

Force multiplier: US-Japan Alliance modernization and maritime Southeast Asia

Bradford, John

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Force Multiplier

US-Japan Alliance Modernization and Maritime Southeast Asia

ABSTRACT

Formal and informal modifications to the US-Japan Alliance have expanded the value the Alliance operational structure delivers in support of US and Japanese national and combined naval activities in Southeast Asia. This article analyzes how the Alliance now serves as an increasingly powerful force multiplier which magnifies the capabilities, efficiency, and impact of the two allies' naval activities in Southeast Asia. Unlike previous studies on the role of the United States or Japan in the region, it focuses on the evolving functionality of the Alliance operational structure. The article systematically discusses how the evolving nature of the Alliance operational structure is enabling it to provide expanded support for Southeast Asian maritime security in five areas: basing, combined operations, partnerships and access, extra-regional coordination, and cooperative capacity-building. Those evaluations enable discussions of prospects for US and Japanese initiatives in Southeast Asia.

KEYWORDS: maritime security, US-Japan Alliance, Southeast Asia, force multiplier, security cooperation

THE UNITED STATES AND JAPAN share many common interests in maritime Southeast Asia. These interests include direct trade with the region's economies, free access to its critical sea lanes, and geopolitical relationships with its strategically located states. In light of increased competition with China, especially in the maritime space, it is unsurprising that Japan and the US are increasing their involvement in Southeast Asia's maritime security affairs. While American and Japanese leaders regularly cite the US-Japan Alliance as

JOHN BRADFORD is Senior Fellow, Maritime Security Programme, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. Email: <isjohnbradford@ntu.edu.sg>.

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“a cornerstone of peace and security in the Indo-Pacific region and around the world” (White House 2021), most of their engagements are done bilaterally, with the US or Japan working directly with regional partners. Still, the US-Japan Alliance provides the foundations for US presence in Asia and its support for other treaty alliances, bilateral partners, and minilateral relationships such as the Quad and AUKUS. This cornerstone Alliance is growing in terms of the roles, missions, and capabilities delivered by each partner (Atanassova-Cornelis and Sato 2019: 78).

Modernization of the operational structure of the US-Japan Alliance has expanded the value it delivers in support of US and Japanese naval activities in Southeast Asia. These activities aim to help secure waters within and adjacent to the coastal states from state and nonstate threats. While the activities of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) have been an important catalyst, the US and Japan also act to strengthen bilateral relations with regional states and support these partners’ other security priorities (Limaye and Kikuchi 2016). Alliance evolution has been examined in many contexts (e.g., Liff 2015; Oros 2017), and a sizeable body of literature discusses the US and Japanese activities in Southeast Asia, but the specific role of the Alliance (vice the allies) in regional maritime dynamics has been under-analyzed.

This article investigates how Alliance modifications have impacted Southeast Asia’s maritime dynamics, and it helps calibrate expectations regarding likely developments. I find that the modernized Alliance operational structure serves as a force multiplier which is increasingly magnifying the capabilities and effectiveness of the two allies’ maritime initiatives in Southeast Asia. I systematically analyze how formal and informal Alliance modifications deliver expanded support for US and Japanese Southeast Asian naval activities in five areas: basing, combined operations, partnerships and access, extra-regional coordination, and cooperative capacity-building. I build on this analysis to discuss how the US-Japan Alliance can be expected to continue empowering US and Japanese naval initiatives in Southeast Asia but will increasingly face new challenges.

THE US-JAPAN ALLIANCE’S ROLE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Understanding the Alliance’s role as a force multiplier supporting maritime security programs in Southeast Asia is especially valuable as challenges in the region become more complex. The US and Japan are both expanding their

Southeast Asian naval posture and exploring new opportunities to work together as partners in the region. Limaye and Kikuchi (2016) document four core drivers behind this: commercial stakes, the rising importance of regional cooperation, regional integration between Northeast and Southeast Asia, and opportunities for bilateral cooperation. However, the scope of what the allies have already accomplished together and how the Alliance has enabled their initiatives has not been explored.

Stephen Walt (1987: 1) provides a classic definition of *alliance* as a formal or informal relationship of security cooperation between two or more sovereign states. The US-Japan Alliance involves both formal and informal elements. From the perspective employed in this article, the Alliance is a commitment to act toward shared interests, a legal/diplomatic arrangement, and a construction based on shared values, common ambitions, habits of cooperation, and mutual expectations. Alliance instruments, institutions, and human networks come together to form the operational structures that guide functional decision-making and the practical implementation of policy.

The formal elements of the Alliance are founded in the 1960 Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security, a peculiar arrangement that requires Japan to provide the US with base facilities, obligates the US to defend Japan against attack, and does not mandate that Japan defend the US. Although the Japan Self-Defense Forces (SDF) had been established in 1954, their foundational legislation and anti-military political sentiment limited their early roles to the maintenance of public order and activities aligned with a narrow conceptualization of self-defense (Katzenstein 1996: 133–34). Over time, formal policy modifications have modernized the Alliance's obligations and benefits for both allies (Smith 2019: 15–16). Formal modifications are found in bilateral documents such as the Guidelines for US-Japan Defense Cooperation, as well as in national legislation and policy documents such as security strategies and constitutional interpretations.

In contrast to formal modifications, informal modifications involve changes in priorities, expectations, and assumptions. Important informal elements of the Alliance are the high levels of mutual confidence and strong cooperation norms that have been built over years of close interactions and mutual reliance (Schoff 2017: 146). These mean that the US and Japan assist each other in security aspects beyond those formally mandated by the treaty and its related documents (Singh 2008: 315–17). For example, Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) ships first conducted anti-piracy missions in the

Gulf of Aden as law enforcement activities disconnected from formal Alliance arrangements (Black 2014: 136–39). However, because of the informal Alliance elements, these deployments were smoothly facilitated by US intelligence and logistics. Later, the Japanese formally joined the US-sponsored Combined Task Force 151, but the cooperation remained beyond the scope of the formal Alliance. US Pacific Fleet Commander Samuel Paparo explained that “the behaviors, the habits of mind, the habits of action” resident in the US-Japan naval forces enable them to operate as a *de facto* joint task force, even without formal authorities (Shelbourne 2022).

The Alliance’s implementing arrangements have evolved over its 60-year history, and Japan’s leaders have gradually refined Japan’s defense posture, its security institutions, and the scope of the SDF operations in response to changes in the geopolitical situation. For example, under the 1977 Fukuda Doctrine, Japan restored its political role in Southeast Asia, but SDF units would not participate in regional security arrangements (Lam 2012: 11). The rate of change accelerated after the Cold War and has been even more significant in the last 15 years (Oros 2017: 7). These most recent changes have been most important to empowering the US and Japan in their Southeast Asian maritime security initiatives. Still, in peacetime, the Alliance operational structures merely facilitate coordination and cannot direct collective operations abroad. While the allies have robust consultative mechanisms, there is no standing command and control authority to direct a common strategy or to manage regular military operations. Nor is there any formal mandate for combined operations far beyond Japan.

While recent modifications to the Alliance have empowered new US-Japan Alliance cooperation globally, they are particularly important in Southeast Asia. As the area immediately beyond the Alliance’s home operation areas around Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia is where the Alliance can project the most power beyond Japan’s home waters (Patalano 2018: 156). It is also the region where the US and Japan have the strongest shared interest beyond East Asia, a point consistently clear in Alliance policy documents. For example, “U.S.-Japan Global Partnership for a New Era” describes the Alliance as “a cornerstone of peace and security in the Indo-Pacific region and around the world” (White House 2021), but all the specific focus areas and nations discussed in the document are in East or Southeast Asia.

Analyzing the US and Japanese naval activities in this region reveals cooperation that falls within the formal mandate of the Alliance, and cooperation

that is facilitated by its informal aspects. Formal Alliance modifications that enable US and Japanese naval operations in Southeast Asia include the expansion of the JMSDF's mission to include regional capacity-building, relaxation of Japan's arms export policy, the lifting of geographic limits on Alliance activities, and the conditional extension of Japanese collective self-defense authorities. Informal modifications include expanding SDF deployments to Southeast Asia, Japanese participation in US-sponsored regional exercises, strengthening commitment to support Southeast Asian security, Japan's welcoming of expanded US capabilities based in Japan, an increase in US-Japan naval exercises in the South China Sea, and shared commitment to support extra-regional powers' operations in the region. While some of these changes trace to bilateral decisions regarding the Alliance and others reflect unilateral policy adjustments by one of the allies, all impact the way Alliance operational structure enables national and combined activities in Southeast Asia. The individual changes are discussed more deeply in the article's analytical section.

The US military defines *force multiplier* as “a capability that, when added to and employed by a combat force, significantly increases the combat potential of that force and thus enhances the probability of successful mission accomplishment” (US Joint Chiefs of Staff 2007: GL-II). While it was originally a term of military operational art, the concept is now widely used in analysis unrelated to combat outcomes. Here I use the force multiplier concept in a similar fashion to the Lowy Institute's evaluation, for its Asia Power Index, of “defense partnerships that act as force multipliers of autonomous military capability” (Lemahieu and Leng 2020). In this case, the Alliance has a limited direct role in Southeast Asia and lacks a centralized command relationship and collective forces that engage the way, for example, NATO forces could. Instead, the Alliance operational structure increasingly makes both the US and Japan more independently effective and powerful in support of one another in Southeast Asia.

The data in this study focus on developments in the last five years because this has been, as those works presaged, a period during which US–Japan cooperation in Southeast Asia has grown significantly. For analytical parsimony, I group these developments into five categories—basing, combined operations, partnerships and access, extra-regional coordination, and cooperative capacity-building—and explain how Alliance modifications are empowering US and Japanese initiatives in support of Southeast Asian

TABLE 1. Alliance Modifications, Force Multipliers, and Naval Activities in Southeast Asia

<i>Force multiplier</i>	<i>Is the causal alliance modification formal or informal?</i>	<i>Are the enhanced activities national or bilateral?</i>
1. Basing	Informal	National
2. Combined operations	Both	Bilateral
3. Partnerships and access	Informal	National
4. Extra-regional coordination	Informal	Both
5. Cooperative capacity building	Formal	Both

maritime security. Relationships between the Alliance modifications, force multipliers, and naval activities are summarized in Table 1.

A great deal of analysis has addressed the US and Japan security activities in Southeast Asia, but these studies are almost all about national vice Alliance roles. Notable recent works examining the growing Southeast Asia–Japan security relationships include Nguyen (2013), Aizawa (2014), Shoji (2015), Koga (2017), and Midford (2020). Pajon (2013), Storey (2013), Midford (2015), Drifte (2016), and Tarriela (2019) specifically examine Japan’s interests, role, and contributions concerning Southeast Asian maritime security. Much more scholarship focuses on Southeast Asia–US security relationships. Specific to maritime security, Wuthnow (2017), Brands and Cooper (2018), and Scobell (2018) are among the most relevant recent articles discussing expanding American involvement. Much of this literature discusses the utility of the two nations’ projects and the receptivity of the Southeast Asian partners, but it does not address how Alliance changes impact the regional security activities.

Only a few publications address the role of the US–Japan Alliance in Southeast Asia, as opposed to national activities. Taken collectively, they leave a significant analytical gap. One of the first post–Cold War examinations was by Rowan (2005), who looked at what the US and Japan could do to stabilize competition in the South China Sea. However, today’s geopolitical situation invalidates its assumptions regarding a restrained JMSDF and ideas about using Japanese economic influence to drive demilitarization and US naval power to enforce China–ASEAN compromises. Bower et al.’s (2015)

short monograph on the relationship between Southeast Asia and the US–Japan Alliance argues that growing PRC influence in Southeast Asia will both undermine US–Japanese interests and push Southeast Asia to desire that the Alliance play a larger role in the region as a geopolitical balancer. However, its 26 recommendations call for the US and Japan to take similar actions in parallel, rather than bilaterally. Several involve maritime security, but none touch on coordination, nor do they explain how the Alliance enables national activities. Fargo et al. (2015) and Konishi and Oros (2016) discuss the role of the Alliance in response to Southeast Asian disasters but do not address other aspects of security.

Limaye and Kikuchi's (2016) is the most important study on the logic behind the commitments being made in Tokyo and Washington to expand the contributions of the US–Japan Alliance to Southeast Asian security. The monograph opens by noting, "A new era of more coordinated, sustained, and combined commercial and security involvement by the US and Japan in Southeast Asia may be at hand" (v). It explains that Southeast Asian policymakers generally value the US–Japan Alliance as a mature institution that fosters Southeast Asian security and balances growing Chinese power, but they do not want to be drawn into direct confrontation with China. While analyzing the interests and motivations involved, the report emphasizes that there has been "little systematic thinking about *how* members of the Alliance could work together on Southeast Asian security problems" (3, emphasis added).

Schoff (2017) draws on Limaye and Kikuchi (2016) in building the case for the US and Japan to "help build a strong, stable, and prosperous Southeast Asia along China's periphery" as an indirect approach to strengthening deterrence. Schoff emphasizes the maritime orientation of Southeast Asia's security challenges and takes a careful look at the range of challenges but does not discuss how the Alliance was already addressing these challenges, or link Alliance modifications to regional operations, or predict the developments that would unfold in the coming years. This is precisely the gap this article addresses. It uses the force multiplier concept to pick up where Limaye and Kikuchi and Schoff left off. Focusing on the naval element also allows me to offer more detail than those studies, which looked at the wider security relationships.

This article complements some other work I have recently completed. Bradford (2020a) discusses the history of Japan's involvement in Southeast

Asia maritime security as a 50-year development, documenting how and why the JMSDF became seriously involved from 2010. Bradford (2020b) describes how and why Southeast Asia has emerged as the nexus of a Japanese maritime strategy that seeks to sustain the security of its critical sea lanes and counter what it perceives as an increasingly assertive China. How and why Japan has responded to increasing maritime threats by positioning itself as the *de facto* leader of middle powers involved with strategic developments in the Western Pacific is analyzed in Bradford (2021a). Bradford (2021b) is a shorter policy paper that advocates specific steps for the US-Japan Alliance to improve their maritime security cooperation to enhance the rule of law in the Indo-Pacific. As a collection, these papers do not address what the Alliance has been doing in Southeast Asia nor how that has changed in recent years. This article digs into the working of the Alliance to demonstrate how modifications to the Alliance operational structure have made both nations' combined and national actions more powerful.

Like Patalano (2018), this article approaches a question related to Japanese maritime power from the field of strategic studies, an “inter-disciplinary field of study, which at its core examines the ways in which military power and other coercive instruments may be used to achieve political ends” (Duyvesteyn and Worrall 2017). As strategic studies “welcomes both theoretically minded historians and historically minded political scientists” (Mahnken 2008: x), the article draws on elements both empirical and conceptual, while helping to set expectations about future developments. As such, the study is more focused on understanding how decisions are implemented and how their implementation influences the international security situation than on predicting decisions. Specifically, it examines how the informal and formal modifications to the Alliance enable a wider range of more efficient and more powerful US and Japanese naval activities. While the naval activities themselves could be considered means to higher-order ends, every end can also be considered a means to another end. This article leaves evaluation of the value of these naval activities to other existing and future studies.

MARITIME SECURITY FORCE MULTIPLIER 1: BASING

Japan generally allows the US to independently define how American forces operating from bases supplied by the Alliance arrangement should contribute to regional peace and security; only attacks against third parties require prior

consultation. In the current context, this arrangement provides a multiplier effect increasing the impact of US military activities in maritime Southeast Asia. The *Ronald Reagan* Carrier Strike Group and *America* Expeditionary Strike Group are forward-deployed to the Japanese ports of Yokosuka and Sasebo, respectively. These locations provide ready combat power several times greater than could be delivered by forces based in the US. In fact, this Alliance contribution is not new, and US bases in Japan played a key role in the Vietnam War and supported other Cold War containment operations in Southeast Asia. However, the bases' contributions have become more important as the US seeks to reassert its military influence in Southeast Asia. The expanded value the Alliance leaders place in these bases, coupled with the solid trust between the two allies, explains why the US Navy (USN) footprint in Japan has expanded quantitatively (four additional ships since 2014) and qualitatively (a nuclear-powered carrier in 2008, an amphibious warfare ship capable of employing fifth-generation-fighters in 2019, and the most capable ship classes and baselines throughout the force), even as competitors such as Russia, the PRC, and North Korea have expanded their ability to strike those locations with air and missile forces. These modifications should be understood as informal, because they reflect changes in collective thinking.

Of specific relevance to Southeast Asian maritime security is the fact that these homeports are within days of the South China Sea. The *America* group pairs with Marines from the 3rd Marine Expeditionary Brigade in Okinawa, an island less than 500 nautical miles from the entrance to the South China Sea. The large quantities of fuel and ammunition at these strategic locations would be of additional significance in a prospective conflict. While the US enjoys regular use of Southeast Asian ports such as Singapore and Subic Bay, such access is not assured nor underpinned by bilateral relationships that feature foundational guarantees akin to the enduring US-Japan Alliance. Furthermore, while these places can generally provide some (limited) support to operational forces, they lack the scale necessary to support the maintenance and work-up training evolutions required for force generation cycles and the range of other services available at the bases in Japan.

The proximity of US naval bases in Japan to Southeast Asia means that American forces can spend more time on station during regular deployments and more quickly surge in times of crisis. Therefore, it is no surprise that ships from these strike groups are often the first on the scene and perform the bulk of the USN activities in Southeast Asia. For example, US disaster

response assistance to the Philippines in the wake of the absolute devastation that Typhoon Haiyan delivered to the Philippines in 2013 was spearheaded by forces from Japan. The relatively short distances enabled the immediate response that was critical to saving lives (Parker et al. 2016). Similarly, according to data compiled by Collin Koh (2022), of the 30 Freedom of Navigation operations the USN has conducted in the South China Sea since October 2015, over half were conducted by Yokosuka-based Aegis vessels, though Yokosuka hosts less than one-quarter of the Pacific Fleet's Aegis force.

Bases provided by the Alliance also provide mid-deployment maintenance and support options for naval forces that are unavailable in commercial and partner military ports in the region. A recent example illustrates this point. On May 24, 2020, the Yokosuka-based US 7th Fleet flagship, *Blue Ridge*, visited Okinawa's White Beach Naval Facility after 70 consecutive days at sea, much of which was spent in Southeast Asian waters. White Beach offered a safe haven port visit opportunity where protocols could enable the necessary recuperation opportunities for the ship and sailors without the readiness and political risks associated with exposing the crew to a partner-nation population during the COVID-19 pandemic. The lack of such opportunities in other locations had prevented her from making several planned visits to Southeast Asia (Doornbos 2020). While the loss of naval diplomacy opportunities during the early months of the pandemic was notable, the opportunity to replenish and recuperate at White Beach was central to keeping *Blue Ridge* on task for her primary mission. Throughout the pandemic, the commander and staff on board have provided continual command and control to the entire 7th Fleet, or all USN operational forces assigned to Southeast Asia and its adjacent waters. Had *Blue Ridge* lost the ability to operate, as the aircraft carrier *Theodore Roosevelt* did when suffering a major COVID-19 outbreak, presumably from viral loads introduced during a port visit in Vietnam, operations would have been hamstrung throughout the fleet (*USNI News* 2020).

MARITIME SECURITY FORCE MULTIPLIER 2: COMBINED OPERATIONS

Historically, combined US-Japan Alliance naval operations have been focused on the immediate maritime approaches to Japan, but the geographic scope of that partnership has been expanded. Under the arrangements

facilitated by formal changes to the Alliance operational structure made in the 2015 security legislation, Defense Guidelines, and related policy pronouncements, the USN and JMSDF are now able to operate together in Southeast Asia to coordinate activities, provide mutual supply support, and engage in mutual defense should threats warrant. This makes an Alliance response more powerful when engaging in peacetime operations such as search and rescue and disaster response. The development is even more significant in terms of potential combat operations, as it means the combined fleets can now make a collective effort to deter conflict or fight together in Southeast Asia. While meaningful constraints remain in place, Alliance modifications now support combined operations in Southeast Asia.

A 1981 Japanese doctrine enabled the JMSDF to begin cooperating with the USN to defend sea lanes up to 1,000 nautical miles from Japan, a distance understood to correspond to Guam and the Bashi Channel, stopping short of Southeast Asia (Sato 2017: 129–30). This doctrine applied only to cases involving the defense of Japan and did not extend to situations where threats were directed toward other nations. Under the 1997 Defense Guidelines, Japan considered new options to coordinate security responses to “situations in areas surrounding Japan.” However, the constitutional interpretations of that time assured that Japan’s support in these scenarios would be limited to activities such as search and rescue and rear area support and would not include direct combat or the defense of US forces outside Japan.

The USN and JMSDF launched their largest-ever overseas operation to assist the Philippines in the wake of November 2013’s Typhoon Haiyan. Formal Alliance operational structures did not include the features necessary to deliver a combined Alliance operation, and the forces acted on the authorities of their national policies. However, thanks to the informal features of the Alliance, coordination was significant. The two fleets, manned with plenty of veterans of the allied response to Japan’s 2011 Great East Japan earthquake and tsunami disaster, swiftly formed a sea base from which to conduct search and rescue and deliver supplies ashore. Senior military leaders cross-decked between the two flagships, the JSMDF’s *Ise* and USN’s Japan-based *George Washington*, while mid-ranked officers performed liaison duties in multiple locations. Though the mission was unique, these decisions were natural to leaders accustomed to exercising, operating, and living side by side. The unprecedented landing of a US tilt-rotor Osprey on *Ise* provided impressive symbolism which highlighted the allies’ military interoperability and ability

to project combined forces (Konishi and Oros 2016). By coordinating their activities, the two forces had an impact that exceeded the simple sum of the two efforts. An April 2014 statement by President Obama and Prime Minister Abe said, “The robust U.S. and Japanese civilian and military response to Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines demonstrated our ability to collectively assist the region in disaster relief and risk reduction” (White House 2014).

In 2013, Japan’s first-ever National Security Strategy introduced the concept of “pro-active pacifism,” firming up a conceptual shift away from the long-standing “one-country pacificism.” In 2014, the government issued a new constitutional interpretation allowing the SDF to exercise collective self-defense with close partners when necessary to protect national survival. These laid the groundwork for formally expanding the scope of Alliance operations (Atanassova-Cornelis and Sato 2019: 84). The 2015 Defense Guidelines eliminated geographic restrictions on Alliance responses and enabled collective action in peacetime against emerging threats to Japan’s peace and security and against armed attacks on countries other than Japan. Under these new authorities, the two navies are much more likely to be authorized to conduct combined responses to armed conflict in Southeast Asia and gray-zone developments in the South China Sea (Hornung 2015). A package of security laws passed later in 2015 provided the domestic legal foundations necessary to implement the new constitutional reinterpretation, foreign policy options, and operational arrangements.

These new formal Alliance authorities transformed the value of the combined naval exercises in the South China Sea that the JMSDF has been conducting with increasing frequency for the last decade (Mizokami 2011). Previously, these were exhibitions of political signaling and opportunities to develop unit-level skills but were unhinged from potential combat scenarios. The Alliance modifications mean that the forces involved are expanding their readiness to fight together in these strategic waters, should they be so tasked.

Since 2016, exercises with the USN and other partners in the South China Sea have been consistent elements of the annual deployment of large JMSDF helicopter carriers to Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean, while other Alliance vessels punctually team up for smaller events. These exercises indicate increasing Japanese desire to demonstrate their readiness to conduct military operations in the South China Sea, should the situation require. While the collective self-defense regulations remain quite constraining, the JMSDF and US are preparing for scenarios where political leaders authorize

joint operations. Informed observers, including retired JMSDF admirals, point out that many of the exercises have focused on anti-submarine warfare and suggest the force is seeking greater familiarity with South China Sea hydrodynamics in preparation for a potential conflict that could include operations to guard against hostile submarines. These could pose an existential threat to Japan by strangling critical sea lanes or launching missile attacks (Hayton 2017; Koda 2020).

MARITIME SECURITY FORCE MULTIPLIER 3: PARTNERSHIPS AND ACCESS

Both the US and Japan maintain extensive partnership networks in Southeast Asia. Both are seeking to enlarge and enhance those relationships for their immediate national gain and as a part of their effort to balance PRC influence in Asia. However, the two allies' security relationships with the region are very different. "Ninja diplomacy," "stealth superpower," and "courteous power" are all monikers that have been given to the proactive, nimble, balanced, and often quiet approach to security partnerships that has earned Japan favor as the most trusted extra-regional partner in Southeast Asia (Ciorciari and Tsutsui 2021; Schoff 2020; Strangio 2020: 82). In contrast, US relations are seen as more muscular, louder, and prone to shifting focus. The US is the leading extra-regional military partner for most Southeast Asian states, and American military power is regarded by many Southeast Asian leaders as the essential counterbalance to China, but regional states also demonstrate concerns about tying themselves too tightly in security relations with the US (Rolf and Agnew 2016).

These contrasting relative strengths enable the US and Japan to help each other by making introductions, facilitating access, and enabling low-cost engagement opportunities. Informal Alliance coordination is built on mutual confidence, and cooperative norms drive coordination. Each partner assumes that helping the other will deliver shared benefit. In the decade since the SDF began meaningful operational and training engagements in Southeast Asia, this cooperation has matured quickly. These activities also involve each ally helping the other strengthen its relationships with regional partners.

American military commitments to deter regional aggression continued forward from the hot wars in Indochina and are tied to treaty commitments to the Philippines and Thailand. Today, the USN regional engagement

calendar includes a sustained operational presence in the South China Sea, port visits, defense exchanges, and annual exercises with seven of the ten ASEAN states (Lum 2019). According to the *State of Southeast Asia: 2021* survey report, regional policy leaders are concerned about growing Chinese influence, but only 61% of respondents said they would side with the US over the PRC if forced to decide; and 24% said that they had little or no confidence in the US as a strategic partner and provider of regional security (Seah et al. 2021, 33, 40).

In contrast to the US's status as a standing military power, Japan has worked hard to overcome regional memories of its wartime aggression. During the Cold War, large-scale foreign direct investment and overseas development assistance outlays, both decoupled from immediate political objectives, rebuilt confidence in Japan (Yamamoto 2017: 73). The *State of Southeast Asia* survey found Japan to be Southeast Asia's preferred partner in America's absence: 67% of respondents thought that Japan will "do the right thing" to provide global public goods, while China was at 17% (41–44). Japan's prioritization of Southeast Asia was clearly displayed in both 2012 and 2020, when Abe Shinzo and his successor, Suga Yoshide, made Southeast Asia their first overseas destination as prime minister (Suryadinata 2020).

Japan began investing in Southeast Asian maritime safety capacity-building projects in the late 1960s. The Japan Coast Guard (JCG) began directly supporting regional maritime security forces with law enforcement capacity-building projects from 1999 onward. After decades of limiting JMSDF activities with Southeast Asian partners to goodwill events conducted by vessels passing through the region and multilateral events, in 2010 the JMSDF began conducting defense-oriented exercises and capacity-building events with Southeast Asian partners (Bradford 2020a). These related policy changes can be regarded as formal Alliance modifications. Nascent relationships between the JSDF and Southeast Asian militaries were, in several cases, jumpstarted by welcoming the JSDF into an existing activity co-sponsored by the US.

Piggybacking on the US allowed Japan to take advantage of American door-opening services, leverage existing budgetary commitments by host nations, streamline bureaucratic procedures, and avoid the political costs associated with Southeast Asian leaders having to announce the creation of new events tailored to the Japanese. In the wake of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the 2005 iteration of Cobra Gold, the annual US–Thailand

capstone military exercise, was focused away from defending against an armed attack and toward multilateral disaster response. Japan's participation in that year's Cobra Gold marked its first experience with a major Southeast Asian military exercise since World War II (Slavin 2005). In 2010, participation in Pacific Partnership, a USN civil–military humanitarian mission, provided an opportunity for prime minister Hatoyama Yukio to dispatch a JMSDF a “boat of fraternity” to Vietnam and Cambodia for the first military capacity-building missions undertaken by Japan in Southeast Asia. JSDF personnel observed the 2012 US–Philippines Balikatan exercise, and the Japanese role in that exercise has gradually expanded ever since. Other deployments of SDF forces to the Philippines were deliberately timed to correspond with US–Philippines exercises such as Cooperation and Readiness Afloat Training (Bradford 2020a: 15–18). During the US–Philippines exercise Kamandag 2018, Japan's new Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade landed SDF assault vehicles in Southeast Asia for the first time (Fuentes 2018). The familiarity and confidence built through these events lower the hurdles that arise when the JSDF starts bilateral engagements with Southeast Asian militaries.

In other cases, it has been Japan opening the door for the US. Regional states can engage with Japan to set precedent for a particular type of engagement or partnership activity with a high-end military, without the consequences associated with turning first to the US or PRC. Vietnam began expanding its international engagements in the 1990s, and in 1999 two JMSDF ships visited Ho Chi Minh City. This international socialization helped set the stage for the USN's first postwar port visit to Vietnam, in 2005. The first overseas activity sponsored by the Capacity Building office of Japan's Ministry of Defense was an underwater medicine seminar with the Vietnam People's Navy (VPN). Once the JMSDF and VPN had developed confidence in their bilateral underwater medicine relationship, the USN was invited to augment the series (International Policy Division 2016; Japan Ministry of Defense 2014). In 2016, JMSDF destroyers became the first foreign warships to visit the Cam Ranh Bay since the Soviet withdrawal (*Japan Times* 2016). Senior Japanese government and military leaders used this as an opportunity to work with their Vietnamese counterparts and set the preconditions for the first USN port visit to Cam Ran Bay a few months later. The pattern was repeated when a 2017 visit by *Izumo* set precedent and gave Vietnam experience in handling a large flattop event, enabling *Carl Vinson* to

become the first American aircraft carrier to visit Vietnam, in 2018 (Ngo 2018). JMSDF submarine visits in 2019 could similarly facilitate access for the USN.

Conversely to their successes, the setbacks of one ally can endanger the progress of the other. For example, it would be reasonable to expect the track record of JMSDF P-3 maritime patrol aircraft visits to Vietnam to help generate similar opportunities for the US. The strength of the Japan–Vietnam relationship in this area was demonstrated in April 2020 when Vietnam stepped up as the only Southeast Asian nation ready to refuel a JMSDF P-3 headed home from Djibouti during the COVID-19 pandemic. When the aircraft encountered technical difficulties, Vietnam, otherwise closed to international travel, hosted the crew for two months while facilitating the entry of parts and technicians (*Vietnam Times* 2020). The breakdown and the subsequent pressure the PRC placed on Vietnam will reinforce the perceived risk associated with hosting a US aircraft. Similarly, the high-profile political pushback Indonesia levied against US access requests for their maritime patrol aircraft in 2020 may raise barriers to similar Japanese requests.

Despite the imperfect record of success, access facilitation is an important Alliance function in Southeast Asia. In the near term, we should expect Vietnam to remain more comfortable with its security relationship with Japan than with the US. The sustained relations between Japan, Myanmar, and Cambodia might also be useful if the US decides to re-engage after imposing sanctions as a result of human rights concerns. Suggesting another plausible situation, a retired JMSDF fleet commander pointed out that Japan might assist with rebuilding US–Philippine relations given the unsteady recent history between those partners (Koda 2020).

MARITIME SECURITY FORCE MULTIPLIER 4: EXTRA-REGIONAL COORDINATION

The US–Japan Alliance also serves as an enabler for extra-regional powers friendly with the allies who are seeking to expand their engagement in maritime Southeast Asia. More specifically, as extra-regional powers such as Australia, Canada, India, and the United Kingdom have sought to expand their influence on the Southeast Asian maritime security situation, they have included strengthening or broadening their partnerships with Japan and the US. Informal Alliance cooperation serves as a force multiplier as both allies

strengthen their national security relationships with third parties. This enabler is becoming increasingly important as extra-regional powers are quickly ramping up their contributions to regional maritime security.

The bases provided by the Alliance are an important element of that contribution. For example, in 2011 and 2013, Australian ships visited the US base at Yokosuka and then deployed to Southeast Asia as an integrated part of the US strike groups (Slavin 2013). Before the British HMS *Albion* conducted its 2018 freedom-of-navigation operation near the Paracel Islands, it made visits to Yokosuka for maintenance and crew rest (Hlavac 2018). While *Albion's* visit certainly reflects growing defense ties between the UK and Japan, it is noteworthy that *Albion* berthed on the USN, vice JMSDF, side of the harbor and was able to access American logistics support through their decades-old and frequently exercised bilateral relationship and structures. Although Japan and the UK signed a defense logistical agreement in January 2017, that aspect of the relationship has not been thoroughly exercised and remains more limited in terms of practical utility (GOV.UK 2017). Between 2018 and 2020, five Royal Navy ships visited the US base in Japan. The *Queen Elizabeth* strike group followed in 2021. Only Singapore, a way-point for most journeys vice a far-flung endpoint, received as many visits (Patalano 2021: 158). All of these ships went on from Japan to operate in the South China Sea (Defense Contracts International 2018; *Navy Lookout* 2019). The first Royal Navy ships from the *Queen Elizabeth* Carrier Strike Group 2021 deployment to visit Japan, RFA *Victoria* and HMS *Richmond*, did so to conduct planned maintenance and take on supplies. Canadian and Australian ships make similar use of the maintenance and resupply services offered by US bases in Japan (DVIDS 2018; Slavin 2013).

The US-Japan Alliance also provides one of the strongest connections within the Australia-India-Japan-United States consultative body, also known as the Quad. While the Quad is an Indo-Pacific relationship, Southeast Asia is at both the geographic and the policy center of its aims, and the US-Japan Alliance is central to its strength. The US-Australia Alliance is the other solid link that steadies the framework, while the Japan-India and India-Australia relationships are weaker (Hatekayama 2021: 28-31). In 2020, Japan invited the other three members' prime ministers to Tokyo, enabling the group to continue at speed despite the lack of normal opportunities to meet on the sidelines of ASEAN-sponsored meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic. Readouts indicate the conversation focused on

China's assertive posture, maritime disputes, and opportunities for maritime cooperation. Southeast Asia, the space at the geographic center of the Quad, played heavily in those discussions (Teo 2020). In the meeting's aftermath, Australia was invited to join the trilateral India–US–Japan naval exercise, Malabar, which took place in the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea in November 2020 (Task Force 70 Public Affairs 2020). These diplomatic efforts would not have achieved such milestone outcomes so quickly without the multiplying effect of the close bonds and strong trust resident in the US–Japan Alliance.

MARITIME SECURITY FORCE MULTIPLIER 5: COOPERATIVE CAPACITY-BUILDING

Formal modifications to the Japanese capacity-building policy have also opened the door for US–Japan Alliance managers to begin discussions on expanded prospects for the nations to coordinate their security-capacity-building projects in Southeast Asia to create synergetic impacts. In 2010, the SDF embarked on its first-ever capacity-building mission in Southeast Asia, the deployment of JS *Kunisaki* to Cambodia and Vietnam, where it paired with the USNS *Mercy* under the umbrella of the USN's Pacific Partnership campaign. Japan's 2010 National Defense Program Guidelines stipulated that the SDF would begin engaging in capacity-building activities. The first of these events was a 2012 underwater medicine seminar held with the VPN (International Policy Division 2016: 2, 8–10; Japan Ministry of Defense 2014: 273–34). In 2011 and 2014 relaxations of Japan's Three Principles of Arms Exports enabled circumstances under which Japanese defense equipment could be provided to partner militaries. The most significant post-reform exports have been maritime patrol aircraft and surveillance radars received by the Philippines (Bradford 2020b).

A 2015 president–prime minister statement said that recent Alliance modifications would enable working “more closely on issues including maritime security, and to partner with other countries that share our aspirations” (White House 2015). Since then, the most significant senior-level reiteration of this direction was the 2019 2+2 statement pledging activities in Southeast Asia to include “joint exercises and port calls with partners in the region, capacity building in such areas as maritime domain awareness and law enforcement, and promotion of sustainable economic development and connectivity through quality infrastructure” (US Department of State and Japan

Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2019). The conceptual example frequently offered concerning cooperative capacity-building is for Japan to provide boats or aircraft and for the US to equip those with weapons or sensors. A less ambitious concept would be for the two Allies to simply coordinate their projects to avoid providing redundant or counter-productive capabilities.

The workshops reported by Limaye and Kikuchi (2016) explored the hurdles to delivering such coordination and predicted that “these initiatives would remain separate and parallel for the foreseeable future given the different funding, legal and systematic factors shaping the countries’ respective programs” (7). In the five years since the president–prime minister commitment was made, there have been regular reports of US–Japan consultations (sometimes involving additional partners) aimed at coordinating maritime capacity-building efforts, but few concrete examples have emerged. In the successful cases, the results are directly linked to close cooperation between US and Japanese officials on the ground in the partner-nation capital.

The strongest examples of US–Japan cooperative capacity-building activities have taken place in the Philippines. In 2017, Japan sponsored a coast guard training exercise hosted by the Philippines that also included participants from Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam. The JCG provided training in small boat operations, and the USCG led instruction on small boat engine maintenance (Furuya 2020). While folding a limited US-led project into a larger curriculum was a relatively small step, minor adjustments can have large impacts. Specific to this case, regional coast guards often explain that introducing different maintenance approaches into different units through a variety of small-scale interactions with foreign partners creates challenges when trying to establish common standards across their forces. The US and Japan are now coordinating their projects to enhance the technical workforce capacity of the Philippines Coast Guard (PCG). They are both providing containerized maintenance facilities and are working trilaterally with the Philippines to roadmap the placement of “workshops in a box” and minimize duplication of capabilities (Metz 2019). On the training side of technical workforce development, the US is taking the lead for outboard engine maintenance. Japan focuses on skills related to electric generators and the maintenance required needed to support the multi-role response vessels (MRRVs) that have been transferred from Japan to the PCG through an overseas development assistance loan (Japan International Cooperation Agency 2019).

Complementary technology transfers are another element of the US-Japan Alliance capacity-building effort in the Philippines. When announcing large armament purchases, a PCG spokesman explained: “The ships from Japan, they have no guns. If we can buy and install their machine guns, it’s going to be great” (Xinhua 2018). Ultimately, the MRRVs were equipped with Israeli gun systems, but weapons for other boats provided by Japan are reportedly being arranged through US Foreign Military Financing arrangements. Similarly, US funds have reportedly been earmarked for the provision of electronic sensor packages for the TC-90 aircraft that the JMSDF transferred to the Philippine Navy, which are currently performing maritime patrol activities using only human spotters.

Japan and the US are also coordinating the development of the Philippines’ national network of radars and communications. For example, in support of maritime domain awareness, the US funded the establishment of the National Coast Watch Center in Manila. Radar stations in the southern Philippines that were provided by Japan are providing data to that center. Japan has also provided parts to maintain older air defense systems originally provided by the US as excess defense articles. More recently, the Philippines and Japan reached an agreement for four modern air surveillance radar stations to be built in Japan and exported to the Philippines (Embassy of Japan in the Philippines 2020). The selection of the Japanese system over an Israeli competitor could be significant because there are reports that the arrangement also includes an information-sharing agreement. The common equipment and information-sharing agreements could enable the fusion of some air defense operational picture data from the Japanese and Philippines segments of the Western Pacific’s first island chain. This could quietly yield a significant contribution to both the US–Japan and US–Philippine alliances (Robin 2020).

The Alliance’s practical on-the-ground coordination is enabled by the US and Japanese country teams in Manila interacting regularly and including one another in working-level events held with the host nation. Illustrating the routine nature of this coordination were USN officers observing a Japan International Cooperation Agency–sponsored, JCG–implemented towing and maintenance training exercise with the PCG. The American observers were not called out in the press materials but are visible in the photos posted on official social media outlets. This steady-strain, business-as-usual approach that focuses on accomplishment over public posturing is bearing fruit in the

Philippines and should set an example for similar Alliance activities with other Southeast Asian partners.

PROSPECTS

The US and Japan share a broad political consensus in which opposing domestic political parties support continued expansion of capabilities and policy commitments to address their national allies' strategic requirements. The primary drivers of this expansion—increasing pressure from China, growing valuation of an enhanced Japanese defense posture, desire to sustain American regional power, and a shared commitment to strengthen the “free and open Pacific”—can be expected to endure (Satake 2020). One aspect of expanded Alliance cooperation is the development of security relationships with third parties. While the US and Japan both see a need for partnerships beyond the Alliance to protect their regional interests, the fact that they use the Alliance to foster those relationships demonstrates how firmly the relationship is entrenched in both nations' strategic outlooks.

Given the strong Alliance foundations, bases in Japan will continue to support US operations. US–Japan combined operations in Southeast Asia can be expected to expand incrementally. Furthermore, the US–Japan Alliance is set to continue to enable expanded Indo-Pacific activities by extra-regional partners. Growth in other areas of US–Japan Alliance activities in Southeast Asia, including cooperative capacity-building activities, can also be expected to expand but will face greater implementation challenges.

Although Southeast Asia's states are generally favorable to the balancing power of a stronger US–Japan Alliance, those partners will remain careful with military invitations (Nagy 2017). Southeast Asian states also recognize that drawing closer to the US–Japan Alliance could endanger their positive relationships with the PRC and pull them more deeply into undesirable security dilemmas. As Alliance coordination becomes more regular and apparent, it may undermine the status that Japan currently enjoys as a “third option.” Thus, some of the multiplying effects, particularly those involving access and partnership-building, can be expected to depreciate as the US and Japan grow closer in the region and the US/PRC choice becomes more acute. Furthermore, a stronger direct role of the Alliance in the region could magnify intra-ASEAN divides, with some members being more eager to cooperate with the Alliance than others. Already we can see that Alliance

coordination is most advanced in the Philippines and Vietnam, the two states most immediately threatened by PRC maritime advances.

The PRC will be quick to highlight these dilemmas and possibly exaggerate the case. Already Chinese voices in the region caution Southeast Asian leaders that, while American presence in the region is troubling, a return of Japanese power would be intolerable, given the intensity of anti-Japanese sentiment carried by the Chinese people. How much of that popular hatred toward Japan is exaggerated or manufactured and to what degree it actually constraints Chinese leaders' decisions are interesting questions, but the answers are somewhat immaterial given the implied nature of China's warnings. Southeast Asian policymakers will continue to give thoughtful pause before opening their arms to US-Japan Alliance military initiatives.

Internal institutional and bureaucratic barriers will also continue to inhibit Alliance coordination. Within the Japanese government, bureaucratic stove-piping problems are well documented, even though reforms by the Abe administration improved the situation (Hornung 2013). Americans face similar challenges related to taming the bureaucratic sprawl in their foreign policy interagency process. Therefore, however much energy Alliance managers apply to advance lines of coordination, it is challenging to break through these barriers without the involvement of senior leadership. The March 2021 2+2 statement suggests that this leadership has been focused elsewhere. Rather than discussing the implementation of the ambitious Alliance commitments laid out in the 2015 president–prime minister and subsequent 2+2 statements, this document's references to maritime issues are limited to reiterating “objections to China's unlawful maritime claims and activities in the South China Sea.”

Without the efficiencies created by cooperation, the Alliance may be hard-pressed to find additional resources to devote to Southeast Asia. Both the JCG and the JMSDF suffer from shortfalls in ships and manpower. Responding to the increased pressures from China and North Korea near Japan will remain their top priority. The USN and USCG are both growing in the region and shifting forces to the Western Pacific, but neither is keeping pace with the expansion of China's naval forces. Cooperation can offer efficiencies to help the allies keep up, but it still requires resource investments and deliberate strategic decisions.

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