Japan’s Shifting Strategic Discourse

As Narushige Michishita and I have argued, after decades of accepting U.S. supremacy in Asia as the foundation of its foreign and security policies, finding the right distance between the U.S. and China is the most important strategic choice facing Japan today.1 “Getting it just right” with these two powers will require both military and economic readjustments. But it will not be easy. Some in Japan fret about a Chinese power, it will accommodate to Chinese power, it will lose influence in the region and globally. Still others are concerned that rivalry with China is unavoidable. Because the debate is often so clamorous, and because the Sino-Japanese relationship is so frequently punctuated by tension, the possibility that improved relations with China might be compatible with sustained close relations with the United States is often lost in the noise.

Four Domestic Worldviews

Arrayed against one another, Japan’s relationships with the world’s two most powerful nations define spaces for four different national security strategies. Those who distrust foreign entanglements prefer that Japan acquire and sustain an independent military capability and domestic technological base. These “autonomists” see no reason to hedge their bets on the rise of China or on the decline of the United States. In their view, Japan should provide for itself in a “self-help” world and situate itself at a distance from both China and the United States. They include pacifists as well as Gaullists who endeavor above all to preserve their version of Japan as sovereign and independence.

Those advocating a China-Japan economic condominium prefer a bandwagoning strategy. They discount the Chinese military threat and emphasize the benefits from a robust economic relationship with the new global economic giant. They support an East Asian economic bloc and discount the costs of alienating Washington. They would draw closer to Beijing and imagine it will be a responsible stakeholder in the regional order. Their strategy welcomes-- and indeed would accelerate-- formation of a post-Washington economic consensus and global multipolarity.

“Balancers” are less enamored with the economic benefits from closer relations with China and are more attentive to military threats from China. If those who bandwagon would hedge by integrating with China economically, those who balance China would hedge militarily, by maintaining a robust alliance with the United States. They prefer that Washington remain the dominant player in the global system, and imagine that Japan will be safest when aligned with Washington as the system becomes bi- or multi-polar. Economically, they embrace free trade, using it as both policy guide and as leverage in international negotiations to buy time for the revitalization of Japan.

Finally there are “integrators” who argue, qua Goldilocks, that Japan can-- and should-- get it “just right.” They believe that better economic relations with Beijing need not be purchased at the price of diminished relations with Washington. They would wield an economic sword and a military shield, a dual hedge to protect Japan from NAFTA and EU economic predation by integrating with the Chinese economically and from Chinese coercion by maintaining a healthy alliance with the United States. They fear China’s betrayal and U.S. decline in equal measure. Their short term objective is to seize the opportunity to help design, build, and board a “G-3 bus” in order to avoid either

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“...AFTER DECADES OF ACCEPTING U.S. SUPREMACY IN ASIA AS THE FOUNDATION OF ITS FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICIES, FINDING THE RIGHT DISTANCE BETWEEN THE U.S. AND CHINA IS THE MOST IMPORTANT STRATEGIC CHOICE FACING JAPAN TODAY. ‘GETTING IT JUST RIGHT’ WITH THESE TWO POWERS WILL REQUIRE BOTH MILITARY AND ECONOMIC READJUSTMENTS. BUT IT WILL NOT BE EASY.”
dominance by a Washington-Beijing G-2 condominium or subordination to a new Chinese regional hegemon.

**Competition Among Domestic Worldviews**

For much of the Cold War the progenitors of today’s dual hedges dominated the Japanese security discourse. Led by the pragmatic wing of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), they surrendered some degree of foreign policy autonomy to Washington and off-loaded responsibility for national security to the United States. They never moved as close to Beijing as some wished and never quite balanced their relationships with China and the United States, but they followed the “Yoshida Doctrine”—a mercantile blueprint that emphasized economic growth and technological development and that constrained defense spending and limited military deployments. Under their leadership, Japan would not only hug the United States, but also Article Nine of the postwar constitution. They never ruled out deep economic integration with political competitors.

By the early 1990s, this group was losing ground to those who believed that Japan needed to be a more muscular ally of the United States. This group of “military hedges,” led by Yoshida’s nemesis Kishi Nobusuke in the 1950s and by Nakasone Yasuhiro in the 1980s, was anxious about the U.S. commitment, suspicious of Chinese (and Soviet) intentions, and keen to revise the constitution in order to loosen constraints on the use of force. They would balance Beijing’s power as fuller allies of Washington. LDP revisionists governed during the 2000s under Koizumi Junichirō and govern today under Koizumi’s former chief cabinet secretary (and Kishi’s grandson), Abe Shinzō.

Before they reclaimed power, however, Japan’s national security discourse was dominated for a short time by “economic hedges” from the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), led at first by Hatoyama Yukio and his once powerful ally, Ozawa Ichirō. Soon after the DPJ came to power in September 2009, the Hatoyama government reopened base relocation issues and began questioning decisions on the realignment of U.S. forces. Determined to put more space between Japan and the United States than had heretofore seemed possible, it cancelled the logistic support operations the SDF had been conducting since 2001 in the Indian Ocean to help U.S. and other forces fighting in Afghanistan. The DPJ government also began closing the distance between China and Japan on the economic front. Ozawa took a 600 person entourage to China including more than 120 DPJ Diet members. Discussions between Japan and the United States were not relevant in the fall of the DPJ, the resurrection of the LDP, and the making of national security policy however. In late 2012, for example, then Tokyo Governor Ishihara Shintarō, the poster child of this corner of the strategic discourse, forced the Noda government to purchase the disputed Senkaku Islands, altering the status quo in the East China Sea and setting off a second, much more fractious, dispute with Beijing.

**Misalignments With Public Opinion**

Mike Mochizuki and I have argued that Japan’s current strategic discourse has not been aligned with public opinion and that this misalignment prevents—or at least frustrates efforts to establish—the clear mandates necessary for difficult strategic choices. It is not clear if the Abe government is “ahead” of public opinion or lagging behind it, but it does seem that despite the large electoral swing back in favor of the LDP, they are not entirely on the same page.

Consider the case of Sino-Japanese relations. Although Japanese public perceptions of China have become increasingly negative, societal preferences about how to deal with China are less clear. Various public opinion surveys suggest that Japanese are still reluctant to embrace a robust military response and tighter alliance with the United States to balance against China’s rise. In an NHK poll conducted two months after the first Senkaku crisis in 2010, 57% supported collaborating with other Asian countries to deal with China and 23% favored deepening the bilateral relationship with China; only 12% of those surveyed favored dealing with China by relying on the United States military. In a poll taken by the Asahi Shimbun during the August–September 2012 period when Sino-Japanese tensions were escalating over the most recent Senkaku dispute, 90% of the Japanese respondents stated that bilateral relations were not going well, twice as many as in 2002. But when those polled were asked to identify the biggest problem in Sino-Japanese relations, they mentioned (in order of frequency) 1) the territorial problem (38%), 2) the problem over historical perceptions (30%), 3) economic frictions (10%), 4) food safety and the environment (10%), and finally 5) China’s increase in military power (7%). In other words, despite the high profile conflict over the Senkaku Islands, few Japanese view the rise of Chinese military power as the key problem in bilateral relations.

Although Japanese public opinion is still distinctly anti-military and although the business community is lobbying strongly for repairs to the relationship with China, the “military balancers” are ascendant. Sovereignty and security issues fuel their leadership. Many, especially those in the new Abe administration, are not convinced that recent experiments in bilateral maritime cooperation provide credible assurance about China’s long-term intentions. They believe instead that China could eventually evolve into an aggressive sea power with a chain of strategic and diplomatic bases from the South China Sea to the Middle East that can threaten Japanese sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) and the U.S. ability to defend them.

There is some misalignment in the case of the alliance as well. Those most concerned about sea-lane security in the face of China’s growing naval and air capabilities and about Japanese interests in the East China Sea in the context of increasing Chinese assertiveness have welcomed the Obama Administration’s re-balancing in the Asia-Pacific. But questions persist in Japan’s debate about the long-term American will and ability to provide adequate security assurance as China rises. Autonomists and military balancers who are less confident about the U.S. security commitment in the future both stress self-help security policies that might even include a nuclear weapons option. Even those who prefer extended deterrence would increase Japan’s defense capabilities in the East China Sea and reinterpret the constitution.
to enable Japan to exercise its right of collective self-defense, key elements of the Abe national security strategy.

Even though national security was not the most salient issue during the campaign, both the self- and military hedgers made significant gains in the December 2012 election. Abe assumed the latter posture, supporting a tighter alliance with the United States, particularly collective self-defense. The Japan Restoration Party, led by former Tokyo governor and nuclear weapons advocate Ishihara Shintaro, leaned more in the direction of autonomy, but announced it could be counted on to vote with the LDP on constitutional reform and defense spending. This may become necessary because the DPJ, while emphasizing the importance of the bilateral security alliance, had shied away from advocating constitutional revision or abandoning the “exclusively defensive” defense doctrine and because the Komeito, the LDP’s coalition partner, converges more with the DPJ than the LDP on defense policy and constitutional reform issues. Abe moved immediately to increase the defense budget for the first time in 11 years and to reopen study of the extant constitutional interpretation of “collective defense.”

When it took power in late 2012, Japan’s new leadership seemed disinclined to pursue a Goldilocks strategy of getting relations with Beijing and Washington “just right.” Yet, there was only lukewarm public support for enhanced militarization of the Sino-Japanese relationship, and even the United States, which otherwise welcomed Japan’s embrace, urged caution. Meanwhile, other elites continued to openly wrestle openly with Japan’s strategic choices. “Economic hedgers” and “dual hedgers” in the business community—including Yonekura Hiromasa, chairman of the Federation of Economic Organizations (Keidanren)—counseled Abe to be prudent. Consequently, candidate Abe’s tough talk soon turned more pragmatic. He reiterated that the Senkaku islands were unquestionably Japanese territory, but also vowed to improve relations with China through dialogue. He sent an envoy to meet with the new Chinese leadership in an effort to deescalate bilateral tension. It soon became less likely that he would follow through on provocative promises to build structures on the Senkakus, deploy Maritime Self-Defense Force vessels to stop Chinese intrusions into the islands’ territorial waters, or fire warning shots across the bow of intruding airplanes or ships. Abe remained more a military balancer than a dual hedger, but he seemed cognizant of domestic and international constraints.

In the case of the U.S.-Japan alliance, a great many problems persist despite unprecedented levels of support among the Japanese public. Without declaring it openly, Washington surely welcomes a reinterpretation of the constitution to allow for collective self-defense, increases in Japanese defense spending, and a second revision of the alliance guidelines. But the LDP has never affirmed its support for joining TPP negotiations and relocation of the Marine Corps Air Station Futenma is as elusive as ever; both issues are fueled by widespread public opposition. Likewise, while Washington welcomes a tough Japanese response to Pyongyang’s nuclear and missile development, U.S. leaders will be frustrated by Tokyo’s return to elevation of the abductee issue in discussions with North Korea.

As we have seen, public opinion and elite discourse co-exist in the maelstrom of Japan’s democratic politics. Each will continue to shift and be buffeted by regional politics. Unless they come into closer alignment, however, we should expect Japan’s still unsettled grand strategy to persist well beyond the next national election in July 2013, possibly with deleterious consequences for the region as a whole.

By Richard Samuels, Ford International Professor of Political Science and Director, Center for International Studies, Massachusetts Institute of Technology


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