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Implications for Southeast Asia of the New U.S.-Japan Defense Guidelines

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One of the key strategic developments for East Asia in 2015 was the signing of the new Guidelines for US-Japan Defense Cooperation – almost 20 years after the previous version was signed in 1997. While their contents and impact on Japan-US relations have been widely discussed, the impact of the guidelines on Southeast Asian security has not been sufficiently analyzed.

This analysis on Southeast Asia is important for two reasons. First, Southeast Asia is a region where the interests of the major powers of East Asia – the United States, China, and Japan – intersect. Second, Southeast Asia has become a platform for increased competition between the major powers. This is visible in two key areas: first, the escalating Sino-Japanese competition in Southeast Asia in the economic, political, and strategic domains, particularly since 2010; and second, the rise of tensions due to China's activities in the South China Sea that has resulted in the United States and Japan paying greater attention to this territorial dispute. How these issues evolve will have a direct impact on the operationalization of the new defense guidelines.

Southeast Asia views the revised guidelines in positive terms mainly due to two main reasons. First, the guidelines further anchor the strategic presence of the United States in East Asia. Southeast Asia views the new guidelines as another key development in the long-term strategic engagement and presence of the United States in East Asia through its security partnership with Japan. In 1997, the US-Japan security partnership was updated in response to the regional security challenges of the post-Cold War period. This resulted in the revision of the 1978 version of the defense guidelines to incorporate a regional security element within US-Japan defense cooperation, namely focusing on contingencies in the Asia-Pacific region. In the 2000s, US-Japan defense cooperation broadened its regional focus to address diverse global security challenges. Both governments pushed for greater integration between their militaries in a range of areas that include policy and operational coordination during peace and crisis periods, information sharing and intelligence cooperation, and ballistic missile defense cooperation.

The 2015 defense guidelines signal a new phase in Japan-US defense cooperation. The guidelines augment the already strong bilateral defense relationship with various measures, such as the introduction of a whole-of-government approach to ensure a more effective alliance coordination mechanism; the authorization for Japan to engage in missions to help defend the United States and other allies even when Japan is not under attack (known as collective self-defense); the expansion of bilateral defense cooperation from a regional to global level in traditional areas, and into new areas

Bhubhinder Singh, Associate Professor at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore, explains that “In light of the rising tensions in the South China Sea, the United States and Japan have strengthened cooperation to maintain regional stability and protect the security and economic interests of the regional states.”

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deemed critical to the current strategic environment, such as cyber security and space. For Southeast Asia, the US-Japan alliance is a source of stability for East Asia. The new guidelines demonstrate a stronger deterrent effect of the US-Japan alliance against key regional strategic challenges. The agreement has come at an apt time, as the new guidelines will facilitate the realization of the US rebalancing strategy towards Asia – a proposal that has been received positively by most Southeast Asian states.

Second, the new guidelines signal a return of East Asia as a locus for US-Japan defense cooperation, despite the global focus in the document. In fact, the 2015 version has greater relevance to Southeast Asia than the 1997 guidelines for the simple reason that while the 1997 effort was meant to address North Korea, the 2015 revision is widely understood as a response to China. China’s advanced military build-up and assertiveness in the East China Sea and South China Sea have taken center stage for the defense planners in Washington and Tokyo to propose new roles and areas of cooperation as outlined in the new guidelines.

A key area stressed in the new guidelines is maritime security. This is relevant to Southeast Asia, as tensions in the maritime domain have risen considerably in the South China Sea following a series of incidents, such as the *Haiyang Shiyou 981* oil-rig stand-off between China and Vietnam, and China’s reclamation activities.

The United States and Japan are closely watching China’s behavior in the South China Sea. Their main objectives are to preclude Chinese assertiveness or possible use of force, to promote a peaceful resolution of the issue, and to protect the freedom to navigate the air and sea space around the disputed area. In light of the rising tensions in the South China Sea, the United States and Japan have strengthened cooperation to maintain regional stability and protect the security and economic interests of the regional states. One initiative introduced in the new guidelines is the “Partner Capacity Building” that aims to build capacity throughout the region so that states affected by the maritime instability are able to defend themselves against aggressive acts from China and maintain open sea and air space for all countries to benefit.

One implication of the new guidelines would be escalated major power competition in Southeast Asia – a development that traditionally worries Southeast Asia. Not only do the guidelines signal a more engaged US, but also an elevated strategic involvement of Japan in Southeast Asia. Though mainly through soft power strategies, Japan’s widened strategic involvement signals the emergence of Japan’s role as a balancer against China’s assertiveness. This involvement could trigger China to implement counter strategies and result in the escalation of tensions between the major powers that could rupture the stability in Southeast Asia.

To counter the negative consequences of major power dynamics, it is critical for the Southeast Asian states to advance efforts towards strengthening unity within ASEAN. Major power dynamics triggered by China’s strategic rise have been a cause of fractured relations within the region, as displayed at the ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ Meeting in Cambodia in 2012 and in Kuala Lumpur in 2015. Southeast Asian states should realize that ASEAN can be a source of strength for the region when dealing with the major powers. Strengthening its unity serves as the best strategy to maintain ASEAN’s centrality in the East Asian regional security architecture and preserve its convening role for all major powers to engage in East Asia.

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