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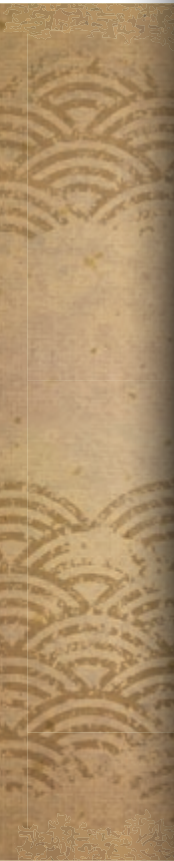


SHINZO ABE AND JAPAN-CHINA SECURITY RELATIONS

Irritants & Legacies

DR. SUDEEP KUMAR







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Shinzo Abe and Japan-China Security Relations:

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ABSTRACT



The paper examines Japan-China security relations during the second administration of former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe from 2012. This was also the year when Chinese President Xi Jinping came into power. For the Abe-Xi Era (2012-20), no comprehensive assessment is available regarding the evolving Chinese grand strategy and Japan's strategic responses within the larger policy framework of Trump's East Asia policy. The rise of these two strong Asian political leaders of world's second and third largest economies initiated a series of backchannel efforts to normalise their contemporary bilateral relations. As a result, at the 2014 Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation Summit in Beijing, their 'quiet diplomacy' facilitated the brief meeting of both leaders. On Xi's official invitation, Abe visited Beijing again in 2018 in pursuit of a major breakthrough in bilateral relations. This period saw Abe proactively involved in diplomatic manoeuvrings to safeguard major bilateral and regional issues such as the 'bilateral history problem', 'core contentious issues', 'rise of China', and 'nuclear-capable North Korean missile program' and so on. On the other hand, China's rising economic and military power emboldened Xi to decide the future direction of bilateral relations vis-à-vis Japan and the United States. This period was also to see American President Donald Trump (2017-2021) and his transactional policies further complicating the multilayered Japan-China security relationship. The strategic competition between China and the United States led to a paradigm shift where Japan, as the defence ally of the United States, was adapting to the evolving Chinese grand strategy in the multi-polar Indo-Pacific. Japan wanted to

remain a 'tier-1' power and planned hike in the defence budget, rapid military modernisation, and increasing joint military training in the region. It seems that Japan's strategic response to the rise of China during this period faced a crucial question, i.e. whether to kowtow to Xi's building a community of common destiny. In this backdrop, this paper analyses the continuity and changes in Abe's security policy towards Xi-led China and possible implications for peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region.

Keywords: Shinzo Abe, Xi Jinping, Japan, China, Indo-Pacific



BACKGROUND



Japan and China normalised their diplomatic ties on 29 September 1972. In the 1970s, their dominant political dynamics were guided by the common threats of the Soviet Union. Events like the textbook controversy in 1982, Japanese Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro's official visit to the Yasukuni Shrine in 1985, the Kokaryo incident in 1987 and the Tiananmen incident in 1989 revealed intergovernmental frictions and simmering antipathy in Japan-China relations. The 1990s were mostly marked by territorial disputes regarding Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. In a setback to diplomatic ties, the official visit of Japanese Prime Ministers Hashimoto Ryutaro and Junichiro Koizumi to the Yasukuni Shrine and the dispute of Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands led to the suspension of the official visits of state delegations between 2002 and 2006. Since then, there was a growing apprehension that their maritime disputes could lead to military clashes and conflicting political interactions. These key events and developments however were in line with their 50 years of normalisation in bilateral ties that had been full of ebbs and flows (Yinan 2022).

The current chapter of synergising of their bilateral relations is believed to start with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visit to Beijing in December 2018. This is when Abe and Xi discussed economic cooperation and opportunities for building joint infrastructure projects in Southeast Asia. During this official visit though Abe had also raised Japanese concerns about Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, human rights and several Japanese citizens' detention on espionage charges. But Abe's China Policy also

As regards to China's fragile relations with Japan, Chinese nationalism has been one of the main factors in serving the political legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party by invoking a siege mentality on the collective psyche especially of the Chinese youth.

witnessed rather restrained public criticism of Chinese maritime assertiveness and human rights violations while fostering dialogue on common concerns, including trade and investments (Tobias 2020).

Due to the US-China strategic competition and slowing down of China's economic growth, China found itself encircled with many social, economic and political problems like urban-rural income inequalities, ageing population, declining demography, COVID pandemic, all of which resulted in decline of the political legitimacy under Xi Jinping. This coincided with China's education curriculum emphasising the achievements of the 4000-year-old history of the Chinese civilisation, and the shame of the 'Century of Humiliation' as an attempt to divert the attention of the Chinese public from the growing economic problems towards nationalism for maintaining national unity. The underlying message was that it is only the Chinese Communist Party which can govern China, and any friction between the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese people will lead to chaos and anarchy.

As regards to China's fragile relations with Japan, Chinese nationalism has been one of the main factors in serving the political legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party by invoking a siege



mentality on the collective psyche especially of the Chinese youth. The educational curriculum still emphasised ongoing external security threats and the painful history of the Sino-Japanese War of 1895, the Boxer Rebellion and the Sino-Japanese War of 1937. China used the successive visits of the Japanese Prime Ministers to the Yasukuni Shrine to honour their fallen heroes in the Second World War as a political tool to whip-up strategic mistrust in the Chinese people's perception. The Chinese one-party state controls mainstream media and censors alternative media outlets and has been responsible for the Chinese people's opinion about Japan (Tan and Szanto 2016).

The geopolitical imperatives of Abe's proactive policies, on the other hand, were to check and balance China's security threats with the deepening security alignment of the United States while engaging China without jeopardising the economic security interests of Japan. Abe wanted to stabilise diplomatic relations and deepen economic cooperation to restrain China's encroachment in Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and the artificial island building in the South China Sea. Moreover, Abe's Indo-Pacific strategy outreaches in cyber-security, green energy, digital technology and economic security domains were meant to build a multipolar Indo-Pacific region. Abe was quite critical of Xi's authoritarian security legislation in Hong Kong, human rights violations in Xinjiang, increased aerial incursion and fire drills in Taiwan's air defence zone, the COVID pandemic and noncooperation with the World Health Organisation. Abe played a decisive role in building all parties' consensus in Japanese politics against China's human rights violations and democratic upheaval, which was significant compared with Japanese apathy at the time of the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989.

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China's tactical détente with Japan might have been a pretext for the groundwork regarding Chinese law enforcement in the Japan-administered Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. This is because China's militarisation of the artificial islands in the South China Sea could be a coercive attempt to assert effective control of contested sovereignty. (Singh and Yamamoto 2015) Xi had also begun to tinker with the other most important irritant of Japan-China relationship i.e. China's Taiwan policy that moved from 'peaceful reunification' to 'forceful reunification' (Kawashima 2022). Xi's possible forceful enunciations on the likely use of force in unification of Taiwan has its security implications for the freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific. The forceful reunification of Taiwan with China was seen as possible legacy of Xi but he needed to silence his opposing within the Communist Party.

China's alleged role in spreading COVID-19 across the world raised and added to Japanese scepticism towards China-led world order in light of its rapid military modernisation and technological advancement to reclaim its centerstage in world

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politics. Furthermore, China's strategic usage of the economic interdependence of global and regional supply chains had already raised the alarm for the diversification of Japanese trade baskets and enhanced economic insecurity. To make sense of the Japanese security policy of these years, one needs to also look at Abe's Indo-Pacific strategy within the broader framework of the United States-China strategic competition (Torri, Mocci and Boni 2021).

ABE'S INDO-PACIFIC INITIATIVES

During the second Abe administration (2012–2020), Japan witnessed major security reforms, which would have far-reaching implications domestically and internationally. The reason behind these reforms was to build Japan as a 'tier-1 power' and play agenda-making roles in global political and economic decision making. This began with Abe setting up the 'National Security Council' with an 'Economic-Security' unit towards building supply-chain resilience that was as significant as the direction of the China-United States strategic competition that had moved from geopolitics to geoeconomics. Later this was to see Shinzo Abe launching Japan-India-Australia trilateral Supply Chain Resilience Initiative.

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China from a position of strength by building a national military to maintain stability in the Indo-Pacific region. Abe's economic diplomacy was aimed at creating a coalition for the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), revamping of Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement of Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), Partnership for Quality Infrastructure (PQI) and Data Free Flow with Trust (DFFT) to preserve the "rule-based order" with like-minded partners. One might ask as to what extent Abe successfully built institutions and projected Japanese power in the Indo-Pacific region, given that Japanese dual-use civil–military engagement capabilities are comparatively weaker than the Chinese civil-military capabilities. Xi's geoeconomic push, on the other hand, aimed to obtain China a great power status with the help of a dual-use civil–military fusion strategy of critical technologies, infrastructures and existing supply-chain mechanisms to their advantage. Against these backdrops, Japanese security reforms only pursued a minimum power-projection capabilities; witnessing geopolitical and geoeconomic challenges in coordination with the United States and other regional powers as a rule-making nation to ensure the FOIP (Koshino and Ward 2022).

This period was to also witness rise of pro-independence Democratic Progress Party in Taiwan changing dynamics for China's regional Asia-Pacific policies. This was to make Taiwan emerge as a major irritant in the evolving narratives around the Indo-Pacific geopolitics. Professor Yang Bojiang of Beijing-based Chinese Academy of Social Science believes that the future trajectories of Japan-China relations lie in the Taiwan issue and common economic interests. There is a need to discuss the Taiwan issue



under the four political documents, namely the *China-Japan Joint Statement of 1972*, the *China-Japan Treaty of Peace and Friendship of 1978*, the *China-Japan Joint Declaration of 1998* and a *Joint Statement on Advancing Strategic and Mutually Beneficial Ties of 2008*, to deepen economic engagements while resolving differences for normalising bilateral relations (Bojiang 2022).

So, at end of Abe's longest tenure as prime minister of Japan they still had several unsettled issues that required building a stable and constructive relationship to realise a shared vision for building peace and prosperity in the region (Miki 2022). To manage their conflicts and differences and to deepen their multi-domain exchanges and cooperation, both Japan and China still needed to follow these aforementioned 'four political documents' and a series of other important consensus understandings built over the past 50 years for the mutual benefit of their people, region and the world (Huaxia 2022). As, Kong Xuanyou, the Chinese Ambassador to Japan, mentions both the 'History problem' and the 'Taiwan issue' should not be allowed to overstep to avoid the fluctuation in diplomatic ties. Therefore, it is important to abide by the four political documents in a comprehensive way (Xuanyou 2022). But recent years have seen Taiwan emerging as China's core interest, and Japan must not help the United States to use Taiwan in its contain China policy (Sheng 2022).

The 'History problem and Taiwan' issues define the criss-cross of the continuity and changes in Japan-China security relations during the second administration of the Abe era, which witnessed his significant roles in shaping the political ideologies, historical issues, and proactive leadership. China remained Japan's the largest

China remained Japan's the largest trading partner
but also its biggest security anxiety.

trading partner but also its biggest security anxiety. Contemporary diplomatic interlocutors of these two countries have a great deal to learn from this period that saw bilateral relations become increasingly strained due to the rise of China followed by its military modernisation and assertive political discourse and cyber-strikes. The geographical proximity, historical resentment, territorial conflict, the United States–Japan security alliance and stationed American military bases in Japan only further complicated the Japan–China dynamics, which carries enormous potential to impact the peace, stability and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific rim.

HISTORY-TEXTBOOK & YASUKUNI SHRINE

One of the main reasons behind the ‘History problem’ in China–Japan relations is that there is no consensus on weaving common narratives about the Second World War and its painful memories on both sides. There has also been no willingness to write History textbooks based on comparing notes, popular perceptions and understanding towards each other. It is the emotional dimension of the legacy of the war, and the lack of proper closure between Japan and China that makes it the core of their discord. The Yasukuni issue is an example how both nations have remained trapped in the memories of war and political ideologies. Furthermore, with the Rise of China economically and militarily, Japan has become concerned about the Chinese security threats. At the same time,



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for China, the reconciliation of the ‘History problem’ remains interlinked with the security threats concerns and cannot be dealt with separately. In other words, the ‘History problem’ and more recently the ‘China challenge’ are essential preconditions for building peace, prosperity and stability in the region (MOFA 2010).

Contrary to the popular narratives on the Pearl Harbour and the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, China considers the ‘History problem’ starting from the Manchurian Incident of 1931 and continuing into the Sino-Japanese War of 1937. Chinese Communist Party has used anti-Japanese sentiments to nurture nationalism in New China since the leadership of Mao Zedong. The ‘History problem’ between Japan and China has, as a result, remained the victim of the differences in political ideologies and subjective interpretations to serve the political expediencies of the respective government on both sides. Thus, it is still a distant dream to work towards building a common narrative on the Yasukuni issue and History textbooks (Hoshino and Satoh 2012).

The Yasukuni Shrine is a Shinto shrine which was established in 1869. In post-war Japan (1947 onwards), this relic became a private religious shrine in Tokyo. However, China objects to the visit of Japanese officials to the Yasukuni Shrine because it is a symbol of

pre-war militarist Japan, and there is an element of continuity in the conservative mindset of Japanese politicians. Even today, there is a separation between the state and religion, where the Emperor does not hold political power. Against this backdrop, the visit of the Japanese officials to the Yasukuni Shrine does not reflect the pre-war state mentality and patriotic education of those times (Takahashi 2007). The Japanese official's visit to the Yasukuni Shrine is also about regaining the source of national identity, which was lost in the post-war reform period (Dore 1997).

The post-war 1947 Constitution drafted by the United States and Japan–United States Security Treaty coexist and continue to compete against each other in the Japanese political debates. Post-war Japan chose to be a pacifist nation in accordance with Article 9 of the 1947 Constitution (Sato 2010) but it lately wants to reinvent and revitalise itself in light of the rise of China. On the contrary, China has used the ‘History problem’, including the textbook issue, the Yasukuni issue and the Nanjing massacre, to push Japan into defensive mode over the years (Emmott 2009).

Another political reason behind the Chinese protests against the visit of the Japanese officials to the Yasukuni Shrine is that the souls of 2.5 million fallen Japanese soldiers are enshrined as divine spirits here starting from the Boshin Civil War (1868–1869) to the Second World War (1939–1945). China has strategically used the history

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The 'History problem' from perspective of Japan's domestic politics is crucial because it tests the leadership capabilities, leaving no room for conciliatory tones and diplomatic niceties in bilateral relations.

card to make it a Japanese weakness, so the Yasukuni shrine and textbook issues remain a fundamental problem in bilateral relations (Nye 2005). Prime Minister Shinzo Abe had visited the Yasukuni Shrine on 26 December 2013. His visit to the Yasukuni Shrine was seen as a statement against the alleged external meddling in Japan's internal affairs and to respect its Shinto customs and traditions to honour the fallen soldiers of Japan. For Shinzo Abe, the Yasukuni visit was meant to serve domestic political interests rather than diplomatic signalling to the neighbours (Watanabe and Wakamiya 2006).

The 'History problem' from perspective of Japan's domestic politics is crucial because it tests the leadership capabilities, leaving no room for conciliatory tones and diplomatic niceties in bilateral relations. Japan-China relationship is not an exception to this proposition. For example, Abe visited the Yasukuni Shrine in December 2013 and after China's newly anointed President Xi Jinping responded against this visit by Abe in the strongest possible way, it resulted in creating a brief period of stalemate in their diplomatic relations. Even its alliance partner, the United States, continues to request for a careful management of the 'History problem' asking both sides to avoid the further deterioration of fragile Japan-China relations. As a result, the refrainment of the Japanese cabinet minister's visit to the Yasukuni Shrine, excluding the one of December 2016, has

opened the diplomatic channel to normalise their bilateral relations (Koide 2018).

CORE CONTENTIONS: SOUTH CHINA SEA, SENKAKU/DIAOYU ISLANDS



To better understand the core bilateral conflicts between Japan and China, one needs to have a brief background of China's evolving position on the South China Sea, Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and Taiwan issues. In the pre-cold war period, China was contented with the Japanese foreign policy orientation, commonly known as the Fukuda doctrine, that aimed to become a mercantilist nation by departing from the pre-war militarist nation. The Fukuda doctrine relied primarily on trade, investment, infrastructure development and official developmental assistance to increase its influence abroad. China, on the other hand, began to strengthen its economic and territorial security while using anti-Japan sentiments in educational curriculum to divert anti-Chinese Communist Party's sentiments towards anti-Japan protests domestically. Deng Xiaoping led economic reform, and opening up resulted in the migration of workers to the special economic zones of the coastal cities and the transition from an agriculture-based society to an industry-based society for increasing the volumes

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of export-based trade for the developed nations. This made the sea lines of communication significant, which connects Chinese ports with overseas markets. Since then, there was a Chinese push to pursue its maritime claims of Japan-administered Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, on its contested islands of the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait all getting included in its core interests, which are non-negotiable and may see China use force to defend them (Tan and Szanto 2016).

At the beginning of the second decade of this century, China was to announce an East China Sea Air Defence Identification Zone, which included Japan-administered Senkaku Islands. This plan was released in November 2013, just after the closing of the Third Plenum of the 18th Chinese Communist Party Central Committee. In other words, China unilaterally violated international law under which Japan has freedom of flight over the East China Sea and threatened to use emergency retaliation by its armed forces. It was a move to garner support within the Chinese Military Commission. In response, the Japanese Diet enacted the cabinet decision on 1 July 2014 not to jeopardise the neighbouring countries' territorial sovereignty and security interests, including China. It appeared that the Xi administration was taken on board vis-à-vis the Japanese security legislation as the Chinese side restrained themselves from commenting on the issue at that time. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe also changed the interpretation of the Japanese constitution

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe also changed the interpretation of the Japanese constitution via security legislation to exercise the right to collective self-defence around Japanese territories

via security legislation to exercise the right to collective self-defence around Japanese territories keeping in mind the Chinese assertiveness in the Japan-administered Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, contested islands of the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait.

The Abe administration was to become increasingly alarmed about the Chinese construction of artificial islands in the South China sea but especially about China's deep-sea gas fields near the Japanese-administered Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea. Consequently, the Japanese Diet passed two bills related to security legislation to increase the number of emergency powers of Self Defence Forces in contested maritime waters (Kokubun, et al. 2017). China's territorial claims in the South China Sea and the construction of artificial islands infringe on international law. China had also defied the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling in favour of the Philippines on 29 October 2015, which China declared null and void with no binding effect. Instead, China included the South China Sea as its national core interest. For Japan, the South China Sea has been important for carrying its exports to the world; thus, the freedom of navigation in the South China Sea is essential to counter Chinese security threats (Koshino and Ward 2022). In the meantime, China is likely to continue its maritime incursions in the South China Sea, East China Sea and the Taiwan Strait. But it would be largely for the grey-zone maritime activities to avoid the possible

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confrontation between the Japanese coast guard and Chinese coast guards and militia (Samuels 2019).

THE TAIWAN ISSUE



Historically, Japan had defeated Qing China in 1894 and Taiwan was ceded to Japan under the provision of the Treaty of Shimonoseki. Taiwan (then known as the Republic of Formosa between 23rd May 1895 and 21st October 1895) became part of the Japanese empire from 1895 to 1945 (ROC 2023). Following the defeat of Japan in the Second World War and under the Postdam Declaration, Japan handed over the jurisdiction of Taiwan to the Republic of China government in 1945. The Republic of China, under the leadership of Chiang Kai-shek between 1945 and 1949, exercised jurisdiction over Taiwan. However, in 1949, after the establishment of the People's Republic of China under the leadership of Mao Zedong, the Republic of China government moved to Taiwan and continued ruling the Republic of China on Taiwan.

Furthermore, this Republic of China had become the founding member of the United Nations Security Council on 24 October 1945. Mao led the People's Republic of China then was in isolation for many decades and was recognised as real China by much of the world led by powerful United States and its Western friends and allied nations. On 25 October 1971, Mao's diplomatic success led to the replacement of the Republic of China with People's Republic of China (PRC) as the real successor state at the United Nations including getting a permanent seat at the Security Council. This has

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also resulted the normalisation of diplomatic ties between PRC and Japan and the United States.

Nevertheless, China continues to consider growing Japan–Taiwan relations a threat to its security and strategic interests. Although there are no formal intergovernmental diplomatic relations between Japan and Taiwan, China observes the contact between their officials with mistrust due to the Taiwanese claims to state or diplomatic autonomy. The Xi administration though continues to vouch for strategic patience on the Taiwan issue, but Taiwan remains an issue that can disrupt the Japan-China diplomatic ties. For example, in April 2021, China’s Assistant Foreign Minister, Wu Jianguo, summoned the Japanese Ambassador to China and condemned former Prime Minister Abe’s statements on the Taiwan issue (Xinhua 2022). In his last few years, Abe has been quite consistent in raising concerns against China’s possible forceful reunification of Taiwan and the linkages of Japanese security with the Taiwan issue.

The geographical proximity between Taiwan and the nearest Japanese habitat island Ishigakijima is just 200 miles which explains their related security interests vis-a-vis mainland China.

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China believes that the real instigator is the United States in East Asia because Japan is still playing second fiddle to the United States.

So, for Tokyo, it is crucial to prevent the fait accompli problem of democratic Taiwan, that remains vulnerable to China's forceful reunification of Taiwan. Therefore, China's aggressive military postures and increasing entries of fighter jets and bomber aircraft in Taiwan's air defence identification zone have the propensity to destabilise even the larger Indo-Pacific region. For this reason, the Taiwan issue assumes immense significance in bilateral ties between Japan and China (Ben & Hisako 2021). China has also been closely following the US-Japan security alignment and coordination over the Taiwan issue, Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute and human rights in Hong Kong, Xinjiang and Tibet. Nonetheless, China believes that the real instigator is the United States in East Asia because Japan is still playing second fiddle to the United States.

The shifting geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific, the ongoing strategic competition between China and the United States and the rising tension in Japan-China relations underscore their changing bilateral dynamics vis-à-vis Taiwan. China has also been concerned about the growing Japan-Taiwan-United States triangular engagements and their consequences for the Taiwan's future; this is perhaps why the Xi administration is trying to mend its bilateral relations with Japan. In his latest research paper, Professor Yang Bojiang, a Japanese expert at the Chinese Academy of Social Science, argues that Japan primarily uses the United States-Japan Security Treaty to strengthen its involvement in Taiwan. The Sino-Japanese

China has also been concerned about the growing Japan–Taiwan–United States triangular engagements and their consequences for the Taiwan’s future; this is perhaps why the Xi administration is trying to mend its bilateral relations with Japan.

Treaty of Peace and Friendship in 1978 and subsequent diplomatic documents do not mention the United States–Japan Security Treaty and its role in Taiwan. Therefore, Japan is increasingly finding ways to strengthen its involvement in Taiwan and minimise its implications for Japanese strategic and security interests (Bojiang 2022). More recent debates of Taiwan Policy Act in US Congress and House Speaker, Nancy Pelosi’s August 2022 visit to Taiwan has made Beijing all the more concerned about Japan potentially exploiting this growing brinkmanship between the United States and China.

JAPAN-CHINA SECURITY DYNAMICS



Since the normalisation of their diplomatic relations since 1972, the main aim of Japan-China relations was to keep away political and ideological differences from the deepening economic and political relations. However, Japan-China relations have remained devoid of the balance of power politics, and with the rise of China and the paradigm shift in the United State’s China policy, both Chinese and Japanese foreign policy choices and diplomatic tools have become circumscribed in directing their bilateral relations. Especially the lack of mutual trust in the complex bilateral ties has reduced their convergences of interests,



Xi's Japan policy was focused on four main methods: anti-Japanese propaganda, pressurise Japanese ruling politicians, luring Keidanren - the Japanese business community, and making contacts with key Japanese officials and their family members.

which is also detrimental to regional peace and stability (Hoshino and Satoh 2012).

Before the Japan-China summit meeting on 10 November 2014, on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting in Beijing, Xi's Japan policy was focused on four main methods: anti-Japanese propaganda, pressurise Japanese ruling politicians, luring Keidanren - the Japanese business community, and making contacts with key Japanese officials and their family members. On 22 April 2015, Abe and Xi met on the sidelines of the 60th anniversary of the Asian-African Conference held in Bandung. Xi insisted on the 'History problem' as a precondition in normalising bilateral relations. However, Abe proposed mutual interest-based building of bilateral relationships to promote mutual understanding, deepen economic interests, maintain status-quo and set up communication mechanisms in the East China Sea, and finally work towards peaceful and stable regional order. On 29 April 2015, Abe gave a speech to the US Congress in which he mentioned "deep repentance" and "deep remorse" regarding Japan's History problem. Furthermore, on 14 August 2015, Abe issued an official statement in which Abe mentioned apology (*owabi*), aggression (*shinryaku*), colonial rule (*shokuminchishihai*) and remorse (*hansei*) related to Japan's History problem. It seemed that Abe was sincerely seeking a new start in bilateral relations with China. On the contrary, Xi's

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was to keep Japan as tier-1 power in the region.

response to Abe's statement was restrained, which proved that China did not want to lose its History card to put Japan in defensive mode (Kokubun, et al. 2017).

The most pressing challenge for Abe's security policy was to keep Japan as tier-1 power in the region. To address this security dilemma, he had launched a holistic package of diplomatic, economic and security policies related to the following four initiatives to shape the rule of law in the liberal international order. He increased spending towards trade liberalisation as a strategy to project Japanese geo-economic power, for example, the revamping of Comprehensive and Progressive Trans Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) that was formerly known as Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Also, Japan signed an Economic Partnership Agreement with the European Union to resist Trump's protectionism and promotion of free trade and possible membership of the European Union into the CPTPP by 2019. His second initiative was towards normalising bilateral relations with China, which would act as mutual insurance against Trump's tariff war. Maintaining the 'status quo' in core contentious issues such as the South China Sea, Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, and the Taiwan issue is a key to downplaying China's usage of the 'History card' against Japan. His third initiative was the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy for building connectivity and trade, promoting "the rule of law" and "freedom of navigation" in the Indo-Pacific region. In other words, the real agenda of the FOIP for the United States is to resist the temptation of joining the G2 world order with China. His



fourth initiative was to bolster independent policy in the foreign and security policy domain, for example, the passage of security legislation and the reinterpretation of its constitution to exercise collective self-defence for maintaining peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region (Ikenberry 2020). Let's look at some of the salient features of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's contributions to resolving Japan's China challenge.

Rise of China and Japan's Security Dilemma

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe had identified the challenges from the rise of China, its implications for Japanese security and the acknowledgement of common economic interests as both a threat and an opportunity for their bilateral relations. His China policy aimed to balance and coordinate Japanese policymaking in the economic and security domain to reposition Japan to preserve the “rule-based order” to supplement the United States-led security architecture in East Asia. Abe tried to use a geo-economic strategy vis-à-vis China in exploring common economic interests to safeguard its security interests. Since China is Japan's largest trade partner, it is imperative to project Japanese geo-economic power to preserve the liberal international order, which has also transformed the bilateral dynamics in this process. Abe's economic reform, for

His China policy aimed to balance and coordinate Japanese policymaking in the economic and security domain to reposition Japan to preserve the “rule-based order” to supplement the United States-led security architecture in East Asia.

example, led to the growth of domestic tourism and provided stimulus to local economies of cities and prefectures; however, Japan-China economic relations became asymmetric.

China needs Japanese technology and know-how and seeks to lure Japanese Keidanren, or the Japanese business federation, in exchange for access to the Chinese market to lobby against its government's antagonistic China policy. Simultaneously, China has also been investing in defence modernisation and dual-use civil–military technologies such as quantum computing, robotics, big data, genomes and artificial intelligence (Koshino and Ward 2022), which has further heightened Japanese apprehensions. To address the Japanese Security dilemma domestically, Abe was to introduce three security legislations, namely “State Secrets Law” in December 2013, the limited constitutionality of “Collective Self-Defence” in July 2014 and “Peace and Security Legislation” of September 2015. In 2018, Japan and the United States also agreed to new security guidelines for improved management of security threats (Koide 2018).

China's rapid military modernisation, technological advancement programme and the strategic competition between the United States and China also had security implications for Abe's Japan. Xi-led China had been building a closed and surveillance-driven society internally. China was also seen as involved in gaining its

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digital sphere of influence in Southeast Asia with the help of its created networks, logistics and data for exercising greater political control. Japan faced tough choices regarding China's aggressive military postures towards its neighbours on one side while seeking cooperation on non-traditional security threats such as climate change, non-proliferation, and terrorism. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was seen pushing developing nations into the debt trap and failing to provide fair competition or ensure quality infrastructure or to address the region's environmental and human rights concerns (Ikenberry 2020).

China–North Korea Strategic Alignment

For China, the North Korean nuclear missile program and its forced abductions of Japanese nationals are often seen as China's strategic assets to manage Japan-North Korea relations. However, the United States is a main security provider in East Asia, which has pushed Japan into build its military and to further deepen its alignment in the United States-Japan security alliance to balance overall power asymmetries vis-à-vis the rise of China (Koide 2018). In this North Korea's nuclear arsenal and especially its incessant missiles test — with some of these landing in Sea of Japan — have made Japan conscious of North Korea's close links with Beijing which have serious security implications for Japan.

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For the last two decades, North Korea's nuclear missile programme has emerged as a threat to Japan's security. In addition, both China and North Korea share common historical resentments due to the Japanese colonisation of China's Manchuria and the Korean Peninsula in the early 1930s. As regards North Korea, Japan has traditionally made the following policy choices to address its strategic concerns towards the denuclearisation of North Korea: strengthening its security alliance with the United States, deepening economic cooperation with China and Russia to exert influence on North Korea, building defence cooperation with South Korea and exploring ways to deal with North Korea bilaterally. As for Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, he chose the 'first choice' to strengthen its security alliance with the United States and enforce the United Nations sanctions to denuclearise North Korea (Koide 2018).

North Korea, meanwhile, has been reluctant to cap its missile and nuclear capabilities as a de facto nuclear state. In addition, China–North Korea strategic alignment has the propensity to create a rift in the “extended nuclear deterrence” of the United States to ensure Japanese security. This strategic alignment aims to disengage the United States and expose Japan to North Korea's nuclear weapons,

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such as nuclear-capable intercontinental ballistic missiles. Japan is a signatory to the treaty on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, which binds Japan not to develop its nuclear weapons. Also, the North Korean nuclear crisis can have repercussions for the global non-proliferation regime. Against these backdrops, Japan's security dilemma has been to change its anti-nuclear posture or continue with its non-nuclear identity with the reliance on the extended credible nuclear deterrence of the United States (Ikenberry 2020). To deal with North Korean contingencies, Chinese maritime incursions in neighbouring seas, and Russian assertiveness in the region, Japan faces an arduous task of building capabilities in the cyber and space domain (Samuels 2019).

Trump Factor in Japan-China Relations

The US President Donald Trump (January 2017-January 2021) made a paradigm shift in the United States global leaders including its East Asian policy. President Trump's trade and tariff wars with China saw him ask China to cut its trade deficit. But he also asked Japan to hike payment for the stationed American troops in Japan. With the acceleration of the China-United States tensions, President Xi Jinping began to improve trade and investment opportunities with Japan and began working for a possible China-Japan-Korea trilateral free trade agreement; China-Japan Economic Talks

This strategic alignment aims to disengage the United States and expose Japan to North Korea's nuclear weapons, such as nuclear-capable intercontinental ballistic missiles.

took place in April 2018. In May 2018, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang visited Tokyo to participate in China–Japan–South Korean Trilateral Summit to promote free trade, the currency swap agreement, the BRI, the expansion of Chinese Bonds and the relaxation of import restrictions on Japanese food items. For Abe, it was a diplomatic breakthrough to improve economic relations, which could exert influence on the North Korean missile crisis and the pending Japanese abductions issues, but it did not happen (Koide 2018).

Trump’s East Asia Policy was based on his transactional approach to foreign policy. Each interaction was a discrete deal that went against the traditional foreign policy approach based on strategic relationship building with Japan. He understood that China’s geo-economic capabilities are linked to security issues and elucidated further that trade deficits will have serious strategic and security implications. Moreover, Trump’s East Asia Policy narrowed the diplomatic space for policy coordination and negotiations with Japan and weakened the overall relations with China (Ikenberry 2020). As a security provider, the United States wanted to hike payment for the stationed American troops in Japan’s defence budget, but Abe convinced him not to do so. Prime Minister Abe was able to convince Trump to maintain the American bases and credible extended nuclear deterrence to Japan (Samuels 2019). To preserve the liberal international order, Abe used Trump’s China policies to build his administration’s FOIP strategy and Quadrilateral Security

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To preserve the liberal international order, Abe used Trump's China policies to build his administration's FOIP strategy and Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) with India, Australia, the United States and Japan.

Dialogue (QUAD) with India, Australia, the United States and Japan (Koshino and Ward 2022).

Trump wanted to apply higher tariffs on Chinese products for distorted market practices to defend his industrial base in the United States. He tried to accelerate the economic decoupling with China through an export control mechanism for Chinese businesses in the United States because the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party is based on its economic development. China is still trying to catch up in critical technologies with the developed nations; thus, it depends on technology market access and deepening cooperation with the United States and Japan. Shinzo Abe complimented Trump's China policy by incentivising Japanese companies to diversify their trade portfolios. Furthermore, he promoted the PQI, updated its data policy and ensured data governance through his concept of DFFT and revamped the regional free trade agreement, the CP-TPP. In partnership with India and Australia in September 2020, Japan also launched the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (Torri, Mocci and Boni 2021).

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In the early days of the Abe administration, the United States requested to cooperate in three possible areas such as Japan's participation in the CPTPP, the relocation of the Futenma base to the Henoko base in Okinawa prefecture under the 1996 United States–Japan agreement and the strengthening of security cooperation. Chinese maritime incursions in the South China Sea and East China Sea and North Korea's nuclear missile development programme further highlighted the significance of the United States–Japan security alliance in the region. Abe met Trump more than 30 times to strengthen their alliance system because Trump was more focused towards 'transactional diplomatic deals' rather than 'keeping the burden of the alliance' to lead the liberal international order. Indeed, Shinzo Abe successfully engaged the Trump administration to maintain strategic cooperation in many diplomatic and defence-related areas (Koide 2018).

Trump Administration's economic nationalism and 'America's First' policy over time had weakened its credibility as an alliance partner and leader of the liberal international order. Abe knew that without the American counterbalance to China, regional order would open up to China-led authoritarian regional order. Therefore, Abe wanted Japan to become a rule-making nation to buy time for American leadership to ponder over their return to play leading roles in regional and global governance. Article 2 of the United

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States–Japan security alliance mandates the coordination of their economic policies to achieve their security interests in the region, as Japan and the United States should also have defensive and offensive capabilities respectively (Ikenberry 2020). But this sense of Abe’s Japan fending for itself was to fundamentally change the pace of ‘normalisation’ of Japan with his successor Prime Minister Fumio Kishida lauding two important — security and defence related — reports and planning to not just allow Japan’s defence budget from their self-imposed limit of 1 per cent of gross domestic product but achieve 2 per cent share by 2027 (Singh 2023).

ABE’S CHINA POLICY IN NUTSHELL



It is commonplace that Japan and China are ideologically different powers, convergence of whose interests have waxed and waned over the years. But both nations are in geographical proximity and have an enduring long and shared history. China is the largest economy in Asia and has been rapidly modernising its military to catch up with the United States. Moreover, China is a nuclear weapon state with permanent membership in the United Nations Security Council that brings it enormous power and influence. Japan is the second largest economy in Asia, and exercises enormous economic influence along with the other G7 members in moulding global agenda-setting on various issues,

The Abe years saw United States-Japan security alliance becoming critical to balance the asymmetries in power relations vis-à-vis China, especially so in the Indo-Pacific region

including traditional and non-traditional threats. The Abe years saw United States-Japan security alliance becoming critical to balance the asymmetries in power relations vis-à-vis China, especially so in the Indo-Pacific region (Hoshino and Satoh 2012).

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's proactive security policies for Japan were guided by the following factors: the United States-Japan security cooperation, the improvement of Japan-China relations while maintaining the security alliance with the United States, seeking denuclearisation of North Korea's nuclear weapons programme, the building of Japanese military capabilities to defend itself and promotion of multilateral security agreements with like-minded democratic nations including India that was to see a complete transformation in Indo-Japanese relations. With the focus on the China threat, Abe's diplomatic outreach, from the balance of power perspective, was aimed at balancing power relations in the Indo-Pacific. But, he also explored the possibility of a summit meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping. Abe met Xi in October 2018 despite the cold bilateral ties emanating from his visit to the Yasukuni Shrine in December 2013 (Koide 2018).

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Abe's Indo-Pacific strategy becomes his enduring legacies in globalising the 'China challenge' that today binds several Indo-Pacific stakeholders.

It was an ardent task for Shinzo Abe to balance Japan's relations with China and the United States, especially so amid their strategic competition during Trump era. Shinzo Abe's tragic demise, especially in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic created a strategic vacuum in dealing with an assertive China under the leadership of Xi Jinping who has since entered an unprecedented third term in the apex office in China. There was of course also this sense of need to mend their ties with reciprocity and ensure that 'mutual interests' are factored into bilateral negotiations (Hoshino and Satoh 2012). Nonetheless, Abe's Indo-Pacific strategy becomes his enduring legacies in globalising the 'China challenge' that today binds several Indo-Pacific stakeholders. The only question remains how quickly Japan's Indo-Pacific strategy would generate an alternative source of strategic autonomy with or without the United States in the Indo-Pacific region (Torri, Mocci and Boni 2021).

CONCLUSION



As the current world order remains in flux; the Asian Superpower China continues to compete with Superpower United States and this has become acute in the new Indo-Pacific theatre that was first visualised by Abe. This is because Abe believed that Japan could not afford to live under Chinese hegemony in East Asia and his nuanced Indo-Pacific strategy was to uphold the freedom of

Abe believed that Japan could not afford to live under Chinese hegemony in East Asia and his nuanced Indo-Pacific strategy was to uphold the freedom of navigation, democracy, and the rule of law to preserve the 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' region.

navigation, democracy, and the rule of law to preserve the 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' region. Abe had understood the need to focus on the 'China challenge' in the defence and diplomatic spheres. Although there was no fundamental breakthrough in Japan-China relations, Abe tried to maintain economic engagement with China. Still, he found it difficult to do so because of China's increasing defence budget, aggressive military postures, and economic might to build its geopolitical and geo-economic influence in the region. Indeed, Abe set the contours of Japan-China security relations which continue to dominate their bilateral security dynamics and even the regional dynamics of the United States-China strategic competition and the narratives on their shared 'China challenge' in the Indo-Pacific region.

Abe's imagination of FOIP was also to trigger creation of Quadrilateral Security Framework of the United States-Japan-Australia-India, an informal grouping that focuses on building infrastructure, climate change, resilience supply-chain of critical

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technologies, cyber security, health security and partnerships in space technology so far. But, Xi's possible forceful enunciations on the likely use of force in unification of Taiwan has its security implications for the freedom of navigation have kept QUAD together to possible counter Chinese aggression in the region. To quite an extent, it seems that the Taiwan issue would decide the future trajectories of Japan-China security relations. The Taiwan issue today both triggered as also limits Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's diplomatic manoeuvring in Japan-China security relations.

To summarise, this paper contends that study of Japan-China security relations during Abe era shows that these will continue to remain turbulent in the near future. Japan and India have a shared perception of China's challenge and China's policies have serious geo-strategic and geo-economic repercussions for Japan and India. Both neighbouring countries are facing similar strategic and security compulsions emanating from the rise of China. So Japan is likely to continue making efforts to reduce its over dependence on the American security blanket, strengthen its military and build security cooperation with like-minded countries. Japan and India are committed to ensuring freedom of navigation, the rule of law and democratic values and securing multi-polarity in the Indo-Pacific region. Under the Indo-Pacific calculus, India's strategic imperatives would be around deepening multilayered

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security cooperation with Japan. Shinzo Abe put India into Japan's strategic horizon via pragmatic and proactive diplomatic ties to maintain peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region. But, it remains to be seen whether post-Abe Japanese leadership will continue to push the strategic directions of Japan-India bilateral relations in rationalising Japan's dependence on the United State and at the same time redressing challenges flowing from an aggressive Chinese military modernisation and its serious security implications for Japan.

Shinzo Abe put India into Japan's strategic horizon via pragmatic and proactive diplomatic ties to maintain peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region.



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