Geopolynomics and Japan: Asia-Pacific Policy Prescriptions

Brendan M. Howe

Abstract: *Characterized as everything from a great power to a reactive state, Japan faces many diplomatic challenges. Nevertheless, Japan has become increasingly active on the international stage, reflecting a subtle shift from "exclusive bilateralism to modest multilateralism" (Mulgan 2008). Yet, especially in the Asia-Pacific, contemporary multilateralism is itself challenged geopolitically, geoeconomically, and geoculturally. In this strategic context, and particularly in response to great power contestation, "minilaterals" have proliferated, with Japan keen to join. Although current regional minilaterals are critiqued as creating as many problems as they resolve, restricting the agenda-setting of second-tier powers like Japan, a geopolynomic perspective illustrates how alternative policy prescriptions for leadership include non-traditional security minilaterals and regional international commissions.*

Image 1: Japan's Geopolynomic Neighborhood [Source: Wikimedia Commons]

Geopolynomics

Geopolynomic is a term used to aggregate geostrategic, geopolitical, geoeconomic, geohistorical, and geocultural considerations of the distribution of power and influence (Howe 2005). Spillover between these considerations complicate diplomatic policymaking but also open areas of niche diplomatic advantage for state actors. By focusing on non-state-centric, non-traditional, yet still geographically and geoculturally sensitive policymaking, a second-tier power can overcome the constraints of its geostrategic operating environment, as well as

1

the challenges facing maxilateral interpretations of multilateralism. A geopolynomic emphasis, therefore, requires a refocusing of analysis and policy prescription considering multiple channels of power while also recognizing structural challenges to using that power. Existing geostrategic perspectives are either overly pessimistic about the prospects for impact by second-tier powers, or emphasize traditional security minilateralism. Maxilateralism, with its emphasis on universality of membership and norms, is doomed to fail due to geostrategic considerations and cultural relativism. This essay considers the limitations of traditional geostrategic analyses of Japan and its operating environment, before turning to geopolynomic-based policy prescriptions for Japan to get the most bang for its diplomatic buck based on its limited resources, the constraints on its use of those resources, and its strategic considerations.

Japan's Strategic Operating Environment

Debates about the traditional East Asian geostrategic operating environment within which Japan is situated have revolved primarily around two dominant perspectives: a neorealist "back to the future" vision whereby the end of the Cold War has released previously suppressed indigenous conflicts, and a neoliberal view whereby complex interdependence has curtailed military rivalry between industrialized states (Buzan and Segal 1994: 3). The continued regional dominance of the neorealist-neoliberal duopoly in theory and practice, despite the rise of competing theoretical perspectives, has been a function of the ongoing primacy of the state in both domestic and international governance in East Asia, leading to the region being labeled the most Westphalian in the world (Acharya 2003: 9). Not only are states considered the main referent object of security, but also security

threats are identified from the perspective of the state (Nishikawa 2009).

Related to this has been the ongoing hegemony of great state powers (both global and regional). The region lacks a Western-style security international organization (IO) along the lines of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) which evolved into the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The ASEAN Regional Forum could be considered something of a regional equivalent, but it faces serious challenges in its evolution into a fully-fledged security IO, and currently remains something of a talking shop. Also, while the ASEAN Defense Ministerial Meeting (ADMM) was first convened in 2006 and the ADMM Plus in 2010, which included Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, and the US, such multilateral groupings are structured differently from Western conceptualizations of such and are too broad in terms of membership to be considered strictly regional entities (Howe 2021, 508). Instead, much of the security architecture in Asia is a product of the San Francisco hub-and-spokes system of bilateral security alliances with the US. As such, regional peace and security are more dependent upon great power leadership and cooperation than perhaps anywhere else. Yet such leadership and cooperation has hitherto been in short supply.

Hence, "conventional wisdom on East Asia's prospects carries more pessimism than optimism" (Mahhubani 1995: 102). Richard Betts (1995: 40) called the region "an ample pool of festering grievances, with more potential for generating conflict than during the Cold War, when bipolarity helped stifle the escalation of parochial disputes." Aaron Friedberg (1993–94: 107) considered Asia likely to become a "cockpit of great power conflict," and Victor Cha (2012) contends the region remains "ripe for rivalry." Thus, East Asia has been considered among the most

dangerous and insecure regions, containing colonial and Cold War legacies and several potential flashpoints (Calder and Ye 2010). It is a region deeply affected by conflict. Colonial, ideological, and national wars have left their scars and legacies, including disputed borders and divided loyalties. It is also considered a volatile region, with a dangerous and unpredictable nature, and a tradition of mutual hostility between many of the actors. From the perspective of this essay, such analyses highlight the need for more cooperative initiatives and the potential role for a prominent player in the region like Japan.

Japan's Power Resources

Despite the wide variety of definitions and usage, most notions of power boil down to references to "allocation of resources," "ability to use these resources," and the "strategic character" of power, meaning its use not only against inertia, but also opposing wills. "This tripartite approach to power can be restated using a simple taxonomy that describes power as 'resources,' as 'strategies,' and as 'outcomes'" (Tellis et al. 2000: 13–14). This section addresses the first two of these sets of references, the following section addresses the strategic character of power. The problems here break down into delimitation, or which variables to use, aggregation, or how to combine them, and the salience of variables over time. Most traditional perspectives include measurements of industrial/economic capability or development, military might, land area, and population.

Japan long possessed the resources of a great power. Even after defeat in World War II, wholescale destruction, and occupation, Japan quickly re-emerged based on its "economic miracle" raising it up to be the world's second largest economy (although substantially based upon its preferential position within the US-led San Francisco system, and later passed by China). The rise of China, the ongoing threat of North Korea, and pressure from the US to move from mere "checkbook diplomacy" to shouldering more of the regional defense burden have contributed to a remarkable renaissance of Japanese military might. Japan has the ninth largest military budget in the world at US$54.1 billion, with some of the most advanced military technology in the world making it the fifth most powerful military in the world after the great powers of the US, Russia, and China, and the rising power, India (Hecht 2022). Yet, in terms of land area, Japan is only in the middle of the geopolitical pack, and with the demographic timebomb of a dramatically ageing and shrinking population, Japan's future resource-base is unlikely to reach great power levels. Measuring power by these terms, the country will not match the power potential of the existing great powers (the US, China, and Russia), and may even be outstripped by rising powers such as India and Brazil.

Further, Japan's strategies and its ability to use its traditional power resources have been severely impacted by internal and external constraints. Internally, Japanese policymaking is significantly constrained by "Article Nine" of its so-called "Pacifist Constitution," imposed on it by the victorious Allied powers after World War II, which forbids the country from waging war or maintaining an army. Although this definition has long been stretched by interpretations that allow "self-defense forces" and acts of "self-defense," importantly, an aversion to militarism has significantly been internalized by the domestic body politic. Just as impactful, if not more so, has been the lack of political will to be more assertive and to provide global leadership. Externally, such is the dependence upon the US geostrategic platform, that Japan has been described as occupying the unique position of having the power potential of a mid-range European state, yet the political leverage of much smaller and weaker reactive states (Calder 1988: 518–528). Kent Calder, the originator of the "reactive

state" hypothesis, claimed that his major contentions have weathered the test of time, noting that Japan has not, despite a huge economy, emerged as an effective "rule-maker" in international affairs (Calder 2005: 1–3).

Despite its historic economic strength, Japan has also faced challenges due to its position in the global economy. The 1997 Asian financial crisis impacted Japan's economy, as well as that of the wider region, but perhaps greater damage was done to its international prestige (the day-to-day currency of diplomacy) by its delayed response. Furthermore, Japan's attempt to provide leadership with an Asian Monetary Fund was torpedoed by the US, demonstrating reactivity even in geoeconomic terms. A decade later, the global financial crisis of 2007-2008, despite having its roots in the West, hit Japan hard. Japan was particularly vulnerable because of the structural changes that had taken place over the preceding decade in its trade and industrial structures, leaving Japanese output much more responsive to shocks in the advanced markets of the US and Western Europe (Kawai and Takagi 2009: 1–2). As a country dependent on exports, Japan was also hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic and the global shrinkage of trade, triggering a major recession. Furthermore, its supply-chain vulnerabilities were exposed when forced to join with the US in its trade war with China.

Hence, the 2022 National Security Strategy (NSS) noting Japan's security challenges included "issues that have not necessarily been recognized as security targets in the past, such as weak supply chains, increasing threats to critical infrastructure, and the struggle for leadership over advanced technologies" (Suzuki 2024: 41). Yet, Japan has long taken a polynomic perspective to security, from the comprehensive security paradigm of the 1970s and 1980s, through human security initiatives pursued in response to the Asian Financial Crisis, to the contemporary debate embodied in the 2022 NSS and the Economic Security

Promotion Act of the same year.

The Character of Power – From Geostrategic to Geopolynomic

The strategic character of power, in terms of definitions and operationability, has experienced profound changes, some of which have opened the door to greater Japanese geopolynomic leadership. These are related to the expansion of security conceptualizations along the X-axis of issues and the Y-axis of referent object. Japanese policy evolution in response to the changing nature of the strategic operating environment, has manifested in three policy directions. First, traditional security "normalization," second, regional multilateralism, and third, non-traditional security (NTS) and human security initiatives.

Traditional security concerns have significantly been addressed under what John Nillson-Wright (2017: 6) has termed "Japan's incremental security 'normalization'." Initially, Japan's security build-up was focused on the US alliance and becoming a more reliable and worthy partner. The "normalization" of Japan's security role under Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi (2001–2006) involved overseas deployment of Japanese troops for the first time since World War II when they were sent in a supporting role to the US-led "War on Terror" operations in Afghanistan and Iraq—a major step up from the checkbook diplomacy operated by Tokyo in support of its allies during the 1990–1991 Gulf War. This changed under Koizumi's successor, Shinzo Abe (2006–2007 and 2012–2020), to address the issue of regional security multilateralism. Indeed, there has been a subtle shift from "exclusive bilateralism to modest multilateralism" in Japan's strategic engagement (Mulgan 2008). Whereas the Koizumi administration gave sole priority to the US, "the Abe administration adopted a dual-

track approach, combining enhanced bilateralism with enhanced regionalism" (Mulgan, 2008, 53).

Importantly, therefore, Japan has been shifting its geopolynomic engagement away from a sole emphasis on traditional power hierarchies of geostrategy, towards both multilateralism and regionalism. And it is in the NTS and human security arena in which Japan has been most proactive and had the greatest international impact, including in geoeconomic and geocultural terms (Howe 2010). Human security was introduced into the lexicon of Japanese foreign policy by Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi in 1998, after the Asian financial crisis. For him it encompassed "a comprehensive view of all threats to human survival, life and dignity" and one of the three areas on which Asia should focus for a "century of peace and prosperity" (Obuchi 1998). Given internal and external structural constraints on the use of force, Japan has consistently tried to pursue its foreign policy through economic means, such as ODA and foreign direct investment and loans, rather than by military means. Indeed, these anti-military, pro-economic norms have become characteristic of Japanese foreign and security policy (Berger 1993: 119–150). And it has traversed this path in the pursuit of human security objectives as well.

The speeches in which Prime Minister Obuchi made the statements quoted above laid the foundation for human security as a main pillar of Japan's foreign policy agenda, and for its mainstreaming into Japanese ODA. Obuchi also contributed 500 million yen (USD 4.2 million) for the establishment of the human security fund under the UN, (later renamed the United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security, UNTFHS), as an expression of Japan's commitment to promoting the paradigm and supporting related projects by UN agencies. The Commission on Human Security (CHS) was established in 2000 through an initiative of the Government of Japan and in response to the UN Secretary General's call at the 2000 Millennium Summit for a world free from want and free from fear. Japan remains by far the largest supporter of human security at the UN.

Given this emphasis on multilateralism and human-centered policymaking, combined with the strategic constraints of its operating environment, Yoshihide Soeya (2012) has categorized Japan as a middle power. A middle power can be described in hierarchical terms as a state lacking the compulsory resources of great powers to coerce others, but is nevertheless, potentially system-affecting through its middling access to resources (Vom Hau et al. 2012). Meanwhile, behavioral studies of "middlepowermanship," confer status as a middle power in accordance with diplomatic behaviour rather than size, focusing on global issue areas like human rights (or in Japan's case human security), the environment and other NTS issues, with middle power states defined as the staunchest multilateralists (Rudderham 2008). Japan has systematically engaged with a wide range of multilateral institutions, including at the global level (e.g., the UN (especially components addressing NTS issues), the World Bank, the IMF, and the UNDP), and at the regional level (e.g., ESCAP, the ADB, and ASEAN).

Challenges to Multilateralism and Minilateralism

The rising prominence of alternative forms of collective action as complements to, and often substitutes for, traditional intergovernmental cooperation is the defining feature of twenty-first century multilateralism (Patrick 2015: 115). International commissions are prominent among these forms of collective action. They are *ad hoc* transnational investigative mechanisms aimed at transforming "the assumptions and staid thinking that plague long-standing problems in international relations" (Robertson 2020). Examples include

the Independent Commission for International Developmental Issues, the Independent Commission on Disarmament and Security Issues, the World Commission on Environment and Development, the World Commission on Environment and Development, the Commission on Global Governance, the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, and so on.

Yet norm entrepreneurs of middling capacity like Japan, have found their "maxilateral" approach to global governance foundering on the harsh geostrategic realities of great power contestation, as well as regional epistemological divergence. The unilateralism of US President George W. Bush represented an early manifestation of this challenge, which reached a peak under the Donald Trump administration from which multilateralism may never recover. Furthermore, rivalry between the great powers, the US, China, and Russia, has reached such an intensity that it is seen as a new Cold War. The need for effective multi-country collaboration has soared, but at the same time multilateral talks have inevitably failed (Naím 2009). Instead, actors have resorted to "minilateralism," which brings together the smallest possible number of countries needed (usually seen as three to five) to have the largest possible impact on solving a particular problem (ibid). These trends are particularly prominent in East Asia, a region deeply affected by conflict, but also with a tradition of relativism regarding global norms, resulting in a resistance to maxilaterism. Hence, countries like Japan have increasingly embraced "minilateral" groupings.

Mulgan (2008, 53) points to the 2007 Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation with Australia as both a starting point for, and an important element of Japan's more complex strategic policymaking which also included the promotion of "concepts of security trilateralism (Japan-India-US/Japan-Australia-US) and quadrilateralism (Japan-US-Australia-India),

backed by the overt rhetoric of 'shared values' and references to 'strategic partnerships' based on common security interest." Japan originated the concept of a "free and open Indo-Pacific," inaugurated the first iteration of the Quad in 2007 and cooperated with the US in 2017 to revive a more robust Quad 2.0. It drove forward the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative, which includes Australia and India, and took the lead on the "Asia-Pacific Four" (AP4)—Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, and Australia (Richey and Reiterer 2022). Yet these minilaterals remain mostly focused on traditional security, geostrategy, and at most limited geoeconomic considerations.

Asia-Pacific minilateral frameworks are largely great power constructs (primarily by the US, but also China, and in Central Asia, Russia), and there are "lingering concerns that minilateral partnerships are designed to serve large power interests and not individual state interests in the region" (Chhangani et al. 2022). The US-led minilaterals, which have proliferated in the region, often revolve around containing a rising China, rather than resolving regional governance issues, and forcing regional actors, including middle powers, into "with us or against us" narratives. While from a traditional security perspective, such realignment might be seen as inevitable, at the very least such structures serve once more to constrain Japan's autonomy of action from the US. They may also undermine the coherence of regional multilateral organization and cooperation, the arena within which normative middle powers like Japan have traditionally sought to play the greatest role. In side-lining multilateral platforms, current minilaterals threaten to replace the provision of international public goods championed by middle powers with "club" goods benefiting a narrower range of countries (Patrick 2015: 117 & 130).

Policy Prescription

From a geostrategic perspective, such as that described above, Japan may be doomed to reactivity, even within regional security minilaterals. Yet, from a geopolynomic perspective, there are many possibilities for Japan to lead in regional cooperation, particularly in the NTS realm. NTS issues are inherently less confrontational, and more amenable to cooperation and leadership by second-tier states. By taking a regional focus Japan could also overcome some of the epistemological challenges of global initiatives and generate international public value in ways that are not dependent on global consensus, or the involvement or acquiescence of the great powers.

In business theory, the term "disruptive innovation" was coined to describe an innovation that creates a new market and value network and eventually disrupts an existing market and value network (Christensen, 1997). This was later generalized to identify disruptive science and technological advances (Wu, Wang, & Evans 2019). Here, the term applies to the radical out of the box thinking and practices needed to address both traditional security and NTS challenges in the regional context. The proposal is for minilateral cooperation of like-minded second-tier powers on NTS issues, and regional rather than global international commissions. Such commissions could be launched on such varied issues as NTS challenges like regional pandemic response, transnational pollution, regional refugee flows, and disaster risk reduction.

There are numerous advantages to taking this type of institutional approach. First, it would empower second-tier agents like Japan. Second, it would remove the great power tensions from NTS security promotion. Third, it would allow for spillover from NTS problem solving to traditional security de-escalation and confidence-building by establishing a non-threatening, non-confrontational cooperative culture of yes-ability in the region being addressed.

As explored above, Japan is well positioned to take on this role. It has a track record in championing NTS at the UN and elsewhere, most notably in the context of human security. In its rhetoric, it has also illustrated its embrace of geopolynomics in its policy framework. Yet, a regional focus would further free it from some of the constraints that have led it to be seen as more reactive than leading. Analytically, the geopolynomic approach allows us to move beyond lamenting geostrategic inadequacies and challenges and see how Japan has great potential for regional leadership that can lead to tangible outcomes.

References

Acharya, A. 2003. "Guns and Butter: Why do Human Security and Traditional Security Co-exist in Asia?" *Global Economic Review* 32(3): 1–21.

Berger, T. 1993. "From Sword to Chrysanthemum: Japan's Culture of Antimilitarism" *International Security* 17(4): 119–50.

Betts, R. 1995. "Wealth, Power, and Conflict: East Asia After the Cold War." *In East Asia in Transition*, edited by R. S. Ross, 21–58. (London: Routledge).

Buzan, B., and Segal, G. 1994. "Rethinking East Asian Security" *Survival* 36(2): 3–21.

Calder, K. 1988. "Japanese Foreign Economic Policy Formation: Explaining the Reactive State", *World Politics* 40(4): 517–541.

_____ 2006. "Halfway to hegemony: Japan's tortured trajectory" *Harvard International Review* 27(3): 46–49.

Calder, K., and Ye, M. 2010. *The Making of Northeast Asia* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press).

Cha, V. 2012. "Ripe for Rivalry: Has Asia's moment of reckoning finally arrived?" *Foreign Policy* December 13. https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/12/13/ripe-for-rivalry/.

Chhangani, A., Tey, A., & Noor, E. 2022. "Is Minilateralism the Future of the Indo-Pacific." *Asia Society Summary Report*. March 29. https://asiasociety.org/sites/default/files/2022-04/ASPI_IndoPacific_SummReport_finalize.pdf

Christensen, C. 1997. *The Innovator's Dilemma: When New Technologies Cause Great Firms to Fail* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press).

Friedberg, A. 1993-94. "Ripe for Rivalry: Prospects for Peace in a Multipolar Asia." *International Security* 18(3): 5–33.

Hecht, E. 2022. "World's biggest military: Top 10 list by budget, active and reserve members" *USA Today* August 27. https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2022/08/27/who-has-biggest-military-world-most-powerful/7888866001/

Howe, Brendan. 2005. "Three futures: geopolynomic transition and the implications for regional security in Northeast Asia" *Modern Asian Studies* 39(4): 761–792.

_____ 2010. "Between Normality & Uniqueness: Unwrapping the Enigma of Japanese Security Policy Decision-Making" *Modern Asian Studies* 44(6): 1313–1336.

_____ 2021. "Challenges to and Opportunities for International Organization in East Asia" *Global Society* 35(4): 501–521.

Kawai, M., and S. Takagi. 2009. "Why was Japan Hit So Hard by the Global Financial Crisis?"

ADBI Working Paper 153. Tokyo: Asian Development Bank Institute. http://www.adbi.org/working-paper/2009/10/05/3343.japan.gfc/

Mahhubani, K. 1995. "The Pacific Way." *Foreign Affairs* 74 (1): 100–111.

Mulgan, A. 2008. "Breaking the Mould: Japan's Subtle Shift from Exclusive Bilateralism to Modest Minilateralism" *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 30(1): 52–71.

Naím, M. 2009. "Minilateralism" *Foreign Policy*, 173. https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/06/21/minilateralism/

Nilsson-Wright, J. 2017. "Creative Minilateralism in a Changing Asia: Opportunities for Security Convergence and Cooperation Between Australia, India and Japan" *Chatham House Asia Programme Research Paper*, July. https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/images/2017-07-28-Minilateralism.pdf

Nishikawa, Y. 2009. "Human security in Southeast Asia: Viable solution or empty slogan?" *Security Dialogue* 40(2): 217.

Obuchi, K. 1998. "Toward the Creation of a Bright Future for Asia," *policy speech at the Lecture Program hosted by the Institute for International Relations Lecture Program (Hanoi, Vietnam).* http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/asean/p

mv9812/policyspeech.html

Patrick, S. 2015. "The New 'New Multilateralism': Minilateral Cooperation, but at What Cost?" *Global Summitry* 1(2): 115–134. https://doi.org/10.1093/global/guv008

Richey, M., and Reiterer, M. 2022. "Japan's Indo-Pacific Leadership Aspirations" *East Asia Forum* August 4. https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2022/08/02/answering-the-bell-japans-indo-pacific-leadership-aspirations/#more-1078115

Robertson, J. 2020. "In Search of a Middle-power Rethink on North Korea Policy." *The Interpreter*, November 25. https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/searchmiddle-power-rethink-north-korea-policy?fbclid=IwAR1Uz2RfQNO4rNqrsFetFnuJ6mlwMJ8XqY_KfbbCXMcX01AjQ1HIWMo4RXE

Rudderham, M.A. 2008. "Middle Power Pull: Can Middle Powers use Public Diplomacy to Ameliorate the Image of the West?" *York Centre for International Security Studies Working Paper*, 46. http://yciss.info.yorku.ca/files/2012/06/WP46-Rudderham.pdf

Soeya, Y. 2013. "Prospects for Japan as a Middle Power" *East Asia Forum*, July 29. https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2013/07/29/prospects-for-japan-as-a-middle-power/

Suzuki, K. 2024. "Japanese Economic Security as "Derisking" *Korea Policy* 1(3):38–51.

Tellis, A., Bially, J., Layne, C., & McPherson, M. 2000. *Measuring Power in the Postindustrial Age*. (Santa Monica: RAND).

Vom Hau, M., Scott, J., & Hulme, D. 2012. "Beyond the BRICs: Alternative Strategies of Influence in the Global Politics of Development" *European Journal of Development Research* 24(2): 187–204.

Wu, L., Wang, D., & Evans, J. 2019. "Large teams develop and small teams disrupt science and technology" *Nature* 566: 378–382. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-019-0941-9

Brendan M. Howe is Dean and Professor of the Graduate School of International Studies, Ewha Womans University in South Korea, and President of the Asian Political and International Studies Association. He holds a PhD (Political Science) from Trinity College, Dublin, a Master's in International Conflict Analysis from the University of Kent at Canterbury, and a BA (Hons)/MA in Modern History from the University of Oxford. His fields of research include international security, international law and norms, human security, comprehensive peacebuilding, international and domestic governance, resilience, and post-conflict development. He has published 100+ related books, book chapters, and journal articles.