

Building alliances – Japan’s quest for the power status

ABSTRACT

This text starts with the assumption that Japan seeks to gain the great power status. The subject is what it needs to attain such position in the international system. The author briefly examines the elements needed for the status of great power. Strong military, the presence of US bases on its soil without having its own elsewhere and lack of international engagement are major obstacles in pursuing the higher international status Japan is member of the G-8 since its founding and of a Trilateral Commission. Still it lacks the permanent seat in the UN SC. Entrapped between policy of American outpost versus China and a necessity to save the position in the US market, Tokyo has to choose whether to challenge the Washington policy in international arena, creating strategic new partnerships or remain in the current position. Strong regional competitors and presence of the most of the major international players leaves small room for independent action.

Key words: Japan, great power status, geopolitical position, international system, alliances

“Japan is a major world economic and political power, with an aggressive military tradition, resisting the development of strong armed forces.”²

Japan has second largest national economy in the world and third economy worldwide if we consider EU – as unique economic actor since it has a common market, monetary policy and common currency. Taking into account this fact we could erroneously believe that Japan is if not a super power at least a great power in the international relations. Despite intentions of some researchers in the field of international relations willing to explain the international relations by measuring and quantifying, power, interest and security can not be measured as explained by Hedley Bull or by Morgenthau.³

The subject of this text is not if Japan seeks to become a great power, which can be corroborated by the mere fact that Tokyo wishes to become a permanent member of a UN Security Council. Presupposing that Japan seeks recognition as a great power, we would like to question what kind of behaviour and what instruments it needs to achieve that goal, and the feasibility of achieving it. Our hypothesis is that given the regional order Japan has slim chances of obtaining it. Still, involvement in other regions and building of alliances – good relations with countries in distant regions is prerequisite for reaching a great power status – all round player in the international system.

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² “Japan Defense Agency”, Internet, <http://www.fas.org/irp/world/japan/jda.htm>, retrieved on: 10/09/2008.

³ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Truth and Power, Essays of a decade, 1960–1970*, Pall Mall Press 1970, pp. 242-254, 261; and Hedley Bull, International theory, The case for a classical approach, *World Politics*, Vol. 18, No. 3, (Apr., 1966), pp. 361-377.

In order to determine pros and cons for the possibility of achieving the higher international role we will examine briefly a) the international system; b) the elements needed for the great power status; c) the Japanese status in the light of these elements; d) the geopolitical position e) threats and; f) open opportunities.

Currently international system is difficult to judge, whether it is multipolar, unipolar or shifting – nonpolar as Richard Haas would say.⁴ Still, at least until recently we were able to clearly indicate one super power and at least two great powers with two more traditional powers united in an supranational framework, and one rising. The first one is USA, the other two are Russia and China, former colonial empires harbouring great influence in former dependant territories: United Kingdom and France are other two and finally India with constantly rising influence in Indian Ocean (Mozambique and Madagascar).⁵ All five countries, excluding India are Second World War winners and permanent members of SC UN. What makes them great and major powers is power to influence the behaviour of other units in the international system, states and international organisations, promoting its own interest. Some may argue that intergovernmental, global and regional organisations supersede and challenge power of many nation states – regional powers, such as World Bank, IMF, UN, EU, Arab League, ASEAN, OPEC, SCO, global companies, religious/ideological militant movements.⁶ As far regards the intergovernmental organisations we could point to the fact that the nation states are those delegating or withdrawing a power to these organisations making them hardly possible to form independent policy. Same regards G-8. As far regards informal groupings of the *crème de la crème* of international political, economical and media elites as the World Economic Forum or Trilateral Commission we could agree that decisions taken in these fora influence and may shape politics of numerous nation states, even of powers. Still as we analyse the Japan we have to examine requirements for a nation state to gain great power status in the international system.

Elements needed for the status of a Great power

Far from wishing to establish some sort of formula, we would like to individuate elements common to great powers contributing to the more quality description of this status.⁷ Usually, in describing elements of national power, researchers and politicians speak of military, economical and political power (influence on behaviour of other states). Some add information and more often culture as elements needed for power of the state.⁸ Here are elements that can be taken into account when dealing with power status in international relations:

⁴ Richard N. Haas, “The Age of Nonpolarity: What will Follow U.S. Dominance”, *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2008.

⁵ “India, Mozambique sign MoU in defense cooperation”, March 07, 2006, Internet, http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200603/07/eng20060307_248396.html, retrieved on: 25/08/2008; and “Indian Navy to lease station in Madagascar”, India Defence 15/2/2006, Internet, <http://www.india-defence.com/reports/1357>, retrieved on: 29/08/2008.

⁶ Richard N. Haas, “The Age of Nonpolarity: What will Follow U.S. Dominance”, op. cit.

⁷ Hans Morgenthau said on power: “(P)ower is a quality of interpersonal relations that can be experienced, evaluated, guessed at, but that is not susceptible to quantification. What can be quantified are certain elements that go into making of power, individual or collective, and it is a common error to equate such a quantifiable element of power with power as such.” in: “Common Sense and Theories”, Hans J. Morgenthau, *Truth and Power, Essays of a decade*, op. cit., p. 245.

⁸ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Truth and Power, Essays of a decade*, op. cit., p. 245.

- A) Six powers above mentioned, except France and UK have big territory (Russia, USA, China and India). It is also worthy of noticing that there is no, and there wasn't in history a great power that is landlocked.
- B) They all (again except remains of old colonial empires of Paris and London) have large population – China, India and USA as first three countries and Russia at the eighth place.⁹
- C) All countries are military interventionists or they have military outposts and bases in other countries or distant territories, except China which did not intervene military since Korean War and Viet Nam occupation of Cambodia.
- C1) All countries are global security providers and security receivers among nation states. They have military bases out of their national territories and participate in international security arrangements. USA, France and UK receive security from NATO and provide it to other members of the Alliance, while Washington and Paris guarantee and provide security to many other countries based on bilateral and multilateral agreements. China guarantees North Korea while Russia is protector of Armenia and has military bases and outposts in numerous countries of the ex USSR and in Syria (recently Libya, Yemen and Venezuela offered to host a Russian military naval bases). India is observer in Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. New Delhi has signed defence agreements, pacts and other type of defence treaties with Russia, U.S.A., Cambodia, Singapore, Indonesia and South Africa.
- D) Finally, all mentioned countries account for 6 of 12 largest national economies.¹⁰
- E) Since cultural influence, although very indicative, remains difficult to ascribe without in depth analysis we will leave this element out of our study. Only cultural element non disputable, revealing the cultural impact is spread of a language. National languages of these countries, except Hindu, are UN official languages and official languages of other countries does vesting international importance in diplomacy and economics as well as in the intercultural exchange and cooperation.

Haas points out for components of a Great Power: military, economy, culture and information control.¹¹

It is quite clear that none of the actors except the USA and Russia fits in all of the mentioned elements or criteria of a great power status.

Status of Japan in international system

In the 1991 the Chinese leadership envisaged the probability of a multipolar order considering “(a) five-polar structure consisting of the US, a united Germany (sometimes EU), China, Japan and Russia.”¹² In 1993 the opinion was that: “(G)ermany and Japan

⁹ “Countries of the World”, *WorldAtlas.com*, Internet, <http://www.worldatlas.com/aatlas/populations/ctypopls.htm>, retrieved on 30/08/2008.

¹⁰ Internet, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_GDP_\(nominal\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_GDP_(nominal)), retrieved on 30/08/2008.

¹¹ Richard N. Haas, “The Age of Nonpolarity: What will Follow U.S. Dominance”, op. cit.

¹² Rosemary Foot, “Chinese strategies in a US-hegemonic global order: accommodating and hedging,” *International Affairs* 82, I (2006), p. 81.

cannot today be considered great powers, however, because they lack the requisite military capabilities, especially strategic nuclear arsenals that would give them deterrence self-sufficiency.”¹³

Today Japan is denominated also as one of “major powers” if system is to be considered nonpolar.¹⁴ Brzezinski in his latest “Second Chance” predicts the change in Japan security policy by assuming more self reliant role: “(J)apan will inevitably become a significant military power.”¹⁵ Here, we touched maybe the core argument or one of them, explaining why Japan is not a great power. It would be good to confront now the chances of Japan being a great power with the 5/6 elements we listed previously.

- a) Japan with territory of 377,835 square kilometers is 61st on the list of countries by size, therefore it can not count on this element.
- b) As regards the size by population it can be considered for the great power status with around 127 million of people and 10th place in the world in this category. The birth rate projections still may discourage the strength of this argument.
- c) Japan is not a military interventionist, although it participated in peacebuilding missions in Iraq and Afghanistan. At present it has withdrawn its ground forces from Iraq and ended the refueling mission in Afghanistan.¹⁶ Japanese Nagoya High Court issued this year non-biding ruling that the air lift operation from Kuwait to Coalition forces in Iraq is unconstitutional.¹⁷
 - c1) Tokyo participates in regional security arrangements at different levels (a multi-tiered approach) opposing the creation of a regional security structure that would include China, the only Great power in the region and prospectively even the largest economic power.¹⁸
- d) Japan has a second largest national economy in the world (the third economy if the EU is to be enlisted).
- e) Culture and information are very restrained to what could be named as Isle Japan. Despite having economy of “titanic” dimensions, Japanese language is hardly spoken out of the country of origin and its media can not be considered of global importance.

Out of 5/6 listed elements Japanese empire claims only two – size of population and the economic power.

¹³ Christopher Layne, “The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Rise”, *International Security*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (Spring 1993), footnote 1, p. 6,

¹⁴ “(T)he major powers -- China, the European Union (EU), India, Japan, Russia, and the United States (...)” in: Richard N. Haas, “The Age of Nonpolarity: What will Follow U.S. Dominance”, op. cit.

¹⁵ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Second Chance*, Basic Books New York 2007, p. 213.

¹⁶ Look in: “Japan pulls out of Afghanistan coalition”, November 01 2007, Internet, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/nov/01/afghanistan.japan>, taken on: 08/09/2008; “Iraq: More nations plan pull-out”, Independent, 22 February 2007, Internet, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/politics/iraq-more-nations-plan-pullout-437346.html>, taken on 08/09/2008.

¹⁷ “Court says Japan's Iraq operation unconstitutional”, Reuters April 17, 2008, Internet, <http://www.reuters.com/article/latestCrisis/idUSSP334577>, taken on: 08/09/2008.

¹⁸ Kuniko Ashizawa, “Japan’s Quest for Regional Order-Building: Quo Vadis?”, Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association 48th Annual Convention, CHICAGO, IL, USA, Feb 28, 2007, Internet, http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p178795_index.html, taken on: 13/08/2008.

Global financial turmoil will necessarily downsize the markets. Japanese ability to invest in period of global market compression will eventually invigorate already super status it enjoys in the economy sphere.

The classical, pre WW II territory acquisition, is still almost impossible, although the imperial politics including dissemination of military bases and decisive influence on formally sovereign states politics resembles the imperial policies from times of ancient Rome. Therefore, formal augmentation of territorial Japan is out of option (at present).

It is difficult to judge exactly which of the mentioned elements is more telling when the power status is in question. But if we make a cross exam of them, we can see that the USA with larger population and more military bases and decisively larger defence spending is a super power comparing to Russia which is the biggest country in the world. China has about the same size of USA, it has lesser economy and defense spending. During the bipolar international system, Soviet Union with roughly half of the USA GDP, was still a super power with defence spending roughly equal with that of Washington and territory twice bigger than that of its main rival. Hence, we can deduce that each side had one of the elements twice bigger in quantity over another and they still had the same status in international system. If we compare EU and the USA, although the institutional power is in much higher degree diffused in Brussels than it is in Washington, we see that the EU has numerically bigger army, larger population, territory twice smaller, larger economy but decisively much lesser military spending.¹⁹ The fact that incoherent foreign policy of EU limits the power and possibility to analyse it as single actor complicates this comparison. The American military spending (enabled by its economy) combined with its interventionist policy, which contributed to its spread of military bases and outposts around the world contributed decisively to its status. Russia reestablishment of a great power status was facilitated with the economical growth but became possible only after it resumed large scale arms production, augmented the defense spending and restarted with Cold War time global engagement of its navy and military air forces in Pacific, Mediterranean sea and Atlantic ocean. Therefore, the military build up remains the element of possible upgrade of the power status.

The defense budget of Japan although limited to 1% of the GDP, translated in money is still one of the largest sums singled out for the military spending. Augmenting the cipher will assure the military power projection outside the region – prerequisite for the power status.

Geopolitical position – 4 scenarios

Japan is relatively distant from the traditional *Big Game* playground (Middle East).²⁰ Its insular position is geopolitically one of the best imaginable, yet it is complicated by the proximity of the great powers and power emanation of the USA.

¹⁹ For the data on population, army size and military spending on FIRST, Internet, <http://first.sipri.org/index.php?page=step3&compact=true>, retrieved on: 18/09/2008; For data on EU population: Giampaolo Lanzieri, "Population and social conditions", *EUROSTAT Statistics in Focus* 81/2008, Internet, http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_OFFPUB/KS-SF-08-081/EN/KS-SF-08-081-EN.PDF, retrieved on 18/09/2008.

²⁰ For the Big Game in the Middle East see: „Sukobi na Bliskom istoku — osnovna obeležja”, *Međunarodni problemi*, Vol. LIX, No. 2-3/2007, pp. 266-307; and from the same author: „Геостратешке карактеристике сукоба на Блиском истоку”, *Међународна политика*, Год. LVII, бр. 1124, октобар–децембар 2006, ИМПП, Београд 2006, pp. 5-12.

American bases on Japanese soil still cast the shadow of occupation in particular in the light of incidents that occur from time to time. This presence together with the Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution, and 1 percent limit on defence spending, precludes reinvigoration of Japanese military above regional importance. Military might proves to be of big importance in providing stable energy supplies. In case of Iraq, Chechnya and partially Georgia and Afghanistan military operations may be motivated also by the reasons of energy security. Having in mind that Japan is energy resources free – dependant upon import of oil, gas, coal and uranium, this may become of utmost importance.²¹

Japan (and South Korea) has been USA guard post against Soviet Russia and communist China for decades. Today with new Russian might and ongoing economic, diplomatic, demographic and military growth of China on borders of Japan pose the question of durability of the position of regional counterweight to these two powers. Brzezinski favours clearly the rise of Tokyo as engaged “in expanded participation in key transatlantic consultations. It should also involve a special role for Japan in expanded NATO security planning.”²² American military presence in Pacific would be seriously compromised with the changed Japanese foreign policy oriented toward growing political influence in Western and Central pacific, because this would add on the challenge posed by China and in minor measure by Moscow. The American navy dominance and its capacity to bloc naval shipment to Japan, and rival position of China together with territorial disputes with Russia, China and South Korea leaves almost no room in the region for its growth. Japan is currently facing four geopolitical scenarios:

I) American ally II) Sino-Japanese alliance III) Independent-lonely player IV) Moscow-Tokyo partnership

I) Continued position of key regional ally of USA, could be eventually formalised by entering the NATO alliance. This step, if it is to be realised, would inevitably compromise utterly relations with Moscow, but even with China which probably sees USA as the “major competitor.”²³ With the Washington tacitous consensus Tokyo may change its Constitution and as a NATO ally engage in peace building/keeping/enforcing missions. Yet, it would remain regionally blocked by the presence of two rival superpowers and American tough senior partner interested at the maintenance of the regional balance of power. This growth in the American shadow may give also time to Japan to enforce and upgrade its military capabilities and afterward change its position into active “swing state”.

²¹ “Why Japan Needs Nuclear Power”, Internet,

<http://www.japanuclear.com/nuclearpower/program/why.html>, retrieved on: 29/08/2008.

²² Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Second Chance*, op. cit., p. 212.

²³ “Big Shift in China's Oil Policy”, Washington Post Foreign Service, July 13, 2005, Internet, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/07/12/AR2005071201546_pf.html, retrieved on: 24/10/2006.

American military presence in Yokosuka, Okinawa and elsewhere represents sort of material and psychological impediment to independent and truly partnership relations. Infact, Italian general Prof. Carlo Jean in 2004 concludes that Japan lacks a geopolitical vision due to reliance on USA and its strategies.²⁴

II) Alliance with China and turnover in Tokyo's strategy would create a new power pole that would challenge immediately Washington's position in Pacific but also in entire Eurasian rim-land. Joint efforts might surely produce military navy capable of sure transport of oil and gas through Malacca straight. Concentration of such economical, military and political power could be actively challenged in the Pacific only by alliance of Washington and Moscow. The territorial disputes with PRC and ROC over Senkaku islands, and run for the oil and gas in Siberia are points of tensions and obstacles to this scenario. Maybe more important limiting factor to this axis is a fact that China is a competitor or rival of Japan for the energy resources. Another limit for this kind of axis is a difference in size of population, territory and opportunities for economic expansion. It is hardly conceivable to have equal partnership relation between two actors of different capacities. Beijing-Tokyo partnership would seriously undermine independent politics of ROC, and help Communist China absorb it and enforce itself even more.

III) Independent position in contemporary world is a dubious privilege of a few nations, maybe four or five. In order to achieve this position Japan has to be able to have its own junior partner nations with two way support; acquire larger independence in the energy field or be able to provide it constantly; and develop strong army as a strategic deterrent.

IV) Although both countries did not sign peace treaty and have territorial dispute over Kuril islands/Northern territory, Japanese companies invest in Russian oil and gas fields, like Mitsui and Mitsubishi in project Sakhalin II, or others in the development of the "Eastern Siberia – Pacific Ocean" oil pipeline.²⁵

Dugin recently, but also Haushofer and Mackinder previously wrote about Berlin-Moscow-Tokyo alliance.²⁶ Indubiosly positive aspect of such alliance is that neither Japan may endanger Russia nor Russia is able to threaten Japan. Renewed Russian power together with strengthened Japanese empire could serve as deterrent to eventual territorial expansionistic ambitions of China over eastern Siberia and against pressure over Japan from the east Pacific coast. Technological superiority of Nippon and natural resources of Russian land makes match capable of challenging other power poles and together with their junior partners become a guarantor of the international order stability. Tokyo-Moscow alignment suffers in the long run the aging and shrinking population. Its main challenge would be contemporary pressure from Beijing and Washington.

²⁴ Carlo Jean, *Geopolitica del XXI secolo*, Laterza, Bari 2004, p. 138.

²⁵ "Gazprom joins Sakhalin II", Pipeline Asia, 22 December 2006, Internet, http://www.pipelineasia.com/view_article.php?ArticleID=7988, retrieved on: 05/03/2007; "Japan Hopes that the "Eastern Siberia – Pacific Ocean" Pipeline and Oil Terminal to be Built in Time", Vladivostok Times, September 11 2008, Internet, <http://vladivostoktimes.com/show/?id=29394>, retrieved on: 19/09/2008.

²⁶ See in: Александар Дугин, „Основи геополитике 1/2”, Зрењанин 2004.

Threats

Beside mentioned control from Washington, territorial disputes with Russia, China and South Korea are currently most evident threats to the regional order.²⁷ Longevity of the conflicting advances over island and islets speaks about complexity of the border delimitation in the region.

Another type of the threat to the stable development of Japanese economy is the problem of energy dependency on the Middle East as far considers oil and gas, and soon to be, on Russia. Further construction of nuclear plants underlines the issue of environmental protection threatening the ecological security of Japan in the long run. Some studies predict that the deposits of uranium are to be extinguished around 2060.²⁸ “However, with better exploration techniques in extracting uranium from seawater, the source of uranium for nuclear energy would grow. Thorium, which is more abundant than uranium, can also be used as a fuel for nuclear reactors. Furthermore, spent fuel from the nuclear reactors can be reprocessed...”²⁹ Therefore the nuclear option remains viable for the Japan. But as nuclear means energy security it means also the weakness as (almost improbable) target in the armed conflict.

Highly expensive usage of renewable energy of the sun, wind and the sea water with future technology advancement may prove sustainable and finally sufficient to cover the needs currently cover by fossil fuels.

Open opportunities

Regardless of the 4 geopolitical scenarios Japan will follow, it has the opportunity to better its international position by building alliances. Namely, all powers, and even all actors in the international system needs temporary or durable alliances in advancing their needs and positions. Powers, besides investing in the region create partnership relations with countries far geographically distant in order to influence global politics. Serbia as a receiver of Japanese humanitarian donations may be one of the countries supporting Tokyo initiatives in international fora and in Europe. Of course it would expect to be backed by Japan vice versa. More partnerships, regional and extra regional alliances and Nippon will augment its international influence.

Although Japan is among the major world aid donors it did not manage to develop partnerships outside East Asia. Power position requires also responsibility and often security cooperation. Chinese and Russian interests in Iran are being protected by Moscow and Beijing in UN SC and other international fora. This is two way support that enables gains for both or all sides.

²⁷ “Dispute over Dokdo Island hinders ROK-Japan relations”, July 23, 2008, Internet, <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90001/90780/91343/6456906.html>, retrieved on 12/09/2008; Michael Richardson, “Oil Lies at the Bottom of China-Japan Dispute Over Islands”, September 17, 1996, Internet, http://www.iht.com/articles/1996/09/17/isles.t_4.php, retrieved on 12/09/2008; Senkaku/Diaoyutai Islands, Internet, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/senkaku.htm>, retrieved on 12/09/2008.

²⁸ “Why Japan Needs Nuclear Power”, Internet, <http://www.japannuclear.com/nuclearpower/program/why.html>, retrieved on 27/08/2008.

²⁹ Alvin Chew, “Is nuclear energy a viable option for all?”, 24/10/07, Internet, <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/news/sw/details.cfm?ID=18271>, retrieved on 27/08/2008.

Among elements of a great power we noticed that they are security receivers and providers. Japan provides security regionally in accordance with external player, but globally hesitates – due to relationship with USA and pressure from powers in the region – to engage independently.

Concluding remarks

Military buildup and building of alliances globally will add significantly in Japanese search for greater power status. That is the only element of a great power that it is able to reach. As far as it is the ‘U.S. protectorate’, label used by Zbigniew Brzezinski, Japan, has a limit in foreign policy impeding its power formation.³⁰ Current position of Japan, its global influence and capacities do not promise possibility of obtaining the desired status. Still, the new modeling of alliances whether with old or with a new partners plus more (worldwide) decisive behaviour may add to the current position of Nippon in international relations.

Main threats to Japanese state derive from its energy dependency and strategic position *squeezed* between three great powers.

Any geopolitical vision Japan will undertake has its weaknesses and strengths. Eventual strategic partnership with Russia could be the most balanced, if Japan is willing to maintain its policy of *Isle Japan* and is rather supporter of a multipolar than bipolar or unipolar international system.

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³⁰ “(A)merica is also the main reason for Japan's continued lack of national self-reliance in the security area.” In: Zbigniew Brzezinski, “The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives”, Basic Books 1997.

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RESUME

Second largest economy in the world is driven by the will to become great power in order to assure further economic prosperity and assure independence in the international arena.

Probability of reaching the objective can be evaluated analysing the regional and international system.

Analysis of the current great powers helps us distinguish the core elements of the great power status: a) size of the territory; b) size of the population; c) and c1) military interventions and activity in providing and receiving security; d) size of the national economy and d) cultural influence. Japan fulfills only two of the mentioned elements, and has opportunity to upgrade its military power. Still, stabile development of Japanese economy is threatened with energy dependency, which will lead Japan to skilfully choose partners. Investments in highly expensive renewable energy will find its rationale in the energy hungry world of tomorrow. Open opportunity for Japanese promotion is active international politics in regions out or the region of East Asia. Capitalisation of its international donations, like those in Serbia, will better Tokyo standings and bid in international power.

Alliances are one of the crucial elements for establishing stability but also for the promotion of the national interest and influence. Japan has at least 4 geopolitical scenarios ahead: I) American ally II) Sino-Japanese alliance III) Independent-lonely player IV) Moscow-Tokyo partnership. Each of the scenarios has its pro et contra, but the alliance with Russia seems to be the most balanced and least detrimental to the Japanese interests and security in the future.