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Cause Analysis of Suga Administration's Foreign Policy Orientation against the Backdrop of Sino-US Game

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Abstract

When Yoshihide Suga took over as Prime Minister in September 2020, he was described by some international observers as a leader who might be great at internal affairs but poor at diplomacy, possibly due to his experience as the longest-serving Chief Cabinet Secretary, a position in which the policies of ministries and agencies in the executive branch are coordinated. In his one-year ruling time, at a diplomatic level, Mr Suga put emphasis on further deepening Japan's close relations with the US as well as all-round cooperation with others who share common value. In the meanwhile Japan-China relations had been strained, which may be caused by Mr Suga's occasional unfriendly actions towards China like unprecedentedly mentioned Taiwan issues in his bilateral statement with President Joe Biden since Japan established diplomatic relations with PRC in 1972. Comprehensively speaking, Suga's foreign policy was conducive to the optimization of Japan's national interest in the COVID-19 period with the continued economic downturn and infrequent personnel exchanges. Nonetheless, when the epidemic is brought under control, it will be necessary for future Japanese administrations to place a higher priority on improving relations with China out of consideration for considerable economic and trade interests with this neighbor.

Keywords: Japan-US alliance, Japan-China relations, constitution revision, the quadrilateral security dialogue, COVID-19

1. Introduction

As the world's third-largest economy, Japan has always played a role as a participant in actively promoting economic globalization in the regional and global fields as well as the realization of regional peace, stability and prosperity. Japan, together with US and China, are

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global powers in virtually every dimension in terms of national power; not only are they the top three runners in terms of the world economy but also possess the most advanced military in the world. Hence, it is generally considered that China–US–Japan trilateral relations are among the world's most critical tripartite relations. (*Glosserman, 2005*)

For decades, Japan's core interest has been to maintain the smooth flow of its international links. Tokyo seeks not to be surpassed, isolated, as well as gagged. On the other hand, from American perspective, its core interest in East Asia is to secure the stability of this region under its lead. The stability surely means benefit-sharing, but Washington wants to retain the leader position, because America and other countries have not yet found another trustworthy stability provider with such desire and such capability. [1] Generally, the core interests between Japan and US are basically compatible, while there are some interests overlapping areas that may lead to conflict. Aiming to keep profiting from East Asia by circumventing challenges to its regional hegemony as well as maintain the basic state of peace, the US hopes to see Japan can be able to play more international roles with more confidence and independence while still under the control of America in security area. Washington is also pleased to see a Japan-Chinese relations with both sustained friction and relatively stable contact between the two countries, which will invite America's management but without paying excessive costs: [2].

Japan-Chinese relations is also worth studying as these two countries are the two largest economies in Asia. The GDP of the two countries combined is nearly 60% of the region's total GDP in 2020.[3] Intrinsically, an amicable relation between China and Japan would be crucial to maintain regional political stability as well as enhance economic cooperation. (*Jinan Wu, 2019*) Nevertheless, feelings of historical resentment mingled with practical national interests have aggravated various contradictions between China and Japan, producing a great impact on their strategic judgment of each other. Although both sides have restrained from furthering tensions so far, the sources of conflict, such as historical issues and territorial disputes, have remained. In addition, with China's economic rise and the strengthening military might, East Asia's political economic structure that relied on Japan's advanced industrial inputs and the US for national defense may be changed. The changing China-Japan relations not only have profound implications for the region but also for the global power structure. [4]

After months of sliding approval ratings, Yoshihide Suga, the 99th Prime Minister of Japan, announced he would not stand for re-election as leader of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP),

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meaning that he abandoned the attempt to become the next Prime Minister since the LDP has been the ruling party for nearly ten years and is quite possible to win the House of Representatives election which is scheduled to be held on 31 October. Suga administration, which lasted for only 384 days, pursued a foreign policy based on the Japan-US alliance in which he was striving for achieving equivalence as well as diversified cooperation against the backdrop of fluctuating Sino-US relations. (Yaodong Lv, 2020) On the other hand, despite frequently claiming that they are seeking for constructing harmonious relations with China, Suga authorities, contrary to the Abe administration which paid practical action to improve the bilateral ties, had some negative moves which may presumably damage the relations with this neighbor. A containment policy towards China may be conducive to a more solid Japan-US alliance, but it will also inevitably aggravate tensions in Sino-Japan relations. (Yaodong Lv 2020; Yongsheng Zhou, 2020) **So how should we explain Mr Suga's diplomatic strategies which favored the US at the expense of China?** To answer this question, we should comprehensively consider two significant factors: (1) Japan's growing ambition to become influential power in recent years, and (2) sustained tension with the US encountered by China in the COVID-19 period.

2. Achieve equivalence: From shield to spear

The alliance between Japan and the United States has been unequal from the outset, which is due to both historical factors as well as practical problems. According to the *Treaty of Security and Safeguard Between Japan and United States (1951)* which constitutes the legal basis for Japan's current subordination to the United States, the United States is responsible for safety insurance of Japan by establishing and almost indefinitely utilizing military bases in Japan. Meanwhile, being subject to Article 9 of the *Constitution of Japan*, Japan's self-defense forces must insist on the so-called *purely defensive defense*, which means its military power can only be wielded when being assaulted by enemy countries.

Recently, however, successive Japanese administrations, especially the Abe cabinet, were striving for revising the constitution, which has been considered to be a significant opportunity not only for strengthening its military forces to attack the enemy and protect allies but also reversing the current unequal alliance between Japan and the United States. Some scholars described the recent US-Japan alliance as *uncomfortable bedfellows* (Kent E Calder,

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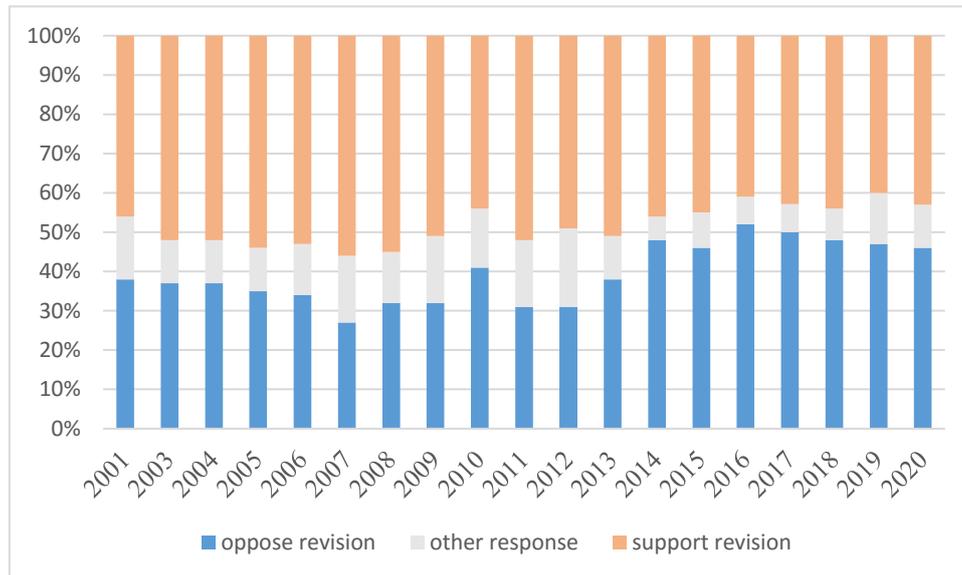
2018) since these two countries hold opposing attitudes on whether the current status of Japanese troops should be altered or not.

In September 2020 when Mr Suga took over as the prime minister from Shinzo Abe, he indicated that most policies of the former administration, including constitution revision, would be inherited. Nevertheless, Mr Suga seemed to feel more than willing but lacking the power to give impetus to constitution revision since fighting COVID-19 as well as organizing Tokyo Olympics had been the two key priorities in the one-year ruling time, albeit it is estimated that the future government will continue to carry forward this enterprise as long as the epidemic gets moderated.

From the perspective of the United States, the Biden administration as well as the future ones, are likely to continue its close cooperation with Japan in the deployment of a missile defense system for the consideration of the vested interests of the United States in East Asia which it is directly related to the adjustment of the Japan-US alliance with Japan acting as the "shield" while the United States as the "spear". Despite it is not the willingness of the United States to change the status quo of Japan-US alliance mechanism which is evidently unequal, for the practical consideration of safeguarding its own strategic interests in the Asia Pacific region in which Chinese influence is increasing, the American government has to pay attention to allies demanding for equivalence in bilateral cooperation.

Figure 1. Asahi Shimbun reader's positions on constitution revision

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Source: Asahi Shimbun (English)

(In May 2020, the gap between those who opposed and favored revision shrank to 3 percent, with 46 percent opposed and 43 percent in favor. Asahi Shimbun readers are typically cautious on constitutional revision. Thus it is predicted that the popular basis for this issue may be more solid according to this current trend.)

3. Realize diversification: Strengthen comprehensive power

Under the influence of COVID-19, the United States urgently needs Japan to undertake the role of safeguarding the strategic interests of the United States in East Asia and even the whole world. (Yaodong Lv, 2020) With regard to the traditional security, the Suga government had frequently emphasized that Japan would purchase more sophisticated weapons from the United States, hoping to rely on the bilateral alliance to improve the deterrence of the self-defense force.

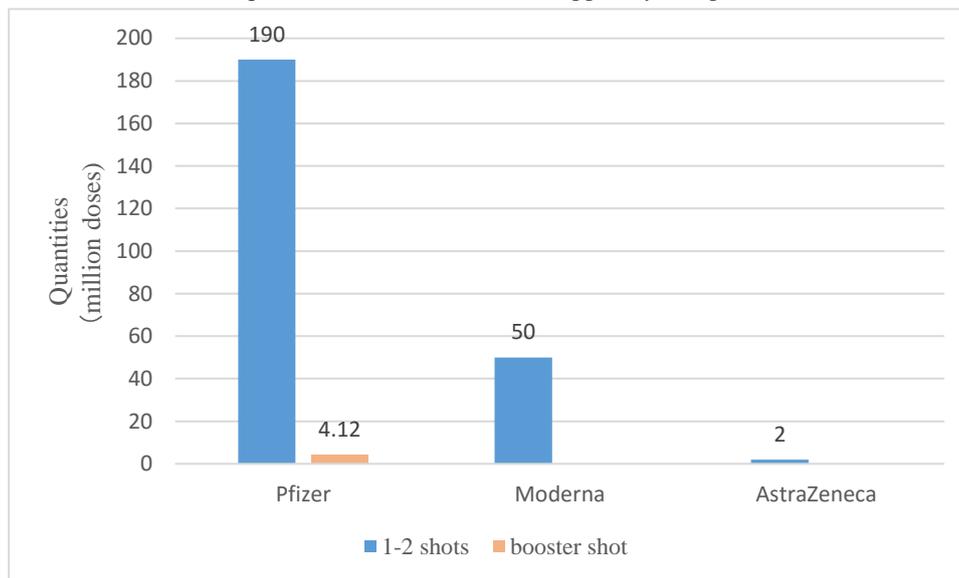
Actually, apart from military reciprocity, Japan can gain substantial benefits from many other fields while enhancing its intimate relations with Washington, which is quite conducive to enhancing synthetic national power. The heads of these two countries announced in their joint meeting on April 16 that they will constantly strengthen cooperation in the domain of life sciences, biological sciences, artificial intelligence, quantum info-technology and space research. Additionally, the Suga administration welcomed Biden's approval of returning to the

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Paris Agreement and hoped to achieve a "decarbonization society" through bilateral cooperation in curbing climate change. Biden also expressed his willingness to cooperate with Japan in the aspect of fighting against COVID-19, vigorously supporting Mr Suga in purchasing vaccines from Pfizer and Moderna.

In addition to a pursuit of multi-field collaboration with the US, Suga administration also spared no effort in deepening relations with countries including India, Australia and Britain who share common values with Japan, which highlights Mr Suga’s further development towards value-oriented diplomacy of Abe administration.

Figure 2. COVID-19 vaccines supplied for Japan.



Source: Yahoo! Japan

(Suga administration has purchased more than 240 million doses of COVID-19 vaccine, the majority of which is from US-based vaccine companies like Pfizer and Moderna.)

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue(Quad), in which Japan, America, Australia and India are currently involved, was initially proposed by Mr Abe with the aim to uphold “freedom and prosperity” in the Asia-Pacific. Abe’s proposals were widely understood as aimed at countering Beijing’s growing influence in the region even though he did not mention China. Since 2017, the Quad has held several more rounds of dialogue and even organized the first joint naval exercises since the forum’s initial incarnation. [5] Though the Quad generally refrained from directly mentioning China, Motegi Toshimitsu, Japanese foreign minister, was

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the only person who mentioned China in the first Quad ministerial meeting since President Biden's inauguration through a statement expressing "serious concern with regard to China's coastguard law", which indicates Suga government's possible intention to play a catalytic role in attaining the goal of Quad, which is about maintaining the "rule of law, honoring agreements, respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, and peaceful resolution of disputes", and these norms have been "unilaterally revised" by China. (*Lalit Kapur, 2021*)

The Quad also provides a valuable opportunity for Japan to perfect strength in various domains so that its influence can be promoted internationally. Few days before leaving the office, Mr Suga paid a special visit to the White House and met the other two leaders of the Quad in person for the first time. The leaders solidified their commitment to collaborating on a range of issues including COVID-19 vaccines, green-shipping network, semiconductor supply-chain initiative and space exploration. Innovative mechanisms for collaboration will be vital since this is an ambitious agenda; deliberate and consistent attention will also be required for implementation.^[6]

4. China Policy: tentative or provocative?

Compared with the extraordinary intimate Japan-US relations, Japan has also developed multi-domain collaboration with China for several decades, but it is currently far from in-depth and prone to volatility due to some sensitive factors related to historical and political issues. As the second-largest economy in G7, Japan has co-operated much further and more extensive with other western countries (particularly the United States), to which its administrations will be preferentially inclined to turn while encountering national emergencies exactly as what Mr Suga has done in COVID-19 period when tension has risen between Washington and Beijing. Following western countries led by the United States, Suga administration had explicitly expressed concerns to Chinese government on "suppressing" democracy and human rights in Hong Kong and Xinjiang, but he remained prudent when it came to imposing sanction on Chinese officials, which revealed his apprehension on head-on confrontation with China.

One event that has once caused tensions between Japan and China happened on April 16 when Mr Suga and President Biden emphasized the importance of peace and stability of Taiwan Strait in their joint leaders' statement, which was considered to be a gross provocation

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leading to sharp retrogression of Sino-Japan relations by some Chinese analysts because both two heads of Japan and US have avoided addressing Taiwan issues in public since 1966. On the other hand, many others argued that such action, with relatively oblique words, is rather tentative since Taiwan issues had already been mentioned in the US-Japan foreign ministers' and defense ministers' meeting(2+2) on March 16. Generally, such moves reflect the reality that the current Japanese leader, even the candidates for president of the LDP including Mr Fumio Kishida who was formerly a foreign policy dove towards China, holds a deposition for getting tough with Beijing against the backdrop of strained Sino-US relations and the increasingly austere situation in Taiwan Strait, which will inevitably overshadow the prospects of Japan-China relations. So why did Mr Suga take the risk?

For quite some time, Japan's China policy has been primarily affected by the orientation of the United States due to the present alliance between these two countries in terms of security. Concerning the fierce competition between China and the United States as well as the state that China is dealing with affairs assertively in the South China Sea and Taiwan which is contiguous to southern Japan, is contributing to a consensus within the LDP that a toughening stance against China should be taken. Another fact concerning Japan-China relations that cannot be neglected is the continuing poor perception of China in Japan. On 17 November, 2020, two months after Mr Suga took office, an annual survey conducted by Japanese organizations including Japan's Genron NPO showed that the proportion of Japanese with a negative perception of China came to 89.7%, rising for the first time in four years. The majority of the respondents were antagonistic to the repeated intrusions into Japanese territorial waters around the Senkaku Islands (Diaoyu Islands called by Chinese) as well as China's actions in the South China Sea which are inconsistent with international rules. By contrast, there were only 52.9% of Chinese respondents who held negative impressions about Japan.^[7] Folk dissatisfaction towards China urged Mr Suga to maintain his hard-line stance. Simultaneously, viewed from economic aspects, current Japanese industry is reluctant to review its growing dependence with China's economy. Some people in Japan recently even advocated decoupling from Chinese economy on the ground of safeguarding domestic economic security (*Kodachi,2020*). On the whole, it is argued that China's aggressive behaviors have exacerbated the harsh public perception of China in Japan as well as the regional unrest, but it seems that there is a fundamental lack of understanding among Chinese policymakers in the regard of this.^[8]

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Nevertheless, it is not negligible that China is Japan's largest trade partner, export market and import source with bilateral trade volume reaching 317.5 billion US dollars in 2020, which is expected to set an all-time record. Considering the enormous potential of collaboration between Japan and China in the post-epidemic era with economic resurgence and frequent folk exchange, blindly following American wishes at the expense of the tremendous economic interests from China may ultimately prove Pyrrhic. In view of this, apart from maintaining economic collaboration, constructive and inclusive approaches of these two countries need a bilateral response so that a substantial outcome can be produced. One of Japan's leading experts on China, called Ario Takahara, suggested Japan and China ought to compose a joint message on constructing a peaceful order in the future bilateral summits and even advocated that President Xi should indicate his readiness to build a free and open Indo-Pacific. Such development is not only contributory to remolding the regional political landscape but also provides an ideal litmus test for Japan's search for order and stability in Asia thanks to Japan and China's gravity in the regional balance of power.^[9] Consequently, when Japan's political atmosphere becomes suitable, it seems quite necessary to mediate President Xi's visit to Japan, which was previously postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

5. Conclusion

Currently, western countries including Japan tend to resolve on a much strong foreign policy towards China which has been accused of "repressing" the anti-extradition law protests in Hong Kong as well as deliberately "concealing" the outbreak of COVID-19. Unlike the former Abe administration which had several years of effort around ameliorating relations with China, Mr Suga has made some hostile actions towards China like intervention in Taiwan affairs, whose real purpose is to guarantee overall benefits gained from the intimate collaboration with the United States as well as to make subsequent adjustment and optimization of his China policy according to the extent of Chinese response so that Japan's self-interest can be maximized.

With Mr Kishida becoming the 100th Prime Minister of Japan, there has been great interest in the future development direction of Japan-China relations. Kishida's China policy is not expected to be as passive as the former administration thanks to his extensive experience as a

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Foreign Minister so he is perfectly clear about where the bottom line lies. (Zhigang Da, 2021) Mr Kishida is also leading Kouchikai, a faction of the LDP known for its dovish, liberal-leaning stance. Thus It is predicted by some Chinese scholars that the Kishida administration will possibly do some practical things to ameliorate the current circumstance of Japan-China relations including policy adjustments to promote economic exchanges, with cooperation between Chinese and Japanese enterprises under the framework of Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership(RCEP) in particular. They are also anticipating bilateral collaborations in fighting COVID-19, mitigating the global climate change and intensifying people-to-people contacts. [10]

The continuity of Kishida's policy will be significantly affected by the results of the House of Representatives election held on the last day of October. If the opposition parties(especially the Constitutional Democratic Party, or CDP) fail to make significant electoral gains, Mr Kishida's leadership in the LDP will be further consolidated so that he can minimize the constraints of his former administrations and persist in his own path. Still, the strategy of "equilibrium diplomacy", which has long been adopted by successive Japanese authorities, is quite likely to be inherited by Mr Kishida as well as the future government. Due to the political exclusivity and pertinence of US-Japan military alliance, it may be arduous to handle the trilateral relations ideally among Japan, US and China through this strategy, meaning that Mr Kishida as well as future leaders of Japan should make full preparation for this challenging journey.

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