

Relative Weakening of the Post-Cold War Japan-U.S. Alliance

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The Japan-U.S. alliance is one of the world's most important alliances. The two states possess unparalleled military, economic and cultural resources that can make a remarkable difference in regional and world affairs. During the Cold War, the alliance worked as the primary mechanism in balancing Soviet power and checking Communist expansion in the Asia-Pacific region. After the Cold War, despite fundamental changes of world politics and economics, the Japan-U.S. alliance continued to serve the strategic needs of both sides by facilitating bilateral communication and cooperation. In the meantime, conflicting trends can be observed in the adjustments of the alliance: in the absolute sense, the Japan-U.S. alliance has been deepening, as many scholars observed, which is symbolized by its widening horizon and improving mechanism; compared with the alliance itself during the Cold War and with bilateral relations between Japan / the U.S. and third parties since the 1990s, however, the alliance has been weakening in terms of security cooperation, diplomatic synergy, and economic and cultural ties.

This research investigates the development of the Japan-U.S. alliance since then end of the Cold War from a relative perspective, and endeavors to explain its paradoxical trends by analyzing the conflict between existing alliance arrangements, the evolving international system, and both allies' changing expectations. This paper is divided into five sections. Signs of the relative weakening of the alliance are discussed in the first three sections, covering dimensions of security cooperation, diplomatic synergy, and economic and cultural ties. Then driving forces of the paradoxical trends are examined in the context of the changing nature of power in global affairs. In the end, this paper explores future development of the alliance with emphasis on changing ideas.

Decreasing Marginal Utility of Security Cooperation

Undoubtedly, security cooperation is the most significant dimension of the Japan-U.S. alliance. The U.S. sees its alliance with Japan as an indispensable juncture in its global alliance networks, and Japan takes the alliance as the bedrock of its diplomacy. (MoFA 2009) However, in the

post-Cold War era with the evolving balance of power, pluralizing actors in international affairs, and emerging non-traditional treats, the adjustment of the alliance's security arrangements has become a complicated issue. The Japan-U.S. alliance has been under transformation rather than consolidation, during the process of which its marginal utility has been decreasing.

First, since the end of the Cold War, the growing self-defense ability of Japan has been downplaying the function of the Japan-U.S. alliance as a guarantee of Japan's security.

Japanese people somewhat have the instinct that they should not rely on the U.S., though there is no anti-Americanism in the political sense, there has always existed some kind of "anti-American atmosphere" or "anti-American feelings", and the resolution to promote Japan's self-defense ability never ceases in the postwar years.(Nakayama 2011) In Japan's 1995, 2004, 2010 and 2013 National Defense Program Guidelines, the section "Japan's Own Efforts" is always listed before contents related to the Japan-U.S. alliance. If the alliance is seen as the framework of Japan's defense policy, Japan's self-defense should be seen as the substance.

Since the end of the Cold War, Japan has been endeavored to aggrandize its military. Japan's military power is already substantial and it has the capacity to make it even more so.(Menon 2007, p. 113) According to the statistics in its defense guidelines, although the scale of Japan's military forces has been slightly shrinking, advanced weapons and equipment it possesses, including the anti-missile system, have been developing at a steady speed; in terms of defense strategy, Japan has been distributing more and more resources to maritime and air forces than ground forces. Since its defense budget is strictly constrained by its fiscal conditions, Japan pays more attention to quality and efficiency in its military building-up.(Maeda 2010) This matches the strategy to build a Dynamic Joint Defense Force as proposed in the 2013 National Defense Program Guidelines. Moreover, Japan has always been among the top in the world regarding its military industry and intelligence capabilities. According to Chinese observers, Japan already has the ability to manufacture nuclear weapons in terms of technology,(Guo 2005) therefore its potential of military growth should not be underestimated despite current constrains.

In the light of the increasing self-defense ability of Japan, the efficiency of the Japan-U.S. alliance seems doubtful. When faced with traditional threats, the alliance serves as a deterrent, and does not seem to be more effective than Japan's self-defense. As a result of the global posture adjustment, the U.S. forces in Japan have been hollowed, and deficiencies can be observed with regards to budget, personnel, and equipment, so the era to rely on the U.S. for Japan's security may have gone.

In a similar vein, the issue of host nation support and related problems have raised serious questions about the efficiency of the Japan-U.S. alliance. While Japan's financial contribution continues at a high level, (MoD 2011) there have been long-existing opposing arguments. It is not entirely justifiable in the legal sense. (Akamine 2006, Terashima 2010) What is more, the U.S. pays high rent for using Philippine military bases; in contrast, Japanese bases are used by the U.S. at no expense, with extra Japanese budgetary subsidies, and are used for purposes other than the defense of Japan as well: compared with the alliances the U.S. has with other countries, the U.S. takes much more advantage of the Japan-U.S. one. (Kubo 2011) Against the background of the relatively declining U.S. power and substantially shrinking defense budget, the U.S. has a pressing demand for burden sharing among allies, of which none will matter more than Japan. (Smith 2012) The U.S. keeps urging for more Japanese responsibility in the alliance, imposing large amounts of military costs on Japan in the name of imbalanced alliance obligations, even though Japan has been enlarging its role in bilateral military cooperation. (Fukuda 2006) In this sense, it is not groundless to argue that the so-called alliance can be condensed to three points: the U.S. uses Japanese military bases, cooperation between the Self Defense Forces of Japan and the U.S. forces, and Japan providing financial support for the U.S. forces in Japan. (Kaneko 2011) Now Japan has less to worry about being abandoned by the U.S, yet as the "alliance dilemma" describes, the risk of Japan being entrapped in unnecessary alliance responsibilities rises. (Green 2002, Schoff 2007)

Second, the constraints put by the Japan-U.S. alliance on Japan's military development and the increase of Japan's military power form an essential conflict which underlies the security cooperation between Japan and the U.S. Throughout the post-Cold War decades, Japan has been using the Japan-U.S. alliance as the major approach to enhance its military capabilities, in

consideration of its constitutional constraints and domestic atmosphere. Yet it should not be forgotten that the Japan-U.S. is also endowed with the “cork in the bottle” mission, in the sense that the U.S. reassures Japan’s neighbors that Japan’s military capabilities would be kept in check. Although the U.S. has been tacitly encouraging Japan’s military aggrandizement since the beginning of the 21st century, it is more tactic than strategic. The U.S. has gone from Japan “bashing” and Japan “passing” to Japan “surpassing” as Tokyo in recent years has generally not only met but exceeded Washington’s expectations.(Cossa and Glosserman 2005) After all, it is not in the best interest of the U.S. to support Japan in radical constitutional reform and accelerated military development. A rare admonition from the U.S. after Prime Minister Abe’s visit to the Yasukuni Shrine in 2013 may be seen as a reminder of the U.S.’s bottom lines. In other words, the Japan-U.S. alliance imposes an invisible ceiling on Japan’s military build-up: the higher level Japan’s self-defense ability reaches, the nearer it is to the ceiling, and the smaller the marginal utility of the alliance becomes as a vehicle for Japan’s military build-up. It is Japan’s grand strategy to balance between cooperation with the U.S. and independence.(Samuels 2007) The paradox is Japanese policies that suggest the strengthening of the alliance are, in fact, laying the groundwork for its demise.(Menon 2007, pp. 122-123)

Third, the emerging regional security network, in place of the old hub and spoke framework, downplays the importance of the Japan-U.S. alliance in the relative sense.

In recent years, the U.S. has been signing new treaties and reinforcing existing ones to cooperate with its allies and friends in the Asia-Pacific region, enriching its regional cooperation network. Japan has been an active participant of this process, establishing security cooperation frameworks with India, Australia, Singapore, Thailand, and the Philippines. In the meantime, various measures have been taken to strengthen the Japan-Korea-U.S. cooperation framework, which was initiated to address the nuclear problem in the Korean Peninsula. Japanese scholars tend to dub the trilateral or multilateral joint trainings, exercises and dialogues “Japan-U.S.+ α ” new form of security cooperation. Although held to be evidence of alliance strengthening by many scholars, the expansion of these networks in fact reflects the decreasing significance of the Japan-U.S. alliance in the U.S. global strategy.

Under close scrutiny, the regional cooperation network was initiated and led by the U.S.; it serves the strategic needs of the U.S., and should not be treated as a natural extension of the Japan-U.S. alliance. In 2006, then U.S. Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld mentioned, there had been an expanding network of security cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region, both bilaterally and multilaterally, and the United States saw it as a welcome shift.(Rumsfeld 2006) During the 2008 Shangri-La Dialogue, then Secretary of Defense Gates commented on the idea of a “new security architecture” in Asia, expressing the U.S.’s interest in institutionalizing various forums to deal with region-specific problems, participating in their evolution, and continuing to depend on its time-tested Asian alliance architecture.(Gates 2008) His speech in the 2009 Shangri-La Dialogue further developed this idea. He argued that it was necessary to overcome the conventions and habits of the Cold War, which referred to the security architecture in Asia that mostly reflected a “hub and spokes” model, with the U.S. as the “hub” and the “spokes” representing a series of bilateral alliances with other countries that did not necessarily cooperate much with each other.(Gates 2009) According to Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, the ultimate goal of the U.S. in the region is to encourage allies to work together to design the next generation of platforms.(Hagel 2013) It is not difficult to tell that the U.S. plays a dominant role in the agenda of the Asia-Pacific regional cooperation network. In another word, the network is a product of the U.S. initiative; the Japan-U.S. alliance is just one of its junctures, not its axis. It is easy to draw the conclusion from the U.S.’s simultaneous emphasis of the new regional cooperation network and existing alliance relationships that at present the new regional cooperation network is only supplementary to traditional security arrangements. Japan’s function in the U.S. global strategy will be more arguable if the new network is attached with more significance. In the 2011 Shangri-La dialogue, then Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld talked about the U.S. global posture adjustment, including the enhancement of the U.S. presence in Southeast Asia and into the Indian Ocean.(Gates 2011) When addressing the ASEAN Defense Ministers, then Secretary of Defense Panetta claimed that the ASEAN has been the driving force behind Asia’s growing regional architecture for decades.(Panetta 2011) Thus, the orient and structure of the new regional cooperation network still remain an open question.

Fourth, the military cooperation under the alliance framework is adjusted to be more interventional than defensive, which worries certain countries.

The mission of Japan's military is no longer simply the defense of the home islands against a direct attack, but also enhancing regional stability in Asia-Pacific.(Katzenstein and Okawara 2002) As stated in alliance declarations over the decades, external goals of the Japan-U.S. alliance have been broadening since the end of the Cold War, and global goals are becoming more flaring than regional ones. From the Japanese perspective, the alliance is a convenient approach to gain the international influence it believes it deserves; in the U.S. eyes, the alliance is a useful vehicle to enhance its global strategy.

In addition, Japanese leaders have made ambitious attempts to uphold the alliance as a global common good,(MoFA 2003, Fukuda 2008) which is far from materialized. Although the alliance has made joint interventional actions in various parts of the world since the "War on Terror" started, these moves have always been controversial.

To make the Japan-U.S. alliance more welcome in the Asia-Pacific region, neighboring countries' recognition of its contribution to regional security is indispensable. Unfortunately, countries in the Asia-Pacific region, especially China, still hold misgivings about the alliance. From the Chinese perspective, the Japan-U.S. alliance is an outdated form of international relations, which represents a strong legacy of the Cold War mentality.(Interviews 2013) Alliance theorists tend to see alliance as "against specific other states, whether or not these others are explicitly identified".(Snyder 1990) Chinese IR elites generally believe the Japan-U.S. alliance has been strategically directed at China since the mid-1990s and adds to regional tensions, while North Korea is only a tactic and short-term target, or merely rhetoric.(Interviews 2013)

Reducing Motives for Diplomatic Synergy

The Japan-U.S. alliance is an alliance based on common values of free market, democracy, human rights and the rule of law,(U.S. and Japan 1960) with the Japan-U.S. Security Arrangements as its core,(MoFA 2009) and security, economy and cultural and people-to-people exchanges as three underpinning pillars.(MoFA 2011) Nevertheless, there has always been a tendency of security issues to overwhelm everything else,(Akira 1995) and

most of the attention of practitioners and scholars is paid to the security domain. In the diplomatic arena, Japan is largely seen as a loyal follower of the U.S. In recent decades, the situation seems to be changing as the U.S. tried to participate directly into Asian affairs, and Japan explored more ways to exert international influence independently.

First, delayed policy consensus between Japan and the U.S. shows that the diplomatic efficiency of the alliance has been decreasing.

The world was political-economic consistent during the Cold War, (Yamamoto 2011) two camps divided not only political and military allies and enemies but also economic and cultural friends and rivalries, i.e. diplomatic space of any country was limited. In this sense, it had been relatively easy to reach consensus within partners, which also explained the leader-follower relationship between the U.S. and Japan. Globalization, however, brought about profound changes to world affairs: economic interdependence quickly spilt over to other aspects of international relations, making the world more integrated in a way that had never been experienced by the human society. By this token, national interests are diversified, as well as diplomatic choices available for individual states. It is therefore understandable that it takes longer time than before for Japan and the U.S. to reach policy solutions that are acceptable to both. For instance, it took years for the partners to agree on a plan to relocate the Futenma marine base. Similarly, Japan hesitated almost four years, in spite of repeated invitations and urges from the U.S., before it finally decided to join the Trans-Pacific Partnership negotiations in mid-2013.

This paper argues against two different types of misunderstandings about the nature of the Japan-U.S. alliance. One sees the alliance as purely military, ignoring significant fields of cooperation, the other simplifies the relationship as “the U.S. dominates, Japan follows”, failing to acknowledge changes of the nature of international affairs and the adjustments of the alliance since the end of the Cold War. The alliance should be viewed with updated understanding of the world and flexible perspectives, and the complexity of alliance collaboration should be fully taken into account.

Caveats are needed here. This paper is not arguing that the ability of the alliance to coordinate and compromise has been weakened; instead, it compares the policy making environments for the alliance during and after the Cold War, and concludes that the decision making process has been

considerably prolonged due to complicated situations and diversified interests.

Second, the U.S. shows a more proactive posture and is willing to participate more and directly in Asian affairs to consolidate its leadership.

The relative decline of the Japan-U.S. alliance's influence in the Asia-Pacific region is gradual, and has been accelerated since the Global Financial Crisis. In 2008, then Secretary of Defense Gates emphasized that the U.S. was a "resident power" in Asia-Pacific,(Gates 2008) the meaning of which has been substantiated by later diplomatic discourses. In 2011, then Secretary of States Clinton confirmed that the U.S. was a resident power in Asia, not only a diplomatic or military power, but a resident economic power; and it was here to stay.(Clinton 2011) The U.S. returned to Asia in recent years, and its statement was underscored by the significant growth in the breadth and intensity of its engagement in Asia, even at a time of economic distress at home and two major military campaigns ongoing in Iraq and Afghanistan.(Gates 2011)

Ties between the U.S. and regional powers except Japan have also been strengthening during the post-Cold War years. Sino-U.S. relations are featured by both competition and cooperation. They have established more than sixty dialogue frameworks covering various issues.(Yang 2012) The U.S. diplomatic discourses concerning China has been changing too, from "we now need to encourage China to become a responsible stakeholder in the international system", (Zoellick 2005) to "the relationship between the United States and China will shape the 21st century".(Obama 2009) In the light of this, it is not groundless to worry that the Japan-U.S. relationship is only alliance in name, and China has surpassed Japan to be the priority of the U.S. diplomacy. (Komori 2010) In a similar vein, the U.S. always attaches great importance to its cooperation with India. In 2010, President Obama claimed that the relationship between the U.S. and India would be one of the defining partnerships of the 21st century.(Obama 2010) Moreover, the U.S. also sees the ASEAN as a key partner. It joined the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia in 2009, participates actively in regional forums, and intervenes in South China Sea issues. The Trans -Pacific Partnership is, apparently, another approach to strengthen diplomatic ties. Needless to say, the U.S. plays a significant role also in addressing the North Korea nuclear issues, within the Six Party Talks framework or not.

All these contributed to the relative decrease of the Japan-U.S. alliance's diplomatic efficiency. The direct participation of the U.S. in regional affairs undoubtedly marginalizes the alliance which is largely seen as an instrument of the U.S. power. In addition, a growing percentage of the U.S.'s diplomatic resources are distributed to relations with regional powers, especially China and the ASEAN, rendering Japan less crucial in the U.S. global strategy. That then Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld mentioned South Korea before Japan when naming traditional allies in 2006, (Rumsfeld 2006) and then Secretary of States Clinton did the same in 2010, (Clinton 2010) also made Japanese observers somewhat alerted.

Third, Japan has been exploring its diplomatic space which matches its own advantages and strategy, but does not necessarily match that of the U.S.

Official Developmental Assistant (ODA) counts as one of the most remarkable fields of Japan's diplomatic achievements during the post-war years. It started shortly after the end of the Second World War, its scale expanding along with Japan's economic miracle since the 1970s, and Japan remained the world No.1 donator throughout the 1990s. In the 21st century, however, the Japanese economy would not be able to afford ODA as much as in the past. Therefore, Japan adjusted its ODA policy. The new ODA Guidelines in 2003 emphasized ODA's strategic effects, flexibility, transparency, and efficiency, and its function of enhancing international communication and strengthening Japan's stances on world affairs. In 2010, the Japanese Foreign Ministry published a report on ODA reform which was titled "Enhancing Enlightened National Interest", clearly linking ODA with diplomatic goals and introducing the idea of "strategic and effective aid". (MoFA 2010) Conclusions can be drawn that Japan's ODA policy has been evolving towards a pragmatic direction since the end of the Cold War. While aiming to reduce poverty, promote peace, and support growth, Japan's ODA policy is also closely associated with its energy strategy and technological advantages.

As is known to all, Japan suffers from lack of energy. In 2010, its energy self-efficiency was only 4.4% / 19.5% (excluding / including nuclear energy), and fossil energy which took up 81% of Japan's energy needs relied heavily on marine imports. (METI 2013, pp. 103-104) This explains why Japan often takes initiatives on issues concerning energy-rich regions, global energy governance, and sealane security.

In addition to domestic legal measures and constructive participation in frameworks derived from the ASEAN and the G8, Japan has been leading the international cooperation centered on maritime security and the freedom of navigation. In 2001, then Prime Minister Koizumi proposed a regional cooperation mechanism on maritime security. On this basis, the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP) was signed in 2004, and the mechanism has been functioning well since it came into effect in 2006.

Environment and climate change is another category of issues to which Japan devotes much diplomatic efforts. Japan is among the top in the world in terms of its green technology, emphasis on new energy, and relevant legislations and policies. It contributed greatly to the 1997 Kyoto Protocol and continued its endeavors despite the U.S. withdrawal in 2001. Japan has always been a constructive advocate of global environment governance. Before the first commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol (2008-2012) expired, Japan had proposed new frameworks which called for equal responsibilities among developed and developing countries. Having declared withdrawal from the second commitment period, Japan enhances bilateral cooperation, using its technological advantages as an alternative, so its endeavors in the environment field do not come to a halt due to unsatisfactory economic performance.

Tapping into its own advantages, Japan does not synchronize its foreign policies with that of the U.S., but explores independent and efficient approaches to ensure its national interests. Nevertheless, this statement is confined by the following conditions. Firstly, issues on which Japan develops independent policies are those related to its crucial interests. Secondly, Japan's advantages in relevant areas facilitate its diplomacy. Thirdly, most of these issues fall into the low-politics category, and are not sensitive topics to most of other countries. Last but not least, these attempts of independent diplomatic approaches observed in Japanese foreign policies are not overwhelming. Tokyo's outreach under Abe has centered on key democracies that also enjoy close relations with the U.S. (Kliman and Twining 2014). Japan's diplomacy is still coordinated with the framework of the Japan-U.S. alliance, and synergy is normal between the two partners when it comes to foreign policies concerning important issues.

Economic and Social Ties outside the Alliance Structure

In the economic and cultural domain, the Japan-U.S. alliance does communicate and collaborate, but does not show many differences from other bilateral relationships. When scholars study economic and cultural relations between Japan and the U.S., they tend to use totally different discourses from that commonly employed in alliance-related discussions, which narrows the alliance to the security dimension in spite of repeated claims to adjust the alliance towards a comprehensive one.

First, cooperation between Japan and the U.S. is still issue-driven, which does not distinguish the Japan-U.S. alliance from non-alliance cooperation in essence.

In terms of economic cooperation, the Japan-U.S. alliance has developed multi-level dialogue frameworks under which practitioners address various issues. In terms of cultural and personnel exchanges, various taskforces have been established under the framework of the Japan-U.S. Conference on Cultural and Educational Interchange (CULCON). This kind of cooperation is issue-specific and flexible, but does not show sharp distinction from non-alliance bilateral economic and cultural interactions. It is the lack of crisis consciousness- the perverse spirit of mutual self-congratulation- that pervades U.S.-Japan relations today. (Calder 2009, p. 12)

Second, the institutionalization process of the economic and cultural cooperation is slower than similar processes between Japan/U.S. and other countries.

For example, the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue started from 2009, integrating and developing existing mechanisms. In 2010, the U.S.-China High-Level Consultation on People-to-People Exchange was established, and programs including the “100,000 Strong Initiative” and the U.S.-China Women’s Leadership Exchange and Dialogue were started. During the third round of the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue, the U.S. also set up plans to simplify visa processing to facilitate bilateral personnel exchanges. The annual U.S.-India Strategic Dialogue was also started in 2010, covering many issues in the economic and cultural domain. Japan, similarly, has been institutionalizing its cooperation with other countries at a high speed. The Japan-China High Level Economic Dialogue started since 2007. The 21st Century East-Asia Youth Exchange Program proposed by then Prime Minister Abe in 2007 paved way for more personnel

exchanges with neighboring countries. Moreover, the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement between Japan and the Republic of India was signed in 2011 to outline further cooperation. India also simplified visa processing for Japanese citizens to promote personnel exchanges.

Third, internal interaction between the two alliance partners should be further strengthened.

Regarding economic relations, the interdependence between Japan / the U.S. and emerging markets are deepening, yet the interdependence between Japan and the U.S. is relatively decreasing. China took up 7.73% of U.S. exports and 19.42% of U.S. imports in 2013, growing from 1.66% and 4.83% in 1992; in contrast, Japan's percentage in U.S. exports and imports declined from 10.67% and 18.29% in 1992 to 4.13% and 6.11% in 2013.(UnitedStatesCensusBureau 2014) In Japan's trade, China's percentage grew from 3.51% of exports and 7.26% of imports in 1992 to 18.05% and 21.27% in 2012; in contrast, the U.S. percentage shrank from 28.18% of exports and 22.43% of imports to 17.55% and 8.60%.(SBJ 2014, SBJ 2014) This renders the alliance partners less important in each other's economic strategies.

Regarding cultural and personnel exchanges, the planned scale of Japan-U.S. exchanges are less than those proposed between Japan / the U.S. and other countries. The network dimension of the U.S.-Japan alliance has fallen into a quiet crisis since around 2005.(Calder 2009, p.24, p.28, pp. 115-133) After all these decades of collaboration, Japan and the U.S. haven't developed regular, large-scale, and multi-level personnel exchanging frameworks in the alliance structure, and cultural and personnel relations are largely left to be governed by the civil society.

In summary, since the end of the Cold War, the efficiency of the Japan-U.S. alliance has been weakening compared with the alliance itself during the Cold War and bilateral relations between Japan / the U.S. and third parties since the 1990s.

Table 1 Paradoxical Trends of the Post-Cold War Japan-U.S. Alliance

| Domain | Absolute trend | Relative trend |
|--------|----------------|----------------|
|--------|----------------|----------------|

| | | | | |
|---------------------|--|---|--|--|
| Security | Broadening scope and deepening cooperation | Traditional security functions weaken | Downplayed in the new regional cooperation networks centered on the U.S. | |
| Diplomacy | | Difficulty in reaching consensus, the U.S.'s direct participation in regional affairs, and Japan's independent diplomatic initiatives | | |
| Economy and culture | | | Issue-driven cooperation, slow institutionalization, and relatively decreasing interdependence | |
| Reference | Japan-U.S. alliance during the Cold War | Relations between the U.S. and its allies and friends | Other bilateral relations | |

Driving Forces of the Post-Cold War Japan-U.S. Alliance

The paradoxical trends of the alliance development reveal the efforts of the U.S. and Japan to employ the alliance as an instrument of power projection, and the declining efficiency of such attempts, which lie in the gap between a rapidly changing world and gradually adjusting perceptions of related parties.

Since the end of the Cold War, especially in the 21st century, the world balance of power has been changing greatly. The U.S. has been in relative power decline and in the process of losing its absolute advantage in the international system. This forms the strategic context of the development of the Japan-U.S. alliance and the perceptions about it.

First, the Japan-U.S. alliance remains indispensable to the strategies of the U.S. and Japan, but cannot totally satisfy either. This is why both the U.S. and Japan are striving for diversification in their military, diplomatic, economic and social ties with other countries in the Asia-Pacific region, while adjusting and enhancing cooperation within the alliance.

Military build-up is part of Japan's national strategy of normalization. Obstacles exist in public opinions both internationally, from countries that were invaded by Japan, and domestically. The arrangements of the alliance, however, allow Japan to maneuver within its constitutional constraints. The "War on Terror" served more as a political pretext for Japan to legitimize long-planned changes in military security policy that were often only marginally related to the U.S.'s anti-terrorism agenda. (Hughes 2007) Even

though there has been an opposite voice calling for detachment from the U.S., opinions of Japanese IR elites differ only in means, not in ends, all sharing a strong desire for military aggrandizement. Current situations suggest no better way to achieve this goal than to take advantage of its relationship with the U.S., and this explains why “Japan locks itself into the U.S.-Japan alliance”.(Hughes 2004, pp. 139-147) In the diplomatic field, however, Japan cannot become a regional leader by merely following the U.S., and two countries also have conflicting economic interests.

From the U.S. perspective, it needs a strong Japan no less than Japan needs a strong U.S.(Armitage and Nye 2012) Japan is geographically the front line of the U.S. global posture that the U.S. cannot afford to lose. Guaranteeing its right to use Japanese military bases at low cost is among the priorities of U.S. policies in Asia. In addition, the U.S. expects responsibility sharing among allies, but does not want an aggressive Japan that worries other countries including the U.S. itself. The U.S. faces tough challenges in maintaining the U.S.-Japan alliance in a form that reassures both Japan and its neighbors.(Christensen 1999) As argued above, the diplomatic efficiency of the Japan-U.S. alliance is questionable, especially in the post-Cold War context of China’s rise.

Second, mutual perceptions of Japan/U.S. and the targets of the alliance have transformed from the traditional rivalry mentality to less confrontational way of thinking, shaping their way of interaction into an oxymoron. After the collapse of the USSR, “containment of China” is usually read into the context despite the gingerly wording in the alliance’s documents. Yet the post-Cold War world is more complicated than a clear-cut distinction of enemy or ally. For both Japan and the U.S., China is not a security threat in the traditional sense: China poses competition for regional leadership, obstacles for certain trade and intervention policies, but possible sources of support in some issues as well, including recovery from the Global Financial Crisis and countering terrorism. This explains the will to cooperate between the Japan-U.S. alliance and China, coexisting with deep-rooted mistrust. To some extent, alliance has transformed from “balance of power” to “management of power”.(Thalakada 2009)

Third, the development of the alliance of the post-Cold War years has a clear “path-dependent” color. The Japan-U.S. alliance is not an alliance on paper, but an alliance with assets.(Michishita 2014) There are military bases and

related facilities, much integrated military R&D and arms trade, all of which stand as the starting point of further policy adjustment. Admittedly, the post-Cold War development of the Japan-U.S. alliance, especially its redefinition in the latter half of the 1990s, is a deliberate choice, but one that is based on existing alliance arrangements.

In summary, the marginal gain of further strengthening the Japan-U.S. alliance in the post-Cold War years, though remaining positive, has been decreasing for both countries. The absolute strengthening and relative weakening of the alliance are, in essence, the decline of its efficiency as a means of power. This is due to changes of international relations in both material and ideational terms.

Towards an “unlocked alliance”

The disadvantage for Japan to constrain itself within the alliance is self-evident. On the one hand, the Japan-U.S. alliance is not necessarily the most economical way for Japan to boost its military capabilities. On the other hand, Japan needs supplements to the alliance for its pursuit for regional leadership and greater global influence, including closer bilateral ties with regional countries and multilateral diplomacy. It is a possibility for Japan to consider a hedging strategy against the U.S. There are inveterate conflicts of interests between Japan and the U.S. despite their alliance, and Japan could hedge between the U.S. and other powers including China and Russia on specific issues. Unfortunately, sometimes Japan keeps too close to the U.S. in terms of foreign policies and does not attach as much importance to its relations with Asia countries, as if it does not belong to Asia at all. (Tay 2010, p. 59) This opinion ignores the policy flexibility of Japan and sees Japan as merely a subordinate of the U.S. In this vein, Asia-Pacific countries would prefer bilateral approaches with the U.S. rather than alliance approaches, and underestimate the space of Japan’s maneuver.

Less salient is the inability on the part of U.S. policy makers to conceive of Japan differently. (Taylor 2011) In the sense that the U.S. continues to hold Japan as the bedrock of its Asia-Pacific strategy, it is narrowing down its own policy choices when dealing with China. Since the end of the Cold War, the competitive yet cooperative relationship between the U.S. and China has been featured with complexity and uncertainty. As the U.S. and China endeavor to strengthen their economic and cultural ties while restricting the

other through international institutions and multilateral arrangements, reciprocal hedging between the U.S. and China has increased remarkably. When tensions amount between China and Japan, as happened since the end of the 2000s, Sino-U.S. relationship is entrapped and the U.S. loses policy flexibility as Japan's ally.

A rigid Japan-U.S. alliance with little policy flexibility, in reality or as perceived, is worrisome for concerned parties, especially China. Seeing the Japan-U.S. relationship as somewhat subordinate to the U.S.-China relationship, (Shi 2000) Chinese foreign policy elites prefer bilateral approaches rather than direct interaction with the alliance as a whole, and treat the U.S. as the key of Sino-U.S. as well as Sino-Japan relations. This results in China having too much patience for the U.S. and too little for Japan. (Liu 2013) If countries in the Asia-Pacific region view the alliance as a rigid military arrangement instead of a flexible diplomatic instrument and make foreign policies accordingly, it may in turn reinforce the military nature and confrontational aspect of the alliance. It is an important factor in regional affairs whether China's political leadership would be able to restrain the virulent nationalist feeling that has surfaced in relation to both the U.S. and Japan. (Buszynski 2011)

All related parties should cooperate to shape the Japan-U.S. alliance into a public good which serves not only the U.S. and its allies, but also other countries in the region. The first step is to allow the idea of an unlocked alliance into policy discussions. It is easier to stay inactive, lap into the vicious circle of distrust and confrontation, and accuse others of provocation and lack of sincerity. But changes of the perspectives of others are always enabled through one's own behaviors, and at a price.

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