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Asia in 2019: Escalating international tensions and authoritarian involution

**Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Nicola Mocci
Filippo Boni**

viella

A large, faint, light blue decorative mandala graphic is positioned on the right side of the cover, partially overlapping the text area. It features intricate geometric and floral patterns.

CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

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The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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When this Asia Maior issue was finalized and the Covid-19 pandemic raged throughout the world, Kian Zaccara, Greta Maiorano and Giulio Santi, all children of Asia Maior authors (Luciano Zaccara, Diego Maiorano and Silvia Menegazzi), were born. We (the Asia Maior editors) have seen that as a manifestation of Life, reasserting itself in front of Thanatos. It is for this reason that we dedicate this issue to Kian, Greta and Giulio, with the fond hope that they will live in a better world than the one devastated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

JAPAN 2019: INAUGURATING A NEW ERA?*

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2019 ushered in a new era for Japan. The Cabinet framed the Reiwa era through a committee of experts responsible for its christening. The name was chosen with reference to a well-known medieval text of Japanese poetry, rather than ancient Chinese literature, a notable first. But did the imperial succession and the start of Reiwa actually reflect the dawn of a new era in Japanese domestic and international politics? By taking stock of primary sources, including a substantial number of interviews with scholars and policy-makers in Japan, Washington DC and elsewhere, this article suggests that the dawn of the Reiwa era appears to be characterised by a return to the conservative camp's grip on domestic politics, suspiciously similar to Japan's old way of doing politics. Yet, a stable prime ministerial executive, which is front and centre of the decision-making machine, has allowed for considerable change in Japan's diplomatic and security policies. This has taken place during heightened US-China strategic competition and greater volatility in the international system. Aside from an ongoing (in fact, deepening) US-Japan entente vis-à-vis China, the year under review testifies to new developments in Japan's international relations. Particularly worth noting are Japan's acquisition of offensive capabilities, its expanding strategic horizons, its careful balancing act in the Middle East, and its rounder engagement with economic statecraft. These events provide a testament to important developments in Japan's standing in world politics and to Abe's legacy.

1. Introduction: Debating Abe's legacy

On 20 November 2019, Abe Shinzō became modern Japan's longest serving prime minister when he surpassed Meiji-leader Katsura Tarō, who had managed to stay in office for a total of 2,886 days. If he serves in full his third consecutive term as the Liberal Democratic Party's (LDP) president (a post usually linked to the position of prime minister given the party's parliamentary majority), Abe will be in power until September 2021. There is plenty of discussion over a post-Abe LDP, and some have suggested that

* The present chapter is the outcome of a joint research effort. The introduction and conclusion were co-authored, part 2 was written by Sebastian Maslow, and parts 3 and 4 were written by Giulio Pugliese. The authors wish to acknowledge the valuable feedback provided by Masashi Murano, Brad Glosserman, Mike Mochizuki, Liselotte Odgaard, two practitioners and three reviewers. Japanese names are cited with surnames first, then followed by given names.

Abe may also serve a fourth term.¹ With political stability the new normal, Abe's long-term government has triggered intense debate over its legacy.²

In office for a short period in the years 2006-2007, Abe returned to power in December 2012, pledging to depart from the nation's post-war regime of constitutional pacifism, and restore a strong Japan, domestically and internationally. As he steered his LDP from opposition back to power, Abe criticized a deflated Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) – splintered into a Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan and Democratic Party for the People – for its handling of the 11 March 2011 triple disaster of the earthquake, tsunami and Fukushima nuclear meltdowns, and the DPJ's foreign policy approach vis-à-vis China and the US-Japan alliance. Thus, reflecting on the LDP's time in opposition in the years 2009-2012, Abe has repeatedly called this period a «nightmare» for the Japanese people.³ Raising fears of a declining Japan and national crisis, Abe, in his years in office, effectively delegitimized the opposition and entrenched a powerful and united LDP in power. Apart from restoring the conservative dominance, akin to the post-war «1955 system», though this time lacking a veritable opposition on the left, what is Abe's legacy in terms of policy and institutional change?

At the core of Abe's agenda to build a «new» Japan, was his pledge to revise the country's 1946 constitution and its constraints on the use of military force in international affairs.⁴ In lower house elections in 2012, 2014, and 2017, Abe's LDP together with its junior coalition partner Komeito secured the necessary two-third majority to push for this agenda. Abe's coalition, as we will show later in this section, also performed well in the upper house elections in 2016 and 2019, thus bringing Japan increasingly closer to constitutional revision. This was still unaccomplished in the year under review, although Abe has renewed his emphasis on achieving it, as part of his mission.⁵ Obstacles remain, however, as vast portions of the Japanese population, and his Komeito coalition partner, remain sceptical of the need to change the country's constitution. With attention locked on its war-renouncing Article 9, according to some opinion polls, only 28% were in favour of Abe's plans of revising the constitution.⁶ In 2017, Abe initially expressed his hopes for constitutional revision to be realized before

1. Kyodo, 'Abe «not thinking about» fourth term as Liberal Democratic Party head', *Japan Times*, 13 December 2019.

2. See, for example, Hugo Dobson, 'Abe's lasting legacy', *East Asia Forum*, 24 November 2019.

3. '安倍首相また「悪夢のような民主党政権」 麻生派パーティーで発言' (Prime Minister Abe insists on «Nightmarish DPJ Government» at Asō Faction party), *Mainichi Shinbun*, 14 May 2019.

4. Shinzō Abe, *新しい国へ* (Towards a New Country), Tokyo: Bungei Shunju, 2013.

5. Ryō Aibara, 'Abe again calls for constitutional revision in policy speech at Diet', *The Asahi Shinbun*, 4 October 2019.

6. Linda Sieg, 'Mission unaccomplished – Abe's drive to revise pacifist Constitution', *Reuters*, 19 November 2019.

the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games scheduled for late July and August.⁷ In the meantime, no consensus has emerged and ruling and opposition parties have in late 2019 postponed their bipartisan discussion on a referendum bill (the Act on Procedures for Amendment of the Constitution of Japan).⁸ The revised bill would allow the government to install polling stations in public places, such as railway stations or shopping centres, to secure the necessary 50% majority of all voters.

This year-in-review essay sheds light on major developments in Japan's domestic and international politics. It does so to highlight transformation, or lack thereof, in Japan's conducts of public affairs, in line with Abe's afore-mentioned aspiration of building a new country. Do the imperial succession and the start of Reiwa reflect the dawn of a new era in Japanese domestic and international politics? This essay – basing itself on primary sources, including a substantial number of interviews, suggests that a return to the conservative camp's grip on domestic politics resembles Japan's old way of doing politics, but with a notable exception: a prime ministerial executive that is front and centre of the decision-making machine.⁹ In turn, domestic stability and a centralized policymaking machine have allowed for considerable change in Japan's diplomatic and security maturation. Japan's acquisition of offensive capabilities, its expanding strategic horizons, its careful balancing act in the Middle East, its surprising economic coercion towards South Korea are a testament to important developments in Japan's international relations and to Abe's legacy. After a panoramic perspective on Japanese domestic politics at the dusk of the Heisei and dawn of the Reiwa era, the essay provides a detailed analysis of Japan's international relations in 2019.

2. *Japan's domestic politics in 2019: Reset for a new era?*

Notwithstanding Abe's dreams of a constitutional revision, his legacy contains deep institutional changes, most notably to Japan's post-war security and defence system. These include: the 2013 establishment of a National Security Council and issuing of a National Security Strategy, the 2014 easing of Japan's virtual ban on arms exports and legalizing of participation in collective self-defence operations to aid Tokyo's allies, the building of new security partnerships, a new Development Cooperation Charter, and the current push for a strategic vision under the rubric of a Free and Open

7. Sakura Murakami, 'Abe's push to change Japan's Constitution hits roadblock as parties scrap Diet discussion', *The Japan Times*, 21 November 2019.

8. '改憲「20年施行」断念 首相、任期中こだわらず' (Constitutional Revision: «realization in 2020» Given Up – The Prime Minister Not Particular to Change During His Mandate), *Mainichi Shinbun*, 7 December 2019.

9. Aurelia George Mulgan, *The Abe Administration and the Rise of the Prime Ministerial Executive*, New York and London: Routledge, 2018.

Indo-Pacific (FOIP).¹⁰ Moreover, Abe's legacy entails more centralization of executive power under the Prime Minister's Office (*Shushō Kantei*, hereafter Kantei). This has rerouted decision-making from the halls of ministries, Diet commissions and party headquarters to Abe and his aides, who have further strengthened their power through new mechanisms of appointing career bureaucrats.¹¹ These changes became pivotal to a series of political scandals that have plagued the Abe government over the years and continued to do so in 2019. With career decisions now directly linked to the Kantei, few bureaucrats openly questioned Abe's directions; in fact, bureaucrats often anticipated or pre-empted those directions (a practice referred to as *sontaku*).

The ongoing controversy over the Moritomo and Kake school scandals have shown that in anticipation of favourable treatment from the Kantei, bureaucrats were increasingly willing to cover the trails of murky legal decisions involving the PM and his inner circle.¹² In combination with recurrent attempts to intervene in media, art and education, in 2019 this development renewed concerns among Japanese public intellectuals, journalists, and social scientists of Abe causing a democratic breakdown.¹³ And yet, despite a stream of political scandals and concerns of a dying post-war democracy, Abe has remained relatively strong in public polling over the years. Seven years into this second term as PM at the end of 2019 and amidst an unfolding political scandal over a publicly funded annual cherry blossom party, exploited for catering to the PM's local political support base, polls still recorded sufficiently high support for Abe. Although the approval rating dropped following the scandal, the second straight month of decline, almost 43% were still in favour of his leadership (see below),¹⁴ As in previous years, driving Abe's sustained support were the public's interest in bread and butter issues.

10. Yuichi Hosoya, 'FOIP 2.0: The Evolution of Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy', *Asia-Pacific Review*, Vol. 26 (1), 2019, pp. 18-28.

11. Aurelia George Mulgan, *The Abe Administration and the Rise of the Prime Ministerial Executive*, London and New York: Routledge, 2018; Izuru Makihara, 崩れる政治を立て直すー 21世紀の日本行政改革論 (Rebuilding Crumbling Politics: A Plea for Administrative Reform in 21st Century Japan), Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2018.

12. Moritomo and Kake were two educational institutions, which sought governmental approval for the building of new school facilities; they obtained politically-backed preferential treatment thanks to their proximity to the Prime Minister's Office and key Abe lieutenants. See Sebastian Maslow and Giulio Pugliese, 'Japan 2017: Defending the domestic and international status quo', *Asia Major* 2017, pp. 107-10.

13. Philip Braso, 'Outrage over Aichi Triennale exhibition ignites debate over freedom of expression in art', *Japan Times*, 17 August 2019; Yōichi Higuchi, リベラル・デモクラシーの現在ー「ネオリベラル」と「イリベラル」の間で (Liberal Democracy Today – Between 'Neoliberal' and 'Illiberal'), Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2019; Jirō Yamaguchi, 民主主義は終わるのかー瀬戸際に立つ日本 (Will Democracy End? Japan at a Critical Moment), Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2019.

14. 'Japan Cabinet support rate at 42%, falls for 2nd month', *Kyodo News*, 15 December 2019.

2.1. *Reiwa and Naruhito's enthronement*

On 1 April, Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga Yoshihide announced that the name for Japan's new era, which followed the Heisei period, was «Reiwa», officially translated as «beautiful harmony», but also translatable as «venerable peace».¹⁵ Interestingly, while conventionally Japan chooses its era names with reference to classical Chinese literature, the new name was a neologism from an ancient collection of Japanese poetry, the *Man'yōshū*. In 2017, Emperor Akihito announced his wish to abdicate. Throughout 2018, this triggered discussions over a new law to allow for the transfer of the Chrysanthemum Throne to his son Naruhito. With a new law in place, Akihito abdicated on 30 April 2019, and the next day, Naruhito inherited the imperial regalia and seals as proof of his ascension to the throne, thus marking the beginning of the Reiwa era.

Associated with Japan's wartime past, the death of Shōwa Emperor Hirohito in 1989 triggered discussions over the country's long post-war period.¹⁶ The sudden end of the Cold War, the bursting of Japan's bubble economy and the collapse of Japan's «1955 system» of conservative LDP rule in the early 1990s morphed the Heisei era into a period of reform and uncertainty. Marked by chronic deflation, growing social disparities and political instability, Heisei became synonymous with Japan's «lost decades». Even so, and similarly to the end of Shōwa, the dawn of Heisei did spur hope for renewed growth and change in Japan.¹⁷

Embodying a break with his father's wartime Shōwa Japan, Akihito was a «people's» emperor, who was praised for his attempts at historical reconciliation and outreach to the public.¹⁸ In this vein, the imperial couple's visit to China in 1992 was a landmark in the Sino-Japanese relationship. Akihito's travels to disaster hit areas in the aftermath of the 2011 tsunami furthered Akihito's popularity. Thus framed as a critical juncture, PM Abe also embraced Reiwa to renew his pledge for restoring a strong and rejuvenated Japan through constitutional revision and economic reform.¹⁹

Under the Japanese constitution, the emperor possesses no political rights and his role is defined as a symbol of the Japanese state. While Abe and many of his political followers wished to reinstate the emperor as the head of Japan, many conservatives are deeply opposed to discussing reforms of the

15. Ryan Shaldjian Morrison, «Thoughts on the New Japanese Era Name, Reiwa: «Comely Peace»», *Nippon.com*, 19 April 2019.

16. Carol Gluck, «The «End» of the Postwar: Japan at the Turn of the Millennium», *Public Culture*, Vol. 10 (1), 1997, pp. 1-23.

17. Ben Dooley, Makiko Inoue & Hisako Ueno, «Japan Has a New Emperor: Now It Needs a Software Update», *New York Times*, 23 April 2019.

18. Kenneth J. Ruoff, *The People's Emperor: Democracy and the Japanese Monarchy, 1945-1995*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2001.

19. Ryō Aibara, «Abe again calls for constitutional revision in policy speech at Diet», *The Asahi Shimbun*, 4 October 2019.

imperial household, including a female emperor.²⁰ Often considered a liberal counterpoint to Abe's conservative viewpoints, Akihito's wish for abdication triggered a debate on reforming the old institution of the Imperial Household. Reflecting on the Heisei era, many have departed from narratives of a declining Japan mired in crisis and shifted towards praise of the ruptures and changes which have made Japan more diverse, dynamic and international.²¹ Thus critically revisiting the «lost decades» narrative, observers have, for instance, acknowledged the rise of a vibrant civil society after the mid-1990s. A non-profit sector and volunteerism became critical in post-disaster recovery such as after the triple disaster of «3.11».²² As indicators for deep social changes, others have focused on the implications of a post-growth era in form of inequality and shrinking regions,²³ as well as the push for gender equality in politics and the economy, legal recognition of same-sex partnerships, and multiculturalism that has established itself with a growing population of foreign workers and residents in Japan.²⁴ On 22 October, Naruhito formally proclaimed his ascension to the Chrysanthemum throne and he did so in a Japan that was very different from that of the late Showa and early Heisei eras.

2.2. *Old politics in a new era*

Despite hopes for profound change, Abe and his LDP-led government remained embroiled in political scandals after allegations over the PM's involvement in the 2017 Moritomo and Kake cronyism scandals, lingered on.²⁵ On 5 April 2019, Abe's deputy Land Minister Tsukada Ichirō was forced to

20. Takeshi Hara, 平成の終焉—退位と天皇・皇居 (End of Heisei – Abdication and the Emperor, Abdication and the Imperial Court), Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2019.

21. Sebastian Maslow, 'Japan zwischen Stillstand und Aufbruch: Waren die dreissig Jahre der Heisei-Ära unter Kaiser Akihito wirklich verlorene Jahrzehnte?', *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 30 April 2019.

22. Shunya Yoshimi, *Heisei Jidai (The Heisei Era)*, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2019; see also Yoichi Funabashi & Barak Kushner, *Examining Japan's Lost Decades*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2015; Jeff Kingston, *Japan's Quiet Transformation: Social Change and Civil Society in 21st Century Japan*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2004; Koichi Hasegawa, *Beyond-Fukushima: Toward a Post-Nuclear Society*, Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press, 2015.

23. Stephanie Assmann (ed.), *Sustainability in Contemporary Rural Japan: Challenges and Opportunities*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2015; David Chiavacci & Carola Hommerich (eds.), *Social inequality in Post-Growth Japan: Transformation During Economic and Demographic Stagnation*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2016.

24. Emma Dalton, 'Womonomics, «Equality» and Abe's Neo-liberal Strategy to Make Japanese Women Shine', *Social Science Japan Journal*, Vol. 20 (1), 2017, pp. 95-105; Yasuo Takao, 'The Politics of LGBT Policy Adoption: Shibuya Ward's Same Sex Partnership Certificates in the Japanese Context', *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 90 (1), 2017, pp. 7-27; Malliga Och & Linda Hasunuma, 'Womonomics under Abe's Leadership: Signs of Feminisation of Japan's Liberal Democratic Party?', *Representation*, Vol. 54 (2), 2018, pp. 177-193.

25. 'Abe may be in the clear on land sale scandal, but questions remain', *The Asahi Shimbun*, 10 August 2019.

resign after reports of inappropriate interventions to fund a highway linking the constituencies of Abe and his deputy PM-cum-Finance Minister Asō Tarō.²⁶ Then on 11 April, Abe's Olympics Minister Sakurada Yoshitaka handed in his resignation after it was reported that he had suggested that support for an LDP Diet member would be more important than the economic revival of the 3.11-hit Tohoku area, where the lawmaker came from.²⁷

Amidst this cascade of political scandals in the new Reiwa Japan, the old sense of crisis was renewed after a report by the Financial Services Agency in early June suggested that in rapidly aging Japan new pensioners would require 20 million yen in savings to cover living costs for 30 years post retirement.²⁸ With elections coming up, this bombshell report was quickly retracted by Finance Minister Asō, as many in the government and the LDP feared that it would erode the government's legitimacy in the eyes of an aging population.²⁹ With a majority of voters frustrated by the government's response, Abe's approval ratings dropped 3 points to 40% by mid-June.³⁰ The report regained its relevance later in the year. Data published in September by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications showed that Japan's elderly population (defined as over 65) had risen to 35.9 million, thus constituting 28.4% of its total population and 12.9% of the labour force – the highest rank worldwide.³¹

In the first national election of the new era, on 22 July, Japan elected one-half of the 245-seat Upper House of the Diet. Enabled by a fragmented opposition, the LDP and its coalitions partner Komeito won 57 and 14 seats, respectively. Combined with the 70 seats already controlled by the ruling coalition Abe was handed a comfortable majority in this chamber of the Diet. And yet, the PM fell short of securing a two-third majority which would have enabled him to push for constitutional revision. The Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan received 17 seats, thus consolidating its role as leading opposition party. Abe has considered his electoral victory as evidence for public support of this agenda for constitutional revision, while voices within the LDP – notably Secretary-General Nikai Toshihiro – have argued that

26. Reiji Yoshida, 'Deputy land minister quits after using graft buzzword son-taku to describe his decision to fund project for Abe', *Japan Times*, 5 April 2019.

27. 'Japan Olympics minister sacked over 2011 disaster insulting remarks', *Kyodo News*, 11 April 2019.

28. Financial Servicing Agency, 金融審議会 市場ワーキング・グループ報告書「高齢社会における資産形成・管理」('Formation and Management of Assets in an Ageing Society', a Report by the Market Working Group of the Council on Financial Services), 3 June 2019, https://www.fsa.go.jp/singi/singi_kinyu/tosin/20190603/01.pdf

29. Isabel Reynolds, 'Japan's Creaking Pension System Could Deal Abe Election Blow', *Bloomberg*, 18 June 2019.

30. '68% unconvinced about Aso's refusal of report on pension issue: Mainichi poll', *The Mainichi Shinbun*, 17 June 2019.

31. 'Elderly citizens accounted for record 28.4% of Japan's population in 2018, data show', *Japan Times*, 15 September 2019.

Abe's electoral performance provided reasons for the PM to serve a fourth term.³² Yet, this election was important for other reasons: first, it marked the second lowest voter turnout recorded at 48.80% (the lowest was 44.52% in 1995).³³ Second, the elections produced new parties of which the Reiwa Shinsengumi led by Yamamoto Tarō performed relatively well. While Yamamoto lost his seat, his party secured mandates for two candidates with disabilities, spurring new debates over inclusivity, social welfare and human rights.³⁴

To build on the post-electoral momentum and to recover his approval ratings further, Abe reshuffled his Cabinet on 11 September. Especially noteworthy was the appointment of the young LDP member Koizumi Shinjirō, son of former PM Koizumi Junichirō (2001-2006), as environment minister. Koizumi is seen by many as potential candidate to succeed Abe as prime minister, but responsibility over the Environment Ministry will certainly test his leadership skills in post-Fukushima Japan. Following the reshuffle, the Cabinet's approval recovered, going up above 50%.³⁵ Yet, this was only a brief interval as the new cabinet quickly disintegrated over yet another round of scandals. By the end of October two members resigned from the brand-new cabinet: Trade and Industry Minister Sugawara Isshū and Justice Minister Kawai Katsuyuki both resigned over violations of the election law.³⁶ Both Sugawara and Kawai were close aides to Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga. It is thus likely that their resignations have strained Suga's influence within the Kantei, damaging his chances as a potential player in the race to replace Abe.³⁷ At the end of 2019, the series of scandals cumulated into fresh allegations of PM Abe's abuse of power, this time over use of public funds for lavish cherry blossom parties aimed at his local support organizations. The scandal gained further traction as Abe failed to produce guest lists for these events, claiming that these had already been shredded, and conveniently so on the very same day of the Japanese Communist Party's request.³⁸ Criticism over Abe's lack of accountability, as in previous

32. '二階氏「総裁任期延長に期待集まっていると思う」' (Mr. Nikai: 'I think expectations are high for an extension to term of LDP Presidency), *NHK Seiji Magazin*, 22 July 2019.

33. Tomohiro Osaki, 'Abe's ruling coalition victorious, but pro-revision forces suffer electoral setback in drive to amend Constitution', *Japan Times*, 22 July 2019.

34. 'Reiwa Shinsengumi makes splash in Japanese election debut, giving voice to people with disabilities', *Japan Times*, 22 July 2019.

35. 第4次安倍再改造内閣 支持率は5割以上に (4th Abe Cabinet, Support Beyond 50%), *Terebi Asahi*, 16 September 2019.

36. 'Second minister in a week resigns from Japan cabinet', *Reuters*, 31 October 2019.

37. Ryutarō Abe, 'Suga's influence could wane with resignation of second associate', *The Asahi Shimbun*, 1 November 2019.

38. '桜を見る会名簿、共産議員の請求当日に「廃棄」内閣府' (Cabinet Office revealed that the name list of cherry blossom party was destroyed on the day Japan Communist Party Diet Member demanded the list), *The Asahi Shimbun*, 15 November 2019.

school scandals involving the PM's documents being falsified or destroyed, resurfaced.³⁹ According to the «Asahi Shimbun», by late December, Abe's approval ratings fell to 38% from 44% in the previous month, with other polls confirming this downward trend.⁴⁰ Still, these episodes were further evidence that Abe's Kantei was particularly deft at information control, possibly also through dirty tactics, such as the 2017 smear campaign against a former administrative vice-minister of education willing to provide sworn testimony at the Diet on the Kake scandal.⁴¹

2.3. *The fading impact of «Abenomics»*

Economic reform remains a key pillar of the Abe administration's agenda and of its sustained support. Yet, the year under review began with revelations that cast doubt on the fate of Abe's reform package, popularly known as «Abenomics». In January 2019, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW) was forced to revise its monthly labour survey for the years 2012-2018, i.e. the period during which Abe promoted his economic reforms. These revisions became necessary, as the MHLW overstated nominal annual wage increases, data that is key for the Bank of Japan's own statistics and economic forecasts. In short, the incident has raised serious doubts over the impact of Abenomics, its positive effects on wages and the achievement of Abe's proclaimed 2% inflation target.⁴²

By early 2019 data also emerged suggesting that Japan's exports had been plummeting since December 2018, while industrial output was also decreasing. This resulted in the Abe government's downgrading of its economic assessments – the first time since 2016. As a major cause for its revision, the Abe government cited China's economic slowdown. The opposition in Japan was quick to forecast «the beginning of the end of Abenomics».⁴³ Similar forecasts were made as Japan's October planned increase in consumption tax from 8 to 10% approached.⁴⁴ After the tax was increased according to schedule, polls among firms revealed broad concerns over an

39. Rintarō Tobita, 'Abe cherry blossom scandal stirs up tweet storm of rare intensity', *Nikkei Asian Review*, 30 November 2019.

40. 'Disapproval rate for Abe Cabinet exceeds approval rate in survey', *The Asahi Shimbun*, 24 December 2019; Yusuke Yokota, 'Abe's approval rating flat at 50% after November slide', *Nikkei Asian Review*, 23 December 2019.

41. 'Probe Abe's ties with the media, Mackawa urges', *Japan Times*, 23 June 2017; Conversation with Japanese government official, Tokyo, 2018; 'Anonymous LDP lawmaker pressured Nagoya school board for details on lecture by Kake Gakuen whistle-blower', *Japan Times*, 19 March 2018.

42. 'Faulty data scandal reveals lower 2018 wage growth in Japan', *Nikkei Asian Review*, 23 January 2019.

43. Ben Dooley, 'Japan Stumbles as China's Growth Engine Slows', *New York Times*, 3 April 2019.

44. Toru Fujioka & Emi Urabe, 'Japan Tax Hike Will Mean Failure of Abenomics, Abe Ally Says', *Bloomberg*, 23 May 2019.

economic slowdown in Japan.⁴⁵ To temper the negative impact of the tax hike, for the first time since 2016, Abe issued a massive 13.1 trillion yen (ca. 121.5 billion US dollars) stimulus package to counter risks of an economic slowdown and to revive Abenomics. Advertised as a «15-month budget» and primarily marshalling the same fiscal instruments of similar measures in the past,⁴⁶ the money was largely to be invested in infrastructure projects and new technologies such as 5G. Abe promoted his policy as the «first economic stimulus of the Reiwa era».⁴⁷ The measures were also meant to address the damage caused by typhoon Hagibis, which hit Japan on 12 October, resulting in 98 deaths, large-scale power outages across the Tokyo and Shizuoka areas, and damage to businesses and infrastructure.⁴⁸

Interestingly, by December economic data was suggesting that between July and September Japan's economy grew faster than initially projected, with its GDP growing by 1.8%.⁴⁹ It remains to be seen, however, whether this growth is the result of spending prior to the tax hike and whether the October tax hike has actually resulted in the anticipated economic slowdown; in fact, there were clear downward trends in the last quarter of the year.

3. *Japan in an age of great power competition*

Great power politics continued to shape Japan's international relations throughout 2019 and the Abe administration gave ample proof of deft management, without too much fanfare, of world affairs. It did so against the semblance of a Japan that blindly followed disruptive, and potentially dangerous, US foreign and security policy initiatives. In the authors' view, the Japanese government cleverly shaped the debates and the environment around the US government both by taking advantage of the amateurishness of the Trump administration's policy team,⁵⁰ and by emphasizing common strategic objectives vis-à-vis China – the strategic priority of both governments. In the words of Michael J. Green, a former Special Assistant to the

45. 'Poll: Firms see «Abenomics» sputter, tax hike hurting economy', *The Asahi Shinbun*, 11 October 2019.

46. 'Abe's stimulus brings back «bridges to nowhere» spectre in Japan', *Financial Times*, 6 December 2019.

47. 'Shinzo Abe launches \$121bn stimulus package for Japan', *Financial Times*, 5 December 2019.

48. Motoko Rich & Ben Dooley, 'Typhoon Hagibis Slams Into Japan After Landslides, Floods and a Quake', *New York Times*, 12 October 2019.

49. 'Japan's economy grew much faster in third quarter than first estimated', *Japan Times*, 9 December 2019.

50. 'In Leak, U.K. Ambassador to U.S. Calls Trump Administration «Inept» and «Clumsy»', *New York Times*, 7 July 2019; Interview with former high-ranking US government official in charge of Asian affairs, 7 February 2020, Washington DC; Interviews with European diplomats, Washington DC (2019 and 2020).

US President for National Security Affairs and Senior Director for Asian Affairs at the National Security Council: «No other country in the world is as prepared to compete against China, with us, as Japan»,⁵¹ a statement that found in agreement the panel moderator, former National Security Advisor to President Trump, General H.R. McMaster.⁵²

The year under review witnessed a steady crescendo in the US push-back against China across the military, economic and communication dimensions. Economic nationalists and a hyper-empowered national security establishment informed the Trump administration's heavy-handed strategy towards China. This strategy went well beyond action/reaction dynamics proper of the security dilemma or the US government's stated goals of taming Chinese economic predation and coercion «through strength», not to mention the president's more profane extraction of economic concessions. In fact, there was little room left for US-China cooperation or consultations – as evidenced by the US decision to shut down the US-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue. Trump's national security team and some of the economic hawks, which became more prominent in 2018, held a strong anti-China ideological bent. They were convinced that the Chinese Communist Party engaged in malign activities aimed at exporting its autocratic system of governance, ensnaring developing countries into neo-colonial «debt trap» diplomacy, hollowing out rich markets through economic predation, and sabotaging liberal democracies.⁵³ In light of this maximalist diagnosis, the Trump administration's national security team, and senior economic officials, acted above and beyond the China-sceptical bipartisan and bureaucratic consensus within the Beltway.

Since the diagnosis was of malevolent international intent, the US government's prescription to deal with China demanded a new «X Article» policy, namely a policy analogous to the Soviet containment advocated by George Kennan in an anonymous *Foreign Affairs* article in 1947.⁵⁴ These drivers translated into a patchy, heavy-handed policy of containment, qualified by (partial) economic decoupling. One regular strategic consultant to the Department of Defense went as far as suggesting that the US government's mission was actually «regime change», especially by halting the leading engine behind the Chinese Communist Party's domestic legitimacy:

51. 'Historical Reflections on U.S.-Japan Relations: The 60th Anniversary of the 1960 Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security', 27 February 2020, Hudson Institute, Washington DC (<https://www.hudson.org/events/1783-historical-reflections-on-u-s-japan-relations-the-60th-anniversary-of-the-1960-treaty-of-mutual-cooperation-and-security22020>), quote from minute 44:50.

52. *Ibid.*

53. Multiple interviews and conversations with European diplomats, Japanese academics and US officials in Washington DC and Tokyo: 2018-2020

54. Odd Arne Westad, 'The Sources of Chinese Conduct', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 98, N. 5, pp. 89-92. For the text of Kennan's article, see X, 'The Sources of Soviet Conduct', *Foreign Affairs*, 25, 4, July 1947, pp. 566-582.

economic growth.⁵⁵ Authoritative Japanese analysts recognized this fringe uber-hawkish group as partly informing the US government's all-out-offensive, along with those in favour of weakening China (the «containers»), and the «balancers», who recognized the need to concomitantly engage China.⁵⁶ The latter faction was hardly to be seen in the government. Still, there was tension between the US administration's national-security hawks and the «America First» economic nationalists, who also eyed Japan and the European Union's trade surpluses; finally, Washington's unilateralism frustrated its allies.⁵⁷ Given these dangers and the potential downsides to Japan's economic investments into regional supply chains, specialists have posited that «Japan clearly wants to avoid being entangled in the growing conflict between the US and China», and given Trump's extortionist and protectionist instincts a degree of diplomatic hedging was only natural.⁵⁸

In the authors' view, however, Japan's hedge against the United States was quite blunt given a relatively common assessment on the composite nature of the China challenge (see below) and the permanence of the US-Japan alliance as the key vector of Japan's foreign policy, with no clear alternative in sight.⁵⁹ Japanese officials also reasoned that a modicum of stability in Sino-Japanese relations rested on the very US China pushback: according to this logic, Chinese policymakers would seek strategic latitude by mending relations with Japan.

In fact, Japanese advocacy under the Abe administration has been particularly effective in cajoling a US rethink of its China policy – a matter of deep frustration during the Obama years.⁶⁰ One notable example of these efforts in 2019 was Tokyo's ability to share its Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategic vision with the United States and other likeminded par-

55. Conversation with US strategist involved in China matters, 17 June 2019, Washington DC; for more details on the US economic pushback against China, please refer to: Giulio Pugliese, 'A Global Rorschach Test: Responding to the Belt and Road Initiative', *Defence Strategic Communications*, NATO Excellence Centre Riga, Vol. 7 (2), December 2019, pp.113-32; Giulio Pugliese, 'China Confronts «America First»: Recent Developments and Likely Scenarios', *Asia Trends*, N.4, Paris: Asia Centre – Centre Études Asie, Autumn 2018, pp. 21-9.

56. Ryō Sahashi, '米中対立と日本: 関与から戦略的競争に移行するアメリカを中心に' (US-China Confrontation and Japan: With a Focus on America's Shift from Engagement to Strategic Competition), *Kokusai Mondai*, Vol. 688, January-February 2020, pp. 5-17, pp. 12-3; conversation with Japanese academic, 24 June 2019.

57. Hiroyuki Akita, 'China hawks in Trump administration jostle for power', *Nihon Keizai Shinbun*, 26 January 2019.

58. Raymond Yamamoto, 'Understanding Abe's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Vision Through Japan's Development Assistance', *Pacific Forum Issues and Insights*, Honolulu: Pacific Forum CSIS, Vol. 20 (1), March 2020, pp. 7-11.

59. Hiroyuki Akita, 'Time for Asia to rethink its deep dependence on US for security', *Nihon Keizai Shinbun*, 3 March 2019.

60. YA (anonymous Japanese government official) 'The Virtues of a Confrontational China Strategy', *The American Interest*, 10 April 2020.

ties. In short, the Japanese government was relatively sanguine about the US-China confrontation, because it left sufficient space for Japanese initiatives and facilitated a rethink in Chinese policymakers' attitude towards its neighbour, a vital US ally.

3.1. *Japan in an age of great power competition I: FOIP and broadened strategic horizons*

The FOIP concept provided a tangible measure of Japan's and, to a lesser extent, Australia's successes in sharing the narrative with allies and strategic partners, first and foremost the United States of America. To be sure, inter-governmental differences in interpretation of FOIP remain, also in terms of its geographic scope, but there is a degree of division of labour. Under the FOIP rubric Japan largely played «good cop» by providing economic alternatives to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This was quite different from Washington's more militarized and disruptive «bad cop» approach, one that also aimed at the relocation of supply chains away from the People's Republic of China (PRC). Still, to better confront the China challenge, the evolution from «policy coordination» to «shared policy vision» testified to Japan's appetite for growing interoperability with its American ally, and other like-minded partners, well beyond traditional security. At the same time, Japan's recalibration of its FOIP messaging cleverly emphasized the inclusive qualities of Japan's vision.⁶¹ Tokyo behaved so to assuage external players that were less inclined in picking sides in a US-China «Cold War». This was the case, for example, of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries. The June 2019 endorsement by ASEAN of a constructive and ASEAN-centred reading of FOIP was pre-approved by China.⁶² Indeed, China refrained from venting public criticism of FOIP; this was a notable difference from the caustic words uttered by then-Foreign Minister Wang Yi, who, in March 2018, had alluded at the concept as a «headline-grabbing» idea that, «like the sea foam in the Pacific or Indian Ocean», might get some attention, but was bound to soon «dissipate».⁶³ In all likelihood, Washington's aggressive China pushback and ASEAN leaders' reassurances that their definition of the Indo-Pacific did not exclude China shaped State Councillor's Wang Yi's marked change of tone.⁶⁴

61. Yuichi Hosoya, 'FOIP 2.0: The Evolution of Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy', *Asia-Pacific Review*, Vol. 26, 2019, pp. 18-28; Kitaoka Shimichi, 'Vision for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific', *Asia-Pacific Review*, Vol. 26, 2019, pp. 7-17.

62. 'ASEAN «インド太平洋の中心に»独自構想を採択' (ASEAN 'towards centrality of the Indo-Pacific' – Opting for its Own Concept), *Nihon Keizai Shinbun*, 23 June 2019; conversation with Japanese academic, 20 November 2019, London.

63. 'Scepticism over free and open Indo-Pacific strategy', *Straits Times*, 12 August 2018.

64. 'ASEAN – 米と距離' (ASEAN Keeps its Distance from the US), *Asahi Shinbun*, 2 August 2019, p. 9.

Notably, FOIP testified to Japan's expanding strategic horizons. Japanese policymakers under the security-conscious and China-wary Abe administration understood the BRI's Maritime Silk Road squarely in geopolitical terms. According to this understanding, Chinese economic clout and investment into port facilities in the Indian Ocean aimed at expanding control of the seas through a «String of Pearls» strategy. Hence, China-controlled harbours across that Ocean would – slowly but surely – assist the Chinese People Liberation Army Navy's (PLAN) military deployment into the Indo-Pacific.⁶⁵ On the Eastern front, Japan and like-minded parties followed with apprehension China's growing economic and physical presence in the Pacific Islands for similar reasons.⁶⁶ Along with Japan, Australian policymakers too feared China's «double-edged» economic embrace and regional assistance.⁶⁷ In their view, China's economic assistance entailed the risk that Chinese influence across the small Pacific islands would eventually translate into Chinese military power in waters close to Australia.⁶⁸ As a consequence, 2019 testified to Japan's growingly concerted and coordinated regional engagement, with Australia, the United States, New Zealand, France, the United Kingdom and, to a lesser extent, India.

Interestingly, Japan's connectivity push extended all the way to East Africa, where Japan intended to pursue a joint maritime capacity building project with the United Kingdom, and possibly start joint connectivity initiatives with the European Union through the EU-Japan Strategy for Sustainable Connectivity and High-quality Infrastructure.⁶⁹ It helped that capacity-building projects were relatively cheap, but coordination among donors and with recipient countries was no easy task.

Japan's engagement with Sri Lanka and the Pacific Islands provides an excellent window on Tokyo's multi-faceted statecraft through economic inducements, diplomatic visits and little-appreciated mini-lateral coordination. Tokyo offered to develop portions of the Colombo port, to donate de-commissioned coast guard patrol vessels to the Sri Lankan Navy and

65. Interview with former high-ranking Japanese government official from the Prime Minister's Office, Tokyo, 20 December 2019; conversations with Japanese officials in charge of Sri Lanka and FOIP: MOJ official, 23 December 2019, Tokyo; MOFA official, 11 February 2020; MOFA official, 21 February 2020, Washington DC; conversation with Japanese academic specializing on Chinese development finance, 26 January 2020.

66. 'ソロモン諸島染まる中国色' (Solomon Islands Falling into China's Hands), *Asahi Shimbun*, 18 July 2019; '特別区構想 揺れるマーシャル諸島' (Special Zones Concept – The Marshall Islands Shake), *Asahi Shimbun*, 18 July 2019; '人口5万の島国に中国の影' (China's Shadow over Islands Country of Fifty Thousand Souls), *Asahi Shimbun*, 18 July 2019.

67. On China's «double-edged aid»: Liselotte Odgaard, *Double-Edged Aid: China's Strategy to Gain Influence through Regional Assistance*, Hudson Institute, 12 March 2020.

68. Participant presentation at 'Economic Statecraft in the Indo-Pacific' Workshop, 27-28 May 2019, Center for Rule-making Strategies – Tama University, Tokyo.

69. Conversation with European diplomat, 9 January 2020, Tokyo.

to assist in the infrastructure developing of the Trincomalee harbour. This latest project was an evident jab at China's appropriation of the Hambantota port and its potential militarization.⁷⁰ Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's official visit to Japan in 2018 resulted in a Japan-India Vision Statement that remarked the synergy in joint connectivity projects in the region, including Sri Lanka.⁷¹ First-hand interviews suggest that India had directly asked Japan to push for a physical presence there, and was particularly welcoming of successive strategic port calls by Japanese warships.⁷²

Similarly, Japan's 2019 engagement in the Pacific – replete with new exchange and capacity building programmes, economic diplomacy, and the first high-level diplomatic visits in 32 years by a Japanese foreign minister – clearly worked in lockstep with initiatives taken in Washington, Canberra and Wellington.⁷³ Vanuatu, where Japan inaugurated a new diplomatic mission in January 2020, was the most likely island country to host a Chinese military facility in the future, which would allow the PLAN to extend beyond the so-called First Island Chain.⁷⁴ The Japanese government also engaged in joint infrastructure projects through public-private partnerships sponsored by the Japanese, Australian and American policy banks: these included an expansion of Papua New Guinea's electric power grid, as well as co-financing of a liquefied natural gas (LNG) supply and telecommunications systems there.⁷⁵ Marking the increased importance of connectivity competition in the broadened Asia-Pacific, in 2019 the United States inaugurated its new International Development Finance Corporation, which overtook and expanded the firepower and responsibilities of its earlier incarnation. On its part, Canberra established the Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific and expanded the mandate and financial capacity of its export credit and overseas infrastructure financing agency.⁷⁶ It is all the more

70. Fabio Leone, 'Sri Lanka 2018: The Unfinished Drama of an Island State Democracy', *Asia Major* 2018, p. 350.

71. India Ministry of External Affairs, *India-Japan Vision Statement*, 29 October 2018 (<https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/30543/IndiaJapanVision-Statement>)

72. Interview with high-ranking Japanese official from the Prime Minister's Office, Tokyo, 20 December 2019; conversations with Japanese officials in charge of Sri Lanka and FOIP: 23 December 2019, Tokyo, 11 February 2020.

73. Satoshihiro Akimoto, 'The great power game in the Pacific: What Japan can do', *Japan Times*, 24 December 2019.

74. '中国と南太平洋 – 影響力拡大に警戒が必要' (China and the Southern Pacific Islands – Alert Needed Given Its Expansion of Influence), *Yomiuri Shinbun*, 24 September 2019.

75. '日米豪、パプアに協調融資LNG開発に1100億円超' (Japan-US-Australia Co-Financing in Papua – More than 110 Billion Yen for LNG Development), *Nihon Keizai Shinbun*, 25 June 2019.

76. Japan Bank for International Cooperation, 'OPIC(US), JBIC(Japan), DFAT/Efic (Australia) Reaffirm Commitment to Indo-Pacific Infrastructure Development', 25 June 2019.

remarkable that Japan's efforts in the Pacific also rested on the good offices of a major Japanese Non-Profit Organization, which complemented and supported the government's activities there, to «increase the effectiveness of the Japanese government's strategy for the regional security of the Pacific islands», as per one of its financed projects.⁷⁷ Finally, the United States' Blue Dot Network, an infrastructure certification system established in 2019 in close partnership with Japan and Australia, built on the «partnership for quality infrastructure» agenda that Tokyo had consistently pushed for since the 2016 G-7 Ise-Shima Summit and 2019 G-20 Osaka summit.

3.2. *Japan in an age of great power competition II: Economic statecraft and relations with the US, China and South Korea*

3.2.1. *Japan's relations with the US*

Abe has gone to great lengths to appease and have a fruitful working relationship with Trump. In February 2019 it emerged that the US President had asked for Abe's endorsement to his (the US President's) nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize, in light of the historic US-North Korea summit.⁷⁸ According to Japanese diplomatic sources, the Japanese Prime Minister diligently fulfilled Trump's request for a nomination by producing a five-page letter. This was a remarkable event, considering Abe's deep reservations of Washington's opening towards North Korea and his preference for a maximum pressure policy.⁷⁹ Similarly, Trump's four-day visit to Japan, starting on 25 May, was short on deliverables, but high on symbolisms and targeted communication that appealed to the US President's ego-narcissism and electoral base. For instance, Trump was the first foreign leader to meet the new Emperor whereas most foreign dignitaries, including China's, would salute him only in October. This was a record that Trump duly tweeted,⁸⁰ and highlighted with usual bombast: «I am the guest, meaning the United States is the guest, but Prime Minister Abe said to me, very specifically, 'You are the guest of honour. There's only one guest of honour.' [I] represent the country. Of all the countries in the world, I'm the guest of honour at the biggest event they've had in over 200 years.»⁸¹ During the same visit, Trump attended a

77. Sasakawa Peace Foundation, Pacific Island Nations Program (<https://www.spf.org/en/programs/pacific-islands>); conversation with European diplomat, 9 January 2020, Tokyo.

78. Philip Rucker & Carol Leonning, *A Very Stable Genius: Donald J. Trump's Testing of America*, London: Penguin Press, 2020, p. 187.

79. 'Abe shushō «Toranpu-shi wo Nōberu-shō ni» no hamon' (The Ripple Effects of Prime Minister's Abe endorsement of Trump to the Nobel Prize), *Tōyō Keizai*, 22 February 2019.

80. 'An Old Tweet Haunts Trump As He Brags About Meeting Japanese Emperor', *Hill Reporter*, 27 May 2019.

81. 'For Trump, a «very big event» in Japan that he struggles to explain', *Washington Post*, 24 May 2019.

sumo tournament and presented the winning wrestler with an eagle-topped «President's Cup», a first for an American president.⁸²

At the same time, Japan compromised on a bilateral trade agreement with the United States, which remained its most valuable foreign market. On 17 May, the White House announced that the Commerce Department's investigation into automobile imports under Section 232 of the Trade Expansion Act of 1962 found that the automotive industry was critical to US «national security» (a term often overused by the Trump administration to raise protectionist measures); concomitantly the White House instructed the US Trade Representative to engage into negotiations with the European Union and Japan to rectify impairments resulting from their exports in the industry.⁸³ This was a clear means of increasing US leverage in ongoing US-Japan trade negotiations, but – differently from the European Union's more confrontational posture – the Abe administration did not stall negotiations.

The Trump administration was still embroiled in a protracted tariff war with China throughout 2019, which could have allowed Japan to wait out the US President. Instead, the Abe government announced a limited bilateral trade deal that essentially created a levelling field in the rich Japanese market between American agricultural and farm producers on the one hand and competitors from the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership on the other.⁸⁴ While the trade agreement did not explicitly spell out the abandonment of future US automobile tariffs/negotiations, the Japanese government left the European Union to deal with the unpleasant issue of dealing with Trump,⁸⁵ preserved a good relationship with Trump, and appeared to bide its time to lure a future American administration back into the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

3.2.2. *Economic statecraft and Japan's relations with China*

The Japanese government aimed many of its international economic initiatives at China more decisively in 2019, and hinted that it would up its game in the coming years. The Abe administration acted on a clear distinction between win-win Sino-Japanese complementarities and techno-hegemonic risks associated with China's rise. With regard to the former, the Japanese government welcomed and pushed for summit di-

82. 'Bei daitōryō-hai, rainen ikō mo zōtei he' (US President's Cup to be Presented Also from Next Year Onwards), *Asahi Shimbun*, 26 May 2019.

83. The White House, *Adjusting Imports of Automobiles and Automobile Parts Into the United States*, 17 May 2019 (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/adjusting-imports-automobiles-automobile-parts-united-states>).

84. The White House, *Joint Statement of the United States and Japan*, 25 September 2019; 'U.S., Japan reach a limited deal on agriculture, digital trade', *POLITICO*, 25 September 2019.

85. Conversation with Japanese automotive industry representative, 21 January 2020, Washington DC.

plomacy with the Chinese leadership, also to improve its national appeal among Chinese public opinion and enhance Japan's market access to China. In 2019, Japan registered its record amount of foreign tourists – 30 million – most of them Chinese, who also travelled to Japanese regions off the beaten track.⁸⁶ On their part, Japanese automakers preferred to take advantage of the rich Chinese automotive market by setting up shop there, including advanced electric car factories.⁸⁷ On the other hand, Japan was roughly on the same page with its US ally. Tokyo became growingly aware of the «dual-use» risks of new technologies – especially under China's «military-civil fusion» path to technological innovation. Moreover, Japanese government officials acknowledged the strong competitive elements behind China's technological superiority in the Internet of Things, robot technology, Artificial Intelligence, Quantum technology and the like.⁸⁸ The Japanese government was particularly concerned with China's dominant position in the telecommunication industry, as evidenced by Huawei's advances in 5G technology and its forays in submarine cables. As a consequence, Tokyo quietly lined up with Washington's decision to embargo, weaken and offer alternatives to the Chinese Information and Communications Technology industry, for both security *and* economic reasons (i.e. to protect its industries).⁸⁹

Thus, the Japanese government was redoubling its efforts at economic statecraft, the use of economic and tech policy to advance security and diplomatic goals. After all, US-China strategic competition has led to increased uncertainty in the global economy and as a result Tokyo was seeking to adjust to the new and more difficult environment. The Japanese government announced that it would add an Economic Team within its National Security Secretariat, and would reportedly formulate a National Economic Security Strategy by the end of 2020, possibly through a revised National Security Strategy.⁹⁰ Thus, aside from infrastructure competition, securitized aid, strategic free trade agreements – all topics already covered by these authors elsewhere⁹¹ – Tokyo inaugurated tighter investment

86. '訪日客「地方へ直行」急増' (Inbound Visitors: Sudden Increase in 'Direct Flights to Rural Areas'), *Nihon Keizai Shinbun*, 22 December 2019.

87. Interview with METI official, 7 January 2020.

88. Cabinet Office of Japan, 「国家安全保障戦略」の現時点での評価について (Evaluation of the 'National Security Strategy' at present), 18 December 2018 (<https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryou/anzenhoshouhyouka.html>).

89. Hiroyuki Akita, '海底が握る大国の命運' (The Bottom of the Seas Holds the Destiny of Great Powers), *Nihon Keizai Shinbun*, 23 May 2019; Mathieu Duchâtel, *Japan's 5G: a Mirror for Europe*, Institut Montaigne, 26 February 2020; 'Govt looks to counter China's growing submarine cable presence', *Yomiuri Shinbun*, 8 January 2020.

90. 'Japan likely to draw up economic security strategy in 2020', *The Japan News*, 5 January 2020.

91. Giulio Pugliese & Sebastian Maslow, 'Japan 2018: Fleshing out the «Free and Open Indo-Pacific» strategic vision', *Asia Maior* 2019, pp. 101-128.

screening, and more seriously considered trade embargoes, wider export controls, and technological protection, mostly with China in mind. For instance, the government pushed for revisions to the Foreign Exchange and Foreign Trade Act, through tougher rules to screen acquisitions by foreign firms on national security grounds; foreign investors would be required to notify authorities of acquisition of 1% or more in stakes in Japanese companies; this measure targeted a broad set of designated sectors to prevent «leakage of information on critical technologies as well as disposition of business activities».⁹²

Japan's tightening of foreign investment screening mechanisms closely followed in the footsteps of similar initiatives in the United States, Europe, Israel and the like. The willingness to better coordinate actions with the White House's National Security and National Economic Councils was also part of the calculus.⁹³ Still, a reconsideration of Japan's presence in regional and global supply chains, as well as preservation of its technological edge was likely also aimed at defusing the political risks associated with US economic offensive towards China. Ministry of Economics Trade and Industry (METI) officials agreed with the US government on the technological and economic risks associated with China's rise, but not with the US potent decoupling prescription, given Japanese embeddedness in regional supply networks; still, fieldwork research found – on balance – sanguinity concerning US economic countermeasures vis-à-vis China.⁹⁴ Concomitantly, the Japanese government countered China's Digital Silk Road through a mix of norm/standard-setting initiatives with likeminded counterparts concerned with «data free flow with trust», as well as providing regional players with software and hardware infrastructure alternatives to China's.⁹⁵ Japan moved in the same direction with regard to multilateral summits preoccupied with global governance.⁹⁶ Compounded by a relatively buoyant business community, the Japanese government's initiatives suggested there was real momentum for a more assertive set of economic statecraft initiatives that targeted China.

92. Ministry of Finance of Japan, *Frequently Asked Questions on the Amendment Bill of the Foreign Exchange and Foreign Trade Act*, 31 October 2019 (https://www.mof.go.jp/english/international_policy/fdi/faq_191031.pdf, accessed on 4 April 2020).

93. Interview with high-ranking Japanese official from the Prime Minister's Office, Tokyo, 20 December 2019.

94. Interview with METI officials, 29 May 2019, 23 December 2019, 7 January 2020, Tokyo.

95. Dai Mochinaga, 'The Expansion of China's Digital Silk Road and Japan's Response', *Asia Policy*, volume 15, number 1 (January 2020), pp. 41–60; On the normative side of things, an EU-Japan Data Transfer adequacy agreement entered into force on January 2019: Samantha Green, 'Will the EU-Japan Data Transfer Partnership Agreement Have Global Influence?', *Law.com*, 27 March 2019.

96. Government of Japan, *The G-20 Leaders Osaka Declaration*, (<https://g20.org/en/g20/Documents/2019-japan-g20-osaka%20Leaders%20Declaration.pdf>).

Amidst a deepening uncertainty of regional dynamics, Japan looked forward to project an idea of stability with China through summit diplomacy. But competitive undercurrents still defined Sino-Japanese interaction. The year under review registered a substantial increase of Chinese incursions in the contiguous zones of the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, almost doubling the previous year's number, but one needs to make a distinction between Chinese activity in the contiguous zones and the territorial waters: the former would be legal even if China recognized Japanese sovereignty over the Senkaku. Sino-Japan diplomatic engagement did not prevent Tokyo from emphasizing China's activities around the disputed islands, even when such activities were not necessarily unlawful.⁹⁷ On infrastructure competition, Tokyo's recourse to diplomatic property and its unwillingness to publicly condemn China's BRI – unlike Washington's grotesque and amateurish public diplomacy offensive – ought not to be taken at face value, because Tokyo remained highly sensitive to China's economic influence.⁹⁸ In 2019, Italy's accession to the BRI, and, separately, the expansion of the «16 + 1» China and Central and Eastern Europe Countries initiative to include Greece worried especially American *and* Japanese diplomats, no matter the actual content of those initiatives.⁹⁹

Concomitantly, Japan's infrastructure cooperation with China in third countries was premised on shaky grounds, to the extent that former Ambassador to China, Niwa Uichirō, suggested that it was mostly «just rhetorical»,¹⁰⁰ an important testimony since the general trading company he once chaired, Itōchū, signed one of the many MoUs with Chinese counterparts in late 2018. Abe was also among the first world leaders to – reportedly – criticize, at the bilateral level, Xi Jinping's stance on Xinjiang, asking for restraint in Hong Kong and on the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands.¹⁰¹ Moreover, direct Kantei pressure on Zhongnanhai, headquarters for the Chinese Communist Party leadership and the State Council, allowed for the release of a Japanese academic – accused of seizing materials related to

97. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, *Records of Intrusions of Chinese Government and Other Vessels into Japan's Territorial Sea*, (updated monthly) (<https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000465486.pdf>).

98. On Japan's securitized approach to infrastructure competition: Nikolay Murashkin, *Japan and the New Silk Road. Diplomacy, Development and Connectivity*, Routledge: London, 2020, pp. 53-4.

99. Liselotte Odgaard, 'Europe's Place in Sino-U.S. Competition', in Ashley Tellis, Allison Szalwinski & Michael Wills (eds.), *Strategic Asia 2020: U.S.-China Competition for Global Influence*, Seattle and Washington DC: The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2020, pp. 247-74; Giulio Pugliese, 'A Global Rorschach Test: Responding to the Belt and Road Initiative', *Defence Strategic Communications*, NATO Excellence Centre Riga, Vol. 7 (2), December 2019, pp. 113-32.

100. Interview with former Ambassador Niwa, 22 December 2019, Japan.

101. '首相 尖閣自制を要求' (Prime Minister Requests Self-Restraint around the Senkaku), *Sankei Shinbun*, 24 December 2019.

Chinese state secrets – and whose detention had generated quite an uproar among the intellectual community.¹⁰²

These developments did not restrain Abe's eagerness to host Xi for a state visit, which was originally planned for spring 2020 and subsequently postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The summit promised to be short on substance (not unlike the Italy-China BRI framework MoU), no matter the CCP leadership's overtures and its insistence on unveiling a 5th bilateral statement highlighting the supposed start of a «New Era» of Sino-Japanese relations under Xi.¹⁰³ It was indicative of US maximalism that American policymakers in Washington, DC fretted that Japan was compromising too much by signing a bilateral statement that somewhat sought to stabilize Sino-Japanese relations. This attitude resembled the exaggerate US pushback on the rather constructive (if symbolic) Italy-China BRI MoU.¹⁰⁴ In fact, Sino-Japanese competition was more of the same if we include techno-economic competition, but with both governments grasping for new spin.

3.2.3. *Japan's relations with South Korea*

As noted above, Japan resorted to economic coercion in its relationship with South Korea. The South Korean Supreme Court ruled in favour of individual claims for wartime compensation –relinquished under the 1965 Republic of Korea-Japan normalization treaty – and the forced seizure of Japanese corporations' assets to that end. Japan's calls for international arbitration on the matter were consistently rebuffed by Seoul. Thus, shortly after the Osaka G-20 Summit in June 2019, the Japanese government introduced export controls on three materials used in smartphone displays and semiconductor manufacturing, requiring export licenses on an *ad hoc* basis. This decision effectively added South Korea to the list of countries for which export controls were required. Japan has a near monopoly of some key chemical and advanced industrial products used as smartphone components. Accordingly, Japan's decision to delist Korea from the «white list» of trustable countries for dual-use items was bound to make it more burdensome to export some products there, with the need for singular export

102. Scholars at Risk, 'On October 21, 2019, it was reported that Chinese authorities detained a professor of Chinese history from Japan's Hokkaido University on suspicion of spying,' (<https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2019-10-21-hokkaido-university>); '中国、北大教授を解放 当局、「スパイ容疑」と主張' (China Frees Hokkaido Professor, but Authorities Label Him as 'Suspected of Spying'), *Mainichi Shinbun*, 16 November 2019.

103. Interview with Japanese academic, 27 December 2019, Tokyo.

104. Japan Society, 'Geopolitics of Coronavirus: Japan and Korea', 10 April 2020, Minute 48:20 onwards, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j57vxs5e5HM>).

licenses on a case by case basis.¹⁰⁵ Essentially, this measure was intended as an informal sanction towards South Korea, one that would slow down its export-led manufacturing economy. In reality, though, the delisting of South Korea eventually turned out to be a symbolic measure, aimed less at hitting Seoul than pandering Japanese nationalist crowds. The move was planned in advance, made after the G-20, and was certainly contradictory with Japan's attempt to salvage an open world economy in Osaka.¹⁰⁶ Evidence also suggests that the Prime Minister's Office initiated these pressure tactics by empowering fellow hawks in METI, and these measures coincided with the Upper House elections and a high tide of anti-Korean feelings.¹⁰⁷ Allegations of South Korean trade diversion of some exports to countries, such as North Korea or China, helped Japan to prepare its case in the event of international litigation. Still it was evident that Tokyo was making use of coercive economic statecraft with a quasi-ally, and the move suggested that it may well do so in the future with strategic rivals, such as China; these tactics were under review of the new National Security Secretariat team.¹⁰⁸ The United States' hands-off approach reinforced the conflicting tides between South Korea and Japan. Still, private and public US pressure made South Korea reconsider earlier threats to quit the General Security of Military Information Agreement, a military intelligence pact with Japan. This was the worst crisis between Tokyo and Seoul since 1965 and promised to result in major economic boycotts and the crystallization of mutual mistrust.

3.3. *Japan's security and diplomatic maturation*

The year under review provided further evidence that Abe's Japan qualified as a proactive and security-conscious player in the international chessboard. A report confirmed Abe's pet interest in security and foreign policy matters throughout his tenure by detailing the numerous work meetings with the head of the Cabinet Intelligence Research Office and new head of the National Security Secretariat, Kitamura Shigeru, and outgoing

105. Suzuki Kazuto, '対韓輸出管理問題がここまでこじれた理由' (Why Did the Export Controls Towards South Korea Worsen to This Point?), *The Asahi Shimbun*, 19 July 2019.

106. Conversation with Japanese diplomat, 16 July 2019, Washington DC.

107. Yakushiji Katsuyuki, '高まる「嫌韓」、対韓強硬論にこれだけのリスク事態を打開するには「日韓首脳会談」しかない' (Rising 'Anti-Korea' Tide, The Only Way to Solve the Crisis of an Anti-Korea Maximalist Policy is to Do a 'Japan-South Korea Summit'), *Tōyō Keizai*, 12 June 2019; Kawase Tsuyoshi, '日本政府は韓国の輸出規制を再考すべきだ' (The Japanese Government Should Reconsider its Export Controls Towards South Korea), *Tōyō Keizai*, 13 July 2019; interview with Japanese government officials from MOFA testified to frustration among strategic players in Japan on the rushed decision: 10 July 2019 and 16 July 2019.

108. Conversation with Japanese official, Tokyo, January 2020.

National Security Advisor Yachi Shōtarō.¹⁰⁹ Abe also made key security appointments by choosing among close bureaucratic loyalists, many of whom were his former executive secretaries.¹¹⁰ The Japanese government's appetite for the procurement and deployment of offensive capabilities, as per the December 2018 National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG), and its initiatives in the Iran crisis (on which, more later) testify to its security and diplomatic maturation. In the face of a rapidly changing power balance, Chinese military expansion and «grey zone» pressure tactics, Abe and his policy team's credo translated into an overhaul of Japan's security regime. This was mainly aimed at balancing China, which was seen as Japan's most pressing security challenge in the 21st Century. In the words of a prominent scholar, the two Abe administrations unveiled «the most security and deterrence-prone China policy you would ever get in Japan.»¹¹¹

3.3.1. *Japan's security and diplomatic maturation I: Towards offensive capabilities*

According to the literature, deterrence can be disentangled into a more offensive «punishment» strategy that allows states to strike an adversary's territory through long-range strike capabilities, and a more defensive «denial» approach that prioritizes the development of capabilities aimed at tailoring and limiting the damage of potential military threats.¹¹² Japan's inability to match the pace of Chinese military modernization meant that it was bound to rely on US extended deterrence (through the nuclear umbrella) along with closer alliance cooperation, based on promoting «jointness» and interoperability between the armed forces of Japan and the USA. Still, Japan's main deterrence strategy was premised on denial, because it aimed at shoring up its asymmetric capabilities to make a Chinese invasion of the archipelago as costly as possible.

Japan's strategy somehow reflected China's own Anti-Access Area Denial (A2/AD) approach and was still largely in line with Japan's traditional «defensive realist» stance that maximized security for the purpose of homeland defence, while mitigating the regional security dilemma.¹¹³ And Japan's recalibration of its defences towards its far-flung southwestern flank, along with

109. 'Gaikō anpo medatsu menkaisū' (The Number of Meetings Reveal Importance of Foreign and Security Policy), *Asahi Shimbun*, 27 December 2019.

110. 'Abe names close aides to key security posts, raising concerns', *The Asahi Shimbun*, 24 September 2019.

111. Interview with prominent China specialist, 1 June 2019, Tokyo.

112. Luis Simón, 'Between punishment and denial: Uncertainty, flexibility, and U.S. military strategy toward China', *Contemporary Security Policy*, published online on 21 January 2020, p. 2.

113. See for example: Eivind Lande, 'Between Offensive and Defensive Realism – The Japanese Abe Government's Security Policy toward China', *Asian Security*, Vol. 14 (2), 2018, pp. 172-92.

the establishment of an amphibious rapid deployment brigade, the installation of new mid- and short-range surface-to-ship and surface-to-air missile units, deployment of ballistic missile defence (BMD) systems – both ashore and at sea – and redoubled efforts in promoting anti-submarine warfare all point at the prioritization of homeland defence and deterrence by denial.

The United States had actively sponsored the development of its Asia-Pacific allies' denial capabilities to prevent China's regional dominance. For instance, the US-Japan alliance deterred Chinese expansionism into the China Seas by performing activities in support of freedom of navigation and strengthening the denial capabilities of Southeast Asian states through military/constabulary capacity building (e.g. provision of coast guard ships and training of coast guard forces there).¹¹⁴ These initiatives were welcome by Japan, and many arguably followed in the footsteps of earlier Japanese initiatives.¹¹⁵ Throughout 2019 Japan was seeking new Western partners in joint capacity building programmes in the Indo-Pacific all the way to Eastern Africa.¹¹⁶ Under the Trump administration, the US increased the number of freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs), while more actively enlisting the participation of likeminded partners in the deterrence mix, and deploying its military and Coast Guard vessels in East Asian waters. In order to reassure its allies, the US claimed it would retain the ability to «punish», or defeat China, especially through strategic and, «if necessary», tactical nuclear weapons.¹¹⁷ In line with this promise, the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review strengthened the flexibility of the US nuclear force structure through submarine-launched tactical nuclear weapons that may come in handy in Northeast Asia. The latter being a move that was reportedly in line with the expectations of some influential Japanese defence planners and analysts.¹¹⁸

The Japanese government was reassured by the Trump administration's «principled realist» overhaul of US strategic posture, which underscored inter-state competition and great power rivalry. Significantly, Japanese policy planners were reportedly «relatively appreciative of a

114. Scott W. Harold, Yoshiaki Nakagawa, Junichi Fukuda, John A. Davis, Keiko Kono, Dean Cheng & Kazuto Suzuki, *The US-Japan alliance and deterring grey zone coercion in the maritime, cyber and space domains*, Santa Monica, California: Rand Corporation, 2017.

115. Jay Tristan Tarriera, 'What Is the US Coast Guard's Role in the Indo-Pacific Strategy?', *The Diplomat*, 21 June 2019.

116. Conversation with European diplomat, 9 January 2020, Tokyo.

117. U.S. Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review - 2018*, Washington DC, 2018, p. 48 (<https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF>).

118. David McNeill, 'Strategic approach: Washington's shifting nuclear policy in the Asia-Pacific region is putting Japan in a difficult position', *Japan Times*, 29 July 2017; Masashi Murano, 'What the New US Nuclear Posture Means for Northeast Asia', *The Diplomat*, 29 August 2018.

harsh US China policy».¹¹⁹ In fact, Japan's summit diplomacy with China was grounded on those very foundations. China was front and centre of Washington's prioritization of states-based threats, which was addressed through a «whole-of-government» approach, based on the employment of all sources of US power, including counterintelligence and raw propaganda.¹²⁰ Behind the US president's crude mercenary instincts, an empowered national security establishment sought to increase US strength and credibility, ramp up the confrontational rhetoric, and exert pressure on foes and friends alike to comply with US objectives. The high number of officials in charge of East Asian security *and* diplomatic affairs hailing from the military was indicative of this logic.¹²¹ In 2019, the Department of Defense's inauguration of a new deputy assistant secretary position with exclusive oversight over China matters and the promotion of a hawkish China specialist to the ranks of deputy national security advisor, a first in the history of the US National Security Council (NSC), showed the importance assigned to the People's Republic of China.¹²² The US executive office had also changed the language register to wage an all-out communication war against China and its signature policies, such as the BRI.¹²³ In the process, the legislative branch of government has followed through, by promoting the Congress-led National Defense Authorization, the Asia Reassurance Initiative, the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act, and the Uighur Intervention and Global Humanitarian Unified Response Act. The administration's budget proposals for national security were the highest since the height of the Iraq War, and set to increase further the following year.¹²⁴

Washington's escalation dominance traditionally also targeted and circumscribed Japan's manoeuvrability, but this was changing under Trump. According to a former US defence official, the ability for «the US to 'concentrate on the offensive side of things' would mean that 'Japan would not have to do it itself,' and that 'would also be most welcome from the perspective

119. Interview with high-ranking Japanese official, Tokyo, 20 December 2019.

120. Robert Sutter, 'Washington's «Whole-of-government» Pushback Against Chinese Challenges—Implications and Outlook', *PacNet*, No. 26, Honolulu: CSIS Pacific Forum, 23 April 2019.

121. For instance: in 2019 retired Brigadier General David Stillwell was nominated Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs at the Department of State.

122. 'Trump Picks Matt Pottinger as Deputy National Security Adviser', *Wall Street Journal*, 20 September 2019. Matt Pottinger's uninterrupted service at the NSC under four very different National Security Advisors also testifies to his centrality in crafting the US China strategy.

123. Robbie Gramer & Elias Roll, 'With New Appointment, State Department Ramps Up War Against Foreign Propaganda', *Foreign Policy*, 7 February 2019.

124. 'Trump signs \$738 billion defense bill. Here's what the Pentagon is poised to get', *CNBC*, 20 December 2019.

of managing the Japan alliance adequately.’¹²⁵ After all, the Obama administration had prevented Abe’s Japanese acquisition of strike capabilities.¹²⁶ In these authors’ view, the advent of the Trump administration allowed for a change in US defence planners’ calculus, one that provided incentives for Japanese rearmament *beyond* deterrence by denial. This was the end product of the new, more confrontational approach of the US government towards China, one that enlisted like-minded partners for its «big stick diplomacy» towards China, and the US President’s desire to boost American exports, including expensive arms sales.

In 2019, Japan procured power projection capabilities that would have allowed for a more offensive declination of deterrence, although capabilities were still limited. To be sure, Japanese armed forces remain *politically* constrained to strictly defensive functions: a deeply engrained antimilitarist and anti-nuclear ethos both prevented the acquisition of nuclear weapons and curtailed Abe’s ability to make a rounder use of the military as a tool of statecraft.¹²⁷ But most scholars do not appreciate the full extent of the Abe administration’s relaxation of the legal constraints previously limiting Japan’s offensive capabilities. For instance, constitutional reinterpretation in favour of collective self-defence contained a subtle, if notable, expansion of the rationale behind self-defence: the government would exercise self-defence and collective self-defence to protect an ill-defined – and therefore amenable to flexible interpretation – people’s «right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness».¹²⁸ An influential public official closely linked with Abe’s security reforms wondered why the Prime Minister was so fixated with constitutional revision, since there was, in fact, ample room of manoeuvre within the boundaries of the 2014 constitutional reinterpretation and 2015 peace and security legislation.¹²⁹

Thus, since «interpretations of the constitution have contributed to set expectations over what capabilities should and should not be within the reach of the national defense posture»,¹³⁰ a more malleable interpretation of

125. Former US defense official (October 26, 2016) cited in Luis Simón, ‘Between punishment and denial: Uncertainty, flexibility, and U.S. military strategy toward China’, *Contemporary Security Policy*, p. 12.

126. ‘US voices objections to Japan’s plan to ensure «preemptive strike capabilities»’, *Hankyoreh*, 5 October 2013.

127. Sheila A. Smith, *Japan Rearmed: The Politics of Military Power*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019.

128. Ministry of Defense of Japan, 憲法と自衛権 – (2)憲法9条の下で許容される自衛の措置 (The Constitution and the Right to Self-Defense – (2) Measures Allowed for Self-Defense Under Article 9 of the Constitution), <https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/agenda/seisaku/kihon02.html>, accessed on 26 March 2020.

129. Interview with high-ranking Japanese government official, 23 May 2019, Tokyo.

130. Franz-Stefan Gady, ‘Alessio Patalano on Japan’s Growing Naval Power’, *The Diplomat*, 4 June 2019.

the anti-militarist constitution was allowing for gradual, yet potentially significant, changes in Japan's security posture. For instance, during Trump's visit to Japan, in a historic first, Trump addressed military personnel along with Abe on top of the Kaga helicopter carrier that – as per the December 2018 Cabinet-approved NDPG – was now allowed to host aircrafts, such as expensive F-35Bs with their short take-off and vertical landing capabilities.¹³¹ In fact, in 2019 Japan confirmed its acquisition of 105 F-35s: 62 F-35A for the Air Self-Defense Force and 43 F-35Bs for Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF). By 2030 the fleet was poised to reach a total of 147 F-35s, making Japan the largest foreign buyer of the Lockheed Martin-made jet, possibly tipping the balance of fifth-generation air power in Japan's favour, especially if the F-35s worked through a seamless alliance integration, allowing Japan to share US carriers. Moreover, Japan announced its intention to procure long-range joint strike missiles and joint air-to-surface stand-off missiles, tailored for its F35 fleet.¹³² The capacity for Japan's two carriers to host up to ten F-35Bs, the aircraft's stealth technology and its multirole capabilities suggest that Japan was moving beyond air defence to also include penetration of adversaries' air defences. At the same time, the Kantei's dependence on US Foreign Military Sales (FMS) programme risked holding Japan's force structure and military planning hostage of Trump's «Buy American» desiderata, and, at the same time, potentially weakening Japan's defence industrial base.¹³³

The Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) officially maintains that the two Izumo-class warships are «multifunctional destroyers», but they are in fact aircraft carriers. As such, they endow Japan with mobile air defence platforms and a degree of power projection, albeit a modest one given the limited number and size of the JMSDF carriers. At the same time, authoritative voices doubted the appropriateness of procuring large military vessels, in light of China's sophisticated anti-ship missiles (from ground, air and sea), and the steep costs of procuring, operating and maintaining an aircraft carrier.¹³⁴ On the other hand, since the China challenge was often based on showcasing resolve and overwhelming military and constabulary

131. 'In symbolic first, Abe and Trump jointly address military personnel aboard Japan's Kaga carrier', *Japan Times*, 28 May 2019.

132. Franz-Stefan Gady, 'Japan's Ministry of Defense Confirms Plans to Procure New Stand-off Missiles', *The Diplomat*, 4 February 2020; Mike Yeo, 'Japan inks deal with Kongsberg for F-35 standoff missile', *Defense News*, 13 March 2019.

133. 'F-35組み立て中止技術継承は' (What Does Interruption of F-35 Assembly [in Japan] Mean for Technological Continuity?), *Asahi Shimbun*, 13 July 2019; '官邸主導くすぶる不満' (Smouldering Discontent at Kantei Leadership), *Asahi Shimbun*, 13 July 2019.

134. Masashi Murano, 'The Future of Deterrence Strategy in Long-Term Strategic Competition', in Yuki Tatsumi & Pamela Kennedy (eds.), *Key Challenges in Japan's Defense Policy*, Washington DC: Stimson Center, March 2020, pp. 61-72; 'Aircraft-carriers are big, expensive, vulnerable – and popular', *The Economist*, 14 November 2019.

presence to its smaller neighbours, Japan's carrier groups would likely be used to reassure Indo-Pacific littoral states through presence operations, possibly in close cooperation with other like-minded countries, such as the US, India, Australia France and the United Kingdom.

The US President's aforementioned May visit to Japan was meant to cater to Trump's ego-narcissism, also by underlining Japan's big ticket arms purchases, and showcase the strength and vitality of the US-Japan alliance. The latter was a distinct message – one of deterrence – that was aimed at North Korea and China. After all, a month earlier, the US-Japan Security Consultative Committee led by the ministries responsible for foreign affairs and defence matters emphasized «cooperation to introduce advanced weapons systems to Japan and to further streamline the foreign military sales process».¹³⁵ Moreover, the 2+2 meeting would also aim at increasing deterrence in the cyber domain, by stating that «a cyberattack could, in certain circumstances, constitute an armed attack for the purposes of Article 5».¹³⁶ This was a noteworthy development in alliance politics, one that went hand-in-hand with Japan's quest for offensive cyber capabilities – for deterrence purposes during peacetime and defensive aims during a contingency – as per the 2018 overhaul of the NDPG.¹³⁷ In 2019, Japan's Self-Defense Forces' (JSDF) cyberdefence unit had expanded from 150 to 220 personnel from the army, navy and air force,¹³⁸ and reportedly «outsourced the development of offensive cyber capabilities to one or several unnamed private Japanese companies».¹³⁹

Finally, the Abe administration and Japanese defence planners likely felt reassured by the US withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty.¹⁴⁰ The withdrawal was nominally aimed at Russia's violation of the treaty, but China's development of nuclear and conventional missile capabilities was arguably a more pressing reason that hinted at a US-China missile race,¹⁴¹ prompting US overtures towards Japan's acquisition

135. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, *Japan-U.S. Security Consultative Committee (Japan-U.S. '2+2')*, 19 April 2019 (https://www.mofa.go.jp/na/fa/page3e_001008.html, accessed on 27 March 2020).

136. *Ibid.*

137. Stefan Soesanto, *Hotspot Analysis A one-sided Affair: Japan and the People's Republic of China in Cyberspace*, CSS – ETH Zurich, January 2020, p. 15.

138. Ministry of Defense of Japan, *Defense Programs and Budget of Japan*, 21 December 2018 (https://www.mod.go.jp/e/d_budget/pdf/190510b.pdf).

139. Stefan Soesanto, *Hotspot Analysis A one-sided Affair: Japan and the People's Republic of China in Cyberspace*, p. 15.

140. U.S. Department of State, 'U.S. Withdrawal from the INF Treaty on August 2, 2019', 2 August 2019 (<https://www.state.gov/u-s-withdrawal-from-the-inf-treaty-on-august-2-2019>).

141. Tsuyoshi Minami, 'Do China's new missiles change the game?', *East Asian Forum*, 29 February 2020.

of conventional strike capabilities.¹⁴² In order to counter China's ballistic and ground-launched cruise missile capabilities – on full display during the 1 October 2019 military parade celebrating the 70th Anniversary of the establishment of the PRC – the United States government swiftly considered installing land-based intermediate-range missiles in China's proximity, Japan being a prime candidate for deployment.¹⁴³ The government was likely happy with the potential deployments, but Okinawa already made clear its opposition.¹⁴⁴ In fact, in 2019 the Abe administration signalled its intention to counter China's advances with its own intermediate-range missile force, deterring China through denial. Nonetheless, in line with this essay's argument, the Japanese government also considered both the deployment of longer-range strike missiles that could hit enemy territory, and development of its own hypersonic gliding vehicles.¹⁴⁵ Concerning the latter point, it is worth stressing that China's development of its hypersonic weapons questioned Japan's missile defence system's capacity to predict the course of incoming gliding missiles, a task that the US-developed Aegis Ashore system, designed to intercept and destroy incoming missiles, was unable to perform.¹⁴⁶ As a consequence, Japan's best defensive course was building up its offensive capabilities, on the premise that «tactically, having the option to go on the offensive will complicate the opponent's calculations».¹⁴⁷

Summing up, as evident in the year under review, Japan was, slowly but steadily, acquiring offensive capabilities, in close coordination with the United States.¹⁴⁸ As a result, Japanese defence policy was venturing into a new era. It however remains to be seen whether Japan can elaborate an appropriate retaliatory military doctrine and create a credible offensive counterforce – especially with only conventional weapons and warheads.

142. 'INTERVIEW/ Brad Roberts: Conventional strike capability by Japan good for deterrence', *Asahi Shimbun*, 5 April 2020.

143. Sheila A. Smith, 'Japan's Interests in an Era of U.S.-China Strategic Competition' in Ashley Tellis, Allison Szalwinski & Michael Wills (eds.), *Strategic Asia 2020: U.S.-China Competition for Global Influence*, Seattle and Washington DC: The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2020, pp. 45-74, p. 67.

144. 'Okinawa Governor Denny Tamaki Warns of Strong Resistance to U.S. Missiles in Japan', *Straits Times*, 3 November 2019, cited in Sheila Smith, 'Japan's Interests in an Era of U.S.-China Strategic Competition', p. 67.

145. 'Japan deploying longer-range missiles to counter China', *The Asahi Shimbun*, 30 April 2019.

146. Kazuto Suzuki, '深まる世界秩序の不確実性' (Deepening Uncertainty of the World Order), *Gaikō*, December 2019, pp. 84-91; pp. 86-7.

147. Masahi Murano, 'The Future of Deterrence Strategy in Long-Term Strategic Competition', p. 69.

148. 'New missile deployment in Asia raised at Japan-U.S. talks', *The Asahi Shimbun*, 22 October 2019.

3.3.2 *Japan's security and diplomatic maturation II: Crisis diplomacy in Iran*

Amidst an exacerbation of US-Iran tensions, the Japanese government cut itself a space to reassure Tehran of Japan's goodwill, providing at the same time a communication channel with Washington. In short, Japan's initiatives over the worsening Iran crisis were, on balance, a success. In light of their alliance relationship with Washington and support of non-proliferation, past Japanese governments have sustained international efforts at curbing Tehran's nuclear breakout. However, Tokyo's earlier proposals to act as a mediator were reportedly rebuffed by the Obama administration.¹⁴⁹ Tokyo was satisfied with the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and supported the framework to allow its oil companies to resume development of oil fields in Western Iran.¹⁵⁰ After all, Japan's oil imports depend heavily on the Middle East – for about 87% by one account.¹⁵¹ Washington's 2018 withdrawal from the JCPOA and the reintroduction of sanctions for businesses trading with Iran meant that Japanese companies had to comply, if reluctantly, to preserve good economic relations with the world's largest economy.¹⁵² Japan did not invest diplomatic energies in salvaging the JCPOA – an initiative it did not pursue – and preferred to avoid challenging its most important ally. Following Trump's symbolic visit to Japan in May 2019, Abe secured a blessing for directly mediating with Tehran. Japan's initiative culminated in the Japanese Prime Minister's historic two-day diplomatic visit to the Islamic Republic in mid-June, reciprocated by Iranian President Hassan Rouhani's visit to Japan in December. US Secretary of State Pompeo remarked during a press briefing that «President Trump had sent President Abe to take a message of his to the leadership in Iran»,¹⁵³ but this was likely an oversimplification. In fact, Japan plausibly obtained a green light from the Trump administration for an independent diplomatic initiative that, not unlike France's surprise invitation to Iran's Foreign Minister during the 2019 G-7 Summit, aimed at curbing the US-Iran escalatory spirals.¹⁵⁴ It was a diplomatic *démarche* that had the additional advantages of preserving Japan's traditional goodwill with Tehran and boosting Abe's support back home. After all, Tokyo wanted the US to keep focusing on East Asia and avoid needless military engagements in the Middle East.

The Prime Minister's Office ability to «spin» the 12-14 June diplomatic visit – the first time a Japanese premier had visited the Islamic Republic

149. Conversation with think-tank expert, 5 January 2020, Tokyo.

150. 'Impex eyes bid for Iran's Azadegan oil project', *Japan Times*, 17 August 2017.

151. 'Japan Still Reliant on Middle Eastern Oil', *Nippon.com*, 25 June 2019.

152. 'Impex may drop second bid for Iran's Azadegan oil project after sanctions decision', *Reuters*, 10 May 2018.

153. U.S. Department of State, *Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo Remarks to the Press*, 18 June 2019 (<https://www.state.gov/secretary-of-state-michael-r-pompeo-remarks-to-the-press-2>).

154. Conversation with Japanese gov't official; 10 July 2019, Washington DC.

– did prop up Abe’s support rate.¹⁵⁵ Abe’s foreign policy credentials and his perceived successes provided the premier with much needed political oxygen as the administration faced recurrent domestic scandals and an impasse in the domestic political agenda. Regular polls indicated that the Japanese government’s handling of diplomatic affairs was consistently well-regarded by public opinion.¹⁵⁶ For that very reason Abe’s record-breaking diplomatic tours,¹⁵⁷ televised speeches and multilateral summits have often aimed at polishing his political charm back home.

For instance, the Prime Minister’s Office’s careful management of the domestic messaging surrounding Abe’s consistent, albeit unsuccessful, Russia overtures demonstrates that political substance was not necessary for that diplomatic charm to work its magic.¹⁵⁸ This was also facilitated by active control over information pertaining diplomatic discussions, characterized by a tightening unmatched by past practice (including secretive summit meetings with the North Korean leadership).¹⁵⁹ Abe’s engagement with Russia was, after all, premised on cool-headed calculations of Russia’s shrinking strategic horizons in the near future. According to a high-ranking government official, Moscow will eventually see the merits of responding positively to Japan’s overtures.¹⁶⁰ The PM’s Russia policy has antagonized and alienated traditional MOFA diplomacy towards Russia. Many experts doubt the justifiability and manageability of negotiating in this style at this time with President Putin, who has antagonized much of Europe (when Japan is expanding security partnerships).¹⁶¹

155. ‘41年ぶり首相のイラン訪問・日本の中東外交は新たな局面’ (After 41 Years a Japanese Prime Minister Visits Iran – A New Stage in Japan’s Middle East Diplomacy), *Sankei Shinbun*, 19 June 2019.

156. According to the progressive-leaning *Asahi Shinbun*, Abe’s foreign policy was appreciated by more than 50% respondents throughout 2019. See, for example, ‘世論調査・質問と回答 (6月22, 23日)’ (Public Opinion Polls – Questions and Answers (22-23 June), *Asahi Shinbun*, 23 June 2019.

157. Abe holds the world record for countries visited by a sitting head of government: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 総理大臣の外交訪問一覧 (A Look at the Prime Minister’s Diplomatic Visits), (https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/kaidan/page24_000037.html).

158. Akihiro Iwashita ‘Abe’s Foreign Policy Fiasco on the Northern Territories Issue: Breaking with the Past and the National Movement’, *Eurasia Border Review*, Vol. 10, No. 1, Fall 2019, pp. 111-33; Akihiro Iwashita, ‘安倍首相は元島民の声を聴いたのか’ (Did Abe Listen to the Voices of [the Northern Territories’] Former Residents?), *Masukomi Shimin*, Vol. 577, 2017, pp. 42-47; Akihiro Iwashita, ‘二〇一六年十二月安倍プーチン首脳会談に寄せて’ (Apropos the December 2016 Abe-Putin Summit Meeting), *Gakushikai Kaihō*, Vol. 2, 2017, pp. 23-37;

159. ‘Government’s state secrecy law still vague, rapped 5 years after enactment’, *Mainichi Shinbun*, 6 December 2018; interview with retired high-ranking Japanese diplomatic official from MOFA, 25 January 2019, Tokyo.

160. Interview with former high-ranking Japanese government official from the Prime Minister’s Office, Tokyo, 20 December 2019.

161. We are indebted to the third reviewer for raising these issues.

Similarly to Japan's Russia policy, Abe's gamble in Iran did not seem to bring immediate results, quite the opposite. A new round of US sanctions ahead of his visit seemed to undermine Japan's mission, while Supreme Leader of Iran Ali Hosseini Khamenei told the visiting guest, according to the Iran state media, that he «[did] not see Trump as worthy of any message exchange, [nor did he] have any reply for him, now or in future.»¹⁶² Finally, Iran's reluctance to talk was seemingly demonstrated by unidentified attacks on a Japanese oil tanker, attacks that took place while Abe was in Iran. The course of events suggested that Abe's visit wasn't very prudent since it endangered a Japanese tanker's safety.

The Japanese government demonstrated an independent streak when it refuted US conclusions that Iran was behind the attack, in marked contrast with other US allies. After all, the nature of the attack was rather murky since it was designed to send a message rather than harm sailors or sink the tanker, with the limpet mine that hit the tanker placed relatively high. Moreover, even if the culprits may have hailed from the Revolutionary Guard they may have not been acting in line with the senior Iranian leadership's desires.¹⁶³ On the other hand, Japan would have political interests in downplaying the incident: it would have exacerbated US-Iran tensions and put to test the actual merits of Abe's hastily arranged historic visit to Iran. Only diplomatic archives will reveal the political machinations behind Abe's surprise Tehran visit. Still, there is broad agreement among specialists and diplomats alike that Abe managed to act as a communication channel between the US and Iranian leaderships, constructively carving out a diplomatic space for Japan, while avoiding entanglement in a potential conflict.¹⁶⁴ Importantly, Abe's trustworthiness was recognized in the aftermath of Trump's decision to assassinate by drone Iranian General Qassem Soleimani on 3 January 2020; the Iranian leadership apparently communicated to Prime Minister Abe, among others, that there would not be further retaliation following a «face-saving» missile strike of a deserted US base in Iraq.¹⁶⁵ The clear intent was to have the message passed to the US leadership.

The Abe administration's crisis diplomacy in Iran policy outgrew decades of timidity in the Middle East. Recent archival research has discredited the view of Japan's allegedly independent balancing act during the hot years of the Arab-Israeli conflict, with its response to the 1973 Yom Kippur War as a prime example of such supposedly autonomous path. According

162. 'Iranian leader tells Japan's Abe Trump «not worthy» of a reply to message', *Reuters*, 13 June 2019.

163. Interview with European diplomat, 10 January 2020, Tokyo; interview with Japanese government official, Prime Minister's Office, 10 January 2020, Tokyo.

164. Conversation with European diplomat, 9 January 2020, Tokyo.

165. Interview with Japanese government official, Prime Minister's Office, 10 January 2020, Tokyo.

to the historical canon, in 1973 the Japanese cabinet sided with oil producing countries in the face of a threatened embargo, against US desiderata.¹⁶⁶ Yet, declassified documents showed that the Japanese cabinet's support for Israeli withdrawal from all the territories occupied during the 1967 War and statements in favour of the Arab camp were closely coordinated with the US government, which understood Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei's electoral pressures. The US government, in fact, welcomed Tanaka Kakuei's strategy, which was dovetailed nicely with US initiatives in favour of oil consumers' cooperation.¹⁶⁷ According to German political scientist Kai Schulze, the Japanese government inaugurated an independent and forceful Middle East policy only under the first and second Abe administrations. A set of initiatives that also eyed Chinese interests in the region culminated in the 2014 Japan-led Conference on the Cooperation among East Asian countries for Palestinian Development, now at its third round.¹⁶⁸

The December 2019 Cabinet decision to dispatch two P-3C patrol planes and one destroyer in open seas off Yemen and Oman was symptomatic of Japan's security transformation. To be sure, the two P-3C aircraft were merely moved eastward from the Horn of Africa, where they were previously engaged in anti-piracy operations, in relatively safe waters. But, by doing so, Japan highlighted its determination in defending international shipping lanes throughout the Indo-Pacific, from Eastern Africa, to the Middle East, throughout the China Seas, Japan's most important theatre. After all, about 80% of the oil Japan imported from the Middle East passed through the Strait of Hormuz. And with the dispatch of the P-3C planes and the destroyer to international waters away from Iran, the Japanese government solved the dilemma of providing support to the United States while avoiding a deterioration of relations with Tehran.¹⁶⁹ In short, Tokyo was able to fend off US requests to participate in a military coalition responsible for patrolling Arab Gulf waters, thus steering clear of the area around the Strait of Hormuz, while showing commitment to the preservation of international public good. Arguably, Abe's shuttle diplomacy and close reading of President Trump and the US Congress' instincts informed Japan's mission: the

166. Kai Schulze, 'Rivalry in the Middle East? Japan's CEAPAD initiative and China's rise', *Pacific Review*, Vol. 32 (5), 2019, pp. 809-30; especially pp. 816-18.

167. Erika Miller, *The United States, Britain and Japan in the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1967-1974: the Competing Claims of the Cold War and Oil*, Unpublished PhD Thesis, King's College London, 2019: pp. 173-185; 196-201; and Erika Tominaga, 'Japan's Middle East Policy, 1972-1974: Resources Diplomacy, Pro-American Policy, and New Left', *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, Vol. 28 (4), 2017, pp. 674-701.

168. Kai Schulze, 'Rivalry in the Middle East? Japan's CEAPAD initiative and China's rise', pp. 816-18; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, *Third Conference on Cooperation among East Asian Countries for Palestinian Development (CEAPAD)*, 27 June 2018, (https://www.mofa.go.jp/me_a/me1/palestine/page3e_000879.html).

169. '商船警護・日本のジレンマ' (Protection of Commercial Ships – Japan's Dilemma), *Asahi Shimbun*, 8 August 2019.

probability of entrapment were low, although a potential emergency may still put its 260 military officials in the line of fire.

Swift domestic approval of the mission testified to the soundness of the Abe administration's security handling. The Japanese government entirely bypassed the legislative branch to sanction the dispatch of military assets overseas. It issued a Cabinet decision by invoking an obscure Law on the Establishment of the Ministry of Defense that allowed for JSDF's «investigation and research» activities.¹⁷⁰ This is a lesser known security law, drafted during the early post-war, that has allowed the Minister of Defense to deploy Japanese military assets for intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) missions within Japan's immediate proximity. Nonetheless, prior to 2019 it was *never* used to dispatch forces overseas. Interestingly, Japanese decision-makers mulled over the opportunity of using this law for sending military aid and perform refuelling operations in the Indian Ocean following the 2001 UN-mandated International Security Assistance Force intervention into Afghanistan, but to no avail given intra-LDP opposition.¹⁷¹ Opposition forced the Koizumi government to go through the Diet and secure an *ad hoc* special law with a sunset clause instead, and this process has been the norm for post-Cold War Japan's international security engagements.¹⁷² The prompt 2019 decision was also a far cry from Japan's small steps against piracy in the Gulf of Aden ten years earlier, which caused Washington's frustration. In 2009, according to a former director at the US Department of State Japan Desk, the Japanese government was relatively late in deploying two destroyers and two P-3C aircraft for surveillance activities during another UN Security Council (UNSC)-mandated mission. Moreover, the military activities under the Self-Defense Force Law were grossly curtailed and awaited the Diet's passage of an Anti-Piracy Law to augment its operational efficiency.¹⁷³ In contrast, in 2019 the government swiftly issued a Cabinet Decision without waiting for a (highly unlikely) UNSC mandate and with no need for an *ad hoc* law. The dispatch may be renovated on an annual basis through other Cabinet Decisions, essentially allowing the prime minister to exercise his leadership.

Finally, the manner and timing of the decision was also exemplary of the Prime Minister's Office's careful handling of domestic public opinion. The Cabinet decision neutralized the opposition party's uproar by

170. 'Japan's Cabinet adopts plan to send SDF to Mideast amid Iran tensions', *Japan Times*, 27 December 2019.

171. Shigeru Handa. '自衛隊は「調査研究」のために中東へ行く? 日本政府の奇妙な論理' (The Self-Defense Forces' «Investigation and Research» Activities as Rationale for Middle East Dispatch? The Japanese Government's Bizarre Logic, *Gendai Media*, 30 October 2019.

172. Sheila A. Smith, *Japan Rearmed: The Politics of Military Power*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019.

173. Lecture notes, Johns Hopkins SAIS, Washington DC, Autumn 2009; Victor Teo, *Japan's Arduous Rejuvenation as a Global Power*, London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019, pp. 182-83.

providing less time in the Diet to grill Prime Minister Abe and his Cabinet.¹⁷⁴ The decision, moreover, was further legitimized by obtaining an acknowledgement of Japan's ISR missions in international waters by Iran President Rouhani during his diplomatic visit to Tokyo on 20 December.¹⁷⁵ Another development of note was the relative lack of public demonstrations worthy of note against the decision, which was likely made to coincide with the end-of-year season on purpose.¹⁷⁶ In short, the Rouhani visit and strategic calendarization of the cabinet decision defused opposition and public questioning about the rationale and interests at stake behind the nebulous JMSDF dispatch.

To be sure, the new security bills and Japan's decision to exercise the right of Collective Self-Defense did not apply to the dispatch of the mission off Yemen and Oman. Foreign security experts, for example, were rather baffled by the fact that JMSDF was poised on an «independent» mission, for the purpose of «research» and also out of more dangerous areas (Strait of Hormuz) with no clear «rules of engagement».¹⁷⁷ More importantly, this is another example where the JSDF overseas dispatch is covered up by bureaucratic language and as a result, Japan as a polity is fundamentally evading more direct discussions about the meaning of an «independent» mission (vis-à-vis the US ally and its partners), purpose and goals of such missions, acceptability of risk-taking, and what the criteria of effectiveness/success of such missions are.¹⁷⁸ Nevertheless, the mission *de facto* constituted a significant evolution in that direction because it theoretically placed Japanese military assets in proximity of US and European maritime security initiatives in the Arab Gulf. Thanks to the afore-mentioned constitutional reinterpretation and peace and security legislation, the SDF could also engage in individual and collective self-defense, should the situation require it. The Japanese government's diplomacy and security activism in 2019, and its use of security decisions for diplomatic gains and vice-versa, were all noteworthy developments.

174. 'EDITORIAL: Rigorous debate needed in Budget Committees of both houses', *Asahi Shimbun*, 12 October 2019; 'In Japan's Diet, is there such a thing as too much time for questions?', *Japan Times*, 26 February 2018.

175. '海自、中東派遣決定' (Decision to dispatch Maritime Self-Defense Forces to Middle East), *Mainichi Shimbun*, 28 December 2019; 'Iran welcomes Japan opting out of US-led naval mission in Gulf', *Al Jazeera*, 21 December 2019.

176. The strategic calendarization of controversial bills or policy initiatives has defined the post-2012 Abe governments: Paul Midford, 'Foreign Policy as an Election Issue' in Robert Pekkanen, Steven R. Reed & Ethan Scheiner (eds.), *Japan Decides*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp. 179-94.

177. The authors are indebted to the third reviewer for comments and citations.

178. The authors are indebted to the third referee for very perceptive feedback.

4. Conclusions

In sum, Abe further cemented his power in 2019 despite a series of political scandals. While it remains to be seen what his political legacy will be and how sustainable the institutional and policy changes implemented since 2012 are, the year under review showed Abe's position in power remained largely unchallenged. As in previous years, this was primarily the result of a fragmented opposition, which locked its attention on Abe's scandals thus failing to challenge the LDP-led government's policies. The cascade of new political scandals also effectively redirected the media's attention away from critical discussion of the government's policies. In addition, Abe succeeded in maintaining the LDP's unity behind his government and, through a strengthened Kantei, controlled the bureaucracy. Yet, as Abenomics has lost steam the public may lose its patience with Abe. And while restoration of political stability remains a key achievement of Abe's reign, the past has shown that after long-term governments such as Nakasone's in the 1980s and Koizumi's in the 2000s, periods of political instability, with a high turnover of prime ministers, are likely to follow. In this perspective, Abe's inability to groom his successors and, arguably, to avoid confronting Japan's long-term structural trends were potentially big failures.¹⁷⁹ While Japan has entered the new Reiwa era, the year 2019 showed that its politics and economic policy remain in the past, with scandals and conventional fiscal policies continuing to be the norm.

As evidenced by the healthy state of Japan-US relations in 2019, the Japanese government was mostly satisfied with the Trump administration's foreign and security policy recalibration, and essentially welcomed America's more confrontational China policy. To be sure, by late 2019 Japanese officials started worrying about the US President's more disruptive and «unhinged» traits,¹⁸⁰ highlighted by military escalation in Iran and exorbitant requests to cover US forward military deployment, in Japan and elsewhere in the region. No doubt, the Japanese government's overtures did not shield it from the US President's mercenary request of a four-fold increase of Japan's already generous host nation support budget, which the Trump administration possibly strengthened also by holding US extended deterrence as ransom.¹⁸¹ Yet, on balance, US government officials confirmed that the level of engage-

179. See for instance: Brad Glosserman, *Peak Japan*, Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2019.

180. Conversation with former US government official, Washington DC.

181. '米軍駐留経費、日本に4倍増の負担額を要求か・7月来日のボルトン氏' (During his July Visit to Japan, Did Mr. Bolton Ask for a Four-Time Increase to Japan's Budget Devoted to US Military Forward Deployment Costs?), *Yomiuri Shinbun*, 16 November 2019; Akita Hiroyuki, '米政権が「核の傘」に課金か・米軍費の分担どこまで' (Is the US Government Charging for its 'Nuclear Umbrella'? What's the Limit to Covering US Military Costs?), *Nihon Keizai Shinbun*, 30 January 2020.

ment between Abe and Trump was «absolutely unprecedented»,¹⁸² and the White House actively sought Japanese mediation with foreign leaders, such as Hassan Rouhani and Vladimir Putin. In fact, a major Japanese academic and government advisor believed that the Japanese Prime Minister's relatively smooth relationship with his American counterpart was a source of envy among foreign leaders.¹⁸³ In light of the dismal state of relations between the US and many of its Western NATO allies, with Trump's mercenary and trade bully tactics in full display, this was not a far-fetched analysis.

The year under review demystified accounts of a Japan that reacted to US initiatives, or hedged the Trump risks by opening to China. As evidenced by this essay, there was still little substance to Sino-Japanese rapprochement, aside from diplomatic property and face-saving overtures that assuaged Chinese public opinion. Chinese pressure in the East China Sea, and the military build-up there continued unabated. Meanwhile, Japan's diplomatic and security agenda kept prioritizing China. The year under review pointed at new developments in Japan's management of international affairs under Abe: coercive economic statecraft aimed at South Korea, a broadening of Japan's strategic horizons under FOIP, the acquisition of offensive capabilities and a careful balancing act in the Iran crisis. Against a backdrop of a relatively stable domestic environment and, concomitantly, a fluid and unstable international order, Reiwa Japan ventured into new uncharted waters. As shown, this move deserves wide attention, because it hints at an overhaul of past practice.

182. Michael Crowley, '«Absolutely Unprecedented»: Why Japan's Leader Tries So Hard to Court Trump', *POLITICO*, 24 May 2019.

183. Conversation with Japanese academic, 29 May 2019, Tokyo.

