



# Situating the Japan-UK Security Partnership in Japan's Regional Balancing Strategy

Safeguarding Indo-Pacific Maritime Order via  
ASEAN-Led Mechanisms

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Cover Photo: Scene from multilateral exercise with Japan and the UK during the Indo-Pacific deployment of HMS *Queen Elizabeth*-led Carrier Strike Group (October 2021) (photo: Mc2 Jason Tarleton/U.S. Navy/Planet Pix via ZUMA Press Wire/Kyodo News Images)

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## Summary

Amid intensifying strategic competition between the United States (US) and China, the Japan-United Kingdom (UK) security partnership is gaining traction in the Indo-Pacific. Anchored in a shared vision of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), both countries have deepened defence cooperation, frequently in coordination with the US. Against the backdrop of China's maritime expansion in the East China Sea and South China Sea (SCS), the evolving Japan-UK defence ties may herald a new phase in their bilateral security relationship—one that warrants closer scrutiny within the context of regional strategic realignment.

This study examines the partnership through Japan's "inclusive institutional balancing" strategy in the SCS—a form of soft balancing that seeks to embed China within ASEAN-centred institutions. This approach promotes adherence to the rule of law at sea ("rules"), advances FOIP as the regional "agenda," and operationalises these goals through ASEAN-led "practices" like the East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus.

Two key questions guide the analysis: how Japan-UK cooperation aligns with this strategy, and how it could be strengthened. The paper argues that Japan-UK security cooperation aligns with Japan's inclusive institutional balancing strategy by reinforcing its momentum. This strategy—aimed at pursuing a rules-based Indo-Pacific order in an inclusive manner—requires bolstering ASEAN's resilience, particularly its centrality and unity in the SCS. In this context, Japan-UK cooperation in Maritime Domain Awareness contributes to this goal by engaging ASEAN-led platforms as strategic venues.

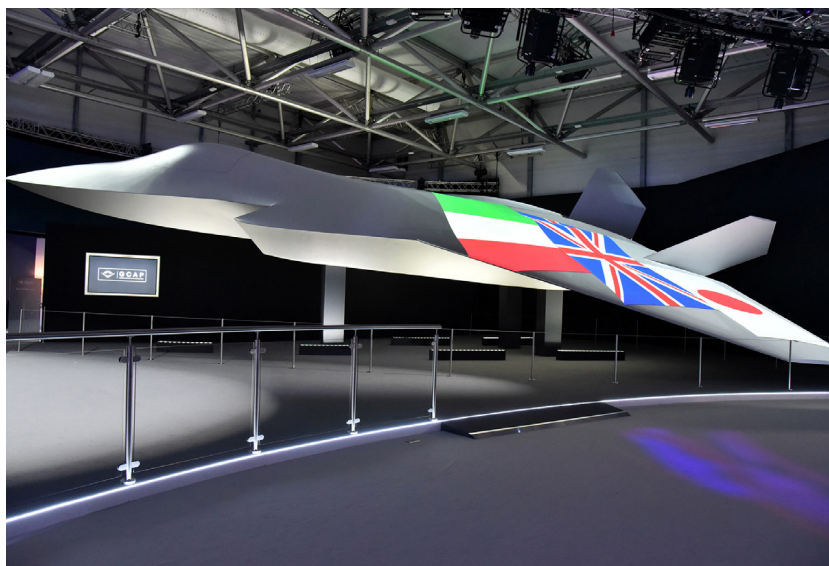
Despite challenges, including the UK's potential accession to ASEAN-led bodies, the partnership holds strong potential to reinforce ASEAN's role as a cornerstone of regional security—whose effectiveness is at times called into question—and to contribute to a stable and inclusive Indo-Pacific order.



## Introduction

Amid growing uncertainties in the Indo-Pacific region stemming from intensifying strategic rivalry between the United States (US) and China, Japan-United Kingdom security partnership has taken on a new sense of purpose. To uphold the rules-based international order under a banner of Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), Japan and the UK have increasingly engaged in bilateral and minilateral exercises, often in coordination with other countries such as the US. Furthermore, the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP) has been launched as a trilateral initiative among Japan, Italy and the UK. In addition to such practical cooperation, institutional frameworks have also evolved, exemplified by the establishment of the Japan-UK Foreign and Defence Ministers' Meeting (2+2) in 2015. Against the backdrop of China's maritime expansion in the East China Sea and South China Sea (SCS), these developments suggest a deepening of security cooperation between the two maritime powers, potentially heralding a new phase in the bilateral relationship—one that merits closer examination in the context of regional strategic realignment.

However, the UK's tilt toward the "Indo-Pacific" and the future developments of the Japan-UK security partnership remain uncertain in terms of their scope and sustainability.<sup>1</sup> To assess the validity of such sceptical views, this paper explores the significance of the Japan-UK partnership through the lens of Japan's counter-balancing strategy aimed at China's growing influence and maritime expansion in the SCS. In previous studies, Japan's counter-balancing approach toward China's maritime expansion in the SCS—seeking to respond to China's rise primarily through non-military means—has been described as a



A concept model of the GCAP fighter jet (Photo: Jiji)

1 Ben Barry, Bastian Giegerich, Euan Graham, and Ben Schreer, *The UK Indo-Pacific Tilt: Defence and Military Implications* (The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2022), 18–20, [https://www.iiss.org/globalassets/media-library---content--migration/files/research-papers/2022/06/the-uk-indo-pacific-tilt\\_defence-and-military-implications.pdf](https://www.iiss.org/globalassets/media-library---content--migration/files/research-papers/2022/06/the-uk-indo-pacific-tilt_defence-and-military-implications.pdf).

“soft balancing” strategy.<sup>2</sup> More specifically, in theoretical terms, Japan’s approach can be characterized as “inclusive institutional balancing.”<sup>3</sup> The objective is to constrain China’s behaviour by leveraging ASEAN-centred institutions, such as the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus), in order to promote a rules-based order. With this strategy in mind, two questions arise. First, how does Japan-UK security cooperation fit into Japan’s inclusive institutional balancing strategy? Second, what forms of Japan-UK cooperation are considered necessary to further advance this strategy?

By addressing these questions, this paper argues that the Japan-UK security partnership can provide momentum to Japan’s strategy by contributing to ASEAN’s resilience—namely, the maintenance of its centrality and unity—which is essential for establishing a rules-based order in the SCS and in the region as a whole. Japan’s pursuit of the inclusive institutional balancing strategy depends on ASEAN’s continued ability to serve as the hub of regional institutions, and the bilateral partnership, particularly in the realm of strengthening regional Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) capabilities, has the potential to support ASEAN’s pivotal role as part of broader regional efforts.

In the following sections, this paper first provides an overview of Japan’s strategic approach in Southeast Asia and the SCS. The second section examines the concept and features of soft balancing/inclusive institutional balancing strategy, highlighting the critical role of a resilient ASEAN in Japan’s approach. The third section evaluates the opportunities and challenges currently facing the Japan-UK security partnership, with particular emphasis on aligning their respective efforts on MDA by utilising ASEAN-centred institutions as a catalyst. The conclusion summarises the argument and outlines its broader implications.

## 1 Japan’s Efforts in Southeast Asia and the SCS

Since the 1970s, Japan has sought to build a “Heart to Heart” relationship with Southeast Asian countries as equal partners, particularly in the realms of business and diplomacy.<sup>4</sup> As the regional security environment has grown increasingly complex, Japan’s security cooperation with ASEAN countries has deepened significantly. Notably, over the past decade—and especially in light of China’s maritime expansion—Japan’s involvement in the SCS disputes has increased, reflecting its commitment to maintaining a rules-based regional order.

Japan’s engagement in the SCS disputes can be broadly categorised into three areas: expanding the operational presence of the Japan Maritime Self-Defence Force (JMSDF); promoting capacity-building

2 Bhubhindar Singh, “Japan’s Responses to China’s Rise: Soft Balancing in Southeast Asia,” *Asian Security* 18, no. 1 (2022): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14799855.2021.1942849>.

3 Kai He and Huiyun Feng, “The Positive Externalities of US–China Institutional Balancing in the Indo-Pacific,” *International Affairs* 101, no. 1 (2025): 35–52, especially, 37–40, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaae272>.

4 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFA), *Japan and ASEAN* (MOFA, 2023), 3–5, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/100489370.pdf>.



cooperation including the transfer of defence equipment and technology; and supporting a rules-based order through active engagement with ASEAN-centred institutions.

Over the past ten years, the JMSDF has conducted a range of bi-/multi-/mini-lateral exercises and training activities with regional partners to underscore Japan's commitment to the principles of freedom of navigation and overflight in the SCS. For example, exercises involving the UK include the 2021 maritime exercise in the SCS, in which the JMSDF participated alongside the UK, the US, the Netherlands, Canada and New Zealand, coinciding with the deployment of the UK's HMS *Queen Elizabeth* to the Indo-Pacific. More recently, in May 2025, a trilateral maritime exercise involving the UK, Italy, and Japan was held in the SCS.

Japan has also been actively engaged in promoting capacity-building cooperation in Southeast Asia, through the efforts of both the Ministry of Defense and Self-Defense Forces, as well as the Japan Coast Guard. A prominent example is its collaboration with the Philippines, which has adopted a firmer stance on China in the SCS disputes. Japan has provided a range of assets—including coast guard vessels, patrol aircraft, and radar systems—to bolster the Philippines' MDA capabilities.

At the regional level, Japan has advanced ASEAN-wide security cooperation through initiatives such as the "Vientiane Vision," announced at the ASEAN-Japan Defence Ministers' Informal Meeting in 2016. Updated in 2019, the initiative aims to support ASEAN's efforts to uphold principles of international law, particularly in the maritime and air domains, by fostering shared understanding and experience on maritime security and law of the sea. To this end, Japan has implemented the Japan-ASEAN Ship Rider Cooperation Program since 2017. Furthermore, in 2023, Japan introduced the "Japan-ASEAN Ministerial Initiative for Enhanced Defense Cooperation" (JASMINE) to further advance the shared vision between Japan and ASEAN.

Although Japan's capacity-building efforts vis-à-vis Southeast Asian countries remain limited in both scope and scale, recent developments are nonetheless significant—especially when viewed against the backdrop of domestic constraints on Japan's security posture.

In addition to the aforementioned defence-related efforts, a pivotal aspect of Japan's engagement in the SCS disputes lies in its commitments to upholding a rules-based order through the utilisation of ASEAN-centred institutions. Specifically, at ASEAN-related meetings such as the EAS and the ADMM-Plus, Japan has consistently advocated for adherence to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the three principles of the rule of law at sea as a foundation for the peaceful settlement of disputes. These principles are: first, "making and clarifying claims based on international law"; second, "not using force or coercion in trying to drive their claims"; and third, "seeking to settle disputes by peaceful means."<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, Japan has used ASEAN-centred institutions to promote FOIP as a shared agenda among

5 MOFA, *Diplomatic Blue Book 2024* (MOFA, 2024), 92–93, 257–59, [https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/other/bluebook/2024/pdf/en\\_index.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/other/bluebook/2024/pdf/en_index.html).

regional countries, with the goal of reinforcing a rules-based order. Japan's current engagement with ASEAN-centred institutions is especially notable in light of its historically lukewarm attitude toward the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in the early 2000s, when concerns over its limited effectiveness were prevalent.<sup>6</sup> The 2023 *Basic Plan on Ocean Policy* now articulates Japan's intention to utilise these institutions more actively as platforms for advancing regional cooperation and strengthening legal norms in the maritime domain.<sup>7</sup>

In sum, Japan's security efforts in Southeast Asia and the SCS can be characterised as a dual approach, with a particular emphasis on the diplomatic component. First, Japan adopts a hard balancing strategy, which entails countering threats through defensive measures. For instance, the increased presence of the JMSDF in the region has been made possible by the enhancement of Japan's own defence capabilities. Conducting various bi-/multi-/mini-lateral exercises, as well as supporting the improvement of MDA capabilities among SCS littoral states, further exemplifies Japan's defensive response to China's maritime expansion. Second, Japan pursues a diplomatic approach as a vital complement to the first approach. In fact, Japan has identified diplomatic initiatives as the primary component of its approaches to achieving national security objectives.<sup>8</sup> Specifically, it seeks to utilise ASEAN-centred institutions as platforms for advancing a rules-based order in the region.

## 2 Japan's Strategy: Pursuit of the Inclusive Institutional Balancing Strategy

From the perspective of Japan's national strategy, its dual approach to China's maritime expansionism in the SCS—emphasizing the diplomatic component—can be seen as a form of “soft balancing,” or, more specifically, an “inclusive institutional balancing” strategy.

In its 2022 *National Security Strategy* (NSS), Japan underscored the importance of achieving “a new balance” in the Indo-Pacific as one of its national security objectives.<sup>9</sup> This expression can be interpreted as reflecting Japan's view of the shifting regional power dynamics, marked by the rise of China and the relative decline of the US. To be clear, the 2022 NSS affirmed the pivotal role of the US in ensuring regional security as emphasising “an indispensable role” of the Japan-US alliance not only for Japan's national security but also for maintaining regional stability.<sup>10</sup>

Nonetheless, in light of an increasingly volatile regional security environment, Japan appears to be

6 Takeshi Yuzawa, “Japan's Changing Conception of the ASEAN Regional Forum: From an Optimistic Liberal to a Pessimistic Realist Perspective,” *The Pacific Review* 18, no. 4 (2005): 478–80, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512740500338895>.

7 Naikaku-fu (Cabinet Office), *Kaiyo Kihon Keikaku (Basic Plan on Ocean Policy)* (Cabinet Office, 2023), 40, [https://www8.cao.go.jp/ocean/policies/plan/plan04/pdf/keikaku\\_honbun.pdf](https://www8.cao.go.jp/ocean/policies/plan/plan04/pdf/keikaku_honbun.pdf).

8 Cabinet Secretariat, *National Security Strategy of Japan* (Cabinet Secretariat, 2022), 11, <https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryou/221216anzenhoshou/nss-e.pdf>.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., 12–13.

considering the potential implications of a shifting strategic landscape in which traditional patterns of regional power may no longer function as they once did. As a result, the establishment of a free and open regional order—alongside the enhancement of Japan's own defence capabilities—has emerged as a potential solution. Indeed, Japan has stated that the realization of “a free and open international order based on the rule of law,” under the banner of the FOIP vision, is of “vital importance” to its national security.<sup>11</sup> This broader strategic outlook is particularly relevant to Japan's strategy toward China's maritime expansionism in the SCS.

In this context, the importance of ASEAN-centred institutions in Japan's strategy is brought into focus. Establishing a region-wide “free and open” order requires the broad participation of countries across the region—from allies and like-minded states to other regional actors. ASEAN-centred institutions, which convene a diverse range of regional players, serve as precisely the kind of strategic platforms Japan needs to achieve its goals. The significance of ASEAN as a venue for the promotion of Japan's national strategy may explain its strong emphasis on upholding “ASEAN's centrality and unity” in its FOIP vision.<sup>12</sup>

Some previous studies have categorised Japan's strategic approach in the SCS as a “soft balancing” strategy.<sup>13</sup> Soft balancing is defined as a strategy that seeks to counter “a threat through nonmilitary measures, such as international institutions, economic statecraft, and diplomatic arrangements, as well as limited military measures.”<sup>14</sup> More specifically, Japan's soft balancing approach, which utilises ASEAN-centred institutions, can be described as “inclusive institutional balancing”—a “strategy of binding and constraining a target state within the rules, agendas and practices of institutions.”<sup>15</sup> Japan's strategic efforts can be characterised by its attempt to constrain China's maritime expansion in the SCS by advocating adherence to the rule of law at sea as the established “rules,” and by promoting the FOIP initiative as the “agenda” that regional countries should collectively pursue. Japan also aims to embed these efforts within the “practices” of ASEAN-related regional frameworks, of which China is also a participant.

As the rationale behind Japan's pursuit of a strategy characterised less by pure hard balancing and more, largely, by elements of soft balancing—specifically, inclusive institutional balancing—the literature on Japan's response to the SCS disputes and China's rise identifies several constraints that Japan faces. For example, Bhubhindar Singh cites “the domestic culture of anti-militarism and extant suspicion of East Asian states of an expanded Japanese security role in East Asia” as a key reason.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, Kei Koga highlights Japan's “limited power-projection capabilities” and “the limited degree of Japan's maritime interest [in the SCS]” as major factors explaining the constraints on Japan's hard balancing approach.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, Japan's current strategic approach in the region is often discussed within the framework of

11 Ibid., 8.

12 MOFA, *Free and Open Indo-Pacific* (MOFA, October 2024), <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/000430632.pdf>.

13 Singh, “Japan's Responses to China's Rise.”

14 Ibid., 2.

15 He and Feng, “The Positive Externalities of US-China Institutional Balancing in the Indo-Pacific,” 38.

16 Singh, “Japan's Responses to China's Rise,” 13.

17 Kei Koga, “Japan's Strategic Interests in the South China Sea: Beyond the Horizon?” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 72, no. 1 (2018): 16–30, especially, 17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2017.1399337>.

a “hedging strategy” vis-à-vis the US. Koga argues that Japan’s effort to “strengthen strategic relations with non-US security partners” reflects a desire to diversify “the risks of diplomatic overdependence on the United States.”<sup>18</sup> Nobuhiko Tamaki also contends that “due to the decline of US liberal hegemony, Japan [...] seeks a rules-based international order via classic diplomacy and balance of power.”<sup>19</sup>

Even if Japan must adopt inclusive institutional balancing as its strategic choice due to various constraints Japan faces and uncertainties about US policy, the effectiveness of this approach remains a matter of debate. While it is difficult to assess the success of Japan’s strategy, it would be misleading to judge its effectiveness solely by its ability to deter China’s maritime expansion in the SCS, given the significant power asymmetry between the two countries. Instead, evaluation should take into account other factors, such as the costs the strategy imposes on China and the differing levels of strategic interest that Japan and China have in the SCS.

After all, Japan’s approach still “imposes increased material, normative and time costs on China” in the SCS where China holds substantial historical and security interests.<sup>20</sup> This is achieved through Japan’s efforts to amplify regional countries’ initiatives in upholding a rules-based order, primarily by leveraging ASEAN-centred institutions and by enhancing the MDA capabilities of selected Southeast Asian states. Therefore, although Japan’s ability to directly counter China’s maritime expansion is limited, its qualified strategic success deserves recognition.<sup>21</sup>

That said, the medium- to long-term viability of Japan’s strategy presents a separate challenge. Given the strategic leverage Japan derives from ASEAN-centred institutions, maintaining the effective functioning of these institutions can be considered as a key factor in ensuring the strategy’s sustainability. In this context, Japan faces the critical task of supporting ASEAN in enhancing its resilience. ASEAN’s resilience may be defined as its ability to retain unity and centrality—thereby maintaining strategic autonomy—in an increasingly volatile regional security environment. This enables ASEAN to continue serving as a hub for addressing security issues in the region. Should ASEAN lose this capacity, Japan would be compelled to reassess its strategy, as it would lose a core mechanism for promoting its “inclusive institutional balancing” approach. In short, Japan’s strategy in the SCS and, more broadly, in Southeast Asia is anchored in a resilient ASEAN. The significance of the Japan-UK security partnership should also be evaluated in this light.

18 Kei Koga, “Hedging for Balancing: Japan’s Foreign Policy in the 2010s–2020s,” *East Asian Policy* 16, no. 4 (2024): 29–44, especially, 31, <https://doi.org/10.1142/S1793930524000266>.

19 Nobuhiko Tamaki, “Japan’s Quest for a Rules-based International Order: The Japan-US Alliance and the Decline of US Liberal Hegemony,” *Contemporary Politics* 26, no. 4 (2020): 384–401, especially, 398, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2020.1777041>.

20 Yu Harada, “Evaluating Japan’s South China Sea Policy: A Qualified Success?” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 45, no. 1 (2023): 30–54, especially, 30.

21 Ibid.

### 3 Opportunities and Challenges of the Japan-UK Security Partnership

If the significance of Japan-UK security cooperation in Southeast Asia and in the SCS is to be examined through the lens of Japan's strategy, two questions arise. First, how does Japan-UK security cooperation fit into Japan's inclusive institutional balancing strategy? Second, what forms of Japan-UK cooperation are considered necessary to further advance this strategy?

To address these questions, it is essential to consider a key conceptual issue for the partnership: how Japan and the UK can support ASEAN in maintaining its centrality and unity amid intensifying US-Sino strategic competition. While the responsibility for preserving ASEAN's centrality and unity ultimately rests with ASEAN itself, the policies of regional actors also shape this dynamic. As previous studies suggest, the development of "non-ASEAN channels" such as AUKUS and the QUAD—joined by the UK and Japan respectively—is "likely to lead to a drop in the utility" of ASEAN-centred institutions and thereby undermine ASEAN's role as the regional hub.<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, the bilateral security cooperation that both Japan and the UK are pursuing with individual ASEAN member states has elements that could inadvertently weaken ASEAN's unity. Both Japan and the UK are likely to be incentivised to deepen cooperation with selected Southeast Asian countries, such as the Philippines, with which they share common strategic concerns. This may lead some ASEAN member states to prioritise bilateral cooperation over ASEAN-led mechanisms as a more effective means of securing their maritime interests. However, if this dynamic results in the erosion of ASEAN's unity, the broader goal of upholding a rules-based order will be undermined—not only because ASEAN's value as a platform for diplomatic leverage will be diminished, but also because the number of ASEAN countries actively participating in such an order will be limited.

Importantly, the weakening of ASEAN's unity is not necessarily the result of internal challenges, such as the Myanmar crisis and Thailand-Cambodia border clashes. It may also stem from the way external actors engage bilaterally with ASEAN members. Taken together, this highlights the paradox facing Japan and the UK: efforts to contribute to regional stability must be carefully calibrated so as not to inadvertently weaken the very institutions that sustain it.

That said, this does not necessarily mean that Japan and the UK must choose between activating non-ASEAN-centred regional frameworks, enhancing bilateral cooperation with selected Southeast Asian countries, and utilising ASEAN-centred institutions. These approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but can, in practice, be mutually reinforcing.

Regional cooperation on MDA illustrates how these approaches can be interconnected. For example, both Japan and the UK are committed to strengthening MDA in the Indo-Pacific by promoting

22 Sarah Teo, "ASEAN and Multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific: Past, Present, and Future," *Raisina Files* 7 (2023): 109-115, <https://www.orfonline.org/public/uploads/posts/pdf/20230407125720.pdf>.

capacity-building cooperation and information sharing with regional partners.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, each country has signed a memorandum with the Philippines that outlines collaboration on MDA-related initiatives.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, both countries have also engaged in efforts to improve Vietnam's MDA-related capabilities. For instance, while Japan has provided patrol vessels to the Vietnam Coast Guard, which are necessary for monitoring situations arising in the SCS, the UK also appears to have conducted certain types of MDA assessments for Vietnam, though the precise nature of these assessments is unclear.<sup>25</sup> In addition, Japan has joined the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA), launched by the QUAD in 2022, which aims to enhance MDA across the region.<sup>26</sup>

Currently, these various MDA initiatives are being pursued separately, and their interlinkages remain unclear. However, given their shared objective of enabling regional countries to respond swiftly and collaboratively to maritime challenges—including unilateral attempts to alter the status quo by force—it is desirable to streamline those efforts and foster a common operational understanding of the maritime environment in the region.<sup>27</sup>

In this context, the importance of ASEAN-centred institutions as venues for coordinating regional efforts becomes evident. Several forums already exist to facilitate maritime cooperation, such as the ARF Workshop on International Cooperation on MDA and the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF).

The key challenge lies in linking the work of these regional mechanisms with the capacity-building cooperation for selected Southeast Asian countries currently being pursued by Japan, the UK, and the QUAD, and in transforming these efforts into a cohesive, ASEAN-wide initiative. If Japan and the UK can identify ways to align bilateral and minilateral cooperation with broader ASEAN-led frameworks, these efforts will prove complementary and help reinforce ASEAN's centrality and unity.

For instance, best practices undertaken by Japan and the UK to enhance MDA capabilities in selected ASEAN countries could be shared more broadly across the region through ASEAN-led institutions. In addition, these institutions could serve as platforms for integrating MDA-related systems—potentially including those being separately introduced by the UK, Japan or by other partners—in order to facilitate a common maritime situational picture, thereby supporting region-wide collaboration on maritime security.

A complicating factor is that the UK is not yet an official member of the ARF, the ADMM-Plus, or the

23 MOFA, *Strengthening Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) Capacity* (MOFA, 2024), <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/100477457.pdf>; HM Government, *National Strategy for Maritime Security* (HM Government, 2022), 43–45, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/630880c5e90e0729d9ab15fc/national-strategy-for-maritime-security-web-version.pdf>.

24 “Japan, Philippines Agree on More Maritime Cooperation to Detect Suspicious Ships,” *The Japan News by The Yomiuri Shimbun*, December 20, 2023, <https://japannews.yomiuri.co.jp/politics/defense-security/20231220-156668/>; Joyce Ann L. Rocamora, “PH, UK Ink Defense Pact; Focus Set on Maritime Domain,” *Philippine News Agency*, January 16, 2024, <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1217069>.

25 Bich Tran, “Vietnam's Quest for Enhanced Maritime Domain Awareness,” *ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute Perspective*, no. 96 (2023): 5–7, [https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/ISEAS\\_Perspective\\_2023\\_96.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/ISEAS_Perspective_2023_96.pdf); “Southeast Asia Maritime Security Annual Review Summary 2023 to 2024,” Gov.UK, January 30, 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/conflict-stability-and-security-fund-annual-review-summaries-for-south-east-asia-and-the-pacific-2023-to-2024>.

26 Peter Parson, *Quad's Maritime Domain Awareness Initiative Strengthens Indo-Pacific Security* (Indo-Pacific Defense Forum, 2025), <https://ipdefenseforum.com/2025/06/quads-maritime-domain-awareness-initiative-strengthens-indo-pacific-security/>.

27 Hoang Do, “Popular MDA Initiatives and Implications for ASEAN,” *Security Nexus Perspectives* (Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, 2024), <https://dkiapcss.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/N2656-Popular-MDA-Initiatives-and-Implications-for-ASEAN.pdf>.





Scene from the 15th East Asia Summit Foreign Ministers' Meeting held in Malaysia in July 2025  
(Photo: Xinhua/Kyodo News Images)

EAS. The UK's 2023 applications for full membership in the ARF and ADMM-Plus underscore its strategic ambition to enhance engagement with ASEAN-led mechanisms.<sup>28</sup> This trajectory may reasonably be expected to encompass the EAS. If ASEAN-centred institutions are to serve as effective platforms for advancing Japan-UK security cooperation, the UK's membership will be essential.

In sum, Japan-UK security cooperation will reinforce Japan's inclusive institutional balancing strategy by supporting ASEAN's centrality and unity—particularly through streamlining each country's respective efforts in MDA via ASEAN-led frameworks. In this regard, the UK's accession to these institutions presents both an opportunity and a challenge, as membership expansion alone does not guarantee institutional effectiveness. Japan-UK cooperation must therefore be carefully calibrated to reinforce—rather than complicate or dilute—the role of these institutions. Cooperation through ASEAN-centred platforms—as exemplified by the above-mentioned case of Japan-UK collaboration on MDA—represents a promising approach that deserves further development.

## Conclusion

This paper has examined the opportunities and challenges of the Japan-UK security partnership from Japan's perspective, with particular attention to its pursuit of an inclusive institutional balancing strategy that depends on the effectiveness of ASEAN-centred institutions. In doing so, it has highlighted the importance of enhancing ASEAN's resilience—particularly by maintaining its centrality and unity—as a

28 “Policy Paper: UK-ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) Factsheet,” Gov. UK, July 11, 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-asean-association-of-southeast-asian-nations-factsheet/uk-asean-association-of-southeast-asian-nations-factsheet--2>.



Welcome ceremony for HMS *Prince of Wales*, the UK aircraft carrier, held in Tokyo, Japan, in August 2025 (Photo: EPA=Jiji)

key theme within the Japan-UK security partnership. More specifically, this paper has demonstrated that such a partnership could be operationalised in the development of regional MDA through the streamlining of the respective efforts of each country, using forums such as the ARF Workshop on International Cooperation on MDA and EAMF as catalysts. While challenges remain, there are ample opportunities for Japan and the UK to collaborate in upholding a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific.

Amid an increasingly volatile regional security environment, the role of ASEAN-centred institutions has come under scrutiny due to their “incremental and consensual approach,” which has been criticised as “a permanent drag on its [ASEAN’s] efficacy and the delivery of concrete results.”<sup>29</sup> The emergence of minilateral initiatives such as the QUAD and AUKUS is seen as indicative of major powers recalibrating their expectations of ASEAN. Yet a sustainable rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific cannot be realised without ASEAN. A regional architecture composed solely of allies and like-minded states resembles a bloc more than a shared order.

In this context, the inclusiveness embodied by ASEAN-centred institutions warrants renewed attention. Rather than focusing on perceived institutional decline, greater emphasis should be placed on enhancing ASEAN’s resilience. The future direction of the Japan-UK security partnership should be examined from this perspective if it is to contribute meaningfully to the shared strategic goal of building a rules-based regional order.

29 Hoang Thi Ha, “Repositioning the ADMM-Plus in a Contested Region,” *ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute Perspective*, no. 13 (2021): 1-9, especially, 5, [https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ISEAS\\_Perspective\\_2021\\_13.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ISEAS_Perspective_2021_13.pdf).

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