



## JAPAN IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA: RESTRICTED YET STRATEGIC?

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### *Abstrak*

*Artikel ini bertujuan untuk menjawab bagaimana Jepang menanggapi meningkatnya ketegasan Cina di Laut Cina Selatan di tengah keterbatasan proyeksi kekuatannya. Postur keamanan Jepang yang seperti 'ditakdirkan' untuk memiliki karakter pasifis, membuat Jepang hanya dilengkapi dengan kemampuan defensif yang cenderung minimum. Bersamaan dengan itu, Cina juga terus memanfaatkan pengaruhnya untuk menduduki Laut Cina Selatan secara agresif dan menciptakan ancaman bagi Jepang. Untuk itu metode analisis naratif digunakan untuk menganalisis rangkaian fenomena berdasarkan kerangka teori keseimbangan ancaman Walt. Hasil studi menjelaskan bahwa pertimbangan Jepang untuk menyeimbangkan melawan Cina alih-alih ikut-ikutan melalui pemahaman tingkat ancaman dan prasyarat aliansi Cina agar cukup seimbang. Oleh karena itu, strategi penyeimbangan eksternal dengan Amerika Serikat dan negara-negara Asia Tenggara tampaknya menjadi langkah strategis Jepang melawan China.*

**Kata Kunci:** *aliansi, balancing, Cina, Jepang, Laut Cina Selatan*

### **Abstract**

This article aims to answer how Japan responds to China's increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea amidst the limitations of its power projection. Japan's security posture is like 'destined' to have a pacifist character, making Japan only equipped with defensive capabilities that tend to be minimal. At the same time, China also continues to use its influence to aggressively occupy the South China Sea and create threats to Japan. For this reason, the narrative analysis method is used to analyze a series of phenomena based on the framework of Walt's threat balance theory. The results of the study explain that Japan's considerations for balancing against China instead of joining in through understanding the level of threat and the prerequisites for China's alliance are quite balanced. Therefore, the external balancing strategy with the United States and Southeast Asian countries seems to be Japan's strategic move against China.

**Keywords:** alliance, balancing, China, Japan, South China Sea

## Introduction

The longstanding pacifist identity pursued by Japan is typically a double-edged sword. It has helped the nation reintegrate with its neighboring countries after its colonization, and it also limits the capacity to insulate its security. Under the Peace Constitution, there are two significant contentions on Japan's ability to secure its nation while maintaining its relevance in the international sphere: disengaging from direct war and remaining defensive in its military posture. The Constitution acts as a safety net and assurance of a non-aggressive Japan for neighboring countries while enhancing its regional profile, economic development, soft power, influence, and acceptance (Japan Ministry of Defense, 2020).

Although Japan's reintegration into the international sphere has been highly rewarded for its pacifist commitment, the other sword's edge proves its restrictions, including contending security threats. Under the Abe government, the leniency of the pacifist identity has loosened to a bare minimum collective self-defense along with its allies. However, basic policies embedded in its National Security Strategy (NSS) as the core defense value remain exclusively defense-oriented and non-militaristic through its policies, non-nuclear principles, and civilian control (Japan Ministry of Defense, 2020). The principles translate to a comparatively weaker military posture from neighboring countries that Japan does not possess nuclear submarines or aircraft, intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), long-range strategic bombers, and aircraft carriers. The position becomes even more difficult upon public perception as Japan seemed 'destined' over such identity hence, foreign involvements are mostly criticized.

It would be logical to assume that Japan has a challenging task in mitigating threats amid the thin security layer, including matters related to China in the South China Sea (SCS). The sea infamous for shaping the power politics in the Indo-Pacific has constantly undergone a competitive situation. It is rooted in China's increasing assertiveness through militarization, land reclamation, and cross-Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) operations. It is interesting to understand Japan's position in the dynamics, especially when Japan does not claim any inch in the seas. The historical rivalry between the two countries has marked precautions upon Japanese decision-makers; the SCS acts as a platform to obtain economic, security, and political leverage (Yee & Storey, 2002). However, China has shown an increasing military budget of over \$100 billion, equivalent to a 74% increase during Abe's governance alone

(World Bank, 2020). Equipped with its restrictions, perhaps Japan needs to figure out measures preventing its interests from being abducted and ensuring freedom of navigation.

Discourses on Japan's approach to the SCS have brought some attention and debate among scholars. Vidal and Pelegrin (I Vidal & Pelegrín, 2018) and Hornung (Hornung, 2014) highlighted Japan's behavior to be dominantly hedging since 2010. Under the definition of hedging, which includes both cooperative and competitive policies, the dependency in the economic sector presumes a cooperative aspect in the relationship. Hence, despite the eruption of conflicts about territorial disputes, the existing economic cooperation still counts.

Simultaneously, Liff (Liff, 2019) and Koga (Koga, 2016) have debunked previous claims, especially in understanding the changing dynamics in the region and the bilateral relationship. Although economic relations are present, they can be disregarded as Japan has shown efforts to mitigate its dependency and diverted its investments to Southeast Asia. Instead, Liff and Koga argued on Japan's reinforced balancing towards China's increasing capabilities through developing the Japan-US security alliance and bolstering its capabilities.

Furthermore, Hatakeyama (Hatakeyama, 2019) has also made an interesting analysis based on the middle power strategy. Japan has been institutionally active and pursuing rules-based order in ensuring the region's stability –including in the SCS. Essentially, Hatakeyama wrapped up Japan's traditional approach by reinforcing bilateral dialogues, extra-territorial multilateral frameworks, and assisting littoral states. Thus, the analysis attempts to participate in the discussion by supporting the balancing argument.

Amidst debate between scholars, this paper argues upon the balance of threat basis, which is sufficient to explore other layers of rationale, such as the aggressive intention from the source of threat and why not undertake the bandwagoning approach. Understanding the cloudy relationship between Japan and China, the calculus of aggregate power will consistently lead to a balancing argument, especially with Japan's restrictions. What can be delivered through this analysis is perhaps the implication of China's growing assertiveness toward-Japan's decision-making.

Acknowledging the urgency to secure and mitigate China's unilateral claims in the SCS, it is imperative how Japan has been dilemmatic and weak in response. Japan's restrictions pose the inability to confront the region directly, yet its involvement alone in a cross-border conflict has been highly hissed. Previous scholars have well identified the gravity of such a

dilemma, whether Japan has been performing a hedging, balancing, or traditional strategy, in which everyone seemed to understand the concurring relationship of the two. There shall be an additional parameter to calculate these strategies, especially in a specific case context. Hence, this article aims to answer how Japan responds to China's growing assertiveness in the SCS amid its power projection limitations? Japan essentially performed a balancing strategy with its primary and additional counterparts involved in the conflict. Utilizing a balance of threat theory, this paper is directed to explain China's threat level in the SCS and Japan's balancing attempt.

The first sub-section on Walt's balance of threat theory becomes the tool to analyze this article. Under this theory, the following sub-section elaborates on the perception of threat and external balancing measures –which directly concludes the decision of strategy to be either balancing or bandwagoning.

### **The Balance of Threat Theory**

For long enough, the regional order in Indo-Pacific has been gravitating around the rise of China and United States (US) contention. China has been acting highly assertive and aggressive– showcasing the degree of disappointment in the system, especially in the SCS case. Such behavior causes disruption and distrust among states and creates uncertainty, especially from 2012 to 2020. Thus, Japan which has been considerably neutral yet owns deep interests in the SCS, shall face the dilemma of responding reasonably. Walt's balance of threat theory then answers the dilemma and further explains the rationale behind Japan's balancing strategy with the US and possibly The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) counterparts.

Walt emphasizes threat perception and alliance formation, which typically issues how states respond to threat-balancing or bandwagoning. The tool attempts to debunk the original balancing assumption proposed by realists, where Walt believes that states tend to balance against threat instead of power. From the realists' perspective, the definition of powers is limited to aggregate power with offensive decision-making capabilities (Walt, 1987). Instead, Walt provided four factors determining the source's threat level: aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive power, and aggressive intention.

The relations between threat perception and the four factors are directly proportional – meaning, the larger aggregate power, offensive power, and aggressive intention followed by the closer geographic proximity imply the greater perception of threat. Firstly, aggregate power refers to the total resources of a state, such as industry and military capabilities, technology, and population. The presence of a strong aggregate power can be seen as a gift to reward or punish nations with the trade-off of a high perception of threat. Furthermore, the ability of a source of threat to project its power lies in geographic proximity. It is pretty self-explanatory where states see closer oppositions as highly threatening. However, states are most likely to engage in an alliance based on this factor. Thirdly, identifying offensive power can be concluded as the conjoin of the previous factors. Unlike aggregate power, offensive power can directly harm one's sovereignty or territorial integrity. Aggregate power becomes offensive if the factors to calculate offense-defense relative advantage are discovered. The last and main contribution from the balance of threat theory is aggressive intention. The factor can be conversely seen as an aggressive perception on its own, where it is a fundamental element in alliance formation and strategy choices (Walt, 1987).

A thing to note is, either way, smaller states will be the cost of the unalterable aggressiveness. Then, the calculus of the strategy taken shall be based on the lowest cost. A considerably stronger neighbor experiencing existential threat might be leaning to balance. However, it does not close the possibility that weaker states might bandwagon as balancing on their own might be even more costly than aligning with the source. If the source of threat has an inherently high level of threat, the decision depends on the availability of the alliance. The tendency of weaker states to mobilize their resources to balance by themselves is rare. Hence, accommodating the source of threat will most likely happen in conditions where external assistance is not present (Walt, 1987).

Substantially, the confidence of possessing an alliance is supported by effective diplomatic communication and shared interests and/or threats among states. It translates to the likelihood of being protected or whether the alliance provides a larger shelter than the source of threat. Walt identified how alliances specifically to balance threats are based on various forms, primarily how superpowers and regional powers differ. Although both actors seemed to add up the powers within the alliance, the superpowers' motives are to prevent the source's sphere of influence from growing. While regional states often seek foreign assistance in

conditions of active conflicts. Regardless, Walt elaborated when the degree of alliance importance shall be considered, and then there are various efforts to sustain the commitment.

There are three levels of commitment: the highest level marks the point with the most tangible assets, including monetary help, territory, and manpower. The moderate provides or loses diplomatic sacrifices based on formality and intangibility, and the lowest solely acts as a symbolic alliance where none portrays military nor diplomatic sacrifices. These judgments perhaps can be complemented by considering the duration of the alliance. Walt's observation shows that the relationship between commitment and the duration of alliances is directly proportional. Hence, a more lasting commitment mostly favors balancing against the source of threat (Walt, 1987). Superpowers tend to seek allies to diminish the influence and threat of the source of threat, while regional powers have the option to seek external help from superpowers of their neighboring countries. Furthermore, outside of the availability of alliance, the strategy decision also lies in the atmosphere of the situation. If the condition were to be peaceful or in an early conflict stage, bandwagoning might be present after the results of early deterrence appear and vice versa.

### **Research Methods: Narrative Analysis**

This research employs narrative analysis under qualitative research methods to analyze the data. Bryman (Bryman, 2012) explains that this method allows the researcher to focus on sequences of events and make sense of the results of an event. In this case, this method employs to see sequences of events related to Japan's responses and behavior toward China's aggressiveness in the South China sea. This method also considers the issues' complexity, especially with the US and Southeast Asian countries' involvement.

Furthermore, the case study's understanding can be built by interpreting data based on the theoretical framework. This research utilizes the balance of threats theory by Walt to understand Japan's anomaly response towards China, based the analysis on the alliance relationship with great power, in this case, the US.

In order to gain those objectives, this research collected data mainly from government official websites, publications, and statements. This research also uses reports published by international organizations and think tanks to define the dynamics of the phenomenon.

Furthermore, this research also utilizes arguments and data from books, journal articles, and news to complement the primary data.

## **Result and Discussion**

### **China's Level of Threat within Japan's Perspective**

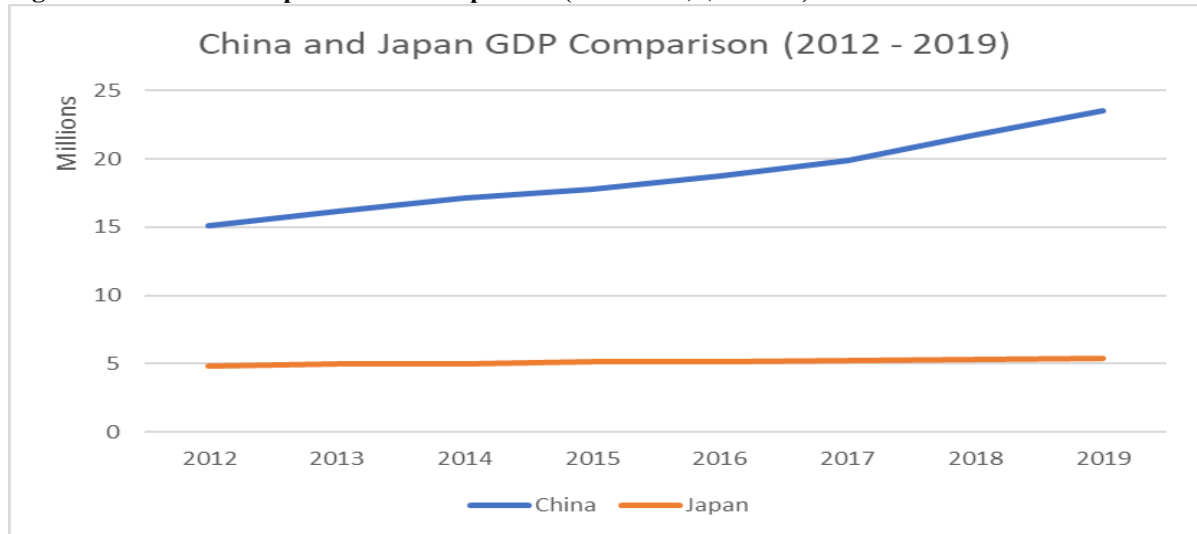
Scenarios of the Japan-China encounters are highly threat accentuated –from China's breach of the international law and Japan's territorial integrity to the East China Sea (ECS) dispute. China's achievement in surpassing Japan's position as Asia's largest economy in 2010 perhaps explains the growing assertiveness in critical chokepoints and disputes (Azizian et al., 2012). Such leverage enables China to steadily equip its military with advanced technologies, contributing to a more assertive and aggressive stance in the SCS. China's economic growth poses a threat to Japan's market leverage and regional image, and its military presence in the SCS has somewhat paralyzed Japan's activities in the region. China's dominating influence rewarded them for punishing those against their will through their aggregate power (Mazarr et al., 2018). However, a thing to note is that aggregate power might be a pushing factor on aggressiveness, but whether China would utilize its offensive capabilities and geographic proximity benefits lies within their intention –creating another degree of threat in the conflict.

Walt starts by identifying the relationship between aggregate power and threat perception. This factor has three things to consider: population size, industry and military capabilities, and technological aptitude. China's infamous large labor size has undoubtedly boosted other developments as many decision-makers are pressured to utilize its manpower to the fullest extent. Its 1.4 billion population comprises 70.3% of the working population and only 11.64% elderlies (OECD, 2022b). Regardless of possessing a degree of the curse, it has allowed China to have inherent benefits that are rarely owned by other states: supply work of forces, high productivity, and competitive product production. Compared to Japan, its population does not even reach 10% of China's, majorly filled by elderlies of 23.79%.

Furthermore, the industry sector has felt the impacts of China's productive population. With its primary economic source relying on services and industry, its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) contribution reached 54.4% and 30.8% consecutively (World Trade Organization, 2020). As it is understandable that these developments are to compensate for their large population, the case of energy and electricity is perhaps what China is fighting in

the SCS. Regardless, Japan still loses in this aspect. Figure 1 below demonstrates the comparison between both countries' GDPs.

Figure 1 – China and Japan's GDP Comparison (2012-2019) (in \$ US.)



Source: OECD, 2022a.

The figure shows Japan's justification of fear against China and China's drastic ambition. It portrays Japan's concern about the economy as the source of power, especially following the 2018 economic deficit (World Trade Organization, 2020). China's massive GDP is technically capable of overthrowing Japan, especially in technology. While Japan has always been well-known for its technological finesse as a significant source of income –machinery at 19.3%, electrical machinery at 18.5%, and transport equipment at 21.3% of its GDP– China seemed to be able to surpass Japan's position through automating its industry under the Made in China 2025 ambition and advancing its telecommunication through 5G network development by Huawei. Faced with the reality, Japan's stance on China's rapid technology is negative – as it directly hampers its economy and the selling point of the nation.

If these assets are utilized for offensive purposes, they may become offensive power. Walt identified this factor to explain the strength of the source of threat's military –where in this case, China has a strong one. In a glimpse, China's high GDP can explain the recent People's Liberation Army (PLA) restructuring and magnificent expenses in the past years. The figure below might explain the statistics.



**Table 1 Comparison between China’s GDP Growth, Military Expenditure, and Military Budget (2012 - 2019) in bio RMB**

Comparison between China’s GDP growth, military expenditure, and military budget (2012-2019) in bio RMB							
Year	GDP	Military Budget	Military Expenditure	Expenditure/ Budget	Growth		
					GDP	Military Budget	Military Expenditure
2012	53858	669,2	916,1	137%			
2013	59286,3	741,4	1017	137%	10,08%	10,79	11,01%
2014	64356,3	829	1119	135%	8,55%	11,82	10,01%
2015	68885,8	908,8	1224	135%	7,04%	9,63%	9,38%
2016	74639,5	976,6	1320	135%	8,35%	7,46%	7,84%
2017	83203,6	1044	1424	136%	11,47%	6,90%	7,88%
2018	91928,1	1128	1538	136%	10,49%	8,05%	8,01%
2019	98651,5	1213	1660	137%	7,31%	7,54%	7,93%

Source: Collated by Writer from SIPRI Yearbook (SIPRI, 2022) and China Statistical Yearbook (China National Bureau of Statistics, 2022).

China’s military expenditure trend has always gone above its designated budget, which implicitly explains its ambition to uplift the PLA’s position in military training and technology advancements while maintaining its presence in the seven-region theater command. With its GDP increasing annually from 7% to 11%, its military budget and expenditure followed similar schemes. It also shows that the ratio between its military expenditure and budget is consistent –implying China's willingness and budget leniency to spend money on its modernization mission. These modernizations allow China to create a safety net within its territories, deterring others and leveraging its political stance. However, the question is, how would China utilize these capabilities for offensive benefits?

The easiest way to measure it is through the context of their possessions, geographic proximity, and aggressive intention. If these factors are combined, an aggressive breakout would be highly feasible. China’s modernization has also been accompanied by restructuring, including forming the PLA Strategic Missile Forces (Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2021a). China equipped itself with surface-to-surface missile launchers such as ICBMs, Intermediate-range Ballistic Missiles (IRBMs), Medium-range Ballistic Missiles (MRBMs), Short-range Ballistic Missiles (SRBMs), and Ground Launched Cruise Missiles (GLCMs) – and can reach 300–17,000 km reach (Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2021a). Its air forces are also advanced through the new J-20 fifth-generation fighter jets, J16D electronic warfare fighter jets, and various drones. The modernization provides

PLA with maneuverability and capability to project long-range missiles, disrupting the enemy's air defense systems and surveillance capabilities suitable for offensive operations (Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2021b). In addition, China's blue-water navy ambition is still on the table –where recently has shown the tendency to succeed. Their new amphibious capabilities –Landing Helicopter Docks (LHDs)– sailing through the seas in 2020 and realizing the new aircraft carrier Shandong in 2019 was a sign of advancement (“Chapter Six: Asia,” 2021).

What does this mean for Japan? Obviously, Japan cannot deny its loss in this case. However, what becomes worrisome is that the inherent aim of China's advancement lies in the expansionist nature of cross-territorial military operations through their long-ranged and maneuverable equipment. Thus, China can directly harm Japan's territorial integrity and other regions within their crossing interests regardless of their location.

Regarding location, this is something inevitable. Japan and China are both located in the same region of East Asia and divided by a disputed sea –the ECS. To clarify, Japan's perspective on the ECS and SCS is seen as an interlinked conflict– where any disruptions in one sea will affect the other. This fact alone allows China to dominate in the regional dynamics that Japan is trying to reserve. The aggressive precedent embedded in China's identity worried littoral states in the SCS region. The domination limits Japan's move in the region –either their pacifist identity will be the main argument used to prevent Japan's response, or it puts Japan under China's offensive reach. As the ECS is the sole separator between the countries, both states' EEZ overlaps (Center for Preventive Action, 2022). This strategic geographic proximity is a threat for Japan, especially understanding that their shortest SRBMs can still reach Japan's territory. Walt iterates that this condition puts a higher level of threat on the source, where it is sensible that China, as the owner of the immense military, can attack Japan quickly.

Lastly –and the main point of Walt– on aggressive intention. Even though the intention parameter cannot be measured per se, looking through previous measures shall be sufficient. Table 2 below demonstrates China's unilateral moves on Japan's territorial integrity.

**Table 2 China’s Estimated Activities in Japan’s Territory**

Year	Estimated Phenomenon
2012	A Chinese government ship, two sailing activities of Chinese vessels, and a Chinese aircraft invaded Japan’s islands and territory.
2013	Two attacks from Chinese vessels towards Japan’s Maritime Self-Defense Forces (SDF) destroyer, nine sailing activities of Chinese vessels, and a Chinese bomber flight across Japan’s territory and islands. Furthermore, the Chinese established ADIZ.
2014	Four sailing activities of Chinese vessels, three abnormal flights of Chinese fighter jets towards SDF aircraft, and PLA exercises caused vessel transits along with Japan’s territory and islands.
2015	Six sailing activities of Chinese vessels, three intelligence-gathering activities by Chinese aircraft, two Chinese bombers activities, a Chinese Navy AGI passages, and weapon-carrying China Coast Guard are conducted along with Japan’s islands and territory.
2016	Nine sailing activities of Chinese vessels, two intelligence-gathering activities by Chinese aircraft, a round-trip Chinese Navy AGI, an abnormal and a dangerous flight of a Chinese PLA fighter jet, and entrance warnings by the PLA conducted in the islands and territory of Japan. Furthermore, the Chinese air force announced regular SCS combat patrol and a rigorous increase of vessels occurring in the ECS.
2017	Eleven sailing activities of Chinese vessels, a Chinese government drone flight, five intelligence-gathering activities by Chinese ships, expansion of seven Chinese electronic warfare aircraft's activities, and three Chinese bombers activities conducted in the islands and territory of Japan.
2018	Chinese submarine activities, twenty-two sailing activities of Chinese vessels, twelve intelligence-gathering activities by Chinese ships and aircraft, aircraft activities, and eight Chinese bomber activities conducted in the islands and territory of Japan. Furthermore, Chinese advancement on hypersonic projectiles was claimed successful.
2019	Twenty-one sailing activities of Chinese vessels, five intelligence activities by Chinese ships and aircrafts, a Chinese patrol flight, three bomber activities, and a Chinese Coast Guard sail were conducted in Japan's islands and territory. Furthermore, the launch and test of China’s first indigenous carrier, alongside the first test of anti-ship ballistic missiles, was conducted along with the SCS and Taiwan Strait.
2020 (until May)	Six sailing activities of Chinese vessels, a Chinese bomber activity, and two Chinese aircraft's activities were conducted across the islands and territory of Japan.

Source: Japan Ministry of Defense, 2019.

The table 2 explains the increasing trend of China’s intrusion into Japan’s territorial integrity. Its various attempts from private and public vessels intrusion, intelligence gathering activities, bomber and submarine activities, and military tests within Japan's important chokepoints threat perception from Abe. The 2014 Chinese standoff in the SCS against Vietnamese patrol ships had Abe exclaimed China’s move as "a unilateral action against the backdrop of force and coercion" and related it to the ECS (Spitzer, 2014). China's presence here is being blamed on the ongoing tension.

While Japan has felt unease about these actions, their nerves were challenged by China's assertiveness directly in the SCS. With its claim persistence throughout the nine-dash-line, it claims over 80% of the seas through various attempts to ensure their effective occupation (Nordholt, 2016). Land reclamation projects over the Spratlys and Paracels have

shown significant progress in building airstrips, taxiways, buildings, military garrisons, and radar drones (Lee, 2015). Experts have assumed that these constructions support the PLA operations related to the rapid militarization activities (Lee, 2015). Live-fire training exercises using its destroyer flotilla (Zhuo, 2019), forming its first aircraft carrier, and simulating its advanced amphibious assault vehicle (AAV) (Panyue, 2018) have stimulated prior reclamation projects to be fully supplied with military necessities (Stashwick, 2017). Recalling prior explanations on geographic proximity, we may assume that China's motive also attempts to dominate the SCS while also easing their cross-EEZ operations to the territories of littoral states, such as reclamation of the Philippines' EEZ of Hughes, Johnson South, and Mischief Reef (Elsea & Lawrence, 2015).

As a state which possesses a degree of interest in the SCS, Japan perceives China's actions in the SCS have negatively impacted the Indo-Pacific peace and stability. Japan understood that China had utilized its offensive power and geographic proximity leverage to deter states and worry other claimants. While aggressive intention remains the tipping point of 'Walt's contribution, previous factors have proved the willingness to conduct aggression. Furthermore, the inherent tendency to seek dominance and control is translated through their anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities, followed by declining agreements and cooperation. This non-compliant behavior increases the suspicion and insecurity of Japan and other claimants in perceiving their presence in the region.

Japan's take on the SCS is less possessive than the ECS dispute. However, understanding the importance SCS poses alongside the relationship between the two conflicts, China's presence adds to the aggressive intention box. With the considerable high perception of intent, Walt would assume that this puts high leniency to balance –and this is where the US plays a role.

### **Confidence in the United States: Japan's External Balancing**

As Japan's perception of the threat towards China ticks all the boxes, the dichotomy directed to either alliance is present or absent to determine the strategy. Aligning the phenomenon with Walt's perspective, China's emergence has opened the chance for alliance formation for neighboring countries to defend their interests, including Japan's alliance with the US. A thing to understand is that the US interference within the Indo-Pacific's peace and security is not

merely due to the historical relationship between Japan and the US. Instead, the emergence of threat in the region has solidified the US' commitment through historic adjustments and measures focusing on the SCS. This research does acknowledge the presence of historical relationships. However, it is just to show how Japan gained its confidence in requesting assistance from the US. The Trump administration is a perfect example of the latter, where generally, the US involvement in the region has declined. The Abe administration persuaded them due to an increasingly common threat and shared interests.

Japan's security relationship with the US was initiated in 1951 through a ten-year renewable agreement –and constantly renewed until today– under the US-Japan Mutual Security Treaty (Maizland & Cheng, 2021). The agreement is translated through the Guidelines for Japan-US Defense Cooperation which embodies the coordination operations within the alliance. Highlighting Walt's perspective, alliance confidence lies in effective communication. The Guidelines can explain that measure where the 2015 renewed document allowed the bilateral relationship to serve as a new coordination mechanism, responses against the rising threat, and technology cooperation. The document is also a product of the US accommodating manner to trust the Abe government with a broader scope of cooperation and positively respond to the Peace Constitution's reinterpretation issue (Maizland & Cheng, 2021). Even though the following years have demanded a lot of efforts from the Japanese government to ensure the US presence in the region, the Guideline shows a degree of threat acknowledgment from both parties (Halim & Syawfi, 2020).

The sophisticated communication line shall be based on a common value –a shared interest. The US and Japan both acknowledged the premise of the SCS acting as a political tool for China's power exertion. Both understand how Chinese media depicts the two in a deviant and aggressive manner toward their sovereignty, while its claims and violation against the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) have created regional instabilities (Congressional Research Service, 2022). Hence, the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) was created to ensure regional stability, uphold economic and political freedom, embrace democracy and human rights, and expand people-centered prosperity (US Department of State, 2020).

Additionally, conceding the presence of a common threat is also a crucial shared value – as Walt's central premise of balancing against the threat. At the very least, the creation of

the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (or 'The Quad') as formal security cooperation between the US, Japan, India, and Australia to pursue the FOIP mission multilaterally, deter China's deviance on the international order, and uphold freedom of navigation is a concrete realization. Abe's success in persuading the Trump administration to formalize the dialogue and acknowledge China's growing assertiveness in the region was then embodied in the 2017 US NSS, which renounced the growing 'great power competition' that has disputed the US' geopolitical sphere (The White House, 2017). Despite the US' wishy-washy stance during Trump's governance, the continuance of a more substantial commitment through training, high-level dialogues, and expansions are seen within Biden's administration. The US attempts to prevent China's sphere of influence and promote their interests in alliance integration and active participation through energy, digital, and infrastructure connectivity.

Thus, these shared values result in transparency –to ease the understanding within the alliance. Japan's requests for assistance have mostly been reciprocally responded by the US, primarily due to Japan's limited power projection capabilities. As the relationship has been going on pretty long, it is senseful on where Japan got the confidence in the alliance to balance China. The question now is, how big is the alliance commitment?

The US-Japan relationship adheres to the highest commitment form through Walt's identification. Essentially, there are shared threats and interests, a grounded treaty, and guidelines to provide effective diplomatic communication as the basis of the alliance. Then, to assess the argument, it shall be seen through its monetary, territory, and manpower support between the alliance.

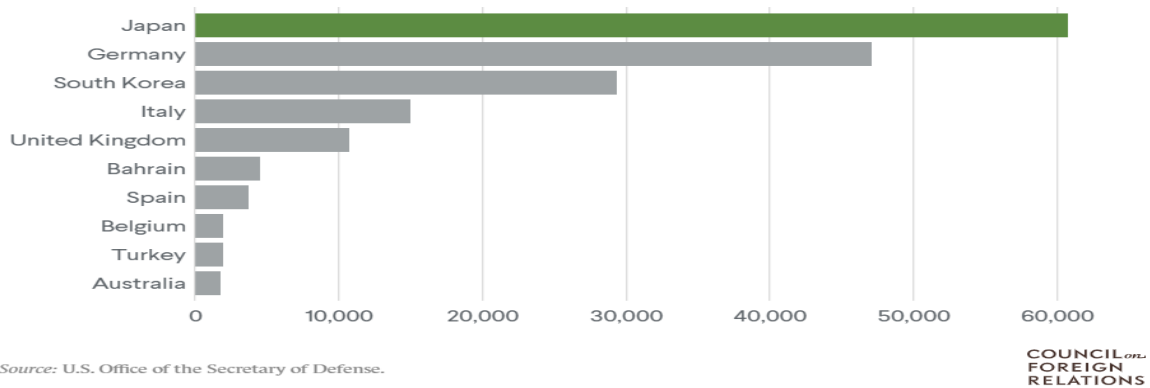
Speaking of financial support, there is no indication of the US providing direct development assistance to Japan as the SCS is categorized as an early conflict with no war indication. Thus, the US' security posture pertaining to Japan may remain defensive as its current technical assistance is sufficient to uplift Japan's limitation in its defense. This realizes how alternate contributions are as valuable as financial assistance –in this case, supporting Japan's military equipment advancement under the US Congress' Foreign Military Sales (FMS). The Japan SDF is now in possession of 105 new F-35 Joint Strike Fighters in 2020 worth up to \$23.11 billion, marking the second-largest individual request that the US Congress has ever granted. Other advanced assets, including the USS Ronald Reagan carrier strike group, were additional assistance the US made to compensate for financial support (US

Department of State, 2021). This commitment stage showcases a mutually beneficial relationship where the US might get Japan's dependency and approval while Japan can advance its SDF without violating its limitations. Although monetary assistance is absent, this is a fair trade-off for the loss.

While in terms of territory, it should not be a question. Japan has warmly welcomed the US Forces within its soil on seven large military bases (US Forces Japan, 2021). These bases are significant buffers to secure Japan's territory, preventing China from using offensive power and geographic proximity leverage. For example, the US' maneuvers toward the SCS and military training often depart from Kadena Air Force Base in Okinawa, where its location is the closest to China and is equipped with war-prepared aircraft to reach the SCS (South China Sea Strategic Situation Probing Initiative (*An Incomplete Report on US Military Operations in the South China Sea in 2020 SCSPI*, 2021)). Furthermore, Japan also facilitated an exclusive facility for the US Forces around the area to conduct training. The construction of a more advanced Northern Training Area was part of Japan's major defense plan in 2016 to increase its presence in the SCS, especially after China acknowledged Japan's move to meddle around the SCS (Crowell, 2016). Thus, ensuring the US Forces can settle around and adjust the needs of the manpower is part of the alliance commitment.

Japan's limitation of the defense budget perhaps implies a limited number of personnel. In essence, the availability of manpower can act as additional forces, opportunities to conduct training and capacity building. The provision of a generous number of military bases translates to the high number of manpower deployed from the US Forces. In fact, amid the dispersion of US Active-Duty personnel worldwide, the East Asia placement ranks second with 6.2% of the total manpower (US Department of Defense, 2020). From a micro-level perspective, analysts have mentioned that Japan possesses the highest number of US Forces manpower from the whole East Asia deployment from the figure below.

Figure 2 – Active-duty Service Members and Department of Defense Civilian, 2021 (top ten countries)



Source: U.S. Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020: 30.

The large number of U.S. Forces residing in Japan portrays commitment and attention to the Asia-Pacific regional dynamics. It is safe to assume that the shared interests and common threats can be proven through this figure. However, does it also apply to the perception in the SCS? Japan's commitment to upholding the rule of law in the SCS has somewhat mimicked the U.S.' path. By supporting the U.S.' Freedom of Navigation and Operations (FONOPs) – which technically is Japan's FOIP mission – Japan is encouraged to participate in joint patrol training and be proactive in the SCS (Brunnstrom, 2016). Thus, other military exercises such as the Indo-Pacific Deployment (IDP), Keen Sword, and AnnualEx emerged as part of the commitment.

### *Alliance in the Making: Japan's Southward Outlook*

Amid the question of the U.S.' commitment, Abe decided to seek other alternatives to secure the SCS through strengthening security ties with like-minded countries – or those who have similar threat perceptions on the SCS. The arrow points to Southeast Asian countries which have acknowledged Japan's contribution to defending the region (Irsadanar, 2020). This might or might not relate to Japan's interest in reintegrating with Southeast Asia after colonization. However, the tipping point lies in increasing the bargaining chip of littoral states to deter China by providing capacity building directly. On the one hand, this is a smart move to keep Japan's hands clean. It also might spark the question of Japan's involvement amid their zero claims in the SCS.



Throughout the years, Japan has shaped its role in the SCS as a neutral party that adheres to the rule of law and supports every talk pertaining to the issue. However, its contributions do not stop there. Additional technical support has been delivered under Abe's administration, either through training or even weaponizing claimants, including Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia. Military equipment donations were contributed to these three countries – patrol boats to Vietnam, vessels to Indonesia, and patrol aircraft to the Philippines (Irsadanar, 2020). This approach feels like a handover of help from the US grace to Japan. Japan has also been arranging coordination and capacity building through military exercises in the Malacca Strait and assembling the Vientiane Vision to formalize Japan's contribution to the FOIP mission and secure the SCS (Irsadanar, 2020).

Perhaps Japan's power is more advanced than these littoral states, making it a strategic move for them to accept assistance. When faced with a similar source of threat, this would be an intuitive move to increase their bargaining power. If the conflict has not turned into a militarized war and these littoral states are not mobilizing resources alone, then a balancing strategy is essentially happening. From Japan's perspective, these littoral states are potential counterparts to strengthen their political affirmation and balancing game against China in the SCS. As Walt mentioned, regional powers tend to balance against similar threats in such conflicts. If such cooperation were clustered into a form of alliance, it would be heading to an 'almost alliance' with a 'medium to high commitment' as the foundations and communication lines have not been clearly defined. However, engaging in the same ray of interests, threats, and sacrifices is not a formality.

## **Conclusion**

Japan's involvement in the SCS is a matter of interests and perception –to reintegrate with Southeast Asian counterparts, elevate its regional profile through influence and soft power, and secure potential resources. While Japan's non-claimant status in the dispute shall ideally refrain them from meddling, an interesting perspective of how the SCS might be relational with the ECS dispute shall also be considered. Perhaps, Japan's power projection circumstances have somewhat created such a perception. With the inability to engage in direct war and remain defensive on its security posture, mitigating threats within their seas are highly controversial – both internationally and domestically. The SCS alone is a place of power

contestations that shape the Indo-Pacific power politics. Hence, how would Japan govern the response to the latest aggression occurring in the SCS, and why does it come out as such?

The dynamics of Japan's engagement in the SCS indicated an external balancing strategy against China. The 'why' question can be answered through two dimensions under Walt's balance of threat theory. Japan perceives China negatively where the historical context and the status quo allow Japan to think like such. China's economic, military, and intention updates are sensitive to Japanese decision-makers, especially noting the geographic proximity among the states. China's growing leverage has successfully questioned Japan's capabilities, such as the disparity between GDPs, population size and composition, and military budget and technologies. Japan is prone to being dominated, but its interests in the SCS are at risk.

Such a level of threat, thus, is responded to by Japan's attempt to retain their alliance with the U.S. and slowly approach ASEAN –to balance China communally. It is worth highlighting Japan's confidence level towards the U.S. and vice versa. Amid the uncertain Trump administration, Abe strengthened their alliance through a constantly renewed agreement and formalizing the 'Quad', which aims to deter China-endorsed threats. From assessing the variables present within the alliance – namely territorial, financial, and manpower support –this article argues that the status of the alliance is highly committed. Whereas for ASEAN countries, it remains a flourishing affiliation as it is still classified as an 'almost alliance'. Japan has been well welcomed by its other counterparts, leaving room to provide military and diplomatic assistance in deterring China in the SCS.

The power politics present in the SCS has made the topic complicated. Foreign presence, stances, and alliances have interestingly portrayed the significance of the seas. Debates amongst scholars in describing Japan's strategy in the SCS have also shown interesting perspectives. However, the conclusion in this article to support the balancing argument under a neorealist approach disregards the presence of a possibly supportive economic relationship between both states as the variable has always been there. If further research wishes to incorporate economic dependency, one shall be able to provide sufficient parameters to what extent cooperation falls under a balancing or hedging strategy. Furthermore, interesting follow-up research can also enclose Japan's internal balancing attempt, which was popular during Abe's administration, especially after the reinterpretation

ambition. This would enrich the discussion of how deep the alliance has contributed to Japan's development to reach its regional influence and how it translates externally.

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