



**SOUTHEAST ASIA'S MARITIME  
SECURITY SHOULD BE A US-JAPAN  
ALLIANCE AGENDA**

BY JOHN BRADFORD

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Rule of law is essential to ensuring the prosperity of Southeast Asia, a region rich in maritime resources, home to essential marine ecosystems, and the location of the world's busiest sea lanes.

Unfortunately, state and non-state actors in this region exploit weak governance to undermine the security and well-being of those who make legal use of the sea. State-level contests over sovereignty and administrative control of key waters dominate maritime security policy discourse, while activities such as illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing; smuggling; terrorism; plus piracy and sea robbery pose direct challenges to coastal communities' immediate sustenance and safety. Rising interstate tension, rapidly depleting fish stocks, and an increasing rate of natural disasters are all troubling trends likely to drive any of these problems into crises with global implications. All of these threats thrive in

the waters under the jurisdiction of states with limited capacity for maritime governance.

To address these challenges and preserve their own maritime interests, the United States and Japan, wealthy nations already bound by an alliance, should prioritize regional maritime governance capacity-building as an area of joint work. Cooperative capacity-building projects should take center stage to address the full range of Southeast Asian maritime challenges. This strategy should maintain focus on military competition, while significantly expanding activities to enable the maritime governance challenges prioritized by the coastal states.

While various states have been accused of undermining good order at sea through actions that are non-compliant with the rule of law, China remains the most frequent and most aggressive culprit in the Indo-Pacific. However, when the People's Republic of China is faced with strength, it can be deterred from direct action. In these cases, China has demonstrated a track record of resorting to "gray-zone" strategies that use incremental steps to advance the Chinese agenda, while keeping each step small enough to remain below the threshold that would trigger an armed response or other crisis. Because these steps exploit weak governance and disregard the rule of law, the sort of capacity coastal states employ in response to non-state criminal threats, also enables stronger responses to Chinese behavior. To this end, any maritime governance capability is valuable. Capabilities best suited for one governance activity can also be applied in others or free up resources that are used inefficiently. Because maritime domain awareness capabilities are often highly fungible and enable smart decisions, they are extremely valuable.

Japan and the United States are already large-scale investors in Southeast Asia maritime capacity-building, but they could achieve more through cooperation. While the allocation of additional resources would be welcome, fiscal constraints suggest that there is more to gain from improving the efficiency of the resources already budgeted. By sharing information, coordinating activities, leveraging each other's comparative strengths, and establishing joint projects, the US-Japan partnership

can gain greater efficiencies. US-Japan alliance conversations about cooperative capacity building in the region are not new, but achievements are limited thus far.

Part of the problem is a lack of sustained alliance leadership focus. Once an agenda item identified as a bilateral priority by US President Barack Obama and Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, cooperative maritime security capacity building disappeared from senior alliance leaders' statements mid-way through the Donald Trump administration, and has not yet reappeared. While diplomats and action officers continue to advance this line of effort, without a clear top-down push, institutional urgency is lost and achievements piecemeal. Those individuals pushing ahead most vigorously can be inhibited by mid-level leaders focused on other priorities, stove-piped bureaucracy, and a lack of cross-levelled information from within their own governments.

A US-Japan alliance agenda that supports regional maritime governance capacity-building should include specific elements to maximize its effectiveness.

First, priority should be given to projects focused on coordinating maritime infrastructure, environmental protection, resource management, domain awareness, and law enforcement. The allies should share information about their defense capacity-building projects and, as they are doing currently, coordinate them on a case-by-case basis. To avoid endangering Japan's current status as a viable "third option" for coastal states seeking to strengthen external security partnerships without being drawn into the US-China competition, military capacity should be held at the edges of this alliance-based maritime capacity-building agenda.

Second, a senior coordination committee should be established to overcome interagency dysfunction, set the prioritization needed to find resources, and sustain implementation-level energy in large bureaucracies. It should be a regional committee chaired by the US National Security Council Indo-Pacific Coordinator and a counterpart from the National Security Secretariat.

Third, working-level coordination should be centered in the coastal states' capitals. When coordination takes place in Washington or Tokyo, it lacks the immediate and sustained interface with the coastal states' leadership that is needed to understand their priorities and secure buy-in.

Fourth, only once these elements are up-and-running should additional nations and organizations be brought into the partnership. While it will be tempting to bring additional partners into the process, doing so too early will water down discussions, create distractions, and push policy actions toward the lowest common denominator. Similar focused capacity-building effort would also make sense in South Asia and the Pacific, but those should include coordination with India and Australia, respectively.

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