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ANALYSING JAPAN-ASEAN SECURITY DYNAMICS

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The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Japan celebrated their 50th anniversary of friendship and collaboration in 2023.¹ The relationship between Japan and ASEAN has grown and evolved over the past fifty years. As an equal partner in fostering peace and prosperity in the region, Japan has "made every effort to build up 'heart to heart' relations of confidence and trust with the ASEAN Member States."² Amidst the growing complexity of the East Asian strategic environment, Japan's partnership with ASEAN has become more diverse and multifaceted, leading to an expansion and deepening of cooperation in the security field.

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Southeast Asia's geopolitical and strategic location is in the Malacca and Lombok straits. This is the chokepoint from where the oil tankers, as well as container ships, go to and from Japan, which further makes the region vital.³ Japan's top concerns are therefore the region's political unrest and instability, maritime crime, and threats to safe passage, as well as the competing territorial claims in the South China Sea that are close to the sea lanes of communication. The current state of affairs has strengthened Japan's political and security interest in the region due to several factors, including the rise of China, US calls for Japan to take on a more significant security role in the region and elsewhere, a decline in neighbourly sensitivity to Japan's increased external defence profile, and Japan's desire to become a "normal" power progressively.

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Background

Since historic times, Japan has been committed to bolstering its ties with Southeast Asia, as also outlined in the 1977 Fukuda doctrine.⁴ In the context of the escalating strategic rivalry between the United States and China, Southeast Asia serves as both a geostrategic theatre and location of Japan's vital sea lines of communication and natural resources for its "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) initiative.

ASEAN, the central organisation of East Asian multilateral institutions, is likewise located in Southeast Asia. Southeast Asia's and other regions' regional orders have been shaped by ASEAN and institutions under its leadership ever since the end of the Cold War. As a result, ASEAN is crucial to Japan's Foreign Policy Initiative (especially FOIP) since Japan depends on its diplomatic backing to uphold and strengthen the current rules-based international order, which has long benefited Japan both diplomatically and economically. For this reason, Japan has continuously demonstrated its unwavering respect for the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) and the region's centrality and unity.

In the late 1960s, Japan's economy grew to become the second largest in the world, and it began to assert itself economically throughout Southeast Asia. Japanese businesses established operations throughout the region and exported industrialised goods.⁵ Japan gave Southeast Asian nations a great deal of aid by using its economic clout to exert political influence. Japan's early economic involvement in Southeast Asia caused the ASEAN nations to retaliate. The Fukuda doctrine of the late 1970s emphasised an "equal" partnership, which did not reflect the actual state of relations between Japan and ASEAN at the time. Earlier, Japan-ASEAN relations primarily revolved around the economic cooperation between the two. Over time, this partnership has expanded to include political cooperation and into a comprehensive relationship which includes security cooperation.

China's increasing power and influence in the ASEAN region has led to the development of security cooperation between Japan and ASEAN. To make up for the relative decrease in its presence in the region, Japan has worked to forge more extensive partnerships of cooperation with ASEAN, including security cooperation, as China's influence in the area has grown. Japan's security was strengthened by its security cooperation with ASEAN. Japan has attempted to create a coordinated response to China's maritime expansion by opposing China's assertiveness in the East China Sea and encouraging cooperation with

ASEAN, which directly confronts China's assertive stance in the South China Sea.

Security Cooperation

Japan and ASEAN held their summit in December 2023 to mark the 50 years of their relationship. The summit focussed more on enhancing the security cooperation between the two due to China's rise and intensification of US-China competition. Southeast Asia is the hub of the dynamic Indian Ocean and Asia-Pacific regions. Due to the numerous geostrategic changes occurring in these areas, which are also centres of economic growth, ASEAN is guiding the development of new security and economic paradigms that will ensure peace and stability throughout the Indo-Pacific.

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The cornerstone of Japan's current Indo-Pacific strategy is the idea of FOIP. The "three pillars of FOIP"—the rule of law, freedom of navigation, and enhanced connectivity—along with a dedication to peace and stability translate into defence strategies that ensure the stable use of important sea lanes, avert emergencies, and promote peace and stability through proactive involvement in the area.⁶ The FOIP approach to defence cooperation with ASEAN is embodied in the Vientiane Vision. At the second ASEAN-Japan Defense Ministers' Informal Meeting, which took place in Vientiane, Lao PDR, in 2016, Defence Minister Inada announced this vision, which serves as a compass for Japan's defence cooperation with ASEAN.⁷ This vision focussed on deeper cooperation with ASEAN nations keeping in mind China's expansionist behaviour. Based on the AOIP and the FOIP, the Vientiane Vision was revised in 2019. During the fifth ASEAN-Japan Defense Ministers' Informal Meeting that year, Defence Minister Kono unveiled Vientiane Vision 2.0.

Recent years have witnessed expansive defence and security cooperation involving defence equipment and technology cooperation between the two nations. Japan has gradually signed defence equipment and technology cooperation agreements with the Philippines in 2016, Malaysia in 2018, Indonesia and Vietnam in 2021, Thailand in 2022, and other ASEAN nations.⁸ It is anticipated that these agreements will foster cooperation in maritime security and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR).

Furthermore, in the recent Japan-ASEAN summit, Southeast Asian and Japanese leaders emphasised strengthening their maritime security cooperation. The leaders also focused on stabilising the rules-based Indo-Pacific region through peaceful settlement of disputes.

In light of China's maritime expansion, bilateral defence cooperation with the

Philippines is making particularly noteworthy strides. April 2022 saw the inaugural "2+2" Foreign and Defense Ministerial Meeting between Japan and the Philippines.⁹ Together with strengthening their coast guard cooperation, Japan and the Philippines signed an agreement in November 2023 to provide the Philippine Navy with coastal surveillance radars and to begin negotiations for a major defence accord known as the Reciprocal Access Agreement, which would facilitate the entry of their troops into each other's territory for joint military drills.¹⁰

Japan is also strengthening its economic and security ties with Malaysia as recently Japanese PM Kishida agreed to provide 400 million Yen as part of its Official Security Assistance Program (OSA) for warning and surveillance equipment.¹¹ To create a world where human dignity is maintained and to preserve and enhance a free and open international order based on the rule of law, Japan places a high value on fostering relations with ASEAN, which includes Malaysia. Rescue boats and other equipment are being provided as part of the support to help strengthen Malaysia's military capabilities. Malaysia plays a critical role in warning and surveillance activities for the entire area due to its location on maritime lanes that connect the Indian Ocean with East Asia. The first-ever combined military training between ASEAN countries took place in September, despite host nation Indonesia's insistence that the exercises were non-combat drills with a focus on disaster assistance and marine patrols.

The leaders approved a 130-project execution plan at the recent summit. Japan demanded increased defence and security cooperation in areas like cybersecurity, disinformation management, and the transfer of weapons and equipment. Tokyo also promised to increase funding, particularly for the region's automobile sector, and to assist initiatives aimed at halting climate change, promoting green technology, and digital transformation.

Challenges and Way Forward

Japan stated in the December 2022 announcement of its National Defense Strategy that it would cooperate with ASEAN in a multilateral framework and participate in bilateral assistance for capacity building, joint exercises, strategic dialogue, and strategic port calls.¹² By increasing the frequency and degree of implementation, this statement appears to reflect an intention to continue with the existing basic selection of joint efforts into the future. Moreover, Japan's G7 Presidency and India's G20 Presidency in 2023 proved that both India and Japan are increasingly focussing on the Global South and aim to strengthen cooperation with the Global South which also includes ASEAN Member countries.

Japan and ASEAN are currently facing external difficulties and challenges. East Asia benefited from a stable regional environment following the end of the Cold War under the liberal international order upheld by US hegemony. The shifting balance of power

and growing geopolitical rivalry between the US and China now pose a danger to this stability. It is difficult to navigate these power relations, and neither Japan nor the ASEAN nations can pick a side.

Japan's foreign and defence policies are centred on its partnership with the United States. To achieve long-term peace and security in the region, collaboration with the US is given priority in the 2022 National Security Strategy. The security ties between China and Japan, which are already tense due to territorial disputes over the Senkaku/Diayu Islands and natural resources in the East China Sea, could be affected by the growing rivalry between the two countries. However, Chinese economics continues to be important for Japanese companies. China ranks third in terms of Japanese direct investment destinations in 2022 and is Japan's biggest trading partner.

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The free and open, rules-based order in the South China Sea is threatened by China's forceful actions, according to ASEAN. ASEAN's 'centrality' is under threat from growing US-China strategic competition, and the significance of ASEAN's contributions to regional stability is lessened by the formation of minilateral strategic coalitions like the Quad Framework (involving Japan, Australia, India and the US) and AUKUS (involving Australia, UK and the US). Simultaneously, the economies of China and ASEAN have integrated into one another. China's greatest trading partner is the ASEAN region as a whole, and Chinese FDI in ASEAN is growing steadily. The United States continues to be a major trading partner and source of investment for ASEAN nations.

Japan and ASEAN must strengthen their cooperation since both of them require allies to address domestic issues and promote a stable regional order. To safeguard themselves against the caprices of major power rivalry, they must preserve their diplomatic independence and assert their influence. Since both countries are committed to a free and open international order, defence and security cooperation should be enhanced more, especially maritime cooperation. Through the reinforcement of free trade accords like the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, ASEAN and Japan can also improve the resilience of their supply chains.

Since India-Japan ties have been deepened as both nations cooperate to secure the Indo-Pacific region and amidst great-power politics, both nations work to realise a rules-based order in the region. Japan and India also have mutual concerns in the region and attempt to shape the regional dynamics to support ASEAN Centrality and unity. India's defence approach toward Southeast Asia is also driven by maritime security for the need to safeguard shared waters. Therefore, a convergence among India, Japan and

ASEAN may create a robust Indo-Pacific region in the coming time and could perhaps be a beneficial trilateral arrangement to counter China's behaviour.

The moment is perfect for ASEAN and Japan to create a new, equal partnership that is based on defence and security cooperation, equitable and sustainable economic development, and deeper mutual understanding as the regional order becomes increasingly unstable.

Notes:

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² Ibid.

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⁴ Toru Yano, "The 'Fukuda Doctrine' and its Implications for Southeast Asia: A Japanese Perspective," *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 1978, pp. 60–64, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27908336>. Accessed on December 30, 2023.

⁵ Akira Suehiro, "The Road to Economic Re-Entry: Japan's Policy toward Southeast Asian Development in the 1950s and 1960s," *Social Science Japan Journal*, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 85–105, 1999, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30209747>. Accessed on December 30, 2023.

⁶ Tomotaka Shoji, "Japan's Security Policy on ASEAN – On the 50th Year of Friendship and Cooperation," The Sasakawa Peace Foundation, August 24, 2023, https://www.spf.org/iina/en/articles/shoji_17.html. Accessed on January 02, 2024.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Kei Koga, "Japan's 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' Strategy: Tokyo's Tactical Hedging and the Implications for ASEAN," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 41, no. 2, August 2019, pp. 295–299, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26798855>. Accessed on January 02, 2024.

⁹ Ministry of Defense, Government of Japan, "1st Japan-Philippines Foreign and Defense Ministerial Meeting ('2+2')," April 9, 2022, <https://www.mod.go.jp/en/article/2022/04/35c208e3ce294a24137f3c2dcca11b6d3e1f06e8.html>. Accessed on January 03, 2024.

¹⁰ Simran Walia, "Evolving Japan-Philippines security ties," *Asia Times*, November 20, 2023, <https://asiatimes.com/2023/11/evolving-japan-philippines-security-ties/>. Accessed on January 03, 2024.

¹¹ Sakura Murakami, "Japan and Malaysia sign \$2.8 mln maritime security assistance deal," *Reuters*, December 16, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/japan-malaysia-sign-28-mln-maritime-security-assistance-deal-2023-12-16/>. Accessed on January 04, 2024.

¹² Kei Koga, "Japan's Policy Toward ASEAN in 2023: Opportunities and Challenges," Stimson Centre, January 25, 2023, <https://www.stimson.org/2023/japans-policy-toward-asean-in-2023/>. Accessed on January 04, 2024.



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