

THE JAPANESE COAST GUARD'S OPERATIONALIZED HEDGING STRATEGY IN THE EAST CHINA SEA

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ABSTRACT

Qualitative evidence from nearly two dozen sources are used to explain how and why an energized, retooled, and restructured Japanese Coast Guard can serve as the primary enabler of an updated Japanese maritime security policy. This study examines the efforts associated with improving Japan's maritime security in the East China Sea against the pressure points of an assertive Chinese naval apparatus, as well as the country's enduring security partnership with the U.S. This research showcases both how, and more importantly, why, a specific Japanese Coast Guard-related policy and operational capability can be effective when developed and cultivated from a tailored hedging strategy. This study finds Japan's best bet for long-term stability and absolute security gain lies in operationalizing a varied hedging strategy through a capable and resourced coast guard.

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Introduction

The nation-state of Japan now stands at the crossroads of a dynamic Pacific power struggle. A contemporary Japan realizes that its national interests are deeply intertwined with both traditional and emergent regional actors. A preponderance of Japanese government elites and defense experts accept that the enduring bilateral security apparatus may have grown stale and potentially unresponsive to the modern-day realities of a Chinese "assertiveness" that deliberately operates in a coercive and ambiguous manner (Zhang 2015; Liff 2018; Turcsanyi 2018). On the one hand, although Japan considers the U.S.–Japan Alliance to be vital for its defense and regional stability, it is concerned about the future of the U.S.'s security commitment to East Asia. On the other hand, the Japan's economic livelihood from both trade and resources has become increasingly reliant on the emergent Sino state. This uncertainty regarding economic

prosperity and commitment to traditional alliances have given rise to a variety of tensions. Japan, with its security policy centered around a varied spectrum of hedging, is forced to delicately navigate between both China, which "has rapidly strengthened its material capabilities in projecting power beyond its borders and has been narrowing its capability gap with the United States," and an invigorated U.S., who with its regional hegemony is determined to force-feed the world some Hobbesian variation of a "pivot to the Pacific" to ensure both creditability and supremacy in the region (Koga 2018, 635; Ford 2020).

As China and the U.S. continue to promote domestic nationalism and refine economic and military policies through uber realist lenses, Japan pragmatically updates its security mechanisms and strategies. With traditional power projection platforms signaling potential offensive ambitions and thus contributing to ever-growing security dilemma and with the

procurement of modernized capital ships eroding an already tense national budget, “the purchase of new (self-protection orientated) vessels and aircraft, the construction of new bases, and the recruitment of additional personnel are turning the (Japanese Coast Guard) into an increasingly important asset in Japan’s national security calculus” (Hribernik 2015, 1). Critical to solving this national security conundrum is the belief that “Japan’s defense capability should not become too large, which could seriously harm other Asian states as well as the Japanese public and might even cause an arms race in East Asia. Japan’s security policy needs to avoid displaying any misleading signs regarding its capabilities and intentions” (Komine 2017, 246). Simultaneously, Japanese national security stakeholders and government decision-makers must ensure that any security policy and defense capability adequately deter “external threats and simultaneously reassure[s] both Japanese citizens and other Asians of the continuation of its self-defense non-nuclear posture” (Komine 2017, 246).

Research Questions, Purpose, and Methodology

With Chinese advances in defense technology and their continued implementation of coercive actions in the once seemingly black-and-white maritime domain, Japan now acknowledges the requirement for renewed physical, political, and psychological capital toward the East China Sea in hopes of wielding influence and ensuring security (Pajon 2017; Liff 2018; Liff 2019). As Japan stumbles forward in forging a security environment to its liking and necessity, as well as one which addresses the seemingly conflicting demands of China, the U.S., and an enduring domestic identity, essential questions begin to take shape. Do specific maritime defense-related tools exist to maximize Japanese security while reducing risk along the strategic, operational, and tactical frontiers? Can Japan effectively increase its security while also minimizing the ever-growing security dilemma between China and the U.S.? Why is an updated, refined, and energized Japanese Coast Guard vital to the security and stability of the East Asian Sea?

This study will examine the reasons, complexities, and efforts associated with Japanese maritime security generation in the East China Sea against both the pressure points of an assertive Chinese maritime apparatus and an

enduring security partnership with the U.S. This research intends to further solidify and bridge timely analysis and policy prescriptions that resonate with theoretical, foundational, and seminal realist efforts. The conclusions of this study can be used to reinforce and extend a dynamic body of knowledge serving international relations, global security, the Pacific region, and defense policy studies.

This research showcases both how, and more importantly, why, a specific Japanese Coast Guard-related policy and operational capability can be effective when developed and cultivated from a varied hedging strategy. In fact, this study specifically argues how and why the Japanese Coast Guard can serve as the ideal focal point and primary enabler of an updated Japanese security policy that both maximizes security and stability for all stakeholders, while simultaneously reducing specific risks associated with hedging. This hedging strategy operationalized through the Japanese Coast Guard can help Japan to reduce Chinese incentives to send dishonest cooperation signals, thus increasing cooperation and decreasing the potential for conflict between China and the U.S.–Japan Alliance (Yoder 2019). These broader implications showcase a possible divergence from the inflexible neo-realist approach toward a more pragmatic defensive realism that sheds light on the complexities and varied range of strategic options that countries such as Japan can formulate and implement in the face of power asymmetries.

The analysis of current and prescribed Japanese Coast Guard efforts to generate comprehensive security and reduce risk among varied stakeholders involves a close look at the nuanced Japanese strategy of hedging. This specific hedging inquiry is distinct from pure forms of balancing and bandwagoning and is operational in the current context of the Japanese–Chinese–American maritime strategy, the area of influence being the East China Sea. Qualitative evidence from nearly two dozen relevant documents are used to explain how and why an energized, retooled, and restructured Japanese Coast Guard can serve as the ideal focal point and primary enabler of an updated Japanese maritime security policy that both maximizes security and stability, and reduces the specific risks associated with hedging. Data points from over two dozen peer-reviewed academic journals, relevant policy papers, and relevant government- and security-related documents will be identified and

analyzed. The data exhibiting Japanese maritime security efforts and success in relation to both China and the U.S., as well as the Japanese Coast Guard's efforts and effects along an updated hedging and security dilemma framework, will be thematically coded. The developed categories will be linked through axial and causation coding, and inductive and inductive methods will shed light on meaningful relationships, facilitating a logical conclusion.

Japanese Coast Guard's Operationalized Hedging Strategies

Despite the formally entrenched Alliance network, the updated Trump administration "approach appears to create discrete winners and losers" in the international system (Ford 2020, 8). Overall assessment of the U.S. Pacific strategy warns that the Trump administration's inability to address China's challenge in a way that does not undermine the long-standing tenants of American leadership, such as strengthening U.S. alliances and supporting liberal values, has been deeply problematic (Ford 2020, 9). This raises the challenge of an underpowered and underdeveloped Japanese defense system facing off against an aggressive and ever-determined China in a possible conflict. Japan needs assurance that its U.S. ally will not seek chaos or compromise at its expense, and it also carefully courts Chinese engagement because of the need to maintain economic livelihood. Japan can resort to a host of policy options when confronting Chinese assertiveness. A full spectrum of possibilities ranging from hard balancing and full deterrence to full bandwagoning and selective engagement can potentially increase security in the maritime domain. However, the current situation is not without risk, given the asymmetries among these nations. "China's huge and varied set of grey zone tools...confronting the Chinese white and blue hulls with U.S. grey hulls could risk presenting the United States" and the Alliance as the aggressor (Erickson and Martinson 2019, 297). This operational and conceptual gap lends support to the relevance and timeliness of this study. This shortfall provides an opportunity for a tailored Japanese Coast Guard to fill the gap and provide the proper balancing effort for the Alliance partners. This forced and absolute security generation with defensive differentiation will allow Japan to compete in the grey zone, force a proper signaling among various parties, stabilize the environment allowing mutual trust to build. This deliberate hedging

allows the middle power to buy time and determine whether the state should balance or bandwagon. It could also allow Japan to attain "a strategic benefit to maintain the state's neutral position in a manner that maximizes autonomy" and stability (Koga 2018, 637).

Currently, the underpowered and under-resourced security agency exhibits an enduring binary-bound apparatus and bureaucratic system with a host of challenges that are non-factorial toward or even facilitates Chinese assertiveness (Pajon 2017). Acknowledgment of a variety of grey zone and maritime challenges in the East China Sea help the Japanese Coast Guard enhance its coordination and facilitate systematic changes along the legal and political spectrums (Pajon 2017). With the need to bridge the classic and primary defensive realist realities with more refined and updated theories and practices, the agency's vast mission set, defensive alignment, and global common orientation allow this nimble and respected security force to flourish and endure despite the residual cultural and bureaucratic constraints.

Over the last decade, Japan's security strategy of hedging toward China and the U.S. encompassed an energized and refined defense policy that "is not simply a matter of political realignment, a purported shift to the right in Japanese politics, or the 'salami-slicing' away of Japan's postwar constraints that have been evident for decades" (Oros 2017, 6). Rather, Japan, which is neither a rising power nor a regional hegemon, currently finds itself at the epicenter of a domestically uncertain and dynamic regional environment destined for relative change. Despite a virtual widespread domestic embrace of new maritime security approaches, many of which were once considered anti-mainstream, Japan's current security renaissance does "not reflect a wholesale change or the dramatic break from the past that some have suggested. And yet the shifts occurring are important and distinctive" (Oros 2017, 9).

Despite a creditable lingering mythology of pacifism, anti-militarism, and buck-passing, the energized and refined Japanese maritime defense strategy anchored on hedging has begun to allow Japan to play "a greater role in the U.S.–Japan Alliance and assisting new security partners outside Japan in important ways not widely understood outside elite circles" (Oros 2017, 170). Notwithstanding an enduring narrative

alluding to Japan's shortcomings regarding full-fledged defense and constitutional modernization, the country's maritime forces are among the most capable in the world. Japan's maritime capability and hedging strategy-related initiatives serve the "national policy on issues as wide-ranging as territorial integrity and sovereignty, maritime security, naval affairs, economics, and international law" (Yoshihara 2020, 54). While considering and harnessing a unique maritime culture and national identity, these hedging efforts are "in turn driven or constrained by a nation's geography, economic demands on the seas, security needs, and the degree to which policymakers pay attention to the seas" (Yoshihara 2020, 54).

The conscientious deepening of the joint U.S.–Japan maritime balancing effort includes a continued embrace of the "complex, consensus-based rules, norms, and shared understanding that govern the highly institutionalized interactions between Washington and Tokyo" that have metabolized over half a century (Yoshihara 2020, 83). Simultaneously, balancing efforts meant to please both the U.S. defense establishment and a salient faction of Japanese domestic supporters who advocate for a more capable and independent maritime force have ensured enhanced funding streams and added emphasis on advanced front-line maritime military hardware and robust capabilities. These modernizations and hard-power enhancements are meant to not only develop Japanese maritime competitiveness in the ubiquitous grey zone but, more importantly, allow updated deterrence and continued asymmetric balancing of power.

With these realities, Tokyo declares that both Asian countries share "a major responsibility for the new peace and stability of the region and the international community, and a stable relationship between Japan and China is essential not only to the citizens...but also for dealings with regional and international issues" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2019). By warming toward the Chinese Belt and Road initiative and a host of Sino-centric trade and economic initiatives, Japan hopes to secure and stabilize maritime lines of communication and economic integration in the East China Sea. This flexible foreign policy and engagement with China seems as necessary as ever as given the Trump administration's peddling of the "America First" domestic strategy, which has shed key elements of a prior less competitive "Pivot to Asia"

strategy (Ford 2020). "As a result, while Abe remained a loyal U.S. ally, he gradually started envisaging Japan's participation in regionalization initiatives competitive to Washington in order to engage the rising China" (Zakowski 2019, 148). Because of this, Japanese leadership engages elsewhere as the U.S. has tossed aside the Trans-Pacific Partnership and amplified his disdain for multilateralism.

China's maritime forces, which range from hundreds of capital-class ships to thousands of militia fishing vessels, help China penetrate the physical, legal, and psychological seascape of the East China Sea (CRS 2020). "China wants its navy to be capable of acting as part of a Chinese anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) force—a force that can deter U.S. intervention in a conflict in China's near-seas region" and a force that is able to effectively limit the Alliance's capability and influence within the first island chain (CRS 2020, 3). With recent military modernization focused on quality versus quantity, and given the spectrum of both tailored and multi-functional naval forces, Chinese maritime capabilities can claim not only a near-dominating aggregate of maritime power, but also boast of owning a specific toolset that actively employs the country's "salami-slicing" strategy in the East China Sea (Turcsanyi 2018).

China's energized maritime capability supports an ever-realistic anti-access strategy forcing the Alliance to project power and defend its long-established and dictated institutional norms. Chinese military planners are determined to mitigate any strategic and military weaknesses by expanding the country's presence in any potential battlefield. Given the degraded confidence in "their aging bomber fleet's ability to survive missions inside denied airspace," China is aggressively pressing forward with normalizing maritime grey zone operations with their coast guard and militia fishing fleets in the hopes of both expanding their own buffer and adding complexity for the Alliance forces (Mastro 2017, 4). As China's maritime fleet consistently presses undeterred and deeper into the East China Sea, the Alliance's military installations, early warning capabilities, and power projection platforms become more vulnerable. With the growing dissatisfaction and non-acceptance of a U.S.-declared hegemony, China employs its newfound power to degrade U.S.–Japan strength and potentially decouple both countries' national security and economic

priorities. China understands that if trends continue, then its maritime forces, ranging from fishing militia to capital ships, can control the littoral up to and potentially beyond the first island chain.

Due to Japan's ever-increasing interdependence on China to support its national economic and trade efforts, and because of the above-mentioned realities of geography and military capability, Japanese decision-makers understand that executing an effective hedging strategy also requires them to ensure adequate engagement through various national mechanisms and to maintain a calculated military restraint. As Japan's economic lifeline runs through the East China Sea, it hopes to not only stabilize vital maritime sea lanes and an ever-critical grey zone, but also promote an active engagement strategy along the diplomatic and economic fronts. Given their understanding of these potential conflicts, Japanese officials look to skillfully execute a hedging strategy in an attempt to ensure regional stability, and coax China's maritime forces to adhere to the norm-based liberal institutional order that the Alliance has touted.

With refined and amplified Japanese Coast Guard actions empowering the spectrum of maritime hedging strategy in the East China Sea, Japan can begin to respond to the relatively credible signals of China's assertiveness. With a holistic hedging strategy generating cooperative signaling and increased trust in the East China Sea region, Japan does not have to haphazardly venture into hard balancing or pure bandwagoning that may further disrupt the equilibrium. The increased Coast Guard capability and presence in the East China Sea can help Japan force norms and best practices toward unambiguous signaling from China. If adequately operationalized, the Japanese Coast Guard can erode some of the strengths and opacity that the Chinese maritime forces currently take advantage of in the East China Sea. Enhanced operations by the Japanese Coast Guard to operationalize a nuanced hedging strategy in the East China Sea and the associated grey zone area facilitate "a screening mechanism that increases the credibility of a riser's (China) cooperative signals" (Yoder 2019, 942). With the coast guard as a creditable, non-offensive, first line of defense in the East China Sea, Japan's hedging strategy supports a limited containment short of war. Once operationalized, this strategy allows the nation-

state, to reduce Chinese incentives to send false cooperative signals, thus allowing for improved cooperation and reduced potential for conflict (Yoder 2019).

The Alliance currently perceives Chinese maritime assertiveness as supporting an uber realist outlook and long-term strategy. However, the Chinese political elites "do not want to put the regime's stranglehold on Chinese society at risk or to do things that harden the existing American Alliance structure into something more multilateral and more offensively oriented toward Beijing" (Edel 2018, 9). Chinese maritime assertiveness is a calculated risk and probing effort that attempts to numb the Alliance's deterrence and created international norms. With this calculus in mind, Japan can cultivate and operationalize a multi-pronged strategy centered around its nation's coast guard. This agile, yet highly visible, force can foster a new limited deterrence, enhance maritime norm adherence, and develop a promising new buffer zone.

Economic Pragmatism

With over 455 vessels and 13,442 personnel, the Japanese Coast Guard patrols and operates inside the East China Sea and surrounding littoral to guard Japan's economic sea lines of communication (Pajon 2017). This route serves as the main maritime artery, allowing vital trade and needed resources to flow uninterrupted into the South China Sea and onto the Indian Ocean. A salient section of the Chinese society perceives Japan as "posing a threat to the international order by harboring goals of hegemony, expansionism or domination," prompting China to be on guard and justify its overt and surreptitious aggressiveness (Hardy-Chartrand 2016, 5). Moreover, by enforcing maritime rules and international norms, the Japanese Coast Guard ensures the safety of the country's economic system. By supporting a free and non-coercive economic maritime environment, the Japanese Coast Guard provides the country's citizens a sense of non-militarized security. Further, it provides the Japanese government official leverage to induce China to adhere to a broader liberal institutional order. This binding and engagement can forcefully socialize and integrate an emergent China into the established and preferred system of regional norms and neutralize any revisionist tendency and temptation the Sino state may currently justify.

Binding Engagement

By forcing all stakeholders that operate in the East China Sea to adhere to international norms and best practices, the Japanese Coast Guard can allow Tokyo to engage Beijing on a variety of non-threatening and collective security ventures, including anti-privacy, search and rescue operations, drug trafficking, fishery enforcement, and maritime domain awareness. The Japanese Coast Guard can thus stabilize this global common with the otherwise differentiated Chinese counterparts (Hribernik 2015). “While many of these forums (allow for) basic interactions, they enable Japan to claim initiative in addressing threats...but to also set the agenda and give prominence to issues it considers vital to its economic and national security” (Hribernik 2015). Facilitating economic prosperity on the high seas and in the globalized and diplomatic arenas assures and involve a variety of stakeholders whose primary concern is not deterrence and security. This facilitates interdependence and interconnectedness, reducing risk between the two nation-states.

Limited Bandwagoning

By selectively choosing to align with China along economic and diplomatic lines, but not through a conventional defense partnership, Japan employs a limited bandwagoning hedging strategy. This limited bandwagoning diverges from a zero-sum framework, allowing Japan to remain flexible. This effort also helps Japan to retain its autonomy while constraining the country from becoming overly dependent on its dominant U.S. ally. By employing a robust, capable, and modernized Japanese Coast Guard in the East China Sea, Japan can “assert its sovereignty claim while reducing the risk of direct confrontation with or kinetic escalation involving” otherwise more offensive-orientated and traditional hard-power naval platforms. By ensuring a deliberately defensive-orientated differentiation, Japan can not only send clear signals to China, but also satisfy an ever-lingering domestic anti-militarism faction. Such resourcing and actions by the coast guard allow Tokyo to prioritize the areas “peaceful and stable” management, a stark contrast to the lip service paid by Beijing to “self-restraint” in the South China Sea (Liff 2019, 6). Simultaneously, non-pure bandwagoning by the Japanese white hull fleet ensures an ever-present show of force in the vicinity of the disputed Senkaku Island group.

With consistent operation in the East China Sea's highly contested grey zone, the Japanese Coast Guard can facilitate an ever-emerging nationalist commitment and resolve needed by both the Diet and the general Japanese public. A deliberate counter-encroachment and counterpressure campaign in the East China Sea by Japan's internationally recognized coast guard helps thwart the Chinese ‘salami-slicing’ strategy.

Dominance Denial

Japan's fear of entrapment by its more hegemonic alliance partner has ebbed and flowed for decades. With Washington's ever-present bullish tendencies, which have been seemingly only amplified by the Trump administration's unpredictability, Japan's fear of being forced into a conflict or political dilemma in the East China Sea is as high as ever. A dominance-denial hedging strategy led by the Coast Guard creates a renewed and seemingly preferred buffer zone between the Chinese and American hard-power forces. An amplified Coast Guard presence in the East China Sea maintains a delicate status quo by promoting a non-threatening signaling to all stakeholders. By exhibiting active and relevant operations and deterrence in the grey zone littoral, Japan's Coast Guard forces U.S. decision-makers to act rationally and with good faith. Through this particularly non-offensive but burdensome effort, Japan can ‘kill two birds with one stone’—it can increase its absolute security and demonstrate heightened commitment and resolve with its decades-old defense partner.

Indirect Balancing

A modernized Japanese Coast Guard energizes Japan's indirect balancing hedging by forging defense cooperation both internally with the Japanese Maritime Self Defense Force and externally with U.S. military maritime forces. As China continues to refrain from kinetic operations and explicitly declaring the Japanese naval forces a threat, the amplified Japanese hard-power force can provide a renewed grey zone deterrence and soft containment. Granting Japan's Coast Guard amplified legal authority on the high seas, increasing patrol craft capability and numbers, creating specialized grey zone units, and accruing high-tech equipment to expand maritime surveillance, helps the force remain a credible actor in the simmering competition among the great global powers (Liff 2019). These transformations in equipment, policy, and practice ensure the Japanese Coast Guard remains

formidable and able to confidently venture into the increasingly relevant grey zone. Despite its defensive orientation, the Coast Guard plays a more plausible role in the high seas, and bridges the gap between itself and the highly modernized Japanese Maritime Self Defense Force (Pajon 2017). The Coast Guard's ability to encapsulate some portion of the Japanese Maritime Self Defense Force's traditional roles (namely defense in the maritime domain, engaging in noncombatant operations, conducting search and rescue operations, and ensuring territorial sovereignty) results in amiable indirect balancing observable by all regional partners (Pajon 2017).

Conclusion

The Japanese hedging strategy follows a pragmatic formula and diverges from more traditional neo-realist security frameworks. The Japanese government's ongoing operationalization of hedging through its Coast Guard sheds light on the diverse range of strategic options that middle powers such as Japan can apply in the face of power asymmetries. China's assertiveness is yet to erupt into distinguishable kinetic conflict that can actually harm Japanese national interests. However, uncertain signaling from Beijing necessitates that Tokyo's response remain firm, refined, and intricate. In this case, the Japanese hedging strategy strays from neo-realist assumptions and adopts both a prosperity-maximizing and security-seeking formula. A self-defensive and collective security oriented white hulled fleet can help reduce a variety of immediate and encroaching Chinese threats. These efforts reduce ideological fault lines, promote adherence to a non-coercive global common that fits squarely among internationally accepted norms, and mitigate tensions contributing to competition.

It is evident that China, Japan, and the U.S. continue to address their respective security needs through a "variety of security measures, including alliances, political and security communities, and other frameworks for regional cooperation" (Tokuchi 2017, 1). Due to the unique combination of globalization, power shifts, and domestic considerations, Japan's national interests in the maritime domain overlap with those of the Chinese and American states. Currently, Japan's best bet for long-term stability and absolute security gain in the East China Sea lies in operationalizing a varied hedging strategy through a well-resourced and capable coast

guard. For the foreseeable future, it is the Japanese Coast Guard and its unique flexibility and defensive differentiation that can stabilize the uncertain grey zone and facilitate a more transparent signaling to and from all regional stakeholders. Given the ever-present cultural and domestic hesitation to shed constitutional shackles, as well as enduring concerns of both entrapment and abandonment, an energized and resourced coast guard facilitates a sculpted and multi-pronged effort that simultaneously pursues two sets of mutually counteracting policies. This hedging strategy allows Japan to remain optimistic and yet strategically and militarily ready should Beijing provide a more threatening signal. Given the uncertainties about a strong U.S. commitment, whether Beijing will double down on its revisionist behavior, or whether the three regional actors will find a way to co-exist peacefully, Japan hopes that its efforts of countering one transaction against another will ensure lasting security and stability, not only for the island nation, but for all stakeholders of the East China Sea.

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