The Autonomy–Alignment Trade-Off: Japan’s Evolving Defense Posture

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Tokyo’s defense doctrine and behavior have undergone a number of significant shifts under the Abe administration. These have occurred against the backdrop of declining U.S. power in Asia and, more recently, the Trump administration’s idiosyncratic “America First” policy. These developments thus raise questions about Tokyo’s strategic orientation and the continued durability of the U.S.-Japan alliance. Is Tokyo hedging against possible U.S. strategic abandonment of Japan and shifting toward a more independent defense posture? Drawing on interviews with government officials in 2019, it is argued here that the recent evolution of Japan’s defense policy has instead been premised on the continuation of the alliance as the core of its national security strategy. The U.S.-Japan security relationship has therefore been conducted primarily under the framework of traditional alliance management.

Key words: Indo-Pacific strategy, Japanese security, Japan’s defense policy, U.S.-Japan alliance

自治与结盟之间的抉择: 日本不断演变的国防姿态

东京方面的国防纲领和行为在安倍政府的管理下已经历了一系列重大转变。这些转变发生的背景则是美国在亚洲的强权削弱, 以及更为近期的、特朗普政府推行的“美国第一”这一异质政策。这些进展因此引起了有关东京方面的战略导向, 以及美日联盟持久性等问题。东京方面是否正在防止可能的美国对日本战略抛弃, 同时转向一个更为独立的国防姿态? 基于作者在2019年与政府官员进行的访谈, 作者主张, 日本国防政策的近期演变反而是建立在美日联盟的持续, 这种持续是其国防安全战略的核心。美日安全关系因此主要是在传统联盟管理框架下进行的。

关键词: 美日联盟, 日本安全, 日本国防政策, 印度-太平洋战略

El Cambio de Alineación de Autonomía: La Postura de Defensa Evolutiva de Japón

La doctrina y el comportamiento de defensa de Tokio han sufrido varios cambios significativos bajo la administración Abe. Esto ocurrió en el contexto del declive del poder de los EE. UU. En Asia y, más recientemente, de la política idiosincrásica de la administración Trump de “América primero.” Estos desarrollos plantean dudas sobre la orientación estratégica de Tokio y la durabilidad continua de la alianza entre EE. UU. Y Japón. ¿Está Tokio protegiéndose del posible abandono estratégico de Japón por parte de los EE. UU. y está cambiando hacia una postura de defensa más independiente? Basándose en entrevistas que el autor realizó con funcionarios del gobierno en 2019, se argumenta aquí que la evolución reciente de la política de defensa de Japón se ha basado en la continuación de la alianza como el núcleo de su estrategia de seguridad

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nacional. Por lo tanto, la relación de seguridad entre EE. UU. Y Japón se ha llevado a cabo principalmente en el marco de la gestión tradicional de la alianza.

Palabras clave: Alianza Estados Unidos-Japón, seguridad japonesa, política de defensa de Japón, estrategia del Indo-Pacífico

Introduction

Japan's alliance with the United States has long been the centerpiece of its national security strategy, which is otherwise constrained by a unique constitutional clause prohibiting the maintenance of *de jure* military forces. Although the original Cold War rationale of the alliance has long since dissipated, it has continued to evolve in response to new threats and has remained robust against transformations in the regional order.

In recent years, however, Tokyo's defense doctrine and behavior have undergone a number of significant shifts, which suggest an orientation toward a more autonomous defense posture. Many of these shifts have been implemented under Shinzo Abe, Japan's longest serving prime minister, on the premise of achieving a "proactive contribution to peace." Over the course of his tenure, Abe has increased Japan's defense expenditure and procured a range of offensive military assets that had hitherto been relegated to a political "no-go" zone. He has furthermore circumvented constitutional constraints by enacting legislation that permits the Japanese Self-Defense Force (JSDF) to respond to security issues with the use of force. This "Peace and Security Legislation," which was passed in 2015, not only rectified a fundamental asymmetry in the U.S.-Japan strategic relationship, but also raised the prospect of Tokyo establishing additional alliances. And indeed, Prime Minister Abe has sought to engage an array of potential new strategic partners in the Indo-Pacific, suggesting an intent to diversify Japan's security policy and mitigate against dependence on the United States. He has moreover played a leading role in articulating a strategic framework for the Indo-Pacific, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, which he envisaged to draw Australia, India, and the United States into a regional coalition with Japan. Finally, as he approaches the end of his leadership tenure, Abe's desire to establish a political legacy remains firmly focused on amending Japan's "pacifist" Constitution.

Lending further credence to the notion of a more autonomous defense predilection in Japan, such developments have occurred against the backdrop of declining U.S. power in Asia and, more recently, the Donald Trump administration's idiosyncratic "America First" policy. The developments thus raise questions about Tokyo's defense posture and the state of the U.S.-Japan alliance. Is Tokyo hedging against possible U.S. strategic abandonment of Japan and shifting toward a more independent defense posture?

The orientation of Japan's security policy has been differentially interpreted by scholars in recent years. Lionel Fatton (2018) argues that Japan is pursuing greater autonomy from the United States in response to apprehensions about its traditional security policy. Other scholars have argued that Japan is strengthening

its alliance with the United States. According to Chris Hughes (2017), on the contrary, although the removal of past constraints has presented new strategic opportunities for Japan, the main objective of policymakers is still the reinforcement of the U.S.-Japan security relationship; he makes this case through an analysis of Japan's nascent arms transfer strategy.

This article contributes to this debate on Tokyo's strategic orientation by examining defense doctrine and behavior under the Abe administration across a number of policy domains. Drawing on interviews conducted with government officials from Japan and United States in 2019, it is argued here that the recent evolution of Japan's defense policy has been premised on the continuation of the alliance as the core of its national security strategy. The adjustments implemented by Abe toward a more "proactive" posture have therefore been conducted primarily under the framework of alliance management. Notwithstanding Trump's incessant criticism of the alliance, which has doubtlessly been psychologically damaging to Japanese defense officials,¹ it has continued to strengthen at both the strategic and operational levels. This momentum has been driven by the logic that the U.S.-Japan alliance remains Tokyo's most feasible policy option for deterring the evolving China threat, which overshadows the North Korean problem in the minds of Japanese defense officials.

The article proceeds by examining Abe's pursuit of "normal country" status and its shaping of Japan's defense posture. It subsequently evaluates how Japan's alliance policy under the Abe administration has accommodated Trump's critical rhetoric. It then assesses Japan's evolving threat perceptions of China and North Korea and the effect of such on Tokyo's security strategy. Finally, the article evaluates the role of the alliance in Japan's Indo-Pacific policy and how it relates to Tokyo's burgeoning strategic partnerships with Canberra and New Delhi.

Abe's Pursuit of "Normal Country" Status

Abe's quest to "normalize" national security policy, which he has pursued more fervently than any of his predecessors, is one of the main indicators that Tokyo's defense orientation may be shifting in the direction of autonomy. Essentially this pursuit has focused on unshackling Japan from the various institutional constraints on its Self-Defense Forces. Given that the U.S.-Japan alliance was in many respects born of such constraints, it is logical to assume that Abe is seeking a more independent posture for Japan. Abe's long-coveted goal has indeed been to amend Japan's so-called "pacifist" Constitution, a feat which has so far proven impossible on account of various limitations. Unable to overturn such constraints, Abe has sought instead to circumvent them in his pursuit of more "normal" defense policies. The behavioral and normative changes that this has ushered in for the JSDF has increased Japan's burden-sharing capacity vis-à-vis the alliance. This has ultimately led to an enhanced symmetry in the alliance, rather than greater autonomy.

Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution, a document drafted by American officials in the context of Japan's defeat in the Second World War, imposes numerous restrictions on the development of military potential and is thus commonly referred to as a "pacifist clause." Over recent decades, a number of Liberal Democratic Party leaders have sought to amend this clause to enable greater flexibility in Japan's defense policy. Yet, constitutional reform has proven to be

an impossibility for its advocates, as it requires support from two-thirds of the upper and lower-house members of the legislature, and subsequently, a majority of voters in a national referendum. Other constraints include the deeply entrenched pacifist norms in the Japanese populace, and the polarization of the electorate on constitutional reform (Soeya, Tadokoro, & Welch, 2011, pp. 8–9). With Abe nearing the end of his tenure and having failed to win a two-thirds super majority in Japan's 2019 upper-house elections, his chances of changing Article 9 remain slim.

Owing to such constraints, Abe has pursued the normalization of Japan's defense policy through legislative and normative means, resulting in a greater burden-sharing capacity. In 2007, in his first term as prime minister, Abe formally upgraded Japan's Defense Agency to full ministry status. While this was a largely symbolic move, it served to elevate the role of defense officials in Japan's strategic policymaking bodies. Upon commencing his second term, Abe then promoted legislation enabling Japan's defense force to participate in foreign conflicts. This move was strongly supported by Washington, who has long urged that Tokyo step up its engagement in U.S. operations abroad. Since the Japanese Constitution restricts security activities to the realm of defense, Abe's security legislation interpreted such restrictions as permitting "collective self-defense" and the use of armed force to defend allies. He initially planned to bestow greater latitude on the activities of the JSDF, but was forced to scale back the terms of the legislation as a result of opposition from the ruling coalition.² The passage of these controversial security laws in 2015 sparked wide-scale public protests in Japan, with surveys indicating that over 50% of citizens opposed the bills (*Japan Times*, 2015, July 15).

Prime Minister Abe has also significantly increased Japan's defense spending. This once again was largely in response to pressure from the United States, which has been intensifying under the Trump administration. While an unofficial cap of 1% of gross domestic product (GDP) has been in place on Japan's defense spending since 1976, Abe announced in 2017 his intention to lift that self-imposed restriction. Although yet to reach 2% of GDP, defense spending under Abe's leadership has steadily increased over a period of eight years. In fact, for fiscal year 2020, Japan's Ministry of Defense has requested a record high budget of ¥5.32 trillion (approximately U.S. \$50 billion) (*Japan Times*, 2019, August 30). In another break from tradition, the most recent iteration of Japan's National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG) included, for the first time, acquisitions of capabilities that have traversed the defensive realm and appear to be intended for combat operations. Up until now, such capabilities—which include T-10 tanks and converted helicopter carriers—have been considered unconstitutional. This again stems from the pacifist Constitution and public aversion to weapons that invoke memories of wartime militarism. Defense officials have justified these procurements on the grounds that changes in Japan's security environment—elaborated below—necessitate an upscaling of military capabilities, and that such weapons systems are offensive only in the context of homeland defense.³

Despite dwindling prospects for achieving constitutional amendment, Prime Minister Abe has made significant headway in changing the status quo of Japan's defense and security policy by legislating around the Constitution and enabling the JSDF to shoulder a greater share of the defense burden within the

alliance. He has also set new norms for defense spending and procurements. In this way, Abe's normalization politics has in many respects deepened the U.S.-Japan alignment.

The U.S.-Japan Alliance Under the Abe Administration

A further harbinger of change under the Abe administration has been the strenuous bolstering of defense capacity. As mentioned earlier, not only has this manifested in a marked increase in defense spending, but also in the acquisition of a new line of defense assets with offensive strike capabilities. Further, Tokyo has also sought to develop a local industrial base to assemble F-35s domestically. A number of scholars have interpreted these advancements in Japan's defense policy as representing a shift toward greater autonomy, and this view has become more prevalent since the advent of the Trump administration and its characteristic "America First" worldview. Yet, we cannot directly infer from these developments that Japan's strategic orientation has become more autonomous. In fact, Abe's bolstering of defense capabilities has primarily centered on strengthening the alliance and enhancing interoperability. Meanwhile, Trump's frequent indictments of the U.S.-Japan alliance have not necessarily stoked fears of abandonment, but rather have had the intended effect of encouraging increased Japanese investment in U.S. defense technology. Security cooperation between Japan and the United States is now more aligned under the Abe–Trump administrations.

There have been a number of reasons to suspect that Tokyo could be hedging against abandonment by its long-standing U.S. ally. American leadership in Asia has arguably been declining since the turn of the century, fueled in part by Washington's preoccupation with conflicts in the Middle East. Trump's rise to power is also believed to have imperiled the U.S.-Japan alliance (Bell & Kertzer, 2018). He has frequently dismissed the alliance as an "unfair" deal, criticized its lopsidedness, and publicly expressed skepticism as to whether Tokyo would defend the United States in the event of an attack (*Asahi Shimbun*, 2019). Adding to these apparent strains in the security partnership is the strategic divergence that has emerged between Washington and Tokyo with regard to the North Korean problem; Trump's engagement of Kim Jong-un in many ways undermined Abe's North Korean policy and has been regarded as a slight of Tokyo's interests by Washington.

The Abe administration, however, has not been inclined to interpret these developments as indications of impending abandonment or as diminishing credibility of the U.S. security guarantee. Although Trump's criticisms have certainly posed a diplomatic conundrum for Tokyo, there is a prevalent view among those involved in alliance management in Japan that his critical rhetoric is a tactic designed to rectify asymmetries in the alliance and encourage greater Japanese investment in the American defense industry.⁴ In other words, Trump is exploiting Japan's dependence on the U.S. security guarantee to narrow Tokyo's trade surplus with Washington. This interpretation is evidenced in Abe's response to Trump's demands: He has increased defense purchases from the United States Foreign Military Sales Program, including the costly acquisitions of the "F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, Aegis Combat System, E-2D Airborne Early Warning Aircraft; [and] the KC-46 Refuelling Tanker," to name only a few (U.S. Department of State, 2019). As many of these acquisitions are interoperable

with American military assets, in effect they have strengthened the alliance on an operational level by enabling closer coordination of U.S.-Japan defense operations. According to a senior U.S. defense official, Tokyo—more so than any other ally—has gone to great lengths to acquire expensive, interoperable assets.⁵ In this sense, Abe has not only steered the alliance toward greater alignment under Trump, but he has also ensured that Tokyo's defense policy remains inextricably tied to the U.S. Abe has sought to manage Trump's critiques diplomatically by fostering strong interpersonal relations with him and refraining from retaliatory criticism.

While these defense purchases have clearly been appreciated by Washington, they also seem to have come at a domestic trade-off. In 2013, the Abe government began to assemble F-35s domestically as part of an attempt to develop a local industrial base in the Japanese city of Nagoya. For fiscal year 2019, however, this venture was deemed financially unsustainable and Tokyo reverted to ordering F-35s from the United States (Yeo, 2019). Given that this revelation coincided with the Abe government coming under increasing financial pressure from Trump, presumably this unsustainability equation was shaped by the United States. Instead of assembly, Japan's nascent industrial base in Nagoya will focus on F-35 maintenance, repair, and upgrade. While Abe's trade-off may have addressed some of the bilateral trade tensions with Trump, it has come at a domestic cost and increased Japan's dependence on the United States for defense assets.

The strategic divergence in Trump and Abe's North Korean policy has been cited as a further strain on the alliance (Dian, 2018). However, this divergence emerged as a result of policy considerations in the United States and Japan that are largely exogenous to the alliance; it has therefore not necessarily stoked fears of abandonment in Tokyo or tangibly impaired the alliance. Trump's engagement of North Korea has been predicated on dealing with the changed status quo in the Kim regime's nuclear and missile capabilities, which was ushered in by the successful H-bomb and intercontinental ballistic missile tests of 2017. It has moreover been premised on the coordination of Washington's policy with Seoul under the framework of the U.S.-South Korea alliance. Once President Moon Jae-in embarked on his rapprochement with Kim Jong-un in January 2018, Trump had little option but to follow his lead, lest it appear that Kim was driving a wedge in their security partnership. As the U.S.-South Korea alliance policy is focused primarily on Korean Peninsula security, it serves as a stronger determinant of North Korean policy in Washington than the U.S.-Japan alliance. Moreover, Abe's marginalization from the denuclearization summitry with North Korea bears little relation to Trump; it is, rather, a consequence of his decision to privilege the Japanese abduction issue over Kim's nuclear program in his North Korean policy, which was based on sustaining domestic political support. To be sure, Trump could have better communicated to Abe his plans for concessions to Kim, which included a scaling down of military exercises off the Korean Peninsula. Yet, this marginalization is the price that Abe has paid—and likely will continue to pay—for failing to break the prolonged impasse between Japan and North Korea. Although Tokyo is not optimistic about the outcome of the regional denuclearization negotiations with Kim, Abe has dealt with his

government's strategic divergence from Washington by reiterating a willingness to meet with Kim (in spite of the unlikely nature of this scenario), as a show of support for Trump's engagement policy (*Japan Times*, 2019, May 2).

Despite—and in large part because of—the diplomatic challenges presented by the rise of Trump, Abe has continued to strengthen Japan's security partnership with the United States at the operational level. This has been fueled by Trump's heavily transactional approach to the alliance on the one hand, and by Abe's desire to maintain the alliance as a pillar of Japan's national security strategy on the other.

Response to the Evolving China and North Korean Threats

In addition to Trump's antics, the Abe government's heightened threat perception of China and North Korea has been a significant driving force behind the pursuit of a more "proactive" defense posture. This has been spurred by the belief that China, and to a lesser extent, North Korea, are increasingly testing Japan's security environment. The evolution of the China threat in Tokyo's strategic thinking conforms to that of a traditional, rising power. However, it has been conceived to be rapidly expanding in scope and complexity and challenging Japan across multiple security domains. Meanwhile, the trajectory of the North Korean problem has been less predictable, yet it is deemed to be a more discrete, nuclear and missile threat, with the added complexity of the abduction issue. While Japan's NDPG for 2019 devotes relatively equal attention to developments concerning China and North Korea (Ministry of Defense, Japan, 2018, p. 3), it is clear that Tokyo's defense strategy is focused more on countering the China threat. These two security challenges have steered Japan's defense policy toward greater alignment with the United States. This has been based on an assessment that the capabilities of the JSDF need to be more deeply integrated with the U.S. military in order for the alliance to provide effective deterrence in the current strategic context.

The primary driving force behind the shifts in Tokyo's security policy has been the Abe government's evolving conception of the "China threat." This conception has been informed by China's ostensibly bottomless supply of labor, historical grudges against Japan, nationalism, and "illiberal" mode of governance.⁶ Compounding these factors is China's geographical proximity to Japan and steadily growing economic and military power. Given Japan's scarce natural resources and heavy reliance on open sea lanes for trade purposes, Tokyo is particularly troubled by Beijing's activities in the maritime domain. In 2012, following the escalation of China and Japan's territorial dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyutai Islands, Tokyo's strategic focus was fixed on China's behavior in the East China Sea; this is reflected in the 2014 iteration of the NDPG (Ministry of Defense, Japan, 2013, p. 3). However, the latest version indicates that Tokyo's preoccupation has shifted to China's "grey zone" tactics in the South China Sea (Ministry of Defense, Japan, 2018, p. 3). These tactics have entailed the construction and reclamation of maritime features in the absence of environmental assessments and in the space of a few short years. Japan's Ministry of Defense is most concerned by Beijing's conversion of these islands into veritable military facilities. That being said, China's activities in both the East and South China

Seas are assessed by Tokyo under the same rubric of increasingly assertive maritime behavior (Ministry of Defense, Japan, 2018, p. 5).

Tokyo's defense strategy vis-à-vis China is premised on the logic that the two countries are engaged in a long-term strategic competition. From the standpoint of the Abe administration, the only way for Japan to avoid losing this competition is to acquire capabilities that could inflict significant damage on Chinese forces in the event of a conflict. The aim of this strategy is to deter Beijing from using military means to realize its foreign policy objectives. Despite China's significant economic and demographic advantages over Japan, Tokyo believes that greater symmetry can be attained by identifying and exploiting China's vulnerabilities and achieving greater synergy across defense domains.

The overarching objective of the Abe government's defense strategy is to establish maritime and air superiority in the region surrounding Japan, a feat that can only be achieved in the context of the alliance. Toward this end, in 2018, Abe increased an existing order of 42 F-35 fighter jets to 147, which will provide Japan with the largest fleet among all U.S. allies. It is intended that these will be deployed on two Izumo-class warships, which Tokyo plans to modernize and convert into aircraft carriers. While these capabilities could of course be utilized in the event of a North Korean contingency, it is clear that they are primarily aimed at altering the balance of power in the region and challenging China's South China Sea strategy. However, Japan remains dependent on the United States, when it comes to deep-strike capabilities, in accordance with the traditional division of labor in the alliance. To counter the cluster of tactics Beijing has employed to expand its physical position in the South China Sea, the Japanese Ministry of Defense is seeking to develop a more multilayered force composition. The JSDF, meanwhile, is conducting an array of steady-state activities geared toward increasing Japan's naval presence in the South China Sea, in order to further shape the strategic environment in Tokyo's favor.

While it is evident that this strategy is fundamentally focused on countering the China threat, North Korea's missile program still looms large among Tokyo's security concerns. The main threat perception in this regard stems from the possibility that Pyongyang might one day launch a ballistic missile attack on a major Japanese city. Although Japan has long been within the radius of North Korea's short- and medium-range ballistic missiles, there is a relatively strong consensus in Tokyo that this scenario is unlikely given that it would spell the end of the Kim regime. Since Tokyo's relations with Pyongyang are at a protracted impasse, and Abe remains marginalized from the regional denuclearization summitry with Kim, there are limited diplomatic means for managing this threat. Defense options have also narrowed considerably with the rapid deterioration of Tokyo's relations with Seoul, which was triggered in late 2018. Consequently, even benign forms of security cooperation—such as intelligence sharing—between the two governments have become highly contentious and precarious. Adding to the anxieties of the Japanese government is the prospect of a reduction of U.S. forces in South Korea, which serves as an added layer of deterrence for Tokyo against North Korean belligerence.

In light of these limitations, the only viable strategy for the Abe administration to deal with the North Korean problem has been to enhance ballistic missile defense. Toward this end, Japan's Ministry of Defense plans to deploy two

land-based Aegis Ashore missile defense batteries by 2023, which will be integrated with solid state radar antenna sets supplied by U.S. defense contractor Lockheed Martin. By enabling the simultaneous interception of multiple targets, this technology represents a significant upgrade to Japan's missile defense capacity (Gady, 2019b). As its functioning will be entirely dependent on U.S. technological and military capabilities, this will constitute one of the most interoperable aspects of the alliance.

In sum, the rapidly evolving China threat and developments in North Korea's missile program have served to steer Tokyo in the direction of greater alignment with Washington. While the China threat significantly outweighs the North Korean problem in the Abe administration's strategic thinking, its deterrence strategy for both of these challenges has become more deeply integrated with that of the U.S. military on an operation level.

Networking the Alliance into the Indo-Pacific

Perhaps the most conspicuous change to the status quo in Japan's defense policy under Abe has been the development of a strategy for the "Indo-Pacific." While the security relationship with Washington has remained at the core of the Abe government's defense policy, projections of China's military and economic growth have led to a realization that the deterrent capacity of alliance may become insufficient in the near future. This sentiment has been reinforced by the expansion of China's influence in the South China Sea and Pacific Islands, and the susceptibility of states in these areas to diplomatic pressure from Beijing. Based on these concerns, and the prospect of declining regional leadership by the United States, Abe began implementing an Indo-Pacific strategy in 2006. While this has been characterized by coalition building with "likeminded democracies" in the region, since the inception of this strategy Abe envisioned the U.S.-Japan alliance to constitute its backbone. He has thus targeted countries of common strategic interest to the United States and Japan for incorporation into his strategic fold. Abe's Indo-Pacific strategy can therefore be read as an attempt to network the alliance into the region, rather than as a shift toward greater strategic autonomy. This section examines the logic behind this strategy.

Under Abe's leadership, the Japanese government's strategic framework for the region shifted from the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific. The new framework, which has been adopted by a number of other governments, essentially entails linking the Indian and Pacific Oceans under a common strategic vision. This linkage was spurred primarily by India's economic rise and the transformational prospects it might have for the region. The Abe government's embrace of this geopolitical concept was not only driven by the potential of India's growing economy, but also by considerations of the role that India might play in counterbalancing China's rise. Abe sought to institutionalize his strategic vision in the form of a Quadrilateral Strategic Dialogue (the Quad) in 2007, during his first and short-lived term as prime minister. This arrangement sought to draw Australia, India, Japan, and the United States into a strategic grouping of "likeminded democracies." The Quad's inception was marked by a strategic dialogue between American, Australian, Indian, and Japanese heads of state, and was followed by a joint military exercise between the four parties (Exercise Malabar) with the addition of Singapore. Abe envisioned that the Quad would constitute a

loose coalition of countries who would patrol the Indo-Pacific waterways. While Abe publicly downplayed the balancing rationale of the arrangement, it was evidently designed to countervail China's expanding sphere of maritime influence, and as a counterbalance to China's Belt and Road Initiative. It also reflected an attempt by Abe to encourage U.S. commitment to the region. Despite this early momentum, however, the Quad was disbanded in 2008 in response to a formal diplomatic protest issued by China to each of the four member countries.

Upon returning to office in 2012 for a second leadership term, Abe's regional strategy therefore became underlined by the more ambiguous notion of maintaining a "Free and Open Indo Pacific" (FOIP). This entailed the promotion of norms of "the rule of law, freedom of navigation and free trade" in the region. While the Indo-Pacific construct did not enter U.S. foreign policy lexicon until about 2017, the strategic outlooks of Tokyo and Washington soon became closely aligned, and despite some subtle differences, they now mutually emphasize a commitment to ensuring that the region remains "free and open" (particularly from Chinese coercion). The centrality of the U.S.-Japan alliance to Abe's Indo-Pacific strategy is based, in large part, on a simple balancing equation vis-à-vis China's (immense) population. Reminiscent of the post-war "Five Eyes" intelligence-sharing community, the Abe administration believes that the establishment of a regional norm consensus on the basis of the FOIP principle will require a grouping of countries commensurate with China's population.⁷ In Tokyo's eyes, the United States is the most integral country to this grouping on account of its balancing power.

Amid a resurgence of South China Sea tensions in 2017, the Quad member countries regrouped on the sidelines of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and East Asia Summits; the four parties discuss regional security and have since continued working-level meetings (Envall, 2019).⁸ In light of the general diplomatic sensitivities surrounding the Quad, Abe has become more cautious in his approach to further developing this arrangement. He has significantly downplayed the strategic rationale of the Quad and is more reluctant to emphasize its associations to the U.S.-Japan alliance. Instead, Abe has turned his focus toward promoting the values and interests that the Quad seeks to realize: A FOIP built upon an "an international rules-based order" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2016). Yet, this value-based approach still constitutes an affront to China, albeit an ideological one. The Quad members—India in particular—therefore continue to have reservations about the grouping (Smith, 2019).

Despite the various impediments Abe has faced in bringing his vision for the Quad to fruition, his government has continued to develop Japan's security ties with Australia and India bilaterally. This will pave a stronger institutional foundation upon which the Quad can be pursued in future. With regard to Australia, the Japanese Ministry of Defense has been negotiating a Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) with Canberra since 2014; this aims to facilitate administrative and legal procedures for the movement of Japanese and Australian forces between both countries, and ultimately streamline joint military exercises. This agreement will represent a significant upgrade to the burgeoning bilateral security partnership and will also constitute the first visiting forces agreement for Tokyo outside of its arrangement with the United States; it might therefore serve as a precedent for similar such agreements with other potential strategic

partners. Although the RAA negotiations appear to be somewhat lagging, Japan and Australia's respective defense forces engaged in their first joint air combat exercise in northern Japan in 2019 (Gady, 2019a).⁹ In relation to India, the Abe government is in the process of establishing a bilateral logistics sharing agreement, which will enhance interoperability between the two countries' defense forces. India currently has a similar treaty in place with the United States, known as the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement. This Tokyo-New Delhi security initiative has been supplemented by a number of bilateral infrastructure projects, and reinforced by the close relationship between Indian leader Narendra Modi and Prime Minister Abe.¹⁰

In sum, although many aspects of Abe's Indo-Pacific strategy were conceived autonomously, he has encouraged Washington to align with his strategy and considers the U.S.-Japan alliance to be its backbone. Abe's role in articulating a strategic vision for the Indo-Pacific represents a desire to exercise greater leadership in shaping the regional order, however, still within the framework of the alliance. In this sense, his strategy constitutes a further step toward a more symmetrical alliance, and is also an attempt to encourage greater U.S. commitment to the region. Given the diplomatic sensitivities surrounding the Quad arrangement, Abe will likely focus on realizing the normative—rather than overtly strategic—aspects of his Indo-Pacific strategy in the foreseeable future; that is to say, the promotion of norm consensus in relation to “the rule of law, freedom of navigation and free trade” in the region.

Conclusion

On the surface, the shifts in Japan's security policy under Abe are suggestive that Tokyo is hedging against abandonment by its long-standing ally and moving toward a more independent defense posture. Having examined various developments in Japan's defense doctrine and behavior, however, it is apparent that such shifts have been largely premised on the continuation of the alliance as the core of Tokyo's security strategy. In other words, they have been conducted under the framework of traditional alliance management. Indeed, the bolstering of Japan's defense capabilities in recent years has been geared primarily toward enhancing interoperability with the U.S. military and adherence to the long-standing division of labor between the two allies. Furthermore, Tokyo's objective of developing an indigenous military industrial base appears to be faltering, with plans for local assembly of F-35s being reverted to the United States ostensibly for financial reasons. Meanwhile, Abe's bid to “normalize” Japan's security policy through new legislation has served to enhance Tokyo's burden-sharing capacity in the alliance.

It is reasonable to assume that Tokyo's fears of U.S. abandonment have been heightened by the Trump phenomenon and his unsparing censure of “free-riding allies.” Yet this assumption presupposes that Tokyo has taken Trump's rhetoric at its word. To the contrary, however, the Abe administration has been inclined to conceive of such criticisms as a tactic aimed at encouraging increased investment in U.S. defense technology, and ultimately, to achieve a reduction in Tokyo's trade surplus vis-à-vis Washington. Trump's belittling of the strategic value of the alliance has also been psychologically offset, to some degree, by

his close personal ties with Abe. In fact, it appears that Trump is more closely acquainted with Abe than any other head of state, as evidenced by the frequency and length of their reciprocal visits and phone communications. And although Trump's rhetoric has certainly posed a diplomatic conundrum for Prime Minister Abe, it has simultaneously supported his bid to achieve a more dynamic defense posture.

The Abe government's policy orientation toward strengthening the U.S.-Japan alliance has been driven primarily by two realizations: (1) the China threat is expanding in scope and complexity; and (2) in order to balance against this expansion, Japan's defense posture requires comprehensive changes. This policy line has been further shaped by the relative decline in U.S. influence in the region and the persistent constraints on Japan's defense policy. On a practical level, Abe has sought to increase the deterrent capacity of the alliance through shoring up Japan's defense capabilities and networking the alliance into his Indo-Pacific strategy.

Whether Tokyo's security policy will proceed in the direction of greater alignment with the United States in the post-Abe era will likely depend on the extent to which Trump is prepared to pressure his Japanese counterpart with regard to alliance cost-sharing. Up until now, Tokyo has been quite accommodating of Trump's financial demands, yet these one-sided exactions are doubtlessly wearing thin for Tokyo and tarnishing the credibility of the United States as a strategic partner. In light of Japan's precarious fiscal position and impending demographic crisis, any significant increase in Tokyo's contribution to host nation support will conceivably become unsustainable in the near future. Abe's successor might therefore be compelled to pursue greater autonomy from the United States if only for financial reasons.

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Notes

¹For an explanation of the effect of the Trump administration on the psychology of U.S. allies, see Bell and Kertzer (2018).

²For an overview of the legislative process, see Nasu (2016); Kim (2017).

³Author interview with government official, Tokyo, February 2019.

⁴Author interview with government official, Tokyo, February 2019.

⁵Author interview with government official, Tokyo, February 2019.

⁶Author interview with government official, Tokyo, February 2019.

⁷Author discussion with government official, Canberra, November 2019.

⁸For a more in-depth analysis of the revival of the Quad, see Kersten (2018).

⁹For a comprehensive analysis of the evolution of Japan-Australia security cooperation, see Satake (2016).

¹⁰See Paul (2012) for an overview of the Japan-India security partnership.

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