

# Assessing Japan's and China's strategic relationships with the USA

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SARAH TORKI, JAN 18 2012

### **Compare and Contrast Japan's and China's strategic relationships with the United States. How have they changed and what is currently driving them?**

According to the balance of power theory, "balancing powers will emerge in a unipolar system as they seek to fill the asymmetrical gap" (Layne, 1993, p.7). This is currently what is happening in Asia, where the end of bipolarity has led to a shift in the regional balance of power.

Indeed, since the end of WWII, the region has been characterized by US hegemony. As both a promoter of neoliberal reform and as the key strategic actor in the East Asian Region, the impact of US power has been considerable. However, in the post-Cold war era, the Asia-Pacific's emerging powers are beginning to translate their prosperity into military power, with profound implications for regional stability and military alliances. This new trend is best illustrated if one examines China's rising military power and Japan's willingness to return to a normal nation. In such a context, the relationships between the two regional powers, Japan and China, and the established hegemonic power, the United States, appear crucial. Japan's desire to no longer be a political pygmy has been leading Tokyo to rethink its fifty year alliance with the United States. As for China, its political and military rise is perceived by the US as a sign of revisionism which directly threatens Washington's strategic dominance in the region.

Therefore, I set myself on the realism side and argue that the unipolar order has led to new trends in Asia illustrated by the will of China and Japan to be the new regional leaders in Asia. This leads to a competition between a revisionist China and a status quo America in the region and a possible redefinition of the strategic Japan-US alliance.

To answer the essay's question, this essay is divided into two sections. The first section focuses on the Cold War era. During this period, Japan developed a strategy of bandwagoning (Schweller 1994 and Waltz 1987), relying on the United States to profit from its security while the country focused on rebuilding its economy. The China-US relationship was first characterized by hostility – as China became a communist nation- and then cooperation to counterbalance the Soviet Union. The second section analyzes their current relationships: Japan wishes to grow diplomatically and for many Japanese leaders, this has to be achieved by emancipating from the US. However, given the balance of threats Japan perceives, the alliance remains essential for its protection as well as for its normalization. The Sino-American relationship has become one of the most important topics in global affairs: the two countries are hedging against each other to prevent the domination of the region. Finally, the essay concludes that Friedberg's diagnosis (1993, p. 5) arguing that the region is "ripe for rivalry" is more relevant today than ever.

The Cold war era initiated the beginning of an asymmetrical relationship between Japan and the United States. The bilateral relation was the sine qua non for Japan's security and permitted the USA to exercise its control over the Asia Pacific region.

Japan, devastated after its defeat by the allies, adopted a strategy of bandwagoning, that is aligning with the dominant power to profit from its victory (Schweller, 1994, p. 77). In this way, according to Aurelia George Mulgan

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(2005), the US Security Treaty brought Japan considerable benefits. First American power and presence acted as a “stabilising force in the region by maintaining the balance of power, muting regional rivalries and reducing security dilemmas” (2005, p. 63). Second, the US furnished Japan and other East Asian countries with an environment suitable for their industrialization and economic growth. Third, Japan's subordinate role in the security promoted its reintegration into Asia by guaranteeing other countries against a revival of Japanese aggression (Calder, 2004, p. 137). However, as Walt argues, bandwagoning with the dominant power involves asymmetrical concessions (1987, p.282): the price Japan had to pay was that it renounced its sovereign right to war and the threat or use of force as a means to settling international disputes.

That relationship was equally crucial for the United States; it prevented communist expansion and domination of the Asia Pacific region by any hostile power, and it allowed the US to maintain access to the region and to foster the spread of market orientated economies (Mulgan, 2005 p. 54).

In this respect, Washington has been able to shape Japan's interests. The 1951 Security Treaty and its revised version in 1960 stress the desire of both countries to uphold the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law. The Treaty also emphasized US and Japan's common concern with the maintenance of international peace and security in the Far East. These shared interests can explain Japan's perception that the US was a benevolent hegemony (Ikenberry, 2001 p.28).

The China-US relationship throughout the Cold War can be analyzed through a realist perspective. The period between 1949 and 1972 was characterized by hostility: as China became a communist country, it constituted a threat which Washington was intent on containing. However, from the late sixties, one could see a strategic rapprochement between the two nations, the cooperation being for both a counterbalance to the Soviets.

In 1949, the civil war between the nationalist and communist Chinese resulted in a communist victory. Because the United States had at this time declared all communist governments as enemies, the relationship between China and the United States deteriorated. From that moment on, China was the target of US containment in Asia in order to stop the spread of communism as well as strengthen America's security and influence abroad and prevent a domino effect (Kennan, 1984). An obvious example of this policy was the continuous US support of Taiwan with military supplies and expertise to prevent the island from falling into the hands of the People's Republic of China.

According to Thomas Christensen (1996), the hostility at the beginning of the Cold War might have actually served the two countries. He introduces the concept of “national political power” (1996, p. 11) defined as “the ability of state leaders to mobilize their nation's human and material resources behind security policy initiatives”. Because the two countries lacked sufficient political power to do what they wanted, the Sino-American hostility allowed Chinese and American political leaders to mobilize their respective populations in order to achieve their political agendas: the fight against communism (in fact the Soviet Union) for Washington and a forced modernization for Peking (p. 18).

However, the late sixties announced a period of strategic rapprochement between China and the US as illustrated by Nixon's historic visit to Peking in 1972. How can this be explained? According to Waltz, within a balance of power system, a state may choose to adopt either a balancing or a bandwagoning behavior (1979). In a time of war, this decision may determine the survival of the state. Given the increased tensions between Moscow and Peking in 1969, a closer relationship with Washington provided China an effective counterbalance to the Soviet Union. Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai considered the USSR as the main adversary and ‘American imperialism’ as far less threatening. In this view, China acted as a survivalist country, “husbanding its limited capabilities and adjusting to the realities of its precarious position in a dangerous environment” (Brown, 2000, p. 27).

The post- Cold War era, characterized by American unipolarity and a shift in the global security environment, has led Japan and China to adopt strategies and behavior in accordance with this new order.

Since the 1990s, Japan's desire to once again become a normal country, that is to develop an independent defense and power projection capability, has led the Japanese political elite to redefine its relationship with Washington. According to the Neo Classical Realism theory, the change in Japan- US relations can be attributed not only to the

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structure of the international system but also to Japanese domestic politics and especially the foreign policy choices made by its leaders (Rose, 1998). From this perspective, two factors have engendered a subtle modification in the relations between Tokyo and Washington.

The first key event was Tokyo's embarrassing experience during the Gulf War in 1991. Despite its major financial contribution to the war effort, Tokyo's reluctance to dispatch non-combat personnel to the Gulf exposed it to criticism of its "checkbook diplomacy" (Okawara, 1993, p.56). For Francis Fukuyama (1993, p.9) this event marked the beginning of a reflection within Japan about whether it wanted to continue playing a subordinate role to the US or if it should seek a more independent and prominent role in world affairs[1]. This implies that Japan would transform itself from an abnormal nation of enormous economic power with limited military power to a normal nation with a balance between economic and military might. This desire for emancipation was illustrated by the 1993 Higuchi Report, written by the Prime Minister Ozawa's new coalition, in which some experts suggested that Japan should develop a new security policy based on UN-centered multilateralism, rather than a bilateral security alliance with the US (Sunohara, 2010, p 2).

The second recent factor that contributed to tensions in Japan-US relations was the 2009 historical election of the Japanese Democratic Party, in a context of economic stagnation and huge challenges in Japan. The country, highly dependent on exports, had been severely affected by the 2008 financial crisis. Moreover, facing the rise of China, the Japanese elite had started to feel as though their place and role in the international arena was quickly diminishing. The docile ally the Japanese Liberal Party used to be has given way to a more active one, illustrating the willingness of Japan to assert itself in the international and regional exchequer. US-Japan tensions are best reflected by the debate regarding the relocation of the Futenma Air Base: US military presence has become a stormy political issue in Japan, particularly in Okinawa where 37000 US soldiers are stationed. In his article *A new path for Japan* (New York Times, 2009), Hatoyama suggests that regional integration and collective security would be the most appropriate path Japan should follow for protecting its political and economic independence and pursuing its interest in its position between the US and China.

Despite changes in the Japan- US relationship, given the current strategic environment, the alliance is not likely to be ended. According to Walt's balance of threats theory, states use four criteria to evaluate the threat posed by another state: its overall capabilities, its geographical proximity, its offensive capability and its aggressive intentions (Walt 1987, 281). Given the prospect of nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula, the Taiwan Strait situation and China's military rise, Japan is pushed to align more deeply with the US against those threats through a balancing strategy.

There is actually a convergence of strategic interests between Washington and Tokyo. For the US, Japan is an important tool with which it can balance China's influence, while to Japan the United States serves as an indispensable outside power that can be used to counter the rise of China. In a strategy of "offshore balancing" (Mearsheimer, 2001), the US has been encouraging Japan to develop its military capabilities in order to build Japan as a center of power in the Asia Pacific. In a 2006 meeting's document, Taiwan and the Korean Peninsula were listed as the "common strategic objectives" (Xinbo, 2006) between the US and Japan in the Asia Pacific Region. As one US expert on Japan noted, 'since the end of the Cold War...Washington has been doing everything in its power to encourage and accelerate Japanese rearmament. Such a development promotes hostility between China and Japan" (Johnson, 2005).

In the same way, the threat posed by North Korea increases Japan's sense of vulnerability and fosters the bilateral relation. The Japanese Report of the Special Advisory Council on Security and Defense capabilities delivered to the Prime Minister in 2004 warned that:

The problem of WMD development, including North Korea nuclear weapons, and the development and deployment of ballistic missiles could represent a direct threat to Japan and instability on the Korean Peninsula may yet become a major destabilizing factor affecting the international relations of East Asia (Cronin, 2005, p. 53).

The report stresses the crucial role played by the US-Japanese alliance; particularly US extended deterrence.

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The rise of China can be analyzed through both neo realism and neo classical realism. According to the latter, over the long term the relative amount of material power resources countries have will shape the magnitude and ambition of their foreign policies: as their relative power rises, states will seek more influence abroad (Rose, 1998, p. 144).

In the current context of unipolarity, the rise of China is the example of a revisionist country seeking to “change the status quo and to establish new arrangements to more accurately reflect its own conception of its place in the world” (Friedberg, 2000, p.200-2001). As a consequence, in a realist logic, as China becomes an economic and military power, the country becomes the main strategic rival of the status quo power, the United States, which seeks to preserve the existing order and the distribution of power in the Asia Pacific. Indeed, many Chinese perceive that Washington is trying to contain or at least constrain China's reemergence as a great power in Asia. It is feared that China will undermine American global predominance and its pursuit of global security.

Given this situation, is a confrontation inevitable between a revisionist China and a status quo America? Too much is at stake in the China-US relationship for a direct clash. Indeed, a stable relationship with the US is vitally important for China if it wants to secure its continuous rise.

According to the Neorealist Joseph Grieco (1990, p. 47), states are “defensive positionalists” concerned with relative rather than absolute gains. In other words, states are not compelled to ask ‘will the both of us gain?’ but ‘who will gain more?’ (Mingst, 2004, p.69). In terms of relative economic gains, the United States has a comparative advantage over China: only 15% of American imports come from China and all of the basic types of manufactured consumer goods that China exports to the US can be imported from other countries or could be produced domestically. In comparison, China is highly dependent on US demand for its products as economic growth in China is heavily dependent on exports (Dunaway, 2009). Thus, US superior relative gains are compelling China to maintain stable economic relations with the US in order to ensure continued economic development and to increase its national power[2].

Moreover, adversarial relations would also jeopardize China's regional aspirations by hampering economic and political interactions with US allies in Asia. Indeed, Washington has engaged in bilateral actions that seek to improve the scope of US security cooperation with Asian partners, particularly with countries with longstanding concerns about China. As a former Bush administration's strategist explains: “deepened relations with Japan, India, and key allies in Southeast Asia will create structural constraints that may discourage Beijing from abusing its growing regional power” (Tellis, 2005).

These conditions increase China's sense of vulnerability in its relationship with the United States and encourage Beijing to adopt specific strategies. According to Walt, the current unipolar order encourages secondary states to abandon hard counterbalancing and to adopt indirect, subtler strategies, such as hedging or soft balancing (2004, p.14). To hedge, China is on one hand pursuing engagement and integration policies with Washington, and on the other hand, adopting an indirect balancing strategy in the form of military modernization program and external security cooperation with Asian countries.

The first way, China is hedging against the US is through engagement policies, in order to stabilize bilateral economic relations and security tensions and to broaden areas of cooperation (Medeiros, 2005, p.10). Since 9/11, Beijing has been expanding bilateral counterterrorism and nonproliferation cooperation; it has been making concessions to resolve economic disagreements – as illustrated by the 2006 US-China Strategic Economic Dialogue – and has assumed a more active role in the resolution of the North Korea Nuclear Crisis. China's key role in the Six Party Talks is a relevant example of Chinese commitment to soothe its relations with the US.

The second way of this hedging strategy is first through internal balancing (Waltz, 1979, p. 132-133) which occurs when states grow their own capabilities by increasing economic growth and military spending. Since the 1990s, China's military modernization efforts, at a time when Beijing was greatly worried that Taiwan was moving rapidly away from reunification, demonstrates this. This strategy is best seen in the People Liberation Army's focus on acquiring advanced naval, airborne, missile and command and control capabilities for area denial, precision strike and information dominance. This modernization is aimed at complicating US military operations in the East Asian

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littoral and at imposing greater costs on US naval and air force assets in a conflict over Taiwan (Medeiros, 2005, p. 34).

Beijing is also hedging against the Washington by enhancing its diplomatic representation and its security ties with other Asian countries. This strategy can be related to soft balancing defined as:

Measures that do not directly challenge US military preponderance but use international institutions, economic statecraft and diplomatic arrangement to delay, frustrate and undermine US policies (Pape, 2005, p7)

In this way, China's embrace of Asian multilateral organizations such as ASEAN is designed to create norms and structures with the result of limiting American involvement in regional security affairs. ASEAN + 3 looks particularly worrisome precisely because it includes U.S. allies and security partners -Japan, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, and Thailand- but excludes the United States. Moreover, since the 1990's, China has made continuous efforts to cultivate economic and security partners in Southeast Asia, reassuring states that China's rise presents economic opportunities and does not represent a threat for the region (Medeiros, p. 11).

Finally, Friedberg's diagnosis arguing that the Asia Pacific region was 'ripe for rivalry' (1993, p.5) is more relevant today than ever. This reality can be seen in the willingness of China on one hand and the US and Japan on the other, to pursue balance of powers strategies in which China plays a central role. Peking still faces huge social challenges, but it is not inclined to passively accept American hegemony along its borders. The country has chosen a hedging strategy as "a manifestation of security dilemma dynamics at work in a globalized world characterized by deep economic interdependence and the need for multilateral security cooperation" (Medeiros, 2005, p.2).

Since the post-Cold War end, Japan has been confronted with the perpetual question: can it survive as a responsible stakeholder in the 21<sup>st</sup> century given the status quo? Japan's post- Cold War relations with the United States reflect its fundamental defense dilemma: "it wants to become a normal nation but it does not necessarily want a normal alliance with the US" (Mulgan, 2005, p.1). Although there is a growing desire among Japan's policy makers to take a more independent position within the alliance, given the current balance of threats Japan perceives, the alliance remains essential for Japan's security.

The strategic importance of Japan and China to the US foreign policy substantiates Deng Xiaoping's prediction that the 21<sup>st</sup> century seems likely to be 'the Asian Century'.

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[1] The importance of Japanese elite and their perception of the Japan-US alliance is stressed by Tsuyoshi Sunohara in "*The Anatomy of Japan's shifting Security Orientation*" (2010). Sunohara argues that Japan's elite perceived that the US saw Japan as an inexperienced "junior partner" that should be treated as such in the international arena.

[2] Good economic relationships with the US are all the more important for China that China Communist Party is deemed to be essentially based on economic growth ((Lewis and Xue 2003, p. 934)

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