparent, and multilateral approach to international cultural cooperation.

Notably, Japan's ability to function effectively as a regional cultural power hinges on its management of historical issues. The handling of forced labour issues, particularly concerning the World Heritage nomination of the Sado Goldmine, serves as a litmus test for Japan's future actions.<sup>47</sup> Like Hashima or

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<sup>47</sup> N. Johnsen, "The Sado Gold Mine and Japan's 'History War' Versus the

Battleship Island, this historic site is associated with the memory of Korean forced labour, and protests erupted in Korea when Japan nominated it during the Abe era. While the Japan-South Korea relationship has notably improved since Yoon Suk-Yeol assumed office in 2022, domestic opinions in South Korea remain divided regarding the president's perceived "pro-Japan" political stance. To maintain a lasting positive relationship with South Korea, Japan must be attuned to the sentiments of Koreans who believe Japan has not adequately addressed historical grievances. Given that some right-wing nationalists in the LDP may advocate for a more assertive stance and outright denial of Korean claims, it is challenging for the Kishida administration to tame those forces and avoid any provocations. Nonetheless, mishandling this historical issue could result in another setback for Japan as a regional cultural power.



## 2. Japan's "Pragmatic" Diplomacy Towards the PRC: Lessons from the Cold-War?

Marco Zappa

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In July 2017, the President of the People's Republic of China (PRC hereafter) Xi Jinping and Japanese Prime Minister (PM) Shinzō Abe met on the sidelines of the Group of 20 (G-20) Summit in Hamburg to discuss the state of bilateral ties between their two countries. It was a key moment in the ephemeral Sino-Japanese rapprochement that culminated in a 4-day state visit to Japan of late PM Li Keqiang (May 2018) to celebrate the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Sino-Japanese Treaty of Peace and Friendship. Citing the healthy growth of a baby panda born in Ueno Zoo, the Japanese PM expressed his hopes for an improvement of PRC-Japan relations (*kankei kaizen*) as a key to maintaining regional and global peace and stability.<sup>1</sup>

Notwithstanding the emerging geoeconomic competition between the two nations,<sup>2</sup> the Abe-Xi rapprochement of 2017-19 can be considered a high point in contemporary Sino-Japanese relations, after the nadir of the 2012 nationalisation of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands by Tokyo and subsequent political

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<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, Nicchū shunō kaidan (Japan-China summit meeting), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 8 July 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Abe went as far as to announce that Japan welcomed the PRC's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and announced case-by-case cooperation provided it satisfied a series of criteria and principles consistent with Japan's own geoeconomic strategy, the 2015 Partnership for Quality Infrastructure (Harris, 2019).

upheaval in the PRC forestalling the November 2012 leadership transition in Beijing.<sup>3</sup> This succession is consistent with patterns of Sino-Japanese interaction since the late 1940s, which are rooted in mutually non-exclusive habits of cooperation (particularly in the economic realm) and competition (on multiple levels: political, technological, military, geoeconomic and symbolic).<sup>4</sup>

For decades, a somewhat twisted expression has been used in Japan's foreign policy-making circles to refer to this phenomenon: separation of politics and economics, or *seikei bunri* in Japanese. Born out of the Cold War context and Japan's early postwar alignment with Washington in the effort to contain international communism, it has proven useful in several instances to frame Japan's relations with the PRC in an acceptable way *vis-à-vis* international allies and portions of Japanese civil society. As pointed out by Suzuki, particularly after the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) in China and the

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<sup>3</sup> K. Nakazawa, "Premier Li Keqiang Reveals China's True Motive: 'China-Japan Relations Have Returned to a Path of Normality'", AJISS-Commentary, Tokyo, JIIA, 29 June 2018; M. Zappa, "Abe, Xi e il nuovo sinocentrismo 'economico'. Gli accordi sino-giapponesi del 2018 in una prospettiva di lunga durata," in G. Amitrano, S. De Maio, and A. Manieri (eds.), *Indagini sul Giappone: nuove prospettive di studio e ricerca*, Napoli, UniorPress, 2023, pp. 423-43.

<sup>4</sup> H.G. Hilpert and R. Haak (eds.), *Japan and China - Cooperation, Competition and Conflict*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2002; C.W. Hughes, "Japan's Response to China's Rise: Regional Engagement, Global Containment, Dangers of Collision", *International Affairs*, vol. 85, no. 4, July 2009, pp. 837-56; C.W. Hughes, "Japan's 'Resentful Realism' and Balancing China's Rise", *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, vol. 9, no. 2, June 2016, pp. 109-50; G. Pugliese and A. Insisa, *Sino-Japanese Power Politics: Might, Money and Minds*, Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2017; G. Pugliese, "The 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' as a Strategic Narrative", *China-US Focus* (blog), 18 February 2019; W. Pascha, "The Quest for Infrastructure Development from a 'Market Creation' Perspective: China's 'Belt and Road', Japan's 'Quality Infrastructure' and the EU's 'Connecting Europe and Asia'", *International Economics and Economic Policy*, vol. 17, no. 3, July 2020, pp. 687-704; H. Yoshimatsu, "Japan's Strategic Response to China's Geo-Economic Presence: Quality Infrastructure as a Diplomatic Tool", *The Pacific Review*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2 January 2023): 148-76.

economic reforms launched by Deng Xiaoping in 1978, Japan has consistently defended the *seikei bunri* principle to foster stable relations with Beijing mainly through economic and business-related gains.<sup>5</sup> Not surprisingly, in 2017, Xi conceded that the economy and Japan-China trade are the “driving force” (*suishinryoku*) of Sino-Japanese ties and highlighted the need for a “practical” cooperation (*jitsumu kyōryoku*).<sup>6</sup>

However, in the light of ongoing PRC-Japan competition and against the backdrop of multi-dimensional US-PRC confrontation for primacy in the Asia-Pacific, to what extent can *seikei bunri* be sustainable?

According to scholars such as Kawashima and Suzuki, since the mid-2000s, the maintenance of *seikei bunri* has become increasingly frail.<sup>7</sup> Despite the Japanese government's purported resolve to keep building “constructive and stable” relations with the PRC, the Asian neighbour is associated with a series of “long-pending issues” (*ken'an*), such as unilateral attempts to alter the status quo in the East and South China Seas, the risk for Taiwan's stability, the suppression of political dissent in Hong Kong, and human rights violations in Xinjiang.<sup>8</sup> This has revealed a sense of anxiety regarding the PRC and, by infringing upon a set

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<sup>5</sup> This staunch pragmatic orientation of Japan's diplomacy towards the PRC soon yielded to international diplomatic pressures following the events of June 1989 in Tiananmen Square, Beijing. Japan reluctantly adhered to international sanctions against the PRC, remarking the conviction that the PRC should not be isolated. Facing US criticism over protecting the PRC and fearing international isolation, the Japanese government toned down its positions on Beijing. Nevertheless, by the end of 1990, Tokyo lifted its yen loan freeze to China. K. Suzuki, “Nihon to Chūgoku ‘keizai anzen hoshō’ no gainen ga taitō shita jijō” (“The conditions for the emergence of the concept of ‘economic security’ between Japan and China”), Tōyō Keizai Online, 6 June 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, *Nicchū shunō kaidan...*, cit.

<sup>7</sup> Suzuki (2022); S. Kawashima, “Anzen Hoshō No Jidai e - 2020 -” (“Toward the Era of Security – 2020 – today”), in A. Takahara et al. (eds.), *Nicchū Kankei 2001-2022 (Japan-China Relations 2001-2022)*, Tōkyō daigaku shuppan kai, 2023.

<sup>8</sup> Y. Hayashi, “Dai 208 kai kokkai ni okeru Hayashi gaimudaijin no gaikō enzetsu” (“Foreign policy speech by Minister of Foreign Affairs Hayashi at the 208 Session of the Diet), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 17 January 2022.

of values seen by Japanese policymakers as key to world peace and stability, has contributed to Japan's ontological insecurity.<sup>9</sup> To confront this perception, Japanese authorities have put in place specific defence mechanisms, at both the discursive and policy levels. Since the late 2000s, Japan's Ministry of Defence (MOD) has been consistently referring to the PRC as a matter of deep concern (*kenen*) in its annual reports for its unilateral attempts to change the status quo,<sup>10</sup> especially considering that the PRC is also a nuclear power.<sup>11</sup>

Most significantly for the argument put forward in this chapter, political frictions between Beijing and Tokyo in the early 2010s, culminating in the latter's nationalisation of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, have resulted in trade disruptions, such as the 2010 embargo on rare earths, a key resource for the Japanese car making sector. Against Beijing's weaponisation of trade, the government of Japan (GOJ) has taken steps toward a "securitisation of China", in the traditional military and economic domains.<sup>12</sup> Particularly, this has resulted in an acceleration of the process of institutional change begun in 2007 with the upgrade of the Japan Defence Agency into the MOD,<sup>13</sup> and in a series of specific measures aimed at strengthening the nation's economic security (*keizai anzen hoshō*). A case in point

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<sup>9</sup> K. Gustafsson and N.C. Krickel-Choi, "Returning to the Roots of Ontological Security: Insights from the Existentialist Anxiety Literature", *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 26, no. 3, 1 September 2020, pp. 875-95.

<sup>10</sup> K. Schulze, "Japan's New Assertiveness: Institutional Change and Japan's Securitization of China", *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, vol. 18, no. 2, 1 May 2018, pp. 221-47; Ministry of Defense of Japan, *Reiwa 2 Nen Ban Bōei Hakusho* (Defense of Japan Annual White Paper 2020), 2020; Ministry of Defense of Japan, *Reiwa 5 Nen Ban Bōei Hakusho* (Defense of Japan Annual White Paper 2023"), Tokyo, 2023.

<sup>11</sup> Y. Hamada, "Reiwa 5 Nenban Bōei Hakusho No Kankō Ni Yosete (On the Publication of the 2023 Annual White Paper," in *Reiwa 5 Nen Ban Bōei Hakusho* (Defense of Japan Annual White Paper 2023), Tokyo, Ministry of Defense of Japan, 2023.

<sup>12</sup> Schulze (2018).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

is the 2018 *de facto* restrictions imposed on Huawei with regard to the supply of 5G network equipment, implemented since late 2018 by the Abe and Yoshihide Suga administrations.<sup>14</sup>

Current PM Fumio Kishida, despite his affiliation with the dovish *Kōchikai* faction within the LDP,<sup>15</sup> has consistently taken a series of steps aimed at strengthening Japan's economic security *vis-à-vis* the PRC. Particularly, in an attempt to prevent future supply chain disruptions such as those of 2020-21 while supporting an albeit limited decoupling from the PRC, in May 2022 he promoted the adoption of a specific law enabling the government of Japan (GOJ) to reduce the possible negative effects of a deteriorating international situation on the national socioeconomic structure by determining secure quotas of essential goods and resources and providing support to private entities or specific measures to ensure their supply, while supporting research and the development of key advanced technologies.<sup>16</sup>

Such developments must be analysed against the backdrop of a comprehensive revision of Japan's security posture in the region. During the second Abe administration (2012-2020), the GOJ adopted a new interpretation of article 9 of Japan's constitution allowing for the recognition of Japan's right to collective self-defence: it established a National Security Council, strengthening the Prime Minister's role in security and foreign policy making and updated the laws governing the

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<sup>14</sup> Suzuki (2022), p. 3; A. Krolkowski and T.H. Hall, "Non-Decision Decisions in the Huawei 5G Dilemma: Policy in Japan, the UK, and Germany", *Japanese Journal of Political Science*, vol. 24, no. 2, June 2023, pp. 171-89.

<sup>15</sup> In the context of factional competition within the LDP for influence over the GOJ, since the mid-1950s, the *Kōchikai* has established itself as the "conservative mainstream" current within the LDP. The group has traditionally prioritised economic development over security, defending the need for Japan to pursue a realistic and pragmatic approach. See K. Zakowski, "Kōchikai of the Japanese Liberal Democratic Party and Its Evolution After the Cold War", *The Korean Journal of International Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2, 31 December 2011, pp. 179-205.

<sup>16</sup> Cabinet Office, *Keizai anzen hoshō suishin hō* (Economic Security Promotion Act), Cabinet Office, Government of Japan, 2021.

Japan Self Defence Forces (JSDF)'s deployment to international peacekeeping operations and in case of attacks against allied powers and even in "grey zone" conflicts.<sup>17</sup>

More recently, Japan has embraced the US-led Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy, which was actually introduced by PM Abe in 2016, and welcomed the revival of regional security frameworks such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), even establishing defence and intelligence exchanges with AUKUS, NATO and the Five Eyes countries.<sup>18</sup> Ultimately, in December 2022, the GOJ moved to approve a sweeping review of the country's three major defence documents, the National Security Strategy (NSS), the National Defence Strategy (NDS) and the Defence Buildup Programme (DBP), resulting in the enhancement of counterattack capacities and in a 27.4% increase in defence spending for fiscal year 2023.<sup>19</sup> In light of these facts, it might be possible to argue that Tokyo has gradually moved closer than ever before to the US's China strategy and further strengthened its role in the Asia-Pacific region's security arrangements. Moreover, Kishida has proceeded to gradually hold down the influence of "China-friendly" figureheads within the LDP such as former LDP Secretary-General Toshihiro Nikai and, more recently, former Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> A.L. Oros, *Japan's Security Renaissance: New Policies and Politics for the Twenty-First Century*, Columbia University Press, 2017.

<sup>18</sup> The AUKUS is a security and defence partnership between the US, Australia and the UK underpinning the US strategy in the Asia-Pacific region within the Indo-Pacific framework. The Five Eyes, in turn, is an intelligence and information sharing network built since 1946 by five major English-speaking countries (the US, the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand). U.S. Department of Defense, "New Uncrewed Undersea Capabilities Strengthen AUKUS Partnership", 13 November 2023; K. Haan and K. Aditham, "What Is the Five Eyes Alliance?", *Forbes Advisor*, 5 October 2023.

<sup>19</sup> H. Tokuchi, "Japan's New National Security Strategy: Background and Challenges", Policy Paper, European University Institute, 2023; Kawashima (2023), p. 80.

<sup>20</sup> According to Japanese press revelations, after the 2021 LDP presidential elections,

For decades, supporters of the *seikei bunri* principle have been instrumental in establishing and maintaining semi-official diplomatic channels with the PRC, safeguarding the cabinet's political approach toward Beijing (as harsh as it may be) without discouraging the business interests which the majority party and cabinet represent.<sup>21</sup> Figures such as Kenzō Matsumura in the 1960s and Toshihiro Nikai in the 2000s, who were members and leaders of minor factions within the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), favoured the emergence of a semi-official diplomacy toward the PRC, which, at any rate, has contributed to reducing Japan's ontological insecurity, granting, for instance, critical trade agreements and the maintenance of good neighbourhood relations.

Against this backdrop, a look back at a critical moment for the application of *seikei bunri* might be useful to discuss the pragmatic and opportunistic nature of the principle since its inception and its intrinsic fragility. In fact, the case presented below focuses on one of the earliest emergences of Japan's ontological insecurity *vis-à-vis* the US and the PRC at a critical time characterised by bilateral efforts to normalise ties, and, concomitantly, by the beginning of Beijing's rise as a nuclear power. This chapter will show that *seikei bunri* was hardly sustainable already in the 1960s

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Nikai is allegedly a "persona non grata" within the current administration, and his faction is marginalised. By contrast, Hayashi, a former chairman of the Japan-China Friendship Diet Members' Union, was reportedly not confirmed as Foreign Minister in the September 2023 cabinet reshuffle for his overtly soft approach to the PRC and out of the suspicion that he could be the object of political manoeuvring by Chinese authorities. See H. Tomokuni and Ō. Takuya, "Kyū Takeshitaha kara kanjichō, Jimin habatsu ni meian, Nikai-ha reigū, dattai kibōmo" ("Secretary-General from former Takeshita faction [winners and losers among LDP factions] Nikai faction's cold treatment, some wish to withdraw"), *Nishi Nippon Shimbun*, 13 November 2021; Y. Fuji, "Hayashi Yoshimasa shi 'kin' naikaku kaizō, hoshu ha torikomi kasaku mo me o hiku 'ronkō gyōshō' nisei giin mo... Abe shi shinrai atsukatta Kihara shi ga bōeishō ni" ("Yoshimasa Hayashi's 'assassination', the cabinet reshuffle and the plan to attract conservatives: an interesting conferral of honors. Even second generation Diet Members. Kihara, an Abe-loyalist, to the Ministry of Defense"), *Zakzak Yūkan Fuji*, 13 September 2023.

<sup>21</sup> Zappa (2023).

due to factors such as the internal workings of foreign policy making in Japan since the early postwar period, (e.g. the influence of non-government actors, such as opposition parties, or factions within the majority on the government's decisions), the agency of individual leaders on the narratives and implementation of foreign policy,<sup>22</sup> US diplomatic pressures and processes of legitimation within the international order based on adherence to a certain set of shared rules and institutions.<sup>23</sup>

### **The Liberal Gospel: The Origins of *Seikei Bunri***

The idea of a Sino-Japanese rapprochement started floating around in Japan's policymaking arena in the early 1950s, once the country regained its sovereignty after signing the San Francisco Treaty in 1951, ending a 7-year US military occupation. Two of the major figures in Japan's postwar politics, namely Shigeru Yoshida and Hayato Ikeda, Japan's PMs between 1946 and 1954 and 1960 and 1964 respectively, defended, though not publicly, given Washington's tight scrutiny of Tokyo's foreign policy, the need for Japan to regain access to mainland China's resources and markets.

On top of being considered the "father" of Japan's postwar foreign policy, Yoshida is also credited with the creation of the idea of separating economics and politics in dealings with the People's Republic of China (PRC) after its founding in 1949. A 1951 US Department of State document reports that Yoshida believed that "in the long run the Chinese would adopt the attitude that 'war is war and trade is trade' and that it would be possible for a reasonable degree of trade to take place between Japan and China".<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> G. Pugliese, *Leadership and Japan's China Policy*, Doctor of Philosophy Thesis, Cambridge, University of Cambridge, 2016.

<sup>23</sup> M. Dian, *La Cina, gli Stati Uniti e il futuro dell'ordine internazionale*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2021.

<sup>24</sup> C.W. Braddick, "In the Shadow of the Monolith: Yoshida Shigeru and Japan's

This vision is also reflected in several internal MOFA documents of the early 1950s that lamented the loss of China after Japan's defeat. In a 1951 letter to John Foster Dulles, Yoshida wrote that the Japanese government ultimately aspired to establish "trade and political relations with our neighbour China" it being "in our best and realistic interest" adding, however, that for the time being Tokyo had "no intention of establishing bilateral relations with the People's Republic of China".<sup>25</sup> Having to ensure US protection and economic aid for the sake of Japan's national interest, Yoshida moved to recognise Taipei as *one* of the governments of China, rather than *the only* one, granting his government room for relatively free manoeuvring towards the PRC, under the cover of a fully-fledged US-alignment.<sup>26,27</sup>

Nonetheless, during much of the 1950s, private trade, parliamentary delegations, non-governmental trade missions and agreements were tolerated and allowed by the GOJ.<sup>28</sup> In this period, however, a major role was played by the Socialist Party, and particularly its leader Inejirō Asanuma, who emerged as a reliable intermediary with the Chinese authorities for businesspeople dealing in made-in-China goods, such as lacquer and wood oil, which were in demand on the Japanese market.<sup>29</sup>

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China Policy During the Early Cold War Years, 1949-54", in *The Japanese Empire in East Asia and Its Postwar Legacy*, Monographien Aus Dem Deutschen Institut Für Japanstudien, München, Iudicium Verlag, S, 1998, p. 213.

<sup>25</sup> T. Tamaki, "The Persistence of Reified Asia as Reality in Japanese Foreign Policy Narratives", *The Pacific Review*, vol. 28, no. 1, January 2015, pp. 30-31.

<sup>26</sup> Pugliese (2016), p. 88.

<sup>27</sup> According to Braddick, against the US Department of State's opinion, Yoshida was convinced that Japan could exercise influence over the PRC such that it would ultimately pull it out of the USSR's domination. From the perspective of the US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, a PRC-Japan rapprochement could create a Sino-Japanese global "third force" and, therefore, had to be avoided, in favour of the hard wedge strategy, identifying the PRC as the major regional threat for Tokyo while pushing the PRC toward the USSR to accrue its dependence from Moscow, see Braddick (1998), pp. 214-15.

<sup>28</sup> M. Itoh, *Pioneers of Sino-Japanese Relations: Liao and Takasaki*, Springer, 2012, pp. 96-97.

<sup>29</sup> T. Kimura, "LT Bōeki No Kiseki: Kansei Nicchū 'Minkan' Bōeki Kyōtei Ga

The end of the Great Leap Forward in China and the instalment of an economic recovery and growth-oriented cabinet led by Hayato Ikeda in 1960 imparted a new momentum to postwar Sino-Japanese relations. The PM himself was reportedly supportive of establishing official trade relations with the PRC but had to “save face *vis-à-vis* the United States”. For this reason, he chose Kenzō Matsumura, an LDP MP from Toyama Prefecture, as the government’s sole China hand.<sup>30</sup> Matsumura is credited with pioneering the normalisation of China-Japan ties. Along with him was Tatsunosuke Takasaki, a former businessman who had worked in Manchuria under the Japanese occupation between the 1930s and 1940s and then emerged as PM Ichirō Hatoyama’s key advisor on Chinese affairs and Japan’s envoy to the Asian-African Conference in Bandung, Indonesia, in 1955. Both Matsumura and Takasaki could be considered heralds of the *seikei bunri* principle.

One quote by Matsumura clearly represents his interpretation of the idea of *seikei bunri*.

As for the question of the inseparability of politics and the economy, I don’t know to what extent we shall separate them. Japan ought to take its responsibility as a liberal country, and Communist China has its own stance as a strong member of the communist countries. But both China and Japan are Asian countries; therefore, a common goal must be found.<sup>31</sup>

As this quote poignantly shows, in Matsumura’s vision, Japan and the PRC had taken divergent political courses but shared a common “Asian” origin and “should work together for common prosperity”.

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Mezashita Mono (The Legacy of the LT’Trade: The Aims of a State-manufactured “Private” Trade Pact)”, *Historia: Journal of Osaka Historical Association*, vol. 216, 20 August 2009, p. 112.

<sup>30</sup> Itoh (2012), pp. 112-13.

<sup>31</sup> Wilson Center Digital Archive, “Matsumura Kenzo’s Remarks on His Visit to China and the Peoples’ Responses”, October 1959.

Takasaki too admittedly saw politics as an "obstacle" to the construction of mutually beneficial trade relations. Particularly, Takasaki seemed keen to repay China of the sufferings inflicted by Japan's military intervention in the 1930s, through aid and trade, much in the same spirit as the US helped Japan in the aftermath of World War 2. Arguing that, from a Japanese perspective, political divisions between Taiwan and the PRC were meaningless, he conveyed his ideas to US congressmen and senators during a 1960 trip. "Like you, the Japanese do not like communists; however (...), [w]hile [it] is a political ally of the United States, Japan cannot survive without economic relations with China and the Soviet Union".<sup>32</sup> In fact, separating politics from economics was needed to enhance trade as "the best messenger of peace".<sup>33</sup> Based on this conviction and inspired by his experience as an entrepreneurial leader in Japanese-occupied Manchuria at the end of the Pacific War, Takasaki nurtured personal ties with Chinese PM Zhou Enlai, whom he had met at the 1955 Bandung Conference, and one of his key advisors, Liao Chengzhi, a Japan-born CCP official who later oversaw the Committee of Overseas Chinese Affairs. The trust he was able to win over led to the signing of the Liao-Takasaki (L-T) Trade Agreement of late 1962 which heralded the *de facto* normalisation of ties a decade later. Moreover, by supporting the L-T Trade Agreement, the government and the LDP could finally marginalise the JSP and bring the then limited China trade under its supervision.<sup>34</sup>

If Takasaki arranged the economic and financial aspects of the trade agreement, it was Matsumura who pulled the political strings. Having received PM Ikeda's support, between the late 1950s and early 1960s, he visited China twice, meeting with prime minister Zhou Enlai and discussing ways to enhance bilateral ties.

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<sup>32</sup> Itoh (2012), p. 112.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 115.

<sup>34</sup> Kimura (2009).

Considering the above, it is clear that for liberals such as Takasaki and Matsumura, postwar Japan-China relations had to be built upon a non-ideological approach to diplomacy and, above all, pragmatism, prioritising mutual economic benefits. Against the backdrop of the transformations in policymaking processes characterised by the ascendance of ministerial bureaucracy and LDP faction politics,<sup>35</sup> Takasaki and Matsumura succeeded in influencing cabinet-level decisions.

At any rate, bilateral trade under the L-T framework reached US\$100 billion in late 1963 (mostly Japanese steel, fertilisers, insecticides and agricultural machinery in exchange for Chinese soybeans, maize, coal, iron ore, salt and tin), leading to the establishment of liaison offices (functioning as *de facto* embassies) and to the expansion of the agreement on industrial plant exports.<sup>36</sup> When put into practice, however, this approach was all but easy. After the L-T Agreement was made public, PM Ikeda had to reassure Taiwan, the only China that Japan officially recognised under the San Francisco Treaty, by way of former PM Yoshida, that Tokyo was not considering extending financial aid and the transfer of capital goods to the PRC. In addition, Ikeda could neither prevent a port visit by a US nuclear submarine in November 1964 nor allow the entry into Japan of CCP delegates ready to attend the eighth congress of the Japanese Communist Party three years earlier.<sup>37</sup> Since the early 1960s, on top of establishing friendly relations with China for the sake of Japan's economic security in terms of raw material supply, it was essential for Japanese decision makers to "save face" with their major regional and global allies, specifically the US, and eventually align their policies with external diplomatic pressures. In this sense, the separation of politics and economics was a means to bypass US Cold War restrictions while maintaining access to Washington's defence and economic support.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Pugliese (2016), p. 89.

<sup>36</sup> Itoh (2012), pp. 117-19.

<sup>37</sup> D.T. Yasutomo, "Sato's China Policy, 1964-1966", *Asian Survey*, vol. 17, no. 6, 1977, p. 538.

<sup>38</sup> It is worth noting that for the Chinese side the principle of the separation

## The 1964–66 Chinese Nuclear Tests: The Early Crisis of *Seikei Bunri*

Momentum for the long-awaited bilateral normalisation fizzled out with the demise of the Ikeda cabinet in November 1964 and the rise of Eisaku Satō to the top of the LDP and Japan's executive body. Satō, Japan's second longest serving PM in postwar history and former PM Nobusuke Kishi's birth brother, hailed from a more Taiwan-lenient conservative faction within the LDP. From an institutional point of view, Satō could be described as the harbinger of *kantei*-led policymaking and diplomacy based on "brain trust"<sup>39</sup> which became key to the political ascendance of Shinzō Abe between 2012 and 2020.<sup>40</sup>

In the earlier phase of his 8-year tenure, given his relative inexperience in foreign policy making, he adopted a prudent China policy based on precedent.<sup>41</sup> Nonetheless, as opposed to Ikeda, Satō appeared reluctant to concede government financing to China through Japan's Export-Import (EXIM) bank for the transfer of machinery to produce synthetic fibres in the PRC as agreed upon by the L-T agreement liaison offices.<sup>42</sup> Satō's course of action was in part influenced by the emergence of the "China threat", following the October 1964 Chinese nuclear test.

The event, which was anticipated by the US Secretary of State Dean Rusk in early 1964, caught Japan by surprise and

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between economics and politics did not apply until 1962, as the Chinese government explicitly required Japanese businessmen to follow three principles that highlighted the inseparability of politics and business, namely as not being openly adversarial toward the PRC, not joining conspiracies to create two Chinas, and not obstructing the normalisation of Sino-Japanese relations. See Itoh (2012), p. 96.

<sup>39</sup> R. Hattori and E. Sato, *Japanese Prime Minister, 1964-72: Okinawa, Foreign Relations, Domestic Politics and the Nobel Prize*, Routledge, 2020.

<sup>40</sup> G. Pugliese, "Japan's Kissinger? Yachi Shōtarō: The State Behind the Curtain", *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 90, no. 2, 1 June 2017, pp. 231-51.

<sup>41</sup> Yasutomo (1977).

<sup>42</sup> Mayumi Itoh, *Pioneers of Sino-Japanese Relations: Liao and Takasaki*. (Place of publication not identified: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 123–24.

pushed diplomats and decision makers to find a way around the “China issue” (*Chūgoku mondai*). A series of editorials in the *Asahi Shimbun*, one of Japan’s major liberal newspapers, in late 1964 discussed the effect of Beijing’s nuclear tests on its relations with Tokyo. One commentary, which appeared in the *Asahi* on 18 October 1964, a few days after the PRC government’s announcement of the successful conclusion of its first nuclear test, condemned the event as a “challenge to international peace” and called for greater US and USSR commitment to international denuclearisation, while maintaining that the nuclear tests did not constitute a direct military threat to Japan.<sup>43</sup>

Through its chief cabinet secretary (CCS) Zenkō Suzuki, the government of Japan, however, denounced China’s decision as constituting a risk for Japan’s own peace and stability and causing environmental damage to neighbouring countries (including Japan). It is worth noting that the CCS statement points to the military significance of the nuclear test, conducted with contempt for the international community’s efforts in the early and mid-1960s toward a reduction in the worlds’ nuclear armaments and Japanese public opinion on nuclear weapons. Concomitantly, the document highlighted that the country’s security was guaranteed by the US-Japan security treaty.<sup>44</sup>

In this regard, the first instalment in a series titled “China’s nuclear test and Japan” offered an insight from within the Japanese policymaking arena. In fact, the article noted, soon after Beijing’s announcement, Japanese diplomats started considering two ways to respond to the PRC’s provocation: an assertive one, based on containing a belligerent China and a more moderate one, based on persuasion, aimed at having Beijing embrace the international law on nuclear weapons. A sense, however, that

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<sup>43</sup> *Asahi Shimbun*, “Shasetsu: Chūgoku Kakujikken No Jūdaina Eikyō (Editorial: Important Consequences of the Chinese Nuclear Test),” October 18, 1964.

<sup>44</sup> MOFA, “Genbaku Jikken Ni Tsuite No Kanbōchōkan Danwa (Chief Cabinet Secretary’s Declaration on the Nuclear Test)” (MOFA, October 17, 1964), Sekai to Nihon, <https://worldjpn.net/index.html>.

this constituted a serious and urgent matter started spreading in relevant Japanese ministries. "The only thing that is clear is that the government too should look for a new direction in foreign policy in order to respond to an international situation which looks extremely fluid, at a time of transition", highlighted the *Asahi* piece. According to the report, Kenzō Matsumura supported the idea of Japan's proactive engagement to reduce tensions in Asia against the backdrop of the Sino-Soviet split, given its position as a "middle agent" (*kakebashi*) between Asia and "the West". However, quoted by the same article, Masayoshi Ōhira, FM under Ikeda between 1962 and 1964, argued that Japan could not afford to act freely on the "China issue" as opposed to other international powers, given the several hurdles to its international action, namely its ties to Taipei and the US-Japan security treaty. Raising international awareness based on its experience as the only country to have suffered two atomic bombings seemed to be ineffective as a means to stop China from conducting new nuclear tests.<sup>45</sup> In a subsequent instalment, Matsumura's regret for the nuclear test and his resolve to keep working for the normalisation of ties are reported against the backdrop of emerging international competition to gain access to the Chinese market.

Besides the political reactions to the test, the *Asahi* reported altered values in radioactivity levels across Japan following the Chinese nuclear test, and featured articles regarding the possibility of radioactive rains on Tokyo, thus discussing the environmental consequences of the event. Quoting a researcher investigating the spike in radioactivity observed in Niigata Prefecture, one article concluded that it was not natural, but rather related to the "death dust" (*shi no hai*) released from the Chinese nuclear test and carried over by air currents and winds blowing from the continent.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> "Chūgoku No Kakujikken to Nihon (1) Tenkanki, Igaini Hayai Ka? Taibei Hatsugenryoku Kyōka Mo Kadai (China's Nuclear Test and Japan (1) An Unexpected Early Transition?)" , *Asahi Shimbun*, 18 October 1964.

<sup>46</sup> "Mata Tsuyoi Hōshanō, Koyama Kyōju: Chūgoku No 'Shi No Hai' to Suitei

The premier-designate Satō's positions on the "China issue", as reported again by the *Asahi* in November that year, seemed consistent with those of his predecessors, except for Satō's pledge to adopt an approach based on "pragmatic policy choices" (*gutaisaku*) regardless of the previously future-oriented direction of Japan's relations to Asia. The report does not explicitly mention the nuclear test issue, nor its consequences on Japan's China policy, nor the afore-mentioned effects on the environment, but detailed Satō's intention to coordinate with the US and preserve Japan's "moral ties" (*dōgitekina kankei*) with Taiwan, stressing the need to act "one day later than the US" (*Beikoku yori ichinichi osoku*) rather than "one day earlier".<sup>47</sup> At the opening of the January 1965 regular session of the Diet, Satō highlighted the importance of acting "cautiously" on the problem of China representation, based on an unbiased judgement, while maintaining friendly ties with Taiwan and still promoting the idea of separation between economy and politics in dealings with Communist China.<sup>48</sup>

## The Emergence of the "China Threat" Narrative and Satō's Diplomatic "Coups"

A narrative turning point occurred in May 1965, after China's second nuclear test. Even on the liberal *Asahi*, China starts being framed as a "threat" (*kyōi*). In a particularly interesting dialogic article reporting on an internal editorial meeting, the

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(High Level of Radiation, Again. Prof. Koyama: Possibly China's Death Dust)", *Asahi Shimbun*, 19 October 1964.

<sup>47</sup> "Satō Shin Naikaku No Kadai (Naka). Gaikō: Ajia Ni Gutaisaku o, Nicchū 'Maemuki' Dake de Sumanu" ("Satō's New Cabinet's Agenda (part 2 of 3). Foreign Policy: Concrete Policies Toward Asia and the Impossibility of Future-Oriented Japan-China Relations Only"), *Asahi Shimbun*, 11 November 1964.

<sup>48</sup> E. Satō, "Satō Eisaku Naikaku Sōri Daijin Shisei Hōshin Enzetsu, Dai 48 Kai (Tsūkai)" ("Programmatic Speech by Prime Minister Satō Eisaku at the 48th Session (Regular) of the Diet"), GRIPS, University of Tokyo, 25 January 1965, Sekai to Nihon.

possibility of a Chinese attack deploying the Tupolev TU-4 and TU-16 type bombers on Japan and on the US Pacific fleet is discussed as a direct security menace, even considering the protection offered by the US-Japan security treaty to Tokyo.<sup>49</sup>

In this regard, there might have been a correlation between the increased threat perception and the public statements by the Japanese PM in the aftermath of the incident. At a hearing in front of the special committee for Japan-Korea relations in the Upper House of the Diet in May 1965, Satō himself described China as a threat to Japan's own security. "Even without nuclear weapons, the PRC's recent behaviour would cause great concern, and it is natural that we feel threatened by Communist China since it has nuclear weapons". This was a departure from Japan's earlier posture toward China. As opposed to the USSR, the latter seemed to want to break away from the principle of peaceful coexistence with non-Communist countries which was central to Japanese early postwar diplomacy.<sup>50</sup> A few weeks later, Satō proceeded to a cabinet reshuffle which would soon take a pro-Taiwan configuration and refocused foreign policy on the normalisation of Japan-South Korea relations, another irritant to Japan-PRC ties.<sup>51</sup>

In January 1966, speaking in front of the plenary session of the Lower House, Satō reiterated the need for "prudence" (*shinchō*) in dealing with the PRC, preserving Japan's national interest. On that occasion, referring to the 1965 nuclear test, Satō underscored the fact that the PRC had taken a course of action that would isolate it from the rest of international society.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>49</sup> "Nikaime No Chūgoku Kakujiikken: Honsha Kisha Zadankai" ("China's Second Nuclear Test: Our Reporters Discuss"), *Asahi Shimbun*, 15 May 1965.

<sup>50</sup> "Aija Gaikō de Kappatsu Rongi: San'in Nikkan'I" ("Energic Debate on Japan's Asia Policy: House of Councilors Special Committee for the Normalization of Japan-Korea Relation's"), *Asahi Shimbun*, 25 May 1965.

<sup>51</sup> Yasutomo (1977), p. 537.

<sup>52</sup> E. Satō, "Satō Eisaku Naikaku Sōri Daijin Shisei Hōshin Enzetsu, Dai 51 Kai (Tsūkai)" ("Programmatic Speech by Prime Minister Satō Eisaku at the 51st Session (Regular) of the Diet"), GRIPS, University of Tokyo, 28 January 1966,

In December, Satō reiterated the importance of stability in the PRC not just for the country's own domestic situation but for the rest of Asia, indirectly criticising the isolationist foreign policy course chosen by Mao Zedong against the backdrop of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76).

If the situation in China becomes unstable, achieving actual peace and prosperity in Asia would be difficult [...] But, actually, the foreign policy that Communist China is currently pursuing is hindering her possibilities to be accepted in the international community and the improvement of Sino-Japanese ties that we hope for.<sup>53</sup>

At the foundations of this narrative might have been Satō's affiliation with a pro-Taiwan conservative faction within the LDP and his preference for the maintenance of the status quo on the problem of China's representation in multilateral settings. Moreover, the instability narrative reflected Satō's aim to upgrade Japan's defence and security architecture. Undoubtedly, the Chinese nuclear tests of 1964, 1965 and 1966 increased Satō's sense of insecurity.<sup>54</sup> Against this backdrop, Satō would use the purported acquisition of nuclear capacities for Japan as diplomatic leverage *vis-à-vis* the US. Confident that Washington would oppose Japan's transition towards a nuclear power, the Japanese leader sought the US's unrestricted commitment to defend Japan in case of an attack from a Communist enemy and, in fact, Satō obtained it in early 1965 after a meeting with the US President Lyndon Johnson. Although China was still lagging in nuclear development, the threat of a nuclear attack from China or possibly from the Soviet Union was perceived as real. Thus, Satō's insistence on China's nuclear threat was

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Sekai to Nihon.

<sup>53</sup> E. Satō, "Satō Eisaku Naikaku Sōri Daijin Shoshin Hyōmei Enzetsu, Dia 53 Kai (Rinjikai)" ("Programmatic Speech by Prime Minister Satō Eisaku at the 53rd Session (Extraordinary) of the Diet"), 15 December 1966, Sekai to Nihon, <https://worldjpn.net/>.

<sup>54</sup> A. Kusunoki, "The Satō Cabinet and the Making of Japan's Non-Nuclear Policy", *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations*, vol. 15, 2008, p. 31.

instrumental to increasing the credibility of the US-Japan alliance, notwithstanding the intrinsic asymmetry involved in it.<sup>55</sup>

However, on this basis, Washington and Tokyo embarked on a long negotiation leading to (1) the 1968 confirmation of Japan's Three Non-Nuclear Principles; (2) the signing of the NPT by Japan, and (3) the 1972 reversion of Okinawa to Japan and the removal of nuclear stockpiles from the islands, secretly agreeing on the fact that ports were excluded from the no-introduction clause, that is, US nuclear armed vessels could enter and moor in Japanese ports without previously consulting with Japanese authorities, and nuclear weapons could be reintroduced by US forces to Okinawa in case of an emergency. In other words, in exchange for its pledge to contribute to international non-proliferation on top of the Three Non-Nuclear Principles, the Satō cabinet obtained the renewal of Washington's commitment to defend Japan against the Chinese and Soviet threats and an upgrade in Japan's strategic role in the Asia-Pacific region. In this context, of particular importance is the 1969 pledge to regard Taiwan's and South Korea's security as indivisible from that of Japan.<sup>56</sup>

Hence, Japanese business leaders who had benefitted from the L-T Trade Agreement since 1962 and their political advocates struggled to find ways to keep the existing semi-official trade arrangements operating. In February 1968, at the height of the Cultural Revolution, entrepreneur Kaheita Okazaki (All Nippon Airways) and two liberal LDP politicians, Yoshimi Furui and Seiichi Tagawa, were allowed into China to discuss the renewal of the L-T Trade Agreement, despite the demise of Liao Chengzi, marginalised in the context of the Cultural Revolution. Faced with criticism from their Chinese counterparts, the Japanese delegation was pushed into extending its "deep understanding" of the inseparability of

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., pp. 31-32.

<sup>56</sup> Kusunoki (2008), pp. 49-50.

economics and politics, that is, *de facto* renouncing the *seikei bunri* principle, in exchange for a 1-year extension of the L-T Trade Agreement, to be renegotiated yearly until 1972 through subsequent memoranda.<sup>57</sup>

Interestingly, by early 1970, Satō showed a more optimistic attitude toward the RPC in his speeches to the Diet, despite the continuation of the PRC's nuclear programme. In his February 1970 address, Satō again called for “particular attention” (*ryūi*) toward the PRC, thus somehow tempering the “threat” perception of Beijing, while signalling that the government of the neighbouring country was expected to take a more “conciliatory and constructive posture” (*kyōchōteki katsu kensetsutekina taido*) toward Tokyo.<sup>58</sup> This was especially true after the new Nixon administration in Washington took over and demonstrated its resolve to scale down US military involvement in Vietnam and engage in talks with Beijing in the context of the Sino-Soviet tug of war of the late 1960s.<sup>59</sup>

In his last address to the Diet as PM in January 1972, Satō seemed to anticipate the process of diplomatic normalisation which would be pushed forward by his successor Kakuei Tanaka. China is described as Japan's “largest neighbour country” with which Japan had entertained exchanges for at least 2,000 years. According to Satō, “stable Sino-Japanese ties in the long run would be of great importance for peace in Asia and in the rest of the world”. Tensions over China's nuclear tests seemed to have been shelved and the adversarial name Communist China (*Chūkyō*), found in previous speeches, is replaced by the official country name “People's Republic of China” (*Chūka jinmin kyōwa koku* in Japanese). The Japanese

<sup>57</sup> Kimura (2009), p. 121.

<sup>58</sup> E. Satō, “Satō Eisaku Naikaku Sōri Daijin Shisei Hōshin Enzetsu, Dai 63 Kai (Tokubetsukai)” (“Programmatic Speech by Prime Minister Satō Eisaku at the 63rd Session (Special) of the Diet”), GRIPS, University of Tokyo, 13 February 1970, Sekai to Nihon, <https://worldjpn.net/>.

<sup>59</sup> G. Warner, “Nixon, Kissinger and the Rapprochement with China, 1969-1972”, *International Affairs*, vol. 83, no. 4, 2007, pp. 763-81.

PM then pledged to proceed swiftly with the establishment of "friendly neighbourhood ties" based on mutual respect and the peaceful resolution of controversies in the hope of contributing to the region's peace, economic and cultural exchanges.<sup>60</sup>

## Discussion and Conclusion

The historical episodes analysed in the preceding sections show the long-lasting nature of Japanese foreign policymakers' preoccupations with handling the PRC as (a) a key trade partner and (b) a source of political and security concerns in preserving the national interest. Events in the last decade have confirmed that Japan-China relations are better understood as constructed around dynamics of cooperation and competition that are not mutually exclusive.

For decades since the early 1950s, the principle of the separation of economics and politics (*seikei bunri*) provided an acute justification for the opening of trade relations with Communist China in the context of the Cold War, for the provision of foreign aid between the late 1970s and the 1990s and for the periodic renewal of pledges to maintain friendly ties despite political tensions in the 2000s.

By adopting the *seikei bunri* principle – separating economics and security – in foreign policymaking with respect to the PRC, Japanese policymakers have in fact obliterated the intrinsic fragility of the concept itself, to support, or at best avoid discouraging, economic enterprises and trade relations with the PRC. If, on the one hand, this approach has left room for the agency of semi-official deal brokers and providers of good offices on both sides, with Tatsunosuke Takasaki and Liao Chengzhi as the epitomes of this phenomenon, on the other it

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<sup>60</sup> E. Satō, "Satō Eisaku Naikaku Sōri Daijin Shisei Hōshin Enzetsu, Dai 68 Kai (Tsūkai)" ("Programmatic Speech by Prime Minister Satō Eisaku at the 68th Session (Special) of the Diet"), GRIPS, University of Tokyo, 29 January 1972, Sekai to Nihon.

has provided subsequent Japanese governments with a useful, but in fact fragile, narrative framework for their China policies. From the mid-1960s, particularly under the Satō cabinet, semi-official trade was discouraged by suspending credits for plant export and a new narrative of China as a “threat” and a source of instability for the region emerged after the 1964 and 1965 nuclear tests, in the context of Japan’s alignment with the US and adherence to the UN-led international nuclear non-proliferation pledges resulting in the 1968 NPT. Against this backdrop, the stigmatisation of the PRC’s behaviour by the Satō administration served two major aims of the GOJ at the time. First, it signalled Japan’s *difference*, boosting Japan’s image as a responsible member of the US-led international order in the context of US-Japan negotiations on Okinawa; second, it highlighted Satō’s own breakaway from his predecessors’ *softer* approach to Beijing and the cabinet’s resolve to upgrade Japan’s standing in the regional security arrangements.

In light of the above, PRC-Japan trade negotiations amidst Satō’s *kantei*-led diplomacy and the Chinese Cultural Revolution had to be conducted on the condition that Japanese semi-official envoys accepted the inseparability of politics and economics. It was in fact on these premises that trade relations were conducted before the definitive normalisation in 1972 and the conclusion of the Treaty of Peace and Friendship in 1978. In other words, against that historical backdrop, Japanese policy makers realised that political orientations and decisions could have a direct impact on Japan-PRC economic relations. Thus, it may be argued that until the early 1970s, the *seikei bunri* principle helped Japanese leaders and policymakers to reinstate a pipeline with Beijing while saving face *vis-à-vis* Taiwan and the US, but it has not been immune to interpretation by individual cabinets prioritising national security in the face of an emerging “Chinese threat”.

By contrast, after PRC-Japan normalisation and the end of the Cold War, the principle has epitomised a restored pattern of pragmatic and non-ideological cooperation in the economic

domain. In fact, despite political downturns in 2012 over the Senkaku/Dioayu Islands spat and in 2020 over Covid-19-related immigration restrictions, Japan is still the third largest source of direct investment in the PRC, with bilateral trade relations thriving since the mid-1990s. The total trade volume amounted to more than US\$200 billion in 2021.<sup>61</sup>

However, as shown above, GOJ trends toward securitising the PRC have intensified in recent years in direct proportion to structural anxieties in Japanese foreign policy making and more contingent concerns over the PRC's regional assertiveness. Political polarisation following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 have naturally affected these tendencies, stressing the intrinsic contradictions of the *seikei bunri* principle that first emerged in 1964. However, if politics ruled over economics in the mid-1960s, after 2020, it appears that the economy, and economic security in particular, is driving political decision making. Measures aimed at streamlining the GOJ's decision making processes in the domain of security, strengthening defence capabilities and consolidating economic security through the reshoring of fractions of supply chains and the designation of secure quotas for key goods and resources, are shattering the remnants of the *seikei bunri* principle. Once again, in response to the aforementioned diplomatic anxiety, the current Japanese leadership sees alignment with US geopolitical and geoeconomic strategies in the Asia-Pacific as the most viable and reasonable option. The recent demise of seemingly "China-friendly" figures in mainstream Japanese politics, such as Nikai, who represented PRC-related economic interests within the LDP leadership until 2020, seems to further confirm this tendency.

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<sup>61</sup> "2022nen no nichū bōeki wa zenneni de bigen, yushutsu wa 2 keta herashi de 6 nen buri no yushutsu chōka ni" ("Sino-Japanese trade in 2022 will be slightly lower than the previous year, with exports falling by double digits and imports exceeding exports for the first time in six years"), *JETRO*, 29 March 2023.



### 3. Which Japan? Representations in Chinese Modern Diplomatic Discourse

Giulia Sciorati

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This study presents an analysis of 145 remarks made by spokespersons of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) of the People's Republic of China (PRC) spanning the period from July 2021 to July 2023, and thereby offers empirical evidence as to the complex dynamics that exist between China and Japan today. Using software-assisted thematic analysis, the research examines the discourse of Chinese diplomats concerning Japan and relations with Tokyo.<sup>1</sup> The study focuses on the content of regular press conferences held by the MFA, collected by keyword search from the NexisUni repository and the official website of the PRC MFA, which is particularly helpful for understanding how China-Japan relations are represented and communicated to domestic and foreign audiences by Chinese diplomatic service. MFA press conferences are “reactionary” in that they react to questions on current affairs spurred by interlocutors such as the media that have a mandate for holding national political authorities to account. Yet, they are also naturally brief and, thus, only convey the uncontested, core beliefs of the national political authorities.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> More specifically, MAXQDA.

<sup>2</sup> The author understands the close relations between China's media and the Party/government, which argues against any media mandate toward holding political authorities accountable for their decisions and policies (see M. Repnikova, *Media Politics in China: Improvising Power Under Authoritarianism*, Cambridge, Cambridge

In exploring various themes, the following observations aim to contribute to an empirical mapping of China's recurring discourse towards Japan and bilateral relations and offer evidence in support of our theories of states' foreign constructions and the role of "Self and Others" characterisations in foreign policy and diplomacy.<sup>3</sup>

The following sections of this chapter detail the discursive constituents of the constructions that emerge from the analysis of Chinese diplomatic discourse – Japan's historical "irresponsibility" and the country's construction as a "negative other". The conclusions summarise and discuss the findings.

## Japan As a Historically Irresponsible Actor in East Asia

Chinese diplomats' discourse on Japan is influenced by a particular perspective, which centres on historical grievances and underscores the importance of acknowledgement.<sup>4</sup> Japan's nuclear responsibility is also placed under the spotlight and negatively connected to the country's past. Maintaining a specific focus on the legacy of the 2011 Fukushima Daiichi nuclear incident, Chinese diplomats stress Beijing's concerns regarding Japan's decisions and actions on nuclear waste,

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University Press, 2017 for a recent conceptual and empirical discussion). However, given China's growing role as a global power and noting that foreign media also participate actively in the MFA media conferences, the study presumes that a certain level of awareness, at least, would inform how Chinese diplomats operate in these conferences.

<sup>3</sup> On this research endeavours, see D. Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1998 and, more recently, W.A. Callahan, "Chinese Visions of Self and Other: The International Politics of Noses", *International Affairs*, vol. 99, no. 5, 2023, pp. 2079-99.

<sup>4</sup> E.g., "It is nothing but a trick to deflect attention, shift responsibility, and conceal their deplorable track record". "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian Regular Press Conference on January 21, 2022", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, January 2022.

emphasising the interdependence of Tokyo's environmental and historical responsibilities.

### Enduring militarism

Japan's militaristic history and its present-day implications reverberate within the analysed data, painting a portrait of Tokyo's decisions and actions as rooted in the nation's past as an aggressor.

The Yasukuni Shrine holds significant importance in China's discussions of Japan's historical responsibility.<sup>5</sup> While the Japanese government presents the site as a place of remembrance for deceased soldiers, China sees it as a lasting representation of Japanese militarism and aggressive warfare.<sup>6</sup> According to this construction, the Yasukuni Shrine serves as an immaterial instrument and an emblem of aggression, as it pays tribute to who China considers war criminals from the Second World War involved in crimes against humanity. China strongly urges Japan to address its past by referencing Yasukuni – an appeal that extends beyond a mere request for historical acknowledgement but asks Japan to confront its actions.<sup>7</sup> According to Chinese discourse, Yasukuni's enduring political consequences are understood as a powerful symbol by the Chinese, stressing the need for Japan to address its historical legacy.

There is a prevailing argument in the analysed remarks that Japan should exercise caution when dealing with sensitive historical matters and unambiguously distance itself from all remnants of militarism. Chinese diplomats, in particular, emphasise the importance of this call to action by urging Japan

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<sup>5</sup> On the Yasukuni Shrine and historical memory, see e.g. M.M. Mochizuki, "The Yasukuni Shrine Conundrum: Japan's Contested Identity and Memory", in K. Mikyoung and B. Schwartz (eds.), *Northeast Asia's Difficult Past: Essays in Collective Memory*, London, Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2010, pp. 31-52.

<sup>6</sup> Among others, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian Regular Press Conference on October 18, 2021", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, October 2021.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*.

to uphold previous statements and commitments regarding its history of aggression.<sup>8</sup>

The abuse of “comfort women” is another prominent theme in this discursive construction and is represented as a severe human rights violation perpetrated by Japanese militarism.<sup>9</sup> China calls upon Japan to confront this historical period, advocating for a thorough examination that embraces a dedication to reconciling historical grievances.<sup>10</sup> The matter concerning comfort women serves as a Chinese representation of historical injustice, highlighting the imperative for Japan to recognise and address the ongoing suffering endured by those impacted. In the discourse constructed by Chinese diplomats, examining Japan’s historical obligations also necessitates prioritising redress for the sufferings of comfort women – an action presented as imperative to foster reconciliation and prove Japan’s commitment to human rights.<sup>11</sup> This narrative points out that Japanese political figures perpetuate an inaccurate stance regarding historical matters, which, in turn, are seen as resurrecting the threat of militarism.<sup>12</sup>

Even what the data refer to as the US “politicisation” of origin tracing, which emerged in Chinese public debates in

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<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., “[Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying Regular Press Conference on August 15, 2021](#)”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, August 2021.

<sup>9</sup> On comfort women, see, among, others, Q.E. Wang, “The Study of ‘Comfort Women’: Revealing a Hidden Past – Introduction”, *Chinese Studies in History*, vol. 53, no. 1, 2 January 2020, pp. 1-5.

<sup>10</sup> “[Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Mao Ning Regular Press Conference on February 3, 2023](#)”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, February 2023.

<sup>11</sup> “[Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian Regular Press Conference on September 13, 2021](#)”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, September 2021.

<sup>12</sup> For instance, “no one should expect to whitewash themselves by hiding historical facts or deflecting responsibilities. Denying and refusing to reflect on one’s guilt will not help one to embrace the future”. “[Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Mao Ning Regular Press Conference on February 3, 2023](#)”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, February 2023.

July 2021 in response to the outcry for investigations into the origin of Covid-19, has been reformulated in diplomatic discourse around the Fort Detrick lab's "dark history" and its collaboration with Japanese war criminals after the Second World War. In this narrative, Fort Detrick continues to exist for China as a tangible example of a past characterised by problematic cooperative efforts and scientific exploration.<sup>13</sup>

Lastly, the presence of Japan's abandoned chemical weapons (ACWs) in China is discursively reformulated by Chinese diplomats as a testament to the present-day repercussions of militaristic aggression. ACWs are understood by Chinese diplomatic discourse as a tangible representation of the transgressions committed by Japanese militarism.<sup>14</sup> China thus asserts that Japan should implement measures to rectify the environmental and humanitarian consequences.<sup>15</sup>

Within this construction, China presents a consistent and unambiguous discourse concerning Japan. Indeed, China's discourse asserts that Japan must confront its historical past directly, disassociate itself entirely from militarism, and establish trust among neighbouring countries and the global community through concrete measures. Chinese diplomats construct a narrative arguing that only when Japan confronts the historical legacies of its past will the process of historical reconciliation establish regional peace.

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<sup>13</sup> "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian Regular Press Conference on July 26, 2021", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, July 2021.

<sup>14</sup> See "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian Regular Press Conference on April 29, 2022", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, April 2022; and "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Mao Ning Regular Press Conference on October 10, 2022", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, October 2022.

<sup>15</sup> "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Mao Ning Regular Press Conference on July 10, 2023", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, July 2023.

## Nuclear responsibility

Chinese diplomatic discourse also engages with Japan's approach to addressing the consequences of the Fukushima nuclear accident, particularly the question of environmental responsibility. Diplomats' remarks are directed against Japan's unilateral actions regarding Fukushima, the potential hazards posed to the regional and global population, and the act of releasing nuclear-contaminated water into the ocean.

In this narrative, China emphasises the need for multilateral consultation and disapproves of Japan's unilateralism, asserting that Japan exhibits contrasting attitudes towards wastewater disposal and that Tokyo opposes nuclear-contaminated water release by the US forces stationed in the country in support of the same government.<sup>16</sup> This statement highlights the fact that China's discourse stresses the absence of consultations as being equivalent to imposing decisions on others rather than promoting consensus.

China has also emphasised the potential hazards faced by the global population and described Japan's decision to release nuclear-contaminated water into the Pacific Ocean as a "chilling move that would pass on the risk to the entire humanity".<sup>17</sup> The sentiment expressed aims to emphasise that China recognises that the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear incident is among the most severe in recorded history, thus raising concerns regarding its wider ramifications for global health.

China's criticism of Japan's plan for wastewater disposal is centred around the lack of any historical precedent in which the discharge of nuclear-contaminated water into the ocean has been observed. In the Chinese narrative, the absence of prior examples underscores the hazards linked to Japan's proposed

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<sup>16</sup> "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin Regular Press Conference on August 30, 2021", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, August 2021.

<sup>17</sup> "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin Regular Press Conference on April 13, 2023", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, April 2023.

actions and highlights the absence of historical guidance in support of such a choice.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, environmental ramifications are also central to China's narrative on the environment. Chinese diplomats stress that the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear accident resulted in the release of substantial quantities of radioactive materials, emphasising that such materials have the potential to damage significantly both the marine ecosystem and human well-being. The magnitude of the discharge is also framed in particularly negative terms:

If more than 1.2 million tonnes of nuclear-contaminated water are discharged into the Pacific Ocean as planned by Japan, it will have an impact on the marine environment in the whole region and even the world. Is this the kind of consequence that can be borne by Japan alone? (Zhao Lijian, 15 December 2021).<sup>19</sup>

This statement is accompanied by the recognition of a mandate for China to encapsulate and support opposition and the concerns raised by the international community and citizens of Japan, thereby assigning China a positive role *vis-à-vis* Japan.<sup>20</sup> This critique is further substantiated by numerous references to the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), which asserts that the unresolved and unaddressed concerns regarding Japan's decision to discharge wastewater into the Pacific Ocean remain significant and highlights the worldwide scope of opposition

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<sup>18</sup> E.g., “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Mao Ning Regular Press Conference on February 1, 2023”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, February 2023; “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Mao Ning Regular Press Conference on March 1, 2023”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, March 2023; and “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin Regular Press Conference on July 6, 2023”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, July 2023.

<sup>19</sup> “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian Regular Press Conference on December 15, 2021”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, December 2021.

<sup>20</sup> “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin Regular Press Conference on January 19, 2023”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, January 2023.

towards Japan's decisions.<sup>21</sup> Such a collective stance is shown in the data as the rejection of Japan's approach, which is presented as a self-centred strategy that disregards the well-being of neighbouring nations.<sup>22</sup> Chinese diplomats thus make a case for the international community to denounce this approach and urge Japan to cease preparations for releasing nuclear-contaminated water. Moreover, restating the appeal for substantial engagement in this context, during the 11 April 2023 regular press conference, PRC MFA Spokesperson Wang Wenbin asserted that

we [China] once again urge Japan to take seriously the legitimate concerns of the international community and the Japanese people and dispose of the nuclear-contaminated water in a way that is safe and consistent with international obligations, international safety standards and international good practice, including by duly studying other options than ocean discharge, instead of shifting unforeseen risks to the international community. Pending consensus with neighbouring countries, other stakeholders, and relevant international agencies through a full consultation, Japan must not start the ocean discharge process.<sup>23</sup>

China's diplomatic discourse primarily focuses on opposing Japan's unilateral decision-making. In this narrative, China recommends that Japan abstains from releasing the nuclear-contaminated water until a consensus is reached with all parties

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<sup>21</sup> "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian Regular Press Conference on September 23, 2021", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, September 2021, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian Regular Press Conference on July 19, 2022", July 2022; "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin Regular Press Conference on January 19, 2023", January 2023.

<sup>22</sup> "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian Regular Press Conference on December 3, 2021", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, December 2021.

<sup>23</sup> "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin Regular Press Conference on April 11, 2023", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, April 2023.

involved and relevant international organisations, following thorough consultations.

Such criticism extends around Japan's violation of international obligations, explicitly highlighting that the discharge of nuclear wastewater contravenes the country's obligations to protect the marine environment, as stipulated in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).<sup>24</sup> In particular, the statement characterises Japan's actions as environmentally unsustainable and violating internationally established norms, building on the country's representation as an irresponsible actor in the region. Indeed, the credibility of Japan's assertions regarding safety is also questioned. Japan maintains that the treated nuclear-contaminated water is devoid of risks and poses no harm. However, Chinese diplomats point out that the country refrains from releasing it into domestic rivers or employing it for agricultural and industrial applications, thus casting doubts on the validity of Japan's safety claims.<sup>25</sup>

Through such discursive constructions, China emphasises the need for Japan to acknowledge international concerns, assume appropriate responsibilities, fulfil its international obligations, and engage in comprehensive and meaningful consultations with relevant stakeholders, particularly neighbouring countries and ad hoc agencies. Indeed, on 15 February 2022, Wang again noted that

the Chinese side hopes that the IAEA [International Atomic Energy Agency] technical working group can follow the objective, just, and science-based principles to conduct independent assessment, monitoring, and verification of the disposal of the Fukushima nuclear-contaminated water throughout the whole process to ensure absolute safety [...] China will keep following

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<sup>24</sup> “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin Regular Press Conference on June 13, 2023”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, June 2023.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. and “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin Regular Press Conference on May 10, 2023”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, May 2023.

the progress of the technical working group and hopes it will keep the international community, especially stakeholders, informed in a timely manner.<sup>26</sup>

However, Chinese diplomats also show a cautious and sceptic stance towards the IAEA, arguing that the agency's report risks not being based on scientific principles and evidence but is rather intended as an endorsement for releasing nuclear-contaminated water, depicting a general friction between China and Western-based organisations.<sup>27</sup> In the face of Japan's endeavours in public relations, China contends that the feasibility of the ocean discharge plan remains questionable despite Japan's attempts to present it in a favourable light.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, China expresses concerns regarding the reliability of data on nuclear-contaminated water, the effectiveness of the treatment system, and the uncertain environmental impact based on the two reports released by the IAEA.<sup>29</sup>

China presents a multifaceted viewpoint regarding Japan's environmental responsibilities. This perspective encompasses various concerns, such as unilateral decision-making, global risks, ecological impact, opposition from the international community, neglect of international obligations, and the necessity for transparent and science-based alternatives. In this narrative, China aims to emphasise its appeals to Japan, encouraging the country to re-evaluate its strategy and actively

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<sup>26</sup> “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin Regular Press Conference on February 15, 2022”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, February 2022.

<sup>27</sup> “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin Regular Press Conference on September 7, 2021”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, September 2021.

<sup>28</sup> “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin Regular Press Conference on January 19, 2023”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, January 2023.

<sup>29</sup> “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin Regular Press Conference on July 7, 2023”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, July 2023.

participate in multilateral discussions to tackle the issues surrounding the Fukushima nuclear-contaminated water. This presents a view of China as a responsible actor *vis-à-vis* Japan.

## Japan As a Negative “Other”

On China-Japan relations, Chinese diplomats also construct a discourse rooted in the principles of peaceful coexistence and cooperation, which, according to the Chinese framing, should provide a foundation for ties between the two countries.<sup>30</sup>

A core topic in this discourse urges Japan to consider international concerns, specifically regarding regional security and historical territorial grievances. China is presented as calling upon Japan to reconsider its historical acts of aggression and fulfil its obligations concerning sensitive matters such as Taiwan and the Diaoyu/Senkaku territorial dispute.<sup>31</sup> The emphasis China places on historical responsibility shows a juxtaposition between a Chinese “Self”, presented as a “positive” force, and a Japanese “Other”, which historical reminders highlight as being “negative” to the international and regional system.

A significant area of dispute raised by Chinese diplomats pertains to Japan’s approach to regional security, alleging that the country provokes potential threats and pursues military expansion with a mindset reminiscent of the Cold War era *vis-à-vis* China’s peaceful rise.<sup>32</sup> It is observed that Japan’s actions regarding Taiwan, shared historical grievances, and the military alliance with the United States are all presented with suspicion. In contrast, China is portrayed as placing significant

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<sup>30</sup> “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin Regular Press Conference on August 18, 2022”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, August 2022.

<sup>31</sup> As the chapter presents Chinese diplomatic discourse, Chinese terms are adopted.

<sup>32</sup> “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin Regular Press Conference on May 25, 2022”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, May 2022.

importance on acting responsibly to maintain regional stability. This discursive construction argues for Japan to relinquish any Cold War mindsets and refrain from engaging in actions that have the potential to instigate a new Cold War within the Asia-Pacific region, thus assigning exclusive responsibility for regional instability to the Japanese side.<sup>33</sup>

At the same time, China is represented as consistently emphasising the importance of adhering to established international norms, demonstrating respect for historical sensitivities, and promoting regional stability by upholding responsible conduct. Indeed, China portrays itself as a proponent of global standards and stability in the region, emphasising what it views as Japan's departures from these norms and advocating for the country's return to responsible conduct across different domains – Taiwanese sovereignty, the dispute over the Diaoyu islands, and perceived Japanese support for a “Cold War” mentality.

### Territorial issues

The issue of Taiwan's sovereignty is primarily connected in this narrative to Japan's approach to the One China principle, the country's historical obligations in this context, and apprehensions regarding external intervention and actions perceived as provocation. Throughout the analysed remarks, China consistently maintains that the Taiwan question is an internal matter, underscoring Taiwan's inherent status as an integral part of its territorial domain.<sup>34</sup>

Chinese diplomats also treat the relationship between China and Japan as closely interconnected with the Taiwan question. For instance, Japan's historical obligations during the First

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<sup>33</sup> “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin Regular Press Conference on January 13, 2023”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, January 2023.

<sup>34</sup> “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying Regular Press Conference on August 3, 2022”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, August 2022.

Sino-Japanese War and its subsequent colonial governance of Taiwan are prominently highlighted.<sup>35</sup> This narrative asserts that Japan carries significant historical responsibilities for Taiwan, which have impacted the political framework between Beijing and Tokyo:

Japan committed countless crimes during its aggression against China and the colonial rule in Taiwan for half a century, and thus bears grave historical responsibilities to the Chinese people.<sup>36</sup>

The One China principle is also a recurring frame. Chinese diplomats raise concerns regarding the potential for other nations to manipulate and undermine such a principle.<sup>37</sup> The primary focus of this discourse aims to foster an international endorsement of the country's reunification. Indeed, the data represent Japan as lacking the legal, political, and moral authority to comment on the Taiwan issue, emphasising China's expectation that the country should adhere to the One China principle at the bilateral and multilateral level.<sup>38</sup> The historical context significantly shapes the ongoing political and diplomatic dynamics between China and Japan regarding Taiwan: Chinese diplomatic discourse emphasises the historical obligations derived from Japan's involvement in the First Sino-Japanese War and its colonial legacy regarding Taiwan, stripping Tokyo of any legitimacy in discussing Taiwan today.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian Regular Press Conference on April 15, 2022”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, April 2022.

<sup>36</sup> “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin Regular Press Conference on February 28, 2022”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, February 2022.

<sup>37</sup> “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian Regular Press Conference on September 27, 2021”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, September 2021, link not publicly available.

<sup>38</sup> “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin Regular Press Conference on May 24, 2022”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, May 2022.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

Moreover, Chinese diplomats strongly advocate for other states, specifically Japan and the United States, to restrain themselves from intervening in China's domestic matters, particularly regarding the island.<sup>40</sup> In this narrative, Japan is strongly encouraged to refrain from engaging in activities that this discourse portrays as provocative, considering what the Chinese refer to as the underlying principles of China-Japan relations as presented in the political documents shaping the bilateral relationship.<sup>41</sup>

In sum, on the Taiwan question, Chinese diplomatic discourse uses historical grievances and the safeguard of the One China principle to define China-Japan relations today, particularly attempting to project a negative image of Tokyo *vis-à-vis* Beijing stemming from its colonial past.

### Diaoyu/Senkaku islands

China's responses to Japan's criticisms regarding the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands exhibit a consistently assertive stance. The Chinese narrative highlights Beijing's assertion of ownership of this territory, grounded in historical justifications.<sup>42</sup> China insists that the status of the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands as an integral part of its territory is irreversible, regardless of external actions.<sup>43</sup> Such discourse is mainly triggered within the timeframe of the Japanese Ministry of Defence's release of a white paper designed for elementary and junior high school

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<sup>40</sup> "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian Regular Press Conference on September 27, 2021", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, September 2021, link not publicly available.

<sup>41</sup> "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin Regular Press Conference on May 24, 2022", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, May 2022.

<sup>42</sup> "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian Regular Press Conference on December 3, 2021", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, December 2021.

<sup>43</sup> "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian Regular Press Conference on January 25, 2022", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, January 2022.

students, which, according to the Chinese, negatively evaluates China's military endeavours in the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands and the South China Sea and argues for Japan's "weaponisation" of history.<sup>44</sup>

The data presents this territorial issue as "Japan's illicit desire for Chinese territory" – an ongoing cause of contention regarding sovereignty matters. Indeed, China's perspective on the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands is closely connected to its wider position on territorial integrity, which also encompasses Taiwan and other maritime concerns. In this discursive frame, Japan is again portrayed as a negative Other *vis-à-vis* China, acting outside the law and following considerations of self-interest, jeopardising regional security.

### Cold War mentality

The last narrative identified in the data centres around the necessity for the United States and Japan to relinquish what is presented as a mindset rooted in the Cold War era.<sup>45</sup> The line supported by Chinese diplomats cautions against ideological biases, unnecessary containment of Chinese economic statecraft, and the violation of market economy principles and international trade regulations.

This narrative basically asserts that the United States and Japan have contributed to perpetuating a Cold War mentality by engaging in actions such as promoting ideological hostility, intervening in the internal affairs of other nations under the guise of democracy and freedom, and establishing military alliances and exclusive groups.<sup>46</sup> Once more, responsibility

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<sup>44</sup> "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin Regular Press Conference on March 30, 2022", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, March 2022.

<sup>45</sup> "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin Regular Press Conference on May 24, 2022", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, May 2022.

<sup>46</sup> "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian Regular Press Conference on January 21, 2022", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of

for current and potential instabilities is ascribed to “negative” Others – in this case Japan as a manifestation in Asia of the United States.

The narrative emphasises the importance of Japan’s agency as a strategic partner of the United States in actively promoting a shift away from the Cold War mindset.<sup>47</sup> This entails diminishing the significance of nuclear weapons within national security strategies and actively participating in worldwide efforts towards nuclear disarmament.<sup>48</sup> Allusions to the statements made by President Joe Biden highlight the significance of the United States’ pursuit of a new Cold War with China.<sup>49</sup> In particular, Chinese criticism is made clear by asserting that the United States and Japan are driven by self-interest, exacerbating division and potentially instigating a new Cold War, starting in the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>50</sup>

In conclusion, the dynamics of China-Japan relations are revealed by China’s portrayal as an advocate of amicable relations with its neighbours – a positive Self that places emphasis on collaboration and adherence to global norms. China exerts pressure on Japan regarding historical accountability, environmental policy choices, and security concerns, and stresses the need for responsible conduct to ensure regional stability. Taiwan, the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, and the appeal to relinquish a Cold War mindset are recurrent themes that offer micro-level insights into the dynamics of such Self and Other representations. The unfolding narrative highlights

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China, January 2022.

<sup>47</sup> “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin Regular Press Conference on May 25, 2022”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, May 2022.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>49</sup> “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian Regular Press Conference on May 31, 2022”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, May 2022.

<sup>50</sup> “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian Regular Press Conference on July 1, 2022”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, July 2022.

China's story of its responsibility, commitment to global norms, and regional stability: discussing Japan and its conduct merely provides an opportunity to reiterate a self-representation of China as a peaceful regional power.

## **Conclusion**

This analysis of 145 remarks by PRC MFA spokespersons on Japan and China-Japan relations uncovers a multifaceted bilateral relationship involving historical grievances, territorial disputes, and broader issues of self-representation. China consistently presents itself as a proponent of good neighbourliness, cooperation, and adherence to shared principles. In contrast, a noticeable emphasis on historical grievances marks China's diplomatic discourse on Japan. The focus on Tokyo's historical responsibilities, particularly in recognising wartime atrocities, thus has the function of mirroring China's demand for "Japanese introspection". The Yasukuni Shrine continues to be a central subject of controversy, with Beijing relying on the discursive line that Japan is failing to acknowledge historical injustices and militarism, including matters concerning "comfort women" and abandoned chemical weapons on Chinese territory. This, in turn, constructs a hero-enemy juxtaposition between the two countries.

Another type of responsibility – environmental responsibility – becomes evident as China treats Japan's actions following the Fukushima nuclear incident. Beijing's criticism is primarily based on the construction of an "irresponsible" Japan that acts without consultation, disregarding the potential risks associated with releasing nuclear-contaminated water, and breaching international obligations. Thus, China is portrayed as being dedicated to ecological stewardship, in pursuit of which the country is shown as upholding the principles of transparency, independent evaluation, and adherence to international standards.

The Taiwan question, the Diaoyu/Senkaku territorial disputes, and the representation of a perceived Cold War mindset bring geopolitical aspects to China's diplomatic discourse on Japan and China-Japan relations. In particular, China's constructed role as the party asking for responsible conduct, adherence to diplomatic principles, and avoidance of ideological biases reflects a vision of stability at both regional and international levels where China is the sole promoter.

In summary, the examination of China's diplomatic discourse on Japan and China-Japan relations reveals a several historical intricacies, environmental considerations, and geopolitical complexities. As China manoeuvres through its diplomatic ties, it consistently presents itself to foreign audiences as a country that prioritises responsibility, adherence to principles, and regional stability. These factors significantly shape China's representation of its relations with Japan, providing valuable insights into its motivations and expectations.

## 4. Japan and Taiwan: Time To Call a Spade a Spade

Axel Berkofsky

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### Let's Get Real

Are Japan and Taiwan military allies in 2023? Yes they are, even if policymakers in Tokyo and Taipei do not use the term 'ally' when they refer to each other. At least not yet. Speaking of terminology. This chapter will not use the term "self-governing island of Taiwan" when speaking of Taiwan. We will talk about "Taiwan". The term 'self-governing island of Taiwan' sounds awkward and is an anachronism that does not reflect reality on the ground. Taiwan is a highly industrialised economy with a GDP per capita amounting to roughly US\$32,000 (in 2023). Taiwan has its own government, a president, a parliament, and an independent judiciary, all of which sovereign and independent countries typically have. In defiance of international law and political realities, Beijing on the other hand claims that Taiwan is a Chinese "province" that must be "re-integrated" into Chinese territory and the Chinese "motherland" sooner rather than later. While Tokyo formally recognised the Communist government in Beijing (and with it the One China Principle) in 1972, it had not yet explicitly recognised China's claim of sovereignty over Taiwan. In other words, Japan has not adopted a position on the status of Taiwan. "Japan fully understands and respects

Beijing’s position”, is Japan’s position.<sup>1</sup> To be clear, there is no need for Japan to adopt a legally unambiguous position unless Beijing decides to change the current territorial status quo. In other words, there is no need to change the current “strategic ambiguity” over the status of Taiwan – unless Beijing does something very drastic such as attacking Taiwanese offshore islands during Taiwan’s presidential elections in January 2024. Taiwan is – as we have already established – a country and the more mainland China increases military pressure on Taiwan, the easier it might become for the international community in general and the West in particular to start treating Taiwan like a country without hiding the One China principle, the anachronistic principle through which Beijing effectively obliges countries to obey its order to acknowledge that Beijing’s claims of sovereignty are legitimate – unless you are a country that has chosen not to maintain diplomatic relations with Beijing but with Taipei. Today, only 12 countries recognise Taiwan diplomatically, and none of the Western countries and Japan – at least on the official record – are considering the possibility of granting Taiwan diplomatic recognition, effectively rendering the One China principle obsolete. The principle quite simply belongs to a different era and epoch of global history and Beijing’s insistence that it has the legitimate right to rule over Taiwan come what may when and if it decides to do so only sounds legitimate in Beijing. Unsurprisingly, Taipei begs to differ, and as an expression and confirmation of Taiwanese statehood, the Taiwanese electorate has voted a new president into office in January 2024. Unlike in Hong Kong since 2019, Taiwan’s political leader does neither get appointed nor ‘pre-approved’ by Beijing.

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<sup>1</sup> A. Liff, [Has Japan’s Policy toward the Taiwan Strait Changed?](#); Commentary Brookings Institution, 23 August 2023.

## **“Strategic Ambiguity” No More**

In my view, since 2021, Washington and Tokyo have – individually and jointly – effectively turned “strategic ambiguity” into “strategic clarity”. And done so quite deliberately, one might add. “Strategic ambiguity” stands for – or rather stood for – Washington neither confirming nor denying that it would defend Taiwan militarily in the case of a Chinese attack on Taiwan. This alleged “ambiguity” is (or was) meant to deter both Taiwan and China from unilaterally changing the current (increasingly fragile) territorial status quo: “change” meaning Taiwan declaring formal independence and China attacking and seeking to occupy Taiwan. In April 2021, Washington and Tokyo jointly underscored the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait in a joint statement. For what it’s worth, this was the first reference to peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait to be made in a joint US-Japan statement since 1969. The bottom line of today’s “strategic-ambiguity-turned-strategic-clarity” paradigm is: if China decided to throw what is left of its political and economic good sense overboard and attack Taiwan, then Washington and Tokyo would militarily intervene on Taiwan’s behalf. And Beijing has helped a lot to turn “strategic ambiguity” into “strategic clarity”. Increasingly frequent and dangerous Chinese incursions into airspace effectively controlled by Taiwan have had consequences since 2021. As mentioned above, “Taiwan” and “peace and security in the Taiwan Strait” began to be mentioned in official Japanese, US and joint US-Japan statements from 2021 onwards. In April 2021, US President Joe Biden and the then Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga met for a bilateral summit and China featured prominently in the summit’s joint statement. Biden and Suga jointly announced they would “take on the challenges from China and ensure that the future of the Indo-Pacific is free and open”.<sup>2</sup> Security in the Taiwan Strait was, of

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<sup>2</sup> See K. Moriyasu, “[Biden and Suga Refer to ‘Peace and Stability of Taiwan](#)

course, also mentioned in the statement: “We underscore the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and encourage the peaceful resolution of cross-Strait issues”.<sup>3</sup> While press reports after the summit focused on the fact that the last time Taiwan was mentioned in a US-Japan joint statement was in 1969 (during a meeting between US President Richard Nixon and Japanese Prime Minister Eisaku Sato), Adam Liff from the Brookings Institution wrote that “Taiwan” was not even mentioned in that statement. Instead, it mentioned the “Taiwan Strait”, leading Liff to conclude that part of the joint statement was “anodyne” and therefore in line with Japan’s “strategic ambiguity” towards Taiwan and the Taiwan Strait.<sup>4</sup> Certainly, semantics do not make any difference to China: whether Taiwan or “only” the Taiwan Strait was mentioned in the official US-Japan statement is irrelevant: both constitute unwanted interference in China’s internal affairs as far as Beijing is concerned. In 2022, Washington and Tokyo confirmed what they had decided a year earlier. The US-Japan Joint Statement of May 2022 “reiterated the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait as an indispensable element in security and prosperity in the international community”.<sup>5</sup> Translation: the US and Japan will jointly defend Taiwan in the case of an unprovoked Chinese attack on Taiwan. Arguably, very little remains of what Washington and Tokyo call “strategic ambiguity”. To be sure, Washington officially continues to stick to the One China principle, and every time President Biden suggested in the recent past that US military would be defending Taiwan in the case of an unprovoked Chinese attack, his spokespersons and the US Department of State quickly

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Strait’ in Statement”, *Nikkei Asia*, 17 April 2021.

<sup>3</sup> See [US-Japan Joint Leader’s Statement: US-Japan Global Partnership for a New Era](#), The White House, 16 April 2022.

<sup>4</sup> A.P. Liff, “Has Japan’s Policy Toward the Taiwan Strait Changed?”, 23 August 2021.

<sup>5</sup> [Japan-U.S. Joint Leaders’ Statement: Strengthening the Free Open and International Order](#); The White House, 23 May 2022.

back-pedalled, clarifying that the president's remarks on security in the Taiwan Strait – made on more than one occasion in 2021 – did not change anything about Washington's interpretation of the One China principle. One can choose to believe that (or not).

## **Getting Ready, Just in Case**

China increasing military pressure on Taiwan roused the military planners into action and led to numerous reports and analyses on how the US and Japan should speed up their joint preparedness to militarily defend Taiwan in the case of a Chinese attack.<sup>6</sup> Many reports conclude that Japan should contribute indirectly to the defence of Taiwan by developing a multi-domain joint defence force. Among others, Japan and the US are advised to draw up joint operational plans for the defence of the Senkaku Islands in East China and Taiwan, accompanied by joint training and exercises.<sup>7</sup> Washington and Tokyo are indeed actively equipping their bilateral military alliance with instruments and resources to counter Chinese military aggression over Taiwan. US-Japanese military cooperation in the case of a Taiwan crisis scenario, i.e. US-Japanese military cooperation to defend Taiwan in the case of a Chinese attack, has undoubtedly always been on the US-Japan policy planning agenda, even if not explicitly. When, in 1997, the US and Japan revised their bilateral defence guidelines, the guidelines spoke about US-Japanese military cooperation in “areas surrounding Japan”. While it was clear and obvious that both Taiwan and the Taiwan Strait are part of the “areas surrounding Japan”, Tokyo and Washington at the time insisted

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<sup>6</sup> For more details see e.g. D. Sacks, “[Enhancing U.S.-Japan Coordination for a Taiwan Conflict](#)”, Preventive Action Center Discussion Paper, Council on Foreign Relations, January 2022.

<sup>7</sup> See T. Kotani, “[The New Taiwan Clause: Taiwan and the Security of Japan](#)”, JIIA Strategic Comments, 6 January 2021.

that “areas surrounding Japan” was not a geographical concept but a “situational concept”. While it was indeed obvious, and perceived and interpreted as such by scholars and policymakers at the time, Washington and Tokyo maintained that such “areas” can be anywhere, including beyond and outside Asia – any areas where the US and Japan decide to cooperate militarily when the situation calls for such cooperation in fact. Examples include Japan’s contributions to the US-led wars in Afghanistan in 2001-09<sup>8</sup> and Iraq in 2004-06.<sup>9</sup>

### “Officialising” Relations

Japan is Taiwan’s third largest trading partner, while Taiwan is Japan’s fourth largest. Japan does not have a formal diplomatic representation in Taiwan, and instead handles bilateral relations through the “Japan-Taiwan Exchange Association in Taipei”. That does not sound like much in terms of official and institutional ties and exchanges but we should not underestimate the current state of play and the quality of bilateral encounters: Tokyo and Taipei have over recent years intensified their government-to-government and party-to-party relations. In September 2023, Tokyo appointed a serving government official to act as its *de facto* defence attaché in Taiwan.<sup>10</sup> Until then, Tokyo’s defence attaché had always been a retired officer from the country’s Self-Defence Forces (SDF). Tokyo’s new defence attaché will be joined by an official from the Japanese Ministry of Defence. Tokyo’s position to date has been that it only maintained “non-governmental”

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<sup>8</sup> From 2001-09, Japanese navy vessels were engaged in a refuelling mission in the Indian Ocean, providing US and British navy vessels with fuel. The US and British vessels brought military troops to and back from Afghanistan.

<sup>9</sup> 1,000 Japanese Self-Defence Forces (SDF) were deployed to Samawah in southern Iraq contributing to a reconstruction mission. Due to Japan’s pacifist constitution, Japanese military was deployed to Iraq on the condition that they would not get involved in military fighting in Iraq. Which they didn’t.

<sup>10</sup> See K. Kaneko, Y. Toyoda, T. Kelly, and S. Murakami, “Japan Elevates Taiwan Security Ties in Move likely to Rile China”, *Reuters*, 13 September 2023.

ties with Taiwan. Now that a serving government official has been deployed, this principle no longer appears to be written in stone. Sending an actively-serving government official as defence attaché to Taiwan is a calculated risk and, from a realpolitik point of view, one worth taking. Not least as Beijing is unlikely to react beyond verbally protesting against Tokyo's decision to effectively institutionalise ties between Japanese and Taiwanese armed forces. This was certainly not a case of Beijing retaliating economically against the world's third largest economy in times of structural economic crisis in China. Then again, we cannot conclude this for certain given the importance of Taiwan as part of Xi's ill-fated obsession for making Taiwan part of what he calls the "great rejuvenation" of the Chinese people. I do not know what that means and why Taiwan must be part of that "rejuvenation". And there are more "unknowns". As there are no independent Chinese opinion polls, i.e. polls that are not conducted and supervised by China's state-controlled newspapers, we do not know whether and to what extent the Chinese people – after all Xi Jinping's claims that absorbing Taiwan serves to "rejuvenate" the Chinese nation – are counting on being "rejuvenated" through Beijing's decision to invade a sovereign country that Beijing (falsely) claims has always been part of Chinese territory. As we know, the China that has been governed by the Chinese Communist Party since 1949 has not ruled over Taiwan for a single day. Of course, none of that matters in Beijing. Under Xi, Beijing is investing enormous resources into challenging and controlling the historical narrative whereby Taiwan has always been an integral and "inseparable" part of Chinese territory. This in no way reflects the (accurate) version of global history current outside Beijing's governing circles.

## **To Fight or Not To Fight?**

The debates over Taiwan inside and outside Japan centre around the question of whether Japan would militarily get involved in a Taiwan Strait crisis scenario, i.e. whether Japan's armed

forces would fight alongside US military to defend Taiwan in the case of a Chinese attack and attempt to occupy Taiwan. The short answer is “yes”. Not that it is likely to come to that any time soon as the prospects of a successful Chinese attack on and invasion of Taiwanese territory are very bleak, to say the very least. Recent studies and simulations – including the one published by the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in January 2023 – conclude that while China might be able to attack Taiwan and cause enormous damage to the country and its economy, it is very unlikely to be able to successfully invade and occupy Taiwan.<sup>11</sup> To be sure, the CSIS crisis scenario simulation demonstrates that a Chinese attack would cause enormous damage on Taiwanese territory, but Chinese armed forces would be very unlikely to be able to conquer and occupy Taiwan. If the CSIS is aware of China’s difficulties or indeed inability to occupy and re-unify Taiwan with mainland China, so is Beijing. Consequently, while Chinese threats to use military force to attack and absorb Taiwan must be taken seriously, they must also be measured against realities on the ground in Taiwan and the bleak prospects of a successful Chinese invasion of Taiwanese territory. Either way, it seems that the Japanese people are ready. In April 2021, a Nikkei Asia opinion poll showed that 75% of the Japanese people support a Japanese contribution to peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.<sup>12</sup> This level of support has undoubtedly remained the same (or indeed increased) since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Such public support also means that Tokyo’s plans to drastically increase its defence budget by 2027 – envisioned as an increase of between 65 and 100% as announced by Prime Minister Kishida in December 2022 – will not be met with much resistance by the public. While pacificism is arguably

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<sup>11</sup>See M.F. Cancian, M. Cancian and E. Heginbotham, “[The First Battle of the Next War: Wargaming a Chinese Invasion of Taiwan](#)”, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 9 January 2023.

<sup>12</sup> See R. Nemoto and N. Iwata, “[74% Support Japan Engagement in Taiwan Strait Nikkei Poll](#)”, *Nikkei Asia*, 26 April 2021.

still deeply embedded in Japanese society, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 could not have made it any clearer to the Japanese electorate that we do not – putting it bluntly – inhabit a pacifist world. China militarily threatening Taiwan also confirms that the part of the world closest to home has become decidedly non-pacifist. China challenging Japanese territorial integrity in the East China Sea, i.e. Chinese naval incursions into the Japanese-controlled territorial waters around the Senkaku Islands<sup>13</sup> will make sure public approval for Tokyo equipping its armed forces and its alliance with the US to deter Chinese military aggression is bound to remain high. Yoichi Kato from the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) argues that “if Taiwan were to be attacked, Japan would inevitably be attacked as well, mainly because Japan hosts the US Armed Forces at several major bases and facilities throughout the country, including the US Seventh Fleet. Taiwan and Japan are situationally in the same operational theatre when it comes to facing potential aggression from China”.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Japan cannot escape geography, and there is very little doubt that China's air force would also seek to bomb US military bases on Japanese territory in the case of conflict with the US over Taiwan.

In the recent past, Japanese politicians, among them former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, have concluded that a conflict between the US and China over Taiwan automatically amounts to a case of US-Japan military cooperation under the US-Japan security alliance. Abe also warned back in 2021 that “what happened in Hong Kong must never happen in Taiwan”.<sup>15</sup> At

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<sup>13</sup> Not the Chinese navy but above all Chinese fishing boats ordered to enter Japan's Economic Exclusive Zone around the Japanese-controlled Senkaku Islands. China's new “naval militia”, i.e. Chinese fisherman ordered by the Chinese government to challenge Japanese territorial integrity in the East China Sea.

<sup>14</sup> Y. Kato, “How Should Taiwan, Japan and the United States Cooperate Better on Defense?”; *Brookings*, 27 October 2021.

<sup>15</sup> See D. Sacks, “Shinzo Abe Transformed Japan's Relationship with Taiwan to Counter Threat from China”, Council on Foreign Relations, 13 July 2022.

that time, Abe was referring to the all but complete erosion of the “One-Country-Two Systems” formula in Hong Kong, which would have granted Hong Kong political autonomy until 2049. This has not turned out to be the case since Beijing adopted an attitude of direct and aggressive interference in Hong Kong’s political and judicial affairs in 2019. This situation was exacerbated by fundamental changes to Hong Kong’s electoral laws ordered and adopted and by Beijing’s National People’s Congress (NPC) in December 2021. The NPC – on behalf of Beijing’s Politburo Standing Committee (PSC) chaired by no other than Xi Jinping in tandem with Hong Kong’s (Beijing-approved/Beijing-installed) government – decided that candidates running for a seat in Hong Kong’s Legislative Council (LegCo) must first be approved as “patriots”. This effectively put an end to anything resembling political opposition in Hong Kong.<sup>16</sup>

Then Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, which led Japanese Prime Minister Kishida in July 2022 to warn that “today’s Ukraine may be tomorrow’s East Asia”, and it is obvious that he meant Taiwan when he spoke of “East Asia”.<sup>17</sup> This may sound deliberately dramatic, but there is no doubt that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has had an impact on the will among Asian countries to voice an opinion on military tensions between Taiwan and China in the Taiwan Strait. South Korea and the Philippines, among others, went on the record in 2022 and 2023 by stating that peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait is a concern. In April 2023, Manila announced that the US military will get access to four more military bases in the Philippines. The institutional basis for this increased access is the bilateral Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) adopted in 2014.<sup>18</sup> There is little doubt that granting the US

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<sup>16</sup> See J. Lau and S.S. Yam, “‘Patriots’ Only: Hong Kong’s New Election System in Action”, *The Diplomat*, 1 December 2021.

<sup>17</sup> See A. Gale, “Ukraine War Boosts Support for Added Defense Spending in Japan”, *Wall Street Journal*, 7 July 2022.

<sup>18</sup> See “Philippines Reveal Locations of 4 New Strategic Sites for U.S. Military

navy additional access to military bases in the Philippines also took place against the background of increased Chinese military pressure on Taiwan (together with Chinese territorial expansionism in the South China and Chinese companies building military bases on artificial islands de facto attached to disputed islands).

## Talking Defence

In 2021, Japan's ruling Liberal-Democratic Party (LDP) established the 'Taiwan Policy Project Team.' At the time, this was understood to be in support of US President Biden's calls to support Taiwan in times of increasing Chinese military pressure (such as frequent Chinese incursions into Taiwan's Air Defence Identification Zone, ADIZ). As part of this initiative, regular meetings took place between Japanese and Taiwanese parliamentary defence committees. In August 2021, lawmakers from Japan's LDP and Taiwan's governing Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), among others, met for the first time to discuss regional security.<sup>19</sup> The talks at the time focused on Taiwanese semiconductor manufacturing investments in Japan and other issues related to economic security – the kind of economic security typically threatened by Chinese economic blackmail tactics and politics such as the temporary interruption of Chinese exports of rare earth elements. The lawmakers reportedly also discussed the possibility of a trilateral US-Japan-Taiwan security dialogue and Japanese-Taiwanese collaboration on maritime rescue cooperation. While the talks – as they took place on a part-to-party and not governmental level – are not being referred to as "official", Beijing naturally interprets them as such. In December 2022, senior LDP lawmakers went to Taiwan to talk about regional security issues

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Sites", Reuters, 3 April 2023.

<sup>19</sup> T.-F. Cheng and L. Lauly, "Taiwan Says Security Talks with Japan Focused on TSMC Investment", *Nikkei Asia*, 27 August 2021.

of concern to both Taipei and Tokyo. Tokyo, Beijing warned at the time, was crossing a “red line” by holding official talks on defence with and/or in Taiwan.<sup>20</sup> Tokyo and Taiwan (somehow) formalising exchanges on security and defence in turn opens up a fundamental question: should two democracies (Japan & Taiwan) allow the terms and conditions of their encounters to be dictated by a decisively non-democratic/authoritarian country (China)? A rhetorical question.

In March 2023, Taiwan made another move towards institutionalising bilateral defence talks when Vice President Lai Ching-te called for the establishment of an official bilateral Japanese-Taiwanese defence dialogue.<sup>21</sup> And this is not the only time policymakers in Taiwan and/or Japan have called for such a dialogue to be established. In fact, calls for such a dialogue have emerged so often over recent years that the endgame will ultimately be the establishment of an official dialogue, regardless of Chinese protests and threats. In fact, one gets the impression that Tokyo and Taipei are taking turns to put the institutionalisation of defence talks onto the agenda – possibly to test the waters and assess reactions from friends and foes alike. Therefore, it is probably only a matter of time before Tokyo and Taipei officially announce the establishment of a bilateral defence dialogue. In fact, it must be hoped they do so soon as the sense of Chinese military aggressiveness and bullying in the region calls for deterrence and containment. A strong message from like-minded democratic countries inside and outside the region that they are willing and ready to defend each other has become more necessary than ever.

In July 2023 scholars and retired government officials from the US, Japan and Taiwan held a two-day tabletop war games event in Japan and called on their respective governments to establish a trilateral security dialogue to be able to react to

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<sup>20</sup> See J.P. Panda, “Taiwan: Tokyo’s New Ally?”, Institute for Security and Development Policy, March 2023.

<sup>21</sup> “Taiwan Vice President Calls for Military Dialogue with Japan”, Japan Times, 25 March 2023.

regional contingencies.<sup>22</sup> This also undoubtedly falls under the heading of testing the waters with allies and enemies. And there was more in 2023. In mid-December 2023 Taiwanese military intelligence asked its Japanese counterpart to deploy Japanese submarines to the East China Sea to support Taiwanese submarines' maritime surveillance.<sup>23</sup> These and other requests for support are very likely to reappear on the bilateral Japanese-Taiwanese agenda and Japanese submarine experts had already been invited to Taiwan to train Taiwanese submarine personnel in early 2023.

Finally, the Global Cooperation Training Network (GCTF) founded in 2015 and consisting of four core members – the US, Taiwan, Japan, and Australia – provides another potential avenue for Japanese-Taiwanese military coordination. The GCTF is a platform that discusses and implements information-sharing and inter-state collaboration on humanitarian issues such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, public health and clean energy. In 2019, Japan became a contributor to the GCTF. Through their collaboration on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief efforts, Japanese and Taiwanese armed forces can conduct joint exercises without having to refer to them as “military exercises”. To be sure, everything that the Japanese and Taiwanese do together would certainly be referred to as “military exercises” in Beijing. But so be it. And again: what could Beijing do about cooperation between Tokyo and Taipei's armed forces beyond protesting? It is unlikely that Beijing would impose economic sanctions on the two trade and investment partners which – together with Europe – decide on the making or breaking of the Chinese economy.

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<sup>22</sup> “Tabletop War Games Reveal Lack of Security Dialogue Mechanism: Think Tank”, *Focus Taiwan*, 17 July 2023.

<sup>23</sup> “Japan Sends Submarines to Support Taiwan in East China Sea”, *Intelligence Online*, 13 December 2023.

## A Japanese Taiwan Relations Act (JTRA)?

In February 2021, a group of LDP parliamentarians called on the government to consider the adoption of a Japanese version of the US Taiwan Relations Act.<sup>24</sup> At the time, the parliamentarians proposed this Japan-Taiwan Relations Act (JTRA) in reaction to the continuous incursions of Chinese fighter jets into airspace effectively controlled by Taiwan.<sup>25</sup> However, that proposal was not followed up and almost three years later there is very little (official) talk about such an act. Then again, 2021 was not the first time LDP politicians tabled the idea of a JTRA act, which could authorise or indeed oblige Japan, like the US, to militarily defend Taiwan in the case of a Chinese attack on Taiwanese territory. In the past, politicians in both Taiwan and Japan put the idea onto the agenda, including Japan's former Minister of Defence Nobuo Kishi (back in 2014). Although it continues to be unlikely that Japan will adopt a Taiwan Relations Act any time soon, thinking out loud about the act every once in a while is probably meant to send a message to Beijing: Japan, the message seems to be, is not sitting idly by but is instead willing to prepare itself for military conflict (backed up by the above-mentioned increase of Japan's defence budget announced in December 2022). But putting Japanese commitment to defend Taiwan on paper is not without risks. China is Japan's biggest trading partner<sup>26</sup> and

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<sup>24</sup> The US Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) was adopted in 1979 and is a de facto guarantee that Washington would provide Taiwan with military support in the case of a Chinese military attack on Taiwan. The act reads that “the United States will make available to Taiwan such defense articles and defense services in such quantity as may be necessary to enable Taiwan to maintain a sufficient self-defense capability”, and “shall maintain the capacity of the United States to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security, or social or economic system, of the people on Taiwan”.

<sup>25</sup> See T. Mizorogi and M. Kato, “Japan Lawmakers want Taiwan Act of their Own”, *Nikkei Asia*, 6 February 2021.

<sup>26</sup> In 2022, China bought roughly 20% of Japan's exports. Japan's exports to China amounted to roughly US\$145 billion in 2022.

Tokyo adopting its own Taiwan Relations Act would possibly lead to a Chinese retaliation such as economic sanctions. When South Korea in 2016 deployed a US-made missile defence system on South Korean territory, China imposed economic sanctions on South Korea and effectively obliged Chinese citizens to boycott South Korean products. To be sure, Beijing sanctioning Japan would mean inflicting a lot of economic damage on itself (as Japan would surely retaliate), but China under Xi Jinping has over recent years repeatedly made it clear that it is ready and willing to let politics and ideology rule over economic rationality and benefits. Then again, Beijing has come to live with the US Taiwan Relations Act without ever using it as an excuse to impose political and/economic sanctions on Washington. The scholar Adam Liff lists a number of reasons why a Japanese “Taiwan Relations Act” is complementary to Washington’s Taiwan Relations Act.<sup>27</sup> Japan, he writes, is a ‘major US treaty ally whose territory lies less than 100 miles from Taiwan.’ Indeed.

There is certainly currently no need for Japan to adopt such act, not least as there is no doubt that Japan would interpret a military conflict between the US and China over Taiwan as having a direct impact on Japan’s national security – which in turn would trigger Article 5 of the US-Japan Security Treaty and an active Japanese contribution to a joint US-Japan military operation. “Active” as in not limiting itself to providing rear-area support and logistical and medical support for US military in the case of conflict. In other words, Japan would be fighting alongside US military to defend Taiwan, also because the Chinese air force would very likely bombard US military bases on Japanese territory in the case of a conflict – which in turn would be perceived in Tokyo as a direct Chinese military attack on Japan.

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<sup>27</sup> See A. Liff, “[A Taiwan Relations Act for Japan?](#)”, Wilson Center, 25 February 2021.

## **Conclusions and What Comes Next?**

Beijing is not preparing to attack and invade Taiwan just yet. Washington, Tokyo and Taiwan – individually and jointly – are nonetheless preparing for the worst-case scenario. There is next to no doubt that Japan would join in militarily defending Taiwan in the case of a Chinese attack. It would do this directly, or indirectly by providing US military with military and/or “rear area support”. As mentioned above, Japan – like the rest of its democratic partners in the West – is very unlikely to abandon the One China principle and recognise Taiwan diplomatically any time soon. But then again, who knows that for sure? The more China increases its military pressure on Taiwan, the more Japan and Western countries could be inclined to review the anachronistic One China principle and acknowledge the reality that Taiwan is a country and not a Chinese province as Beijing insists. When thinking out loud about the Taiwan Relations Act, Tokyo occasionally suggests that Japan is – to put it bluntly – open to “change”, i.e. Tokyo potentially readjusting its official preparedness to make a commitment to defend Taiwan militarily.

What if Beijing attacked Taiwan even knowing that it would not be able to occupy Taiwan? How far would US and/or US-Japan commitment go to defend Taiwan? Would such a commitment include the defence of Taiwanese offshore islands very close to the Chinese mainland? In other words, what would the US and Japan do if Beijing decided to attack and invade Taiwanese offshore islands? Intervene militarily or “sacrifice” an area such as the island of Kinmen to avoid a further escalation of the conflict? Who knows. While Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has not changed everything as regards a possible Taiwan/Taiwan Strait crisis scenario, it has certainly had an impact on the level of alert among the US and its Western allies over the possibility of Beijing attempting to replicate Moscow’s idea of invading another country for the purpose of “reunification” – as interpreted by Beijing. China under the CCP (since 1949)

has not ruled over Taiwan for a single day, meaning that the term “reunification” is flawed in this context from the outset. The term that Beijing should (but obviously does not) use is “annexation” – the unlawful kind, obviously.

A Japanese version of the US Taiwan Relations Act could/ would have effectively obliged Tokyo to make a commitment towards defending Taiwan militarily in the case of a Chinese attack on Taiwanese territory. In reality, however, such an act would not even be necessary as Japan would defend Taiwan in any event even if it cannot be denied that putting Japan’s commitment to defend Taiwan militarily on paper would be sending Beijing a very clear political message. Bilateral Taiwanese-Japanese security and military relations are bound to intensify and there is next to no doubt that Tokyo and Taipei will step up military cooperation in the years ahead.

Finally, the West arguably made an enormous strategic blunder in the 1960s and 1970s when it decided to effectively obey China’s order and adopt the One China principle. This was a mistake when China was economically very weak at the time after the excesses of the Cultural Revolution and in need of economic and financial support from the West. Today, things are different. China is the world’s second biggest economy and is able to economically punish those who recognise Taiwan for what it is: a country. Then again, China depends more for trade and investment on the West in general (and Europe and the US in particular) than the other way round meaning that punishing the West means China punishing itself. Is China prepared to suffer the economic damage the interruption of trade and investment relations with the West would bring? Probably not right now. China under Xi Jinping finds itself in the middle of a self-imposed economic crisis as a result of ill-fated economic and financial policies. This hopefully means that all the Chinese talk of “re-unifying” Taiwan with Mainland China sooner rather than later is and remains just that: talk directed at a domestic audience aimed at displaying strength and determination.



## 5. Japan and India: Why Must They Build a Strategic Axis with ASEAN?

Jagannath P. Panda

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Today, the Indo-Pacific is mired in seemingly never-ending conflicts, largely courtesy of China's territorial aggression (e.g. with India in the Himalayan region, Japan in the East China Sea and Southeast Asian states - primarily Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam in the South China Sea) and China's stubborn goal of reunification with Taiwan.<sup>1</sup> The continuing intense geopolitical competition dominated by the US-China tussle alongside the regional powers' fight for survival is not helping matters. Nor is the resurgent climate of war accentuated by the Hamas-Israel war in West Asia and Russia's war in Ukraine – the latter has in fact strengthened fears of an emergency precipitating in the Taiwan Strait, which would be disastrous for neighbouring Japan, India and Southeast Asia.

On top of this, the region is witnessing a slide in multilateralism. One of the main reasons has been the loss of faith in regional multilateral institutions exemplified by the still-revered Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN, comprising 10 members and one waiting in the wings).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> C. Chap, “[ASEAN Remains Divided Over China's Assertiveness in South China Sea](#)”, *VOA*, 12 September 2023; M. Yamaguchi, “[China, Japan trade accusations over maritime incursions](#)”, *AP*, 16 March 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand are the founding members; the others are Brunei Darussalam, Vietnam, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Cambodia. In principle, ASEAN has agreed to accept Timor Leste, which

However, despite ASEAN's ineffectiveness in resolving conflicts for its own member states, let alone Asia as a whole, the bloc is still crucial to the Indo-Pacific economic and security architecture, not least because of its huge market, trillion-dollar economy and strategic waterways.<sup>3</sup>

ASEAN's failure to get its act together to end the conflict in Myanmar and its divisiveness in the face of Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea, thus hindering the adoption of a code of conduct in this resource-rich maritime region, are certainly glaring examples of its ineffectiveness.<sup>4</sup> Yet ASEAN's relative success in managing a multitude of major inter-state conflicts in a culturally, ethnically, linguistically, politically, and religiously diverse region while bringing about significant economic transformation in Southeast Asia by brokering booming intra-regional trade and connectivity drives cannot be disregarded.<sup>5</sup>

It is no wonder that major and middle powers, including the US, the European Union, and China, have been seeking to lure the inclusivity-oriented ASEAN into their folds, especially in recent years. Japan and India are no exceptions.

Moreover, India and Japan are both on rising global trajectories especially following the Ukraine invasion in 2022. Soon after the war, especially, Japan's leadership displayed major power ambitions in terms of attempting to unite the Indo-Pacific against imperialistic endeavours such as that of Russia. For example, the Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida toured Global South countries like India, Cambodia, and other Southeast Asian states but also raised the alarm about a similar emergency developing in Asia, citing China's military forays

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already has observer status, as its 11<sup>th</sup> member. See ASEAN, "Member States", <https://asean.org/member-states/>; J.N. Shofa, "Timor Leste to 'Ideally' Become Full ASEAN Member in 2025: President", *Jakarta Globe*, 7 August 2023.

<sup>3</sup> J.-O. Lee and S. Adam, "ASEAN is poised for post-pandemic inclusive growth and prosperity – here's why", World Economic Forum (WEF), 18 January 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Chap (2023); T. Chau, "Severe stress? Myanmar, South China Sea push ASEAN to breaking point", *Al Jazeera*, 4 September 2023.

<sup>5</sup> S.M. Khasru, "What we've achieved and the challenges ahead - 50 years of ASEAN", World Economic Forum (WEF), 14 November 2017.

into the region, particularly the “new normal” in Taiwan and Beijing’s unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force in the East and South China Seas.<sup>6</sup>

India, on the other hand, played an extremely deft diplomatic hand by choosing not to sideline its historical partner Russia while maintaining good relations with western-led countries sanctioning Russia, including Japan. India’s booming economic and technological sectors, especially in the space sector, have also made it an obvious partner of choice. India is looking to capitalise on this aspect with other major economies like Japan and the ASEAN states – India, Japan, and Vietnam have already been marked out as top-performing markets in the region in the near future.<sup>7</sup> As a result, relations between India and Japan during these testing times have not just remained stable but seen an upswing. In order to develop a truly regional architecture, however, this tried and tested bilateral relationship must engage with the inclusive regional bloc of ASEAN to expand their respective, bilateral spheres of influence regarding economic, security, and digital engagement.

Even though the majority of the ASEAN states, like India, have not condemned Russia, ASEAN is still concerned about the effects of the war in Ukraine on global food and energy security as well as the humanitarian issues, and called for restraint and a peaceful resolution.<sup>8</sup> The ensuing events, primarily the escalating divide between democracies and autocracies has not, however, weakened the respective bilateral agreements with India or Japan.

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<sup>6</sup> R. Sochan, “Japan’s Kishida set for second Cambodia visit to bolster ties”, *Phnom Penh Post*, 29 September 2022; *VOA*, “Japan PM: East Asia Could Be Next Ukraine”, 14 January 2023; J.P. Panda, “Kishida’s India Visit: Samaritan of the Eleventh Hour?”, *Japan Forward*, March 2022.

<sup>7</sup> C. Jacob and S. Sanyal, “Looking to ride the Asia-Pacific rally? Here are analysts’ top markets to invest in for 2024”, *CNBC*, 7 January 2024.

<sup>8</sup> T. Shoji, “Southeast Asia and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine - Diverse Relations, Mixed Reactions”, Sasakawa Peace Foundation, 1 November 2022.

On the contrary, the looming threat of conflict has demanded stronger relationships among the three partners. In November 2022, ASEAN and India becoming Comprehensive Strategic Partners highlighted the maturity achieved over the years since they established ties in 1992. A year later, Japan and ASEAN celebrated 50 years of relationship by adopting a joint vision for security and economic cooperation while respecting the rule of law amid growing tensions with China.<sup>9</sup>

But will the three sides coalesce together for the greater good of the region, or will China again loom large? Could third-country partnerships with ASEAN help in integrating the subregions of Asia?

This chapter attempts to answer such questions by first exploring the concept of ASEAN centrality and its relevance for Japan and India in building a strategic axis with Japan. It then examines the congruence between Indian, Japanese, and ASEAN visions and strategies for a peaceful and stable Indo-Pacific. It also looks at the salience of the Chinese challenge as an impetus for ASEAN, India and Japan coming together. In this context, it explores the trilateral synergy between Japan, India and ASEAN for maintaining the Indo-Pacific's geopolitical equilibrium and for creating resilient global supply chain networks. The chapter particularly focuses on the Bay of Bengal (BoB) as a hub of cooperation and third-country partnerships with ASEAN.

## **India and Japan's Common Quest for Channelling ASEAN Centrality**

The Strategic and Global Partnership between India and Japan has long upheld a combined commitment to upholding the centrality of the ASEAN, building bilaterally on the individual Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships both Delhi and Tokyo

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<sup>9</sup> M. Yamaguchi, "Japan and ASEAN bolster ties at a summit focused on security and economy amid tensions with China", *AP*, 17 December 2023.

share with ASEAN.<sup>10</sup> They have also advocated strongly for this centrality to be reflected in statements of multilateral and minilateral groupings – like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) comprising Australia, India, Japan, and the United States – that they are a part of.

It is important to note that the term ASEAN centrality is used here in both a restricted and broader sense.<sup>11</sup> The former meaning highlights the ASEAN bloc as the central “peace-preserving”, “stabilising” entity that encircles other extensive multilateral networks like the ASEAN Plus Three (APT, namely China, Japan and South Korea); the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM+); the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF); and the East Asia Summit (EAS), which focus on a multitude of areas from economic security to regional security.<sup>12</sup> It nonetheless allows member states to expand their ties with external states, as well as minilaterals and multilaterals while belonging to the ASEAN network of forums oriented towards inclusivity, unity and consensus-building.

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<sup>10</sup> Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), “[India-Japan Relations](#)”, Government of India, January 2013; Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), “[Indian Mission to ASEAN](#)”, Government of India, November 2022; ASEAN, “Joint Statement on The Establishment of The ASEAN-Japan Comprehensive Strategic Partnership”, September 2023, <https://asean.org/joint-statement-on-the-establishment-of-the-asean-japan-comprehensive-strategic-partnership/>.

<sup>11</sup> J.P. Panda, “ASEAN Centrality: Key to ASEAN-India-Japan Tripartite Cooperation?” in J.P. Panda (ed.), *India-Japan-ASEAN Triangularity: Emergence of a Possible Indo-Pacific Axis?*, London, Routledge, 2022, pp. 2-3.

<sup>12</sup> The ADMM Plus includes Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, Russia, South Korea and the United States. The ARF includes Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, China, the EU, India, Japan, Mongolia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, North Korea, Russia, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Timor-Leste, and the United States. And the EAS includes the 10 ASEAN states along with Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, Russia and the United States. See D. Thompson and B. Chong, “Built for Trust, Not for Conflict: ASEAN Faces the Future”, Special Report, United States Institute of Peace (USIP), August 2020.

The latter see ASEAN as a representative model for distinct, new subregional groupings in Asia such as the Quad.<sup>13</sup> In this context, the championing of ASEAN centrality constitutes the most ambitious endeavour undertaken by a subregional organisation, seeking to position itself prominently on the vast canvases of regional and global affairs, all the while diligently upholding a stance of neutrality.<sup>14</sup>

By establishing Dialogue Partnerships with Australia, Canada, China, the EU, India, Japan, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea (the ROK or South Korea), the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom and the United States, ASEAN extends its collaborative engagements beyond the confines of its member states.<sup>15</sup> Significantly, ASEAN has established Sectoral Dialogue Partnerships with Norway, Pakistan, Switzerland and Turkey. It also maintains Development Partnerships with Chile, France, Germany and Italy.

The extensive geographic scope of this cooperation positions ASEAN as an ideal nucleus for shaping the future trajectory of the region, concurrently serving as an exemplary model for other subregional entities to emulate, particularly concerning outreach initiatives. Indeed, it stands as one of the most extensive and accomplished regional bodies operating within the Asian context, despite the challenges and limitations it faces.

The release of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) in June 2019 marked an important development in this ASEAN outreach endeavour and significantly impacted regional dynamics.<sup>16</sup> As the US-China conflict intensified, it became increasingly evident that it was crucial for ASEAN to actively build on the “centrality” assigned to it by regional actors. The need to refocus ASEAN’s neutrality and leadership in the region

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<sup>13</sup> Panda (2022).

<sup>14</sup> R. Emmers, “Unpacking ASEAN Neutrality: The Quest for Autonomy and Impartiality in Southeast Asia”, *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 40, no. 3, December 2018, pp. 349-70.

<sup>15</sup> ASEAN, “[External Relations](#)”.

<sup>16</sup> ASEAN, “[ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific](#)”, June 2019.

is a reminder of why ASEAN's "centrality" was and continues to be important for maintaining the security balance in the Indo-Pacific region. The AOIP encourages ASEAN to set the agenda for cooperation, especially as ASEAN member states remain the most vulnerable to regional great power politics, even though countries such as China and India are ASEAN's Dialogue Partners.

Just as the United States and partner nations, such as India and Japan, converge in their shared objectives, particularly in countering China with an emphasis on advancing democratic principles, the concept of "ASEAN Centrality" offers a localised approach to fostering a distinct Southeast Asian, if not broader Asian, identity.<sup>17</sup> This identity, while not intended to marginalise China – given that ASEAN emerged as Beijing's primary trading partner in 2020 – aims to construct a more comprehensive framework characterised by equitable, rules-based systems. Consequently, notwithstanding the challenges it faces, the assured trajectory of ASEAN's critical future role within the Indo-Pacific and the broader Asian landscape persists.

It has hence become increasingly pertinent to revisit the creation of a strategic axis between ASEAN and two of its most trusted and reliable partners, namely Japan and India, by building on mutual interests for a safer Asia and Indo-Pacific.<sup>18</sup>

## **Building Commonalities in Approaches Towards ASEAN**

ASEAN relies significantly on its Dialogue Partners India and Japan, owing to them being distinguished stalwarts within the Asian economic and security framework, possessing close affiliations with the United States and maintaining an economic balance *vis-à-vis* China. The imperative for ASEAN to increase its significance is intricately tied to its collaboration with India

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<sup>17</sup> E. Pankaj, "ASEAN Centrality and the Indo-Pacific: Finding a Convergent Reality?", *The Indo-Pacific Review*, vol. 1, no. 1, October 2022, pp. 40-54.

<sup>18</sup> Panda (2022).

and Japan. Such dependence on these two nations for the advancement of “ASEAN Centrality” arguably surpasses similar expectations ASEAN may have from any of its 10 member states. In particular, amid the escalating rivalry between China and the United States (a geopolitical landscape in which several ASEAN states find themselves ensnared) both India and Japan emerge as steadfast allies for ASEAN, playing pivotal roles in shaping its prospective trajectory.

As prominent advocates of the principle of “ASEAN Centrality”, Japan and India have consistently been actively endorsing this stance within ASEAN forums, such as ASEAN +6 and the East Asia Summit, of which they are integral members. Extending beyond their engagements with ASEAN, both nations have championed the concept of “ASEAN Centrality” through individual addresses and bilateral statements.<sup>19</sup>

For India and Japan, ASEAN’s centrality and unity constitute the cornerstone of the Indo-Pacific concept, characterised by inclusivity and openness to all stakeholders. Notably, multilateral frameworks involving India and Japan, like the Quad, have explicitly embraced the notion of “ASEAN Centrality”. This endorsement was formally set out in the Quad’s inaugural joint statement, “Spirit of the Quad”, wherein the security dialogue unequivocally expressed robust support for ASEAN’s unity and centrality, aligning with the AOIP.<sup>20</sup>

## **Could the China Challenge Coalesce the Middle Powers of Japan, India, and Southeast Asia?**

A pivotal partnership domain within ASEAN for both India and Japan involves addressing China, particularly the ambitious trillion-dollar infrastructure project of the Belt and Road

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<sup>19</sup> Prime Minister’s Office, “[India-Japan Vision Statement](#)”, Press Information Bureau (PIB), Government of India, 29 October 2019.

<sup>20</sup> The White House, [Quad Leaders’ Joint Statement: ‘The Spirit of the Quad’](#), 12 March 2021.

Initiative (BRI), which has been the flagship tool for China's engagement in Southeast Asia.<sup>21</sup> China's political and economic influence is likely to continue even as BRI investments face the brunt of China's economic downturn, as well as rising concerns over environmental, social, and financial viability in Southeast Asia in the coming years.<sup>22</sup>

Against this scenario, India and Japan must stay vigilant regarding China's economic clout and devise creative but feasible means to achieve common aims. These include the (re)building of a sustainable, rules-based, inclusive economic security architecture in the Indo-Pacific that also counters the expansionist, West-baiting geopolitical goals of Beijing, via the BRI, centred on a Sino-centric vision of a regional, global order – yet does not sideline or isolate China in keeping with ASEAN's strategy of centrality.<sup>23</sup>

Notably, a primary focus in this domain for both India and Japan has been the promotion of sustainable and people-centred multimodal (rail, road, air, sea and digital) connectivity, focusing on quality infrastructure, digital innovation, seamless logistics, regulatory excellence, “multi-layered” connectivity (including technical, knowledge and human aspects) and population mobility.<sup>24</sup> Initiatives such as India's Act East Policy, Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) and Sagarmala, along with Japan's Expanded Partnership for Quality Infrastructure (EPQI) within the framework of its Free and Open Indo-Pacific, have been instrumental in fostering connectivity between ASEAN, India and Japan.

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<sup>21</sup> S. Nanwani, “Belt and Road Initiative: Responses from Japan and India – Bilateralism, Multilateralism and Collaborations”, *Global Policy*, vol. 10, no. 2, May 2019, pp. 284–89.

<sup>22</sup> Peh Hong Lim, “China's Trade Grows in SE Asia Under BRI, as Do Concerns”, *V/OA*, 15 October 2023.

<sup>23</sup> F. Umbach, “How China's Belt and Road Initiative is faring”, *GIS Reports*, 8 April 2022.

<sup>24</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), Japan, “Japan-ASEAN Comprehensive Connectivity Initiative”, September 2023; Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), India, “ASEAN-India Connectivity: Mapping Pathways of Shared Prosperity”.

Furthermore, the impetus provided by ASEAN's "Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025" significantly informs and propels this collaborative momentum.<sup>25</sup> Both India and Japan actively engage with ASEAN under the umbrella of this master plan, aligning their respective initiatives with the overarching goals outlined by the regional organisation.

One of the most important objectives is to achieve economic resilience in order to not just reduce the Indo-Pacific states' overdependence on Chinese supply chains but also to prevent China from weaponising its economic coercion tactics as a tool to get its way in political matters. Japan has been at the receiving end of Chinese economic coercion on multiple occasions; the recent suspension of Japanese seafood imports in response to the release of treated water from Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station into the sea, while China engages in fishing on Japan's economic waters, is already impacting Japanese businesses, and highlights China's (mal)intentions.<sup>26</sup>

Even though Southeast Asia – and India for that matter – may well have not witnessed China's economic coercion in the same manner as Australia, South Korea and Taiwan, China has been exploiting the region's dependencies, as evidenced by Vietnam's and the Philippines' frustrations over the South China Sea conflict and disunity in ASEAN.<sup>27</sup> In 2014, tensions over a Chinese oil rig in the disputed waters of the South China Sea affected Vietnam's trade with China; and in 2023, China which accounts for about 99% of Vietnam's lobster exports unexpectedly halted their import, highlighting the need to expedite new mechanisms to limit such instances beyond deference to China's whims.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> ASEAN, "Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025", August 2021.

<sup>26</sup> J. McCurry, "China drastically cuts seafood imports from Japan in wake of Fukushima water release", *The Guardian*, 25 September 2023.

<sup>27</sup> G. Priyandita, "Chinese economic coercion in Southeast Asia: Balancing carrots and sticks", Hybrid CoE Working Paper 25, 26 October 2023.

<sup>28</sup> V. Dong, "Vietnam Seeks to Step Out of China's Economic Shadow", *VOA*, 26 June 2014; P. Dung, "Vietnam calls on China to resume import of ornate rock

Therefore, sooner or later ASEAN will need to look at concrete alternatives to mitigate its dependence on China. One definite option for achieving this diversification and shielding the member states from China's (inevitable) economic coercion is the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI) co-founded by Australia, India and Japan. India's concerns about ASEAN's overdependence on China, cited as grounds for objecting to its admission to the SCRI, are also likely to develop following ASEAN's evolving position.

In recent years, India and Japan have also been proactively courting ASEAN and its member states, with both countries having established their respective credentials as credible partners in Southeast Asia.<sup>29</sup> Japan has been a top leader in quality infrastructure in the region: not only were its pre-COVID-19 investment figures bigger than China's (worth US\$367 billion to China's US\$255 billion, even with its official development assistance declining), Japanese investments in Southeast Asian countries, such as in Indonesia, Vietnam, and Thailand, have been growing because industries are diversifying away from China.<sup>30</sup>

There has also been a boost to security and economic cooperation between Japan and some ASEAN states like Vietnam and the Philippines. Ties between Japan and Vietnam are set to be upgraded to a "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership", including expanding cooperation in trade and investment, defence and security, green transition, and digital transformation, in line with Japan's enhanced ties with India.<sup>31</sup> In addition, Japan and the Philippines have upped their ties to

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lobsters", *VnExpress*, 29 November 2023.

<sup>29</sup> D. Grossman, "India Is Becoming a Power in Southeast Asia", *Foreign Policy*, 10 July 2023; R.J. Heydarian, "Japan's new golden age in Southeast Asia", *Interpreter*, 14 November 2023.

<sup>30</sup> J.N. Shofa, "Japanese Investors Favor Southeast Asia as Domestic Economy Slows", *Jakarta Globe*, 14 December 2023; Heydarian (2023).

<sup>31</sup> M. Yamaguchi, "Japan and Vietnam agree to boost ties and start discussing Japanese military aid amid China threat", *AP*, 27 November 2023.

the extent that they are entering a “golden age”, which includes agreeing to start negotiations on a “reciprocal defence pact” and Japan granting aid for a maritime radar system.<sup>32</sup> This should concern Beijing as Japan is looking to bring together regional partners with genuine grievances against China for the purpose of multifaceted security cooperation.

Alongside new connectivity initiatives, India’s renewed partnership with ASEAN has redirected the spotlight on maritime cooperation. This has encouraged trade-oriented potential private sector participation in the development of seaports and maritime logistics networks and reconfigured the security outlook. India and ASEAN have agreed to deepen their strategic ties through a recently released joint statement on maritime cooperation.<sup>33</sup> India is also looking to expand its naval presence in Southeast Asia as evidenced by the first India-ASEAN maritime exercises, co-hosted by India and Singapore.<sup>34</sup> They are already having an impact as China reportedly sent its maritime militia boats to the area where exercises were being held.<sup>35</sup>

India has also been strengthening its bilateral security ties with individual ASEAN member states like Vietnam and Indonesia. Another important ASEAN middle power with which relations are on the upswing, as its ties with China deteriorate, is the Philippines. Besides engaging in bilateral and multilateral drills with the country, India has also firmly supported it in the South China Sea dispute. In a June 2023 joint statement with the Philippines, India underscored the need “for adherence to international law, especially the UNCLOS and the 2016 Arbitral Award on the South China Sea” – a vital change of

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<sup>32</sup> A.A. Arugay and M. A Galang, “The Philippines-Japan Security Relationship: A New Golden Age?”, *Fulcrum*, 16 November 2023.

<sup>33</sup> ASEAN, “ASEAN-India Joint Statement on Maritime Cooperation”, 7 September 2023.

<sup>34</sup> Ministry of Defence, “Sea Phase of ASEAN-India Maritime Exercise – 2023”.

<sup>35</sup> A. Bhaumik, “Beijing flexes muscle in South China Sea amid India-ASEAN maritime exercises”, *Deccan Herald*, 9 May 2023.

stance considering it previously only “noted the Award of the Arbitral Tribunal”.<sup>36</sup> The Philippines, which in 2022 purchased the BrahMos cruise missile from India, is also looking to buy more defence equipment from India amid rising tensions with China, while negotiating on a preferential trade deal with India.<sup>37</sup>

Such concerted efforts aim to mitigate the expansive, coercive economic and political influence of the BRI, as well as China’s asymmetric hold over the Indo-Pacific region’s overall economic security and the challenges of the evolving US-China strategic competition for the middle powers including India, Japan and the ASEAN states in particular. In this context, a structural change in increasing economic engagement (exemplified by the new supply chain networks, including the Australia-India-Japan-led SCRI, which helps in countering China’s regional ambitions of dividing and weaponising its economic clout) is possible and must be explored in greater detail.

## **India-Japan-ASEAN Triangularity in Shaping the Future of the Indo-Pacific**

The Indo-Pacific serves as a cognitive compass, akin to a psychological guide or a “mental map”, tailored to the contemporary era characterised by maritime connectivity and international political dynamics among diverse actors.<sup>38</sup> Within this context, it becomes imperative to discern the particular convergence zone that manifests itself among all regional players through their diverse perspectives on the Indo-Pacific. The shared commitment to upholding the centrality of ASEAN

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<sup>36</sup> A.-M. Lariosa, “[India Revises Stance on China-Philippines Maritime Dispute as New Delhi Looks East](#)”, U.S. Naval Institute (USNI), 5 July 2023.

<sup>37</sup> J.A.L. Rocamora, “[PH, India to commence bilateral trade deal negotiations](#)”, 30 June 2023.

<sup>38</sup> Australian National University, “[National Security Podcast: Rory Medcalf: the rise of the Indo-Pacific](#)”.

emerges as a pivotal focal point of mutual convergence, with China, the Quad, and even European actors like France subscribing to this common objective.

While New Delhi and Tokyo have outlined regional cooperation across the Indo-Pacific as a key objective in their bilateral partnership, their commitment to collaboration with ASEAN and Southeast Asia remains central to their overarching Indo-Pacific strategy.<sup>39</sup> Such driven focus is crucial, owing simply to the fact that the Indo-Pacific, conceived of as a broadly framed conceptual construct, amounts to a mega-region whose delineation varies among its proponents, each driven by their own national interests.

As a geographical actuality, interpretations of the region's boundaries diverge, even among the ostensibly like-minded Quad powers and other actors such as the EU, the UK and China. Nevertheless, a notable point of convergence among all regional actors is their dedication to upholding "ASEAN Centrality". Whether by the Quad powers or China, the acknowledgement of ASEAN Centrality – and the organisation's distinctive Indo-Pacific definition – reflects a nuanced strategic approach. This approach aims to cultivate autonomy in dealing with the region while concurrently striving to maintain a balance of power in an increasingly multipolar Asia.

The trilateral synergy between Japan, India and ASEAN holds profound implications for the Indo-Pacific's geopolitical equilibrium and the resilience of global supply chain networks. Amidst disruptions, a consolidated front can enhance economic stability and foster innovation, crucial for navigating the challenges of the 21st century.<sup>40</sup> Japan and India have shown their recognition of this fact by repeatedly reiterating the focus on ASEAN's role. In its most direct and restricted interpretation, ASEAN centrality conveys the notion that ASEAN occupies,

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<sup>39</sup> D. McLain Gill and H.V. Pant, "India and Japan Converge in Southeast Asia", *Hindu*, 22 November 2023.

<sup>40</sup> Carnegie, "India-Japan-ASEAN: Promoting Stability in the Indo-Pacific", 13 March 2019.

and should persist in occupying, a central position within the foundational structures of the Asia (or Indo-Pacific) region, notably within the APT, the ARF, the ADMM+ and the EAS.<sup>41</sup> ASEAN aspires to serve as the institutional platform upon which broader Indo-Pacific and Asian regional organisations are anchored, thus affirming its centrality as a pivotal axis.

Keeping such realities in mind, future reshaping of global supply chains that pass through the Indo-Pacific and rely heavily on Southeast and South Asia is only possible with the support and active participation of ASEAN. For instance, the success of the Japan-India-Australia-ideated SCRI is contingent upon its collaborative engagement with significant monetary powers and regional entities.<sup>42</sup> Establishing a connection through the SCRI with ASEAN – and bringing in partners like the EU at a later stage – will help eradicate trade barriers, creating substantial opportunities for growth. Japan's proposal to include ASEAN in the SCRI was however discouraged by India – owing to ASEAN's heavy dependence on China.<sup>43</sup>

This raises two key challenges: firstly, that even traditional partners like Japan-India have differing approaches to issues.<sup>44</sup> Notably, it bursts the bubble that bilateral trust could become a failsafe recipe for finalising agreements. A similar situation arose with the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which India refused to join primarily to avoid making itself more vulnerable to Chinese economic and political coercion despite the push from close ally Japan.<sup>45</sup> The fact that

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<sup>41</sup> R.M. Marty and M. Natalegawa, "The Centrality of ASEAN – Further Entrenching What Works in the Decades Ahead", *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development*, no. 13, Winter 2019, pp. 128-35.

<sup>42</sup> J.P. Panda, "The Structural Limits of the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative", *PacNet* 31, Pacific Forum, 8 July 2021.

<sup>43</sup> "India against ASEAN joining new supply chain", *VOV World*, 29 March 2021; Ministry External Affairs, "India-Japan-Australia Supply Chain looks to include ASEAN nations", Government of India, 28 April 2021.

<sup>44</sup> E. Pankaj, "Kishida's Emerging India Challenge", *Tokyo Review*, 11 April 2022.

<sup>45</sup> *Mint*, "Japan won't sign China-backed RCEP if India doesn't join", 29 November 2019.

these differences do not get in the way of the long-standing partnership is a testament to Indian-Japanese diplomatic maturity. Secondly, ASEAN's China chip is starting to weigh heavily on its dreams of maintaining a neutral vision of itself, and these woes will only grow over time.

The SCRI is tasked with establishing a nexus between multipolar Asia and maritime Asia. The supply chain network it constructs must achieve equilibrium by expansively spanning both land and sea. Integrating ASEAN economies into the initiative can contribute to enhancing its relations in the Indo-Pacific, whereas affiliations with the EU and West Asia will bolster its land-based connections. Including ASEAN in the SCRI will mean increasingly moving forward but it is important for Japan and ASEAN to recognise the merit behind India's objections and work on the contested issues to avoid another RCEP-like situation.

While both nations have prominently advocated for "ASEAN centrality", distinctions persist in their approaches to the regional grouping. A notable contrast is evident in the realm of trade which became clear in the case of RCEP when India, despite engaging in negotiations, opted not to partake in the initiative. Following ASEAN's involvement, the RCEP assumed a narrative emphasising the promotion of ASEAN centrality in economic domains. India's decision to abstain from RCEP was rooted in national interest, a priority that ultimately took precedence over fostering regional unity.

However, this choice did not signify a deviation from India's commitment to supporting the importance of ASEAN in its Indo-Pacific perspective. These divergences are accommodated within the robust India-Japan partnership. Japan has long upheld that it wants India in the RCEP.<sup>46</sup> ASEAN's Secretary General Kao Kim Hourn recently stated that the bloc wants India to

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<sup>46</sup> S. Haidar, "Japan still hopes India will re-join RCEP: Japan Cabinet official Noriyuki Shikata", *Hindu*, 20 March 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/japan-still-hopes-india-will-re-join-rcep-japan-cabinet-official-noriyuki-shikata/article65243818.ece>.

join the agreement for greater market access.<sup>47</sup> Here, Japan, with its economic prowess and diplomatic influence, can play a pivotal role in creating a favourable ground for India's economic diplomacy within ASEAN, thus bridging the economic gaps and fostering a conducive environment for regional growth. By potentially advocating for informal discussions between India-ASEAN-Japan to manage India's expectations of the RCEP and create a favourable negotiation environment, Japan can lead the way for India's ultimate inclusion in the extensive trade agreement that will enhance economic integration between Southeast and Northeast Asia.

Another key area of synergy is renewable energy. India and ASEAN are looking to work together to develop a renewable energy ecosystem focusing on knowledge sharing, capacity building, technical assistance and joint initiatives for developing renewable energy manufacturing hubs in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>48</sup>

As Japan (which already has a clean energy partnership with India including a new US\$600 million bilateral India-Japan fund for investments in renewable energy and other circular economy sectors) also seeks a resilient economic partnership with ASEAN, focusing on climate goals together with India for achieving energy security and climate action in the Indo-Pacific can also help Japan achieve "realistic energy transition".<sup>49</sup> Moreover the three partners must help advance innovation in clean energy supply chains, including solar, wind, green hydrogen and battery storage.

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<sup>47</sup> "ASEAN wants India to join RCEP for greater market access: Secretary-General Kao", *Hindu*, 21 November 2023.

<sup>48</sup> B. Suryadi, "ASEAN-India Cooperation on Energy Transition", *ASEAN Magazine*, 9 May 2022.

<sup>49</sup> *Economic Times*, "\$600-mn bilateral India-Japan fund to invest in renewable energy, e-mobility biz", 4 October 2023; Y. Obayashi and K. Golubkova, "Japan pledges financial support to help ASEAN decarbonize", *Reuters*, 4 March 2023.

## Bay of Bengal and ASEAN: A Hub of Cooperation and Third-Country Partnerships?

The BoB's strategic significance cannot be overstated in facilitating cooperation between India and Japan. ASEAN-Japan-India-led joint initiatives in infrastructure development, naval exercises and diplomatic engagements can transform this region into a gateway for enhanced connectivity, trade, and diplomatic collaboration. As India and Japan continue talks to engage in third-country cooperation, they may be able to kill two birds with one stone by focusing on connectivity contours in the BoB region.<sup>50</sup> Both India and Japan have individually sought to expand their presence and engagements in the BoB region, bringing ASEAN into the fold. Japan's work on interconnecting electric cables from Java to Sumatra as part of its support to ASEAN via land, maritime and miscellaneous connectivity corridors paves the way for it to engage in more BoB projects.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, the Japan-India synergy on Northeast Asia emerges as a vital and successful stage to develop as part of their BoB outreach.<sup>52</sup>

India is also increasingly embracing the concept of regional integration, exemplified by its initiatives in the BoB region. These initiatives encompass the development of coastal shipping and inland waterways in collaboration with Bangladesh, infrastructure projects involving ports and roadways in Sri Lanka (with the West Container Terminal being yet another

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<sup>50</sup> "India, Japan looking to boost cooperation in third countries: Harsh Vardhan Shringla", *Deccan Herald*, 20 July 2021.

<sup>51</sup> Mission of Japan to ASEAN, "Japan-ASEAN Friendship and Cooperation", 2015; "Japan and ASEAN partnership: From Fukuda to Abe Doctrine".

<sup>52</sup> J.P. Panda, "Tokyo's 'Northeast India' Diary: From Cooperation Corridor to China", in J.P. Panda (ed.) *India-Japan-ASEAN Triangularity: Emergence of a Possible Indo-Pacific Axis?*, London, Routledge, 2022. R.K. Reddy, "India, Japan and the Strategic Role of Infrastructure", *Organisation for Research on China and Asia*, Orcasia, 27 October 2023..

Japan-India led project), and the establishment of the Sittwe port in Myanmar.<sup>53</sup> The Indian government has actively pursued the integration of Assam, and the broader Northeast region, with Myanmar, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Vietnam and Japan through comprehensive land, air, and sea linkages. Endeavours to implement this objective encompass the construction of a new 20-kilometre Dhubri-Phulbhari Bridge over the Brahmaputra, supported by Japanese official development assistance.<sup>54</sup> Other initiatives include a power grid facilitating the transmission of power to and from India's neighbouring regions through Assam, and the trilateral India-Myanmar-Thailand highway, with a potential extension to Laos and Vietnam.<sup>55</sup>

The BoB, situated at the core of the Indo-Pacific and bordering India's eastern coast along with its adjoining waters, the Andaman Sea, represent India's geostrategic portal into the extensive maritime domain. Consequently, Northeast India stands poised to function as the focal point for promoting connectivity via BoB between India, Japan, and ASEAN, thereby fostering a more robust trilateral relationship. The BoB region, therefore, serves as a nexus where India's Act East Policy aligns with Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy. The incorporation of ASEAN as an observer in initiatives like the India-Japan Act East Forum, which focuses on Northeast India, has the potential to further enhance and delineate this partnership by facilitating the connection of the BoB region with the broader Indo-Pacific domain.

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<sup>53</sup> Ministry of Shipping, "India and Bangladesh sign Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) to operationalize agreement on coastal shipping", PIB, Government of India, 15 November 2015; B. Mallawarachi, "Sri Lanka Approves New Port Development with India and Japan", *The Diplomat*, 2 March 2021; G. Mohan, "India-financed Sittwe Port opens in Myanmar, countering China's connectivity projects", *India Today*, 11 May 2023.

<sup>54</sup> Embassy of Japan in India, "Foundation Laying Ceremony for the Dhubri-Phulbhari Bridge, supported by Japanese ODA loan", 18 February 2021.

<sup>55</sup> Ministry of Power, "Interconnection with neighbouring countries", Government of India; M. Anand, "Steps on to complete India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highways", *Deccan Chronicle*, 6 October 2020.

Similarly, as opportunities for third-country participation via the BoB deepen, scope for building such partnerships in ASEAN itself remains underutilised. An immediate opportunity has arisen with the dropping of Chinese funding for three railway projects by and in the Philippines over concerns regarding sustainability and geopolitical considerations.<sup>56</sup> The Philippines is now pivoting its focus towards Japan and India as alternative avenues for development and security. This strategic realignment was underscored by Transportation Secretary Jaime Bautista earlier this month, emphasising the Philippine government's readiness to seek development assistance from both Japan and India.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, with Japan having now upgraded ties with Vietnam to the highest level of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership – which India has shared with Vietnam since 2016 – the scope of India-Japan-Vietnam trilateral working in unison has become all the more necessary.<sup>58</sup> India and Japan's quest for a “partnership for peace” and deeper maritime security cooperation could further increase if a “third” Southeast Asian country were to join the collaboration, and Vietnam is a strong contender.<sup>59</sup>

The scope for and future of a potential India-Japan-ASEAN trilateral is immense, urgent and strategically inevitable. It is essential for ASEAN, Tokyo and Delhi to recognise the value that adding such a minilateral would bring to the Indo-Pacific and Asian security architecture, and work on making it a reality in upcoming summits and meetings. The trust shared between the three parties trilaterally and bilaterally is nothing

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<sup>56</sup> S. Strangio, “[Philippines Drops Chinese Funding for Three Railway Projects](#)”, *The Diplomat*, 27 October 2023.

<sup>57</sup> “[Philippines says Japan, S.Korea, India offer to fund railway projects](#)”, *Reuters*, 6 November 2023.

<sup>58</sup> “[Vietnam upgrades ties with Japan to highest level](#)”, *Reuters*, 27 November 2023; Embassy of India in Vietnam, “[India – Vietnam relations](#)”, July 2023;; D.R. Chaudhury, “[Japan-India-Vietnam trilateral could be created for Indo-Pacific stability](#)”, *Economic Times*, 2 December 2021.

<sup>59</sup> J.P. Panda, “[The India-Japan-Vietnam Trilateral: An ‘Inclusive’ Proposition](#)”, Commentary, ISPI, 15 April 2019.

short of unique in the field of foreign relation building. By not formalising this trust into a triangular strategic axis, the two countries plus ASEAN will miss an opportunity to establish one of the most crucial partnerships of the region for times to come.



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