

Japan Seeking “Strategic Independence”: Initiatives, Motivations and Constraints

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Stimulated by recent drastic changes in the international situation and with the aim of maximizing Japan’s national interests, the government of Shinzo Abe is trying to adopt a national strategy that deviates from and even contradicts that of the United States, while maintaining the framework of US-Japan alliance and avoiding head-on confrontation with US interests. This pursuit of “strategic independence”¹ is distinguished as being independently designed and self-contained. It not only inherits² the strategic ambitions of previous Japanese governments but is also innovative and ground-breaking. At the moment, Japan is active

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1 The “strategic independence” discussed in this article does not mean that Japan seeks to gain absolute political independence from or decouple its security relationship with the United States. Neither does it mean that it intends to get rid of the US-Japan alliance. Strategic independence is not the same as “normalization of the state,” which mainly refers to breaking away from the “post-war system,” i.e. realizing the three key objectives of constitutional revision, independent army, and peer-to-peer alliance. Strategic independence is only a path to or necessary condition for becoming a normal state. It refers to independent policymaking without changing the above three major structural constraints and is mainly adjustments or changes at the tactical level.

2 As a defeated state of World War II, Japan has been subordinate to the United States in the post-war era, and there is no lack of pursuit of independence and equality in its national strategic thinking. Since the 1950s, the nationalist political forces within the Japanese government have been criticizing the Yoshida Doctrine that attached Japan to the United States, demanding a change to its subordinate status to the US and the implementation of an independent diplomacy. For example, the cabinets of Ichiro Hatoyama and Tanzan Ishibashi proposed the concept of “independent diplomacy.” The subsequent Nobusuke Kishi cabinet put forward the “three principles of diplomacy.” After Japan became an economic power, it has shown a more intensive inclination toward independence. Since the 1970s, concepts such as “independent defense,” “all-around diplomacy,” “comprehensive security strategy,” and “Japan-US-Europe tripolarity” which took place around the end of the Cold War continued to emerge. In the 21st century, the concepts of “East Asian community,” “strategic diplomacy” and “diplomacy with a bird’s eye view of the globe” have been proposed by successive Japanese governments, manifesting their pursuit of independence.

in the international arena and adopting the most independent and high-profile attitude toward the rest of the world since the end of World War II. It has even changed the situation of the US being dominant while Japan is subordinate. Japan's pursuit of strategic independence will likely shape it into a major power in the international political arena that is different from its previous style. In addition to affecting Japan's own peace and prosperity, it will also change the future regional order in East Asia.

Japan's Main Measures to Promote Strategic Independence³

In his effort to seek Japan's strategic independence, Abe has taken corresponding measures in the areas of strategic and top-level structure, macro geographical diplomacy, and relations with major powers, which are embodied in the following three aspects. First, safeguarding a favorable international system and order for Japan's survival and prosperity, namely the global multilateral free trade system. Second, independently conceiving, promoting and inducing the United States to accept the new geopolitical strategy of the "post-Asia-Pacific rebalancing era," namely the free and open Indo-Pacific strategy. Third, actively shaping relations with major powers and adjusting Japan's ties with Russia, India, and major countries of the European Union. In particular, Japan has adopted a policy toward China since 2017 which is distinct from that of the Donald Trump administration. Under the leadership of Abe, Japan is pursuing strategic independence and actively playing the role of a major power in global political, economic and security affairs, to the end of exerting greater influence.

3 In a broader sense, Japan's measures of strategic independence, in addition to the three points discussed in this article, should also include: (1) further loosening the "internal shackles" in security and defense, and strengthening self-defense capabilities, especially upgrading national defense guidelines and developing military strike forces; (2) promoting regional multilateral diplomacy, especially with regional partners with similar political goals, forming a network of partners outside the US-Japan alliance, and increasing independent resources and leverage against the US. However, as these two points are longstanding goals rather than new developments that emerged after 2017, they will not be discussed herein.

Leading free trade negotiations and maintaining a free and open international economic order

Japan is unprecedentedly committed to safeguarding the post-war international economic system and trying to assume new leadership responsibilities in dealing with issues such as the rise of protectionism. Japan's economic diplomacy that mainly seeks to expand investment and secure its market has been restructured to a more macro and strategic initiative of constructing international regulation and maintaining order. Japan is a leading promoter of the existing global economic rules and a leading protector of the free and open international economic order, who facilitated the conclusion of the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP, also known as TPP-11) and the Japan-EU Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA). It is noteworthy that these agreements were reached without the leadership or participation of the United States, reflecting that Japan's strategic independence has considerably improved.

First, saving the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). After the Trump administration abandoned the TPP, Japan tried to hoist the banner of resurrecting the TPP, and, with unprecedented multilateral leadership, signed the CPTPP together with the other 10 TPP signatories in March 2018. The new agreement came into effect at the end of 2018, which retains more than 95% of the original TPP agreement. This shows that a free trade circle, which involves 11 Asia-Pacific countries, led by Japan and without the United States' participation, is finally taking shape. Reviving the TPP shows that Japan's attitude toward globalization and its role in the world have witnessed substantial changes. In fact, Japan is intended to compete for rules-making power and dominance in Asia-Pacific economy and trade. In addition to establishing a favorable trade order in the region to rein in China, Japan also hopes to exert pressure on the United States so that the US seeks compromise with other TPP members and returns to the multilateral trading system. In doing so, it also supports trade

multilateralism as a model for other large trade agreements in the Asia-Pacific, such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) which is under negotiation.⁴

Second, promoting the Japan-EU EPA. The Abe government actively promoted this high-standard Japan-EU free trade agreement despite pressure from the United States. In December 2017, Japan and the EU jointly announced that they had completed relevant negotiations and finalized the agreement, which is intended to “build the world’s largest open economic zone.” It signals Japan and the EU are firm supporters of trade liberalization. In July 2018, the EPA, which covers nearly 30% of global GDP and 9% of the world’s population, was officially signed. The important signal from Japan and Europe is that without the participation of the United States, Japan is uniting like-minded countries to create a possible alternative to the US-led trade and globalization. It means that Japan, as a staunch supporter of free trade, is against protectionism and is willing to provide new liberalization initiatives. For Japan, the signing of trade agreement with the EU can help ensure that the TPP standards are incorporated into other agreements and pressure the Trump administration to return to the TPP.

Third, promoting RCEP and China-Japan-South Korea FTA negotiations. The initial success of the CPTPP and the Japan-EU EPA has undoubtedly inspired Japan to further promote the RCEP. In face of rampant US unilateralism and trade protectionism, China and Japan will play a more important and constructive role in maintaining an open and inclusive Asia-Pacific regional economic order, with one effort being that the two countries join hands with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to promote RCEP negotiations. In November 2018, the second RCEP leaders’ meeting was held in Singapore. The joint statement issued following the meeting suggests the parties’ determination to conclude RCEP negotiations in 2019. After China-Japan relations have warmed up, Japan is

4 With reference to the author’s interview with Mireya Solis, Director of the Center for East Asia Policy Studies of the Brookings Institution, on December 8, 2017.

also committed to promoting China-Japan-South Korea FTA negotiations. In May 2018, at the trilateral summit meeting in Japan, the three countries uniformly agreed to accelerate negotiations of the FTA .

Promoting Indo-Pacific strategic vision to create a “post-Asia-Pacific rebalancing” regional order

Trump’s policy adjustments after taking office, including putting US interests first under the concept of “America First,” continuous withdrawal from signed agreements such as the TPP, and discarding the Asia-Pacific rebalancing strategy of his predecessor, have damaged the international credibility of the United States. US allies have thus been prompted to take more initiative in shaping regional orders. Japan is no exception. “In the coming new regional order, Japan will be forced to play a semi-American role ... No other country is capable of or interested in playing such a role.”⁵ In the Sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD-VI) in August 2016, Abe put forward the strategic concept of a “free and open Indo-Pacific,” marking the official launch of Japan’s new regional grand strategy. In his keynote speech, Abe stressed that “Let us make this stretch that is from Asia to Africa a main artery for growth and prosperity,” and “make the seas that connect the two continents into peaceful seas that are governed by the rule of law.” He also claimed that “Japan bears the responsibility of fostering the confluence of the Pacific and Indian Oceans and of Asia and Africa into a place that values freedom, the rule of law, and the market economy, free from force or coercion and making it prosperous.”⁶

The Indo-Pacific strategy envisioned by the Abe government responds to the new situation, which involves political, security, and economic aspects. It has clear goals and directions which can be summarized into “a center

5 Lully Miura, “US-Japan Cracks Are Starting to Show,” September 5, 2018, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2018/09/05/us-japan-cracks-are-starting-to-show>.

6 Shinzo Abe, “Address at the Opening Session of the Sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development,” August 27, 2016, http://www.mofa.go.jp/af/af2/page4e_000496.html.

and two basic points.”⁷ The center, namely the top-level strategic design, is mainly about safeguarding the West-dominated international order and rules of democracy, freedom, rule of law and market economy in the Indo-Pacific region by means of a democratic alliance and value diplomacy at the political level. As for the basic points, one is establishing a security mechanism and framework on the basis of US-Japan alliance and other bilateral and multilateral platforms, that is centered on cooperation among the US, Japan, India and Australia to safeguard the security of the Indo-Pacific region and especially that of the maritime order and sea lines of communication, and restrain China’s expanding strength and influence in the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions. The other basic point is economic interests. By hedging or partly cooperating with China’s Belt and Road Initiative on the western front, Japan will expand the share of its participation in relevant infrastructure construction, trade and investment, promote its Expanded Partnership for Quality Infrastructure initiative and the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) plan under the joint leadership with India. Meanwhile, Japan will promote the CPTTP on the eastern and Pacific front, and strive for favorable results in negotiations on the Asia-Pacific Free Trade Area (FTAAP), RCEP and China-Japan-South Korea FTA rather than abandon its participation.⁸

After Abe launched the Indo-Pacific strategic concept, he has accelerated its implementation. First of all, Japan is working hard with India to jointly promote its Indo-Pacific strategic vision. Since 2017, Abe has met with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi several times to discuss the promotion of the “free and open Indo-Pacific” strategy with India. The two sides agreed to synergize Japan’s Indo-Pacific strategy and India’s “Act East” policy.⁹ Second, Japan has been lobbying and touting the Trump administration through

7 “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy,” in *Diplomatic Bluebook 2017*, Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Chapter 1, p.26, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000287676.pdf>.

8 Wu Huaizhong, “The Abe Government’s Indo-Pacific Strategy and China’s Countermeasure,” *Contemporary International Relations*, No.1, 2018, p.18.

9 “Japan-India Joint Statement: Toward a Free, Open and Prosperous Indo-Pacific,” September 2017, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000289999.pdf>.

multiple channels. In November 2017, when Trump met with Abe, the two sides discussed the Indo-Pacific concept and reached agreement on strengthening cooperation to achieve this strategic vision.¹⁰ Subsequently, the Trump administration stated in the National Security Strategy published in December 2017 that the US supports free and open development environment in the Indo-Pacific region.¹¹ In May 2018, the US Indo-Pacific Command was established, which marked the United States' official acceptance of Japan's promotion of the concept and strategy. Besides, Japan has also promoted its Indo-Pacific strategy by making up for its shortcomings, such as promoting upgrade of trilateral relations and quadrilateral networking. In November 2017, leaders of Japan, the US and Australia held a tripartite meeting in Manila. One key point of the talks was to promote the free and open Indo-Pacific strategy. The three countries reached an agreement on cooperation in "guaranteeing the free and open Indo-Pacific order based on the rule of law" and "maintaining freedom, openness, prosperity and inclusiveness within the region."¹² Japan is also eager to resume and develop the quadrilateral cooperation mechanism. In November 2017 and June 2018, the Japanese delegation promoted two quadripartite meetings of Japan, the US, India and Australia, urging cooperation on the construction of "a free, open, prosperous and inclusive Indo-Pacific region." In 2018, Japan has also accelerated a quadrilateral investment plan for "Indo-Pacific" infrastructure projects.

Utilizing major-power relations and promoting "Japan-China coordination"¹³

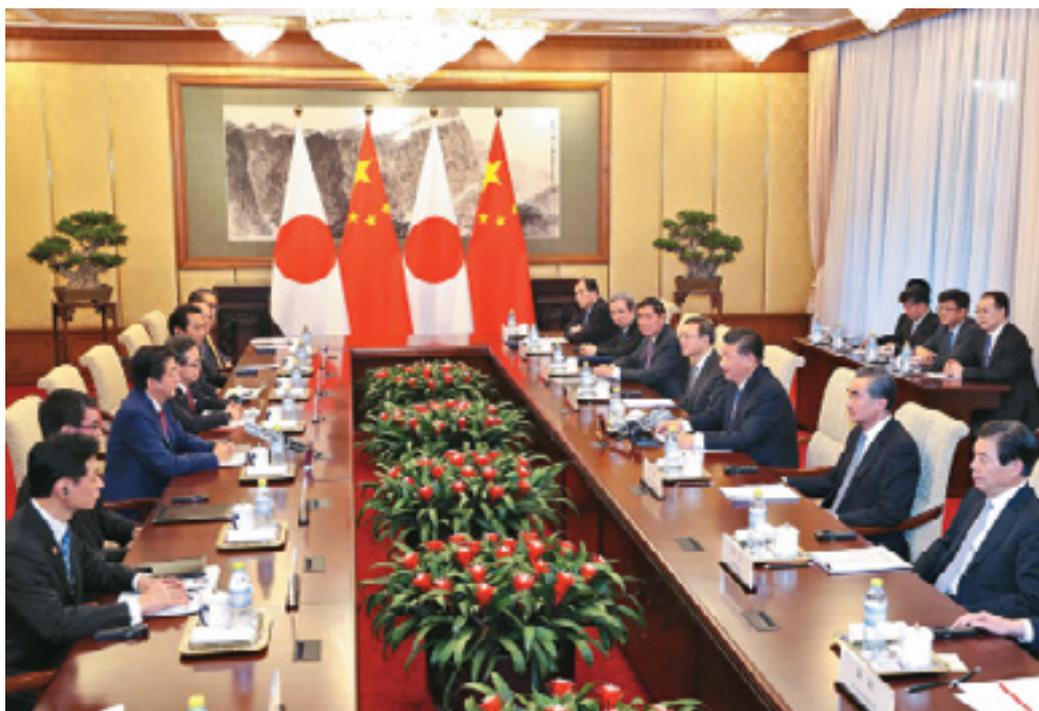
Great-power relations are still the main determinant of the international

10 "Inside President Trump's Trip to Asia," The White House, November 15, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/articles/president-trumps-trip-asia>.

11 *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, The White House, December 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

12 "Japan-Australia-India Trilateral Dialogue Senior Officials Meeting," Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, December 8, 2017, https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e_001834.html.

13 The Abe government has also tried to launch its own policy toward North Korea and Iran, which also showed it was not in sync with the United States and pursued independence. However, these attempts were not successful and did not have global significance in Japanese diplomacy, and therefore they will not be discussed here.



Chinese President Xi Jinping meets with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in Beijing, October 26, 2018. In their first official meeting in seven years, Abe expressed his hope for the two sides to usher in a new era when “competition is transformed into coordination.”

and regional situation. In Japan’s strategic diplomatic design, China, major EU countries, along with Russia and India, are relatively important powers besides the United States. Abe pays great attention to Japan’s relations with the EU, Russia and India. The diplomacy serves the three major goals of Japan’s foreign strategy. First, maintaining Japan’s status as a major power, economic prosperity and security. Second, reigning in China or balancing China’s rise. Third, shaping strategic space for Japan and a potential advantage of getting rid of its dependence on the United States. However, Abe’s eager adjustments to its relations with Russia have not been successful, while the strengthening of relations with the EU and India had begun before Abe took office, which is more of a continuation of policy than a leapfrog. They do not have the significance comparable to that of the adjustment of relations with China since 2017.

Out of strong internal and external motivations, the Abe government has decided to improve relations with China since 2017. In May 2017, the visit of a delegation led by Secretary-General of the Liberal Democratic Party Toshihiro Nikai was a landmark event. Since then, Abe has repeatedly expressed his willingness to promote China-Japan relations on different occasions, saying that Japan is willing to participate in the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Belt and Road Initiative and “lift Japan-China relations to a new dimension.”¹⁴ In December, during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Vietnam, Abe held an important meeting with President Xi Jinping, which opened a new starting point for bilateral relations and paved the way for mutual visits. 2018 marked the 40th anniversary of the China-Japan Treaty of Peace and Friendship and Japan showed signs of actively adjusting relations between the two countries. In January, Abe mentioned China’s Belt and Road Initiative in his policy address, indicating a strong desire to improve bilateral relations. In April, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi paid an official visit to Japan after a gap of nine years. The two sides’ agreement to further maintain the momentum of improving relations significantly signaled the recovery of bilateral ties. In May, Abe held a telephone conversation with President Xi Jinping. The two sides expressed the wish to rekindle the spirit of the Treaty of Peace and Friendship and ensure that China-Japan relations are back on track and register a new development. During the same period, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang visited Japan after a gap of eight years and exchanged views with Abe on realizing the return of bilateral relations to a normal development track. The two sides also reached a consensus on promoting bilateral pragmatic cooperation, establishing a hotline and conducting cooperation in third-party markets. In this regard, the 2018 Japanese Diplomatic Bluebook stated that the two countries “jointly take responsibility for the peace and stability of the region and the international community” and will “steadily develop

14 “Prime Minister Shows Cooperative Posture to Belt and Road Initiative,” *Nikkei*, June 5, 2017, https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXLASFS05H51_V00C17A6000000.

friendly and cooperative relations from a broader perspective.”¹⁵ Improving relations with China has increasingly become the core of Abe’s foreign policy goals.

Abe’s official visit to China in October 2018 marked a Japanese Prime Minister’s official visit to China after a seven-year interval. During the visit, leaders of the two countries held talks and exchanged views on improving bilateral relations and international and regional issues of common concern, signed a series of cooperation agreements, and held a reception for Chinese and Japanese people from all walks of life to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the Treaty of Peace and Friendship as well as the first China-Japan Third-Party Market Cooperation Forum. Before and after his visit to China, Abe repeatedly mentioned three proposals on developing China-Japan relations. First, relations between the two countries should transition “from competition to coordination.” Second, the two countries should shift “from being threat to each other to being partners.” Third, the two sides should “develop the free and fair trade system.” Through these measures, Abe proposed to “lead the China-Japan relations to a new era.”¹⁶ These opinions show new directions of Japan’s relations with China, reflecting its independence and strategic sense in the implementation of its policy adjustment toward China, which is not completely consistent with the Trump administration’s strategic design and direction. First, unlike the United States’ clear positioning of China as a “strategic competitor,” Abe’s macro-strategic adjustment marked by coordination and cooperation has substantially eased its strategic relations with China. While adhering to the US-Japan alliance, Japan has strengthened the China-Japan coordination more seriously and carefully. This is in stark contrast to the Trump administration’s suppression of China that has led to tensions in China-US relations. Second, unlike the US efforts to promote trade protectionism

15 *Diplomatic Bluebook 2018*, Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/bluebook/2018/html/index.html>.

16 “Three Principles for the New Era of Japan-China Relations,” *Nikkei*, October 26, 2018, <https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXMZO3696284026102018MM8000>.

and strongly hedge against the Belt and Road Initiative, Abe has clearly proposed that the two countries “contribute to the maintenance of free trade” and claimed that the Belt and Road Initiative is a promising concept and Japan is willing to strengthen cooperation with China in a wide range of areas, including joint exploration of third-party markets. This shows that Japan is willing to join hands with China to expand the common interest of maintaining regional stability and prosperity and “promote regional economic integration, jointly combat global challenges, safeguard multilateralism, uphold free trade and construct an open world economy.”¹⁷

Abe’s Motivations to Promote Japan’s Strategic Independence

Japan’s pursuit of independence stems from its endogenous motivation to realize the strategic ambitions as a “normal state.” Abe, who is dedicated to Japan’s “normalization” and status as a major country, shows a particularly strong commitment to this goal. At the beginning of his second tenure in office, Abe successively put forward slogans such as “getting rid of the post-war system,” “leading the Asia-Pacific economy and security” and “becoming a major player in the international community,” and has proposed “strategic diplomacy,” “diplomacy with a bird’s eye view of the globe” and “proactive pacifism” in the field of diplomacy and security. At the operational level, Abe is building up Japan’s role and striving to gain the initiative and independence by strengthening the US-Japan alliance and cooperating with US global and Asia-Pacific strategies within the alliance framework.¹⁸ Therefore, from 2013 to 2016, Abe’s path of seeking independence was to fully cooperate with the Obama administration’s Asia-Pacific rebalancing strategy and the TPP and strive to achieve a dominant

17 “Xi Meets Japanese PM,” *Xinhua*, October 26, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-10/26/c_137560869.htm.

18 Like his grandfather, Nobusuke Kishi, Abe, as a nationalist and pro-American conservative within the Liberal Democratic Party, implements a path that seeks independence by being pro-US. In contrast, the Asian international side believes that Japan should properly distance itself from the US and achieve self-reliance through integration into Asia.

position in the Asia-Pacific while balancing China. This path was marked by the 2016 meeting between Obama and Abe after the signing of new guidelines for defense cooperation between the two countries in 2015. However, since Trump took office in early 2017, the world situation has undergone profound changes, and it was hard to continue on the above-mentioned path. The situation forced Abe to start thinking about independent policies that met and ensured Japan's national interests. In terms of the impact of such situational changes, the overall change of the international order is fundamental, the change in Japan-US relations is primary while the change in China-Japan relations is crucial.

Sense of responsibility amid drastic global changes

Since the end of World War II, Japan's foreign and security policy has been centered on a single premise of the liberal international order led by the United States. From Japan's perspective, however, this premise is gradually faltering and weakening in recent years.¹⁹ As official documents such as the Diplomatic Blue Book in recent years suggest, Japan believes that the liberal international order and rules introduced after World War II have always been the foundation of its peace and prosperity. Japan relies on this order perhaps more than any other country. However, this order is facing an unprecedented external crisis, such as the rise of emerging countries and the power shift in international landscape. Especially, countries such as China and Russia are considered to challenge the "status quo" and explore a new international order.²⁰

However, only in 2017 did Japan readjust its national strategy and show tendency to accelerate pursuit of strategic independence under immense anxiety caused by changes in the international situation. With Trump coming to power, the liberal international order is facing a huge shake-up from within. Believing in "America First," Trump declared that

19 Mitoji Yabunaka, *New Rules for Japan-US Relations in the Trump Era*, PHP, 2018, pp.91-102.

20 "Diplomatic and Security Environment Surrounding Our Country," Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, September 2018, http://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/singi/anzen_bouei2/dai2/siryou1.pdf.

“the US is no longer the world’s policeman” and has not taken it seriously to make efforts to maintain a multilateral free trade system and promote global governance. Internal contradictions in the EU and the US have intensified, and Brexit has “caused tragic results and severely wobbled the unity of the liberal democratic countries that have supported the post-war order for many years.”²¹ For Japan, the leadership vacuum in the global economic system is disastrous. Over the past 70 years, the multilateral free trade order has underpinned the economic relations and prosperity of Japan and the world. However, Trump’s ignorance of international rules and the existing order has left the United States’ allies with a huge sense of uncertainty and crisis.²²

Japanese strategists believe that regional prosperity and security are based on a rules-based international order, and Japan needs to cooperate with other advanced democracies to maintain a liberal international order. In the Trump era, the future of the liberal international order depends on the role of Japan and Europe, and Prime Minister Abe is a key figure.²³ The world may have to move forward without US leadership. Therefore, Asia has the responsibility to show greater leadership, and Japan needs to show a new kind of independent growth.²⁴

Necessity of plan B under “Trump impact”

Trump’s electoral victory and taking office are “black swan events” of international politics with an impact on Japan that is no weaker than that of the “Nixon shock.”²⁵ So far, the Japanese psychology is like sitting on a

21 Yuichi Hosoya, “The Trump Presidency and Japan’s International Role,” *Nippon*, August 15, 2018, <https://www.nippon.com/en/currents/d00423/the-trump-presidency-and-japans-international-role.html>.

22 Satoshi Machidori, “How Will Japanese Politics Face Confusing Trump Diplomacy?” *Chuo Konron*, August 2018, p.18.

23 Mataka Kamiya, “The Spirit to Preserve the Liberal International Order,” *Sankei*, May 11, 2018, <https://www.sankei.com/column/news/180511/clm1805110004-n1.html>.

24 Yoichi Funabashi, “A Message from the Asia-Pacific to President-elect Trump,” November 24, 2016, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2016/11/24/a-message-from-the-asia-pacific-to-president-elect-trump/>.

25 The “Nixon shock” refers to the political event in July 1971 when the US announced the change of its policy toward China but before that it was kept as a secret to Japan, which caused the government of Eisaku Sato, which had been closely following the anti-China policy of the US, to be flustered in a diplomatic dilemma.

roller coaster. Having experienced many ups and downs, Japan feels that its interests and status have not received enough respect from Washington.

In the political field, Trump signed an executive order in January 2017 to withdraw the US from the TPP. When he visited Japan in November that year, he reiterated that the US would not return to the TPP, and remained unmoved despite Japan's earnest persuasion. Japan regards the TPP as an important means of participating in and leading the formulation of other international norms, and a program to build a leading trade order and rules-making dominance, consolidate and strengthen the US-Japan alliance, suppress and squeeze out China, ensure the achievements of Abenomics and promote domestic reforms. In the words of then Japanese Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida, the TPP is not only a trade issue but also a political and strategic issue — concerning the 21st-century global and Asia-Pacific standards, rules and order, as well as regional stability.²⁶ The miscarriage of the TPP plunged Japan into the predicament of international strategic mistakes and frustrations.

Abe used a lot of political resources to curry favor with Trump and tried to influence Trump's Asia policy through personal friendship, so as to ensure the stability of US-Japan alliance and the reliability of US commitment to East Asia. That said, Abe's efforts have been in vain, and he was unable to win respect and major concessions from Trump.²⁷ Japanese strategists believe that "the absurd situation is that during the meetings with North Korean and Russian leaders, President Trump expressed appreciation for them, who had always been hostile to the US, and tried to establish friendly relations, while on the other hand he always despises and attacks allies with shared values, which is something we have never seen in the post-war era."²⁸ Trump began to expose his true character shortly after taking office, dealing with Japan in a highly unpredictable way, and was

26 Fumio Kishida, "Outlook of 2017: The Year of Change," *Diplomacy*, Vol.41, 2017, pp.13-14.

27 Katrina Manson, "China Profits from Donald Trump's UN Isolation," *Financial Times*, September 29, 2018.

28 Yuichi Hosoya, "The Trump Presidency and Japan's International Role."

thus considered to have caused potential damage to Japan's economy and security.

In the economic field, US-Japan trade frictions have intensified, while the two countries have been slow to find common ground. Japan is striving to reduce its trade surplus with the US and appease Trump by renewing and increasing investment in the US and purchasing new energy and advanced American weapons. Even so, Trump's special preference for tariffs has still left Japan susceptible. The US-Japan comprehensive economic dialogue has not made significant progress since its inception, and Japan has so far failed to secure exemption from steel and aluminum tariffs imposed by Trump.²⁹ Trump has further threatened to impose high tariffs on Japanese automobiles. Some analysts believe that all of this reflects Trump's view of Japan and the world formed in the 1980s.³⁰ In the end, Abe had to agree to a new round of US-Japan negotiations to reach a "free, fair and reciprocal" bilateral trade agreement. Trump's zero-sum view on trade issues has made the Japanese feel uneasy.³¹

In the field of security, the United States' policy vacillation toward North Korea in 2018 has made Japan anxious and concerned, leading to a rare consensus of Japanese left and right wings to strengthen independent defense.³² Trump's refusal to consult with allies on key strategic decisions greatly affected Japan's confidence in the alliance and exacerbated Tokyo's disappointment and anxiety. Abe has always been insisting on putting maximum pressure on North Korea and firmly supports the ultimate goal of denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula. Trump initially

29 In March 2018, the United States imposed high tariffs on imported steel and aluminum products in accordance with Section 232 of the Trade Expansion Act. Although many US allies are exempted, Japan is not one of them.

30 In 1987, Trump spent nearly 100,000 US dollars on full-page advertisements in *The New York Times* and other newspapers, criticizing Japan for stealing US jobs, exporting to the US but refusing to import, manipulating its currency to gain export advantages, and taking advantage of the US on national defense.

31 Yuki Tatsumi, "Abe and Trump's Friendship without Benefits," *Australia & Japan in the Region*, Volume 6, No.4, 2018, pp.25-28.

32 Toshihiro Nakayama, "Can the Japan-US Alliance Survive the Trump Presidency?" *Nippon*, May 16, 2017, <https://www.nippon.com/en/currents/d00313/can-the-japan-us-alliance-survive-the-trump-presidency.html>.

expressed support for Japan's security concerns about Pyongyang, leaving the impression that the two countries had walked in step on their North Korea policy, but then he suddenly deviated from that. In March 2018, Trump announced that he would meet with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. His statements on issues of abduction, denuclearization and medium-range missiles following the historic Trump-Kim summit in June further disappointed Japan.³³ The US decision-making toward North Korea does not include Japan and does not alleviate Japan's concerns, but many related risks and costs may fall on Japan.³⁴ In other words, the Japanese government has no leverage to initiate policy coordination with the US. Abe has made great efforts to keep US-Japan cooperation stable but suffered severe setbacks due to the abrupt changes in the Trump administration's policies. These changes are increasingly revealing the vulnerability of Japan's core economic and security interests in this relationship.³⁵

Benefits of coordination with China

Since Abe took office for the second time in 2012, the development of China-Japan relations has experienced three stages: opposition and tension, defrosting and easing, and improvement and recovery. Since 2017, in stark contrast with the Trump administration, the Chinese government has been leading global development and prosperity and building its image as a responsible major country by constructing a new type of international relations centered on win-win cooperation. The Japanese government changed its view of China in a positive direction and began to significantly adjust its China policy, which was marked by the participation of a Japanese delegation led by LDP Secretary-General Toshihiro Nikai in

33 "Dot Not Be Fooled by North Korea's Denuclearization Strategy," *Sankei*, April 17, 2018, <https://www.sankei.com/column/news/180417/clm1804170004-n1.html>.

34 Carlos Ramirez, "Abe's Charm Offensive – Is There a Second Act?" *The Diplomat*, March 23, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/03/abes-charm-offensive-is-there-a-second-act>.

35 Sheila Smith, "Can Tokyo Survive Trump?" September 2, 2018, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2018/09/02/can-tokyo-survive-trump>.

the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation. Since then, the two sides have continued to implement a series of positive interactions, and relations between the two countries have clearly shown a stronger momentum of improvement. This change is mainly due to two important factors.

First, Abe's policy of balancing and countering China has not worked. After Abe retook office, his main policy toward China was to vigorously promote "strategic diplomacy," cooperate with the United States' Asia-Pacific rebalancing, and unite with more partners to comprehensively balance China. However, Abe not only failed to contain China despite his painstaking efforts but was even astounded by China's further development and growth. Under immense pressure both psychologically and politically, Abe has sensed no chance of winning with his anti-China approach, given China's heavily-built size, Japan's lackluster diplomacy with South Korea and Russia, as well as the United States' potentially unstable East Asia policy. Against this background, Japan has to seriously consider the possibly heavy cost of the continued deterioration of its relations with China. As such, Abe's perception of China has undergone an important change. He comes to understand that Japan cannot benefit from blind confrontation and it is necessary to rationally face China's development and re-weigh Japan's one-sided policy toward the US. Abe also wants Japan to independently coordinate with China: rather than balancing China in vain and with no benefit, he considers it better to maximize national interests by relaxing tensions with China and integrating itself into Asia, coordinating and optimizing cooperation, and keeping balance in relations with China and with the US.

Second, taking advantage of China's rapid development to boost the domestic economy. Chinese and Japanese economies are increasingly interdependent, as China is Japan's largest trading partner and China-Japan trade has become the world's third-largest bilateral trade relationship. As Abe has achieved ultra-long-term governance, he needs to revitalize the Japanese economy. To maintain sustained economic growth, however,

it is impossible to ignore engagement with China, which is a must for sharing the dividends from bilateral economic ties and third-party market cooperation. China's continual economic development since 2012 and the fruitful Belt and Road Initiative suggest huge potential for China-Japan economic cooperation, which has incurred an increasingly strong call among all circles in Japan to improve relations with China, and forced the Abe government to change its initially cold attitude toward the Belt and Road Initiative that had deprived Japanese companies of many profitable opportunities.³⁶

Effectiveness of Japan's Pursuit of Strategic Independence

Although Japan has a clear-cut goal and path in its pursuit of strategic independence, the trend of this pursuit may still change as it is constrained by domestic and foreign factors, and the effectiveness of relevant implemented policies remains to be proved. Historically, Japan has always had a political and cultural tradition that adapts to external pressures, i.e., it adjusts national strategies according to international changes. However, with the future of the international situation and order still far from clear, the Japanese leadership, including Abe, is often faced with many confinements and hesitates when making decisions on the country's direction. It is also difficult for Abe to clarify a more independent vision of Japan. There are three chronic problems influencing the Japanese strategic trends that are difficult to solve in the short term.

Dual constraint of alliance constraint and dependence

Throughout the post-war era, Japan was in a unique subordinate position in the world order dominated by the United States: unconditional surrender, territorial occupation, imposed alliance and accepting the US

36 In the past few years, leaders of major EU countries have often managed to sign cooperation projects of huge amounts with China. Although the economic size of South Korea is only about one-third of that of Japan, the volume of its trade with China is almost the same as that between China and Japan.

hegemony. In an asymmetric alliance system, a weak country often has to sacrifice its independence in order to obtain security.³⁷ Perhaps because of public opinion and the past history, Abe now dares to say “no” to the United States. However, subject to the US-Japan alliance and the lack of sufficient leverage for independence, Abe cannot have a direct conflict with the United States. Instead, he usually copes with US pressure by dispersing or weakening contradictions, initiating litigation, and indirectly checking the US, which has been reflected in his diplomacy with Russia, Iran, and North Korea.

Long-term restraint leads to obedience and attachment, and entails a huge cost for Japan. Although Trump has made Japan uneasy, Japan still strongly trusts its security relations with the United States, and the fear of isolation and abandonment has led to Japan’s reliance on the alliance since World War II.³⁸ With concern that the US-excluded Asian regionalism may prompt Washington to move further toward isolationism, Japan believes that its core geopolitical vision for East Asia is still to achieve Asia-Pacific integration through the US-Japan alliance. In fact, even the most important aspect of Japan’s initiative to promote the Indo-Pacific strategy is to maintain and strengthen US influence by expanding the scope of US-Japan cooperation and supporting or supplementing US presence in the region.³⁹ The Japanese government has not been able to imagine a regional order dominated by countries other than the United States. Even though it has led the construction of CPTPP, Japan is still planning for US return to the TPP. By speeding up RCEP negotiations, Japan’s intention is also to pressure and precipitate US re-engagement in the Asia-Pacific region as

37 James Morrow, “Alliances and Asymmetry: An Alternative to the Capability Aggregation Model of Alliances,” *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol.35, No.4, 1991, pp.904-933.

38 Since the end of World War II, Japan has largely sought to achieve Asia-Pacific integration through the US-Japan alliance. Japan refused to advocate East Asian initiatives without US participation, and supported Asia-Pacific or East Asian cooperation mechanisms and frameworks that include the US, with the guiding principle of ensuring US involvement in Asian affairs.

39 Tomohiko Satake, “Should Japan Continue to Support the US-led International Order?,” October 2, 2018, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2018/10/02/should-japan-continue-to-support-the-us-led-international-order/>.

soon as possible. Japan's actions show that it is not capable to portray a realistic vision beyond its alliance in its strategic plan.⁴⁰

Japanese policy-makers believe that improving US leadership and influence in the Asia-Pacific is key to maintaining the regional order and is in line with Japan's national interests. "This view is perhaps more entrenched in Japan than in any other country, including Australia and the United States itself."⁴¹ Japan's geopolitical and security environment is very different from that of Europe. It is not wise of Japan to show an obviously confrontational attitude toward the United States, as France and Germany did, since Japan's power is not sufficient to shape the regional order alone. Supporting the strategic vision of the US-Japan alliance has always regulated Japan's foreign policy. As long as Japan's geopolitical conditions and the regional power balance remain the same, the alliance will not depreciate in value.⁴²

Difficulty in befriending China and lack of regional support

Japan has not achieved reconciliation on historical issues in real terms and established strategic mutual trust with other East Asian countries. It cannot obtain reliable strategic support for building a regional community as Germany did from France after WWII. In Northeast Asia particularly, Japan has failed to effectively settle historical issues with almost all other countries. Although Abe once claimed success of Japan-Russia and Japan-South Korea cooperation, the ties have proved unstable. The crux lies in China-Japan relations, with problems such as the absence of strategic mutual trust, structural contradictions, disputes on hotspot issues and national sentiments all difficult to resolve in the short term. Without unity of the two top East Asian countries and a robust regional cooperation mechanism, Japan simply has no leverage of playing against the United

40 Rebuild Japan Initiative Foundation, *Geopolitics of Modern Japan*, Chuko Shinsho, 2017, pp.117-118.

41 Ryo Sahashi, "Japan's Vision for the East Asian Security Order," February 23, 2016, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2016/02/23/japans-vision-for-the-east-asian-security-order>.

42 With reference to the author's August 12-13, 2018 interview with Japanese scholars Yuichi Hosoya and Makoto Iokibe.

States and pursuing real strategic independence.

It is obviously too early to judge whether Japan will distance itself from the United States, be closer to Asia, and befriend China because of the “Trump shock.” Abe has always been regarded as the most determined national leader in his efforts to cooperate with the US and confront China, and China has long been dissatisfied with and criticized his revisionism and strategic thinking. Since Abe took office for the second time, Japan has repeatedly sent half-hearted signals of friendliness to China. It remains uncertain whether the acts will continue and bring some breakthrough. In the past, regarding the relationship of “strategic reciprocity” he helped establish, Abe coarsely perceived it as only seeking interests and reciprocity but neglecting strategic mutual trust. Most importantly, Japan does not seem to fundamentally change its perceptions and strategic positioning of China on its way to improving bilateral relations. As Foreign Minister Wang Yi said, the root cause of the badly hurt China-Japan relations lies in the Japanese authorities’ problematic misperception of China. Japan has not regarded China as a partner but as an opponent and a threat.⁴³ Many Japanese political elites believe that the rise of China has fundamentally changed the geopolitical landscape of East Asia and had a negative impact on Japan’s security and interests, which cannot be accepted and should be responded to by constraining China. Affected by this view, Japanese nationals have a low level of intimacy with China. In the foreseeable future, Japan’s strategic suspicion of China will still likely outweigh strategic trust.

Japan has also rejected any idea of a China-led regional order so far. Japan’s goal may be to obtain real economic benefits by utilizing the recent China-US rift and the favorable factors in the China-US-Japan triangle, without seeking political reconciliation and strategic mutual trust with China. Japan is reassessing its foreign strategy because of concerns about the existing US-led order, but it has not decided to comprehensively

43 “Wang Yi: Root Cause of Problems in China-Japan Relations Lies in Japan’s Perception of China,” *Xinhua*, March 8, 2016, http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2016-03/08/c_1118266809.htm.

review its diplomatic strategy. Basically, Japan's strategic community has endorsed Trump's confrontational approach to China on issues of Taiwan, the South China Sea, trade policy, and military development. They tend to believe that Japan has no choice but to strengthen its alliance with the US to prevent China from becoming a regional hegemon.⁴⁴ US-China relations have significantly affected China-Japan relations. Since Trump took office, the former have gradually become tense. The US regards China as a "strategic competitor" and that has put Japan in a difficult position. The Abe government continues to regard the US-Japan alliance as the cornerstone of its diplomatic and security policy, which means that Japan cannot develop its relations with China by disregarding the political nature and strategic framework of the US-Japan alliance.

Even on the Belt and Road Initiative which is now a highlight of bilateral cooperation, Japan has obvious reservations concerning the dominance of China. Its main focus is on technical cooperation rather than strategic synergy and compatibility. The mainstream of Japan's strategic community suspect that China's Belt and Road Initiative aims at subverting the free and open international order. Therefore, the Indo-Pacific strategy is Japan's framework for a strategy to counter China. For Japan, it is very important to incorporate China into the strategy while infiltrating the principles and mechanisms of the traditional liberal international order into the Belt and Road Initiative.⁴⁵ Japanese diplomats have said on informal occasions that an important reason for Japan to promote the CPTPP and why it would welcome the US back to the TPP at any time is to further liberalize the rules so that the increasingly powerful China can be kept under control and prevented from filling the power vacuum left by the US.⁴⁶

44 Hitoshi Tanaka, "Future Prospects for Japan-China Cooperation," August 29, 2018, http://www.theasianforum.org/category/alternative-scenarios/?post_id=8990.

45 Yoshihide Soeya, "East Asia in an Unexperienced Zone and Japan's Response," May 24, 2018, https://www.jfir.or.jp/j/activities/roundtables/303_180524.htm.

46 Aurelia George Mulgan, "CPTPP a Boost for Japan's Regional Trade Leadership," February 27, 2018, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2018/02/27/cptpp-a-boost-for-japans-regional-trade-leadership/>.

Persistent restraint of security identity

Since Abe took office for the second time, Japan has been seeking normalization of its national defense under the banner of “proactive pacifism” and strengthening the ability to defend itself. From 2012 to 2016, under the pretext of Chinese and North Korean threats and the framework of Obama’s Asia-Pacific rebalancing strategy, Japan sought to accumulate leverage for strategic independence in the US-Japan alliance. Abe remains concerned about the excessive security dependence on the United States and has made some changes to Japan’s security and foreign policies. The changes were initiated in the Obama era, intended to make Japan a more equal partner of the US while sharing more security responsibilities.

However, Abe’s promotion of Japan’s defense independence and “normalization of national defense” still faces multiple domestic restraints, including the “peace constitution,” rising costs in military technology, fiscal constraints, the aging population, and the public suspicion and criticism of heavy military deployment. This has forced Japanese political leaders to maintain long-term self-restraint in pursuing the goals of defense reform and military independence. The core pillar of Japan’s “security identity” formed after World War II, which is a key indicator related to revising the constitution, strengthening defense, dispatching troops and using military force, is difficult to be completely subverted in the actual sense. Public opinion forms the biggest obstacle for the Abe government in revising Japan’s “peace constitution” and military policy. Polls show that there are different opinions on revision to the post-war constitution, which has always been a “brake” on the Abe government to establish a stronger defensive force or full-fledged military. Although Abe made a high-profile announcement to revise Article 9 of the constitution after retaking office, he has had to slow down the plan amid domestic opposition. While his government has partially lifted the ban on collective self-defense, strict conditions are specified for its application.

On the whole, Abe hopes that Japan will quickly get rid of the post-war system and move toward strategic independence through normalization of national defense as soon as possible. The reality, however, is that Japan's security policy is more "special" and faces more restrictions than other major powers. Abe and his supporters have relaxed these policy restrictions, but they cannot eliminate them and can only continue to manage security affairs within strict limits. Japan has extensive political sensitivity to military affairs, and the interaction of domestic forces helps explain why Abe has still failed to realize his most ambitious goal despite having achieved more than his predecessors.

In important policy documents, the Abe government has still stressed Japan's long-standing exclusively defense-oriented policy and the "Three Non-Nuclear Principles" as "basic national policies." It still clearly states that it will not deploy strategic weapon platforms that other major powers own, which it believes exceed the minimum necessary level of self-defense capability. Japan's defense budget is still severely restricted, and the spending announced by the government remains close to or below 1% of GDP. At present, Japan's ratio of defense expenditure to GDP ranks 102nd in the world. The actual annual growth of defense spending under the Abe government since 2012 is only about 1.9%,⁴⁷ in spite of the wide publicity in 2018 that it has registered a "consecutive increase for six years." Japan's military transformation and defense independence will be very difficult in the absence of a substantial increase in defense funding.

Implications for China

Abe's pursuit of strategic independence and his policy adjustment have led to a "new Japan" that is very different from the previous one in the political arena of East Asia and the world, which has complicated the regional geopolitics and economy. At present, Japan's future strategy has become a

47 "Defense Programs and Budget of Japan: Overview of FY 2015 Budget," Japanese Ministry of Defense, January 2015, http://www.mod.go.jp/e/d_budget/pdf/270414.pdf.

major variable and driving factor in the changing Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific situation. Its strategic independence and the trend of becoming a great power are geopolitical events that have not existed since the end of World War II. In Japan's pursuit of independence, its military revival, revisionism on historical issues, and its tendency to regard neighbors as enemies have been the world's concern, which inevitably has a negative impact on the regional situation. However, it is not necessary to excessively demonize or iconize this complicated process, which reflects Japan's changes in social thought and political trends after World War II. Abe's strategic vision and plan of power balancing should not be underestimated. His vision is to make Japan relatively independent of the United States. For this reason, it is also necessary to keep the triangular balance between Japan, China and the US, maintain the world free trade system, deepen regional cooperation, and moderately integrate into Asia. Neither being a military power in an absolute sense nor jumping on the bandwagon of US war ventures is the inevitable outcome of independence. The pursuit of independence will stimulate Japan's positive role in maintaining the free trade system at the global level, and also prompt Japan to rethink its strategy of allying with the US, which may lead to policy measures like multi-directional hedging, strengthening diplomatic work in the Asia-Pacific region, and keeping balance between China and the US.

Japan's strategic independence will also have a significant impact on the development of its relations with China. First are two negative impacts. On one hand, Japan's pursuit of independent military power and national defense is likely to make its confrontations with China more frequent and intense. Japan's accelerated military rise and process of "normalizing national defense," and the advance of its China-oriented military building and deployment have become an important variable for China's realization of its national strategic goals and its efforts to improve the neighborhood environment. The China-Japan maritime and air liaison mechanism launched in June 2018 is expected to effectively prevent accidents and emergencies on both sides, but it will not significantly ease military

confrontation between the two sides. At the same time, in order to offset Japan's excessive strategic dependence on the United States and especially considering the unpredictability of President Trump, Abe believes that he needs to become a regional leader and allow Japan to play a greater security role.⁴⁸ Therefore, Japan has been actively engaged in security affairs in Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific regions with a focus on maritime security, and has thus sometimes instigated China-Japan contradictions and competition. Second, Japan's diplomatic independence will lead to spillover of China-Japan competition and internationalization of bilateral rivalry. As Japan cannot fully trust and rely on US protection, Abe has been preparing backup plans by expanding the "circle of friends," looking for alternatives and growth points for cooperation, launching an international campaign to create a multilateral structure of power balance against China, in order to offset Beijing's growing influence in the Asia-Pacific region. The negative impacts of the multilateral diplomatic campaign against China, initiated either by Japan or jointly by Japan and the US, cannot be underestimated, with examples including the establishment of Japan-Australia and Japan-India quasi-alliances, the expansion of Japan-EU coordination, the promotion of Japan-US-Australia and Japan-US-India cooperation, and the development of Japan-US-Australia-India quadripartite dialogue. Abe is also obsessed with upgrading Japan's relations with Russia, improving the geopolitical situation in Northeast Asia, and driving a wedge between China and Russia to obtain a favorable position in its regional competition with China. In addition, Abe has also wooed Southeast Asian countries and cooperated with the United Kingdom, France and Australia to hype up the South China Sea issue as a means of reining in China.

Having said that, Japan's pursuit of strategic independence not only has negative implications but also positive ones. As far as China-Japan relations are concerned, Japan's strategic adjustment has eased tensions between the two countries and prompted the two sides to maintain the

48 Eric Heginbotham and Richard Samuels, "A New Military Strategy for Japan," *Foreign Affairs*, July 16, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2018-07-16/new-military-strategy-japan>.

global free trade order. The two sides came to agree on win-win and multi-win cooperation in the economic and trade field, in particular reaching a consensus on third-party market cooperation. The economic coordination and integration of China and Japan have also been given the expectation of driving some change on the strategic and security level.

China-Japan bilateral relations and China-Japan-US triangular relations have direct implications for the realization of China's national strategic goals. China should objectively understand the situation and properly cope with the trend of Japan seeking strategic independence in the new era. Japan's pursuit of strategic independence has not essentially changed the fundamentals of China-Japan interdependence. It is in Japan's interests to maintain basic peace, initial stability and mutually beneficial exchanges with China, and benefit from China's development. To this end, on the basis of effectively handling disputes and frictions and implementing bilateral crisis management mechanisms, China should keep its major-country mentality and strategic self-confidence, actively expand cooperation with Japan and enrich common interests, and actively shape a benign bilateral relationship. At present, it is clear that China can cooperate with Japan to maintain the global free trade system, vigorously advance the construction of China-Japan-South Korea FTA, RCEP and FTAAP, and ensure substantial progress of the cooperation. Japan has also acknowledged that Japan and China "have the only choice of working together to contribute to the world through dialogue and cooperation."⁴⁹ By "transforming competition into coordination" and shifting "from being threat to each other to being partners," China can enable Japan to focus its economic interests within the framework of East Asian cooperation, so that Japan's negative political factors toward China are subject to the positive process of advancing a community with a shared future and establishing a strategic partnership. 🇨🇳

49 Fumio Kishida, "Outlook of 2017: The Year of Change," p.11.