

Asian Multilateralism in the Age of Japan's 'New Normal': Perils and Prospects

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Abstract

This paper makes three related points. First, Japan has played an instrumental role in helping to define the shape and substance of multilateralism in Asia in ways deeper than scholarly literature on Asia's regional architecture has allowed. A key driving force behind Japan's contributions is the perceived utility of multilateralism in facilitating Japan's engagement of and/or balancing against China. Second, Japan has been able to achieve this because of the United States' support for Asian multilateralism and Japanese security interests. In the immediate post-Cold War period, Japan facilitated US participation in regional arrangements such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation and the ASEAN Regional Forum. But Japanese ambivalence over its dependence on the United States was also apparent in Tokyo's attempts to exclude Washington from the newly formed East Asia Summit in late 2005, despite Japan's felt need to balance China. Japan's reliance on quiet diplomacy and an implicit regional leadership has equally been instrumental to its achievements in regional integration. Third, in the light of Japan's longstanding aim to become a normal military power and adopt a more assertive policy toward China, Japan-US security ties are likely to deepen with negative consequences for Asian multilateralism. However, if its ties with China and South Korea worsen over their islands disputes in the East China Sea, Japan risks undermining its relations with the United States. How Japan balances its normalization with a continued engagement with multilateralism could be key to a stable and secure Asia.

It has become commonplace for students of Japanese foreign policy to see and define Japan's policy options as comprising bilateralism, as represented by its longstanding security partnership with the United States, and multilateralism, as represented by its participation in Asian and global forms of multilateral diplomacy and institutionalism (Fujiwara, 2003; Hook, 1998; Okawara and Katzenstein, 2001; Pekkanen, 2005). Japan's

postwar foreign and security policy has been marked, invariably so, by swings of the pendulum between those two options as well as attempts by Tokyo to integrate both strategies toward a more comprehensive and balanced approach to international affairs. However, Japan's recent displays of diplomatic assertiveness and its evolution as a 'normal military power' have prompted questions over whether Japan, under the nationalistic leadership of Shinzo Abe and in the face of the rising power and influence of an equally assertive China, might not prefer its bilateral relationship with the United States over its commitment to multilateralism (Hughes, 2007; Tisdall, 2013). While Prime Minister Abe's keynote address at the 2014 edition of the Shangri-La Dialogue (SLD), a defense forum held annually in Singapore, offered firm assurance regarding Japan's continued robust support for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the East Asia Summit (EAS) (Abe, 2014), the ramifications of Japan's military normalization and its deepening security integration with the United States for Japan's future involvement in Asian multilateralism could prove worrisome for the future security and stability of Asia.

This article will survey and assess Japan's contributions (considerable, it is argued here) to Asian multilateralism from the latter's early manifestations near the end of the Cold War to its still evolving architecture of overlapping regional arrangements. As Abe's remarks at the SLD 2014 imply, the issue is less likely to be Japan prioritizing of its alliance with the United States over Asian multilateralism but rather the likelihood that it will selectively choose among the multilateral structures at hand as to which would prove the most useful to its immediate political and strategic aims, while downplaying other structures. Given Tokyo's security integration with Washington, it is highly probable, as evidenced by Abe's focus on the EAS, that a convergence in outlook and effort regarding Asian multilateralism will emerge – indeed, has emerged – between the two allies, not only as to which regional arrangements are most apropos to realizing their goals, specifically their common cause to engage with but more precisely to balance against China, but also how those arrangements ought to be refashioned in order to achieve that. Such a convergence is likely to lead Japan, in tandem with the United States, to focus its attention, energy, and resources on a preferred arrangement at the expense of other arrangements. While Japan's putative turn to 'à la carte multilateralism' is entirely comprehensible (Patrick, 2009) – indeed, most if not all countries engage selectively with multilateralism no matter their avowed support for it – there are potential risks involved, not least those associated with an uncritical adherence to a particular multilateral path favored and defined by the Americans (Kagan, 2002). Adopting a highly parochial and selective approach to Asian multilateralism could come at the possible expense of Japan's relations with regional countries which it has carefully nurtured over the years as well as its vision of alternative security that it has long advanced and for which it has come to be admired (Edström, 2011; Lam, 2006). At stake here is Japan's very regional leadership, which it will do well to preserve and enhance through maintaining its hitherto broad and normative commitment to multilateralism.

Making ‘multi-multilateralism’ work

Multilateralism in Asia emerged partly in response to the strategic uncertainty of the post-Cold War Asia-Pacific environment. It has been described variously as a ‘complex’, an ‘ecosystem’, and/or a ‘patchwork’ of institutional arrangements (Cha, 2011; Haggard, 2013; Pempel, 2010). Endowed with neither grand architectural nor strategic coherence (Tow and Taylor, 2010), the regional ‘house’ that Japan and other regional stakeholders have built, most of which is centered upon ASEAN, is far from the finished article (Tan, 2009). That said, the bits and pieces of its still evolving architecture – one analyst has identified at least five distinct institutional complexes within the Asian region, each with its own ensemble of arrangements (Haggard, 2013) – have been added in an ad hoc and pragmatic fashion in response to specific historical challenges and crises, and as such have their own contingent rationale. But while the experience of the European Union (EU), long regarded as the gold standard in regional integration and multilateralism (Börzel and Risse, 2009), led its advocates to advance institutional singularity as destiny, the global landscape paints a different picture. More like Asia than Europe, multilateralism worldwide has developed into a plethora of formal standing multilateral institutions as well as interest-based coalitions referred to by scholars as ‘minilaterals’ (Naim, 2009; Patrick, 2009; Wright, 2009). Making the case for ‘multi-multilateralism’, Francis Fukuyama, observing that the world is ‘far too diverse and complex to be overseen properly by a single global body’, has argued: ‘A truly liberal principle would argue not for a single, overarching, enforceable liberal order but rather for a diversity of institutions and institutional forms to provide governance across a range of security, economic, environmental, and other issues’ (Fukuyama, 2007: 163).

With its overlapping concentric circles and ‘variable geometries’ (Merand and Hofmann, 2011), multi-multilateralism might seem to critics who prefer architectural coherence and elegance to be the embodiment of inefficiency and ineffectiveness owing to the high possibility for rivalry, replication, and redundancy between and among institutions. The proliferation of institutions in Asia has not only been driven by the imperative for collective action among regional states in response to challenges common to all but also their perceived need to balance and/or hedge against each other (Emmers, 2003; Khong, 2004; Medeiros, 2005/06; Pempel, 2010). The dynamics of balancing, engagement, and hedging are not restricted to state-to-state interactions within institutions, however. The multiplicity of institutions in Asia – the ‘oversupply of region’, according to one formulation (Breslin, 2010) – also enables states to balance one another *across* institutions. In this respect, the complex character of Asia’s ‘multi-multilateralism’ in effect allows states to mitigate the impact of the predominance of any single state in one institutional context by shifting the locus of regional activity and attention to other institutional contexts (Hughes, 2009). By the same token, it has also been argued that interstate relations that face gridlock in one institution could be taken up in other institutional settings where breakthroughs could be sought (Cha, 2011). This also presupposes a level of instrumental and normative commitment on the part of countries to Asia’s suite of institutions. While states will always be tempted to pursue

à la carte multilateralism for pragmatic and strategic reasons, they will do well to avoid making false choices between and among institutions. After all, recent history – for example, the United States' foreign policy unilateralism during the first term of George W. Bush's presidency – suggests that marginalizing institutions can carry tangible costs for states, such as squandering their legitimacy to have a say (much less lead) and lost opportunities for them to encourage burden sharing in cooperative enterprises, which could lead ultimately to the erosion of international order (Patrick, 2009: 84).

Ultimately, what is true for effective multilateralism is true also for interstate stability more generally: a sustained mutual exercise in restraint and the formation of healthy and ambitious bilateral relationships among key actors and great powers. G. John Ikenberry's influential work on the postwar liberal international order persuasively argues that the volitional strategic restraint of the United States proved the crucial factor in the establishment and preservation of that order (Ikenberry, 2000). Likewise, the success of European integration would likely not have been possible without restraint and rapprochement between Europe's two key powers, France and Germany (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Verdier, 2005). ASEAN's existence would not have been possible without Indonesia's self-moderation following its undeclared war against Malaysia and Singapore (1963–1966) known as Confrontation (Tan, 2013a). Nor is the idea of restraint solely a liberal preoccupation, as even realist theorists of the balance of power have long appreciated that an effective balance of power system depends on the preexistence of moderation and restraint (Claude, 1989; Little, 1989). Given the pervasiveness of balancing and hedging within Asian multilateralism, the effectiveness of the region's institutions depends on the shared willingness of its participants to exercise restraint even if they stand to incur costs to themselves in the short term. While the region's institutional woes are many, the lack of restraint by states, many whose security outlooks are increasingly colored by nationalistic sentiments, has become a key cause of interstate tensions (Callahan, 2012; Heydarian, 2014; Marquardt, 2013). 'Any solution must improve bilateral relationships and base institutional cooperation on a preexisting commonality of interest', as Thomas Wright has argued about effective multilateralism (Wright, 2009: 164). Thus understood, the key to effective regional multilateral cooperation in Asia would have to involve concerted efforts by states to convert their strongest bilateral relationships into meaningful multilateral collaboration.

Japan and Asian multilateralism

At a public address given at Washington's Center for Strategic and International Studies in February 2013, Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe assured his audience of Japan's revival as a putative great power, or at least his commitment to realizing that goal (Abe, 2013). Signs of economic recovery have since been matched with a diplomatic assertiveness towards China over their East China Sea dispute, a plan to increase defense spending, and the revocation of a ban that since 1945 has disallowed Japan's armed forces from engaging in combat abroad. Fair or otherwise, these developments have led some

to inquire whether Abe is ‘a dangerous militarist or modernizing reformer’ (Tisdall, 2013). Such a question also matters where Japan’s approach to Asian multilateralism is concerned. Rather than a passive regional player and ‘buck passer’ (Lind, 2004), Japan historically has been a proactive actor whose contributions have shaped Asia’s regional architecture in ways deeper and more intimately than much of the existing scholarship on Asian multilateralism has hitherto acknowledged. Backed by the Yoshida Doctrine, Japan focused principally on economic development and regional integration while leaving its military security in the hands of its ally, the United States. Within this ‘Japan as peace state’ phase (Singh, 2013), Japan relied largely on a foreign policy strategy of quiet diplomacy, soft power, and implicit regional leadership. No less proactive, this form of regional engagement – also known as ‘directional leadership’, leadership by ‘stealth’, and/or ‘leadership from behind’ (Drifte, 1998; Hook, 2009; Rix, 1993; Terada, 2001) – has played an important role in the formation and maintenance of Asia’s complex architecture of regional arrangements.

With Japan’s push to become a normal military power, driven equally by expectations of a resource-constrained United States for a more equal partnership with its allies in collective defense and the influence of nationalistic leaders like Abe, the era of a Japan accustomed to playing second fiddle has effectively ended (Hughes, 2007; Kelly, 2014; Tanaka, 2010). Driven by its growing aspirations, a changing regional strategic environment, and the rise of Chinese power and influence, Japan has undertaken a key policy shift described variously as ‘from the Yoshida Doctrine to the Koizumi Doctrine’ and/or from a ‘peace state’ to an ‘international state’ (Tang, 2007: 117; Singh, 2013). What ramifications would a revitalized and assertive Japan have as such for Asian multilateralism? What consequences might a ‘normal’ Japan, one that is deepening its security ties with the United States at a time of rising tensions with China, have for Asia’s regional security architecture? As Abe avowed at the SLD 2014: ‘Taking our alliance with the United States as the foundation and respecting our partnership with ASEAN, Japan will spare no effort to make regional stability, peace, and prosperity into something rock solid’ (Abe, 2014: 8–9). To those who would question Abe’s sincerity or the wisdom of his strategy, a noted Japanese analyst has offered this assurance: ‘Although Japan’s identity is complex, the diplomatic strategy of a “normal” middle power is essentially internationalist; its mission is to contribute to the creation of a liberal international order’ (Soeya, 2012). Presumably, Japan’s continued strong support for Asian multilateralism would be a manifestation of ‘its mission’. To that end, Abe’s affirmation of the EAS – whose enhancement and ‘multilayered’ coordination with the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) he has urged (Abe, 2014) – could go some way to allay concerns ASEAN states might have regarding his disposition toward Asian multilateralism.

Crucially, Abe’s viewpoint is shared by the United States, not least by an Obama administration known for its advocacy of multilateralism (Good, 2009; Gowan and Jones, 2009). However, much as Japan’s rise as an economic power and its at times ambivalent relationship with its key ally have allowed it to forge its own

multilateral path (Regnier, 2001), its recent policy convergence with the United States regarding their shared expectations for Asian multilateralism as tools to assertively manage and counterbalance China could potentially be counterproductive to Japan's liberal internationalist mission, particularly if it ends up destabilizing Asia. But while an enhanced Japan–US partnership is presumably healthy in order for Asian multilateralism to be effective, it could only be so if China goes along with what Japan and the United States expect of it or is given a stake in defining the rules of the road.

Building Asian multilateralism 'from behind'

Japan's track record in multilateralism in Asia is a strong indictment against any crass caricature of its alleged regional passivity or serial buck-passing (Lind, 2004). It has rendered significant contributions to Asia through its 'leading from behind' strategy. In the postwar years, Japan has pursued a policy of constructive diplomatic and economic engagement with China consistent with its 'leading from behind' approach to regional affairs, such as providing overseas development assistance (ODA), investing in the Chinese economy, and facilitating and enhancing bilateral economic cooperation (Green, 1999; Xia, 2007). Japan also pursued deep economic engagement with Southeast Asian countries. While it is debatable whether the Fukuda Doctrine – wherein Japan pledged that it will never become a military power – played any role in guiding Japan's approach to Asian multilateralism, it is noteworthy that the ASEAN states regard that doctrine as a watershed that transformed Japan–ASEAN relations (Satoh, 2012; Sudo, 1992). On the other hand, the successful reception by Southeast Asian audiences of the Fukuda Doctrine might not have been possible without the existence of the Yoshida Doctrine, which prioritized economic development while leaving Japan's military defense to the United States (Midford, 2011). To the extent both the Yoshida and Fukuda doctrines facilitated Japan leading the region 'from behind', they have been able to do so because of the military guarantee provided by the United States, and the strategic assurance provided more broadly to East Asia concerning its regional security by the United States and the latter's role, through its treaty with Japan, in curbing Japanese militaristic ambitions.

In the post-Cold War era, Japan's most important early contributions to Asian multilateralism have resulted arguably because of Tokyo's directional leadership and Washington's selective investments in multilateralism (Haass, 2008; Kagan, 2002). The formation of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) trade forum in the late 1980s is a well-known story, particularly from the Australian angle given the enormously important roles played by its prime minister, Bob Hawke, and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) of Australia. But the lesser known contributions by Japan's Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) – and, for that matter, the regional vision of former Japanese foreign minister and prime minister, Takeo Miki – were no less significant (Terada, 1998; Terada, 1999). Crucially, the Australian view of the APEC as a post-Cold War multilateral platform through which to engage with the

major powers – chiefly China and the United States – is an aim shared by the Japanese (Thompson, 2009). Indeed, the APEC would become the first region-wide mechanism envisaged by its architects for socializing China (Wesley, 2007: 214). This intent would also have resonated well with ASEAN leaders, for whom the regional institutional architecture of Asia that they would help to define downstream – beginning with the ARF – would be about convening regular gatherings wherein the great powers and regional countries can interact according to ASEAN's terms (Tan, 2013b).

If the formation of APEC underscored Japanese efforts to attract America's 'buy in' to Asian multilateralism, then nowhere is this logic more apparent than in the run-up to the establishment of the ARF in 1994. The ARF has been credited, not with exaggeration in some instances, for helping to integrate and socialize a China initially suspicious of multilateralism as a tool of containment, to becoming a canny connoisseur of multilateral diplomacy for its own ends (Ba, 2006; Johnston, 2003; Johnston and Evans, 1999). As in the case of APEC, Japan's efforts to secure China's participation in the ARF cannot be overstated; as Michael Wesley has noted, 'Japanese officials worked assiduously on their Chinese counterparts to overcome Beijing's initial resistance to joining the [ARF]' (Wesley, 2007: 214). Indeed, the ARF might not even have been formed if not for a Japanese intervention. At the July 1991 ASEAN Post Ministerial Conference (PMC), Japan's Foreign Minister Taro Nakayama proposed that the PMC process should in the future become a political forum for political dialogue aimed at discussing mutual security concerns facing Asia-Pacific countries. 'I believe it would be meaningful and timely to use the ASEAN Post Ministerial Conference as a process of political discussions designed to improve the sense of security among us', as Nakayama put it then. 'In order for these discussions to be effective, it might be advisable to organize a senior officials' meeting [SOM], which would then report its deliberations to the ASEAN Post Ministerial Conference for future discussion' (cited in Ashizawa, 2013: 125).

Although the ASEAN countries reacted coolly to Nakayama's proposal, the United States reacted positively to it and officially accepted the principle of multilateral dialogue, however, thereby paving the way for the July 1993 agreement to establish the ARF. While the ARF is better known these days as an arena for great power megaphone diplomacy and for its inability to implement its own stated security objectives (Emmers and Tan, 2011), it bears reminding that Japanese policymakers had initially hoped that the ARF would serve as a convenient mechanism through which China and other conservative regimes could be educated concerning the value of military transparency to regional peace and stability through multilateral security dialogue and the implementation of confidence building measures (Yuzawa, 2007: 50). Another example of a policy idea for multilateral security cooperation contributed by a Japanese official that was met initially with reservations in ASEAN circles, but subsequently proved indirectly revolutionary, is that of a regional forum for defense ministers. In March 2002, Gen Nakatani, the director of the Japan Defense Agency, the precursor to the Japan Ministry of Defense, suggested that the ARF, predominantly

a forum driven by the region's foreign policy establishments, could perhaps be complemented by a parallel defense forum. Taking inspiration from the SLD, Nakatani argued that the SLD could eventually become an 'Asian defense ministerial meeting' (Hook *et al.*, 2001: 263). Again, as in the case of the Nakayama proposal in 1991, the proposal was met with cool reaction from the ASEAN states. It would take another eight years before the ADMM-Plus – comprising the ten ASEAN states, which formed the ADMM in 2006, and eight dialogue partners of ASEAN, Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, Russia, South Korea, and the United States – would be established in 2010 (Tan, 2012). In June 2013, multilateral humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) and military medicine exercises – involving two thousand troops from eighteen countries – conducted under ADMM-Plus auspices marked the first time Chinese and American military forces had worked together (Sieff, 2013).

Notably, Japanese contributions to Asian multilateralism have not always been about securing US commitment to and involvement in the region. The ASEAN Plus Three (APT), formed in the late 1990s in the wake of the 1997 financial crisis, and the currency reserve pool it hosts, the Chiang Mai Initiative (CMI), constituted a form of 'reactionary' regionalism that not only provided the then ailing East Asian countries a putative hedge against their reliance on the International Monetary Fund and the United States for their economic recovery (Beeson, 2003; Pempel, 2010), it also gave Japan, chastened by America's disapproval of its proposal for an Asian Monetary Fund, a platform with which to engage China and other regional countries without the United States present (Lipsy, 2003). Moreover, Japanese anxiety over the Clinton administration's effort to enhance Sino-US ties in the mid-1990s – even as Sino-Japanese ties frayed over their territorial dispute in the East China Sea – convinced Japan to hedge its bets even as it continued to engage China (Green, 1999: 163).

Shaping Asian multilateralism under normalization

Driven by its security perceptions of Asia's strategic environment, Japan has since the last fin de siècle been working more resolutely at becoming a normal military power (Tang, 2007). With the end of 'leading from behind' has come the targeted use of Asian multilateral institutions as places for building coalitions to counter Chinese power and influence. Through measures designed to delay, frustrate, and undermine China's aims rather than directly confront China's military power (Paul, 2005; Pempel, 2010), Japan has arguably employed 'soft' balancing against China as it did with Junichiro Koizumi's idea of an East Asian Community (EAC), which called for the inclusion of Australia as opposed to China's preference for a regional community whose membership would be exclusive to APT member states only (Samuels, 2007). It bears remembering that China, whose perceived dominance of the APT and East Asia at large has caused considerable alarm for Japan and other regional countries, initially welcomed the proposal by Japan and others to form a summit-level gathering, believing its membership would comprise essentially the 13 member countries of the APT (Emmers *et al.*, 2011). But what Koizumi had in mind was a bigger grouping – he sought the inclusion of Australia and New

Zealand in particular – out of concern that China’s power and influence needed to be counterbalanced (Terada, 2011: 222). This implies that Japan actively supported the ad hoc formation of multiple regional institutions in East Asia out of worry that the APT might end up as the only framework for Japan to deal with China (Hughes, 2009; Terada, 2006).

Beyond the EAS, Japan also sought to balance China with its proposal for a Comprehensive Economic Partnership for East Asia (CEPEA) covering 16 countries – the APT states and Australia, India, and New Zealand – that rivaled the East Asia Free Trade Area (EAFTA) championed by China. Japan-sponsored organizations such as the Asian Development Bank Institute produced comparative studies on the anticipated economic benefits of the CEPEA and the EAFTA, engendering in one instance the (unsurprising) conclusion that ‘consolidation into a [CEPEA] at the ASEAN+6 level would yield the largest gains to East Asia among plausible regional trade agreements’ (Kawai and Wignaraja, 2008: 113). Unlike Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama’s short-lived and considerably hazier version of the EAC proffered in 2009, however, Koizumi’s EAC avoided any pretension of being a comprehensive overarching framework in the EU mold and focused instead on building intraregional collaboration over a number of functional fronts such as energy, the economy, and the environment (Samuels, 2007: 166). Thus understood, Japan effectively contributed to the ‘multi-multilateral’ character of Asia’s regional architecture. Moreover, it proved ambivalent in its attitude toward its principal ally, the United States, and even sought to exclude it from particular regional arrangements – despite, crucially, Tokyo’s perceived need to balance against Beijing in a specific multilateral institutional context. As Samuels has noted, ‘Japan responded to the threat of Chinese regional dominance with characteristic ambiguity and a studied ambivalence about its continued dependence on the United States’ (Samuels, 2007: 166). If Yoshida-type pragmatists worry over the potential exclusion of the United States from Asian multilateralism, Koizumi-type revisionists cum nationalists who chafe at Japan’s junior partner status in its alliance with the United States did not seem overly perturbed at the prospect of America’s exclusion from the EAS back in 2005 (Berkofsky, 2012: 140–4). That this took place despite the apparent close interpersonal relationship between Koizumi and George W. Bush underscored the complexity in Japan–US ties (Green, 2006). Such studied ambivalence toward its key ally would carry over to the Hatoyama administration, whose 2009 EAC proposal has been viewed by some as the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) government’s putative attempt to hedge or even counterbalance against both China and the United States (Yang and Lim, 2010). That said, the fact that the EAS emerged partly out of the region’s concern that the APT was at risk of being dominated by China only underscores the importance of US involvement in Asian multilateralism – realized when America (together with Russia) eventually joined the EAS in 2011 – if only as a counterbalance against China and/or other powers wishing to control the multilateral agenda.

Needless to say, China has emerged as the prime rationale for the Abe administration’s projected increase in defense spending to record levels and its

establishment of a US-style national security council (Hayashi, 2013; Sieg and Takemaka, 2013). Arguably, Abe sees Japan's promised economic revival as an effective means to building 'a more powerful, assertive Japan, complete with a full-fledged military, as well as pride in its World War II-era past' (Tabuchi, 2013). Rather than forge a strategic path independent of the United States, however, Japan is more likely than not to integrate its growing military capabilities into its alliance with the United States, with potential ramifications for its hitherto strong support for Asian multilateralism (Hughes, 2007). At the same time, the risk of being drawn reluctantly into a conflict with China as a consequence of its alliance with Japan – what scholars call 'entrapment' (Snyder, 1997: 315–18) – is worrisome to the United States (Bosco, 2013). Nor have official visits by Japanese leaders to the Yasukuni war shrine that exacerbate tensions with neighboring countries – as happened when Abe visited the shrine in December 2013 – found support in Washington, for which strife between its allies, Japan and South Korea, is an additional concern it would rather avoid (Smith, 2013). Whether the United States' ability – some would say obligation – to temper Japanese temptations toward unilateralism has diminished in recent times, even as their alliance partnership has been deepening, is open to question (The Editorial Board, 2013). Be that as it may, both Japan and the United States share the aim to balance against China through closer Japan–US military cooperation toward that end the logical consequence. Christopher Hughes has suggested that Japan would enhance security integration with the United States out of disillusionment with its efforts to engage China:

The result of Japan's perceived exhaustion of its options for engagement, despite its strenuous and innovative regional and global activity, and thus to assert an active hold on China's rise, could be to force it on the defensive and to shift precipitously to a default policy of containment. Japan has already shown signs of this containment founded inevitably on the further enhancement of its own military power, tighter US–Japan security cooperation, and active, if quiet, balancing against China. (Hughes, 2009)

Hughes' premonition is supported by an influential policy study co-authored in 2011 by a prominent coterie of 'young guns' of Japan's security studies community, which contended that in place of its longstanding dual strategy of engagement and hedging long adopted *vis-à-vis* China, Japan ought instead to do the following: (1) further integrate China – as opposed to 'engage' since, it is argued, China is already a part of the international order – regionally and globally; (2) balance against China through persuading it to comply with international rules and norms; and (3) militarily deter China from attempting to change the status quo by force (Jimbo *et al.*, 2011: 6). Their third recommendation has been echoed by Abe himself, who averred in the context of Chinese assertiveness that Japan 'will never tolerate the change of status quo by force or coercion' (Baker and Schlesinger, 2014). The ready and quite public references to political balancing and military deterrence against China presumably marks the verbal crossing of a Rubicon of sorts, where Japan's normalization will no longer be something to be pursued haltingly, quietly, and apologetically, but – notwithstanding incessant

resistance at home and indeed within Abe's Liberal Democratic Party itself (Clifford, 2014; Hirose, 2014) – enthusiastically, energetically, and unabashedly.

Nor, interestingly enough, has Japan's mix of internal balancing (militarization) and external balancing (deepening its alliance with the United States) led it to de-emphasize and dismiss multilateralism in the way the United States did during George W. Bush's first presidential term. But what has become clear – and, crucially, what could prove a watershed in Japan's participation in Asian multilateralism – is a growing convergence, beyond the ambivalence of the past, in Japanese and American expectations about and approaches to Asian multilateralism, not least where their collective management of China's rising power is concerned.

Converging multilateralisms *à la Carte*?

As noted, Abe has made clear his desire to support ASEAN and to see the EAS and other regional arrangements strengthened. Japan harbors the hope that Asian multilateralism would function as venues through which interstate transparency and trust can be fostered, not least with China. In Abe's 2014 SLD remarks, the EAS, the ARF, and the ADMM-Plus were all referenced by the Japanese leader as the appropriate mechanisms where member countries could engage in the mutual disclosure of their respective military expenditures. According to Abe, 'Keeping military expansion in check and making military budgets transparent, as well as enlarging the number of countries that conclude the Arms Trade Treaty and improving mutual understanding between authorities in charge of national defense – there is no lack of issues those of us national leaders ought to take up, applying peer pressure on each other' (Abe, 2014). While Japan might not have played a leading role in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) – indeed, there were early signs suggesting that domestic opposition at home could dampen Japanese enthusiasm for the regional trade pact, despite Abe's and the former DPJ government's support for it – it has since, in negotiations with the United States, resolved most of its key reservations about the TPP (Meltzer *et al.*, 2014). While it is in Japan's geopolitical interest to join the TPP, given the presence of the United States and other security partners of Japan in the TPP, the trade pact also provides Japan with a weighty platform through which it could engage China and, when the time is apposite, encourage its participation in the TPP (Nippon, 2013). While the TPP could conceivably be the economic mechanism through which Japan would facilitate China's further integration with the regional and global economy (Jimbo *et al.*, 2011), there is no question concerning its political and strategic value as a tool to (as Abe has put it in another context) apply peer pressure and balance against China. As a pundit has observed, getting the rules of the TPP set before inviting China to join the party is a strange way of encouraging China to be a responsible stakeholder (Grenville, 2014).

The United States has made clear its support for effective multilateralism in Asia. 'It's more important to have [Asian] organizations that produce results, rather than simply producing new organizations', as Hillary Clinton emphasized during her tenure

as the US secretary of state (Clinton, 2010). Much as the Obama administration has been at pains to insist that its rebalancing in Asia is not only about China much less its containment (Manning, 2013), the risk America faces is that its broader multilateral focus, through mutual reinforcement, could equally be reduced to a China-centric one by dint of its policy convergence with Japan on Asian multilateralism. Echoing similar calls, an influential pundit has urged enhanced coordination between Japan and the United States and pursuance of 'US-tied multilateral strategies' (Bremmer, 2014). According to the Japan–US Joint Statement released in April 2014:

The United States and Japan renew our commitment to deepening diplomatic, economic, and security cooperation with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), recognizing the importance of ASEAN unity and centrality to regional security and prosperity. We are coordinating closely to support ASEAN and its affiliated fora as its members seek to build a regional economic community and address trans-border challenges, including cybersecurity and cybercrime. In this context, the two countries view the East Asia Summit as the premier political and security forum in the region. (The White House, 2014)

In a key respect, these developments satisfy some of the requisite conditions of effective multilateralism highlighted above – a strong bilateral partnership and commonality of interest, on one hand, and strong support for a formal standing arrangement, the EAS, without apparently sacrificing others such as the ARF. Indeed, the emphasis on cyber espionage in the above Joint Statement implies not only those two countries' view of the EAS as an appropriate forum for mutually addressing that concern but also for counterbalancing against other powers, particularly China (Finkel *et al.*, 2014; Tiezzi, 2014). However, it is also possible that the developments highlight a mutual lack in restraint among the three powers in question here, Japan, China, and the United States. To be sure, it could be argued that China's policy of 'tailored coercion' in the East and South China Seas (Cronin *et al.*, 2014), an incremental and selective form of low-end coercive diplomacy, is in fact an exercise in restraint. However, the level of competition and risks arising from their respective employments of sea denial strategies and counterstrategies, on the one hand, and the lack of any dedicated maritime code of conduct, incidences at sea agreement, and confidence building measures, on the other, far exceed any benefit gleaned from occasional and uneven displays in restraint by any power (Buszynski and Roberts, 2013; White, 2014). How Japan, China, the United States, and the ASEAN countries, among others, find ways to improve their bilateral ties and emphasize their common interests will be fundamental to the success of any multilateral framework in facilitating the region's security and stability.

Furthermore, notwithstanding Japan's and America's affirmations of ASEAN centrality and the EAS, a nagging concern for the ASEAN states would be to what extent such an inordinate focus on the EAS could mean for ASEAN's own part and place in the very multilateral house it constructed. Both the Japan–US Joint Statement and Abe's SLD remarks were careful to emphasize the import of ASEAN's centrality. At the same

time, however, ASEAN's weakness and disunity are seen by many, fairly or otherwise, as a root cause of the relative ineffectiveness of Asian multilateralism. It has been proposed, as Abe also has done, that the EAS should be empowered with the capacity to 'steer' the various regional modalities available. Mindful of the problems former Australian leader Kevin Rudd's 'Asia-Pacific Community' proposal had with regional anxieties over the prospect of the region being co-managed by a concert of powers at the expense of a more representative and equitable community (Acharya, 2010; Koh, 2009), a leading Indonesian policy intellectual has argued that the EAS 'should function as a sort of steering committee for the Asia-Pacific region [through] coordinating various regional institutions in the region' such as the APT, ARF, ADMM-Plus, and APEC, whilst 'the EAS members of the G20 [should] form an informal caucus to coordinate their policies and interests at the global level' (Sukma, 2012). It is debatable whether other ASEAN states – with the possible exception of Indonesia, the only Southeast Asian member of the G20 – would accept the idea. The challenge for Japan, the United States, and other powers would be to ensure, in the collective quest to enhance the EAS, that the concerns and interests of the smaller players are not ignored. The proposed conferral of steering capacity on the EAS also leaves unanswered the question of whether the EAS would be able to secure the agreement of the ARF and the APEC, not least when their respective memberships include a large number of non-EAS countries, to that idea.

Those concerns aside, Japan's reputation as a regional leader, already in doubt for some in the wake of Japan's persistent 'deficiencies' – controversial shrine visits, ambivalence on the comfort women issue, resistance against giving a full formal apology for war transgressions, and the like – could be further jeopardized should its future participation in Asian multilateralism be shaped exclusively by the perceived need to counterbalance China through its partnership with the United States. The issue here has less to do with balancing *per se* – the existence of soft balancing and hedging dynamics within Asia's institutions has long been acknowledged (Emmers, 2003; Khong, 2004) – than the risks posed to those institutions by member countries potentially engaged in hard balancing. Moreover, it has been argued that the choices Tokyo makes concerning the frameworks – bilateral alliance, Asian multilateralism, and/or United Nations-centered multilateralism – through which it will deploy its expanded military power will prove decisive for regional stability and the international order as a whole (Hughes, 2007). Even so, it is not entirely certain, should Japan adopt an *à la carte* multilateralism that is mutually convergent with the US position and narrowly focused on the China threat, whether the future security environment of the region would be any less worrisome than if Japan had decided to go it alone.

Another equally challenging ramification for Japan's regional leadership as a consequence of its military normalization has to do with its longstanding devotion to and championing of alternative security, especially economic, human, and other non-military approaches to security (Edström, 2011; Hughes, 2007; Lam, 2006). According

to the 2013 interim report by the Japanese commission tasked to review the country's defense guidelines, Japan's security policy is acutely focused on traditional security concerns rather than non-traditional ones – the latter with which, on the other hand, Japan continues to engage proactively in areas like disaster relief, maritime security, and military medicine through the ADMM-Plus and the ARF (Shoji, 2013: 2). If anything, it is in the area of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) that has afforded the most opportunities to foster military-to-military cooperation between Japan and other members of the ADMM-Plus and the ARF, including China (Futori, 2013). But it is also in such ostensibly non-military areas of regional cooperation that Japan's contributions could potentially destabilize the region by proxy, such as its decision to donate patrol boats to the Philippines amidst rising tensions in the South China Sea (Agence France-Presse, 2013; Baker and Schlesinger, 2014). While Japan's turn to hard balancing against China has not quite led it to abandon its support for alternative security approaches, it is nonetheless at risk of hijacking and undermining its own historical legacy by securitizing its contributions to multilateral cooperation.

Conclusion

This article has argued that Japan's present push to become a normal military power is likely to have a lasting impact on Asian multilateralism, though not quite in the way anticipated by those who foresee Japan's prioritization of its alliance with the United States at the expense of its longstanding and largely positive history with the region's multilateral enterprise. The envisaged outcome is likely the same, but arguably arrived at not through Japan's rejection or abandonment of multilateralism as much as its adoption of an *à la carte* approach to multilateralism that risks alienating not only China but other regional countries as well. Japan's increasingly selective and parochial approach to multilateralism could prove risky for the region's stability as its focus on the perceived threat posed by China to its interests and the lack of restraint on the part of Japan and other powers equally contribute to an ineffective multilateralism. Furthermore, whatever contributions Japan's *à la carte* multilateralism might deliver to the region, they would not only be undermined by its turn to hard balancing against China, but its leadership in alternative security approaches could itself be jeopardized. The foregoing analysis has also shown that Asia's 'multi-multilateralism', for which ASEAN has often been criticized for having fashioned, is in fact equally attributable to efforts by Japan, among others, to create political and strategic space for managing and counterbalancing China (Samuels, 2007; Tan, 2013b). While the way forward to an effective multilateralism and a stable and secure Asia will likely need to involve close bilateral (and possibly even trilateral) coordination and cooperation between and among Japan, China, and the United States, how those powers can pull that off, while at the same time addressing residual regional worries over existing multilateral institutions being hijacked by a concert of power arrangement, could prove to be the key challenge.

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