This paper attempts to explain the puzzling silence the United States has exhibited towards Japan’s potential development of autonomous strike capabilities. While welcoming a general trend for Japan to become a more active player, the United States also fears that some of Japan’s proactive security policies could cause a heightened risk of entrapment into an insecurity spiral in Northeast Asia. This paper seeks to improve the existing literature on how states respond to the risk of entrapment by arguing that before a state chooses either a distancing strategy (moving away from the ally) or an adhesion strategy (moving closer to the ally), it first engages in a strategy of inaction, or what this paper calls a “waffling strategy.” Additionally, this paper posits that international pressure, depending on where it originates from, can force a state to move from a “waffling strategy” to adhesion or distancing.

“Japan is back. Keep counting on my country.” This was the key message Prime Minister Shinzo Abe delivered in April 2013 to an audience in Washington, D.C., the capital of Japan’s sole and long-time ally. In turning his words into actions, the government of Japan has been engaging in a series of efforts to strengthen its defense posture. First, it established its first ever National Security Council (NSC) and published a National Security Strategy (NSS) in December 2013, replacing the 1957 Basic Policy for National Defense. Additionally, it replaced the ban on arms exports with the new “Three...
Principles on Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology” in April 2014, allowing Japan to export its arms with much fewer restrictions. Finally, in July 2014, it interpreted the Constitution to allow for the exercise of the right to collective defense. As these changes in Japan’s defense posture unfolded, the United States expressed its support. The Joint Statement at the annual U.S.-Japan Security Consultative Committee (2+2) in 2013 stated that “[t]he United States welcomed these efforts and reiterated its commitment to collaborate closely with Japan.” Nonetheless, this list of Japan’s specific “efforts” did not include one particular issue that the Japanese side pushed to be included in the statement: the matter of Japan’s potential development of autonomous strike capabilities. According to media sources, U.S. officials at the 2+2 meeting did not even respond to their Japanese counterparts’ mention of potentially acquiring the capability to attack enemy bases. Given U.S. silence on this matter, this discussion has been significantly toned down. Consequently, Japan’s newly established National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG), published on 17 December 2013, only vaguely stated that “Japan will study a potential form of response capability to address the means of ballistic missile launches and related facilities, and take means as necessary.”

The United States’s decision to remain silent is striking since this development would mark one of the most significant shifts in the long history of the U.S.-Japan alliance, which spans more than six decades. If Japan were to possess autonomous strike capabilities against *tekikichi* (enemy bases) or *sakugenchi* (bases of operations), it would not only retain its traditional role as a “shield” in the alliance with the United States, but would also hold the role of a “spear,” which it has long depended on its ally to provide. Current U.S. behavior is even more puzzling if placed in a historical context. The United States has long encouraged a stronger, more capable, and more dependable Japan as an ally in the Asia-Pacific region, since this would allow Japan to better contribute to regional stability through more burden-sharing and less free-riding in the alliance. U.S. silence here also contrasts with its determined support for Japan’s other aforementioned normalization efforts.

Why is the United States remaining silent on this issue? If the United States simply has not yet determined its stance on the issue, what is stopping it from doing so? This paper argues that its indecision is driven by a fear of entrapment: the fear of being

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dragged into an insecurity spiral in Northeast Asia, which may lead to high tensions or even an unwanted war between China and Japan. This fear is one that the United States is encountering for the first time in the history of the U.S.-Japan alliance.

This paper is divided into four sections. In the first section, it discusses the historical significance of this new dynamic in U.S.-Japan relations. Next, it introduces existing alliance theories on how a state responds to the fear of entrapment, followed by the proposal of a new theory that better explains U.S. silence on Japan’s strike capabilities. Third, it presents cases of the United States’s recent behavior vis-à-vis Japan to demonstrate the proposed theory and its applicability to the issue of autonomous strike capabilities. Lastly, the fourth section addresses possible counterarguments.

**Historical Significance: Abandonment and Entrapment during the Cold War**

Alliances form between states that share similar security interests. Even so, allies can develop interests that are dissimilar, leading them to develop either fears of abandonment or entrapment. Michael Mandelbaum first coined these two terms, defining abandonment as the fear that an ally “will be abandoned in his hour of need” and entrapment as the fear that “he will be entrapped in a war he does not wish to fight.” Glenn Snyder further developed this concept in 1984, characterizing abandonment as “defection” and entrapment as “being dragged into a conflict over an ally’s interests that one does not share, or shared only partially.”

If all alliances involve fears of entrapment and abandonment, then it is crucial to understand why the new development of a U.S. fear of entrapment in the U.S.-Japan alliance is important. The following section examines the significance of this development by looking at the history of abandonment and entrapment dynamics in the alliance.

**Abandonment**

Historically, fear of abandonment was a less significant variable than fear of entrapment in alliances during the Cold War. As Snyder explains, the Cold War polarized the world into two camps and made it hard for members of one camp to realign with the other, which alleviated fears of abandonment. This was certainly true in the case of the U.S.-Japan alliance. The strictly bipolar international system and the accompanying U.S. dominance in the alliance made it impossible for Japan to normalize its relations with the Soviet Union and China prior to U.S. reconciliation with those nations. For example, the attempts to normalize with the Soviet Union under Prime Ministers

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Ichiro Hatoyama and Tanzan Ishibashi in the 1950s were blocked by the United States.\textsuperscript{10}

Despite such inflexibility in regard to realignment, both the United States and Japan faced abandonment fears due to their mutual dependency in the alliance. However, their fears were more or less symmetrical. Nixon's surprise visit to China in 1972 and the secretive manner in which it was carried out surely raised questions about the reliability of the United States as an ally, which naturally translated into heightened abandonment fears in Japan. Still, Nixon's announcement that the United States would withdraw troops from Asia did not cause as much fear of abandonment in Japan as compared to the Republic of Korea (ROK), since the United States was more strategically dependent on Japan.

Meanwhile, the United States also feared abandonment by Japan. This fear was not simply that Japan would defect should the United States be attacked, but also included a concern that Japan could possibly fall into the Communist bloc and then not come to help the United States when it was attacked. The “domino theory” (the concern that if the United States lost one state to the Communist bloc, the rest would fall like dominos) contributed to U.S. fear of abandonment. The intense yet limited wars in Asia, such as the Korean War from 1950 to 1953 and the Vietnam War from 1956 to 1975, were viewed within the “domino” context: if the United States lost these countries, it would eventually lose Japan. Kenneth Pyle explains that the United States viewed the Korean War as a “Soviet invasion…to approach Japan,” and that Japan was “the most desired prize” for the Communists and their “natural target for the desire to dominate the Far East.”\textsuperscript{11} John Foster Dulles, prior to serving as Secretary of State, wrote in Foreign Affairs in 1952:

\begin{quote}
We heard the Soviet Delegation at San Francisco brazenly demand that Japan should be kept virtually disarmed, that all Western power should be permanently withdrawn, and that Japan's surrounding waters and the straits which divide her own home islands should be open, for all times, only to warships based on the Sea of Japan, which means the Red Pacific fleet at Vladivostok.\textsuperscript{12}
\end{quote}

Losing Japan to the Communists meant losing the cornerstone of U.S. strategy in Asia. Numerous declassified U.S. documents on Japan's domestic political situation in the 1950s and the 1960s indicate how carefully the United States monitored communist and socialist influences in Japan as a result of its fear. Japan's geostrategic importance in the United States's Cold War strategy not only created an abandonment fear on the U.S. side, but also provided Japan with leverage over its bigger ally and thus helped to


alleviate Japan’s fear of abandonment.

Entrapment

In contrast, the dynamics of the entrapment fear in the U.S.-Japan alliance were completely asymmetrical during the Cold War. The United States, in fact, never felt a fear of entrapment vis-à-vis Japan, while Japan was fraught with it. This is not simply because Japan was smaller and lacked the capability to entrap its much larger ally: the history of the U.S.-ROK and the U.S.-Taiwan relationships shows that entrapment by the weaker ally is a possibility. Rather, the key factor was that Japan possessed neither the intention nor any reason to entrap the United States. First, Japan's focus on economic growth and its grudging resistance to rearm made it almost impossible for the Japanese to entrap the United States in any unwanted wars. Second, any direct attack on Japan was considered an attack on the United States itself in the context of the Cold War. Therefore, any war that Japan dragged the United States into would never be an unwanted or unrelated war.

Opposite to the United States’s experience in the alliance, Japan has always been fraught with the fear of entrapment over U.S. engagement in global conflicts. Despite U.S. efforts to get Japan more involved in regional security, Japan's fierce entrapment fears caused it to shrewdly reject such pressure. During the Cold War era, the United States wanted Japan to normalize—to free itself from the restrictions imposed upon it both directly and indirectly by Article IX—so that it could play a bigger role in countering the mounting Soviet threats in Asia. Even in the beginning of the 1950s, the United States was already regretting its creation of a pacifist Constitution for Japan during the occupation. Then-Vice President Richard Nixon explicitly called it “a mistake” in his speech at the America-Japan Society in Washington in 1953. However, Shigeru Yoshida, the post-war Prime Minister of Japan who signed the 1953 San Francisco Treaty, successfully rejected U.S. pressure to normalize so that his war-torn country could focus on its economic recovery. Pyle has argued that Japan's post-war pacifist orientation was not rooted in “wartime trauma” or efforts to discredit pre-war militaristic policies, but was rather “the product of the pragmatism” of conservative politicians, as underscored by their undertaking of “an opportunistic adaptation to the international political-economic environment.” Henry Kissinger praised Japan's diplomatic maneuver as “the most farsighted and intelligent of any major nation in the postwar era.”

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14 Of course, Japan has not been entirely exempt from having to make concessions in the alliance, a difficulty it faced due to its continuous free-riding under the U.S. security umbrella. Nonetheless, Japan did achieve some success in its continuous struggle to resist entrapment by the United States.
prime minister, illustrates Japan’s strategy:

The day [for rearmament] will come naturally when our livelihood recovers. It may sound devious, but let the Americans handle [our security] until then. It is indeed our Heaven-bestowed good fortune that the Constitution bans arms. If the Americans complain, the Constitution gives us a perfect justification.18

Theoretical Framework: “A Fear of Entrapment Leads a State to Waffle First”

Whereas responses to abandonment fears are generally more predictable, as Snyder notes, a state response to the risk of entrapment can be complicated.19 One school of thought makes the case that a state responds to the risk of entrapment by distancing from the ally through “a weak or vague commitment,” such as “failing to support the ally in specific conflicts.”20 Various alliance theories argue that a state generally responds to such situations through “distancing” or “hedging” strategies vis-à-vis the ally, such as (1) withholding material support from the ally; (2) castigating the ally’s over-zealousness; (3) appeasing the adversary; or (4) abrogating the alliance.21

The other school of thought makes the case that under certain conditions, states choose “adhesion” strategies over “distancing” strategies. For example, Victor Cha argues that allies will choose adhesion “when entrapment fears (1) are intensely held, (2) are accompanied by power asymmetries (i.e., the larger power seeks control over the smaller one), or (3) when the smaller power has a revisionist agenda.”22 Snyder also argues that in some cases, a firm commitment or an “adhesion” strategy is “a better safeguard against entrapment,” as it increases deterrence against the adversary, and also provides a needed assurance to the ally that enables it to “feel safer in conciliating its opponent.”23

Both of these theories are compelling. Nonetheless, this paper argues that there is an unexamined dimension of states’ behaviors when facing the risk of entrapment. Before a state makes a decision on whether to distance itself from or adhere to an ally, or until it is pushed to do so, a state fearing entrapment will engage in a “waffling strategy,” meaning that the state simply maintains a state of silence or ambiguity24

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21 Cha, “Powerplay,” 195. Note that Cha adds that accommodating the adversary and nullifying the alliance are too risky to be realistic options, and therefore, the weaker commitment is the most plausible actions for a state with entrapment fear.
22 Cha, “Powerplay,” 195.
23 Snyder, Alliance Politics, 185.
24 I would like to thank my academic advisor, Professor Victor Cha, for this terminology.
The paper argues that when a state faces the risk of entrapment, it responds first by waffling. It does not attempt to either distance itself from or adhere to the ally until it willingly determines or is forced to determine whether distancing or adhering would be preferable to maintaining a waffling strategy. This paper argues that a state prefers to waffle when it risks emboldening the ally by providing it with unconditional support or when it risks weakening the solidarity of the alliance by opposing the issue. In this case, states hope that the issue at hand will come to a resolution without their involvement.

In asymmetrical alliances, such as the U.S.-Japan alliance, there are three main actors: a defender, a protégé, and a challenger (an adversary). While both the defender and the protégé can exhibit waffling behavior when facing a fear of entrapment, this paper places a particular focus on the entrapment fears and resulting waffling strategy from the perspective of the defender. Future scholarship should examine waffling from the perspective of a protégé.

In practicing a strategy of waffling, a state neither criticizes nor supports its ally in certain conflicts or on certain issues. This gives a state some time and flexibility to consider each option as they calculate the costs and benefits of distancing, adhering, or continued waffling. Distancing may undermine deterrence against the adversary and cause the adversary to engage in a “wedge” or de-coupling strategy. By contrast, adhering may embolden the ally to provoke the opponent and increase the risk of entrapment. Continued waffling can help a state to prevent these negative consequences of distancing and adherence. This not only allows a state to show a stronger loyalty and commitment to the alliance than if it were to distance itself, but it also allows the defender to avoid unnecessarily emboldening an ally, as compared to adhering. Waffling is also a preferable option for a state that does not want to make a topic of conflict problematic in the alliance. Once the defender takes a position, an issue between the protégé and the challenger becomes an issue among the three parties, automatically increasing the chances of entrapment for the defender.

Thus, waffling is a form of ambiguity within alliance structures. A number of scholars have discussed the use of ambiguity as a tool of alliance management. Snyder and Diesing outlined the “deterrence-versus-restraint” dilemma to describe a key conundrum when it comes to defense commitments in alliances. Frank Zagare and Marc Kilgour called the use of ambiguity a state’s “mixed strategy” of defending and abandoning the protégé in order to maximize the deterrence effect on the adversary while also restraining the protégé. However, compared with these previous works, waffling introduces a new dynamic within alliance behavior. For example, only a limited number of works reveal the relations between the classical entrapment and abandonment

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dilemmas and the “deterrence-versus-restraint” dilemma. Moreover, there exists no written analysis that reflects the changing nature of the alliance dilemma in U.S.-Japan relations and explains U.S. ambiguity towards recent issues in the alliance and Japan's recent actions regarding its defense and military capabilities. By addressing this gap, this paper seeks to build on the existing literature on the U.S.-Japan alliance as well as discuss in general terms how states respond to the risk of entrapment through indecision.

The concept of “waffling” differs from the already established concept of “strategic ambiguity,” a concept often used to describe U.S. policy towards Taiwan. There exist several key differences between waffling and strategic ambiguity. First, under strategic ambiguity, the United States takes a firm position on the issue in question, but remains ambiguous regarding what it would do if its interests were threatened. For example, the United States’s official and coherent stance on Taiwan has been that it “insists on the peaceful resolution of cross-Strait differences, opposes unilateral changes to the status quo by either side, and encourages dialogue to help advance such an outcome,” but the Taiwan Relations Act does not spell out what kind of response the United States must take if Taiwan were to be threatened. On the other hand, when pursuing a waffling strategy, the United States often chooses not to take any position on an issue or, at least from the perspective of its ally, is ambiguous as to whether it has a position.

Second, “strategic ambiguity” implies a deliberative and purposeful nature in a state’s ambiguous behavior. By making it unclear whether it will defend an ally, the defender simultaneously achieves its twin goals of deterring an external challenger as well as restraining the protégé from actions that the challenger may perceive as aggressive. However, a state might waffle deliberately both for strategic reasons or simply as a default when it has not had time to fully consider the issue. In the absence of a position, it is unclear to both allies and challengers as to whether a state has decided on a position and is purposefully not revealing it, or if the state is simply being indecisive.

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29 Some scholars, such as Ambassador Joseph S. Nye, Jr., have called for the United States to shift its current policy of strategic ambiguity to a conditional commitment to defend Taiwan only if China attacks without provocation. For more information about the U.S. policy of “strategic ambiguity” towards Taiwan, see for example Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, “Strategic Ambiguity or Strategic Clarity?” in *Dangerous Strait: The U.S.-Taiwan-China Crisis*, ed. Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

30 U.S. Department of State 2015, “U.S. Relations With Taiwan: Fact Sheet,” http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/35855.htm; On U.S. strategic ambiguity in its Taiwan policy, see Taiwan Relations Act of 1979, Public Law (96-8), 96th Congress. The Taiwan Relations Act obliges “the United States...to make available to Taiwan such defense articles and defense services in such quantity as may be necessary to enable Taiwan to maintain a sufficient self-defense capability.” However, it also provides policy leeway by stating, “The President and Congress shall determine the nature and quantity of such defense articles and services based solely upon their judgment of the needs of Taiwan.”
Third, based on a state’s cost-benefit calculus, “strategic ambiguity” may end up becoming a permanent strategy, especially in cases where the protégé and the challenger also share an interest in the defender’s ambiguity.\textsuperscript{31} Waffling, however, is often a transitional strategy due to the external pressures on states to take a position. In particular, a waffling state is compelled to take a clear stance when pressured to do so either by its ally or by changing negative external circumstances, such as the rise of a potential challenger. When such pressure arises, the state’s transition away from waffling and towards either adhering or distancing is determined by which actor is responsible for the changing negative circumstances. If the state sees that its ally is exacerbating tensions, it chooses distancing. If it perceives that the challenger is the source of tensions, the defender chooses to adhere to the ally.\textsuperscript{32}

Table I. Differences Between Strategic Ambiguity and Waffling Strategy

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<th>Strategic Ambiguity</th>
<th>Waffling Strategy</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Behavior</strong></td>
<td>Takes a position on an issue, but remains ambiguous on what it will do if interests are threatened</td>
<td>Does not even take a clear position on the issue; perceived as indecision by others</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Purpose</strong></td>
<td>Deliberate; aims to both deter a challenger and restrain a protégé</td>
<td>Could be deliberate as in the case of strategic ambiguity, or accidental, if the state has not had time to consider the issue</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Permanence</strong></td>
<td>Relatively permanent, especially if both a protégé and a challenger support the ambiguity</td>
<td>Often transitional, because international pressure from a protégé or a challenger may force the state to take a stand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Key Examples</strong></td>
<td>U.S. position on Taiwan</td>
<td>U.S. ambiguity over the position it has previously taken on the Senkakus; U.S. non-position on visits by Japanese leaders to the Yasukuni Shrine (until recently); U.S. non-position on Japan’s strike capabilities</td>
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\textsuperscript{31} For example, if a protégé or a challenger is not satisfied with the defender’s ambiguity, it could create tensions and pressure the defender ally to make its stance clear. The permanency of “strategic ambiguity” indicates relative satisfaction among the related parties. Further study is needed on this topic.

\textsuperscript{32} Brett Benson also argues that states choose ambiguous defense commitment to their allies when “it is simply not possible for the third party to determine whether a conflict occurred because the protégé was aggressive or because the adversary was aggressive.” Benson, \textit{Constructing International Security}, 12.
The following section examines two case studies that demonstrate transitions in U.S. behavior from waffling to either distancing or adhesion, as well as a third case study that explores the United States’s ongoing waffling strategy: (1) U.S. responses on visits to the Yasukuni shrine by Japanese leaders; (2) U.S. security commitments regarding the Senkaku Islands; and (3) Japan’s potential development of autonomous strike capabilities. Within each case study, the paper addresses how the fear of entrapment into unnecessary instability has led the United States to waffle on recent developments in the U.S.-Japan alliance. In three cases, international pressure obliged the United States to choose distancing or adhesion after determining whether its ally or a challenger was responsible for raising tensions or aggravating a situation. The final case—the ongoing U.S. waffling on Japan’s potential to acquire autonomous strike capability—is a clear demonstration of its initial reaction to the fear of entrapment.

Case Studies: Distancing, Adhering, and Waffling

The United States has recently employed all three options—distancing, adhering, and waffling—in response to the risk of entrapment, due mainly to increasing tensions between China and Japan. Along with Japan, China has a great stake in the issues described in these case studies. What stance the United States takes shapes both the nature of U.S.-China relations as well as the future order of the region. First, this section demonstrates U.S. distancing behavior by examining the U.S. response to Prime Minister Abe’s visit to the Yasukuni Shrine, an incident that further aggravated hostility between China and Japan. Here, U.S. behavior transitioned from waffling to distancing, as it determined that Japan was the party responsible for aggravating tensions in the region. Second, the paper turns to U.S. behavioral change from waffling to adhesion over the defense of the Senkaku Islands by examining the evolution of U.S. officials’ changing statements, including an unprecedented presidential statement in April 2014. The United States decided to adhere to Japan as it witnessed China’s increasing assertiveness, such as its establishment of the Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in November 2013 and its continuous provocations in both the East and South China Seas. Finally, this paper tackles the United States’s silence on Japan’s potential development of offensive capabilities, which demonstrates its waffling strategy. This case study also shows the circumstances in which a state is permitted to continue waffling.

Waffling To Distancing: Castigating Japan for Creating Unnecessary Regional Tensions

In the last several years, the United States exhibited distancing behavior toward Japan in several circumstances. The most apparent case was its public castigation of Abe’s December 2013 visit to the Yasukuni Shrine.

This instance of U.S. distancing was demonstrated through “castigating the ally’s overzealousness,” as Snyder puts it. Specifically, the United States intervened during a period of tension stemming from historical animosities in the region. On 26 December 2013, Prime Minister Abe visited the controversial Yasukuni Shrine, where fourteen convicted Class-A war criminals are enshrined. This occurred despite relentless opposition by neighboring countries and active U.S. efforts to dissuade the Prime Minister.
from going. After the visit, the United States made a public statement that it was “disappointed” by the visit.³³ This negative public statement indicated a clear change from the United States’s stance on this issue during the Bush administration.

The United States has long been concerned that visits to the Yasukuni Shrine would hurt Japan’s position in Asia and therefore would not serve the interests of the alliance. This concern rose as the issue became more politicized in Asia due to the Chinese government’s criticism of Japan as well as anti-Japanese demonstrations. Even so, prior to the Obama administration’s unprecedented statement, the United States waffled on the Yasukuni Shrine issue. In previous instances, former governmental officials such as Joseph S. Nye Jr. discouraged such visits.³⁴ Some senior U.S. officials may also have used back channels to discourage their Japanese counterparts from visiting the shrine. Nevertheless, the U.S. government still maintained that the circumstances were not appropriate for the United States to take a position on this issue, making waffling a logical choice.

The following episode is a revealing example: When then-Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi visited the Yasukuni Shrine on 15 August 2006, one of the most sensitive dates in the region, then-President George W. Bush decided not to take a public position on the issue.³⁵ As then-National Security Council official Michael J. Green later explained, “President Bush decided that one of the worst things the United States can [sic] do would be to publicly threaten or criticize such a trusted ally as Japan, given the expanding confidence of China in Asia and its efforts to delegitimize and isolate Japan.”³⁶ In contrast to Bush’s calculation, the Obama administration saw distancing as more advantageous than strategic silence.

This transition is a reflection of U.S. frustration over the increasing regional tensions caused by the Yasukuni Shrine visits. In addition to causing problems between China and Japan, the visits also hurt ties between U.S. allies Japan and the ROK at a time when trilateral U.S.-Japan-ROK defense cooperation was becoming more important, particularly given China’s increasing assertiveness and North Korea’s nuclear activities. While the United States initially avoided taking a public position on this issue, international pressure in 2013 no longer allowed the United States to waffle and compelled

³⁴ For example, in a 2001 interview with the Asahi Shimbun after he had left government, Nye stated that visits to the Yasukuni Shrine are not in the interest of Japan. Quoted in Yasuki Chijiwa, Hazuki Sasaki, and Chisa Taguchi, “Koizumi Junichiro syusyo yasukuni mondai sanpai mondai—Taipei kankei no bunmyaku kara, [Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro’s Visits to Yasukuni Shrine—A Perspective from Japan's Relations with the United States],” Kokusai Kokyo Seisaku Kenkyu 12, no. 2 (2008): 145-159.
³⁵ This date is sensitive because 15 August 1945 is the date on which Japan announced its surrender to the Allies, ending World War II.
³⁶ Michael J. Green, Press Conference with Kurt M. Campbell, Japan National Press Club, July 16, 2013.
it to get involved in the controversy by taking a stance. Thus, over the course of several years, there has been a clear transition from “waffling” to “distancing” by the United States towards Japan on this contentious historical issue.

It is also notable that this public castigation over the Yasukuni visit came about in the context of already existing U.S. frustrations that Japan was creating unnecessary tensions in the region. About a year before Abe’s Yasukuni visit, his predecessor Yoshihiko Noda decided to purchase three of the eight disputed Senkaku Islands from a private Japanese owner in September 2012. During the consultation process, the United States explicitly told the Japanese side “not to go into this direction” because it could “trigger a crisis” with China. Japan’s decision to do so despite such warnings was not well received in the United States, although it did not at that time result in public castigation.

The response to Abe’s visit to Yasukuni clearly indicates an increasing U.S. concern over regional tensions and the fear of possible entrapment into a regional insecurity spiral caused by Japan. These incidents marked a definite change in U.S. perceptions of Japan, diverging from the old perception of Japan as the United States’s “favorite son” in Asia.

Waffling to Adhesion: A Path to Presidential Defense Commitment over the Senkakus

On 24 April 2014, President Obama made history by becoming the first U.S. President to publicly announce that U.S. defense commitments to Japan included the Senkaku Islands, stating that “our treaty commitment to Japan’s security is absolute, and Article V covers all territories under Japan’s administration, including the Senkaku Islands.” This adhesion strategy was brought about after almost two decades of Japan pursuing a clearer and stronger defense commitment from the United States. Long years of pressure from Japan pushed the United States to transition from waffling behavior to adhesion.

The Obama administration had been notably reluctant to make any statements on the Senkakus for several months, despite Japanese efforts to encourage affirmative statements through public media and official channels. Additionally, this silence occurred while the popular narrative of the “Group of 2”—a term used to describe a potential bipolar condominium between the United States and China—was on the rise, which

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37 Chinese name for these islands is the “Diaoyu Islands.”
39 This term comes from Cha, “Powerplay,” 194.
increased Japan’s fear of abandonment. Obama’s presidential statement, which marked a significant shift in the United States’s commitment regarding the Senkakus and territorial disputes in general, illustrates how a state that fears entrapment waffles first before taking a definitive stance.

The dispute between China and Japan over the Senkaku Islands has existed for decades, but significantly intensified after the trawler collision incident of September 2010. In order to measure U.S. commitment in defending its ally over this conflict, this paper analyzes both public and private statements made by top U.S. government and military officials on this issue from 1996 to 2014 (see appendix enclosed after the conclusion).

Four main themes can be found in these statements: (1) the United States does not take a stance on sovereignty; (2) the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty’s Article V applies to the Senkakus because they are under Japanese administrative control; (3) the United States objects to any unilateral actions that seek to change the status quo by force; and (4) the United States urges the reduction of tensions and seeks a peaceful solution to the dispute. Statements highlighting the first and fourth themes made Japan wary because they conveyed a sense of neutrality on the part of the United States. On the other hand, statements emphasizing the second and third themes were assuring for Japan, especially since the country does have administrative control over the Senkaku Islands under the status quo.

In 1996, then-U.S. Ambassador to Japan Walter Mondale was quoted in the New York Times as stating that the United States would not fight in a conflict over the Senkakus. However, then-Assistant Deputy Secretary of Defense Kurt M. Campbell refuted this statement, and since then the official U.S. stance has not changed: Article V of the U.S.-Japan Security Mutual Cooperation and Security Treaty applies to the Senkaku Islands, as they are under the administrative control of Japan. Nonetheless, this study proves that inconsistent U.S. government statements created uncertainty in

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42 I would like to thank Nicholas Szechenyi for his suggestion to analyze these four themes in U.S. government statements. Article V of the Treaty Of Mutual Cooperation and Security Between Japan and the United States of America reads, “Each Party recognizes that an armed attack against either Party in the territories under the administration of Japan would be dangerous to its own peace and safety and declares that it would act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional provisions and processes. Any such armed attack and all measures taken as a result thereof shall be immediately reported to the Security Council of the United Nations in accordance with the provisions of Article 51 of the Charter. Such measures shall be terminated when the Security Council has taken the measures necessary to restore and maintain international peace and security.” Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between Japan and the United States of America, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/n-america/us/q&a/ref/1.html.
43 I define “assurance” as a strategy directed at allies, while “reassurance” is directed at adversaries. See Jeffrey W. Knopf, “Varieties of Assurance,” The Journal of Strategic Studies 35, no. 3 (June 2012): 375–399.
Japan regarding where the United States stood on this conflict. The inconsistency of the aforementioned four themes included in these statements illustrates a lack of clear top-down communication on the issue, which is far from assuring to an ally. Unlike U.S. strategic ambiguity on Taiwan, the inconsistency of the U.S. statements gave an impression that the United States was either backing away from the position it took in 1996 or ambiguous as to whether it had a clear position on the issue. Some top government officials made statements that only included the fourth theme. From Japan's perspective, this implied that the United States was distancing itself from Japan by maintaining neutrality and "castigating the ally’s overzealousness" regarding the dispute.

The way these statements were made is also telling. Until Hillary Clinton explicitly told then-Japanese Foreign Minister Seiji Maehara in 2010 that the Senkakus were covered by the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty, U.S. government officials had only passively made statements about the Senkaku Islands when questioned about the issue at various fora. Making statements voluntarily is an indication of how willing a government is to demonstrate its commitment. Although Obama’s statement was reassuring, the fact that it took two decades for any U.S. president to make such a statement, even when tensions were on the rise, indicates years of waffling behavior on this issue. Also, the fact that the U.S. president himself had to publicly assure the ally of the United States’s commitment shows that the U.S. government was aware of the extent of Japan's concern over U.S. waffling. In addition to waffling by officials, unofficial voices also demonstrated the existence of waffling. Pundits in Washington, including former top U.S. government officials, made statements suggesting a lack of importance of U.S. commitments to an ally involved in a territorial dispute. For example, former National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley argued in October 2013 that one should be "cautiously optimistic" about the future of Sino-U.S. relations because "there are no competing territorial claims between China and the United States today." Although this is technically true, this type of analysis reduces the credibility of the United States’s commitment to the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty. Patrick Buchanan, a pundit and former Republican Congressman, questioned why the dispute over the Senkakus should be "America’s quarrel." Furthermore, there are numerous articles in popular publications quoting anonymous U.S. veterans saying that the United States “would not be excited to go to war over a bunch of rocks.”

The United States finally took an irrefutable stance on the Senkakus after two decades of waffling, thus demonstrating the power of international pressure in causing a defender state to shift its position. Ever since Sino-Japanese tensions over the Senkakus intensified in 2010 and thereafter, the United States has felt pressure to make its stance clear on its defense commitment. In other words, before 2010, the international pressure was not strong enough to compel the United States to make a clear stance, thus allowing room for the United States to waffle.

Waffling: Japan’s Potential Development of Autonomous Strike Capabilities

1. Japan’s Discussion of Autonomous Strike Capabilities

While the discussion of autonomous strike capabilities occasionally appeared starting from the 1950s, the current exploration of acquiring offensive capabilities arose from Japan’s fear of abandonment after North Korea’s Taepodong missile launches in 1998. Green has argued that in the beginning of the 1990s, Japan started to view autonomous defense production “as a hedge against abandonment by the United States.” This development may also have put more pressure on the United States to take actions that would enhance the alliance. As Snyder argued, a state with a fear of abandonment may build up internal capabilities or bolster its commitment to the alliance “in order to get the ally to reciprocate.”

A more recent move that added fuel to this discussion was a report published on 4 June 2014 by the ruling Liberal Democratic Party’s (LDP) Committee on National Defense. The report proposed that “the Government should launch a study on the Self Defense Forces’ capabilities to strike enemy bases (which has been regarded as legally admissible) and immediately draw a conclusion, while taking into consideration neighboring countries’ development and deployment of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles.” The report further stated that the government should undertake this initiative “with a view [towards] further solidifying the credibility of alliance extended deterrence.” Then—Minister of Defense of Japan Itsunori Onodera said in a July 2014 media interview that he would consider the option of acquiring autonomous strike capabilities.

Contrary to the active discussion in Japan, the United States responded to this issue with silence. Not only was the issue of autonomous strike capabilities left out of the joint statement in the 2013 2+2 meeting, but there have also been no official comments on the United States’s stance. Whenever the issue was raised in press briefing question and answer sessions at the Department of Defense (DOD), officials answered ambiguously. For example, during a September 2013 press conference, a senior DOD official from the DOD skillfully skirted the issue by saying:

At the core of the defense guidelines is a discussion about both the current and the future roles, missions and capabilities of the U.S.-Japan alliance. And that’s a discussion that we have yet to have, that we will have as part of the defense guidelines review process.54

In addition to these ambiguous statements, in a conversation with this author, one Department of State official revealed that the United States has “not made its stance clear yet.”55 It is clear that the United States is in the stage of waffling on this particular issue.

2. Why Not Distance

Unlike the issue of visits to Yasukuni, the United States certainly is not distancing from Japan on the issue of autonomous strike capability by opposing or castigating the idea. Former Deputy Secretary of Defense Bradley Roberts, who served during Obama’s first term, acknowledged in his report that from a purely military point of view, Japan acquiring offensive capabilities would be positive for the United States. This development would enhance the deterrence and capabilities of the U.S.-Japan alliance as a whole. Roberts further argued that Japan’s development of offensive capabilities would strengthen regional deterrence (especially in gray zone conflicts), as well as add protection in case of deterrence failure.56 The positive effects of Japan gaining a strike capability seem to preclude the possibility that the United States would distance itself from its ally by criticizing this development.

In addition, such behavior vis-à-vis its ally involves fundamental risks, as distancing can be exploited in the adversary’s wedging strategy. Mandelbaum explains this dynamic with a classic example: “The Corinthians, the enemies of Corcyra, warn the Athenians that accepting the Corcyrians as allies will lead to entrapment: You will force us to hold you equally responsible with them, although you took no part in their misdeed.”57 Chinese strategic culture gives another example. Ancient Chinese strategist Sun Tzu

55 Non-attributable discussion with the author, October 8, 2014.
57 Mandelbaum, The Nuclear Revolution, 151.
illustrates China's wedging strategy: “When [an enemy] is united, divide him. Sometimes drive a wedge between a sovereign and his ministers; on other occasions separate his allies from him. Make them mutually suspicious so that they drift apart.”

In line with this thinking, Chinese Ambassador to the United States Cui Tiankai, along with other Chinese ambassadors around the globe, engaged in a series of negative campaigns against Japan after Abe's 2013 visit to the Yasukuni Shrine. Later in May 2014, referring to the visit of Japanese nationalists to the Senkaku Islands and the visit of Japanese cabinet members and ministers to the Yasukuni Shrine, Cui also pointed out, “[t]he U.S. side should stay alert against the recent provocative actions taken by Japanese political leaders.” As China's Minister of Defense Chang Wanquan said to then-U.S. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel in April 2014, “[w]e hope that the U.S. could stay vigilant against Japan's action and keep it within bounds and not to be permissive and supportive.” Exacerbating the entrapment fear of an enemy's ally is a classic strategy in international politics. U.S. distancing strategy vis-à-vis Japan's acquisition of autonomous strike capabilities would weaken deterrence and create more opportunities for China to employ a wedging strategy.

3. Why Not Adhere

From the U.S. perspective, an adhesion strategy regarding autonomous strike capabilities is not desirable under the current circumstances. This can be illustrated by comparing the autonomous strike issue with the Senkakus issue. Although the presidential statement confirming that U.S. defense commitments covered the Senkakus certainly assured the ally through a strategy of adhesion, it also had the effect of reassuring the adversary (in this case, China) by reiterating that the scope of the U.S.-Japan security treaty was purely defensive. Thus, through this statement, the United States was also able to ensure that the ally would not become overly risk-tolerant. This echoes Snyder's argument that “one way to restrain an ally from aggressive initiatives is to point out that [the] alliance is defensive only.” Because of this unique dynamic, adhesion did

61 This comment was a response to a question to Minister Chang on Secretary Hagel's previous statement in Japan that the Senkakus fall under the U.S.-Japan security treaty and that the United States supports Japan's exercise of its right to collective self-defense. Even so, it reflects how China is likely to respond if discussions of Japan acquiring autonomous strike become more prominent. Chuck Hagel and Chang Wanquan, “Joint Press Conference with Secretary Hagel and Minister Chang in Beijing, China,” U.S. Department of Defense, April 8, 2014, http://www.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=5411.
62 Snyder, Alliance Politics, 323.
not significantly raise tensions in the region. However, the same logic cannot simply be applied to the issue of strike capabilities. By adhering to the ally on this issue, the United States would essentially welcome and actively engage in discussion on Japan’s strike capability, or even encourage Japan to accelerate such discussion. In this situation, unlike the case of the Senkakus, it is hardly possible for the United States to simultaneously reassure China. To the contrary, such an act would likely encourage a further arms race and destabilize the region, specifically because Japan’s possession of the physical capability to initiate preemptive or preventive strikes would never be in China’s interests.

To make matters worse for China, the current interpretation of Japan’s constitution, which calls for sensyu boei (an exclusively defense-oriented military posture), has never eliminated the option of preemptive strikes. As then-Prime Minister Ichiro Hatoyama once said, “If no other suitable means are available, Japan is not obligated to merely sit and wait but can engage in offensive action within certain limits.”63 Japan’s use of preemptive or preventive strikes is also problematic for the United States, as the security treaty does not specify what level of defense commitment the United States would need to provide Japan in such scenarios. Japan’s strike capabilities increase the risk of U.S. entrapment into an armed conflict in which it does not wish to take part. Furthermore, by encouraging the ally’s development of autonomous strike capabilities, the United States would face the risk of undercutting the credibility of its extended deterrence to its allies in the region because U.S. extended deterrence, if sufficiently credible, should have obviated Japan’s need to develop its own strike capabilities.

Richard C. Bush III, a senior fellow at Brookings Institution, attributes the difference in U.S. reactions to the Senkaku Islands problem versus autonomous strike capabilities to the scope of the issues and the potential for escalation. According to Bush, the presidential statement on the Senkakus was only made possible due to the limited scope of the issue: the United States either pledges to defend the islands or it does not. On the other hand, “the issue of offensive strike capabilities is more general and ambiguous,” which means there is a great amount of uncertainty as to what impact it will have on “escalation.”64

4. Waffling and Fear of Entrapment

The United States’s waffling strategy is driven by its fear of entrapment into the regional insecurity spiral that could arise from Japan’s potential acquisition of autonomous strike capabilities. Distancing could not only damage deterrence against the adversary and create room for China’s wedge strategy, but it could also exacerbate Japan’s fear of abandonment and encourage Japan to speed up military development. The latter

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development could provoke an arms race in the region. Adhering could also embolden the ally to take more risks against China, which may lead Japan to be more inclined to use their strike capabilities. Another key U.S. ally, the ROK, has exhibited concern over this possible development, which further complicates the potential repercussions in the region. Thus, choosing either distancing or adhesion would heighten the risk of entrapment, which would likely arise from negative regional reactions. Supporting this view, Bush stated in an interview that "if the United States had a problem with this, it would be because we would worry that Japan would be too prone to escalate if there were some kind of a danger of attack or threat of attack."  

Indeed, the aforementioned U.S. government official indicated to this author that the concern over regional stability is the most likely reason for U.S. silence on Japan acquiring autonomous strike capabilities.  Based on this calculus, the United States has determined thus far that it is not yet time for them to distance or adhere, making waffling the best possible strategy with regard to Japanese development of strike capabilities.

Counterarguments

This section addresses possible counterarguments. Some may say that U.S. silence on Japan's strike capability is due to (1) U.S. indifference; (2) financial concerns and opportunity costs; or (3) concerns about proliferation. These are all plausible arguments, but fail to capture the whole picture.

U.S. Indifference

Some may argue that U.S. silence regarding Japan's development of autonomous strike capabilities is simply due to Washington's indifference. Previous studies on this issue suggest that even with such capabilities, Japan would still depend on U.S. satellite systems to detect and target enemy bases, especially for missiles launched from mobile launchers. Consequently, Japan will not be technically independent unless it developed a satellite system as capable as the one the United States possesses. Consequently, until this occurs, Japan is both unable and unlikely to attack China without U.S. help, thus making Japan's possession of autonomous strike a non-issue.

This argument is plausible, particularly considering the fact that it was only with the return of the LDP to power in December 2012 that this discussion on autonomous strike capability was allowed to resurface. During the three years when the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) was in power, there was little, if any, media coverage of the issue. Indeed, in September 2014, Reuters quoted an anonymous U.S. official, who stated that Washington's lack of a position on the issue was "in part because the Japanese have

65 Ibid.
66 Non-attributable discussion with the author, October 6, 2014.
not developed a specific concept or come to us with a specific request.” This indicates that the discussion is in too early of a stage to draw U.S. attention. In addition, the relative lack of attention may well be because the United States has been distracted by other international issues, such as instability in the Middle East, as well as by the recent domestic deadlock that led the 2013 government shut-down and, consequently, led Obama to cancel his attendance at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum.

This explanation, however, is clearly flawed. Obama’s “rebalance to Asia” strategy directly contradicts the possibility that U.S. leadership is indifferent to Asia in general and Japan in particular. If the United States views Japan having a “spear” capability as a positive development that serves U.S. national interests, there is no reason to believe that it would not give its support to Japan just as it did on collective self-defense and Japan's increasing defense budget. Thus, U.S. indifference solely on Japan’s offensive capability itself is puzzling when examined in the context of the U.S. rebalance to Asia.

**Financial Concerns and Opportunity-Costs**

Another alternative argument is financial concerns and the opportunity costs of the issue. As sequestration will force the U.S. Department of Defense to continuously cut its defense budget by almost $1 trillion over the next ten years, the United States may be concerned about the potential financial costs if Japan were to develop such a capability. Due to Japan’s limited discussion of how far it would develop its strike capability, including enhancement of its satellite systems to strike mobile launchers, the United States may be uncertain regarding the potential breakdown of burden-sharing. Green explains U.S. reluctance on this issue, arguing that “even if Japan possessed the capability to attack enemy bases, it would be limited so it would be the United States that would have to deal with any counterattack.” The United States may also have been concerned about opportunity costs. Roberts writes that the United States is concerned that “investments in these capabilities would come at the expense of investments in other capabilities important to the alliance, [which are] perhaps of higher priority.” This concern is plausible as Japan has had a self-imposed regulatory cap to limit its defense budget for decades, and an increase in the national defense budget was not proposed together with the discussion of strike capability.

These alternative arguments, however, do not offer a complete explanation for U.S. silence. Such severe financial constraints, in fact, could give the United States an incentive to support Japan’s development of autonomous strike capabilities. By supporting or even pushing Japan’s strike capability development further, the United States could

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69 “Analysis,” *AJW by The Asahi Shimbun*.

acquire more financial or technical support from Japan to aid in U.S. satellite programs, as Japan's strike capabilities are likely to rely on U.S. satellite systems that are far superior to those of Japan. As for opportunity cost concerns, there are many possible ways that the United States could negotiate with Japan to invest in other capabilities necessary for the alliance, while also developing Japan's autonomous strike capability. After all, the 1 percent cap on Japan's defense spending is not a law but a Cabinet resolution. Therefore, it can be changed depending on circumstances. Thus, these arguments do not explain why the United States does not simply approach this issue in a way that serves its financial interests and limits its opportunity costs.\footnote{Roberts, “Extended Deterrence and Strategic Stability”, 24.}

U.S. concerns about proliferation might explain U.S. silence to some extent, as non-proliferation issues have been a main source of tension in U.S. alliance networks. The United States appreciates stronger allies and greater those allies’ greater commitments to their own national defense, but it also has a long history of committing to the principle of nonproliferation. Still, previous cases have shown that U.S. commitment to nonproliferation becomes a secondary priority when the United States determines that regional stability is better served by strengthening an ally’s capability through proliferation. For example, in 2012, the United States allowed the ROK to extend the range of its missiles up to 800 kilometers from the prior cap of 300 kilometers. This example shows that U.S. concerns about proliferation can change depending on the situation and thus should not be considered the sole factor preventing U.S. support for Japan’s offensive capability.

**Conclusion**

Alliances need meticulous care from both sides in order to be maintained. As Mandelbaum stated, entrapment and abandonment fears are “the heart of any alliance.”\footnote{Mandelbaum, *The Nuclear Revolution*, 151.} In the U.S.-Japan alliance, the dynamics of entrapment and abandonment have evolved as the alliance and the two nations within it have changed. The peculiar absence of a U.S. fear of entrapment in its alliance with Japan during the Cold War indicated the asymmetries of the U.S.-Japan alliance. Throughout those decades, Japan possessed neither the ability nor the intent to entrap its counterpart. However, that situation has changed. The alliance has become a more symmetrical alliance as a result of Japan’s normalization and its very different international standing compared with the immediate post-war period. To a great extent, this growing symmetry demonstrates the trust built up between the United States and Japan and the increasing maturity of the alliance. However, this symmetry will not be without its challenges given this newly introduced undercurrent of a simultaneous U.S. fear of entrapment and Japanese fear of abandonment. To ensure the continued strength and robustness of the alliance, the United States and Japan will need to pay careful attention to managing this double-layered dilemma.
As this paper argues, the United States is responding to its fear of entrapment into an insecurity spiral in Northeast Asia through a waffling strategy. In cases where it faces strong international pressure, it has transitioned to distancing or adhesion in order to maintain stability. The recent discussion of Japan’s autonomous strike capabilities, as well as U.S. silence on the issue, arises from this dynamic alliance dilemma. Japan will never have a “spear” capability unless both sides succeed in assuaging each other’s fears.

Furthermore, as a note of caution, states should also be warned that waffling can create counter-productive results in the long run by undermining credibility and loyalty. Waffling, an essentially passive behavior, may appear rational to a state that plays the primary defending role in an alliance. However, from the perspective of the protégé, waiting for international pressure in order to respond indicates a lack of leadership. History has revealed that while making ambiguous commitments may be an optimal strategy for a period of time, it is ultimately not the best strategy to deter against aggression from a determined challenger in the long run.  

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Appendix. U.S. Government Officials’ Statements on the Senkaku Islands

1 = The United States does not take a stance on sovereignty of the Senkaku Islands
2 = Article V applies to Senkaku Islands as they are under Japan’s administrative control
3 = The United States opposes unilateral actions to change the status quo through coercion
4 = The United States urges the reduction of tensions and peaceful resolutions to disputes

O = present; X = absent; # = Implied but not explicitly stated

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No responses to the inquiries made by the Government of Japan and other Japanese media regarding the U.S. stance on the Senkaku Islands

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Teraoka | Adhering, Distancing, or Waffling?

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References


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“Ambassador Cui Tiankai Delivered A Speech on the New Model of Major Country Relationship Between China and the US.” April 11, 2014.


