



# The Impacts of US-China Tensions: ASEAN's deeply rooted pragmatism



“Going forward, a tendency to actively position minilateral attempts [like Quad, Lancang-Mekong Cooperation and others] and the ASEAN framework as complementary initiatives may become apparent among ASEAN members.”

Photo: OPgrapher / PIXTA

Southeast Asian countries have dealt with the major powers through loose cooperation. There is much Japan could learn from ASEAN's pragmatism.

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## A history of freedom in foreign and security policy and standoffs

Amid ongoing US-China tensions, the stance of ASEAN member countries towards the United States, China, and other extra regional countries appears to differ, with divisions and standoffs among ASEAN members being pointed out. However, from a historical perspective, several factors need to be borne in mind.

First, ASEAN was never a military alliance to begin with and does not prevent its member countries from formulating their own foreign and security policies in line with their own national interests. If anything, such a large degree of freedom has allowed for loose cooperation and collaboration. At one time in the 1970s, Malaysia proposed the neutralization of Southeast Asia guaranteed by the United States, China, and the Soviet Union. Thailand



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objected to this proposal, prioritizing its relationship with the United States given the intensification of the Vietnam War, and Singapore and Indonesia also opposed the idea, arguing that it could lead to major power interference. Consequently, ASEAN merely declared that the neutralization of Southeast Asia would be desirable, without clearly specifying what kind of involvement ASEAN would expect from extra-regional powers.

Likewise, in their security relations with the United States, each ASEAN member adopted a different policy. Whereas the Philippines and Thailand maintained a close relationship with the United States, other members such as Indonesia preferred a non-aligned position. Whilst most ASEAN members tacitly approved of US military bases in the Philippines as necessary for regional stability, when the Philippines sought ASEAN support for US-Philippines negotiations on the US military base issue at the end of the 1980s, ASEAN avoided making a collective response on the grounds that this was a bilateral issue (Tamaki Kazunori, “*Zai-Hi beigun kichi mondai to ASEAN no taio* [US military base issue in the Philippines and ASEAN’s response],” Okabe Tatsumi, ed., “*ASEAN ni okeru Kokumin-togo to Chiiki-togo* [National integration and regional integration in ASEAN, Japan Institute of International Affairs, 1989]). The ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting has been held since 2006; however, this does not mean there has been any progress on military cooperation in a traditional sense, since the meeting aims to promote non-traditional security cooperation, such as expansion of the role of the military in disaster management.

Second, standoffs within ASEAN members is nothing new. A delve into history shows that member countries have always had conflicting interests. As mentioned above, in the 1970s, they could not agree on the neutralization of Southeast Asia. Another event which led to a lengthy standoff amongst ASEAN members is the Cambodian Civil War (1978–91). In response to Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia, ASEAN members were split into hardliners and soft-liners on Vietnam. Underlying this split were different threat perceptions of the extra-regional powers. Whereas the hardliners perceived the Soviet Union which was backing Vietnam as the number one priority threat, the soft-liners adopted a conciliatory approach towards Vietnam as a buffer zone, arguing that China which was antagonizing Vietnam was the bigger threat. On another occasion, ASEAN members disagreed over Myanmar’s membership of ASEAN in the 1990s.

However, none of these clashes were life threatening for ASEAN and did not lead to the withdrawal of any member countries. ASEAN countries have maintained cooperation while reconciling their different interests. To be sure, US-China tensions may have highlighted the differences of values and views among ASEAN members. However, it is still true that, for policymakers in ASEAN countries, standoffs are nothing out of the ordinary.

### **ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP)**

Despite such internal standoffs, ASEAN member states have also attached importance to achieving as unified a stance as possible when under pressure to send its messages to the rest of the world. “As unified as possible” means creating a consensus rather than seeking complete conflict resolution, which leads to non-binding agreements and leaves the procedure for implementation to the discretion of each country. This is why ASEAN often receives disappointment and despair from outside.

The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) issued in June 2019 is also one such consensus. Both the United States and China have made proposals to shape the regional order, with Japan and the United States setting forth Indo-Pacific strategies following China’s Belt and Road initiative (BRI). In light of such developments, some countries in the region, notably Indonesia, which is a great power in ASEAN, recognized the need for ASEAN to show what kinds of order and cooperation it favors in the Indo-Pacific region. The consensus reached under Indonesia’s leadership was for non-interference in domestic affairs, openness, inclusiveness, respect for international law, emphasis on dialogue and cooperation instead of rivalry, and maritime cooperation, connectivity, SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals), economic and other possible areas of cooperation [four key areas] and for cooperation under ASEAN-led frameworks

such as the EAS (East Asia Summit).

However, there appears to be no consensus among ASEAN members on how to put this AOIP into practice. Given that maritime cooperation and connectivity centered on infrastructure development was adopted by Indonesia as its own national policy, other member countries including Singapore have a lukewarm attitude towards realization of the AOIP. Partly because of such reluctance, Indonesia, which had proposed the policy, asserted that even progress in bilateral cooperation with India would constitute implementation of the AOIP, lowering the bar for its realization. In all likelihood, Indo-Pacific cooperation among ASEAN countries will not be something promoted through the establishment of a new organization such as APEC but rather will be based on network-type loose cooperation, with emphasis on the existing ASEAN-led framework.

At the same time, given that extra-regional countries have reacted to this AOIP one after another, some member countries take the pragmatic view that if the AOIP draws support from extra-regional countries then why not take advantage of it. China shares this pragmatic approach. Partly because the AOIP used the same Indo-Pacific concept in the strategies of Japan and the United States, China viewed it negatively as expected but was quick to identify the shared theme of strengthening connectivity in this AOIP and the BRI's infrastructure development. At the ASEAN-China Summit in November 2019, China mentioned the AOIP and BRI, and issued a statement with ASEAN confirming the importance of cooperation in infrastructure development.

Meanwhile, Japan, the United States and Australia expressed clear support for the AOIP but moves towards realization of the vision have yet to be taken. At the ASEAN-Japan Summit in November 2020, a Joint Statement on the AOIP was issued, confirming that both the AOIP and Japan's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)" concept share relevant fundamental principles in promoting peace and cooperation, strengthen cooperation within existing frameworks, forming a transparent and open rules-based regional order, support the ASEAN principles of strengthening good governance, respect for sovereignty, nonintervention and enhancing practical cooperation and synergy in the four key areas as outlined in the AOIP.

## **Balancing between wariness about China and economic ties**

Without a doubt, China poses a threat for many ASEAN countries, despite their shared pragmatism. Even pro-China member countries need to deal with China's influence to no small degree. ASEAN countries have generally welcomed the involvement of the United States in the Southeast Asia region whether officially or unofficially. The US-led Quad (Japan-US-Australia-India Strategic Dialogue) has met with some hostility on the grounds that it shows a lack of respect for ASEAN but at the same time there is also some optimism for a framework that will address the China threat (Le Thu H., "Southeast Asian Perceptions of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue," The Australian Strategic Policy Institute; 2018).

Meanwhile, more and more ASEAN members are voicing concern over China. China's actions in the South China Sea are escalating year after year and not only the Philippines and Vietnam which are directly affected but also other members such as Malaysia and Indonesia are becoming increasingly wary. Since the start of 2020, many ASEAN countries have come out in clear support of the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA)'s ruling, which ruled in favor of claims by the Philippines that China's territorial claims in the South China Sea are a breach of international law. The United States also jumped on the bandwagon and declared its support for the PCA's ruling, saying China's claim has no basis in international law.

There are limits to the action ASEAN countries can take against the threat from China on their own and there is an attempt to use the United States' hard line against China to reign China in. However, it would not be a good idea to irritate China more than necessary by emphasizing such a strategy. One of the reasons for this is that economic ties with China are essential for the economic growth of ASEAN members and amicable relations need to be maintained. This applies not only to Cambodia, Thailand and Laos which are regarded as pro-China on the South China Sea issue but also to the other member countries. Recently, in addition to interdependence on a national level, links on a municipal and provincial level are also growing stronger and relations with China are crucial for the regional development of ASEAN countries (Hemmi Nobuhiro, "China/ASEAN no Shogeki (Impact of China and ASEAN)," Nikkei BP, 2021).

Moreover, the China-led Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) framework launched in 2015 has rapidly become prominent in terms of cooperation in the Mekong region. Billed as part of the BRI, the LMC framework brings together China, Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. In February 2020, when COVID-19 was becoming widespread around the world, a special ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers' Meeting was held in Vientiane, Laos for the exchange of information on measures to combat the virus. This meeting was held to coincide with the already scheduled 5th LMC Foreign Ministers' Meeting, and the representatives of the other ASEAN countries which are not LMC members also gathered in Vientiane, indicating the intention of ASEAN countries to try to strengthen cooperation within a China-led framework.

## **Hostility and cooperation towards the United States**

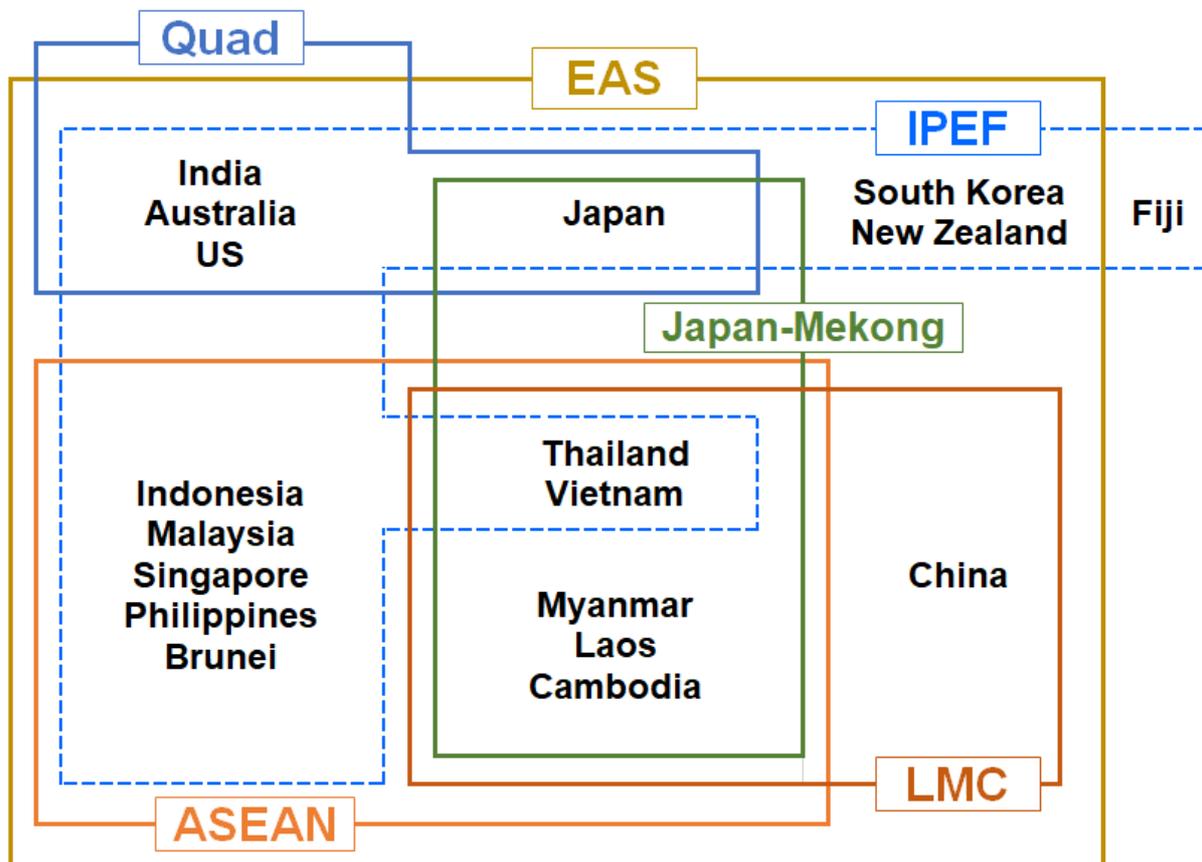
Another reason behind the desire of ASEAN countries to avoid a confrontation with China is because they suspect that the United States' policy in Southeast Asia is merely a part of its anti-China policy and are dubious over the extent of the United States' continued involvement in the Southeast region and ASEAN. The United States' involvement in ASEAN has not changed significantly from the Trump to the Biden administration.

To be sure, unlike the Trump administration, the Biden administration appears to attach importance to ASEAN, attending ASEAN meetings and holding a special ASEAN-US Summit in Washington in May 2022. However, the Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States issued by the Biden administration in February 2022 set forth a policy of strengthening relationships with regional partners, including India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Vietnam, together with alliances with Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea (ROK), the Philippines, and Thailand, whilst at the same time confirming its support for ASEAN. In other words, the strategy suggests the administration will prioritize bilateral relationships rather than the Southeast Asia region as a united entity.

Furthermore, in August 2021, the countries in the Southeast Asia region that Vice President Kamala Harris chose to visit were Vietnam and Singapore, which are regarded as hardliners against China. The IPEF (Indo-Pacific Economic Framework) proposed by the Biden administration in May 2022 is also not a framework for the promotion of free trade but rather a framework indirectly aimed at reducing sourcing from China. ASEAN member countries have each responded in their own way to the IPEF, with seven ASEAN countries, excluding Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar, signing up. However, even though they have signed up, to what extent they share the principles of this framework with the United States has yet to be determined.

The US-led Quad and the China-led LMC can probably be seen as minilateral movements by a few countries in the Indo-Pacific region (Singh Bhubhindar and Teo Sarah, *Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific*, Routledge, 2020). Viewed in this way, there are various cooperation frameworks made up of different members in this region and each of them is trying to position itself within the context of Indo-Pacific regional cooperation (see Fig.)

**Figure: Indo-Pacific region cooperation frameworks**



**Source:** Created by the author

ASEAN countries are hostile towards such developments on the grounds that they show a lack of respect for ASEAN members but at the same time they are also assessing how they can use them, and in some cases are prepared to cooperate and explore how to respond flexibly. Going forward, ASEAN members might make a move to actively position minilateral attempts and the ASEAN framework as complementary initiatives. The aforementioned AOIP is flexible enough to allow such a move.

### **Towards Japan’s unique policy with regard to ASEAN**

2023 is a milestone year marking the 50th Year of ASEAN-Japan Friendship and Cooperation. In 2020, Japan and ASEAN confirmed the synergies between the AOIP and Japan’s FOIP. In particular, the strengthening of ASEAN connectivity and quality infrastructure projects fit well together. Japan should lead discussions on institutional building for Indo-Pacific regional cooperation, stressing, for instance, that Japan has promoted high-quality infrastructure development.

It is also necessary to stress once again that the areas of cooperation towards ASEAN on which Japan has focused could be issue areas for Indo-Pacific regional cooperation. The four areas of the AOIP are very

all-encompassing and the inclusion of individual specific issues is possible. For example, Japan has already provided a great deal of support to ASEAN and member countries in the field of disaster management, which is a non-traditional security issue. To position this issue within wider regional cooperation that goes beyond Japan-ASEAN cooperation is strategically important for Japan.

In the context of Japan-ASEAN cooperation, Japan has attached importance to the ASEAN framework. This will continue to be important but Japan-Mekong cooperation and bilateral assistance to ASEAN member countries are also essential. It is probably necessary to incorporate such cooperation into Japan-ASEAN cooperation or to reaffirm the complementary nature of cooperation at different levels. While not denying the importance of multilateral frameworks, the United States and China have basically prioritized bilateral relations. In response to this, Japan has an opportunity to demonstrate that multilateral cooperation and bilateral cooperation are substantially linked, which can realize the development of a more multi-tiered as well as network-type Indo-Pacific cooperation. It is not a good idea to allow the rivalry between Japan and China to play out in the Mekong region through Japan-Mekong cooperation and the LMC. There is much Japan could learn from the pragmatism of ASEAN member countries and China.

*Translated from “Tokushu 1 Bei Chu tairitsu no Giseisha: ASEAN ni nezuku puragmathizumu (Feature 1 The Impacts of US-China Tensions: ASEAN’s deeply rooted pragmatism),” Voice, December 2022, pp. 84-91. (Courtesy of PHP Institute) [January 2023]*

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