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From Asean Centrality to Strategic Minilateralism? Japan's Maritime Security Strategy in Southeast Asia

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Abstract: Amid intensifying Indo-Pacific geopolitical rivalry, this study examines how Japan recalibrates its maritime security strategy in Southeast Asia to navigate the operational tension between ASEAN centrality and strategic minilateralism. Moving beyond the conventional binary of multilateral norm-setting versus minilateral efficiency, the article adopts a qualitative document analysis framework to investigate the alignment between Japan's strategic doctrines including the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) and Official Security Assistance (OSA) and its practical security engagements with the Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia. Based on systematic thematic coding of official primary security documents and bilateral policy frameworks, the findings reveal that Tokyo does not abandon ASEAN centrality; rather, it refunctionalizes the principle as a critical source of normative legitimacy and diplomatic reassurance. Concurrently, Japan strategically layers its engagement by deploying selective bilateral and minilateral mechanisms to enhance capability-building and operational responsiveness with strategically aligned partners. The study indicates an emerging tendency toward a more functionally layered maritime security order in Southeast Asia, in which ASEAN retains normative primacy while bilateral and minilateral arrangements increasingly perform substantive security functions.

Keywords: Japan, Maritime Security, ASEAN Centrality, Strategic Minilateralism, Southeast Asia.

1. Introduction

In recent years, maritime security has emerged as one of the most dynamic arenas of power competition in the Asia-Pacific (ASEAN, 2019). For Southeast Asia, it is not merely a matter of safeguarding vital sea lanes or addressing non-traditional challenges such as piracy, illegal fishing, and transnational smuggling (ASEAN, 2019; H. S. H. S. Nguyen, 2013; Raj, 2009) but is also directly tied to sovereignty disputes, great-power strategic rivalry, and the future of the regional order (Ashley & Fraser, 2023; Po, 2023; Singh, 2021a). It is precisely in this context that ASEAN centrality continues to be reaffirmed as a foundational principle of regional cooperation (ASEAN, 2019; Baker, 2023). In the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (2019), ASEAN emphasizes that ASEAN centrality constitutes the basic principle for advancing cooperation across the Indo-Pacific space (Irsadanar, 2023; Zhang, 2023), with ASEAN-led mechanisms such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus), and the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF) serving as platforms for dialogue and cooperative implementation. At the same time, the AOIP places particular emphasis on fostering a region of "dialogue and cooperation instead of rivalry," in which the maritime domain is regarded as a key pillar of the emerging regional architecture (H. S. H. S. Nguyen, 2013). In Japan's foreign policy, Southeast Asia occupies a distinctive place in Tokyo's maritime strategic thinking and in its vision of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) (Ashley & Fraser, 2023; Sakaki, 2025; Shoji, 2024). Japan's official documents indicate that Tokyo has deliberately adjusted its strategic language in order to alleviate concerns over confrontation and enhance its compatibility with ASEAN (ASEAN & JMOFA, 2020; Sakaki, 2025). At the 23rd ASEAN–Japan Summit in 2020, both sides affirmed that the AOIP and the FOIP share common underlying principles (ASEAN & JMOFA, 2020; JMOFA, 2022). At the same time, they also committed to advancing practical cooperation in the four priority areas identified by the AOIP, namely maritime cooperation, connectivity, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and other economic fields (ASEAN & JMOFA, 2020; Suh, 2024; Zhang, 2023). Japan's 2022 Progress Report on Cooperation for the AOIP further underscored that

Japan and ASEAN share a common vision of promoting a rules-based, free, and open Indo-Pacific that respects ASEAN unity, ASEAN centrality, inclusiveness, transparency, and international law (JMOFA, 2022).

Yet it is precisely here that a notable paradox and a critical theoretical problem emerge. At the level of discourse and institutional legitimacy, Japan has consistently upheld ASEAN centrality (ASEAN & JMOFA, 2020; Japan & Philippines, 2023; Shoji, 2020). In practice, however, Tokyo's maritime security strategy in Southeast Asia has increasingly operated through selective bilateral and minilateral channels rather than relying solely on broad ASEAN-led frameworks (H. S. Nguyen, 2013; Shoji, 2024). This development is closely tied to changes in Japan's security environment. Japan's National Defense Strategy (2022b) makes clear that China continues to pursue unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force in the East and South China Seas, while also warning that serious contingencies in the Indo-Pacific, particularly in East Asia, cannot be ruled out and could shake the foundations of the stable postwar international order. Within this strategic logic, cooperation with "like-minded countries" has become an increasingly prominent component of Tokyo's security thinking (JMOD, 2022a, 2022b; Government of Japan, 2022).

This shift reflects not only a harsher security environment but also the rise of minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific. Recent studies suggest that the interaction between deepening economic interdependence and intensifying strategic competition has driven the growth of smaller, more flexible, and functionally oriented forms of cooperation (Parameswaran, 2023; Pongsudhirak, 2023; Wilkins, 2023). Compared with broader multilateral institutions, minilateral arrangements offer advantages in terms of speed, flexibility, and the ability to bring together partners with higher levels of strategic convergence, even though they also carry the costs of exclusivity and the risk of fragmenting the regional structure (Koga, 2023; Parameswaran, 2023; Tow, 2019; Wilkins, 2023). This is particularly noteworthy in Southeast Asia, where ASEAN remains the only regional organization capable of maintaining close diplomatic relations with dialogue partners whose material capabilities far exceed those of its individual members (Yoshimatsu, 2023). At the same time, however, ASEAN itself is increasingly confronted with questions regarding the limits of its centrality in a security environment more powerfully shaped by strategic competition than before (Koga, 2023; Parameswaran, 2023; Wilkins, 2023).

Existing scholarship often frames this dynamic through a rigid binary, treating ASEAN-led multilateralism and minilateral security arrangements as either mutually exclusive or inherently contradictory governance models (Baker, 2023; Koga, 2023; Tow, 2019). To overcome this conceptual impasse, this article introduces two clarifying frameworks. First, 'Refunctionalised ASEAN Centrality' conceptualises the strategic process whereby ASEAN centrality pivots from an all-encompassing operational nexus toward a core provider of regional normative legitimacy, diplomatic reassurance, and inclusive dialogue space. Second, a 'Functionally Layered Maritime Order' delineates an emerging regional architecture in which inclusive, multilateral bodies (ARF, ADMM-Plus) form the normative outer layer, while agile bilateral and minilateral partnerships such as Japan's Official Security Assistance (OSA) constitute the operational inner layer responsible for concrete security implementation.

It is precisely at this conceptual intersection that the article poses its central research question: How has Japan recalibrated its maritime security strategy in Southeast Asia to reconcile the operational tension between upholding ASEAN centrality for normative legitimacy and advancing strategic minilateralism for implementation effectiveness?

The article argues that Japan has not abandoned ASEAN centrality; rather, it is refunctionalizing this principle as a source of regional legitimacy and a necessary mechanism of political reassurance. At the same time, Tokyo is increasingly relying on strategic minilateral practices to enhance the effectiveness of maritime security cooperation with those Southeast Asian partners that display higher levels of strategic compatibility. Put differently, while ASEAN continues to provide legitimacy and inclusiveness, strategic minilateralism offers Japan flexibility, selectivity, and implementation effectiveness in an increasingly securitized maritime environment. On this basis, the article contributes to three lines of discussion: first, it clarifies the adjustment in Japan's security role in Southeast Asia; second, it explains the non-exclusive yet increasingly layered relationship between ASEAN centrality and minilateral practice; and third, it shows that the maritime security order in Southeast Asia is evolving in a direction where institutional legitimacy and strategic effectiveness no longer reside fully within a single regional mechanism.

2. Literature Review

Scholarly debates on maritime security governance in the Indo-Pacific have focused on the institutional dynamics between multilateralism led by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and more agile forms of security. A prevailing body of literature tends to view ASEAN centrality as the cornerstone of Southeast Asian regionalism. In this view, ASEAN-led mechanisms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), East Asia Summit (EAS), and ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) are seen as a critical platform for communication, trust-building, and norm-setting (Shoji, 2020; Yoshimatsu, 2023). In this perspective, ASEAN centrality functions not only as an institutional leadership but also as a normative framework that is based on inclusiveness, consensus-forming, and peaceful resolution of conflicts.

However, a parallel strand of scholarship highlights the structural and operational limitations of ASEAN-led mechanisms. Although ASEAN has been reasonably successful in maintaining dialogue and avoiding conflict, it is constrained in its capacity to operationalise normative convergence into enforceable or practical security outcomes, especially in maritime environments characterised by sovereignty claims and power imbalances. (Koga, 2023; Shoji, 2024; Yoshimatsu, 2023). This has led to a growing analytical distinction in the literature between ASEAN as a normative anchor and ASEAN as an operational security provider, with several studies suggesting that ASEAN centrality is increasingly discursive rather than functional in security delivery terms.

Parallel to this debate, another study has examined the new regional order in the Indo-Pacific in light of emerging rival strategic approaches, including the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). FOIP has been seen as a Japanese response to evolving power dynamics and heightened maritime challenges in the South and East China Seas (Ashley & Fraser, 2023; Sakaki, 2025). It promotes a rules-based system based on international law, connectivity, and freedom of navigation. Recent scholarship identifies a level of normative convergence between FOIP and AOIP, particularly in the context of increased ASEAN–Japan interaction (Sakaki, 2025; Suh, 2024; Zhang, 2023). However, the literature is not unanimous: while some see FOIP as reinforcing ASEAN-centred regionalism via convergence, others see it as subtly recasting regional order through parallel institutional logics, which go beyond ASEAN's coordinating function.

Another emerging and growing body of literature focuses on the emergence of minilateralism in Indo-Pacific security governance. Minilateral arrangements - small-scale, flexible, and functionally oriented cooperative arrangements - are broadly seen as an effective way of overcoming the challenges of large multilateral institutions to tackle complex security challenges. (Wilkins, 2023; Allès & Fournol, 2025). These arrangements are typically linked to greater efficiencies in shared areas such as maritime domain awareness, coast guard coordination, and capacity-building programs. At the same time, researchers warn that minilateralism could add to the fragmentation in the regional order by prioritising exclusive sets of partnerships over inclusive multilateral initiatives. (Tow, 2019; Wilkins, 2023).

Significantly, current research under-theorises how external powers simultaneously harness ASEAN legitimacy and bypass ASEAN-centred processes through strategic minilateralism. In other words, while ASEAN is recognised as a normative framework, and minilateralism as a practical approach, little attention has been paid to how the two are mobilised as part of a single and synergic maritime security architecture. As such, current research does not fully explain the integration, rather than disintegration, of legitimacy-seeking and capability-seeking logics in state practice.

Within this evolving intellectual environment, Japan's maritime security policy in Southeast Asia has attracted growing attention. Previous research has identified Japan as primarily a development actor in Southeast Asia, with Official Development Assistance (ODA) serving as a central policy instrument before the subsequent expansion of security-oriented assistance (Japan's Cabinet, 2015; Singh, 2010; Shoji, 2024). Hughes (2022) traces the pre-2023 expansion of Japan's security role through the National Security Strategy, the Development Cooperation Charter, and defence-capacity-building frameworks. The establishment of Official Security Assistance in 2023 constituted a subsequent institutional development documented by Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and analysed by Shoji (2024) (JMOFA, 2024; Shoji, 2024). These studies emphasise Japan's capacity-building, maritime security, and defence diplomacy initiatives with Southeast Asian countries.

Despite these contributions, existing research provides little explanation for how Japan continues to rhetorically uphold ASEAN centrality while engaging in more selective bilateral and minilateral cooperation. The majority of studies still view ASEAN-led multilateralism and minilateralism in security governance in Southeast Asia as distinct or competing frameworks. (Baker, 2023; Koga, 2023; Tow, 2019). Moreover, studies of Japan's policy instruments (such as ODA, Vientiane Vision, and OSA) remain piecemeal, with little attention being given to how they link to broader shifts in regional security governance.

3. Methodology

Drawing on qualitative document analysis (Bowen, 2009), this research used a qualitative policy analysis framework to examine the refocusing of Japan's maritime security policies towards Southeast Asia, within a dynamic of ASEAN centrality and minilateralism. This qualitative approach was chosen as the study was concerned with interpreting the meanings, institutional practices, and strategic intentions of policy, rather than causal relationships and statistical inferences. The analysis focused on Japan's formulation of its maritime security strategy in the context of its changing engagement in the region. The core documentary analysis covers the period from 2013 to 2024, beginning with the adoption of the Japanese National Security Strategy (2013), which represented a policy transition towards proactive security policy under the "Proactive Contribution to Peace" (PCP) doctrine. This was chosen as the point of formalisation of Japan's contemporary security "regime". The empirical documentary cut-off was 31 December 2024; later scholarly sources are used only to situate and interpret the recent policy trajectory rather than to extend the core documentary period. This temporal delimitation enables the study to trace both continuity and transition in maritime security policy while keeping the empirical coverage consistent with the official documents analysed.

This research utilised qualitative document analysis of primary policy sources from Japan and ASEAN. The core documentary corpus comprised 18 principal official and institutional documents explicitly cited in the manuscript, selected on the basis of official status, policy authority, and direct relevance to maritime security governance and regional engagement. For Japan, the principal sources included the National Security Strategy, National Defense Strategy, Defense Buildup Program, Diplomatic Bluebook, Development Cooperation Charter, Vientiane Vision, Official Security Assistance (OSA) materials, relevant Ministry of Foreign Affairs documents, and Japan International Cooperation Agency records on maritime-capacity assistance. For ASEAN and regional institutions, the study examined the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), joint ASEAN-Japan statements, relevant ASEAN-led mechanisms, the Viet Nam National Defence White Paper, and ReCAAP institutional material. These sources were selected to capture strategic doctrine, regional normative positioning, bilateral implementation, and observable maritime-security assistance. The use of multiple official sources across these categories was intended to strengthen triangulation and improve the validity of the analysis.

Following the logic of structured comparative case analysis (George & Bennett, 2005; Yin, 2018), the research adopted a comparative case study approach focusing on three Southeast Asian nations: the Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia. The cases were chosen through purposive sampling according to their significance to Japan's maritime security policy and differences in terms of their institutional and geopolitical orientation towards Japan. The Philippines was chosen as the most mature case of maritime security cooperation with Japan, due to the deepening cooperation in the coast guard and the adoption of the Official Security Assistance (OSA) program. Vietnam was chosen as an example of "uncommitted but strategically important" engagement, as reflected in its concern over the South China Sea disputes and its foreign policy neutrality. Indonesia, ASEAN's largest archipelagic state, does not claim the disputed islands in the South China Sea but faces recurring challenges to its sovereign rights in the North Natuna Sea; it was chosen as a case that represented the larger trend of maritime security, connectivity, and capacity-building rather than direct security commitments. The comparative design allowed the study to analyse nuanced expressions of Japan's maritime security strategy in different political and strategic environments in Southeast Asia.

This research used a qualitative document analysis method involving thematic analysis of policy documents. Document analysis was employed to analyse official policy texts to identify patterns in Japan's maritime security discourse and institutional practices. Thematic analysis followed a combined deductive–inductive procedure (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Neoclassical realism (Rose, 1998) and Regional Security Complex

Theory (Buzan & Wæver, 2003) informed the initial coding frame. Neoclassical Realism offered the analytical framework to explain how factors at the international level (such as China's maritime expansion and competition in the Indo-Pacific region) exerted influence through the lens of Japan's domestic institutions and preferences. RSCT provided the basis for regional analysis by accounting for the role of security interdependence in Southeast Asia on Japan's external security.

The coding process was undertaken in three stages. The unit of analysis was the relevant policy statement, paragraph, provision, or documented policy action within each selected source that addressed Japan's maritime security strategy, ASEAN centrality, bilateral or minilateral cooperation, or related implementation mechanisms. In the first phase, the documents were read and familiarised to identify relevant policy narratives. Second, codes were applied deductively based on theoretical and policy elements such as perceived external threat, ASEAN centrality, FOIP-AOIP interaction, and strategic minilateralism, while inductive codes were allowed to emerge through repeated reading. These inductive codes captured developments not fully specified in the initial framework, including the transition from conventional Official Development Assistance (ODA) toward Official Security Assistance (OSA). Coding was carried out manually by the authors, and differences in interpretation were resolved through discussion before the final thematic categories were retained. Third, the themes were examined comparatively across time and across the Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia to identify patterns in the evolution of Japan's maritime security strategy. This deductive-inductive procedure was used to maintain interpretive consistency while remaining responsive to empirical variation across the documentary evidence.

The research is constrained by the fact that it bases its analysis on formal policy documents, which may not encompass informal diplomacy or internal decision-making processes. Being a qualitative study, its results cannot be statistically generalised, but analytically generalised. Nevertheless, the multi-source triangulation adds credibility and strength to the analysis.

4. Results: Empirical Evidence of Japan's Recalibrated Maritime Strategy in Southeast Asia

The empirical analysis reveals that Japan's recalibration of its maritime security strategy in Southeast Asia has developed along two primary tracks: the systematic transformation of its domestic foreign policy instruments and the differentiated implementation of bilateral and minilateral security ties.

4.1. The Evolution of Japan's Policy Toolkit (2013–2024)

From a long-term analytical perspective, Japan's recalibration of its maritime security strategy in Southeast Asia has not occurred through an abrupt policy disruption; rather, it has unfolded as a gradual, cumulative transition from an ASEAN-led multilateral dialogue model toward a layered framework that combines regional institutional legitimacy with highly selective operational practices (Hughes, 2022; Pajon, 2019; Shoji, 2024; Singh, 2010). In essence, Tokyo has not abandoned ASEAN, but it has fundamentally transformed how it utilizes ASEAN within its broader Indo-Pacific maritime security architecture (Shoji, 2020, 2024).

The cognitive foundation of this recalibration was laid by Japan's redefinition of its regional security environment in its primary national-level strategic documents (Hughes, 2022). The 2013 National Security Strategy (NSS)—Japan's first postwar comprehensive security document—established the doctrine of "Proactive Contribution to Peace" (PCP) (Hughes, 2022; Government of Japan, 2013, 2022; Santoso & Banyu Perwita, 2016). This document formally acknowledged that Japan's surrounding security environment had become increasingly severe, affirming that Tokyo needed to play a more active role in protecting vital sea lines of communication (SLOCs), upholding a rules-based maritime order, and expanding security partnerships across the region (Government of Japan, 2022; Santoso & Banyu Perwita, 2016).

Within this strategic logic, Southeast Asia was accorded paramount geostrategic, political, and security importance (Sakaki, 2025; Singh, 2021b):

Geostrategically: The region sits astride critical maritime chokepoints linking Japan to energy supplies in the Middle East and markets in Europe (Ashley & Fraser, 2023; Government of Japan, 2013; Phan, 2022).

Politically: ASEAN constitutes the core institutional driver through which Tokyo maintains its strategic presence and manages regional great-power competition without triggering anti-hegemonic backlash (Sakaki, 2025; Shoji, 2020; Singh, 2021b).

Security-wise: The South China Sea has become a primary arena where unilateral attempts to alter the status quo, challenges to the rule of law, and threats to freedom of navigation are most acute (Government of Japan, 2022; H. S. Nguyen, 2013; Singh, 2021a).

For consecutive years, Japan's Diplomatic Bluebook has highlighted the strategic indispensability of ASEAN, linking support for ASEAN-led multilateral frameworks (ARF, EAS, ADMM-Plus) directly to the objective of maintaining an open, stable, and rules-based regional order (Irsadanar, 2023; JMOFA, 2024; Venti, 2022). As Tomotaka Shoji (2020) demonstrates, Japan remained a consistent advocate of ASEAN-led security multilateralism because Tokyo recognized these platforms as essential sources of institutional legitimacy for its expanding regional security role.

However, while strategic cognition provided the conceptual justification, the qualitative transformation of Japan's maritime strategy was executed through a sequence of successive adjustments in its policy instruments (Hughes, 2022; O'Shea & Maslow, 2024; Singh, 2021a).

4.1.1. Strategicization of Development Cooperation (2015)

The revision of the Official Development Assistance (ODA) Charter into the 2015 Development Cooperation Charter marked a pivotal policy breakthrough (Japan's Cabinet, 1992, 2015). While maintaining the core principle that aid must not be used for direct military expenditures or aggravating international conflicts, the 2015 Charter stipulated that development cooperation should be employed in a "more strategic" manner to proactively contribute to global peace, stability, and security (Japan's Cabinet, 2015). This revision provided the legal and policy foundation for Tokyo to deploy ODA resources for quasi-security purposes, including Coast Guard patrol vessels, maritime-safety and surveillance equipment, and technical capacity building for maritime law-enforcement agencies across Southeast Asia (H. S. Nguyen, 2013; JMOFA, 2022, 2024; Shoji, 2024; Singh, 2021a, 2021b).

4.1.2. Institutionalization of Defense Capacity Building (2016/2019)

This strategic shift was further institutionalized through the 2016 Vientiane Vision, which Japan's Ministry of Defense designated as the foundational guiding initiative for Japan–ASEAN defense cooperation (JMOD, 2016; Shoji, 2020, 2024). For the first time, Tokyo articulated a transparent, comprehensive roadmap for defense ties with ASEAN as a collective entity, integrating maritime security, rule of law, capacity building, and joint response capabilities into a single framework (Phan, 2022; Shoji, 2020, 2024). The adoption of Vientiane Vision 2.0 in 2019 accelerated this momentum by emphasizing "practical cooperation" while explicitly aligning Japan's defense initiatives with ASEAN's "resilience," "centrality," and "unity" (Sakaki, 2025; Shoji, 2020, 2024). This reflected a key operational logic: the more Japan pushed for substantive security implementation, the more strongly it underscored its commitment to ASEAN centrality as a legitimizing umbrella.

4.1.3. Strategic Reorientation in National Security Documents (2022)

The recalibration entered its most decisive and hard-edged phase with the release of the 2022 Security Trilogy—comprising the National Security Strategy, National Defense Strategy, and Defense Buildup Program (JMOD, 2022a, 2022b; Government of Japan, 2022). Describing the contemporary security environment as the most severe and complex since World War II, these documents explicitly identified China's unilateral attempts to alter the status quo by force in the East and South China Seas as a grave challenge to the rules-based order (JMOD, 2022b; Government of Japan, 2022; O'Shea & Maslow, 2024). Consequently, cooperation with "like-minded countries" was elevated to a top-tier strategic priority, signaling that Tokyo would prioritize security ties with Southeast Asian littoral states that exhibited higher strategic convergence and greater willingness to enhance maritime deterrence capabilities (Hughes, 2022; Sakaki, 2025; Shoji, 2024; Suh, 2024).

4.1.4. Establishment of Official Security Assistance (2023)

The ultimate structural shift in Japan's toolkit occurred with the establishment of Official Security Assistance (OSA) in April 2023 (JMOFA, 2024; Shoji, 2024). Designed explicitly for the armed forces and security institutions of "like-minded countries," OSA operates completely separate from socio-economic ODA (JMOFA, 2024; Shoji, 2024). By enabling the direct provision of military-grade defense material, coastal surveillance radar systems, and defense infrastructure, OSA demonstrates that Tokyo has formally uncoupled military assistance from civilian development aid (Shoji, 2024). This confirms that Japan's strategic recalibration is not merely a discursive adaptation, but a fundamental restructuring of its state policy toolkit to execute a proactive, networked security role in Southeast Asia (JMOFA, 2024; Shoji, 2024). The successive changes in Japan's maritime security instruments are summarized in Table 1, highlighting the transition from development cooperation and defense capacity building to the OSA framework.

Table 1. Japan's Security Policy Milestones (2015–2023)

Year	Policy Framework	Core Focus	Practical Output / Instruments
2015	ODA Charter Revision	Strategic use of civilian / quasi-security aid	Patrol vessels, Coast Guard capacity building & maritime safety equipment
2016 / 2019	Vientiane Vision I & II	Roadmap for ASEAN defense capacity building	Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) training & defense exchanges
2022	Security Trilogy (NSS / NDS / DBP)	Hardened security assessment; "like-minded" focus	Strategic posture reorientation towards regional deterrence
2023	OSA Framework	Equipment grants to armed forces and related security institutions	Direct military-grade transfers (e.g., coastal surveillance radar systems)

4.2. Comparative Analysis: The Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia

The empirical evidence demonstrates that Japan does not deploy a uniform security template across Southeast Asia (H. S. Nguyen, 2013; Shoji, 2024). Rather, Tokyo strategically calibrates its maritime engagement—adjusting the degree, functional scope, and hard-security intensity of its minilateral and bilateral linkages—to match the structural alignment, institutional constraints, and strategic risk tolerances of individual littoral states (Sakaki, 2025; Shigenoi, 2022b; Shoji, 2024). The distinct trajectories of the Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia illustrate how Japan's "strategic minilateralism" shifts along a continuum ranging from alliance-adjacent hard defense integration to soft capacity-building and non-traditional sea-lane governance (Hughes, 2022; JMOFA, 2024; Shoji, 2024).

4.2.1. The Philippines

The Philippines serves as the primary operational anchor for Japan's most militarized and structurally integrated security cooperation in Southeast Asia (Ashley & Fraser, 2023; Sakaki, 2025; Shoji, 2024). Driven by Manila's position as a formal U.S. treaty ally and an active claimant state directly confronting high-intensity maritime coercion in the South China Sea, the bilateral strategic alignment exhibits near-total convergence with Tokyo's vision of active deterrence and rules-based enforcement (Ashley & Fraser, 2023; Japan & Philippines, 2023; Shoji, 2024).

In response to Manila's explicit appetite for collective defense capabilities, Japan's strategy has evolved from initial civilian maritime support toward Alliance-Adjacent Hard Security Minilateralism (Shoji, 2024; Singh, 2021a):

Evolution of Capabilities: While earlier assistance centered on civilian law enforcement via JICA-funded Official Development Assistance—providing 10 Multi-Role Response Vessels and two 97-metre multi-role response vessels to the Philippine Coast Guard (Japan International Cooperation Agency, 2024; Ashley & Fraser, 2023)—Tokyo subsequently upgraded this posture following the launch of Official Security Assistance (OSA) in 2023 (JMOFA, 2024; Shoji, 2024).

Hard Defense Transfers: By designating the Philippines as one of the first FY2023 OSA recipients, Japan committed ¥600 million under its FY2023 OSA programme to provide coastal radar systems to the Philippine Navy, marking a clear shift from civilian maritime aid toward direct assistance to a partner country's armed forces (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2023; JMOFA, 2024; Shoji, 2024).

Institutionalization: This hard-security trajectory culminated in the signing of the landmark Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) in July 2024, establishing legal and administrative procedures for visits by the two countries' forces and facilitating joint exercises, training, humanitarian assistance, and other mutually agreed cooperative activities (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2024; Sakaki, 2025; Shoji, 2024).

Crucially, this structural posture enables Tokyo to seamlessly plug Manila into broader Indo-Pacific minilateral networks, most notably the Japan–U.S.–Philippines trilateral framework and expanding Quad-adjacent maritime domain awareness exercises (Hughes, 2022; Pajon, 2019; Shoji, 2024; Wilkins, 2023). Because the Philippines possesses the constitutional and geopolitical latitude to absorb military-grade deterrence instruments, Japan leverages Manila to operationalize the "inner operational layer" of regional maritime security in its most direct and militarized form (Shoji, 2024; Wilkins, 2023).

4.2.2. Vietnam

In sharp contrast to Manila, Vietnam's interaction with Japan's maritime recalibration is conditioned by Hanoi's strict "Four No's" defense policy and its imperative to maintain strategic equilibrium amid intense proximity to China (Ministry of National Defence of Viet Nam, 2019; K. G. Nguyen, 2022; Phan, 2022). While Vietnam is an active South China Sea claimant with high threat perceptions regarding maritime sovereignty, its institutionalized non-alignment prevents it from entering formal defense alliances or joining anti-China containment blocs (Hughes, 2022; Phan, 2022; Shoji, 2020).

Recognizing Hanoi's strategic constraints, Japan adjusts its engagement toward a Soft Minilateralism / Civil-Military Capacity-Building Framework (Hughes, 2022; Phan, 2022; Shoji, 2024):

Focus on Law Enforcement: Rather than pushing for direct military alliance integration, Tokyo focuses its resources on strengthening the Vietnam Coast Guard (VCG) and Fisheries Resources Surveillance agencies (Hughes, 2022; Phan, 2022; Shoji, 2024; Singh, 2021b).

Targeted Asset Provision: Under a ¥36.626 billion JICA ODA loan agreed in 2020, Japan financed the procurement of six 79-metre offshore patrol vessels for the Vietnam Coast Guard, alongside earlier transfers of used patrol vessels and maritime law-enforcement capacity building (Japan International Cooperation Agency, 2020; Phan, 2022; Shoji, 2024).

Normative Frameworks: The elevation of bilateral ties to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) in late 2023 anchored maritime cooperation strictly within UNCLOS 1982, freedom of navigation, and diplomatic dispute resolution (JMOFA, 2024).

This carefully calibrated posture allows Japan to achieve soft-balancing objectives without forcing Hanoi into geopolitical overextension (Phan, 2022; Singh, 2021a). In the minilateral domain, Vietnam engages with Japan and regional partners primarily through functional, issue-specific arrangements—such as information-sharing networks and coast-guard capacity exchanges—that enhance maritime domain awareness while preserving Hanoi's strategic autonomy (Hughes, 2022; Shoji, 2024; Wilkins, 2023).

4.2.3. Indonesia

As the largest archipelagic state in ASEAN, Indonesia presents a distinct structural model centered on non-traditional maritime governance and strategic sea-lane security (H. S. Nguyen, 2013; Irsadanar, 2023; Raj, 2009). Jakarta's foreign and security policies are fundamentally anchored in its traditional bebas-aktif (free and active) doctrine, prioritizing archipelagic integrity, regional connectivity, and the safeguarding of vital sea lines of communication (SLOCs)—specifically key chokepoints such as the Malacca, Sunda, and Lombok Straits—against non-traditional maritime threats including piracy, illegal fishing, and transnational trafficking (H. S. Nguyen, 2013; Raj, 2009).

Consequently, Japan adapts its policy to construct an Archipelagic / Non-Traditional Minilateralism Framework (H. S. Nguyen, 2013; JMOFA, 2024; Shoji, 2024):

Capacity and Safety Infrastructure: Japanese assistance to Indonesia emphasizes institutional capacity building for the Indonesian Maritime Security Agency (BAKAMLA), the installation of advanced Vessel Traffic Service (VTS) systems in strategic straits, and long-term technical expert dispatches (H. S. Nguyen, 2013; Raj, 2009; Shoji, 2024).

Indo-Pacific Synergy: Under the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, Japan aligns its Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision with Indonesia's leadership in the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), framing maritime security around economic connectivity, disaster relief, and maritime safety (Irsadanar, 2023; JMOFA, 2024; Suh, 2024).

For Jakarta, minilateral cooperation with Tokyo is functional and non-confrontational, channeled through multi-agency coast guard dialogues, bilateral maritime-security mechanisms, selected operational cooperation with the ReCAAP Information Sharing Centre, and joint search-and-rescue activities (ReCAAP Information Sharing Centre, 2014; Raj, 2009; Shoji, 2024). By respecting Indonesia's non-aligned stance, Japan secures vital shipping corridors and embeds its presence in the broader archipelagic space without provoking institutional pushback from Jakarta (Irsadanar, 2023; Shoji, 2024). Table 2 compares the geopolitical profiles, cooperation mechanisms, and operational emphases of Japan's maritime security engagement with the Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia.

Table 2. Comparative Empirical Matrix of Japan's Calibrated Maritime Strategy

Criterion	The Philippines	Vietnam	Indonesia
Geopolitical & Institutional Profile	U.S. Treaty Ally; Active Claimant	Non-aligned Claimant; "Four No's" Defense Doctrine	Non-aligned archipelagic state; non-claimant to disputed islands, with North Natuna sovereign-rights concerns
Dominant Model of Minilateralism	Hard Security / Alliance-Adjacent	Soft Security / Maritime Law Enforcement	Non-Traditional Security / SLOC Governance
Primary Policy Instruments	ODA + OSA + Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA)	ODA + Defense Capacity Building + CSP Framework	ODA + Safety Exercises + SLOC Connectivity Framework
Minilateral Channels & Operational Outcomes	Japan–U.S.–Philippines Trilateral; Quad-adjacent MDA; Radar grants & troop deployments	Multi-agency Coast Guard exchanges; Functional MDA networks; Patrol vessel transfers	Selected cooperation with ReCAAP ISC; Multi-lateral Coast Guard forums; VTS systems & Straits safety
Securitization Level	High: Direct military hardware, surveillance integration, and troop access	Medium-High: Focus on civilian law enforcement & sovereignty capacity	Medium: Focus on straits safety, non-traditional security & connectivity

5. Discussion: Theoretical Implications, Drivers, and Structural Limits

As Japan recalibrates its maritime security strategy in Southeast Asia by combining support for regional legitimacy with selective operational cooperation (Shoji, 2020, 2024), the crucial analytical question is why Tokyo has pursued this dual-track path and under what structural conditions that choice is constrained. In essence, the rise of strategic minilateralism in Japan's maritime policy is not an accidental or ad-hoc development; rather, it represents the strategic intersection of three major structural drivers: changes in Tokyo's assessment of regional deterrence requirements (JMOD, 2022b; Shoji, 2024), the institutional limitations of ASEAN-led mechanisms (Baker, 2023; Koga, 2023; Shoji, 2024), and the operational imperative to enhance implementation effectiveness in an increasingly complex maritime domain (JMOD, 2022b; JMOFA, 2024; Shoji, 2024). At the same time, precisely because it is a

highly functional and selective strategy, it remains bound by political, normative, and material limits that cannot be overlooked (K. G. Nguyen, 2022; Shigenoi, 2022b; Shoji, 2024; Suh, 2024).

5.1. Drivers of Strategic Minilateralism: The Functional Gap

First and foremost, this strategic recalibration stems from a fundamental shift in Japan's perception of the regional security environment. Tokyo's 2022 national security documents show that Japan no longer views maritime challenges in Southeast Asia as a collection of isolated non-traditional security issues, but instead places them firmly within the broader framework of strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific (Government of Japan, 2022; JMOD, 2022b). The National Defense Strategy (JMOD, 2022b) explicitly asserts that Japan's national security is directly linked to maintaining the stable use of vital sea lines of communication (SLOCs), while warning that the South China Sea has become a primary arena where China is intensifying unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force. The document emphasizes that Japan must promote maritime security cooperation under the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision alongside allies, like-minded countries, and coastal states across the Indo-Pacific (JMOD, 2022b). Consequently, maritime security cooperation with Southeast Asian littoral states is no longer viewed in Tokyo as merely a supplementary foreign policy initiative, but as an integral component of Japan's core national defense strategy (Hughes, 2022).

This shift in strategic assessment generated a second key driver: Japan's operational need for smaller, more flexible, and highly responsive cooperation mechanisms than broad multilateral institutions can provide (Shoji, 2024; Tow, 2019). The core problem is that, although ASEAN continues to retain institutional centrality in terms of regional legitimacy, it does not always deliver a corresponding level of implementation effectiveness when addressing sensitive maritime security contingencies (Baker, 2023; Shoji, 2024; Tow, 2019). The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) affirms ASEAN centrality as a foundational principle and emphasizes ASEAN-led mechanisms as platforms for dialogue (ASEAN, 2019; Shoji, 2024). Yet the AOIP also reflects a normative preference for dialogue, consensus, and inclusivity over security arrangements that are binding or highly selective (Suh, 2024). In other words, ASEAN is exceptionally effective at generating diplomatic legitimacy, providing strategic reassurance, and shaping regional discourse, but it remains structurally constrained when executing concrete, actionable security responses—particularly when member states possess divergent threat perceptions regarding China (Po, 2023; Shoji, 2024; Suh, 2024).

It is precisely in this gap between legitimacy generation and operational effectiveness that strategic minilateralism has emerged as a pragmatic solution for Tokyo (Shoji, 2024; Tow, 2019). The logic is clearly illustrated in Japan's Vientiane Vision 2.0 (2019). While the document reaffirmed support for ASEAN's unity and centrality, it simultaneously called for "further practical cooperation" tailored to specific operational needs (JMOD, 2016; Shoji, 2020, 2024). What emerges here is a crucial theoretical insight: Tokyo does not reject the value of ASEAN-led multilateralism; rather, it acknowledges that achieving strategic effectiveness in the maritime domain requires relying on cooperative networks that are smaller in scale, less dependent on collective consensus, and more adaptable to individual partner states (Shoji, 2024; Tow, 2019).

The third driver stems from strategic differentiation within Southeast Asia itself. In practice, Japan cannot apply a single, uniform model of maritime security cooperation across all ten ASEAN member states (H. S. Nguyen, 2013; Shoji, 2024). As demonstrated by the empirical cases, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia occupy distinct geopolitical positions, hold different security priorities, and possess varying degrees of risk tolerance (Sakaki, 2025; Shigenoi, 2022b; Shoji, 2024). In this context, strategic minilateralism enables Tokyo to accomplish what ASEAN-wide multilateralism struggles to deliver: the ability to select partners, prioritize specific security domains, and calibrate levels of assistance (H. S. Nguyen, 2013; Shigenoi, 2022a; Shoji, 2024). The 2023 OSA policy reflects this logic directly, as MOFA defines OSA as a new framework specifically designed for the armed forces of "like-minded countries" to enhance deterrence and surveillance capabilities (Government of Japan, 2022; JMOFA, 2024; Shoji, 2024). This definition confirms that OSA is not an inclusive, all-partner mechanism, but a highly selective strategic instrument (JMOFA, 2024; Shoji, 2024).

5.2. Structural Limits and Strategic Reassurance

However, focusing solely on these drivers would risk overstating the coherence and unconstrained nature of Japan's strategy. In reality, Tokyo's strategic minilateralism in Southeast Asia operates under three significant political, normative, and material limitations.

The first limitation is political and normative in nature. Japan cannot openly behave as if ASEAN no longer matters for regional governance (Sakaki, 2025; Shoji, 2024). Tokyo's diplomatic efforts to align its FOIP vision with the AOIP demonstrate a careful, deliberate effort to ensure strategic compatibility (ASEAN & JMOFA, 2020; Sakaki, 2025; Shoji, 2024; Suh, 2024). This reflects a basic geopolitical reality: any Japanese shift toward selective cooperation must be wrapped in a narrative that reaffirms ASEAN centrality; otherwise, Tokyo would risk being perceived as an external power undermining regional cohesion or attempting to construct anti-China containment blocs (Chanborey & Chansambath, 2022; Sakaki, 2025). Consequently, strategic minilateralism cannot develop in open opposition to ASEAN, but must function under the guise of "complementing," "supporting," or "operationalizing" ASEAN's normative framework (Pajon, 2019; Sakaki, 2025; Yoshimatsu, 2023).

The second limitation concerns the receptive capacity and hedging behavior of Southeast Asian partners. Not every state in the region is willing to accelerate the securitization of its bilateral ties with Tokyo (Hughes, 2016; Koga, 2023; Shigenoi, 2022b). While littoral states readily accept Coast Guard vessels, radar equipment, and capacity-building assistance to enhance their own sovereignty enforcement (Ashley & Fraser, 2023; Singh, 2021b), this does not imply a willingness to join formal military alignments or be integrated into anti-China balancing coalitions (Hughes, 2016; Shoji, 2020). As a result, Japan's strategic minilateralism possesses a clear structural upper limit: it can expand rapidly at the technical, functional, and capacity-building levels (Quilop, 2023; Shoji, 2024), but it is unlikely to transform into a hard defense alliance in the traditional sense (Koga, 2023; Quilop, 2023; Shigenoi, 2022a).

The third limitation lies in Japan's own material capabilities and constitutional boundaries. Although Tokyo has adopted a significantly more proactive defense posture, Japan is not a traditional military power capable of unilaterally restructuring Southeast Asia's maritime security environment (Irsadanar, 2023; Singh, 2021b). Its security tools—from the strategicization of ODA (Japan's Cabinet, 1992, 2015; Singh, 2021a, 2021b), to the Vientiane Vision (JMOD, 2016; Shoji, 2024), and OSA (JMOFA, 2024)—are effective for strengthening partner resilience and domain awareness (Sakaki, 2025; Shoji, 2024), but they cannot replace the primary hard deterrence provided by the U.S. alliance network, nor can they independently resolve South China Sea territorial disputes (Sakaki, 2025; Shoji, 2024; Singh, 2021a, 2021b). Strategic minilateralism should therefore be understood as an adaptive, network-building strategy under structural constraints rather than a total replacement for regional multilateralism (Sakaki, 2025; Shoji, 2024).

5.3. Reconceptualizing Regional Order: Functional Layering of ASEAN Centrality

Beyond state-level strategy, Japan's recalibration serves as an important empirical indicator of a broader transformation in Southeast Asia's maritime security order. Whereas ASEAN centrality was historically understood as ASEAN holding the leading role across all dialogue, confidence-building, and security implementation mechanisms (Koga, 2023; Shoji, 2020), the concept is undergoing a fundamental functional redefinition. ASEAN continues to hold centrality in terms of institutional legitimacy and political inclusivity (Baker, 2023; Yoshimatsu, 2023; Zhang, 2023), but the substantive, operational layer of maritime security cooperation is increasingly being executed through smaller, flexible, and targeted minilateral arrangements (Baker, 2023; Shoji, 2024; Wilkins, 2023).

This structural evolution has given rise to a Functionally Layered Maritime Security Order in Southeast Asia:

The Normative Outer Layer: Comprises broad, inclusive institutions such as the ARF, EAS, ADMM-Plus, and EAMF (Baker, 2023; Sakaki, 2025). This layer guarantees political inclusiveness, prevents regional polarization, and provides strategic reassurance.

The Operational Inner Layer: Comprises bilateral security partnerships, OSA hardware transfers, and targeted minilateral networks (JMOFA, 2024; Shoji, 2024; Wilkins, 2023). This layer delivers actionable capabilities, maritime domain awareness, and operational responsiveness.

Within this layered architecture, Japan operates as a networked security actor (Колдунова, 2021). Tokyo does not seek to replace ASEAN with a rigid alliance system; instead, it weaves together multiple tiers of cooperation utilizing ASEAN as an organizational legitimacy anchor, bilateral partnerships for targeted capacity building, and broader Indo-Pacific minilaterals (Quad, trilateral frameworks) for strategic alignment (Hughes, 2022; Pajon, 2019; Shoji, 2024).

In conclusion, the transformation of Southeast Asia's maritime order is unfolding not through the collapse or abandonment of ASEAN, but through the refunctionalization of ASEAN centrality. ASEAN remains the indispensable center for normative discourse and political legitimacy, while minilateral mechanisms assume the responsibility for substantive security implementation (Baker, 2023; Koga, 2023; Shoji, 2024; Wilkins, 2023). Japan's policy of combining discourse-level support for ASEAN with practical strategic minilateralism stands as one of the most significant drivers of this emerging layered regional order (Bradford, 2021; Sakaki, 2025; Shoji, 2024).

6. Conclusion

The article has shown that Japan's recalibration of its maritime security strategy in Southeast Asia does not represent a shift away from ASEAN centrality, but rather a process of refunctionalizing this principle within a rapidly changing regional environment. ASEAN continues to be maintained by Tokyo as a source of institutional legitimacy, a foundation for political reassurance, and a legitimate space through which to expand its security presence. At the level of practical implementation, however, Japan has increasingly relied on selective bilateral and minilateral forms of cooperation in order to enhance strategic effectiveness in the maritime domain. Through an analysis of Japan's key security, defense, and foreign policy documents, the article has argued that this adjustment is driven by three main factors: changes in Tokyo's threat perceptions, the limitations of ASEAN-led mechanisms, and the need for greater flexibility in responding to an increasingly complex maritime environment. At the same time, this strategy is also constrained by political and normative considerations, the uneven degree of readiness among Southeast Asian partners, and the limits of Japan's own role within the regional security architecture.

Basically, the article contends that Japan's strategic adjustment provides evidence of an emerging tendency toward a more functionally layered maritime security order in Southeast Asia rather than proof of a completed region-wide transformation. ASEAN continues to occupy a central role in normative legitimacy, political reassurance, and inclusive regional dialogue, while bilateral and minilateral mechanisms increasingly perform selected implementation functions in maritime security cooperation. The evidence from the Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia therefore supports a cautious interpretation: functional layering is developing unevenly across the region and remains conditioned by national preferences, institutional constraints, and the continuing importance of ASEAN-led mechanisms.

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