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STRATEGIC POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITATIONS
FOR ABE'S JAPAN IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

JOHN LEE



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INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

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FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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Strategic Possibilities and Limitations for Abe's Japan in Southeast Asia

By John Lee

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's desire for Japan to play a more proactive role in strategic affairs stems largely from not just his concern about the nature of China's rise but the challenge to the post-war liberal regional order that the latter's rise and behaviour presents. Any disruption to that order is perceived to be extremely detrimental to Japan's core national interest.
- The concern with reinforcing and strengthening the existing regional order is causing Japan to take far greater strategic interest in Southeast Asia – and also reflects lessons learnt from Abe's first time in office (2006–07.)
- The increased Japanese strategic interest in Southeast Asia is welcomed by all key states in Southeast Asia and the United States, meaning that the growing Japan-Southeast Asian strategic dynamic is mutually reinforcing.
- Japanese desire to play a more proactive strategic role in Southeast Asia needs to be understood alongside its post-war constitutional limitations. While relaxation of military equipment and technology export policy may be highly significant, constitutional limitations are likely to preclude direct Japanese military involvement in Southeast Asian conflicts.
- There is strong potential and promising possibilities for Japan to play a more proactive multilateral role in Southeast Asia through its standing and participation in regional institutions (especially ASEAN-led or backed institutions) that will further Tokyo's

objectives and advance the strategic and security goals of key Southeast Asian states.

- Japan's capacity to significantly enhance its strategic role in the region ultimately depends on the success of Abe's domestic reforms.

Strategic Possibilities and Limitations for Abe's Japan in Southeast Asia

By John Lee¹

INTRODUCTION

In his first press conference for the current year conducted on 5 January, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe reaffirmed that Japan will continue to pursue a “proactive contribution to international peace.”² The phrase has been used numerous times by Prime Minister Abe to characterize his government’s strategic vision and narrative of the role for Japan, including in the country’s “National Security Strategy”,³ “National Defence Program Guidelines”⁴ and in almost every major foreign policy speech delivered by the prime minister and his foreign and defence ministers. One such recent occasion was the prime minister’s keynote address to the Shangri La Dialogue in May 2014.⁵

¹ John Lee is Visiting Fellow at ISEAS. He is also a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute in Washington, D.C. and an Adjunct Associate Professor at the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at the Australian National University.

² “New Year’s Press Conference by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe”, 5 January 2015 <http://japan.kantei.go.jp/97_abe/statement/201501/05newyear.html> (accessed 4 March 2015).

³ “National Security Strategy”, 17 December 2013 <<http://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryou/131217anzenhoshou/nss-e.pdf>> (accessed 4 March 2015).

⁴ “National; Defense Program Guidelines for FY 2014”, 17 December 2013 <http://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/agenda/guideline/2014/pdf/20131217_e2.pdf> (accessed 4 March 2015).

⁵ Keynote Address by Shinzo Abe at the Shangri La Dialogue, Singapore, 30 May 2014 <<http://www.iiss.org/en/events/shangri%20la%20dialogue/archive/2014-c20c/opening-remarks-and-keynote-address-b0b2/keynote-address-shinzo-abe-a787>> (accessed 4 March 2015).

That Japan make a proactive contribution to peace is linked to Abe's insistence that "Japan is not, and will never be, a Tier-two country."⁶ The desire for Japan to play such a "proactive role" was offered in large part as the justification for the formation of a National Security Council to coordinate strategic, foreign and defence policy under the Prime Minister's direction, for increasing Japanese defence spending in 2013 (which was the first increase for eleven years even if the rise was a modest one of 0.8 per cent,) and for relaxing its self-imposed arms export ban for the first time by revising the country's long-standing "Three Principles on Arms Exports" — guidelines which had been left in place for over fifty years. Tellingly, seeking to play a more "proactive role" is at the heart of Abe's reinterpretation of the country's pacifist constitution to allow contributions to "collective security" (i.e., coming to the military aid of allies) under a number of scenarios.

The (re)emergence of a "can-do" and "will-do" Japan under Abe is also of high interest to Southeast Asia — to key strategic players such as Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia — but also to the region as a whole. Telling an audience in Jakarta of the strategic significance of Southeast Asia due to the region's geographical position between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, Abe promised that Japan would shift its attention southward rather than only focus more narrowly on its immediate environs as it has done for decades after World War II. Abe also reaffirmed the significance of the Japan-U.S. alliance in maintaining stability in Southeast Asia (and not just Northeast Asia,) while the prime minister would make genuine efforts to "strengthen ties with maritime Asia" and also with ASEAN.⁷ When one considers that Abe took the highly symbolic decision to visit all ten ASEAN nations during his first year in office of his second coming as prime minister (a first for any non-ASEAN leader,) it is clear that Tokyo's contemporary strategic interest in Southeast Asia under Abe is both genuine and meaningful.

⁶ Shinzo Abe, "Japan is Back", Speech at CSIS in Washington, D.C., 22 February 2013 <http://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/pm/abe/us_20130222en.html> (accessed 4 March 2015).

⁷ Shinzo Abe, "The Bounty of the Open Seas: Five New Principles for Japanese Diplomacy", 18 January 2013 <http://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/pm/abe/abe_0118e.html> (accessed 4 March 2015).

Less clear is Tokyo's strategic motivation, giving rise to some alarmist sentiment in the region. Japan's conception of an expanded strategic role for itself in East Asia, including in Southeast Asia, has led to some capitals (namely Beijing and Seoul) and commentaries chiding Tokyo for a shift "to the right" and returning to a "militaristic past" which might even "threaten peace and stability" in the region.⁸ One survey of South Koreans — a country with still raw memories of its troubled history with Japan — even found that 62 per cent of respondents perceived Abe's Japan to be a "military threat".⁹ Such sentiments tend to be based on crude "slippery slope" projections of an ever expanding Japanese strategic role and presence including in Southeast Asia. Little consideration is given to what Japan is actually doing in the region and why; and importantly what enduring limitations remain for Japan when it comes to Tokyo playing an extended role in Southeast Asia in particular.

The paper is designed to answer these above contentions. It begins by looking at the pillars of the liberal order that emerged after World War II, and why China's rise potentially presents a fundamental challenge to such an order. As the paper will argue, offering such a "scene setter" is important for two reasons. First, the Abe administration's desire for Japan to play a much more "proactive" strategic role in regional affairs is driven primarily by China's rise. But second and more important, seeking to counter Chinese power and influence (especially in Southeast Asia) is not so much about reigniting historical rivalries for the sake of

⁸ See, for example, Zhang Junshe, "Japan Turning to the Right Threatens Regional Peace and Stability", *China-US Focus*, 18 February 2014 <<http://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/japan-turning-to-the-right-threatens-regional-peace-and-stability/>>; Peter Cai, "Abe's alarming assault on Japan's democracy", *Business Spectator*, 27 June 2014 <<http://www.businessspectator.com.au/article/2014/6/27/china/abes-alarming-assault-japans-democracy>>; Norihiro Kato, "Japan's Break With Peace", *New York Times*, 16 July 2014 <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/17/opinion/norihiro-kato-japans-break-with-peace.html?ref=collection%2Fcolumn%2Fnorihiro-kato&_r=0>; "Shinzo Abe: is Japan's PM a dangerous militarist or modernising reformer?", *The Guardian*, 16 December 2013 <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/dec/16/shinzo-abe-japan-pm>> (all accessed 4 March 2015).

⁹ See "62% of South Koreans regard Japan as a military threat: think tank poll", *Japan Times*, 30 October 2013 <<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2013/10/30/national/politics-diplomacy/62-of-south-koreans-regard-japan-as-a-military-threat-think-tank-poll/#.VPeEovmUeSo>> (accessed 5 March 2015).

it but about protecting and strengthening the pre-existing liberal order in East Asia.

Indeed, as the paper will go on to argue, Abe's growing strategic interest in Southeast Asia is very much part of this Japanese desire to reinforce and strengthen the existing regional order vis-à-vis China's rise by providing a partial check against Chinese ambitions and territorial claims, assertive actions and rising influence; in addition to offering greater hedging and balancing options for Southeast Asian states. The paper will then examine the possible ways that Japan might enhance its strategic relevance in Southeast Asia and how this relates to countering Chinese influence in shaping and protecting its preferred East Asian regional order — but also consider some of the limitations on a greater Japanese strategic role in that sub-region.

SETTING THE SCENE: THE HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR ORDER AND THE RISE OF CHINA

(a) Historical Basis of Order in East Asia

The historical basis for regional stability since after World War II is founded on two related pillars. The first is uncontested American naval power and maritime access. Even during the height of the Cold War, the Soviet Union lacked the capacity to deny the United States unfettered access to the maritime commons in the region since Soviet military power was a continental-dominated force and largely focused westward. The Soviet Union was also geographically better positioned as a Eurasian rather than Asian great power, meaning that Moscow found it particularly challenging to project power into the Far East for any sustained period of time. Importantly, American naval pre-eminence meant that no Asian power (or group of powers) could seek regional dominance, and any attempts to do so would lead to those countries suffering enormously prohibitive costs.

American naval power was sustained through its base in Guam, but also through allied Asian states hosting and maintaining American military assets in Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, Australia,

and to a lesser extent in Singapore and Malaysia. In return, America provided public security goods to the region in terms of a strategically stable regional environment, and safe and unfettered maritime access for commercial shipping.

Importantly, America also opened its immense domestic economic market to states who willingly played by Washington's rules, leading to the emergence of an Asian export-led growth model for development. Indeed, the economies of Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, Thailand, the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia and China owe a debt of gratitude to the American consumer, just as the latter owes a debt of gratitude to the former countries for providing them with cheap consumer goods over many decades.

In addition to the increased foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows and outflows between the United States and Asia, and agreement on international norms, the economic integration between America and the region created a virtuous spiral in which American interests became increasingly tied to Asia — thereby increasing the incentives for Washington to devote significant military assets to the Asia-Pacific for the long term. This meant that American strategic and military engagement in the region survived periods when Washington increasingly doubted its own lasting power in the region (e.g., the Nixon Doctrine articulated in 1969). On the other side of the coin, the continued prosperity of Asian states was increasingly linked to the permanence and pre-eminence of the American strategic role.

The second and related historical pillar for stability is that American strategic and military pre-eminence dampened competition between still rivalrous Asian states. This occurred for a number of reasons.

For one, it was impossible for any Asian state to match or exceed American military capabilities in the region, making it pointless (and dangerous) for larger states such as Japan to attempt to do so. Given that much of the region's security was outsourced to a much more powerful and generally reliable superpower, the pro-growth states in the region focused on achieving rapid economic development rather than engaging in an escalating and costly military competition.

Indeed, one could advance a persuasive argument that the balancing and band-wagoning activity of many large and small pro-growth Asian

states over the past few decades is largely designed to perpetuate a U.S.-led hierarchical strategic order within which no Asian state can dominate the region or sub-region¹⁰ — much to the dismay of many contemporary Chinese strategists who preferred a multipolar order within which China can exercise increasing influence. This, incidentally, also partly explains why America’s geographical distance from Asia makes it the preferred security partner of all major Asian countries (excluding China).¹¹

Furthermore, American alliances with Japan, Australia, South Korea, Thailand and the Philippines, de facto alliances with Taiwan, and the security partnership with Singapore and Malaysia were seen as stabilising influences in the region, rather than divisive arrangements. There was a general balance of capabilities and influence between states in Northeast Asia, and in Southeast Asia which provided a strong foundation for strategic stability in the region — despite the prevalence of historical rivalries and unresolved territorial disagreements.

Note that this U.S.-led order underpinned and facilitated Japan’s deepening connections and reliance on Southeast Asia in the post-World War II period. In economic terms, Southeast Asian countries provided an important outlet for Japanese goods, and stable and fruitful markets for Japanese outward capital investment. Southeast Asia was also an important source of raw materials during Japan’s decades of rapid growth. In security terms, the stability and security of sea lines of communications (SLOCs) was critical to the success of Japan’s export-led model of development in the second half of the previous century. In institutional terms, and under the American security umbrella, Japan played the leading role in organizations such as the Asian Development Bank and became an extremely active and constructive member of ASEAN-led regimes such as the ASEAN Regional Forum.

¹⁰ See Evelyn Goh, “Hierarchy and the role of the United States in the East Asian security order”, *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 8, no. 3 (2008): 353–77 <<http://irap.oxfordjournals.org/content/8/3/353.full.pdf>> (accessed 4 March 2015).

¹¹ See John Lee, “An Exceptional Obsession”, *The American Interest* 5, no. 5 (2010) <<http://www.the-american-interest.com/2010/05/01/an-exceptional-obsession/>> (accessed 4 March 2014).

(b) China's Rise and the Emergence of "Systemic Instability"

There are developments within individual countries and events that could negatively impact Japanese interests in the region. One major one is developments in the Korean Peninsula which could trigger serious strategic and economic instability, and even lead to the threat of a nuclear arms race or exchange in East Asia. Others include the prospect of failing states in particularly Southeast Asia, such as Indonesia, even if this is looking less likely over time. Regional and transnational criminal activities also constitute enduring problems for all countries such as drug trafficking, people smuggling and money laundering.

Despite the seriousness of the above challenges, it is China's rise which has the potential to systematically and seriously undermine every element of the aforementioned historical pillars of regional security and stability; and which commands the most attention and dominates long term strategic thinking of most analysts in the region. China is the first major power in the post-World War II period to emerge as a strategic competitor to America in East and Southeast Asia. Its emergence is of unparalleled significance and creating unique disruption for several reasons.

The first factor is China's absolute size and resulting potential capabilities. Although the Soviet Union was a more formidable military competitor to the United States at the peak of its powers, the Soviet economy was barely one third the size of America's. In contrast, although China's GDP per capita is still about one-fifth that of the United States', the size of the Chinese economy is already at least two-thirds that of America's. Even though it is likely that the Chinese economy will grow at more modest pace over the next few decades, it is still likely to match or exceed the size of the American economy in absolute terms over the next ten years.

Sustained by its growing economic weight, the Chinese defence budget is almost three times larger than Japan's, even if it is less than one third of America's overall defence budget. But America has global interests and responsibilities while China can focus primarily on its immediate environs. In other words, China's re-emergence signals the rise of an Asian power that could dominate Asia, but for the American presence.

The second factor is China's geography and historical place and role in the region. Unlike the Soviet Union, China is geographically at the centre of Asia. It shares an extended maritime border with almost every major trading country in Asia. Whereas the Soviet Union's interest in maritime Asia was an ideological-driven matter of extending its influence into the region, China's interest in maritime Asia is permanent and unavoidable — deepened by its reliance on seaborne trade of especially energy resources and commodities. It also means that the growth in Chinese strategic, military and economic power directly affects the interests of every major Asian state.

In particular, the contemporary Chinese shift from being a predominantly land or continental power (as it has been throughout most of its history) to a maritime power is disconcerting for other maritime Asian states; especially given China's more assertive recent behaviour in asserting its maritime claims in the East China and South China Seas.

Moreover, unlike the Soviet Union, China has crafted (and also somewhat exaggerated) an image of itself as the enduring and natural hegemon in Asia. China has propounded and domestically nurtured an interpretation of history which sees itself as the victim of foreign powers jockeying to remove China from this historical and natural position, and that Beijing is simply reclaiming its natural preeminent status. In other words, the roots of Chinese ambition in Asia are far deeper, and are more extensive, those of the Soviet Union's.

Third, China is the first major Asian country in the post-World War II period to emerge as a formidable military competitor vis-à-vis the U.S. — at least as far as capabilities in the region are concerned. Furthermore, the greatest advances in Chinese military capabilities are maritime-relevant capabilities along its east and southeast borders — impacting the interests of both American and all maritime Asian powers.

Significantly, Chinese military advances from the mid-1990s onwards are explicitly designed as a counter against both American military capabilities in the region and against the effectiveness of conventional American extended deterrence on behalf of East and Southeast Asian allies. The fact that these capabilities were initially designed to primarily counter America's capacity to defend Taiwan is increasingly irrelevant since these Chinese capabilities can be redeveloped and deployed in

theatres of conflict beyond the Taiwan Straits. In particular, Chinese investment in anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities threatens to upset the long-standing regional strategic and military balance, if it has not done so already.

The A2/AD strategy is part of what the People's Liberation Army (PLA) term "counter-intervention operations" which is a stratagem designed to slow, limit or prevent a militarily superior enemy from conducting successful military operations in China's theatres of core interest. Part of an awkward sounding capability to "wage and win local (or regional) wars under conditions of informatization", cyber-warfare capabilities and anti-satellite weapons will be used to disable or else inflict severe damage on the "eyes and ears" of America's heavily networked offensive military assets (such as aircraft carrier battle groups). Diesel and nuclear submarines, mines and missiles will be used to inflict heavy losses on supporting vessels within the carrier group, and possibly on an aircraft carrier itself.

For strategic instability to deepen, China only needs to create a credible fear for Washington that the PLA is able to inflict prohibitive losses on U.S. aircraft carrier groups, making the prospect of U.S. intervention in any Chinese conflict less likely or far more difficult. The point is that China's military modernization and doctrine could mean that uncontested and unfettered access for American naval vessels in East and Southeast Asia is at an end for the first time since after World War II.¹²

Fourth, China's emergence as an economic power is a unique challenge to the post-World War II order. Unlike the Soviet Union, sectors of the Chinese economy are heavily integrated with the rest of Asia and America. China has emerged as the largest trading partner of Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, Indonesia and Australia. China is the largest trading partner of India and America in Asia. The dilemma for many of these countries including Australia is that their largest trading

¹² For further discussion of China's challenge to the U.S.-led liberal order in East Asia, see Ashley J. Tallis, "Uphill Challenges: China's Military Modernization and Asian Security", in *Strategic Asia 2012-13: China's Military Challenge*, edited by Ashley J. Tallis and Travis Tanner (Washington: National Bureau of Research 2012).

partner is now engaged in a deepening strategic competition with their American security guarantor. Unlike relations with the Soviet Union, there are potential economic costs for all major regional states should relations with China dramatically worsen — even if the extent of regional integration and reliance on the Chinese economy and market is often overestimated and misunderstood.¹³

More than that, many states (including Japan) are increasingly dependent on a growing Chinese economy for their own continued growth — meaning that security and economic interests are not necessarily aligned. Importantly, China’s importance to the regional and global economy means that it is not possible for America to lead an overt security coalition against China in the absence of immense and sustained provocation by Beijing. At best, American-led security coalitions and relationships can serve to “shape” Chinese strategic actions without at the same time inhibiting China’s economic rise.

RESPONDING TO CHINA’S RISE: PUTTING CONTEXT TO ABE’S “PROACTIVE” TURN TO SOUTHEAST ASIA

(a) Focusing on China and Systemic Threats to Order

Despite the current elevated interest in Abe “Mark II”, the Japanese leader’s abiding interest in meeting the challenge of China’s rise is not a recent inclination. For example, and in January 2007 during one of his first major foreign policy speeches as prime minister, Abe “Mark I” expressed his intention to pursue a “proactive foreign policy” and have Japan “play a meaningful role on the global stage”.¹⁴ While the speech was primarily about deepening cooperation between Japan and the North

¹³ See monographs in the ISEAS *Trends in Southeast Asia* series by this author examining China’s economic relations with Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam and Singapore: <http://www.iseas.edu.sg/research-output.cfm?category_id=586BB54F-C2F7-8320-1CE59EA764DCEFAD&status=past> (accessed 4 March 2015).

¹⁴ Shinzo Abe, “Japan and NATO: Toward Further Collaboration”, Speech at the North Atlantic Council, 12 January 2007 <<http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/europe/pmv0701/nato.html>> (accessed 4 March 2015).

Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Abe turned the focus to Asia exclaiming that China's rise presented "great opportunities for us all." In the same breath, he nevertheless noted that "there are some uncertainties surrounding China, such as its increasing defence expenditures and continued lack of transparency." Elevating "fundamental values as freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law," the then Japanese leader affirmed his government's commitment to "protecting and promoting those values" and his belief that "stability and prosperity of the world" could only be based on these values (in direct contrast to any order based on leadership offered by an authoritarian China).

While such rhetoric is commonplace amongst democratic leaders, Abe "Mark I" proved his seriousness by forging ahead with what proved subsequently to be an ill-fated *Quadrilateral Initiative*: an informal strategic dialogue between Japan, the United States, India and Australia that was likely intended to open the door for genuine and more meaningful strategic and military cooperation between these four democracies. Implicitly but undoubtedly designed to address concerns with China, the "Quad" might have been somewhat premature and not fully thought through. The initiative rapidly unravelled once Australia under newly elected leader Kevin Rudd unilaterally withdrew from the grouping, offering an easy way out for America's President Barack Obama. But the point is that finding ways to address the challenge of a rising China was an early and primary strategic priority for Abe.

It is clear that the Mark II version of the Abe government (even more so than during his first time as prime minister) believes China's emergence and rise presents opportunities but also challenges to immediate Japanese interests (especially Japanese administered territories in the East China Sea). But critically, Abe Mark II is also increasingly viewing China as a challenger to the existing post World War II liberal order. This is the result of not just China's greater power now compared to when Abe was first elected leader in 2006 but also an increase in Chinese assertiveness in the maritime domains since around 2010.¹⁵

¹⁵ For commentary about the recent increase in Chinese assertiveness in East Asia, see Patrick Cronin, "The Challenge of Responding to Maritime Coercion", *CNAS Maritime Security Series*, September 2014 <http://www.cnas.org/sites/default/files/publications-pdf/CNAS_Maritime1_Cronin.pdf> (accessed 4 March 2015).

That China is perceived to be the major challenge for Japan and the region in the medium-long term (in Japanese eyes) is confirmed by the country's *2013 National Security Strategy* which states that "the maintenance and protection of international order based on rules and universal values, such as freedom..." is fundamental to Japan's national interest.¹⁶ This is understood in the context of a "shift in the balance of power" since the beginning of this century which has been "changing on an unprecedented scale, and has substantially influenced the dynamics of international politics".¹⁷ Identifying China as the primary factor for changes in the balance of power in a world where "Sovereign states remain the principle actors", the document goes on to declare that "Risks to Global Commons" presents a grave threat to order more generally, and that "risks that can impede the utilization of and free access to global commons (such as the sea and cyberspace) have been spreading and becoming more serious." Zeroing in on "an increasing number of cases of unilateral actions in an attempt to change the status quo by coercion without paying respect to existing international law", the same section goes on to highlight "disputes that have arisen over sovereignty between coastal states and China" as harmful to "the maintenance of law at sea, freedom of navigation, and stability in the Southeast Asian region".¹⁸

The Chinese challenge to regional order more generally and in areas such as Southeast Asia will have serious ramifications for Japan given Japan's reliance on SLOCs in Southeast Asia for its trade and energy security.¹⁹ Remember that as a trading island-nation, Japan is even more dependent than China on imports of energy, food and the like. Such sentiments and analyses of Japanese vulnerability to disruptions in the post-war order generally, and reliance on open and unfettered access to SLOCs in particular, are mirrored in key documents such as the country's

¹⁶ *National Security Strategy*, 17 December 2013, p. 4 <<http://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryou/131217anzenhoshou/nss-e.pdf>> (accessed 5 March 2015).

¹⁷ *National Security Strategy*, p. 6.

¹⁸ *National Security Strategy*, p. 8.

¹⁹ *National Security Strategy*, pp. 9, 16–17.

National Defence Guidelines,²⁰ *Principles on Transfer of Defence Equipment and Technology*,²¹ and the explanatory note on the “Cabinet Decision on Development on Seamless Security Legislation to Ensure Japan’s Survival and Protect its People”.²²

While Japan is hardly alone in its concern about China’s rise and the possible disruption to regional order (and impact on access to SLOCs) resulting from this, Abe’s explicit desire that Japan use its considerable weight to play a significant role in upholding and protecting the existing order is beyond the ambition of any previous Japanese administration in the post-war period. Japan has traditionally relied on economic and “soft power” diplomacy and eschewed strategic and military approaches to addressing problems beyond its immediate environs.²³ The point must also be made that Abe’s determination to go beyond mere emphasis on protecting national sovereignty, including Japan’s claims over the Senkaku Islands, and inextricably and explicitly tie Japan’s more ‘proactive role’ to issues of upholding and protecting regional order goes beyond any position taken by his post-war predecessors.

In short, seeking an eminent Japanese role in terms of the preservation and protection of the liberal order in East Asia is a far more sophisticated and ambitious view of the country’s strategic duties than that envisaged by previous administrations. This is the case even as recent prime ministers in Naoto Kan (June 2010–September 2011) and Yoshihiko Noda (September 2011–December 2012) put forward concepts such as “dynamic deterrence” based on a “dynamic defence force”²⁴ during their time in office to counter increased Chinese assertiveness and power in the region.

²⁰ <http://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/agenda/guideline/2014/pdf/20131217_e2.pdf> (accessed 5 March 2015).

²¹ <<http://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000034953.pdf>> (accessed 5 March 2015).

²² <http://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/nsp/page23e_000273.html> (accessed 5 March 2015).

²³ See Andrew L. Oros, “Japan’s Strategic Culture: Security Identity in a Fourth Modern Incarnation?”, *Contemporary Security Policy* 35, no. 2 (2014): 227–48.

²⁴ See *National Defense Program Guidelines for FY 2011 and Beyond* <http://www.mod.go.jp/e/d_act/d_policy/pdf/guidelinesFY2011.pdf> (accessed 22 April 2015).

(b) Explaining the Southeast Asian Turn

The primary interest in this paper is examining the reasons behind Japan's enhanced strategic focus on Southeast Asia, and the possibilities and limitations of a Japanese strategic role in that sub-region.

On the one hand, a focus on East Asian SLOCs to Japan's south will automatically increase the strategic relevance of Southeast Asia. But it does not fully account for the lengths Abe has gone to in enlarging Japan's strategic and political weight in Southeast Asia. As mentioned, Abe's (Mark II) decision to visit all ten ASEAN countries within his first year in office was an unprecedented move by a Japanese leader, all in the context of a prime minister seeking to play a much more proactive role in regional strategic affairs.

The focus on Southeast Asia has continued beyond the first year of Abe Mark II. For example, and in the prime minister's keynote speech at the 2014 Shangri La Dialogue in Singapore, Abe pledged to "offer [Japan's] utmost support for efforts by ASEAN member countries to ensure security of the seas and skies and rigorously maintain freedom of navigation and overflight."²⁵ In doing so, and with the usual senior defence officials in the audience including from China, the United States and all ASEAN countries, the speech made much of Japan's decision to provide new patrol vessels to the Philippine Coast Guard and aid to Indonesia to allow Jakarta to procure three new patrol vessels. In flagging similar arrangements with Vietnam, another claimant state against China in parts of the South China Sea, Abe left little doubt that the strategic turn to Southeast Asia, and standing up to China in particular, will be a hallmark of his tenure. Japan has also offered technical skills and training in Coast Guard operations to officials in the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam.

Abe has also phrased the Japanese role in Southeast Asia in broad terms. As the Shangri La keynote address puts it, "Japan will combine various options within its assistance menu, including ODA (Overseas Direct Assistance), capacity building by the Self-Defence Forces, and

²⁵ *Keynote Address by Shinzo Abe at the Shangri La Dialogue*, Singapore, 30 May 2014.

defence equipment and technology cooperation, to support seamlessly the capacity of ASEAN countries in safeguarding the seas". Such a Japanese turn is directly linked to a "new Japanese" mentality to "take on peace, order and stability of the region as their own responsibility".

To be sure, Chinese policies and behaviour over claims in the South China Sea have become an even more fraught issue for the region since Abe first came in to power. But what else explains the Japanese shift in strategic focus toward Southeast Asia? One partial explanation seems to be that Abe has learnt lessons from his first time as prime minister. In particular, the Quadrilateral Initiative received a cool reception from major Southeast Asian states since none were included in the Quad. Unintentionally, the Quad also created the perception that Abe was seeking to bypass or else supersede ASEAN centrality in multilateral discussions of regional strategic issues; or worse encourage America to prioritize such groupings over ASEAN-backed institutions. In this sense, Abe realized that if Japan wants a greater strategic role in the region, Japan needs to garner the support of states that are situated in what his government recognizes as the overwhelmingly important strategic gateway between the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

Additionally, it seems that Abe's strategic objectives and reading of the region has become significantly more profound and nuanced during his second time as leader. Whereas Abe Mark I and Mark II are both wary of increasing Chinese power, the Mark II version is emphasising Japan's desire to play a more proactive role in upholding and protecting the regional order — and not in containing Chinese power *per se*. After all, it is not China's rise in and of itself that is of concern to Japan and other countries in East Asia but how China will choose to wield its enhanced power. While it is true that upholding regional order includes measures to balance against growing Chinese power so as to provide effective constraints and costs against disruptive Chinese behaviour, the focus on order more generally is a far more palatable message for Abe to sell when promoting Japan's desire to play a more 'proactive' strategic role.

The point is that the championing of the existing open and liberal order (as opposed to a hegemonic one designed for the benefit of great powers) and suggesting measures to protect and strengthen such an order, is an inherently collective exercise involving both great and modest powers

(even if great powers have more material capacity to protect or disrupt any order). That being the case, obtaining the consent and approval of key Southeast Asian states — in addition to its superpower American ally — for a greater Japanese strategic role is essential to the legitimacy of Abe’s “proactive” ambitions. Indeed, without the legitimacy that comes from widespread and collective regional approval, a more “proactive” Japan would be seen as a disruptive rather than constructive and stabilizing power.

When it comes to building support for a more proactive Japan in Southeast Asia, enhancing legitimacy necessarily includes approval both from a large number of individual states in Southeast Asia, and ASEAN. With respect to the latter, Abe explicitly linked of Japan’s desire to play a more proactive role in Southeast Asia with Japan-ASEAN initiatives to deepen institutional and operational cooperation to enhance the capacities of Southeast Asian states to promote maritime security and safety for the explicit purpose of regional “peace”, “stability” and “order”.²⁶

Furthermore, Japanese moves to help enhance the maritime (including naval) capabilities of states like the Philippines, Vietnam and Indonesia help meet existing and growing demand emanating from within Southeast Asia for states to acquire greater domestic capacity to resist coercive behaviour by great powers over maritime claims and disputes. Southeast Asian states are already engaged in a number of ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ balancing approaches vis-à-vis China.²⁷ By putting Japanese assistance to Southeast Asian states in the context of strengthening regional capacity to uphold

²⁶ For example, see official joint comments released following the 17th Japan-ASEAN Summit Meeting, held 12 November 2014 in Myanmar <http://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/rp/page3e_000260.html> (accessed 7 March 2015). Likewise, Tokyo reiterated the same theme during the inaugural Japan-ASEAN Defence Minister’s Roundtable held a week later. See <<http://www.mod.go.jp/e/jdf/no59/specialfeature.html>> (accessed 7 March 2015).

²⁷ See Andrew Shearer, “Southeast Asia and Australia: Case Studies in Responding to China’s Military Power”, in *Strategic Asia 2012-13: China’s Military Challenge*, edited by Ashley J. Tallis and Travis Tanner (Washington: National Bureau of Research 2012).

existing order – rather than as a mere hard-balancing ‘containment’ mechanism against a rising China – there is enhanced and widespread acquiescence for a greater Japanese strategic role generally, and for Japanese assistance to these Southeast Asian claimant states specifically.

Finally, the focus on the South China Sea may well prove a diplomatic boon and masterstroke for Japan in another way. Japanese preparedness to strategically counter and criticize Chinese coercive and assertive behaviour over maritime claims in the South China Sea might eventually encourage Southeast Asian states to offer more explicit criticism of similar Chinese coercive and provocative behaviour in and around the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea. Although involving a different set of claims and legal issues in two different Seas, highlighting any Chinese behaviour considered contrary to adherence to a rules-based order may well become a collective endeavour – which can only work in Tokyo’s interest.

This is not to suggest that Abe is only interested in what Southeast Asia can do for Japanese interests in the East China Sea, or that the Japanese leader does not genuinely view Chinese actions in the South China Sea as a challenge to regional order more generally. The overwhelming evidence is that Abe does so when it comes to the latter point. It is simply to advance the proposition that Tokyo’s Southeast Asian turn and interest in upholding a regional liberal order more generally is entirely consistent with more narrow Japanese interests in its more immediate surrounds.

By way of summary, and at the most general level, the increased Japanese interest in Southeast Asia, and South China Sea issues in particular, reflect the Abe government’s belief that the rules of the game have been changed by China’s rise as detailed in earlier sections. In one respect, the framework of the “Yoshida Doctrine” which has guided Japanese strategic doctrine for almost seven decades has not changed: strategic and military reliance on the United States allowing Japan to focus on economic revitalization and growth. But as China’s strategic ambition and military capability expand, the pillars of the post-war liberal order upon which the Yoshida Doctrine depends will come under increasing strain.

As Southeast Asia becomes an increasingly important geostrategic region that will in large part determine the future shape and characteristics

of the East Asian order, the Abe government appears to believe that it becomes incumbent on Japan to lend its weight to the preservation of the order that the Yoshida Doctrine depends upon.²⁸ In other words, the Yoshida Doctrine — and Japanese security and prosperity — falls into abeyance if the South China Sea effectively becomes a “Chinese lake”.²⁹

JAPANESE AMBITION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITATIONS

The credible Japanese line is that while no nation can maintain peace, security and order in East Asia alone and that doing so requires a collective effort, Japan is the second largest and most innovative Asian economy with still (arguably) the most formidable indigenous navy and air-force in the region. While Japan has long been capable of playing a significant proactive role, under Abe, it is now willing to do so. To advance this ambition when it comes to Southeast Asia, there are three broad ways in which Japan might conceivably make a significant contribution:

²⁸ This paper is not suggesting that the strategic importance of Southeast Asia to Japan is a recent realization. Even back in 1973, the international oil shock made it clear to Japan that uninterrupted and unfettered access to SLOCs was of critical importance to the country’s economic and strategic future. To achieve that, helping to create a stable and peaceful regional environment was a critical objective for Japan, including in Southeast Asia. This led to the so-called Fukuda Doctrine which included promoting peaceful coexistence and cooperation amongst Southeast Asian states, and for Japan to build strong relations with all key states in Southeast Asia. The difference now is that although these goals have not changed, Japan under Abe is seeking to play a much more active strategic role in the region vis-à-vis the rise of China. On the Fukuda Doctrine applied to Southeast Asia, see Andrew Pressello, “The Fukuda Doctrine and Japan’s Role in Shaping Post-Vietnam War Southeast Asia”, *Japanese Studies* 34, no. 1 (2014): 37–59.

²⁹ For a summary of the contemporary Japanese view of the importance of the South China Sea, see Tomotaka Shoji, “The South China Sea: A View from Japan”, *NIDS Journal of Defence and Security*, 15 December 2014 <http://www.nids.go.jp/english/publication/kiyo/pdf/2014/bulletin_e2014_7.pdf> (accessed 6 March 2015).

1. military assistance in Southeast Asian theatres of conflict;
2. technological and arms exports; and
3. multilateral and other diplomatic initiatives.

(a) Military Involvement in Southeast Asian Conflicts

In early February of this year, Japanese Defence Minister Gen Nakatano stated that Japan might one day consider contributing to America-led naval patrols in the South China Sea since “the interdependence of nations is increasing and deepening, and the situation in the South China Sea affects our national security”.³⁰ Comments such as these and others have led to some speculation that under the cover of Abe’s “proactive contribution to peace and security” and specific actions such as the government’s reinterpretation of the Constitution to allow “collective security”, the Japanese Self-Defense Forces (SDFs) will be used to join conflicts in Southeast Asia.

Such expectations ought to be tempered and wound back. Even though the National Security Strategy expand Japan’s core national interests to include peace and stability in maritime regions such as the South China Sea, any “proactive contribution” involving deployment of Japan’s SDFs need to be read alongside existing legal and self-imposed limitations that remain firmly in place and are likely to be so in the foreseeable future. For example, the National Security Strategy specifically excludes deploying Japan’s SDF in the wider region under the banner of “proactive contribution to peace and security” and includes only greater reliance on diplomatic and multilateral measures.

More importantly, there is widespread misunderstanding (or misreporting) of the implications of Abe’s constitutional reinterpretation to allow “collective self-defence”. While the reinterpretation now widens the options that may allow Japan to render military assistance to America or possibly other defence partners in the event of an armed attack, such a

³⁰ Quoted in Andy Sharp and Ting Shi, “Japan to Mull Expanding Naval Patrols to South China Sea”, *Bloomberg*, 4 February 2015 < <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-02-04/japan-to-consider-expanding-navy-patrols-to-south-china-sea> > (accessed 7 March 2015).

right of collective self-defence only comes into play when the following restrictive conditions are all met:³¹

1. The situation should pose a clear threat to the Japanese state or could fundamentally threaten the Japanese people's constitutional right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.
2. There is no other way to repel the attack and protect Japan.
3. The use of force is limited to the minimum necessary.

Any deployment of the SDF in scenarios that cannot meet these necessary conditions would require a change to Article 9 of the Constitution and not merely a reinterpretation of an existing provision. Constitutional change would require majorities in both houses of Parliament and a public referendum supporting the change which is not possible in the foreseeable future. In this light, it is difficult to envisage a scenario under which Japan could legally deploy its SDF to assist American forces or the militaries of a Southeast Asian state in a dispute between claimants in the South China Sea. Indeed, the Abe government recently concluded that it was not constitutionally possible for Japan to join America and contribute militarily to the fight against the Islamic State in the Middle East even when two of its citizens had been captured and were threatened with execution in January 2015.³²

In reality, the more significant outcome from the constitutional reinterpretation is that it will encourage and allow greater integration between Japanese and American forces in collective military actions pertaining to traditional arenas of possible conflict such as in the East China Sea – where Japanese contributions in areas such as missile defence and anti-submarine warfare will become increasingly important.³³ This

³¹ See <http://www.mod.go.jp/e/d_act/d_policy/dp01.html> (accessed 7 March 2015).

³² See “Japan’s Abe seeks more active military role”, *Al Arabiya*, 2 February 2015 <<http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/world/2015/02/02/Japan-s-Abe-seeks-more-active-military-role.html>> (accessed 8 March 2015).

³³ See Michael Green and Jeffrey W. Hornung, “Ten Myths About Japan’s Collective Self-Defence Change”, *The Diplomat*, 10 July 2014 <<http://thediplomat.com/2014/07/ten-myths-about-japans-collective-self-defense-change/>> (accessed 7 March 2015).

will improve the capacity and readiness of the U.S.-Japan alliance for operations in Northeast Asia but will have limited military relevance for Southeast Asia.

Putting aside constitutional and legal limitations which have in the past been watered down through “reinterpretation” for reasons of strategic convenience³⁴ (although Japanese military intervention in the South China Sea would be a step too far for even the most creative of “reinterpretations”) one should also consider the domestic obstacles to any Japanese military involvement in Southeast Asia.

As multiple surveys and studies across a long period of time including up to the current period show, any expansive use of Japanese military assets or “adventurism” will be strongly resisted by the population and many elites steeped in a post-war pacifist strategic culture.³⁵ Bear in mind that even with respect to the rather modest reinterpretation of the constitution to allow collective self-defence under the limited conditions mentioned, around half of those surveyed were against such a reinterpretation.³⁶ Other surveys suggested that a majority were opposed to the reinterpretation while only one third supported the move. Even then, two-thirds of respondents (including some who supported the action as being in Japan’s national interest) considered the constitutional reinterpretation “improper” as a matter of process and procedure.³⁷

³⁴ See Adam Liff, “Japan’s Article 9 Challenge”, *The National Interest*, 27 June 2014 <<http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/japans-article-9-challenge-10766>> (accessed 7 March 2015).

³⁵ For example, see Brad Glosserman and Scott Snyder, *The Japan-South Korea Identity Clash* (New York: Columbia University Press 2015); Andrew L. Oros, “Japan’s Strategic Culture: Security Identity in a Fourth Modern Incarnation?”; “Keeping the peace: Japan’s pacifist constitution”, *The Economist*, 14 May 2014 <<http://www.economist.com/blogs/banyan/2014/05/japans-pacifist-constitution>> (accessed 7 March 2015).

³⁶ See Brad Glosserman, “Japan’s Collective Self-Defence Play: A Game Changer?”, *The National Interest*, 3 June 2014 <<http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/japans-collective-self-defense-play-game-changer-10810>> (accessed 7 March 2015).

³⁷ “Asahi Poll: 67% deem Abe’s plan to reinterpret Constitution as ‘improper’”, *Asahi Shimbun*, 26 May 2014 <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/behind_news/politics/AJ201405260032> (accessed 7 March 2015).

Finally, consider the economic fallout for Japan following an elevated spat over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in 2012 which was estimated to have caused a one per cent cut in Japanese growth in the final quarter of that year when the spat was at its peak after the Chinese government supported (or at least tolerated) the domestic boycott of Japanese branded goods.³⁸ When one includes the even greater economic fall-out that would likely occur from any military conflict with China in any theatre,³⁹ it is even more unlikely that there could be broad based support for Japanese military intervention in the South China Sea as it would be extremely difficult to argue that such an action could be said to be necessary to defend the Japanese state, its sovereign territory, or the basic rights and freedoms of the Japanese people.

(b) Offering Arms and Military Technology to Southeast Asian States

If joining future wars in Southeast Asia appears out of the question in the foreseeable future, offering arms and military technology to Southeast Asian states appears a more feasible option for Tokyo. In the National Security Statement under the sub-heading of “Japan’s Strategic Approaches to National Security”, the Abe government flagged “cooperation on defence equipment and technology” in ways that “fit the new security environment” (i.e., the rise of China and possible challenges to the liberal order.)

In the subsequent “Three Principles on Transfer of Defence Equipment and Technology” clarification document released by Abe’s Cabinet, Tokyo appears to offer a fairly permissive export controls

³⁸ See Andy Sharp and Kevin Hamlin, “China-Japan Dispute Takes Rising Toll on Top Asian Economies”, *Bloomberg*, 8 January 2013 <<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2013-01-08/china-japan-dispute-takes-rising-toll-of-asia-s-top-economies>> (accessed 7 March 2015).

³⁹ See Richard Katz, “Mutual Assured Production: Why Trade Will Limit Conflict Between China and Japan”, *Foreign Affairs*, June/July 2013 <<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/139451/richard-katz/mutual-assured-production>> (accessed 7 March 2015).

regime. The Second Principle states that following a “transparent” and “strict examination” of individual cases, transfers may be allowed if they: (1) contribute to the promotion of peace and international cooperation; and (2) transfers contributes to Japan’s security. Moreover, the second criterion includes transfers designed to further “joint development and production projects with allies and partners” or “enhance security and defence cooperation with allies and partners”.

Further guidance is then offered by the “Implementation Guidelines” for these “Three Principles” adopted by the National Security Council on 1 April 2014. Under these Guidelines, such transfers must contribute to Japan’s security, of which promoting international peace and order is an important element of national security. The Guidelines list two conditions under which transfers would positively contribute to Japanese security and interests: (1) transfers related to joint development and production with countries cooperating with Japan in security areas including the United States; and (2) transfers contribute to enhancing security and defence cooperation with countries cooperating with Japan in security matters.

The bottom line is that subject to the proper governmental deliberation and decision-making processes, the transfer of Japanese defence equipment and technologies is likely to become an important avenue for Japan to play a more “proactive” strategic role in Southeast Asia.⁴⁰ As the explanation in the “Three Principles” document puts it, “An appropriate overseas transfer of defence equipment and technology contributes to

⁴⁰ The most significant impact of Abe’s permissive export regime will be Japan’s newfound ability to enhance its military relevance to the United States and leveraging off cooperative development agreements with the United States and other advanced Western powers such as France. This will further improve the cutting-edge capability of the Japanese SDFs. See Mina Pollmann, “Japan’s First Steps into the World of Arms Exports”, *The Diplomat*, 15 January 2015 <<http://thediplomat.com/2015/01/japans-first-steps-into-the-world-of-arms-exports/>> (accessed 8 March 2015). On Japan’s contribution to the U.S. “pivot” to Asia from a defence exports perspective, see Ken Jimbo, “U.S. rebalancing: A Japanese perspective”, in *The New U.S. Strategy Towards Asia: Adapting to the American Pivot*, edited by William Tow (New York: Routledge 2015), pp. 77–89.

further active promotion of the maintenance of international peace and security ... [by contributing to, amongst other things] capacity building of developing states.” Moreover, “such transfer also contributes to strengthening security and defence cooperation with Japan’s ally, the United States as well as other countries.”

In other words, Japanese military equipment and technology can now in principle be used to enhance the capacity of like-minded Southeast Asian states that seek to resist significant Chinese changes to the territorial status quo in the South China Sea more particularly, and the shape of the regional order more generally. So far, relatively modest contributions of a small number of patrol ships have been made to the Philippines and Indonesia, and would likely be made to Vietnam in the future under the banner of the “strategic” application of Overseas Direct Assistance (ODA).

This is hardly enough to change the tactical military balance in the South China Sea. The emergence of Japan as a major military equipment and technology supplier to like-minded countries in Asia is only at its early stages and must negotiate domestic obstacles (political, bureaucratic and social) against joint-development and selling of military equipment and technology that have been built up over decades of passivity. But as the ongoing Japanese discussions to possibly export its most advanced submarine technology to Australia and discussions with France to develop cutting-edge weapons for fighter aircraft show, things are changing.⁴¹

Indeed, China which has maximum “skin” in the strategic game clearly realizes the potential for Japan to emerge as a counter-balancer to China in this context. As one Chinese official has complained, mirroring the concern of other colleagues, Japan’s openness to both export military equipment and technology to Southeast Asia and to provide fund assistance to countries for the purpose (through ODA and other mechanisms) “will break the existing political, economic and military patterns among countries in Southeast Asia” and in the process

⁴¹ “Report on Japanese Military Power 2012”, *Global Security*, July 2013 <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/2013/japan-military-power2012_cscpa.htm> (accessed 8 March 2015).

“undermine stability in the Asia Pacific”.⁴² Reinterpreted from across the non-Chinese side of the East China Sea and perhaps in Southeast Asia, China’s plan to strategically and militarily “neutralize” (or perhaps “neuter”) Southeast Asian states is meeting a significant obstacle in the form of a more ‘proactive’ Japan.

(c) Multilateral and Other Diplomatic Initiatives

Given Japan’s long-standing support for and participation in all regional economic and security institutions, in addition to the country’s enormous contribution to regional prosperity, development and aid over many decades, Japan has built up unmatched goodwill amongst Southeast Asian countries. This is confirmed by numerous surveys showing that Japan is viewed more favourably by all major Southeast Asian countries compared to all other great powers in the region (the United States, China and India)⁴³ and is considered the most “reliable” great power according to another recent survey.⁴⁴ Even so, it is generally accepted that Japan has resisted translating its economic power and good standing into proportionate political and strategic influence in the region.⁴⁵

When it comes to multilateral and diplomatic initiatives aimed at Southeast Asia, Japanese passivity is rapidly diminishing under Abe.

⁴² “Expert: Japan’s accelerating arms export undermines stability in the Asia Pacific”, *PRC Ministry of National Defence News*, 4 December 2014 <http://eng.mod.gov.cn/DefenseNews/2014-12/04/content_4555524.htm> See also Stephen McDonell, “China criticises Japan’s revision of pacifist constitution”, ABC, 2 July 2014 <<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-07-02/china-slams-japan-military-shift/5565630>> (both accessed 8 March 2015).

⁴³ For example, see “How Asians View Each Other”, in *Pew Global Attitudes Survey*, 14 July 2014 <<http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/07/14/chapter-4-how-asians-view-each-other/>> (accessed 8 March 2015).

⁴⁴ See “Southeast Asia views Japan as most reliable country, poll says”, *Japan Times*, 19 April 2014 <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2014/04/19/national/southeast-asia-views-japan-as-most-reliable-country-poll-says/#.VPud_vmUeSo> (accessed 8 March 2015).

⁴⁵ See Suelo Sudo, *Japan’s ASEAN Policy: In Search of Proactive Multilateralism* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2015.)

The paper has already mentioned the unprecedented step of head-of-government visits to all ten ASEAN countries in 2015 by Abe — a clear indication of bilateral diplomatic energy and intent towards Southeast Asia. This is an important political and diplomatic “counteracting” approach by Japan against China. It has been welcomed by all major Southeast Asian countries who are in the process of pursuing hedging approaches against China by reaffirming or improving relations with other great powers such as the United States and India. Some Southeast Asian countries such as the Philippines and Vietnam are actively balancing against China, while others such as Singapore and Malaysia are doing so more subtly.⁴⁶ As much existing research is already pointing out, Japan’s considerable weight (as a stand-alone country and through its alliance with the United States and deepening strategic partnerships with countries like Australia and India) create subtle and more overt balancing options for Southeast Asian states.⁴⁷

But the more immediate and consequential impact that Japan might make could be in the multilateral arena, especially as it relates to ASEAN-backed institutions. Like China, Japan is not so powerful that it can unilaterally shape or veto a multilateral entity or agenda pursued by such an entity, but powerful enough in the sense that offering its acquiescence is vital to the success and viability of that multilateral

⁴⁶ See Andrew Shearer, “Southeast Asia and Australia: Case Studies in Responding to China’s Military Power”.

⁴⁷ For example, see Robert G. Sutter, Michael E. Brown and Timothy J.A. Adamson, *Balancing Acts: The U.S. Rebalance and Asia-Pacific Stability* (Washington, D.C.: George Washington University, 2013) <http://www2.gwu.edu/~sigur/assets/docs/BalancingActs_Compiled1.pdf>; Dhruva Jaishankar, “What Beijing Fears Most: Intra-Asian Balancing”, *The Lowy Interpreter*, 18 August 2014 <<http://www.loyyinterpreter.org/post/2014/08/18/What-Beijing-fears-most-Intra-Asian-balancing.aspx?COLLCC=477366544&>>; Zachary Keck, “Made in China: A US-Japan-Philippines Axis”, *The Diplomat*, 29 June 2013 <<http://thediplomat.com/2013/06/made-in-china-a-us-japan-philippines-axis/>>; John Lee, “Why Australia’s Relationship with Japan infuriates China”, *Business Spectator*, 10 September 2014 <<http://www.businessspectator.com.au/article/2014/9/10/australian-news/why-australias-relationship-japan-infuriates-china>> (all accessed 8 March 2015).

process or institution. For this reason, no plausible multilateral process or institution with region-wide impact can exclude Japan, and would find it difficult to gain regional traction without overt Japanese support. That being the case, Japan's "proactive" advocacy for a particular multilateral process or institution (or "proactive" advocacy against such an entity) is a considerable avenue for influence.

Multilaterally, China has long pursued an approach of promoting institutions that exclude America in security regimes such as ASEAN+3,⁴⁸ while Beijing also attempted to deny American membership in emerging regimes such as the EAS⁴⁹ (although this is now obviously a lost cause.) Having long caught on to this stratagem, all major countries in Southeast Asia have consistently refused to allow China to elevate institutions that exclude the United States, thereby helping to institutionalize and entrench the American presence in the fabric of security regimes in Asia.

For these reasons, the East Asia Summit (EAS) has emerged as the preferred preeminent forum for key Southeast Asian states. That Japan under Abe has joined with America and India in offering its full weight to elevate the EAS as the most important multilateral forum for the discussion of security matters and debate about the shape of the future order in the region — as was reiterated during Abe's keynote at the 2014 Shangri La Dialogue — all but guarantees the pre-eminence of the EAS. With Tokyo, Washington, New Delhi, Canberra and all major Southeast Asian states in line, it all but scuppers China's plans to use multilateral forums to (re)create or (re)shape a regional order without significant American input. (Having said this, Japan and the United States must nevertheless walk a fine line between championing the EAS without

⁴⁸ John Lee, "China's ASEAN Invasion", *The National Interest*, May/June 2007, pp. 40–46 <<http://nationalinterest.org/article/chinas-asean-invasion-1563>> (accessed 8 March 2015).

⁴⁹ See C. Fred Bergsten, Bates Gill and Nicholas R. Lardy, *China: The Balance Sheet: What the World Needs to Know about the Emerging Superpower* (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs 2007), pp. 118–54; Donald K. Emmerson, "US, China role play for ASEAN", *East Asia Forum*, 25 November 2011 <<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2011/11/25/us-china-role-play-for-asean/>> (accessed 8 March 2015).

arousing suspicion amongst key Southeast Asian member states that ASEAN might be losing its central role in driving the EAS agenda.)

Moreover, with greater Japanese willingness to involve itself in matters pertaining to the behaviour of states in the South China Sea, it enhances the collective diplomatic pressure that Southeast Asian states may be willing to bring to bear in multilateral meetings that both include and exclude the United States such as the EAS for the former and ASEAN+3 for the latter. At the very least, Japan's newfound willingness to involve itself in contentious Southeast Asian issues makes it more difficult for China to unilaterally define and dominate the agenda in institutions lacking American participation, or prevent the "multilateralization" of disputes which is Beijing's desire.

CONCLUSION

Despite seeing Southeast Asia as a critical geostrategic region when it comes to the future shape and characteristics of order in the region, Japan (like China) lacks the individual weight to unilaterally change the political, diplomatic or military balance or state of affairs in that particular sub-region. But unlike Japan, China has no strategic maritime allies and arguably no genuine security partners. Too important and powerful to provoke or dismiss, China nevertheless remains distrusted by every maritime power in Asia, even if all seek mutually beneficially economic relations with it. China can neither use its military to bully its way towards pre-eminence (whilst America remains fully engaged in the region,) nor use economics to seduce its way to the top in what is a diverse and deeply integrated economic region.

In contrast, and in addition to Japan's underestimated economic weight due to the size of its domestic market (which is far more open and accessible than China's) and its standing as the leading Asian source for the spread of innovation and advanced technology in the region,⁵⁰

⁵⁰ See Richard Florida, "The World's Leading Nations for Innovation and Technology", *City Lab*, 3 October 2011 <<http://www.citylab.com/tech/2011/10/worlds-leading-nations-innovation-and-technology/224/>>; Wei Lu and Marcus Chan, "30 Most Innovative Countries", *Bloomberg*, 23 January 2014 <<http://www.bloomberg.com/slideshow/2014-01-22/30-most-innovative-countries.html#slide31>> (both accessed 8 March 2015).

Japan enjoys advantages not applicable to China. While China is isolated strategically, Japan is the most important alliance partner of America's in Asia and the U.S.-Japan alliance remains the bedrock of the San Francisco alliance system in the region. Japan has increasingly strong and meaningful security partnerships with Australia, India, the Philippines, Vietnam and Indonesia. Japan's security relationship with Singapore and Malaysia is far more meaningful than the relationship those countries have with China. As the building and sustaining of order is a collective enterprise — with great powers playing a disproportionate role but with the acquiescence of smaller powers — Japan is well positioned to play such a major role (including in Southeast Asia) even as its legal post-war limitations ought to be kept in mind.

The importance of the Japanese turn to Southeast Asia in shaping and protecting the future regional order can be stated in another way. Many countries in Southeast Asia are in what might be termed a “strategic holding pattern”, leaning towards America and its allies to varying degrees but all watching closely what other allies and partners of the United States are doing. So far, no American ally or partner has strategically “turned”. A robust and invigorated Japan — as a stand-alone power, U.S. alliance partner and proactive multilateral participant — will increase confidence that the key pillars of the San Francisco system is strong. This will help the regional “strategic holding pattern” to persist by encouraging potential “swing states” to hold the line and not change their strategic trajectory towards China. If alliances and coalition operations function robustly, the capacity and perception of China's ability to successfully challenge the strategic environment on any issue is significantly weakened. If that occurs, then China will be greatly restricted in its capacity to alter key aspects of the region's maritime boundaries and the regional order more generally.

Finally, and despite the promise, one needs to end with some caution. While the demand for Japan to play an increasingly prominent role in Southeast Asia and in broader questions of regional order is strong, that Tokyo will do so depends ultimately on Japanese capacity and will. If Abe's Japan can successfully implement reforms that can revive a moribund Japanese economy, then the domestic appetite for a more expansive foreign policy (which must be paid for) will strengthen whether this be under Abe's leadership or his successor. If such reforms

fail to ignite the economy, then a return to strategic passivity and perhaps even isolationism will become more attractive. If that happens, a more proactive strategic role in Southeast Asia for the purpose of countering China's rise and shaping the future regional order will seem to the majority of Japanese as more a political and economic indulgence than a national and regional necessity.

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