

January 9, 2025

# EXPERTS TAKE

## Navigating Power in Asia: Insights into Regional Order

### Japan's Role as a Middle Power in Asian Diplomacy

*An Interview with*  
**PROF. KEI KOGA**

*Kei Koga is an Associate Professor at the Public Policy and Global Affairs Programme, School of Social Sciences, Nanyang Technological University (NTU). Concurrently, he is a Non-resident Fellow at the National Bureau of Asia Research (NBR) in the United States and a member of the RIPS Research Committee, the Research Institute for Peace and Security (RIPS), Japan. His research focuses on International Security, International/Regional Institutions (particularly ASEAN), and East Asian/Indo-Pacific security.*

*Previously, he was a Japan Scholar at the Wilson Center in 2022, a visiting fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in 2017, a Japan-U.S. Partnership Fellow at the Research Institute for Peace and Security (RIPS), Tokyo, in 2012-2014; Postdoctoral Fellow in the International Studies Program, The Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, in 2012-2013; a Vasey Fellow at the Pacific Forum CSIS in 2009-2010; and RSIS-MacArthur visiting associate fellow at S. Rajaratnam School of International*



*Studies (RSIS), NTU in 2010. He received his Ph.D. in International Relations at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University.*

*He has published on topics that include East Asian/Indo-Pacific security, U.S. and Japanese foreign policies, the U.S.-Japan alliance, and ASEAN. His*

recent publications include “Managing Great Power Politics: ASEAN, Institutional Strategy, and the South China Sea” (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022) and “Tactical Hedging as a coalition-building signal: The Evolution of Quad and AUKUS in the Indo-Pacific” (British Journal of Politics and International Relations, 2024). He spoke to Léna Fargier and Alexander Droop, both Interns at the ISDP’s Stockholm Center for South Asian and Indo-Pacific Affairs.

**Lena Fargier:** What do you think an international order is? Can you briefly define the order from your point of view?

**Kei Koga:** The international order consists of two key components: the balance of power, determined by the distribution of material capabilities, and international rules, norms, and principles. Together, these elements shape the structure of global interactions. For example, since the 1990s, we have operated within the liberal international order, primarily led by the West and the United States. This order was made possible by a favorable balance of power for Western states, which provided the foundation for its development. However, when the balance of power shifts, the associated rules, norms, and principles also evolve. Thus, the international order is a dynamic combination of these two factors.

**Fargier:** Japan has tried to reshape the regional order during its colonization of China. How has Japan’s approach to regional order evolved post-colonization

of China? With the 1977 Fukuda Doctrine stressing cooperation with Southeast Asia, does Japan’s view of East Asian stability provide a model for ASEAN and middle powers to enhance regional cooperation?

**Koga:** Japan’s approach to shaping the regional order significantly transformed after World War II. This was driven by constitutional constraints that prohibited the country from possessing offensive military capabilities or resolving international disputes through force. These limitations led Japan to adopt a distinctly non-militaristic and economic approach to regional engagement.

Japan shifted its strategic orientation by becoming more receptive to the voices of developing countries in Southeast and East Asia. It incorporated these perspectives into its policies, focusing on building economic norms and structures prioritizing development. Japan provided substantial development assistance to these nations, aiming to create a region oriented around economic cooperation rather than political competition. While Japan maintained a low profile in political order-shaping, it was assertive in fostering an economic order emphasizing mutual benefit and stability.

The 1977 Fukuda Doctrine further solidified this approach. It reassured East Asian nations wary of Japan’s potential remilitarization by emphasizing non-military leadership, cooperation, and mutual respect. This commitment remains a cornerstone of Japan’s regional engagement, particularly in its relationships with ASEAN and Southeast Asian nations.

Japan’s diplomatic efforts also reflect a balance

“Japan’s participation in minilateral groupings, such as the Quad and other cooperative frameworks involving countries like South Korea and China, is a strategy to hedge against uncertainties surrounding the United States’ commitment to East Asia.

between its alignment with Western liberal values—such as democracy and human rights—and its unique approach to pursuing these principles. Unlike Western nations, which often impose sanctions in response to violations of these values, Japan relies on engagement and dialogue. While this approach can be slower, it resonates more strongly with many Asian countries that prefer patient, negotiation-based diplomacy over coercive measures.

Today, Japan continues to shape the regional order through informal groupings and initiatives integrating Western liberal principles into an Asian context. It prioritizes inclusive, economic, and political engagement rather than military power, fostering a cooperative and rules-based regional order. By acting as a bridge between Western values and Asian sensibilities, Japan plays a unique role in maintaining stability and promoting development across the region.

**Fargier:** Drawing from your analyses, I saw that Japan's foreign policy has involved balancing against the risk posed by China's rise while also employing security hedging in response to uncertainties about the U.S. commitment to East Asia. How does Japan integrate these balancing and hedging strategies into its engagement with minilateral frameworks? Could these efforts evolve to create a stable and inclusive regional order that complements larger institutions while addressing internal and external security concerns?

**Koga:** Japan's participation in minilateral groupings, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and other cooperative frameworks involving countries like South Korea and China, is a strategy to hedge against uncertainties surrounding the United States' commitment to East Asia. As the U.S. focuses on other global regions, these initiatives act as security hedging for Japan. However, these frameworks still need clarification, lacking formal

institutionalization and clear objectives. For instance, the Quad promotes public goods in the Indo-Pacific, but it is often perceived as a counter-China initiative aiming to contain Beijing's influence. This duality leaves room for evolution over time.

Minilateral frameworks have the potential to complement existing regional institutions by fostering inclusivity and collaboration. However, this dynamic could shift if strategic balances change, such as heightened Chinese assertiveness in areas like the Indian Ocean, East Asia, or the South China Sea. Should member-states within these frameworks perceive such actions as significant threats, they could pivot toward becoming more security-oriented, possibly transforming into exclusive coalitions focused on defense and deterrence.

Ultimately, these frameworks are fluid in nature, and their role—whether inclusive or exclusive—depends on evolving strategic conditions and the priorities of their member-states.

**Fargier:** On that note, Japan's national security and free and open Indo-Pacific concepts involve internal and external balancing against China to put all their vital interests while promoting the rule-based order. So, I wondered how Japan navigated the balance between countering China's rise and acting as a "leading rule-maker" in shaping a stable and inclusive Indo-Pacific. Could Japan's initiatives in the Mekong reflect a test case for this dual role?

**Koga:** Before recent political shifts, initiatives like Japan's Mekong Initiative were firmly rooted in promoting a rules-based order. Japan's development assistance in the Mekong region has adhered to international standards, focusing on transparency, environmental protection, and labor rights—unlike China's often criticized approach to development, which can overlook these considerations. By providing economic packages aligned with global standards, Japan has facilitated development in

the Mekong and strengthened adherence to international norms. These efforts have received support from European countries and the United States, reinforcing Japan's leadership in fostering sustainable and ethical development.

For instance, the 2018 G20 summit established principles for 'quality infrastructure,' emphasizing economic viability, minimal harm to local communities, and avoiding excessive debt burdens for recipient nations. Japan played a crucial role in promoting these criteria as a standard for international development. However, the U.S. shifted toward a more transactional approach under the Trump administration, showing less commitment to the rules-based order. This reluctance to prioritize international norms and frameworks has posed challenges for Japan, which relies on like-minded partners to advance its vision.

Despite these difficulties, Japan continues to champion the rules-based order, seeking alliances with European countries and other global stakeholders to maintain momentum. However, with consistent U.S. support, Japan can sustain this leadership role, particularly in rising geopolitical uncertainty.

**Fargier:** Talking about the Trump administration, how did Trump's approach to Asia impact Japan's position as a liminal power navigating between U.S. and Chinese influence? How can Japan adapt to shifts in U.S. leadership while safeguarding its interests and ensuring stability?

**Koga:** There are two key points here. First, the United States is arguably the most important country for Japan to align with due to the longstanding U.S.-Japan alliance, the historical development of their bilateral relationship, and, most importantly, its commitment to Japan's defense. With U.S. military bases in Japan, the security ties between the two countries are very strong. Therefore, from Japan's perspective, it must align with the United States regardless of which president is in power.

However, with the arrival of the Trump administration, there were potential shifts in U.S. foreign policy, especially regarding international diplomacy based on the rules-based order. In this context, Japan may need to nurture or create new regional frameworks that help maintain the existing order. These groupings would likely need to be formed without relying solely on the United States since the U.S. might not prioritize the future of the international order. Japan could look to engage other countries not only in Southeast Asia and South Asia, but also in the Pacific, Central Asia, and South America to work together to sustain rules and ensure regional stability.

As a 'liminal power,' Japan is in a unique position. Its power status and identity are continuously in flux, balancing shared values with the West while drawing on more Asian-oriented approaches. This allows Japan to bridge these two worlds and foster dialogue among diverse regional actors. However, Japan's ability to pursue this strategy will also depend on how much pressure the

**“Japan is actively conducting what I call ‘strategic empowerment’, aiming to empower ASEAN and Southeast Asian countries without strong strings attached. The idea is that by strengthening these smaller nations, Japan can contribute to regional stability.”**

United States places on Japan to stay closely aligned with its priorities.

**Fargier:** Japan has also employed dual-track diplomacy, forging strategic partnerships with smaller South Asian states like Cambodia while engaging broadly across Asia. How does this dual-track approach advance Japan's goals within the region, particularly in fostering stability?

**Koga:** This approach can be described as 'strategic empowerment.' Japan aims to empower ASEAN and Southeast Asian countries without strong strings attached. The idea is basically that by strengthening these smaller nations, Japan can contribute to regional stability.

Asian politics is often characterized by a division between large powers, such as Japan, China, South Korea, the United States, and possibly Russia, and smaller countries like those in Southeast Asia. These smaller nations frequently face the challenge of choosing sides when great powers ask them to align with one country or another. Empowering Southeast Asian countries is crucial because it allows them to resist external pressures, make independent choices, and assert their strategic autonomy.

Japan's goal is to help ASEAN as an institution stay unified, giving it a collective diplomatic voice that can counter the influence of major powers. This unity allows Southeast Asia to maintain its strategic autonomy. However, empowering institutions alone is not enough. Japan also focuses on empowering individual Southeast Asian countries through bilateral assistance, offering support to nations like Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, and even Myanmar when needed.

In this way, Japan's diplomacy aims to mitigate the effects of power politics in East Asia, ensuring that smaller countries have the strength to maintain stability and autonomy in the region.

**Fargier:** Of course, Japan's foreign policy has not always followed its current approach, as it carries the legacy of being a once-dominant imperial power. This includes genuine historical grievances. And I know this often resurfaces in regional relations and occasionally complicates its diplomatic initiative. How do historical tension and the lack of formal wartime apologies affect Japan's ability to be a more assertive middle power role, and is it? Is it limiting his influence and trust in fostering regional stability and cooperation?

**Koga:** It depends on the region we're focusing on. Due to historical legacies, Japan's leadership is more limited in Northeast Asia. Whenever Japan attempts to lead, countries like China or South Korea often explain why it shouldn't, citing Japan's past actions. Despite Japan having apologized many times for its history, some countries continue to view these apologies as insufficient, and some Japanese officials have made controversial statements that worsen relations. This complicates Japan's leadership role in Northeast Asia.

In contrast, Southeast Asia is different. Japan has successfully overcome these historical issues and built a trusting relationship with ASEAN countries. According to a Singapore think tank survey, Japan is now considered ASEAN's most trusted partner in East Asia.

Japan's strategy is to work through ASEAN, which acts as a neutral entity that can engage with all major powers. Instead of seeking to take on a leadership role, major regional powers, including Japan, allow ASEAN to drive regional cooperation. Meanwhile, Japan continues its bilateral dialogue with countries like South Korea and China to manage historical legacies over time.

This two-pronged approach—empowering ASEAN to lead in cooperation while Japan manages historical issues with its neighbors—helps Japan

navigate the complexities of regional power dynamics. However, leadership in Northeast Asia remains challenging due to the region's complicated power politics and history.”

**Fargier:** *What policy recommendation would you offer Japan to help strengthen its role as a middle power in the Indo-Pacific? How can Japan address the challenge of bridging gaps among its partners and allies and identify optimal points for active and coordinated policies?*

**Koga:** This is a difficult question, and if you had asked me a couple of weeks ago, I might have had a more straightforward answer. But right now, it's a lot more complicated. My recommendation to Japan would be not to rely solely on the US-Japan alliance. While I understand that the US-Japan alliance is critical for diplomatic and security reasons, especially under the Trump administration, focusing too much on it might cause Japan to overlook the importance of multilateral frameworks.

Since the end of the Cold War, Japan has invested in and created institutions like ASEAN-led organizations. These frameworks are essential for fostering regional stability and cooperation. Japan is also developing mini-lateral frameworks that complement ASEAN's role in the region.

To maintain the stability of these frameworks, Japan should continue empowering Southeast Asian countries and strengthen ASEAN's unity. ASEAN's ability to facilitate dialogue among significant

powers and shape the rules and norms of the region is crucial.

If Japan or other countries neglect ASEAN and multilateral institutions, the region could fall into divisions, where countries prioritize bilateral relationships over multilateral cooperation. This shift would inevitably lead to a rise in power politics, fostering more misunderstandings, skepticism, and fear among countries.

Japan must keep engaging in and prioritizing multilateral cooperation to avoid these risks and maintain regional stability. By focusing on this, Japan can help foster a more collaborative and less fragmented regional order.

**Alexander Droop:** *You've mentioned this briefly, but could you explain how, in your view, the Trump presidency will affect Southeast Asia, and specifically Japan's approach to the region?*

**Koga:** First, U.S. policy towards Southeast Asia is increasingly shifting towards bilateral engagement. This means the United States will likely disengage from multilateral forums like the ASEAN-led East Asia Summit or ASEAN Plus forums. Even under the Biden administration, attention to ASEAN has diminished, and this trend will likely accelerate. The Trump administration, in particular, focused on strengthening ties with specific Southeast Asian countries, such as the Philippines, which it viewed as an essential ally in countering China's influence. For example, with the appointment of Mike

**“If Japan or other countries neglect ASEAN and multilateral institutions, the region could fall into divisions, where countries prioritize bilateral relationships over multilateral cooperation. This shift would inevitably lead to a rise in power politics, fostering more misunderstandings, skepticism, and fear among countries.**

Pompeo as Secretary of State, the U.S. emphasized the importance of the U.S.-Philippines alliance for regional security.

This shift has implications for Japan. If the U.S. no longer prioritizes Southeast Asia's multilateral frameworks, Japan will face the challenge of leading regional cooperation without the same level of U.S. support. Japan could potentially take on a more significant role in strengthening multilateral frameworks in Southeast Asia, particularly those led by ASEAN. However, with the U.S. focusing on bilateral relations, Southeast Asian countries expect Japan to advocate for multilateralism and engage with regional powers to stabilize relationships.

Japan should play a more active role in Southeast Asia without strong U.S. support for multilateralism. Japan can help stabilize the region and promote broader regional cooperation by aligning with major regional powers and fostering cooperative frameworks.

**Droop:** We interviewed David Kang last week, and he offers a very different and unconventional approach. He talked about how one can't observe balancing against China in East Asia, not Japan. Could you briefly explain how you see Japan and China's relationship and if you would go along with his assertion that Japan is not balancing China and is more accepting of a China-led regional order?

**Koga:** David Kang's view is insightful, but I believe it might not fully align with the current dynamics in East Asia. Japan has consistently recognized China as a challenge, particularly after the 2010 Senkaku Islands incidents. In the 2022 National Security Strategy, Japan identified China as its most significant strategic challenge, leading to military enhancements and closer cooperation with the U.S. on regional contingencies, including Taiwan. These actions suggest Japan is balancing rather than accepting a China-led order, a stance shared by

many countries in Southeast Asia who are hesitant to embrace such an order. While some Southeast Asian nations may align with China on specific issues, like human rights or democracy, they do not see this as a reason to accept a China-led order. These countries tend to lean toward balancing rather than bandwagoning, though their approach remains cautious. So, the term 'hedging' is often used, but I find it only partially accurate.

**Droop:** Could the military cooperation between Japan and South Korea, which has been focused on the North Korean threat, expand to balance against China's incursions in East Asia?

**Koga:** For now, Japan and South Korea's military cooperation is mainly focused on North Korea, given the security implications of North Korea's actions. The joint military exercises are not aimed at China, though they may consider scenarios like the Taiwan contingency. However, the primary concern for both countries remains North Korea. That said, Japan and South Korea, under the current administration, have strengthened their relationship with some discussions about broader political cooperation.

Japan and South Korea are not looking to exclude China but aim to engage with it constructively. This is why Japan, South Korea, and China have been revitalizing their cooperation, including military summits. These initiatives focus more on hedging against China rather than directly balancing it militarily. So, while the cooperation is focused on North Korea, it also reflects a broader desire to manage China diplomatically.

**Droop:** David Kang has argued that Southeast Asian countries often view Taiwan primarily as an internal issue for China rather than a regional security concern. How do you assess this view?

**Koga:** Southeast Asian countries are indeed concerned with Taiwan, but primarily from an

economic rather than military perspective. While they might not see Taiwan as a direct regional security issue, they are deeply concerned about the economic consequences of any conflict, such as disruptions to supply chains and semiconductor production. Many Southeast Asians also have ties to Taiwan, which adds to the region's concerns.

**Droop:** If you were to advise European Union policymakers on their engagement strategy in the Indo-Pacific, what key recommendations would you offer?

**Koga:** While European countries express interest in the Indo-Pacific, they are geographically distant from the region. Apart from nations like the UK and France, their presence is minimal. If the EU attempts to engage in all aspects of the region, it risks spreading its resources too thin to make a meaningful impact.

To signal their seriousness, the EU should prioritize connectivity, environmental protection, or climate change. The EU can demonstrate its commitment to the region by focusing resources on these areas. Southeast Asian countries will be more likely to engage with the EU if they see that the EU is serious about contributing to these areas.

The key for the EU is to signal its priority areas for engagement in the Indo-Pacific clearly. This will enhance the region's confidence in the EU's presence and help strengthen EU-Asia cooperation by demonstrating the EU's strategic intent and practical contributions.