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## Japan's Shifting Security Posture in Southeast Asia

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### SYNOPSIS

*In recent months, Japan launched a new security initiative aimed at strengthening its relations with countries in Southeast Asia and bolstering their military capabilities. This shift in its security posture is driven by the need to counter the rise of China. Japan's move will likely find support among most of the ASEAN Member States given the salutary effect on regional stability.*

### COMMENTARY

The recent Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) between Japan and the Philippines underscores Japan's escalating commitment to bolstering its military capabilities for deterrence and defence. This agreement is the first and currently the only arrangement that Japan has with Southeast Asian countries. In parallel, Japan also launched the Official Security Assistance (OSA) with several countries including ASEAN Member States (AMS) Malaysia and the Philippines, and soon Indonesia and Vietnam, as beneficiaries; reflecting the converging interest between Japan, which wants to maintain the status quo, and ASEAN countries, which think it crucial to have a stable region amid China's growing influence.

### Welcoming Japan's Security Initiative

Japan's recent moves in Southeast Asia can be regarded as a calculated response to the evolving strategic landscape in the Indo-Pacific, particularly in the increasingly volatile South China Sea. Its RAA and OSA initiatives indicate an emerging interest in Japan to play a bigger security role in international settings.

Japan understands that it needs to play a nuanced strategy to counter China's rising influence in Southeast Asia. This has led its defence establishment to push for an increase in defence budget to a record US\$55.9 billion for the fiscal year 2024, [with a](#)

[goal of reaching US\\$62.5 billion by 2027](#). It also significantly doubles the OSA's budget to around US\$34 million in the fiscal year 2024, more than twice the previous year's amount.

Japan's efforts to preserve the status quo align with the AMS' desire for a stable and secure region. For the AMS, Japan's role is crucial given that there is no other country in the region with the military capacity to provide some counterbalance to China's influence.

It is likely that more of the AMS will benefit from Japan's initiatives in the region, even as they engage in hedging policies in line with their respective national interests. These countries have a positive perception of Japan given its long-standing engagement and economic cooperation with the region. Hence, the AMS' relative silence with regard to the RAA and OSA should not be regarded as a lack of support for the initiatives.

### **What is the OSA and RAA?**

Japan's OSA initiative will reshape the security domain in Southeast Asia by providing countries in the region with more security partnership options. The [launch of OSA in 2023](#) marked a pivotal shift, moving Japan beyond a traditional economic player under its well-known Official Development Assistance (ODA) to a more robust security framework. OSA is specifically designed to enhance the capabilities of armed forces and related organisations by providing equipment, supplies, and capacity building tailored to the specific needs of beneficiary countries.

This initiative reflects Japan's strategic intent to strengthen individual capabilities and also collective deterrence of like-minded countries, especially in the context of China's unremitting territorial claim to the South China Sea. Among the AMS, Malaysia and the Philippines were the first recipients in the fiscal year 2023/2024, while [Indonesia and Vietnam](#) are likely to be recipients in the following fiscal year. While these countries are not formal security allies of Japan – the Philippines being its closest security partner – they will stand to benefit from the security assistance.

As for the RAA between the Philippines and Japan, it will cement the latter's security presence in the region. The agreement – the third after similar accords with Australia and the UK – will deepen defence ties besides providing for specific security arrangements, such as troop interoperability, joint exercises, and disaster relief between the two countries. While the RAA arrangement is confined to countries with similar interests, the expanding OSA framework should pave the way for Japan's security engagement with partner countries. As Japan and the Philippines are the co-chairs of the [ADMM-Plus EWG on Maritime Security](#) from 2024 to 2027, Japan's role in regional security is poised to grow.

### **FOIP Behind the Policy Shift**

Japan's current outreach to Southeast Asia is intricately tied to its New Plan for a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)" strategy, an updated one from the previous FOIP. This strategy reflects Japan's commitment to "freedom", "the rule of law", and "diversity", and aims to cultivate a stable and peaceful regional environment. A central element of

this updated FOIP is the fourth pillar, which focuses on securing maritime routes and safeguarding public domains and beyond, giving Japan more flexibility to enhance its maritime security and strengthen law enforcement capabilities.

Japan's new FOIP strategy can be regarded as the motive behind its security initiatives, reflecting its response to the changing security landscape in Southeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific, and the need to maintain regional stability. This new policy has been attributed to the late Prime Minister Shinzo Abe who advocated for a more assertive Japan.

This policy embraces working-level cooperation in defence exchanges, capacity-building, and joint exercises with countries in Southeast Asia. Abe's legacy also includes a significant reinterpretation of Japan's pacifist constitution through the 2015 "Peace and Security Legislation". This legislation [reinterpreted](#) Article 9 to allow Japan to exercise the right of collective self-defence under specific conditions, marking a pivotal change in Japan's military posture.

### **How Likely Will Japan be Accepted?**

It is expected that Japan will sign more OSAs and, to a lesser degree, RAAs with the AMS. Japan's initiatives are for the AMS to opt for a way to avoid relying on one power. Besides these, Japan has also signed bilateral maritime-related cooperation agreements with AMS which focus on research and development, naval patrols, and capacity-building aspects, tailored to the AMS' needs. [Eight AMS](#) have joined Japan's "Peace and Stability in the Indo-Pacific" projects.

Japan maintains a favourable image in Southeast Asia with [regional surveys](#) consistently ranking it as the most trusted dialogue partner. A shift in Japan's self-defence doctrine toward a more proactive stance is not expected to impact Japan's long-standing relationship with AMS, given its firm commitment to be a non-military power and to treat AMS on an equal footing approach as inspired by the Fukuda Doctrine. The AMS seems open to further cooperation with Japan, especially bilateral arrangements.

### **Conclusion**

Although Southeast Asia is still relatively stable and secure, the AMS must anticipate possible turbulence ahead. Japan's new security initiatives in the region align with their need to maintain the status quo. Japan's change in posture matches the Southeast Asian vision for a secure and stable region. Although not all the AMS will align with Japan as security partners, the latter's growing role in security will likely benefit all.

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