

# Japan-ASEAN Relations: Challenges, Impact and Strategic Options

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The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)'s celebration of its 50th anniversary in 2017 is certainly a milestone, given the difficult conditions under which it was formed in 1967.<sup>1</sup> This organization, which started with five states (Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Philippines, and Thailand) in 1967 and now with a membership of ten states (with the addition of Brunei, Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Laos), has grown from strength to strength despite the range of challenges it faced during both the Cold War and the post-Cold War periods as well as the criticisms it attracted.<sup>2</sup> Rather than just focusing on economic and social-cultural cooperation, ASEAN has expanded cooperation into the political and security dimensions. In fact, ASEAN has incorporated discussions on creating a regional community resting on three pillars – ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) (which came into force in December 2015), ASEAN Social and Cultural Community (ASC), and ASEAN Political and Security Community (APSC). The incorporation of the “community” concept into ASEAN's discourse is testimony to the strength of the institution and its future positive trajectory.

One of the most important achievements of ASEAN has been the creation of an ASEAN-led regional architecture governed by the ASEAN norms of regionalism. These norms, known as the “ASEAN Way”, are not only subscribed to by the ASEAN states but also by their external partners. Through this regional architecture, ASEAN has been able to develop strong relations with the external partners (the United States (US), China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, India, and Russia), who are integrated into the ASEAN-led open regionalism approach. One of the most important external partners for ASEAN has been Japan, especially after the establishment of informal dialogue relations in 1973, which were subsequently formalized in 1977. In fact, Japan has been one country that has expressed sustained support for ASEAN as an institution. It has worked closely with all ASEAN states, both at the bilateral and

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<sup>1</sup> For a good, as well as brief, discussion on the historical conditions, see Bilahari Kausikan, *Singapore is Not an Island: Views on Singapore Foreign Policy* (Singapore: Straits Times Press, 2017), pp. 100-1.

<sup>2</sup> See Kishore Mahbubani, “How Fear, Luck, Golf brought ASEAN Together,” *The Asia Report* (a magazine published by The Straits Times (Singapore)), Apr-May 2017, pp. 8-9.

multilateral levels. Since the late 1970s, Japan has been an ardent defender of the notions of the ASEAN Way, ASEAN's centrality, and ASEAN unity.

This paper offers a forward-looking analysis on Japan-ASEAN relations. As there are numerous dimensions to this relationship, this paper focuses on identifying key strategic challenges facing East Asia, and how Japan and ASEAN could respond to them. More specifically, the paper focuses on the emerging Sino-US competition/rivalry, the impact of this on Japan and ASEAN, and the means through which Japan and ASEAN have responded to the evolving strategic landscape, both individually and bilaterally. In short, the paper's main argument is that the escalating Sino-US competition/rivalry will raise the profile and influence of both Japan and ASEAN in regional affairs. While Japan's response is clear, ASEAN's response remains relatively unclear. ASEAN's position is not surprising, as it is an institution made up of ten countries with diverse interests. Nevertheless, the evolving structural forces will make it imperative for ASEAN leaders to craft a common position on ASEAN's policy position and relevance in the evolving strategic architecture.<sup>3</sup>

The paper starts off with a brief overview of Japan-ASEAN relations. This is followed by a discussion of three regional challenges that both Japan and ASEAN will have to deal with – China's strategic rise, US's commitment to East Asia, and the contested visions of the regional order for East Asia in light of the escalating Sino-US competition/rivalry. The third section is a discussion on how these challenges impact Japan and ASEAN. The fourth section focuses on the strategic options pursued by Japan and ASEAN in addressing the rising Sino-US competition/rivalry.

## EVOLUTION OF JAPAN-ASEAN RELATIONS

Southeast Asia has always been a critical sub-region for Japan's foreign policy strategy.<sup>4</sup> During World War II (WWII), Southeast Asia served as a critical region for resources for Japan's imperial policy, especially when the international structure became unfavourable to Japan's interests. During the Cold War, Southeast Asia was important for Japan's return to the international community after its devastating WWII defeat. Since the China market was officially closed to Japan, Southeast Asia once again served as

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<sup>3</sup> The discussion here is an expanded version based on the author's previous publications: Bhubhindar Singh and Sarah Teo, "ASEAN has an Instrumental Role in the US-China Power Play," *Channel News Asia Commentary*, 8 May 2017; Bhubhindar Singh, "Japan's Strategic Importance in an Uncertain 2017," *Channel News Asia Commentary*, 3 February 2017; Bhubhindar Singh, "Geopolitical Trends in East Asia: Japan and ASEAN's leading role," *Policy Forum* (Publication of the Asia and The Pacific Policy Society, Australia), 5 July 2016.

<sup>4</sup> For an expanded discussion on the evolution of Japan-ASEAN relations, see Bhubhindar Singh, "ASEAN's Perceptions of Japan: Change and Continuity," *Asian Survey* Vol. 42, No. 2, March/April 2002, pp. 276-296; Bhubhindar Singh, "The Evolution of Japan's Security Relations with Southeast Asia," *The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 99, No. 409, August 2010, pp. 375-386.

a source of raw materials and an important market for Japanese products. This connection with Southeast Asia was critical for Japan's rapid economic recovery and its eventual rise to become the economic leader of Asia.

Even though the China market became officially available to Japan from 1978 onwards, Japan-Southeast Asia relations continued to grow over the course of the Cold War period. After addressing the anti-Japanese sentiments in Southeast Asia in the mid-1970s,<sup>5</sup> Japan was able to cultivate a long-standing positive presence in Southeast Asia through mainly economic (trade, investments, and aid) and limited political terms during the Cold War period that was grounded in the principles of the Fukuda Doctrine announced in 1977. The Fukuda Doctrine was defined by the following principles: Japan will not become a military power again; Japan will conduct its relations with Southeast Asian states through "heart-to-heart" dialogue; and Japan will pursue an equal relationship with ASEAN.<sup>6</sup> Japan's economics-focused strategy was crucial not only for its economic growth and "return" to the international community following the devastating experience in WWII, but also for the growth of Southeast Asian economies. These states adopted Japan's developmental-state model of economy and were reliant on Japanese investments, trade, and aid. The exclusion of a military domain in Japan's strategy was a strategic move that laid the foundation for a partnership to emerge between Japan and ASEAN subsequently.

During the post-Cold War period, Japan's relations with Southeast Asia grew even stronger. In economic terms, Japan-ASEAN relations grew through stronger economic interdependence and an expansion in the areas of cooperation, such as information technology and human resources. Both parties also signed the Japan-ASEAN Comprehensive Economic Partnership that came into force in January 2007. Politically, Japan and ASEAN commemorated the 40th Anniversary of Dialogue Relations in 2013. Japan became more engaged in the ASEAN-led multilateral process and even signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) in 2004. When Abe Shinzō became prime minister in 2012, not only did he choose to visit Southeast Asia for his first overseas trip, he, in fact, became the first Japanese prime minister to visit all ten ASEAN states in the first year of his term (2012-2013).

The post-Cold War period also saw stronger cooperation between Japan and ASEAN in security matters at both the bilateral (such as capacity-building, provision of patrol boats to the Philippines and Vietnam, and military exercises) and multilateral (such as through the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus)) levels.

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<sup>5</sup> Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka's trip to the Philippines, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia in January 1974 was an important wake-up call for Japan as it displayed strong anti-Japanese sentiments held by the Southeast Asian states. In fact, riots erupted when Prime Minister Tanaka visited Indonesia and Thailand. (Richard Halloran, "Tanaka's Explosive Trip," *New York Times*, 21 January 1974.)

<sup>6</sup> Lam Peng Er, "The Fukuda Doctrine: Origins, Ideas, and Praxis," in Lam Peng Er (ed.), *Japan's Relations with Southeast Asia: The Fukuda Doctrine and Beyond* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 2.

The security dimension of the bilateral relationship has expanded since the 2000s, especially under the Abe government. Under Abe's leadership, Southeast Asia became a special sub-region with critical strategic importance to Japan's foreign policy strategy.<sup>7</sup> The strengthened relationship between Japan and ASEAN in comprehensive terms (economics, politics, and security) in the post-Cold War period is in response to the challenges both parties face and have to address. These challenges are discussed as follows.

## STRATEGIC CHALLENGES

The coming decades are going to be defined by transition and unpredictability. Though one could argue this applies to any period, the position taken here is that we are in an important moment of history due to changes in structural conditions, perhaps ushering in a new period of global affairs. Three challenges are discussed below.

### China's Strategic Rise

China's strategic rise is one of the most, if not the most, important developments in global and regional affairs. From the onset of the post-Cold War period, China has incrementally expanded its political, economic, and strategic influence in global and regional affairs. Despite Beijing's repeated assurances on its "peaceful rise" strategy, China's behaviour continues to raise questions by other states, including Japan and the Southeast Asian states.

The most frequent questions relate to Chinese intentions. This has coincided with China's perceived assertive policies in the area of maritime security. In the context of the East China Sea, some examples include China's announcement of an air defence identification zone in November 2013, repeated intrusions by Chinese ships and planes into Japanese-controlled waters and airspace near the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, and the Chinese military's locking of fire-control radars on Japanese military vessels. In the context of the South China Sea, examples include the announcement of regulations requiring all fishing vessels in disputed water to seek approval from Chinese authorities, the standoff between China and the Philippines near the disputed Scarborough Shoal in 2012, China's transfer of an oil rig near the disputed Paracel Islands, escalating tensions with Vietnam, and China's rapid land reclamation to enlarge certain islands and reefs in the South China Sea, including the militarization of some of these islands through the deployment of anti-aircraft missile systems, such as on Woody Island, part of the Paracel group. China's assertiveness entails run-ins with not only the other claimant states in the South China Sea disputes, such as the Philippines and Vietnam, but also with its long-standing

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<sup>7</sup> Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet (a), *National Security Strategy* (Tokyo, 17 December 2013), [http://japan.kantei.go.jp/96\\_abe/documents/2013/](http://japan.kantei.go.jp/96_abe/documents/2013/).

partner Malaysia and Indonesia, a neutral actor in the dispute. These developments raised tensions in East Asia, threatened to derail the ASEAN process, invited greater participation by the US and Japan in the dispute, and resulted in greater investments by several East Asian states to augment their naval and coast guard capabilities.

China's assertiveness will continue in the context of the South China Sea and beyond. The reclamation and militarization activities on the disputed islets in the South China Sea are intended to reinforce its claims and ensure that China possesses strategic control over the entire South China Sea. All great powers "own" backyards. China is no exception. It is "re-possessing" its own backyard – a policy that it is determined to succeed in (provided China remains united). This policy is complicated by the strong economic, political, and military presence of the US in East Asia. China views the US as containing its rise through its policies (such as the Obama administration's rebalancing policy, and the deployment of the THAAD system in South Korea), challenging its core interests (US naval patrols in the South China Sea), and interfering in its domestic affairs (such as in territorial disputes, supporting pro-independence movements in Hong Kong and Taiwan, and selling arms to Taiwan). This situation (fuelled by rising nationalism) will result in higher mutual suspicion, greater competition, and worsening rivalry between the two great powers. As China continues with its assertive policy, this will cause greater discomfort within its neighbours, including Japan and ASEAN.

## US Presence and Commitment in East Asia

The second challenge is to keep the US deeply engaged, interested, and committed to East Asia. Though still the strongest political, economic, and military power in the world, there is a relative weakening of its structural power and position in the global and regional order. The slogan in Trump's election victory, "Make America Great Again", is apt in explaining the present state of US in the global order. It is both recognition of a relative decline in its structural power, as well as a strong desire to regain its position. Trump hopes to reverse the relative decline and restore US's strength. He has announced a range of measures to boost its domestic economy, increase its defence expenditure (that would involve building more warships, aircrafts, and weapons systems), and ensure US remains the premier nuclear-powered state.

Though these are critical measures, US will find it more difficult to sustain the US-led global and regional orders and its interests will be challenged more regularly in East Asia and beyond. Though abandonment fears have been a constant feature in East Asia, the present situation is unique due to two factors – first, the rising challenge to the US ability to maintain its superior position due to China's strategic rise; and domestic considerations related to sustaining US commitment towards Asia.

China's strategic rise poses a greater challenge to US's role of being the main source of stability for the region. China's incremental rise has reduced the relative power gap between the two countries; and this process is expected to continue. China

is determined to be a great power and to take back what was “lost” in a period when it was in a relatively weaker position compared to the US (and Japan). We are witnessing this in the maritime security domain – especially in China’s perceived assertiveness in the South China Sea and East China Sea. China’s (along with North Korea’s) pursuit of gaining a military advantage vis-à-vis the US through the anti-access/anti-denial capability (A2/AD) is a critical development. It could limit the US’s ability to access and maintain its bases in Northeast Asia, and affect its commitment to its allies, partners, and friends.

Also, US isolation or abandonment fears have become pressing issues under the Trump administration. Trump’s “America First” policy has resulted in a widespread perception of greater isolation of the US from global affairs, let alone East Asian affairs. Since becoming president the Trump administration has undone Obama’s rebalancing policy towards Asia, and “torn up” the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) agreement, which was seen as an important economic element of the rebalancing strategy. With no visible strategy towards Asia, these moves by Trump are largely construed as signs of disinterest towards Asia.

To be sure, Trump administration officials have sought to reassure allies and partners that the US will remain committed to East Asian security and stability. There have been some encouraging signs from the Trump administration. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson expressed strong US commitment to Asia in his meeting with ASEAN foreign ministers on 4 May 2017, and accepted an invitation to attend a series of ASEAN-led meetings in the Philippines in August 2017. US Vice President Mike Pence announced that President Trump would attend the ASEAN-US and East Asia Summit meetings in the Philippines, as well as the APEC meeting in Vietnam in November. Despite these encouraging signs, there is still considerable uncertainty in East Asia about the American commitment under President Trump.

## Contested Visions of the Regional Order

For the past several decades, peace and stability in East Asia have rested on a regional order characterized in large part by the US’s economic and military primacy. This order is defined by free trade, US-related security alliances, resembling a hub-and-spokes structure, and a complex web of overlapping multilateral arrangements. Nevertheless, as discussed above, the US is likely to find it more difficult to sustain the US-led global and regional orders in East Asia and beyond.

While this order continues to exist, China seems to be forming its own China-led order. This does not mean that China is abandoning the present US-led order. In fact, it continues to support the useful elements of the existing order (promotion of free trade

and globalization).<sup>8</sup> However, it is certainly creating a preferred regional order that would serve its interests best. As China's relative power and influence increased, it has implemented initiatives that could be likened to an alternative regional order centred on Chinese leadership. This has come in the form of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the One Belt, One Road initiative (or also known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)). While the complementarities between the respective visions put forward by the US and China are clear, there are also competing elements. These visions will complicate the foreign policy strategies of other states, including Japan and the ASEAN states.

## IMPACT ON JAPAN AND ASEAN

For Japan, the impact of the structural forces has resulted in a greater clarification of its national security strategy. Japan has become an engaged security actor – a critical actor in contesting China's influence and preserving strong US presence in the region. It has undertaken several measures internally and externally. Internally, Japan has strengthened its military capabilities; revised its defence strategy (southwest strategy); lifted its self-imposed ban on arms exports; and increased defence spending. Externally, Japan has strengthened the US-Japan defence cooperation through the signing of the new 2015 Guidelines for Japan-US Defence Cooperation that authorized Japan to engage in missions to help defend the US and other allies even when Japan is not under attack (known as collective self-defence). Outside of the US-Japan alliance, Japan has also strengthened its security relations with like-minded countries (Australia and India); strengthened security partnerships with claimant countries in the South China Sea disputes (Philippines and Vietnam); engaged in robust defence diplomacy efforts bilaterally and multilaterally (ADMM-Plus) to contribute to debates on regional security; and participated in regional-level military exercises.

For ASEAN, the impact of the structural forces discussed above is yet unclear. This is no surprise as ASEAN is a collection of ten states with individual national interests. However, this situation has resulted in an undesirable outcome where the region is showing increasing signs of fracture. The differences between pro-China, anti-China, and neutral camps have become starker. The 2012 and 2015 ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meetings, and the meeting between the foreign ministers of China, Laos, Cambodia, and Brunei in April 2016 are good examples to demonstrate this divide. Moreover,

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<sup>8</sup> In fact, China has widened its role in global governance. Some examples are: China signing the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change; increased financial and personnel contributions to the UN operating budget and Peacekeeping Operations (PKO); anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden; multilateral economic governance; public health contributions to fight the Ebola and Zika virus outbreaks; and the Iran nuclear deal. (Shambaugh, David, "Dealing with China: Tough Engagement and Managed Competition," *Asia Policy* (Roundtable on "Assessing US-Asia Relations in a Time of Transition"), January 2017, p. 6.)



“neutral” states, such as Indonesia, have had to reassess their neutral position following clashes between Chinese Coast Guard and Indonesian Coast Guard ships. Malaysia, a long-standing partner of China, has also found it increasingly difficult to maintain its traditionally moderate and non-confrontational approach towards China in the context of the South China Sea disputes. Also, the shifting strategic priorities of certain member states could also be attributed to the uncertainty within ASEAN. A clear example is the Philippines’ policy towards China under the leadership of President Rodrigo Duterte. Despite being an ally of the United States, the Philippines has pursued a foreign policy that is “marked by a pivot to China”.<sup>9</sup> This contributes to the difficulty for ASEAN to project a coherent response to the structural challenges discussed above.

## STRATEGIC OPTIONS FOR JAPAN AND ASEAN

The impact of the evolving Sino-US competition will be felt most by East Asian states, including Japan and ASEAN states, by virtue of geography. The main point here is that not only must Japan and ASEAN respond to this major powers competition, but more importantly, both will have a larger burden in determining peace and stability in the region. Below we discuss the strategic options available to Japan and ASEAN.

### Japan

In response to the challenges above, Japan is pursuing a comprehensive strategic policy that will secure its national interests. Japan’s security policy has become a lot more responsive compared to the passive policy pursued during the Cold War. Though this has been an incremental process since the onset of the post-Cold War period, the process has picked up speed during the post-2000s, especially under the Abe government. The Abe government elevated Japan’s role as a strategic actor in light of the escalated unpredictability and transition in the current strategic landscape. This strategy entails the continued robust American engagement and presence in East Asia with the US-Japan security alliance being the anchor – a necessary element to preserve the US-led international/regional order. However, Japan’s expansion of its security policy is also in preparation for the undesired possibility of a reduced presence of the US in East Asia. In both scenarios, Japan will assume a wider role in ensuring peace and stability in the region both within and outside of the alliance framework to ensure that the region remains favourable to US-Japan interests. Instead of the US-Japan strategic alliance being the cornerstone of peace and stability – a characterization that largely underscores the importance of the US – Japan’s role within the alliance will become more critical to maintaining the US-led status quo in the regional structure.

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<sup>9</sup> Raul Dancel, “Duterte’s ASEAN Vision,” *The Asia Report* (a magazine published by The Straits Times (Singapore)), Apr-May 2017, p. 6.



To support its widened strategic role, Japan is pursuing a comprehensive strategy that entails military force modernization, restoring economic growth, and strengthening its alliance with the US and security partnerships with like-minded states. ASEAN is an important element in Japan's emerging strategic policy towards East Asia. Japan has strengthened its relationships with all ASEAN states bilaterally and multilaterally. For Japan, ASEAN's unity, ASEAN centrality in the East Asian multilateral order, and ASEAN regional norms are absolutely critical for regional stability. Japan has developed an important role in assisting ASEAN states involved in the South China Sea territorial disputes in capacity-building, training, and provision of equipment – all to strengthen the capabilities of these states so that they hold firm to their claims and not be intimidated by a bigger claimant state. Through bilateral and multilateral cooperation, Japan's policy is to contribute to the creation of a network of ASEAN states to resolve issues collectively. This is a positive contribution to regional security affairs by Japan, as it will result in more goodwill among ASEAN states and security for both Japan and Southeast Asia.

## ASEAN

For ASEAN, as made clear above, the picture is not as clear as Japan's. Nevertheless, ASEAN states have to respond to the evolving strategic landscape defined by the escalating Sino-US competition/rivalry. Clearly, ASEAN has played an instrumental role over the last few decades in maintaining a stable regional order in East Asia. With contending visions of the regional order promoted by China and the US, an urgent task for ASEAN would thus be to consolidate its regional leadership role and decide how the institution and its member states could best respond to the competing visions of the regional order offered by the US and China. The longer ASEAN takes to decide its place in the evolving regional order, the less relevant or useful it might become in regional affairs.

The first key strategic goal is to restore ASEAN unity, which is important for maintaining ASEAN centrality in the East Asian multilateral order. The structural forces discussed above have caused the fracture within ASEAN to widen, and addressing this fracture/disunity is the most important challenge for the next decade. The basic question here is how ASEAN will respond to the escalating Sino-US competition/rivalry. In fact, ASEAN has already been dealing with this situation since 2000, with China's active engagement in Southeast Asia. China's role has been perceived as dividing ASEAN especially in relation to the South China Sea territorial disputes. This division/fracture is clearly visible, as witnessed in ASEAN-led meetings since 2012; debate on whether to include references to either the rising tensions in the South China Sea or the Arbitration ruling has become a regular feature in these meetings.

However, it is important to note that the problem is not related to China alone, but has to do with ASEAN and the member states themselves. ASEAN is in a critical

position in the regional strategic landscape and has to decide what its place should be in the evolving strategic landscape. The weaknesses in domestic politics within several ASEAN states and the lack of leadership shown by the traditional leader of ASEAN, Indonesia, have led some to use “adrift” to characterize ASEAN. The longer ASEAN takes to plan for its place in the evolving regional order, the less relevant or useful it might become in regional affairs. The negative impact of the structural forces could result in a re-reading of ASEAN’s core norms and features of ASEAN in crafting a new direction for ASEAN in the evolving regional landscape. For example, ASEAN could perhaps explore options where the tacit leadership of ASEAN does not lie with one country, but it could be issue-based; and embrace the ASEAN-Minus-X approach informally at first, but in a more institutionalized manner subsequently not only in economic matters, but in security issues as well.<sup>10</sup> The latter is especially an important response in situations where reaching a consensus between the members states proves to be difficult due to the extant disunity within ASEAN.

To be sure, ASEAN’s perceived fracture/disunity has not halted progress within ASEAN. It has seen developments, such as (a) achieving the vision of developing an ASEAN Economic Community (AEC); (b) agreeing with China to formulate a framework for a Code of Conduct (CoC) to manage tensions in the South China Sea; (c) facilitating dialogue amongst member states and the Plus countries; and (d) finally, being able to maintain somewhat its unity and centrality in the East Asian multilateral order. As ASEAN leaders are aware of the challenging times ahead, incremental steps to maintain its unity will prove to be critical in maintaining its relevance in the evolving regional landscape. To restore unity, ASEAN has to decide the tipping point when Chinese or American actions become detrimental to regional stability. This should push ASEAN to devise a common approach to challenging the negative actions of the great/major powers. This does not refer to a common foreign and security policy as practised by the European Union (EU), but a common approach that is issue-based, such as in the South China Sea disputes. The evolution of structural forces has ushered ASEAN to a point in history where it has to decide collectively its place in the evolving strategic landscape and consider perhaps even collective approaches to security (both traditional and non-traditional forms) to stake its claim on the type of regional order that will emerge in East Asia.

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<sup>10</sup> Briefly, ASEAN-Minus-X is an approach within ASEAN’s consensus-based decision making process. This approach offers flexibility for member states to opt out in the implementation of commitments if they decide to do so, leaving the rest of the member states to continue with the implementation process. The opt-out option is also reached by a consensus among the member states of ASEAN. The ASEAN-Minus-X is enshrined in the 2007 ASEAN Charter, specifically focusing on economic commitments. (See Seng Tan, “Herding Cats: The Role of Persuasion in Political Change and Continuity in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)”, *International Relations of Asia Pacific*, 13, 2013, p. 251; ASEAN, *The ASEAN Charter* (ASEAN Secretariat, Jakarta, 2015), p. 23).

Relatedly, efforts to restore ASEAN unity will form a strong foundation to reinforce ASEAN centrality in the East Asian multilateral order. ASEAN centrality has been the bedrock for the evolving East Asian multilateral order. In the evolving strategic landscape it is important that ASEAN maintains its centrality which facilitates its role of being the convening institution for East Asia. This is a strategy that has worked well for ASEAN in engaging great/major powers in the region and in sustaining ASEAN's relevance in the East Asian multilateral structure.

Moreover, both Japan and ASEAN should support the continued US military engagement in East Asia. The US has been the main source of stability in the region, and both Japan and the ASEAN states have benefited from this structural condition. Both Japan and ASEAN (to various degrees) are strong supporters of a strong American commitment to Asia. Japan is an ally of the US and is host to the largest US military deployment in Asia. This alliance is not just to defend Japan's national security, but is also critical for regional peace and stability. This point is well understood by Japan and the ASEAN states. The need for continued US commitment and presence in the region is even greater in light of the regional challenges, such as the instability in the maritime domain, China's strategic rise, and the instability on the Korean Peninsula. Hence, it will be in the interest of both Japan and ASEAN to ensure the strong commitment of the US towards East Asia.

At the same time, the structural forces discussed above make it crucial for Japan and ASEAN to pursue a strategy that is beyond a sole reliance on the US commitment/presence as well. As Kausikan wrote, "[the US presence] is no longer a sufficient condition to preserve stability for future growth".<sup>11</sup> Instead, Japan and ASEAN should support the creation of a robust East Asian multilateral structure that is based on open regionalism (an inclusive rather than an exclusive concept of regionalism). The East Asian regional architecture is a complex web comprising bilateral security alliances, trilateral arrangements, and multilateral institutions (both formal and informal) at the sub-regional, regional, and global levels; and these arrangements focus on cooperation between states in politics, economics, security, social, and a range of other issues. Though complex in nature, the various units that make up the regional and global order not only offer opportunities for dialogue and strengthening mutual interdependence, they are also important mechanisms for addressing global governance issues. Japan and ASEAN should support the strengthening of this complex architecture and the building of even more synergy between the various arrangements/meetings.

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<sup>11</sup> Kausikan, *Singapore is Not an Island*, p. 106.

## CONCLUSION

This paper provided a forward-looking analysis on Japan-ASEAN relations. It specifically focused on the impact of the escalating Sino-US competition/rivalry on Japan and ASEAN. It concluded by underscoring the elevated importance of Japan and ASEAN in contributing to peace and stability in the evolving strategic landscape in East Asia. In discussing the means through which both Japan and ASEAN have or could respond to the unfolding strategic challenges, the paper noted that unlike Japan's clear response, ASEAN's response has been expectedly unclear. Nevertheless, ASEAN has to collectively decide on its proper place in the evolving strategic landscape so that it remains a relevant actor in the East Asian regional architecture.

However, there are two points for both Japan and ASEAN to note. First, for a stable Japan-ASEAN relationship, Japan should avoid two points that might reduce the goodwill it has nurtured with ASEAN states since the Cold War period. The first is avoiding any destabilizing behaviour related to the unresolved historical legacy issue. Such behaviour not only reduces goodwill but also fuels the view that Japan can be a destabilizer in the region. Second, Japan should avoid defining its strategy in clear anti-China balance of power terms. This results in regional countries adopting a view that Japan is attempting to create an anti-China coalition through its active engagement policies in East Asia.

Second, both Japan and ASEAN have to ensure there is convergence of interests in the creation of a regional order that is favourable to the interests of both parties. For Japan, it should look out for increasing accommodation from ASEAN states towards China, whether in the maritime domain or beyond. For ASEAN, Japan's "going it alone" (without the US) approach as well as Japan striking a deal with China that could lead to Tokyo's withdrawal of its involvement in the South China Sea, resulting in ASEAN losing an important partner in preserving a regime defined by international law and norms, would also be detrimental to ASEAN's interests.

The Japan-ASEAN relationship has grown from strength to strength since the 1950s. Both Japan and ASEAN should be proud of where the bilateral relationship is on ASEAN's 50th anniversary. However, both parties should also recognize that there is more work ahead. This is especially so as the responsibilities of both Japan and ASEAN have been elevated in light of the evolving strategic landscape defined by the escalating Sino-US competition/rivalry in the East Asian regional order.

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