

Japan's Approach toward ASEAN-led Security Multilateralism: Coordinating Strategic Agendas with the United States

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Introduction

This paper discusses Japan's approach toward security multilateralism in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in terms of cooperation and coordination with the United States. During the past decades, Japan has vigorously strengthened political and security cooperation with Southeast Asia. One of its main activities has been to actively participate in ASEAN-led multilateral frameworks. Since the establishment of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1994, which was the first instance of ASEAN taking the initiative to form a cooperative security mechanism involving outside major powers, Japan has continuously and consistently supported ASEAN in reinforcing its multilateral network. Japan's strategic objectives in ASEAN-led multilateralism are to continue to be a relevant partner to ASEAN, to play a significant role in regional issues as a regional stakeholder, and to manage great-power relations within specific multilateral frameworks.

In fact, Japan's security approach toward ASEAN multilateralism has always considered, and been strongly influenced by, external factors beyond Japan-ASEAN cooperation, including Japan's relationship with the United States based on the Japan-U.S. security alliance. Thus, this paper explores the modalities of the link between Japan's engagement in ASEAN-centered security frameworks and Tokyo's collaboration with Washington over the past two decades, as they relate to Japan's evolving strategic interests.

This paper consists of three sections. The first section examines how Japan has been engaged in ASEAN-related security institutions to attain its strategic objectives, and how those objectives have evolved over time. The second section explores and assesses the importance of Japan-U.S. cooperation in shaping the agendas in these institutions; it refers to the opportunities and challenges for engagement with other like-minded countries. Finally, the third section points out policy recommendations that Japan can adopt to further enhance its leadership role in ASEAN security multilateralism and support a rules-based international order.

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Evolution of Japan's Strategic Interests in ASEAN-led Security Multilateralism

Japan's proactive approach toward ASEAN-centered security multilateralism has been consistent and coherent. Since the 1990s, Tokyo has enthusiastically participated in multilateral frameworks of security cooperation led by ASEAN, in step with the whole region's endeavor to promote confidence and trust among countries in the Indo-Pacific and enhance regional security. Japan's engagement can be categorized into three types: first, it supported ASEAN's formation of a mechanism for addressing regional security issues; second, it developed, transformed, or expanded existing mechanisms; and third, it supported ASEAN efforts to "reinforce" its multilateral structure. These three types of participation correspond to the following three frameworks: ARF, the East Asia Summit (EAS), and ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) Plus. Further, Japan's strategic objectives for taking part in ASEAN multilateral frameworks have evolved over time; the three phases of evolution correspond to these three frameworks. This evolutionary process also indicates Japan's gradual but steady clarification of perceived security concerns about China, and its careful consideration about how Japan should cooperate with the United States to address this "China challenge."

Phase 1 (1990s): Supporting the Formation of the ARF

The ARF was established in 1994 as the first ASEAN-led security dialogue across the Indo-Pacific. This security dialogue aimed at creating conditions for a new balance of major powers in the region after the end of the Cold War; these conditions would facilitate ASEAN's efforts to maintain, and possibly enhance, its strategic autonomy. In cooperation with Australia, Japan supported ASEAN in launching the framework. In the negotiation process for forming the ARF, Japan conducted "behind-the-scenes" diplomacy to avoid criticism—mainly centered on skepticism about Japan's intention to play a more proactive role in regional security—from regional countries. Japan "took the lead from behind" and backed up Singapore's initiative to establish a region-wide dialogue mechanism. Further, to encourage the United States to participate in the ARF, Japan made great efforts to convince Washington of the importance and effectiveness of a multilateral security dialogue for regional security.²

Japan's initiative in the formation of the ARF was motivated by two strategic objectives. First, Tokyo sought to play a greater political and security role in the region that

² Takeshi Yuzawa, *Japan's Security Policy and the ASEAN Regional Forum: The Search for Multilateral Security in the Asia-Pacific* (Routledge, 2007), pp. 44-48.

went beyond its role in the Japan-U.S. alliance; this role would be commensurate with its status as a great economic power. This desire was strengthened by international criticism of Japan's passive attitude toward contributions to international security after the Cold War. Japan was also motivated by rapid improvements in diplomatic relations between various regional countries during that period and saw an opportunity to develop security cooperation accordingly. Japan's second strategic objective stemmed from the need to address newly emerging security uncertainties and risks, such as unresolved territorial disputes and persistent distrust and suspicion among regional countries. These new security challenges stemmed mainly from China's rapid economic development and increasing military expenditures, which generated great concern among regional countries, including Japan.³

The ARF was also expected to contribute to the reinforcement of Japan's security policy based on "multilayered security cooperation," a combination of bilateral and multilateral security alliance and partnerships. This has long been a key concept in Japan's approach toward multilateral security cooperation. In supporting ASEAN's formation of the ARF, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan developed the concept of a "multifaceted approach" toward regional security. Against the backdrop of a volatile security situation in the Indo-Pacific caused by the end of the Cold War and a resurgent China, this approach was intended to accomplish the following four objectives: (i) developing economic cooperation; (ii) pursuing ways to address ongoing disputes and conflicts; (iii) maintaining existing security arrangements, including the Japan-U.S. alliance; and (iv) promoting confidence building measures. Within this context, from Japan's perspective the ARF was, at the outset, established mainly to accomplish the fourth objective. The forum was thus expected to improve the security environment in the region through a deepening of mutual understanding and trust among regional countries. Further, Japan expected the framework to address, to a certain degree, sensitive security issues, such as territorial disputes.⁴

Since the ARF's foundation, the Japanese government has been consistently keen to promote confidence building measures. But as time went on, Tokyo's expectations and enthusiasm waned because of the ARF's failure to evolve as an institution from a forum for

³ Takeshi Yuzawa, "From a decentering to recentering imperative: Japan's approach to Asian security multilateralism," *The Pacific Review*, 31:4 (2018), pp. 463-465.

⁴ Tomotaka Shoji, "Japan's Perspective on the Security Environment in the Asia Pacific and Its Approach toward Multilateral Cooperation: Contradictory or Consistent?" *Prospects of Multilateral Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific: To Overcome the Gap of Security Outlooks*, NIDS International Symposium on Security Affairs 2013 (October, 2014), p. 93.

confidence building toward a venue for preventive diplomacy.⁵ However, Japan believes that the ARF has retained its effectiveness in terms of promoting practical cooperation, and particularly in holding joint exercises for nontraditional security. For example, Japan actively participated in the ASEAN Regional Forum Disaster Relief Exercise (ARF-DiREx), a civil-military joint exercise regularly conducted every two years from 2009–2015. (In 2011, Japan co-hosted the second ARF-DiREx with Indonesia.) Japan’s current effort to revitalize the ARF aims to build on these habits of practical cooperation and strengthen confidence and trust among participants that could in turn help the ARF move from confidence building to practicing preventive diplomacy.⁶

Phase 2 (2000s): Pursuit of Expanding Membership to the EAS

In response to the Asian financial crisis in 1997, ASEAN and three Northeast Asian countries (Japan, China, and South Korea) agreed to establish a new cooperative framework—the ASEAN Plus Three (APT). The APT had two contrasting implications for Japan’s China policy within the context of ASEAN multilateralism. The first implication was the possibility of increasing opportunities for policy coordination with China within the framework. On the other hand, Japan feared that this cooperative mechanism might expand China’s influence over the region and lead to a relative decline in Japan’s influence because the APT would enable China to take the initiative in East Asian politics by excluding the United States.⁷

In the 2000s, Japan’s concern about China regarding regional politics and security deepened. During this period, China steadily expanded its political influence over ASEAN by vigorously promoting economic cooperation, such as the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area (ACFTA). Regarding regional security, China’s military grew active in the East China Sea; further, Beijing unilaterally conducted gas field development in the areas of the sea adjacent to its border with Japan. Facing a growing challenge from China, Japan, in cooperation with the United States, encouraged like-minded countries such as Australia and India to participate in

⁵ Takeshi Yuzawa, “Japan and the ASEAN Regional Forum: From Enthusiasm to Disappointment,” Jürgen Haacke and Noel M. Morada eds., *Cooperative Security in the Asia-Pacific: The ASEAN Regional Forum* (Routledge, 2010), pp. 72-73.

⁶ Shoji, “Japan’s Perspective on the Security Environment in the Asia Pacific and Its Approach toward Multilateral Cooperation,” pp. 93-94.

⁷ Tomotaka Shoji, “Pursuing a Multi-dimensional Relationship: Rising China and Japan’s Southeast Asia Policy,” Jun Tsunekawa ed., *The Rise of China: Responses from Southeast Asia and Japan* (NIDS, 2009), p. 172.

East Asian politics by spreading universal values, such as human rights and democracy.⁸ To address China's rise, Japan also created the concept of an "East Asian Community" in an attempt to enmesh China's political influence in a region-wide multilateral framework.

Against this backdrop, discussions about membership in a new ASEAN institution, the East Asia Summit (EAS), became a chessboard on which the rivalry between Japan and China played out. This Japan-China rivalry led to tensions between inclusiveness and exclusiveness in regional multilateralism. At the APT Bali summit in 2003, participating countries agreed to pursue the possibility of developing the existing APT framework into the EAS. Japan sought the involvement of Australia, New Zealand, and India in this new summit to make it more inclusive and to balance China's influence, while China sought to confine membership to APT participants so that this new framework would be more exclusive. ASEAN members' views were divided: Malaysia tended to be on the Chinese side, while Indonesia, which was cautious of a powerful and dominant China, supported Japan's idea. Eventually, the APT Ministerial Meeting held in July 2005 announced that the first EAS would include Australia, New Zealand, and India as the new participants. Japan's position vis-à-vis EAS membership was adopted, partly because in addition to Indonesia's strong support, India was very positive about participating in the EAS to support its goal of becoming a key driver of community building in East Asia.⁹

Phase 3 (2010s): Active Participation in the ADMM Plus

Japan has been an enthusiastic supporter of another ASEAN forum, the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) Plus, since its foundation in 2010. Japan's Ministry of Defense (MOD), responsible for the ADMM Plus within the government, has regarded the meeting highly because it is the only official meeting among defense ministers in the Indo-Pacific region. In this regard, the MOD has actively supported the ADMM Plus to promote substantial security cooperation in the region.¹⁰

The ADMM Plus consists of a ministerial-level meeting, but there are also various sub-meetings including experts' working groups (EWGs) that address various issues. The participants in EWGs conduct cooperative activities in seven fields pertaining to nontraditional

⁸ Takashi Terada, *Higashi-Ajia to Ajia-Taiheiyō: Kyōgo Suru Chiki-Tōgō* [East Asia and the Asia Pacific: Competing Regional Integration Initiatives] (University of Tokyo Press, 2013), p. 135

⁹ Shoji, "Pursuing a Multi-dimensional Relationship," pp. 172-174.

¹⁰ *Defense of Japan 2019*, p. 378.

security: counterterrorism, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR), maritime security, military medicine, peacekeeping operations (PKO), demining, and cyber. Japan's proactiveness was demonstrated by its co-chairmanship of two EWGs: the EWG on military medicine with Singapore in 2010-2011, as well as the EWG on HA/DR with Laos in 2014-2015¹¹. Further, the MOD and Self-Defense Forces have actively participated in meetings and joint exercises related to other EWGs.

Japan has sought to attain three strategic objectives in the ADMM Plus. First, Tokyo expected that cooperation in nontraditional security would positively affect traditional security. Japan has been facing a serious security challenge from China in the East China Sea, especially since 2010 when a fierce political quarrel occurred between the two countries after a Chinese fisherman was arrested by the Japan Coast Guard for illegal fishing activities. Since then, China's assertiveness has grown steadily, and Chinese government vessels have repeatedly intruded into Japan's territorial waters around the Senkaku Islands. Facing this China challenge, Japan hoped for a "spill-over" effect to transform deepening cooperation with China on nontraditional security matters into a cooperative atmosphere to alleviate tensions in the realm of traditional security. Unfortunately, Tokyo so far has not found any indication that deepening multilateral cooperation in nontraditional security matters has a positive impact. Rather, multilateral cooperation seems to be operating separately from ongoing tensions in the maritime domain.

Japan's second strategic objective is to use multilateral gatherings including the ADMM Plus as venues to convey Japan's stance on specific security issues and promote dialogue, even on sensitive matters such as maritime and territorial disputes. In April 2007, the MOD issued an official notice under the vice minister's name titled "Basic Policy for Defense Exchanges (BPDE)." The document aimed to outline a basic approach for promoting active defense exchanges by the ministry and set general guidelines for the MOD's policy on defense dialogues and other types of defense cooperation.¹² The BPDE stipulated that defense exchanges should be conducted to promote understanding of Japan's defense policy and posture, as well as convey Japan's concerns about other countries' defense policies or military activities and encourage them to revise their approaches.¹³ In this regard, bilateral/trilateral meetings held on the sidelines of multilateral dialogues are equally important to address sensitive security issues. In fact, at the inaugural ADMM Plus meeting held in October 2010, the defense

¹¹ In the fourth terms of the ADMM Plus (2020-2023), Japan will co-chair with Vietnam the EWG on PKO.

¹² National Institute for Defense Studies, *East Asian Strategic Review 2013*, pp. 120-121.

¹³ MOD, "Boei Koryu no Kihon Hoshin nitsuite (Tsutatsu) [Basic Policy for Defense Exchanges]," p. 5.

ministers of Japan and China held talks for the first time since the aforementioned Senkaku incident; further, this informal bilateral meeting actually created an atmosphere that improved, to some degree, their strained relations since the incident.¹⁴

Japan's third strategic objective is to forge security ties with ASEAN by supporting ASEAN's centrality in a regional security framework. There are two main reasons why Japan is so involved in strengthening security cooperation with ASEAN. First, the Japanese government is pursuing a more "comprehensive" partnership with ASEAN by forging security ties to support stability in Southeast Asia, in addition to longstanding economic and political cooperation. This initiative is motivated in part by a desire to remain "relevant" for ASEAN against the backdrop of competition with other external powers, especially China. The other dimension is the increasing importance of ASEAN for Japan's own security, especially concerning maritime issues. Beijing's growing assertiveness in the East and South China Seas has prompted Tokyo to cooperate with regional partners in jointly addressing China's behavior. In sum, Japan's motivation to pursue more security cooperation with ASEAN is closely related to the rise of China.

Japan-U.S. Cooperation in ASEAN-centered Multilateral Mechanisms

The Japan-U.S. alliance, together with Japan's own defense capabilities, continues to be the cornerstone of Japan's security strategy. Fulfilling its own responsibility as a sovereign country is the way for Japan to fully play its role in the alliance. It is also the foundation upon which Japan should strategically promote security cooperation with other partners, in line with the government's vision of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)."¹⁵ Based on the FOIP vision, Japan should be active in enhancing its defense capabilities and conducting defense cooperation and exchanges, including joint exercises, capacity-building support, and cooperation in defense equipment and technology. Further, in addressing global security challenges, Japan should position the Japan-U.S. alliance as its cornerstone and work closely with countries that share universal values and strategic interests through full coordination with diplomatic activities.¹⁶

¹⁴ MOD, "Nicchu Boeisho niyoru Kondan (Gaiyo) [Outline of talks between Japanese and Chinese Defense Ministers]," October 11, 2010.

¹⁵ MOD, *National Defense Program Guidelines for FY 2019 and beyond*, December 18, 2018, p. 2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

In this regard, Japan is putting its alliance with the United States at the center of its security strategy and identifying other bilateral/trilateral partnerships and multilateral mechanisms to network alliance cooperation. Japan has prioritized forging relationships with other U.S. allies, such as Australia, and emerging powers, including India, in bilateral, trilateral, and multilateral forums. Tokyo is seeking to strengthen ties with ASEAN countries as well. In this concentric circle of multilayered security cooperation, multilateral frameworks are complementing and fortifying bilateral/trilateral partnerships. In this sense, from Japan's perspective ASEAN multilateralism should address both traditional and nontraditional security matters.¹⁷

Japan-U.S. cooperation in ASEAN-led multilateral frameworks functions at two levels: "normative" and "practical." The "normative" level indicates cooperation mainly on three issues: maintaining the presence of the United States in ASEAN multilateral institutions; ensuring rule of law and freedom of navigation are priorities on ASEAN's agenda; and repeatedly stating that the South China Sea is one of the most important topics to discuss in multilateral security dialogues, despite China's opposition.

The "practical" level focuses not only on the two states' coordination in conducting substantial activities in multilateral frameworks, such as the ADMM Plus, but also on "ad hoc mini-lateral" cooperation, including trilateral or quadrilateral joint exercises. This type of cooperation refers to joint activities among Japan, the United States, and a specific ASEAN country; they are sometimes joined by Australia or India. This practical level cooperation is highly significant for building trust and confidence among participants and collectively enhancing political and diplomatic leverage in multilateral agenda-setting.

Japan-U.S. Cooperation at the Normative Level

As mentioned in the previous section, Japan and the United States share a concern about China's rise and its growing assertiveness in the East and South China Seas. Within the context of the China challenge, Japan, in successfully establishing the ARF, persuaded the United States to participate by supplementing the hub-and-spoke system of U.S.-led alliances.¹⁸ The United States did not initially take part in the EAS, but Japan coordinated with Washington to expand the membership to include "like-minded" countries such as Australia and India. The

¹⁷ Shoji, "Japan's Perspective on the Security Environment in the Asia Pacific and Its Approach toward Multilateral Cooperation," p. 92.

¹⁸ Yuzawa, *Japan's Security Policy and the ASEAN Regional Forum*, pp. 45-48.

United States supported their participation to promote basic and universal values such as human rights, as well as to prevent the isolation of Japan within the EAS framework. Tokyo and Washington expected Australia and India to play a role in putting these universal values on the EAS agenda. Further, Japan sent a letter to APT countries to convey a message about the possibility of the United States attending the EAS as an observer.¹⁹ Subsequently, the Obama administration, which was more active and interested in ASEAN multilateralism than the previous administration, decided to become a formal member of the EAS in 2011 and underscore the U.S. commitment to multilateral institutions in the Indo-Pacific to reinforce a system of rules, responsibilities, and norms to secure regional peace, stability, and prosperity.²⁰

The second aspect of Japan-U.S. cooperation in ASEAN multilateralism pertains specifically to setting basic rules for securing the existing regional order. For example, at the 2019 EAS held in Bangkok, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe mentioned strengthening maritime security based on the rule of law and noted that Japan was strongly opposed to any unilateral attempt to change the status quo by force or by intimidation against other countries. Prime Minister Abe also stated that Japan would urge the peaceful resolution of disputes in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).²¹ In addition, at the U.S.-ASEAN Summit held in conjunction with the 2019 EAS, U.S. National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien, as head of the U.S. delegation, reaffirmed that the United States and ASEAN shared a commitment to maintaining and promoting peace, security, and stability in the region, as well as the peaceful resolution of disputes; this included full respect for legal and diplomatic processes, without resorting to the threat or use of force, in accordance with international law, including UNCLOS. Further, the United States and ASEAN reiterated their shared commitment to supporting ASEAN's centrality and ASEAN-led mechanisms in an evolving regional architecture that is open, transparent, inclusive, and rules-based.²²

Japan and the United States have also coordinated a normative agenda in multilateral meetings on defense issues. At the 2019 ADMM Plus, Defense Minister Taro Kono, echoing the remarks made by Prime Minister Abe, stated that Japan was strongly opposed to any unilateral attempt to change the status quo by force, as well as coercion against other parties,

¹⁹ Terada, *Higashi-Ajia to Ajia-Taiheiyo*, p. 140.

²⁰ The White House, "Fact Sheet: East Asia Summit," November 19, 2011.

²¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFA), "The 14th East Asia Summit," November 4, 2019.

²² US Mission to ASEAN, "Chairman's Statement of the 7th ASEAN-United States Summit," Bangkok/Nonthaburi, November 4, 2019.

and that the country would urge peaceful resolution of disputes in accordance with UNCLOS.²³ At the same meeting, U.S. Secretary of Defense Mark T. Esper stated that it was important for the nations concerned to assert their rights and emphasize the importance of international law.²⁴

More specifically, Japan and the United States have cooperated in continuously putting the South China Sea on the agenda in multilateral settings. At the ARF meeting held in 2010, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton discussed U.S. interests in maintaining free shipping in the South China Sea and offered to facilitate multilateral dialogue on disputed sovereignty claims between regional states. Japan and other countries expressed similar sentiments, and the United States and Japan in effect “internationalized” and “multilateralized” the South China Sea issue in coordination with some ASEAN members, despite China’s insistence that the issue be dealt with on a bilateral basis.

Since then, Tokyo and Washington have repeatedly put the South China Sea on the agenda at various ASEAN dialogues. For example, at the EAS Foreign Ministers’ Meeting held in August 2019, then-Foreign Minister Kono stressed the importance of upholding the rule of law and stated that Japan shared a serious concern with other EAS countries over the worsening situation in the East and South China Seas. Subsequently, at the ADMM Plus in November 2019, Kono, in his new role as Defense Minister, reiterated that Japan strongly expected an effective and substantive code of conduct (COC) in the South China Sea to be concluded that was consistent with international law, including UNCLOS, and that did not infringe on the legitimate rights and interests of all parties.²⁵ At the U.S.-ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting held in conjunction with the 2019 ADMM Plus, Secretary Esper criticized China’s behavior in the South China Sea and expressed skepticism about Beijing’s approach toward the COC.²⁶ Further, Defense Minister Kono and Secretary Esper held a bilateral meeting on the sidelines of the ADMM Plus in which they agreed it was important to work together to ensure that the rule of law and freedom of navigation are firmly established in the East and South China Seas.²⁷

²³ MOD, “Defense Minister Kono’s Participation in the 6th ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting-Plus, the 5th ASEAN-Japan Defence Ministers’ Informal Meeting, and Bilateral and Trilateral Defense Ministerial Meetings,” November 19, 2019.

²⁴ *The Manila Times*, November 19, 2019.

²⁵ MOD, “Defense Minister Kono’s Participation in the 6th ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting-Plus, the 5th ASEAN-Japan Defense Ministers’ Informal Meeting, and Bilateral and Trilateral Defense Ministerial Meetings,” November 19, 2019.

²⁶ *The Mainichi*, November 18, 2019.

²⁷ MOD, “Japan-US Defense Ministerial Meeting (summary),” November 18, 2019.

Japan-U.S. Cooperation at the Practical Level

Japan's MOD has been participating in and providing support for the ADMM Plus by focusing on practical cooperation. In addition to actively participating in EWG meetings and relevant joint exercises to promote practical cooperation, Japan is keen to establish rules to manage potential conflicts at sea and in the air. In October 2018, Defense Minister Takeshi Iwaya attended the fifth ADMM Plus held in Singapore. In his speech, he highly appreciated the adoption of the Guidelines for Air Military Encounters (GAME), stating that the enhancement and development of the rule of law would contribute to building confidence within the region.²⁸

More specifically, Japan's approach toward ASEAN security is embedded in the Vientiane Vision. In November 2016, the second ASEAN-Japan Defense Ministers' Informal Meeting was held in Vientiane, Laos. During this meeting, Defense Minister Tomomi Inada proposed Japan's initiative, "Vientiane Vision: Japan's Defense Cooperation Initiative with ASEAN," as a guideline for Japan-ASEAN defense cooperation. The Vientiane Vision is the first document on Japan's defense policy to clearly present an overall picture of the areas of priority in future defense collaboration between Japan and ASEAN. In this vision document, in addition to achieving bilateral defense cooperation with ASEAN member states, Japan will promote multilateral defense cooperation with ASEAN that contributes to the association's capacity building through a focus on: (i) consolidating the regional/maritime order in line with the principles of international law; (ii) reinforcing maritime security cooperation; and (iii) effectively addressing increasingly diverse and complex security issues.²⁹

In accordance with the Vientiane Vision, Japan has conducted activities to support ASEAN's capacity building in cooperation with the United States, even going outside the framework of the multilateral ADMM Plus to do so. For example, regarding capacity-building support to Vietnam, Japan has so far conducted relevant projects on underwater medicine and aviation safety in cooperation with the United States and Australia. Further, Japan cooperated with the United States and Australia in conducting projects on military medicine and engineering in the Philippines. And Japan is active in cooperating with the United States in joint exercises involving specific ASEAN countries. From Japan's perspective, the Pacific Partnership, a U.S.-led humanitarian and disaster-response preparation mission in the Indo-Pacific, can be a part of Japan's cooperation with the United States in ASEAN security. Japan's

²⁸ *Defense of Japan 2019*, p. 378

²⁹ MOD, "Vientiane Vision: Japan's Defense Cooperation Initiative with ASEAN."

Self Defense Forces have participated in the mission since 2010.

Challenges for Japan-U.S. Cooperation

While cooperating in ASEAN multilateral frameworks, there are several challenges Japan and the United States need to address and eventually overcome. The first challenge is a divergence in views regarding the FOIP vision. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe unveiled Japan's FOIP vision at the 2016 Tokyo International Conference of African Development (TICAD) meeting, and President Donald Trump responded positively to Japan's initiative by introducing a U.S. FOIP framework in his speech at the 2017 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Vietnam. While there is some overlap, the two visions emphasize different aspects of regional engagement, placing a premium on close coordination between the two countries.

The FOIP vision advocated by Japan focuses on the improvement of connectivity between Asia and Africa through the Indo-Pacific and the promotion of stability and prosperity in the region. For example, one of the main goals of FOIP is to support infrastructure development in the region, and in June 2018 Prime Minister Abe announced plans to establish a USD 50 billion investment and loan framework. Japan's FOIP vision also ties the East China Sea to the South China Sea by promoting peace, stability, and prosperity across the Indo-Pacific and emphasizing a "free and open" architecture for the provision of international public goods. As Kei Koga correctly points out, Japan's FOIP initially included many "conceptual ambiguities." However, Japan has gradually developed the concept and made FOIP more sophisticated as a strategic tool.³⁰ The vision is composed of three pillars: (i) promotion and establishment of the rule of law, freedom of navigation, and free trade; (ii) pursuit of economic prosperity by improving connectivity and strengthening economic partnerships; and (iii) commitment to peace and stability that encompasses capacity building in maritime law enforcement.³¹ Regional security cooperation, such as the capacity-building initiatives with ASEAN countries referenced above, arguably falls under Japan's FOIP umbrella but is deemphasized to account for regional sensitivities about appearing to use FOIP as a means of addressing the China challenge.

In contrast, the U.S. FOIP vision is more military-oriented. In June 2019, the U.S. Department of Defense released its Indo-Pacific Strategy Report. The report describes China

³⁰ Kei Koga, "Japan's 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' Strategy: Tokyo's Tactical Hedging and the Implications for ASEAN," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 41: 2 (2019), p. 288.

³¹ MOFA, "Free and Open Indo-Pacific."

as a revisionist power that “undermines the international system from within by exploiting its benefits while simultaneously eroding the values and principles of the rule-based order.”³² Further, the report predicts that China will become a regional hegemon in the Indo-Pacific that will ultimately seek global dominance in the long term.³³ The report also lists forging strategic partnerships as one of the main policies of the Indo-Pacific strategy, and many ASEAN countries are classified and listed as countries with whom partnerships should be maintained and strengthened.³⁴ The relative emphasis on military tools to shape the regional environment is not so unusual for the United States, but this contrasts with Japan’s approach and could complicate efforts to encourage ASEAN support for the FOIP construct.

How about ASEAN’s reaction to FOIP? ASEAN countries are generally skeptical about the FOIP vision and are especially concerned about the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy. The first area of concern is its confrontational approach toward China, which has become increasingly clear in U.S. strategic documents. ASEAN certainly needs the United States to be present in the region as a security provider and has relied on U.S. strategic engagement to counter China’s growing assertiveness in the South China Sea. However, ASEAN is deeply involved in China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and China is now an indispensable partner for ASEAN, especially in economic matters. Consequently, ASEAN cannot choose between the United States or China, even if it is ultimately required to take the U.S. side when confronting China.

Second, ASEAN’s centrality and unity may be impaired under a FOIP construct. The U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy is based on cooperation with allies; thus, ASEAN is not in a central position. ASEAN’s role in addressing regional issues has traditionally centered on the “Asia-Pacific” as a core regional concept, and the institution also developed various multilateral frameworks for security and economic cooperation. The Indo-Pacific strategy is a regional concept based on shared values, which does not necessarily complement ASEAN’s emphasis on regional diversity. If all the countries participating in the Indo-Pacific strategy have to share common values, the participation of all ASEAN member states is not necessarily guaranteed. Therefore, there is concern about whether ASEAN centrality and FOIP might be mutually exclusive.

³² The US Department of Defense, *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region*, June 1, 2019, p. 7.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 21-41.

The second challenge for U.S.-Japan cooperation is cooperation with like-minded countries. We are currently witnessing remarkable developments in Japan-Australia and Japan-India defense cooperation as the United States also continues to increase cooperation with those partners. Japan currently regards Canberra as a “semi-ally,” and Tokyo and Delhi recently launched a so-called “two-plus-two” to facilitate diplomatic coordination and defense cooperation between the two countries.³⁵ In addition, the United States and Japan have developed trilateral dialogues with Australia and India. Enhanced networking with these like-minded countries can be converted into collective leverage within multilateral mechanisms, though incorporating ASEAN countries into these networks could prove complicated.

ASEAN tends to link FOIP with security cooperation among Japan, the United States, Australia, and India, known as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or Quad. The goal of FOIP is not actually to contain China, but to work together to ensure that China’s expanding power cannot be used to challenge, undermine, and ignore the rules-based order. Ultimately, FOIP is meant to encourage China and other countries to follow existing rules and principles. However, ASEAN also regards the Quad as part of FOIP and is concerned that it may have the purpose of containing China, which could contrast with ASEAN’s principle of balanced external relations.

As a response to the FOIP vision promoted by Japan and the United States, ASEAN released the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) in June 2019. This is a reconfirmation of ASEAN centrality for regional diplomacy and the importance of ASEAN’s multilateral cooperation framework. The AOIP positions ASEAN centrality as a basic principle for promoting cooperation in the Indo-Pacific and uses the EAS as a forum for promoting cooperation among regional countries, including the major powers. The AOIP does not emphasize the role that U.S. alliances and partnerships play in addressing regional political and security issues; rather, it stresses a network of multilateral security cooperation frameworks, where ASEAN coordinates the interests of major powers.³⁶

The third challenge is a lack of high-level interest in ASEAN multilateralism in the United States. Under the Trump administration, U.S. attendance at ASEAN-centered meetings has declined, exemplified by President Trump’s absence from the EAS during 2017-2019. For Southeast Asian politicians, practitioners, and scholars, this lack of high-level focus on ASEAN

³⁵ Tomohiko Satake, “Nichi-Go Domei no Kanosei [Possibility of Establishing a Japan-Australia Alliance],” NIDS Briefing Memo, September 2019.

³⁶ ASEAN, *ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific*, p. 1.

gives the impression that U.S. influence within the region is declining, while at the same time China has been making much more remarkable progress in its relations with ASEAN, as exemplified by the BRI.³⁷ Against the backdrop of this perceived decline in U.S. influence, Japan's leadership role is even more significant. At the 2019 EAS, Japan strove to tie the FOIP and AOIP concepts together. Prime Minister Abe also emphasized the salience of ASEAN's unity and centrality articulated in the outlook and referred to the possibility of pursuing synergistic effects of the two visions.³⁸

Policy Recommendations

What should Japan do to further enhance its leadership role in ASEAN-centered security institutions to support a rules-based international order? First, to enhance its position in ASEAN multilateralism, Japan should continue to strengthen “plus one” cooperation with ASEAN. Since 1997, Japan and ASEAN have regularly held a “plus one” summit (Japan-ASEAN Summit). Moreover, since 2015, a Japan-ASEAN defense ministers' retreat has been held regularly. At the 2019 Japan-ASEAN Defense Ministers' Informal Meeting, Defense Minister Kono revealed an upgraded version of the Vientiane Vision, “Vientiane Vision 2.0,” noting that Japan, in cooperation with other external partners, should reinforce security cooperation with ASEAN.³⁹ Under the Vientiane Vision, Japan is trying to reconcile differences between the U.S., Japanese, and ASEAN visions for the Indo-Pacific and promote synergy based on shared principles including openness, transparency, inclusivity, and a rules-based order. Forging stronger security ties with ASEAN will certainly contribute to enhancing Japan's voice within regional institutions.

Second, as stipulated in the Vientiane Vision 2.0, Japan needs to further support ASEAN's centrality. It is true that Japan and the United States clearly recognize the salience of advocating for this basic principle. Thus, Japan should cooperate with the United States in supporting Vietnam, ASEAN's chair in 2020. Vietnam is committed to defending its interests in the South China Sea, where it has been facing coercion from China. To address China's maritime assertiveness and effectively deal with its “divide and rule” tactics toward ASEAN, Tokyo and Washington should strongly support Vietnam's chairmanship, in addition to broad

³⁷ Ian Storey and Malcom Cook, “The Trump Administration and Southeast Asia: Political Disconnect, Policy Rollout,” *Perspective* (ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute), No. 97, November 21, 2019.

³⁸ MOFA, “The 14th East Asia Summit,” November 4, 2019.

³⁹ MOD, “Bienchan Bijon: Nichi-ASEAN Boei Kyoryoku Inishiatelibu no Appudeto [Vientiane Vision: An Update of the Japan-ASEAN Defense Cooperation Initiative].”

support for ASEAN's centrality and unity.

Third, Japan should engage more with the so-called "pro-China" countries in Southeast Asia—Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar. Japan has to date pursued a "middle way" between the two extremes of being a strong advocate of human rights (the United States) or non-interventionist (China). At present, the Hun Sen regime in Cambodia, which is attempting to maintain its power by authoritarian means, is building very close ties with China. In the event of criticism or sanctions by Western countries against an attempt by a government, particularly an individual political leader, to maintain or strengthen its power or regime, China serves as a protective shield for such governments or leaders. Taking advantage of its position as a politically trusted partner of ASEAN, Japan should mediate between the United States and these pro-China countries to prevent those countries from entering China's orbit of influence.

Fourth, Japan should attempt to be a bridge between the AOIP and the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy. At the 2019 EAS, Prime Minister Abe signaled Japan's endorsement of the AOIP by describing the outlook as a relevant vision "by ASEAN and for ASEAN." Prime Minister Abe stated that Japan would cooperate with ASEAN toward making the AOIP a reality because it could align with Japan's concept of FOIP. To achieve the principles enshrined in the AOIP, Japan should cooperate in various areas such as strengthening maritime security based on the rule of law, enhancing connectivity through quality infrastructure, and ensuring sustainable use of marine resources, including the combatting of illegal fishing.⁴⁰ As a mediator and strong advocate of FOIP, Tokyo should try to effectively synthesize different visions regarding FOIP, and play a "bridging" role in reinforcing U.S.-ASEAN cooperation.

Fifth, Japan should promote dialogue between Australia, India, and ASEAN member countries to explore avenues for cooperation and coordinate priorities in regional institutions.

Conclusion

Japan's strategic aim in actively participating in ASEAN multilateral frameworks has evolved over time, indicating the country's gradual but steady clarification of its China-related security concerns, and its careful consideration about how Tokyo should cooperate with the United States to address the China challenge. In this regard, it has always been salient for Japan to cooperate with the United States in ASEAN-led frameworks, both at the normative and practical levels. However, there are several challenges such as divergences under FOIP,

⁴⁰ MOFA, "The 14th East Asia Summit," November 4, 2019.

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balancing ASEAN centrality with cooperation among like-minded countries, and sustaining high-level U.S. interest and presence in ASEAN institutions. Japan should continue its own efforts to cooperate with ASEAN, continue to coordinate closely with the United States, and deepen engagement with pro-China ASEAN members to enhance its position in ASEAN as a whole. This is a delicate balancing act, but one Japan is well positioned to manage given its long history of engagement with ASEAN and commitment to cooperation with like-minded countries.

(The views expressed herein are entirely the author's and do not represent the official position of his organization.)