Japan’s foreign policy

Sebastian Maslow

Ambivalence between Asia and the West

Japan’s foreign policy and its relationship with Asia is marked with ambivalence. Indeed, since the formation of the modern Japanese state in the 19th century, discourses on its foreign policy oscillated between a Western and Asian identity (Suzuki 2009). Following the Meiji Restoration in 1868, prominent intellectuals, such as Yukichi Fukuzawa, advocated a course of rapid modernization through an embrace of Western values and a “de-Asianization” of Japan (datsua nyūō). In contrast, discourses emerging in the early 20th century began to focus on the Asian region as Japan’s civilizational space. The slogan “same culture, same race” (dō bun dō shi) was a result of this discourse and evolved alongside a Pan-Asianist movement in Japan (Saaler 2006). Propagating the “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere,” the intellectual discourse on cultural identity was overtaken by Japan’s imperial expansion into Asia. The dismantling of Japan’s wartime state under US occupation was quickly followed by years of rapid economic growth, which marked the return of Japan to the international stage. Japan’s colonial legacy, however, has shaped its relationship with its Asian neighbors ever since, as did its postwar economic recovery.

As the region’s economic center and key US security ally, Japan sought to reconcile its relations with states in North- and Southeast Asia during the 1960s and 1970s. Arguably, the industrial and trade policies of Japan’s postwar developmental state have built the foundation for growth and modernization in large parts of postcolonial Asia and thus represent a crucial condition for the region’s central role in economic globalization (Berger 2003). Meanwhile, the end of the Cold War and regional power shifts converging over China’s economic and military ascendency have triggered debate over Japan’s international role. Thus, amidst historical animosities over its wartime past and unresolved territorial disputes, Tokyo’s latest efforts to renegotiate its postwar pacifist security system have triggered widespread concerns over a return of Japanese militarism in Asia as well as a scholarly debate on future directions of Japan’s foreign policy.

Japan’s current foreign policy remains marked with ambivalence. Japan’s dual role as key source for trade, investment, and developmental aid, as well as key US military ally, has placed Japan at the intersection of Asia’s security and economic regional orders. Thus, shifts
Japan’s foreign policy in Japan’s foreign policy continue to impact Asia’s complex political and economic dynamics. As was the case in Meiji Japan, Tokyo’s political elite remains divided on the course of Japan’s foreign and security policy. During the early 1990s, key leaders have advocated an active role for Japan in promoting Asian regionalism and community building. China’s rise in military capabilities and North Korea’s ongoing security crisis, however, have caused strategists in Japan to advocate a robust security relationship with the United States. Indeed, this cleavage between an Asianism on the one hand and bilateralism centered on the US-Japan security alliance on the other represents a defining feature of contemporary Japan’s foreign policy (Hook et al. 2012).

The return of Shinzō Abe and his Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) to power in 2012 was followed by his pledge to restore Japan’s role in international politics by “taking Japan back” from the constraints of its pacifist postwar regime. Advocating a strategic shift towards a “proactive pacifism,” the Abe administration broadly altered the parameters of Japan’s foreign and security policy. These changes were accompanied by a new Asia policy complementing the US “Pivot to Asia.” Thus, in an effort to hedge China’s growing economic and military role in the Asia-Pacific, Japan has expanded its strategic posture in Asia, combining economic cooperation with the establishment of new security partnerships.

This chapter examines Japan’s foreign and security policy as it has evolved in close interaction with its Asian neighbors and the broader international community. For this purpose, this chapter is structured as follows: First, I describe the formulation and entrenchment of Japan’s Cold War foreign policy consensus, which has combined a low-key military posture with a high-profile foreign economic and trade policy. I will then move on to outline the process of post-Cold War realignment in Japan’s foreign policy, which has resulted in the evolution of a “proactive pacifism,” placing Japan on track to play an active military role in international security affairs. In the second part of this chapter, I will outline changes in Japan’s foreign policy, particularly in relation to Asia. In the conclusion, I will look at some of the most recent challenges faced by Japan’s foreign policy as tensions in the East and South China Seas prevail, and new uncertainties emerge over the future of the US-Japan alliance.

**Historical and institutional parameters of Japan’s postwar foreign and security policy**

**Formation and entrenchment of Japan’s foreign policy and security principles**

Following its defeat in World War II and US occupation, Japan’s primary objective was to seek political rehabilitation and economic recovery. As it signed the San Francisco Peace Treaty in 1951, Washington and Tokyo concluded a mutual security treaty on the sidelines. Amidst the unfolding Cold War in Asia, epitomized by the Chinese Communist Revolution in 1949 and the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, Japan entered a close security alliance with the United States. To bolster Japan’s role in Cold War US strategic planning, Washington extended its nuclear umbrella over Japan, while Tokyo promised to host US troops on Japanese soil (Hara 2014).

The United States had pressured Japan to remilitarize. Thus, in accordance with the US and Japan Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement, Japan established its Self-Defense Forces (SDFs) in 1954 (Shibayama 2010). Yet Japan’s postwar leadership deflected further US pressure for a strong military posture by referring to the US-sponsored 1946 pacifist constitution, which, in its Article 9, prohibits Japan from possessing any military force and renounces war as sovereign right of the nation (Dower 1999). Named after postwar Prime Minister

Entrenchment of the “Yoshida Line” as the basis of Japan’s postwar foreign policy was fostered by a strong antimilitarist culture (Berger 1993). While conservative elites promoted constitutional revision to allow for a more robust Japanese defense posture, foreign and security policy evolved into a key cleavage structuring Japan’s postwar politics (Igarashi 1985; Choi 1997). This cleavage further manifested itself in the so-called “1955 system,” pitting the conservative ruling LDP against the opposing Japan Socialist Party – with both parties being established in 1955. As public opposition erupted in the late 1950s over the LDP’s course of extending the US-Japan security alliance, the conservative mainstream embraced a political realism in line with key positions of the political left. Further, to secure its monopoly of power in the 1960s and 1970s, the LDP shifted its policy focus away from security issues to economic growth and social welfare.

After Japan joined the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade in 1955 and the United Nations (UN) in 1956, its status as a global power gained attention as its economy grew to become the world’s second largest after the United States in the 1960s. In this period of LDP policy adaption, the core principles of Japan’s pacifist postwar foreign and security system were formulated (Calder 1988a). In 1967, it imposed restrictions on arms exports, which were further extended in 1976. Also in 1967, it formulated principles that prohibited the production, possession, and introduction of nuclear weapons in Japan. Also in the late 1960s, it committed itself to the peaceful use of space and restricted the deployment of its SDFs overseas. Finally, in 1976, it introduced a one percent of GDP ceiling on its defense budget (Hughes 2009).

Meanwhile, following its defeat in the Vietnam War, the United States amended its foreign and security policy objectives in Asia in the form of the 1969 Nixon doctrine and engaged in diplomatic rapprochement with China in the early 1970s. In Japan, these policy shifts have triggered fears of abandonment by the United States. In response, Tokyo formulated for the first time a clear outline of its defense policy in the form of the 1976 National Defense Policy Outline and expanded the regional and functional scope of the bilateral US security partnership through the 1978 Guidelines for Defense Cooperation, thus finalizing the formation of US-centered security bilateralism as a main feature of Japan’s postwar foreign policy (Yoshida 2012). Reassessing the fundamental changes in the global economy and security throughout the 1970s, Japan carefully readjusted its foreign policy. While building on the “Yoshida Line,” it has adopted a new foreign policy strategy known as “comprehensive security” (sōsō anzen hoshō). Thus, this strategy explicitly emphasized the use of economic and diplomatic means in pursuit of Japan’s national security interests in contrast to military instruments (Akaha 1991). In the eyes of many, Japan’s approach to foreign policy as foreign economic policy has served as proof for the country’s successful postwar return to international politics.

Japan’s response to post-Cold War geostrategic changes

The parameters of Japan’s foreign and security policy shifted with the end of the Cold War. Internationally, the first Gulf War, following Iraq’s invasion and annexation of Kuwait in 1990, has caused debate over Japan’s role in international affairs. While it contributed 13 billion US dollars in support of the coalitional forces led by the United States to liberate Kuwait, Tokyo’s “checkbook diplomacy” was dismissed as insufficient, particularly in the
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United States. What was consecutively narrated as Japan’s “Gulf War trauma” in academia and Tokyo’s policymaking circles has in part been strategically framed by long-term proponents of a more active Japanese foreign policy capable of exercising military force in international security affairs (Hisae 2015). Most prominently, the stage for this debate was set by the former LDP Secretary General Ichirō Ozawa who, as an advocate of internationalism, has called for a “normal Japan” able to deploy its military capacities in support of UN peacekeeping operations (PKO) (Ozawa 1993).

As a result of this debate, Japan has passed legislation enabling the dispatch of troops under UN command. Based on a mandate constraining overseas dispatches to noncombat areas, Japan deployed its SDF for the first time in postwar history to a UN PKO mission in Cambodia in 1992 (Dobson 2003). It should be noted that despite criticism of Japan’s passive role in international affairs, in addition to its US-centered security bilateralism, Tokyo also embraced a UN-centered internationalism. As such, Japan has for decades served as the UN’s second largest financial contributor after the United States. Tokyo has exercised leadership in pushing the UN agenda on issues such as human security, environmental protection, and African development assistance (Green 2003: 205–207). This effort is closely connected with Japan’s attempt to mobilize support for a reform of the UN with the goal of securing a seat for itself as a permanent member of the Security Council (Drifte 1999).

Meanwhile, post-Cold War Japan’s incremental departure from its postwar pacifism was accelerated by changes in the Asian security environment. Briefly put, concerns over North Korea’s missile and nuclear program since the early 1990s have triggered policy and institutional changes in Japan’s security system. North Korea’s Nodong-1 missile test in 1993 and the launch of the Taepodong-1 missile over Japan’s airspace in 1998 have demonstrated to the Japanese public and policymakers the threat that North Korea’s acquired missiles pose to their country as Pyongyang’s missile arsenal is capable of striking all of Japan’s territory. These security concerns were further amplified by North Korea’s efforts toward developing nuclear weapons. In response, Japan has engaged in managing the North Korean nuclear crisis, first in 1993–94 as part of the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization and in 2003 as a member of the Six-Party Talk framework. While both of these initiatives have failed to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula, they do provide evidence of Japan’s effort toward shaping multilateral security cooperation in Northeast Asia.

While North Korea has become a priority item on Japan’s foreign policy agenda, official diplomatic relations remain absent and thus remain a reminder of Japan’s wartime legacy. In fact, since 1990, both countries have repeatedly tried to open a diplomatic path towards normalizing diplomatic ties, which even resulted in a summit meeting between Japanese Prime Minister Junichirō Koizumi and North Korea’s Kim Jong-il in 2002. This summit has been praised as a key success in post-Cold War Japanese foreign policy as it has produced the Pyongyang Declaration, outlining a roadmap for diplomatic rapprochement, with North Korea agreeing on a moratorium of its missile and nuclear program. Yet any progress since the 2002 summit was forestalled by domestic outrage in Japan over North Korea’s state-sponsored abduction campaign of Japanese citizens during the 1970s and 1980s—a fact publicly acknowledged by Kim at his meeting with Koizumi (Funabashi 2007). Thus, in response to the mounting domestic pressure, Japan began to prioritize the abduction issue, limiting its own potential role in contributing to regional security cooperation in solving the threat posed by North Korea’s missile and nuclear weapons proliferation (Hagström 2009; Mason 2014).
In addition to the threat posed by North Korea, Japanese foreign policymakers and defense planners were increasingly concerned with China’s growing military capabilities. Beijing’s effort of consolidating its security interests in the region were forcefully brought to the attention of strategists in Japan during the Taiwan Strait crisis of 1995–96. Thus, as China has moved towards expanding its military presence in the East and South China Sea, this poses challenges to Japan’s sea lanes of communication in the region, which link Japan’s market to the world and are thus vital for its economic security as a resource-scarce trading nation (Graham 2006). These anxieties are further amplified by China’s recent challenges of Japan’s sovereignty claim over the Senkaku/Diaoyutai islands in the East China Sea (O’Shea 2012).

Japan has responded to these security challenges primarily by strengthening the US-Japan security alliance and by implementing changes to its defense posture. Concisely put, the North Korea and Taiwan Strait crisis has propelled a redefinition of the security alliance in the form of the revision of the US-Japan Guidelines for Defense Cooperation in 1997, which, in turn, resulted in Japan’s Law Concerning Measures to Ensure the Peace and Security of Japan in Situations in Surrounding Areas. Essentially, these measures expand the US-Japan security alliance beyond the defense of Japan while specifying its role in providing rear-area logistical support to the United States during military conflict (Tamaki 2012). In addition, in response to North Korea’s missile and nuclear threat, Japan has developed its own surveillance satellite capabilities and introduced the US-sponsored ballistic missile defense system in 2002, thus further consolidating the US-Japan security alliance as a pillar of Japan’s foreign and security system.

In addition to the geostrategic changes unleashed by the end of Cold War, a second critical juncture in Japan’s trajectory towards a proactive foreign and security posture were the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, and the following “war on terror” (WOT). Under the leadership of Prime Minister Koizumi, Japan dispatched its Maritime Self-Defense Forces to the Indian Ocean to provide logistical support as part of Operation Enduring Freedom in 2001. Building on the momentum triggered by the WOT, Japan joined the “coalition of the willing” in 2004 and dispatched 600 Ground and Air Self-Defense Forces to southern Iraq to participate in a noncombat reconstruction mission (Pekkanen and Krauss 2005).

Despite domestic political turmoil and a high turnover of prime ministers in the 2000s, consecutive governments have continued this course of bolstering the US alliance and of setting Japan on track towards a more proactive foreign and security policy in Asia and beyond. For example, in 2011, Japan has dispatched 170 SDF members to Djibouti to participate in the international fight against piracy in the Gulf of Aden (Black 2014). Moreover, in 2012, Japan has dispatched 400 troops to the UN mission in South Sudan. These efforts should also be seen as part of Japan’s commitment to a human security agenda and its contribution to development assistance. In fact, introduced in 1954, Japan’s official development assistance (ODA) was often criticized as mainly serving Japan’s economic interests; yet Japan remains one of the largest donors in support of grant aid and technical cooperation. Japan’s hosting of the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) since 1993 offers additional evidence for Japan’s evolving role as a civilian or humanitarian power in international affairs (Hook and Son 2013). In sum, post–Cold War realignment of Japan’s postwar foreign and security system witnessed the evolution of a proactive foreign policy centered on US-centered security bilateralism as a pillar for Japan’s Asian foreign and security policy and an internationalism promoting a stronger profile for Japan in global security affairs.
In addition to the geostrategic changes, the shift in Japan’s foreign and security policy was critically driven by shifts in Japan’s domestic politics. Most importantly, the collapse of Japan’s political left in the 1990s has opened space for conservative forces to promulgate ideas for a new foreign policy. The dismantling of the “1955 system” was followed by a mix of domestic institutional changes, which increased the public focus on foreign policy issues. A reform of Japan’s electoral system in 1994 and of the central bureaucracy in 1998 has enforced political debate on foreign policy issues, while the role of the core executive in the form of Japan’s prime minister office (Kantei) in foreign policy decision-making increased significantly (Shinoda 2013; Catalinac 2016). For example, as reform of Japan’s bureaucracy went into force in 2001, Prime Minister Koizumi was able to increase his personal leadership in foreign policymaking using an empowered Kantei to smoothly implement Japan’s support for the US “war on terror.”

In the past, Japan’s foreign and security policy has been driven by many actors and interests. In fact, Japan’s “reactive” foreign policy has been causally traced to the multitude of conflicting interests and bureaucratic sectionalism in the making of Japan’s foreign policy (Calder 1988b). For example, as Japan emphasized trade and economic growth, the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI, since 2001 Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry: METI) played an important role in shaping Japan’s foreign policy agenda in the past. Though, Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) plays the leading role in managing the US-Japan security alliance. Japan’s postwar tradition of civilian control meant that MOFA and bureaucrats of the National Police Agency occupied key positions within the Japan Defense Agency (JDA), while mediating influence of military personal to the prime minister (Hisae 2015). However, as Japan’s foreign and security policy adapted to the multitude of post–Cold War challenges, the formation of a new conservative generation of politicians has sought to revise Japan’s pacifist security system (Samuels 2007). Thus, for example, during his first term as prime minister, the LDP’s Abe upgraded the JDA to a full-fledged Ministry of Defense in 2007, increasing the role of the military in security policymaking.

In contrast, government change in 2009 from the LDP to the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) has not served as a critical juncture in Japan’s foreign policy. The DPJ under Yukio Hatoyama has pledged a shift in Japan’s foreign policy away from the US-Japan security alliance towards an “Asianism” focusing on the establishment of an East Asian Community alike to the European Union based on the vague notion of “yūai” or “fraternity” (Sneider 2011). Yet, as the Hatoyama administration failed to deliver on its promise to relocate the Futenma US air base out of Okinawa, the DPJ-led government quickly returned to a political realism continuing the evolution of a proactive Japanese foreign policy in line with the US-Japan security relationship (Hughes 2012). As a result, the DPJ government under Naoto Kan initiated a shift towards a “dynamic defense force” (dōteki bōeiryoku), thus replacing the Cold War concept of “basic defense force” (kibanteki bōeiryoku). This shift implies the buildup of maritime surveillance and defense capabilities on the southern borderlines of the Japanese archipelago in direct response to China’s increased presence in close proximity to Japan’s maritime territory. In addition, the DPJ has also moved forward easing bans on Japan’s arms exports, thus permitting arms deals with Australia, the United States, and NATO members. In addition, the March 11, 2011, triple disaster of earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown in the northern Tohoku region has resulted in an increase of public trust and support of the US-Japan alliance, as Washington has launched “Operation Tomodachi,” using the Japanese term for friend, and dispatched its troops to Tohoku for immediate disaster relief (Samuels 2013).
Japan’s approach to Asia

Rapprochement and regional cooperation

In light of Japan’s wartime past, its relationship with modern Asia unfolded in the form of a victim/aggressor chasm (Berger 2012). In the subregion of Northeast Asia, Japan has engaged in reproaching South Korea and China. As a result, Tokyo has normalized relations with Seoul in 1965 and Beijing in 1978. Circumventing reference to Japan’s colonial legacy Beijing and Tokyo sought to consolidate their relationship throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, as did Seoul and Tokyo (He 2009; Dudden 2014). As for the broad strokes of Japan’s foreign policy towards Northeast Asia, a key role must be assigned to MOFA’s influential “China school” as well as to pragmatic leaders from within the conservative mainstream of the LDP in the form of former prime ministers Kakuei Tanaka, Masayoshi Ohira, or Takeo Fukuda. Tanaka and Fukuda also shaped postwar Japan’s return to Southeast Asia in the 1970s. Thus, despite anti-Japanese protests throughout Southeast Asia at the occasion of Tanaka’s tour through the region in 1974, Japan sought to improve relations using its economic power. Based on the “Fukuda doctrine” taking its name from Prime Minister Takeo Fukuda, Japan committed itself to the promotion of peace and prosperity in this subregion and quickly became the largest ODA donor to ASEAN member states (Lam 2013). Throughout both regions, Japan expanded its production networks and thus critically contributed to Asia’s integration through trade and investment (Hatch and Yamamura 1996).

However, China’s economic rise in the 1990s has narrowed the gap between Tokyo and Beijing, thus making this particular relationship more vulnerable to political conflict. Vice versa, Beijing became more concerned with Tokyo’s efforts to consolidate its security relationship with Washington. It is in this context that bilateral distrust and nationalism unfolded as a feature of contemporary regional affairs in Asia (Rozman 2004). Thus, as historical animosities over conflicting interpretations of Japan’s wartime past have frequently strained Tokyo’s relations with its Asian neighbors, the dominant modus of Japan’s regional diplomacy was a separation of political and economic interests (seikei bunri). As a result, interdependence between Japan and Asia’s economic development intensified, as Japan relies on its production networks in the region, while Asia depends on Japanese investments (Calder and Ye 2010; Hatch 2010).

Sino-Japanese rivalry and the unfolding of Asian regionalism

In addition to Japan’s role in shaping market-driven regionalization in Asia, Tokyo has also attempted to shape the intergovernmental process of regionalism. Multilateralism has evolved significantly since the mid-1990s and has expanded its functional scope in the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis of 1997 (MacIntyre et al. 2008). For example, in response to the financial crisis, Japan has proposed the creation of an Asian Monetary Fund (AMF) with a portfolio of 100 billion US dollars. This initiative gained the sport of South Korea and ASEAN member states but was eventually shot down by the United States and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), as well as China who saw in it a plot for enhancing Japanese leadership in East Asia. However, as China grew more vulnerable to instability at the global financial and economic markets in the process of its growing share in world trade, Beijing embraced regional financial governance supporting the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) bilateral swap arrangement in 2000 known as Chiang Mai Initiative (CMI). Parallelizing its own previous AMF plan, Japan has embraced the multilateralization of the CMI scheme in
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2010. Yet China has taken the leadership in financial regionalism, appointing the director of the 2011-established CMI APT Macroeconomic Research Office as Beijing has used this scheme to counter the influence of the IMF. In contrast, Japan lobbied for an open regionalism including the role of global financial institutions (Rathus 2011).

The Japan–China rivalry over the future of East Asian regionalism first emerged in the crafting of East Asia Summit (EAS) in 2005. Beijing promoted an EAS centered on the APT region opposing participation of the US, while Japan promoted an open regionalism involving US interests through the inclusion of US allies, such as Australia and India. As such, Japan has also played a critical role in linking dynamics of East Asia regionalism to US geostrategic interests (Katzenstein 2005). Furthermore, the rise of “competitive regionalism” in the form of regional free trade agreements (FTAs) has also demonstrated the new Sino-Japanese rivalry over the future of Asia. Thus, while China has launched an FTA with ASEAN in 2001, a previously reluctant Japan quickly followed in promoting its own bilateral FTAs with Asian countries starting with Singapore in 2001 (Solis et al. 2009). In 2006, Japan promoted the EAS-based Comprehensive Economic Partnership for East Asia (CEPEA) as a counterproposal to China’s East Asia Free Trade Area (EAFTA). In 2013, Japan announced its participations in the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPP), which excludes China. Finally, in 2015, China launched its Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which excludes Japan and the United States, and which represents a counterpoint to the Asia Development Bank, launched in 1966, traditionally led by Japan.

The emergence of Japan’s “proactive pacifism”

The China factor in Japan’s new security system

After his return to the post of prime minister in 2012, Abe promised to “take Japan back” from the constraints of Japan’s postwar pacifist security system and to restore a “strong Japan” in international affairs. This pledge resulted in a strategic readjustment of Japan’s foreign policy advocated under the slogan of a “proactive contribution to peace” or “proactive pacifism” (sekkyokuteki heiwashugi) as it became known. Japan’s strategic readjustment unfolded in large part as a result of the geostrategic changes converging over the rise of China and its implications for Asia (Maslow 2015a).

While throughout the 2000s, Japan and China examined joint exploitation of natural resources in the East China Sea (Manicom 2014), this process was stalled after the standoff over the Senkaku/Diaoyutai islands escalated in late 2010 triggered by the collision of a Chinese fishing trawler with Japanese coast guard vessels (Hagström 2012). The conflict escalated further as the DPJ-led government of Yasuhiko Noda purchased the Senkaku islets from their private Japanese owner in September 2012, triggering massive anti-Japanese protests in China. While criticism over the DPJ’s crisis management vis-à-vis China has contributed to its rapid decline in voter support, the LDP returned to power in late 2012. While Sino-Japanese security relations further deteriorated in early 2013, the newly elect Abe sought the momentum and to push its security agenda (Pugliese 2015). In November 2013, China reacted to Japan’s more robust public stance and announced the establishment of an air defense identification zone over the East China Sea and thus the disputed territory. In the meanwhile, incidents in which Japan scrambled fighter jets to intercept Chinese planes have also increased dramatically between 2010 and 2013 (Erickson and Liff 2016).

Against this background, Japan’s conservative government led by Abe has amplified the need for a new foreign and security policy (Liff 2015; Maslow 2015b). First, the changes...
proposed by Abe included a new state secrecy law. Introduced in November 2013, this law is designed to increase Japan’s control of sensitive information with regard to defense, diplomacy, or counterterrorism measures. This law was passed as a precondition for the establishment of Japan’s National Security Council (NSC), also in November 2013. Based on the American model, the NSC was introduced in order to improve Japan’s capabilities in intelligence analysis, policy coordination, and crisis management particularly in the context of the US-Japan security alliance. The NSC is directly attached to the Kantei and headed by Shotaro Yachi, a former top MOFA bureaucrat. Together with Nobukatsu Kanehara, Yachi has long served as Abe’s top diplomatic adviser and is considered the architect of Japan’s current diplomatic roadmap and known as a proponent of a resolute security strategy on hedging China (Pugliese 2016). Second, in December 2013, the Abe government released a new National Security Strategy (NSS), which redefined Japan’s international role by advocating a “proactive pacifism.” Explicitly stating Japan’s concerns for the declining role of the United States in Asia vis-à-vis the implications of China’s rise for Asia’s geostrategic status quo, the NSS proscribes Japan the role as a regional balancing power. Third, to achieve this, the Abe government has in December 2013 revised Japan’s National Defense Program Guidelines and Mid-Term Defense Plan to promote the acquisition of new defense technology, including amphibious landing units to recapture islands, F-35 stealth fighter jets, and Global Hawk surveillance drones. Since 2013, the Abe government has gradually restored a growth in its defense budget.

These changes were implemented as a precondition for Japan’s push to participate in collective self-defense operations alongside the United States. In order to achieve this, the Abe government altered the interpretation of Japan’s pacifist constitution in July 2014 and subsequently passed a set of security bills to build the basis for a new robust foreign and security posture. Amidst parliamentary deliberation of this legislation, Japan and the United States announced an “Alliance of Hope” as they revised the Guidelines for US-Japan Defense Cooperation in April 2015 to account for a proactive Japan in bilateral security framework. Finally, in line with the new “proactive pacifism” doctrine, the Abe government has lifted Japan’s long-standing ban on arms exports and actively engages in joint development of weapons technology in arms exports to states such as the United States, Great Britain, and Australia, and revised its ODA guidelines to allow for the use of development aid in support of foreign armed forces.

Japan’s “pivot to Asia”

It is worth noting that the strategic currents for Japan’s newly evolving foreign and security policy were already formulated during Abe’s first term as prime minister (2006–2007). Abe promoted a value-based diplomacy (kachikan gaikō) in an attempt to hedge China. Based on this initiative, Japan launched a campaign known as “arch of freedom and prosperity” (jīyū to han’ei na kō) with the aim of establishing Japan as a “thought leader” in Asia (Schulze 2013). Following his return to power in 2012, Abe reinitiated this campaign in calling Japan “Asia’s democratic security diamond” and advocated a strong focus of Japan on maritime security in Asia in response to China’s attempt to turn the South China Sea into a “Lake Beijing” (Abe 2012).

As a result of Japan’s securitization of Asia’s maritime space, Japan attempts to consolidate its presence in South and Southeast Asia, as this region is deemed vital for hedging China. The Abe government has promised new investments in infrastructure projects as a counterpoint to China’s “One Belt, One Road” initiative while facilitating new security
partnerships with India, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Australia (Wallace 2013). For example, Japan has provided the Philippines with new patrol vessels and surveillance aircraft to strengthen Manila’s defense capacities vis-à-vis China in the South China Sea. Japan has also expressed its support for the US “freedom of navigation” operations in the South China Sea in response to China’s construction of military bases in the area of the Scarborough Shoal and the Spratly Islands. Linking China’s handling of its territorial disputes in this maritime area to its own conflict with Beijing in the East China Sea, Japan has even announced to participate actively in multilateral military maneuvers in the South China Sea, thus suggesting that Tokyo is willing to further entangle itself in the South China Sea and to securitize Asia’s maritime space to reconstitute its own security institutions (Wirth 2016; Drifte 2016). In sum, as Japan developed its own regional security strategy, Tokyo became a vital part of the US “rebalancing to Asia” strategy adopted under Obama in 2012.

Whither Japan’s role in Asian politics?

Along the structural realist/social constructivist divide in the study of international relations, scholarly debate has long been divided over the trajectory of change in Japan’s post–Cold War foreign and security policy. Whether Japan will depart from the constraints of its post-war pacifist institutions and embrace a proactive military role was indeed the main concern in this scholarship (e.g. Pyle 2007; Samuels 2007; Singh 2013; Oros 2015). However, as outlined, recent developments in response to the multitude of geostrategic changes in Asia suggest that Japan has indeed embarked on a pathway towards becoming a “normal country” capable of playing an active role in international security.

Under the banner of its “proactive pacifism,” Japan applies a mix of military, economic, and political instruments to its foreign policy, as Tokyo has opened a legal path towards participation in collective self-defense operations alongside its US ally. Japan’s current foreign policy in Asia is driven by the strategic objective of hedging China’s rise. As such, Tokyo has invested heavily in consolidating its presence in Asia through the establishment of new security partnerships. At the same time, Japan has engaged in further consolidating its security alliance with the United States. As a result, Japan’s foreign policy in Asia is marked, both, with increasingly autonomous policy initiatives and a sustained focus on US security relations. It is worth noting that Japan under Abe has improved ties with South Korea in an attempt to resolve conflicts over Japan’s wartime past. Despite political turmoil in South Korea converging over the presidency of Park Geun-hye, both countries have even signed a General Security of Military Information Agreement to share intelligence in late 2016. In addition, Abe has also engaged in reopening dialogue with China, after meeting with Xi Jinping at the 2014 APEC meeting, in an attempt to temper tensions over the Senkaku dispute and Chinese outrage over Abe’s visit to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine in late 2013.

Finally, while Japan has invested heavily in strengthening the US-Japan alliance, the unfolding political changes in the wake of Donald Trump’s victory in the 2016 presidential race have caused concerns over the future of this partnership. As such, Trump has called on Japan to step up its financial and military burden sharing in the alliance (despite Japan’s already high 75 percent contribution to all costs related to the alliance) and suggested a gradual withdrawal from Asia in his “America-first” approach to international affairs. Reference was even made during Trump’s campaign to a nuclear armament of Japan and South Korea. Trump’s promise to withdraw US participation from the TPP would cause a major pillar of Japan’s current strategic planning for the Asia-Pacific to collapse. As this would open up space for China to expand its presence in the region still further, Japan would then be presented with
a choice of active balancing or active integration into Asia embracing Beijing’s new role (cf. Hughes 2016). Either way, Japan’s response to the increased geostrategic uncertainty will have a profound impact on Asia politics.

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**Notes**

1. While the definition of what constitutes the geographical and cultural space referred to as Asia is contested, in this chapter, I refer to an East Asia understood as a regional complex consisting of the sub-subregions of Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia, respectively, thus excluding the South Asian subcontinent (cf. Buzan and Weaver 2003).

2. It is worth noting that Japan has built its first permanent overseas military base in Djibouti.


4. Exports from Japan to East Asia grew from 96.3 billion US dollars to 469.2 billion US dollars during the period from 1990 to 2011, while imports from this region to Japan expanded from 66.2 billion US dollars to 354.1 billion US dollars during the same period. As such, as of 2011, East Asia’s overall share in Japanese trade (imports 42.9% versus exports 56.9%) surpassed that of other world regions, thus demonstrating the overall importance of East Asia for Japan’s economy (Shirata 2014).

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Sebastian Maslow


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