CHAPTER 6

Japan and the South China Sea Disputes — Emerging Power Politics and "Fake Liberalism"

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Japan, over the last two decades, — and especially intensifying under the current administration of Prime Minister Abe Shinzō (2012–present day) — has devoted considerable attention to, and even increasing preparedness for indirect and direct involvement in, the emergent South China Sea (SCS) disputes. Abe has built on the approach of previous governments of both Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) hues, but been particularly vocal in advocating a position in regard to the SCS that forms part of his agenda of a "proactive contribution to peace" (*sekkyoku-teki heiwashugi*), which in turn is underpinned by the pursuit of self-proclaimed liberal values. Abe — upon his return to power for his second stint in office — argued that Japan should function in the Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific as a "rules promoter" for trade, investment, intellectual property, labour and the environment; a "guardian of the global commons", including the "maritime commons"; and work with the other like-minded democracies to promote these values. In statements related to the SCS, Abe in one of his earliest pronouncements on the point of returning to office, articulated the concept of an "Asian Democratic Security Diamond", consisting of Japan, Australia, India, and the US that would seek to safeguard the "maritime commons" from the Indian Ocean to the Western Pacific, and counter China's ambitions to convert the South China Sea into "Lake Beijing" and to alter the territorial *status quo* in the region by coercion (Abe 2013a). Abe emphasized that this concept was underpinned crucially by the universal values of democracy, the rule of law, and human rights (Abe 2012).

Abe again emphasized in a speech in Jakarta in January 2013, Japan's interest in keeping "Asia's seas unequivocally free, open and peaceful" through the principles of governing the maritime global commons by "rules and laws, not might" (Abe 2013b). In May 2014, Abe further stated in a keynote address at the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue Asia Security

Summit — obliquely and without doubt referring to the SCS and concerns over China's activities — that Asian security should be determined by the principles of freedom, democracy and the rule of law, and that maritime issues should be addressed through clarification of claims based on international law, through non-coercion, and peaceful means (Abe 2014). Abe further proposed, directly referring to the SCS, that all concerned parties should avoid unilateral action and return to the spirit and provisions of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)-China 2002 "Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea".

Taken at face value, therefore, Abe and Japan's stance on the SCS as a part of a broader security strategy of a "proactive contribution to peace" appears to engender a rejection of power politics and *realpolitik*, and instead an embrace of a fundamentally liberal approach expressed in working with other liberal-minded and democratic nations, upholding the rule of international law, and reliance on multilateral associations and frameworks. However, this chapter argues that Japan's position towards the SCS disputes has many more dimensions and is often far from running in line with, and indeed increasingly diverging from, the liberal principles espoused by Abe in particular. For just as Abe's larger security program has been subject to critique in regard to its ambitions to expand Japan's military capabilities and external commitments often driven by a new engagement in balance of power politics vis-à-vis China and historical revisionist and nationalist sentiment, so Japan's SCS policy can be revealed as a subset of this arguably highly realist approach to international relations (Hughes 2015).

Japan for the last decade or so — and becoming markedly more prominent during Abe's tenure in power — appears to be not only avoiding following with any great energy the components of its own professed liberal line in SCS issues, but in many cases to be moving actually in direct contravention as its practices its own brand of the very power politics that it has supposedly rejected itself and condemned others for utilizing, and especially (in veiled terms) China. Japan's motivations for increasing involvement in the SCS revolve around classic realist issues of the balance of power and its own territorial and economic material concerns. Moreover, Japan's means for addressing the SCS appear increasingly realist in tone in prioritizing common cause with regimes that are evidently not democracies and lack strong regard for human rights; in failing to maintain a stance on territorial issues and the maritime commons that is consistent with issues of international law; and in taking an approach to multilateral cooperation that is nominal, opportunistic, selective and ultimately an extension of power politics. Furthermore, in pursuing its interests in the

SCS, Japan is utilizing not just old patterns of diplomacy with the ASEAN states and China, but is now actively engaging in new forms of "soft" and increasingly "hard" balancing as it seeks to form diplomatic coalitions and military partnerships to contain Chinese influence and to enhance its potential ability to deploy, individually or collectively, military force in the SCS. Overall, therefore, Japan's opting for expediency and realism in the SCS makes it more and more indistinguishable from other actors in the region, and exposes its rhetoric of principled values as a form of "fake liberalism".

Japan's Typically Realist Interests in the SCS Disputes

Japan in the post-war period, although not always seeking direct engagement due to the impact of its colonial past in Southeast Asia and accompanying constraints on its diplomatic and military power, has long maintained a strong set of interests in the SCS. In particular, Japan's reliance on the Straits of Malacca SCS for the passage of around one third of its global trade and close to 90 percent of its oil supplies has been a constant interest (Midford 2015: 525; Storey 2013a: 139). The fact that Japan maintains such material interests as open access to markets and resources, and concerns over the security of the sea lines of communication (SLOC), can certainly be portrayed as congruent with a liberal world view and has clearly been cast as such by Abe and other Japanese policy makers. Nevertheless, in recent years, Japan's approach to the SCS can be revealed as far more congruent with and placed within Abe's evolving and broader security vision that correlates strongly to typically realist notions of the regional balance of power, territorial integrity, balancing behavior, and essential concerns over relative rather than absolute gains as manifested in the SCS.

Japan's predominant approach to regional order and security during most of the post-war period has been that of a *status quo* power. Japanese grand strategy as formulated in the so-called "Yoshida Doctrine", originally formulated by Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru and then refined by his mainstream LDP successors, has essentially sought to preserve the *status quo* of a US-centered international order and strong US security and economic engagement, or even hegemony, in East Asia, so as to benefit Japan's own reengagement with Northeast and Southeast Asia, economic development, and a circumscribed military commitment.[1] Japan's approach towards China within this grand strategy for most of the post-war period has been attempts to foster its internal domestic reform, and integration into the regional political economy and cooperation frameworks. Japanese policy makers have thus had confidence, for much of the Cold War period and into the early 2000s, that China's behavior

in the region could be influenced in a benign direction and within the evolving international liberal order sponsored by the US and supported by Japan. In this sense, Japan's policy can be seen to corresponding to promoting a form of liberal international order (Ikenberry 2012: 333–60).

Nonetheless, since the early 2000s, Japanese policy makers have become conscious of the deterioration of the existing international and regional orders, and the transition from the relatively comfortable *status quo* of the US-led hegemonic order to a shifting balance of power and new era of uncertainty. The US-led international order is seen to be under stress from the US's own economic vulnerabilities and military overstretch and accompanying risks of isolationism or practice of a more predatory form of hegemony to secure its own interests and neglect those of other allies and partners. At the same time, the US's relative hegemonic decline and the shifting balance of power is seen to be compounded by China's rise. China is viewed as only partially integrated into the regional order, and indeed increasingly anti-*status quo* in orientation as it seeks to check or gradually push out US influence from the East Asia region by building its military power and starting to forge new frameworks for economic cooperation revolving around China. The scale of China's regional ambitions and intent to overturn the *status quo* are also thought to be manifested in the attempt to use bilateral economic and security ties to pull individual ASEAN states into its orbit, and to again pursue territorial claims in Northeast and Southeast Asia, often driven by a growing sense of irredentist nationalism within China (Hughes 2016).

In turn, Japanese policy makers are aware that this transforming regional order has potentially deep implications for Japan itself. Japanese policy makers are increasingly apprehensive that the Chinese leadership has a desire to marginalize Japanese political and economic influence in the East Asia region; to increasingly dominate the regional security order and so jeopardize Japan's core security interests reliant on the maintenance of the US-Japan alliance, maritime security and SLOCs; and that the renewal of Chinese nationalism, often engendered in anti-Japanese sentiment from the colonial period, will express itself in renewed tensions over territorial and resource disputes in the East China Sea. Japanese policy makers and the general public were most alerted to these types of risk in the aftermath of the 2010 incident involving a Chinese trawler and the Japan Coast Guard (JCG) around the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islets which resulted in a diplomatic stand-off, a supposed Chinese economic embargo on rare earth resources, and thereafter prolonged tensions between the coast guards and militaries of both sides around the islets. For many Japanese the incident revealed that China was clearly no longer just perhaps posturing over the territorial dispute

but was intent on asserting its territorial claims, would not accept the *status quo*, and was seemingly prepared to use economic levers and even military force to pursue its claims (Smith 2015: 100–45, 110–96).[2]

Japan's policy makers have reacted to these scenarios connected with China's rise with considerable constraint and retain some confidence that China can be engaged — and that the deep economic interdependency built up over the last three decades can mitigate tensions over bilateral issues and the shape of the larger regional order. Indeed, the DPJ in its brief period in power from 2009 to 2012 sought initially to redouble engagement efforts with China (Hughes 2012: 129–30). Nonetheless, Japan's dominant policy makers in the LDP and central bureaucracy increasingly share a consensus that China's influence in the region can no longer be easily steered in a benign direction, and that the absolute gains of economic cooperation that might be thought to approximate to a liberal mode of interaction are giving way to concerns of relative gains over access to economic resources and markets, maritime security concerns, and territorial disputes that more reflect realist imperatives (Hughes 2016: 125–8).

As a consequence, Abe and other policy makers have shifted their policy to a more explicitly realist stance toward China's rise. Abe has argued that, whilst Japan clearly wants to avert tensions with China and prefers engagement, it is important to recognize that China is a state which works on a fundamental logic of only respecting power and thus Japan has respond with a more robust diplomatic, economic and military stance (*Yomiuri Shimbun* 2015). For Abe this means restoring Japan's position as "tier-one" or even great power in the international community, reviving its own economic fortunes through "Abenomics", deepening and strengthening the US-Japan alliance and US presence in the region, and working with a coalition of potential allies such as Australia and India, and partners in Southeast Asia and on China's periphery as a counterweight to its influence. Hence, Abe has spent much of the early years of his second administration bolstering the US-Japan alliance through the 2015 revision of the US-Japan Guidelines for Defense Cooperation and the passing of legislation to enable Japan's exercise of collective self-defense in support of the US. Abe has also demonstrated great energy in visiting states in ASEAN, Northeast Asia, Central Asia, South Asia and the Middle East, and pledging political cooperation in a barely veiled attempt to "encircle" China's influence (Hughes 2015: 64–89).

Japan's move towards viewing the regional order and China's rise within a more overtly realist framework has thus meant that it increasingly views its interests in the SCS issue in similar terms, so making its claims of a liberal stance as rather thin. Japan's first

National Security Strategy (NSS) of 2013 makes evident this realist outlook on the SCS. At the same time as discussing Japan's desire for open seas and respect for the global commons, the NSS clearly views the SCS disputes within the realist context of the balance of power. As the section on "Security Environment and Challenges in the Asia-Pacific Region" argues:

> The shift in the global power balance has elevated the importance of the Asia-Pacific region in the international community. While this shift provides opportunities for security cooperation, it has also given rise to regional issues and tensions….
>
> In this context, in addition to the issues and tensions arising from the shift in the balance of power, the Asia-Pacific region has become more prone to so-called "gray-zone" situations, situations that are neither pure peacetime nor contingencies over territorial sovereignty and interests….
>
> China has taken actions that can be regarded as attempts to change the *status quo* by coercion based on their own assertions, which are incompatible with the existing order of international law, in the maritime and aerial domains, including the East China Sea and the South China Sea (Cabinet Office of Japan 2013: 11–12).

Japan has clearly ramped up its interest in the SCS as part of its vigilance against and desire to counter China's deleterious effect on the balance of power in Southeast Asia as well as the wider East Asia region, and as will be seen in later sections, has practiced diplomacy and "soft" and "hard" balancing in action-reaction fashion to China's expanding influence.

In addition, as noted from the NSS statement above, it is clear that Japan's engagement in the SCS has been driven deeper not just by concern for the ramifications of the disputes in Southeast Asia, but because of the potential close linkages with its own national interests over maritime and territorial issues with China (Pugliese and Insisa 2017: 43–54). Japanese policy makers anticipate that China's expansionism in the SCS creates a pattern for imposing its will on Japan over the Senkakus dispute (de Castro 2013: 160). China's stratagem is viewed as looking to first of all drive out US influence from the region and separate Japan from the US so as to expose Japan alone to dealing with China on the territorial dispute (Bōeishōhen 2011: 76). At the same time, and in the same way as the SCS, China is seeking — through maintaining a constant presence of its civilian maritime agencies and "over the horizon" the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) —to intimidate Japan and erode its will to resist (Satake 2017: 239–44; Storey 2013b: 2). All of this is reinforced by China's precedent of overriding the rule of international law in the SCS and its potential transfer to the context of the East China Sea.

Japan as a Consistent Upholder of the Rule of International Law in SCS?

Japan's policy makers, with Abe at the forefront, have sought to argue that they take a principled and internationalist stance on the SCS in line with international law and norms, and in apparent contradistinction to China's approach based on power politics and narrow national interest. However, Japan's rhetoric does not entirely stand up to scrutiny and appears contradiction-ridden.

As Midford points out, Japan's supposed liberal logic is flawed. Most importantly, in its treatment of the controversy over its own Okinotorishima territory Japan appears to be acting in contravention of the United National Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which it claims all states should adhere to in the SCS.[3] Japan's Okinotorishima is a small reef in the Western Pacific that is used to claim a 200 nautical mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and continental shelf beyond. Japan has persisted in its claims despite the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf ruling in April 2012 that Okinotorishima was not entitled to a shelf status given it was deemed an uninhabitable geographical feature, and so indicating also that Japan was in contravention of UNCLOS with its claimed EEZ. Nevertheless, Japan has continued land reclamation at Okinotorishima and maintains its EEZ under its own interpretation of UNCLOS as permitting this for "islands" such as Okinotorishima but not for other geographical features that are "rocks" (Yabuki 2016: 97–106).

Japan's contravention of UNCLOS in the case of Okinotorishima has been made even starker following the July 2016 ruling of the Tribunal at the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) at the Hague regarding the maritime dispute between China and the Philippines. The Tribunal ruled in favor of the Philippines and interpreted Article 121 of UNCLOS in such a way that insignificant "features" should not be entitled to generate large maritime zones. The Tribunal rejected any distinction between "rocks" and "islands" and produced a definition of a feature that indicated the necessity of sustaining a stable human community and non-reliance on outside resources or purely extractive economic activity, and so rejected in turn China's claim that it could use its reclamation activities as the basis for territorial claims.

Japan, though, has not appeared to take heed of the ruling for its own territorial claims, still arguing for the distinction between rocks and islands, and that Okinotorishima constitutes the latter, and arbitrarily claiming that the ruling does not apply to the Western Pacific. Japan, in this instance, appears to be acting in contravention of UNCLOS that applies globally and to be contradicting its own stance on the application of UNCLOS in the SCS. The Japanese government expressed strong support for the July 2016 Tribunal outcome and

the stance of the Philippines. As Foreign Minister Kishia Fumio stated on the announcement of the Tribunal's decision:

> The Government of Japan supports the Philippines' use of procedures under the UNCLOS aiming at peaceful settlement of disputes on the basis of international law, as such an action contributes to the maintenance and enhancement of the international order in the region based on the rule of law (MOFA 2016a).

The fact that Japan supports the UNCLOS in the SCS and critiques China for not abiding by its rulings but chooses to ignore it in the case of Okinotorishima clearly casts doubt on Japan's rhetoric of liberalism. Moreover, in other instances, Japan has been observed as critiquing China for overriding UNCLOS while itself selectively applying its provisions or even practicing the same behavior as China. Japan has, for instance, opposed foreign intelligence gathering and surveys in its EEZ, even though the US has taken the line that this is permitted under UNCLOS, and so Japan has actually has moved closer to China's position and the type of activities that China has been accused of taking heavy handed action on in the South China Sea.

Japan's Selective Multilateralism

Japan's clear preference has been for a diplomatic approach to achieve a resolution to the SCS issues or at least maintain the *status quo*. Consequently, it has sought in the past to support and initiate itself a range of multilateral frameworks to address the SCS disputes. Japan was in part one of the originators of the concept of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) established in 1994 and worked with its membership to persuade China to discuss aspects of the SCS multilaterally. Similarly, Japan supported efforts through the 2010 ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM) Plus forum to encourage China to work with the ASEAN states to conclude a binding Code of Conduct relating to the SCS. Japan went further in November 2011 and proposed at the East Asian Summit (EAS) that the ASEAN Maritime Forum (AMF) should be expanded into a wider regional forum incorporating the ASEAN states and eight dialogue partners. Japan's proposal, after considerable discussion, was subsequently given shape with the creation in 2012 of the Expanded AMF (EAMF) comprising the EAS membership.

All of this activity would seem to support the Japanese government line that it has been a model proponent of multilateral norms and approaches in the SCS. That Japan has been active multilaterally and a supporter of key initiatives cannot be denied. Nevertheless, it is

also arguable that Japan has become increasingly skeptical of the efficacy of multilateral initiatives over time and attempted to shape frameworks, some competitive in nature, to enable it to pursue its own national relative gains within a cover of multilateralism.

Japan's continuing disenchantment with the ARF as a forum capable of moving from dialogue to actual conflict resolution has been well documented (Yuzawa 2005). Japanese policy makers have also been alarmed at ASEAN's seeming inability to effectively address the SCS issue, despite its being the most mature multilateral diplomatic community in the region. China's ability to drive a wedge within ASEAN over the SCS was illustrated for Japan at the July 2012 ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting which failed to agree to a final statement because of Cambodia's refusal to include mention of the SCS for its concern at alienating China (Storey 2013a: 152–3). In 2012, ASEAN did restore its unity and begin discussions with China on a binding Code of Conduct for the SCS, but Japan's concerns over the weakness of ASEAN to achieve a multilateral approach to the SCS still remains.

Japan has thus switched increasingly to a track of not abandoning multilateral frameworks as a means to address the SCS but of tailoring them to suit its own political interests (Limaye and Kikuchi 2016: 11). Hence, Japan's proposal for the EAMF was undoubtedly precipitated by the intensification of the Sino-Japanese dispute over the ECS in 2010 and the increasing perceived linkage, already pointed out in early sections, with the SCS. Japan was seeking through the EAMF proposal to further multilateralize the SCS, but do it in such a way that drew into the grouping dialogue partners that were clearly favorable to its maritime cause, including the US, Australia and India, and thus the EAMF was a form of extension of Japanese balancing of China in the ECS and SCS seen in earlier and later sections. It was therefore no surprise that China initially opposed Japan's proposal for fear of this multilateral framework being used to isolate it diplomatically.

Japan's Bilateral Dealings and Ebbing Liberalism

Japan's frustrations with the limitations of multilateralism to deal with the SCS disputes has encouraged its policy makers to increasingly switch energies to developing bilateral tracks (Ordaniel 2015: 112). This has involved working with Southeast Asian partner states that essentially share Japan's own views on the SCS, suspicions of China, and strategic alignment with the US. Significantly, Japan appears to have been willing to work with these states with declining reference to or even with disregard to any suggestion of their status as supposedly

"like-minded" liberal powers, so indicating that Japan places its realist political interests far above considerations of principle.

The prime target for Japan's efforts to build a bilateral, interest-based approach to the SCS has been The Philippines. Japan's policy makers have clearly identified The Philippines as key given that it is a prime disputant with China over the SCS, is aligned with the US, and is a functioning democracy. Prime Minister Tarō Asō and President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo had already sought to foster a "strategic partnership" in 2009, although it largely did not touch upon security issues, referred only to maritime security in relation to the Straits of Malacca and piracy, and made no mention of the SCS (MOFA 2009). In 2011, however, in the wake of Japan's growing concerns over China's territorial ambitions after the Sino-Japanese trawler incident, and as the SCS disputes heated up, Prime Minister Noda Yoshihiko and President Benigno S. Aquino concluded a full "Strategic Partnership", which stated that based on shared values of freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law they should expand cooperation beyond economics into maritime security, including exchanges and coordination with the Japan Coast Guard and Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF), and now mentioning for the first time diplomatic support in the SCS (MOFA 2011).

As explained in more detail in the next section, Japan under Noda pressed ahead with substantive bilateral maritime security cooperation with The Philippines, and Abe has largely continued this approach of enhancing diplomatic and security coordination over the SCS, including the transfer of maritime patrol vessels. The Abe administration has expressed support for The Philippines taking the territorial disputes to the PCA, and in turn Aquino backed Abe's revision of the constitutional prohibition on the exercise of collective self defense and thus a potentially more active security role in the Asia-Pacific region (MOFA 2015a). Most notably, though, the Abe administration has not shifted its position in any way on Japan-Philippines cooperation even with the transition to the new regime of President Rodrigo Duterte. After assuming power Duterte has indicated the intention to pursue an "independent foreign policy" of distancing The Philippines from the US and rapprochement with China, even comprising the acceptance of military assistance (Parameswaran 2017). Duterte has also pursued a domestic set of policies around the "drug war" which has raised questions of a new authoritarianism and international condemnation of breaches of human rights. The Abe government has, however, remained silent on these domestic issues, preferring to maintain its same policy line towards the Philippines to avoid its moving further toward China. All this indicates that Japan is far more focused on pursuing power politics around the SCS disputes than concerning itself with the illiberalism of the Duterte

government and its contraventions of the foundations of the Japan-Philippines strategic partnership supposedly based on common principles.

Japan's preparedness to prioritize its strategic interests in the SCS disputes in aligning with Southeast Asian states whilst sidelining its liberal principles is further demonstrated in its pursuit of closer bilateral ties with Vietnam. Japan and Vietnam concluded their own "strategic partnership" in October 2010, which was gradually expanded in scope to commenting on the SCS and maritime security cooperation (MOFA 2010). Vietnam also expressed support for Japan's intention to revise the ban on the exercise of collective self-defense, and Japan, as with the Philippines, also looked to transfer maritime patrol vessels (MOFA 2015b). Japan and Vietnam have repeatedly justified this interaction in terms of common values of the rule of law. However, Japan has consistently overlooked the fact that it is aligning with a highly illiberal state in the shape of Vietnam which has been argued to have a human rights record that is little better than that of China.[4]

Japan's "Soft" and "Hard" Balancing in the SCS

Japan's failing liberalism in approaching the SCS has meant that it has resorted to methods of engagement in the issue that approximate increasingly to a realist doctrine. Of course, the Japanese preferred approach, as noted in previous sections, is diplomacy and a form of "soft" balancing of China's ambitions in Southeast Asia. Japan has pursued this "soft" balancing through its key bilateral ties outlined in the previous sections. Its extension of power interests in multilateral fora to constrain China's influence has also been noted. More generally, Japan has sought, through working with ASEAN and other states concerned with the SCS and China's rise, to influence the diplomatic balance of power to complicate China's freedom of action.

Abe's diplomacy in Southeast Asia has been highly vigorous. Shortly after assuming power in December 2012, the new prime minister paid visits to Vietnam, Thailand, and Indonesia in January 2013, Myanmar in May, and Malaysia, Singapore, and The Philippines in July, Brunei in October, and Cambodia and Laos in November. Abe had thus visited all the ASEAN states by the end of his first year in office. Abe has reinforced diplomacy with economic assistance: Japan pledged close to US$20 billion in official development assistance (ODA) to ASEAN states at the Japan-ASEAN Commemorative Summit in Tokyo in December 2013. Overall, therefore, Japan and Abe in these interactions with the ASEAN

states has attempted to lead the creation of a regional system characterized by a series of shared values that are set up in implicit opposition to China's rising presence.

Starting before Abe, but consolidating under his administration, the most significant development in Japan's behavior relating to the SCS has been a move toward a form of "hard" balancing. This stratagem has taken various interlocking forms of enhancing the maritime capacity of individual ASEAN states, supporting the presence of the US in the region, and an increasingly direct projection of JCG and MSDF presence in the sub-region.

Japan has been attempting since the early 2000s to boost the maritime security capacity of ASEAN states, particularly to respond to the threat of piracy in the Straits of Malacca, but more generally to enhance the ability of Southeast Asian partners to exert presence in the region in the face of China's rise and to prevent any easy destabilization by the latter of the territorial *status quo*. Japan stepped up these efforts under the Noda and Abe administration in line with the rising consciousness of China's intent to purse its territorial claims. Japan, in seeking to further develop "strategic partnerships" with the Philippines and Vietnam, agreed in July 2013 to export ten patrol boats to the former through a yen loan and thus as part of the ODA provision, and in January 2013 to investigate providing similar maritime security support to Vietnam (MOFA 2013a, 2013b, Midford 2015). Japan and the Philippines signed a defense ministry-level "Memorandum on Defense Cooperation and Exchanges" in January 2015, including pledging collaboration on defense equipment and technology (MOD 2015a). Japan and the Philippines further produced in June 2015 an "Action Plan for Strengthening of the Strategic Partnership", again making reference to defense equipment cooperation (MOD 2015b). In September 2015, Abe and President Duterte agreed on the transfer to The Philippines of MSDF TC-90 training aircraft (MOFA 2016b). The Japan Ministry of Defense (JMOD) was also reported in December 2016 as attempting to sell MELCO's FSP-3 radar to Thailand in order to counter China's increasing influence in arms sales to the country (*The Japan Times* 2016a*)*.

Japan's second main effort has involved improving potential support for the US's ability to maintain the *status quo* in the SCS as the dominant military player and the only power capable of facing down China's use of force. The 2015 revised US-Japan Guidelines for Defense Cooperation contain a number of statements about the need for enhanced bilateral cooperation in maritime security in the Asia-Pacific region (MOFA 2015c). Japan's reinterpretation of constitutional prohibitions and passing of new legislation between 2014 and 2015 to enable the exercise of the right of collective self-defense has further made feasible US-Japan military cooperation in the SCS (Hughes 2017). Japan's support for the US

is likely to be its traditional "shield" role to support the "sword" of US power projection, taking the form of the provision of bases in Japan for US Navy and Air Force missions into the SCS and the likely extension of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities through its maritime patrol aircraft and increasing space-based maritime domain awareness (MDA) capabilities. Japan might also be called upon to provide logistic support for the US military in the event of conflict. Least likely would be Japan's joining the US or other Southeast Asian states in collective self-defense combat operations, but Japan is certainly now equipped constitutionally for such a role for the first time.

In addition to constitutional empowerment, Japan is perhaps equipped for the first time for a direct military role in the SCS due to the experience and capabilities it has built up over the past two decades. The JMOD's National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG) was revised in 2010 to note that the JSDF would enhance security cooperation with the ASEAN states (MOD 2010: 9). The further revision of the NDPG in 2013 stressed the importance of maritime security cooperation with ASEAN countries (MOD 2013: 11). Japan has thus expanded military-to-military non-combat cooperation with ASEAN states. For instance, two MSDF destroyers and a submarine made a much publicized port visit to the Philippines' Subic Bay in April 2016, and then the destroyers continued on to Vietnam's Cam Ranh Bay the same month (*The Japan Times* 2016b*)*. President Benigno Aquino, on visiting Japan in June 2015, also claimed his government would initiate talks with Japan on a Visiting Forces Agreement to allow the JSDF to use bases in the Philippines (*Asahi Shimbun* 2015a).

Japan's potential for much greater naval deployments in the SCS has been demonstrated in other instances. The JMOD dispatched over 1000 JSDF personnel and three MSDF vessels for relief operations around the Leyte Gulf following the Haiyan cyclone disaster in the Philippines in 2013. In November 2015, during the US-Japan Summit at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Forum in the Philippines, Abe expressed support for US Freedom of Navigation (FON) operations and even mused that as the South China Sea, "influenced Japan's own security continued attention would be devoted to it and investigation of JSDF activities", so hinting that Japan could join FON in line with interpretations of collective self-defense (*Asahi Shimbun* 2015b: 3*)*. In June 2017, the MSDF dispatched its largest vessel, the 27000 ton *Izumo*, classed as a destroyer but essentially a light helicopter carrier, for the first ever US-Japan joint naval exercise in the SCS. Although the exercise was not defined as FON, the fact that it came the same week as FON exercises by the USN was an indication of Japan's potential to take on such role (Osborn 2017).

Moreover, Japan is clearly building the military capacity for meaningful deployments in the SCS if necessary. The 2013 NDPG provides for two *Izumo*-class helicopter carriers embarking up to 14 helicopters, providing a very strong ASW (Anti-Submarine Warfare) capability and versatile naval asset for potentially supporting US missions in the SCS. MSDF submarine capabilities have increased, with the revised NDPG and accompanying Mid-Term Defense Program (MTDP) continuing the 2010 NDPG's build-up of the fleet from sixteen to twenty-two boats. The MSDF's air fleet is strengthened through the procurement of the P-1 aircraft with an 8000-kilometer range capable of patrolling and ASW operations deep into the SCS. All this adds to the sense that Japan can attempt to balance China not just via the ASEAN states and the US, but it can now directly intervene in the SCS disputes if the situation was sufficiently threatening to require it.

Conclusion: Japan's Traditional Realism Camouflaged as Liberalism

Japan's contention that it is pursuing in the SCS a policy characterized by the rejection of power politics and adoption instead of an approach based on essentially liberal values looks like a leaky proposition when held up to full scrutiny. Japan appears to be driven by the same considerations of the shifting balance of power, territory and material gain that has influenced other interested actors, including the largest protagonist in the disputes in the shape of China. Japan's concerns over the SCS, indeed, reflect the larger pattern of the deterioration of Sino-Japanese relations and the triumph of relative over absolute gains, so compounding the realist outlook. Japan also appears also to be an inconsistent upholder of international law — the most important claimed distinction between itself and China — in regard to its own parallel territorial claims in the Western Pacific and flouting of UNCLOS provisions. Japan's record in multilateral cooperation is a strong one, but it appears to be simply extending its realist concerns into these frameworks rather than allowing the frameworks themselves to be the decisively shapers of approaches to the disputes. Japanese policy makers have further demonstrated an increasing propensity to work bilaterally with regimes that are far from like-minded democracies, and are increasingly illiberal, if not outright authoritarian. Japan's preferred policy response is diplomatic in nature, but its current approach has clear "soft" balancing characteristics, and more and more Japanese policy makers are enhancing "hard" balancing options through the build-up of ASEAN states' maritime security capacity, the JSDF's own capabilities and experience of operation in the SCS region, and most crucially, cooperation with the US and other partners.

In sum, therefore, Japan's policy towards the SCS look like a plain case of realist calculations and responses. The liberal trope is perhaps a useful means of internationalizing the SCS disputes, painting Japan as an honest broker, and camouflaging its real interests and behavior. Japan's desire to conceal its approach is understandable given its desire to reassure East Asian neighbors of its security intentions, but just how much traction and effectiveness the approach has and will yield is questionable. Certainly, ASEAN states are in general less sympathetic to the playing of the liberal arguments.

In terms of the future implications of Japan's "fake liberalism" in the SCS, even if the camouflage is stripped away, the essential core approach is unlikely to remain unchanged. Japan will continue to seek to check Chinese influence in the sub-region through diplomacy and a quiet expansion of military presence. As noted above, Japan will seek to avoid direct confrontations with China in the SCS to avoid the image of attempting to exert any form of dominance or interference, and the main thrust of its policy is to complicate Chinese influence that could change the status quo by force or *fait accompli*. Nevertheless, if the situation in the SCS continues to deteriorate in China's favor, and the ECS situation fails to improve, then Japan's interests in the both and the linkage of the two might precipitate a more direct approach such as logistical or defensive support for US military action in the SCS.

Notes

[1] For classic formulations of the "Yoshida Doctrine" see Pyle (2007) and Samuels (2003).

[2] For a critical appraisal of the perceived "embargo" see Hagström (2012: 282–3).

[3] Midford (2018, forthcoming).

[4] Ibid.

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