

Japan's Strategy to Keep the
North Koreans and Chinese
Down, the Americans in, and
the Russians Neutral

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The Japanese government makes no secret of its intensifying security concerns. The Ministry of Defense's most recent annual white paper includes the assessment that, "The security environment surrounding Japan has become increasingly severe, with various challenges and destabilizing factors becoming more tangible and acute." The report is also explicit about the source of these challenges. The most immediate danger is identified as North Korea, whose "military development such as its nuclear and missile development constitute unprecedented, serious and imminent threats to the security of Japan." Second on the list is China, which is singled out for the non-transparent strengthening of its armed forces, as well as the increase in its military activities in the vicinity of Japan. Lastly, the white paper notes that "Russia has been modernizing its forces including its nuclear capability not only in the Europe region but in the periphery of Japan," and that close attention needs to be paid to these developments.¹

North Korea, China, and Russia, therefore, each present Japan with specific security concerns. Yet, Japan also faces the added worry that these three countries will increasingly coordinate their activities within the region. Even if they do not actually forge a strategic triangle, there remains the threat that they could gang up together on certain issues, forming a "loose coalition" to counter the interests of Japan and its U.S. ally.²

These fears have intensified as a consequence of the deepening of the relationship between Beijing and Moscow, which is officially described as "a comprehensive, equitable, trusting partnership and strategic cooperation."³ In particular, Japan took careful note of the Vostok-2018 exercises, which were held between July and September 2018 in Russia's Eastern Military District. The Russian military described these drills as being the largest since the Soviet era, involving approximately 300,000 troops.⁴ Vostok-2018 was also the first time that Chinese forces had participated in an annual Russian strategic exercise of this type, contributing approximately 3,000 troops.⁵ Observed by Russian president Vladimir Putin and Chinese Defense Minister Wei Fenghe, Vostok-2018 served as a powerful symbol of Russia and China's increasingly close security relationship.

The situation regarding China and Russia's relations with North Korea is more complicated. Officially, Beijing and Moscow share Tokyo's goal of achieving the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. They have also repeatedly voted in favor of strengthening United Nations Security Council (UNSC) sanctions on North Korea's nuclear and missile programs. However, while there may be some common ground regarding the ultimate goal of Korean denuclearization, Beijing and Moscow are diametrically opposed to Tokyo's position when it comes to the question of how to achieve this.

Despite North Korean leader Kim Jong-un's turn to diplomacy in 2018 and the resulting summits with U.S. president Donald Trump in Singapore and Vietnam, the Japanese government has maintained a hard-line position. Even though Prime Minister Abe Shinzo has conceded that he too would be willing to meet Kim, he has made it clear that his priority is to resolve the abductions issue, which relates to the fate of Japanese citizens kidnapped by the North Korean regime during the 1970s and 1980s.⁶ Additionally, the Japanese government has consistently argued that existing UNSC resolutions should continue to be upheld and implemented in full until concrete progress is made towards "the complete, verifiable and irreversible dismantlement (CVID) of all weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missiles of all ranges by North Korea."⁷

By contrast, Beijing and Moscow take the view that Pyongyang has already made significant concessions, including its moratorium on missile launches and nuclear tests, demolition of the Punggye-ri nuclear test site, and commitment to working towards the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. On this basis, the Chinese and Russian foreign ministers used a session of the UNSC in September 2018 to call for an easing of sanctions on North Korea.⁸ Tokyo is, therefore, worried that Beijing and Moscow are increasingly making common cause with Pyongyang. This impression was strengthened in October 2018, when the deputy foreign ministers of Russia, China, and North Korea met in Moscow. Also significant was Kim Jong-un's summit with Putin in Vladivostok in April 2019, which added to the four meetings the North Korean leader had already held with Chinese president Xi Jinping. Furthermore, there have been allegations that China and Russia are becoming increasingly lax in enforcing existing international sanctions. For instance, in January 2019, the Japanese media reported that Chinese fishery operators were violating UN sanctions by purchasing fishing licences from Pyongyang to operate in North Korean waters.⁹

Although this increased closeness between China, Russia, and North Korea is a worrying trend for Japan, this is hardly the first time that Tokyo has faced difficult relations with these three Northeast Asian neighbors. Two factors, however, make the current situation especially troublesome. The first is the poisonous state of relations between Japan and South Korea, and the accompanying breakdown in trust between the Abe administration and the government of Moon Jae-in. The most serious incident occurred on December 20, 2018 when a Republic of Korea Navy destroyer is alleged to have directed its fire-control radar at a maritime patrol aircraft operated by the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Forces (JMSDF). The underlying cause of the tensions, however, is bitter differences over the history of Japanese colonial rule over the Korean Peninsula and related arguments regarding previous intergovernmental agreements about the issues of the so-called "comfort women" and forced labor.

In other circumstances, Washington could be expected to intervene to smooth out these tensions between its main East Asian allies. At present, however, it is a contributor to Japan's sense of regional insecurity. This is a consequence of Trump's "America First" foreign policy and the transactional approach that he takes to alliances. In essence, Trump has made the U.S. security guarantee to allies conditional, making it clear that, if countries are to continue to receive the protection of the U.S. superpower, they must be ready to concede to Washington on other issues. The United States has, of course, always exerted influence on security partners to encourage their policies to develop in a direction favorable to its national interests. However, the Trump administration is unusually brazen in the manner in which it exercises U.S. leverage and in its openness about directly connecting security and economic issues.

With regard to Japan, prior to becoming president, Trump was explicit about his willingness to withdraw U.S. forces if Tokyo did not significantly increase its financial contribution to their deployment. He also criticized the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty for being one-sided and "not a fair deal." Additionally, in the same interview, Trump took issue with Japan's large trade surplus, describing it as "a very unfair situation."¹⁰ Guided by these long-standing views, Trump has pressed Japan to buy "massive" amounts of U.S. military equipment.¹¹ He has also continued to criticize Japan on trade and, in March 2018, his administration declined to give Japan an exemption from tariffs on imports of steel and aluminium.

Furthermore, Trump has used the threat of further tariffs to force Japan to accede to talks about a bilateral trade deal, telling Abe, “You don’t have to negotiate, but we’re going to put a very, very substantial tax on your cars if you don’t.”¹² With talks also expected to begin towards the end of 2019 about revised cost-sharing arrangements for U.S. forces in Japan, Tokyo can again expect to be strong-armed into concessions.

In short, Japan’s security situation is alarming. The country faces not only the individual security challenges posed by North Korea, China, and Russia, but also the danger of increased cooperation between these three nuclear-armed neighbors. What is more, at just the time when Tokyo needs reliable partners, it finds itself dealing with a South Korean government that it considers chronically untrustworthy and a U.S. administration that often seems less like a loyal friend and more like an increasingly expensive supplier of commercial security services.

Having identified the nature of this problem, the remainder of this essay focuses on explaining Japan’s strategy for addressing it. It does so by adapting Lord Ismay’s famous description of the fundamental goal of NATO as being to “keep the Soviet Union out, the Americans in, and the Germans down.”¹³ Correspondingly, Japan’s current strategy can be characterized as aiming to keep the North Koreans and Chinese down, the Americans in, and the Russians neutral. After outlining the details of each part of this strategy, the essay will identify the main challenges to overcome in its implementation.

Keeping the North Koreans and the Chinese Down

From the second half of 2018, there were indications of increased willingness on the part of the Abe administration to engage with both North Korea and China. In particular, Abe’s address to the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in September 2018 set a considerably more positive tone about relations with North Korea than his speech a year earlier. Abe stated that: “I am also ready to break the shell of mutual distrust with North Korea, get off to a new start, and meet face to face with Chairman Kim Jong-Un.”¹⁴ Language about “continuing to increase pressure on North Korea to the maximum level” was also removed from the 2019 version of Japan’s Diplomatic Bluebook.¹⁵ A further step was taken at the start of May 2019 when Abe said in a media interview that he was ready to meet the North Korean leader “without conditions.”¹⁶

Additionally, in October 2018, Abe made an official bilateral visit to China, his first since returning to power in December 2012. During that trip, he announced his ambitions for the relationship, stating that, “Switching from competition to collaboration, I want to lift Japan-China relations to a new era.”¹⁷ Unlike the United States, Japan also accepted China’s invitation to send a naval ship to participate in the April 2019 fleet review to mark the 70th anniversary of the founding of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army Navy.

Some observers took these moves as indicating that a significant shift in Japanese thinking about North Korea and China had occurred. Indeed, one enthusiastic commentator proposed that Abe’s visit to China could mark the start of a “Pax Sinae-Nipponica era” in Asia.¹⁸ This is an enticing idea, yet, in reality, no fundamental change has taken place in Japan’s policy. The

Japanese leadership remains just as wary of both Pyongyang and Beijing as previously and the guiding principle of Japan's strategy remains to contain North Korea and China. Rather than indicating a true reorientation of strategy, Japan's seemingly changed approach has been driven by the need to respond to alterations in U.S. policy towards North Korea and by Japan's priority of avoiding a crisis in relations with China.

North Korea

Japan was caught off guard by the Trump administration's sudden embrace of diplomacy with North Korea. In a phone call on February 14, 2018, the Japanese and U.S. leaders agreed that there would be "no meaningful dialogue" until Pyongyang agreed on "complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearization."¹⁹ Having affirmed this shared commitment to a policy of "maximum pressure," the Japanese leadership was shocked by Trump's announcement in early March that he intended to meet the North Korean leader. This was made even more unpalatable by the knowledge that the change in U.S. policy had been brought about through the work of the Moon administration, in which Japanese trust has never been high.

From the very start then, the Abe administration regarded the talks with North Korea as a mistake, believing that a summit with the U.S. president should only have been granted after Pyongyang offered something more concrete than a vague commitment to the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. And yet, given the enormous importance to Japan of remaining in close alignment with its U.S. ally, the Abe administration felt that it had no choice but to alter the presentation of its North Korea policy to limit the appearance of differences with Washington. This is the real reason why Abe also announced his willingness, in principle, to meet Kim Jong-un.

The actual nature of Japanese thinking about how to deal with the North Korean threat remains that which was expressed in Abe's speech to the UNGA a year earlier. That address, which was focused exclusively on North Korea, made an explicit case for countries to abandon the path of dialogue and instead fully commit to a policy of pressure. Specifically, Abe argued that efforts at dialogue had been tried to exhaustion during the 1990s and 2000s. In his assessment,

"During the time this dialogue continued, North Korea had no intention whatsoever of abandoning its nuclear or missile development. For North Korea, dialogue was instead the best means of deceiving us and buying time...Again and again, attempts to resolve issues through dialogue have all come to naught. In what hope of success are we now repeating the very same failure a third time? ... What is needed to do that is not dialogue, but pressure."²⁰

This belief in the merits of pressure is encouraged by Japanese memories of the process that led to Prime Minister Koizumi Jun'ichirō's landmark visit in September 2002, when the sides signed the Pyongyang Declaration, which presents a comprehensive framework for the normalization of diplomatic relations. Additionally, North Korea agreed to extend a moratorium on missile testing and promised to let in international nuclear inspectors. Crucially, it was also at this time that the North Korean regime finally admitted to the

abduction of 13 Japanese citizens, five of whom were permitted to return to Japan one month later. Japanese observers consider that this breakthrough was achieved by means of the international isolation of Pyongyang, including President George W. Bush's characterization of the regime in January 2002 as being part of the "axis of evil." As Soeya Yoshihide explains,

"Aggressive policies from the United States had pushed North Korea into a corner, and only then did Kim Jong-il make a strategic decision to cultivate a slim route to survival through Japan. Among the Japanese, including Abe himself who accompanied Koizumi as deputy chief cabinet secretary, this memory of North Korean concessions must be still vivid. The lesson was that pressure against an isolated North Korea works to the advantage of Japan."²¹

Even if Abe's new offer to meet Kim Jong-il were to be accepted, it would be difficult for the Japanese leader to make a positive contribution to addressing the nuclear and missile issues. This is because Abe has placed himself at the forefront of the movement to secure the return of remaining Japanese abductees in North Korea. Indeed, Abe has consistently emphasized the abductions issue as being the most important problem in relations with North Korea.²² This means that Abe would find it hard politically to sustain engagement with Pyongyang unless real progress can be made on the abductions issue. This will not be easy since the North Korean side describes the Japanese government's continued emphasis on this question as "a clumsy and foolish attempt for reactionary elements in Japan to again bring up the 'abduction issue,' which was already resolved."²³

The Abe administration's real policy is, therefore, to support engagement with North Korea only to the extent that it contributes to the resolution of the abduction issue. To address the nuclear and missile threat, Japan's priority is to encourage the United States to maintain as much pressure as possible. Additionally, Japan is focused on the goal of minimizing the perceived risks of the U.S.-DPRK talks. Above all, Japan is worried about the prospects of Trump cutting a deal with Kim Jong-un that would address the issue of North Korean intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) but would not tackle the threat of short- and medium-range missiles that can reach Japan.²⁴ This nervousness was exacerbated on 26 May when President Trump dismissed concerns about North Korea's recent tests of short-range ballistic missiles, stating that "North Korea fired off some small weapons, which disturbed some of my people, and others, but not me."²⁵ Additionally, there is anxiety that Trump could grant North Korea the peace treaty that it desires, thereby formally bringing an end to the Korean War. This is a concern in Tokyo since, if the war has officially concluded, Trump may be inclined to begin implementing his long-standing goal of withdrawing or reducing the U.S. military presence in South Korea.²⁶ Japanese strategists see such a step as not only benefitting North Korea, but also potentially causing South Korea to reorient itself towards China. As Michishita Narushige warns, "If the Korean Peninsula gets inside the Chinese sphere of influence and there are no U.S. forces on the peninsula, life for the U.S. and Japan would be very difficult, but especially for Japan."²⁷

Given these worries, the Japanese leadership was undoubtedly relieved when Trump walked away from making an agreement at the Hanoi summit in February. Their hope is now that Washington will again realize that dialogue does not work and will return to the policy of maximum pressure. The risk, however, is that Trump's tough stance in Hanoi was

just a negotiating tactic to extract a few additional minor concessions from North Korea. On 11 April, the U.S. president affirmed his willingness to meet with Kim Jong-un for a third time and stated that “There are various smaller deals that maybe could happen.”²⁸ This will magnify Japanese fears that, despite declaring an uncompromising stance, the U.S. president will ultimately accept minor concessions, then proclaim the underwhelming deal to be a tremendous personal victory. This is the pattern of behavior that Trump is said to have shown when meeting Kim for the first time in Singapore, as well as in his approach to renegotiating trade relations with North American neighbors and China.²⁹

China

Japan’s policy towards China also underwent an apparent change in 2018; yet, as in the case of relations with North Korea, there was actually no fundamental shift. This is not to say that the prime minister’s trip to Beijing in October 2018 was insignificant. After Abe’s decision to visit the controversial Yasukuni Shrine in December 2013, the Chinese leadership had decided that he was not an individual with whom they could legitimately deal. Indeed, the spokesman for the Chinese foreign ministry Qin Gang stated,

“Abe has miscalculated on Sino-Japan ties, and made mistake after mistake, especially visiting the Yasukuni Shrine which houses class-A war criminals. These people are fascists, the Nazis of Asia. ... Of course the Chinese people don't welcome such a Japanese leader, and Chinese leaders will not meet him.”³⁰

This moratorium on contacts had already been brought to an end in November 2014 when Xi and Abe held formal talks for the first time and shared a famously awkward handshake. That encounter was, however, on the sidelines of the APEC summit in Beijing. By contrast, Abe’s trip to the Chinese capital in October 2018 was an official bilateral visit, thereby marking the completion of his rehabilitation.

In terms of content, the summit delivered an agreement on cooperation for maritime search and rescue, and it was decided that Japan and China would promote reciprocal visits by their defense ministers. The sides also reaffirmed their adherence to the 2008 agreement regarding development of resources in the East China Sea and reconfirmed their resolution to make the East China Sea a “Sea of Peace, Cooperation and Friendship.” They also concluded a yen/yuan currency swap agreement.³¹ This positive trend is expected to continue when Xi meets Abe on the sidelines of the G20 summit in Osaka in June 2019.

However, while the atmosphere in relations between Tokyo and Beijing has undergone a welcome improvement, Japan continues to regard China as a chronic security threat, exceeding even the acute danger posed by North Korea. This is reflected in Japan’s National Defense Program Guidelines, which were released in December 2018. Despite Abe’s talk in Beijing of a “new era” in bilateral relations, these defense guidelines continue to emphasize the perceived threat posed by the build-up in Chinese capabilities, asserting that “Such Chinese military and other developments, coupled with the lack of transparency surrounding its defense policy and military power, represent a serious security concern for the region including Japan and for the international community.” A leading goal of Japan’s security policy is, therefore, to counter Beijing’s “unilateral, coercive attempts to alter the status quo based on its own assertions that are incompatible with existing international

order.” Above all, these efforts are concentrated on challenging China’s expanding activities in the East China Sea, especially around the Senkaku Islands, as well as in the South China Sea, where Japan accuses China of conducting “large-scale, rapid reclamation of maritime features, which are being converted into military foothold.”³²

The Japanese government, therefore, shares the Trump administration’s assessment that China is a revisionist power that is intent on reshaping the world in a way that is antithetical to the interests of the United States and its allies.³³ However, while Tokyo may be united with Washington in the overall aim of countering China’s geopolitical ambitions, it has a very different approach to achieving this. The United States has taken an increasingly confrontational stance vis-à-vis China. This has been notable in the Trump’s administration’s rhetoric, including Vice President Mike Pence’s speech at the Hudson Institute in October 2018.³⁴ The U.S. also began a trade war with China and, in September 2018, imposed tariffs of 10% on Chinese goods worth approximately \$200bn. More provocatively still, Washington has taken a more supportive position regarding Taiwan. In September 2018, the U.S. approved arms sales to the island worth \$330m and, in November, two U.S. warships were sent through the Taiwan Strait. In December 2018, the U.S. Congress also passed the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act, which encourages more arms sales and official exchanges between the United States and Taiwan.

These policies are unusually combative, even for the U.S. superpower. They are quite unthinkable for a country like Japan, which places so much emphasis on its status as “a peace-loving nation” and must take into account the fact that China is a close geographic neighbor.³⁵ Instead, Japan’s strategy is to quietly work towards containing the effects of China’s rise, yet to simultaneously keep bilateral relations on an even keel and to avoid dangerous squalls.

The first strand of this policy is best illustrated by Japan’s “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) vision, the Abe government’s signature foreign policy concept. Japanese officials diligently insist that FOIP is not intended to contain China, but most observers conclude that that is precisely its purpose.³⁶ In particular, it is believed that FOIP is Japan’s response to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China’s multibillion-dollar program of global infrastructure projects. Japan fears that BRI is an instrument of Chinese geopolitical, as well as economic, influence and could lead to Japan being shut out of key markets. As a consequence, the FOIP concept has been put forward as an alternative framework within which to promote regional infrastructure development and connectivity. Indeed, even the name of the policy, which emphasizes freedom and openness, is intended to imply a contrast with China’s more closed and non-transparent approach.

The same motivations also explain Japan’s enthusiasm for the quadrilateral security dialogue with Australia, India, and the United States, which all share both democratic values and significant concerns about China. Closer security ties are also being pursued with Southeast Asian nations, as well as with the United Kingdom and France. Added to this, Japan has been increasing its own defense capabilities. It was with China in mind that Japan took the decision to develop its own amphibious rapid assault brigade in March 2018. This is also the justification for Japan’s decision, announced in December 2018, to purchase 147 F-35 fighter jets and to create its first aircraft carrier since WWII. As Ono Keitaro of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) put it with unusual candor, “Actually this trigger ... to be

straight out [is] China. ... There is no need for us to operate such kind of aircraft carrier if we don't have to respond to China in the Pacific Ocean."³⁷

These measures can all be categorized as part of a strategy of containment; yet they have been combined with a countervailing approach that emphasizes the goal of coexistence. It is this second strand of policy that explains the conciliatory rhetoric employed by Abe during his visit to Beijing in October 2018. It is based on the wise calculation that, while China may be an enduring threat that needs to be addressed, Japan has nothing to gain from recurring crises. For this reason, the Abe government has been seeking to take the heat out of the relationship and to return ties to their status before the collision incident of September 2010, when the arrest of a Chinese fishing captain, who had rammed his trawler into Japanese coast guard vessels in the vicinity of the disputed Senkaku Islands, caused China to freeze high-level contacts.

Although Japan's aim of returning bilateral relations to a state of normalcy received particular attention in 2018, in reality this search for coexistence has always been a feature of Abe's China's policy. Above all, it was evident in the four-point consensus that the sides reached in November 2014. This included a commitment to pursue engagement in "the spirit of squarely facing history," as well as a recognition that they have "different views" about the East China Sea and Senkaku Islands. On this basis, they agreed that they would "gradually resume dialogue in political, diplomatic and security fields and make an effort to build a political relationship of mutual trust."³⁸

The warming of Japan-China relations since the end of 2017 cannot, therefore, be attributed to a shift in Japanese strategy, which has consistently pursued these twin elements of containment and coexistence. Instead, the improvement appears to have been driven by changes on the Chinese side. In particular, after solidifying his grip on power at the National Congress of the Communist Party in September 2017, Xi may have felt emboldened to pursue rapprochement with Japan. Furthermore, this may have been encouraged by the downturn in relations with the United States and by concerns about the strength of the Chinese economy.³⁹ It may also have been that, as the Chinese leadership recognized that Abe was sauntering towards an unprecedented third term as LDP leader in September 2018, they concluded that it was necessary to engage more intensively with him.

Overall then, one should not be distracted by the recent improvement in the atmosphere between Japan and China. Although Tokyo certainly does not want bad relations with Beijing, nor does it have any illusions about how close ties are likely to become, China continues to be perceived as a major threat to Japan's security and prosperity. For this reason, as well as strengthening its own efforts to contain China, Japan is counting on the United States to maintain its current presence in the region.

Keeping the Americans In

Japanese leaders have often feared abandonment by the United States. This is the consequence of being located in a dangerous neighborhood and of relying on an extra-regional power for security. However, these concerns have become especially intense since Trump's election to the White House and his frequent questioning of the value

of alliances. As noted above, Japan is particularly worried that Trump could agree to withdraw, or at least draw down, troop numbers in South Korea as part of the negotiations with North Korea.

The worst-case scenario for Japan is that Trump declares the talks with Chairman Kim to have successfully eliminated the need for U.S. troops to be maintained in Korea. These fears receded slightly after the failure of the Hanoi summit and following an agreement between the U.S. and South Korea in February 2019 for Seoul to increase its financial contribution towards the upkeep of U.S. troops on the peninsula. However, as noted, Hanoi did not mark the end of the diplomatic process between Washington and Pyongyang. Moreover, the agreed increase in South Korea's contribution fell short of initial U.S. demands, and the deal will only last 12 months, meaning that fraught negotiations will soon begin again.⁴⁰ Trump has also looked to keep his options open, telling an interviewer in February 2019 that, while he had no plans to remove the troops, "Maybe someday. I mean who knows. But you know it's very expensive to keep troops there."⁴¹ Additionally, Tokyo did not welcome the March 2019 decision by the United States and South Korea to scrap the large-scale Key Resolve and Foal Eagle joint military exercises.

Reliance on the United States can be slightly offset by the increase in Japan's domestic military capabilities and through the development of closer security ties with other democratic partners. However, these steps are supplements to the relationship with the United States, not replacements for it. As the National Defense Program Guidelines put it, the Japan-U.S. alliance remains the "cornerstone" of Japan's security. Without it, Japan's national defense architecture would fall apart. This being so, the Japanese leadership needs to ensure that the United States remains fully committed to Japan and to the region as a whole.

Guided by this priority, the Abe administration is pursuing what might be described as a preventative anti-abandonment strategy. This consists of two parts. The first is to take action that demonstrates that Japan is a valuable ally and not a free rider, thereby ensuring that Washington does not even begin to question its security commitment. This strategy is described by Taniguchi Tomohiko, a special adviser to the prime minister. He states that:

"From the firsthand knowledge I have obtained by working with Prime Minister Abe for over six years, I have learned that the questions he asks about U.S.-Japan relations are not 'what ifs' (such as what if the United States withdraws from the Korean Peninsula, or what if the United States under Trump sees less value in getting engaged in East Asian affairs militarily). Rather, the questions he poses to himself and his cabinet pertain more often than not to what Japan should do to keep those 'what if' situations from occurring at all."⁴²

It is this strategy that has encouraged many of the changes to Japan's security policy in recent years. Firstly, Taniguchi says that increases in defense spending have been used to demonstrate that "Japan is doing as much as it can to help reduce the cost of U.S. engagement in the Indo-Pacific region."⁴³ Additionally, the Abe administration has sought to show increased national defense capabilities by establishing the National Security Council in 2013. In line with U.S. requests, the government also introduced a tougher secrecy law in 2013. Most importantly of all was the enactment of the legislation on collective self-defence in 2016, which, in certain circumstances, enables the SDF to give protection to the

military assets of the United States and other partner nations. This is designed to show that, while the U.S.-Japan security alliance is still not fully reciprocal, it is no longer as one-sided as it once was. Lastly, Japan has sought to keep Washington satisfied by making large purchases of U.S. defense equipment, including the F-35 strike fighters and Aegis Ashore missile defense system. In Taniguchi's words, the increase in such expensive purchases "kills two birds with one stone: enhancing Japanese airborne and anti-missile capabilities while reducing bilateral trade tensions. It is hoped that these combined measures will keep the United States close and further incentivize it to stay involved in the region."⁴⁴

The second part of the strategy is to maintain strong personal rapport with the U.S. president. This is, of course, something that Japanese leaders seek to do with all U.S. counterparts. The task has, however, become especially important with Trump due to his isolationist instincts and highly personalised approach to foreign policy. From the outset, therefore, Abe has sought to establish himself as Trump's closest partner within the G7. His tactic has been to conduct frequent meetings and phone conversations, as well as to make the most of their shared passion for golf. Abe has also not been shy about indulging in outright sycophancy.

These efforts began immediately after Trump's election victory in November 2016, when Abe rushed to New York to become the first foreign leader to meet the president-elect. On that occasion, he gifted Trump a golden golf club worth almost \$4000, a present intended to appeal to Trump's passion for both the sport and the precious metal. Abe and Trump have since engaged in several rounds of golf diplomacy, including when Trump visited Japan at the end of May 2019. During this same trip, Trump was also given the honor of being the first foreign leader to meet the new emperor after the enthronement of Crown Prince Naruhito on May 1.

These efforts have generally been accepted within Japan as sensible foreign policy. There was, however, criticism of the prime minister when Trump announced that Abe had nominated him for the Nobel Peace Prize for his diplomatic engagement with North Korea. It was subsequently reported that Abe had submitted the nomination at the request of the U.S. government.⁴⁵ This revelation was embarrassing for the Japanese leader, not least because it is known that Abe is not an enthusiastic advocate of diplomatic engagement with Pyongyang. Defense Minister Onodera Itsunori also stated that the threat from North Korea remained undiminished after the summit in Singapore.⁴⁶ Moreover, there has been no apparent progress towards resolving the abductions issue. Nonetheless, Abe evidently calculated that humbling himself before the U.S. leader was a price worth paying if it contributes to retaining the U.S. presence in the region.

Keeping the Russians Neutral

In contrast to its NATO partners, Japan does not consider Russia to represent a significant threat on its own. The Defense of Japan white paper does mention Russia's military activities as something that needs to be watched. The document also notes that of 904 scrambles that the Air Self-Defense Forces conducted in fiscal 2017, 390 were to intercept Russian aircraft, second only to the 500 scrambles provoked by Chinese planes.⁴⁷ However, compared with the threats posed to Japanese security by China and North Korea, Russia is considered a very distant third.

Japan's primary concern is, therefore, not that Moscow's forces will pose a direct military threat, as was the case during the Cold War. Instead, the main worry is that Russia's support will embolden North Korea and China. Regarding the former, Japan's goal has been to encourage Russia to remain committed to the full implementation of UNSC sanctions. Abe has also requested Putin's cooperation in resolving the abductions issue.⁴⁸ However, while Russia remains involved in events on the Korean Peninsula, Japan realizes that it is a lesser player compared with China and the United States. The focus of Japan's policy towards Russia from a geopolitical point of view is the relationship between Moscow and Beijing.

The close relationship between China and Russia is already a source of strength for Beijing in at least four areas. First, Russia is a reliable supplier of energy and other strategic resources via overland routes that are secure from interdiction by the U.S. navy. Second, friendly relations with Russia provide China with security along the countries' 4000km land border, enabling Beijing to focus on other priorities, including the South China Sea. Third, Russia and China see eye-to-eye on many geopolitical issues, and Beijing is grateful for Moscow's diplomatic support in the UNSC. Indeed, since Russia is often willing to vocally oppose Western initiatives within the Security Council and to wield its veto, this enables China to keep a lower profile on controversial issues. Fourth, Russia remains an important supplier of military technology to China in certain key areas, including aircraft engines.

Ties between Moscow and Beijing have been growing steadily since the end of the 1980s; yet relations reached a new level after the Ukraine crisis in March 2014 when tensions with the West forced Russia to place more emphasis on its relations with China. Of particular concern to Japan is that bilateral military relations have become closer, with Russia agreeing in 2015 to supply the S-400 anti-aircraft system and Su-35 fighters. Previously, Russia had held back from providing China with these most advanced weapons systems in order to maintain a military edge over its neighbor and to protect against the risk of technology theft.

Following the unprecedented Vostok 2018 exercises, Tokyo fears that security ties between China and Russia will become yet closer. This concern will only have intensified following the release of the U.S. Worldwide Threat Assessment in January 2019, which opened with the warning that "China and Russia are more aligned than at any point since the mid-1950s, and the relationship is likely to strengthen in the coming year as some of their interests and threat perceptions converge."⁴⁹ The strategic nightmare for Japan is that this trend could lead to Russia abandoning its position of neutrality on the issues of the Senkaku Islands and the South China Sea and could move to explicitly support Beijing's position.⁵⁰

Guided by this threat perception, Japan's Russia policy has been shaped by the goal of neutralizing the danger of Beijing and Moscow forging a united front against Japan.⁵¹ This, along with Abe's desire to resolve the countries' territorial dispute over what Russia calls the Southern Kuril Islands, explains the Japanese government's dedicated pursuit of warmer relations with Russia during recent years. The Abe administration also apparently judges that Moscow will be receptive to such a policy since they assume that it secretly shares their concerns about China. This view was expressed by Kawai Katsuyuki, Abe's special adviser for foreign affairs, when he told an audience in January 2019 that "Both Japan and Russia view China as a potential threat ... I would like the United States to understand the importance of concluding a Japan-Russia peace treaty as a means to jointly counter the threat from China."⁵²

Undoubtedly, the Japanese leadership recognizes that, as a treaty ally of the United States, there are limits to how close its relationship with Russia can become. Nonetheless, the Abe administration clearly wants to develop a basic level of security cooperation, not least to demonstrate that Russia has options beyond its relationship with China. This helps explain why, despite the conspicuous lack of progress towards resolving the territorial issue, Abe continues to visit Russia so frequently, prompting criticism from opposition parties that he is engaging in “a foreign policy of paying tribute.”⁵³ It is also a factor in Abe’s flattery of Putin, with the prime minister describing his Russian counterpart as someone who “is dear to me as a partner.”⁵⁴ Additionally, further incentives have been offered to Moscow through the Japanese government’s 8-point plan for economic cooperation and by recent suggestions that it is willing to provide substantial financial support for Japanese companies if they invest in Russia’s Arctic LNG 2 project.⁵⁵ In the same spirit, the Japanese authorities have made it known that they are considering cancelling short-term visa requirements for Russian visitors.⁵⁶

Within the security realm itself, the goal of expanding cooperation with Russia is made explicit in the 2013 National Security Strategy, which states that, “under the increasingly severe security environment in East Asia, it is critical for Japan to advance cooperation with Russia in all areas, including security.”⁵⁷ In accordance with this ambition, Japan began 2+2 meetings between the countries’ foreign and defense ministers in November 2013, with the latest of these held at the end of May 2019. Regular meetings have also been held between the secretary of the Russian Security Council Nikolai Patrushev and his Japanese counterpart Yachi Shotaro, despite the fact that Patrushev is now subject to U.S. sanctions. There have also been increased exchanges between senior military officers. Most prominently, Oleg Salyukov, commander-in-chief of the Russian Army, and Valerii Gerasimov, chief of the general staff, visited Japan in November and December 2017. In return, Japan SDF chief of staff Kawano Katsutoshi travelled to Russia in October 2018. Head of the Russian navy Vladimir Korolev is anticipated to visit Japan in 2019. Joint drills have also continued between the Russian Pacific Fleet and the JMSDF, with search-and-rescue exercises held for the 18th time in July 2018. Moreover, maritime cooperation moved into a new area in November 2018 when the JMSDF and Russia’s Northern Fleet conducted their first anti-piracy drill in the Gulf of Aden.

Tokyo evidently hopes that these contacts will promote a degree of trust and encourage Moscow not to make common cause with Beijing against Japan. This will remain a priority when Abe welcomes Putin to Japan for the G20 summit in June. If the talks on a peace treaty ever reach fruition, there is also the possibility that this document could contribute to this effort since the sides have reportedly discussed including a clause that would commit them not to take part in hostile military activities against each other.⁵⁸ While easing Japanese concerns about Russia contributing to hostile actions by China, this clause could also appeal to Moscow in guaranteeing that the U.S.-Japan alliance will not be directed against Russia.

Conclusion

Kim Jong-un’s turn to diplomacy in 2018 has done nothing to ease Japan’s long-term security concerns, nor has Beijing’s simultaneous adoption of a softer stance towards Tokyo. Rather, Japanese strategists remain deeply concerned about the threats posed by North Korea and China, as well as by the danger that Russia could increasingly make common cause with

them. Added to this, the Abe government questions whether the Moon administration really is a security partner and fears the withdrawal of the U.S. commitment to the region. This leaves Japan in the perilous situation of attempting to keep the North Koreans and Chinese down, the Americans in, and the Russians neutral. This is, of course, a crude simplification, but it captures the essence of Japan's contemporary security thinking.

From a strategic point of view, Japan's approach seems logical. It also shows subtleties, especially in the combination of containment and coexistence in Japan's approach to China and in what I have called the preventative anti-abandonment policy towards the United States. However, as with any strategy, Japan's current approach faces challenges. The biggest concern relates to policy towards North Korea, where it seems that the Japanese leadership is content for the current diplomatic efforts to fail, thereby overlooking the risk that such a failure will return the region to the brink of a conflict from which Japan can hardly expect to escape unscathed. Additionally, the Abe administration must surely recognise that pressure in itself is not a policy but must serve as a prelude to negotiations.

Separately, there is the worry that Japan's carefully calibrated policy towards China will be disrupted by the Trump administration's hard-charging and erratic tactics. This already occurred with the U.S. withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a regional trade agreement seen by the Abe administration as making a valuable contribution towards containing China in a non-confrontational manner. Additionally, there is the danger that Trump's trade war with Beijing will seriously damage the global economy and have substantial knock-on effects for Japan itself. Worse still, if the Trump administration's actions contribute to a full-blown crisis with China, such as over Taiwan, Japan can hardly expect to stay aloof.

Finally, the Abe administration may find it increasingly difficult to continue its courtship of Putin's Russia. Domestically, there is growing criticism of Abe's failure to achieve real progress on resolving the territorial dispute. Meanwhile, while Trump himself is unlikely to criticize Abe for being too close to Putin, others in the U.S. security establishment may increasingly ask why their main ally in Asia continues to so ardently pursue cooperation with the U.S. strategic competitor. Added to this, the Japanese leadership may have overestimated the extent to which Moscow shares its concerns about China since there is currently no evidence that Abe's efforts have had any success whatsoever in altering Russia's policy towards China. Overall, the Japanese government has a clear view of the threats that it is facing and a settled understanding of the strategy it must pursue in order to address them. However, implementing this strategy and managing the tensions that are inherent within it will prove a significant test for Japan's political leadership.

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