



# Recalibrating U.S.-Japan Indo-Pacific Strategies Towards ASEAN

By Kei Koga

## Southeast Asia as the Indo-Pacific's Center

Southeast Asia is the geostrategic center for both the United States and Japan as they look to develop the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). Not only does the region have vital sea lines of communications (SLOCs), which pass through the choke point that connects the Indian and Pacific Oceans, the Strait of Malacca, but it is home to the world's fastest growing economies with over 680 million people. Not surprisingly, Southeast Asia's strategic and economic importance have long attracted regional major powers, including the United States, China, and Japan.

At the same time, Southeast Asia's collective memories under colonial occupation have made the region much more cautious about engaging with great powers. They have scrutinized the types of great power competition and resisted their "divide and conquer" approach and ensure Southeast Asia's regional autonomy. By establishing their own regional organization in 1967 in the form of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the 10 member nations have mitigated intra-member diplomatic tensions derived from territorial and political disputes. ASEAN has also facilitated regional economic integration and security cooperation within Southeast Asia and provided inclusive inter-state forums such as ASEAN Regional

Forum (ARF), ASEAN+3, the East Asia Summit (EAS), and the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting (ADMM)-Plus, where regional major powers can hold multilateral and bilateral dialogues. In short, ASEAN has evolved into not only the guardian of regional interests in Southeast Asia but also a regional public good for East Asian stability.

Still, the foundation of the strategic stability in East Asia has been essentially anchored by the preservation and development of U.S. military presence, and that strategic foundation has become shaky amid the rise of a more assertive China. Using gray zone tactics, China's engagement with Southeast Asia started to become the mix of cooperation and coercion. While China conducts a *fait accompli* strategy to control the South China Sea, it provides massive financial and economic assistance for infrastructure development and allures regional states, including Southeast Asian states, particularly Cambodia and Laos. Diplomatically, China puts implicit pressures on those states that do not adequately respond to China's demand, as in the case of Singapore President Lee Hsien Loong's tacit statement regarding the 2016 South China Sea Arbitration Tribunal's award.<sup>1</sup> As a result, China virtually conducts a "divide and conquer" tactic toward Southeast Asia and ASEAN.

The United States and Japan have been alarmed by these developments. Increasing disunity among ASEAN member states would risk dividing Southeast Asia that is further susceptible to external intervention and makes it substantially difficult to maintain and enhance the existing rules-based international order that the United States and Japan support. As such, the United States and Japan have continuously expressed the importance of ASEAN centrality and unity as well as their respects for the ASEAN's initiatives,

particularly the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). Nevertheless, despite their supportive diplomatic posture to ASEAN, there is no clear set of coordinated strategy between the United States and Japan, to effectively empower ASEAN.

## The Case to Focus on ASEAN

ASEAN is a gathering of small and mid-sized powers in Southeast Asia. In peacetime, it acts as a forum for multilateral and bilateral dialogues and negotiations. It is not, however, a results-oriented institution. Nor is the association designed to resolve regional issues. Rather, ASEAN's goal is to shape the environment where issues of mutual concern can be contained or concerned parties can engage peaceful negotiation for the resolution of disputes. The main reasons for this are two-fold. One is that ASEAN lacks capabilities to enforce any rules and norms. The other is ASEAN's institutional principles that strictly follow the non-interference principle and consensus decision-making process. In times of intensification of strategic tension, these factors make it difficult for ASEAN to act collectively and decisively.

ASEAN's strength is that it is functionally useful in a regional order-building. The association can generate rules and norms in Southeast Asia and East Asia, which means that ASEAN's political support for rules and norms that are proposed by external actors would likely be the foundation of regional order. ASEAN also has convening power underpinned by the principle of ASEAN centrality, by which ASEAN maintains its chairpersonship and holds agenda-setting power, so that it could prevent great powers from hijacking ASEAN-led fora. However, ASEAN centrality is essentially founded on the premise that ASEAN is united. If ASEAN is divided, then each member state will be susceptible to great powers' pressure, losing



collective voice as well as its function for a regional order-building.

This impacts the Indo-Pacific strategies of both the United States and Japan because a divided Southeast Asia makes it difficult to achieve their strategic objective, namely to maintain the existing international order. Of course, the foundation of the existing order is anchored by the UN Charter, which include contradicting norms such liberal values as democracy and human rights on the one hand and traditional international norms including state sovereignty and non-interference principle on the other. However, in the post-Cold War era, liberal values have been further emphasized under the U.S. unipolar system and embedded in newly created international rules and norms, which become a beacon for appropriate state behavior and shape a pattern of state behavior. For its part, ASEAN has been following this political trend, albeit slowly, in establishing “ASEAN communities.”<sup>2</sup> But if divided, ASEAN will not be able to sustain its trend.

## When No Strategy toward ASEAN Becomes a Problem

Neither the United States nor Japan have a clear vision for ASEAN’s strategic role in the Indo-Pacific. Currently, the United States and Japan engage with ASEAN in a functional manner. Japan has listed the progress of functional cooperation in the four areas: maritime cooperation, connectivity, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and economic and other possible area of cooperation—that Japan worked with ASEAN, highlighting complementarity between Japan’s FOIP and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP).<sup>3</sup> Likewise, the United States emphasizes the importance of non-traditional security

cooperation with ASEAN, such as climate change, sustainable development, and health security, and AOIP’s “complementary objectives” of the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy.<sup>4</sup> Yet these types of cooperation are highly functional and less strategic.

ASEAN itself is in the midst of questioning its *raison d’être* amid the development of the great powers’ new institutional initiatives, such as the establishment of the Quad, AUKUS, and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), and the promotion of the rule-making activities through them. These initiatives contradict U.S. and Japanese statements about their respect for ASEAN and ASEAN centrality. In its Indo-Pacific statements, the Japanese government repeats the importance of ASEAN centrality and unity.<sup>5</sup> The U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy of 2022 also “endorse[s] ASEAN centrality and support[s] ASEAN in its efforts to deliver sustainable solutions to the region’s most pressing challenges.”<sup>6</sup> For its part, ASEAN indicates that ASEAN centrality is to “be the primary driving force in regional arrangements that it initiates and maintain its centrality in regional cooperation and community building.”<sup>7</sup> Considering the ongoing institutionalization of their own non-ASEAN arrangements, it is not clear how those new arrangements and the ASEAN centrality are compatible.

Precisely because of this uncertainty, some ASEAN members are skeptical about those institutional initiatives. This skepticism creates opposition within ASEAN, which makes it difficult for ASEAN to endorse those initiatives given ASEAN’s consensus decision-making process. The case in point is Cambodia’s concern toward the IPEF. Since the framework excluded Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar, some argue that it would likely damage ASEAN centrality and unity.<sup>8</sup>



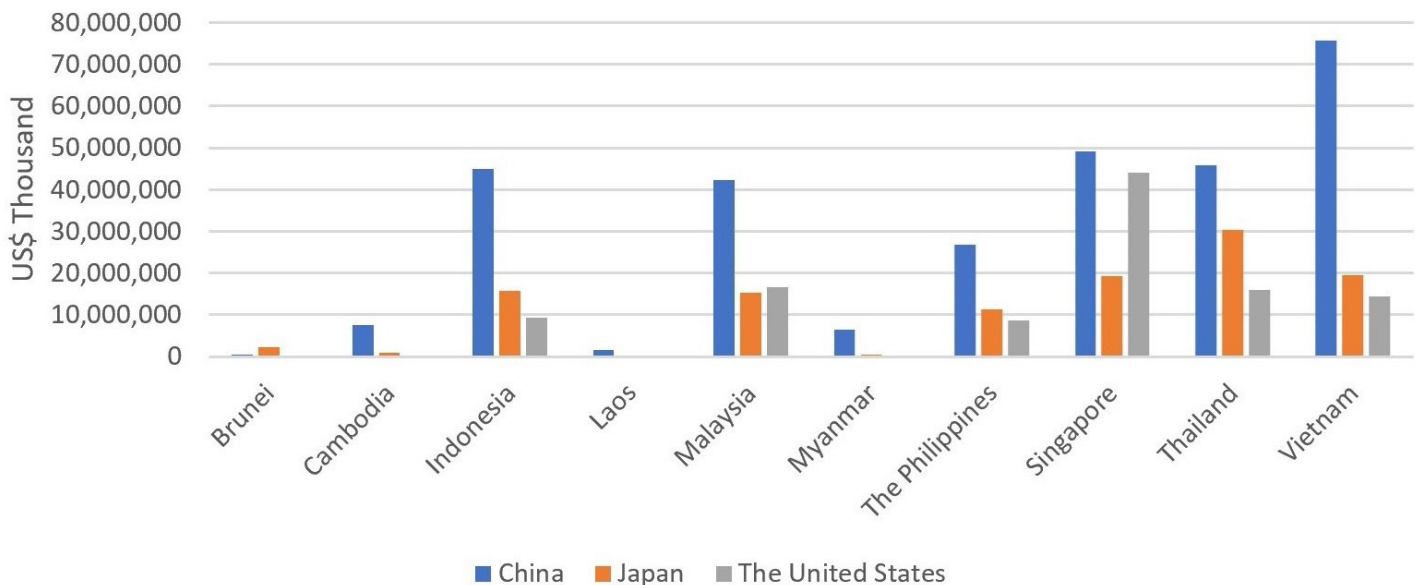
At the same time, the United States and Japan understand that there are limits to ASEAN playing a leading role in the Indo-Pacific. In fact, the United States tacitly indicates that the Indo-Pacific needs two types of arrangements—one being the existing institutions most notably ASEAN, and the other being new results-oriented groups, such as the Quad.<sup>9</sup> ASEAN has yet to indicate what strategic role the association can play in the vast Indo-Pacific region, and the association has not openly contested such statements. However, over time, the gaps between diplomatic rhetoric and actions will likely widen, which will further the divide within ASEAN.

It will be a challenge for any single great power to gain influence over all of Southeast Asia. While the United States, Japan, and China have certain economic leverage over certain Southeast Asian states, no one country can easily prevail in all ten

member states, even in economic terms. For example, while the total number of US FDI to Southeast Asia (US\$35,039 million) far exceed those of China and Japan (US\$7,732 million and US\$8,520 million respectively) in 2020, this does not mean that US excelled FDI amount in every ASEAN member state.<sup>10</sup> Its investment is highly skewed to Singapore, while FDI to countries such as Laos and Cambodia, is negligible.<sup>11</sup> As such, economic and investment volume is not a good gauge to measure leverage over ASEAN as a whole. The same can be said to the trade relationship. Although China has become ASEAN's largest trading partner, there are differences in the level of import and export, among China, Japan, and the United States (Figure 1 and 2).

As such, rather than winning over Southeast Asia, it becomes much easier for the great powers to drive a wedge between ASEAN member states.

Figure 1:  
Import between ASEAN member and China, Japan, and the United States  
(2019)

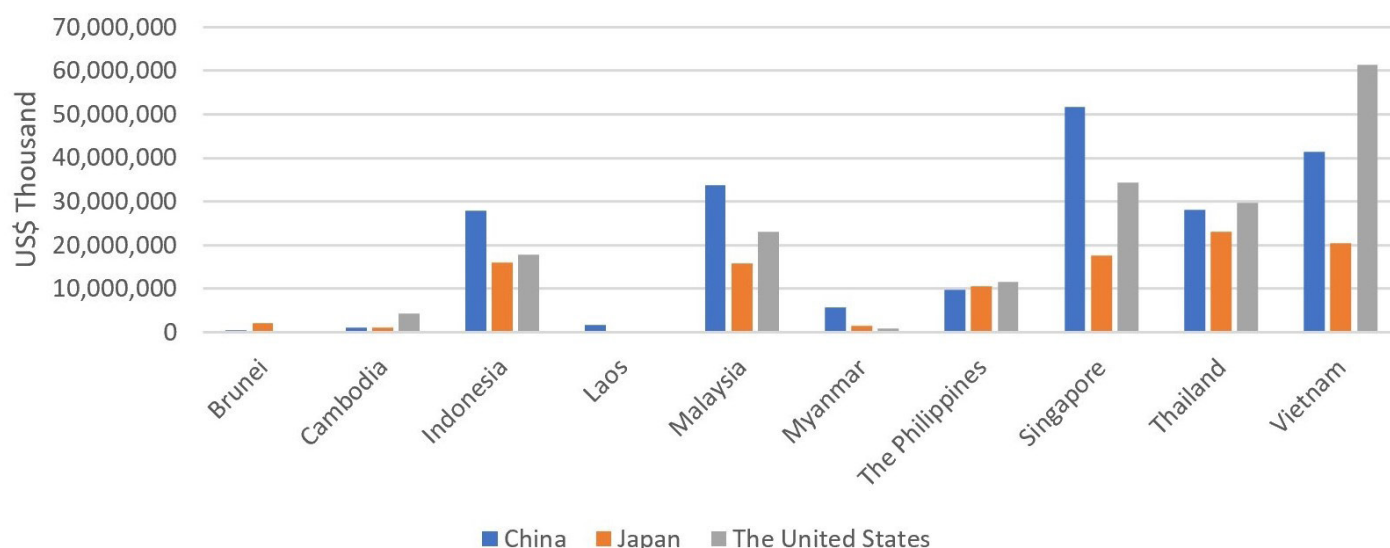


Source: World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS)





Figure 2:  
Export between ASEAN member and China, Japan, and the United States  
(2019)



Source: World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS)

While ASEAN desires to maintain its unity, the political, economic, and social diversity among the 10 ASEAN member states are inherently susceptible to a divide and conquer strategy. China has captured this characteristic and consistently conducted such a wedge strategy toward ASEAN when it comes to China's fundamental interests. The ASEAN divide over Scarborough Shoal in 2012 and the award of the South China Sea Arbitral Tribunal in 2016 illustrate this point. Japan also did so against China in the making of the East Asia Summit in 2005, but this also facilitated internal divisions within ASEAN.<sup>12</sup>

If Japan and the United States want to empower ASEAN to maintain its unity and centrality as objectives of their respective Indo-Pacific strategy, a carefully crafted ASEAN policy is necessary. Without clarifying the strategic role of ASEAN in the Indo-Pacific and the means to maintain ASEAN centrality and unity, the U.S. and Japan strategies

will likely be seen as a mere diplomatic rhetoric by the ASEAN member states, and their diplomatic leverage remains weak as China engages a wedge strategy easily whenever the United States and Japan attempt to forge ASEAN unity in their favor.

### Three Strategic Options

How can the U.S. and Japan Indo-Pacific strategies vis-à-vis ASEAN be improved? Before answering this question, three assumptions should be clarified. First, the United States and Japan do not have infinite diplomatic, economic, and defense resources to invest in ASEAN. Since Japan's geopolitical priority is Northeast Asia and the United States has global commitment, it is unrealistic to assume that they can constantly prioritize Southeast Asia, particularly in the time of contingency.<sup>13</sup> As such, a commitment gap between the diplomatic rhetoric and actions



by both Japan and the United States may be inevitable. Second, the ASEAN unity is increasingly fragile. Internally, ASEAN faces the problem of the Myanmar junta, which is isolated from ASEAN and has become closer to China and Russia. The region's ongoing democratic backsliding would also create disunity in ASEAN members' perspective on fundamental values, such as democracy and human rights. Externally, ASEAN members have different strategic perspectives on geostrategic issues, such as the US-China strategic competition in Southeast Asia, the South China Sea, and the Mekong sub-region. Third, there is no common or shared understanding of ASEAN centrality even within ASEAN member states. To date, neither the United States nor Japan have officially clarified the concept. With these assumptions, there are three options vis-à-vis ASEAN.

### 1) Benign Neglect

The first option is *benign neglect*. Given the inability of ASEAN to resolve the conflicts within Southeast Asia and the increasingly fragility of ASEAN unity in the context of US-China strategic competition, the objectives of this option is 1) to prevent China from forging ASEAN unity in its favor in the issues which do not comply with the existing international rules and norms; and 2) to support ASEAN's institutional reform at minimal cost; and 3) to enhance newly established non-ASEAN regional groups, such as the Quad, AUKUS, and the IPEF.

Under this scenario, Japan and the United States continuously emphasize the importance of ASEAN and ASEAN centrality in the Indo-Pacific, but significantly lower their expectations for ASEAN. The underlining assumption is that ASEAN is in decline. ASEAN's foremost advantage in East Asia is its convening power. However, this has become

increasingly difficult with the Ukraine war and the Myanmar coup as some Western members start to boycott attending ASEAN-led sub-meetings.<sup>14</sup>

While the level of diplomatic, economic, and military engagement remains the same, resources may shift to focus on pivotal states in Southeast Asia, such as Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam. The rationale is that given ASEAN's decline, it is not worth further investing their resources in ASEAN. This is based on the experience that despite the significant diplomatic and economic efforts made by Japan under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and the United States under President Barack Obama during the first half of the 2010s, ASEAN did not make significant changes.<sup>15</sup> Rather, Japan and the United States strengthen ties with those who share a similar threat perception toward China through capacity-building programs and empower them to deter China's assertive behavior.

The cost of this option is regional division. It would risk dividing Southeast Asia further and make the region a strategic theater of US-China power politics. Since both Japan and the United States continuously strengthen their bilateral relations with several Southeast Asian states, particularly with pivotal U.S. allies and partners including the Philippines, Singapore, Vietnam, and Indonesia, their diplomatic rhetoric to engage in Southeast Asia will widen over time. Non-supported Southeast Asian states are then likely to shift their attention to the other regional major power, China, to gain economic benefits and political leverage. In this environment, it is difficult to realize Tokyo and Washington's vision to maintain and enhance the existing rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific region. Rather, the United States and Japan will compartmentalize spheres of influences in the region, including a divided Southeast Asia.



## 2) Enhanced Engagement

The second option is *enhanced engagement*. The objective of this option is to engage with Southeast Asian states comprehensively to rejuvenate ASEAN. As the fall of ASEAN would likely divide the region and create sub-regional coalitions with great powers, ASEAN unity is crucial for regional stability. Furthermore, ASEAN is a pivotal player in shaping regional rules and norms as it can become either a winning or a blocking coalition for new rules and norms introduced in the Indo-Pacific region.

To this end, Japan and the United States need to engage more evenly to the ASEAN member states through bilateral and multilateral diplomacy. Given the weak economic links with Brunei, Cambodia, and Laos, enhancement of diplomatic engagement with those countries would become particularly important. As Japan did during the Abe administration, the United States also consider the conclusion of strategic partnership or equivalent with those small states in Southeast Asia, which is helpful to provide regional states a tool to frequently communicate with the United States and hedge against the risk of overdependence on China.<sup>16</sup>

Two caveats are in order. One is that ASEAN consolidates its de facto member suspension of Myanmar. Since the international community does not recognize the Tatmadaw as a legitimate government and since the Tatmadaw does not comply with ASEAN's 5-point consensus, Myanmar becomes the spoiler for ASEAN unity.<sup>17</sup> Bilateral engagement may be possible, but to cut a loss, the United States and Japan should regard ASEAN without Myanmar as a legitimate institution. The other is that the United States and Japan persuade ASEAN to narrow its strategic

focus on Southeast Asia, rather than the entire Indo-Pacific region. Given that the Indo-Pacific region has many sub-regions and that it is difficult for even great powers to comprehensively engage all sub-regions, ASEAN will likely overstretch its diplomatic resources if it focuses on the entire Indo-Pacific.

The cost of this option is high uncertainty of success in operationalization. Both the United States and Japan currently highlight fundamental values in its competition with China. While Japan takes softer stance, it would become difficult for the United States to deepen its engagement in non-democratic Southeast Asian states without raising the issue of democratization and human rights issues. If some ASEAN members make little progress, the United States would disengage from them. This political posture is illustrated by the Summit for Democracy the United States hosted in December 2021, which included only three ASEAN members, namely, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, as China increases its overall engagement in terms of trade, investment, and infrastructure development, enhanced engagement might be overridden by China's growing influence in Southeast Asia.

## 3) Strategic Coordination

The third option is *strategic coordination*. Its fundamental objectives are similar to those of enhanced engagement—to empower ASEAN member states through economic and security engagement and to maintain ASEAN centrality and unity. ASEAN centrality should be limited to Southeast Asia, and ASEAN unity should be consolidated except for Myanmar. But unlike enhanced engagement, the United States and Japan can utilize their existing comparative advantages in Southeast Asia.



The United States generally strengthens its relationship with democratic states, namely Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, and geo-strategically important states, Singapore and Vietnam. Economic, political, and military ties between the countries are strong, and the United States aimed to strengthen its bilateral ties with them. The historical track-record also suggest that this trend is highly likely to continue, unless the United States see a high probability to help non-democratic Southeast Asian states transform into democracy.<sup>19</sup>

For its part, Japan comprehensively conducts diplomatic and economic engagements with ASEAN member states, including Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar, which the United States does not engage actively. However, its military engagement is limited because of the long-held political and constitutional constraints, albeit incrementally changing. Since both the United States and Japan have different comparative advantage, their policy coordination toward ASEAN can enhance their efficacy of engagement.

Under this situation, diplomatic communication between ASEAN and Japan and policy coordination between the United States and Japan becomes the key to maintain ASEAN unity. ASEAN members often expressed concerns about the fluctuation of U.S. diplomatic commitment to Southeast Asia and its neglects toward some member states while the United States considers that it has never left Southeast Asia and that its economic and military commitment is continuously strong. This perception gap exists because of a lack of close communication between the United States and ASEAN and the U.S. tendency to engage bilaterally.

On the other hand, Japan comprehensively engages with ASEAN member states, and its

channels of communication and reassurance skills are strong.<sup>20</sup> There is still room for the United States and Japan to coordinate their policies toward Southeast Asia and ASEAN. For instance, while both have just begun to coordinate their coast guard cooperation under the new operation, *Sapphire*, which includes capacity building and information sharing, the United States and Japan has not fully engaged their coordination in other areas, such as the Mekong sub-regional development.<sup>21</sup>

Effectively engaging coordinate capacity building between the two help them understand an efficient and effective division of labor in capacity-building and the level of their commitment to ASEAN. For littoral states, both can provide maritime domain awareness (MDA) capabilities through the provision of equipment such as coastguard cutters, radars, and satellite information with adequate trainings. In this context, Japan can be a bridge builder between ASEAN and the United States. Japan can coordinate policies with the United States while acting as an intermediate communicator to bridge the perception gap between the United States and ASEAN. In short, Japan would reassure ASEAN about U.S. military and economic engagement and also directly convey ASEAN's concerns toward the United States.

The United States and Japan can thus clarify their strategic posture toward ASEAN—respect ASEAN's sphere of political influence in Southeast Asia. The United States and Japan should reassure by close communication that new strategic groupings, such as the Quad and AUKUS, do not diplomatically marginalize ASEAN's role in Southeast Asia. ASEAN's strategic reach is limited but ignoring ASEAN in the Southeast Asian affairs would create diplomatic repercussions against U.S. or Japanese initiatives in the region.





Although this does not mean that the maneuver of the United States and Japan need to be limited by ASEAN, such communication contributes to clarifying the institutional division of labor in the Indo-Pacific as well as a strategic role of ASEAN.

The cost of this option is the status quo bias on the current resource commitment. Strategic coordination aims to manage the perception of regional states while achieving maximum efficiency and effectiveness through U.S.-Japan-ASEAN coordination. Admittedly, the resource can slightly increase, but this option does not assume its drastic increase. Consequently, if regional contingencies such as intensifying tensions over the Taiwan Strait or the rise of new terrorism in the Middle East occur and both the United States and Japan need to reallocate its resources, the efficiency and effectiveness of strategic coordination are likely to decrease rapidly unless their channels of communication are concretely institutionalized.

## Recommendations

Among these three options, *strategic coordination* is the most efficient given the resources available. Benign neglect would easily divide the region, weaken ASEAN, facilitate alignment and realignment with regional major powers, making strategic calculations more complicated in times of contingency in East Asia. Enhanced engagement is ideal, yet the United States faces resource constraints and political difficulties conducting deep engagement with non-democratic states in Southeast Asia. However, as with other options, strategic coordination is not a panacea, and the United States and Japan need to prepare for Southeast Asia without ASEAN unity and centrality. With this mind, the following is necessary to operationalize strategic coordination:

### 1. Institute U.S.-Japan Policy Coordination Mechanisms for Southeast Asia/ASEAN

- Close and regular communication between the United States and Japan will be the most effective and efficient way to coordinate policies toward Southeast Asia for their respective Indo-Pacific strategies. In June 2022, the United States held the U.S.-Japan Southeast Asia Policy Dialogue.<sup>22</sup> Institutionalization of this group could be the first step. In the future, the group can be expanded to include other ministries and agencies, such as U.S. Department of Defense and Japan's Ministry of Defense.
- The United States and Japan can send coordinated messages toward ASEAN through close coordination. Since ASEAN's cautious attitude toward the enhancement of cooperation with the US-Japan alliance, which might raise China's concern, ASEAN+1 is the best venue to interact with ASEAN.

### 2. Define the strategic role of ASEAN in the Indo-Pacific

- There has been no discussion on the strategic role of ASEAN in the Indo-Pacific in U.S. and Japanese Indo-Pacific strategies despite highlighting the importance of ASEAN, ASEAN centrality, and AOIP. Further gaps between rhetoric and action would increase Southeast Asia's skepticism toward the strategic initiatives of the United States and Japan.
- To avert this, the United States and Japan need to:

#### a) Define "ASEAN centrality"

The minimalist definition of ASEAN centrality highlights ASEAN's institutional privileges, namely agenda-setting power



and chairpersonship within ASEAN-led institutions, such as ARF, ASEAN+3, EAS, and ADMM-Plus. The core geographical scope is Southeast Asia. Anything beyond this fundamental role that the United States and Japan expect from ASEAN should be discussed further between Japan and the United States and with ASEAN.

**b) Strategize the means to sustain ASEAN unity**

ASEAN unity is the pre-requisite for ASEAN centrality, and such a unity requires each ASEAN member states' capacity to resist external powers' excessive intervention. The United States and Japan thus need to contribute more to capacity-building efforts in the region. Cambodia and Laos in particular need more socio-economic assistance. The United States and Japan, particularly USAID/OPIC and JICA/JBIC, can share information and coordinate their development policies (e.g. human resource development and capacity-building programs) in critical areas including infrastructure development in the Mekong subregion.

**c) Clarify the institutional division of labor between the Quad, AUKUS, the IPEF, and ASEAN**

ASEAN member states view the emerging minilateral and multilateral frameworks negatively and positively.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, those frameworks rapidly evolve. In order to avoid raising doubts and creating a blocking coalition within ASEAN, it is necessary for both the United States and Japan to regularly

update ASEAN the development of those institutions.

**3. Prepare for deeper ASEAN disunity**

- It is imperative for the United States and Japan to empower ASEAN to maintain its regional autonomy for the realization of their FOIP visions, which requires a long-term commitment. However, there is also a possibility that ASEAN would drift for a long time, considering that the association currently faces internal and external difficulties. If this becomes the case, the United States and Japan need to shift their strategies from *strategic coordination* to *benign neglect*.
- The potential indicator for the timing of strategic shift is the degree to which ASEAN deviates from the existing international rules and norms because of external pressure. For example, in the ASEAN-China negotiation over the conclusion of the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (COC), ASEAN would be regarded as dysfunctional if the association adopts the COC that is not compliant with the international maritime law, including the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

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Kei Koga is an associate professor at Nanyang Technological University and a Japan Scholar at the Wilson Center's Asia Program.

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