

Japan Balances Power Dynamics in Southeast Asia: An Analysis of Japan's Role in Crystalizing Asian Relations

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Abstract

This paper examines Japan's role in balancing power dynamics and reshaping Asian relations in Southeast Asia. Japan significantly affects the socio-economic, political, and security paradigms in the region. Japan has engaged Southeast Asian nations by creating strong economic ties and opening markets for Japanese and Asian products. Thailand, Philippines, Vietnam, Singapore, and Indonesia are among the most prominent, to name a few. These states, in addition to, Taiwan, Malaysia and Brunei, have conflicting claims with China over sovereignty and resources in the South China Sea. Japan recognizes the importance of its strategic influence in mitigating such regional conflicts while securing and defining clear relations among Asian states, and external powers who are regionally involved like the United States and Australia. Such a mission is important to Japan. The stability of the region is vital for securing Japan's external trade routes through the Malacca Strait, preventing piracy operations, and maintaining safe economic channels with regional states. The rise of China's military power and its perceived regional hegemonic expansion underscore such concerns and heralds a regional structure that Japan does not prefer. It is important to acknowledge that effort to counter China's power is not an easy mission, given the overall complexity of the challenges of regional competition over security and socio-economic measures. In response, Japan plays a fundamental part in counterbalancing Chinese hegemonic influence and preventing a Sino-Asian centric region. This analysis seeks to add to the literature an examination of Japan's role in crystalizing power relations of Asian states. Overall, the objective is to provide a clear understanding of the region and its power dynamics.

Keywords

Hard Power, Soft Power, Functionalism, Power Struggle, ASEAN States, Fukuda

1. Introduction

Japan has claimed no islands in the South China Sea since renouncing all such claims in the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty after its defeat in the Second World War. However, Japan continues to claim and occupy the Senkaku Islands located just north and east of Taiwan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2023). The dispute over the Senkaku Islands has caused several incidents between Japan and China, such as the collision of a Chinese fishing boat with Japanese coast guard ships in September 2010 and the confrontation in February 2013 between Chinese and Japanese naval vessels. Confrontations over the Senkaku Islands show that China and Japan are in an ongoing low-level dispute with China occasionally engaging in shows of force in the vicinity of the islands. China's activities in the Senkaku Islands have caused Japan to evaluate the impact of similar activities in the South China Sea on Japanese interests (Graham-Harrison, 2017). Any Chinese advancement in the South China Sea, especially ones that are perceived as threats to the freedom of navigation, may also be perceived as an additional lever for China to use against Japan due to the overwhelming volume of trade and natural resources (especially oil) that travel to Japan through the region (Storey, 2017: p. 136). As a result, Japan looks toward regional partners for security cooperation in addition to its longstanding alliance with the United States.

In this context, Japan has engaged the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) states on two fronts, economic and security. ASEAN is an international organization in Southeast Asia that can advocate collectively for its members (Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia) when there is strong enough consensus on an issue. On the economic front, Japan has worked with ASEAN since 2003 to create a Free Trade Area (FTA) that could serve Japan's significant economic interests in the region. ASEAN states represent a major through route for Japan's imported goods. Seventy percent of Japan's oil is shipped via sea lanes that pass through the Malacca Straits (bordered by Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore) (Rowan, 2005: pp. 414-436). Moreover, the region represents a significant market for Japanese products with ASEAN being Japan's second largest trading partner after China (Okano, 2016). The economic relationship between Japan and ASEAN was cemented with the signing of the ASEAN-Japan Comprehensive Economic Partnership (AJCEP) Agreement in 2008, a free trade agreement that significantly lowered tariffs between them and may lead to further economic integration in the future (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2017). Such economic integration represents ASEAN desires to include Japan in its regional sphere as Japan has consistently supported regional economic development in Southeast Asia.

Even though ASEAN economic relations with Japan is extensive, Japan's inte-

gration with ASEAN in the past brought up security concerns linked to the strength of Japan's economy that experienced remarkable growth after the Second World War. Economic growth in Japan proceeded at a rate of 10 percent per year from 1950 to 1970, causing Japan to quickly become a developed industrial power and the second largest economy in the world (Yoshioka & Kawasaki, 2016). The economic resurgence of Japan created mistrust among ASEAN countries about Japan's intentions. The disparity in economic power between Japan and ASEAN countries led to fears that Japan could use its economy to build a military that would once again threaten the region. The mistrust stemmed from Japan's occupation of ASEAN countries during the Second World War and its treatment of local populations. Their fears were partially allayed by the United States-Japan alliance that links Japan's security with the United States' military presence and disincentives any independent Japanese military ambition. According to Robert Stoufer,

Japan's past has had a significant influence on ASEAN fears regarding the implications for Southeast Asia of Japan's current pervasive influence on national economies. Indeed, today those fears have been heightened in some circles largely because the post-war Japanese economic "intrusion" into ASEAN has been predicated on the perceived symmetry between the United States and Japan. In other words, Japan's penetration into the ASEAN economy has been more acceptable as long as it was accompanied by a strong U.S. military presence in the region to act as a counterbalance—precluding the possibility of a military role by Japan (Stoufer, 1991: pp. 40-41).

Japan itself has tried to calm ASEAN nations over their concerns regarding a post-war resurgence. In 1977, the Japanese Prime Minister, Takeo Fukuda delivered a speech in Manila whereby he articulated the "Fukuda Doctrine" or Japan's foreign policy towards ASEAN states. The doctrine states Japan's refusal to become a military power, that ASEAN nations will be treated by Japan as equals and underlies Japan's commitment to creating a stable regional order in Southeast Asia (Kikuchi, 2007). The Fukuda doctrine clarified Japan's role as a non-military power and ensured that economic advancements would not be used to gain a military advantage over ASEAN states in the future. The impact of the Fukuda Doctrine allowed Japan to achieve greater cooperation and build mutual trust and confidence with ASEAN states. It allowed Japan to cooperate as a member of regional institutions such as the Asian Regional Forum, ASEAN + 3 (ASEAN + China, Japan, and South Korea), and ASEAN + 6 (ASEAN + China, India, Japan, New Zealand, Australia, and South Korea), also known as the East Asia Summit (Kikuchi, 2007: p. 4). Overall, Japan's economic integration and partnership with ASEAN, its renunciation of military expansionism, and its accession to regional institutions illustrate its desire for inclusive regionalism in Southeast Asia. This type of regionalism was primarily anchored on the economic integration of Japan and ASEAN, which serves as a compliment to the

increased security cooperation that has taken place in parallel and with the goal of countering China's maritime aggressiveness in the Senkaku Islands and the South China Sea (Chongkittavorn, 2018).

Japan and ASEAN states have engaged each other and cooperated in the realm of security in no small part due to the rise of China as a potential hegemon. China's activities in the South China Sea as well as the Senkaku Islands give ASEAN states and Japan an incentive to engage in regional cooperation and regional institutions towards a shared perceived goal (Soderbaum, 2012: p. 17). According to Kavi Chongkittavorn,

In the past two years [2016 and 2017], Japan has been moving swiftly to strengthen maritime security ties with Vietnam and the Philippines, two main claimants in the South China Sea disputes. The move has been viewed as an attempt to counter the rise of China's maritime power and its presence in the troubled maritime areas. Other ASEAN countries have welcomed Japan's proactive and pro-peace policies under [Prime Minister Shinzo] Abe (Chongkittavorn, 2018).

In addition to Japan's attempts to gain a favorable position in Southeast Asia by cooperating with claimant states, Japan has expanded the range of its security cooperation through its alliance with the United States. Japan and the United States signed the bilateral Guidelines for Defense Cooperation in 1978, with a significant revision in 1997, to allow their respective militaries to begin mutual training exercises and grant Japan the ability to deploy its defense forces beyond its national borders to Southeast Asian areas. This was a response to the concerns that arose from Japan towards North Korea's missile launch in 1993 and the Taiwan Straits crisis in 1996 (Hoff, 2016: p. 3). More recently, the improvement and growth of China's military presents the greatest regional security concern for Japan and the United States. "The growth in Chinese defense spending and military capabilities threatens to shift the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific" (Hoff, 2016: p. 4). As a result, Japan and the United States as allies seek to exercise their influence in order to obtain a more favorable distribution of power in the region to benefit themselves at the expense of China and its exclusive regional missions.

2. Japan and Power Structure in Southeast Asia

The rapid growth of China's economic and military power in the 1990s is viewed with concern by neighboring states in Southeast Asia. These concerns increased when China fired Ballistic missiles close to the vicinity of Taiwan in 1996. It was an opportunity for the United States to return to the region by sending Naval vessels to the Taiwan Strait. This show of force occurred despite the legacy of the Vietnam War and the subsequent Case-Church Amendment of 1973 prohibiting the United States from military involvement in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia unless approved by Congress (Belasco et al., 2007). Moreover, the United States maintained a large military installation in the Philippines (Subic Bay) after the

Clark Air Base closed in 1991 because of disagreements regarding leasing costs. The United States as an external power also had military partnerships with other claimant states such as Vietnam, Taiwan, and Brunei. The goal for the United States was to build a strategic structure capable of representing U.S. interests in the region. Japan was not excluded from these arrangements. "In 1996, Japan and the United States redefined their security roles in Asia Pacific by issuing a joint declaration." (Masashi, 2003: pp. 154-155). The declaration stipulated that Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) would provide logistics support to U.S. forces securing the area. The United States encouraged Japan to expand its security mission in response to North Korea's expanding military programs, piracy and terrorist activities. Japan has altered its security role in Southeast Asia as it deems necessary to respond to changes in regional power structure.

It was a priority for Japan to assure ASEAN states that it was not pursuing hegemonic goals in Southeast Asia. Japan's pervasive economic relationship with ASEAN states and its regional peacekeeping missions in Singapore, East Timor and Cambodia eased the fears of ASEAN states of a possible resurgent Japanese military dominance in the region (Masashi, 2003: p. 156). As a result, ASEAN states were more acceptable of strategic partnership with Japan and the United States. Indeed, the alignment of the United States and Japan's security played a fundamental role in shaping the dynamics of such inclusive cooperation. Extensive regional cooperation also reduces the incentive of any ASEAN country to negotiate separately with China due to the collective desires and common predicament they are all in vis-à-vis China. ASEAN states have no desire to negotiate their respective conflicting claims with China bilaterally (Tonnesson, 1999: p. 16). The internationalization of the issue was a response of ASEAN states refusal to concede China's proposed negotiating framework for resolution of any South China Sea issues.

Japan augmented its security role in Southeast Asia to safeguard international trade routes, monitor the illegal flow of arms and build strategic military partnerships with regional states. "Today Japan and ASEAN countries have increased levels of Military-to-Military (MM) contact aimed at building mutual trust" (Masashi, 2003: p. 160). Japan conducted bilateral military exercises with the Philippines in addition to sending offshore patrolling boats that were used to secure maritime trade lanes. Additionally, Japan engaged Thailand, an ASEAN member state that had strained relations with China and the United States because of domestic political instability.

After cooperation with each other to solve the problem of Cambodia, Thailand and Japan have been building a relationship that exceeds the bounds of their bilateral relationship through close dialogues and cooperation in their combined efforts to solve the problems of the Southeast Asian region and the Asia-Pacific region. Since May 1998 the two countries have held their Politico-Military Talks between Japan and Thailand once every year, while their cooperation in security issues is also being duly streng-

thened. In 2012, Japan and Thailand upgraded the relationship to a strategic partnership (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2020).

Japan also has had a steady strategic military partnership with Indonesia and Vietnam. A major reason for engaging in such an alliance is Japan's desire to bolster its relations with ASEAN states on multiple fronts. In such an environment, Japan's foreign policy goal is to build an inclusive paradigm of strategic cooperation in Southeast Asia.

The neorealist approach portrays the struggle for power between nation-states as the pursuit of national interests within an environment characterized by a state of international anarchy, uncertainty, competition, and security dilemma. In an environment of uncertainty, weaker states act to pursue the options that are open to them. Through the defensive neorealist point of view, weaker states may be seen as attempting to increase their power expansion based on the principle of "self-help" to balance against China's rising power. However, one may surmise that because of the limited resources and military capabilities of weaker states, "self-help" is insufficient, and these states would prefer the presence of Japan and the United States as a deterring force to China's military as it also gives them leverage in dealing with China that would otherwise be absent. Consequently, if Japan and the United States withdrew from the region, this could upset the existing balance of power, which may contribute to the rise of China as an offensive power. The rise of China as an offensive power would upend the status quo and ignite a security dilemma in the region.

One may surmise that if Japan and the United States are absent from the scene, weaker states would bandwagon. A process that tends to be less common than balancing. Neorealism states that bandwagoning will occur only when the possibility of balancing has been removed from the weaker state, causing the cost of opposing the stronger power to far exceed the benefit derived from alliance therewith (Schweller, 1997: p. 928). Moreover, bandwagoning often results in less independence on the part of the weaker state "because there is nothing to prevent the stronger [state] from subsequently turning on its allies whenever that suits its purposes" (Russett, Starr, & Kinsella, 2004: p. 95). Claimant states have conducted themselves in a manner that can be interpreted as having an aversion to bandwagoning with China out of a desire to safeguard their independence and the presence of the Japan and the United States as a strategic partner or outright ally (Karim & Chairil, 2016: p. 7).

3. Japan and Soft Power Relations in Southeast Asia

Since 1945, Japan has maintained distant relations with foreign states while focusing on rebuilding after the destruction and devastation of World War II. However, Japan could not ignore restructuring and developing its economy without opening its markets with other regional states. "As Japan develops the concept of comprehensive security, she sees other Asian countries, particularly China and the Soviet Union, as partners to be traded with rather than aggressed"

(McIntosh, 2013: p. 124). Japanese corporations and businesses were ambitious to take part in the channels of the global free market economy. As a result, Japan's economic growth proceeded rapidly between the period of post-World War II and the end of the Cold War. This period was called the *economic miracle* years of Japan; a period characterized by significant economic growth. When Japan's economy faced a recession in the 1990s following the financial bubble years in the late 1980s, Japan pursued an expansionist financial policy to support its economy and prevent further downturns. Indeed, Japan's economic recession was a concern for ASEAN states as they rely on Japan's markets for exports. Moreover, ASEAN states faced a financial crisis in 1997 that started in Thailand. This caused widespread financial collapse among Southeast Asian states. Japan's economic recession during the same period and the Asian financial crisis of 1997 created a mutual interest of continuous reform and cooperation among Japan and its neighbors. It is no exaggeration that the process of departing an economic stagnation period contributed to reshaping relations between Japan and ASEAN states.

The contention of this article is that Japan was a part of the Asian financial crisis by discounting its financial problems. An argument that was introduced by several political scientists whereby Japan's extended financial crisis exacerbated the Asian one. Even though this may be the case, "Japan's immediate proposals for a regional framework to tackle the crisis in the shape of an Asian Monetary Fund (AMF) were shot down by US, Chinese, and European opposition in late 1997" (Hook, Gilson, Hughes, & Dobson, 2002: p. 178). This is a reflection of Japan's steady vision of maintaining stable economic relations with its neighbors despite diplomatic pressures. Yet, outside pressures constrained Japan's efforts such as its ongoing domestic recession, competition between the United States and China for bailing out Asian states to gain influence in the region, and the effect of the international community, organizations and non-state actors on Japan's regional behavior. These challenges in the end did not prevent Japan from assembling financial packages with the United States to bailout regional states in economic crisis.

In 1997, Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Korea all experienced attacks on their currencies and stock markets, and their governments could not, on their own, manage these attacks or stabilize their economies. In response, the IMF, with the participation of Japan, the United States, and other governments, assembled international financial rescue packages in an effort to stabilize the international financial market. The combined total of aid committed through multilateral and bilateral channels reached more than \$110 billion by the end of 1997 (Katada, 2001: p. 172).

Do such strategies crystalize Japan's relations with ASEAN states? Certainly, as foreign policies among nation-states stipulate well-defined decisions to operate and engage the mechanisms of financial institutions towards a foreseen goal.

Financial doctrines are a substantial indicator of state behavior; in this case, to engage Southeast Asian financial establishments with Japan's. The result is a cooperative political and economic climate that is conducive to solving not only financial crises but resolving otherwise intractable political and diplomatic issues as well.

It was not only Japan and the United States that helped ASEAN states during the financial crisis. ASEAN-China relations shifted at a bilateral level in the early 1990s, when ASEAN states started to perceive China as a potential competitor in Southeast Asia. The turnaround of relations occurred during the 1997 economic crisis where China provided "financial bailout packages for several ASEAN countries and promised not to devalue its own currency to take advantage of its neighbor's financial woes" (Storey, 2017: p. 5). It is stated that China's bailout packages was a small fraction of Japan's and "that the ostensible reason for not devaluing its own currency was to protect the Hong Kong dollar mattered not (Storey, 2017: p. 5)". Certainly, ASEAN states looked favorably upon China's behavior in contrast to the United States and Japan's distant position during the crisis. Consequently, ASEAN states' overall view towards China became much more positive, especially when compared to the United States and Japan. Japan and the United States had to compete with China over influence in Southeast Asia. Influence became a matter of established economic ties with ASEAN states while achieving regional security vis-à-vis China. One could surmise that the most beneficial actors in the region are ASEAN states where economic incentives are granted from regional and external powers like Japan, the United States, and even China.

When analyzing Japan and ASEAN, it is important to consider power struggles and international relations from a framework that goes beyond regional security missions. Soft power cannot be ignored as a factor of the competition between Japan, the United States and China. Even though the United States focuses more on the security paradigm and countering China's military rise in Southeast Asia, Japan and China as major regional states struggle to be the most predominant economic powers in Southeast Asia. In the context of this soft power struggle, Japan still manages to be a regional economic force that is capable of representing its interest even in the face of economic competition from other countries in the region. "There is no doubt that an East Asian brand of capitalism was created by Japan and followed by Korea and other Asian countries" (Sohn, 2011: p. 84). Despite the economic recession encountered, Japan was able to recover and lay the foundations of a new politico-economic order that is structurally proficient to regulate Southeast Asia's economic power. Such order is characterized by pursuing a pervasive economic strategy between Japan and ASEAN states after the financial crisis while maintaining vital diplomatic relations in place. This is not to undermine China's role in opening its markets for Southeast Asian states, but rather as a comprehensive Japanese vision to gain regional influence along with its security strategies tied to the United States.

Japan has always been an important actor when it comes to balancing power relations in Southeast Asia. Japan realizes the significance of establishing strong relations with Southeast Asian states. As mentioned before, they are relatively weaker states in terms of military and economic power. However, they are active regional states in which major powers rely on to gain influence in the region. The competition between Japan and China over security issues could be the driving force behind Japan's efforts to sustain Southeast Asian states, yet economic ties and national interest add another element to the equation. Even though the United States and Japan cooperate in terms of hard power strategies to deter China, Japan still finds soft power (diplomatic or economic influence) to be more effective for the same purpose. To Japan, this is a win-win game, where Japan's economy benefits through increased market-access in Southeast Asia while also bolstering Southeast Asian economies like Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia and South Korea. The tenor of Japan's support to develop regional states is imperative to creating a political and socioeconomic culture of cooperation. Such cooperation could be valuable for all parties to counterbalance China's activities and fill the power vacuum in the region.

4. Japan and ASEAN States: Diplomacy and Bilateral Relations

Geographically, Japan is close to the vicinity of ASEAN states. Maritime lanes that flow through the ten-member Southeast Asia nations make up the busiest sea-lanes and most important international trade routes in the region. For example, the South China Sea includes key trade routes such as the Strait of Malacca which links the Indian and the Pacific Ocean. According to Robert D. Kaplan, in his 2014 book *Asia's Cauldron*,

The South China Sea functions as the throat of the Western Pacific and Indian oceans—the mass of connective economic tissue where global sea routes coalesce. Here is the heart of Eurasia's navigable rimland, punctuated by the Malacca, Sunda, Lombok, and Makassar straits. More than half of the world's annual merchant fleet tonnage passes through these choke points, and a third of all maritime traffic world wide. The oil transported through the Malacca Strait from the Indian Ocean, en route to East Asia through the South China Sea, is triple the amount that passes through the Suez Canal and fifteen times the amount that transit the Panama Canal. Roughly two thirds of South Korea's energy supplies, nearly 60 percent of Japan's and Taiwan's energy supplies, and 80 percent of China's crude oil imports come through the South China Sea (Kaplan, 2014: p. 9).

Indeed, Japan has had a clear perspective in building its own economic power while supporting Asian states' economies. This is based upon the mainstream political belief in Japan's soft power capabilities towards creating a coherent structure of shared regional success. Japan and ASEAN states have been collaborating on framing financial policies that serves their mutual interest. "The

Japanese government and private sector have built partnerships and cooperative relations with these countries for economic development and prosperity by building social infrastructure, concluding free trade agreements, and other initiatives through bilateral, regional, ASEAN wide, and various other frameworks at different levels.” (Keidanren Japan Business Federation, 2021). Japan’s regional foreign policies are constructed on a sophisticated politico-economic understanding of the importance of having neighbors who are politically and economically stable. In other words, the more stable neighbor states are, the more likely it will serve the national interest of the more powerful state.

The discrepancies of economic power serve as a catalyst to the exchange of goods and services among regional states. Japan would find markets in weaker ASEAN states more receptive to its products, while ASEAN states’ domestic industrial companies would compete for better output. The result is the initiation of industrial power, where ASEAN states’ companies and corporations would produce cheaper products and services that can be exported to wealthy markets like Japan, the United States, and Australia. This market mechanism forms an economic structure that serves Japan’s interest in stabilizing neighbor states’ financial corporations and economies. A politico-economic vision may have not been clear during the era of the financial crisis in 1997 and Japan’s economic stagnation period. Japan was more involved in correcting domestic economic deficiencies while the United States and China were bailing out ASEAN states to gain influence in the region. This was driven by the United States’ desire to increase its own influence after the Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1996. The criticism of Japan by political scientists during that period might be acceptable. However, it is important to recognize that states’ foreign policies alter in response to political and socioeconomic variables that goes beyond a specific phase.

Diplomacy is a continuous course of action; an influential form of soft power that can alter states’ behavior in favor of all state actors. It is continuous because it can easily fluctuate in response to political circumstances and events. Fluctuation occurs when the process leads state-actors to form collective treaties and agreements that satisfy all parties or result in merely diplomatic initiatives in response to states’ power structures. Japan’s diplomatic relations with ASEAN states were continuous but changed in response to internal and external forces accordingly.

Nonetheless, by the late 1990s, the long recession and financial crisis had severely damaged its top-flight economy, and Japan was in disarray. Riddled by self-defeating politics and economic management, Japan’s image declined along with its hard power. Tokyo became inward-looking. It focused on its own problems, debated its own economy, feasted on its own scandals, and worried about the society-wide decline in morality. Foreign policy was a secondary concern. If anything, Tokyo was narrowly concerned with strengthening its hard alliance with the United States. When there was a massive opportunity for Japan to take advantage of reservoirs of

overseas investment and aid, Japan walked away from Asia (Sohn, 2011: p. 84).

It was a priority for Japan to put an end to its economic recession. This phase took enough time that China was able to build economic relations with ASEAN states. By the time Japan's economy recovered, Japan realized that it was important to build its soft power capabilities in the region to bolster its own influence in the region. This does not mean that diplomatic relation between Japan and ASEAN states were absent during Japan's long recession but it was limited as Japan was engaged in serious economic reforms. Thus, diplomacy could be a process but the range of its application varies in response to changes in domestic and international politics.

4.1. Japan and Thailand

Japan and Thailand have had a cooperative relationship that goes beyond a strong bilateral dynamic. Both countries have been cooperating on the economic and strategic fronts. However, trade partnerships between Japan and Thailand go back to the 17th century and 18th century when both states signed the Declaration of Amity and Commerce in 1887. The declaration led to an exchange of experts and scientists between Japan and Thailand. Japanese professionals of law, agriculture and science were sent to Thailand to boost its economic growth and development in general. The modernization of Thailand was one of the most important goals of Japan's foreign policy and diplomatic efforts where both states cooperated in the fields of politics and economics. The intermingling forms of cooperation encouraged Japanese to invest in Thailand's assets, bonds, and corporations. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, direct Japanese investment in Thailand make up thirty-one percent of all Thailand's direct investment. Moreover, the East Asian countries have had a long-term trade partnership. "Japan was Thailand's second largest importer and the third largest exporter in 2019" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2020). This data reflects the success of the Japan-Thailand Economic Partnership Agreement (JTEPA) signed in 2007. Products exported to Thailand are not limited to metal, machinery, auto and railway parts, and electronic equipment.

Japan and Thailand also engaged in a strategic partnership that sustains an open dialogue regarding security interests. The main objective is to achieve regional security in Southeast Asia and Indo-Pacific. Both states recognize the importance of political stability in ASEAN states as a condition to attain regional peace. In March 2012, the Prime Minister of Thailand Yingluck Shinawatra visited the Prime Minister of Japan Mr. Yoshihiko Noda upon an invitation from the Government of Japan. "The two leaders also reaffirmed the importance that, Japan and Thailand, as countries sharing basic values such as democracy, human rights, rule of law, good governance, respect for diversity and market economy, should, in partnership with other regional countries, help contribute to establishing a more prosperous and stable regional architecture in the Asia-Pacific,

based on such values” (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, 2012). This highlights the importance that Japan placed on its diplomatic relations with Thailand and Asian states. There is no doubt that Japan utilized its resources and institutions to cooperate with Thailand’s in order to support its development efforts. This is based on Japan’s belief that strengthening neighboring states contributes to Japan’s security in addition to regional stability.

4.2. Japan and the Philippines

Japan and the Philippines formalized their diplomatic relations in 1951 with the signing of the San Francisco Peace Treaty, which resulted in the establishment of the Philippines Embassy in Tokyo. Diplomatic ties between both states incorporate all geopolitical and economic relations where Japan plays a fundamental role in developing the infrastructure, industry, and economic advancements of the Philippines. Indeed, Japan has introduced itself as an important regional power and a political actor that can influence economic outputs in regional states. “The Philippines and Japan have always maintained a robust, vibrant and dynamic economic relations” (Nanes, 2018: p. 3). Such relations were enhanced when the two states signed the Treaty of Amity, Commerce, and Navigation in the 1970s. The treaty opened the door for Foreign Direct Investment flows from Japan to the Philippines and contributed to the increase of the Philippines’ economic growth and development. In addition, the United States, an ally to both states, encouraged deeper diplomatic relations, trade and investments. Japan and the Philippines signed the Japan-Philippine Economic Partnership Agreement in 2006, which allows for the free flow of goods, services and capital between the two states (Nanes, 2018: p. 27). The agreement had a substantial impact on the Philippines’ economic growth and contributed to Japan’s uptick in foreign investments.

Upon the entry of force of the PJEPA in 2008, balance of trade gradually improved in favor of the Philippines. Based on an 8-year average before and after the entry of force of the PJEPA, trade balance improved by USD 32.2 billion from USD-7.51 billion pre-PJEPA (2001-2008) to USD 27.64 billion post-PJEPA (2009-2016). Moreover, total trade improved by 19% from USD 115.99 billion to USD 137.96 billion resulting to Japan becoming the Philippines’ largest export market. In 2019, Japan remained to be the Philippines’ major trading partner, ranking 2nd out of 225 countries with total trade amounting to USD 21.38 billion. It is the Philippines’ 2nd export market (out of 220) and 2nd import supplier (out of 191). In terms of investments, a 146.7% amounting to PHP260.81 million surge in approved investments from Japan was recorded by investment promotion agencies (IPA)—from PHP 117.83 million pre-PJEPA to PHP 438.64 million post-PJEPA. In 2019, Japan ranked as the 4th largest contributor for approved foreign investments to the Philippines amounting to PHP 19.89 million with the manufacturing, real estate activities, and electricity, gas, steam and

air conditioning supply industries contributing to the larger part of investments from Japan (Republic of the Philippines, 2021).

Japan's investments in the Philippines are indicative of its desire to build strong economic ties with its neighbors and in concert with a larger soft power strategy. Japan's desire to create a regional economic architecture is imperative and a key pillar in its regional diplomatic goals. It goes without saying that the Philippine markets are more receptive towards this inclination as economic development is a primary objective of state institutions. The Philippines finds it more beneficial in establishing desired economic and security relations with Japan and the United States to face regional challenges and fill in the existing power vacuum in Southeast Asia.

The security apparatus in Southeast Asia requires regional major powers and states to deliver on cooperation. The Philippines is a vital actor. Certainly, the Southeast Asian state has been a strategic ally to the United States and Japan in terms of military cooperation. The Philippines and the United States signed an addition to the Visiting Forces Agreement, the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, in 2014 that allowed United States troops to use up to five Philippine bases on an ongoing basis "amid rising tensions with China's excessive claims in the South China Sea" (Katigbak, 2016). On the other hand, Japan's partnership with the Philippines encompasses a wide variety of regional issues such as maritime security, counterterrorism, piracy, and drug trafficking. They initiated this partnership in 2005 during the meeting between their respective Defense Directors Ono Yoshinori and Avellino Cruz in Manila. "The event was historical and significant because it was the first official visit made by a Japanese defense director to the Philippines." (Castro, 2009: p. 691). Yet, Maritime security tends to become the mainstream concern on the global stage, especially in an environment where overlapping territorial claims and busy trade lanes are both present. Perhaps out of concern for its security, Japan, an ally to the United States, signed a defense agreement with the Philippines in 2016 by which both states agreed to conduct joint military exercises and an exchange of military equipment and technology (Strangio, 2021). Japan's hard power strategy continues to be a vital component of its foreign policy towards regional conflicts despite its clear doctrines that reflects a continuous interest in soft power strategies. Japan's desire to further cement its relations in Southeast Asia are embedded in bilateral cooperation while maintaining an inclusive hard power dynamic with powerful allies and ASEAN states. That is to say, Japan's foreign policy appreciates both bilateral and multilateral relations in Southeast Asia and it has given Japan the ability to implement both hard and soft power strategies.

4.3. Japan and Vietnam

Japan and Vietnam's relationship is unique in its own right. Japan has been the primary foreign donor to Vietnam, channeling millions of dollars into Vietnam's economy. The objective is to sustain Vietnam's development and economic

growth. Vietnam endured Japanese invasion in the 1940s, protracted wars with France and the United States in the 1950's and 1960's, and the Sino-Vietnam war of the late 1970s. Vietnam has unquestionably suffered destruction and economic stagnation as a result. Japan's desire to help rebuild Vietnam's economy rests on the Fukuda doctrine, where Japan committed to building cooperative relationships with regional ASEAN states that are based on trust and mutual confidence. Indeed, the East Asian state's foreign policy is to ensure Vietnam that it has no desire to attain regional hegemonic power but rather incentivized to be a key regional partner that can benefit Vietnam's economy and open Japan's markets for its products and potential investments.

Regional security in Southeast Asia has also attracted attention from both the Japanese and the Vietnamese governments. Defense cooperation increased among the two states in the South China Sea. Both have viewed Chinese actions in the area with concern. Among those is China's desire to establish a fixed oil drilling platform near the Paracel Islands, which has been an area of conflicting claims between China and Vietnam. Known as the Hai Yang Shi You 981 stand-off, it has aroused anti-China protest in Vietnam as concerns escalated towards China about its intentions in the region. Recently, Japan and Vietnam have signed a deal for the transfer of military equipment and technology as a reflection of Japan's efforts to shore up its neighbor's capabilities. This is not to say that China does not have the right to operate in its backyard however, states respond if they perceive that their sovereignty and national interests are at risk. A change in regional power structure initiates defensive responses from regional states to send the message to power maximizers that they must adhere to such a structure as it safeguards the overall sovereignty of regional states. In other words, when regional major powers tend to be power maximizers, regional states respond to transform state's strategies to security maximizers.

4.4. Japan and Singapore

Singapore is a more modernized Southeast Asian Nations in terms of economic power. The Southeast Asian nation has been working diligently on improving its industries, education, tourism and economy. Singapore's view of China's activities sees them as constituting a greater threat to Singapore's development due to its dependence on economic activities directly tied to the region as well as the disparity in terms of size between the two countries. Singapore's foreign policy supports diplomatic relations among ASEAN states but appreciates the significance of external powers in the region as they play a fundamental role regional security or at the very least, as entities with shared interests with Singapore. This means that military power in international relations act as a catalyst for a state's developmental protection. This is not to refute the premise of soft power strategies. Soft power strategies do matter to the extent that they are a means to prevent future wars. An example of this is the European Union, whose members constitute a group of deeply integrated states in terms of economic policies, borders and monetary currency. The European Union is the successor to prior

organizations founded in the aftermath of World War II to prevent future conflicts and encourage cooperation among its members. While the European Union is not a military alliance, its economic and political influence allows it to wield significant soft power on the world stage. In the case of Southeast Asia, Japan plays an important role in solidifying soft power strategies with ASEAN states, including Singapore, even if the extent of economic and political integration among all nations involved is less than the European Union.

Japan occupied Singapore for four years during World War II. Like many Southeast Asian states, Japan has built economic and political relations with Singapore after the end of the war. Large-scale trade, investments and cultural exchanges are among the most prominent of bilateral relations between Japan and Singapore.

A key milestone in bilateral economic ties between Singapore and Japan is the Agreement between Japan and the Republic of Singapore for a New-Age Economic Partnership (JSEPA), signed by then-Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong and then-Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi in 2002. The agreement was Japan's first bilateral economic partnership agreement and Singapore's first with a major trading partner. In 2019, Japan was Singapore's 7th largest trading partner. As of end-2018, Japan was Singapore's 3rd largest investor, while Singapore was Japan's top Asian and 4th largest foreign direct investor ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Singapore, 2020](#)).

Both states share common interests in the region; the most important of which is to encourage Asian state's economies to flourish. To this end, they started the Japan-Singapore Partnership Programme for the 21st Century (JSPP21) which is aimed at closing the gaps of development among ASEAN states. The agreement is to provide assistance and joint training programs to ASEAN states in the fields of trade, communication, and technology, education, science and security. Japan recognizes Singapore as a strong regional partner in terms of economic power that is capable of making significant contributions to its soft power agenda.

4.5. Japan and Malaysia

Japan and Malaysia's relations go back to the 15th century. Malaysia, as a former colonized state of Japan, established diplomatic relations with Tokyo in 1957. Both states' relations were characterized by establishing themselves as regional trade partners regardless of historical differences. Malaysia is a unique example as it introduces a foreign policy that is able to balance relations between China and Japan with the ability to refrain from being pushed into China's disputes with ASEAN states over maritime sovereignty and national interest in the South China Sea. Malaysia's focus is to build strong economies with its neighbors while keeping diplomatic relations well defined. Malaysia's aims work as a common strategy with Japan's foreign policy to improve each other's economy after the devastations of World War II and subsequent financial crisis. Malaysia as a

newly independent state, seeks to reorganize its state institutions and work towards its development. The result was government cooperation between both states, eventually leading to the establishment of the Malaysia-Japan Economic Association in Malaysia and Japan-Malaysia economic Association in Japan. Both Associations enhanced bilateral relations yet, further efforts have been introduced, especially after Japan's rapid economic growth. These developments have lead Malaysia to fully cooperate with Japan and to serve as a constructive example on confronting external financial shocks and increasing global market access for its domestic products. Malaysia's progress can be attributed in part to Japan's technological advancements, high-tech services, and regional free trade agreements that were essential to attract investments from different Asian investors.

Malaysia claims a significant part of the Spratly Islands that intersects with claims by all other claimant states in the South China Sea. Regional security is vital for Malaysia as it attempts to secure its national interest. Although Malaysia is the most amiable regional state of China, the Southeast Asian state still put security issues as a priority. A regional power structure is a regional power structure. States may value economic bilateral relations but not at the expense of regional security and their sacred sovereignty. In this context, Malaysia and the United States have engaged in a military partnership and shared a program to modernize the Malaysian Air Force through aircraft sales from the United States, such as F/A-18 HORNET and C-130 HERCULES aircraft (Jackson, 2005: p. 62). Malaysia and Japan's defense cooperation has also been increased as they work closely to secure the Indo-Pacific region and the freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. According to Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy was essential to developing economic and security cooperation among ASEAN and Indo-Pacific countries to deter and contain China's hegemonic activities in the region. ASEAN states, including Malaysia, have been welcoming defense cooperation with Japan and The United States as they see it necessary in the current regional order. Regional states did not rely only on major power's military presence in the region but they also have succeeded in modernizing their military stations and organizations, "although none of them is a match for China's, and they have been partially successful in forming a unified front against China in ASEAN" (Blair, 2016).

4.6. The United States, Japan and Taiwan

Tawian is an East Asian state that borders China to the northwest, Japan to the northeast, and the Philippines to the south. China from its perspective, simply views Taiwan as its own (Position Paper of the Government of the People's Republic of China, 2014). While the island itself is strategically important, the issue of sovereignty is also a sensitive one as well, where an entire state exists on territory claimed by China but outside the control of its central government. In this case, China has long pursued a strategy of isolating Taiwan and occasionally resorted to military intimidation, as in the 1996 Taiwan Straits Crisis. While most

nations worldwide recognize officially that Taiwan is a part of China, China's attempts at diplomatically isolating Taiwan are seen in a similar light to its activities in the South China Sea and other regional states may view it as an imposition to their respective sovereignty.

The Taiwan Straits crisis was initiated by the 1995 visit of the president of Taiwan at the time, Lee Teng-hui, to the United States. Despite the opposition of then President Bill Clinton, Lee Teng-hui was granted a visa to visit the United States by congressional resolution. Chinese opposition to the visit was immediate. In response,

“...from July 21 to 26, the PRC conducted missile tests on Pengjia Islet, a place North of the ROC. Forces were also mobilized in the Fujian province. From August 15 to 25, 1995, the PRC fired another set of missiles as part of a military exercise and in November, an amphibious assault exercise was conducted. In the meantime, the PRC initiated a propaganda campaign to denunciate Lee Teng-hui's cross-strait policies.” (Zhou, 2017: p. 22).

China's threats and missile tests were a naked attempt to use force to intimidate Taiwan. China's military activities and threats led to significant disruption in ship and air traffic around Taiwan, causing a reevaluation by the United States of the threat posed to freedom of navigation (in the short term) in the region should China's activities continue (Zhou, 2017: p. 23). The United States then deployed two aircraft carrier battle groups and a host of support ships to the Taiwan Straits, marking “the biggest display of US military power in Asia since the Vietnam War” (Zhou, 2017: p. 22). The result of the carrier deployments was the cessation of Chinese missile tests in the vicinity of Taiwan. Therefore, the United States' actions were successful in deterring China from escalating the situation with Taiwan (Chiang, 2003: p. 10). The United States was willing to send a signal or a message to China that it will do whatever it takes to protect its interests and maintain a status quo that is beneficial to the United States. While the United States will not support Taiwan in declaring independence, the current situation allows the United States to benefit economically from both entities (through trade with China and trade and arms sales to Taiwan) while denying China a better strategic position in the region were it ever to absorb Taiwan and have unfettered access to the Pacific (Chiang, 2003: p. 14).

China views the island of Taiwan as a part of China and rejects any official diplomatic relations with countries that recognize the ROC as the government of China (The State Council: The People's Republic of China, 2014; Chiang, 2003: p. 14). China cares enough about this issue to include it into its constitution and spends great effort to undermine and isolate Taiwan from the rest of the world. The United States also cares about Taiwan and is willing to arm Taiwan and support its efforts to resist China despite risking China's disapproval. The South China Sea is not as important to China as Taiwan and the same can be said of the United States view of Taiwan and the South China Sea as well. The deployment of Carriers in the Taiwan Straits versus the United States declining to in-

interpret the U.S.-Philippine mutual defense treaty to defend the Mischief Reef shows the disparity of importance to the United States between Taiwan and islands in the South China Sea. The different reactions of the United States to the Mischief Reef and Taiwan in such a short period illustrated where the United States priorities lay. One caused a diplomatic clarification of an existing treaty while the other nearly caused a war. As a result, direct Chinese confrontation of the United States over Taiwan is a higher-risk proposition than militarizing disputed islands in the South China Sea. Therefore, China would avoid confrontation over Taiwan while using the South China Sea to probe the resolve of the United States and other countries to resist its hegemonic activities.

Japan's policy towards China illustrates the dynamic of its relations with China and Taiwan in which the former enjoys full diplomatic relations whereas the latter is limited to economic ties. In other words, Japan recognizes Beijing as the sole government of China while keeping economic and cultural ties with Taiwan. "While trade remains a mainstay of their relationship, including robust two-way flows of capital and technology, people-to-people exchanges continue to thrive" (Hornung, 2018). Strategically, Japan and Taiwan have maintained close relations while working to create a dialogue on security partnership that is effective at providing a counterweight to perceived Chinese interests that conflict with either. This does not mean that Japan-Taiwan relations are steady. The two states have territorial conflicts over the Senkaku Islands where each state claims the islands as a part of their sovereignty. Maritime dispute is also an issue as both states claims the waters and the fishing rights around the Senkaku islands. Despite this disagreement, the two states have stabilized the fishing industry through negotiations over fishing rights and their security interests. Indeed, Japan's foreign policy is aimed at building strong ties with Taipei where cooperation between the two states would serve shared foreign policy interests. It is imperative to clarify that regardless of the sensitive relations between China and Taiwan, Japan still defines its relations with Taiwan and play a significant role along with the United States in stabilizing the region as a part of its well-managed doctrines.

5. Japan-ASEAN Relations during the Pandemic

The outbreak of COVID-19 in November 2019 changed how states respond to pandemics. Japan was able to contain the virus for the most part. The Japanese Public Health system was effective despite the growing number of cases in different communities. Public Health centers continuously worked with local government institutions to mandate health policies that counter the spread of the virus. Public Administration in Japan was directed towards managing the crisis in the most efficient and effective manner. Yet, this was not totally an administrative plan for domestic politics; rather, it was an operative response of managing public affairs. State affairs are not only limited to ensure that the population within state sovereignty are healthy and safe but also goes beyond state borders.

Despite the complexity of the political paradigm, states tend to cooperate in response to shared crisis. This could be the case for Japan's behavior towards ASEAN state, but is it just a humanitarian act of kindness? Humanitarian missions definitely encompass cooperation among states that face a global crisis. The literature has proven this premise. However, Japan's role in providing public health help to ASEAN states is significant as it enhances not only its strategic multilateral relations with its neighbors, it will also strengthen the ties between state institutions functioning towards a common goal. It is globalization in action. Indeed, Public administration can be internationalized, and the outcome is noteworthy, especially if it is aimed to end a pandemic crisis among countries that share an extensive cooperation on the social, economic and political fronts. For Japan, it is not merely a matter of crystalizing Asian relations, but it also puts domestic state institutional collaboration to the test. When the results are successful, relations between states progresses and influence becomes a matter of a conjunction process of full cooperation.

The current administration of Fumio Kishida has been working to delineate an effective approach to control the COVID pandemic in Japan and ASEAN states as well. The efforts range from supporting ASEAN states' Public health systems to sending millions of doses of vaccines to Taiwan, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia. Because of these efforts, "ASEAN appreciated Japan's support towards the establishment of the ASEAN Centre for Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases Centre and contribution to the COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund, as well as Japan's support for other initiatives of ASEAN" (*Association of Southeast Asian Nation, 2020*). Senior leaders from Japan and ASEAN states met periodically to ensure the maintenance of regional trade and investment during the pandemic. Indeed, economic concerns arose because of the pandemic as regional states were striving to keep the supply chains going while maintaining a steady management of investment opportunities. Japan-ASEAN meetings discussed not only health and economic concerns, but significant political matters as well. Regional states emphasized the importance of protecting the freedom of navigation of international trade routes in the South China Sea and preserving regional security. One could conclude that Japan and Asian states relations are linked on multiple fronts and that active engagement of mutual national interests is vital in soft power politics and projection.

This analysis raises the question of how the pandemic in Southeast Asian nations will affect regional order. The natural response of states will involve the securing of their borders while insuring self-sufficiency of their resources. Such a state of caution raises the likelihood of creating tension on multiple fronts, as seen recently between the United States and China. Both countries have exchanged accusations over the initial source of the virus, which along with other reasons connected in part to the current struggle for power, started what Hal Brands and John Gaddis called the new cold war. Such a change in the international landscape is already impacting the security decisions of nation-states. A prominent example is the United States and The UK's decision to deliver nuc-

lear-powered submarines to Australia, a prominent ally to the United States and Japan who jointly work towards shared foreign policy goals. Even though the decision disappointed France, whose submarine deal with Australia was cancelled, President Joe Biden has called the move a necessary shift in strategic priorities.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

States structure their power relations in response to growing and changing strategic dynamics that appear on the global stage. Political scientists and experts have developed several theories that can explain why states behave the way they do and how they interact with each other to protect their sovereignty and national interests. The realist approach introduced by Hans Morgenthau and the neorealist approach by Kenneth Waltz explain relations among states based on the unit-level and structural-level of analysis, respectively. Despite the shared assumptions of classical realism and neorealism, key differences exist between the two approaches. One point of departure lies in their view of power. Classical realists see human nature as imbued with a “will to power” to such an extent that their perspective is skewed towards pessimism (Rourke & Boyer, 2010: p. 17). Therefore, classical realists perceive conflict as a near inevitability where it is difficult for trust to develop among states (Brewer, Gross, Aday, & Willnat, 2004: pp. 93-116). For neorealists, power-seeking by states is not a result of human nature, rather, it is the structure of the international system that drives states to pursue power. The anarchic nature of the international system and lack of higher authority over states forces them to seek power for the purpose of survival. Therefore, for classical realists, power is the end as it is a function of human nature while for neorealists, power is a *means* to obtain an end, which is survival (Mearsheimer, 2013: p. 72). On the other hand, World System theory may explain relations between states based on core countries, semi-periphery countries and the periphery countries where core states enjoy dominance over semi-periphery and periphery states. The structure of this relational framework is based upon the global capitalist system. Therefore, from a world system perspective, economic power is the driving force of power relations among states. Idealism, Functionalism, and Constructivism are also among the most prominent approaches that have been introduced to explain states’ behavior and power relations. All differ in terms of the unit of analysis and their assumptions, yet they are in agreement over the notion that states strive to protect their development, national interest and sovereignty.

Southeast Asia is an important region for the world. It includes the most critical international trade routes and holds an abundance of natural resources. It has also witnessed socioeconomic and political changes that may impact Southeast Asia’s future power structure. States tend to build such structures not only for the sake of survival but to establish themselves as an economic and military power. China is a prominent example. China has been engaged in a long-term military modernization and island building campaign in the South China Sea to

reinforce its maritime claims throughout the region. These activities have occurred from before 1996 to the present day. However, China's activities were constrained by the defensive reaction of the United States and Japan, as well as their cooperation with claimant states. The United States' fleet mobilization to the region and its military presence in the Philippines was a response to China's actions coupled with a desire to protect its national interests in the South China Sea where it perceived a conflict with China. This presence is furthermore explained from a neorealist point of view as an active strategic endeavor by the United States and Japan to create an international structure characterized by a defensive coalition against China and to deliver a balance of power to the region.

This paper concludes that the power structure of Southeast Asia dictates the involvement of external powers like Japan and the United States to protect shared national interests. ASEAN states are also more receptive to their military presences in the region. Indeed, China's activities in the South China Sea are a major concern to all parties whose regional stability is a priority. Robert D. Kaplan, in his 2014 book *Asia's Cauldron*, writes that the threat to regional stability and the response often required by other countries in the region (along with Japan and the United States) takes precedence over liberalizing trends (Kaplan, 2014: p. 94). Kaplan calls this precedence of geopolitical balance of power over advancing freedom *The Humanist Dilemma*. That is to say, to preserve a regional balance of power, the United States and Japan will support regimes in the region that it rarely agrees with in other areas such as human rights, democracy, and political ideologies to ensure that China does not gain a decisive advantage in the region. On the other hand, some regional states may prefer the balance of power provided by external powers as it allows them to be free and independent. "Singaporeans equate the balance of power with freedom itself. Because of great powers all around, only a proper balance of power between these large states can allow for the independence of such a small state like Singapore, which, unlike Brunei, has no oil" (Kaplan, 2014: p. 94). Singaporean officials emphasize the importance of military deterrence in the region rather than diplomacy. "Singaporean ministries insisted frank conversations must be off the record: public diplomacy, in their view, is overrated, and is another thing they have no illusions about" (Kaplan, 2014: p. 95). Kaplan further emphasizes his point by quoting a Singaporean official, "At the end of the day, it is all about military force and naval presence—it is not about passionate and well-meaning talk" (Kaplan, 2014: p. 95). Generally, one may conclude that powerful states like the United States and Japan may favor the protection of the balance of power over promoting freedom while small states see the balance of power as the method of maintaining the most basic freedom a state enjoys, its sovereignty.

Political scientists may accept this analysis as a natural response to a complex power struggle in Southeast Asia. Yet, regional security is not only achieved by military power in international relations. Japan still sees value in its soft power structure as states build social, geopolitical, and economic ties to strengthen

their capabilities against their adversary. Certainly, Japan benefitted from its pervasive investments in Southeast Asian nations, but its foreign policy goes beyond just building its own economic power. The vision for the East Asian nation is to sustain weaker states economically, as economic power plays a fundamental role in stabilizing domestic state institutions in ASEAN states and allow them to build their armies. One may surmise that economic power is an essential element of acquiring military power. In other words, Japan is an important actor that motivates ASEAN states' institutions to grow more powerful and more capable of responding to challenges and advocating for themselves as a collective, even if their goals conflict with a country like China. Deficits or imbalances in power are often seen as a way to allow China more negotiating leverage regarding conflicting sovereignty claims in the South China Sea. An issue that invites world actors and non-state actors to respond, especially when it involves China's military installations in the islands, struggles over natural resources and threats to the security of international trade routes.

Despite the fact that security is the nature of regional competition among Southeast ASEAN states and external powers, diplomacy is a cornerstone in Japan's foreign policy. As explained previously, it exists bilaterally and multilaterally. It is bilateral, as Japan is constantly building and developing relations with each ASEAN state exclusively while maintaining a multilateral dialogue through its diplomatic engagement with ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). The tenor of such diplomatic initiatives has fluctuated in response to changes in regional power structure dynamics. However, it is proved to be a prominent and accepted doctrine of Japanese foreign policy towards regional states. The question is: does diplomacy work? Indeed, states may build their armies, engage in joint military exercises and arms sales, while structuring economic ties and opening regional markets to attain financial prosperity lessens the degree to which conflicts among these states escalate to war. Thus, this paper concludes that soft power strategies among ASEAN states serve hard power strategies. China understands such a premise as China has not excluded itself from building serious economic relations with ASEAN states despite conflicts over sovereignty and natural resources. China recognizes that establishing such relations is significant in expanding its regional influence. That is to say, influence is maintained through being engaged in all state-to-state activities with regional states, and that includes non-state actors. External powers like Japan and the United States follow the same steps while preserving their right to deter China's military rise in the region. Japan plays a fundamental role in this structure but also recognizes that the ultimate beneficiary is ASEAN states. As ASEAN states enjoy the benefits of economic relations with regional and external powers, they also appreciate Japan and the United States' role in countering Chinese activities in the region. Therefore, influence becomes a form of resisting force to states who are potential aggressive power maximizers. Japan expands such influence in terms of soft power as it impacts ASEAN states' capacity to respond to China's rise and institute itself as a key partner and an ally to the United States. An effective role Japan

played in the region since the end of World War II, by which power structure and Asian relations in Southeast Asia were clearly defined.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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