

# Strategic Empowerment: Japan’s Evolving Policy toward Southeast Asia from the 2010s

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## Abstract

How has Japan developed its Southeast Asian strategy in the context of the intensifying US-China rivalry since the 2010s? This article argues that the rapidly changing strategic environment brought about by the assertive rise of China prompted Japan to adopt a new strategic vision that went beyond the traditional geographical focus on East Asia. Japan has gradually positioned Southeast Asia as one of the most important strategic theatres in the Indo-Pacific. Utilising its existing economic and diplomatic leverage in Southeast Asia, Japan has been pursuing various types of capacity-building strategies to empower Southeast Asian states and ASEAN to maintain regional autonomy, which the author calls “strategic empowerment”. While Japan has engaged in similar cooperative activities in the past, it has renewed its commitment through three main means: building a strategic partnership in Southeast Asia; promoting international rules, norms and values; and strengthening ASEAN-led institutions.

**Keywords:** Japan, Southeast Asia, Japan-Southeast Asia relations, China, international cooperation, ASEAN, strategic empowerment

## Introduction

The 2010s marked a significant evolution in Japan’s policy toward Southeast Asia. This shift became particularly evident after the second Abe administration clarified Japan’s long-term strategic objectives under the banner of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) during the second half of the decade. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, the objective of the FOIP is to ensure:

[...] the rules-based international order, in a comprehensive, inclusive and transparent manner, attaching importance to ASEAN’s centrality and unity, in order to bring stability and prosperity for every country as well as secure peace and prosperity in the [Indo-Pacific region] as a whole. (MOFA 2022)

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The geographical scope of Japan's "Indo-Pacific" concept encompasses two oceans and two continents – the Indian and Pacific Oceans, as well as the Asian and African continents. The centre of this vast region is Southeast Asia, and therefore it is not surprising that Japan has emphasised the importance of Southeast Asia and shown respect for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

While the meaning of the "rules-based international order" is often contested, for Japan, it refers to the international order based on international rules and norms largely constructed by the United States and its allies, including Japan, since the end of the Cold War. Japan emphasised the importance of this order because it has benefitted economically, militarily and diplomatically from it, and because this order faces increasing challenges from China (MOFA 2023b). To prevent China from rewriting these norms and rules, Japan aims to nurture a diplomatic coalition with regional states, among which Southeast Asian states are key actors.

The means to pursue this strategic objective, however, has not always been laid out clearly. For instance, Japan's institutionalisation of the Quad framework from 2017– Australia, India, Japan and the United States – and its endorsement of the Australia-United Kingdom-United States security partnership, AUKUS, which was established in 2021, may contradict ASEAN centrality, a principle that Japan has long supported in Southeast Asia and beyond.

The Southeast Asia region includes eleven states: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor Leste and Vietnam. Ten of these eleven states are ASEAN members, although Timor Leste will soon become the 11th member state (ASEAN Secretariat 2022). Among them, the Philippines and Thailand are US allies, while Singapore maintains substantial strategic ties with the United States. Since the end of World War II, Japan has nurtured its socio-economic ties with Southeast Asian member states through reparations in the form of service, contributing to socio-economic development in the region.

However, China's rapid economic growth and its development assistance have not only created economic competition with Japan but also facilitated competition over political and security influence in the region. The emergence of these strategic dynamics prompts the question: To what extent does Japan's evolving strategic posture in Southeast Asia, as evidenced in the 2010s, represent a shift from the past rather than a continuity?

I argue that Japan has gradually positioned Southeast Asia as one of the most crucial strategic theatres in the Indo-Pacific region since 2017, when Japan clearly incorporated ASEAN into its "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" concept. This is largely due to the assertive rise of China since 2008, which has extended its economic, diplomatic and military influence beyond its traditional geographical scope of East Asia through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

(cf. Johnston 2013, Li 2020). Leveraging its existing economic and diplomatic influence in Southeast Asia, Japan has implemented various capacity-building strategies to empower Southeast Asian states and ASEAN, aiming to help them maintain their regional autonomy – a strategy I refer to as “strategic empowerment”. While similar cooperative activities have occurred in the past, Japan has renewed its commitment through three main means: establishing strategic partnerships in Southeast Asia; promoting international rules, norms and values; and enhancing ASEAN-led institutions.

## Literature review on Japan–Southeast Asia relations

The existing literature on Japan–Southeast Asia relations can be classified into three categories: 1) the development of political relations; 2) diplomatic and security cooperation; and 3) socio-economic cooperation, including Sino-Japanese strategic competition in regional economic cooperation and infrastructure development in the region. The first category focuses on the positive development of the political relationship between Japan and Southeast Asian states, with studies highlighting the 1977 Fukuda Doctrine, which marked a reorientation of Japan’s relations with Southeast Asian states.<sup>1</sup> The Fukuda Doctrine emphasised three principles: Japan would not become a military power in the region; it would construct “heart-to-heart” relationships as an equal partner; and it would facilitate mutual understanding between countries, which was particularly important against the background of Japan’s role in World War II and the strained relations with Southeast Asian countries that followed.

The second category focuses on Japan’s renewed diplomatic and security policy vis-à-vis Southeast Asia in the post–Cold War era, which extended beyond mere socio-economic cooperation. While Japan’s engagement in the region during the Cold War was predominantly in socio-economic fields, such as infrastructure development, its international role expanded to include diplomatic and security fields as demands for Japan’s security burden-sharing at the international level increased in the post–Gulf War period. Studies capture this trend and illustrate how Japan struck a fine balance between being a non-military great power and playing an active diplomatic and security role, including supporting ASEAN-led institution building in the Asia-Pacific.<sup>2</sup> Essentially, Japan’s concept of comprehensive security, which is not limited to military roles, enabled Japan to become proactive in fields of non-traditional security such as counter-piracy and human security.<sup>3</sup>

1 Cf. Koga 2017, Pressello 2014, Lam 2013, Singh 2002, Sudo 1992.

2 Terada 2001, 2003; Yuzawa 2007; Katsumata 2009.

3 Cf. Bradford 2004; Lam 1996, 2006; Katsumata 2006; Singh 2010.

The third category discusses Japan's engagement with Southeast Asia through socio-economic cooperation, particularly after the 2000s, including free trade agreements and development assistance. Japan has long engaged in development assistance for Southeast Asia since the 1950s, and this has become a core of Japan's diplomatic leverage in the region (Katzenstein / Shiraishi 1997, Trinidad 2007, Yamamoto 2017). At the same time, as China's rise became more evident from the late 1990s, Japan began to compete with China in terms of their respective economic and political leverage in Southeast Asia. In fact, many studies focus on the strategic competition between Japan and China after the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, because this triggered an acceleration of China's growing socio-economic influence through such means as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).<sup>4</sup>

While these existing studies cover a broad range of Japan–Southeast Asia relations, there has until now been little discussion about Japan's growing strategic role in the region. Indeed, Japan has gradually shifted its relationship with Southeast Asian states in more strategic terms, which is well illustrated by Japan's Indo-Pacific strategy (Ciorciari / Tsutsui 2021). Nevertheless, since this trend only emerged around the 2010s, not many academic studies on the shift in Japan's approach toward Southeast Asia have been conducted. In the following, I will introduce the concept of “strategic empowerment” to analyse how Japan has strategically engaged with Southeast Asian states since the 2010s. During this period, Japan's strategic thinking became more evident, particularly under the banner of a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific”.

## Strategic empowerment

The concept of empowerment is prevalent across a broad range of disciplines, including gender studies, race relations, economics and business management. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, “empowerment” refers to “the process of gaining freedom and power to do what you want or to control what happens to you” (Cambridge Dictionary 2024). In the context of social policies, empowerment signifies the connection between individual competencies and social changes (Perkins / Zimmerman 1995). In business management, it aims to “foster employees' effectiveness, creativity, commitment, performance, and other positive work-related attitudes and behaviors, while providing an essential tool for leadership development and succession planning” (Albayrak / Ertürk 2021). For gender and race, it represents a transformative change in social status

4 Katada / Liao 2020, Koga 2016, Oba 2016, Solis / Katada 2015, Wilson 2015, Yoshimatsu 2023, Zhao 2019.

towards equality (Albayrak / Ertürk 2021, Feldman / Khademian 2003). In short, “empowerment” contributes to enhancing others’ capacity to achieve their desired outcomes.

In the field of international relations, numerous international activities resemble “empowerment” on a larger, state level, such as arming, development assistance, military education, capacity-building programmes and knowledge/skill transfer. Strategically, these activities are often categorised as part of “off-shore balancing”. This state strategy attempts to reduce the major power’s security commitment to a particular region or local state while strengthening the local state’s capabilities, by providing support to counterbalance a shared threat (Layne 1997, Mearsheimer / Walt 2016). Its logic rests essentially on the politics of the balance of power, and, in essence, this illustrates the major power’s attempts to defer to a local state to maintain or change a regional balance of power in the major power’s favour (Harris 2023). Yet, if necessary, the major power has the option to directly intervene to maintain or change a regional strategic balance. This is often discussed in the context of US strategy in a specific region, particularly East Asia, regarding the degree to which the United States needs to commit itself to regional security or to rely on its regional allies and partners vis-à-vis the rise of China (cf. Layne 1997, Brands / Feaver 2016).

However, categorising all support activities as “offshore balancing” is misleading. While these activities aim to incentivise regional states to act for similar strategic purposes, it is important to acknowledge the variances in their objectives. For example, a supporting state may use those activities to make other states comply with its desires. If those states’ behaviours deviate, the state may resort to coercive diplomacy by threatening to withdraw its support and directly intervene. Conversely, a state may use support activities to empower other states to become more politically and economically stable, thereby enhancing their autonomy. This second type of support is based on the assumption that a supported state will not align closely with particular great powers to upset a strategic balance. This approach, “strategic empowerment”, refers to the provision of support activities, such as law enforcement capacity building, that provide a state with the strategic ability to ensure its own independence and autonomy.

To implement strategic empowerment, a state does not explicitly guide support-recipient states towards its own preferred outcomes. Although the general concept of empowerment frequently assumes a principal-agent relationship that infers social stratification, strategic empowerment does not aim to consolidate such a relationship. Instead, by understanding a recipient state’s security preferences and needs, the supporting state attempts to engage with them through various security activities. Generally, the strategic preferences of the recipient

state are manifested by certain state strategies, particularly hedging.<sup>5</sup> While there are still debates over whether hedging is a strategy or behaviour or whether hedging can be conducted in a severe strategic environment, such a strategy can be seen as a signal of a recipient state's desire to maintain autonomy and independence.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, there is always a risk of misperceptions and misunderstandings in assessing other states' behaviour or strategies, resulting in a possibility of failure of strategic empowerment. Moreover, providing such support could inadvertently create the impression of social stratification at the international level, potentially causing a backlash within recipient states, which might then become hesitant to receive further assistance. Therefore, a supporting state needs to conduct strategic empowerment in a careful manner, by monitoring recipient states' reactions and avoiding the perceived imposition of such support.

## Developing a strategic environment in Southeast and East Asia

Japan's concept of "strategic empowerment" emerged in the 2010s amidst the rise of China, which posed a challenge to Japan's diplomatic influence in Southeast Asia. However, its foundation was laid well before this period when Japan enhanced its relations with ASEAN through two key engagements: diplomatic reconciliation and socio-economic cooperation.

First, Japan fostered an "equal partnership" with Southeast Asian states through the 1977 Fukuda Doctrine. After World War II, relations between Japan and Southeast Asian states were strained, hampering efforts to overcome the animosity remaining from the war. Although economic ties improved, diplomatic tensions persisted due to scepticism that perceived Japan's re-emerging economic influence as neo-imperialistic ambition. Indeed, the first Japan-ASEAN forum in 1973 was established not to strengthen economic ties but to alleviate tensions over Japan's synthetic rubber exports, which threatened Southeast Asia's natural rubber industry (Government of Japan 2023). Also, Japanese Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka's visit to Southeast Asia in 1974 was met with significant protest, particularly in Thailand and Indonesia.

In response, Prime Minister Takeo Fukuda launched the "Fukuda Doctrine" during a 1977 speech in Manila, the Philippines, declaring Japan's commitment to a diplomatically equal partnership with Southeast Asian states based

<sup>5</sup> State strategy entails, at a minimum, balancing, hedging, and bandwagoning within the balance of power theory.

<sup>6</sup> Ciorciari / Haacke 2019, Koga 2018a, Korolev 2019, Kuik 2016.

on mutual interests and understanding. Japan's diplomatic objective to be a proper member of Asia, as stipulated in Japan's diplomatic bluebook in 1958, necessitated this foreign policy posture toward Southeast Asia, to nurture a non-hierarchical relationship. This prompted Japan's efforts to ease tensions through people-to-people exchanges and official dialogues, including becoming a formal dialogue partner with ASEAN in 1977 (ASEAN Secretariat 2023). Subsequently, Japan closely collaborated with ASEAN member states on economic policy coordination during the Cold War and on security cooperation in the post-Cold War era.

Second, Japan leveraged its economic power to facilitate socio-economic development in the Southeast Asian states. Japan provided war reparations to Southeast Asian states such as Myanmar, Indonesia, the Philippines and South Vietnam after the second World War, while Laos and Cambodia did not seek reparations and agreed to receive economic aid. Independence movements in the region complicated post-war reconciliation, promoting Japan to use economic grants and assistance as a means of compensation. Also, Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore received economic aid through Japan's Official Development Assistance (ODA), totalling USD 20.4 billion from 1964 to 1989 (MOFA 2023).

After the 1985 Plaza Accord among the G5 nations to devalue the US dollar against the Japanese yen, the appreciated Japanese yen promoted overseas investment. Consequently, Japan's ODA surged, making it the world's leading donor. Between 1990 and 2010, Japan provided USD 75.9 billion to Southeast Asia despite Japan's economic stagnation (MOFA 2023). Initially, Japan's ODA practice was "tied" to Japanese companies, but in line with the OECD's standards for Development Assistant Countries, Japan increasingly adopted "untied" economic assistance to foster local economic capacities. In this context, Japan-Southeast Asia relations have evolved positively since the end of World War II. By carefully managing its image to avoid appearing as a regional threat, Japan secured its strong socio-economic presence in Southeast Asia.

The strategic dynamics in Southeast Asia have, however, changed drastically since the 2010s, primarily due to the assertive rise of China. China surpassed Japan in military expenditure and GDP in 2006 and 2010, respectively (SIPRI 2022).<sup>7</sup> The 2008 Global Financial Crisis also narrowed the gap between China and the United States. Although the United States still maintained its primacy, these changes had three important strategic implications.

First, the strategic narrative in East Asia changed. Given that the United States was deeply involved in the prolonged wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, while facing a significant economic setback in 2008, the regional states and the United States began to acknowledge, or at least debate, a relative decline in US influence in the area.<sup>8</sup> While domestic debates in the United States were

7 Calculated in current USD as of May 2024.

8 For example, see the discussions of 2013 in *Foreign Affairs* 92(1). See also Brooks et al. 2023, Posen 2023.

more concerned about the future trajectory of power differences between the United States and China, the concern in Southeast Asia was different. Rather than questioning the power gap, the region was worried about the US's fluctuating commitment to East Asia and its impact on the regional balance of power (Acharya 2010). The regional states considered the fact that the United States would no longer easily deter China, which had gained military and economic confidence, and were thus motivated to reformulate their own strategic posture.

Second, China's power projection capabilities and diplomatic and economic influence began to extend beyond its traditional geopolitical focus on North-east Asia. China's military modernisation enabled it to possess aircraft carriers, symbolising a blue-water navy (Li 2009). Its economic wealth and large market attracted investment from advanced capitalist countries, including the United States and Japan, and smaller economies became increasingly dependent on China for trade (Christensen 1999). Due to these developments, China became able to sustain a military presence in the South China Sea and began to strengthen its bilateral political and economic ties with each individual South-east Asian state as well as with ASEAN (Till / Chan 2013).

Third, China's strategic posture moved beyond Deng Xiaoping's axiom, "hide your strength, bide your time" (cf. Doshi 2021). China's strategic objective had traditionally been to consolidate its internal political base and enhance its strategic assets to expand its sphere of influence in Northeast Asia and beyond. However, the 2008 Global Financial Crisis and the struggle of the United States for economic recovery nurtured China's perception that it could make the most of the strategic situation and consolidate its influence in East Asia by gradually discarding Deng's axiom. As a result, China's international behaviour became more assertive, particularly in the maritime domain of the East and South China Seas.

Amidst this evolving strategic environment, Japan-China relations concerning Southeast Asia grew increasingly tense. However, these tensions did not arise overnight. There were diplomatic indications before 2010.

## Pre-2010: Diplomatic tensions between China and Japan in Southeast Asia

In the late 1990s, Japan began engaging in a diplomatic competition with China to win over Southeast Asia in response to China's increasing regional influence, even as Japan continuously strengthened its security ties with the United States to check China's behaviour. Indeed, China actively pursued diplomatic engagement with Southeast Asian states and ASEAN to increase its political and economic influence over the region, beginning with the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, in particular. During that crisis, ASEAN member states



applauded China's decision not to devalue its currency, the yuan, which also aided China's own economic recovery (Soesastro 1998: 377).

China's economic and diplomatic engagement in Southeast Asia intensified from then on. For example, in 1997, China diplomatically supported the establishment of the ASEAN+3 framework (adding China, Japan and South Korea), which excluded the United States. It proposed to establish an ASEAN-China Free Trade Area in 2000 and signed an agreement with ASEAN in 2002. It also concluded the Declaration of the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) in 2002 and became the first external state to sign ASEAN's landmark treaty, the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), in 2003. China supported Malaysia's initiative to establish an East Asian summit in the early 2000s, resulting in the East Asia Summit (EAS) in 2005. Despite initial concerns about China's assertive actions in the South China Sea in the 1990s and the Taiwan Strait in 1995/96, Southeast Asia began to view China as a stable rising power, providing a strategic alternative for reducing dependence on Western economic and political assistance (Takahara 2009).

Japan, for its part, lagged behind. Admittedly, Japan, like China, initiated its own outreach to Southeast Asia following the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. Prime Minister Keizō Obuchi promoted the concept of “human security” to alleviate the adverse impacts on people's lives in the affected countries, such as Indonesia and Thailand, by providing socio-economic assistance (Soeya 2005). Strategically, however, Japan was rather reactive to China's initiatives. It proposed the Japan-ASEAN Comprehensive Economic Partnership only in 2002 and signed the related framework in 2003, and it acceded to the TAC in 2004, despite initial hesitation. While Japan remained the most economically influential state in Southeast Asia thanks to its long-standing economic assistance, the rising diplomatic and economic status of China began to challenge Japan's leading position.

This diplomatic tension was particularly visible in the development of the East Asia Summit from 2003 to 2005 (Koga 2021). According to the reports of the East Asia Vision Group and East Asia Study Group in 2001 and 2002, the establishment of an East Asian Summit was dependent on the progress of comprehensive cooperation among ASEAN+3 members, as an East Asian Summit was originally considered an upgraded version of ASEAN+3 (East Asia Study Group 2002: 4). While this idea was viewed as a long-term goal, China's basic strategic objective was to reduce US influence in East Asia by such means as the creation of regional-states-only institutions. Malaysia's initiative, which included only ASEAN+3 member states, well aligned with China's strategic thinking.

On the other hand, Japan was not keen to create a closed regional institution that would permanently exclude potential regional members, most notably the

United States. Also, given that the political systems of ASEAN+3 members were not necessarily democracies, Japan feared that the EAS could easily be influenced by China and become a protectionist institution against liberal norms. Therefore, Japan supported the inclusion of other democratic states, namely Australia, India and New Zealand, along with some ASEAN member states who shared the same concerns, such as Indonesia and Singapore.

## Post-2010: Strategic rivalry between China and Japan in the Indo-Pacific

In the 2010s, the strategic competition between Japan and China intensified as China demonstrated its assertiveness in maritime and development domains. In 2012, China and the Philippines were involved in a maritime standoff over the Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea (Green et al. 2017). Although this did not escalate into a physical conflict, it considerably strained diplomatic relations in the region, particularly within ASEAN. Southeast Asian states were divided over how to respond to the incident, and the deep disagreement between the Philippines and Cambodia, ASEAN chair in 2012, led to the unprecedented failure of the ASEAN Foreign Ministerial Meeting to adopt a joint communique. This incident highlighted a sense of urgency for the ASEAN member states to address their internal division, as ASEAN unity was crucial for effective institutional diplomacy with external actors. Nonetheless, ASEAN members opted to sidestep controversial topics in ASEAN meetings. Consequently, when China openly dismissed the ruling of the South China Sea Arbitral Tribunal in 2016, ASEAN could not openly discuss the implications, fearing further division and potential retaliation from China (Koga 2022a, Poling 2022).

Furthermore, in 2013, China launched its geo-economic strategic concepts through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), when President Xi Jinping delivered speeches on a “New Silk Road” and a “21st Century Maritime Silk Road” in Kazakhstan and Indonesia, respectively (MFAPRC 2013, ASEAN-China Centre 2013). Importantly, the BRI has evolved, rather than being a fixed national strategy aimed at countering US influence or leading to “debt trap diplomacy” (Jones / Hameiri 2020). Over time, its vision, objective and methods have adapted to strategic circumstances.<sup>9</sup> For instance, China added the concept of a “Digital Silk Road” in 2015 and “Polar Silk Road” in 2018. China’s offer of development assistance with fewer socio-economic conditions, such as those concerning environmental protection and labour rights, has made it an attractive partner for many Southeast Asian countries, including Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand. As trade volumes with China also

<sup>9</sup> This is a type of “tactical hedging”, by which a state provides a vague diplomatic doctrine that can be modified after evaluating international reactions (Koga 2019, 2020, 2024b).

increased, the region's economic dependence on China also grew significantly (World Bank 2024)

In response, Japan sought to counterbalance China's influence by strengthening strategic ties with "like-minded" regional powers such as Australia and India, through bilateral security agreements and minilateral frameworks, including the Quad. Additionally, Japan redoubled its effort to enhance its economic, diplomatic and defence ties with Southeast Asian states both bilaterally and multilaterally.

## Japan's strategic engagement toward Southeast Asia from the 2010s

Japan has been conducting policies of strategic empowerment in response to China's rising influence. Before 2010, Japan recognised its responsibility to provide economic assistance through its ODA and to contribute to the socio-economic development of Southeast Asian countries. This responsibility stemmed not only from a lingering sense of wartime guilt but also from the absence of any other regional powers capable of fulfilling such a role (cf. Tsutsui 2009, Lam 2015, Koga 2025). Despite China's rapid economic rise in the 2000s, Japan retained its leading position not only in trade but also in the quality and quantity of economic and infrastructural development assistance. Japan's objective was to gradually guide, rather than force, Southeast Asian states toward becoming stable democracies with robust market economies through long-term development assistance, ultimately benefitting Japan as well (Koga 2022b).<sup>10</sup>

This perspective changed as China's GDP surpassed Japan's in 2010, leading China to engage more proactively in Southeast Asia economically and diplomatically. Initially, Japan did not significantly alter its foreign and security policies, but it became increasingly concerned about China's rising influence.<sup>11</sup> This concern was underscored by some Southeast Asian states, such as Cambodia and Laos, as evident by the ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting's failure to issue a joint communique in 2012. Japan's strategic direction gained clarity after Shinzō Abe's return to the prime ministership following the 2012 General Election. In an op-ed, "Asia's Democratic Security Diamond", Abe emphasised the importance of strategic cooperation with democratic states, namely the United States, Australia and India, viewing it as essential to counter an assertive China and prevent it from overriding regional rules and norms (Abe 2012).

<sup>10</sup> This posture is well reflected in Japan's foreign policy doctrine, such as the "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity" (Aso 2007).

<sup>11</sup> For example, see Prime Minister's Office of Japan 2010.

Japan also reached out to Southeast Asian states, particularly those threatened by China's maritime encroachment in the South China Sea. Abe enhanced Japan's diplomatic visibility in Southeast Asia, visiting all ten ASEAN member states in 2013 during the 40th anniversary of ASEAN-Japan Dialogue Relations. He further participated in the 2014 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, delivering a speech titled "Peace and Prosperity in Asia, Forevermore" on the importance of international law, non-use of force and peaceful means to settle disputes, particularly in the maritime domain (MOFA 2014a).

Obviously, with its stagnant economy and ongoing efforts to recover from the 2011 earthquake and tsunami, Japan was not in a position to provide all the defence and economic assets that Southeast Asian states needed. In addition, Southeast Asian states have preferred not to rely on a single great power to avoid over-dependence that could lead to a loss of individual and regional autonomy (cf. Acharya 2014, Fargo et al. 2015, Emmers 2018). This is a major reason why they continue to value ASEAN as an important regional organisation that serves as a mechanism to bind Southeast Asian states together and prevent excessive external intervention. For these reasons, Japan initiated efforts to use its available diplomatic and economic resources to strengthen strategic ties with Southeast Asian states without raising significant concerns.

Japan's strategic empowerment involves conducting capacity-building activities for Southeast Asian states and ASEAN to enable them to resist external pressures and defend their sovereignty, territorial integrity, and political and economic autonomy. To maintain ASEAN's strategically neutral stance, Japan strives to bolster the members' diplomatic, economic and military capacity by providing necessary information, equipment and training over the long term. Japan has employed three main approaches for strategic empowerment in Southeast Asia: establishing strategic partnerships; promoting international rules, norms and values; and enhancing ASEAN-led institutions.

## Cooperation and strengthening of strategic partnerships in Southeast Asia

Bilateral relations are crucial components of Japan's foreign policy toward Southeast Asia. The "strategic partnership" framework has served as a useful tool for Japan and each Southeast Asian state to regularly engage in bilateral discussions on economic, social, political and security issues without considering each state's power status, thus facilitating a deeper understanding of each other's strategic needs (Koga 2022b). Before 2010, the scope of such partnerships was confined to socio-economic and political development, with less emphasis on strategic issues. This was because Japan's view of China's assertive rise was not necessarily shared with Southeast Asian counterparts. However, as China's unilateral behaviour in the South China Sea became more acute and

its economic influence grew, some Southeast Asian states began seeking new strategic options with external states. One such effort was to conclude and enhance a strategic partnership with Japan, which resonated with Japan's continuous efforts to engage Southeast Asia.

Prior to 2010, the only bilateral strategic partnership was the Japan-Indonesia "Strategic Partnership for Peaceful and Prosperous Future" (MOFA 2006). This was established in 2006, and the partnership pledged to enhance bilateral cooperation, focusing on economic, financial, maritime and disaster relief fields, as well as Indonesia's democratisation process. This partly stemmed from the Japan-ASEAN strategic partnership established in 2003 when Japan held the 30th anniversary commemorative summit with ASEAN and adopted the "Tokyo Declaration" (ASEAN Secretariat 2003). Although the declaration stated the Japan-ASEAN cooperation would "ensure peace, stability and prosperity in the region" (*ibid.*), it was vague regarding the specific types of cooperative activities it would entail. As a result, cooperation focused on non-controversial areas – economic and non-traditional security issues – such as countering emerging infectious diseases and improving disaster relief.

From 2010 onwards, however, Japan began establishing various types of partnership with various Southeast Asian states. For example, in 2010, Japan established a strategic partnership with Vietnam and an "enhanced partnership" with Malaysia. While the enhanced partnership with Malaysia discussed security issues in detail, including the importance of the Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs) in the Strait of Malacca amid rising piracy concerns, the Japan-Vietnam partnership focused on people exchange, economic and financial development, and climate change, without addressing any security issues, including maritime affairs (MOFA 2010a, 2010b). In 2012, Japan and Thailand established a strategic partnership, but its focus remained on traditional socio-economic relations (MOFA 2012).

In 2011, Japan and the Philippines agreed to elevate their relationship to a "strategic partnership". They began discussing the South China Sea issue, emphasised adherence to the DOC and expressed the importance of concluding a Code of Conduct (MOFA 2011). At this point, Japan shared similar concerns with the Philippines over China's assertive behaviour in both the South and East China Sea, and eventually in 2015, both elevated their relationship to the "Strengthened Strategic Partnership".

After Shinzō Abe's inauguration as Prime Minister in December 2012, Japan increasingly emphasised the political and security dimensions of the partnerships. In 2013 and 2015, Japan established strategic partnerships with Cambodia, Laos and Malaysia. Japan-Cambodia relations evolved from the "new partnership" in 2007 to the "strategic partnership" in 2013. Although there was no significant difference between them, both emphasised the importance of fundamental values, such as democracy and human rights, economic cooperation,

people-to-people exchanges and environmental issues (MOFA 2007a). Yet, the new partnership with Cambodia also included political and security issues on its agenda, such as the peaceful resolution of disputes in the South China Sea (MOFA 2013).

In 2014, Japan and Vietnam upgraded their partnership to an “extensive strategic partnership” that became more comprehensive, encompassing high-level exchanges and maritime cooperation, including political support for the negotiation on the Code of Conduct over the South China Sea (MOFA 2014b). In 2015, Japan also concluded a strategic partnership with Laos and upgraded its “enhanced partnership” with Malaysia to a strategic one. Both statements stipulated political and security cooperation, and Japan and Malaysia discussed South China Sea issues (MOFA 2015a, 2015b).

On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Japan-ASEAN relations in 2023, Japan further elevated its existing strategic partnerships with Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam to the status of “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership” (CSP) and established a new strategic partnership with Brunei. Japan became ASEAN’s fourth CSP in 2023, following China, the United States and Australia. Admittedly, this CSP status is largely symbolic in nature, and the quality of the strategic partnership depends on the strategic posture of each Southeast Asian country. For example, continental Southeast Asian states tend to distance themselves from maritime disputes, while maritime states focus less on continental issues, such as the development of the Mekong Delta.

Furthermore, Myanmar and Singapore do not consider their relations with Japan as strategic partnerships, although there are substantial socio-economic ties between Japan and these states, such as the Japan-Singapore Partnership Program for the 21st Century (MOFA 2010c; 2021). Japan’s relations with Myanmar have been difficult to manage since the military coup in 2021, although Japan has strived to contribute to Myanmar’s nation-state building by supporting its economic development, democratisation and national reconciliation (MOFA 2020a).

Nonetheless, the status of strategic partnership and similar agreements provides important opportunities for interaction at various levels, including the summit level. Security and defence cooperation can be enhanced at a pace comfortable for each Southeast Asian state, depending on their strategic assessment.

Each cooperative relationship observes its own differential growth. For instance, Japan currently conducts defence and foreign ministerial meetings (2+2) with the Philippines and Indonesia, while also concluding defence assets and technology transfer agreements with Singapore and Thailand. In addition, Japan’s Official Security Assistance, which was created in 2023 to provide military assets for defence enhancement, prioritised Japan’s strategic partners, namely, the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Malaysia (MOFA 2024a). Nurturing these different strategic partnerships, Japan can advance its relationship with each ASEAN member without disrupting ASEAN’S consensual approach.

At the same time, these bilateral relationships ensure more nuanced communication and cooperation between Japan and each partner, enabling Japan to understand the specific needs of each state and to provide effective economic and defence assistance. This type of partnership thus offers Japan a tool to empower Southeast Asian states to hedge against the risk of overdependence on a particular great power and maintain their autonomy.

## The promotion of international rules, norms and values

Japan's diplomatic strategy has evolved to more explicitly support "fundamental values" since the late 2010s. These values encompass the rule of law, peaceful settlement of disputes, non-use of force, state sovereignty, territorial integrity, democracy and human rights (cf. MOFA 2007b). Japan generally prioritises international rules and norms, such as international law and state sovereignty, over more contentious liberal democratic values.

This approach is taken because, while there is broad consensus on international principles among Southeast Asian states, promoting democratic values would be perceived as an interference in domestic affairs (Koga 2024a). In fact, Japan has played down such liberal values under the FOIP over time, focusing more on the importance of international maritime law, including the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and advocating for the freedom of navigation and overflight as well as the stability of SLOCs in the Indo-Pacific region (MOFA 2016).

To ensure adherence to international maritime rules and norms, Japan has adopted a strategic approach to bolster regional security through capacity-building programmes for Southeast Asian states, despite its limited capacity to regularly deploy its naval and coast guard assets in both the East and South China Seas (Koga 2018b). This approach is integral to Japan's FOIP concept, which focuses on "strengthening capacity of maritime law enforcement and Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA)" – empowering Southeast Asian states to deter and defend potential encroachment from external actors (MOFA 2022).

To support this initiative, the Japanese Coast Guard (JCC) has actively provided patrol vessels to Southeast Asian states such as Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam. Furthermore, the JCC has implemented its own capacity-building programmes, focusing on such areas as education and law-enforcement training (Japan Coast Guard 2024).<sup>12</sup>

The Japanese Ministry of Defense also expanded its efforts in the 2020s. While only two capacity-building programmes reportedly existed by 2012, the

12 See also the article by Raymond Yamamoto, "Japan's Coast Guard Capacity Building under Abe Shinzō: Between Power, Money and Norms", in this special issue of the IQAS.

number increased exponentially to over 160 by 2024 (Ministry of Defense 2024). While most of the programmes were not directly focused on traditional maritime security issues, such as territorial dispute management, the development of non-traditional security skills, including search and rescue and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, are vital for ASEAN member states to bolster their capacity to defend their maritime sovereignty.

In the meantime, Japan remains reticent on the promotion of liberal values. This is evident in Japan's diplomatic principle of "human security", which prioritises socio-economic development over the promotion of political freedom, including democratisation and human rights protection. This approach does not mean that Japan disregards liberal values. Rather, it underscores the importance that Japan places on socio-economic development, which it believes can lay a foundation for eventual political liberalisation (Koga 2024a).

This strategic direction was set forth after the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. Japan emphasised the importance of "human security" given the severe social and economic conditions faced by many Southeast Asian states and their populations at the time (cf. Baker 1998, Atinc / Walton 1998, Knowles et al. 1999). Consequently, instead of employing explicit coercive measures such as economic and diplomatic sanctions to enforce liberal values, Japan encouraged non-democratic states in Southeast Asia to transition toward democratic governance through dialogue and education (Katsumata 2006).

For its part, ASEAN faced significant challenges in internalising liberal values, particularly as it expanded to include the states of the Indochinese Peninsula during the 1990s. New pressures were placed on ASEAN by Western countries, which compelled the association to promote democratic values among its new members, namely, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam. As the original members of ASEAN experienced political democratisation, debates emerged regarding the concept of "flexible engagement" and "enhanced interactions". This reflected a shift from the ASEAN's previous stance of strict non-interference (Haacke 1999).

Nevertheless, the new members were primarily focused on nation-state building through economic development, similarly to the paths previously taken by the original ASEAN members at the association's inception (cf. ASEAN Secretariat 1967, Ba 2009, Koga 2010). Therefore, ASEAN's principles, particularly the non-interference principle and the consensus decision-making process designed to protect state sovereignty, became essential for newcomers to uphold. These principles were deemed critical to maintain, at any cost, to ensure ASEAN's unity and coherence.

The compromise reached by ASEAN was to aspire to fully respect liberal values in the long term. This commitment was articulated in the "Declaration of ASEAN Concord II (Bali Concord II)" (ASEAN Secretariat 2012). In order



to establish three regional communities – Security (later, Political Security), Economic and Socio-Cultural – ASEAN began to incorporate normative values through the “promotion of principles of democracy” in member states and the “promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms” (ASEAN Secretariat 2009: 6). The ASEAN Charter of 2008 also stipulates:

[...] respect for fundamental freedoms, the promotion and protection of human rights, and the promotion of social justice [...] adherence to multilateral trade rules and ASEAN's rules-based regimes for effective implementation of economic commitments and progressive reduction towards elimination of all barriers to regional economic integration, in a market-driven economy. (ASEAN Secretariat 2008: 6–7)

Although these statements do not constitute binding rules, they have served to lay the groundwork for institutional norms in ASEAN. In this context, Japan has begun to promote those liberal values at the pace that each ASEAN member is comfortable with. Complying with the non-interference principle, Japan has supported the promotion of these fundamental values through dialogues and programmes with Southeast Asian states. For example, Japan has conducted the “Japan–Kingdom of Cambodia Human Rights Dialogue” since 2005, while also inviting next-generation politicians to learn about democratic governance in Japan, such as the “Invitation Program for Cambodian youths involved in Politics to Japan” (MOFA 2023, 2024a). Through such initiatives, Japan engages in quiet diplomacy to promote liberal values without resorting to economic or diplomatic sanctions. This approach is particularly important to prevent regional states from quickly aligning with China, which offers non-democratic states in the region an alternative model of national governance.

## The enhancement of ASEAN-led institutions

Since the end of the Cold War, Japan has regarded ASEAN as a pivotal regional institution in East Asia, one that provides important venues to interact with regional states multilaterally and bilaterally. Given the prolonged political tensions among Northeast Asian states, ASEAN's convening power through affiliated institutions such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN+3 and the EAS indeed provides numerous opportunities to diffuse tensions among regional major powers.

It is true that Japan initially had much higher expectations for these ASEAN-affiliated institutions, believing they would effectively resolve regional security issues, including tensions over the South China Sea, the Korean Peninsula and the Taiwan Strait. However, these expectations were significantly lowered as these institutions proved ineffective at resolving conflicts (cf. Yuzawa 2010). Instead, Japan has realised that ASEAN and ASEAN-led institutions have served

primarily as a medium for regional states to establish diplomatic guardrails and prevent tensions from escalating to actual conflicts through dialogue, a system often referred to as “cooperative security” (see Emmers 2003).

Further, in the immediate post-Cold War era, ASEAN was in a suitable position to lead regional multilateralism. Having managed internal tensions during the Cold War – stemming from territorial disputes and political differences – through diplomatic interactions, ASEAN developed conflict management strategies that could be applied in post-Cold War Asia. Moreover, the great power rivalry among the United States, China and Japan prevented any single major power from dominating the region. China was not willing to accept US or Japanese leadership, and vice versa. Additionally, the United States was sceptical of Japan’s economic rise in East Asia and opposed Japan’s initiative to establish institutional frameworks that excluded the United States, such as Japan’s proposal to establish an Asian Monetary Fund in 1997 (Lipsky 2003, Katada 2020).

In this context, ASEAN was perceived as a neutral actor, thereby avoiding explicit opposition to its leadership from regional powers. The political legitimacy of multilateralism strengthened as an international norm in the post-Cold War era. With the United States as the sole superpower, there was a recognised need for mechanisms to balance its influence among regional powers, such as China and Russia (cf. Sukma 2010). This sentiment elevated multilateral institutions, such as the United Nations and regional organisations, empowering them as major political players in shaping the international and regional order. Consequently, ASEAN, as a Southeast Asian regional organisation, garnered the political legitimacy to lead regional multilateralism.

It has also been in Japan’s security and economic interests to maintain a strong and autonomous ASEAN that could prevent any single external state from dominating Southeast Asia, ensuring that the region’s vital SLOCs and market access remain open. If ASEAN becomes potentially susceptible to a particular great power’s wedge strategy, Japan conducts a counter-wedge strategy to neutralise this influence by supporting internal opposition within ASEAN. This approach was exemplified during the formation of the EAS. Conversely, when ASEAN is stable, Japan upholds the principles of ASEAN centrality and unity (Koga 2021).

Since the 2010s, Japan has adopted a more strategic approach. Facing China’s encroachment in the South and East China Seas, Japan has sought to forge a common strategic perspective by encouraging ASEAN’s adherence to international law, particularly UNCLOS (MOFA 2020b). Maritime security has become one of the most pressing issues that connects Japan and ASEAN, as both share concerns about maritime instability in the SLOCs. Japan has been proactive in discussing maritime security issues, particularly those concerning the South China Sea, within ASEAN-led institutions, alongside the United States, despite

China's refusal to discuss the matter with third parties (Koga 2022a). In this vein, Japan supported ASEAN's initiative to strengthen the EAS in 2015 to regularly hold discussions on maritime security, including in the South China Sea (Parameswaran 2015).

Admittedly, the initial stage of Japan's FOIP strategy did not specifically mention Southeast Asia or ASEAN, over which some of the ASEAN member states, such as Singapore raised concerns. Given ASEAN's inability to effectively address the 2012 Scarborough Shoal incident, along with its failure to reach consensus on supporting the 2016 South China Sea Arbitration Tribunal's award – coupled with rising concerns about China's influence in Southeast Asia through the BRI – Japanese policy-makers focused more on a major power coalition, namely the United States, Australia and India (Koga 2020). However, this did not mean that Japan relinquished its efforts to empower ASEAN. Responding to ASEAN's concerns, Japan began to emphasise the importance of ASEAN and ASEAN centrality in the Indo-Pacific region in 2018 and has continued to do so since then.<sup>13</sup>

Militarily and diplomatically, Japan has since implemented empowerment programmes toward ASEAN and engaged in activities aimed at consolidating ASEAN centrality and unity. Japan thus launched the “Vientiane Vision: Japan's Defense Cooperation Initiative with ASEAN”, which includes military exercises, exchanges and capacity-building efforts, such as the Japan-ASEAN Ship Rider Cooperation Program and the Japan-ASEAN Joint Exercise for Rescue Observation Program (Ministry of Defense 2016). In 2019, this vision was enhanced and rebranded as the “Vientiane Vision 2.0” to establish closer ties with the Indo-Pacific vision (Ministry of Defense 2019). In addition, Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force has deployed its maritime forces in Southeast Asia as part of its Indo-Pacific Deployment since 2019, demonstrating its presence to ASEAN member states and cooperating with them.<sup>14</sup> Japan has expressed strong diplomatic support for the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) and, in 2020, issued a joint declaration to mainstream the AOIP and strive for synergy between its FOIP and the AOIP, while also supporting the functional areas that ASEAN aimed to reinforce.<sup>15</sup>

13 See MOFA 2018, 2019, 2020b, 2024b.

14 In 2018, the deployment was conducted under the name ISEAD18 (Indo Southeast Asia Deployment 2018; see Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force 2024).

15 AOIP emphasises the importance of inclusivity in regional frameworks and has four pillars for cooperation, namely 1) maritime cooperation, 2) connectivity, 3) UN Sustainable Development Goals 2030, and 4) Economic and Other Possible Reas of Cooperation (ASEAN Secretariat 2019).

## Conclusion: The future of strategic empowerment

Japan has engaged in strategic empowerment in Southeast Asia, particularly since the 2010s. Activities such as capacity building, infrastructure development, socio-economic assistance and support for democratic transition are not new to Japan; similar programmes have been in place since the end of the Cold War. These efforts reflect Japan's strategic interests in fostering a stronger, autonomous Southeast Asia that is economically open and strategically stable.

Similarly, Southeast Asian states have successfully expanded their community to include non-ASEAN East Asian states through the establishment of ASEAN-led institutions, thereby enhancing ASEAN's central role in promoting regionalism. Through these expansions, ASEAN has reinforced its institutional *raison d'être*. ASEAN's multilateral diplomacy has been crucial in mitigating regional tensions by actively facilitating dialogues. Consequently, Japan has pursued mutual strategic interests with ASEAN member states without disrupting the cohesiveness of Southeast Asia and ASEAN.

Nevertheless, the strategic stability that the region previously enjoyed has begun to falter. Confronted with China's heightened assertiveness in the maritime domain, many acknowledge a relative decline in US power and realise that the United States is unable to deter or reverse every unilateral change in the status quo, including China's strengthened presence in the East and South China Seas. Furthermore, China, with its rising economic capabilities, has gained more influence over Southeast Asia and challenged the existing international order, particularly in the field of infrastructure development. This has further intensified the strategic competition between the US and China.

Consequently, Japan has recognised the need to further broaden and intensify its existing assistance to Southeast Asia. This objective has been pursued mainly through the establishment of strategic partnerships; the promotion of international rules, norms and values; and the enhancement of ASEAN-led institutions.

While these efforts do not always provide Southeast Asian states effective means to ensure regional autonomy or deter external intervention, they do offer regional states the opportunity to act based on their own national interests. Throughout much of the past decade, it was primarily Japanese Prime Minister Abe who translated his strategic vision in Southeast Asia into concrete actions. During his eight-year tenure, Japan was able to conceptually integrate the objectives of its various international activities into a cohesive national strategy. A key example of this integration was the creation of the FOIP concept, which has significantly shaped Japan's strategic posture toward Southeast Asia by emphasising strategic empowerment.

Still, Japan faces significant challenges. Strategic empowerment has not produced the anticipated positive outcomes, largely because ASEAN is grap-

pling with a loss of diplomatic unity. This disunity stems from differing perspectives among member states on China's assertiveness as well as on other international events, such as Russia's aggression in Ukraine, the Israel-Hamas conflict and Myanmar's domestic instability. If political disunity continues to overwhelm ASEAN, it will be increasingly difficult to sustain ASEAN centrality in facilitating regional cooperation and resist the wedge strategies of major powers.

Indeed, ASEAN's ability to serve as a comprehensive regional platform has been undermined. Several Western powers, including the United States and Australia, have shown reluctance to participate in meetings involving Russia, because of the Russia-Ukraine war. This was exemplified in July 2022, when Australia, New Zealand and the United States opted out of the ADMM-Plus Experts Working Group on Counter-Terrorism, chaired by Russia and Myanmar (Myanmar Now 2022). If this trend persists, ASEAN risks losing much of its convening power, potentially further complicating the region's geopolitical landscape.

Further, even if Japan continues to pursue strategic empowerment, it could unintentionally exacerbate divisions within ASEAN. Under the rapidly changing strategic environment, Southeast Asian states perceive Japan as a staunch security ally of the United States and fear being pressured into making a geo-strategic choice – whether to align with China or the West, a decision Southeast Asian states do not wish to make. While pro-West members of ASEAN might not see Japan's strategic empowerment negatively, other members, such as Laos, which experience diplomatic tensions with the West, would see such actions suspiciously (Koga 2022b).

At the same time, seeking consensus among the ASEAN member states on strategic matters has become increasingly challenging for Japan, given the current disunity of ASEAN. With a consensus decision-making procedure being compromised by this disunity, bilateral interaction often becomes the preferred approach. This shift complicates Japan's ability to promote the principle of strategic empowerment toward Southeast Asia, particularly under the intensification of US-China strategic competition.

Japan needs to recalibrate its approach to strategic empowerment. Engaging in dialogues with ASEAN and individual member states remains the imperative initial step. These discussions are essential not only for understanding the unique needs of each member but also for assessing how effectively Japan can empower ASEAN to maintain its centrality and unity. In this connection, it is also important to clarify the role of the US-Japan alliance and emerging new minilateral and multilateral frameworks, such as the Quad, in relation to ASEAN in order to reinforce the validity of its strategic empowerment. This clarification is imperative to reassure ASEAN member states that the alliance enhances regional stability and does not undermine their unity and autonomy.

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