

# FRS – Japan Program

## The ASEAN's role and centrality in the Indo-Pacific and the concept of FOIP: a view from Japan

### Interview with Ambassador Masafumi ISHII



Masafumi ISHII was the Ambassador of Japan to Indonesia till December 2020 and retired from Japanese Foreign Service in January 2021, having served there for more than forty years.

He graduated from Tokyo University and joined MOFA in 1980. His posts in Tokyo include Director for Policy Planning, Special Assistant to Foreign Minister, Director General for Global Issues and Legal Advisor. His overseas experience covers Washington DC, where he served twice, London, Belgium and NATO as the Ambassador. His last post, which lasted for almost four years, was in Jakarta.

He has frequently participated in international seminars and symposiums and has extensive experience in working with partners in ASEAN countries.

He is presently teaching International Law at Gakushuin University as well as providing advice to a number of Japanese private companies.

**Question 1: There are multiple debates in East Asia about regional stability, multilateralism, Quad plus format and AUKUS. In that context, how does Japan see the role and importance of ASEAN and the validity of the concept of ASEAN centrality?**

ASEAN is in Japan's vicinity. Thus, stability and prosperity of ASEAN and Southeast Asian countries are crucial for Japan in many respects.

First, ASEAN has a huge potential. Its population, 650 million, is more than that of EU27+UK, 510 million. ASEAN's total GDP is already more than that of MERCOSUR (Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay

and Paraguay) and growing by 5 % annually. Yet, it is still 1/6 of EU+UK and GDP per capita is 1/8. Considering the pace and strength of their economic growth, their unfulfilled potential is obvious.

Second, ASEAN countries exist alongside Japan's crucial Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) shared by many other countries including European ones, and there are a lot of critical choke points on route. ASEAN's stability and capabilities for maintaining maritime safety are fundamental for secure and free navigation, thus the economic growth of Japan and the world. For example, in case of some crisis in the Taiwan Strait, Lombok and Makassar Straits are the only viable alternatives to Malacca Strait for maintaining the flow of goods to and from Japan. Therefore, it

makes every sense to support Indonesia's maritime security capabilities.

Third, in the global context in the future, where Indonesia's and ASEAN countries' stand has a critical importance for Japan, the United States and Europe in forming majority in worldwide rule and trend making. Though the United States may still be the only superpower in the world now, in 20 years, we will witness a world with three superpowers ("G3" – US, China and India). By then, China's GDP and defense spending are likely to match the US' at least nominally. It does sound like final emergence of G2, but again, by then, India's population will be more than that of China and India's GDP will be world n° 3.

Now, what if we try to establish who will be part of the new G7? Who will be among the four countries/areas in addition to the G3? I hope Japan will with world n° 4 or 5 GDP. Then Indonesia, whose GDP is predicted to exceed Japan's at some point in the 2040s if the present pace of growth is not seriously hampered. Then comes the EU, if it stays united, and Russia, which cannot be neglected due to its potential as a disruptive power. So, Japan needs, in addition to the US and Europe, India and Indonesia, to be closer to us than to the other side in order to form a majority among the new G7.

With all these factors in mind, Japan will continue to support ASEAN's crucial role for the regional stability and prosperity, that is what ASEAN's centrality means. Japan keeps on cooperation with ASEAN for the development of the region as a whole and the reduction of the gap between rich and poor in the region, both among countries and people. That is one of the keys to strengthen the stability and prosperity of all the ASEAN countries.

**“Stability and prosperity of ASEAN and Southeast Asian countries are crucial for Japan in many respects.”**

**Question 2: In the context of Sino-US tensions, and mounting pressure from China in the maritime domain, would ASEAN countries welcome an increased security role for Japan in the region? How do you see the future of Japan-ASEAN relations?**

As we all know, ASEAN countries would never make a choice between the United States and China. In fact, their diplomatic posture is to welcome all the important foreign partners, be it the US, China, Japan, the EU, India, Russia, etc., and get the most out of them, which is very logical considering their geographical and geopolitical position. In this regard, we should not expect any ASEAN country to join Quad because this equates to make a choice publicly.

At the same time, it is also true to say that there is too much diversity among ASEAN countries for them to take the same position. Indonesia's population is more than 250 million while Brunei has only 430,000. Indonesia's GDP is 35 % of the total ASEAN GDP while that of Laos, Cambodia and Brunei are less than 1 % each. Singapore's GDP per capita is \$65,000 as the so-called LMC countries have less than \$3,000. All these countries' history and geographical positions are very different to say the least. Against that background, the reality is, contrary to what they say in public, that they have already made their choice in their mind.

The MOFA of Japan has been carrying out detailed opinion polls in ASEAN members since 2008, first among six major countries, then later in all the members. One of the

consistent questions has been “Which country are you going to rely on more in future, US, China or Japan?”. The result has been very insightful. In fact, in the first poll in 2008, the six major countries were clearly divided into two different groups. The first group said: “Of course China!”. These were Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore. The other group said: “Maybe Japan”... These were Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam. More importantly, there have been only three countries where Japan has consistently come over China, which are these three – Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam. What does this mean and what should we do about it? That has been a big question for policy makers in Tokyo.

My take is this. ASEAN countries can be divided into 4 different groups according mainly to their overall national strength. The first group is “Big3”, Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam. They also follow the basic ASEAN strategy of not expressing choice in public. But, in case of real crisis, such as serious pressure from China, which has happened reasonably frequently in recent years, they see themselves as big enough to be able to resist, even while relying on outsiders like Japan and the United States if necessary. Some of them also have historical experiences that make them instinctively cautious toward their big neighbor.

The second group is “Middle3”, Malaysia, Thailand and Myanmar. The opinion polls suggest that their position swings from one side to the other depending on changes in their governments. Malaysia, for example, used to be very close to Japan in its Look East Policy under Prime Minister Mahathir in his first term, but the situation was quite different under his successor.

The third group is “Small3”, Cambodia, Brunei and Laos. I would not say that they are always pro-China but if China tries to put pressure on them to get things in her way, it may be difficult for them to say no. And Brunei nowadays seems to be moving toward that direction.

The last group is the exception, Singapore. Public opinion polls show pro-China tendencies almost all the time, and business ties and the recent flow of immigration from China support that result. But it is well known that Singapore has hosted US naval ships since 1990, right before US forces left the Philippines’ Subic and Clark bases in 1992. Singapore practically chooses both.

### **Question 3: In your view, what should Japan/US and Europe do in dealing with ASEAN countries?**

To support a strong and united ASEAN that develops as a whole should continue to be our main policy objective, considering ASEAN’s central importance in the region. ASEAN is ready and able to launch and pursue its own initiatives for many difficult issues such as the Indo-Pacific and Myanmar. We should encourage them while supporting them from behind. There is no point in undermining ASEAN’s strength and unity.

But our resources are limited. We somehow need to prioritize in pursuing our bilateral relations. Our first priority should go to those who are willing to rely on us, namely, the Big3 ASEAN countries. In addition, they are located along the crucial SLOC. We share strategic objectives such as achieving economic prosperity and sustainable growth, maintaining free and safe navigation and improving quality of life. Thus, our cooperation is not limited to the economic field such as trade,

investment, economic assistance. Capacity-building for Coast Guards, more frequent joint exercises among not only Coast Guards but also navies make sense for increasing interoperability. In the future, cooperation for defense equipment is another possibility.

We should never stop our efforts to strengthen our relationship with Middle3 ASEAN countries because there is always a chance for positive response on a case-by-case basis. In fact, Thailand hosts the largest Japanese economic presence in the region and it should grow further considering US-China frictions. For Small3 ASEAN countries, some pointed approach maybe useful. For example, fair joint use of Mekong River resources is crucial for many countries along the river. We should be able to support, if necessary, the interests of Cambodia in this regard. Naturally, we have to be very careful in prioritization. If we overdo it, it is like promoting division inside ASEAN which is against our main policy objective.

We should also have a tangible presence, not only in words but also in deeds. Japan is making fair efforts in this regard. And after the withdrawal from Afghanistan, there is a good chance of US comeback in terms of military presence in a rotational nature. We should form multifaceted and resilient networks among like-minded partners, including ASEAN countries. The Japan-US security alliance can play a meaningful role for the stability and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific region but that is not enough. We need to cooperate with like-minded countries that share common strategic interests through establishing the missing link of cooperation among the allies of the US since webs of networks work more efficiently than bunches of bilateral alliances.

The Quad, Japan/US/India/Australia, should be regarded as the core and most meaningful partnership in the region. As the summit meeting becomes regular, we need to make this partnership more operational than rhetoric. As for Quad+, we should be flexible but we need to realize that there is a certain limit as to the possibility of adding new members, and adding one could mean alienating others. Above all, we do not intend to create an Asian NATO, which is not possible anyway. Creating series of networks is more realistic and effective for dealing with the situation in the region where diversity and interaction are the middle-name.

In this regard, as is mentioned above, we need to realize that no ASEAN country will join Quad. We need to find out other ways to engage important ASEAN countries, especially Indonesia, in this web of networks. In response to the request from the Government of Indonesia, Japan happens to develop a fishing port in Natuna. We also know that the US is interested in developing an airport in Natuna, which Indonesia welcomes. There is a *de facto* coordination among Japan, the US and Indonesia on the ground. This may become a basis for future dialogue which, if realized, will send a certain message to the audience.

It is also important to promote partnership among like-minded countries. A typical example is India-Indonesia cooperation. Mainly because both of them in recent years have faced the same kind of pressure from the north, these two big countries, which normally wait for others to come to them, have started dialogue and cooperation. Tangible collaboration, for example, is going on over the joint development of Sabang Island of Indonesia and Andaman and Nicobar Islands of India. We have every reason for promoting this very important move, since the Pacific

Ocean and the Indian Ocean are connected and these two countries exist in the middle of them, thus form the key for realizing a Free and Open Indo-Pacific. Australia has already grabbed the opportunity and formed an India-Indonesia-Australia dialogue. Japan is using its project for developing a fishing port in Sabang Island and for establishing tangible coordination with Indonesia and India.

We also need the engagement of Europe. After all, the United States, Europe and Asian democracies such as Japan are three pillars for promoting rule-based liberalism and democracy worldwide. The US and Europe have NATO. Japan and the US have an alliance. So, for achieving net-plus, it makes sense to strengthen Europe-Japan cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region, where both have the same strategic interests and which should be the main arena for cooperation. France is by nature a Pacific power, sending its fleet annually to the region. The United Kingdom is coming back to the region and other aspirants among EU members have started tangible engagement, which Japan deeply welcomes. If and when NATO expands its new Strategic Concept to be adopted in summer 2022 to include ways to deal with challenges coming from China, our cooperation in the region, possibly under NATO flag, should become more realistic and meaningful. We need to increase interoperability through more frequent exercises, occasionally involving other regional partners and form a workable division of labor in the region since we should not expect that European engagement is sustainable all the time.

History shows that ASEAN had made some meaningful progress when Indonesia was the chair and that will be the case in 2023. We should start quietly registering our expectations for the 2023 summit to

Indonesia. We should also prepare a meaningful initiative that shows our clear resolve for engagement in the region and for cooperation in achieving a stronger ASEAN.

2023 happens to be the year when Japan will host the G7. It is possible and it would be good to invite President Jokowi of Indonesia to G7, as a chair of ASEAN, for further coordination. 2023 will be a very important occasion for pursuing our strategic objectives with ASEAN and we should be well prepared for grabbing the opportunity.

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