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## **Wedge strategies in Russia-Japan relations**

Matteo Dian & Anna Kireeva (2021): Wedge strategies in Russia-Japan relations, *The Pacific Review*,

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### **Abstract**

This article analyses wedge strategies in the context of Russo-Japanese relations. In particular, it looks at how both countries have sought to generate a dis-alignment in the opposing side, preventing further steps toward the consolidation of potentially threatening partnerships: the US-Japan alliance for Russia, and the Russia-China entente for Japan. After identifying the respective goals of Russia and Japan, the article examines the conditions that enable the success of wedge strategies. Looking at the case of Russia-Japan relations from 2012 to 2020, the article argues that a strategy constituted of a mix of positive economic and political incentives and a limited amount of coercion can succeed in producing a degree of dis-alignment in the opposing camp. Russia's strategy seems to be more productive than Japan's since Moscow has managed to minimize the effect of sanctions imposed by Japan and it has reduced political differences to mostly bilateral and regional issues. A greater level of cooperation with established partners for both Russia and Japan, and limited costs of wedging strategies, have resulted in dis-alignment but not a reversal of existing alignments. The article also indicates that in this case credibility issues do not fundamentally affect the degree of success of wedge strategies

## **Introduction**

Since the return of Vladimir Putin and Shinzo Abe to power in 2012, Russia Japan relations have been characterized by unprecedented levels of activity aimed at comprehensive improvement of bilateral relations in virtually every domain: politics, security, economics and people-to-people contacts. Abe enhanced Japan's strategic outreach when he initiated his new approach to dealing with Russia in May 2016, to which Putin responded favourably.

Existing literature focuses predominantly on political relations between Russia and Japan, especially on the prospects for the conclusion of a peace treaty and the resolution of the territorial dispute as well as on economic cooperation (Brown, 2016a; 2016b; Pajon, 2017; Panov, 2016; Rozman, 2017; Streltsov, 2015; 2017; Togo, 2016). Several authors have analysed the strategic dimension of rapprochement between the two, in particular, Japan's strategy to prevent a united Sino-Russian front (Brown, 2018; Jimbo, 2017; Pajon, 2017; Streltsov, 2017; Tsuruoka, 2017).

However, what is generally missing is an analysis of the effectiveness of Japan's strategy to prevent further consolidation of the Russian-Chinese entente and the credibility of Tokyo's measures. Similarly, Russia's policy vis-a-vis a US-Japan alliance is rarely a focus of academic literature. This article addresses these gaps by analysing the strategies that Japan employs in relation to Sino-Russian entente and Russia in relation to the US-Japan alliance, especially after the return to power of both Japanese Prime Minister Abe and Russian President Putin in 2012 and Abe's resignation in 2020.

We identify Japan's interests as preventing the formation of a cohesive Sino-Russian geopolitical bloc, a 'nightmare scenario' for Japan since the two could potentially dominate the Asian heartland in a way that is hostile to Japanese interests. An enhanced partnership with China, coupled with a tightened US-Japan alliance, would also be detrimental for Russia since it could generate an unwanted situation of dependency and subordination from China, resulting in a deterioration of the relations with other significant powers. The Ukraine crisis raised the possibility that just such a situation would develop, which could undermine Moscow's bargaining position vis a vis China as well as its foreign policy autonomy in general.

For Russia, the US system of alliances in Asia has always been an issue of concern, albeit a milder one in contrast with concerns about Europe. However, what made Russian leadership adopt a policy targeting Japan's ties with the United States was Japan's adoption of sanctions against Russia following the Ukrainian crisis in 2014 and the military build-up of their alliance. Furthermore, neither country desires a return to a polarized regional system with China and Russia on the one side, and US and Japan on the other. This article analyses the strategies two countries have put in place to avoid that undesired outcome. In particular, we look at wedge strategies, that, as the term implies, are aimed at driving a wedge between two main partners, leading one of the two to assume a more independent position and, at the same time, to cooperate more with the state that promoted the wedging strategy.

The article aims to answer the question of how wedging strategies play out in Russia-Japan relations and how effective they are. We consider favourable permissive external conditions, capacity to reward and to coerce, as well as credibility, as key possible determinants for the success of a wedge strategy. The article argues that a successful wedge strategy does not necessarily entail a break-up of the opposing alliance or that the targeted state switch sides. On the contrary, inducing a target state to disalign, by adopting a more autonomous and more accommodating policy towards the state that promotes the wedge strategy, can be considered a significant outcome.

The concept of dis-alignment best describes the outcome of Russia's wedge strategy towards the US-Japan alliance and, to a lesser extent, Japan's strategy towards Russia and China. Moscow's strategy, characterized by a mix of positive and negative incentives, has induced Tokyo to assume a more independent stance and to dis-align from Washington on significant issues. Examples include sanctions against Russia after 2014, closer economic cooperation as well as diplomatic and security dialogue. Japan's wedge strategy, mostly based on positive incentives has also had some success, albeit more modest. Security dialogue between Tokyo and Moscow has been one of the factors contributing to preserving Russia's neutrality on disputes between China and Japan.

Using Russian and Japanese-language primary and secondary sources, and interviews with Russian and Japanese officials and scholars, this article makes important empirical as well as theoretical contributions on

wedging as a part of strategic interaction between Moscow and Tokyo. Empirically, it locates the evolving dynamics of the Russia-Japan bilateral relationship in the broader geopolitical environment. Therefore, it contributes to a more sophisticated understanding of Russia's policy in Asia, especially vis-a-vis American allies. It also contributes to an analysis of Japan's foreign policy towards Russia by looking beyond the linked territorial dispute and the peace treaty issues.

The article is divided into four sections. The first section reviews the existing theoretical literature on wedge strategies, pointing to its strengths and its limits. Moreover, it proposes a theoretical framework aimed at identifying the possible causes for the success of wedge strategies. In the remaining sections we outline respective goals of Russia and Japan in pursuing wedge strategies and analyse how they worked in recent bilateral relations. The article divides the empirical analysis into three periods, defined by critical junctures that shaped the permissive conditions for promoting wedge strategies. The first period starts with the return of President Putin and Prime Minister Abe to power in May and December 2012 respectively. It ends with the emergence of the Ukraine crisis, that imposed severe limits to the bilateral relationship in the spring of 2014. The second period ends in 2016, when after the bilateral meeting of Sochi in May, bilateral relation resumed. The final period extends from 2016 to 2020, with Abe's resignation in September 2020 providing a closing point. The conclusion reflects on the main sources of success of the Russian and Japanese wedge strategies as well as on their broader implications for the region.

### **Wedge strategies as instruments of foreign policy**

Despite the significance of the issue, scholars have dedicated relatively little attention to wedge strategies. The most relevant research on this issue is that of Timothy W. Crawford and Yasuhiro Izumikawa. Recent research has applied this concept to the analysis of China's strategy towards US-led alliances (Chai, 2020; Taffer, 2020; Yoo, 2015).

Crawford introduced the concept of the wedge strategy, defined as 'a state's attempt to prevent, break up, or weaken a threatening or blocking alliance at an acceptable cost' (Crawford, 2011, p. 156). A successful wedge strategy enables a state to diminish the strength of adversaries

organized against it, or even tries to turn opponents into neutrals.<sup>1</sup> Wedge strategies can be either based on positive incentives or on coercion (Crawford, 2011; Izumikawa, 2013).

Importantly, wedge strategies aim at separating the target from a more powerful and more threatening adversary. In the case of Japan, Russia is the target and China is the most threatening adversary. For Russia, Japan represents the target that should be ‘separated’ from the US. According to Crawford, ‘when the strategy is successful, the state (i.e., the divider) gains advantage by reducing the number and strength of enemies organized against it’ (Crawford, 2011, p. 156). Consequently, wedge strategy can have a significant effect on regional or global balance of power.

The degree of success of a wedge strategy can be measured on a spectrum. The most successful wedge strategies can lead to a re-alignment, with a country switching sides, allying or aligning with the former adversary. Cases of re-alignments can have significant consequences for regional or even global balance of power, as in the case of China’s alignment with the US after the Sino-Soviet Split. Before World War One, Italy changed sides, abandoning the Triple Alliance to join the Entente. Nevertheless, cases of re-alignments are extremely rare. The second possible successful outcome is de-alignment, that induces a country to remain neutral in the case of a conflict involving one of its allies. De-alignments are more common than realignments. Notable examples are the neutrality of Spain, and the neutrality pact between USSR and Japan during World War Two. The third possible aim of a wedging strategy is pre-alignment, with the divider seeking to prevent the formation of a hostile alliance. The last possible outcome is disalignment, a strategy enacted by the divider with the aim of reducing the target’s cooperation within the opposing alliance or coalition. In this case, the divider promotes a policy of selective accommodation, or targeted coercion toward the country it aims at de-aligning from its ally. Examples include the Soviet sponsored ‘peace initiatives’ towards Western European countries during the Cold War. Dis-alignments do not cause the break-up of an alliance or a partnership but can create significant bilateral attrition between partners. Moreover, dis-alignments tend to highlight the existence of different national interests and threat perceptions and, ultimately, a certain discomfort with the degree of control associated with an alliance or a political partnership. On one hand, dis-alignments can appear to be the most modest outcome

of a wedge strategy, since they do not aim at fundamentally altering the global or regional balance of power. On the other hand, attempts to induce dis-alignments into an opposite alliance are more frequent and much more likely to succeed (Crawford, 2008, 2011).

Here we should introduce several distinctions between our theoretical framework and the existing literature. From the perspective of existing studies, the ultimate success of a wedging strategy is whether it results in a re-alignment or a de-alignment. In this article, we consider a scenario in which re-alignments are not realistic outcomes. Moreover, we consider a period which is characterized by the absence of open military conflict. Consequently, our analysis will primarily consider the possibility of disalignments in the US-Japan alliance, as a result of Russian wedge strategies, and pre-alignments and dis-alignments in the case of Russia and China.

In this case, as an example of dis-alignment we could consider the Japanese limited compliance with American sanctions against Russia, or the will to negotiate with Moscow against Washington's wishes. Similarly, a result of pre-alignment and dis-alignment for Japan could be preventing Russia and China from forming a formal alliance with an anti-Japanese leaning, joint development of arms or military technologies targeting Japan, and designating Japan as a potential adversary in joint military exercises.

Looking at our cases, we should consider that, given the different levels of cohesion of the two different pairs, the bar for success of a wedging strategy would be different. While Russia and China have intensified their bilateral relations in the last two decades, but never formed an alliance (Lukin, 2018), the US and Japan have been allied for seventy years. The alliance was further tightened even after the Cold War ended (Dian, 2014). Therefore, even causing minor divergences in the US-Japan alliance could represent the success of Russia's wedge strategies.

Several factors could lead to the success of a wedge strategy. Firstly, to be effective, wedge strategies require suitable permissive conditions. In particular, the international environment should allow some flexibility in alignments. Moments of high international tensions or international crisis tend to enhance the level of cohesion and solidarity within alliances and alignments, preventing the success of strategies aimed at separating allies and partners. A permissive environment should be considered a necessary but not a sufficient condition for wedge strategy success.

Second, wedging strategies can be based on positive or negative incentives, or a mix of the two. Reward based strategies ‘use concessions and other inducements to lure a target away from other adversaries, which are dealt with more firmly’ (Crawford, 2011). This type of strategy generally involves selectively accommodating one of the potential adversaries while standing firm against others, through manipulation of other interests such as assets in peripheral areas, economic relations and diplomatic positions. Strategies of selective accommodation generally include the improvement of bilateral relations with the target country in a key issue area, encouraging the target to keep some distance from its allies or partners, attempts to aggravate potential divergences between the target state and its allies, or attempts to exploit the differences in terms of threat perceptions between the target and its partners.

For a strategy based on reward to succeed, the divider must have a substantial political, diplomatic or economic appeal for the target state. Reward-based wedge strategies can generate a process of ‘competitive bidding’ between the divider and target’s partners. This is likely to increase the cost of the reward without guaranteeing the success of the strategy. States might also use coercion, or mixed strategies if they perceive that they don’t have a sufficient reward power, or if they face an imminent security threat (Izumikawa, 2013). Coercive strategies, however, can generate the opposite of the desired effect, leading to more cohesion in the adversary coalition.

Finally, IR theory argues that credibility is crucial for bargaining between states, both for strategies based on rewards as well as for threats. Reward strategies based on economic engagement require years to deliver any significant gain, however. States might be unable to fulfil their promises, failing to consistently maintain a cooperative stance throughout time. Or they can bluff, putting on the negotiating table something that they are not actually willing to concede. This can lead to short term advantages but can bring into question credibility in the longer term. Similarly, threats should be perceived as credible to have a long-term impact. If states perceive threats as ‘empty words’, these threats will have little effect on their behaviour (Press, 2005; Schelling, 1980).<sup>2</sup>

In short, the conditions in which a wedging strategy can be successful are: Permissive Conditions, such as the absence of external crises that induce further rigidity in the alignment structure.

Reward. The expected benefits received from cooperation with the divider should be higher than the expected costs it creates for the relationship with the established partner.

Coercion. The higher the cost is imposed, or threatened to be imposed on the target, the higher the dis-alignment will be. Coercion can be considered as a threat of use of force, a coercive economic strategy, or a reversion of previous progress. Coercive wedge strategies can be counterproductive generating a growing cohesion of the opposing alliance.

Credibility. Inconsistency, 'bluffs' and broken promises undermine wedging strategies in the long term. Credible commitments favour the success of wedging strategies.

### **Russia's and Japan's objectives in wedge strategies**

The above theoretical framework has detailed the conditions for the success of a wedging strategy. This section will explore what the realistic aims are in terms of a wedging strategy towards the opposing bloc for contemporary Russia and Japan<sup>3</sup>.

#### ***Russia's objectives***

Historically, the USSR believed that Washington's goal was to create a permanent source of tension between the USSR and Japan, and increase Japan's dependence on Washington through the territorial dispute. Consequently, the emergence of the territorial dispute is frequently attributed to the San Francisco Peace Treaty and US interference during the negotiations between the USSR and Japan in 1956 (Hara, 1998; Izumikawa, 2018). The Soviet Union was interested in pulling Japan away from the United States. Following the conclusion of the US-Japan Security Treaty in 1960, the USSR presented an aide-memoire to Japan's ambassador that proposed a possible transfer of the Shikotan and Habomai Islands, in accordance with the Soviet-Japanese Declaration in 1956, on the condition that all foreign troops be withdrawn from Japanese territory. The treaty with the US was seen as violating Japan's independence. Practically, it meant that the USSR put a condition on the transfer of the

two islands, which was the elimination of American military bases (Streltsov, 2015, pp. 226–227). However, with no other significant incentive to offer Japan, the Soviet wedging strategy had little chance for success. During the late Cold War era, Japan consolidated its alliance with the United States by assuming a more explicitly anti-Soviet stance. This culminated in the 1980s when Japan significantly increased both its military cooperation with the US and its anti-Communist ideological rhetoric (Brown, 2016b; Kimura, 2008).

In the 1990s and early 2000s, Russia's policy towards Japan was focused on negotiations regarding a peace treaty, possible conditions for resolving the territorial issue and establishing comprehensive cooperation, especially in the economic domain (Panov, 2016). From the mid-2000s, the US-Japan alliance build-up, including ballistic missile defence (BMD) deployment, has been increasingly perceived as a security challenge by the Russian government (Interview with a high-ranking diplomat in the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Japan, July 2018). The US-Japan alliance is seen as epitomizing a 'bloc approach' to security and aiming to enhance the security of one country at the expense of others (Charap et al., 2016). Russia advocates creating 'an inclusive, open, transparent and equitable collective security and cooperation architecture in the Asia-Pacific' (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016). Thus, Russia has always been interested in driving a wedge into the US-Japan alliance and prompting Japan to distance itself from American policies. This objective became much more urgent way in the aftermath of the 2014 Ukraine crisis and the sanctions imposed by the US and their allies that inflicted damage on bilateral relationship (Streltsov, 2015, pp. 196–197).

De-alignment in the US-Japan alliance, would constitute an ideal outcome for Russia. However, with this goal being unrealistic, Russia's policy is aimed at dis-alignment: reducing the level and diminishing the content of cooperation between Japan and the United States that targets Russia or has a negative impact on Russia's security. In particular, this has been the case with BMD, which Russia believes to directly affects its security. Tokyo's decision to deploy Aegis Ashore was subject to Russia's criticism during 'two plus two' meetings and interactions at the MOFA level in 2018 and 2019 (TASS, 2018), until it was cancelled by the Japanese government in June 2020. Possible deployment of small and medium range missiles in Japan by the US after the end of the INF Treaty is also an outcome that

Russian policy makers would wish to avoid. Moreover, Moscow would like to minimize its disagreement with Tokyo to strictly bilateral problems, rather than seeing the Japanese government siding with the US (against Russia) on several security and political issues related to other regions that do not directly relate to Japan's security, such as Eastern Europe or the Middle East. Russia would generally like to see Japan remain neutral in its disputes with the United States. One example of this would be eliminating or minimizing anti-Russian sanctions taken by Japan in response to the 2014 Crimean dispute.

Overall, Russian policy makers would like to see Japan increase its strategic autonomy and to become a more independent foreign policy actor (Kireeva & Sushentsov, 2017). Russia makes almost no critical remarks on Tokyo's policy per se. It also takes a 'wait-and-see' approach to Japan's military build-up and security policy transformation on the basis of limited collective self-defence; although, in general, Russia views Tokyo's involvement in advancing American foreign policy goals in a negative light (Panov, 2016). Hence, under this logic, a more independent Japan is likely to be more predisposed towards cooperation with Russia.

### *Japan's objectives*

A unified and hostile Sino-Russian bloc would arguably represent a strategic nightmare for Japanese policymakers (Interview with S. Hyodo, 24 January, 2018 and July 6, 2018; Togo, 2014). It would pose a vital threat to Japan's security, dramatically enhancing China's bid to becoming a regional hegemonic power, and it would further increase Japan's dependence on American security guarantees (Interview with K. Jimbo, July 9, 2018; Interview with Y. Koda, July 19, 2018; Brown, 2018, pp. 9–10).

This emerges clearly from official documents, such as Japan's National Security Strategy published in 2013, and White Papers on Defence of Japan and Diplomatic Bluebooks, which since 2014 have emphasized the goal of enhancing cooperation with Russia. The National Security Strategy states that 'Under the increasingly severe security environment in East Asia, it is critical for Japan to advance cooperation with Russia in all areas, including security and energy, thereby enhancing bilateral relations as a whole, in order to ensure its security' (Cabinet Secretariat,

2013). In this case the severity of the security environment is associated with the China's assertiveness and growing military might.

As a consequence, Japan's Russia policy under Abe administration gained a much greater strategic dimension (Interview with K.Togo, July 21, 2018; Tsuruoka, 2019).

Although a Sino-Russian alliance is an unlikely development, Russia-China cooperation has been characterized by a growing alignment and enhanced cooperation in politics, security and economics. Some Japanese security experts consider it to be a realistic goal to make Russia strategically neutral in the Sino-Japanese and Sino-American strategic competition (Abiru, 2017). However, the majority of Japanese foreign policy experts realize that cooperation with China is of greater strategic and economic importance to Russia to realistically expect Russia to abandon these and side with Japan. Consequently, Japan's wedging policy is aimed both at preventing the creation of a consolidated Sino-Russian alliance opposed to Japan (pre-alignment), and at creating incentives for dis-alignment of a closer Russia-China cooperation on specific policies, in particular, in the security realm, but also in economics (Brown, 2018; Hyodo, 2016; Interview with K.Togo, July 21, 2018; Interview with S. Hyodo, 24 January, 2018; Interview with Y. Hosoya, 24 January, 2018; Izumikawa, 2016; Jimbo, 2017; Kireeva, 2019; Koizumi, 2017; Rozman, 2017; Taniguchi, 2016; Tsuruoka, 2017).

As the Director for Regional Studies at the National Institute for Defense Studies, Shinji Hyodo has put it:

This is the Japanese government's view on Russia taken from Japan's first National Security Strategy published on December 17, 2013. Against the backdrop of Japan's effort to strengthen ties with Russia is the strategic thinking that it is desirable for Japan to at least sign a peace treaty with Russia and normalize relations with its neighbours amidst the increasingly severe security environment surrounding Japan. [ ... ] Japan hopes to avoid China-Russia cooperation that would amount to an anti-Japanese front. In short, Japan strategically intends to strengthen Japan-Russia relations to prevent Russia from completely aligning with China on its approach towards Japan (Hyodo, 2019).

Several developments in Sino-Russian military cooperation concern Japan. Russia's arms sales contribute to the acceleration of both the scale and pace of the development of China's military capabilities, helping China to enhance its anti-access and area denial capabilities (A2/AD),

while challenging the US and Japan in strategically relevant domains such as missile defence. China's potential operational coordination with Russia on so called 'grey zone' operations could present serious challenges to Japan's security on two fronts simultaneously (Jimbo, 2017, pp. 26–28; Koizumi, 2017, p. 36). Additionally, robust cooperation with Russia and a stable border may embolden Beijing to freely enhance its activities elsewhere (Brown, 2018, p. 10). Following this logic, the developments to be prevented would include joint R&D of arms and military technologies, conducting anti-Japanese military exercises or air patrols, and the non-inclusion of the disputed Kuril Islands into military exercises with China's participation (Interview with Y. Koizumi, July 12, 2018). As is already the case, Japanese defence has been concentrating more on the southwest due to China's growing maritime activity, and under such conditions, stabilizing the environment in the north by improving relations with Russia could contribute to its security (Interview with K. Jimbo, January 25, 2018; Izumikawa, 2016; Jimbo, 2017; Koizumi, 2017; Taniguchi, 2016). Another goal is to prevent a united front on territorial issues, i.e., where Russia would sign for China's position on the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, or exert pressure on Japan in this area. Russia, by not siding with China but continuing its carefully calibrated strategic neutrality in the South China Sea conflict also corresponds with Japanese interests (Tsuruoka, 2017, p. 15; Interview with Y. Koda, July 19, 2018). Consequently, improving the relations with Moscow, in order to avoid the consolidation of an anti-Japanese Sino-Russian block, appears increasingly imperative for Tokyo (Interview with K. Togo, July 21, 2018; Izumikawa, 2016; Togo, 2016; Tsuruoka, 2017). There is a belief in Japan that it is necessary to not corner Russia too much, so that Moscow will not excessively depend on China (Tsuruoka, 2017, pp. 14–15). Complicating Beijing's strategic calculus is described as the key goal of Japan's wedging policy. It is viewed to be in Japan's interests to contribute to Russia's own course of maintaining its strategic autonomy in Asia, in particular, with providing other options for Russia so that Japan would have some 'strategic space' to reduce its dependence on China in the long term in both security and economics (Hyodo, 2016; Interview with S. Hyodo, 24 January, 2018 and July 6, 2018; Interview with Y. Hosoya Yuichi, July 5, 2018; Jimbo, 2017; Pajon, 2017; Tsuruoka, 2017). Also, amidst the uncertainty in regard to the US-Japan alliance under Trump, Japan has been expanding forms of security cooperation with a

considerable number of like-minded partners. Russia, being an important player in Northeast Asia, is considered in these initiatives by Japan in order to prevent the least desired outcome – that is, of a China-dominated Asia (Interview with Y. Hosoya, January 23, 2018 and July 5, 2018; Interview with K. Jimbo, July 9, 2018; Jimbo, 2017, p. 23). Moreover, security cooperation with Russia is increasingly relevant for Japan in order to reduce strategic and operational tensions and, thus, avoid a two-fronted confrontation (Jimbo, 2017, pp. 26–28).

### **Wedge strategies in Russia-Japan relations in 2012-2020**

This section analyses the two countries' wedge strategies and evaluates their success as compared to the assessed objective in the different periods, as defined by the critical junctures that marked fundamental changes in terms of permissive conditions, such as, Putin and Abe's elections, the Crimea crisis, the Abe-Putin meeting in May 2016, Abe's resignation and a new government by Yoshihide Suga in September 2020. During this period both states introduced a number of measures to improve bilateral relations, corresponding to a set of goals including Abe's desire to sign a peace treaty and settle a territorial dispute and Russia's aspirations to attract Japanese investment to foster economic development (Kireeva, 2019; Streltsov, 2017). Although Abe's motivation was one of the main drivers behind Japan's policy<sup>4</sup>, strategic dimension has gained much greater prominence. Measures implemented by both states in practice were frequently designed to realize various goals at the same time, in many cases making it hard to distinguish between steps to implement wedging strategies and accomplish other targets. Thus, subsequent sections look at Russia's and Japan's policies in their complexity while highlighting the measures that were taken to further wedging strategies among other goals.

#### ***Return of Putin and Abe to power and wedge strategies (2012-2014)***

The period from December 2012 up to the start of the Ukrainian crisis in April 2014 was characterized by favourable external conditions. For Japan, the return to power of Abe in December 2012 clearly represented a

watershed. In contrast to the DPJ governments, Abe made achieving a breakthrough with Russia, signing a peace treaty and solving the territorial dispute his key priorities (Brown, 2016a; Panov, 2016; Streltsov, 2017; Togo, 2018). The year 2012 represents an important milestone for Russia also, due to Vladimir Putin's mentioning 'hikiwake'. Before returning to the presidential post, in March 2012, at a press-conference Putin made a new attempt to search for a compromise on the grounds of a 'hikiwake' formula, that is, a draw in judo, when 'neither side loses'. This was the first significant statement on the bilateral territorial dispute since 2001 and signalled Russia's willingness to return to negotiation (Panov, 2016, pp. 32–34). Another favourable permissive condition included the absence of US opposition to the improvement in Russia-Japan relations, since at the time, despite the emergence of several hurdles, Washington was still promoting its policy of 'reset' with Russia (Stent, 2015). Many experts viewed more favourably Russia-Japan relations as being capable of paving the way for trilateral cooperation aimed at facing some of the challenges posed by a rising China (Charap et al., 2016).

In terms of attempts to reward the other, Russia and Japan agreed on several decisions considered beneficial by both states. Putin's 'hikiwake' statement was favourably viewed by the Japanese public. Abe, on his part, initiated a shift in Japan's approach, trying to restore the dialogue with Russia. As a result of Abe's visit to Moscow in April 2013 the two countries agreed to pursue multifaceted cooperation in order to elevate their relationship to a 'strategic partnership' level in the future, revitalize talks on a peace treaty and foster economic ties. Japan proposed to initiate 'two plus two' dialogue between the ministers of international affairs and defence, type of dialogue Japan had in place only with the US and Australia at the time (President of Russia, 2013). The first 'two plus two' dialogue in November 2013 provided a framework to discuss global and regional security in the Asia-Pacific, with Russia expressing its concern about the global American BMD system with Japan's involvement in it. Russian and Japanese defence ministers also agreed to strengthen confidence-building measures, by holding regular exchanges and conducting the first-ever joint naval military exercises on countering piracy and terrorism. These talks led Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov to speak of a 'new stage' in Russia-Japan relations (Interfax, 2013). Upon Russia's proposals, security cooperation has been expanded in the areas

of countering piracy, terrorism, drug trafficking, cyber-threats, capacity-building, peacekeeping operations, etc. (Koizumi, 2017, p. 29).

On the economic front the upward trend continued, with bilateral trade rising to a maximum of \$33.2 billion (Russian Federal Custom Service Statistics, 2019), and the two governments took a step to facilitate investments. During Abe's visit in April 2013 a Memorandum on the establishment of the Russia-Japan Investment Fund with \$1 billion capital was signed (President of Russia, 2013). Economic cooperation mostly served as Japan's incentive towards Russia to help it diversifying its economic ties in the Asian-Pacific, with Abe emphasizing Japan's stake in the Far East. The fact that both countries committed to long term and costly economic investments, and put in place new institutional channels of cooperation, indicates that both perceived the other as credibly committing to deepen the level of bilateral cooperation in the following years. 2 ■ 2 dialogue clearly highlighted the strategic significance of bilateral relationship for both states.

Despite the cooperative atmosphere of this period, the credibility of Russia's potential rewards towards Japan found a key obstacle in the difficulty to reach a peace treaty and resolution for a territorial dispute, the most important issue for the Japanese side. On one hand, Prime Minister Abe highly appreciated the facilitation of peace talks, while several times throughout this period pledged to make progress on this issue and to settle a territorial dispute during his tenure (President of Russia, 2013). A solution could have potentially been found on the grounds of the formula negotiated during the Irkutsk meeting between Putin and Prime Minister Mori in 2001, called 'two plus alpha', meaning that some other benefit ('alpha') was to follow the transfer of the two smaller islands to Japan (Togo, 2016). On the other hand at the time a quick resolution was unlikely following more than a decade of no progress in stalled negotiations (Panov, 2016, pp. 32–34).

Overall, in the period from 2012 up to the Ukraine crisis of 2014, permissive conditions and incentives were present for both countries to start pursuing a wedge strategy together with other goals. In less than a year and a half, Moscow and Tokyo made significant initial steps in that direction in the diplomatic, security and economic realms. These can be considered as integral part of a wedge strategy based on rewards and selective accommodation. The two countries chose to start from initiatives characterized by a

medium level of reward but also significant levels of credibility, such as the 2 + 2 dialogue and economic cooperation, including the Russian Far East.

This was meant to induce a higher degree of flexibility in the regional alignments and to generate momentum to deal with the most sensitive issues, such as the peace treaty and the disputed islands.

### ***Russia-Japan relations in the aftermath of the Ukrainian crisis (2014–2016)***

In the period from the spring of 2014 to May 2016 fallout from the Ukrainian crisis that essentially made the conditions for pursuing wedging strategies non-permissive. After approval of sanctions promoted by the US and the EU, Tokyo found itself under strong pressure to demonstrate solidarity within the alliance and the G7 (Hyodo, 2016, p. 29). Consequently, Japan adopted four packages of sanctions in 2014, however, being milder when compared with Western broader economic sanctions, including sectoral, technological and financial areas.<sup>5</sup> While Abe himself kept the door for dialogue open by retaining contact with Putin at international fora, sanctions, along with Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida's remarks condemning 'annexation of Crimea the actions of pro-Russian armed forces in Eastern Ukraine' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2014), made any cooperation with Russia virtually impossible (Panov, 2014). This led to a freeze in exchanges on different levels, including Putin's proposed visit to Japan and the 'two plus two' consultations (Koizumi, 2017, p. 31). Japan's sanctions in 2014, albeit milder than those approved by the US and the EU, and the suspension of the 2 + 2 meetings were interpreted by Moscow as an unfriendly act. Russia's MOFA accused Japan of following the US and not displaying an independent policy course (TASS, 2014; Panov, 2014).

Deteriorated relations with the West led Russia to significantly step up its security, political and economic cooperation with China. Developments included a Joint Declaration on the new stage of comprehensive partnership and strategic interaction in 2014, participation of the leaders of both countries in parades commemorating the Second World War, Power of Siberia gas pipeline project and the Declaration on cooperation in connecting the Eurasian Economic Union and China's Belt and Road

Initiative (Lukin, 2018). Moscow decided to sell China several weapon systems, such as Sukhoi Su-35S fighters and S-400 missile defence systems. These systems represent important additions to Beijing's anti-access/area-denial potential within the first island chain (Jimbo, 2017, pp. 26–28).

Although Russia's Foreign Minister criticized Japan's decision to adopt sanctions, he noted that Japan was forced to do it, and did not do it in an aggressive way, and in general, the criticism was very mild comparing to the US and EU. Lavrov signalled that Russia was ready and willing to restore cooperation, for example, resume contacts, putting the 2 + 2 meetings back on the agenda (TASS, 2015). However, for Japan it would have meant disrupting G7 sanctions solidarity and going against an explicit request of President Obama to minimize contact with Moscow (The Japan Times, 2016).

In general, the negative background of crisis in Russia's relations with the US and Europe and Japan's decision to demonstrate solidarity, albeit reluctantly, resulted in contact between Moscow and Tokyo being put on hold and predetermined a virtual non-existence of permissive conditions for conducting wedging strategies. The permissive conditions for significant progress in the bilateral relationship and for the adoption of wedge strategies re-emerged only in mid-2016 (Brown, 2016a).

### ***Wedge strategies between 2016 and 2020***

Prime Minister Abe's visit to Sochi in May 2016 was crucial to restoring Russian-Japanese dialogue and creating permissive conditions for wedging strategies. A domestic development that characterises Abe's approach has been his minimizing MOFA's role (considered to be, in general, negatively predisposed towards Russia), maximizing Kantei's (Prime Minister's Cabinet) role and empowering METI with facilitating economic cooperation, with a top Kantei bureaucrat Takaya Imai playing a key role in formulating the diplomatic course towards Russia (Pajon, 2017; Pugliese, 2017). In spite of US President Obama's urging to the contrary, Abe visited Sochi in May 2016. Putin visited Japan in December 2016. It marked the restoration of all levels of Russia-Japan exchanges, with a new momentum provided for Russia-Japan relations.

The election of Donald Trump further contributed to this trend for different reasons. The Trump administration did not explicitly object to Japan pursuing a rapprochement, despite the fact that US-Russia relations, in practice, continued to deteriorate (Togo, 2018). Nevertheless, it dramatically complicated Japan's security strategy. On one hand, Trump's actions generated a 'fear of abandonment' among the Japanese policy makers, who questioned the US commitment to their country's security (Mount Fuji Dialogue, 2017). On the other hand, Trump's policies contributed to deteriorated relations with China as well as with Russia, both defined as 'strategic competitors' (Rozman, 2017). While Abe's first reaction was establishing a 'special relationship' with the US President and trying to preserve the alliance, Trump's policies created a greater need for Tokyo to find an accommodation with some of its neighbours, including Russia. Ultimately Trump's management of the alliance created a window of opportunity for Russia's wedge strategy (Walker & Azuma, 2020).

During this period, however, cooperation between Beijing and Moscow gained further momentum, particularly due to the deterioration of US-China and US-Russia relations. This in turn made Japan's wedging strategies both more complicated and more urgent. As testified by the joint statement in 2019, Russia and China endorsed a common vision of global and regional developments with a view to a multipolar world order, global governance and strategic stability, criticizing the US and their security alliances as well as the deployment of BMD in Eastern Europe and Northeast Asia. In the new era of strategic competition and destruction of previously existing regimes and rules (such as strategic stability) the two countries pledged to stand together as strategic partners (President of Russia, 2019a).

Defence cooperation also increased with not only regular SCO multilateral land and bilateral joint naval exercises, but also China's participation in Russia's strategic 'Vostok-2018', 'Tsentr-2019' and 'Kavkaz-2020' exercises, the first-ever joint air patrol in the Asia-Pacific in 2019 and Putin's announcement in October 2019 that Russia had been helping China to construct an early warning missile system (President of Russia, 2019c). This led some commentators to argue that the two countries were on the verge of forming an alliance (Kashin & Lukin, 2018; Korolev, 2019), while others remained more sceptical (Ma & Zhang, 2019).

Overall, the permissive conditions for wedging strategies significantly evolved. For Russia, the Trump administration, as well as Abe's continuing interest for a diplomatic breakthrough with Moscow, provided a significant occasion to dis-align Tokyo from the US preferred policies, at least when it comes to bilateral relations with Russia or other selected issues. In particular, it concerned sanctions and ensuring that economic contact remain unhindered. For Japan, the situation was much more complicated. Abe needed both to insulate the alliance from the uncertainty generated by Trump and to prevent a further consolidation of the Sino-Russian partnership. Consequently, both countries put in place wedge strategies based on economic, strategic and diplomatic incentives, characterized by varying levels of reward, but often affected by problems of credibility.

The resumption of dialogue on all levels represented a significant initial signal that both countries intended to terminate the partial freeze in bilateral contacts after the Ukraine crisis. During his visit to Sochi in May 2016, Abe proposed a 'new approach' to conducting a peace treaty and settling the territorial issue and an eight-point economic cooperation plan (Japan's Embassy in the Russian Federation, 2019). High-level political meetings started to take place at a high speed including Abe's visits to the Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok from September 2016. His visit in September 2019 culminated in the 27<sup>th</sup> meeting with President Putin (President of Russia, 2019b). COVID19 pandemics in 2020 interrupted this series of meetings. Moreover, Abe's resignation in September 2020 has further slowed down the momentum for the improvement of bilateral relations.

Between 2016 and 2020, confidence building measures and security dialogue were fully revitalized, including the 'two plus two' dialogue resumed in March 2017 as proposed by Russia. Annual dialogue between the secretaries of the National Security Councils was inaugurated in 2017. Russian military commanders who are the targets of American and European sanctions such as the Chief of General Staff of Russia's army, Valery Gerasimov, and Commander-in-Chief of the Ground Forces, Oleg Salyukov, participated in defence exchanges and visited Japan in 2017. The two states agreed to expand cooperation in combating non-traditional security threats. In 2018 the dialogue continued with the first visit by the Head of Joint Staff of Japan's Self-Defense Forces, Katsutoshi Kawano, to Russia and his talks with Russia's Minister of Defense, Sergey Shoigu,

and Gerasimov in October. This format of high-level military dialogue with Japan has no parallel with other G7 countries in the aftermath of the Ukrainian crisis and imposed sanctions (Brown, 2018; Koizumi, 2017, pp. 30–32).

Dynamic political and security dialogue together with other goals represents a reward for both countries in wedge strategies. For Russia, it has been clearly aligned with the goal to minimize the negative impact of deteriorated relations with the West on its interaction with Tokyo by introducing measures aimed at their comprehensive development – i.e., positive incentives – to prompt Japan to reconsider its solidarity with the United States and other G7 partners in adopting sanctions and critical statements targeting Russia, thus creating a degree of dis-alignment. In addition to restoring high-profile contacts and upgrading security dialogue, Japan did not assume a critical position regarding Russia's involvement in Syria, the Skripal case, taking an intermediate stance between Russia and other G7 states. While joining G7 declarations, Japan opted to take no sanctions. Bilateral relations gained new momentum, notwithstanding Russia's persistent disagreements with the West, mostly limiting disagreements to bilateral and regional issues. Such policy also corresponded to Abe's personal desire to maintain the momentum of political dialogue with Putin, which would be impeded if Japan's policy ignored Russia's aspirations. Japanese defense planners value exchanges with Russian colleagues since they help to better understand each other's capabilities and strategic thinking as well as alleviate concerns about actions that could be interpreted as security challenges or threats. Japanese officials gained a channel to address their security concerns, including the ones about China (Hyodo, 2016, p. 38; Interview with S. Hyodo, July 6, 2018; Interview with Japanese military attaches, July 2019). It could be argued that bilateral communication was a stabilizing factor that contributed to the absence of Russia's joint actions with China targeting Japan (i.e., exercises, patrols, etc.) and subsequently an element of a reward-based wedging strategy.

Russia's major incentive towards Japan concerns the prospects for a peace treaty and territorial resolution<sup>6</sup>. During Putin's visit to Yamaguchi, Japan, in December 2016, both leaders agreed to facilitate dialogue on a peace treaty and start consultations on joint economic activity on the four southern Kuril Islands that Japan claims as its northern territories to develop practical cooperation and build up the trust that is necessary for

territorial resolution (President of Russia, 2016b). In November 2018, both leaders agreed to facilitate the talks on a peace treaty on the basis of the Soviet-Japanese Joint Declaration of 1956, with negotiations starting in January 2019 (TASS, 2019a). The period from December 2016 to November 2018 was described by Abe as the closest the two states had come to finally settling the issue (Nikkei Asia, 2020).

As in previous periods, serious progress on the peace treaty and on the island dispute represented both a clear reward that Japan could look for, as well as a very high hanging fruit. While this remains the most significant hurdle for deeper bilateral relations from the Japanese perspective, a negotiated solution could introduce a significant element of flexibility in the alignments and improve security on the border (Hyodo, 2016, pp. 31–34). A compromise could be reached on the so-called ‘two plus alpha’ basis (Togo, 2016). A peace treaty and the final resolution of the border dispute would enable Japan to eliminate one of the main political obstacles to closer cooperation with Russia (Brown, 2016a, p. 12), fully normalize bilateral relationships and strengthen trust (Hyodo, 2016, p. 31). In the eyes of many in Russian political elite, however, settling the territorial dispute is not urgent (Kireeva & Sushentsov, 2017) and the dispute itself provides a source of Japan’s interest in pursuing cooperation with Moscow.

The details of Russia’s tactics highlight how its approach was functional to a wider wedge strategy that contained both elements of reward and coercion. Firstly, President Putin stated that the possibility of deployment of American troops or BMD on the islands in case of transfer is unacceptable for Russia (RIA Novosti, 2017). Following November 2018 decision to step up negotiations on a peace treaty, President’s spokesman noticed that the guarantees of non-deployment of US troops on the islands are the major question in any territorial solution for Russia. He stated that oral promises cannot be trusted learning from the USSR experience with the US and Germany, thus implying that only a legally binding clause would suffice (Kommersant, 2018). Taking into consideration that the Okhotsk Sea is a base for Russian ballistic missile nuclear submarines, America’s presence on the islands would deal a blow to Russia’s nuclear deterrence (Koizumi, 2017, p. 34). This precondition, as well as excluding the islands from the scope of the US-Japan security treaty is very problematic for Japan since it would entail a regime in which one part of its territory would have a lower security level than the rest. This would

establish a dangerous precedent for the alliance. If the islands ‘returned by Russia’ could represent an exception for article 6 of the security treaty (use of bases), then the Senaku Islands or other disputed territory could be excepted from the article 5 (the security clause). In these terms the Russia seeking an exception creates a significant point of divergence that might have detrimental effects for the alliance (Tsuruoka, 2017, pp. 15–17).

In January 2019, Sergey Lavrov stated that Russia and Japan still have a long way to go in order to become real partners and to achieve the necessary quality of a relationship, citing Japan’s frequency to impose sanctions, anti-Russian statements by the G7 and opposite voting to major UN resolutions (TASS, 2019a). The US-Japan alliance was named by Lavrov as an obstacle to a qualitatively new level of bilateral relations in November 2019. He mentioned that back in 1956, when the joint Declaration was being discussed, the Soviet Union stated that it could be fully realized only if there was no presence of external troops in the Japanese territory. It was widely interpreted as the US-Japan alliance being cited as an obstacle to conclude the peace treaty. He expressed concern that the United States named Russia together with China as its major threats and maintained that its alliances with Japan, Australia and South Korea would be managed according to these challenges. It sharply contrasted with Japanese assurances that the alliance was not aimed against Russia (TASS, 2019b). Similarly, in an interview following his resignation, Abe cited escalating tensions between Washington and Moscow as the key reason for not concluding a treaty (Nikkei Asia, 2020). Settling the territorial dispute seems not very likely in the near future. Considering the issues that were put forward by the Russian side and that need to be settled before any agreement takes place (i.e., Japan’s recognition of Russia’s sovereignty over the islands) (TASS, 2019a), the negotiations are likely to be difficult and protracted. Russia’s citing of the US-Japan security treaty as an obstacle to successful resolution was bound to have no effect on Tokyo due to the greater value of US security guarantees. Even if Russia’s demands seem credible enough, it is hardly possible for Japan to comply with them and exclude any territory from the scope of US-Japan alliance (Tsuruoka, 2017). Interestingly, Abe’s government seemed to be largely unperturbed by the credibility problem of this incentive and continued negotiations with Russia, even though above-mentioned obstacles existed, with the territorial issue being a political goal too important to be discarded.

Secondly, during all the ‘two plus two’ meetings, as well as many ministerial meetings, Russian officials repeatedly criticized the build-up of the US-Japan alliance as an obstacle to Russian-Japanese cooperation. During bilateral talks with his counterpart Taro Kono in March 2018, Lavrov said that the US global BMD system undermined strategic stability and Russia was concerned about Japan’s plans to become a part of it by deploying Aegis Ashore. He mentioned that this affected Russia’s security directly (TASS, 2018). Although Japan cancelled its plans to deploy Aegis Ashore in June 2020, this decision was not made because of Russia’s requests.

In September 2019, Putin expressed his concern about the possible deployment of American short and medium range missiles in Japan and South Korea after the end of the INF treaty. If deployed, the missiles were to cover a vast Far Eastern territory where Russian naval and nuclear submarine bases are located. This, as Putin stated, could become an important factor in relations with Japan and South Korea (President of Russia, 2019b). It could imply that political contacts and negotiations over a peace treaty might be significantly hindered. Above all, it seems likely that Russia could answer to such deployment by increasing its military build-up in the Far East and stepping up its security cooperation with China. All these steps, in turn, would harm Japan’s security and run counter to its own wedging strategy. Russia’s objections, in addition to other factors, seem to create repercussions for Japanese decision making on this topic and make the acceptance of American missiles less likely (Interview with Japanese military attaches, February 2020).

Japan’s rewards for Russia are mostly concentrated in the economic domain. With Abe’s eight-point economic cooperation plan, focus on fostering economic ties was one of the hallmarks of his policy. Its primarily goal was to establish comprehensive cooperation and an environment that is conducive to signing a peace treaty and settling the territorial issue. Another motivation was to provide Russia with options to modernize its economy, especially the Far East, by not relying solely on China. New investment opportunities for Japanese private sector and diversification of energy suppliers should also not be overlooked.

Consequently, from September 2016, when Abe first visited the Far Eastern Forum in Vladivostok, the two countries approved Abe’s eight-point economic cooperation plan for bilateral cooperation and Russia reciprocated with the priority investment project list proposed by the

Ministry of Economic Development. Abe repeatedly highlighted that Japan is an ideal partner for the development of the Far East and that the Sea of Japan could turn into a logistical maritime highway of peace and economic cooperation once the territorial question has been solved (President of Russia, 2016a, 2018).

In August 2017, the Russia-Japan Investment Foundation with \$1 billion capital was established with a goal to foster joint projects. Japan's economic cooperation with Russia in several sectors including energy, logistics, manufacturing industry, digital economy and innovation, medicine, IT, finance, development of SME, postal services, agriculture, urban infrastructure and others represents a reward for Moscow. According to Abe, by late 2019 about half of 200 economic projects had entered the implementation stage (President of Russia, 2019b). The scale of economic activity, including advanced manufacturing and high-tech, has no precedence in Russia-Japan relations, especially when taking into consideration Russia's challenging business environment. Clearly, the scope of bilateral projects signifies a profound diversification of Japanese investment. With contact with Europe put on pause, no other developed nation has initiated such an impressive number of new projects to contribute to Russia's modernization and capacity building in the areas of medicine, services and urban infrastructure, among others, as Japan has done.

Japan sought to partially avoid the financial restrictions caused by sanctions, by financing projects through Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC), a public financial institution, and employing governmental support measures. For instance, in December 2016, JBIC provided a 200-billion-euro credit to 'Yamal-LNG', operated by NOVATEK Oil Company, which was sanctioned by the US. In June 2019, a consortium including Mitsui & Co. and Japan Oil, Gas and Metals National Corporation (JOGMEC) agreed to procure a 10% share in NOVATEK's project 'Arctic LNG-2' (RBC, 2019). This project provides Japan with alternative source for LNG imports and ensures that Russia's partners in the Arctic are not limited to China. Because of sanctions, Mitsui's investment was reportedly made possible only with the participation of the governmental JOGMEC, which de-facto entails national guarantees for the project. This represents Russia's relative success in ensuring that sanctions are not hindering economic activity and new Japanese investment.

It is important to highlight that the perceived lack of credibility did not prevent Moscow from promoting new cooperative initiatives. Russia's elite is aware of the US influence on Japanese policy making, especially on security matters. Consequently, Russian policy makers tend to question Japan's credible commitment to an independent stance on issues such as BMD, and the deployment of US bases in the disputed islands, since they assume that Japan can hardly resist US pressures when it comes to defence policies. At the same time, Russia has retained its neutral stance in ChinaJapan disputes. In addition, increased military cooperation by Russia and China is generally viewed as a consequence of their respective deteriorated relations with the US and a signal not to Tokyo but Washington.

There has been dissatisfaction, however, on the Russian side regarding the size of Japan's new investment. Abe's much advertised eight-point economic cooperation plan did not see realization to the extent that Russia had hoped for. Apart from the large scale energy investment by Mitsui & Co and JOGMEG into Arctic LNG-2 worth \$5 billion, all other projects are medium and small scale. Russia's challenging business environment and American secondary sanctions, especially under CAATSA, continue to constrain investment on a larger scale. Bilateral trade in 2019 reached \$20.3 billion (Russian Federal Custom Service Statistics, 2019), which did not even equal the trade turnover of \$33 billion in 2013. Finally, Russia's elite fascination with large projects and Japan's preference for smaller initiatives generates problems in terms of the credibility of Japan's economic incentives.

China is a much more promising economic partner in terms of trade, import of energy resources that are Russia's main export commodity, investment and technologies (Brown, 2016b, pp. 39–40). With Japan retaining its restrictions over technology transfer to Russia, and European sources having also become increasingly constrained, Russia's key feasible option in terms of technological partnerships seems to be China (Trenin, 2019, p. 2). Nevertheless, expanding trade relations with Japan corresponds to Russia's own goals of balancing its economic relations with Asian partners and avoiding the unwanted degree of dependence on China (Lukin, 2018, pp. 69–70). By providing economic alternatives, especially for the development of the Far East as well as in advanced technologies, Japan can realistically ensure that Russia's Asian pivot<sup>7</sup> remains more balanced. In terms of Japan's pre-alignment goal, however,

it could be argued that whether Russia-China relations eventually evolve into alliance, or not, will be determined by the level of their respective strategic competition and the possibility of military confrontation with the United States (Lukin, 2018, p. 104) rather than by any actions that Japan might take.

## **Conclusion**

The analysis of wedge strategies between Russia and Japan has led to several significant empirical and theoretical insights.

Firstly, and crucially, the success of a wedge strategy should not be measured only in terms of re-alignments or de-alignments, especially in peacetime and in a situation of a stable international environment. Prealignments and, especially, dis-alignments might significantly affect relations between allies and partners as well as relations between them and third parties. From this point of view, it can be argued that there has been a degree of success in wedging strategies of both countries, with Russia's being much more effective. Several measures to implement these strategies in practice have also served to bring other designs and goals into effect.

Russia's wedge strategy aimed at dis-aligning Tokyo and Washington, as well as at undermining Japan's solidarity with its Western partners, together with Abe's own desire to make progress in the relationship with Moscow, should be considered the main factors leading to the bilateral engagement despite the deep crisis in Russia-US relations, Japan's much milder and mostly symbolic sanctions as well as the investment by the Japanese private sector into Russian companies disregarding American sanctions against Russia. Moreover, in line with Moscow's wishes, Russia and Japan have minimized disagreements to bilateral and regional issues, and the damage dealt by Japanese sanctions, which were adopted because of the Ukrainian crisis, was lower compared to the impact of the sanctions imposed by other G7 countries.

Similarly, Japan managed to achieve some of its goals primarily by employing rewards in the economic realm and by means of high-profile security dialogue. Japan's strategy seems to suffice for a degree of dis-alignment, i.e., in the economic domain by providing alternatives to Russia, beyond China. Tokyo's security dialogue with Moscow and

confidence-building measures made taking anti-Japanese steps by the Russian government less likely, adding to Russia's own desire to pursue a diversified Asian policy and maintain strategic neutrality in regional security conflicts. At the same time, Japan's actions made no changes in Russia-China military cooperation, which flourished with joint exercises, arms sales and the first joint air patrols, given that it should be viewed as a reaction and at the same time a response to the policy by the US.

Secondly, a favourable permissive environment is a necessary, but it is not a sufficient condition for wedge strategies to succeed. The analysis of the two years following the Ukraine crisis has highlighted how the external environment created constraints that were conducive to the tightening of existing alignments. Russia's isolation from the West led Moscow to enhance its relations with China and prevented Japan from assuming a more independent stance on bilateral relations. Moreover, for Japan, the role of the United States appears crucial. Especially during the Trump administration, on one hand, Abe was able to pursue his policy towards Russia, but on the other hand the deterioration of relations between the US and both China and Russia undermined the possibility of a more significant effect of Japan's wedge strategies. Moreover, Abe's personal commitment to 'solve' the territorial dispute should be considered a significant factor in this context.

Thirdly, the capacity of rewarding is central, but wedge strategies are not simply about outbidding the other state's current partner. In this case, neither Russia nor Japan can possibly offer more than what the relationship with China and the US have to offer. Neither is ready to compromise their current partnership significantly in order to ensure the success of their wedge strategy. Both countries are promoting a delicate balancing act between their major ally or a strategic partner and each other, and an attempt to pursue the dis-alignment of hostile alignments through improved Russia-Japan relations. The incentives Russia and Japan offered each other during the first and the third period have been considered significant enough to give momentum to bilateral relations and to lead the two states to embark on some form of dis-alignment from their established partnerships.

Comparing Russia's and Japan's dis-alignment strategies, one could say that they both demonstrate some degree of success, but the Russian strategy seems to have accomplished more. It could best be explained by the fact that Japan has been much more interested in the potential reward

that Moscow could present it with (in the form of a peace treaty and possible transfer of the two islands and some 'alpha'). However elusive it might be, for the Japanese it remains the key goal in its relations with Russia. Additionally, Japan is driven to a greater extent by the perception of China's security threat than by Russia's view of the US in Asia. The incentives Japan could offer were arguably lower as the scale of economic cooperation was, in most cases, modest and in security Tokyo was not ready for a greater level of cooperation than defence exchanges. The former could be explained by the fact that Japanese companies make decisions based on the economic viability of projects and, thus, they are cautious about investing in the Russian market.

The fourth point is that mixed strategies that are based on reward as well as some degree of negative incentives, if not coercion, appear to be more effective than strategies purely based on reward. The degree of success of Russia's wedge strategies has been achieved by using tactics comprised of rewards in security (institutionalized contacts), criticism of USJapan alliance build-up and by heavily conditioning the major reward – i.e., linking territorial resolution with the US-Japan alliance.

Dis-alignment, however, is only partial. Russia's mixture of rewards and coercion demonstrates a somewhat lower level of efficiency in the security realm. It did not prompt Japan to take a different foreign policy strategy or minimize its level of cooperation with the United States, which Tokyo perceived as vital for its security, such as Aegis Ashore, before it was cancelled due to other reasons unrelated to Moscow, or lowering the security level of specific territories. However, Russia's warning about consequences to the relationship if American small and medium range missiles are introduced in Japan seems to be one of the factors impacting decision making on this issue in terms of regional strategic calculations. That said, these are not only Russia's but also China's retaliatory measures that Tokyo has to take into consideration.

Japan's approach is largely based on reward, while eschewing coercive policies. If Japan resorts to coercion, it might have an adverse effect on Russia and is likely to result in a closer Russia-China cooperation against Japan.

The fifth point regards credibility, which, although contrary to what IR theory would suggest, does not seem to play a key role in this case. Both states seem happy to 'buy the same horse many times'. Both countries have agreed to revive the bilateral dialogue, proposing new negotiations

despite the enduring distance between their positions, and despite having failed to achieve progress repeatedly in the past. Furthermore, both countries are aware of the limits of the other's possibility to credibly commit on crucial issues that are on the table. Moscow is fully aware that the Japanese security policy is strongly influenced by American pressures on key issues such as deployment of BMD systems. However, both Russia and Japan demonstrate determination to pursue them anyway.

This might be explained by the fact that the type of wedging strategy promoted by both has entailed, so far, limited political and economic costs, but has led to some benefits in terms of security and economic gains, and opened up the possibility to pursue more ambitious, yet more elusive, objectives such as the solution of the territorial dispute, which could, at least in the long term, inject further flexibility in the regional alignments (Tsuruoka, 2019). At the same time, there is a view in Russian political circles that maintaining the territorial dispute seems to provide the incentives for Japan's overtures towards Russia and its willingness to implement rewarding measures and take a muted stance on Russia's conflicts with the West. Thus, the dispute is viewed by many in Moscow as a valuable source of leverage, and as such it can be regarded as a part of wedging strategy that could prove difficult to find a substitution for.<sup>8</sup> At this point it is impossible to make a clear conclusion if the Russian government really considered transferring the islands to Japan.

The significance of these findings goes beyond the analysis of cases of wedge strategies between Russia and Japan and their relations with their allies and partners. The theoretical framework applied here could lead to further research being applied to other cases in East Asia and beyond. For instance, the same framework could be applied to North Korean attempts to wedge the US-ROK alliance. Similarly, to the case analysed here, the South Korean government, both in the late 1990s and the early 2000s, as well as after 2018, seemingly ignored the lack of credibility of the North Korean side, and the risk of dis-alignment to pursue a rapprochement with Pyongyang, offering significant economic rewards.

Other possible applications of this framework could regard China's attempts to undermine the US-led alliances in East Asia. Beijing promoted wedge strategies, characterised by a mix of positive and negatives incentives, towards most US allies in the region, with the objective to dis-align (especially in the cases of Japan, South Korea and Australia)<sup>9</sup> or pre-

align in the cases of Myanmar, Singapore, Vietnam, or even de-align in the case of the Philippines.

Ultimately, analysing the causes for the success of different types of wedge strategies, especially those which are destined to create problems to alliances' cohesion, in the form of dis-alignments, represents a significant contribution to the theoretical debate as well as to the policy analysis of alliance politics in East Asia and beyond.

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