

PERSPECTIVE

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Japan, the Courteous Power, Bares Some Teeth for Regional Stability

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Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida speaking at the Joint Chairpersons' Press Announcement after the ASEAN-Japan Commemorative Summit Meeting in Tokyo on 17 December 2023. (Photo by Eugene Hoshiko/POOL/AFP).

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The establishment of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) between ASEAN and Japan during the 50th anniversary of their partnership in September 2023 reaffirms Japan's role as a trusted partner in Southeast Asia.
- Among ASEAN dialogue partners, Japan has been recognised as a “courteous power” that aligns well with Southeast Asian cultural norms and values. Beyond that, Japan has emerged as the most trusted and strategically relevant middle power to ASEAN in the 2024 State of Southeast Asia survey.
- Japan's trusted status has enabled it to play a greater security role in the region, including through the new Official Security Assistance (OSA) introduced in 2023 to strengthen the security capabilities of like-minded regional countries.
- Japan's engagement in the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” strategy and its active role in various minilateral configurations demonstrate its strategic intent not only to foster a rules-based international order but also to enhance interoperability among regional militaries.
- Japan has recently enhanced its alliance with the United States and deepened collaborations with the Philippines, Australia, and the UK, effectively transforming the traditional “Hub and Spokes” framework into a robust network of aligned partners. This strategic evolution positions Japan to effectively bridge QUAD and ASEAN nations, facilitating the creation of a comprehensive regional security network.

INTRODUCTION

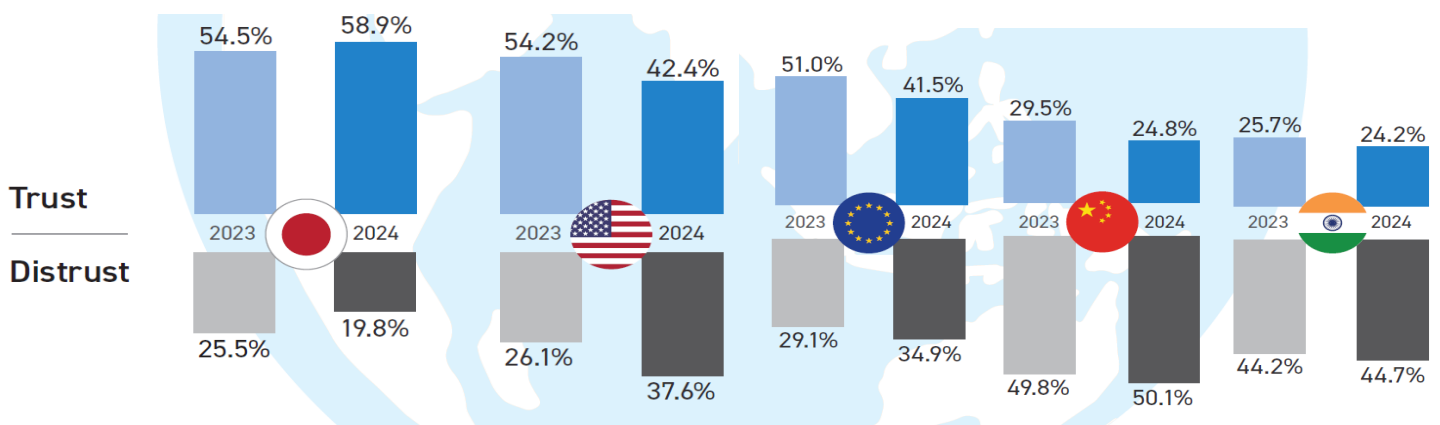
ASEAN and Japan celebrated five decades of partnership in a Commemorative Summit in December 2023,¹ with the theme “Trusted Partners”. This aptly encapsulated a relationship built on Japan’s respectful diplomacy and ASEAN’s preference for mutual respect and shared values. Amidst the diverse challenges and opportunities in the region, Japan’s role as a trusted partner remains pivotal in shaping regional partnerships across Southeast Asia. The establishment of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) between ASEAN and Japan in 2023² underscores this strategic role.

Among ASEAN’s dialogue partners, Japan has distinguished itself as a “courteous power”³ that aligns well with the cultural norms and values of Southeast Asian countries. Beyond its status as one of the region’s top economic, security and diplomatic partners,⁴ Japan has earned the reputation of being the most relied-upon partner in the region.

Japan’s reputation in the region was reaffirmed in the *State of Southeast Asia 2024 Survey*,⁵ where it not only maintained its position as the most trusted power but also emerged as the most strategically relevant middle power to ASEAN. While other middle powers such as Australia, the EU, India and the United Kingdom (UK) experienced a decrease in their perceived influence, Japan saw a doubling of its perceived political and strategic influence in Southeast Asia.

This Perspective delves into Japan’s status as a beacon of trust and growing influence in the broader regional multilateral framework. It is argued that Japan can leverage its stock of trust in Southeast Asia to play a bigger security role in the region. Japan’s enduring role as an all-weather friend to Southeast Asia⁶ over the past five decades is reaffirmed in the survey.⁷ The report continues to underscore the region’s confidence in Japan as the most trusted among five key powers, including the US, EU, China and India. When asked if Japan will “do the right thing” to contribute to global peace, security, prosperity and governance, the majority of respondents (58.9%) expressed confidence, a 4.4% increase from 2023.

Trust and Distrust Rankings of Major Powers



Source: *State of Southeast Asia 2024 Survey*

Among those who trust Japan, the largest group of respondents (36.5%) believe Japan is a responsible stakeholder that respects and champions international law. The second biggest reason for trust in Japan (27.7%) is its vast economic resources and its political will to provide global leadership. Approximately one-fifth of respondents (21.1%) trust Japan because they admire its civilisation and culture.

In the ranking of dialogue partners by strategic relevance to the region, Japan is the frontrunner among all the middle powers, behind only China and the US. Japan surpasses all other middle powers including the EU, South Korea, UK, Australia, Russia, India, Canada and New Zealand.

Dialogue Partners’ Strategic Relevance to ASEAN

Rank	Dialogue Partner	Mean Score (Out of 11)	Ranking Order by ASEAN Member States									
			BN	KH	ID	LA	MY	MM	PH	SG	TH*	VN
1	China	8.98	1	1	1	1	1	2	4	1	1	2
2	The United States	8.79	3	2	2	2	2	1	1	2	2	1
3	Japan	7.48	2	3	3	4	3	3	2	3	3	3
4	The European Union	6.38	8	4	5	5	4	4	3	5	4	4
5	Republic of Korea	5.71	5	6	4	6	6	6	8	7	7	6
6	The United Kingdom	5.52	6	5	9	7	8	7	5	8	5	7
7	Australia	5.51	4	7	7	8	5	8	6	4	9	8
8	Russian Federation	5.08	9	8	6	3	9	9	11	11	6	5
9	India	5.04	7	9	8	9	7	5	9	6	8	9
10	Canada	3.81	11	10	11	11	10	10	7	10	11	10
11	New Zealand	3.70	10	11	10	10	11	11	10	9	10	11

Source: *State of Southeast Asia 2024 Survey*

Southeast Asian perception of Japan’s growing influence in the region is also evident in other survey responses. When asked which country is the most influential political-strategic power in the region, the number of respondents ranking Japan at the top nearly doubled from 1.9% last year to 3.7% this year. Although Japan ranks far behind China, US and ASEAN, its perceived growing influence sets it apart from other middle powers like Australia, the EU, India, and the UK, which witnessed a decline.

GROWING SECURITY ROLE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Southeast Asians’ trust in Japan has been conducive for Tokyo to play a bigger security role in the region. Since the 1990s, Japan has shouldered increased responsibility for maintaining security in the Asia-Pacific region.⁸ During the tenures of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (2007-2008, 2012-2020), Japan assumed a more assertive stance in both military and diplomatic spheres, largely driven by the resurgence of China.⁹

According to Abe, Japan would make a “proactive contribution to the peace”. To this end, Japan has demonstrated its resolve to build a regional security framework, based on shared principles of international law, no recourse to the use of force, and a rules-based order in both words and deeds. In 2016, Abe introduced the concept of a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP), aiming to capitalise on emerging opportunities and challenges across Asia and Africa. This vision is rooted in a commitment to a rules-based international order, peace, stability and

economic prosperity.¹⁰ Further refining this vision, Japan unveiled its “New Plan for a FOIP” in March 2023, acknowledging evolving global dynamics, including the rise of emerging and developing countries as well as pressing global challenges such as climate change and technology advancements.¹¹

In April 2023, Japan introduced the Official Security Assistance (OSA) programme,¹² which provides material equipment and infrastructure assistance to meet the security needs of recipient countries especially in Southeast Asia and South Asia.¹³ The defence equipment provided under the OSA is limited to areas such as rescue, transport, warning, surveillance and minesweeping.¹⁴ Japan’s rationale for the OSA was straightforward: to strengthen the security of like-minded states by improving their “deterrence capacities”, particularly in the face of “China’s growing attempts to unilaterally change the status quo by force”.¹⁵ This serves to bolster the security capabilities of ASEAN countries, including by provision of radars and satellite systems, and reinforces Japan’s strategic engagement with the region, representing a tangible demonstration of Japan’s commitment to regional security.

The OSA is a continuation of a long-standing trend whereby Japan sought to bolster the security capacities of like-minded regional countries. While Japan’s Official Development Assistance (ODA) can only be used for social and economic development, Japan used a “sleight of hand” to send vessels, aircraft and radar systems to help Southeast Asian claimant states in the South China Sea bolster their maritime capabilities.¹⁶ In 2013, Japan delivered 10 multi-role patrol vessels to the Philippines Coast Guard, and dispatched another two patrol boats in 2022. Tokyo has dispatched six second-hand fishery patrol ships to Vietnam. Another six will be sent by 2025.

In April 2024, Japan upgraded its alliance with the US – arguably the biggest elevation of the alliance since 1951. For the first time, the two militaries would be put under the command of a US four-star general, thus resembling the US-South Korea alliance setup, which is structured under an expeditious “fight tonight” deterrent posture.¹⁷ The two allies plan to enable “seamless integration of operations and capabilities for interoperability.” Speaking in April 2024, Joe Biden and Fumio Kishida singled out China, saying the two allies would “respond to challenges by China through close coordination”.¹⁸

Within the same week, Japan and the US also incorporated the Philippines into a first-ever trilateral arrangement, which, according to Kishida would “bolster a free and open international order based on the rule of law”. President Biden reaffirmed US defence commitments to Tokyo and Manila - a clear signal to China, which had been involved in an altercation with Philippine forces in the South China Sea.¹⁹ While Manila and Tokyo are not formal military allies with each other, the institutional linkages between the US, Japan and the Philippines are expected to grow. This would serve as a deterrent to assertive Chinese actions in disputed areas such as the South China Sea.²⁰

At the same set of meetings, President Biden and Prime Minister Kishida also announced that Japan will join the second pillar of the Australia-United Kingdom-US (AUKUS) trilateral security arrangement. The second pillar would involve the development of advanced capabilities such as cyber assets, artificial intelligence and quantum capabilities.²¹ The US and

Japan also announced a regular series of US-Japan-UK exercises, which are slated to begin in 2025.

This underscores the thickening web of US allies and like-minded partners to uphold the regional order. Japan is already emerging as a key player in emerging minilateral arrangements, involving US allies and like-minded partners. In August 2023, the leaders of Japan, South Korea and the US inaugurated a new trilateral partnership, which would enable the three countries to consult and coordinate, on an annual basis, at various levels of their governments concerning common security and other related challenges.²² A new multi-domain exercise, to be held annually, is also in the planning stages.²³

Japan is also playing a role in other minilaterals. In early May, the defence ministers of Australia, Japan, the Philippines and the US met at the US Indo-Pacific Command headquarters in Hawaii to affirm their shared vision for a “free, open secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific” The meeting was apposite, given that both the US and the Philippines had just finished their annual US-Philippine Balikatan exercises (with Japan and Australia as observers), which are aimed at deterring China in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea.²⁴ In Hawaii, the defence ministers of Australia, Japan and the US also met for the 13th time to deepen cooperation to promote regional security. They announced additional trilateral exercises, such as F-35 training in the three countries, and the conduct of a first-ever combined live-fire air and missile defence exercise in 2027.

WHEN A SPOKE BECOMES A HUB

The trifecta of Southeast Asia’s growing trust in Japan, Tokyo’s willingness and ability to play an increased security role, and the thickening of a minilateral security network in the face of growing Chinese assertiveness puts Japan in a position to enhance defence cooperation with ASEAN, and also to integrate individual Southeast Asian countries into a framework involving some (or all) members of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad).

Defence Cooperation with ASEAN

Japan already plays an active role in the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus), which spans various domains including humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, maritime security, military medicine, counterterrorism, peacekeeping operations, and cybersecurity, and has been positively received by the region.²⁵ In November 2023, Japan introduced a new Japan-ASEAN Ministerial Initiative for Enhanced Defense Cooperation (JASMINE).²⁶ JASMINE seeks to elevate ASEAN-Japan defence cooperation amid a dynamic security landscape by focusing on four key aspects, namely: (i) ensuring a security environment that does not allow unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force or coercion; (ii) expanding ASEAN-Japan defence cooperation; (iii) pursuing further friendship and opportunities between ASEAN-Japan defence officials; and (iv) supporting defence cooperation between ASEAN, Japan and the Pacific Island countries. JASMINE mirrors Japan’s vision as laid out in Japan’s Vientiane Vision in 2016. Tokyo said it wanted practical defence cooperation with ASEAN countries based on capacity building, the transfer of equipment, and joint participation in exercises.

Maritime security has emerged as a central focus for Japan, driven by escalating concerns over China's naval activities.²⁷ In this context, Japan can serve as a bridge to facilitate ASEAN's utilisation of the Quad's Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness,²⁸ leveraging innovative technology to provide real-time information on maritime activities. Collaboration in this regard will be instrumental in combating illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing and addressing humanitarian crises. Coordination with existing maritime centers in the region, such as the Information Fusion Centre in Singapore and the Thai Maritime Enforcement Coordinating Centre, will enhance the effectiveness of such endeavours.

Furthermore, Japan should prioritise providing regular updates to ASEAN on developments in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly regarding minilateral initiatives like the Quad and other trilateral groupings. These updates could be shared on the sidelines of events such as the ADMM-Plus or security forums like the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, fostering greater trust and confidence-building between ASEAN and Japan. Such dialogues will not only enhance functional cooperation but also facilitate a clearer articulation of their respective strategic roles in the region.²⁹

Quad-lite Minilaterals

By virtue of its deep linkages with the US and its San Francisco alliance network and growing defence connections with ASEAN countries, Japan is in a strategic position to link the Quad and ASEAN countries into a wider security network. Broadly speaking, the Quad and ASEAN share a common goal of ensuring regional stability and security, as well as common principles, such as the promotion of an open, inclusive and rules-based regional architecture. The point of divergence lies in what is perceived to be the Quad's potential to undermine the centrality of ASEAN, and the consequent effects of ASEAN or its member countries working closer with the Quad (i.e. China's opposition to such activities, given Sino-US rivalry and competition for power and influence in the Indo-Pacific). For many ASEAN countries, Quad membership is out of the question. That said, however, many Southeast Asians have become increasingly receptive to working with Quad countries to strengthen regional stability. In the 2024 State of Southeast Asia Survey, 40.9% of respondents deemed that the Quad would be beneficial to the region -- up from 31% in 2023.³⁰

The Quad's 'flexible' and 'nimble' character can be expressed in what Hoang and Choong term as "Quad-lite" configurations among members of the Quad, as well as between Quad members and Southeast Asian countries. While such Quad-lite collaborations do not carry the Quad "brand" (and thus do not heighten Chinese perceptions of threat), they provide building blocks for bolstering strategic coherence and interoperability among members.³¹ This thickening web includes defence and security cooperation, but also other functional domains such as economics, supply chains, and technologies.³²

In August 2023, navies from Australia, Japan, the Philippines, and the US conducted a multilateral exercise in the South China Sea. This included the helicopter destroyer JS Izumo and destroyer JS Samidare, the US Navy Littoral Combat Ship USS Mobile and the Royal Australian Navy amphibious assault ship Canberra and frigate HMAS Anzac.³³ In April 2024, the four countries carried out joint air and naval drills, again in the South China Sea.³⁴ A joint

statement issued by the Defence Chiefs of the four countries highlighted their “collective commitment to strengthen regional and international cooperation in support of a free and open Indo-Pacific”, and to stand with all countries “in safeguarding international order based on the rule of law”.³⁵

In August 2023, the Talisman Sabre exercises involved not just Australian and American soldiers, but also soldiers, marines and aviators from Japan, South Korea and the UK. Military personnel from the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand attended as observers.³⁶ In September 2023, Singapore and Japan were part of a large-scale Super Garuda Shield exercise carried out by Indonesia and the US. Brunei, Malaysia and the Philippines participated as observers.³⁷

Such Quad-lite interactions are not restricted to the defence/security domain. Australia, Japan and the US have offered their support for clean energy and decarbonisation projects in Vietnam. The US-Japan Mekong Power Partnership, which seeks to facilitate clean energy deployment and electrical connectivity, involves Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam.³⁸ The US-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework comprises all four Quad countries and seven Southeast Asian countries.

These working Quad-lite arrangements do not constitute an overly anti-China defence network, but this network can serve as a potential deterrent to assertive Chinese behaviour. It also means Southeast Asian countries can pursue flexible and timely arrangements with the US and its allies in the pursuit of their national interests and regional stability. The fact that Japan takes a more nuanced approach to China helps it gain traction in the region. As opposed to the US, which at times has used megaphone diplomacy to castigate China, Japan tends to take a more low-key approach, engaging with China in the realm of economics and working with Beijing even in more sensitive political and security matters. In 2018, for example, Mr Abe forged 52 memorandums of understanding with China to facilitate bilateral cooperation in third-country markets. In May 2024, there was a trilateral summit involving China, South Korea Japan. The summit discussed economic issues, as well as regional and global issues such as the Korean peninsula, the war in Ukraine and war between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

Given Japan’s thickening linkages with the US and within the Quad, its deep relationships with Southeast Asian countries and their high level of trust in Tokyo, Japan is best placed to act as a bridge between the Quad and ASEAN countries in defence of the regional order. Going forward, Japan can encourage Southeast Asian countries to participate in military exercises involving some, if not all, Quad member countries. This could involve repeated and scheduled participation of Southeast Asian countries in the aforementioned exercises, namely, Garuda Shield, Talisman Sabre and even future iterations of the August 2023 military exercises involving Australia, Japan, the Philippines and the US in the South China Sea. In addition, Japan can consider involving more Southeast Asian countries in its Indo-Pacific Endeavour series of annual naval deployments involving its light carriers and escorting destroyers. These deployments typically involve other Quad countries. The 2022 and 2023 editions saw two ASEAN countries taking part,³⁹ while 2019 had seen Japanese interactions with five ASEAN countries, namely Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam.⁴⁰

Japan’s involvement in such Quad-lite arrangements would act as an incentive for Southeast Asian countries to do likewise. This would be beneficial to the regional order on two counts.

First, the sustained participation of ASEAN countries in Quad-lite exercises will help to form patterns of cooperative norms and habits between Quad nations and Southeast Asian countries, and thus increase interoperability and coordination for future contingencies. Second, the participation of ASEAN countries in such a Quad-lite network could potentially deter Chinese behaviour that may upset the regional status quo. China has taken notice of such thickening linkages between Quad countries and ASEAN states, stressing that it opposed the “practice of bloc parties” by relevant countries.⁴¹ Put differently, China is keenly aware of such arrangements, and they could have some deterrent value vis-à-vis assertive Chinese behaviour.

CONCLUSION

Japan is in an advantageous position to link up the Quad and various Southeast Asian countries. By leveraging on its long-standing trust capital in Southeast Asia and its linkages to minilaterals such as the Quad, Japan can help to build a sustainable regional order based on shared principles that deter potential aggressors. In other words, the “courteous power” can bare some teeth in the pursuit of regional stability. To paraphrase Ciorciari and Tsutsui, the “courteous power” can facilitate through its growing strategic weight rather than a strong fist to nudge Southeast Asian countries towards the path Japan wants them to take – for the sake of regional security.

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