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Japan, South Korea and the rise of a networked security architecture in East Asia

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## **Japan, South Korea and the rise of a networked security architecture in East Asia**

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### **Abstract**

This article explains Japan's and South Korea's role in the transition from the hub and-spokes alliance system to a networked security architecture in East Asia. It is argued that China's contestation of the rules-based international order in East Asia has been confronted by East Asian states through a mixture of resistance and accommodation. From a Japanese point of view, Beijing's ascendancy is considered particularly disruptive for the regional order. Consequently, Japan has become a central hub in the development of the networked security architecture enacting two complementary strategies: the consolidation of the alliance with the United States and the creation of new and less binding forms of bilateral, minilateral and multilateral security partnerships with Asian allies. By contrast, since Seoul considers China as an essential partner for the stabilisation of the Korean Peninsula, it has played a more peripheral role in the development of this regional networking dynamic.

### **Introduction**

Since the establishment of the "hub-and-spoke" system of bilateral alliances in the early Cold War, Japan and South Korea have been two crucial partners

for the United States in the region, as well as key enablers of the US-led regional hegemonic order, hosting the vast majority of US troops deployed in Asia (Green 2017). After the end of the Cold War, emboldened by its military, economic and political ascendancy, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has engaged in a selective contestation of the primary institutions of that regional order (see Foot).<sup>1</sup> Coherently with the central argument of this special issue, this article argues that regional powers have responded to such challenges by broadening the membership of the hegemonic regional order in East Asia.<sup>2</sup> They have done so by diversifying the range of bilateral defence partnerships across the region as well as by fostering minilateral groupings and multilateral security regimes. The intertwining of these different security arrangements resulted in the development of a networked security architecture<sup>3</sup> (see “Introduction”). Each regional state has perceived the contestation of key primary institutions of the regional order differently. This has led to different roles, positions and degrees of commitment in sustaining, consolidating and expanding the networked security architecture. These differences clearly emerge in the cases of Japan and South Korea.

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<sup>1</sup> Coherently with the rest of the special issue, this article follows the definition of primary institutions and regional order provided by the English School (see Buzan 2004 and Buzan 2014).

<sup>2</sup> The central argument of the special issue is that China’s selective contestation of main primary institutions of the regional order in East Asia has sparked a process of renegotiation of that order among regional powers that has led them to broaden the composition of this regional hegemonic order. This, in turn, has translated into a reconfiguration of the alliances and defence arrangements into a networked security architecture (see Introduction).

<sup>3</sup> The networked security architecture is defined as “a network of interwoven bilateral, minilateral and multilateral defence arrangements between the United States and its regional allies and partners, and that also partly includes China” (see Introduction). From this perspective, the mini and multilateral channels are not alternative, but complementary, to the existing “hub-and-spokes alliances”.

Japan perceives China's behaviour as aimed at contesting several of the key primary institutions of the regional order. Consequently, Japan has become a central hub in the development of the networked security architecture enacting two complementary strategies: the consolidation of the alliance with the United States and the creation of new and less binding forms of bilateral, minilateral and multilateral security partnerships with Asian allies. By contrast, given South Korea's more nuanced perception of the Chinese relationship with the deep rules of the order, Seoul has played a more limited role in the development of a regional networked security architecture.

The arguments developed here are also relevant for the policy and scholarly debate on bilateral security relations between Japan and South Korea. Analyses derived from a structural realist logic or balance-of-threat arguments have often assumed that Seoul and Tokyo should ally, or at least align, as a consequence of the rise of China or the presence of the North Korean threat, or uncertainty about the US commitment (Cha 2000). Lack of progress in bilateral security cooperation has often been explained with the enduring presence of "history issues"<sup>4</sup> between the two countries (Glosserman and Snyder 2015). This article points out that, aside from bilateral historical animosities, different perspectives on China's contestation of the regional order have led the two countries to develop distinctive roles in preserving it. This explains both why the scenario of a triangular alliance is highly unlikely and why the two countries have developed very different roles in the East Asian networked security architecture.

The rest of the article is organised as follows. The first section examines the two countries' perceptions of China's contestation of the primary institutions of the regional order. The second and the third sections explore the two countries' different roles in the emerging networked security architecture. The

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<sup>4</sup> The history issue refers to the enduring animosity on the Korean side stemming from the perceived lack of apologies and contrition for the Japanese occupation of the peninsula between 1910 and 1945.

conclusion discusses the theoretical and empirical implications of the findings. What emerges from the analysis is how different perceptions of China's selective contestation have led to very different roles in East Asia's networking security architecture.

Japan, South Korea and China's selective contestation of the regional order

Japan and South Korea have perceived the rise of China, and its selective contestation of the regional order, very differently. More than any other state in East Asia, Japan considers Beijing's ascendancy as destabilising. From Tokyo's perspective, the PRC has been contesting several primary institutions of the regional order, namely great power management, war, international law and diplomacy. This has led Japan to embrace a very active role in the development of the emerging networked security architecture.

South Korea has considerably benefitted from the US-led rules-based order, which has enabled its economic development and favoured its democratisation (Snyder 2018). For Seoul, however, Beijing's expanding clout does not necessarily entail a direct challenge to the key pillars of the regional order, nor a threat to South Korea's status within it. On the contrary, China is perceived as a legitimate great power, whose cooperation is needed to address the North Korean threat, and as a necessary economic partner. Consequently, the ROK's role in the networked security architecture is more limited than Japan's, with Seoul concentrating its effort mostly on the alliance and on multilateral regimes for dispute resolution.

This section will compare the two countries' perception of China's selective contestation of the main primary institutions of the regional order.

#### Great power management

The primary institution of great power management encompasses elements of social recognition: great powers need to recognise each other's status, their spheres of influence and their "special rights and duties" concerning provision of central direction, and limitation of conflict (Bull 2002; Loke 2016).

During the last three decades, this process of mutual recognition by Japan and China has been particularly underdeveloped (Goh 2013; Zhang 2015). Tokyo deems that China's quest for the great power status entails a contestation of Japan's self perception as the most advanced country in East Asia and, as well, an unwillingness to recognise Japan's membership in the regional great powers' club.

During the entire twentieth century, Japan's perceived superiority in terms of power and prestige was associated with a process of "othering of Asia": coherently, with the Meiji-era dictum, "leave Asia, join the West",<sup>5</sup> the construction of the Japanese identity stressed the differences with and the separation from Asia (Suzuki 2015; Dian 2017). While in the pre-war period, "leaving Asia" meant following the idea of "rich nation, strong army"; in the post-war era, it meant achieving economic and technological progress, coupled with democracy and the rejection of the use of force (Samuels 2007; Tamaki 2015). China's quest for great power status, which emerged in the early 2000s and fully developed during Xi's era, has generated the perception of a direct challenge to the status that Japan enjoyed since the end of the nineteenth century.

Under Xi, the PRC has promoted its own blueprint for a regional order which is based in China's own centrality, coupled with the gradual decline of Japan's role as well as the US hegemonic presence in the region. On the one hand, this blueprint has translated into new economic fora, led by Beijing, such as the Asia Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB), the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and economic initiatives as the Belt and Road Initiative (Dian and Menegazzi 2018). On the other hand, China's concept of a "new type of great power relations" aims at contesting

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<sup>5</sup> Since the Meiji Restoration Japanese policymakers embraced the concept of *Datsu-A Ron*, "Leave Asia, Join the West", originally proposed by Fukuzawa Yukichi in 1885. "Asia" was identified with backwardness and weakness. "Joining the West" meant embracing political and social modernisation. (Korhonen 2013).

the established hierarchy of power in order to promote the recognition of great power parity between China and the United States (Zeng and Breslin 2016). These proposals are considered as particularly threatening by Tokyo, since they degrade Japan's regional role and subordinate its interests to a possible grand bargain between Washington and Beijing (King 2014). This threat to the country's status in the regional hierarchy has led Japan to embrace a role of active defender of the regional order, and of the key normative pillars underpinning it.

The process of mutual recognition of status, and more broadly the institution of great power management, is crucial also to understand South Korea's perspective on the rise of China and, consequently, its role in the networked security architecture.

In the post-Cold War period, while China and Japan have engaged in "mutual social neglect" (Zhang 2015), China and South Korea gradually acknowledged each other's quest for status, spheres of influence and roles in the limitation of conflict. Since the end of the Cold War, South Korea has recognised China's necessary great power role in any possible negotiated solution for the division of the peninsula. Consequently, since the 1990s, Seoul has approached China as a potential partner for the resolution of the North Korean issue, rather than as a potential disruptor of the regional order (Kim and Cha 2016; Ye 2017). Already under President Roh Tawwoo (1988–1993), the ROK's *Nordpolitik* theorised the need to "get to Pyongyang via Beijing (and Moscow)", recognising China's role as a necessary partner in the resolution of the North Korean issue. Its recognition of China's expanding role in regional great power management was consolidated in the following decades. Key steps in this direction were the Six Party Talks (Goh 2013, ch. 3); South Korea's participation to the AIIB; President Park's presence at the



2015 commemorations for the end of the Second World War<sup>6</sup>; and China's involvement in the recent *détente* on the Korean Peninsula.

While Seoul accommodated China's quest for a great power role, Beijing was instrumental in recognising South Korea's quest for middle power status.<sup>7</sup> South Korea and China officially established diplomatic relations only in 1992. Their relationship has rapidly intensified both politically and economically. China became South Korea's first economic partner in 2004, and the political relation was upgraded to the level of strategic cooperative partnership in 2008 (Kim 2016).<sup>8</sup>

Ultimately, a stable and cooperative relation with Beijing, together with the alliance with the United States, represents for South Korea a necessary prerequisite for transcending the dire geopolitical constraints it faces and for nurturing its role as a middle power. This does not entail the absence of recurrent tensions, associated with China's use of coercive measures, as testified by the THAAD controversy in 2016–2017 (Moon and Boo 2017).<sup>9</sup> However, this process of mutual recognition, as well as the priority given to the quest for a negotiated settlement of the North Korean issue, has led South

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<sup>6</sup> In that occasion, Xi Jinping revendicated China's role as a power that defeated Nazi-fascism in World War II, as a fundamental legitimising element for China's newfound great power status. On this point see Kaufman (2015).

<sup>7</sup> The concept of South Korea being a middle power was promoted during the Kim Young-sam presidency (1993-1998) and became increasingly central in the country's foreign policy discourse during Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun presidencies.

<sup>8</sup> Previous steps were labelled "full-scale cooperative partnership" and "comprehensive cooperative partnership" in 2000 and 2003, respectively.

<sup>9</sup> China considered the installation of the THAAD system, a component of the US-led ballistic defence system, as a threat to its security and a form of incipient containment. To put pressure on South Korea, it used economic coercion and trade restriction. In 2018, President Moon announced the policy of three Nos: no additional THAAD deployment, no participation in the US' missile defence network and no establishment of a trilateral military alliance with the USA and Japan.

Korea to avoid overt resistance against China's attempts to contest key pillars of the regional order.<sup>10</sup>

#### War as primary institution and the grey-zone challenge

The two countries have also distinct positions on China's contestation of "war" as a primary institution of the regional order (Buzan 2015).<sup>11</sup> Seen from Tokyo, the emergence of grey-zone strategies and hybrid warfare represents a significant attempt by China to contest the normative and strategic roots of the regional order.<sup>12</sup>

Grey zones are characterised by low-level coercion, compelling defenders either to accept a series *fait accompli* or to risk an escalation for a minor change of the status quo (Green et al. 2017). In the last decade, China has been systematically employing grey-zone strategies in order to gain leverage in the disputes in the South and East China Seas and to undermine the credibility of the US-led alliances. The 2017 White Paper published by the Japanese Ministry of Defence classifies the emergence of grey-zone threats among the key destabilising trends in the region (Japanese MOD 2017a, b). The practice of grey-zone strategies undermines the shared understanding of war embedded in the post-war regional order, which included clear boundaries between conflict and peace. With the extensive use of grey zones, war becomes a blurred spectrum in which contesting powers continuously use low-intensity coercion to achieve their interests (Brands 2016; Green et al.

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<sup>10</sup> The 2018 South Korean Diplomatic White Paper stresses the necessity of consolidating a "substantive and mature strategic cooperative partnership" (p. 63).

<sup>11</sup> Following Buzan, we conceive war as "a negotiated practice within international societies that varies markedly over time"; specifically, it "can vary from a fairly open practice (any reason will do, low restraints on methods) to a highly constrained one" (Buzan 2015, 135).

<sup>12</sup> Grey-zone strategies are defined as "activity that is coercive and aggressive in nature, but that is deliberately designed to remain below the threshold of conventional military conflict and open interstate war" (Brands 2016).

2017). This development is particularly central for Japan, since the alliance with the United States as well as the entire Japanese defence planning, up to the early 2010s, was designed around two scenarios: the defence of the Japanese territory in case of external attack in wartime, and deterrence against such an attack in peace time.<sup>13</sup>

Differently from Japan, South Korea is not concerned by the emergence of greyzone threats, since it has to face the daunting—but clearly “black and white”—security challenge posed by North Korea. Furthermore, and importantly, it is not directly affected by China’s grey-zone strategies. In such circumstances, the strategic interaction with the adversary is defined in the familiar terms of deterrence, commitment and reassurance (Heo and Roehrig 2018). From this perspective, Seoul’s interests are clearly oriented towards the preservation of nuclear and conventional extended deterrence through the consolidation and the deepening of the alliance with the United States. With the vast majority of political and military resources dedicated to deterring North Korea, investing those security partnerships that are aimed at dealing with grey-zone and hybrid challenges does not appear to be a priority for South Korea (Korean Ministry of National Defence 2016).

#### International law

Another significant difference regards the Chinese role in contesting international law as a primary institution. From a Japanese perspective, international law, and particularly freedom of navigation, represents a third key pillar of regional order which is being contested by Beijing. As stressed by the *National Defence Program Guidelines for FY 2014 and Beyond*, since “Japan is a maritime state” “securing the safety of maritime and air traffic

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<sup>13</sup> Japan to introduce the concept of *dynamic deterrence* and *dynamic defence force* in its main strategic document, the National Defence Program Guideline (NDPG), in 2010. These concepts are related to the necessity to deter grey-zone threats, described as a blurred area between war and peace. These documents overcome for the first time the binary distinction between peacetime and wartime activities (Japanese MOD, 2010).

through strengthening an ‘Open and Stable Seas’ order based upon such fundamental principles as the rule of law and the freedom of navigation constitutes the basis of peace and prosperity” (Japanese MOD 2013).

Tokyo has made efforts to support the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the Tribunal on the Law of the Sea as well as the Commission in the Limits of the Continental Shelf (Koga 2018). Moreover, in the last decade, Japanese policymakers have repeatedly voiced their concerns about the PRC’s stance vis-à-vis international law, especially in the maritime domain. Japan considers China’s activities in the East and South China Sea as a challenge to the regional order and its key legal foundations (Yuzawa 2018). In particular, Beijing’s “historical rights” claim over the territories where the body of water included within the nine-dashed line belongs is deeply problematic. As the 2017 Defence White Paper argues, “China’s attempts to change the status quo in the East and South China Seas based on its unique assertions which are incompatible with the existing order of international law, have become serious security concerns to the region” (Japanese MOD 2017b, p. 87).<sup>14</sup> Ultimately, Tokyo considers the preservation of international law, and particularly the freedom of navigation and overflight, as one of the cornerstones of the regional order and one of the key drivers of security cooperation with the United States and its regional partners.

South Korea, especially since the 2010s, has presented itself as an active supporter of the regional order. Moreover, just like Japan and China, it is heavily dependent on stable access to the maritime trade routes. However, Seoul does not appear to perceive China’s behaviour as openly contesting international law (e.g. freedom of navigation). As Cronin argues, “while South Korea depends heavily on freedom of navigation in the South China

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<sup>14</sup> Similar statements can be found in all the Japanese Defence White Papers since 2010.

Sea, [...] as Asian maritime tensions have escalated in recent years, Korea has sought to avoid becoming enmeshed in the middle of a major-power contest between its primary ally and its top trading partner” (Cronin and Lee 2017). Accordingly, it has been more cautious than Japan, Australia or South-East Asian countries in assuming a clear position vis-à-vis China’s encroachments of international law and freedom of navigation.

To be sure, the ROK and China have had their own dispute regarding the islet of Ieodo<sup>15</sup> and fishing rights in the East China Sea. The two countries have been careful not to escalate their disputes, ultimately finding a negotiated solution regarding fishing rights which led to a de-escalation of the dispute.

In the East and South China Sea, Seoul’s position on maritime and territorial disputes has been conciliatory, especially during the Park era to the point of attracting criticisms from the United States and several regional states (Easley and Park 2018). In 2015, when asked to comment on China’s island-building programme in the South China Sea, President Park stated that:

“China is Korea’s largest trading partner, and China has a huge role to play in upholding peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula [...] As for the South China Sea, the security and freedom of navigation are very important for South Korea. We are watching with concern and hope that the situation does not deteriorate” (quoted in Easley and Park 2018).

Similarly, in 2013, Seoul did not join Washington in criticising China over the establishment of an Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the South China Sea and stressed how its position on the issue was not aligned with that of the United States and Japan (Panda 2013).

#### Diplomacy and multilateralism

The third main difference in the two countries’ perception of China’s challenge to the regional order regards diplomacy and multilateralism. Throughout the post-Cold War period Japan viewed the development of

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<sup>15</sup> Called Suyan Reef by China.

multilateral diplomacy as an emerging primary institution of the regional order. Nevertheless, Tokyo's approach towards multilateral security institutions evolved considerably. In the 1990s, Japan saw multilateralism as functional to three objectives: reassuring other Asian states about its own security policies; "decentring" its foreign policy strategy from the alliance; and socialising China (Midford 2017).

Since the early 2000s, Japan has reassessed the role of multilateralism in Asia considering it as a complement, rather than an alternative, to the alliance with the United States and to the existing regional order. Consequently, Tokyo started to promote forms of open and geographically wide multilateralism which included the United States as well as partners like Australia and India<sup>16</sup> (Yuzawa 2018).

As a consequence of this shift, Japan started to consider two aspects of Beijing's foreign policy as being aimed at contesting diplomacy as a primary institution. The first is China's preference for bilateralism, often coupled with coercive threats, as a method to solve disputes. The most prominent example has been Beijing's penchant for negotiating bilaterally with other claimants in the South China Sea, bypassing both ASEAN and institutions such as ARF and EAS (O'Neill 2018). The second is China's promotion of "exclusive" East Asian institutions aimed at increasing its leverage therein, while minimising Japan's influence and excluding the United States. Examples include China's proposals for an East Asia summit modelled on the ASEAN + 3 format, or the project for an East Asia Community proposed in 2009.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> In this case open forms—"Asia-Pacific" or "Indo-Pacific"—of institutional cooperation include the United States as well as other non East Asian partners such as India or Australia.

<sup>17</sup> Recent economic initiatives such as the AIIB, the RCEP and the Belt and Road Initiative promote a similar geographic model, with China at the centre and the exclusion of the United States and the marginalisation of Japan. See Dian and Menegazzi (2018).

These two foreign policy practices have led Japan to attach significant importance to the consolidation of regional multilateral fora as a key normative foundation of the regional order.

Since the end of the Cold War, just like Japan, South Korea has considered multilateralism and the establishment of multilateral fora for dispute resolution as a major pillar of the post-Cold War regional order. However, Seoul, differently from Tokyo, does not consider multilateral institutions as functional to socialise and constrain China, but rather an instrument to mitigate the risks of conflict in the region and to consolidate South Korea's role as a middle power able to build bridges among regional great powers (Snider 2016).

Furthermore, the ROK does not perceive China as a contesting multilateralism as deep rule of the regional order. Firstly, for South Korea, the Six Party Talks represented a crucial test case of China's commitment to multilateralism. On that occasion, Seoul perceived Beijing as acting responsibly in the pursuit of a negotiated solution to the North Korean issue (Goh 2013). Secondly, South Korea has generally favoured solutions centred on an "East Asian" format similar to the ASEAN + 3, rather than on the wider "Asia-Pacific" configurations favoured by Japan (Hundt and Kim 2011).<sup>18</sup> This type of framework is considered by Seoul as maximising the country's role as mediator between China and other regional powers.

Ultimately, Japan and South Korea perceive China's selective contestation of the key primary institutions of the regional order, as well as the challenge this poses to their status within it, very differently. As shown in the next section,

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<sup>18</sup> The most significant examples are Kim Dae-jung's proposals for an East Asia Vision Group in the framework of ASEAN + 3, as well as proposals for a North East Asian Community under Roh Moohyun, later rebranded as North East Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI) under Park Geunhye. Asia-Pacific configurations refer to those including the US, as well as Australia or India, while "East Asian" configurations exclude them.

this has led them to adopt very different roles in the emerging networked security architecture.

Japan as a hub in the networked security architecture in the networked security architecture

Throughout the post-Cold War period, Japan's perception of China's selective contestation of the US-led hegemonic order in East Asia has led Tokyo to promote a strategy aimed at protecting the regional order based on three main pillars: deepening the alliance with the United States, developing new bilateral and minilateral channels of cooperation with like-minded partners, and investing in multilateral and rules-based dispute resolution mechanisms, such as EAS, ARF, and ADMM+.

During the Trump era, with Japan fearing abandonment on the US side, the Abe government has intensified its efforts to preserve the regional order. Firstly, it has sought to preserve the alliance from Trump's isolationist instincts. Secondly, it continued to invest in mini- and multilateral channels, as increasingly significant complements to the relationship with Washington. Bolstering the US–Japan alliance

The adaptation of the US–Japan alliance to the post-Cold War security environment started in the late 1990s with the revision of the alliance guidelines (Oros 2017).<sup>19</sup> This process has considerably accelerated since the return to power of Prime Minister Abe. Key steps undertaken to upgrade the alliance, and particularly the 2015 Guidelines for the Alliance, express the need to respond to China's challenge, not just in terms of balance of power but also of consolidating the normative foundations of the regional order (Schoff 2017).

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<sup>19</sup> The Guidelines for US–Japan Defense Cooperation of the alliances are a document that provides a detailed framework for bilateral defence cooperation within the alliance, integrating the US–Japan Security Treaty of 1960. They have been modified in 1978, 1997 and 2015.



The recalibration of the alliance’s deterrence strategy to cope with China’s greyzone challenge—with the introduction of key innovations such as the Alliance Coordination Mechanism<sup>20</sup> or the concept of “seamless cooperation”—has been one of the most significant developments introduced by the 2015 Guidelines for the Alliance (Harold et al. 2017).<sup>21</sup> This process continued with the 2018 National Defense Program Guidelines that highlighted the need to promote further coordination between the allies to cope with China’s coercion in the East and South China Seas (Schoff and Romei 2019).

The consolidation of the alliance favoured the transition from post-war pacifism to “proactive contribution to peace” (Hagstrom and Hannsen 2016). This concept knits together the need to restate Japan’s status in East Asia, its credential as democratic security provider and its role as defender of the rules-based order. Consequently, deepening the cooperation with the United States and promoting closer relations with other democratic countries represents a way to reaffirm Japan’s full membership of the small club of regional great powers and to restate the necessity to defend the regional order from China’s material and normative challenge (Dian 2017).

#### Forging value-based minilateral partnerships

The alliance with Washington remains the backbone of Japan’s security policies. Nevertheless, Tokyo has increasingly recognised the need—as indicated in the country’s first National Security Strategy (Japanese MOFA 2013)—to invest in a broad range of bilateral and minilateral security partnerships (listed in Tables 1, 2) that complement the alliance.

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<sup>20</sup> The Alliance Coordination mechanism is an inter-agency framework aimed at fostering coordination between the different agencies and bureaucracies involved in alliance activities and security policies more generally.

<sup>21</sup> The concept of seamless cooperation refers to the need to promote cooperation and joint planning, not just for peace scenarios and war contingencies but also in the grey zone between the two, contrasting the use of hybrid strategies by China.

These initiatives constitute some of the most significant responses to China's contestation of the regional order as well as a crucial component of Tokyo's role in the regional networked security architecture.

These minilateral initiatives rest upon the principle that adherence to principles of democracy, and rule of law should be the necessary prerequisite for assuming a role of order-maker in the region. Consequently, the most relevant strategic ideas proposed by the Japanese leadership in the last decade reflect the twin objective of resisting China's contestation of the regional order, while emphasising Japan's role

**Table 1** Japan's trilateral or multilateral security initiatives

Defence initiative	Since	Partners	Content
China–Korea–Japan Trilateral Summits and Secretariat	2008	South Korea, China	Policy Dialogue on Economic and Security Issues
Trilateral Strategic Dialogue	2002	US–Australia	HA/DR, joint exercises, interoperability
Quadilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD)	2007–2008 2017	Australia, US, India	Joint military exercises, diplomatic dialogue, intelligence sharing
Trilateral Intelligence Sharing Agreement	2016	US, Australia	Intelligence sharing

**Table 2** Japan's bilateral security initiatives (other than the US-Japan alliance)

Defence initiative	Since	Partners	Content
Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation (JDSC), "strategic partner ship"	2007	Australia	Personnel exchanges, cooperation in HA/DR, maritime security, intelligence sharing and peacekeeping.
2+ Meeting	2007	Australia	Meetings between Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defence
2 Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA)	2011	Australia	Interoperability; cooperation in PKOs
Security of Military in Information Agreement (GSOMIA)	2012	Australia	Protection of classified information
Intelligence Sharing Agreement (ISA)	2012	Australia	Sharing of classified information
Special Strategic Partnership	2014	Australia	Training and exercises; personnel exchanges; HA/DR, maritime security, PKO, capacity building
Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) reinforced	2017	Australia	Exercises; personnel exchanges and deepened cooperation on HA/DR, maritime security, PKOs and capacity building
Security of Military in Information Agreement (GSOMIA)	2015	South Korea	Protection of classified information
Strategic Partnership	2011	Philippines	Vice-Ministerial Strategic Dialogue
Strengthened strategic partnership	2015	Philippines	Transfer of military equipment, capacity building, Defence Ministerial
Strategic partnership	2009	Vietnam	Strategic Partnership Dialogue on political, diplomatic, defence matters
Extended strategic partnership	2014	Vietnam	Cooperation between Coast Guards, joint naval exercises, Defence Policy Dialogue, capacity building.
High-level "maritime forum"	2015	Indonesia	Maritime security cooperation, capacity-building assistance
Defence cooperation pact	2015	Indonesia	Defence technology development
Strategic partnership	2015	Malaysia	HA-DR; transfer of defence technology; maritime security; consultation on South China Sea; protection of SLOCs

as the country that, from the normative standpoint, has “left Asia and joined the West” (Suzuki 2015).

In particular, concepts such as the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific”,<sup>22</sup> the “Security Diamond” or the “Arc of Freedom and Prosperity” rely upon the idea of crafting multiple forms of security cooperation between like-minded countries with the goal of preserving the foundations of the rules-based order (Hosoya 2011).<sup>23</sup> As argued by Tomohiko Taniguchi, the central aim of these concepts is to “establish Japan’s democratic identity and cement its credentials as a reliable partner for the United States and other peer democracies, thereby widening its strategic position” (Taniguchi 2010: 1). Ultimately, minilateral value-driven initiatives constitute an effort to negate China’s quest for status and legitimacy while reaffirming Japan’s status of main regional supporter of the order. The strategic and normative value of these initiatives is even more significant during the Trump administration. Tokyo has sought to fill the vacuum in terms of regional political and normative leadership created by Trump’s policies, presenting itself as main supporter of the regional order.

The clearest manifestation of Japan’s value-based initiatives has been the promotion of the so-called “Quad” (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) with the United States, Australia and India. The first attempt was promoted by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2007. The initiative came to a halt with the election of Kevin Rudd as Australia’s Prime Minister in 2008, who assumed a much more cautious position *vis-à-vis* China. Abe sought to re-start the initiative in

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<sup>22</sup> The concept of Free and Open Indo-Pacific has been used by the Trump administration since 2017. However, Prime Minister Abe firstly used the concept during a speech in Nairobi in 2016. Previously he used the concept of “the confluence of the two seas” during a speech to the Indian Parliament in 2007. <sup>23</sup> These concepts proposed by the Japanese leadership in the decade after the first Abe government all emphasise the necessity to uphold the regional order and forge new forms of cooperation between democracies based on common values as well as common strategic interests.

2012, stressing how “peace, stability and freedom of navigation in the Pacific and Indian Oceans are “inseparable”, and confirmed Tokyo’s commitment “to preserving freedom of the commons in both regions”. (Abe 2012). The most recent attempt of revitalising the concept was made in 2017–2018, with proposals to enhance quadrilateral security cooperation in the context of the “free and open Indo-Pacific” (Choong 2018; Hanada 2019).

While the relaunch of the Quad has encountered some political resistance in both India and Australia, Japan’s bilateral relations with Canberra have been constantly upgraded in the last decade (Satake 2016). The joint declaration following the 2014 bilateral summit reads: “Japan and Australia have sought to establish an inclusive, rather than exclusive, security order that incorporates various countries with different economies, ideologies and political systems. Japan and Australia have continued to maintain such a policy, stressing the importance of the rules-based order, where disputes and issues are settled by peaceful means in accordance with international law, rather than by the use of force” (Japanese MOFA 2014a, b).

Beyond reaffirming Japan’s status of main regional supporter of the order, the other main objective of Japan’s bilateral and trilateral initiatives is to resist China’s use of grey-zone strategies and its efforts to undermine international law, and specifically freedom of navigation and overflight. Japan has promoted several new forms of security cooperation with Vietnam and the Philippines, and in a lesser extent Indonesia and other ASEAN countries (Japanese MOD 2017a, b). In particular, in order to help its partners to cope with China’s growing assertiveness, Japan has focused on capacity building in areas such as Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) which is crucial to counter China’s coercive strategies in the South China Sea (Japanese MOD 2018).

Overall, bilateral and minilateral security partnerships have been central components of Tokyo’s strategy aimed at resisting China’s contestation of the regional hegemonic order while favouring Japan’s inclusion in the small

club of regional security providers. The effort to turn Japan into a major active supporter of the regional order has emerged even more clearly during the Trump presidency. The Abe government has demonstrated itself eager to broaden its role, and partially compensate for the perceived lack of political leadership by the United States (Pempel 2019).

#### Strengthening multilateral institutions

Policies aimed at strengthening multilateral institutions represent the third leg of Japan's involvement in the East Asian networked security architecture. Since the early 2000s, Tokyo's approach to multilateral institutions has reflected a two-pronged concern. First, Tokyo has sought to promote new institutions or consolidate existing ones with the purpose of avoiding the rise of "exclusive" fora that could be dominated by Beijing. Second, Japan has aimed to counter China's attempts to solve its disputes with its neighbours bilaterally exploiting the asymmetry of power in its favour.

For these reasons, Tokyo has occupied a leading role in the establishment of the East Asia Summit (EAS) in 2005, with the inclusion of countries beyond the ASEAN + 3.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, since 2011, it has favoured the US membership in the EAS (Yuzawa 2018; Yoshimatsu 2018). Since 2011, the Japanese government has identified multilateral fora as the EAS, ARF and Asia Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM+) as instrumental to "encourage China's responsible and constructive role in regional stability and prosperity, its cooperation on global issues and its adherence to international norms" (Japanese MOFA 2011). This position, first articulated by Noda, has been actively embraced by Abe who repeatedly stressed how multilateral systems of dispute resolution are essential to constrain and shape China's behaviour, in particular in the East and South China Sea (Japanese MOFA 2017).

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<sup>23</sup> Chinese proposals for the creation of the East Asia Summit were based on the format including ASEAN countries, China, Japan and South Korea. Japan pushed for a format also including Australia, New Zealand and India.

In 2014, Abe proposed to “enhance the EAS as a premier forum for dealing with regional political and security issues” and to “create a permanent committee for preparing a roadmap to bring renewed vitality to the EAS and enabling the Summit to function along with the ARF and the ADMM Plus in a multi-layered fashion” (Japanese MOFA 2014a, b). These statements indicate how Japan aims at using multilateral institutions, and particularly the EAS, as an instrument to resist Chinese



**Table 3** Japan's involvement in regional multilateral initiatives

Defence initiative	Since	Partners	Content
ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF)	1994	(ASEAN + 17)	Dialogue, confidence building, preventive diplomacy
East Asia Summit (EAS)	2005	(ASEAN + 8)	Dialogue, confidence building, maritime security and cooperation, cyber security, HA-DR, epidemics, counter-proliferation
Japan Defence Cooperation Initiative with ASEAN (Vientiane vision)	2018	(ASEAN)	Dual-use technologies in the sector of ISR, maritime search and rescue, Japanese participation to multilateral naval exercises with ASEAN nations
Japan-ASEAN Defence Vice-Ministerial Forum	2008	(ASEAN)	Consultation over maritime security, cyber security, anti-terrorism.
ASEAN Defence Minister Meeting Plus (ADMM +)	2010	(ASEAN + 8)	Maritime security, counter-terrorism, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, peacekeeping operations and military medicine
Tokyo Defence Forum	2018	24	Dialogue and transparency
Multinational Cooperation Program in the Asia Pacific (MCAP)	2002	22	HA/DR
Shangri-La Dialogue	2002	(global)	Dialogue and consultation
Pacific Command Annual Chief of Defence Conference (CHOD)	1998	(Asia Pacific)	Trust building, dialogue

unilateral changes of the status quo and to build a consensus among the Asian states concerned about Beijing's behaviour. Tokyo's investments on regional

multilateral institutions should thus be considered as an integral part to its increasingly central role in the East Asian networked security architecture (Table 3).

This approach to existing multilateral fora has been complemented by the establishment of a new significant multilateral agreement, the Japan Defence Cooperation Initiative with ASEAN, launched in 2016 in Vientiane. According to the “Vientiane Visions”,<sup>24</sup> Japan aims at creating a scheme to provide ASEAN nations with dual-use technologies in the sectors of ISR, maritime search and rescue. Moreover, this agreement foresees the Japanese participation to multilateral naval exercises and training with ASEAN nations (Japanese MOD 2017a).

To sum it up, Japan considers China’s rise as disruptive for the US-led hegemonic order in East Asia and for its underlying primary institutions. Consequently, it has enacted a comprehensive strategy which relies on the consolidation of the alliance with the United States, the development of new minilateral security partnerships and the bolstering of regional multilateral for dispute resolution. Japan has thus substantively departed from its post-war highly constrained security policy which was almost exclusively based on the bilateral treaty alliance with the United States. Tokyo adapted this strategy, while not departing from it, during the Trump administration. Abe sought to preserve the alliance, presented Japan as a vocal supporter of the regional order and designing a major role for the country in the development of a networked security architecture in East Asia.

South Korea and the networked security architecture

South Korean perception of China’s role in the regional order has translated into a

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<sup>24</sup> The Vientiane Vision is an initiative promoted in 2016 by the Japanese Ministry of Defence aimed at coordinating defence cooperation with ASEAN countries in areas such as ISR, capacity building and cyber security.

distinctive approach to the development of the networked security architecture in East Asia. Seoul's efforts have been largely directed towards the consolidation of the alliance with the USA, complemented by the promotion of multilateral institutionalised frameworks for conflict resolution. Consequently, South Korea has been less active in promoting minilateral channels, aside from those including Beijing such as the China–Japan–Korea trilateral summit.

#### Bolstering the US–ROK alliance

Since the collapse of the Six Party talks, the ROK has faced a growing threat from North Korea, with the acceleration of its nuclear and ballistic programme. Consequently, the sheer majority of South Korea's resources have been directed towards the consolidation of its alliance with the United States for deterrence purposes. In 2009, Obama and Lee signed the “Joint Vision for the Alliance”. The declaration stressed the need to “maintain a robust defence posture, backed by allied capabilities which support both nation's security interests” (The White House 2009).<sup>25</sup> In 2011, the Korea–US Integrated Defence Dialogue (KIDD), consisting of biannual meetings at the Deputy Minister level, was added to the existing instructional structure of the alliance (Korean Ministry of National Defence 2012).

The declaration stressed the need to build a comprehensive strategic alliance of bilateral, regional and global scope, based on common values and mutual trust. The “globalisation of the alliance” and the reference to areas of cooperation different from extended deterrence, such as cooperative regional security, peacekeeping and trade, represent a relevant development. On the one hand, these changes resonated with the theme of “Global Korea” proposed by Lee Myung-bak. On the other hand, they were coherent with Washington's efforts at persuading its East Asian partners to adopt a greater

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<sup>25</sup> The 2009 Joint Declaration led to the creation of a 2 + 2 meeting mechanism similar to that already existing in the US–Japan alliance.

role in upholding regional order (Lee 2013). During the Park era, the United States and Korea continued the process of consolidation, reaffirming the Joint statement, agreeing to deploy the THAAD system and completing the process in the relocation of US troops (Korean Ministry of National Defence 2014, 2016). This process of consolidation has helped the alliance navigating through the challenges presented by the negotiations on North Korea's denuclearisation started in 2018. On the one hand, Moon managed to achieve a significant degree of coordination with the United States in term of North Korea policy. On the other, the USA and ROK did not accept to compromise significant alliance assets during the negotiations with Pyongyang (Shin and Moon 2019).<sup>26</sup>

Seoul's limited involvement in intra-regional bilateral and minilateral groupings

Despite Washington's pressures, however, the consolidation of the US-ROK alliance was associated with rather limited forms of minilateral and triangular cooperation, especially when it came to relations with Japan, largely due to "history problems" (Glosserman and Snyder 2015). The most significant achievement is the 2010 statement that defined trilateral US-ROK-Japan coordination essential to regional peace and stability and necessary to face the North Korean threat (US State Department 2010).

Similarly, South Korea-Japan bilateral cooperation in the security realm remains limited, despite the recognition that the North Korean threat would require some form of coordination, including areas such as ballistic missile defence and contingency planning. Seoul and Tokyo managed to sign their General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) only in

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<sup>26</sup> The main concession on the military side to North Korea was the suspension of joint military exercises such as Ulchi Freedom Guardian.

2016, after protracted negotiations which generated considerable political controversy in Seoul (Park 2016).<sup>27</sup> The most

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<sup>27</sup> The GSOMIA is not a particularly deep form of military cooperation. Before reaching the agreement with Japan, South Korea signed similar pacts with 32 other countries, and NATO.

**Table 4** South Korea in the Networked Security Architecture

Defence initiative	Since	type	Partners	Content
“Joint Vision for the Alliance”.	2009	BI	US	2+ meetings at the Deputy Minister level
the Korea–US Integrated Defence Dialogue (KIDD),	2011	BI		2+ meetings at the Deputy Minister level
( Security of Military Information Agreement, GSOMIA	2015	BI	Japan	Protection of classified information.
Defence cooperation	2015	BI	Singapore	2 Industrial cooperation, defence training, personnel exchanges
Defence cooperation	2017	BI	Indonesia	2 Industrial and technological cooperation.
Memorandum of Understanding	2015	BI	Vietnam	Cybersecurity, military education activities and international peacekeeping operations (PKO).
Intelligence sharing		BI	Australia	Sharing of classified information
Defence and Security Cooperation Blueprint	2015	BI	Australia	Combined training, military education exchanges and cyber security
Protection of Military Information		BI	Philippines	Sharing of classified information
Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG)	1998–2003	MINI	US–Japan	Coordination on North Korea
( China–Korea–Japan Trilateral summit and secretariat	2011	MINI	Japan, China	Policy Dialogue on economic and security issues
Proliferation Security Initiative	2003	MULTI	Global	Control production and illicit trade of WMD
Northeast Asia Cooperation Initiative	2003	MULTI	Japan, China, Russia, the DPRK, US	Policy dialogue, preventive diplomacy
North East Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI)	- 2013	MULTI	Japan, China, Russia, the DPRK and Mongolia, US	Trust building, HA/DR, logistics, non-proliferation, dialogue, preventive diplomacy.
Northeast Asia Plus Community Responsibility (NAPCOR)	- 2018	MULTI	Japan, China, Russia, the DPRK and Mongolia, US, India, ASEAN	Trust building, HA/DR, logistics, non-proliferation, dialogue, preventive diplomacy, economic diplomacy.
Seoul Defence Dialogue	2015	MULTI	Global	Dialogue, preventive diplomacy

significant area of cooperation in the military realm is probably ballistic missile defence, even if the two countries rely on the US and its logistical platforms to share sensible data (Nishino 2017).

South Korea's investment in other forms of cooperation with other "spokes" remains embryonal, as shown in Table 4. So far, South Korea has put in place a strategic partnership agreement and defence industrial cooperation with India, a defence cooperation agreement with Singapore, an intelligence sharing agreement with Australia, and a defence cooperation agreement with Indonesia. The "New Southern Policy", promoted by President Moon, has privileged the development of diplomatic and trade links over cooperation in the realm of security (South Korean MOFA 2018). Ultimately, the climate of uncertainty surrounding US policies during the Trump administration does not appear to have accelerated ROK will to develop new multilateral security channels. Differently from Japan, South Korea does not consider it necessary to compensate the declining US commitment in supporting the regional order, with policies aimed at resisting China's contestation and promoting the networked security architecture.

#### South Korea and multilateral security institutions

While South Korea's activism in developing bilateral and minilateral initiatives has been limited, it has invested significant resources in multilateral initiatives. In the early 2000s, Seoul launched several proposals aimed at building an open, multilateral system of dispute resolution in the region. First, Kim Dae-jung sought to establish a mechanism mirroring the structure of the ASEAN + 3. Then, Roh Moo-hyun launched, in 2003, the Northeast Asia Cooperation Initiative (NACI).<sup>28</sup> These frameworks pointed to the development of security relations close to a model of open networked security architecture that would, at the same time, "sustain the ROK-US

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<sup>28</sup> The NACI envisioned by Roh was multilateral for a dispute resolution and trust building, aimed at defusing conflict in the Korean Peninsula and, more broadly, in East Asia.

alliance, promote comprehensive security cooperation in Northeast Asia and strengthen the cooperative relationships with China, Japan and Russia, through bilateral and multilateral military cooperation and expand confidence-building measures” (Office of the President of the Republic of Korea 2004).

The emphasis on multilateralism grew further during the Lee Myung-bak presidency, which promoted the concept of “Global Korea” (Kim 2015). Lee’s national security strategy explicitly recognises Seoul as a responsible and leading member of the regional liberal order while declaring its commitment to forge and disseminate consensus over its key normative tenets. The document states: “the Republic of Korea not only cooperates actively but offers solutions for dealing with common issues facing the world community”. One of the consequences of this new global commitment is “a networked diplomacy, including strengthening the US–Korea alliance, [...] along with regional and global cooperation and future oriented and advanced security cooperation” (Blue House 2009).

Park Geun-hye revived the proposal for an integrated multilateral security framework through the North East Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI). This initiative aimed at providing an “OSCE-type” mechanism for dispute resolution regarding US–China military competition, territorial disputes and nuclear proliferation (South Korean MOFA 2015). Its main purpose was to build trust starting from areas of convergence in the realm of soft security issues in order to facilitate cooperation in the longer terms even on hard security issues. The NAPCI framework collapsed after the THAAD crisis and the impeachment of Park Geun-hye. Moon Jae-in has sought to revitalise the framework, now renamed Northeast Asia Plus Community of Responsibility (NAPCOR), seeking to include a wider range of partners including ASEAN members and India (South Korean MOFA 2018).

Despite their limited achievements, these initiatives underscore Seoul’s effort to consolidate the regional rules-based order through multilateral diplomacy



as a complement to the hub-and-spoke bilaterally focused system. These efforts highlight Seoul's will to carve a role for itself as a promoter of the regional order, despite the dire geopolitical environment and the persistence of a domestic public opinion and national discourse that constrain higher levels of multilateral cooperation, especially if involving Japan (Jackson 2017).

## Conclusion

This article has argued that Japan and South Korea have contributed to extend the membership of the regional hegemonic order, actively working to consolidate their relationship with the US and to join the small club of regional "order makers". However, different perceptions of China's contestation of the regional order have led Tokyo and Seoul to adopt dissimilar roles in the development of the networked security architecture in East Asia.

Significantly, the argument put forward by this paper allows to overcome the conceptual straitjacket imposed by structural realism, which has often misled scholars and policymakers to believe that the two countries should be allies, or at least aligned, since they must both confront China and a severe threat from North Korea. This article shows that the two countries' different roles in the regional security architecture stem from two very different perceptions of the Chinese selective contestation and of their role in preserving the regional order.

Tokyo and Beijing have not recognised each other's status: while the latter has sought to establish a "new type of great power relations" with Washington, the former has emphasised the centrality of democratic values so as to negate China's bid for great power status. On the contrary, South Korea considers China a necessary partner for the solution of its most pressing security concern, North Korea. Therefore, it has recognised China's great power status and its role in limiting conflict in the region, and in particular in the Korean Peninsula.

Secondly, Japan has engaged in a deep rethinking of its approach to deterrence and security, locating the grey-zone challenge at the centre of its defence planning. This has shaped both the evolution of the alliance as well as new forms of security cooperation with other partners, constituting the emerging networked security architecture. South Korea's strategic environment remains defined by the need to exercise deterrence against North Korea.

Finally, Japan has been very active in supporting initiatives aimed at upholding international law and freedom of navigation and overflight, while South Korea has sought to mediate between the Chinese position taken by the United States, Japan and South-East Asian states on this issue.

These deep differences have shaped the two countries' role in the emerging networked security architecture along different trajectories, and to the persistent, general disappointment among scholars and policymakers that expect them to form a triangular alliance with the United States are likely to continue to do so.

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