

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The analysis shows its contribution to the debate of Japan's involvement in the SCS while acknowledging their efforts amid the limitation. First, the balance of threat theory explicitly contributes to realizing the dynamics in the Asia-Pacific region where states balance against threat and a balancing action requires some degree of confidence. Secondly, Japan possesses a degree of interest in a framework that is easily agreed by the US and ASEAN – where the US-Japan relationship has easily backed up Japan for future aggressiveness in the SCS.

Relating to the restriction embedded in Japan, several points of limitation can be addressed to portray the condition. Under the pacifist identity, Japan is unable to deploy its SDF to direct war, possess any offensive forces, while also keeping its defense expenditure under the 1% GDP cap. Despite Abe's ambition in redefining the Peace Constitution, hence, allowing Japan to contribute into collective defense forces, its basic policy to remain its SDF as defensive as possible and upholding non-nuclear principles perhaps act as another layer of restriction. Furthermore, this thesis identified the significance of the role of public opinion to justify the Japanese governments' actions, especially if it were to entail security.

Japan possesses three main objectives in the SCS: maintaining regional peace and security, ensuring the freedom of navigation, and gaining economic and trading benefits. With China's growing assertiveness in the SCS, these objectives become prone to be destroyed. Perhaps, the balance of threat theory can identify the level

of threat embodied in China's persona through Japan's point of view. First, the aggregate power of China seen through its population size, industry capabilities, and technology advancement is difficult to be contended by Japan with its ageing population and competition in both technology and industry sector. Second, China's military budget followed by its advancement in military equipment acts as another sensitive issue for Japan – especially when compared with Japan's limitation. While the advancement allows China to conduct operations outside its territory, it becomes another point of threat when understanding the third point – geographic proximity. Living within the same region, China's domination limits Japan's movement while it also sparks the possibility of a spillover effect towards other disputes, such as the ECS. Lastly, the aggressive intention is easily seen through China's claims over the nine-dash line, reclamation and militarization of artificial islands around the SCS, and China's invasion over Japan's and other claimants' EEZ. China's easy dismissal of negotiation talks, the PCA ruling, and the ASEAN CoC have shown a non-compliant and rebellious perception to obviously dominate the seas.

Such a level of threat is enough for Japan to balance against the dominance of China in the SCS. This thesis argues how Japan attempts to retain the main balancing assistance towards the Japan-US alliance. The Abe administration has the confidence towards the US to back them up, especially after its renewed Guidelines for Japan-US Defense Cooperation which acknowledged the emerging threats in Japan's region, hence, accommodating Abe's initiation to slightly exert its SDF into a collective defense mission. Perhaps, both states found out the shared interests of

the alliance – upholding the FOIP mission, deterring China, and understanding the economic benefits of the SCS – which pushes the US to grant most of Abe’s request, including reviving the Quad as a security alliance in the Indo-Pacific region and diversifying cooperation to ensure the US’ presence in SCS. However, this thesis emphasizes on the high-level alliance both states share through equipment sales, military base and infrastructure accommodation for the US forces, deployment of US Forces personnel in Japan, and military training.

While the US acts as the main balancing partner, Japan has also aimed to expand its alliance southwards into ASEAN. Through diplomatic and military assistance provided by the Japanese government and the positive responses from each government official, it could be summarized how regional powers do balance against similar threats, which is China. However, the level of this alliance could be classified as an ‘almost alliance’ or a lower degree if it were to be compared with the Japan-US alliance.

Hence, to answer the initial research question of “how does Japan respond to China’s growing assertiveness in the SCS amid its power projection limitations?” the answer is balancing. Japan externally balances China through strengthening their alliance with the US while also expanding the approach to Southeast Asia. While leaning towards the US is the major part of the approach, it also invites other security cooperation – such as the Quad – to be present under the FOIP umbrella. This strategic move is motivated by the high degree of aggregate power, offensive power, and aggressive intention from China while understanding the geographic proximity with Japan. These reasons are considered enough for Japan to portray

China as an emerging threat towards its objectives in the SCS and territorial integrity.

The author's take in this research is simply realizing how complicated the power politics are present in the SCS dispute. As the dispute has been going on for ages, foreign presence into the seas while taking stances to which to support is interestingly explicit to show the interests and importance of the SCS. Analysing the dynamics in the region of Indo-Pacific, specifically on this dispute, shall be seen into smaller pieces – either through bilateral relations or how states relate to the dispute – in order to gain a more specific understanding.

While the debate amongst scholars in explaining Japan's strategy towards China has always been between the array of balancing or hedging, perhaps, this analysis disregards the consideration of the China-Japan economic relationship. A thing to note is the economic relationship has always been present and it can be detached from the responses in the SCS. Even though littoral states are in awe with China's assertiveness in the SCS, economic relations are still present anyways. Yet, militaristically, they are attempting to seek an ally to deter China. Same context applies to Japan, where balancing is a more favourable term to be analysed as the degree of active participation in the SCS is apparent. If further analysis wishes to incorporate the China-Japan economic relationship, one shall be able to provide enough parameters to what extent such change is considered a balancing or hedging.

While another realm of debates pertaining to this issue is present, it is difficult to trace whether the SCS mission posed by the US-Japan alliance is part of the FOIP arrangement or outside of it. As an emerging threat triggers Japan to seek extra help

from the US, the analogies in explaining the types of support that directly aims to secure the SCS might be seen like the whole Japan-US security alignment in general. One might indicate a certain military training is specifically for the SCS, while others analyse otherwise. Some scholars have also argued on this point that the US might intend to not involve the JSDF in patrolling the SCS in order to maintain the US-China tension. However, this would be another point of analysis to simply review the US' strategy in the region – whether it is integrated within the FOIP mission or separated – especially understanding the significance of the seas for its trades.

What is more, with the basis of the balance of threat theory focusing on alliance building, this thesis has not reached the topic of Japan's internal balancing attempts which was popular under Abe's administration. It would be intuitive where Japan has been attempting to redefine its Peace Constitution and strengthening its technological cooperation to be used as an internal balancing mechanism. A separate discussion on this topic shall be a fruitful addition to the topic of Japan's presence in the SCS.

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