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## **The More the Merrier? Sino-Japanese security relations in the context of complex interstate rivalry in the Asia-Pacific region**

### **Abstract**

This paper analyses the evolution of Sino-Japanese rivalry in the security sphere concentrating on the Chinese perspective, and placing it within the wider context of complex interstate rivalry between China, Japan and the United States. From a theoretical viewpoint, this research contributes to the literature on interstate rivalry from multiparty perspective, which has been overlooked in existing research. China-Japan-US complex interstate rivalry includes elements of positional, spatial and ideological rivalry simultaneously. When rivalries mix two or more rivalry types, they become more difficult to resolve. The two broad trends of China's military build-up and deepening US-Japan alliance evolve in tandem intensifying rivalry dynamics and increasing positional elements of rivalry. There are many indications on various levels that for China, controlling Japan's international ambitions has become less important and more attention is paid to ways in which Japan helps the US in reaching its objectives in Asia through their alliance agreement. The cases analysed to display complex interstate rivalry include the Taiwan question, territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas, and the North Korean nuclear issue.

**Keywords:** China, Japan, complex interstate rivalry, Asia-Pacific security, the United States

## **Introduction**

It can be argued that the Asia-Pacific region is currently the most likely location of major power war due to complex interstate rivalries. Issues of regional order are on the table because of China's rise and changing balance of power, to which US and Japan have responded by deepening their alliance. Rivalry perceptions among the major actors in the region are articulated with varying clarity in their respective security policy documents and official statements.

China acknowledges in its 2015 Military Strategy that 'the US carries on its "rebalancing" strategy and enhances its military presence and military alliances in the region.' It continues that 'Japan spares no effort to dodge the postwar mechanism' causing grave concerns 'among other countries in the region.'

While not defining China explicitly as Japan's rival, Defence of Japan 2017 accuses China of masking its military expenditures and describes it in other ways as a threat. Defence of Japan 2017 (p. 46) states that 'Chinese activities represent serious security concerns of the region encompassing Japan, and of the international community.' Yet, Japan is economically dependent on China and has often opted for a 'dual hedge strategy': relying on the US in security and simultaneously trying to get closer to China economically (Heginbotham & Samuels, 2002). For Japan, this is far from unproblematic, as China's military rise continues and Japan's China policy is in many ways entangled with Japan's domestic politics (Smith, 2015). Prime Minister Abe has strongly directed Japan towards more independent security policy, which raises suspicion in China.

US National Security Strategy (US government, 2017 NSS) from December 2017 states that 'China and Russia challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity' (US NSS, 2017, p. 2). The US National Defense Strategy (US NDS) from January 2018 refers to China as a 'strategic competitor' which –together with Russia– 'wants to shape the world consistent with their authoritarian model' (US NDS, 2018, p. 2). After

months long trade dispute with China, Vice President Michael Pence (2018) stated on October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2018 that the US has a new approach to China and it is willing and able to confront China in a wide range of issues from trade and investment policies to China's 'interference in American politics' while maintaining 'military dominance in every domain'. President Trump's economic policy has undermined US-China economic interdependence, which used to constrain strategic rivalry.

Rivalries are associated with war proneness and future conflicts are likely to be linked with established rivalries. According to Thompson (2001), 75 per cent of strategic rivalries have engaged in war at some point (strategic rivalry concept is discussed in the introduction to this special issue). Rivalries can exist between two or multiple states (dyadic vs. multiparty rivalries). Tendency for multiparty rivalry in forms of enhanced military alliances and other cooperation in the security field can be dangerous, as multiparty rivalries can lead to multiparty wars, which tend to cause more disaster than dyadic wars. Vasquez and Rundlett (2016) argue that alliances are a necessary condition for multiparty wars. That means that although alliances per se do not cause multiparty wars, the outcome cannot happen without alliances. Despite the above, rivalries between multiple actors are left understudied, as the dominant method for analysing rivalries has for long been to concentrate on dyadic rivalries from a temporal perspective. In other words, there has been a trend to define rivalries according to the amount and frequency of armed conflicts between two rivals. While methodologically sound, this dispute-threshold definition does not suit all purposes. First, all rivalries are not dyadic and second, a rivalry may be developing even when there has been a long time since the last war between the parties.

This paper analyses the evolution of Sino-Japanese rivalry in the security sphere concentrating on the Chinese perspective, and placing it within the wider context of complex interstate rivalry between China, Japan and the US. Unlike most other articles in this special issue, this one focuses on the Asia-Pacific region. While Sino-Japanese rivalry has been most studied in this geographical area, developments in Asia are likely to shape Sino-Japanese rivalry also in other

regions discussed in other articles of this special issue. In its rivalry analysis, this paper presents four cases manifesting China-Japan-US complex interstate rivalry, and looks them through two broad trends of deepening US-Japan alliance on the one hand and China's rise on the other.

The depth of the US-Japan alliance is one of the most defining factors in East Asian security domain. The US rebalance to Asia policy first launched with the name 'pivot to Asia' in 2010, arguably a counterbalancing act against China's maritime strategy, seemed overhyped before 2015 when Japan and the US announced new guidelines for security cooperation with a larger geographical scope. If Japan and the US continue to deepen their security cooperation, China can easily feel that it is being overly contained (Christensen, 1999; Liff, 2018a). These recent developments highlight the interconnectedness of China's relations with both Japan and the US. On the other hand, thanks to its rise, China has adopted an active foreign policy approach during Xi Jinping's era and its military build-up and maritime disputes decrease the credibility of its 'peaceful development' in the eyes of other actors. When Xi Jinping and Abe Shinzo took office in 2012–2013, situation in the East China Sea was turbulent and tensions in the Sino-Japanese relations were high. After the situation in the East China Sea disappeared from the headlines, Sino-Japanese rivalry has manifested through issues involving multiple parties such as territorial disputes in the South China Sea and security situation in the Korean Peninsula. In addition, the Taiwan issue remains unsolved and complicates China's relations with the US but also with Japan.

This research attempts to answer to the following set of questions: Which factors define China's security strategy in the Asia Pacific region? How has the balance between different elements of rivalry evolved? What kind of evidence can be found from the Chinese side of perceiving Japan as China's rival? The main identified trend is that in the security sphere, Sino-Japanese bilateral rivalry after 2010 is most defined by China-US great power dynamics, although at times the Chinese perceive that Japan has aimed to deliberately deteriorate China's position. The concrete policies China and Japan have conducted reflect these dynamics, for which China's rise sets long-term

temporal perspective. China-Japan-US complex interstate rivalry includes elements of positional, spatial and ideological rivalry simultaneously. Positional elements have been in the increase in recent years.

This paper is organized in four parts. The first section defines complex interstate rivalry. The second part looks at the temporal element in complex interstate rivalries by describing the evolution of alliances and other kind of power blocks in the Asia-Pacific region and also looks at motivations and ambitions behind Chinese, Japanese and American security policies. The third part analyses the Taiwan question, territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas, and the North Korean nuclear issue to display complex interstate rivalry in action. The final section discusses consequences of the developments analysed.

### **Defining and analysing rivalries**

To grasp the nature of rivalry, it must be defined and operationalised. At the core of rivalry definitions lies competition or a (perceived) enduring zero-sum situation. Vasquez (2009, pp. 78–79) writes that ‘Rivalry is a term that characterises a competitive relationship between two actors over an issue that is of high salience to them.’ Operationalisation of rivalry is often done through choosing an approach to the so-called temporal dimension, which refers to emphasis given to the end and starting dates of a rivalry (dispute-threshold approaches vs. perception-based approaches), defining number of rivals (dyadic or multiparty rivalries) and analysing the scope or type of rivalry (spatial, positional or ideological). These typologies and characteristics matter because rivalry type and number of participants are linked with conflict escalation and war proneness. Decisions made regarding the temporal dimension frame which questions the study can answer. Also this research defines rivalry through these elements as will be explained in more detail below.

### *Temporal dimension*

Most empirical definitions of rivalry tend to emphasise repeated disputes. In their classic study, Goertz and Diehl (1993) developed a categorization of enduring rivalries, which is discussed in more detail in the introduction to this special issue. This and other so-called dispute-threshold approaches count disputes using a dyad-year as the unit of analysis. Diehl and Goertz specifically stress that ‘actors in rivalries consist of *states*, and rivalries are *dyadic*’ (Diehl & Goertz, 2000, p. 19 italics in original). By conceptualizing rivalries through dyadic relationships, Diehl and Goertz (2000, p. 20) emphasize ‘the temporal component at the expense of the spatial one’.

Dispute-threshold approaches have been criticised because they treat conflicts as if they were independent across time when in fact a few dyads are responsible for the majority of conflicts. It is thus not sufficient to count events of military conflict within a certain time period in deciding whether two actors are rivals, as such events are not independent of each other and the cause for conflicts has to do with the underlying dynamics of the rival states. Perhaps more importantly, dispute-threshold approaches analyse conflicts only after they have taken place rather than trying to identify which dyads would be more likely to resort to war. (Vasquez & Leskiw, 2001, pp. 296–298.)

This research adopts an approach concentrating on elements that could help us identify factors that increase likelihood of war *ex ante* by focusing on ongoing disputes or rivalries, which could turn violent in the future. Historical legacies naturally matter, as what actors do to each other in the present is conditioned by what they have done to each other in the past. Still, rivalry is not defined solely through number of past armed conflicts. Moreover, as noted above, not all rivalries are between two parties, but rather groups of actors linked together. Diehl and Goertz (2000, pp. 19–20) who concentrate on dyadic rivalries, do not deny that in some rivalries, third parties may play a significant role. Security complexes can have multiple parties forming rivalries that go beyond the dyadic structure. It may be that the legs of the triadic linkage are asymmetrical in duration or relative importance.

### *Rivalry perception*

As it is not always useful or possible to concentrate on start and end dates of conflicts, perception centred approaches have been formed as an alternative or a complementary approach for dispute-threshold approaches. The way actors perceive each other is an important component of rivalry. According to Thompson's strategic rivalry conceptualization (2001, p. 560), 'the actors in question must regard each other as a) competitors b) source of actual or latent threats that pose some possibilities of becoming militarized and c) enemies.'

Both from theoretical and methodological perspectives, concentration on actors' perceptions requires an actor-oriented approach to understanding state behaviour. In other words, the anarchic structure of international system does not dictate state behaviour, rather states can be functionally different with varying primary behavioural drivers. (Hurrell, 2007, pp. 16–17.) Perceiving another country as rival is based on assessment rather than structural factors.

### *Complex interstate rivalries*

In recent years, a few scholars have ventured beyond dyadic clarity in the study of rivalry. Valeriano and Powers (2014) define a complex rivalry simply as a rivalry relationship between more than two actors whose relations and interactions are characterized by common issues of concern, alignments, or dispute joiner dynamics. Joiner dynamics can lead to one party joining an ongoing dispute to settle their own issues or one state being pulled in a conflict due to physical location of a rivalry. The general form of the relationship will be of two partners confronting an antagonist.

Valeriano and Powers base their approach on both Goertz and Diehl's dispute-threshold approach and Thompson's (2001) perception-based approach. These approaches form two types of complex interstate rivalries, the so-called *enduring interstate rivalry* based on dispute-density and *perception-based rivalry* that fails to meet dispute-density threshold but the involved countries have serious tensions short of militarized hostilities. For enduring interstate rivalry, Valeriano and Powers

(2014, p. 7) use a threshold of at least four militarized interstate disputes over a period of at least 10 years. This definition leads them to categorize China-Japan-US triad as a complex interstate rivalry between 1900 and 1945.

### *Rivalry type*

In addition to the number of rivals, their size and relative power positions matter. Thompson separates positional and spatial aspects of strategic rivalries to account for the scope of rivalry. ‘Predominately spatial rivalries begin when more states develop a desire to have exclusive control over the same territory. Predominately positional rivalries involve conflicts over relative positions at or near the apex of a power hierarchy.’ (Thompson, 1995, p. 217.) Positional rivalries imply some rough level of capacity symmetry, especially on the major power level. (Ibid., p. 205.) Colaresi et al. (2008) add ideological rivalry to the list of rivalry types. These three archetypes are not mutually exclusive, and Colaresi et al. suggest that a rivalry may well encompass all three forms simultaneously. Still, especially concerning complex interstate rivalries, previous research suggests that such rivalries tend to be positional. Territorial issues are unlikely to be at the core of complex rivalries since it is less probable that all actors have a stake over a particular piece of territory (Colaresi et al., 2008). A loser interpretation of complex interstate rivalry can define a rivalry predominantly positional, even when it encompasses one or more spatial issues. (Colaresi et al. 2008, p. 172.) When rivalries mix two or more types, they become more difficult to resolve (ibid., pp. 79–80).

In terms of conflict proneness, spatial rivalries are more conflict prone than positional rivalries. If a rivalry is caused by a territorial dispute, likelihood for war increases (Vasquez & Leskiw, 2001). This factor applies both to dyadic and complex rivalries as also multiparty disputes involving territory tend to escalate to war more frequently than multiparty disputes on other issues (Petersen et al. 2004, p. 93). Nakano (2016, p. 167) adds that territorial disputes can be on different levels of severity: a link between domestic politics and territorial dispute tends to signify increased tensions.



Although positional rivalries escalate less often than spatial rivalries, when they do, they are likely to cause larger damage. Using a sample of 173 cases, Colaresi et al. (2008, p. 90) concluded that rivalries including major powers tend to be more violent than minor-major or minor-minor power dyads. Moreover, strong positional grievances encourage multilateral wars, which tend to spread damage (ibid. p. 170).

When looking at the complex interstate rivalry between China, Japan and the US in the contemporary era, this research cannot rely on the dispute-threshold approach as the last military conflict between the parties ended decades ago. Thus, in building its understanding of rivalry perceptions in China, this article identifies rivalry type(s) in each case using official documents, their manifestations in concrete policies complemented with expert commentary. It is also notable that rivalry in one sector does not negate cooperation in some other sector. Most scholars agree that despite disagreements, rival states can cooperate on issues that are less important to them or out of necessity (Dreyer, 2014). Trade relations can exist despite an arms race.

### **Evolution of China-Japan-US complex interstate rivalry in the Asia-Pacific region**

China's, Japan's and American positions in the international system and their relations with each other are influenced by their own ambitions, policies of other major players in the region, their own perceptions of these policies, changes in material capabilities and legacies of post-World War II international power bargains. Essentially, there are two developments that have altered security architecture in the Asia-Pacific region during the past two decades: China's rise and deepening US-Japan alliance. These trends develop in tandem creating a complex interstate rivalry.

### *US-Japan alliance*

The US engagement in Asia changed relatively little since the Cold War ended. After a short period of uncertainty in the early 1990s, US involvement in security issues of Korea, Taiwan and Japan grew somewhat stronger (Buzan & Waever, 2003, p. 167). Deepening US-Japan alliance has evolved gradually and partly as a response to China's rise. After the Second World War and communist takeover of China, Japan quickly changed from a defeated enemy into an US ally. During the Cold War, regional order in East Asia was shaped by two sets of great power bargains, namely the US-Japan security alliance and the tacit agreement between China and the US to shelve their differences in order to contain Soviet power from 1972 onwards. The US-Japan alliance, which made Japan's national defence dependent on the US, guaranteed both China's and Japan's security by making it possible for them to avoid engaging with security competition against each other. However, these arrangements started to dissolve after the Cold War leading to redefinition of Sino-American relations and revision of the US-Japan defence guidelines. (Goh, 2011, pp. 3–5; Christensen, 1999.)

Japan and the US have deepened their security alliance since the mid-1990s and Japan has gradually taken more responsibility for its own defense. There are many reasons for these developments. One key factor was that North Korea declared its intention to withdraw from the Non-Proliferation Treaty in March 1993 and Japan found itself incapable of defending against missile attacks or guerilla tactics (Michishita, 2002). The North Korean nuclear crisis 1993–94 revealed that Japan's responsibilities were not clearly defined in a Korean conflict scenario, and it was not sure if Japan would be obliged to allow the US to use its civilian infrastructure. The 1995 Nye Report and the broader Nye Initiative of which it was a part, laid emphasis on strengthening US alliances in Asia and clarifying Japan's support for US-led military operations. (Christensen, 2011, p. 155.)

After the 1996 Taiwan Strait crisis, these ideas were formalised in a joint communiqué issued by President Clinton and Prime Minister Hashimoto. In 1996, Japan agreed to guarantee US armed forces base access as well as to provide logistics support. Finally, in 1997 ideas expressed in

the joint communiqué were formulated as new defence guidelines. The Chinese side interpreted changes in the US-Japan alliance as an alarming sign of containment, because the scope of US-Japan alliance was defined to cover ‘situations in areas surrounding Japan’ making it easier for the US to intervene in the Taiwan question. (Christensen, 1999, pp. 58–64.)

The US military presence in Asia remains significant and it has military bases in Japan, South Korea and the Philippines. Moreover, US and Japan have continued deepening their military alliance. On 27 April 2015, Japan and the US revised their military alliance by issuing new security guidelines with a larger geographical scope. The new guidelines enable Japan and the US to cooperate in the security realm even if the attacked country is not Japan itself and without the geographical restriction to ‘areas surrounding Japan’. In other words, Japan’s armed forces can now defend an ally under attack, which marks an important shift in the country’s post-war security policy.

On the Japanese side, Abe’s large-scale security reforms facilitated revision of the US-Japan Security Guidelines. Of the domestic changes, especially ‘peace and security legislation’ which included revisions to multiple laws and provided the legal foundation for the reinterpretation of the constitution allowing collective self-defence, was central with regards to strengthening Japan’s alliance with the US (Liff, 2018b, p. 13). There is no consensus on whether the security reforms should be viewed as fundamental changes in Japan’s identity and international orientation or mere policy adjustments. Gustafsson et al. (2018) find that Japan has abandoned its pacifist identity and changes in security policies should be understood as manifestations of Japan’s changed international orientation. Hughes (2018) argues that Japan’s security policies have changed so much in recent years departing from the post-war Yoshida doctrine, that there is now an ‘Abe doctrine’, breaching the ban on collective self-defence at its core. In contrast, some LDP politicians see legal changes mainly as correcting inconsistencies in Japan’s security legislation. Japan’s constitution could allow collective self-defence based on economic security, which according to LDP, was in sharp contradiction with restrictions on defensive measures for the state’s survival (Pollmann, 2015).

However, although new security guidelines came into effect, Japan-US alliance has not been unproblematic in recent years. There has been a continuing pressure from the US side arguing that US allies should take more responsibility of their own defence expenses and not to rely only on US assistance (Hughes, 2018, p. 51). This has raised the question, whether the US is really committed to defend Japan. In consequence, Japan has dismantled some of its self-imposed defence restrictions and on the other hand, searched for closer cooperation with other regional actors such as India and Australia (Heginbotham & Samuels 2018, pp. 135–136; Midford, 2018).

For China, new security guidelines mean that if there is an armed conflict between China and the US over Taiwan or some other issue, under the new guidelines Japan could help the US militarily, at least if Tokyo interprets the conflict as posing a threat to Japan's own survival (broadly defined). Still, China's position on the US-Japan alliance is not simple: On the one hand, China hopes that the US-Japan alliance will remain and prevents Japan from developing an independent defence system. On the other hand, it hopes Japan will promote multipolarity instead of tightening its security links with the US. China is suspicious of any changes to the US-Japan alliance, and the new security guidelines have certainly intensified China's feeling of being contained.

#### *China's rise and its security implications*

China's rise has enabled it to take part in positional rivalry against the US-Japanese alliance in the Asia-Pacific region. As mentioned above, positional rivalry requires a certain level of capacity symmetry to be classified as positional. In the security sphere China's assertive position is visible in its military strategy, which takes a wider geographical scope than before and tougher approach to territorial disputes. USA and Japan react to Chinese policies and China responds to deepening US-Japan alliance. As pointed out in Kai Schulze's article on Japan's CEAPAD initiative in the Middle East in this special issue, rivalries develop over time and gradual changes such as China's rise, can significantly alter conditions for conducting bilateral relations.

Practical meaning of China's rise is intimately linked with issues China sees important. During Xi Jinping's rule, Beijing's security and foreign policies have shifted away from 'keeping a low profile' (*taoguang yanghui*). China's security posture has changed towards increased overseas engagement and a stronger position in territorial and maritime disputes, which complicate its relations with neighbouring coastal countries. Emphasis on China's territorial integrity came clear in Xi's closing remarks of the 13th National People's Congress first session on 20 March 2018. In a speech which was quite nationalistic in tone, Xi stated that 'it is absolutely impossible to separate any inch of territory of our great country from China'. Historically, China has been most likely to use force in territorial disputes when its relative position has been declining, not when it has been increasing (Fravel 2007/2008), a trend that has so far sustained despite changes in political discourse.

Significant annual growth rate of Chinese military expenditures from the mid-1990s have improved its military capabilities. Force projection capabilities such as the navy, but also air and missile forces have benefitted from larger budgets. People's Liberation Army (PLA) is still far from being a global military power, but PLA Navy (PLAN) is beginning to be able to defend its maritime interests in the near seas (Yahuda, 2013, p. 447; Dian, 2015, p. 243). Before recent years, the main focus of the Chinese navy was to concentrate on preparing for scenarios in which Taiwan declares independence or foreign forces try to operate inside the first island chain, particularly around Taiwan (Shambaugh, 2013). According to its 2015 Military Strategy, China aims at broadening its military power to reach longer distances from the shores. The Military Strategy states that 'The traditional mentality that land outweighs the sea must be abandoned'. PLAN is now a 'limited blue water' navy that operates out to the second island chain, covering all of the South China Sea down to Indonesia and East Timor. There is still a long way to go before it can become a true blue water navy that could operate anywhere in the Pacific, not to mention to be able to operate anywhere in the world (Shambaugh, 2013, p. 289). Based on PLAN's current capabilities Walton and McGrath (2014, p.

127) assess that China aims to achieve ‘a regionally dominant and globally capable navy in the next decade’.

Some analysts see recent emphasis on the maritime sphere in China’s security strategy echoing Alfred Mahan’s classic ideas, according to which countries should build strong merchant fleets accompanied with a powerful navy supported by a chain of naval bases. (Holmes & Yoshihara, 2008.) China’s further-reaching security strategy certainly has elements that would fit to Mahanian thinking and this strategy is taking tangible shape. China opened a naval base in Djibouti in 2017, where US and Japan already had bases. Chinese officials often refer to the base as a ‘supply facility’ (*buji zhan*) rather than a ‘military base’ (*junshi jidi*) or ‘naval base’ (*haijun jidi*). China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, a flagship project of the Belt and Road initiative, enables China to access Gwadar port on Pakistan’s coast (CPEC, 2018). Gwadar provides China an alternative transport route avoiding the narrow Malacca Strait, which most Chinese cargo must pass. China currently has one aircraft carrier used for training and its first domestically produced one was completed in the spring of 2017. Furthermore, China is also reforming its legislation to better enable the placement of troops abroad. Counter-terrorism law in effect since 2016 permits the PLA to conduct anti-terrorism operations overseas (PRC State Council, 2016).

While Chinese official sources have for long been talking about supporting multipolarity (*duojihua*) in world politics, which indicates opposition to US hegemony, such statements rarely name Japan or the US explicitly. Foreign ministry spokespeople have emphasized that China and the US are not enemies, even when commenting on the 2017 US National Security Strategy, which refers to China as a threat (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2017a). During Xi Jinping’s reign, Chinese statements have, however, become more critical of the US alliance system arguing that it reflects ‘Cold War mentality’. The view according to which the United States and Japan try to ‘contain’ China has become more widespread, in other words, Washington attempts to prevent China from enhancing its stature. (Lieberthal & Wang, 2012.) The fact that Japanese defence

documents have described China as a security threat after 2004 and the US announced its rebalancing policies in 2011 contributed to spreading this view. The tone has changed from 2012–2013, when China used to promote ‘new type of great power relations’ (*xinxing daguo guanxi*) indicating that its rise will not lead to a major power conflict with the US (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013). Moreover, after Abe started his security reforms, US is seen as enabling Japan’s remilitarization and even pushing Japan towards becoming a more significant regional and global player (Liff, 2018a).

China’s security establishment has been more vocal and explicit in its criticism of Japan’s defence policies in comparison to the foreign policy sector. China Military Online, a webpage representing the PLA, publishes articles that clearly spell out Chinese protest on ‘Japan’s revisionism’. For example, in an article published in January 2018, Wang (2018) argues that Japan’s plan of turning its Izumo destroyer into a de facto aircraft carrier and purchasing F-35B fighters shows Japan’s military ambitions. Japan is by its own constitution forbidden to have aircraft carriers, which is now changing. The underlying reason for such changes, according to Wang, is that the Japanese government never completely renounced militarist thinking after World War II.

China’s Military Strategy 2015 explicitly mentions recent Japanese and American security policies as a reason for further development of the Chinese military. Furthermore, a widely shared perception particularly among defense and security establishments as well as in the Communist Party’s ideological organizations is that the US is China’s greatest national security threat (Lieberthal & Wang, 2012, p. 13). According to a recent commentary, Qi (2017, p. 6) from PLA National Defence University summarises that ‘most experts and scholars in China are inclined to believe that the US efforts to strengthen its security alliances and partnerships -- are mainly targeted at China.’ He continues that according to a widespread understanding, the US threat to China’s has drastically increased.

Partly as a form of geostrategic signalling to counter the US network of alliances and partly for practical reasons China has increased its strategic cooperation with Russia, which is not

without consequences for Japan and the US. Cooperation with Russia can be seen as the security side of China's 'pivot to the west', which manifests itself in the 'Silk Road Economic Belt', Xi Jinping's signature economic policy (Zhang, 2016). Although China and Russia do not have a military alliance, the two countries have increased and enhanced their political and security cooperation in recent years. They formed a strategic partnership in 1996, and the Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation signed in 2001 lifted the bilateral commitments on a new level in its Article 9: 'When a situation arises in which one of the contracting parties deems that peace is being threatened and undermined or its security interests are involved or when it is confronted with the threat of aggression, the contracting parties shall immediately hold contacts and consultations in order to eliminate such threats.' China's 2015 Military Strategy states that 'China's armed forces will further their exchanges and cooperation with the Russian military within the framework of the comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination between China and Russia, and foster a comprehensive, diverse and sustainable framework to promote military relations in more fields and at more levels.'

China and Russia have held joint military exercises frequently since 2005 Peace Mission, which was their first joint exercise involving land, sea and air units. Cooperation with Russia helps China to advance its maritime strategy, as PLAN has relatively little experience on operating further away from China's territorial waters. In their joint exercises, China and Russia have not shied away from politically sensitive areas: the 2014 exercises were held at the East China Sea where Sino-Japanese tensions were high at the time. The 2016 drills were held in the contested South China Sea, and the 2017 naval drills were held in the Baltic Sea in late July and in the Sea of Japan in September 2017 (TASS, 2017a). In September 2018, China took part in Russia's largest military exercise since the fall of the Soviet Union, Vostok 2018, which is last in line of signs of deepening security cooperation. According to Gabuev (2018), taking PLA on board when training in Siberia signifies a drastic shift of Russia's strategic thinking and should not be dismissed lightly. Since 2015, Russia



has also gradually agreed to sell China its most advanced military technologies and the two countries have been able to move towards joint production in limited areas. (Wezeman, 2017.) China and Russia have signed several research and development agreements on aero-engine technology, production of space components and satellite navigation systems. (Meick, 2017.)

### **Manifestations of complex interstate rivalry in the Asia-Pacific region**

The two developments of China's rise and deepening US-Japan security alliance shape various territorial disputes in which China is involved. China has a territorial dispute with Japan on Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea, but Japan is also involved in Taiwan and South China Sea issues. China disagrees with the US on Taiwan's position, and has freedom of navigation issues in the South and East China Seas. Finally, Japan and the US do not approve China's North Korea policy. All of these disputes encompass multiple rivalry types making them hard to resolve. Despite spatial aspects, a rivalry can still be predominantly positional as will be discussed below.

#### *Taiwan*

Taiwan issue represents spatial, ideological, and positional rivalry for China –all at once. National unification has been China's policy goal since the establishment of People's Republic of China. The fact that it is mentioned in the preamble of the Chinese constitution (1982) signifies its importance. In 2005 China ratified the Anti-Secession Law, which states that China shall use 'non-peaceful means' in case Taiwan declares independence. Sovereignty dispute is at the heart of spatial rivalry, but the spatial aspect includes also geostrategic factors, as Taiwan poses natural constraints on naval power projection from the mainland (Holmes & Yoshihara 2008, p. 54).

From ideological perspective, China views that the US interferes in China's internal affairs by supporting democratic Taiwan against socialist PRC. America's democracy promotion agenda, to which Taiwan belongs, is understood in China as designed to sabotage the Communist Party's leadership (Lieberthal & Wang, 2012). For China, maintaining its socialist political system and national unification are its core interests.

Taiwan signifies also positional struggle. If China could unify with Taiwan, it would finally get rid of its divided country syndrome, which would improve its status. In China's 2015 Military Strategy, unification with Taiwan was clearly linked with Xi Jinping regime's goal of national rejuvenation, which the regime aims to reach by 2049. The paper states that Taiwan's reunification with China is 'inevitable in the course of national rejuvenation'.

In the China-US great power rivalry, Taiwan issue remains one of the most difficult causes for contention because of the US support for Taiwan including military backing and repeated arms sales (Kan, 2013). Chinese foreign and defense ministries have regularly protested against US arms sales to Taiwan. What is more, the extent of US involvement in this issue seems to be strongly conditioned by the level of Sino-U.S. hostility. The renewal of Sino-US rivalry in the second half of the 1990s is linked in part with the continued US defence of Taiwan. (Rasler et al. 2013, pp. 172–173.)

Sharp deterioration of US relations with China increased tensions in the Taiwan Strait in the spring of 2018. In January, the US passed Taiwan Travel Act aiming to enhance high-level visits between the US and Taiwan. Beijing applied stronger language on Taiwan, stating that US travel bill risks war (Xinhua, 2018). Oral statements were backed with military showoffs when China's aircraft carrier Liaoning passed the Taiwan Strait accompanied with some 40 ships and submarines in March (Grossman, 2018). In April, the US agreed to sell Taiwan necessary technologies for building its own submarines (Zheng, 2018).

Although Taiwan issue is more related to China-US dyad, Japan plays a role in this question due to its historical ties with Taiwan and because the 2015 security guidelines would most likely require Japan's involvement in case of conflict escalation. While Japan officially sticks to the One China Principle agreed in the 1972 Joint Statement and leaves the issue for the US to handle, there have been concerned voices in Japan worrying that if China takes Taiwan, the Taiwan Strait would become China's internal waters and some of Japan's shipping lanes would shift under China's control. Japan's shipping lanes to Southeast Asia and the Middle East are strategically located near Taiwan. (Wan, 2015, p. 152.)

In the Chinese discussion, the Taiwan issue is often mentioned in the context of strategic competition between China and the US. Hu Bo (2014), estimates that in the forthcoming 10-20 years the US will have to accept China's dominance in its coastal waters, whereas China is unlikely to beat the US maritime areas outside the first island chain. Some academics have studied Japan's relations with Taiwan and raise their concern on closer connections between Abe government and political forces in Taiwan promoting Taiwan's independence after Tsai Ing-wen took power in 2016. Chen (2016) sees such activities as part of Japan's efforts to encircle China and coordinate policies of countries with conflicts with China. Zhu Zhongbo and Zhu Xiaoqi (2017) point out that strengthening of Japan's relations with Taiwan will have negative effects on Sino-Japanese relations and the development of cross-strait relations.

### *East China Sea*

Rivalry in Sino-Japanese relations is most clearly manifested in the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands dispute. Tensions over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands have erupted periodically since the late 1970s. Starting in the 1990's, Japan began to officially deny that there is a dispute despite mutual unwritten consensus formed in the 1970s to shelve the dispute (Drifte, 2013, pp. 19–22). Senkaku/Diaoyu islands present aspects of spatial and positional rivalry, and signs of the latter type have been in the increase in the

past few years. A deepening downward spiral in Sino-Japanese relations started in 2010 with the fishing boat collision incident near the disputed islands. Japan arrested the captain of a Chinese fishing boat, which had collided with Japanese Coast Guard vessels. This resulted in a direct official confrontation for the first time. (Nakano, 2016, pp. 174–175.)

In 2012, Japanese government decided to buy the islands to prevent Tokyo's right-wing Governor, Shintaro Ishihara from doing the same. The Chinese protested strongly, and China issued a white paper titled 'Diaoyu Dao, an Inherent Territory of China' (2012) which presents the Chinese position in the dispute and brings also out how China views the US involvement in this issue: 'The United States arbitrarily included Diaoyu Dao under its trusteeship in the 1950s and "returned" the "power of administration" over Diaoyu Dao to Japan in the 1970s. The backroom deals between the United States and Japan concerning Diaoyu Dao are acts of grave violation of China's territorial sovereignty.'

In November 2013, China established an air defence identification zone (ADIZ), which overlapped with the Japanese ADIZ and covered the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. While official sources do not explicitly link establishment of the Chinese ADIZ to Japan, some suggest a connection. Japan demanded China to revoke the ADIZ, and the US declared it would ignore it although US commercial flights were instructed to comply with it. However, control over the zone has not really been enforced. China has monitored the area, but not intervened in cases of entries to its ADIZ. (Swaine, 2014, p. 7.) Soon after the ADIZ dispute, Abe established a new National Security Council modeled according to White House example. The council published Japan's first National Security Strategy (2013), which discusses the Chinese ADIZ and other Chinese actions in the region considered as destabilizing by the Japanese.

US-Japan alliance affects China's spat over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and highlights the positional elements of rivalry. The US does not take a position in the dispute, but recognizes Japan's administrative control over the islands. Hillary Clinton confirmed in October 2010 that the

US-Japan Security Treaty covers the disputed islands –something Japanese politicians had asked the US to do publicly for a long time. (Fravel, 2015, p. 217.) During his trip to Asia in April 2014, President Barack Obama further confirmed this commitment. China protested both in words and in deeds. In May 2015, China and Russia organized their joint military exercise ‘Joint Sea 2014’ in the East China Sea after which the Chinese Ministry of Defence (2014) complained that Japan’s military airplanes had ‘seriously violated the international law -- by intruding into the airspace of China-Russia naval drill and making dangerous movements,’ which could have led to unintended clashes. Despite strengthened US-Japan alliance, China sent an armed coastguard vessel to the disputed area near the islands in December 2015 (Reuters, 2015). Moreover, Japan Coast Guard reports that Chinese maritime militia continuously penetrates areas near the Senkaku/ Diaoyu islands. In August 2016, 200 to 300 Chinese fishing vessels and 15 Chinese coast guard vessels traveled inside the maritime zone around the disputed islands. (Przystup, 2016.) Utilizing fishermen as part of such moves has become more organized over the years (Morris, 2017).

There have been some efforts to alleviate tensions. In 2013, China unified the management structure of maritime affairs to improve the poor management of maritime actors. The complicated structure was partly responsible for problems of coordination between different agencies, which led to incidents with vessels from other countries during the Hu Jintao leadership. The National Maritime Affairs Committee (*Guojia haiyang weiyuanhui*) was created and four other organizations dealing with maritime issues were merged as the State Oceanic Administration (SOA) in March 2013. In March 2018, National Maritime Affairs Committee was further merged with the newly formed Ministry of Natural Resources. In addition, Maritime Safety Administration continues to function and oversees maritime traffic safety and security and port operations among other duties.

Another concrete policy measure that has for long been in making is establishing a ‘hotline’ between Chinese and Japanese maritime actors. In November 2015, the defense ministers of Japan and China met first time since 2011 in Kuala Lumpur. Gen Nakatani and Chang Wanquan

agreed that defense exchanges and the early launch of a maritime communication mechanism would be important in preventing accidental clashes. Then once more, this issue was shelved. In January 2018, the two sides reached again a basic understanding on establishment of a hotline. (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018.) The agreement was finalized in May and came to effect in June 2018 (Harding & Feng, 2018).

China's academic discussion on the Senkaku/Diaoyu island dispute notes both Sino-Japanese and Sino-US positional rivalries. Lin (2014) sees the island dispute as part of wider Sino-Japanese positional rivalry with long historical roots. China used to be more powerful than Japan, but the roles were reversed. After 2010, China's GDP passed Japan's GDP and also other indicators point out that China has risen and should be regarded as the leader of East Asia. Based on the Cairo Declaration, Japan should return territories it has taken from China, but it refuses to do so and stubbornly holds on to its lost superiority, Lin argues. Writing in 2013, Jin and Wang identify a policy change in Japan's part of the dispute in 2010 when Japan started to deny the existence of dispute over Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. They note that the US support for Japan and its Asian pivot strategy were a major factor in explaining why Japan's policy changed. Hu Jiping (2014) also points out that the 2010 fishing boat incident marked a change in Japan's policy, as it insisted on prosecuting the Chinese captain according to Japanese domestic law. Change in Japan's position in the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute started gradually in the 1990s with the deepening alliance with the US.

### *South China Sea*

South China Sea illustrates complex interstate rivalry including spatial and positional elements. States in the South China Sea area dispute over territory and sovereignty of ocean areas, particularly over two island chains, the Paracels and the Spratlys, which are claimed in whole or in part by a number of countries. Sovereignty claims include exclusive rights to water space and resources. China's claims are most extensive. The South China Sea case is the first occasion in which China has officially

indicated its maritime territorial claim is based on the controversial nine-dashed line map (Chan & Li, 2015; PCA, 2016).

In addition to spatial rivalry, claims of militarization of the area increases tensions and brings forward positional rivalry between China and the US and its allies. To have basis for a claim to an exclusive economic zone, United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) requires a certain amount of landmass. China bases its claims to maritime rights on sovereignty of the Paracels and the Spratlys most features of which do not qualify as islands using the UNCLOS parameters. There is evidence that China has artificially enlarged maritime features under its control motivated by both meeting the criteria to have an exclusive economic zone and using these maritime features for military purposes. In February 2018, pictures from Chinese artificial islands were released showing final stages of building air and naval bases. (Mangosing, 2018.) The deployment of surface-to-air missiles to one of the Paracel Islands and radar facilities to the Spratly Islands have raised speculation that China might be trying to establish an Air Defence Identification Zone over the South China Sea, which would limit the freedom of overflight (Johnson, 2016). In the summer of 2016, China also stated that it has the right to establish an ADIZ to the South China Sea. Whether it decides to do so depends on its threat assessment, said Vice Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin at a press briefing at the Information Office of the State Council. (Xinhua, 2016.) In July 2018, China received the first set of S-400 Triumph missile defence systems, which it bought from Russia as Russia's first foreign customer (TASS, 2017b). Depending on where the S-400 will be placed, they could facilitate China's installation of an air defence identification zone in the South China Sea, improve China's position with regards to Taiwan or in East China Sea, where China has an ADIZ overlapping with that of Japan's (Meick, 2017, pp. 21–22).

Countries disputing Chinese claims have protested using various methods. In 2013, the Philippines initiated an arbitration case against China in the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in The Hague based on the UNCLOS, which published its arbitration award in July 2016 disputing

China's historical claims to the South China Sea (PCA, 2016). After the award, Vice Foreign Minister Zhang Yesui stated that 'China's territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests in the South China Sea will not be influenced by the award. China opposes and will not accept any proposition and action based on the award.' (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016a.) One factor that decreased the legitimacy of the Arbitration Tribunal in the Chinese eyes was the involvement of Shunji Yanai, the then President of the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea and 'a right-wing Japanese' in appointing arbitrators in the case (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016b). In other words, although China did not even recognize PCA's authority in this case, it still found it useful to try to decrease the legitimacy of the arbitration award by hinting towards politically motivated anti-China conspiracy.

Disputes with China have led Vietnam and the Philippines to strengthen their defence cooperation with the US and other parties such as India. Japan has not strayed out of these issues either. Japan's national defence white papers used to ignore South China Sea issue, but have since 2012 included a separate section on it. In May 2013, Japan announced provision of patrol vessels used by the its coast guards to the Philippines in support of Manila's struggle with China over a territory in the South China Sea. This move was confirmed at the 2014 Shangri-la dialogue in Singapore, when Prime Minister Abe promised also to support the Vietnamese coast guard. Japan has increased maritime affairs dialogues with the Philippines (2011 and 2013) and India (2013). (Fravel, 2015.) In 2015 Japan conducted its first joint search-and-rescue drills with the Philippines. In the same year, Japan and Vietnam reached an agreement to hold the first joint naval exercise between their respective navies, which took place in February 2016. In October 2017, Japan announced that it donates five aircrafts to the Philippines instead of leasing them so that the Philippines could better defend their interests in the South China Sea against Chinese claims. Change in Japanese legislation made it possible for Japan to donate used military equipment to third world countries. (Nikkei, 2017.)

While the US is not part of the sovereignty disputes, it claims that China is hindering freedom of navigation. The Trump administration has accelerated the pace of freedom of navigation



operations (FONOP) in the South China Sea since its first FONOP organized in May 2017. In total, the US conducted six FONOPs in 2017 involving areas claimed by China. One covered the East China Sea, one combined areas in both the East and South China Seas and the rest concentrated on the South China Sea. (US Department of Defence, 2017.)

China, Japan and the US have all exercised different forms of ‘commitment by presence’ strategies ranging from naval diplomacy to more emphasised military signalling such as deployment of Japan’s Izumo destroyer to South China Sea jointly with the US navy in the summer of 2017 (Patalano, 2018) and alone in July 2018 (Panda, 2018). China on the other hand displayed its naval might in March 2018 when its aircraft carrier Liaoning passed the Taiwan Strait and continued its journey to South China Sea accompanied with some 40 ships and submarines (Reuters, 2018).

Chinese official rhetoric emphasises that non-claimant powers, particularly the US but also others such as Japan, do not have the right to intervene in the South China Sea disputes. ‘Japan is not a country involved in the South China Sea issue, so it should not stir up enmity, sow discord, and jeopardize the regional peace and stability in the South China Sea.’ (PRC Ministry of Defence, 2015). US involvement is seen as a strategy to undermine China’s development.

Unsurprisingly, Chinese voices are very critical of US and Japanese involvement in the South China Sea issue. Meng (2017), director of Chinese Association for Japanese Studies, assesses new US-Japan security guidelines as Abe’s plan to demolish the ‘post-war regime’. He sees associated developments such as the attempt to change article nine in Japan’s constitution and using ODA to provide patrol ships to Southeast Asian countries to enable them to contain China’s maritime expansion, as worrisome. According to Meng, (2017, p. 107) ‘Japan’s current strategic adjustments are largely targeted at China’. Hu Jinping (2014) writes that Prime Minister Abe's diplomatic activities in the past years have been motivated largely by encouraging other countries to contain China and giving support to them in such efforts. Qi (2017, 6) warns that ‘the US encouragement to Japan and the Philippines to challenge China in the maritime territorial disputes in the South China

Sea could lead to direct or indirect confrontation between China and the US.’ Xu (2017, 34) assesses that the South China Sea dispute may have similar impact on Sino-US relations as the Taiwan Strait crisis in 1996.

#### *Korean Peninsula and North Korean nuclear issue*

From China’s perspective, great power political dynamics and the North Korean question are closely intertwined signifying positional rivalry, although China’s fear of having US troops next to its border in case of North Korean collapse has a spatial dimension. Based on the Treaty of Friendship, Co-operation and Mutual Assistance between the People’s Republic of China and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea signed in 1961, each country commits to come to the aid of the other if attacked. Since 2013 however, the Chinese foreign ministry’s spokesperson (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016b) has regularly reiterated that China’s relations with North Korea do not constitute an alliance, but rather a ‘normal bilateral relationship’.

The pace and intensity of North Korea’s military technological development surprised pundits and scholars worldwide. The widely-spread perception that China could do more to solve the North Korean nuclear issue, but refuses to act, affects its international reputation. Moreover, when the US and its allies respond to threats posed by North Korea, it undermines China’s regional security interests. Responding to the North Korean threat has led into deeper security cooperation between the US and its Asian allies. South Korea and the US started official negotiations on the US-developed Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) system in March 2016, which ended with an agreement to deploy it to South Korea in 2017. In March 2017, the US started building the THAAD missile defence system in South Korea ahead of schedule after North Korea launched four missiles into the Sea of Japan. Moon government took office in May 2017 and after some delays, all launchers became operational in July 2017 after North Korea’s second test of intercontinental ballistic missiles.

China's policy paper on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2017b) states that 'Forming Cold War style military alliances and building global and regional anti-ballistic missile systems will be detrimental to strategic stability and mutual trust, as well as to the development of an inclusive global and regional security framework [...] China firmly opposes the US and ROK deployment of the THAAD anti-ballistic missile system in the ROK, and strongly urges the US and the ROK to stop this process'. In mid-February 2016, China's foreign minister, Wang Yi, explained that the monitoring scope of THAAD's X-Band radar goes far beyond the defence needs of the Korean Peninsula and damages China's strategic security interests. It is possible that China will increase the amount of its nuclear arsenal after South Korea adopts THAAD, because THAAD decreases China's nuclear second-strike capability. (Panda, 2017.)

In addition to THAAD, trilateral coordination between Washington, Seoul and Tokyo has increased sidelining China. On 1<sup>st</sup> of December 2016 Japan and South Korea officially signed the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) to share information about DPRK's nuclear and missile development, which became the first military cooperation agreement between Japan and ROK since the Second World War. More generally, China is worried that Abe's rightist administration uses the North Korea issue to increase its military spending and change security guidelines. (Fan, 2017, p. 18.) This fear is not entirely unfounded. North Korean threat is often mentioned in the Japanese political discourse. Prime Minister Abe gave an interview in January 2018 to the Financial Review in which he stated: 'Now, looking at the security situation broadly, there are threats coming from North Korea. And there is an attempt to alter the present status in the East China Sea and the South China Sea. So I think the security situation is becoming tougher these days.'

As a countermove to THAAD negotiations and deepening US alliances in Asia, China started to hold joint consultations with Russia on Northeast Asian security issues in April 2015 (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2015). China-Russia cooperation over the North Korea question is one

example of their recently enhanced security relationship. According to the Chinese Foreign Ministry (2017c), the two sides will strengthen their coordination on the issue.

The ways in which North Korean issue jeopardizes Chinese security interests are clearly visible in the internal discussion on China's North Korea policy. Hao and He (2014) write that the US and its allies use North Korea to justify procurement and military policies, which go against China's national interests. China must respond to the DPRK nuclear issue, both to safeguard its own national security interests and to serve as a responsible great power in the international community. Zhu (2017) sees that the North Korean threat to the US and its allies has negative consequences for China in respect of developments such as THAAD. Moreover, helping North Korea has a negative effect on China's reputation, and hence the moral and strategic choice for China would be to stay on the right side of history and abandon North Korea.

## **Conclusion**

Unlike dispute-threshold based rivalry approach, which would terminate China's rivalry with Japan and the US based on their last military conflict, perception focused rivalry definition has enabled analysis of different rivalry types even in the absence of armed conflict. The broad range of cases described in this article using complex interstate rivalry framework show that different types of rivalry can be identified in the contemporary era and signs of positional rivalry are in the increase also in cases which were originally based on spatial rivalry elements.

The cases also demonstrate that increasing power asymmetry between China and Japan has led China to perceive Japan most in the context of US-Japan alliance and China-US major power rivalry. Deepening US-Japan alliance has naturally contributed to creating such a lens. Regarding the Taiwan issue, in which China considers the US involvement as more significant than Japan's due to

US security guarantees, Japan's role has become more important after the new security guidelines. In East China Sea, Sino-Japanese rivalry is prominent, but US policy changes have increased its role and positional rivalry. In the South China Sea, Japan started its security cooperation with other actors before major US involvement, which became more significant after the FONOPs started in 2017. In North Korean nuclear issue US has been and remained the most prominent actor in Chinese perspective.

Although Japan naturally matters for China's security interests, recent developments both on the level of rhetoric and actual policymaking indicate that China's focus is on the major power level, which concentrates on the China-US power dynamics rather than China's relations with Japan. As discussed earlier, China's Security Strategy links Japan's security policies with those of the US. A relatively new feature in these dynamics is Russian involvement and coordination with China on Asian security issues.

What will happen next depends on multiple factors. To be sure, a complex rivalry mixing different rivalry types as discussed above, is harder to solve than two-party rivalry build on only one rivalry type. While changes in the US-Japan alliance dynamics will affect Japan's rivalry with China, the situation is not set in stone. As year 2018 marked the 40th anniversary of signing Peace and Friendship Treaty between China and Japan, Abe met Xi in Beijing where the two countries held the first full-scale China-Japan summit in seven years. Abe and Chinese premier Li Kejiang signed significant business deals and cooperation agreements (Wong, 2018). While being ambivalent on China's Belt and Road Initiative overall, Japan has agreed to take part in it to allow its multinationals to benefit from Chinese infrastructure projects (Jennings, 2018). Jointly with the establishment of maritime communication mechanism to prevent unintended clashes, the above manifest decreased tensions.

Sino-Japanese relations may have improved because of Trump's foreign policy. Trade frictions with the US may have led China to mute its criticism on Japanese defence policies at least

during the latter half of 2018. Trump's treatment of Japan has not always manifested US commitment to and respect of its allies. Thus, Japan has partly sought to diversify its security partners and searched for better relations with China. Although the China-Japan-US complex interstate rivalry consisting of spatial, positional and ideological elements is certainly hard to resolve, and the China-US positional rivalry is not likely to change for the better any time soon, there are a few weak positive signs on the Sino-Japanese dyad indicating that rivalry intensity has decreased slightly at least temporarily.

### **Acknowledgements**

The author would like to thank Kai Schulze and Verena Blechinger-Talcott for organizing workshops in which the authors could work on this special issue, as well as Einstein Foundation for funding the workshops. Many thanks to the anonymous reviewers for their professional and detailed comments.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### **Funding**

This work was supported by Kone Foundation.

### **Notes on contributor**

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