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CHINA'S MILITARY RISE AND THE US-JAPAN ALLIANCE: A CASE FOR THE BALANCING STRATEGY

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*Abstract*¹

Alliances are crucial and undated phenomena that determine the agenda of international security and inter-state relations. They shape the security strategies and foreign policies of states and have direct or indirect effect on the causes and consequences of wars. In this respect, Asia-Pacific is one of the hottest zones of international politics, where alliance systems play a vital role in relations among regional powers. Over the last decade, extraordinary shifts in the distribution of material capabilities and arms race have intensified uncertainty and anxiety among regional actors in the Asia-Pacific. The new security environment of the region has inevitably brought strict geopolitical competition at the regional level and has made alliances more visible and important than ever before. This article aims to analyze the formation process of alliances in the Asia-Pacific. China's fastened military buildup and modernization as well as its active foreign policy behavior cause its it to be perceived as a threat by the United States (US) and Japan to their national interests. In response, the US and Japan have stepped up their mutual military relations and defense contacts as well as their own independent military capabilities. From this perspective, the question in the study is why and how the US and Japan form a military alliance against China. The study's argument is that the US and Japan implement balancing strategy by expanding their military and defense relations against the perceived threat from China in order to consolidate their security and preserve their position in the region.

Keywords: *Alliance, Balancing, The US-Japan Alliance, China, Asia-Pacific.*

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ÇİN'İN ASKERİ YÜKSELİŞİ VE ABD-JAPONYA İTTİFAKI: DENGELEME STRATEJİSİ ÜZERİNE BİR VAKA İNCELEMESİ

Öz

İttifaklar, uluslararası güvenlik ve devletler arası ilişkilerin gündemini belirleyen en temel olgulardan biridir. Devletlerin güvenlik stratejileri ve dış politikalarında önemli ölçüde yeri bulunan ittifaklar savaşların nedenleri ve sonuçları üzerinde de doğrudan veya dolaylı olarak önemli bir etkiye sahiptir. Bu kapsamda, Asya-Pasifik bölgesi son on yıllık dönemde devletler arası güç dengesinde yaşanan değişimlerin net bir biçimde gözlemlendiği ve ittifak sistemlerinin bölgesel güvenlik gündemi üzerinde önemli rol oynadığı bir coğrafya olma özelliği taşımaktadır. Materyal kapasitelerin dağılımındaki değişimler ve silahlanma süreci bir taraftan bölgesel güçler arasındaki belirsizlik ve endişe durumunu giderek yoğunlaştırırken, diğer taraftan bölgesel seviyede sıkı bir askeri ve jeopolitik rekabeti beraberinde getirmektedir. Bu çalışma rekabetin her geçen gün tırmandığı Asya-Pasifik bölgesindeki ittifak oluşumları üzerine kapsamlı bir analiz sunmayı amaçlamaktadır. Çin'in hızlı askeri modernizasyonu ve bölgesel seviyede aktif dış politika yaklaşımı Amerika Birleşik Devletleri (ABD) ve Japonya tarafından kendi ulusal güvenliklerine yönelik bir tehdit kaynağı olarak yorumlanmaktadır. Bu tehdit algılamasına cevaben, ABD ve Japonya karşılıklı askeri ilişki ve savunma ortaklıklarını ilerletmekte ve kendi askeri kapasitelerini aşamalı olarak güçlendirmektedir. Bu kapsamda çalışma, ABD ve Japonya'nın Çin'e karşı nasıl ve neden ittifak oluşumuna başvurduğu sorusu üzerine odaklanmaktadır. Çalışma, Çin'den algılanan tehdide yanıt olarak ABD ve Japonya'nın bölgesel pozisyon ve güvenliğini korumak amacıyla bir ittifak kurma yöntemi olan dengeleme stratejisine başvurduğu argümanını ileri sürmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İttifak, Dengeleme, ABD-Japonya İttifakı, Çin, Asya-Pasifik.

INTRODUCTION

World politics has undergone a major structural transformation since the end of the Cold War. With the transition toward multipolarity in the international system, the Asia-Pacific has progressively become a pivotal region among all others, driven by its security agenda and unique political characteristics. In order to unravel the puzzling dynamics of the Asia-Pacific, international security scholars and policy practitioners have recently focused more on new strategic and military tendencies in the region. Historical watersheds like Korean War, Vietnam War, Taiwan Strait Crisis or the US-China rapprochement had regional and international consequences during Cold War since these issues precipitated significant shifts in the global military and political agenda. In the 21st century, through a number of successive developments, the region has re-emerged as a primary focal point within the global security architecture. Long-standing traditional issues across geopolitical flashpoints including the Taiwan Strait, Korean Peninsula and the East and South China Sea maintain their continuity, however, the emerging arms race in these theaters reshapes the strategic landscape of the Asia-Pacific. In addition, AUKUS security pact,

QUAD security dialogue and innovation-oriented defense industry dynamics symbolize the new technology-security nexus in the region. When all these evaluated together, bilateral military relations between the United States (The US) and its Asian allies, coupled with China's military rise, have the potential to profoundly shape the security architecture of the region. It is currently evident that as China's military power increases, the ties between the US and its allies are becoming more stringent, leading to expanded US presence in the region.

There is a comprehensive body of literature interpreting alliance formation among states in international politics. Theoretical explanations of the alliances are put forward mainly by realist theorists who construct their assumptions by noting international systemic variables such as balance of power, balance of threat, security dilemma, polarity and uncertainty about intentions etc. (Christensen & Snyder, 1990; Mearsheimer, 2001; Schweller, 1994; Walt, 1985; Walt, 2009; Waltz, 1964; Waltz, 1979). The common argument alleged by these theories is that states, as the main political units of the international system, form alliances to resist the others' aggressive behavior or to overcome negative systemic outcomes. These theories also claim that the balance of power among states, perception of threats and strategic calculations of states are among the prominent concerns for alliance formation. Kenneth Waltz's balance of power (Waltz, 1979, p. 126) and Stephen Walt's balance of threat (Walt, 1985) approaches are the guiding theories illuminating alliances. However, the severe criticisms are directed at these by other theoretical hypotheses, and the critics have provided new insights into the systemic and unit-level processes to analyze alliance strategies.

This study endeavors to provide a thorough analyze for alliance formation in the Asia-Pacific. In that respect, the question in the study is why and how the US and Japan form a military alliance against China. While observable shifts in the regional balance of power have occurred over the last decade, the distribution of capabilities among regional actors has also undergone some changes. China's rapid armament, especially after Xi Jinping came to power, have stand out as the main considerations escalating the possible confrontation of the regional actors. China's military accumulation and modernization as well as its active policy behavior over the East and South China Sea cause its it to be defined as a challenger by the US and Japan. The article argues that the major incentive for the formation of the military alliance between the US and Japan is the growing threat from China and claims that the alliance between the US and Japan is based on a balancing strategy. In other words, the main purpose of the US-Japan alliance is to counter China's rising challenge and to ensure their own security with the help of the balancing behavior.

In this study, balancing refers to efforts to increase material power capabilities to provide deterrence against a rising power by forming military alliance and increasing defense cooperation (Parent & Rosato, 2015, p. 56). The balancing strategy includes both internal balancing and external balancing. The external form of balancing means increasing the capabilities of another state by forming an

alliance. Internal balancing, on the other side, is the attempt to strengthen and mobilize one's own independent power capabilities (Mearsheimer, 2009, p. 243). From this perspective, the article, initially, will shed light on alliance theories and explain in detail the alliance debates of distinct theoretical approaches in the relevant literature. After that, China's ascending military power, both conventionally and strategically, and how this affects the security and regional position of the US and Japan will be touched upon. Finally, the article will evaluate the dimension of the alliance between the US and Japan in response to the perceived threat from China. Here, the article analyses the military cooperation and defense partnerships of the US and Japan as a balancing act and reveals how they have increased their own military power, both internally and externally, in response to China's expanding influence in the region.

REVISITING THE THEORIES OF ALLIANCES

Alliances are constant and crucial phenomenon in the international relations. They overwhelmingly affect the security of states as well as the possible causes and consequences of wars. Alliances can be formed for both defensive and offensive purposes, and they can be asymmetrical or non-asymmetrical in terms of power calculations (Walt, 1997, p. 157). Similarly, alliances can be formed based on formal or informal commitments. While a formal alliance is formed on treaties or agreements, an informal alliance is built on military exercises and unwritten assurances (Walt, 2009, p. 86). In the relevant and broad literature, particularly realist theorists explain the alliances by addressing several systemic or unit-level variables. Although the first comprehensive approaches were developed by George Liska and Hans Morgenthau, neorealist theorists such as Kenneth Waltz, Stephen Walt, Glenn Snyder, Randall Schweller and John Mearsheimer have set the main debate on alliance strategies. With his international systemic theory, Kenneth Waltz indicates that the balance of power in the anarchic system is a fundamental driving factor for states to form alliances (Waltz, 1979, p. 119). Stephen Walt, on the other side, contributed to the alliance literature by introducing the balance of threat theory (Walt, 1985, p. 5). Other neorealist scholars foreground wide range of alliance strategies including bandwagoning, buck-passing, balance of interest, chain-ganging or soft balancing.

As already suggested above, one of the earlier contributions to alliance debate was made by George Liska's *Nation in Alliances: The Limits of Interdependence* (Liska, 1968). In his study, Liska questions how and why alliances are formed among states and which conditions lead states to cooperate militarily. Liska believes that states form alliances to build up each other's material capabilities against the threatening states. According to this logic, alliances are formed to protect oneself from the aggressive behavior of other states. Therefore, the main incentive for states to form alliances is the maintenance of national interest and survival (Liska, 1968, pp. 21-30). For Liska, ideological differences, cultural factors or economic

interests may also determine the process of dissolution or formation of alliances (Liska, 1968, p. 30). Similarly, according to Hans Morgenthau, who looks at alliances from the perspective of classical realism, the structure of international politics is characterized by the struggle for power of states. Under these circumstances, states always aim to ensure equal distribution of power among themselves through alliances. Joining alliances is a matter of interest, not principle. Therefore, from classical realist perspective costs, gains, and power calculations of states determine whether or not to participate in alliances (Morgenthau, 1948, pp. 137-142).

Unlike classical approaches, neorealism has put alliance theories into a more systematic classification. Kenneth Waltz, in his classical piece *Theory of International Politics*, puts forward that states form alliances to preserve the balance of power. In his point of view, alliances allow eliminating the negative consequences of uncertainty arising from security dilemma. Hence, concern for states to ensure their own security is the main motive in the formation of alliances. In anarchic international politics, for Waltz, states implement two alliance formation strategies which are balancing and bandwagoning. Labeling balancing and bandwagoning as two opposite strategies, Waltz conceptualizes bandwagoning as a weak state's align with the stronger side and balancing as align with the weaker side (Waltz, 1979, p.126).

Waltz's balance of power theory has provided an intellectual basis for other alliance theories. However, Waltz's theory has been described as parsimonious by many other neorealist theorists. In the balance of threat theory alleged by Stephen Walt, states form alliances not to protect balance of power but to avoid potential threats posing from other great powers (Walt, 1985, p. 5). Like Waltz's view, Walt is clear that states form alliances either by balancing or bandwagoning. However, for Walt, balancing stands for forming alliance against the state that is the source of threat and bandwagoning means allying directly with the threat itself. In this rationality, the bandwagoning strategy is applied commonly by weak states whilst the strategic choice of great powers is often balancing. In the inter-state competition caused by the balance of threat, balancing strategy is observed more than bandwagoning in the international system. The primary reason for this is that bandwagoning is a riskier strategy for states and states can maintain their freedom of movement or protect their sovereignty by resorting balancing strategy (Walt, 1985, p. 15).

As a systemic theorist, Walt explains his theory mostly through the structural features of the international system. Nevertheless, parameters that can be considered as domestic variables, such as ideology, are also among Walt's repertoires. In the balance of threat theory, when there are no threats to states' security, policymakers take their ideological preferences into account in forming alliances. Similarly, mutual military and political commitments may disappear when the domestic preferences of allied states change (Walt, 1997, p. 170). Despite all these factors,

states highly overlook their ideologies or any domestic process when they face a great threat. In sum, states always keep their security interests above their ideological preferences and domestic factors disappear in case of a systemic threat (Walt, 1985, p. 24).

Randall Schweller, as another neorealist theorist, advances a balance of interest theory by criticizing Walt's balance of threat. Schweller's criticism of Walt's theory emerges within the scope of balancing and bandwagoning conceptualization. For Schweller, Walt defines both bandwagoning and balancing narrowly. Contrary to Walt's ideas, Schweller points out that balancing and bandwagoning are not opposite strategies. Each state may apply both to consolidate their security, but these two strategies serve different functions. The reason why states resort to balancing is to protect themselves from potential threats. On the contrary, bandwagoning serves to expand the spheres of influence of states or to collect some of the spoils of the expected victory. In different words, while states employ balancing to avoid any strategic loss or to counter rising threats, they often apply to bandwagoning to gain opportunities (Schweller, 1994, p. 74). From this perspective, Schweller's reasoning argues that while explaining the formation of alliance systems, one should not focus only on the source of threat or danger. Rather it may be more accurate to describe alliances by considering political goals and opportunity calculations of states (Schweller, 1994, p. 106).

The alliance interpretation based on the balance of threat does not satisfy some other neorealists such as Glen Snyder. As stated by Snyder, traditional balancing-bandwagoning conceptual dichotomy do not offer complete explanation in formulating alliance systems. Because unlike balancing or bandwagoning, states may determine a wide range of policy tools such as armament or other military actions (Snyder, 1991, pp. 127-128). For this approach, unlike threat factor, the main determinant of alliance process is the security dilemma. Security dilemma has two different stages which are called as primary and secondary on alliance formation. While the primary stage occurs during the pre-alliance formation process, the second stage begins as the alliance is formed. Under that condition, states have two different options in alliance formation process. The first of these is that if states are not satisfied with their current security position, they may build up their power capabilities through alliances. Second, states seek to form alliances because they strive to avoid isolation (Snyder, 1984, p. 461).

A quite different perspective on alliances is also offered by John Mearsheimer. He explores comparatively two alliance strategies which are balancing and buck-passing and highlights which of these are witnessed more common. As claimed by Mearsheimer, both are employed by states to maintain balance of power and to counter aggressive behaviors of threatening states (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 267). He contends that the strategy of buck-passing is applied by states more commonly. The reason for this, states applying buck-passing may abstain from the direct threat of aggressive states. In different words, the proximate cause why

threatened states do not resort to balancing strategy is the desire to avoid excess costs (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 271). Since the actual option in a realist structure of international politics is between buck-passing and balancing, Mearsheimer believe that bandwagoning is an ineffective choice for particularly great powers confronted with source of threats (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 153). In his theory of offensive realism, Mearsheimer also demonstrates that the two alliance formation strategies, balancing and buck-passing, occur at different times. The emergence of these alliances primarily depends on the structure of the international system. For instance, it is more likely to resort to balancing for great powers in the unipolar structure in which there is only one superpower in the system. On the other side, it is more probable for the threatened great power to resort to the strategy of buck-passing in the multipolar system in which the system contains at least three great powers (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 268).

Bringing the variable of polarity into focus, like Mearsheimer, Thomas Christensen and Glen Snyder claim that balance of power and balance of threat theories are insufficient in describing the alliance formations particularly in the unipolar and multipolar systems. Therefore, they propose a more complex theory of alliance strategy based on the interaction between offense-defense balance and polarity by concentrating on technological and geographical consideration of states (Christensen & Snyder, 1990, p. 140). According to this theory, states' perceptions of offense-defense balance determine which alliance option they will consider in the multipolarity. If a state has a defensive perception, for instance, the probability of applying the buck-passing strategy increases in forming an alliance. Contrary to this, chain-ganging is more likely to occur if a state has a perception of offensive advantage during alliance selection (Christensen & Snyder, 1990, p. 165).

In the post-Cold War period, the emergence of the unipolar era and the advent of the US primacy have led the theorists to put forward different approaches. T.V. Paul, for instance, claims that secondary powers are more likely to employ soft balancing to counter the actions of the sole superpower in the unipolarity. For Paul, the secondary powers are not capable of dealing with the military and political elements of the hegemonic power in the unipolarity. In addition, these states do not feel the need to implement hard balancing since they do not perceive an existential threat to their sovereignty from the superpower. For this reason, secondary powers prefer to employ to soft balancing tools through diplomatic and institutional means or limited arms accumulation rather than hard balancing tools in order to avoid the negative actions or unilateral practices of the sole superpower (Paul, 2005, pp. 46-47).

Although realism is the prevalent paradigm in the literature, other theories such as liberalism and constructivism also put forward certain propositions concerning alliances. Liberal theories, to a great extent, overlook systemic factors in their explanation of alliance formation, centering their analysis on intra-state variables. Therefore, liberal theorists generally concentrate on ideational and

normative variables when explaining alliances. For instance, a key figure in classical liberalism, Andrew Moravcsik, examines alliances as a form of foreign policy behavior, with an analysis focusing on domestic factors. According to Moravcsik, state ideology, governmental structure and domestic preferences may influence the process of alliance formation (Moravcsik, 1997). Compared to classical liberalism, on the other side, neoliberal institutionalism offers a different perspective on alliances. In contrast to the threat-centric viewpoint of realist theories, institutionalist liberals do not always link alliances to threat. This is because they believe that even when the threat parameters disappear, states continue to maintain alliance institutions to pursue common security and economic interests. According to liberal theory, international institutions can also contribute to the formation of alliances (Ikenberry et al., 2009, p.20). Moreover, institutionalist theories contend that international institutions not only facilitate interstate cooperation across various domains like security and trade but also help diminish mutual threat perceptions among states (Keohane, 2012, p.127). Lastly, constructivism, another critique of realism, also holds certain views on alliances. Drawing on Alexander Wendt's idea that perceptions, shared ideas and norms shape state foreign policy, constructivism posits that identities shape the formation process of alliances (Wendt, 1992). According to this viewpoint, the cultural, national and ideological identities directly impact alliance formation process among states. For instance, state identities can accelerate alliance formation by fostering trust among them, or they can place existing alliances on a more solid foundation. Conversely, constructivism also claims that identity-driven tensions and conflicts among states could result in the unravelling of alliances.

As is clearly seen, different theories in the literature hold varying perspectives on the structure and nature of alliances. On that account, China's military rise and the US-Japan relations constitute a crucial case for understanding the current alliance relations in the Asia-Pacific. Among all other theories, realism appears to be most suitable theory for interpreting the alliance process in the region. This primarily due to the realist theory's emphasize on systemic variables, such as threat. Combination of China's swift military modernization, rising defense spending and expanding regional clout is viewed as a threat by the US and Japan. Therefore, the US and Japan began to pursue a balancing strategy by broadening their military cooperation and strengthening their defense partnership.

CHINA'S ASCENDING MILITARY POWER AND ITS ACTIVE POLICY BEHAVIORS IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC

The China's rise has become one of the most prominent topics in the contemporary international security studies. Particularly from the onset of the 21st century, the multidimensional power projection of China across military and economic domains has become noteworthy for researchers and scholars. Especially following Xi Jinping's rise to power, China's military strategies and foreign policy

characteristics have transformed prominently, and China has become a great power with its material capabilities in international politics. For instance, China's economy overtook that of Japan in 2010, and many indicators evidently show that China is currently the second biggest economy immediately after the US (Morrison, 2019, p. 9). More than that, it is estimated by some sources that China will probably replace the US as the biggest economic power in the near future (World Bank, p. 6).

During the Cold War, Chinese army's PLA's (People's Liberation Army) overall military capabilities substantially constrained by persistent economic challenges. Particularly in the first half of the Cold War, the PLA lacked strategic, operational and tactical capabilities that create a change in the bipolar international order. Therefore, China could not pose a military challenge to the international order led by the US and Soviet Union. Even though the PLA's land forces were relatively powerful throughout this term due to its numerical superiority, air and navy forces were not in a position to cope with the two superpowers of the Cold War. Moreover, China had nuclear weapons during this period, but its strategic capabilities were quite limited compared to other nuclear powers (Fravel & Medeiros, 2010, p. 53). However, China's economic growth has enabled an enormous increase in its military spending in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War. Even though there is a lack of transparency over how much spends on its military development, China is viewed as the biggest military power among Asian countries. To prove, while China's official military spending was \$11.3 billion at the end of the 1990s (Cliff, 2015, p. 1), SIPRI's recent calculations show that China's spending has reached \$292 billion today (SIPRI, 2023). In this respect, China lags behind the US, but its military spending surpasses that of all countries in Asia. It is currently larger than the combined military spending of Russia, Japan, India, South Korea and Taiwan. There is no question that under the current circumstances China's military is more powerful in the areas of naval, air and land forces than any other country in Asia.

Although China's military modernization fastened after Cold War period (Bitzinger, 2011, pp. 7-8), its military power has made impressive progresses particularly under Xi administration. During this period, the PLA has developed significant military technologies, from precision-guided missiles to advanced surface ships, submarines, fighter jets, hypersonic glide vehicle and aircraft carriers. With the help of these military systems, Chinese military forces are now capable of conducting complex and advanced operations not only in mainland's immediate surroundings but also far off the Chinese coast. China also continues to strengthen its indigenous defense industry and national weapons production capability to reduce its foreign dependence in the international arms market. Chinese defense industry companies such as AVIC and NORINCO are among the top companies that produce and sell the most weapons in the global arms market (Wezeman et al., 2023). Besides these conventional forces, the Xi administration also established the Strategic Support Force in order to strengthen the effectiveness of electronic, cyber and space operations, which has become gradually important in the new era. In recent years, China also has modernized its nuclear-capable intercontinental ballistic missiles

(ICBMs) that can strike the US or any state in the Asia-Pacific. On that account, China is one of the three states called as the nuclear triad, along with the US and Russia, that can launch a nuclear attack from land, air and sea (Kristensen et al., 2023, p. 108). As constantly emphasized by Xi, with the help of all these conventional and strategic power, China aims to complete its military modernization before 2035 and create a world-class army by 2050 (Lei, 2017).

China's such overall military capabilities and insufficient transparency about its military spending have become a source of major challenge to the US and Japan. Defense documents and national strategy papers released by both countries point to China as the main challenger in the region (Japan Ministry of Defense, 2023, p. 1; The US National Security Strategy, 2022, pp. 23-24). The intention why both states have taken an attitude in this direction is that China continues to strengthen and renew unceasingly its naval, air and nuclear capabilities, both qualitatively and quantitatively. This change in China's material capabilities allows it to gradually turn the balance of power of the region in its favor. Of all the other branches, for instance, the Chinese navy (PLAN) is stronger than its any other counterpart in the region. Having more than 370 ships, submarines and other military platforms, PLAN is the numerically largest naval force by far in the region, ahead of even the US (The US Department of Defense, 2024, p. 51). China's constant strengthening of its naval forces steadily deepens the power disparity particularly with Japan. For instance, China's superiority over Japan is clearly seen in the number of destroyers, frigates and submarines. Compared to Japan, China also enlarges substantially its military sphere of influence in the regional seas with its two aircraft carriers which are named Liaoning and Shandong as well as nuclear-powered submarines including Yuan, Shang and Jin which are paired with ballistic missiles. The aggregate capabilities of PLAN have increased so much in the last twenty years that the total number of warships, which was 216 in 2005, doubled numerically by 2023 (O'Rourke, 2024, p. 8). According to the US Department of Defense, it is assumed that number of China's navy vehicles will reach 435 in 2030 (The US Department of Defense, 2024, p. 54).

In this sense, it can be argued that China's rising naval power has various strategic consequences. With its warfare abilities, PLAN forms a main component of a Chinese rising challenge to the US which is the leading military power in the Asia-Pacific. Considering the distribution of capabilities in particular, the existing gap between two great powers is quickly covered by China in the axis of modernization efforts. This inevitably opens a new page in great power politics between the US and China. Because China aims to completely prevent the US presence in the Asia-Pacific by adopting A2/AD (Anti-Access/Area Denial) strategy and using emerging warfare technologies in its naval forces (Lake, 2023). With these steps, China has already gained the predominance over the US in some crucial regional areas like South and East China Sea. The US has also partially lost its advantage in conducting large-scale operations against China in the region. Furthermore, China has reached the deterrent power to resist conventional and

strategic actions of the US in the Asia-Pacific (Clark & Patt, 2023). While this power asymmetry that China has achieved in its naval power provides a large-scale operational advantage especially against Japan, it also makes Japan militarily more dependent on the US.

The superiority attained in the naval forces also appears to be valid in China's air force (PLAAF) capabilities. Along with doctrinal and institutional developments, China endeavors to modernize PLAAF by increasing the number of its air military vehicles. PLAAF currently has approximately 2800 aircraft, and more than 2200 of them are known to be combat vehicles. More importantly, China has more than 1,100 fourth and fifth generation fighters, consisting of both indigenously produced and Russian-made aircraft. This numerical ratio makes PLAAF the largest actor in the region and the third largest in the world. As such, the PLAAF is rapidly reaching to technological capabilities of Western air forces. With the H-6N aircraft, for instance, the Chinese air force has been assigned to a nuclear task and became the first air actor in the region to have nuclear weapons. Thanks to the progress made in nuclear forces, China has gained the range power to strike the borders of the US and Japan (Wright, 2020). In addition to its nuclear capabilities, PLAAF has advanced its offensive warfare capabilities by incorporating military platforms such as early warning aircraft, intelligence collection aircraft, and long-range anti-aircraft missile systems into its inventory. All these have allowed for the advancement of the strategic competencies such as air defense and air strikes (China Defense White Paper, 2019).

Development trend in the Chinese air force poses a significant challenge to the longstanding US air dominance in the region. According to the military strategy paper published by China, the traditional role of the PLAAF, the mission of protecting the borders, has been extended to the task of conducting offensive and defensive operations beyond the land borders (The Science of Military Strategy, 2020, p. 372). The recent actions of the PLAAF indicate that the air force will make its presence in overseas regions more obvious. It is one of the strong possibilities that the intensifying operations and actions of Chinese air forces in the seas of the region will bring about new unconventional encounters and new types of difficulties for Japan and the US. Considering that artificial intelligence (AI) and autonomous system technologies are also integrated into the air force, this situation makes it inevitable to sharpen the competition between the actors in the new age of warfare (Allen & Garafola, 2021, p. 342). In the foreseeable future, unremitting development process of PLAAF's capabilities are expected to continue, since China pursues to become the regional hegemon in Asia and an equal competitor to the US. It is predictable that as PLAAF continues to transform, there is no obstacle to become a Strategic Air Force that threatens the US and Japan in the Asia-Pacific more visibly (Li, 2022). Reflecting that the coordination of civil and military technologies will expand further in the future, it is foreseeable that the PLAN and PLAAF will pose a more intense challenge to American and Japanese current position in the region in the near and medium term.

In addition to military competition, in recent years, China's political and military relations, particularly with Japan, have entered a concener process of destabilization and deterioration. For instance, East China Sea is one of the major causes of tension between China and Japan. The sea grounds a sovereignty conflict between the two nations due to its valuable natural resources and one-sided historical claims. U.S. Energy Information Administration's calculations confirm that there are approximately 310 million barrels of oil and more than 58 billion cubic feet of natural gas in the sea (U.S. Energy Information Agency, 2024, pp. 2-4). This rate is quite high, especially when compared to other seas in the region. The dependence of both countries on this region for their energy needs, which they deem necessary for their economic and military fields, escalate the tension between two countries. Although Japan has demanded China to cease its natural gas and oil extraction in the disputed waters, China continues to pursue its practices. Therefore, with each passing year, China and Japan have experienced more political and military tension in this region.

Disputes over the East China Sea have placed the Senkaku Islands at the center of the political crisis between China and Japan. Although the Senkaku Islands were officially claimed by Japan in the 19th century, China began to restate claims over the islands and has declared historical rights to the region since the 1970s (Shaw, 1999, p. 68). In the current situation, the Xi administration started to pursue a more active policy around the islands with a nationalist stance and implemented its goals on the islands as a power politics. In line with this political line, China declared an ADIZ (Air Defense Identification Zone) in the East China Sea in 2013 (Rinehart & Elias, 2015, p. 6). With this declaration, China claimed sovereignty over the majority of the East China Sea, including the areas claimed by Japan. Since then, Japan has insisted that this declaration has disrupted regional stability. As a result, this development has further intensified the sovereignty conflict with Japan. Apart from this, China also regularly implements the gray zone strategy around these islands as a hybrid warfare method. In addition to conventional military deployment, media, cyber, and electronic warfare tools have become a part of hybrid strategy against Japan in the region. As a part of hybrid strategy, China also actively deploys its different maritime actors and coast guard forces to realize its strategic objectives in the region (Kraska, 2020).

Additional issue that intensifies tensions in the Asia, particularly in maritime disputes, is artificial islands constructed by China in the South China Sea. Though China claims that the main purpose of artificial islands is mostly for scientific research, the US and Japan insist that military weapons are situated on the islands. Some sources already show that three of the artificial islands built in the South China Sea to date have been completely militarized with various missile systems and fighter jets (The Guardian, 2022). On these islands, China deploys missile and radar systems and carries out many navy activities in line with its regional goals. In the South China Sea, China also expands its military actions, including ballistic missile tests and military exercises. Besides security objectives, China also realizes its

economic interests on the islands. Through these islands, China claims sovereignty over the most critical regional and global maritime trade routes. Therefore, China's expansion of its dominance over sea routes through artificial islands is considered by the US and Japan as the challenge not only to regional security but also to the liberal international norms and economic order.

Why has China's military rise placed the strategy of balancing at the forefront of the agenda in the Asia-Pacific? Above all, balancing, as an alliance strategy, is built upon threat parameters and perceptions. Put differently, the balancing strategy is the increase of the material capabilities and the expansion of military partnership against a perceived threat from another state. In this context, China's rapid modernization of its military forces, its increase in military spending, and its expanding political influence in the region have generated threat signals for the US and Japan. As a response, US and Japan implement balancing strategy by expanding their military and defense relations against the perceived threat from China in order to consolidate their security and preserve their position in the region.

BALANCING ACT OF THE US AND JAPAN: DEEPENING AND WIDENING ASPECTS OF THE STRATEGIC RELATIONS AGAINST RISING CHINA

China's increasing military capabilities and regional political approaches have caused the US and Japan to revise their regional security agenda over the past decade. Although bilateral relations date back to the end of the Second World War, China's such latest position has further strengthened the military bond between the US and Japan. In this respect, despite the US-Japan alliance having lasted for over 70 years, this alliance has been re-functionalized as a balancing strategy in the last ten years. Especially as a result of the progressively tense environment in the region since Xi administration took office in China, Japan have backed firmer military relations with the US and has had to build up its military capabilities through a multidimensional military partnership with the US. As a result, the US and Japan prefer to resort to both external and internal balancing against China and overhauled their military relations by establishing more comprehensive security cooperation. In other words, as the Chinese challenge has become more visible over the past decade, the scope of security cooperation between two states has gradually expanded to balance the China's rise. As a natural reflex of the balancing strategy, the US and Japan have boosted their capability of military forces and expansively furthered their defense cooperation and military contacts. In order to strengthen military coordination, furthermore, the US and Japan have been steadily advancing integration at the tactical and strategic levels, as well as building partnerships in the institutional area. On that account, numerical data provides a more realistic picture of the current size of the US-Japan alliance. To illustrate, the US has 120 military bases in Japan and Japan is the country that hosts the most the US military bases in the world. Moreover, the US currently deploys 55,000 military personnel to Japan.

These data clearly shows the current extent and level of military relations between the two states (The US Department of State, 2025).

The US and Japan's perception of the Chinese challenge initially turned into rapid consecutive policy practices and *the China issue* has become truly security-oriented in the policy-making process of both states. In 2010, the US shifted its foreign policy line towards China with the strategy called as "Pivot to Asia". Although this policy was an initiative of the Obama administration, the Trump and Biden administrations both maintained the same attitude towards the rising China. Just like the US, Japan has also made pivoting policy part of its strategy under the administrations of Shinzo Abe and his predecessor Fumio Kishida. Leaders of both countries have made numerous joint statements over the past ten years, affirming their common security concerns and China's expanding influence in the region. For example, President Donald Trump has openly stated that China is a threat to the world because of its military capabilities (Rappeport, 2019). Similarly, President Joe Biden also expressed that he will protect the US against Chinese threats (Collinson, 2023). On the Japanese side, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida has described China's current military actions as the biggest challenge in the region (Magnier & Razdan, 2024).

Threat perceptions towards China reflected in decision-makers' rhetoric has also found a room in security and defense documents published by both the US and Japan. The US National Security Strategy paper, for instance, identifies China as the most "consequential geopolitical challenge" (National Security Strategy, 2022, p.11). With this statement, the paper places China's economic, military and technological rise hierarchically above all other challenges and consider China as the toughest competitor with its exceptional characteristics. On the other side, Japan's latest defense document raises similar concerns about China as well. As the defense document clearly states, China's military and other activities in the new era pose an unprecedented challenge to Japanese national interests and security. From the Japanese perspective, therefore, China is pronounced as a regional destabilizer (Japan Ministry of Defense, 2024, p.18). All these discourses and recent strategy documents clearly confirm that the China issue has positioned itself at the forefront of the security and foreign policy agendas of both the US and Japan.

Apart from policy-making process and policy discourses about China, the US and Japan began implementing decisions to expand their written military commitments. In 2015, for instance, the US and Japan announced a revision to "Mutual Defense Guidelines" which was first signed in 1997. This update in the agreement has not only expanded cooperation in the field of R&D (Research and Development) but also opened a new chapter in the joint production of military technologies. In addition to cooperation in conventional weapons, the revision has also highlighted mutual support on cyber security, space forces and intelligence cooperation in response to China's expanding influence in the region (Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2015, p 14). As another example, the US and Japan also signed

an agreement called the “Reciprocal Defense Procurement Agreement” and the areas of partnership between the defense companies of two nations have showed a significant increase (Chanlett-Avery & Campbell, 2019, p. 37). This agreement has offered the opportunity for advancing mutual commitments such as joint institutional reforms, support for bilateral decision-making processes and response to immediate crises. All these steps evidently show that developing mutually allied relations and expanding scope of written assurances are more vital than ever for both the US and Japan. Because preventing China's efforts to establish regional hegemony in Asia has gained a vital importance for the US and Japan.

In order to better understand the structure of the alliance, it is critical to emphasize the power parameters of both the US and Japan. Considering their military investments and defense industries, as well as their offense and defense capabilities, military powers of the US and Japan are on the cutting edge in Asia-Pacific. Most recently, US military spending has reached \$916 billion, and it now accounts for %38 of total global military spending (SIPRI, 2024). Whereas the US transfers %3.5 of the total GDP to the defense budget, it is the country that allocates the most budget to defense-related R&D activities. In last decade, for instance, in response to China's increasing military technological capacity, the expenditure allocated by the US to R&D activities in the military field grew by more than 20% (The US Department of Defense, 2023). On the other side, Japan has the third largest army after China and India in Asia. Although Japan's military power is marginal compared to the US and China, Japan has set a military spending amount of approximately \$52 billion for 2024, and its share in GDP has exceeded 1% for the first time in recent years (Murakami, 2023). It is apparent that Japan, which has increased its defense budget continuously for ten years, will renew a record in its military expenditures in response to diversified challenge areas from China in the upcoming years (Takeneka, 2021). More critically, Japan plans to spend a total of \$300 billion on defense over the next four years. Globally, this would make Japan the third largest spender after the US and China (Yamaguchi, 2023).

Mutual arms trade is perhaps the most critical pillar of the current US-Japan balancing strategy. Japan is presently among the foremost customers of the US defense and military platforms. In other words, Japan has become one of the largest buyers of US weapons systems over the last decade (Chanlett-Avery & Campbell, 2019, p. 38). According to SIPRI estimates, for instance, arms trade between the two states increased by %161 between 2019-2023 and the US now accounts for %90 of Japan's arms import (Wezeman et al., 2024, p. 3). Among the military products that Japan has purchased from the US, F-35, Global Hawk, Pegasus tankers, Osprey aircraft are at the top of the arms trade list. These are the essential military components forming the cornerstone of the alliance structure between the US and Japan (Chanlett-Avery & Campbell, 2019, pp. 38-39). Other significant weapons sales from the US to Japan involve KC-46 Refueling Tanker, E-2D Airborne Early Warning Aircraft as well as missiles such as AIM 120 and UGM-84 Harpoon (Vergun, 2024). From this perspective, the alliance has become more robust in many

ways with the increasing volume of arms trade. The US arms sales to Japan do not only contribute to deepening joint operations and reciprocal military relations. Weapons sales also tighten commitments between Japan and the US by providing long-term technical knowledge. This cooperation also allows Japan to develop its domestic defense industry and weapons manufacturing capabilities and to adopt technological innovations to its indigenous weapons systems. Hence, although Japanese forces are relatively weak compared to China's military capabilities, they can partially eliminate the power asymmetry against China through arms sales. Finally by acquiring compatible weapons, the US and Japan aim to ensure effective coordination during times of war or crisis. Because arms sales and the joint use of some weapons allow both states to determine common operational and tactical approaches and to avoid confusion in the event of a possible military confrontation in the Asia-Pacific.

As a joint response to the gradually concentrated threat from China and part of the balancing strategy, the US and Japan also have set forth to expand cooperation of mutual defense industry. For instance, the US and Japan continue to work collaboratively to develop ballistic missile defense capabilities. American Raytheon and Japan's Mitsubishi Industry's joint production of the SM-3 Block IIA missile stands as a crucial achievement in the defense industry cooperation. The missile is expected to become a strategic part of the Japan Navy's ballistic missiles to counter China's maritime activities in the region (Nurkin & Hinata-Yamaguchi, 2020, p. 6). Moreover, Japan's Mitsubishi Industry also continues to produce surface-to-air missile system called Patriots in partnership with American contractors Raytheon and Lockheed Martin. Similarly, Japan increase the number of Type 12 anti-ship missiles it has deployed in response to China's aggregate naval capacity. For the same purpose, Japan decided to purchase Tomahawk long-range missiles from the US and started to develop hypersonic glide vehicles (Yamaguchi, 2023). These acquisitions and partnerships in missile technologies can all be viewed as a critical evolution especially in Japan's ability to counter potential Chinese missile threats. Because by deploying these missiles, the US and Japan not only strength their long-range strike capabilities but also attempt to create collective and integrated deterrence and show their war readiness against possible Chinese aggression. More specifically, thanks to the missile partnership established with the US, Japan strengthens its ability to counter China's claims of maritime sovereignty and signals its defense of its own sea lines in East China Sea.

Advancing defense industrial partnerships and arms sales help the US and Japan achieve air superiority in the region. Because China does not only strength its air force numerically, but it also intends to turn the balance of power in the air in its favor with its new generation aircraft fleet. Seeking to counter China's air power, the US has clearly deployed its most competent and technologically advanced military systems to Japan, including the USS Ronald Reagan aircraft carrier and the F-35 Strike Fighter. In order to consolidate air power, Japan also works closely with the American aviation industry and is has become involved in the production process of

various aerial platforms such as F-15 Eagle and F-4 Phantom fighter jets (Pajon, 2016, p. 70). Moreover, Japan collaborates with American leading defense companies Lockheed Martin and Northrop Grumman in the development of the sixth generation F-X stealth fighter, which is expected to enter service by 2030 (Harper, 2021). Considering that China continues its air modernization without interruption and continues to develop its sixth-generation aircraft, Japan's F-X has a crucial role. Because F-X is expected to counter China's new generation fighter jets that provide air superiority in the region and is also expected to provide an advantage in potential air combat.

Limiting the US-Japan's balancing efforts toward China merely to conventional arms sector remains an insufficient analytical perspective. Along with conventional military partnership, the US and Japan also invest in emerging technologies such as AI, machine learning, unmanned vehicles and robotic technologies. The US and Japan deepen their partnership in these areas, particularly to deal with China's increasingly sophisticated military technologies (Nurkin & Hinata-Yamaguchi, 2020, p. 6). For instance, both countries conduct joint research and development projects in military applications of AI and develop unmanned aerial, sea and ground vehicles and space-based military capabilities (Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024; Takahashi, 2023). In addition, QUAD security dialogue, established as a US-Japan-India-Australia security partnership, further emphasizes the importance of AI, space and communication technologies against China's actions in the region. More than that, even the AUKUS military partnership established by the US, The United Kingdom (UK) and Australia has a crucial role for Japan's position in the region. Even though Japan does not have direct participation in AUKUS, potential of Japan-AUKUS interaction especially in hypersonic, cyber and quantum computing technologies seem very high for the future (Smith, 2024). As China's visibility in some regions such as the East China Sea grows, Japan will inevitably become more involved in US-led military collaborations such as QUAD and AUKUS to diversify its strategic capabilities. On that account, one of the primary goals why the US and Japan integrate emerging technologies into military sphere is to prevent China's hybrid warfare strategies and gray zone operations in the region. In recent years, China has incorporated emerging technologies, especially autonomous and semi-autonomous weapons systems, into these operations. For instance, China regularly uses AI-powered unmanned aerial vehicles for some military purposes such as intelligence, reconnaissance and surveillance, and has made surface and underwater unmanned vehicles part of its routine naval operations. Therefore, the US and Japan have had to take novel and technology-driven military measures against China's technological rise through various security pacts and initiatives.

CONCLUSION

Alliances are formal or informal commitments made by at least two states so as to build up their power and influence in the international system. Alliances have many functions in interstate relations. They ensure the maintenance of a functioning balance of power among various states, help protect national defense against the source of threat, and they are also one the main determinants of war, peace and international order. Although systemic variables primarily influence the formation process of alliances, the attitudes of domestic political actors and institutions should also be taken into account in this process. Likewise, offensive and defensive capabilities and foreign policy intentions also have a profound impact on the alliance formation process. In this context, even though classical realist theorists put forward some theories about alliances in the early years of the Cold War, in the ongoing process neorealist theorists have offered a more comprehensive and holistic view of alliances. By focusing on both intra-state and systemic variables, these theorists have presented different approaches to alliance formation process such as balance of power, balance of threats, balance of interests, bandwagoning, buck-passing and chain-ganging.

The Asia-Pacific region is portrayed by key changes in the balance of power and redistributions of military power capabilities among regional countries in the last decade. The highly rapid changes in the distribution of capabilities in the region rise perception of insecurity, uncertainty and suspicion among regional actors. Many scholars focusing on the region believe that a multipolar structure has emerged in the Asia-Pacific and consider that this new structural view of the region has considerably intensified the strategic competition among the regional actors. These inter-state conditions emerging at the regional level inevitably bring the issue of alliance to the agenda. The article efforts to offer a comprehensive analysis of alliance formations in the Asia-Pacific region. In recent years, China's military accumulation and modernization as well as its assertive policy show up as the key issues intensifying the direct military and political crises of regional actors in the Asia-Pacific. China's fastened military modernization as well as its active policy practice over the East and South China Sea cause its it to be described as a revisionist power by the US and Japan. The article maintains that the major reason for the alliance formation between the US and Japan is the growing threat from China and claims that the US-Japan alliance is based on a balancing strategy. In different words, the main purpose of the US-Japan alliance is to counter China's rising challenge and to ensure their own security with the help of a balancing behavior. To strengthen the hypothesis asserted in the study, realism's balancing strategy is utilized. This is primarily because realism, centered on material capabilities, is the most suitable theory for explaining both China's military rise and the progressing defense cooperation between the US and Japan in response to their threat perception. Unlike theories such as liberalism and constructivism, which focus on non-material variables such as ideas, norms, identity or culture, realism's balancing brings greater clarity the power politics and balance of power in the region. However, despite realism's explanatory power for

the cases, it should be noted that the theory mainly neglects the domestic political dynamics and internal decision making process of the US and Japan.

Under current conditions, inevitable rise of China and the US-Japan alliance constitute crucial subject, not only regionally but also in terms of global politics. The strengthened ties between the US and Japan over the past ten year offer insights for future regional projections. First, given the continuing rise of China in the near to medium term, it is reasonable to assume an expansion in the scope of defense and military cooperation and partnership between the US and Japan. This means that arms sales and transfers, along with defense industrial collaborations, will intensify in the future between the US and Japan. Secondly, intense technological competition and investments among Asia-Pacific powers continue without interruption. Today, the integration of AI, autonomous, quantum and machine learning technologies into military and defense systems steadily increases. These technological innovations lead to noticeable changes in the nature of traditional military operations and hybrid strategies. With the awareness of this transformation, the US and Japan will further increase their cooperation and investments in emerging technologies in the coming years. Therefore, it is possible for the US and Japan to operationally deploy more military assets centered on modern technologies, particularly for their naval and air branches. Consequently, a more technology-driven alliance system between the US and Japan is likely to emerge in the coming period.

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