

## The U.S.-Japan Alliance and ASEAN-centric Security Institutions: Vietnam's Perspective

By Huy Pham Quang

ASEAN-centered security institutions have long been criticized for being ineffective, especially in light of challenges from China. Despite these institutions' weaknesses, the United States and Japan have long supported them. Two recent trends have altered the U.S.-Japan alliance: declining support for multilateralism within the Trump administration, and Shinzo Abe's effort to strengthen Japan's security capabilities and extend its presence into the "gray zone." How will these trends affect the future of ASEAN-centered security institutions and regional security more generally?

**Huy Pham Quang**, Visiting Fellow at the East-West Center in Washington, explains that "Beijing under Xi Jinping's administration may benefit the most from a divided ASEAN. In such an environment, the increased presence of the United States and Japan in the region should be seen first and foremost as a strategic move in the balance against China."

Some observers believe that Japan's new National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG) and the Trump administration's preference for bilateralism are degrading the role of such ASEAN-centered security institutions as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM+). Also contributing to the weakening of these entities is the members' perception that their national interests outweigh their shared values. In this vein, the de facto unity among the ASEAN member states could deteriorate due to the U.S.-Japan alliance and Sino-American competition.

Others are more optimistic about the impact of the U.S.-Japan alliance on ASEAN-centric security institutions. While China is having an outsized influence on certain ASEAN members — including in Laotian and Cambodian domestic politics — several other Southeast Asian countries are currently expressing some pushback against Chinese initiatives. Still, Beijing under Xi Jinping's administration may benefit the most from a divided ASEAN. In such an environment, the increased presence of the United States and Japan in the region should be seen first and foremost as a strategic move in the balance against China.

In the security sphere, the U.S.-Japan alliance is of strategic importance. Okinawa, located in the southern part of Japan with the largest number of U.S. military bases, is the gateway for any move of U.S. military forces in the Asia-Pacific region. Hence U.S. military presence in Okinawa allows the U.S.-Japan alliance to play a key role in diffusing Chinese revisionism in both the East China Sea and the South China Sea. Furthermore, beyond U.S.-Japan bilateral relations, minilateralism — including the U.S.-Japan-Australia and U.S.-Japan-South Korea trilateral alliances, and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue between the United States, Japan, Australia, and India (the Quad) — has also been significantly improved through dialogues, exchange, and maritime capacity building and military cooperation.

Japan's new economic statecraft in Southeast Asia is also impressive, including aid, trade, investment, high-quality infrastructure initiatives, use of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision, and the Asian Development Bank. These factors can act as counters to Chinese economic diplomacy by providing alternatives to situations like the debt trap in the Hambantota Port of Sri Lanka and the East Coast Rail Link of Malaysia.

By and large, the decline of U.S. commitment to ASEAN institutions is not identical to the erosion of U.S. engagement for overall regional stability — including through the U.S.-Japan alliance.

## The future regional order

In this trajectory, several scenarios for the future regional order exist: G2 (US and China coordination and cooperation), U.S. hegemony, and G-X multi-polarism or multilateralism. Structural conflicts between the United States and China make the G2 scenario difficult. On the other hand, U.S. hegemony would trigger a “zero-sum” result which ASEAN member states and even Japan — as the first to be affected in any regional tremors — are avoiding. In terms of the G-X or multipolar order, it is difficult to predict which countries would take leading roles.

There may also exist the possibility of building a rules-based order and creating a “win-win” game, which would not only offset the boldness of China but also balance the power and the influence of all stake holders. Following this trajectory, both the United States and Japan, in the long term, still have to look forward to the centrality of ASEAN in resolving regional issues. Therefore, Japan continued fostering peaceful security cooperation with ASEAN in the Vientiane vision in 2017, while U.S. Indo-Pacific Command Admiral Phil Davidson recently announced an ASEAN-US maritime exercise at the end of 2019.

Simultaneously, ASEAN-led security institutions, namely the ARF and the ADMM+, with the centrality of ASEAN, would be of great importance. While these mechanisms have long been regarded as ineffective in solving problems, they could still keep the region in relative peace and stability. In other words, the United States and Japan are cultivating a unity among the ASEAN member states that the existing ASEAN-centric security institutions are lacking, which could help maintain long term regional stability.

### Vietnam’s perspective

Recent surveys indicate that Vietnam welcomes the U.S.-Japan alliance and further U.S. presence in Southeast Asia. Under Japanese Prime Minister Abe, six second-hand patrol boats in 2014 plus six additional boats in 2017, were sent from Japan’s Coast Guard to Vietnam through official development assistance (ODA) funding. Meanwhile, in March 2018, Vietnam welcomed the U.S. aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson with its strike group of 5,500 sailors, to Tien Sa port, which marked a historical turning point since the Vietnam War in security cooperation between the United States and Vietnam. Broadly speaking, U.S. engagement in the region is stronger than ever, despite Trump’s disdain for multilateral institutions, while the Japanese pacifist policy consolidates regional stability. Additionally, about 63% of Vietnamese believe that the initiatives led by the U.S.-Japan alliance can complement the existing regional security frameworks, including the ARF and ADMM+.

### Recommendation for the U.S.-Japan alliance

In the near term, the geo-political presence of the United States can be promoted through bilateralism and minilateralism. As a counter-measure against such Chinese projects as those in Sri Lanka or Malaysia, it will be important for both Japan and the United States to support local projects, including help with the dioxin contamination of Vietnamese air bases, Vietnam’s Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ), and digital infrastructure in Vietnam. In addition, not only economic but also security cooperation — namely intelligence sharing and military deterrence — could be substantially promoted. Furthermore, minilateralism led by the U.S.-Japan bilateral alliance (i.e. the Quad, the U.S.-Japan-Australia, and U.S.-Japan-EU cooperation) should be enhanced, to promote the U.S. presence through joint military exercises and official exchanges. ASEAN-centric security institutions will be effective if the United States and Japan maintain their uninterrupted participation in such regional efforts.

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