

# Security approaches in East Asia: Analyzing counter positions over power balance

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## ABSTRACT

East Asia is a region divided into two main poles of influence; China and the pro-Western nations led by countries such as Japan. The former being one of the most powerful in terms of political, economic, and military capabilities. Trying to balance power in an ideologically bifurcated context, full of territorial conflicts and opposing hegemonic interests, has been a difficult task for States. It has been argued that the rise of China as an economic and financial hegemon with solid military capabilities, including the nuclear one, is a matter of concern not only for countries such as Japan. It has also been a fundamental issue for the Asian political agendas of Western powers such as the United States. Considering this, the aim of this article is to analyze the two

central security approaches in East Asia and what motivations and objectives States have to rival against each other.

**Key words:** East Asia; security issues; China; Japan; power balance.

## ENFOQUES DE SEGURIDAD EN ASIA DEL ESTE: ANÁLISIS DE POSICIONES CONTRARIAS SOBRE EL BALANCE DE PODER

## RESUMEN

Asia Oriental es una región que ha estado dividida por dos esferas de influencia, China y la prooccidental representada por países como Japón, la primera una de las más poderosas en cuanto a sus capacidades políticas, económi-

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cas y militares. Lograr el balance de poder en un contexto ideológicamente dividido, en el que abundan los conflictos territoriales y hay intereses que se oponen, ha sido una tarea complicada para los Estados. Ha sido ampliamente discutido que el surgimiento de China como un actor hegemónico con capacidades militares robustas, incluida la nuclear, es materia de preocupación para algunos países de la región, entre ellos Japón, y para la configuración de la agenda política asiática de actores occidentales como Estados Unidos. El propósito de este artículo es analizar los dos enfoques centrales de seguridad en Asia Oriental y cuáles son las motivaciones y los objetivos de los países para rivalizar en torno al poder.

**Palabras clave:** Asia Oriental; asuntos de seguridad; China; Japón; balance de poder.

## INTRODUCTION

Power balance in a hegemonic context is challenging and always depends on the interests and security models that States attach to. It has been widely argued that hegemonic systems can pose limits for power balance since hegemons tend to deploy both coercive and non-coercive strategies to show other actors their overwhelming capacity to shape international decisions. Power balance dynamics is also a key element when it comes to understanding the security approaches of countries and the aims they have to guarantee their survival in a geopolitical unstable location. East Asia is a diverse region in which nations compete and struggle to keep a regional and global position in terms of political, financial and military power. In recent decades, the region has been

a location that has been widely studied by analysts because of the importance that countries such as China, North Korea, South Korea, and Japan have for the international system. However, for the purpose and limitations of this paper, we will focus on studying the Japanese and Chinese security models and strategies since they represent the main two ideological blocs, characterizing hegemonic stability and power transition; the former represented by the Japanese-Western bloc and the latter by the Sino one.

Analyzing the security subject in East Asia entails considering the United States and its influence in the region. At this point, it is necessary to emphasize the tensions between the US and China. There are several factors that have troubled the relation between the two countries after the Cold War, the most conspicuous ones are those related to international law and institutions, trade, and security. Both nations have had different paths in terms of their historical backgrounds, cultural views, and material capabilities, which have been pivotal to interpreting their opposing security visions and strategies. China is likely to be more unilateral, and the U.S. has shown willingness in establishing bilateral and multilateral agreements with countries from different regions to ensure its own leadership. This has definitely posed a threat for the stability of East Asia because the pro-Western bloc, mainly represented by Japan, and China have decided to get into military security competition, instead of negotiating or having diplomatic approaches. The lack of willingness to solve historical territorial disputes, the updating of security plans, and the increase in defense

budgets and capabilities show that tensions are increasing, setting limits for achieving a more power-balanced context.

To properly analyze the antagonistic security approaches of China and Japan in East Asia, it is pivotal to examine their recent historical experiences. In this way, we can comprehend their current decisions and postures. It is also meaningful to find elements in defensive and offensive realism that serve to explain the aims and motivations of these two states to establish their military agendas and programs and how these views affect power balance. The last aspect to consider is some of the latest political and military moves that might serve to see how their security agendas are put into effect and the challenges they pose for regional cohesion.

#### **CHINA AND JAPAN: A CONTRASTING AND CONFLICTUAL RECENT HISTORY**

China and Japan come from dynastical and ancient traditions. Both come from long-lasting empires and are rooted to ethno-centric values. These two nations share pro-Confucian societal values, which make people's behavior intertwined in a specific ethical system. In spite of the cultural and historical similarities, after the end of the XIX Century, both nations have got into direct confrontations, territorial dis-

putes and political and economic competition that have promoted a never-ending rivalry, leading both countries to seek for leadership in alliances or decisions that affect the East Asian established order. China and Japan have definitely taken different paths in the last seven decades, they not only have different political ideologies, but they have also attached to opposing programs in terms of their national security. The purpose of this first section is to summarize and evaluate the main historical events that have shaped both country's personalities and to figure out how conflict has influenced the current rivalry between them.

The end of the XIX Century brought fundamental political changes for China and Japan. The first lost its influence as the Asian hegemon, and the second experienced reforms that made it an international power. Within this context, the First Sino-Japanese War took place in 1894 when both countries sent troops to Korea. With this decision, Japan took advantage of Chinese internal problems "to deconstruct Qing China's tributary-suzerainty<sup>1</sup> system by ensuring that Korea maintain its "independence" from China" (Kim, 2012, p. 5). This achievement was quite convenient for the growing influence of Japan because its main purpose was to break down the Sino-centric order in East Asia and become the central Asian actor. Japan sent troops to Korea by

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<sup>1</sup> The Chinese suzerainty system was the tributary system in which China could control other regional small polities during Ming and the Qing courts. According to Shangsheng (2020), "the tributary system was a basic mechanism that facilitated bilateral trade, cultural exchange, border control, and judicial cooperation.... although the tributary system enabled a relationship in which the royal court enjoyed a position of superiority and its vassal states an inferior one none of the vassal states formed an alliance that revolved around the Chinese empire". (p.1)

citing the Tianjin Treaty. It gathered an army of about a million men and, despite the fact that it did not have the support of the Western great powers from the beginning, its astonishing victory gave the country the possibility of withdrawing “China’s former position as the key regional power, earned international respect, and the period when it had to conclude unequal treaties with Western states came to an end” (Skřivan and Skřivan, 2015, p. 41). With this, Japan became the only non-Western global power; which also gave its military nationalism the vigor it needed to face the two World Wars.

Japan and China entered the XX Century experiencing different realities. Apart from the triumph over China in Korea, Japan also fought with Russia over the Manchurian territory from 1904 to 1905. China was about to experience one of its three modern revolutions in 1911, the Revolution of the *xinhai year*. In relation to the Japanese context of the time, Martínez (2011) mentions that “the effects of the war against China, and the later victory over the Russians, aside from reiterating its imperialist behavior, facilitated matters for the new businesspeople who had important weapons’ agreements with the state, however, it deeply affected urban workers and peasants who needed to pay the high prices to cover the expenses of the military expansion” (p. 161). During this time, because of the country’s economic modernization, the population grew, and the social stratification promoted plenty of social revolts that caused internal instability and discontent. On the other hand, China was struggling to overcome the dynastic regime and become a republic and,

in March 1912, the last Qing prince abdicated in favor of establishing a Republican political regime. During this time, a lot of territorial and political moves were made out:

The National Assembly (*Canyiyuan*) formally approved the Provisional Constitution of the Republic of China (*Zhonghua minguo linshi yuefa*) on 10 March 1912. The Constitution defined the territory of the Republic as the Twenty-two provinces of China Proper, which included Xinjiang, and also inner and outer Mongolia, Tibet and Qinghai. The rights of the people, including freedom from racial, social or religious discrimination were also outlined. The composition and function of the National Assembly was also explained as was the process by which it would, within ten months, be dissolved when a parliament (*guohui*) would be convened by the provisional president to take its place. (Dillon, 2010, p. 148)

However, the establishment of the Republic was not an easy task in China. The country experienced a new change in 1914 when the National Assembly was replaced by a Political Conference, later renamed as the Constitutional Conference. During the first three decades of the XX Century, Japan consolidated its commercial influence in China, as a result of the rapid economic modernization experienced after the *Meiji* restoration and its establishment as a world power. It is argued that despite the political and social changes both nations were experiencing at the time, Japan was able to materialize a regional and international predominance. This was maintained until its defeat in World War II and was based on both liberalism and nationalism. China had a fundamental change in its political system,

which moved into a communist one led by the May 4 Movement. This allowed the creation of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921, a move that would have a profound effect on the future of the country.

In relation to the two World Wars, both countries had different positions and outcomes. During World War I, they declared war on Germany; Japan was experiencing an economic surplus and it had signed an important agreement with the United Kingdom, which made the country to join the Allies during the war. China, on the contrary, “never sent troops into battle, its involvement in World War I was influential and had impacts that stretched far beyond the war, going on to shape the country's future indelibly” (Boissoneault, 2017, n.p.). The country's real importance in the war was to ship out thousands of men to some of the Allies' territories to repair and build up war supplies. At the end of the war and after the Paris Agreements, Japan got the Shandong Peninsula in China and some of the German territories in the Pacific. It can be interpreted as another victory over its great Asian opponent.

The aftermath of World War II (WWII) was, in fact, opposing for both because China regained its regional and global influence, and Japan had to accept agreements that caused a lot of sudden political changes. Before the war started, both countries got into the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937, which lasted until 1949. During this conflict, Japan committed atrocities like the Nanjing Massacre that was documented by the media and which recognition is still a cause of controversy for both nations. Regarding this event, Dillon (2010) argues that two aspects of the killing made it

stand out: the first was the scale of the atrocities including rapes and mutilations, and the second, the testimonies of the Chinese victims were made by consistent reports from foreign residents that properly documented it. (p. 230) This conflict is considered as the first Asian hostility since World War I; although it did not have an immediate effect on WWII, it had a long-term effect on the Pacific War and the fate of China in the years to come. Nevertheless, peace was not immediately signed, and it must be highlighted that it profoundly increased the gap and resentment between the two nations.

Analyzing Japan's defeat in WWII, there are some remarkable events that promoted its fall in the conflict. The first factor to highlight was the decision to fight wars in different fronts of the Pacific: the first against China and the second against the US. The second factor was the decision to break up its alliance with the West and to propose the creation of a ‘co-prosperity Asian group’ that would have led to a new regional order. The last factor was the Midway Battle because “following their defeat at Midway, the Japanese changed their maritime strategy; in particular, Japan shifted to the strategic defensive” (Aviles, 2015, p. 40). This move put the country in a very weak strategic position which led to its final defeat that the U.S. manifested with the atomic bomb attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. On the other hand, China's advantage during this conflict was the support it got from the U.S. after the Pearl Harbor bombing. With this, the Asian nation became an unexpected ally of Americans and gave military support that was important for the Chinese rise as a winner during the conflict.

The aftermath of WWII changed the position and influence of both countries, which kept promoting the troublesome relation that still remains to this day. After this war, China reclaimed its preponderant global position; Japan had to surrender and accept the conditions imposed by the US, which included a new political and non-military system. According to Lozoya & Kerber (2011) the main purpose of the American occupation and establishment of the new political Japanese system was to have an important Asian ally to serve its interests in the Cold War. Japan started to have a pivotal position in the American strategic thinking to face the Soviet Union (Lozoya & Kerber, 2011, p. 195). On the contrary, China was experiencing the establishment of its new political system, which was born, after a civil war, as the People's Republic of China in 1949, officially attached to communism and served to the interests of the international Soviet bloc. With this being said, we can trace an ideological pattern between China and Japan that has continued until today since the two nations keep systems that represent different and sometimes contradictory ideas on how the international system should work.

During the last four decades of the XX Century, China and Japan faced different experiences. In 1960, Japan's economic miracle gave the country a world rebirth that allowed it to have an internal stability and a desirable financial position in comparison to other nations. It was possible due to "on the one hand, the agricultural reform that increased the incomes of peasants and, on the other hand, the expansion and new conditions of the industrial sector which produced an increase in

the salaries. There was also a record-breaking technological revolution" (Lozoya & Kerber, p. 203). From the military point of view, Japan remained as a pacifist nation, there were only defense forces which depended on a civil ministry, a situation that gradually changed because of the Gulf War and the terrorist attacks in the US in 2001.

China, on the other hand, lived a cultural revolution from 1966 to 1976 for which "the Communist Party appeared to be at war with itself, and it was a war that had been instigated primarily by its own leader, Mao Zedong. Social conflict, often violent, affected all the major urban centers and much of the countryside" (Dillon, 2010, p. 324). After the Cultural Revolution ended and with the death of Mao, China entered a period of reforms that allowed the modernization and opening of the country. The new leaders discussed reforms in agriculture, the over-centralization of the economy, and the development of economic cooperation with the most important world economies. During this period, China and Japan signed the Treaty of Peace and Friendship that put an end to 33 years in which they did not have any contact after the Second Sino-Japanese War and allowed "technology transfer and capital investment from Japan that played a critical role in the economic modernization of China" (p. 358).

During the last two decades of the last Century, the Sino-Japanese positions in political, economic, and military terms were similar, but also contrasting. First, after the economic decline due to the 1970s oil crisis, Japan went through two decades of political and economic adjustments; it also needed to change its mili-

tary program, and in 1991, for the first time, the Diet allowed military troops to cooperate in international conflicts, only under the United Nations flag. Second, China lived a process of economic growth and democratization that was important for the future of the country in building up a hegemonic figure. In the military area, since 1980, the country's capabilities started to increase at a rapid and significant level. Finally, both countries entered the XXI Century with the clear conviction of establishing as the East Asian superpower. To do so, both have got radical economic and military changes that have avoided the region to establish a power balanced order and which have kept the bifurcation between two poles of ideological influence.

#### **DEFENSIVE AND OFFENSIVE REALISM: KEY ELEMENTS TO UNDERSTAND THE EAST ASIAN SECURITY COUNTER POSITIONS**

East Asia is a region where relations among States are divided into different areas. We can argue that economic ties function in an openly different manner in comparison to political or military issues. For instance, the economic relations between China and other counter-political actors such as Japan or South Korea is solid and essential for their own success, which is a rational decision considering that China offers low-cost assembly and production that gives it the opportunity to remain globally competitive. When it comes to political or military topics, the behavior is dramatically opposed, and it has been evident that China and Japan are struggling with each other to guarantee their prevalence and also their na-

tional security in a context that is convoluted for both. In the case of the Nippon nation, its defensive military structure and dependence on the US nuclear protection seem to be not enough to ensure its survival and, with respect to China, the unsolved disputes with Japan and Taiwan, and the American influence in the region are rationales for the development of a rough military defensive strategy. This section will be focused on evaluating the main assumptions of offensive and defensive neorealism that are valuable to explain the Sino-Japanese current security dynamics and strategies.

As argued by Yakubu and Shuaibu (2016) academic discourse on security within Security Studies and International Relations has historically changed due to the security threats that the world has faced over time, and also, that States have the exclusive reserve to subscribe to a given security approach (p. 1). At this point, it is noteworthy to analyze the definition of security that serves to the main purpose of this paper: the realist one. Mijah (2007) defines security as “the freedom from danger, or threat to nation's ability to protect and develop itself, promote its cherished values and legitimate interests and enhance the well-being of its people”. This definition is related to the idea of some capabilities a State should have to guarantee its internal and external security. It means to be able to possess some internal elements that might help it in dealing with the external context. The realist philosophy of security sees power as the most essential feature a State must survive. As stated by Williams (2008) realists see “security as being virtually synonymous with the accumulation of power. From this perspective, security is understood

as a commodity... In particular, power is thought to be the route to security: the more power (especially military power) actors can accumulate, the more secure they will be” (p. 6). To sum up scholars, security, for realists, depends on the capacity a state has to ensure some internal physical capabilities to face its geographical environment so it can coexist in a context based on power balance.

Realism, as a mainstream theory of the International Relations field, has different approaches that can be categorized into two, classical realism and neorealism (structural realism). Their main difference is that the former focuses on the analysis of human behavior and the latter on the anarchic nature of the international system. Recognizing the value of both for the philosophy and systemic study of international politics is imperative within the field. Nonetheless, because of the objective of this work, we will focus merely on trying to interpret the East Asian security affairs through some of the elements that neorealism develops, specifically defensive and offensive realism. The duality between attack and defense is an always prevalent issue in the study of international security, but the most important aspect of it is the efficacy of each of them within a decentralized system, like in the case of East Asia, in which power relations are not controlled by a single unit.

As stated by Lobell (2017) “[T]he anarchic nature of the international system, and the assumptions that States “at a minimum, seek their own preservation” ... allows to explain recurring international patterns and outcomes such as balances of power, war disposition of different distributions of power, and recur-

rent alliance formation” (p. 1). As we already argued, we might consider East Asia as an anarchic region in which there is not one single actor that can centralize rules and behavior. In fact, there is a structure in which the Western-prone and Sino blocs exercise leadership in the decision-making process of some countries, but they do not have the overwhelming power for regulation. This assumption serves to explain the motivations behind the alliance formation between Japan and the US and the rising military and unilateral Chinese strategy.

The Japanese and Chinese security strategies contrast due to their nature and the aims of each. Here, the central argument is about the defensive nature of Japan’s military approach and the offensive essence of China’s, although it has been formally presented as a defensive one. To properly study the current security tendencies of both nations, we will focus on making a review on their last security plans and the actions and decisions made by each state that affect each other and, mostly, the stability of the region.

The first aspect to examine is the motivations of both countries. We might check two types of motivations for which the causes behind competition lie upon, “security-seeking” motivations (states’/citizens’ desires to simply safeguard their own survival/well-being) and “greedy” motivations (other ends that states may value, such as ideological dominance, status/prestige, or additional territory/resources) (Blagden, 2021, pp. 3-4). Japan’s main goal is to preserve its own survival. In contrast, China’s aim is to achieve ideological predominance and to solve territorial disputes considering its national interests.



The Japanese aims, as they were posed in the National Security Strategy document (2013), meets the security-seeking motivations since its main purpose is to develop enough defense capabilities that allow the country to strengthen its ability to react in case of a military attack. On the contrary, China's National Defense Strategy (2019) lays upon both defense and offense aims which ultimate goal is to guarantee a National project that seeks for withdrawing internal and external controversies and conflicts. Both strategies will be properly analyzed in the last section of this paper, considering a holistic view of the issue by considering what has been formally written and also the actions of both states.

Now, it is important to distinguish the main proposals of defensive and offensive realism in order to understand the complete map in analyzing the contradicting security approaches of Japan and China. Defensive realism's main assumption is that the international system encourages States to seek for moderate behavior to ensure its survival in an anarchic power structure. Furthermore, "defensive realists maintain that States seek to maximize security, preserve the existing distribution of power, are not inherently aggressive, and avoid relative losses due to shifts in their relative position and ranking" (Lobell, 2017, p. 10). For defensive States, the central goal is to keep the power framework of the system because for them this is the only way to avoid conflicts. They also help vulnerabilities that can get their safety at risk since they would not be able to fight offensive states in terms of their physical capabilities.

Correspondingly, for defensive realism there are four reasons to avoid aggression, expansion and conquest:

First, attempts to achieve hegemony are self-defeating and can leave the state weaker and less secure because it provokes counterbalancing behavior and aggression tends to meet resistance... Second, conquest rarely pays. The cost of expansion usually exceeds the benefits and therefore expansion is often explained by non-systemic forces or domestic and unit-level pathologies. Third, the offense-defense military balance often favors defenders and the defense over the offensive. Finally, socialization and lessons from history teach states that expansion and the pursuit of hegemony are often misguided because they provoke counterbalancing rather than bandwagoning behavior. (Lobell, 2017, pp. 10-11)

These four arguments lead to see the international system as a structure of norms that promote moderation and avoid territorial expansions, and, because of these, States only seek to develop a robust military system that will firstly serve to dissuade possible attackers. They also attach to a fundamental idea defended in countries that have experienced conflicts, which is that the outcomes could be more dangerous because power switches can lead countries have a disadvantageous position. One of the main traits of defensive actors is their rationality and willingness to look for mutual security; they are rarely revisionists, and their major objective is to reduce the security dilemma by means of cooperation and international institutions and law.

By analyzing the Japanese security behavior and decisions, we can find a place for

defensive realism. Since 1951, the country has focused its military structure in increasing its defensive forces and operations and trusts international institutions and norms to avoid conflicts or attacks. However, the country is not naïve and is conscious of the dangers posed by China, Russia, or North Korea, and it is open to making changes as the regional context demands. In November 2021, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida declared that he “will consider all options, including possessing so-called enemy base strike capability, to pursue strengthening of defense power that is necessary” (CNBC, 2021). The Chinese menace is so serious for the Japanese leaders that in the 2021 Defense of Japan White Paper, it was recognized that “various security challenges and destabilizing factors became more tangible and acute, and the international order based on universal values, which has underpinned the peace and prosperity of the international community, has been greatly tested” (p. 1). It can be interpreted as a way to point out the big threats posed by the constant missile launchings from North Korea and also the Chinese sea actions in the territory of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. These declarations show that despite its defensive nature, Japan is open to the reconfiguration of its security structure.

Offensive realism assumes that States maximize influence, power, and wealth in order to increase their own security within anarchy. The best way to increase the opportunities to survive is to become a hegemon. The first related argument is that for offensive states, “expansion entails aggressive foreign economic, political, and military policies to alter the balance of power; to take advantage of op-

portunities to gain more power; to gain power at the expense of other states; and to weaken potential challengers through preventive wars or “delaying tactics” to slow their ascent” (Organski, 1968, n.p.). Offensive States are usually military maximizers, meaning they use vigorous foreign agendas to show their power to weaker states since they are never certain about the intentions of other actors. Besides, for offensive states, “expansion and conquest often make states more secure... the quest for greater security encourages states to engage in territorial, political, military, and economic expansion” (Lobell, p. 6).

Snyder (1991) stated four systemic conditions that can foster expansion in offensive states:

(a) when military technology favors the attacker; (b) when states can make significant cumulative additions to their power resources; (c) when relative power is expected to decline and thereby encourages preventive war; (d) when the distribution of power is multipolar, which allows states to defeat opponents piecemeal, and contributes to miscalculations and uncertainty about the actual distribution of relative power. (p. 21)

These conditions offer a picture of the reasons behind the behavior of international offensive States such as China. In formal papers, China declared having a meaningful and mutual trust security policy with other major Asian countries such as Japan, South Korea, and India. However, in the case of Sino-Japanese relations, it has been evident that its purpose is to achieve military expansion in the territory of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Over the last two

years, China Coast Guard (CCG) vessels were confirmed to be within the contiguous zone near the islands for 111 in 2020 and 333 days in 2021, according to the information released by the Japanese Defense Ministry in 2021. In this case, the above-mentioned conditions can be understood this way: on the one hand, there has been an accumulation of power resources, and on the other, the vessels were deployed as a type of preventive attack to show prevalence and to maximize the military power gap.

Defensive and offensive neorealist approaches offer valuable assumptions and arguments that serve to explain the security agendas of Japan and China. Through them, we can see two actors that are struggling to achieve different goals that affect each other and the East Asian region. Japan has been seeking for strengthening its military capabilities, its military agreement with the US, and, mostly, to show its willingness to reform the national military structure. China is a great power that has developed unilateral military and economic policies to reorder international and, centrally, regional relations. Its behavior and agenda are promoting power transition in a multipower system that is leading other powers, such as Japan, to potentially get into a deep revisionist period.

## **THE EFFECTS OF THE CHINESE AND JAPANESE SECURITY APPROACHES FOR EAST ASIA STABILITY**

The first two sections of this paper give a historical background and theoretical explanations to understand the two central political and military visions that rule East Asia. This last part will be directed at explaining Japan's defensive and revisionist approach and China's offensive one, by studying and developing their military strategies, decisions, and territorial disputes. This might allow us to figure out whether or not East Asia is part of a consolidated hegemonic order and what type is the most accurate to explain the political dynamics of the region.

## **THE CHINESE SECURITY STRATEGY**

The Chinese National Defense plan, released in 2019, shows the country's willingness to build up physical military capabilities that serve to, in the first place, secure its national coherence and regional preponderance in East Asia and, secondly, to balance power in relation to its major world counterpart, the US. The strategy is linked to a broader goal, "*the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation*"<sup>2</sup>, which is its

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<sup>2</sup> "China's strategy can be characterized as a determined pursuit of political and social modernity that includes far-ranging efforts to expand China's national power, perfect its governance systems, and revise the international order. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) frames this strategy as an effort to realize long-held nationalist aspirations to "return" China to a position of strength, prosperity, and leadership on the world stage" (Cordesman and Hwang, 2021, p. 11).

national strategic plan that includes the political, social, economic and military spheres. An aspect to highlight about this plan is that China thinks of “strategic competition in terms of a rivalry among powerful nation-states, as well as a clash of opposing ideological systems” (The United States Department of Defense, 2021, n.p.). It means that it is pivotal to fight those who oppose the Sino’s goal of becoming the global hegemon by 2049 and, in East Asia, Japan is the center of its rivalry.

The document of the China’s National Defense strategy (2019) is clear about the nation’s expectations and aims related to the region and the world. It asserts that:

China resolutely safeguards its national sovereignty and territorial integrity. The South China Sea islands and Diaoyu Islands are inalienable parts of the Chinese territory. China exercises its national sovereignty to build infrastructure and deploy necessary defensive capabilities on the islands and reefs in the South China Sea, and to conduct patrols in the waters of Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea... Building a fortified national defense and a strong military commensurate with the country’s international standing and its security and development interests is a strategic task for China’s socialist modernization. (pp. 6-8)

Focusing on the military aspect of this strategy, it is based on the concept of active defense, which means the country maximizes all its capacities and actions at sea, on land, and in the air. The first important element to strengthen is the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), and to get it into a “world class” military by 2049. In 2020, “the PLA added a new milestone for modernization in 2027, to accelerate the

integrated development of mechanization, informatization, and intelligentization of the PRC’s armed forces” (The United States Department of Defense, 2021, n.p.).

It is also important to talk about the material capacity of China in military terms, which was summarized by the latest document published by the United States Ministry of Defense as such: 1) the People’s Liberation Army is composed of about two million personnel in the regular forces; 2) the Navy is the largest in the world, it has approximately 355 submarines and ships and some multi-role platforms; 3) in the short term, it will be able to conduct long-range precision strikes against land targets from its submarines; 4) the air force is the third-largest in the world, and the largest in the region; 5) this air force has over 2.800 aircraft and, in 2019, the country declared the return of the airborne leg of its nuclear triad; 6) apart from these main forces, the country has the Army Rocket Force and the Support Force (2021).

It is evident that today’s Chinese military capacities and the projections for the future present a realistic threat for power balance and security in East Asia and also for U.S. interests in the region. It is the rationale for bilateral and multilateral agendas of some countries to establish military plans to try to stop China’s rise. There is also a central element inside its strategy, and it is the nuclear aspect; the country has declared to be expanding its capacity to build up more nuclear reactors. According to Cordesman and Hwang (2021) “the PRC is investing in the number of its land-, sea-, and air-based nuclear delivery platforms and constructing the infrastructure necessary to

support this major expansion of its nuclear forces... The PRC likely intends to have at least 1,000 nuclear warheads by 2030” (n.p.).

All these data show an unprecedented offensive military tendency in the region that has clarity, human and economic capital, and the hegemonic aims to secure a power transition period that could favor China in the next three decades. It also poses a tangible threat for Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan since they are the regional target of Sino aspirations to exercise coercive actions to foster its expansion and create a new hegemonic order. Nevertheless, it is not clear if China’s military modernization is robust enough to balance the US and its allies in the region. What is evident, as we have already argued, is the fact that Japan is the regional center of historical and ideological rivalry for China. It has been the target of its attempt to expand in the maritime domain, and has also experienced coercive acts with the profound challenge that the Chinese economic, political and military agenda is imposing. This context has encouraged Japan to revise its own security program and also its constitutional limits for becoming an active military nation. The future to come in the rivalry seems to affect not only their bilateral relations, but also the types of political regimes in the region.

### **JAPAN’S NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY**

At the end of last year, the Japanese premier Fumio Kishida made a strong statement, “I will consider all options, including possessing so-called enemy base strike capability, to pursue strengthening of defense power that is necessary” (NCBC, 2021). His declaration fits the

latest national defense plan that is articulated into a broad and multilevel strategy whose main purpose is to contain possible attackers with larger material capacities like China, North Korea or Russia. The plan was thought to function considering three elements; on the one hand, its latest security strategy, updated in 2018, and on the other hand, the cooperation agendas with important global partners such as the US or some Indo-Pacific nations including India and Australia; and finally, a constitutional reform whose discussion might be reactivated in the post-Shinzo Abe era. Japan is looking to establish a strategy that allows it to generate a national and international framework needed to gain a more active and substantial role in its own security.

The Japanese National Security Strategy states that

Surrounded by an increasingly severe security environment and confronted by complex and grave national security challenges, it has become indispensable for Japan to make more proactive efforts in line with the principle of international cooperation... Japan’s national interests are, first of all, to maintain its sovereignty and independence; to defend its territorial integrity; to ensure the safety of life, person, and properties of its nationals, and to ensure its survival while maintaining its own peace and security grounded on freedom and democracy and preserving its rich culture and tradition. (pp. 4-5)

The document also highlights the offensive capacities and threats of countries such as North Korea, Russia, and China, and makes emphasis on the security environment and challenges that these countries pose to the stability of the

Asian-Pacific region. In relation to this, the paper addresses the fact that these countries have large-scale military forces and nuclear weapons that can worsen the situation in zones where there are territorial disputes.

In its 2021 Defense white paper, Japan published all the efforts, updates, and alliances the country made during the year to try to put down, mainly, the Chinese and the North Korean intentions to undermine its national security. According to the document, “uncertainty over the existing order is increasing, and inter-state competition is becoming prominent across the political, economic and military realms” (p. 15) and that “Chinese military trends, combined with insufficient transparency about China’s defense policies and military affairs, have become a matter of grave concern to the region including Japan and the international community” (p. 17). As it was argued before, uncertainty and anarchy promote countries to toughen their agendas, and those, who have a liberal view, like Japan deploy a series of national and transnational efforts to secure its well-being.

This issue has also motivated the increase of the country’s military budget. In November 2021, the government’s cabinet “approved a 770 billion-yen (\$6.8 billion) request for an extra defense budget through March to expedite the purchase of missiles, anti-submarine rockets and other weapons” (The Japan Times, 2021). Something to highlight about this is that since 1980 Japan has annually increased its military budget, an indicator of the country’s historical concern about its surrounding. The military budget is invested in supplies to strengthen the National Security Strategy

(NSS), which was established in 2013 and which was last updated in 2019. The NSS’ main goal is “to create, on a steady-state basis, a security environment desirable for Japan by integrating and drawing on the strengths at the nation’s disposal” (Japanese Defense Ministry, 2021). This national effort has been linked to the Medium-Term Defense Program (2019-2023), which is the shortest-term plan of the country, for which there were designed the following policies:

1. Acquiring and strengthening capabilities essential for realizing cross-domain operations;
2. Improving the efficiency of acquisition of equipment and reinforcing the technology base;
3. Reinforcing the human resource base;
4. Strengthening the Japan-U.S. Alliance and security cooperation;
5. Greater efficiency and streamlining in the build-up of defense capability. (Japanese Defense Ministry, 2021, p. 23)

We can argue that the NSS is a program that lacks the offensive character of any military program due to the constitutional limitations the government has to implement a program with a robust military framework that is less dependent of the American military agreement. Considering this, we can say that Japan is passing by a period in which it has not been able to get the changes it needs to have a more competitive military. We can also understand Japan’s momentum as one of profound revisionism that could encourage the political elite to finally achieve a constitutional and military reform. Something that has also changed in the country is the political language used by the last two prime ministers in relation to China. It has become more coercive, less diplomatic,

and more nationalistic, a possible indicator of the nation's intentions and goals for the future.

The last important aspect of the Japanese security strategy is related to the bilateral and multilateral agenda it has established with the U.S. (mainly) and other countries such as India and Australia through the Quad. The U.S. and Japan Military Agreement dates back to 1960 when Americans were seeking to establish a strategic plan in which Japan functioned as a central Asian ally during the Cold War. The agreement was revised in 1997 and 2015, respectively. The functions of each country were properly delineated, considering the Japanese constitutional reform after 1951, and on the last update it was highlighted that “under the current division of labor in the U.S.-Japan Security Alliance, specifically regarding the “spear” role for the United States and the “shield” role for Japan, 57 U.S. forces are expected to conduct counter-strike operations against a country that attacks Japan” (Iida, 2021, p. 11). The Ministries of Defense of each country met in 2021, they committed “to create a desirable security environment including maintaining and enhancing the free and open maritime order, and with an eye on increasing the Japanese and U.S. presence in the Indo-Pacific region” (Japanese Ministry of Defense, 2021).

This last issue is pivotal for understanding the current Sino-Japanese rivalry because what is in the center of it is water security and their clash over the control of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. China has escalated coercive actions in this territory. It “has recently increased the number of the CCG vessels navigating around the islands. Six hundred fifteen CCG vessels

entered the Japanese contiguous zone around the Senkaku Islands in 2018. The number increased to 1,161 in 2020” (Iida, 2021, p. 6). The intensifying decisiveness of China to increase its presence in the “gray zones” of the area has encouraged Japan to raise its long-range precision strike capabilities. However, in terms of the counter-strike capabilities, the country is still weak in comparison to its rival. Comparing both military approaches, we can say that the Chinese interests and goals are clear and they are building up a security program that will be uncontestable for most of the East Asian countries, a clear indicator that the region is passing through a stage of power transition that will probably be achieved in the mid-term. Japan's central challenge is to build up a more solid military framework and, also, to convince its citizens to support a constitutional reform that will empower the political elite to develop a more active military personality for the country. In the decade to come, changes are expected to happen faster and they might serve to establish the next regional hegemonic order.

## CONCLUSION

The main objective of this paper was to sketch out a review on an issue that is important and related to a region which is composed of economic, political, and military (nuclear) powers. It would have been fairer to include other actors and rivalries that are central to study the security approaches in East Asia. Nonetheless, due to the current momentum the region is passing through in terms of the hegemonic transitional order and considering

some of the most important political transformations Japan and China has experienced in the last seventy years, we only focused on making a comparative analysis on the security approaches of both countries. After analyzing historical, theoretical, and framework issues related to the security and defense programs of these nations, we can propose three main final considerations.

First, China's military strategy is robust and complex. It is not only related to developing strong material capacities, but also directed to plenty of political and economic transformations that will possibly allow the country to become a hegemon and to establish its own order based on its vision and interests. We can argue that China is already the central power in East Asia since it does not have any local counter-part that can limit its power with effectiveness. What China has achieved is to lead a political community by using its outstanding economic and military capabilities to push a period of power transition in which other regional actors are forced to address their weaknesses. The country's current security approach has offensive features that have only increased and are expected to continue this way during the following three decades as sketched out in its national rejuvenation strategy. We can argue that within East Asia China has put itself in a favorable position in comparison to other states, however, it remains uncertain for the country if it can balance power with the bloc of the U.S. and its regional allies.

Second, Japan's security approach has changed over the last decade. It has become more coercive since the country has made efforts to maximize its material capabilities.

Nevertheless, the Japanese military capacities in comparison to China are still weak and their development limited by the pacifist nature enshrined in its constitution. The country is experiencing a stage of revisionism and it is in between an important contradiction. On the first hand, it is pushing towards nationalism to guarantee its own security, and, on the other, it is dependent on the military protection and nuclear umbrella of the US. As a *status quo* state, Japan defends the value of cooperation, international law and mutual benefit. But, at the same time, it is becoming more coercive and trusts in military growth and power to neutralize China's intentions to control the Senkaku Islands. This last aspect of the Japanese new security strategy is important to see the full picture of the coming East Asian hegemonic order. The main challenge the country faces is to find the path to become more independent from its military allies and to have the possibility to have internal control on the military actions related to its own security without abandoning its liberal approach.

Finally, a lot of issues within the subject of analysis of this paper are open to transformation and revision. We cannot definitely argue that China's objectives will be achieved and that it will soon become the unique hegemon in East Asia. However, the trend during the first two decades of the century has proved the Sino order to be the preponderant one in the region. Japan's position has been limited to respond and depend on China's military actions and threats. It is still too soon to say that China has established its own order. What the country has been able to do is to impose cooperation dynamics and to push other nations,



including Japan, to assertively review their regimes and strategies, that is to say, East Asia is in between a power-transition period that can lead to a new hegemonic order in which some states might change their historic political and military features.

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