

INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGIC PAPERS

# The Possibility of Power Sharing between China and the US: Implications for Japan's national interests

Koji Yoshino

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## The author

Mr Yoshino joined the Japan Defense Agency (JDA) in April 1995, after graduating from Kyoto University. He worked initially in the Minister's Secretariat and Planning and Programming Division in the Bureau of Defense Policy. From 1998 to 2000, Mr Yoshino was temporarily transferred to the Economic Planning Agency, where he participated in drafting the long-term economic plan for Japan. On his return to JDA, Mr Yoshino served in the Bureau of Equipment, before being temporarily transferred to the Ibaraki Prefectural Police, where he was assigned as Director of Traffic Management and Control Division.

After completion of this transfer, Mr Yoshino served again in JDA in the Bureau of Finance and Equipment from 2003 to 2005, and in the Bureau of Operational Policy from 2005 to 2007. Later appointments in the Ministry of Defense (which transitioned from JDA), have been in the Bureau of Defense Policy, where he drafted the mid-term Defense Program (FY2011-FY2016), and as Principal Deputy Director of Local Cooperation Planning Division in the Bureau of Local Cooperation. He is currently attending the Defence and Strategic Studies Course at the Centre for Defence and Strategic Studies at the Australian Defence College.

## Abstract

This paper examines the foreign policies of the US and China from the perspective of their respective militaries and economies. It addresses the options for future Sino-US relations in the Asia-Pacific region, in the context of preventing their rivalry from escalating into conflict, with a particular focus on the concept of a power-sharing arrangement, such as a 'concert of Asia' as has been proposed by Hugh White.

The paper argues that while such an arrangement could assist in stabilising the Sino-US relationship, it would not be an appropriate solution for Japan. In part, that is because a 'concert of Asia', as currently proposed, does not provide a solution to the ongoing tensions between Japan and China over disputed territories. It is also highly unlikely that Japan would accept any arrangement that requires it to relinquish its security treaty with the US, and to re-emerge as a self-reliant military power, potentially armed with nuclear weapons.

# The Possibility of Power Sharing between China and the US: Implications for Japan's national interests

## Introduction

China has been a dominant country several times in its history. Historically, it was one of the cradles of civilisation, with the Chinese believing their country to be the 'land under Heaven'—the Middle Kingdom that was completely different from other kingdoms and countries.<sup>1</sup> From the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup>, China experienced aggression by European countries and Japan, a period in its history termed 'the century of national humiliation'. However, since the beginning of the 1990s, China has been emerging as a global superpower both economically and militarily.

In 1991, its GDP, when converted to US dollars using market exchange rates, was only 6 per cent of that of the US, and 11 per cent of Japan's.<sup>2</sup> For the next two decades, China's GDP continued to grow at more than 7 per cent each year and, in 2009, it surpassed Japan's, ranking China the second-largest economy after the US. As China grew to be an economic power, its military expenditure also increased rapidly.

Although China's military expenditure has remained around 2 per cent of GDP since the 1990s, significant economic growth has enabled China to increase its military spending at a considerably higher rate than most other military powers.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, China's military spending in 2015 was second only to the US, and 25 times more than in 1991. Specifically, China has placed a high priority on maritime security based on the assumption that its maritime area is vital for the defence of China's mainland.<sup>4</sup>

The other major player in the Asia-Pacific region is the US, whose economic and military capabilities largely surpass those of China. From an economic perspective, the GDP of the US was 1.7 times larger than that of China in 2014, and is projected to continue to grow at a relatively low but steady rate of around 2 per cent in coming years.<sup>5</sup> In order for the US to maintain such economic growth, the stability and security of East Asia is vital, not least because four of its top-10 trading partners are East Asian countries (China, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan), which made up approximately 25 per cent of total US trade in 2015.<sup>6</sup>

In terms of its military expenditure, the defence budget of the US has accounted for more than 3 per cent of GDP since the middle of the 1990s. In 2015, its military expenditure was nearly three times that of China.<sup>7</sup> The US maintains a close relationship with its Asian allies, notably Japan, South Korea and The Philippines. These allies are central to US efforts to ensure its security and, as such, their security is one of the primary national interests of the US. Under the administration of President Barack Obama, the US continues to 'increase [its] focus on the Asia-Pacific region and rebalance US engagements, activities and resources toward and within this vital region'.<sup>8</sup>

Now, however, a rising China is challenging US supremacy. The gap between the GDPs of the US and China is shrinking rapidly due to China's high economic growth rate. A recent report by the US Department of Defense assesses that China's massive investment in military modernisation could threaten 'core US military technological advantage'.<sup>9</sup> While there are different views on the future power balance between the US and China, some analysts assess that the US will be overtaken by China not only in the size of its GDP but also in military capabilities.

For example, *The Economist* predicts that China will surpass the US in GDP as early as 2019.<sup>10</sup> Alexander Vuving, in analysing the power balance between the US and China using 'high-tech GDP'—an indicator of 'hard power' which represents a combination of economic and military power— has assessed that China's GDP will overtake that of the US in the 2020s.<sup>11</sup> He further asserts that if the US fails to maintain a high level of innovation, and if China is successful in boosting productivity, China's hard power is likely to surpass that of the US by 2040.

Even if China does not replace the US as the dominant military power, Eric Heginbotham *et al* argue that the Sino-US military power balance may be approaching a series of tipping points, where ‘ultimate US success might entail sustained combat and significant losses’ in contingencies close to the Chinese coast, such as Taiwan, and possibly in more distant locations such as the Spratly Islands.<sup>12</sup>

As the power balance shifts in favour of China, it is becoming more assertive in pursuing its national interests in the region, as can be seen in its approach to territorial claims in the East and South China Seas. Given America’s stake in the region and China’s increasing assertiveness, Sino-US rivalry could intensify. Moreover, a dispute over islands between China and a US ally such as Japan or The Philippines could be the flashpoint of a conflict involving China and the US. The ramifications of any such conflict would be disastrous, not only for the region but also for the world.

This paper will analyse the foreign policies of the US and China from the perspective of their respective militaries and economies. In terms of preventing their rivalry from escalating into conflict, it will examine the options for future Sino-US relations in the Asia-Pacific region. Among the possibilities, the paper will focus particularly on the concept of a ‘concert of Asia’, a power-sharing arrangement among the US, China, Japan and India, as has been suggested by Hugh White.<sup>13</sup> Although such an arrangement could assist in stabilising the Sino-US relationship, it will be argued that it is highly unlikely that Japan would accept any arrangement that requires Japan to re-emerge as a self-reliant military power, potentially armed with nuclear weapons.

## Section 1: US policy towards China

The relationship between the US and communist China began with antagonism and a sense of loss. Before and during World War 2, the US, confronting Japanese aggression, strengthened its relationship with China (led by Chiang Kai-shek) and, in the 1940s, US citizens were ‘strongly encouraged to view China as a friend and ally, worthy of both support and sympathy’.<sup>14</sup> However, after the foundation of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the US—facing the unwelcome fact that Mao’s Communist Party now ruled mainland China—employed a policy to contain China by isolating the communist country diplomatically.<sup>15</sup>

The US also confronted China in two local wars: the Korean War (1950) and the Vietnam War (1965). Christopher Jespersen, describing the emotion of the US people when China went to communism, asserts that:

[A]fter the Communist Party came to power in 1949, Americans fell into paroxysms of political witch-hunting over who had lost China, as if the nation and its people were the property of Americans—to have and to oversee and which had been stolen by some unscrupulous, even nefarious foes of liberal capitalism and democracy.<sup>16</sup>

The confrontation between the US and China began to shift when China’s relationship with the Soviet Union considerably worsened as a result of border clashes in 1969. Threatened by the Soviet Union, China found ‘a large part of its own interests [now] shared with this former enemy’, namely the US.<sup>17</sup> In 1972, then US President Richard Nixon met with Chairman Mao Zedong of the Communist Party of China, and the US and China agreed to stay in contact through various channels ‘for concrete consultations to further the normalization of relations’ between them.<sup>18</sup>

While the Sino-US relationship changed from confrontation to cooperation after the 1970s, commentators point to a consistent theme in US strategy towards China—a strategy to change China into a cooperative partner.<sup>19</sup> This strategy, accompanied by a paternalistic attitude that has regarded China as a subordinate country, was suitable for a weak and developing China. Because of US efforts to integrate China into the global economy, China has grown into a significant player in the world, so the US strategy to shape China has been generally successful. However, it is ironic that a growing China is now requiring the US to change its paternalistic attitude. The US now has to face an assertive and confident China that can no longer be treated as the ‘property’ of the US to oversee.

Today, the US is confronting a China that has become too large to contain as it did before the 1970s.<sup>20</sup> The US has to deal with a China that has the potential to challenge US supremacy, and that does not necessarily share interests with the US. At the same time, China has the potential to provide the US with economic opportunity and to cooperate with the US in addressing regional and global challenges. Based on this recognition, the US is pursuing its national interests by advancing a 'rebalance' to Asia and the Pacific.<sup>21</sup>

### The military perspective of the 'rebalance'

The military perspective of the 'rebalance' consists of four elements:

1. Enhancing the US defence posture in the region;
2. Shifting US long-term capacity towards the region;
3. Promoting a continued commitment to principles such as open access to the air, maritime, space, and cyberspace domains and adherence to the rule of law; and
4. Strengthening the US network of alliances and partnerships.<sup>22</sup>

To implement the 'rebalance', the US has been shifting some of its most sophisticated air and naval assets to the region.<sup>23</sup> The US is also making efforts to maintain its capability to project power in areas where its access and freedom to operate are challenged, based on the assumption that China will continue to pursue asymmetric means to counter the US' power-projection capacity.<sup>24</sup>

Among these four elements, the US particularly emphasises the importance of its network of alliances and partnerships as 'the core element' of its military approach to the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>25</sup> In addition to treaty allies, such as Japan, the Republic of Korea, The Philippines and Australia, the US is enhancing the relationships it has with regional partners such as Indonesia, Vietnam and India.

The US has reiterated that its 'rebalance' is not designed to contain China.<sup>26</sup> The current US Government officially places its relationship with China as 'a central part' of US rebalancing efforts.<sup>27</sup> Phillip Saunders argues that the US has been careful to frame America's Asia policy in terms of US interests in the region, and not in terms of containing China or frustrating its legitimate aspirations.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, President Obama has made it clear on various occasions that the US welcomes the rise of a China that is peaceful, stable and prosperous and a responsible player in global affairs.<sup>29</sup> He has also repeated the notion that the US can benefit from a rising China, specifically in terms of an expanding Chinese market.

The 'rebalance' has positive effects, not only on the US in pursuing its national interests, but also on regional security by ensuring a US commitment to maintain a long-term military presence in the region.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, when implementing the 'rebalance', the US faces two major challenges in terms of its relationship with China. First, the US has so far failed to convince China that the 'rebalance' is not intended to contain China and prevent its influence from expanding to neighbouring littoral states.<sup>31</sup> China's caution has been intensified by US efforts, stipulated in official US policy documents, to ensure US military forces have the ability to operate effectively in anti-access and area-denial environments imposed by other nations including China.<sup>32</sup>

Second, enhanced ties between the US and its allies that have disputes with China could involve the US in conflicts between those allies and China.<sup>33</sup> For example, when President Obama visited Japan for a summit meeting with Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in April 2014, he said in relation to the dispute in the East China Sea that Article 5 of the Japan-US Security Treaty 'covers all territories under Japan's administration, including the Senkaku Islands'.<sup>34</sup> This was the first time an incumbent US president had made such a remark.

In terms of the disputes in the South China Sea, the US has moved beyond the standard formulation of US policy on the South China Sea, adopted by the Clinton Administration in the 1990s, to declare that the US has a national interest in freedom of navigation, open access to



Asia's maritime commons and respect for international law in the South China Sea.<sup>35</sup> Although these US efforts are positive in regard to strengthening relations with its allied nations, there is a possibility they could encourage US allies to undertake destabilising actions in disputes which could escalate into conflicts involving the US and China.<sup>36</sup>

### The economic perspective of the 'rebalance'

The US is also rebalancing its economic efforts towards the Asia-Pacific region in recognition that future US prosperity is 'intertwined with the East Asia-Pacific region'.<sup>37</sup> Because the expansion of trade and economic opportunity in the region is a core US interest in Asia, the US is focusing on facilitating trade and investment in the region.<sup>38</sup> The Obama Administration sees the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) as a central element of its economic 'rebalancing'. Although it is yet to be approved by the US Congress, the TPP will provide the US with an opportunity to promote economic growth and advance US interests by influencing trade regimes.<sup>39</sup>

Although not a signatory of the TPP, China is an essential economic partner for the US. The Sino-US economic relationship has become progressively more significant for the US as China's economy has grown to become the second largest globally in 2009—and, since 2015, when China overtook Canada to become the largest trading partner of the US in terms of total value of imports and exports.<sup>40</sup>

As their economic relationship has deepened, some analysts have raised concerns over the growing US trade deficit with China that has increased from US\$10 billion in 1990 to US\$344 billion in 2014.<sup>41</sup> Some also worry that the level of China's holdings of US Treasury securities, which rose from US\$118 billion in 2002 to US\$1.25 trillion in 2015, surpassing Japan as the largest holder in 2008, could give China the leverage to affect US foreign policies.<sup>42</sup>

However, a large amount of the trade deficit is due to US firms moving their production facilities from places such as Japan, Taiwan and Hong Kong to mainland China, making China an increasingly important source of manufactured products. On the issue of US Treasury securities holdings, a 2012 report by the US Department of Defense concluded that 'attempting to use US Treasury securities as a coercive tool would have limited effect and likely would do more harm to China' than to the US.<sup>43</sup> The report accordingly concluded that China's holding of US Treasury securities 'does not offer China deterrence options, whether in the diplomatic, military, or economic realms'.

Both countries also have various other economic-related challenges to resolve, such as China's restrictive policies for foreign direct investment, fulfilment of China's World Trade Organization obligations, the improvement of China's intellectual property rights, and disputes over cyber espionage. However, they are trying to address these issues through dialogues such as the US-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue, recognising that the strength of the global economy 'turn[s] in large measure on cooperation between the US and China'.<sup>44</sup>

At the same time, the economic relationship between the US and China can be defined as one of economic competitors. Commentators argue that the US attempt to conclude and implement the TPP has been motivated by the desire to secure an economic order that is preferred by the US and like-minded countries in the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>45</sup> In late 2015, President Obama openly expressed his strong sense of rivalry with China, saying that 'we can't let countries like China write the rules of the global economy.... [w]e should write those rules'.<sup>46</sup> Concurrently, China's success in establishing the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, as well as its enthusiastic pursuit of the 'One-Belt, One-Road' project, demonstrates that Sino-US rivalry to extend their influence to set economic rules and norms in the region is intensifying.<sup>47</sup>

## Section 2: China's policy towards the Asia-Pacific region

China's long history as a pre-eminent country has had a strong influence on the development of its military and foreign policies, and its attitude towards the outside world. In assessing China's policy towards the Asia-Pacific region, this section of the paper points to two elements of historical influence.

The first, as articulated by Martin Jacques, is the principle of hierarchy and superiority.<sup>48</sup> From a historical Chinese perspective, China has always considered itself to be at the centre of the world and superior to other nations. In the past, this Sino-centric view materialised as the tributary system. It is unlikely that this system, which denies the equality of nations, will replace today's global order. However, the history of this system is deeply rooted in Asia and will shape China's attitude towards other countries.

Michael Green *et al* argue that China is seeking 'Japanese acquiescence to a subordinate position in both the bilateral relationship and in the overall regional power dynamic' by attempting to belittle Japan and increase Japan's sense of isolation.<sup>49</sup> Jacques argues that in the long term, Australia and New Zealand might similarly be involved in some kind of modern-day tributary system, given their geographic proximity to China and their economic dependence on China.

The second element of historical significance is the importance of the East and South China Seas for the defence of mainland China. In the past, China's maritime defence was weak, with Yves-Heng Lim noting that 'Western powers invaded China from the sea on eighty-four successive occasions' from the Opium Wars in 1840 to the foundation of the new China in 1949.<sup>50</sup> However, the East and South China Seas are important not only for China but also other nations in the Asia-Pacific region, because of the abundance of natural resources, such as fish, oil and gas, and the shipping lanes that support the growing economies of the region.<sup>51</sup>

China's history of invasion by Western countries provides motivation for it to control the seas that secure the natural resources and sea lines of communication. As asserted by Lim, 'both seas have to fall under Beijing's firm control because they would otherwise constitute highways that would bring hostile forces to China's maritime doorstep'.

China's long history also provides the nation with a vision for the future. In November 2012, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of China, Xi Jinping, articulated the 'Chinese dream', saying that it was China's future vision to improve the lives of people and to 'bring a country with a proud history out of the shadows of the troubling last couple of centuries'.<sup>52</sup> Under the assertion that China's rise means just the 'restoration of fairness' rather than 'gaining advantages over others', China continues to build its military and economic power.<sup>53</sup>

### **Military policy towards the Asia-Pacific region**

China places great emphasis on maritime security. *China's Military Strategy* (its 2015 equivalent of a defence white paper), articulates that the 'seas and oceans bear on the enduring peace, lasting stability and sustainable development of China', highlighting the importance of safeguarding its national sovereignty and maritime rights and interests.<sup>54</sup> Specifically, it expresses China's concern over disputes in the East and South China Seas, stating that:

[S]ome of its offshore neighbors take provocative actions and reinforce their military presence on China's reefs and islands ... [and that] some external countries are also busy meddling in South China Sea affairs; a tiny few maintain constant close-in air and sea surveillance and reconnaissance against China.

To address these concerns, China continues to develop the capabilities to 'dissuade, deter or, if ordered, defeat possible third-party intervention'.<sup>55</sup> Recently, China has also taken actions in maritime disputes that are more assertive. In the East China Sea, China has routinely deployed government vessels in waters adjacent to the Senkaku Islands. While several Chinese vessels were identified in Japan's territorial sea surrounding the Senkaku Islands between 2009 and the middle of 2012, the number increased to 28 in August 2013 and has remained at around ten every month since.<sup>56</sup> In June 2016, China also sent a frigate into Japan's contiguous zone around the islands, the first case of a Chinese naval vessel entering the zone.<sup>57</sup>

In the South China Sea, China is building artificial islands and constructing infrastructure at the features it occupies in the Spratly Islands. Although the Chinese Government insists these projects are mainly for civilian purposes, most analysts outside China believe they are intended to 'bolster its de facto control in the South China Sea by improving its military and civilian



infrastructure'.<sup>58</sup> Chinese media has featured editorial arguments for militarising China's artificial islands.<sup>59</sup> In January 2016, a Chinese naval commander asserted that '[w]e will certainly not seek the militarization of the islands and reefs, but we won't not set up defenses ... [adding that] how many defenses completely depends on the level of threat we face'.<sup>60</sup>

China has also started to refer to the East and South China Seas as its 'core interests'. While it has not made clear what it means by 'core interests', Chinese officials reportedly told US officials in 2010 that the South China Sea is 'now part of China's core interest of sovereignty'.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, in 2013, China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson reportedly announced that the Senkaku Islands were a 'core interest'.<sup>62</sup> Michael Swaine argues that by declaring something as its 'core interests', China is indicating that it will not compromise on these issues and that the possibility should not be discounted of China using force to protect its interests.<sup>63</sup>

The increasing presence of US forces in the East and South China Seas is a thorny issue for China.<sup>64</sup> China is suspicious of the US rebalance and opposes the operations of US forces in the South China Sea.<sup>65</sup> In April 2014, China also condemned President Obama's notion of the Senkaku Islands being covered by the Japan-US Security Treaty.<sup>66</sup>

At the same time, Chinese President Xi Jinping is seeking to build a 'new type of great power relations' with the US that requires both parties to enhance mutual cooperation and respect sovereignty, territorial integrity and each other's core interests.<sup>67</sup> However, President Obama appears to be cautious of using the phraseology, no doubt concerned it could be construed as a US concession of China's national interests, including the territorial sovereignty claimed by China in the East and South China Seas.

### **Economic policy towards the Asia-Pacific region**

China's economic growth can affect the nations in the region both positively and negatively. On the one hand, China provides considerable economic benefit and opportunity for the countries in the region—and their economic ties are growing. For example, China was the largest trading partner of the US in 2015.<sup>68</sup> China has also been the top trading partner of Japan since 2007, and was the second-largest trading partner of The Philippines and Vietnam in 2014, even though both have disputes over islands with China.<sup>69</sup>

China has also accepted an increasing amount of foreign direct investment, with investments from Japan and the US more than doubling between 2001 and 2012, and accounting for 11 per cent of the total foreign direct investment in China in 2012.<sup>70</sup> If it is true that economic interdependence can promote cooperative relations between countries, then China's economic growth should make a positive contribution towards greater security in the region.<sup>71</sup>

Although China faces economic challenges, such as an economic slow-down and inefficient state-owned enterprises, it will continue to be a leader in the global economy. China is now reforming state-owned enterprises as an essential step in the structural transformation of its economy.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, even though China's annual GDP growth rate is forecast to remain at 4-5 per cent in coming years (much lower than the current rate of around 7 per cent), it is still 'more than double the projected growth in more mature economies such as the US and Europe'.<sup>73</sup>

On the other hand, China's increasing economic power has the potential to be used as a means of coercion against its trading partners. Madhu Sudan Ravindran, among others, has pointed to China's tendency to use economic relations to force other countries to change foreign policies that are unfavourable for China.<sup>74</sup> While such coercion is often not acknowledged as an economic sanction, the reality is that China has imposed economic-related sanctions on various countries in the past.

For example, China imposed sanctions on The Philippines in relation to the dispute over Scarborough Shoal in 2012; similarly, on Japan in relation to the Senkaku Islands in 2010; on Norway over the Nobel Peace Prize awarded to Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo in 2010; and, although only a threat, on France over the Dalai Lama's visit to France in 2008.<sup>75</sup> As China's economy has grown, it has become more capable of using economic sanctions. In turn, as

countries come to depend more on China's economy in coming years, they will likely become more vulnerable to China's economic coercion.<sup>76</sup>

### Section 3: The possibility of power sharing between the US and China

The analysis of the previous two sections reveals two important elements of Sino-US relations. The first is that the national interests of the US and China are increasingly overlapping in East Asia. It is vital for the US to ensure free trade and economic opportunity in the Asia-Pacific region. In order to secure its interests, the US is rebalancing its diplomatic, military and economic resources in the Asia-Pacific region. The relationships between the US and its regional allies and partners are also being strengthened.

The US also successfully concluded the negotiation of the TPP to secure its position as an economic rule-maker in the region. However, from a Chinese perspective—given that the East and South China Seas are vital for its national security—the presence of US forces in the East and South China Seas, and even the TPP, can be perceived as intended to encircle and isolate China, hampering its bid to reverse its 'century of humiliation'. Although the US and China are making efforts to work together to resolve various security and economic issues, their overlapping interests in East Asia present a considerable challenge.

Second, the relationship between the US and China is significant not just regionally but globally. They are the two largest economic powers and they are strengthening their military capabilities in East Asia. And because of their overlapping interests, their rivalry is intensifying. If the rivalry escalates into conflict, the ramifications would be catastrophic. In addition, it would then be almost impossible for relations to be restored to a level that would allow them to be cooperative and interdependent.

Even a relatively small conflict could produce a devastating situation: trade between the two would cease, shipping in the Western Pacific would be disrupted, and US allies benefiting from trade with China would likely be compelled to stop trading with China.<sup>77</sup> Consequently, it is vital to seek a solution that will prevent Sino-US conflict and provide stability between the US and China.

#### Options of future Sino-US relations

While commentators argue various options on the future relationship between the US and China, this section analyses the possible and preferable option, taking account of the national interests of the US and China and the need to ensure stable Sino-US relations.

From a US point of view, the most preferable option would likely be to enhance US supremacy in the Asia-Pacific region and compel China to accept US leadership.<sup>78</sup> However, such an option is unlikely to eventuate because it would be unacceptable to China and would not lead to greater stability between the US and China. As China assesses that its adjacent seas provide protection for its mainland, enhanced US supremacy in these areas would make China increasingly uneasy about the defence of its sovereignty.<sup>79</sup>

In addition, the US will likely face increasing difficulties in maintaining its military supremacy in the region. Although the US seems assured of retaining an 'absolute advantage in naval capabilities', it is probable that China could make the most of the proximity of the region to its mainland and defeat or at least inflict serious damage on US forces operating in the East Asian theatre.<sup>80</sup>

This option could also undermine the stability of Sino-US relations. Not only could Sino-US rivalry be intensified but, as Phillip Saunders as pointed out, there is the possibility that an enhanced US security presence could encourage US allies such as The Philippines and Japan to undertake destabilising actions, especially with respect to disputes in the East and South China Seas.<sup>81</sup> Accordingly, an enhanced US presence could cause intensified rivalry and even conflict between a US ally and China, which in turn would probably draw in the US because of its obligation to defend allied countries.

From China's perspective, the withdrawal of the US from East Asia would likely be the most preferable option. It would provide China with the conditions to restore its historical position and ensure its national defence that could otherwise be endangered by the presence of US forces. It would also promote stability in relations between the US and China because it effectively would mean that the US accepts China's supremacy in East Asia.

However, this option is unlikely to be acceptable to the US. The US also regards its expanding trade and economic opportunities in Asia as a 'core interest', and the rise of a potentially-hostile hegemon in the region would pose a threat to its national interests.<sup>82</sup> Hence, it is unrealistic—given the potential threat to its national interests—to assume that the US would withdraw from East Asia and accept China's supremacy in the region.

### Sino-US power sharing as a solution

Based on the above analysis, an option more acceptable to both the US and China must be found. Such an option needs to be acceptable to both countries and conducive to bringing about stability between them. To that end, and aimed at avoiding rivalry and conflict between the great powers, Hugh White has proposed a new order based on a power-sharing arrangement between the US and China.<sup>83</sup>

White has articulated this arrangement as a 'concert of Asia', comprising the four key regional powers—China, the US, Japan and India—wherein all would be required to agree a mutual understanding of seven fundamental issues, namely:

1. Accepting the legitimacy of the political system of others;
2. Accepting that the views and interests of others may differ from their own;
3. Accepting the right of others to build and use force to protect their interests;
4. Sharing an understanding of what behaviour can and cannot be accepted;
5. Prohibiting any members from seeking dominance;
6. Acknowledging these understandings to its citizens; and
7. Treating one another as equals.

White has argued that such an arrangement would ensure stability between the four powers, especially between the US and China, albeit there would need to be a compromise on some of their interests. Notably, he argues that a 'concert of Asia' would require the US to abandon its security treaty with Japan, as Japan remaining a client and a supporter of the US would make the two countries too strong in combination for China to accept as concert partners.

Ending the treaty would work positively towards stabilising Sino-US relations for two major reasons. First, it would prevent the US from being drawn into a conflict between Japan and another country, particularly over an issue never envisaged when the treaty was originally signed. The treaty obligates the US to defend Japan in the event of an armed attack. However, the framers of the treaty, signed in 1960, would not have foreseen the possibility of the US becoming involved in a conflict with China over a dispute between China and Japan over a small group of islands in the East China Sea.<sup>84</sup> Yet because of the treaty's existence, the dispute between China and Japan over the Senkaku Islands could become a flashpoint, drawing in the US 'with catastrophic consequences'.<sup>85</sup>

Second, it would facilitate US efforts to stabilise relations with China. Commentators have highlighted that some countries in the region see potential benefit for themselves from a degree of competition between the US and China for their favour, which is not necessarily beneficial for the US.<sup>86</sup> White also argues that Japan's anxiety about the US improving its relations with China, at the possible expense of Japan, might hinder the US from building stable and peaceful relations with China.

The acceptability of the ‘concert of Asia’ option to the relevant parties is difficult to predict. Jingdong Yuan points to the difficulties that the four powers would need to overcome to reach agreement on critical security issues and common approaches to address them.<sup>87</sup> Even White says that ‘the difficulties ... are very great, and that it will most likely not happen’. However, if the most probable scenario is that the current situation continues to result in a steady escalation of Sino-US rivalry and an associated risk of conflict, White argues that ‘the incentives to take the very difficult steps needed to avoid them would be strong’.

This arrangement would also prove to be a more acceptable option than those that require either the US or China to renounce their interests in the region. From China’s perspective, it would considerably improve China’s capacity to reduce what it sees as the threat posed by US military operations to the sovereignty of China’s mainland. At the same time, the arrangement would allow the US, although not as a dominant power, to ‘remain active in Asia ... [and] willing and able to use force to resist a bid for primacy’ by China.<sup>88</sup> As Frans-Paul van der Putten argues, the concept of power sharing between the US and China certainly seems to be ‘the form of accommodation that would be the most beneficial’.<sup>89</sup>

## Section 4: Implications for Japan

Much of the existing analysis of the concept of a ‘concert of Asia’ has understandably focused on its positive implications for the US and China. However, the concept would not necessarily be beneficial for Japan. Clearly, there are some positive elements, not least by diminishing the catastrophic ramifications of conflict between the US and China. The power-sharing arrangement would also require its members to treat others as equals, meaning China would need to give up the notion of restoring its historical superiority and pressuring Japan to be subordinate to China. Nevertheless, the arrangement would present several very difficult problems for Japan. This section points out three major issues.

### Possible confrontation between Japan and China

First, a ‘concert of Asia’ is not a solution to the problem of a possible confrontation between Japan and China over disputed territories. While White argues the necessity of the US abandoning the security treaty with Japan in order to avoid being drawn into conflict with China over a dispute between Japan and China, he never mentions the necessity of settling the underlying dispute between Japan and China; he only requires Japan to be independent from the US and re-emerge as a military power with a self-reliant capability to deter China.

Yet the most urgent dispute between Japan and China is the Senkaku Islands issue. From Japan’s perspective, the Japan-US Security Treaty, together with the capabilities of the Japanese Self Defense Force (JSDF), play a vital role in deterring any threat to the islands. In order to ensure US commitment, Japan has repeatedly sought assurances that the US considers the islands within the scope of Article 5 of the Treaty.<sup>90</sup> In April 2014, these efforts resulted in President Obama affirming that the article ‘covers all territories under Japan’s administration, including the Senkaku Islands’.<sup>91</sup>

This means that any country planning to attack the islands must confront not only the JSDF but also the prospective involvement of the US. It seems highly unlikely that Japan would forsake this assurance without concurrent measures to resolve the current impasse over the Senkaku Islands.

### Japan’s burden to re-emerge as a military power

The second issue is that the financial burden for Japan to re-emerge as a military power with a self-reliant capability to deter China would be so huge that it would endanger the survival of Japan as an economic power. Since World War 2, Japan has developed highly-educated human capital and advanced technological capabilities. The prosperity of the nation and its citizens, through economic development, is still one of the most important national interests of Japan. Indeed, it is Japan’s economic capacity and technological resources, together with the nation’s social cohesion and strategic advantage of insular territory, which qualify Japan as a candidate

for the 'concert of Asia' in the first place. Therefore, Japan's ongoing prosperity as an economic power would be a precondition of the power-sharing arrangement.

Following a 40-year period of high economic growth rates from the 1950s to the beginning of the 1990s, Japan experienced a period of economic stagnation called the 'two lost decades'.<sup>92</sup> In addition, Japan's population is rapidly ageing. While the total population has been decreasing since 2008, the number of people aged 65 and over is growing—and the number is projected to increase until 2042.<sup>93</sup> Because of these economic and demographic issues, Japan is now facing three serious fiscal problems.

The first is increased social security expenditure. Due to the ageing population, the proportion of total government expenditure on social security has increased from 19.0 per cent in 1996-97 to 33.1 per cent in 2016-17.<sup>94</sup> Second is the cost to compensate local governments to provide basic public services, which accounted for 15.8 per cent of total expenditure in 2016-17. Although the proportion has dropped from 18.1 percent in 1996-97, the fiscal condition of local governments has been worsening because of economic stagnation, and the budget allocation to them cannot be substantially decreased without significant implications for public services and infrastructure.

The third issue is that the accumulation of government debt is so large that Japan has to allocate a significant proportion of its budget to debt redemption, which has been exacerbated since the 1990s by lowered tax revenues caused by economic stagnation. Consequently, the outstanding debt of Japan's government bonds is estimated to increase to ¥838 trillion by the end of 2016-17, which is 15 times Japan's annual tax revenue. In 2016, the proportion of Japan's gross debt to GDP reached 234.3 per cent, which is considerably higher than that of Greece (182.3 per cent), the so-called 'basket case' of Europe.<sup>95</sup>

The accumulation of debt requires Japan to allocate 24.4 per cent of its total budget to debt redemption and interest payments in 2016-17 (against only 18.1 per cent in 1996-97).<sup>96</sup> The budget for social security, local government tax grants and debt-related expenditure, together with expenditure on public works, education and science—all of which are essential components of ensuring economic growth—accounts for nearly 85 per cent of total government expenditure in 2016-17.

Although the defence budget is 5.2 per cent of government expenditure in 2016-17, it would need to be increased considerably if the Japan-US Security Treaty were abandoned and the JSDF was required to replicate the capabilities currently provided by US forces.<sup>97</sup> In order to allocate such a substantially-increased proportion of its budget to national defence, Japan would need to cut expenditure in such areas as social security, grants to local government and education. However, that would cause social instability and deterioration in the quality of human resources, resulting in the decline of Japan's economic power.

### Security environment deterioration

The final issue is the likely impact on the regional security environment of Japan's re-emergence as a military power. Since World War 2, Japan's national security policy has adhered to several basic principles, notably an exclusively defensive orientation, a non-nuclear weapons policy and an aversion to becoming a military power, under the aegis of the Japan-US Security Treaty.<sup>98</sup>

If Japan were to become a more substantial military power, particularly one with nuclear weapons, the whole foundation of its national security would be fundamentally altered, with considerable impact on its relationships with neighbouring countries. In the process of creating a 'concert of Asia', China would have to accept Japan's right to develop the military capabilities to protect its interests. However, Japan's relations with at least two other countries, South Korea and North Korea, would be adversely affected by any such military re-emergence.

Although Japan and South Korea are both US allies, the relationship between the two countries has been affected by distrust stemming from historical issues such as the issue of so-called 'comfort women' and the territorial dispute over Takeshima (a group of small islets in the Sea of Japan).<sup>99</sup> For example, there is a very sceptical view in South Korea of Japan's *Legislation for*



*Peace and Security*, which Japan has articulated as ‘geared towards the common goal of stabilizing peace in Northeast Asia’.<sup>100</sup> South Koreans are also anxious about the ‘likelihood of unwanted Japanese boots on the peninsula’, as ‘they have a painful experience of Japan’s brutal colonization for 35 years’.<sup>101</sup>

Responding to the anxiety, South Korea’s Prime Minister reiterated in October 2015 that ‘Japan’s military should not come to South Korea without permission from Seoul’.<sup>102</sup> Currently, defence cooperation between Japan, the US and South Korea is being promoted.<sup>103</sup> However, bilateral military cooperation between Japan and South Korea could realistically only be enhanced ‘under the US-led trilateral security cooperation umbrella’.<sup>104</sup> Given the sensitive relations between them, it would be extremely difficult for South Korea to accommodate a substantially re-militarised Japan. Indeed, any such re-militarisation would likely prompt South Korea to upgrade its own military forces, possibly by including nuclear weapons, which would further exacerbate the security environment in East Asia.<sup>105</sup>

For its part, North Korea is already developing nuclear weapons and conducting missile launches and nuclear tests. These developments are progressing in spite of opposition from the UN Security Council and the international community. Coupled with North Korea’s provocative words and actions (including a recent missile launch into Japan’s EEZ), they pose a serious and imminent threat to the security of Japan.

North Korea considers it needs its own nuclear deterrence to counter what it sees as the threat posed by the US, in alliance with South Korea and Japan. Given North Korea’s fear of the US and its view of Japan and South Korea as US allies, any moves by Japan towards nuclearisation, in turn provoking a response from South Korea, would strongly alarm North Korea and result in a highly-destabilising nuclear arms race in the region.<sup>106</sup>

## **Section 5: The possibility of Japan’s nuclearisation**

In developing self-reliant military capabilities within the ‘concert of Asia’ concept, Japan would inevitably need to consider the possibility of developing its own nuclear weapons as a deterrent against China. White admits that Japan becoming a nuclear-armed country would ‘obviously be an immensely difficult decision for any Japanese government’; however, while he does not elaborate, he concludes that ‘it is not unthinkable’.

On the one hand, it may seem reasonable to argue that a ‘concert of Asia’ would give impetus—and perhaps even the rationale—for Japan to acquire nuclear weapons. On the other, Japan has firmly adhered to its longstanding non-nuclear weapons policy, stemming in large part from the experience of being attacked by atomic bombs during the Second World War. While both of these elements are relevant in analysing the possibility of Japan’s nuclearisation, the following discussion will argue that the prospect is not only extremely unlikely but, indeed, unthinkable.

### **Reliance on the US extended deterrence**

While Japan has not been directly threatened with nuclear attack since the end of the Second World War, it obviously has been—and remains—within range of the nuclear weapons of Russia and China, and the emergent capabilities of North Korea. To counter such potential threat, Japan has depended on the extended nuclear deterrence provided by the US. However, should the power-sharing arrangement of the ‘concert of Asia’ eventuate, the argument has been made that the US would need to abrogate its security treaty with Japan and cease providing an extended nuclear deterrence to Japan which, in turn, could argue for Japan developing its own nuclear capability.

Regardless of this line of argument, doubt about the credibility of the US extended nuclear deterrence is not new within Japan, and has periodically featured in calls for Japan’s nuclearisation.<sup>107</sup> The scepticism, often held within conservative circles, has been based on the assumption that a US decision to provide extended nuclear deterrence to others would clearly be driven by US national interests on a case-by-case basis, which would not necessarily accord with those of Japan. More recently, the debate has been intensified by comments by Republican



presidential candidate Donald Trump that he would be open to Japan possessing nuclear weapons and the US withdrawing its forces from Japan.<sup>108</sup> If Japan were to face a situation where the US no longer provided extended deterrence, the argument for Japan to acquire its own nuclear weapons would no doubt be strengthened.

### Three non-nuclear principles

For Japan to develop a nuclear-weapons capability, it would need to alter its non-nuclear weapons policy, enshrined in the ‘Three Non-Nuclear Principles’ which have bound Japan’s policy makers since the end of 1960s when then Prime Minister Eisaku Sato mentioned the principles. Currently, Japan’s Constitution prohibits the possession of offensive weapons capable of mass destruction. However, this can be interpreted as meaning that Japan is not necessarily prohibited from possessing and using nuclear weapons if they are strictly defensive in nature.<sup>109</sup>

This interpretation has been used by Japanese officials for many decades, including by then Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi as early as the 1950s.<sup>110</sup> Critics would argue that all nuclear weapons are offensive in nature and that, for Japan, possessing any kind of nuclear weapon is unconstitutional. However, it is the Three Non-Nuclear Principles, not the Constitution, that are the core of Japan’s non-nuclear policy.<sup>111</sup> These principles, which prohibit Japan from possessing or producing nuclear weapons, or allowing nuclear weapons to be brought into Japan, were formalised in a resolution by the Diet in 1971.

The principles are also buttressed by domestic and international law. For example, Article 2 of Japan’s *Atomic Energy Basic Act* stipulates that ‘the utilization of nuclear energy shall be limited to peaceful purposes’.<sup>112</sup> Japan has also ratified the international Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, which incurs an obligation not to manufacture or acquire nuclear weapons. If Japan should alter its non-nuclear weapons policy, it would have to withdraw from that treaty. While the procedure is not difficult, it would cause Japan considerable reputational damage and the likely nullification of certain bilateral agreements that facilitate Japan’s civil nuclear energy programs.<sup>113</sup>

### Anti-nuclear sentiment within Japan

Although the implications of withdrawing from the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons would be one element that Japanese leaders would take into consideration if they decided to alter Japan’s non-nuclear weapons policy, it is not the most important.<sup>114</sup> Rather, it is the anti-nuclear sentiment deeply embedded in Japanese society that is the fundamental factor in preventing Japan from changing its non-nuclear position.<sup>115</sup>

This sentiment has been a strong influence in shaping Japan’s non-nuclear policy, with Mike Mochizuki arguing that Japan’s anti-nuclear sentiment is ‘more than just an impulsive ‘nuclear allergy’’.<sup>116</sup> Yuri Kase similarly asserts that this emotional factor has played a role as ‘the main constraining factor in the debate over Japan’s nuclearization’ and that to overlook this factor would be ‘to miss a vital aspect of the domestic debate in Japan’.<sup>117</sup>

The strength of the sentiment came from multiple tragedies that the Japanese people experienced during and after World War 2. Japan is the only nation to have experienced a nuclear attack. In August 1945, approximately 140,000 people in Hiroshima and approximately 70,000 in Nagasaki were killed by two atomic bombs, while in subsequent years tens of thousands died from illnesses caused by exposure to radiation. These experiences are the most influential factors shaping the anti-nuclear sentiment in Japan.

In addition, Mataka Kamiya points to the Fukuryu-maru No. 5 incident as another factor that ‘left a deep and lasting impression among the Japanese population that anyone could become a victim of nuclear weapons—anywhere, anytime’.<sup>118</sup> In that incident, the Fukuryu-maru No. 5, a Japanese tuna-fishing boat located 35 kilometres from the declared danger zone, was severely contaminated by the radioactive fallout from the first US hydrogen bomb test conducted on Bikini Atoll (in the South Pacific), with its 23 crew members suffering diseases caused by radiation exposure.

Anti-nuclear sentiment has since been reinforced and reproduced in Japan through education, popular culture and public ceremonies. Accordingly, the sentiment remains strong among the vast majority of Japanese people. According to an opinion poll in 2005, 78.3 per cent of respondents were opposed to Japan possessing nuclear weapons, while 18.9 per cent supported nuclear armament.<sup>119</sup> Since then, the regional security environment has gradually deteriorated as North Korea conducted its first underground nuclear test in October 2006, followed by a second in May 2009, a third in February 2013, and a fourth in January 2016. North Korea has also launched multiple ballistic missiles into the sea off Japan.

Following North Korea's nuclear developments, a number of Japanese politicians have argued that Japan should possess or develop nuclear weapons.<sup>120</sup> However, subsequent opinion polls showed that despite the growing nuclear threat posed by North Korea, opposition to possessing nuclear weapons has been gradually increasing. A 2010 survey showed that 78.8 per cent of respondents were opposed to possessing nuclear weapons while 18.0 per cent supported nuclear armament; a 2015 survey showed that 81.2 per cent opposed the nuclear option, with only 15.4 per cent supporting it.<sup>121</sup>

Nevertheless, in spite of the strong anti-nuclear sentiment embedded in Japanese society, some have argued that Japan could decide to develop its own nuclear weapons in certain conditions. For example, Mochizuki has argued that Japan would be likely to cross the nuclear threshold if a significant shift in US policy, such as tacit support for a nuclear Japan and a weakening of US security commitments to Japan, coincided with a marked deterioration of the regional security environment.

### **The difficulty of transferring civilian nuclear technology to military purposes**

Some commentators have argued that Japan would be able to produce nuclear weapons in a relatively short time by using its nuclear materials and technology acquired through its peaceful nuclear program. Steve Herman, for example, has contended that Japanese officials say that Japan would be able to construct a viable nuclear weapon in six months or less.<sup>122</sup> Others disagree with that timeframe, while others assert that while it may be technologically possible, it is unrealistic to think that Japan would transfer civilian nuclear technology and materials to military purposes.<sup>123</sup>

There are two main reasons for the latter assessment. The first is the lack of a coherent strategy to utilise civilian nuclear technology for military purposes. Although a coherent strategy would be indispensable to developing nuclear weapons based on civilian technology, Japan's nuclear energy program has been designed to manage the risks stemming from the country's reliance on external markets for the supply of petroleum; it does not include a strategy to build nuclear weapons.<sup>124</sup>

The significance of nuclear power as an energy source to generate electricity is evident. The rising imports of fossil fuel caused by the shutdown of nuclear power plants after the incident at the Fukushima Daiichi plant in 2011 have cost Japanese utilities an extra US\$28 billion a year since 2011, and resulted in an increase to household electricity prices by more than 50 per cent during 2013 and 2014.<sup>125</sup> Consequently, civilian energy sectors that are responsible for energy provision are unlikely to support the transfer of nuclear materials for military purposes, given the repercussions for the civilian nuclear energy program.<sup>126</sup>

The second is that the repercussions caused by the transfer of nuclear materials for military purposes would be strong enough to endanger the civilian nuclear program. In spite of the strong sentiment against nuclear weapons, the Japanese people have historically had a positive attitude towards the use of nuclear energy to generate electricity. According to a survey conducted by Japan's Atomic Energy Relations Organization in 2010, 77.4 per cent of respondents answered that nuclear power was 'necessary' or 'rather necessary' as a source to generate electricity, while only 4.1 per cent answered it was 'unnecessary' or 'rather unnecessary'.<sup>127</sup>

However, the Fukushima incident completely changed that attitude. A survey in November 2011, about eight months after the incident, showed that the proportion of respondents who answered

nuclear power was 'necessary' or 'rather necessary' sharply dropped to 37.7 per cent, while the proportion of respondents who had negative opinions towards nuclear energy rose to 25.2 per cent.<sup>128</sup> A negative attitude towards nuclear energy persists among the Japanese, as an opinion poll in 2015 showed that 62.7 per cent of respondents answered that nuclear power plants should be abolished gradually or immediately.<sup>129</sup>

Given the decreased support for nuclear power, combined with the negative sentiment towards nuclear weapons, it would seem that any policy change to utilise civilian nuclear technology and materials for military purposes would cause a further decline in public support for nuclear-power generation, endangering the continuation of the civilian nuclear program and, moreover, the energy security of Japan.

## Conclusion

This paper has reviewed the significance of the US and China as global military and economic powers, and the impact that the looming competition between the two powers will have on Japan's national interests in coming years. While the US is still the dominant global power, it has increasingly important national interests in the Asia-Pacific region, causing it to implement a policy of rebalancing military and other strategic resources to the region.

The enhanced US presence promotes regional security by assuring its alliance partners and other states in the region of enduring US commitment to the region. Meanwhile, China has grown into the second largest economic power, providing the US and the region with great economic opportunities. China is increasingly integrated into the global economy, and the economic relationship between China and the US is getting stronger.

At the same time, this paper has highlighted that the US and China have overlapping interests in the region, specifically in East Asia. China considers that its sea areas provide protection for its mainland. It accordingly has placed greater emphasis on maritime security and is becoming more assertive in its approach to disputes in the East and South China Seas, aimed at enforcing its sovereignty claims. In response, the US is focusing on maintaining its access and freedom to operate in the region, and is enhancing its power-projection capabilities in the maritime areas to counter China's asymmetric endeavours to prevent the US from asserting its dominance of the region.

The US is also re-invigorating its network of alliances and partnerships in the region to ensure its interests are protected. Consequently, the rivalry between the US and China is intensifying. The enhanced relations between the US and its allies could involve the US in a conflict stemming from a dispute between a US ally and China. The consequences of a conflict, even a small one, between the US and China would be devastating. It would disrupt the global economy, and it would be almost impossible for them to restore current relations. Given the catastrophic ramifications, it is vital to prevent Sino-US rivalry from escalating into conflict.

A 'concert of Asia' concept, a Sino-US power-sharing arrangement proposed by Hugh White, is a possible option to stabilise the relationship between the US and China. This arrangement would put a priority on eliminating the possibility that Sino-US rivalry could escalate into conflict, while also requiring them to make compromises on their interests. It would likely require the US to abandon the Japan-US Security Treaty to avoid the US becoming involved in any Sino-Japan conflict.

A stable relationship between the US and China is essential for Japan. However, it is not an interest that Japan must secure at any expense. Securing territorial integrity is one of Japan's vital national interests. Although the dispute over the Senkaku Islands is a serious concern for Japan, a 'concert of Asia' would not provide Japan with any solution. Indeed, the dispute would remain unresolved and, if it intensified, Japan would have to confront China without the support of US forces.

On the other hand, Japan's necessary re-emergence as a military power would pose a significant financial burden on Japan. Given Japan's ageing population and growing fiscal deficit caused by

enduring economic stagnation, Japan could not afford to outlay the expenditure needed to develop the self-reliant defence capabilities sufficient to ensure Japan's national security. Even if Japan did re-emerge as a military power, it would result in Japan facing both internal and external difficulties. From an internal perspective, the burden of increased defence expenditure would severely damage Japan's economic power and social stability.

Japan's re-militarisation could also trigger an arms race, possibly including nuclear weapons, between Japan, and South Korea and North Korea, and result in a deteriorating security environment in East Asia. Moreover, it would be highly unlikely that Japan would change its longstanding non-nuclear weapons policy, given the strong anti-nuclear weapon sentiment deeply embedded in Japanese society, even though some would argue that developing its own nuclear deterrence would be essential for Japan to ensure its national security within a 'concert of Asia' concept.

It is vital for Japan to play its part in preventing a Sino-US conflict. At the same time, it is also vital for Japan to ensure that it continues to provide every opportunity for the country to prosper as an economic power in a stable regional environment. A 'concert of Asia' might be a solution to avoid conflict between the US and China. However, this paper has argued that it would not be an appropriate solution for Japan.

## Notes

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