Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo’s Multilateral Role
Conception and US and China Policies

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Promotion of multilateralism has been one of key Japanese roles. It is not limited to support to the United Nations but also related to the promotion of global and regional free trade in Asia-Pacific. This article shows the result of a research based on Japanese, United States, and Chinese political leaders’ statements and behaviors related to economic multilateralism during the second Abe administration. The research uses role theory as a theoretical framework. This article proves that Prime Minister Abe has consistently endorsed multilateralism, deepening economic ties both Asia-Pacific and European countries by examining Japanese, US, and Chinese political leaders’ speeches, interviews, and remarks on the media. His foreign policy does not indicate unilateralism or dismissal of international cooperation because he perceives multilateralism is essential for Japan’s prosperity and security. In addition, Abe does not break the ties with the US but it is difficult to say that Japan-China relations improved during his tenure. This is because China’s influence will grow and the importance of Japan will relatively decline in Asia-Pacific.

Keywords: Japan-US relations, Japan-China relations, multilateralism, security, economy, role theory

Introduction

Under Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, Japan tries to find the optimal trade and security course with the United States (US), China, Southeast Asian (SEA) countries, etc. In a period when the US commitment and the best strategy to cope with China are uncertain, there is no simple choice for Japan. The strategy has to encompass economic engagement and security-related initiatives to broaden options. The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) aim to foster trade and investment, while impacting security matters, a dimension of multilateralism Abe has promoted. However, the importance of China as a key trading and investment partner for Japan and Japan’s strategic partners in the region, and the attractiveness of the Chinese initiatives, notably the BRI, compel Japan to make his security policy look less anti-Chinese. Otherwise, Japanese companies run the risk of losing business opportunities. The difficulty of Japan’s positioning is accelerated by the ambiguity of the current US position concerning its trade and security-related engagement in the region.

Overall, the main alter-parts-expectations by the countries with whom Japan has interactions—welcome Abe’s initiatives related to economic multilateralism. The launch of the Comprehensive and Progressive TPP (CPTPP or TPP-11) in December 2018 gives Japan the opportunity to assert leadership position in Asia. This favorable position could be furthermore reinforced by using international cooperative agreements such as the
bilateral Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the European Union and the launch of the RCEP where Japan plays an active role (Yamashita, 2019). Paradoxically, role inconsistency related to economic multilateralism could originate from the Japan-US relationship. To lead the TPP with the US would have made Japan an economic rule-maker to protect market economy in the region, and eventually promote Japan in a leadership position in the world. US withdrawal from the TPP weakened Japan’s attempt to counterbalance China. Moreover, US preference to bilateral negotiation clashes with the World Trade Organization (WTO) rules and obliges Japan to change its stance. So far, Japan has justified its foreign policy with multilateralism that no one can deny. In fact, Abe prefers pragmatism to multilateralism without committing explicit offences. This behavior is due to Abe’s perception that security and economy are two sides of a coin.

The Delicate Linkage Between Trade and Security Issues

Japan’s competitive advantage to gain political leadership and regain its economic influence in East and Southeast Asia can only come from its legal, managerial, and technical expertise—including in defense related matters—coupled with building of international norms on intellectual property rights, defense of environment and social standards that support free trade and democratic values. China’s behavior in the South China Sea, liable to impede the smooth flow of goods and increase political risks, is presented as vindicating this point (Abe, 2014). Abe is convinced neither military power nor traditional alliance structures are sufficient to protect this system alone. This is why he described the TPP as an attempt to establish an “international order suitable to the 21st century” based on shared norms (Abe, 2015). He is determined to make the region respect “freedom and transparency” (Abe, 2013a).

Japan’s contribution has indeed security-related dimensions, as exemplified by the strategic partnership agreements with Vietnam, Australia, and India (Wilkins, 2011, p. 116) increasingly blurring the line between trade and security-related relationships. It is said that Japan is more interested in the strategic aspect of the TPP than any other member countries (Sahashi, 2016). However, the importance of the strategic security-related dimension of the free trade agreements does not seem to be shared if it means to confront China.

Abe was aware of potential role inconsistency and, possibly, role conflict from start as a result of its emphasis on sharing values for security cooperation. He knew Japan had to be careful not to be perceived from the US as a destabilizing factor in the region. Likewise, Japan did not ignore the reality of Japan’s economic interdependence with China. This called for pragmatism, i.e., the readiness to reconcile very different viewpoints in Japan’s role performance. Thus, my research question in this article is: how Abe manages the balance between Japan’s multilateralism and US and Chinese expectations.

Role Theory Framework

Role theory attempts to apply social psychology theory to states’ behavior in considering them as social collectives characterized by specific patterns and features that reflect collectively shared expectations. It gives an opportunity to study foreign policy issues through relevant angles that cover political but also social, and economic dimensions (Harnisch, 2011). Role theory makes the hypothesis that NRCs, defined as intersubjectively shared and value-driven expectations about appropriate roles of a state in the world composed of what Holsti (1970) called the ego-part (the country itself) and the alter-parts (the countries with whom the country conduct foreign interactions), determine the foreign policy of a country. Foreign leaders reflect the normative collective ideas, cognitive perspectives, and understandings within society and represent it to the
world through their statements. So, without permitting to establish causality, NRCs give support in providing motives for behavioral patterns (Aggestam, 2004) and enable interpretation of decision-makers’ perceived appropriate roles and objectives (Sakaki, 2011, p. 21). Multilateralism requires other states’ understanding and cooperation from the nature. Getting support from domestic actors is not enough. Multilateralism is a continuous process of accommodating foreign expectations and their policy change with political leaders not being swayed from side to side. In other words, giving other countries the impression that the country advocates multilateralism is a way to defend national interests. This research addresses not only Japanese factors but also US and Chinese ones because basically Japan is stuck between the US and China and they significantly impact Japan’s direction, physically, and psychologically. Although there are no supra-national institutions having compelling power on sovereign countries, Japan is an actor being integral part of the international society and depends on the multilateral system. Responding to foreign expectation is essential to adjust its behavior with new values and norms. So, it is worth examining Japan’s relations with them on the assumption that these two countries alter Japan’s NRCs. As a methodology, with reference to Japanese political leader Abe’s statements such as speeches, interviews, and remarks on the media, this research also illustrates how US and Chinese political figures assign roles to Japan regarding security and economy.

**Abe’s Support of Free Trade Through Market Liberalization and Multilateral Cooperation**

First of all, Abe justifies Japan’s participation in the TPP for economic reasons: “Asia” is a synonym for “growth” and another name for “achievement” (Abe, 2014). As the economic weight of Asia will be higher for Japan (Jimbo, 2013), he rejected protectionism in declaring that Japanese national interests are in “keeping Asia’s seas unequivocally open, free, and peaceful—in maintaining them as the commons for all the people of the world, where the rule of law is fully realized” (Abe, 2013b, n.p.). His stance is that Japan’s economic success confidence was built around commitment to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and the WTO rules-based regime (Abe, 2013c). Therefore, the interest of Japan is to continue to support free trade, all the more given the shrinking domestic market. In this regard, the CPTPP is expected to strengthen Japan’s position to liberalize global trade.

At the same time, Japan cannot neglect anymore the initiatives for regional integration coming from other parts of Asia. The population of the 16 RCEP members is about 3.4 billion people and the RCEP accounts for one-third of the world Gross Domestic Product (Shimizu, 2018). The RCEP framework basically conforms to the liberal economic order but the special treatment that it is ready to give to the least economically advanced members to facilitate capacity building and the recognition the necessity of transitional period for liberalization and looser respect of rules makes the RCEP more attractive than the CPTPP for developing SEA countries (Oba, 2018). It means that Japan must be involved in the project to avoid its domination by China.\footnote{To begin with, the aim of the RCEP was to contain China. To answer China’s demand to make a free trade zone in Asia, Japan responded in 2007 under the first Abe administration a free trade zone composed of 16 countries including India, Australia, and New Zealand to keep emerging China in check (Nishimura, 2019).} Taking into account the significance of promotion of international standards in infrastructure and ports within Asia-Pacific and across the Indian Ocean, participation in the RCEP is as important as the CPTPP to counter China and deepen ties with like-minded countries. In the future the trans-continental links are likely to provide a substantial boost to growth in this part of the world. Regarding this, Abe expressed his ambition in a similar way as in the case of the TPP:
Japan, the US and Australia, as well as other close countries have to cooperate closely to promote high-quality infrastructure according to international standard in terms of transparency, openness, and economic efficiency. The recipient countries are under obligation to keep a high standard of performance to realize sustainable development through strengthening connectivity in the region. The important thing is that Japan will provide high-quality infrastructure. Japan will devise concrete plans through several frameworks composed of such as Japan-US-Australia, Japan-Australia-India, or Japan-US-Australia-India on each occasion. Japan wants to cooperate with countries sharing this vision to create a free and open Indo-Pacific region based on the rule of law in all circumstances. (Abe, 2018a, n.p.)

The following speech delivered by Abe in a ministerial meeting for the RCEP indicated his idea that his ambition is not only to establish a giant economic zone but also introduce strict rules comparable to the CPTPP in e-commerce and intellectual property:

We will create rules of free transactions of e-commerce. This will provide a small company in the middle of Yangon which sells coconut oil to tourists with a great opportunity to access a market of 3.5 billion consumers through the Internet. We will also improve rules to protect intellectual property thoroughly, which enables everyone to use state-of-the-art blood test kits developed in Australia. (Abe, 2018b, n.p.)

Since the 1990s, Japan has oscillated between East and Southeast Asia and Pacific-centered regionalism. Pacific-centered regionalism is based on a strong US presence in the region, for economic reasons but also because Japan considers a dominant US military presence essential for stability in Asia (Blumenthal, Tatsumi, Ratner, Suzuki, Luttwak, & Wu, 2014). Thanks to the Pax Americana, allies were able to count on US security guarantee and nuclear deterrence in postwar Asia. Freedom of navigation in the sea and airspace for free trade was ensured to the extent that rules set mainly by the US were respected. Abe wants Japan to be more assertive as a global power on its own, but he is defending the traditional idea that national wealth and power can only be based on a rule-based and market-oriented international order backed by the Japan-US alliance. The very fact of including the US—also other liberal democracies—is important to justify the focus Abe gave to the TPP project. If the US entered the TPP, the trade regime could have attained a higher standard of liberalization, transparency, and accountability in such areas as investment, intellectual property rights, government procurement, and respect of social and environmental norms. So, it would have helped to keep the status quo of the postwar order. In this regard, it could be argued that Japan feels betrayed by US, the largest market among the members, withdrawal after Trump became president in 2017. To maintain its commitment to multilateralism, Abe kept alive the TPP project lest the protectionism cause more serious consequence. The failure could have led the TPP countries to be closer to China.

Backing what would smack of containment of China is too much for the CPTPP members but China’s maritime claim in the East and South China Seas is a significant concern for all of them. Therefore, at the very least, the fear of receiving significant economic damage increases the possibility that the members welcome Japan’s support to balance China’s influence and accept Japan’s leadership in the CPTPP. Nevertheless, although Japan has undisputable economic, legal, and managerial credentials to play the leading role, it is hardly credible to believe it can impose its views on matters of trade rules and respect of universalistic values. In this respect, it is plausible to believe the CPTPP will only really become significant in the mind of Abe when the US decides to take part.

Meanwhile, as part of a risk hedging strategy, Abe decided to deepen its economic ties with European countries. Besides the economic importance of the Japan-EU relationship, the most important aspect of the agreement, as in the case of Australia and India, is to enlarge the circle of countries eager to collaborate with
Japan in order to secure international rules\(^2\). In doing so, Japan can expect to enlarge its strategic options vis-à-vis China and the US. Abe emphasized these points with German chancellor Angela Merkel:

> Japan, having gone through reaping in abundance the benefits of free trade and investment, wants to be the champion upholding open systems alongside Germany…Of course to do so it will be necessary to have rules that are fair and can stand up to democratic appraisal. (Abe, 2017a, n.p.)

**Abe’s Role Performance in Terms of Japan-China Economic Relations**

While Japan linked the TPP with security and values, it also wants to develop strategic economic reciprocal relations with China concurrently. China is the largest trade partner of Japan, accounting for 21% of the total of import-export transactions (Tanaka, 2017). Therefore, there is a limit to the claim of defense of liberal democratic values if it is bound to cause economic damage as Abe’s building of a “mutually beneficial relationship based on common strategic interests” demonstrated (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2008). Unlike the Trump administration, the Abe administration has refrained from questioning Chinese communist party controls economy.

Abe reversed Japan’s original negative stance on the BRI because the active control of China on the project could be considered at variance with the free and open liberal order. Abe expressed Japanese conditional support to the BRI at the Banquet of the 23rd International Conference on the Future of Asia in June 2017. His renewed position is expressed as such:

> I would expect that the “One Belt, One Road” initiative will fully incorporate such a common frame of thinking, and come into harmony with the free and fair Trans Pacific economic zone, and contribute to the peace and prosperity of the region and the world. Japan is ready to extend cooperation from this perspective. (Abe, 2017b, n.p.)

Subsequently, Abe brought about 500 business leaders with him when he visited China in October 2018 (Gao, 2018). In the summit, Abe proposed three principles of ‘shifting from competition to collaboration, working together as partners that will not threaten each other, and developing a free and fair trading system’ to Chinese President Xi Jinping (Nikkei Asian Review, 2018). At that time, they agreed to jointly develop infrastructure in the third countries (Liu, 2018). Nevertheless, Abe continues to emphasize that the benefits of the projects be shared fairly and the projects be in accordance with international standards. This concern confirms Japan’s reluctance to accept the creation of a system through the RCEP and the BRI that could drift toward illiberal economic and political governance controlled by China which could threaten the regional order and, ultimately, Japan’s security (Sano, 2018).

Conversely, China also shows its willingness to deepen international economic cooperation either in the RCEP or in other FTAs. In 2015, “to establish a global FTA network” along the BRI target region was envisioned in the 13th Five-Year Plan by Chinese Government (Aoyama, 2019).

The analysis of statements demonstrates China’s leaders want to show they are eager to assume regional and international responsibility. So, China perceives opportunities to advance regionalism in utilizing regional platforms and promoting free trade. This is exemplified in the following Xi’s statement:

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\(^2\) It is a pity that India declared to pull out of the RCEP negotiations because it would undermine India’s manufacturing and competitiveness by the flow of a large amount of cheap Chinese goods (Chellaney, 2019). India’s withdrawal will relatively increase China’s influence in the RCEP. While continuing to persuade India to join the RCEP, Japan may put more importance on the CPTPP.
We should actively build a free trade cooperation network in Asia and strive to conclude negotiations on an upgraded China-ASEAN FTA and on Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in 2015. In advancing economic integration in Asia, we need to stay committed to open regionalism and move forward trans-regional cooperation, including APEC, in a coordinated manner. (Xi, 2015, n.p.)

China-US trade friction is one of reasons for China to wish for an enactment of the RCEP. China finds a way out in the agreement of the difficulty related to the China-US trade friction (Nishimura, 2019). Even though India is absent, China wants to advance the negotiation. After concluding text-based negotiations by the left 15 countries and confirming the agreement to be reached in 2020, Xi expressed happiness that: “I am happy to note that yesterday 15 countries taking part in RCEP concluded text based negotiations and I hope the agreement will be signed and entered into force at an early date” (Xi, 2019, n.p.).

Xi’s speeches indicate that China’s active involvement in Asian integrational projects is necessary, but it is worried about economic division in the region. Zhang Jun, director-general of the Department of International Economic Affairs at Ministry of Foreign Affairs, implicitly criticized the TPP as exclusive and unfair to developing countries. For him, the TPP was also aiming at China’s containment because its intention was to reduce economic dependence of SEA countries on China (Zhang, 2015).

China supports the WTO and gives priority in Asia to existing mechanisms and structures such as the RCEP and a Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific because of its higher level of inclusiveness than the CPTPP, having an expectation that they alleviate the CPTPP’s negative impact. In the RCEP China and the other RCEP developing countries can avoid increased regulatory reform pressure (economic, social, and political) from the developed democracies having long practice of market economy.

Nevertheless, although entering the CPTPP is considered difficult for the time being, China is not entirely opposed to becoming a member in the longer term and shares a common goal of the creation of a free trade area in Asia-Pacific with Japan and the US. While China recognizes Japan and the US have a different perspective on regional integration, it also recognizes that the RCEP and the CPTPP are not completely incompatible. In this line of thought the Chinese ministry of commerce had declared regarding the TPP: “China hopes the TPP pact and other free trade arrangements in the region can boost each other and contribute to the Asia-Pacific’s trade, investment and economic growth” (BBC, 2015, n.p.). As for the CPTPP, the position of China is explicitly expressed by its foreign minister Wang Yi in the statement that “China is positive about any open, transparent and inclusive arrangement that reinforces regional economic integration and a WTO-centered global free trade system, be it RCEP or CPTPP” (Wang, 2018, n.p.).

**US Expectation of Japan About Trade and Security**

While Abe is proud of Japan’s long-time multilateralism, he does not criticize the Trump administration as isolationist or protectionist. Japan supported US rebalance policy during the Obama administration and has accepted the principle of bilateral negotiations during the Trump administration. In the following statement Abe emphasizes Japan’s contribution to US economy:

For many a year, both Japan and the United States have led the free trade system forward internationally. As evidence of that, Japan’s direct investment has created employment in the U.S. for some 856,000 people nationwide, a quantity second only to what the U.K. has brought about. At present, in contrast to the 1.74 million vehicles exported annually from Japan to the United States, the number of Japanese cars manufactured within the United States is 3.77 million. This is a win-win situation at its finest. I intend for Japan and the United States to continue this kind of relationship between us. (Abe, 2018c, n.p.)
The US similarly describes Japan as a very important economic partner. In this connection Obama contended in 2014 that:

> Of course, the bonds between our countries are not restricted to a military alliance. We represent two of the three largest economies in the world, and we have the opportunity by working together to help shape an open and innovative and dynamic economy throughout the Asia Pacific region. (Obama, 2014, n.p.)

As the statement shows, Japanese support could justify US presence in Asia, but the US expects Japan to build up an environment where the US can make economic profits in the region. It was how Abe was selling the TPP to the US: Promotion of multilateralism in economy must be in line with US national interests. Obama also saw the TPP as a means to increase US national interests by saying “It will be good for the workers of both our countries” (Obama, 2015a). Furthermore, like Abe, Obama positioned the TPP as an important element of his policy of pivoting to Asia and counter China. It appears in the following statement:

> My top priority as President is making sure more hardworking Americans have a chance to get ahead. That’s why we have to make sure the United States—and not countries like China—is the one writing this century’s rules for the world’s economy. (Obama, 2015b, n.p.)

Such a viewpoint was also clearly expressed by Froman, the chief US negotiator of the TPP:

> You know, also, you—people like Prime Minister Lee [of Singapore], who has said, if you can’t deal with us on cars and services and agriculture, can we depend on you when it comes to security and military matters? And I think that’s a very important sentiment. These countries very much want to be embedded with us, or want us embedded with them in the region, both for economic purposes—so that they can diversify their partnerships, diversify their markets—but also, very importantly, from a strategic perspective. And they see this partnership as having broader political and strategic ramifications. (Froman, 2016, n.p.)

Thus, remaining the economic rule maker is de facto linked to security. The situation changed with the advent of the Trump administration. While it is worried of China’s economic emergence, there is no willingness to protect the existing global trade regime, let alone upgraded it through more sophisticated rules. It regarded the TPP just a bad trade deal not beneficial for US workers. Unlike Japan willingness to ensure long-term stability and prosperity through the CPTPP, Trump prefers bilateral free trade agreements to maximize US national interests immediately. As a result, he does not intend to join the CPTPP unless the US finds benefit in it: “I don’t want to go back into TPP, but if they offer us a deal that I can’t refuse on behalf of the American people I would do it—but I prefer bilateral better” (Trump, 2018, n.p.). The Trump administration’s stance on trade goal is represented in the speech as follows:

> America is also committed to improving our economic relationship with Japan. As President of the United States, I am committed to achieving a fair, free, and reciprocal trading relationship. We seek equal and reliable access for American exports to Japan’s markets in order to eliminate our chronic trade imbalances and deficits with Japan. (Trump, 2017, n.p.)

This eagerness to reduce the trade imbalance led to a suggestion of concluding a FTA in October 2017. Japanese and American economic policies are very different, but even to conclude the Trade Agreement on Goods whose negotiation started in 2018 is highly evaluated as vice-president Pence said: “We welcome the decision that you and President Trump reached in September, to begin negotiations on a bilateral trade agreement” (Pence, 2018, n.p.). Above all, the agreement aims to increase export of US agricultural products to Japan (The Sankei News, 2018). Subsequently, in September 2019, Japan and the US concluded a trade
agreement that Japan cut import tariffs on US beef, pork, wine, and agricultural products to the level of the CPTPP. While Japan was able to prevent the US from implementing additional import tariff on Japanese cars and auto parts, the US gained more benefits than Japan by excluding cars, the largest Japanese export product to the US (Shirai, 2019). To focus on specific sectors means the bilateral trade will be “controlled” (Nikkei Business, 2018), creating a contradiction with Japanese support of free trade based on the GATT/WTO principles.

For the moment, Abe’s policy has dodged US bilateral push and role conflict has been prevented. However, Japan’s advocacy of multilateralism has already started to be reshaped with the US’s expectations during the bilateral negotiation for the sake of priority given to security in the framework of the Japan-US alliance. To borrow Cornelia Frank’s term (2011), the US is significant alter, which has a higher value than other actors for Japan. Therefore, Japan faces difficult trade-off to maintain consistency of its role performance related to multilateralism with the US and the other alter-parts.

**Conclusion**

The Abe administration does not adopt unilateralism that would be unacceptable to alter-parts. Abe has repeatedly shown that he favors multilateralism in his statements and role performance. Japan continues to devise and implement important foreign policy in a multilateral structure. It not only maintains the importance of multilateral economic roles as a core part of Japan’s foreign policy strategy but also attempts to expand them steadily. The analysis of the economic side of the NRC of multilateralism revealed the similarity between Japan’s attachment to free trade regional regime and expanding security role with the US and other like-minded countries and its cautious and pragmatic approach to China. Abe’s foreign policy is marked by his strategic perspective on Japan’s economic activity. He has expressed continuously his duty to live up to US expectation so that the US presence continues in the region by emphasizing the commonness between them. This viewpoint can be seen in Abe’s security-related statements that translated into congruent role performance but also in the readiness to make trade compromise to have the US remaining present in the region.

In promoting the TPP and emphasizing regional stable development and interdependence of equal partners in his statements, Abe demonstrated to member countries that Japan would not be hegemonic in the region. The TPP was not supposed to be merely a loose free-trade area but the standard bearer in terms of promoting the rule of law, freedom of navigation, intellectual property rights, data flows, and labor standards that China cannot or is not willing to emulate to the rest of the world. Abe understood the project not only in terms of economic interdependence but also in terms of security. In fact, the TPP frontiers largely coincided with the security and values ones. Japan’s NRC related to multilateralism and the TPP’s strategic aspect obtains positive reaction from the Obama administration but not from the Trump administration. Close alliance with the US goes along with an important economic partnership without China. Japan cannot afford to only opt for security with the US by downgrading its economic relationships with China.

Although he never tried in earnest to stop the Trump administration from implementing protectionist policies and convince the US of the advantages of the multilateral framework, inconsistency between Japan’s proclaimed normative free trade ideal and its role performance toward the US did not create problems with the US. Still, preserving its crucial role of reliable security partner of the US while keeping its commitment to multilateralism at the same time became more difficult with the advent of Trump. Japan has to manage the complex risks correctly that it has to take in this new environment in order not stirring tensions.
The absence of the US in the CPTPP agreement and the unwelcome prospect of having to conclude a bilateral agreement with the US could force Japan to come closer to China, although there is no indication so far that Japan seeks more actively to involve China in the CPTPP. As observed in this article, Abe does not intend to confront China economically; he thinks that economic policies cannot help but decouple China to some extent for security reason. This reinforces the priority to the development of the CPTPP for economic and political reasons and thus, Japan’s influence is likely to be low if China’s influence in the RCEP is prominent.

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