

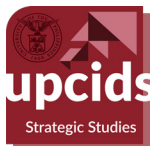
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Re-Evaluating Japan's Middle Power Diplomacy: Between Aspirations and Reality

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Maria Thaemar C. Tana¹ and Ronna Shane M. Belaro²

Abstract

In recent years, Japan has expanded its security policies and become more proactive in its regional security affairs. It is, however, caught between two Great Powers—China and the United States, whose rivalries have significant ramifications on the stability of the Indo-Pacific region. What, then, are Japan’s options for navigating a changing and increasingly volatile regional strategic landscape? Key Japan geopolitical observers have argued for Japan to adopt a grand strategy as a “middle power,” one that can make substantial contributions to maintaining the international order and exert moderate influence in international politics. There are, however, constraints that prevent Japan from fully adopting this role—chiefly, the lack of coercive military force, the dominance of the security identity of domestic antimilitarism, and a US-dependent strategic posture. Using role theory, this paper examines Japan’s “middle power” diplomacy, the strategies it employs, and the limitations of its regional leadership

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ambitions. It further analyzes Japan's regional security engagements, its relations with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and other "middle powers" in the region (e.g., Australia and South Korea), as well as the implications of Japan's strategic choices and behavior on the security and stability of the Indo-Pacific.

Keywords: Japan, Indo-Pacific, foreign policy, diplomacy, geopolitics

Introduction

The international security environment changed significantly during the post-Cold War period. Following the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001, threats to national security changed, and states' vulnerabilities expanded to include terrorism, cyber-attacks, climate change, and public health crises. In the Indo-Pacific region, the balance of power has also been shifting. China is increasing its economic and military strength, growing more assertive as it challenges the established norms and principles that underpin the current US-led security order.

China's contestation manifests in its territorial claims and maritime rights and claims in the South China Sea (SCS). It has undertaken extensive reclamation projects, constructed artificial islands, and militarized these areas, equipping them with missile systems and fighter jets. China also enacted fishing regulations in the SCS to consolidate its control in the areas it claims as part of its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). All these actions have exacerbated tensions and risked confrontations with the other regional states claiming sovereignty over the disputed territories, such as the Philippines and Vietnam. While not a claimant state, Japan is a commercial and naval stakeholder interested in ensuring the security of sea lanes. According to reports from the United Nations (UN), roughly 60 percent of maritime trade moves through Asian waterways, and about one-third of global shipments pass through the SCS (UNCTAD 2015). About 90 percent of

Japan's maritime trade also traverses the sea lines of communication (SLOCs) of the SCS. Japan is likewise aware of the link between China's territorial disputes in the SCS and its dispute with the latter over the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea.

In light of these developments and security challenges, Japan's security policies have expanded, and it appears to be moving away from its post-war pacifism, demonstrating increased autonomy in its defense and military affairs. In 2013, for instance, under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Japan established a National Security Council (NSC) and issued its first-ever National Security Strategy (NSS) based on the principle of "proactive contribution to peace" (Tana 2021, 279). The doctrine addresses existing policy limitations, recasts Japan's international role, and reorients its strategic position. Moreover, it signals Japan's readiness to engage more proactively in international affairs as a security provider than a security consumer. However, despite the Abe government's strategic calculations that necessitated these changes in policy preferences, policymaking is primarily constrained by domestic factors—the chief being the institutionalized norm of antimilitarism. This norm is "so deeply embedded in Japanese collective consciousness" that it has become a powerful force in shaping national interests and an equally powerful constraint on Japanese foreign policy (Tana 2019, 292).

What, then, are Japan's options, given these challenges and constraints? Scholars like Soeya (2009) have long described Japan's postwar policies as inconsistent with new internal and external realities. However, they also concede that it would be difficult—if not impossible—for Japan to revise its 1946 Constitution, given prevailing domestic norms and a predominantly antimilitarist public. Moreover, Soeya adds, any prospects for significant change in the Japan-United States security treaty are unlikely because the former does not possess the military capability to ensure its complete security. Japan likewise cannot compete with China, develop nuclear weapons, or even aspire to become a major power. It then must choose the middle path and "adopt an autonomous strategy as a middle power" (Yoshikazu 2021).

Soeya (2009) defines "middle powers" as "those nations that are influential economically or in terms of certain strategic aspects,

but do not aspire to rival the major nations as the US and China in terms of hard power capabilities.” Hatakeyama (2020) posits that these nations must have some degree of international influence and substantial contribution to the international community. They must also have a favorable attitude towards the international order and the disposition and capability to maintain it. Middle powers also ensure that multilateralism works by enhancing dialogues among key states and assuming leadership roles in multilateral institutions (Yoshikazu 2021).

This paper intends to contribute to the growing discourse on Japan’s middle-power diplomacy. It examines Japan’s strategies in dealing with imperatives beyond its borders and managing its external relations. It highlights how these policies demonstrate Japan’s successful attempts to maintain regional and international order and assert influence on international politics. In doing so, the paper presents a survey of Japan’s security and foreign policies in the last two decades to illustrate how the country has developed a moderate military capacity—commonly dubbed as “normalization”—and pursued its regional leadership ambitions amidst internal and external constraints. The paper further investigates Japan’s current security arrangements, including its relations throughout history with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its role in Asian security multilateralism. Thies and Sari’s (2018) role-based theoretical framework, which conceptualizes middle power as a “status” that encompasses auxiliary roles, as well as conceptualizations pioneered by Hatakeyama (2020) and Soeya (2009; 2011), are employed to investigate Japan’s strategies in its middle power diplomacy.

Japan’s History of Normalization

Japan’s complete overhaul after its World War II loss was genuinely outstanding. Adopting a new identity through a new pacifist constitution in 1947, Japan essentially renounced war forever as a sovereign right of the nation and left behind its reputation as an imperial and wartime hegemon. The East Asian nation adopted the Yoshida Doctrine, effectively yielding its national security to the United States to focus on post-war economic recovery and building a reputation as a passive and

nonthreatening member of the international community. The doctrine succeeded in both objectives. Japan achieved its status as the second-largest economy globally in the 1960s alongside a massive global aid program and refrained from engaging in international politics through bilateral or multilateral arrangements. Using the Japan-US security alliance as an invisible barrier, the Japanese state restrained the country's military resources and engagements in regional and international security affairs for several decades, even amidst multiple security shocks near its borders. Japan limited the Japanese Self-Defense Forces (SDF) to purely defensive missions; capped military expenditures at one percent of the country's gross national product (GNP); enforced a ban on Japan's arms export industry; and imposed the three non-nuclear principles (Potter 2009, 6–7; Singh 2002a, 83–84). Meanwhile, Japan's lack of involvement in regional security by way of the American security guarantee became a fundamental pillar of its foreign policy during the Cold War—an “isolationist regional strategy of one-country pacifism (*ikkoku heiwashugi*)” (Midford 2000, 370).

Japan today remains one of the biggest economies in the world—albeit in third place—after China overtook it back in 2010, while its Official Development Assistance (ODA) program has only expanded throughout the decades. However, Japan is arguably much different in terms of its foreign and security policies. Exactly how significant and crucial the changes over the last seventy-six years, as well as its trajectory, is an enduring subject for debate, but it has unquestionably come a long way from the impetus of the Yoshida Doctrine. While the Japanese constitution is still very much a sacred pillar of Japan's policies and the values of its citizens, there have been pronounced changes in how it is understood, interpreted, and implemented—mainly through the influence of multiple internal and external factors. Legal and social norms within Japanese politics and society have relaxed over time, while challenges and opportunities in the regional and global environment continue to test the capability of Japan's pacifist policies to withstand shocks for the nation's survival and its contribution to the international community.

By the end of the 20th century, Japan had already enforced multiple remilitarization efforts and had been growing its relevance in international politics. Emerging internal and external threats to

Japan's national security prompted the country to take "bold steps to better equip itself," as reflected in the growth of its security and defense policies—a process often called "normalization" (Singh 2002a, 88–89). Nevertheless, the 21st century stands witness to an even more extensive series of firsts for Japan since World War II—landmark developments that accelerated the nation's journey to becoming a normal state. Most take the form of policy developments that materialized under the main pillars of Japanese security policy in the last two decades: (1) Japan's architecture, capabilities, and measures for national defense; (2) the Japan-US security alliance, and; (3) security cooperation with other countries. Moreover, relevant to the focus of this discussion paper, these policies reflect the strategies employed and behaviors and functions performed by Japan that exhibit the roles required of a middle power.

Framework in Classifying Middle Powers

In conceptualizing middle powers, Thies and Sari (2018) built upon existing approaches—hierarchical, functionalist, behavioral, and identity approaches—to develop a theory that encapsulates the ideas put forth by these approaches and resolves ascribed issues and limitations. They identify the concept of "middle power" as a status underpinning a set of auxiliary roles that must be performed or exhibited by an actor, such as a country in the international community. However, such roles must be assumed with recognition from, and based on, the expectations of other significant actors. These roles encapsulate a set of behaviors and functions, and represent and determine the country's rank in the international system. More importantly, the approach underlines the requirement of social recognition and posits that without this component, behaviors exhibited, functions performed, and positions assumed are not meaningful to a country's status as a middle power, even if they explicitly declare themselves as such. The authors further elaborate on the auxiliary roles that middle powers assume. They posit that middle powers are good international citizens, supporters of multilateralism, and proponents of the international order. If countries are to perform these roles, they must be recognized by other members of the international system and the state's citizens.

The auxiliary roles that Thies and Sari (2018) enumerate are predominantly extracted from propositions of proponents of behavioral and functional approaches. The authors cite James Souter, who characterized good international citizenship as promoting rules and values such as human rights, multilateralism, and international law. They also mention Robert Cox, who described the concept as the “commitment [of middle powers] to provide security and facilitate orderly changes in the international system” (Thies and Sari 2018, 400). Andrew Cooper’s classification of middle powers is also highlighted, specifically on how one assumes a leadership role in a multilateral setting by being an initiator, facilitator, and manager of programs and institutions in a specific niche area. The last role, supporting the international order, is exemplified in the idea put forth by Andrew Carr in describing Australia’s leadership role in promoting the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, partly as an act to reinforce the US-led post-Cold War international order.

On the other hand, Thies and Sari (2018) argue with certain premises under the hierarchical and identity approach. They posit that utilizing a set of indicators—such as economic, military, and social factors—could provide an objective comparison between middle powers and others. However, it could also lead to complicated results since there is no universal consensus on these indicators. Meanwhile, the emphasis on the social dimension in the identity construction of middle powers negates the proposition of the rhetorical approach that any state can declare itself as a middle power. To an extent, these ideas suggest that factors such as economic and military capacity and the country’s regard for its status are insufficient to accord any country with the status of a middle power.

Under the role theory approach, it is worth arguing that Japan is a middle power because it assumes a middle power role and is recognized by other actors. Thies and Sari (2018) argue that a minor or a major power may occupy any role that they have the capacity to enact. For a state to be considered a middle power, it does not necessarily have to possess a strong military. Instead, the literature on middle powers only emphasizes two characteristics: (1) “normative capacities in creating or supporting regional order,” and (2) “preference for rule-building

in multilateral set-ups” (Gilly and O’Neil 2014; Wilkins 2017 quoted in Hatakeyama 2020, 3). These two characteristics resonate with the roles identified by Thies and Sari (2018).

Consistent with these features, Hatakeyama (2020) also notes that middle powers mainly utilize diplomatic measures in achieving strategic goals. However, she identifies another strategy—practical actions in niche areas, which includes institutionalization and standardization of policies and initiatives. Through these efforts, middle powers can exert influence over the regional order by pioneering the development of rules and institutions and setting the agenda for particular niches—including maritime security, human security, and climate change—to cultivate shared understanding. These endeavors do not require coercive military power, nor are they severely compromised should a nation lack robust military capabilities.

In the case of Japan, the nation’s bilateral relations and multilateral engagements serve as platforms through which diplomatic and entrepreneurial ventures are pursued. Throughout the decades, Japan’s pace of normalization has picked up, despite being constrained by domestic factors. However, it is precisely in the context of these limitations that Japan has managed to emerge as a middle power—one that possesses reasonable military capacity but has marked influence over regional politics and affairs. In this discussion paper, the authors present Japan’s policies on economic assistance and cooperation, maritime safety and security, and peacebuilding and human security to demonstrate their role as a middle power that upholds the values of good international citizens, promotes multilateral cooperation, and maintains the regional order.

Japan’s Economic Diplomacy

The memories of World War II and Japan’s significant role in it have continued to follow the country’s postwar initiatives to build relations with its regional neighbors, and its attempts to reconfigure its position in the international community. Despite renouncing war perpetually, Japan’s past aggressions could not be disregarded, especially by countries like China and Korea, as well as by Southeast Asian nations, all of whom suffered drastic economic declines, acute

food security crises, and threats to human rights and survival due to the war. Fear and apprehension towards a possible Japanese military resurgence were also pervasive in early postwar period. Perhaps without the US security guarantee, Japan would have suffered from international isolation. As such, alongside settling war reparations, the Yoshida Doctrine aimed to foster Japan's overseas relations for economic recovery and expansion. In Southeast Asia, this was facilitated through trade, private investments, and foreign aid. Japan's policies zeroed in on bilateral economic arrangements to reinforce access to the expansive raw materials, cheap labor, and expanding domestic market in Southeast Asia. These policies essentially boosted overseas investments and bilateral trade. By the 1970s, ASEAN's trade with Japan amounted to a fourth of its annual totals, while Japan had exceeded US investments in the region (Lai 1981 quoted in Singh 2002b, 281).

Additionally, Potter (2009) notes that beyond gaining direct economic benefits, "economic relationships also had a diplomatic dimension" (7). This meant that alongside rehabilitation and growth, Japan capitalized on its economic successes to forward particular foreign policy objectives, including strengthening political relations and achieving specific strategic interests. This feature of Japan's economic diplomacy is distinct but effective, considering its lack of coercive military power. Indeed, once Japan amassed enough economic and financial capacity and political leverage to discontinue aid from the West, it complemented its transition to a free-market economy with a massive development assistance program (Akimoto 2022).

Japan's ODA, which remains one of the main thrusts of its foreign policy, is arguably one of its most effective diplomatic instruments. In 1954, Japan signed the Colombo Plan, a region-wide intergovernmental organization predicated on a "partnership concept for self-help and mutual help in the development process" (The Colombo Plan Secretariat n.d.). Along with physical capital, the Colombo Plan also focused on developing human resources to maximize efficiency and growth. Upon signing the Colombo agreement, Japan began its ODA in the Asia-Pacific region, with India being its first recipient in 1958. When Japan finally achieved its coveted status as the second-largest economy in the 1960s, it also expanded its geographical reach and diversified its

forms of assistance (International Cooperation Bureau 2021). Around 80 to 90 percent of Japan's ODA circulated to East Asian countries, mainly into ASEAN member states, as part of the state's attempts to appease growing anti-Japanese views. By the end of the 1980s, Japan had surpassed the US as the biggest donor of ODA globally (Ryokichi 2003, 135). Such endeavors were dubbed by Kusunoki (2022) as Yoshida Doctrine II, or simply Japan "contributing to the global peace and security through non-military means." Alongside war reparations, foreign aid was arguably effective in warming Japan's relationship with certain recipient countries. South Korea, for instance, was the second biggest ODA recipient in the 1970s before countries like Bangladesh and the Philippines became constant recipients in the 1980s. Japan was also formerly an essential donor to China, especially when the latter stopped accepting war reparations in 1972. Akimoto (2022) believes that Japan's ODA diplomacy was therefore vital in facilitating the reconciliation process between the two countries.

Despite the continuous roll-out of Japan's economic assistance in Southeast Asia, anti-Japanese sentiment ostensibly grew in the region. Japan was criticized for the apparent abuse of its economic diplomacy, which seemingly only favored its economic expansion without regard for its Southeast Asian counterparts. Japanese Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka personally experienced the gravity of the issue during his diplomatic visits to several Asian countries in 1974. In Indonesia, he was met with violent mobilizations and riots in the streets protesting "Japan's economic imperialism" (Halloran 1974). The events were a wake-up call for Japan. Maintaining its policy of *seikei-bunri* ("separation of politics and economics") could only further complicate its already unstable relationship with ASEAN countries and its international image (Singh 2002b, 278–79).

Additionally, Japan realized that the policy was no longer tenable vis-à-vis other imperatives in the regional architecture. At the center of these emerging challenges was the growing instability of American presence and security guarantee in the region, particularly after the fall of Saigon in 1975 (Sudo 1988, 514). These alarming precedents eventually led the government to undertake a *nemawashi* (laying the groundwork) to develop a new guiding framework for Japanese diplomacy.

Among the most remarkable developments that were born out of the *nemawashi* was the Fukuda Doctrine. In 1977, during the first-ever Japan–ASEAN summit meeting, Prime Minister Takeo Fukuda formally recognized the establishment of ASEAN and announced Japan's commitment to be its dialogue partner, one of the group's first. During his closing speech at the event, Prime Minister Fukuda cited the three principles of the doctrine, which to this day guides the foreign policy of Japan towards ASEAN and the rest of Asia. He professed Japan's allegiance towards:

1. "Reject[ing] the role of military power to . . . contribute to the peace and prosperity in Southeast Asia" and the rest of the world;
2. Building a relationship predicated on mutual confidence, trust, and "heart to heart understanding" with Southeast Asian countries on matters of political, economic, cultural, and social affairs; and
3. Cooperating with ASEAN in pursuing dialogues with the countries of Indochina to promote peace and prosperity in the region." (Fukuda 1980, 73)

For both ASEAN and the Japanese government, the Fukuda Doctrine marked the beginnings of their formal relations. While skepticism and trepidation still lingered, they were no longer the dominant sentiments. The progressive policy reflected a change in Japan's view of ASEAN—from a neophyte addition to the regional system to a maturing institution, a crucial player in regional affairs, and an equal partner of Japan in protecting and forwarding the region's interests. Sudo (1988) also noted that the policy helped foster a special relationship with ASEAN predicated on political coordination and closer diplomatic ties, which policymakers deemed necessary to set and strengthen Japanese leadership in the region. A decade or even a few years back, Southeast Asian countries would have resisted the idea of a more sizable Japanese participation in regional affairs. However, these countries had seen the value of Japanese aid, investment, and economic cooperation to regional resilience and prosperity and its role amidst unstable American presence in the region. Such factors worked well enough as a foundation for both sides to move beyond lingering

suspensions and apprehensions, paving the way for meaningful dialogue and economic cohesion to mature even further.

The decades following the declaration of the doctrine witnessed stronger economic relations involving Japan and ASEAN, but one with objectives beyond maximizing profit. Japan's pursuit of establishing good economic and political connections with ASEAN member countries was key to "fostering regional political stability and as a key source for economic security" (Shibusawa 1984 quoted in Singh 2002b, 283–84). Japan believed that engaging economies in Southeast Asia could help shield countries from communism and support the Fukuda Doctrine's aim of brokering peaceful engagements of ASEAN with Indochina (Sudo 1988, 512). Achieving this feat could reinforce the balance of power in the regional landscape. While the invasion of Vietnam by Cambodia in 1978 complicated the realization of these goals, Japan was still able to support economic and social infrastructure, as well as human resource and institutional development in ASEAN countries. This boosted the productive capacities of these nations, and in effect, economic growth (Ryokichi 2003, 129).

The Fukuda doctrine was not only helpful in strengthening Japan's external relations. It also served a strategic purpose for the Japanese economy. Given Japan's dependence on imports of raw materials for industrialization and its lack of maritime capabilities, it had been an enduring challenge for the Japanese government to "reconcile a pacifist constitution with [the] security vulnerability that came with its having become an economic superpower" (Cooper 2016, 5). Southeast Asia was vital for Japan for the region's strategic location and massive domestic market (Masashi 2003, 146–47; Hassan 2003, 156–57). It encompassed Japan's SLOCs, such as the Malacca and Lombok Straits, which are crucial for Japanese imports of oil from the Middle East and commodities from Europe. Protection of these international waterways was therefore needed.

Additionally, the region's growing market, immensely bigger than Japan, was an attractive spot for exports of industrial goods and a hub for Japanese private investment. The 1980s saw a sharp increase in trade and private investments, which Japan was adamant to maintain. The appreciation of the yen amidst the signing of the 1985 Plaza Accord

between the G-5 countries, including Japan, boosted the entry of labor-intensive industries in ASEAN countries, with large-scale business owners taking advantage of the abundant cheap labor and massive market. It was thus in Japan's interest to contribute to the economic and political condition in the ASEAN region, as well as maintain its relations with these countries on such fronts (Hassan 2003; Masashi 2003; Ryokichi 2003).

The end of the Cold War likewise spurred changes in Japan's economic diplomacy. In 1992, Japan released its first ODA Charter, followed by a revision in 2003. The 1992 Charter prioritized issues and imperatives on environmental protection, democratic and market-oriented economic systems, and human rights and freedoms (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 1997). While essentially rooted in the same philosophical underpinnings as the 1992 version, the 2003 charter was responsive and relevant to the new environment after the Cold War. Priority issues expanded to include poverty reduction, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), global problems such as global warming, food security, energy, and terrorism, and peacebuilding and human security (International Cooperation Bureau 2003). Akimoto (2022) explained that while the original charter was shaped primarily by Japan's early post-war policy on war reparations, the second iteration expanded focus to other security issues and gave more emphasis on international cooperation.

These developments can likewise be construed as Japan's response to China's rapid rise as an economic power and political actor in regional affairs—with the latter's growth seen as a threat to Japan's leadership position in the region. As Hassan (2003) posits, “as if in competition” (147), the conclusion of the 2003 ASEAN–Japan Comprehensive Economic Partnership (AJCEP) agreement was influenced, to a certain extent, by the ASEAN–China free trade agreement (FTA) in 2002. In 2015, the 60th anniversary of Japan's ODA, the government renamed the assistance program the Development Cooperation Charter (DCC). Considering major global transformations—which have made countries, especially developing nations, vulnerable to risks and threats—the charter further reinforced Japan's assumption of a leadership role in addressing old and emerging challenges in the international arena by way of international cooperation. Its ultimate goal was to contribute

to the achievement of peace, stability, and prosperity (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2015). Japan also pledged to assist developing nations' capacity-building in law enforcement for maritime safety, combatting terrorism and other transnational crimes, and protecting rights and interests concerning global commons.

These developments were specifically helpful in institutionalizing Japanese bilateral relations with primary claimants in the South China Sea disputes amidst the increasingly assertive stance of China. Japan provided patrol vessels through ODA loans to the Philippines and Vietnam, which aimed to strengthen these countries' capabilities in ensuring maritime safety and security. This was made possible because the Development Cooperation Charter "allowed Japan, for the first time, to provide assistance to foreign military forces" (Tana 2019, 290), as long as it was defensive in nature and would contribute to peace and stability. Japan also supported Papua New Guinea in 2017 by sending military bands and has regularly provided the Philippine military with equipment for rescue missions during natural disasters (Akimoto 2022). In the latest report of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (n.d.), Japan's ODA from 1954 to 2019 has supported 190 countries and regions, reaching a gross disbursement of about USD 550.5 billion. The initiative has likewise dispatched 197,000 experts and 54,000 volunteers, as well as trained 654,000 individuals as of March 2020. Meanwhile, a 2019 public opinion poll in ASEAN nations commissioned by Japan showed that 87 percent of the respondents described relations with the Asian country as friendly, while 84 percent viewed Japan as reliable (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2019). The survey suggests a tremendous development in Japan's international image.

Political and Security Cooperation in Southeast Asia

Japan has likewise demonstrated an evolving role in the regional political and security arena in recent decades. It established formal dialogues with ASEAN in 1977 and actively engaged in bilateral arrangements such as the ASEAN–Japan Summit, Ministerial Meetings, and Senior Officials and Experts Meetings, strengthening connections and coordination between the two parties. These platforms were also helpful in protecting regional stability, especially in the face of unprecedented shocks. During the height of the 1997

Asian Financial Crisis, Prime Minister Hashimoto Ryutaro reaffirmed Japan's commitment to helping crisis-hit countries. Japan introduced policies such as the New Miyazawa initiative in 1998 and the Chiang Mia initiative in 1999, which were launched under the cooperation of the ASEAN +3 to reflate Asian currencies and aid in the recovery of affected economies.

Afiatanti and Surajaya (2017), building on the work of Midford (2000), recount the development of Japan's participation in ASEAN-led mechanisms during this period, and in effect, Asian security multilateralism. After its third installment in 1997, the Japan-ASEAN summit has become an annual event. However, meeting agendas primarily focused on commercial sectors such as economic cooperation, trade and investment, and cultural exchanges (Afiatanti and Surajaya 2017, 361). Similarly, the annual ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conferences (PMC), in which Japan actively participated from 1978 to 1993, did not place regional security on its priority agenda. However, as Afiatanti and Surajaya (2017) and Midford (2000) emphasize, the end of the Cold War was a decisive moment for Japan and ASEAN as it was for the rest of the world. Changes in the regional and global security order brought new threats and insecurities. The apparent rise of China and the dwindling presence of the US in the region have placed pressure on Japan to revisit its defense capabilities and reconfigure its foreign policies—not just for its national security but also for peace and stability in the region. In effect, this also influenced Japan-ASEAN cooperation and Japan's level of participation in Asian multilateralism through ASEAN-led processes such as the ASEAN +3, ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus), and the East Asia Summit (EAS). As Midford (2000) puts it, Japan was a vital driving force of Asian multilateral security cooperation in the 1990s—an unorthodox characterization given Japan's Cold War policy of self-isolationism from regional affairs.

A compelling case to support the previous thesis is Japan's supposed role in influencing the formation of some ASEAN-led mechanisms. The ARF was established in 1994 to facilitate bilateral and multilateral dialogue on political and security issues and to advocate confidence-building and preventive diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific region. The multilateral forum differs from other international organizations

of similar nature—employing Track 1 and Track 2 diplomacy and practicing inclusivity regardless of the regime. Indeed, the ARF is one of the few platforms where Japan, the US, China, and Russia engage in formal security dialogues. Japan, as a dialogue partner, has actively participated, chaired, and cochaired discussions on crucial security areas, including “preventive diplomacy, peacekeeping operations, disaster relief, counter-terrorism, and transnational crime, maritime security, defense cooperation, marine environment protection, and space security” (The ASEAN Secretariat 2022). Before ASEAN created the ARF, however, several multilateral arrangements had already been proposed to ASEAN at the beginning of the decade, one being from Japan. During the 1991 ASEAN-PMC in Kuala Lumpur, then-Foreign Minister Tarō Nakayama introduced a mechanism for conducting a multilateral security dialogue under a Senior Official Ministerial (SOM) concept (Yuzawa 2007 quoted in Afiatanti and Surajaya 2017, 362). While Australia and Canada supported Japan’s proposal, ASEAN countries were less receptive and rejected the proposed mechanism.

Despite its rejection, the Nakayama proposal can arguably be seen as an important precedent for the eventual creation of the ARF. Prior to the 1990s, ASEAN was seemingly cautious of expanding its focus from economic and political issues. However, as Afiatanti and Surajaya (2017) state, through the Nakayama proposal, “ASEAN’s consciousness of the importance of a regional security forum was presumably awakened” (365). The proposal also reflected a change in Japan’s stance on security multilateralism. Midford (2000) explained how Japan had been initially dismissive of engaging in security talks and was unsupportive of the multilateral set-ups for dialogues, much like the United States. Thus, participating in dialogues, much less introducing a mechanism for one, was unprecedented. Midford (2000) also adds that Japan’s development of the Nakayama proposal reflected its strategy of balancing threats and powers amidst the decreasing presence of both the US and the Soviets after the Cold War, while reassuring its neighbors that the Fukuda Doctrine still stood. Japan’s balancing act shows how the country has been making proactive attempts to widen its role in regional security without compromising its growing relations with ASEAN.

Similarly, Tan (2015) recounts how Japan presumably inspired the formation of the ADMM-Plus in 2010. The ADMM-Plus gathers the ASEAN Defense Ministers and the Defense Minister counterparts from its eight dialogue partners, including China, Japan, and the US. It facilitates practical cooperation on emerging security challenges such as maritime security, humanitarian issues, terrorism, and cybersecurity (The ASEAN Secretariat 2022). In 2002, the Japan Defense Agency, now the Ministry of Defense, Director Gen Nakatani recommended the establishment of an Asian defense ministerial dialogue to complement the ARF. For Tan (2015), while the proposal met the same fate as the Nakayama proposal, the recommendation was still revolutionary since it predated the ADMM-Plus by eight years.

Even with rejections, Japan did not fall short in its success in institutionalizing relationships at both the bilateral and multilateral levels. The country, as a matter of fact, has continuously promoted rules-based order to ASEAN and endeavored to strengthen and upgrade its relations with the regional grouping in the security arena. One key area that Japan has focused on in recent decades is maritime safety and security. The rising number of piracy and robbery cases has been a critical concern for both Japan and Southeast Asian countries. Alarmed with the growing cases involving Japanese vessels, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi presented the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP) during the 5th ASEAN +3 summit in 2001. ReCAAP became the first intergovernmental body that institutionalizes multilateral cooperation in combating sea piracy and armed robbery (PAR) against ships (Hribernik 2013a). The agreement pursues its goals through information sharing, capacity-building, and cooperation agreements among contracting parties.

A Singapore-based Information Sharing Center (ISC) was established in the same year to facilitate data sharing on PAR incidents and other relevant information. Hribernik (2013b) explains that the exchanges not only help in warning contracting parties about the presence of attackers but also allow respective maritime agencies to pursue pirates on the run while observing sovereignty concerns—an essential consideration in a region with multiple maritime boundaries. Should attackers escape the borders of one country, they could be dealt

with by authorities in another country they enter. However, Hribernick (2013b) notes that this arrangement is limited in that it only covers member countries, a loophole which pirates can take advantage of in their escape routes. Nevertheless, he argued that ReCAAP has contributed to managing incidents of piracy and robbery in the region. The ISC reported in 2013 that after the surge during the 2009 economic crisis, cases decreased in 2012, especially highly dangerous incidents.

In a recent report by the ReCAAP ISC (2021), data revealed that around 1740 incidents armed robbery and piracy had occurred since 2007 and that, generally, the number of incidents has declined. It has also inspired other similar mechanisms, such as the Djibouti Code of Conduct, and expanded its network to include international organizations, shipping companies, and other information-sharing centers. To this extent, ReCAAP demonstrated the potential of multilateral cooperation in maritime safety and law enforcement. It has also expanded its membership. From having mainly Asian countries as parties to the agreement, ReCAAP today has 21 contracting parties, including ASEAN states and several countries from Europe, Australia, and the US.

Japan has also been the one to propose the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF), advocating the benefits of including the wider East Asia region. The original ASEAN Maritime Forum (AMF) was established two years prior as part of ASEAN's Political-Security Community (APSC) Blueprint. It intended to discuss and address traditional and nontraditional security concerns in the maritime arena, including PAR at sea, maritime navigation, and environmental protection. As an extension of the AMF, the EAMF sought to strengthen cooperation, this time between nongovernment and government representatives from participating countries in the East Asia Summit (EAS). In his address during the inaugural EAMF in 2012, Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs Koji Tsuruoka called for stronger international cooperation between EAS members, particularly in upholding maritime order under international law in the seas, and recognized the central role ASEAN and ASEAN-led mechanisms in carrying out the goals of the EAMF (The ASEAN Secretariat 2012). The forum has been held annually since, and focus has been increasingly

given to the competing maritime interests in the South China Sea. In the ninth iteration of the EAMF in 2021, Japan reiterated the primacy of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in maintaining a rules-based maritime order and declared its enmity towards “unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force in the East and South China Seas” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2021)

In January 2013, during the celebration of the 40th anniversary of Japan and ASEAN relations, Prime Minister Abe introduced the Five New Principles for Japanese Diplomacy. He affirmed Japan's commitment to its economic and security relations with ASEAN, especially in light of new challenges arising from the changing strategic environment in the Asia-Pacific. He likewise reiterated Japan's pledge to sustain rules-based order in the seas—the “most vital commons,” as he described—and welcomed the US rebalancing to realize its goals (Abe 2013). Tan (2015) posits that this new policy reflected the Abe administration's vision to steer Japan's normalization further and shift its enduring “quiet diplomacy to a more assertive diplomacy,” in view, partly, of Japan's strategies to balance, and perhaps even contain, China.

In the same year, Japan released new security documents, the NSS and the National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG), predicated on the principle of “proactive pacifism.” The documents declared that Japan is abandoning its reactive tendencies vis-à-vis international issues to actively work with other nations and assume more significant influence in regional developments (Sakaki 2015, 16).

A key area of focus in the new security documents is on maritime order under the security cooperation pillar. At the multilateral level, Japan sought the continuous promotion of laws and rules in the seas, including the Code of Conduct for the SCS. At the same time, bilaterally, Japan targeted capacity-building for Southeast Asian countries to protect their coastal waters and, in effect, contribute to maritime peace and stability in the region. Japan has established strategic partnerships with ASEAN member states, chiefly with the primary claimants in the SCS disputes—the Philippines and Vietnam. Security ties were enhanced through exchanges of information, regular meetings, and organizing symposiums, where the importance of the rules-based order, especially in the maritime domain, was repeatedly emphasized.

The Abe administration has also ramped up the role of the Japanese Coast Guard to perform functions related to maritime safety, law enforcement, and environmental protection in Japanese coastlines and reinforce cooperation with Southeast Asian countries for maritime security. The Coast Guard Global Summit (CGGS), first held in 2017, was launched by Japan as a forum wherein coast guards and relevant agencies and organizations from participating countries meet to discuss pressing global maritime challenges and the role of coast guards in addressing identified imperatives. Thirty-four countries, including China, the Russian Federation, and the US, participated in the CGGS. In 2019, during the second installment of the summit, more than seventy-five countries sent official delegates, illustrating a growing convergence of commitments among states in promoting maritime order predicated on multilateral cooperation (The Nippon Foundation 2019).

One more notable manifestation of Japan's foreign policy on security cooperation is the 2016 launch of the Vientiane Vision: Japan's Defense Cooperation Initiative with ASEAN, which expands Japan-ASEAN cohesion through practical cooperation on maritime security for regional peace and stability. Since 2014, Japan has promoted the concept of an ADMM+ Japan and conducted informal defense ministerial meetings, which serves as an effective platform to promote enhanced defense cooperation with its ASEAN dialogue partners. Under the Vision, Japan committed to pursuing practical defense cooperation through sharing of knowledge and experience through research and seminars; capacity-building assistance in fields such as maritime security, including competencies for "Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR)," and "Search and Rescue" (SAR); provision of "defense equipment and technology;" training and development for human resource; and joint training and exercises (Ministry of Defense n.d.).

Furthermore, persistent with Japan's security documents, the Vientiane Vision pursued multilateral and bilateral initiatives, such as the Japan-ASEAN Ship Rider Cooperation Program, which offered seminars and engagements on maritime security for all members of ASEAN (Ministry of Defense 2019). Japan also conducted seminars

with individual partner countries under the Vientiane Vision's initiatives. Three years after the launch, Japan introduced version 2.0. While its focus on international security cooperation and practical defense cooperation remained, the new version injected the concept of the Indo-Pacific, which promotes equal and open cooperation.

Amidst all developments in Asian security multilateralism in the past two decades, sensitivities around external intervention still existed within the ASEAN bloc. Thus, "a practical way to improve the safety of the sea lanes was to create a loose cooperative framework that involved all countries concerned" (Hatakeyama 2019, 474). Hatakeyama (2020) recounts that Japan, cognizant of this consideration, had attempted several times to introduce mechanisms and endeavors to rally countries into a shared understanding. However, it was only until the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) concept that Japan's vision began to gain significant traction. The FOIP had initially been dubbed as a "strategy" in speeches and official documents but eventually softened, now called a "concept" or a "vision," to adopt a more inclusive orientation and appease the Chinese perception of its being a containment tactic. The latter approach did not bode well with Southeast Asian countries and the US, who was extensively engaged in economic cooperation with China. The FOIP concept was formally adopted during the Abe administration's second stint and promoted economic development, the rule of law, and freedom of navigation. In line with the FOIP framework, Japan advocates maritime order and the rule of law at sea. Prime Minister Abe operationalized these concepts under three principles during his 2014 Shangri La Dialogue speech. He noted that:

1. "States shall make and clarify their claims based on international law;
2. States shall not use force or coercion in trying to drive their claims; and
3. States shall seek to settle disputes by peaceful means" (Abe 2014).

The Japanese government did not only succeed in overcoming apprehension and rejection over its FOIP rhetoric. Hatakeyama (2020) also argues that Japan succeeded in motivating other countries

to adopt the framework and develop their own in consideration of respective contexts. ASEAN, for instance, adopted an ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). Predicated on ASEAN Centrality, the AOIP builds on the momentum of existing ASEAN-led platforms such as the ARF and the EAS to promote inclusivity and consensus-building, as well as areas of cooperation with emphasis on peaceful and rules-based dispute resolution. The AOIP document does not use the word “free” in consideration of Chinese sentiments but promotes freedom of navigation, a fundamental interest for the US. While the AOIP is not necessarily under the FOIP framework officially, Hatakeyama (2020, 6) asserts that the document illustrates how Japan motivated other states to “reexamine a preferable regional order and a way for them to create and maintain that order.” Under Prime Minister Fumio Kishida’s administration, Japan continues to promote a rules-based order in the maritime field and broader regional security order. In recent years, Japan has also built its defense capabilities to assure its people that the country could withstand shocks, especially with tensions building against China and North Korea and, recently, with Russia.

Peacebuilding and Human Security

Human security emerged as a pillar of Japanese foreign policy in the 1990s, primarily to counter criticisms of Japan’s “checkbook diplomacy” and allegations of “free-riding.” Similarly, Japan’s adoption of human security was linked to its quest for a permanent UN Security Council (UNSC) seat and its desire to play a more active role in regional affairs. Japan’s human security policy was also often connected to Japan’s normative tradition of antimilitarism. Hoshino and Satoh (2013) note that Japan’s version of human security emerged from its constitutional constraint on utilizing force. Atanassova-Cornelis (2005, 70) likewise argues that the rise of human security and its incorporation into foreign policy is a result of Japan’s pursuit of an active nonmilitary role that mirrors the country’s “historical background and antimilitarist norms, its evolution from a reactive to a proactive state and its particular preference for peaceful foreign policy.” Thus, human security is regarded as an extension of the comprehensive security policy that emerged in the 1970s (Shinoda 2003; Sato 2006; Potter 2015).

Japan is one of the lead supporters of the human security norm and actively promotes it through its UN diplomacy, intellectual dialogues and symposia, and utilization of ODA in promoting international security through nonmilitary means. Japan's ODA, which has always been the country's principal foreign policy instrument, linked human security and foreign policy. Human security is implemented through development policies and activities such as postconflict peacebuilding and peace consolidation. As Soeya (2011) mentions, human security is crucial to Japan's middle-power diplomacy. Its approach to human security is primarily motivated by its desire to contribute more to international security under the banner of proactive pacifism.

In Southeast Asia, Japan has actively participated in peacebuilding efforts, notably in East Timor and Mindanao (Southern Philippines).

East Timor

The case of East Timor is a substantial illustration of Japan's international peacebuilding efforts, which centered on the notion of human security. Recounting the highlights of the final stages of Indonesia's colonization of East Timor and the phases of peacebuilding in the country that followed thereafter, Kikkawa (2007, 248) argues that Japan's actions and participation were the country's "first test case of its human security policy." Kikkawa notes that Japan's focus on economic development and capacity-building was new compared to its counterparts in the West—which focused dominantly on instilling liberal democratic norms and principles through institution-building. From being a staunch provider of development assistance to Indonesia, Japan shifted its support and hosted the International Support Conference for East Timor in Tokyo in December 1999. It also pioneered the creation of a Trust Fund for Human Security with the UN and donated about USD 4.63 million with specific appropriations to the reconstruction projects in East Timor and the repatriation of its refugees (Global Issues Cooperation Division 2009). Akimoto (2013) also points out that several Japanese officials were appointed to critical positions in the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET), such as the Humanitarian Assistance and Emergency Rehabilitation (HAER) and Governance and Public Administration

Components, further demonstrating the country's diplomatic efforts in East Timor peacekeeping.

Dispatch of personnel had been more tedious due to domestic restraints. After much government deliberation, the International Peace Cooperation Law (PKO law) was revised in 2001, and around 2,300 SDF personnel joined the United Nations Mission of Support to East Timor (UNMISET), which replaced the UNTAET to administer post-conflict peacebuilding operations. Japan's experience in East Timor showed a great deal of balancing on its part, dealing with political dissent back home while also appeasing international pressures, especially after the incident with the Gulf War. Nonetheless, the successes of its peacebuilding efforts only opened more doors for Japan to explore its human security policy. When Japan revised its ODA charter for the second time in 2003, the document included peacebuilding and human security, illustrating how the country is not merely responding to or avoiding backlash but also developing proactive policies that support the country's efforts in international cooperation and assuming a pioneering role in critical areas such as human security.

Mindanao

In 2002, following the 9/11 attacks, Japan provided the Support Package for Peace and Stability in Mindanao, amounting to about USD 400 million (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2002). Focusing on the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), the package was intended for poverty alleviation, conflict mitigation, and counterterrorism. In 2006, it participated in the International Monitoring Team to ensure the implementation of existing agreements. Japan dispatched a socioeconomic development expert from the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) to take charge of the formulation and implementation of development programs in Conflict-Affected Areas (CAA) in Mindanao.

In 2006, the J-BIRD (Japan-Bangsamoro Initiatives for Reconstruction and Development) was launched. It was assisted by the Mindanao Task Force (MTF), which coordinated with the Bangsamoro Development Authority (BDA), the Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process (OPAPP), and other groups

for project implementation. It was designed to contribute to the peace process by supporting the development of CAA and the surrounding areas in the ARMM. In 2015, J-BIRD2 was launched. It aimed to ease the process of establishing the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) by helping it achieve economic autonomy, promoting the social reintegration of former MILF rebels, and advancing socioeconomic development in CAA.

Japan's continued support for peacebuilding efforts in Mindanao helps foster goodwill between the Philippines and Japan. It also elevates Japan's international position and bolsters its image as a "global civilian power"—one that is still arguably pacifist but is now more engaged in international affairs, involved in global systems, and cooperates with developing countries through ODA (The Prime Minister's Commission on Japan's Goals in the 21st Century 2000).

These two cases of Japan's peacebuilding through human security show that despite the constraints, Japan can still contribute significantly to regional peace and stability and play a leadership role in regional security affairs. Furthermore, through the concept of human security, Japan can uphold international norms such as human rights and realize its goal to expand its regional role beyond economics.

Conclusion

The concept of Japan as a middle power is contested. Those who question it base their arguments on the following: (1) "that there is no consensus within the Japanese bureaucracy" that Japan should assume a more active role in international/regional affairs (Soeya 2009); (2) that Japan, unlike other middle powers like Canada and Australia, has no coercive military force and there has no claim to power in the international system, and; (3) that despite Japan's rule-based middle power, its close ties with the United States prevent it from becoming efficient, as it hardly has an independent stance on various international issues. However, this paper shows that Japan can still be categorized as a middle power despite—and perhaps even because of—these limitations.

Other vital actors in the region recognize Japan as a middle power. Its efforts at establishing, maintaining, and strengthening the rules-based order through multilateral frameworks and various policy initiatives also demonstrate that it could exert significant influence in regional security affairs. As Hatakeyama (2020, 480) notes, utilizing a “combination of diplomatic initiatives and practical action,” Japan was able to “reinforce the security order,” first by taking strengthening bilateral relations through institutionalizing relationships and second by establishing “multilateral frameworks that embrace not only regional states but also extra-regional ones such as the United States.”

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