

Karol Żakowski*

ORCID: 0000-0003-2715-570X

FROM COUNTERBALANCING TO ENGAGING CHINA: SHIFT IN JAPAN'S APPROACH TOWARDS THE NEW INTERNATIONAL ORDER IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC UNDER THE SECOND ABE ADMINISTRATION

ABSTRACT

Since returning to the post of prime minister in 2012, Abe Shinzō has been promoting Japan's active posture in maintaining international stability in the Asia-Pacific. Abe's vision of the new international order in the region has been based on Tokyo's alliance with Washington, both in the security and economic spheres. Through legalizing Japan's participation in collective self-defense pacts and through revising the Guidelines for Japan–US Defense Cooperation in 2015, Abe strengthened the Japan–US alliance. In parallel, he promoted Japan's participation in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which; however, was realized as Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership without Trump administration's participation. In addition, Tokyo has been negotiating Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), Japan–China–Republic of Korea Trilateral Free Trade Agreement, and Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific. The article argues that while initially the Japanese prime minister's regional initiatives were aimed at counterbalancing China's rise, they gradually started putting more emphasis on engaging China in international cooperation. Applying a neoclassical-realist methodology, this study examines both the international and the domestic determinants of Japan's shift in approach towards the new international order.

Keywords: Japan, China, Asia-Pacific, Abe Shinzō, Japan–US alliance, Belt and Road Initiative

* University of Lodz (Poland), e-mail: karol.zakowski@uni.lodz.pl

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the signing of the San Francisco Treaty in 1951, the alliance with the US has been a cornerstone of Japan's vision of the regional order. However, in the period of globalization, economic regionalization started playing an equally important role as security policy in shaping international systems. Due to opposition of the agricultural lobby, Japan made some efforts towards regional economic integration relatively late. Tokyo's first free trade agreement was signed in 2002 with Singapore, as thanks to the virtual lack of the agricultural sector in that country the initiative was easily accepted by the domestic pressure groups. At the same time, regional integration platforms exhibited geopolitical significance as methods for creating a new international order in the Asia-Pacific.

This article argues that Prime Minister Abe Shinzō has perceived different regional initiatives as a way of both counterbalancing and engaging the rising China. Strengthening of the Japan–US alliance and negotiations over accession to TPP were supposed to protect the US-oriented regional order while counterbalancing Beijing's attempts at creating international institutions alternative to the system dominated by Washington. On the other hand, Japan's foreign policy remained flexible enough to seek cooperation with Chinese initiatives once Trump's administration withdrew from the "Pivot to Asia" and TPP. It is argued that the shift in approach towards China from the policy of counterbalancing to the one of engagement was triggered by the change in international determinants, but it was also facilitated by the fact that part of Abe's closest entourage supported a more flexible approach towards Beijing.

The first section examines the policy agenda of the Abe's administration from the perspective of containment and engagement policy towards China. A particular emphasis is put on policy proposals of the prime minister's diplomatic advisors. The second and third sections, in turn, analyze the counterbalancing and engaging strategies undertaken towards Beijing since Abe's return to power in December 2012.

2. THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The neorealists tend to perceive sovereign countries as "black boxes" pursuing objectively definable national interests that stem from the position of states in the international system (Waltz, 1990, p. 29). The neoliberals focus on analyzing the mitigating influence of economic interdependence on international disputes (Nye, 1976, pp. 130–161). The representatives of the third mainstream theory of international relations, constructivists, in turn, place their interest in inter-subjective identities and their influence on defining the roles played by nations in mutual interaction (Wendt, 1999). All three theories point to the significance of China in interpreting Japan's approach towards the formation of the new order in Asia-Pacific. In line with neorealism, Japan has instituted counterbalancing measures against the rising power of the PRC. As predicted by neoliberalism, due to increased economic interdependence with China, Tokyo has tried to engage Beijing in regional initiatives. Just as claimed by constructivism, in turn, history issues and growing nationalism have been major obstacles in Sino-Japanese cooperation. Nevertheless, each of the three theories offers only partial explanation of the determinants of Japan's foreign policy.

This study relies on neoclassical realism in explaining the factors behind Tokyo's regional strategy. As stressed by Gideon Rose, "the translation of capabilities into national behavior is often rough and capricious over the short and medium term" (Rose, 1998, p. 158). While international determinants impose the general direction for foreign policy, domestic-level factors can hinder or accelerate the realization of national interests. As the external environment evolves over time, statespersons should adapt foreign policy decisions to a new situation, but the pace of this process depends on intra-state conditions.

In line with neoclassical realism, this study analyzes both external factors that are treated as independent variables, as well as domestic determinants of Japan's regional strategy which constitute intervening variables. While the former refer mainly to the US grand strategy, the latter focus on examining, through primary and secondary sources, the policy agenda of the prime minister and his closest entourage. It is argued that while the shift from the policy of counterbalancing to engaging China in regional initiatives was conditioned by the evolution of the external environment, it was also facilitated by the promotion of Sino-Japanese rapprochement by Abe's diplomatic advisors.

3. THE ABE ADMINISTRATION'S STRATEGIES OF COUNTERBALANCING AND ENGAGING CHINA

China has gone a long way since launching economic reforms in 1978. At the end of the 1970s China's GDP amounted only to little more than one seventh of Japan's, whereas in 2010 it surpassed Japan's, and by 2019 it was almost three times as high (The World Bank, 2019). According to Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, while in 1989 Japan's military expenditures were nearly 2.5 times as high as the PRC's, in 2018, they constituted less than one fifth of the Chinese defense budget (SIPRI, 2019). Such an abrupt change in balance of power between both countries posed a serious challenge to the regional order based on Japan-US alliance and prompted Tokyo to institute counterbalancing measures against Beijing.

The rise of China's power on regional and global level has been one of the crucial points of concern for Prime Minister Abe. In his bestseller "Towards a Beautiful Country" published in 2006, he drew attention to anti-Japanese demonstrations in China and claimed the necessity of separating politics from economy in relations with Beijing, not to let mutual frictions endanger bilateral trade exchange and investments. As an alternative to strengthening ties with China he hinted at the solidifying of ties with the US and regional powers that shared the same values with Japan – India and Australia. Abe positively evaluated Japan's participation in such multilateral forums as Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Plus Three, and East Asia Summit. He stressed the necessity of further developing cooperation within these institutions to contribute to peace and stability in the region as well as to promote the vision of "open Asia" (Abe, 2006, pp. 146–161).

Abe's policy was a reflection on an approach towards China and integration processes of his closest advisors from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA): Yachi Shōtarō and Kanehara Nobukatsu. Yachi had been foreign administrative vice-minister under the first Abe's administration in 2006–2007. It is his general policy dialogue with Chinese Foreign Vice-Minister Dai Bingguo that paved the way towards Abe's "ice-breaking trip" to Beijing

in October 2006. Yachi was also one of the authors of the concept of “arc of freedom and prosperity,” according to which Japan promoted such values as democracy, human rights, rule of law, and market-oriented economy in the countries situated at the outer edge of Eurasia. He explained that he excluded Russia from the arc not to turn it into a circle surrounding the PRC. Yachi thus wanted to avoid making an impression that Japan intended to contain the rising China. He stressed that Japan and China were neighbours who could not move their homes, and should spare no efforts for building rules of mutual coexistence. As he emphasized, Sino-Japanese cooperation was also expected by the US and Southeast Asian countries as a friendly relationship between both powers contributed to political and economic stability in whole Asia. For that reason, he coined the concept of mutually beneficial relationship based on common strategic interests aimed at finding mutually beneficial solutions to such problems as the dispute over delimitation of the East China Sea or pollution of natural environment (Yachi & Takahashi, 2009, pp. 30–145). After Abe’s return to power in December 2012, Yachi was nominated as his advisor, and subsequently he served as the first head of the newly established National Security Secretariat.

Kanehara Nobukatsu (2011, pp. 50–57), who in turn became Assistant Chief Cabinet Secretary under the second Abe’s administration, stressed that Japan needed to assume a more realistic approach and abandon the pacifist idealism of the 20th century, which he called a “fantasy”. He supported strengthening ties with the US as the best way of guaranteeing security in the region and not allowing “Finlandization” of the countries in China’s proximity. As indicated by Kanehara (2011, pp. 240–241), US alliances with Japan, South Korea, and Australia constituted core framework of the security system in the Asia-Pacific. According to him, Japan was obliged to protect the US-centered regional order not to let China enter the political vacuum that would appear in case of withdrawal of American forces.

Under his second administration Abe, just as his key diplomatic advisors, perceived the rise of China as a serious challenge to the regional and global status quo. While in order to check the rising China the Japanese prime minister promoted US-centered international order on regional and global level, he gradually started putting more emphasis on engaging Beijing in regional integration initiatives. The former goal was to be achieved through the re-definition of the Japan–US alliance and entrance into force of the TPP, and the latter through Japan’s participation in the talks on liberalization of trade among three Northeast Asian countries, as well as through negotiations among a wider group of Asian states.

4. COUNTERBALANCING CHINA THROUGH THE US-CENTERED INTERNATIONAL ORDER

At the beginning of the second Abe administration in December 2012, the prime minister put the strongest emphasis on the need for counterbalancing China by strengthening security and economic ties with the US. His efforts were in line both with the negotiations on TPP accession and “Pivot to Asia” strategy of the Obama administration.

Abe tried to involve the US in counterbalancing China by the concept of “Asia’s Democratic Security Diamond”, which he announced in December 2012. The geopolitical diamond encompassed Japan, India, Australia, and the US state of Hawaii. Pointing to the example of the South China Sea that “seems to become ‘Lake Beijing’,” Abe emphasized that

the four states should “safeguard the maritime commons stretching from the Indian Ocean region to the western Pacific” (Abe, 2012). During his visit to ASEAN countries in January 2013, Abe announced “Five Principles to Build the Future”, in which he restated the need for “ensuring that the seas, which are the most vital commons to us all, are governed by laws and rules, not by might” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2013). It was a reference to incursions by Chinese ships to Japanese waters in the East China Sea.

Abe’s vision of the regional order was consistent with the “Pivot to Asia” strategy that had been drafted by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in October 2011. Under the Obama administration, Washington stressed the necessity of adapting alliances in East Asia to the changing international environment, protecting freedom of navigation, and enhancing the defense capabilities of regional allies (Clinton, 2011). Due to the fact that Tokyo was not powerful enough to counterbalance China alone, supporting the “Pivot to Asia” strategy seemed a viable alternative for Sino-centric regional order gradually built by Beijing. In “Diplomatic Bluebook 2014” the Japanese government pointed to “China’s advance in military capabilities without sufficient transparency and unilateral attempts to change the status quo,” along with the North Korean threat as the main causes of “increasing severity in the East Asian security environment”. Due to the increased international tensions, Tokyo indicated that alliance with the US “as the linchpin of Japan’s diplomacy has become more important than ever”. The Abe administration welcomed “the continued implementation of the United States’ rebalancing toward the Asia–Pacific, as this contributes greatly to the stability and prosperity of the region” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2014a). As admitted by Special Advisor to the Cabinet Taniguchi Tomohiko (2018, p. 51), who ghost-wrote Abe’s address to the US Congress in April 2015, the words about “an alliance of hope” in the speech were to communicate to India, Australia, or the UK Tokyo’s determination to walk hand in hand with Washington. Taniguchi (2018, p. 231) reminded everybody concerned that while American troops were present in South Korea only to keep an eye on North Korea, the US military bases in Japan served to maintain security in the whole Indian Ocean.

In order to reinvigorate the Japan–US alliance, Abe reinterpreted Article 9 of Constitution that prohibited Japan from waging wars and possessing any military potential. In July 2014, he issued a cabinet decision that legalized Japan’s participation in collective self-defense pacts. It was announced that “an armed attack against a foreign country that is in a close relationship with Japan” which “threatens Japan’s survival and poses a clear danger to fundamentally overturn people’s right to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness,” would allow Japan to use force, if only “there is no other appropriate means available to repel the attack and ensure Japan’s survival and protect its people” (Cabinet Secretariat, 2014, pp. 7–8). Such an interpretation of Constitution paved the way not only to making alliance with the US more equal, but also to assist any other country in case of an armed attack on its territory, assuming that the aggression was considered as a direct threat to Japan.

In line with the cabinet decision, in April 2015 Tokyo and Washington agreed on new Guidelines for Japan–US Defense Cooperation. Both sides upgraded the bilateral planning mechanism to enhance communication between their relevant agencies. They also introduced the concept of “gray-zone” disputes that did not involve an armed attack against Japan. What is significant, Tokyo and Washington removed any geographical limitations to joint operations such as maritime cooperation, logistics support, search and rescue, asset protection, or operations to counter ballistic missile attacks. In addition, Japan and the US admitted the

necessity to cooperate bilaterally and with other partners in the disaster relief and humanitarian assistance activities, UN peacekeeping operations, minesweeping and counter-piracy, counterterrorism, partner capacity building, exercises and training, evacuation of noncombatants, surveillance, logistics support, intelligence and reconnaissance, or non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (Ministry of Defense of Japan, 2015).

The other decisions that prepared the ground for solidifying a US-centered order in East Asia were the relaxation of arms export ban and modification of the rules of providing the Official Development Assistance (ODA). In April 2014, the Abe administration issued new Three Principles on Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology that permitted arms export provided “the transfer contributes to active promotion of peace contribution and international cooperation” or “the transfer contributes to Japan’s security” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2014b). In February 2015, in turn, the new Development Cooperation Charter created a possibility of financing projects in which “the armed forces or members of the armed forces in recipient countries are involved in development cooperation for non-military purposes such as public welfare or disaster-relief purposes” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2015, pp. 10–11). Both changes paved the way to selling or donating military equipment to potential allies of Japan and US in containing the rising China, such as the Philippines, India, or even Vietnam.

While strengthening the Japan–US alliance, Abe perceived the TPP as an instrument for creating a US-centered economic order in the Asia-Pacific. After long negotiations, the TPP was signed in February 2016 by Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, the US, and Vietnam. Abe placed high expectations in this agreement. He acknowledged far-going concessions to the US on the reduction of agricultural products tariffs and pushed ratification of TPP forward in December 2016 despite strong opposition by the domestic agricultural lobby. Nevertheless, in order to make the agreement enter into effect, it had to be ratified by at least six states representing at least 85% of the GDP of all signatories. After the withdrawal by Washington in January 2017, Tokyo played a pivotal role in negotiating the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) without the US participation. It was signed in March 2018 in Santiago de Chile, ratified by Japan in July 2018, and entered into force in December 2018. As admitted by Japanese Foreign Minister Kōno Tarō, the new deal would “serve as a foundation for building a broader free-trade area” in Asia-Pacific (Stevenson & Rich, 2017). Nevertheless, without the US participation, the CPTPP lost its geopolitical significance.

Donald Trump’s having been elected as US president in November 2016 endangered Abe’s plans of counterbalancing the PRC. The new US president not only abandoned “Pivot to Asia” policy, but he also withdrew from the TPP (Żakowski, 2019, pp. 85–101). As a result, while Abe remained a loyal US ally, he gradually started envisaging Japan’s participation in regionalization initiatives competitive to Washington in order to engage the rising China.

5. ENGAGING CHINA THROUGH THE EAST ASIAN INTEGRATION INITIATIVES

While strengthening security and economic ties with the US, the Abe administration was aware of the gravity of integration processes in East Asia. RCEP, Japan–China–Republic of

Korea Trilateral Free Trade Agreement, and Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific were the most significant initiatives in the region that necessitated Japan's reaction.

As the first attempts at wider economic integration in Asia, such as creation of East Asian Economic Caucus proposed by Mahathir Muhammad and Lee Kuan Yew in the 1990s, ultimately failed, Japan focused on the efforts towards the liberalization of trade with individual Asian countries on bilateral footing. According to former Foreign Administrative Vice-Minister Yabunaka Mitoji (2010, pp. 157–158), Japan's previously passive posture towards bilateral free trade agreements eventually changed as a result of the stalemate in negotiations on the liberalization of trade on global level within the World Trade Organization. The first agreement of this kind was signed with Singapore in 2002. As of October 5, 2019, Japan had signed 14 free trade agreements (FTA) or economic partnership agreements (EPA) with 14 countries (Singapore, Mexico, Malaysia, Chile, Thailand, Indonesia, Brunei, Philippines, Switzerland, Vietnam, India, Peru, Australia, Mongolia) as well as three multilateral blocks (ASEAN, EU, CPTPP). Another five agreements were under negotiations: with ASEAN on services and investment chapters, Colombia, Turkey, trilateral with China and Republic of Korea, as well as RCEP (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2019c).

One of the most important forums for Japan to engage China was the trilateral meeting with the participation of South Korea. According to Nukaga Fukushirō (2010, pp. 109–114), who served as director-general of the Japan Defense Agency in 1998, the first meeting of the three leaders was scheduled to deal with the North Korean problem, but also to provide a forum for a regular exchange of ideas in a trilateral setting. The initial meeting in ASEAN Plus Three formula took place in Manila in November 1999, with the participation of Prime Ministers Obuchi Keizō and Zhu Rongji as well as of President Kim Dae-jung. Interestingly enough, to emphasize equality of all three leaders, a special triangular table was prepared for the deliberations. In subsequent years, the three leaders met regularly during ASEAN summits. As stressed by Yachi Shōtarō, Tokyo was expected by ASEAN states to represent their interests in talks with Beijing, as in that group Japan was the only country powerful enough to speak with the PRC on equal footing. In order to dilute China's supremacy, Japan proposed the formation of the East Asia Summit with the additional participation of three democratic states: India, Australia, and New Zealand. Its first meeting was held in Kuala Lumpur in December 2005. According to Yachi, the East Asia Summit symbolized the efforts towards creating the East Asian Community (Yachi & Takahashi, 2009, pp. 146–147). In 2011, however, the US and Russia joined the Summit, which turned it into a supra-regional forum. As stressed by Yabunaka (2010, p. 167), ASEAN countries were unceasingly motivated to include Japan in regional integration initiatives for the sake of counterweighing Chinese economic and political influence. According to him, as Japan was unwilling to challenge China alone, Southeast Asian representatives placed high expectations in the US–Japan alliance. Gradually, however, Japan, China, and South Korea leaders started holding meetings separately from ASEAN. The first independent China–Japan–South Korea trilateral summit was held in Japanese Dazaifu in December 2008. Due to frictions between Japan and the other two countries, the summits were suspended in 2013–2014 and 2016–2017, but in May 2018 Prime Minister Abe hosted the seventh meeting in Tokyo.

While at the beginning of his second administration Abe focused on the initiatives oriented at counterbalancing the rising China, since the end of 2014 he started displaying a more accommodative posture towards Beijing. The evolution of Tokyo's diplomatic stance

was related to the changes in the international environment. After annexation of Crimea in March 2014, Japan was forced by the US to introduce economic sanctions against Moscow, which excluded Russia from the group of countries that could be potentially used to counterbalance China. Moreover, first signs of economic stagnation after initial successes of Abenomics (Abe's economics) made Tokyo more eager to improve Sino-Japanese trade exchange¹. Nevertheless, the most important factor was Donald Trump's electoral victory in the US in November 2016. The abandonment of the "Pivot to Asia" policy and withdrawal from the TPP by the new American president put into question the four years of promotion by Abe of US-centered security and economic order in the Asia-Pacific.

Despite Abe's efforts to establish friendly relationship with Trump, Japanese diplomats quickly started voicing their doubts about reliability of the new US president as an ally in counterbalancing the rising China. As stressed by Yabunaka (2017, pp. 89–229), Trump had a tendency to spontaneously reverse his opinions. On the one hand, during the electoral campaign he criticized China for unfair trade practices, but on the other hand due to his and his son-in-law Jared Kushner's business interests in China, he often assumed an accommodating posture towards Beijing. This ambiguity was evident during Abe's visit to the US in February 2017. While emphasizing that Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, disputed between Japan and China, fell within the scope of the US–Japan alliance, Trump said that Japan would benefit from good relations between the PRC and the US. For that reason, Yabunaka advised the Japanese government to broaden the fields of cooperation with Beijing and to make the PRC more willing to respect the rules of the international order by engaging China in joint projects.

Former Ambassador to China Miyamoto Yūji (2019, pp. 75–175) held a similar view. While stressing that the power of the US would wane in the future, he claimed that China would not become the new world leader as the international system would move towards multipolarity. Because international conditions in the 21st century considerably differed from the situation which remained operative until the 19th century, he was also convinced that it was impossible for China to rebuild Sino-centric order. Under these circumstances, Miyamoto emphasized that Japan's prime objective in relations with Beijing should be, just as after the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989, not to let isolate the PRC on the international scene. In fact, according to him, in the era of globalization it was virtually impossible to conduct a strategy of containment against such a powerful country. As claimed by Miyamoto, excessive attempts at isolating China could only turn the PRC into a real "monster" – a revisionist state that feels strong enmity against the Western civilization. Instead, it was wiser to engage Beijing in the currently existing international order. Interestingly, trade wars waged by Trump created an opportunity for initiating such strategy of engagement, as the PRC started appealing to Washington to respect the rules of free market, which were a part of the international order.

Gradually, Abe indeed intensified contacts with China to an extent that instead of counterbalancing, he started putting more emphasis on engaging China in regional initiatives. During Prime Minister Li Keqiang's visit to Japan in May 2018, both countries concluded the Maritime and Aerial Communication Mechanism aimed at facilitating the avoidance of crisis situations in the East China Sea. They signed as many as 10 bilateral agreements or memorandums, such as the Agreement on Social Security or Memorandum on the Development

¹ So-called "three arrows of Abenomics" included monetary easing, fiscal stimulus, and structural reforms to stimulate private investments.

of Service Industry Cooperation. What is important, the two prime ministers appealed for “Building of a free, open, and fair economic order based on international rules, in order to maintain and promote the free economic and trading system” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2018a). Furthermore, 12 international agreements and memorandums were signed during Abe’s visit to Beijing in October 2018. Prime Minister Abe reassured President Xi Jinping that he attached importance to multilateral free trade arrangements, while stressing “that it is essential for China to make further improvements on issues including subsidies and intellectual property rights” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2018c).

In “Diplomatic Bluebook 2019” the Japanese government still indicated the lack of transparency of military expenditures and unilateral actions against *status quo* by China as serious threats to regional order. On the other hand, Tokyo ranked the improvement of relations with neighboring states as one of six priority areas of foreign policy, right behind the strengthening of alliance with the US and promotion of the networking of allies and befriended countries. The document called Sino-Japanese relations “one of the most important bilateral relationships for Japan,” stressing that in 2018 bilateral contacts “returned to their normal track and entered into a new stage aiming for new development”. Tokyo admitted that both countries shared “a major responsibility for the peace and stability of the region and the international community, and a stable relationship between Japan and China is essential not only to the citizens of both countries but also, for dealing with regional and international issues” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2019b).

The shift towards the policy of engagement was symbolized by Japan’s approach towards such China’s initiatives as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) or the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). The BRI was announced by President Xi Jinping as One Belt One Road in 2013. Its aim was to create a new silk route through extensive investments in land and maritime transportation infrastructure from China to Europe. The AIIB, in turn, which started operating in 2015, was to provide the funds for infrastructure projects. Initially, Tokyo declared non-participation in both initiatives, perceiving them as elements of the Sino-centric order that Beijing wanted to build in the region. The AIIB became an alternative not only to the US-dominated International Monetary Fund, but also to the Japan-led Asian Development Bank. Nevertheless, gradually Japan’s approach towards China’s plans started turning more positive. At the banquet of the 23rd International Conference on the Future of Asia in June 2017, Prime Minister Abe remarked that the BRI held the potential to connect East. During the APEC Economic Leaders’ Meeting in November 2017, in turn, the Japanese prime minister expressed his intention to cooperate with the BRI upon the condition of ensuring openness, financial soundness, economic efficiency, and transparency. Moreover, during the Third Japan–China Dialog between Business and Former Government Officials in December 2017, he reaffirmed his will to participate in the BRI within the framework of Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy that encompassed Japan, the US, Australia, and India (Ito, 2019, pp. 116–126).

Interestingly enough, it seems that the shift in approach towards China’s international initiatives was led by the Kantei (Prime Minister’s Residence) rather than the MOFA. When in May 2017 Liberal Democratic Party Secretary-General Nikai Toshihiro visited Beijing, he was entrusted with a letter from Prime Minister Abe to President Xi Jinping. While according to its original contents Japan was to maintain its negative posture towards the BRI, Prime Minister’s Executive Secretary Imai Takaya, acting on behalf of Abe, changed it so as

to express readiness to cooperate with Chinese regional plans, while keeping distance towards the AIIB. As this modification was done without sufficient consultation with the MOFA and the National Security Council, it met with dissatisfaction from National Security Advisor Yachi Shōtarō (Mori, 2019, pp. 51–65). This incident proved to be a personal factor of grave importance in facilitating the shift in Japan's China policy.

At the same time, Japan intensified efforts towards the liberalization of trade with other Asia-Pacific countries without the US participation within the RCEP (ASEAN and Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea) as well as Japan–China–Republic of Korea trilateral framework. During the seventh trilateral summit in May 2018, Prime Ministers Abe Shinzō and Li Keqiang as well as President Moon Jae-in agreed in a Joint Declaration to “work together to strengthen the rules-based, free and open, transparent, non-discriminatory and inclusive multilateral trading system underpinned by the WTO,” while stressing “the importance of bilateral, regional, and plurilateral trade agreements which complement and strengthen the multilateral trading system”. They conceded to “make greater efforts to accelerate the negotiations on the Trilateral Free Trade Agreement aiming at realizing a comprehensive, high-quality and mutually beneficial FTA with its own value” and reaffirmed their commitment to intensify talks on RCEP (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2018b). In April 2019, the fifteenth round of negotiations among the representatives of the three Northeast Asian countries was held in Tokyo. The talks focused on market access and such rules as intellectual property rights or electronic commerce. The three governments “affirmed to continue negotiations toward the conclusion of comprehensive, high-level and mutually beneficial agreement, with regard to the progress of RCEP” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2019a). Some efforts towards the establishment of the Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific within the framework of APEC were less advanced.

Just as the promotion of the US-centered international order in the Asia-Pacific, Japan's stance on regional integration was to a large extent dependent on an approach towards China. It is disappointment with the Trump administration's Asia policy that prompted Abe to seek cooperation with Sino-centric initiatives pursued by Beijing. This shift was enabled mainly by the change in the international environment, but also facilitated by pro-Beijing figures in Abe's entourage.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Japan's efforts towards the establishment of a new international order in the Asia-Pacific under the second Abe's administration were to a great extent motivated by the necessity of responding to China's rise. Prime Minister Abe Shinzō utilized the strategies of both counterbalancing and engaging Beijing in international initiatives. To achieve the former aim, he strengthened the alliance with the US and intensified contacts with such regional powers as India and Australia. Nevertheless, the unstable international situation and trade wars waged by President Donald Trump prompted Abe to incline towards the cooperation with China for the sake of realizing common interests. For that reason, in 2017 Japan started changing its previously negative stance on such Chinese initiatives as the BRI, while intensifying efforts towards economic integration in East Asia without US participation within Japan–China–Republic of Korea Trilateral Free Trade Agreement or RCEP. While the main aim of Japan's foreign policy remained the same – counterbalancing the rising China – after Washington's

withdrawal from “Pivot to Asia” and the original TPP, Tokyo became more willing to pursue a policy of a limited engagement with Beijing. This evolution testifies to the gravity of balance of power between the US and the PRC, just as between Tokyo and Beijing, in shaping Japan’s approach towards regional integration initiatives.

Nevertheless, while the external stimuli pushed Japan towards the policy of engagement towards China, this shift was facilitated by a plurality of opinions among Abe’s closest entourage. In particular, it is Prime Minister’s Executive Secretary Imai Takaya together with Liberal Democratic Party Secretary-General Nikai Toshihiro who played a crucial role in softening Abe’s opposition against Japan’s participation in the BRI, thus breaking the monopoly of the MOFA and National Security Advisor Yachi Shōtarō on foreign policy-making. As such, personal determinants may be treated as one of the intervening variables that have shaped Japan’s policy regarding the new order in the Asia-Pacific under the second Abe administration.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This article is a result of research conducted as a part of project “Evolution of the Core Executive under Prime Minister Abe’s Government in Japan” financed by the National Science Centre, Poland (DEC-2016/23/B/HS5/00059).

REFERENCES

- Abe, S. (2006). *Utsukushii Kuni e* [Towards a Beautiful Country]. Tokyo: Bungei Shunjū.
- Abe, S. (2012, December 27). Asia’s Democratic Security Diamond. Project Syndicate. Retrieved December 25, 2018, from <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/a-strategic-alliance-for-japan-and-india-by-shinzo-abe?barrier=accesspaylog>.
- Cabinet Secretariat. (2014, July 1). Cabinet Decision on Development of Seamless Security Legislation to Ensure Japan’s Survival and Protect its People. Retrieved August 7, 2017, from http://www.cas.go.jp/jp/gaiyou/jimu/pdf/anpohosei_eng.pdf.
- Clinton, H. (2011, October 11). America’s Pacific Century. *Foreign Policy*. Retrieved August 13, 2017, from <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/>.
- Ito, A. (2019). China’s Belt and Road Initiative and Japan’s Response: From Non-participation to Conditional Engagement. *East Asia*, 36, 115–128. doi: 10.1007/s12140-019-09311-z.
- Kanehara, N. (2011). *Senryaku Gaiikō Genron* [A Grand Strategy of Japan for the 21 Century]. Tokyo: Nihon Keizai Shinbun Shuppansha.
- Ministry of Defense of Japan. (2015, April 27). The Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation. Retrieved August 11, 2017, from http://www.mod.go.jp/e/d_act/anpo/shishin_20150427e.html.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. (2013, January 18). The Bounty of the Open Seas: Five New Principles for Japanese Diplomacy. Jakarta. Retrieved December 25, 2018, from http://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/pm/abe/abe_0118e.html.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. (2014a). Diplomatic Bluebook 2014. Retrieved November 4, 2019, from <https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/other/bluebook/2014/html/index.html>.

- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. (2014b, April 6). The Three Principles on Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology. Retrieved December 6, 2019, from http://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/nsp/page1we_000083.html.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. (2015, February 10). Cabinet Decision on the Development Cooperation Charter. Retrieved December 6, 2019, from <http://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000067701.pdf>.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. (2018a, May 9). Premier of the State Council of China Li Keqiang Visits Japan. Japan-China Summit Meeting and Banquet. Retrieved January 24, 2019, from https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/c_m1/cn/page3e_000857.html.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. (May 9, 2018b). Joint Declaration of the Seventh Japan-China-ROK Trilateral Summit. Retrieved November 1, 2019, from https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/rp/page4e_000817.html.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. (2018c, October 26). Prime Minister Abe Visits China. Retrieved November 4, 2019, from https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/c_m1/cn/page3e_000958.html.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. (2019a, April 12). Fifteenth Round of Negotiations on a Free Trade Agreement among Japan, China and the Republic of Korea. Retrieved November 1, 2019, from https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e_002425.html.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. (2019b). Diplomatic Bluebook 2019. Retrieved November 4, 2019, from <https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/other/bluebook/2019/html/chapter1/c0101.html>.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. (2019c, October 5). Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA). Retrieved October 22, 2019, from <https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/economy/fta/index.html>.
- Miyamoto, Y. (2019). *Nitchū no Shippai no Honshitsu. Shin Jidai no Chūgoku to no Tsukiaikata* [Essence of Sino-Japanese Failure. Method for Getting Along with China in New Era]. Tokyo: Chūō Kōron Shinsha.
- Mori, I. (2019). *Kantei Kanryō. Abe Ikkyō o Sasaeta Sokkin Seiji no Tsumi* [The Residence's Bureaucracy. The Sin of Aides' Politics that Supported Abe's Unilateral Strength]. Tokyo: Bungei Shunjū.
- Nye, J.S. (1976). Independence and Interdependence. *Foreign Policy*, 22(Spring), 130–161. doi: 10.2307/1148075.
- Nukaga, F. (2010). *Seiji wa Gēmu Dewanai. Senryakuteki Nihon Kaihō Keikaku* [Politics Are Not a Game. Plan of Strategic Opening of Japan]. Tokyo: Sankei Shinbun Shuppan.
- Rose, G. (1998). Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy. *World Politics*, 51(1), 144–172. doi: 10.1017/S0043887100007814.
- SIPRI. (2019). Military Expenditure by Country, in Millions of US\$ at Current Prices and Exchange Rates, 1949–2018. retrieved November 4, 2019, from https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/SIPRI-Milex-data-1949-2018_0.xlsx.
- Stevenson, A., & Rich, M. (2017, November 11). Trans-Pacific Trade Partners Are Moving On, Without the U.S. *The New York Times*. Retrieved January 22, 2018, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/11/business/trump-tpp-trade.html>.
- Taniguchi, T. (2018). *Abe Shinzō no Shinjitsu* [Truth About Abe Shinzō]. Tokyo: Gokū Shuppan.

- The World Bank. (2019). GDP (current US\$) – China, Japan. Retrieved November 4, 2019, from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=CN-JP>.
- Waltz, K.N. (1990). Realist Thought and Neorealist Theory. *Journal of International Affairs*, 44(1), 21–37.
- Wendt, A. (1999). *Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Yabunaka, M. (2010). *Kokka no Meiun* [Fate of the State]. Tokyo: Shinchōsha.
- Yabunaka, M. (2017). *Turanpu Jidai no Nichibei Shin Rūru* [New Japan–US Rules of the Trump Era]. Tokyo: PHP Kenkyūjo.
- Yachi, S., & Takahashi, M. (2009). *Gaikō no Senryaku to Kokorozashi. Zen Gaimu Jimujikan Yachi Shōtarō wa Kataru* [Strategy and Ambition in Diplomacy. Narrated by Former Foreign Administrative Vice Minister Yachi Shōtarō]. Tokyo: Sankei Shinbun Shuppan.
- Żakowski, K. (2019). Revision of Japan's Foreign Policy After Donald Trump's Electoral Victory. *International Studies. Interdisciplinary Political and Cultural Journal*, 23(1), 85–101. doi: 10.18778/1641-4233.23.06.