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'An Unlikely Trusting Relationship? The United States and Japan since 1945'

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The U.S.-Japanese security relationship since 1945 has provided a fertile ground for the study of international politics. Constructivists have used it to demonstrate the validity of their claims that security is ultimately dependent on cultural norms and identity.² Realists, on the other hand, maintain that the relationship is best understood in terms of alliance politics where one state (Japan) passes the costs of its own defence onto its ally (the United States). In the realist vocabulary, the relationship is a case of buck-passing.³ There are clearly good reasons for such diverse theoretical engagement with the case. For constructivists, it offers an example of a possible change in identity and the ensuing shift in foreign and security policy. In the period after the World War II, Japanese militarism gave way to a different identify of a civilian power, so the argument goes. It is an appealing prospect, because the change came in what could be considered an exceptional case of two states which fought an existential conflict. For realists, the case represents an anomaly that needs to be explained. Why would a powerful state like Japan spend significantly less on its defense and remain reliant on another state? Why would it behave in this way given that it found itself in confrontation with the Soviet Union, was in a close geographical proximity to the Korean War and remains within the range of North Korean missiles, and has seen the rise of the communist China. The only possible explanation for realists is to analyze the behaviour as buck-passing or free-riding, which consists of doing as little as is necessary for one's own defense and shifting as much of the defensive burden as possible onto others.⁴

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² Thomas U. Berger, 'From Sword to Chrysanthemum: Japan's Culture of Anti-militarism,' *International Security*, Vol. 17, No. 4, 1993, pp. 119-150; Peter J. Katzenstein, *Cultural Norms and National Security: Police and Military in Postwar Japan* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), see especially pp. TK; Sun-Ki Chai, 'Entrenching the Yoshida Defense Doctrine: Three Techniques of Institutionalization,' *International Organization*, Vol. 51, No. 3, 1997, pp. 389-412.

³ Jennifer M. Lind, 'Pacifism or Passing the Buck? Testing Theories of Japanese Security Policy,' *International Security*, Vol. 29, No. 1, 2004, pp. 92-121.

⁴ Thomas J. Christensen and Jack Snyder, 'Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks: Predicting Alliance Patterns in Multipolarity,' *International Organization*, Vol. 44, No. 2, 1990, pp. 137-168.

Underlying both approaches are two crucial puzzles. First, why has Japan not developed its own nuclear deterrent? The refusal to do so is surprising because all the other potential competitors in the region possess nuclear weapons. Moreover, regional dynamics have long been seen as the key to nuclear proliferation. The second puzzle is more future-oriented. Will Japan begin to spend more on its defense and conduct a more independent and, as a result more robust, foreign and security policy? Once again, it is primarily the regional situation which gives rise to this puzzle. There are, of course, policy implications for the United States connected with this question, hence it is of obvious interest to American strategic planners and policy-makers.

Answers to these two puzzles invariably differ depending on the theoretical approach. For constructivists, the absence of the nuclear deterrent is explained by the culture of anti-militarism, which has been shaped not only by the repudiation of previous cultural norms and identity, but also, crucially, by the experience of being the only country against which nuclear weapons have ever been used in actual combat. In terms of the second question, the relatively low defense spending will continue so long as these norms remain robust in the Japanese society. On the contrary, realists seek the answer to the first question in the presence of the American nuclear umbrella which has been spread over Japan formally since 1951 and informally even before then. Thus while they might even admit the existence of anti-militarist norms, particularly with regard to nuclear weapons, their emergence came as a result of the US security guarantee. As for the future defense spending, realists contend that it is already substantive, though Japan does not possess some offensive weapons systems. Moreover, defense spending could readily be increased if the US willingness or ability to provide protection were to decline or if additional or even more explicit threats arose in Japan's immediate neighborhood.

As is typically the case, both explanations have their strong and weak points. Constructivists will struggle with explaining a defense budget which, in terms of the GDP share, is low compared to similarly powerful states, but very substantial in absolute terms. In addition, they will have a hard time answering the question why it is permissible under the supposedly robust anti-militarist norms in general, and the anti-nuclear one in particular, to rely on another state's nuclear deterrent. Realists, on the other hand, might be able to describe the Japanese behaviour as buck-passing, but that is hardly an explanation for the adoption of this policy. The question why a state in as volatile a region as North-East Asia would want to put itself into a position of such dependence remains unanswered. This leads some analysts to wonder whether Japan is neglecting its own security because it has been blinded by the strength of its ties to the United States. In the words of Peter Liberman, 'overreliance

is possible because civilian powers' antimilitarism could lead them to overestimate allied loyalty, to underestimate rising threats, and to balance inadequately until the danger levels already are too high.⁵ Depending on the United States and passing the buck might have made sense in the decades when Japan was recovering from the World War II, but not after it became a major economic powerhouse from the 1970s onwards.

The partiality of each explanation has led two observers to call for analytical eclecticism when it comes to explaining the U.S.-Japanese security relationship.⁶ Although the case of analytical eclecticism is intuitively appealing, it faces a fundamental problem. Both approaches are underpinned by fundamentally different, and incompatible, understandings of how the two states relate to each other. To explain the dynamics of the relationship, constructivists only look inside one of the states, namely Japan. While this can tell us much about Japanese policy and attitudes, it seems unwarranted to think that examining one side can be a good guide to explaining and understanding a relationship. Normatively grounded relationships do not depend on one side only and cannot be a one-way street. For an approach that stresses the key role of social interaction, constructivist explanations of the U.S.-Japanese security relationship display a curious lack of intersubjectivity. Paradoxically, realists capture the relational dynamic of the security alliance better. Taking a socially impoverished view of actors as rational power-maximizers who want to protect their own interests gives them at least a framework that can capture both sides of the relationship. In their approach, the two states relate to each other in a series of strategic interactions the outcome of which is determined by the pay-off structure. The relationship will continue only so long as it is beneficial to both sides.

The question of how the two states relate to each other, that is what kind of relationship is this, is therefore of crucial importance in analyzing the U.S.-Japanese security alliance. In particular, our article explores whether the relationship could serve as an example of a trusting relationship in international politics. Based on our novel conceptualization of trusting relationships, we argue that the absence of some and the removal of other forms of hedging strategies suggest the development of a trusting relationship between the two countries over an extended period of time. There is nothing inevitable or permanent about this trusting relationship. Such relationships may dissolve. What our

⁵ See Peter Liberman, 'Ties That Bind: Will Germany and Japan Rely Too Much on the United States?', *Security Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 2, p. 134 [pp. 98-138].

⁶ Peter J. Katzenstein and Nobuo Okawara, 'Japan, Asian-Pacific Security, and the Case for Analytical Eclecticism,' *International Security*, Vol. 26, No. 3, 2001-2002, pp. 153-185.

approach allows us to do, however, is to spot the potential signs of deterioration. In this way, our article contributes to the study of trust at the international level, a research agenda which has been gaining prominence in International Relations over the last decade or so.⁷

There are at least three good reasons why examine this relationship as trusting. First, it is a hard case for any theoretical approach which wants to argue that trusting relationships at the international level are possible. This is primarily so because at the beginning of the relationship there was open enmity and an existential military conflict. Second, there has been no shortage of tensions between the two countries in their economic relations. The Americans, in particular, have long accused Japan of unfair trade practices. Third, the case involves two states which could both adopt a wide range of hedging strategies. It is thus not an instance of a relationship where one side would be so weak as to have no other options but to rely on the other.

In the rest of our presentation, we will do three things. First, we introduce our analytical framework. Second, we briefly apply this framework to the U.S.-Japanese relationship. Finally, we raise and refute some possible counter-arguments to our interpretation of the relationship.

Trusting relationships in international politics: no need to hedge

Any approach that allows for the possibility of trust playing a role at the international level must first answer the following question: How can trusting relationships be identified in international politics? Our approach begins with the simple assumption. Under pressure from the perpetual risk and uncertainty generated by the anarchic realm in which states find themselves, they will engage in hedging strategies. Hedging in this sense is a way of reducing one's dependence on and vulnerability to others. Within anarchy, hedging strategies allow states to self-insure against possible defection or opportunism by other states, allowing one to act more securely in a risky environment because the possible 'worse-case' outcomes are both anticipated and accounted for.⁸ A standard example of a hedge in a military alliance could be the decision by one state to keep more forces than are necessary should their partner fail to come to their aid when it is needed.⁹

Trust functions in the same way as a hedge: it cognitively reduces or eliminates the residual risk and uncertainty. The two, however, are antithetical. Hedging stresses self-reliance and hinders engaging in

⁷ Kydd, Hoffman, Rathbun, Larson, Booth and Wheeler, Wheeler

⁸ Meyerson, Weick et al., 1996: 187.

⁹ Lake, 1996: 15.

cooperative behaviour. By creating a sense of security, it may even lead to excessive risk-taking. Crucially, hedging shifts focus on what might go wrong and perpetuates worse-case scenario thinking. In sum, although hedging avoids the worst outcome and therein lowers the risk, it comes with a cost that lowers the expected value of the position and potentially promotes structural logics with negative consequences.

On the contrary, the presence of a trusting relationship should reduce, or even eliminate, the need to hedge. Actors will simply behave in a manner suggesting that there is no risk of defection, or at least significantly less than might otherwise be expected. Put simply, we argue that should hedging exist in a relationship, it does not suggest a trusting relationship. On the other hand, trusting relationships should be marked by a large reduction or even elimination of hedging.

Hedging cognitively lowers risk because it is assumed to diminish risk in reality, whereas trust cognitively reduces risk independent of a reduction of the 'real' risk. However, whereas hedging decreases risk through lowering the expected value of the outcome and potentially leads to problematic behavioural outcomes, trust lowers risk without a similar trade-off. Fundamentally, this is the primary reason why trusting relationships, where possible, are to be valued.

To come back to our original question of identifying a trusting relationship at the international level, the answer is now fairly straightforward. We can determine the existence of a trusting relationship by looking at changes in hedging behaviour across time. This allows the analyst to decide whether there is sufficient evidence in the long-term relationship to claim that it is trusting. It is only through examining long-term behaviour that we can differentiate between a trusting relationship and a potential short-term lack of hedging that might be used as a signalling device. However, in order to do so, an analyst needs to make two judgements on the situation.

First, hedging, though material, cannot be understood outside of the social meaning of the hedge itself. The analysis must take into consideration the historical understandings of the action to comprehend the hedge –sacrificing an animal to the gods to increase the likelihood of victory in battle might be considered a hedge even if the analyst believes the hedge to be useless from their perspective. Second, taking into account the geographic and historical situatedness of the states in question, an analyst must make an assessment whether the state had an adequate hedge.

Our approach presupposes that hedging will only occur if states are risk averse, a presupposition that we argue is likely, though not necessarily universal. The absence or presence of hedging must be assessed in the light of the state being able to hedge. There cannot be insurmountable

material constraints to the prospective hedging action. In addition, there needs to be some consideration to whether the presence or absence of a hedge was caused by other factors, and whether the significance of these factors is great enough to influence the assessment.

What are the benefits of our approach? First, it escapes the rational choice framework and does not conflate cooperation and trust. Second, because there is an emphasis on the material nature of the hedge, it is not entirely dependent on discursive statements that can suffer from strategic language. Third, it operationalizes the habitual nature of trust. Finally, it provides a framework through which the presence of a trusting relationship can be confirmed or refuted given the limits to epistemology in the social sciences. Importantly, using our approach means that it is possible to argue given empirical evidence, as the realists do, that trusting relationships do not exist, potentially demonstrating the irrelevance as much as relevance of trust in International Relations.

U.S.-Japanese alliance as a trusting relationship

How does our approach fare when applied to the U.S.-Japanese alliance relationship? There is evidence that hedging strategies, though available to both sides, have over time been removed or not adopted at all. This, we argue, is a better indicator of a developing trusting relationship in the security sphere than numerous instances of verbal expressions of trust. Similarly, because of frequent contestation in the economic sphere, the relationship cannot be characterized as trusting simply on the basis of the two countries' ongoing cooperation.

Following the post-World War II occupation, the United States incrementally relinquished an unprecedented degree of control over Japan. In doing so, it moved away from the view, frequently articulated in the early postwar years, that Japan could not be trusted as an ally unless there was a sizeable American contingent present in the country.¹⁰ While the United States clearly maintained sufficient safety net in the form of its own overall military capability to counter any potential U-turns in the Japanese foreign and security policy, it was gradually doing away with hedging strategies. Importantly, the U.S. withdrawals were typically accompanied by calls for greater Japanese military spending. In the absence of a trusting relationship between the two states such moves would hardly have made sense from the U.S. point of view.

Although the declining hedge might have given rise to worries on both sides of the relationship (the Japanese might have questioned the firmness of the American commitment, whereas the Americans could

¹⁰ Schaller, 1997: 28-30.

have had concerns about Japan's reliability as an ally), instead it enabled a virtuous circle of trust unlocking possibilities in the relationship which would have remained closed absent the presence of trust on both sides.¹¹ The corrosive effects of distrust were captured by one Japanese editorial in the early 1970s: 'What we fear the most is the possibility of distrust in the United States giving rise to narrow-minded nationalism in Japan and its leading to the short-range reaction of favouring nuclear armament.'¹²

In mirror reflection of the U.S. relinquishing its hedging strategies, there were a number of Japanese policies during the Cold War that disregarded or dismantled hedging in the security relationship. Faced with the Soviet, Chinese, and to a lesser degree North Korean threats, Japan resisted increasing its spending on conventional forces despite the U.S. prodding. Military spending as a ratio of the GDP remained three to four times below that of other comparable states.¹³ Japan also rejected the possibility of developing its own nuclear deterrent. In effect, it was showing trust in the alliance arrangement even with occasional U.S. suggestions that Japan might consider obtaining its own nuclear hedge.¹⁴ This was reaffirmed following the end of the Cold War when a secret Japanese government report concluded that as a result of acquiring nuclear weapons 'the reliability of the U.S. nuclear umbrella would be undermined and Japan would be viewed as distrustful of its military alliance with the United States.'¹⁵ There could not be a clearer recognition of the negative impact that a hedging strategy could have on a trusting relationship.

Although the Japanese behaviour could be characterized as free-riding, and indeed had been derided as such especially in the U.S. Congress, we argue that the unwillingness to adopt hedging strategies is better understood as a manifestation of a developing trusting relationship. After all, assuming that states are risk-averse, there would be little point to free ride or pass the buck if one had reasonable expectations that things could turn out poorly through doing so.

To conclude, the U.S.-Japanese relationship provides a good illustration of our argument about the development of a trusting relationship as a long-term historical process in which hedging strategies are continuously discarded and/or not adopted. While the negotiation and approval of the

¹¹ Mollering on the wheel/circle of trust.

¹² Cited in John K. Emmerson and Leonard A. Humphreys, *Will Japan Rearm? A Study in Attitudes* (Washington, D.C.: AEI-Hoover Institution, 1973), p. 80.

¹³ Chai, 1997: 390.

¹⁴ Schaller, 2010: 173.

¹⁵ Cited in Kurt M. Campbell and Tsuyoshi Sunohara, 'Japan: Thinking the Unthinkable,' in Kurt M. Campbell, Robert J. Einhorn and Mitchell B. Reiss (eds.) *The Nuclear Tipping Point: Why States Reconsider Their Nuclear Choices* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2004), p. 227 [pp. 218-253].

1960 Security Treaty were met with large public protests (immediately after Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi forced the Treaty through the Diet in June 1960, he handed in his resignation), by 1970, when it came up for renewal, it enjoyed much greater public recognition. Eventually, it became a habitually accepted point of reference in the mutual relationship. What this suggests is that the existence of a trusting relationship is not a binary proposition. It is impossible to say that at one particular point the U.S.-Japanese relationship became trusting. What our approach allows us to do, however, is to focus on hedging strategies or the absence thereof as behavioural manifestations of trust over a longer period of time.

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