Multilateral means for bilateral ends: 
Japan, regionalism, and 
China–Japan–US trilateral dynamism

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Abstract  The conventional understanding of Japan’s approach to East Asian regionalism is that of a primacy struggle with China, using both hard and soft balancing. However, Japan’s strategic priority remains extending and managing the alliance with the US in the post-Cold War era. The increasing trilateral dynamics among China, Japan and the US have largely influenced Japan’s perception of its position in the alliance, which frames the basic thinking of Japan’s attitudes toward regionalism. Japan’s policy and diplomacy toward regionalism have been subordinate to alliance management rather than to a strategic policy shift. Meanwhile, Japan’s perception of its regional influence vis-à-vis China also affects Japan’s calculation in regionalism.

Keywords  Regionalism; alliance; Japan; China; the United States; trilateral relations.

Introduction

Japan has a long history of being interested in Asian regionalism. The imperial expansion of the East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere (EACS) with Japan at its core was introduced coercively in the early 1940s. Between the 1960s and 1980s, Japan floated several regional economic cooperation proposals. The former evaporated with the defeat of Japan in the Second World War (Pyle 2007: 196, 206–207); the latter did not yield substantial achievements due to the confrontational constraints of the Cold War (Takahara 2003: 65–66). With the end of the Cold War, a more favorable environment for the development of regionalism emerged in East Asia. Most strikingly, a
new wave of regionalism, which includes both Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia for the first time, began to gain momentum in the aftermath of the East Asian economic crisis of 1997–1998. As the only advanced economy and traditional advocate of regionalism in Asia, Japan should have taken this opportunity to cultivate its diplomacy toward Asia. The following decade, however, witnessed Japan’s fluctuating policies and attitudes toward regionalism. Japan showed its seriousness in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Yet, it ‘approved only stuttering steps forward’ in the decade that followed (Rozman 2007: 251).

The conventional explanation of Japan’s approach to regionalism is that Japan is balancing against a rising China in Asia (Soeya 2005a: 223; Terada 2006: 5–12; Mochizuki 2007: 756–757; Rozman 2007: 258; Hughes 2009: 846–848; Zhang 2002: 46; Yu 2008: 67; Sohn 2010: 497–519). For some advocates of this position, Japan is a ‘passive follower’ (Terada 2006), while for others it is engaged in a proactive ‘anti-China strategy’ (Soeya 2007: 32) to ‘reshape Asia’ by augmenting its soft power in the region (Sohn 2010: 498). Other contributions to the debate have even labeled Japan’s regional efforts as a strategic shift to be a more regional-oriented diplomacy (Inoguchi 2002: 7; Sohn 2010: 517).

It is undeniable that China matters greatly in Japan’s calculations in regionalism. But the problem of existing explanations is that they largely ignore the link between major power relations – in particular, trilateral ones between China, Japan, and the US – and Japan’s thinking toward regionalism in the last decade. More specifically, the Sino–Japanese competition in East Asia is slightly over-emphasized, while the US factor is ignored.

This paper argues that the trilateral dynamics of Chinese, Japanese and US foreign policies have largely influenced Japan’s attitudes toward regionalism and that alliance management with the US is the primary and fundamental variable in the process for Japan. Japan’s approach toward East Asian regionalism is largely subordinate to, and even serves as a tool for, the management of alliance relations with the US. At the same time, this paper also argues that Japan’s perception toward its regional influence vis-à-vis China’s regional presence has its fair share despite as a secondary variable.

In developing the arguments, this paper makes three contributions to the literature. First, by challenging the conventional wisdom, the paper aims to provide an alternative explanation of the major determinant of Japan’s policy of regionalism and to fill the academic gap between regionalism and major powers dynamics in Asia. The development of East Asian regionalism tremendously depends on the policies of two East Asian giants: Japan and China. Yet, the regional policies of these two countries are fully exposed to the trilateral dynamics of China, Japan and the US. Interestingly, as China’s rapid rise fundamentally transformed the balance among these three states over the past decade, the dynamics of trilateralism have greatly increased parallel to East Asia regionalism since 1997. Although ample research is available on each topic, the links between them remain to be explored.
Second, the empirical analysis will focus on the period of 1997–2009, when Japan’s policy and diplomacy toward regionalism were closely linked with trilateral dynamics. Although the ‘triangular analysis of strategic backdrop’ has been noted in the literature on regionalism (Rozman 2007: 251), comprehensive and detailed empirical studies have yet to emerge (Takahara 2003; Zhang and Montaperto 1999). The few efforts in this regard are mostly focused on a short period around the late 1990s. By way of contrast, this paper will examine the critical period of 1997–2009. In the process, it will provide a more comprehensive picture of Japan’s evolving strategy toward regionalism.

Third, by linking the analysis of trilateral relations and East Asian regionalism, this paper will also reveal elements of Japan’s grand strategy. In particular, it will help to answer the long-standing strategic questions of Japanese statecraft: ‘closer to Asia or to the West’ (Samuels 2007: 2); or a middle path of ‘synergy between the US–Japan alliance and Asian diplomacy’ (Fukuda 2007).

Contextualizing regionalism and trilateralism in Asia

Regionalism remains a vaguely defined term despite its wide use in the literature of international relations. Many intellectual efforts have sought to distinguish regionalism and regionalization. Regionalization, which is often used interchangeably with regional integration, is typically defined as a process of interdependence or interconnectedness in certain geographic regions, especially in the economic sphere (Mansfield and Milner 1999: 598; Griffiths, O’Callaghan and Roach 2002: 280; Evans 2005: 196; Shaun 2007: 29). Meanwhile, regionalism is more often defined in terms of building regional institutions or even regional identities (Griffiths, O’Callaghan and Roach 2002: 280; Evans 2005: 196; Shaun 2007: 29). Taga defines regionalism in terms of ideology, which brings conscious policy and strategy into a certain region (Taga 2005: 87). Others try to blur the distinction between these terms by defining regionalism in terms of regionalization, regional awareness and identity, regional interstate co-operation, state-promoted regional integration, and regional cohesion (Hurrell 1995: 37–73).

This paper does not focus on clarifying the difference between regionalism and regionalization. Given the fact that regional economic integration can occur without regional institution building, this paper limits the discussion of regionalism to conscious initiatives and commitments of enhancing regional institutionalization and collective awareness. These initiatives and commitments are primarily driven by states, although other important players and forces at a regional scale are involved. With this in mind, this paper defines Japan’s policies toward East Asian regionalism as the initiatives and commitments by the Japanese government toward regional institution and cohesion building. From this definition of regionalism, this paper uses three
categories of political, economic and ideological integration to track Japan’s evolving approach toward East Asian regionalism.

The key trilateral relations of Asia are composed of US–Japan relations, US–China relations, and Japan–China relations, all of which have influenced the ebbs and flows of Japan’s policies toward regionalism. Among the three sets of relationships, the US–Japan relationship is critical. During the Cold War, the ‘Yoshida Doctrine’ defined the US–Japan alliance as the core of Japan’s post war diplomacy, which had secured Japan’s relatively smooth and rapid economic recovery, and its political return to the international community and regional reconciliation (Samuels 2003: 204–211; Pemple 2006; Schaller 1982: 392–414; Destler et al. 1976: 10–12; Packard 2010: 92–103). For Japanese diplomacy during the Cold War, the key question was how to manage the alliance with the US. Like other alliance management systems, the US–Japan alliance was not free from the ‘alliance dilemma’, namely the fear of entrapment and the fear of abandonment (Snyder 1984: 461–495; Snyder 1997: 180–186). For instance, the Sino–US rapprochement in the early 1970s witnessed the fear of abandonment by the US in the aftermath of ‘the Nixon Shock’, and Japan’s attitude toward the Vietnam War reflected its fear of entrapment in US wars. At the time, Japan was cautiously balancing the two fears in order to maintain the continuation and effectiveness of the alliance in the context of the Cold War. Yet, Japan worried more about the nightmare of entrapment than of abandonment during the Cold War because the common enemy of the Soviet Union made abandonment by the US relatively unlikely. The management of the alliance weighed more on how to decrease the fear of entrapment in US wars or disputes in which Japan had little interest.

The collapse of the Cold War forced Japan to address new strategic and security calculations. One leading Japan expert summarized the new possible threats to Japan as follows: (1) a rising China, (2) a miscreant regime in North Korea, (3) the possibility of abandonment by the United States, and (4) the relative decline of the Japanese economy (Samuels 2007: 4). In this context, Japan had several strategic options to address the new challenges. The first possible option to be a ‘normal country’ would be to enhance Japan’s autonomy and accommodate the above challenges, but, in doing so, might elevate an internal burden and raise suspicions of neighboring countries. To counter these risks, a second option for Japan would have been to fully embrace regionalism, but Tokyo did not have full confidence in the effectiveness of its Asian relations. The third option was an ideal pattern of evenly balancing between the US and Asia but it required careful diplomatic skills to gain the trust from both sides simultaneously. The choice of the first or the second option would explicitly mean Japan’s departure from its alliance with the US. The third option risked inviting US suspicions toward Japan’s half-heartedness and possibly abandonment by the US without the guarantee of being accepted by its neighbors in Asia. After some illusions and experiments in the early 1990s (Funabashi 1997),
Japan’s strategists decided to maintain its Cold War strategy with the belief of the lowest cost and risk to deal with the post-Cold War challenges. How to manage the US–Japan alliance remains the core issue for Japan’s diplomacy even after the Cold War and the only difference is how to manage the fear of abandonment, which is also closely connected with its perception of US–China relations. Japan’s policy and diplomacy toward East Asian regionalism is not free from this basic mentality. Thus, this paper uses ‘the fear of abandonment by the US’ and ‘the fear of US–China nearing at the expense of Japan’ as the benchmarks in measuring Japan’s perspectives toward US–Japan and US–China relations correspondingly. At the same time, Japan’s confidence in its regional presence vis-à-vis China is another important benchmark, although it is considered of secondarily relevance (see Figure 1).

**Evading abandonment through showing relevance, 1997–2000**

During the first three years of the Clinton administration, the US–Japan security agenda had been allowed to ‘drift’ (Deming 2004: 62; Funabashi 1997). Although the publication of the Nye–Vogel Initiative of 1995 and the signing of the Japan–US Joint Declaration on Security: Alliance for the 21st Century formally finished the ‘drift’ of the US–Japan alliance, bilateral relations remained fragile. The US continued to criticize Japan for its incompetence to reform and recover itself from the aftershocks of the collapse of the bubble economy. As Morton I. Abramowitz described it: ‘The US pressures and incessant lecturing, particularly from the administration, have been almost an integral part of the Japan–US relationship’ (Abramowitz 2002: 41). Meanwhile, the unprecedented rapprochement between Beijing and Washington made Japan worry about exclusion. Indeed, China and the United States announced the establishment of a ‘constructive strategic partnership’ when President Jiang Zemin paid a state visit to the United States in October 1997. In his state visit to China in June 1998, President Clinton praised China’s contributions to easing the Asian economic crisis, and made the famous ‘Three nos’ (the US would not support Taiwan’s independence, its admission to the United Nations, or the creation of two Chinas) commitment on the Taiwan issue (Mann 2000: 36).

In Japan, it became a widely shared view that the Clinton administration paid little attention to Japan and too much to China (Abramowitz 2002: 47). Japan felt ‘deeply uneasy about the ‘constructive strategic partnership’ between the United States and China’ (Funabashi 1998: 32). The sense of marginalization further deepened when Clinton failed to stop over in Japan either before or after a nine-day tour in China in 1998 (interview on 15 July 2012). Coincidentally, the US–China re-engagement almost overlapped the proceedings of the Asian economic crisis. President Clinton even directly criticized Japan’s initial inactiveness in dealing with the East Asian economic crisis during his high-profile state visit to China (Curtis 2004: 191). China was described as ‘a regional stabilizer’ and Japan as ‘a passive bystander’ in the early period of the crisis (Funabashi 1998: 32). Akihiko Tanaka wrote that: ‘The age of “Japan bashing” had, it was felt, been replaced first by that of “Japan passing”, and now by “Japan nothing”’ (Tanaka 2007: 63). Japan’s fear of abandonment by the US reached its peak in this period and it was highly alert to the rapid development of US–China relations, which was considered to be possibly at the expense of Japan (interview on 15 July 2012). For the first time, Japan expressed ‘serious doubts [about] the implications of US–China policy for US relations with Japan’ (Curtis 2004: 191).

For the Japanese strategists, the top priority was to discourage the US from abandoning Japan. They thought that Japan should raise its relevance to the US rather than simply ‘get its policies in line with the United States’ (Curtis 2004: 191). The East Asian economic crisis and the trajectory of East Asian regionalism provided Japan with a golden opportunity to break the diplomatic predicament and to attract the attention of Washington.
First, Japan tried to regain its reputation of economic relevance and regional leadership through a proactive approach, involving substantial commitments toward regionalism. At the very beginning of the Asian economic crisis, the Japanese Ministry of Finance (MOF) suggested the establishment of an Asian Monetary Fund (AMF). However, the proposal was aborted because of opposition from the US and China (Sakakibara 2000: 182–190). In the following year, Japan failed to contribute substantially to easing the crisis. Soon after taking office as premier in July 1998, Keizo Obuchi found the value of regionalism for the purpose of enhancing relations with Washington. Economically, at the second informal ASEAN+3 Summit in Hanoi in December 1998, Japan surprised the world with the announcement of the New Miyazawa Initiative (to differentiate the plan from the one concerning the financial bailout of Mexico in the 1980s that also bore his name), which became the basis of the Chiang Mai Initiative in May 2000. Japan generously committed to the provision of $30 billion–$15 billion in short-term financial support and an additional $15 billion in medium-to long-term financing (Lincoln 2004: 217). Obuchi showed Japan’s ability to play an important role in the region even under conditions of economic distress (Tanaka 2007: 63). In 2000, premier Mori firstly announced a US$15 billion aid package to bridge the digital divide in Asia. Politically, at the 1999 ASEAN+3 Summit, Obuchi succeeded to launch the China–Japan–Korea Summit for the first time. Ideologically, Japan promoted the regional discussion of ‘human security’, which was thought to be Japan’s possible ideological linchpin in its twenty-first century diplomacy. Tokyo’s signal was very clear that in the trilateral relations ‘Japan is a player, not a spectator’ (Abramowitz 2002: 47).

Second, Japan purposely put some ‘anti-America’ tints in its policy toward regionalism in this period, in the hopes to raise concerns in the US about a Japan that was starting to lean more towards Asia. Economically, Japan’s New Miyazawa Initiative was done mostly ‘unilaterally what it had intended to the AMF to do’ (Lincoln 2004: 217) rather than the result of consultation with the US. Japan’s clear refusal against the US proposal to make the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) be a more aggressive liberalization mechanism at the 1998 Kuala Lumpur Summit showed Japan’s determination to stand with its Asian neighbors and side with ‘Asian consensus approach’ (Togo 2007: 97; Rapkin 2001: 381–394). Politically, Japan’s activism to institutionalize a triad mechanism with China and South Korea raised expectations of a more multilateral-oriented Japanese policy. Intellectually, Japan’s human security concept was explicitly different from the concept of humanitarian intervention expressed by the NATO’s New Security Concept in 1999. The US faced a soft challenge from Japan, which was distancing itself from the US. This also partly led to the reassessment of Japan’s value to the US in the early 2000s.
Third, Japan’s proactive ‘anti-America’ policy and diplomacy toward regionalism were cautiously designed and deliberately implemented to not really anger the US. The unilateral New Miyazawa Initiative was of considerably smaller scale compared to the AMF idea. That the New Miyazawa Initiative was firstly floated at a G7 finance ministers’ meeting in Washington rather than in any East Asian related meeting also demonstrated Japan’s desire to show its relevance to the US. Similarly, Premier Mori firstly announced the US$15 aid package for Asia on the occasion of the Okinawa G8 summit.

On the other hand, Sino–Japan relations experienced downward developments. The redefinition of the Japan–US alliance, in particular the so-called ‘Shyuhden Yuji’ (emergency in the surrounding area), made China suspicious of Japan’s intentions. President Jiang Zemin’s visit to Japan in 1998 was not successful due to obvious differences on historical issues. According to a questionnaire conducted by the Yomiuri Shimbun in 1999, only 17% of Chinese interviewees answered ‘satisfactory’ on the state of Sino–Japan relations (in 1998, the ratio was 51%) and only 33% answered ‘satisfactory’ on the state of Sino–Japan relations (in 1998, the ratio was 55%). Fifty per cent of Chinese respondents expressed dislike toward Japan and 46% Japanese interviewees expressed dislike toward China (Jin 2008: 211). Using regionalism to further engage China emerged as a new policy choice for Japan (interview on 2 July 2006), as Japan was a superpower in economic presence in East Asia and China was still a relatively isolated country struggling for entering the WTO. In 2000, Japan’s GDP was almost four times of that of China (World Bank) and Japan had legitimate reasons to be confident in its absolute economic presence in Asia.

This period (1997–2000) witnessed Japan’s increasing interest in, fresh ideas and strong commitments toward East Asian regionalism. Evading abandonment by the US was the primary rationale behind its calculation while it also began to think of engaging China via regionalism. Even though Japan’s enthusiasm toward regionalism was tactically driven, it did provide ‘a golden path for reentering Asia through regionalism and even regaining national identity’ (Togo 2007: 97). Unfortunately, successive Japanese administrations missed the opportunity to make this tactical approach a strategic shift and even squandered Asian diplomatic assets in the following years.

The East Asian community boom and alliance enhancement 2001–2006

Between 2001 and 2006 (a period coinciding with the charismatic Junichiro Koizumi’s premiership), the trilateral relations among China, Japan and the United States were characterized by three dynamics: increasingly intimate Japan–US relations; stable Sino–US relations; and increasingly deteriorating Sino–Japan relations.
When Junichiro Koizumi took office as prime minister in 2001, the aftershocks of the Clinton administration still impacted the Japanese attitude toward the future of US–Japan relations. At the same time, Japan’s economic stagnation in contrast to China’s rapid rise, unsettled Japan’s national identity as an economic giant. A national identity of confusion and an uncertain feeling toward the future of the alliance with the US engendered a more resentful nationalism in Japan. The Japanese public began to be ‘much more supportive of tough, hawkish, assertive, and occasionally confrontational posture in the conduct of foreign policy’ (Kawashima 2003: 3). As a prime minister without conventional factional support in the LDP, Koizumi showed his decisiveness to minimize its external strategic calculation by firmly adopting an explicit diplomatic tendency of ‘one track mind diplomacy of attaching Japan–US relations with special importance’ (Iokibe 2007: 210). Locking in the US–Japan alliance remained a top priority for Tokyo in order to focus on domestic reform and containing nationalism by siding with the US without reservation.

Sino–US relations during this period were largely stable and improved. In early 2001, President Bush described China as a ‘strategic rival’ and the collision of military planes around Hainan Island strained bilateral relations. However, the US rapidly improved its relations with China after the September 11 terrorist attacks. In September 2005, then Deputy Secretary of State Robert B. Zoellick called on China to act as ‘a responsible stakeholder’ in global affairs, a position which gradually became a consensus in the Bush administration (Zoellick 2005; Hills and Blair 2007: 9). In 2006, the Strategic Economic Dialogue was initiated between China and the United States.

Japan’s policy and diplomacy toward East Asian regionalism in this period could be further divided into two sub-periods. The characteristic of the first sub-period (2001–2004) involved more rhetoric than concrete commitments, while the second sub-period (2005–2006) showed ever decreasing both in rhetoric and substance. Koizumi’s diplomacy in Asia was not dissimilar to his domestic politics, which were dubbed as ‘theater politics’ by some scholars (Otake 2003). Japan’s most striking contribution to regionalism – the proposal for an East Asian Community – was introduced by Koizumi in early 2002 in Singapore. (Koizumi 2002: 11–13) The publicity effects contributed to the domestic boom of the discussion of East Asian Community (Yoshino 2006: 5). One symbol of this boom was the establishment of the Council on East Asian Community (CEAC) in May 2004. The CEAC consisted of 11 Japanese think tanks with the aim of providing intellectual support for Japan’s East Asian regional strategy. The former premier Yasuhiro Nakasone served as the president and many influential figures in political, economic and academic circles were members (the Council on East Asian Community 2004). In addition, numerous publications on East Asian regionalism were issued and countless seminars on
this topic were held. However, Japan failed to translate its high-profile slogans into concrete commitments.

The basic logic was to enhance the alliance with the United States by using regionalism as a policy tool. The fear of abandonment by the United States had increased ever since and the Koizumi government basically viewed East Asia regionalism as a useful tool to cooperate with the US global strategy for increasing Japan’s relevance and continue to attract US attention. Meanwhile, Japan’s confidence toward its influence in East Asia vis-à-vis China led to different attitudes toward regionalism in the two sub-periods.

Japan’s reactions toward US coldness during the Clinton administration had drawn attention from Washington, as reflected in the Armitage–Nye Report (INSS Special Report 2000). However, American reassessment of Japan’s importance was just a positive start rather than guaranteed policy shift. The transformation of American troops in Japan made Japanese decision-makers worry about the large-scale military withdrawal from Japan (Sunohara 2007). Former vice defense minister Moriya expressed his deep concern of US inward-oriented shifting after the September 11 (Moriya 2010: 22). Since the end of the twentieth century, America has begun to consider making major adjustments to its global military presence in response to the aforementioned challenges and changes. In September 2001, the Quadrennial Defense Review Report stressed the shift of the basis of defense planning from a ‘threat-based’ model to a ‘capabilities-based’ model for the future (Department of Defense 2001: iv). The goals of US military transformation were overseas military presence reduction including in Japan. Facing with uncertainties on the Korean Peninsula and a rising China, American military transformation had intensified Tokyo’s fear of abandonment (Takeda and Muto 2012: 35). Tokyo knew that without enough incentives, the US interest in Japan would gradually wane and the US–Japan alliance would be irrelevant. Put simply, Japan’s fear of abandonment remained strong in the minds of Japanese leaders. Two professors of Japan’s Nation Defense Academy admit clearly Japan chose to be firmly sided with the United States ‘to lessen the risk of abandonment by ignoring the risk of entrapment’ (Takeda and Muto 2012: 36) during 2001–2006. The US anti-terrorism war provided Japan a critical opportunity to show its relevance and loyalty to the alliance directly. Bilaterally, Japan made substantial and unprecedented commitments both in Afghanistan and Iraq. Regionally, policy and diplomacy toward regionalism were responsively mobilized as a tool to realize the alliance strengthening.

Koizumi swiftly shifted Japan’s previous ‘anti-America’ colored approach toward regionalism to the direction of more accommodation and coordination with US global strategy. Meanwhile, Japan deliberately practiced a balancing act between maintaining independence for diplomacy while not inviting severe American suspicions of its overtures toward regionalism.
Politically, Japan played a proactive role in East Asia in organizing a united front of anti-terrorism through its diplomacy toward regionalism. After the 9/11 attacks, Koizumi asked his Chinese and Korean counterparts to stand with the US against terrorism during his lightning visits to the two neighbors in October 2001. On the occasion of the ASEAN+3 Summit in 2001, Japan actively tried to include an anti-terrorism item in the final chairman statement although ASEAN refused Japan’s proposal with the excuse of having the same item in the ASEAN Summit chairman statement (*Nihon Keizai Shimbun* 2001). The ASEAN–Japan Special Summit in December 2003 proved to be a timely occasion for Koizumi to explain his decision of dispatching the Self Defense Force (SDF) to Iraq especially for obtaining understanding of the biggest Muslim country, Indonesia who co-chaired the Summit with Japan (Japan and Indonesia 2003). In November 2004, Japan succeeded in issuing a joint statement of anti-terrorism with ASEAN at the Vientiane Summit (Iijima 2007). At the same time, Koizumi’s high-profile proposal for an East Asia Community (Koizumi 2002: 5) did not include the US provided the US with incentive to keep thinking about Japan’s possible intentions and options which could lead to a consistent US attention to Japan. In the composition of the membership of the East Asia Summit (EAS) in 2005, Japan had kept ambiguity on the American participation, which contrasted with its strong support of Australia and New Zealand’s joining (Samuels 2007: 166). In the same vein, Koizumi’s unilateral stance on Japan’s North Korea diplomacy also sent signal to the United States that ‘Japan should not be taken for granted’ (Hughes and Krauss 2007). Meanwhile, Japan refrained from making substantial commitments toward regionalism for mitigating US over-concern and misperception of Tokyo including its hesitation in the accession into the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (Taniguchi 2004).

Economically, Japan refused to reform its highly protected agriculture sector. Japan did not sign a comprehensive economic agreement with ASEAN until 2008 without any substantial concession on its agriculture sector, which contrasted strongly with the China–ASEAN pact six years ago with substantial Chinese compromises of the Early Harvest program. Japan did not substantively upgrade its commitments toward the Chiang Mai Initiative (Hamilton-Hart 2007). Thus China had been positively considered by ASEAN countries as a power with ‘a clearer vision’ of its relations with Asia (Yeo 2006) than Japan. The US had reasons not over-concern that Japan might ‘go regional’ (Inoguchi 2002: 7).

Ideologically, Japan practically abandoned its one-time high-profile human security diplomacy for the intellectual foundation of the regionalism. Japan began to shift its focus on regionalism to a more ‘value-based community’ (Sohn 2010: 498) in which universal values were highlighted and more in line with the standard US rhetoric. Japan tried hardest and finally successfully inserted the item of ‘common vision and values’ in the Tokyo Declaration of ASEAN–Japan Special Summit, including respect for the
rule of law and justice, pursuit of openness, promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms of all people (Sudo, 2005). This was the first time that ASEAN inserted these words into its documents with an outside power (Zhang 2009: 186).

Despite less substantive commitments toward regionalism, Japan remained highly interested in regionalism in the first sub-period because Japan was still confident that it had more influence in Asia than that of China. Many Japanese elites still thought of engaging China through regionalism (Takahara 2003; The Council on East Asian Community 2004). On the contrary, China’s ever growing presence in East Asia and aggressive Asian diplomacy (Kurlantzick 2007; Economy 2005) made Japan feel less confident about engaging China through regionalism in the second sub-period (interview on 15 June 2012). In 2005, Japan’s GDP global share became 10.2% and that of China jumped to 5.0%. However, the figures were 14.9% for Japan and 3.8% for China respectively in 2000 (Arai 2007: 87). According to Fumio Yoshino, ‘East Asian community building is not beneficial to Japan at all but even harmful to Japan.’ (Yoshino 2006: 218). Furthermore, the deteriorating Sino–Japan relations discouraged the Japanese enthusiasts’ dreams of regionalism. The Koizmu administration’s ‘near-total neglect of Sino–Japanese relations’ (Hughes 2009: 842) dramatically soured Sino–Japan relations. The ‘common strategic objectives’ of the Japan–US alliance were formulated in a Joint Statement of the US–Japan Security Consultative Committee in February 2005, which clearly ‘encourage[d] the peaceful resolution of issues concerning the Taiwan Strait through dialogue and ‘encourage China to improve transparency of its military affairs’ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2005). In the past, Japan’s bilateral statements with the US had never referred to Taiwan and China directly. This was the first time that Japan joined the United States in voicing public concern over Taiwan. It represented a departure from the most recent previous military cooperation statement between the United States and Japan in 1997, which simply called for the two countries to work together in the ‘area surrounding Japan’ (The New York Times 2005). Beijing saw the joint statement as an ‘unprecedented instance’ of outside meddling in the issue of Taiwan. The National People’s Congress of China responded by passing the Anti-Secession Law, which aimed to prevent Taiwan from seeking independence. Together with historic problems, Sino–Japan relations dropped to their lowest point in 2005 after the normalization of their diplomatic ties in 1972. But a relatively amicable – or at least not confrontational – Sino–Japan relationship had been widely regarded as the linchpin of many prospective and meaningful regional projects (Kokubun 2007).

The decline of regionalism 2006–2009

During this period, Japan’s relations with the United States experienced a ‘quiet ongoing crisis’ (Calder 2009: 1). Japan’s capricious attitude toward
the refueling mission discounted its commitment to the US anti-terrorism war (The New York Times 2007, 2008). This was partly because of the political deadlock in Japan, but also stemmed from Japan’s decreasing interest and necessity in serving the American global strategy. Japan and the United States were also divergent on the budget of the Host Nation Support (HNS). The relocation of American bases in Okinawa failed to yield substantial progress. The US–Japan Security Consultative Committee had not held meetings for almost three years (the last taking place in 2007). If not a new drift period, Japan–US relations was past its heyday under the Koizumi administration.

On the contrary, Sino–US relations continued on as mostly stable, this helped by the institutionalization of bilateral ties. In December 2006, the first China–US Strategic Economic Dialogue was held. This was the first high-ranking institutionalized channel between China and the US to address major issues, although both had agreed to establish the constructive strategic relationship in 1997. The framework was inherited by the Obama administration and further upgraded to cover political, security and economic fields in a global context of debating the Group 2 concept.

Facing the warming of Sino–US relations and relatively stagnant Japan–US relations, Japan had reason to recall the nightmare of a possible Sino–US alignment. And if this were Japan’s reaction, Japan should have used regionalism as a tool to call American attention and then enhance its commitments to the alliance, just as it did in the first and second periods. But, neither happened. Japan’s policy and diplomacy toward regionalism kept waning not only in its commitments, but also its policy articulation and even public interest. The commitment to regionalism was inconsistent and insubstantial. Economically, Many of Japan’s commitments made on regional occasions were actually overlapping with Japan’s Official Development Assistance (ODA) programs rather than new initiatives. Politically, the concept of an East Asia community quietly disappeared in the policy speeches of Japanese leaders. Premier Shinzo Abe emphasized ‘the Japan–US alliance for Asia and the world’ with the view of ‘widening the free society in Asia’ (Abe 2006a). Premier Yasuo Fukuda raised the concept of the ‘synergy of Japan–US alliance and Asian diplomacy’ with a focus on bilateral relations with China and Korea in his Asian diplomacy. Premier Taro Aso failed to articulate his regional ideas (Aso 2008a). Ideologically, the human security concept was replaced by more nationalist articulation (Abe 2006b) or more value-based diplomatic narration (Aso 2008b; Green and Twining 2008). At the same time, public enthusiasm also waned in this period (Amako 2009). Even more surprisingly, this period witnessed the reversal of the debate. Further arguments tended to emphasize the dangers of East Asian regionalism. Toshio Watanabe, a previously leading advocate for Asian integration, argued in his book that ‘East Asian community building is very dangerous for Japan because it would be a tool of Chinese regional hegemony’ (Watanabe 2008). These arguments came in stark contrast with those of some years ago.
One explanation for the above puzzle is that Japan had less fear of abandonment by the United States than a decade previously, and felt less of an incentive to revive its regional efforts to lock in the strategic partnership with the United States. Japan was more willing to maintain the status quo and Mimamori (watch carefully) developments.

First, Japan saw the Sino–US engagement in this period as a noalternative choice for America rather than as a proactive option by the US. Economically, as the third biggest economy in the world, China had dramatically deepened its interdependence with the US in this period. American economic power had been relatively declining, especially after the economic crisis. Even before the global recession, one of the Plaza Accord leading architects Tomomitsu Oba hinted that the new era of ‘weak dollar and weak America’ was coming (Oba 2008: 42) and warned that, ‘it [is] time to think [of] Japan’s security policy in an era of weak America’ (Oba 2008: 49). Politically, as a member of the Security Council in the United Nations, China is important for the US to address thorny problems such as Iran and North Korea. As the biggest developing country in the world, China plays a key role in achieving international consensus on global issues such as global warming and energy. A decade ago, the United States enjoyed absolute advantage over China and its nearing with China was an autonomous option under America’s ample control. In stark contrast, the more recent nearing of US–Sino relations is occurring because the US has no alternative choice. Former administrative vice foreign minister Syotaro Yachi argues that ‘doubtless that the United States is paying more attention to China than Japan because China is experiencing unprecedented development and the US has both hopes and anxiousness toward China’ (Yachi and Takahash 2009: 111). Yachi argues that Japan should not be ‘over-nervous which would lead to being thrown into confusion’ (Yachi and Takahash 2009: 112).

Second, as to the warming relations of China and the US in this period, Japan began to view it as a strategic coexistence with characteristic of ‘sleeping on the same bed, but having different dreams’ (Soeya 2005a: 100). As such, it would not be at the expense of Japan. Both realists and liberals in Japan share the perception that China and the United States relations are mostly strategically competitive. The only difference between them is the extent of that competitiveness. Realists see China as a rival or even an enemy to the United States but Japan as a partner (Chuo Koron 2009: 37), but liberals thinks less confrontationally (Soeya 2005a: 99). Both of them acknowledge that Japan still matters to the United States (Soeya 2005a: 112; Chuo Koron 2009: 37).

Both realists and liberalists recognize the positive meanings of the nearing of China and the United States for Japan. Realist argues that the United States will need allies to accommodate a rapid rising China and Japan’s strategic value would increase in the process. Okazaki, a relatively hawkish former diplomat and strategist, argues that ‘the more China becomes stronger, the more America needs Japan. There is totally no problem of
the US paying more attention to China’ (Chuo Koron 2009: 37). Liberal strategists argue that increasing strategic communication and coordination between the US and China would be helpful to stabilize international order and peace. Soeya, a liberal strategist at Keio University, points out that:

It is meaningless to base Japan’s strategy on the perception of that the stable Sino–US relations would be at the expense of Japan’s interests. The stability of Sino–US relations should be welcomed by Japan and more importantly the strategic relationship between them is beyond Japan’s control. (Soeya 2005a: 112)

Third, in terms of the content of Sino–US nearing, Japan believes that the US is facing a great challenge in managing divergence with China in the process of seeking strategic coexistence. In this context, Japan is comfortably positioned to refrain from choosing sides.

Besides political and security divergence, the economic divergence between China and the United States has become increasingly obvious. Japan’s economic and currency friction with the United States has given way to China. It would be much more difficult for the United States to handle its divergence with China than with Japan, for in the past Japan always took its position of subordination into account (Tanaka 2008: 37–38). Japan has reasons to watch the process cautiously rather than hastily meddling. In face of China’s rise, Japan knows that the United States is more front-positioned to address China’s rise.

Japan has viewed the warming of Sino–US relations in the second part of 2000s differently than a decade ago. It feels less fear of possible abandonment by the US. Furthermore, Japan is in a strong position to negotiate the terms of the alliance, rather than simply capitulating to the United States. Japan would be more willing to strengthen its negotiating position in the alliance by using its leverage of Japan–China relations rather than regionalism. This mentality remained even after the Democratic Party of Japan took office in September 2009. Then Secretary General Ichiro Ozawa brought a 100 more Diet-member delegation to China in the late of 2009 to the surprise of the United States.

At the same time, the ever-growing Chinese economic centrality in East Asia is a worry to Japan, particularly in terms of the potential dominant role of China in East Asia regionalism. In response, Japan began to clearly welcome the United States and Russia at the East Asia Summit around 2006–2007 (Nakasone 2006), as part of a strategy of diluting China’s ever-growing presence in the region (interview on 15 July 2012). Japanese academia began to enthusiastically discuss the role of the US in East Asia (Cossa and Takana 2007; The Council on East Asian Community 2007), especially in the face of the coldness of the Bush administration’s Asian diplomacy (Goh 2004; Limaye 2007; Cossa and Takana 2007: 144–174). Yachi also admitted his strong interest in bringing the US to the East Asia Summit during his tenure as administrative vice foreign minister (Yachi and Takahashi 2009).
Conclusion

Three conclusions can be drawn from the previous analysis. First, the fear of possible abandonment by the United States serves as the primary variable in influencing Japan’s attitudes toward East Asian regionalism. When Japan feels the threat of abandonment by the US, it shows an enthusiasm toward regionalism, as reflected in the first and second periods. When Japan feels abandonment more directly, it tends to make substantial commitments toward regionalism as it did in the first period. When it feels abandonment less urgently, it tends to react more rhetorically toward regionalism. In the third period, Japan’s enthusiasm toward regionalism declined substantially in line with its decreasing fear of abandonment.

Second, fear of abandonment is closely connected to Japan’s perception of China–US relations. Both the first and third periods witnessed a warming in China–US relations, but Japan responded differently to each. That means that close China–US relations do not necessarily lead to a fear of abandonment on Japan’s part. When Japan feels the US tilts more proactively toward China, possibly at the expense of Japan, it feels threatened and responds actively and substantially toward regionalism. Otherwise, Japan seems to have less incentive to do so. The way in which Japan perceives China–US relations also tends to influence Japan’s diplomacy at large.

Third, Japan’s perception of its regional influence vis-à-vis China affects its attitude toward regionalism. When Japan is more confident in its regional presence than China, it shows more interest in regionalism; when it is less confident, it views East Asia regionalism as a policy tool of Chinese dominance.

The analysis thus challenges the conventional assertion that Japan is balancing China through regionalism or is engaged in a regional power struggle. If Japan really intended to balance China and to gain primacy through regionalism, it should have taken a more proactive approach rather than passively following China’s path. Japan’s ‘comprehensive arrangements’ are more lip-service but its real steps are ‘small and tentative’ (Samuels 2007: 166). Koizumi’s ‘near-total neglect of Sino–Japanese relations’ (Hughes 2009: 842) made his East Asian Community idea least persuasive because without the stable relationship between the two giants, the regionalism would achieve nothing. In 2005, Japan even dared to sacrifice the China–Japan–Korea tripartite summit which was established by Obuchi’s initiative. Ideologically, Japan replaced its promotion of a more advantageous human security theory with the value-based thinking in its dealings with regionalism. Unfortunately during the last decade, Japan almost proactively squandered its assets in its Asian diplomacy. The explanation is that the strategic priority of Japan is not on Asia but still on alliance management.

In summary, Japan has failed to formulate a new framework to address new challenges in the post Cold War era and largely sticks to the old alliance management approach. Tokyo’s policy toward East Asian
regionalism is largely defensive. The comprehensive design of Japan’s policy toward Asia and China in particular is far from emerging. This also partly explains its fluctuating relations with China and Asia after the Cold War. Even if Japan feels less abandonment by the US now, it will always suspect the lack of resolve of America in its dealings with neighboring countries and China in particular. Japan might periodically test the resolve of the US, which might further alienate its neighbors. (The recent China–Japan spat on the sea might be a case in point.) Without comprehensive strategy in balancing alliance and Asia diplomacy, Tokyo seems to be falling into a new dilemma between periodically testing alliance effectiveness and occasionally exacerbating, or ignoring, neighborhood relations.

References

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