

Seminar on “Japan in Southeast Asia”

Kei Koga, Nanyang Technological University

Nobuhiro Aizawa, Kyushu University

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Discussants:

Kei Koga, Assistant Professor, Nanyang Technological University

Nobuhiro Aizawa, Associate Professor, Kyushu University

Yuki Tatsumi (Moderator), Director, Japan Program; Senior Associate, East Asia Program, Stimson Center

Richard Cronin, Distinguished Fellow, Stimson Center

Website:

<https://www.stimson.org/content/japan-southeast-asia>

The Stimson Center hosted a seminar featuring Kei Koga, Assistant Professor at Nanyang Technological University, and Nobuhiro Aizawa, Associate Professor at Kyushu University, to discuss their research on Japan’s peacebuilding activities in Southeast Asia. They were joined by Richard Cronin, a Distinguished Fellow at Stimson who was previously Director of the Southeast Asia Program. Yuki Tatsumi, Director of Stimson’s Japan Program, introduced the speakers and moderated the discussion.

Koga began with a discussion of his research so far, which focuses on the development of Japan’s policies towards Southeast Asia over time. He emphasized that though China’s rise gives a new context for Japan’s engagement with Southeast Asia, Japan’s work in the region is decades old. Japan’s bilateral relationships with Southeast Asian countries have evolved to include security cooperation, particularly under the Abe administration and in part due to China, but also have deep economic ties. Japan’s efforts to engage on security issues are not only to reassure Southeast Asian countries that Japan’s security policies are non-threatening, but also to help these countries to increase their own capabilities.

Koga identified Japan’s diplomacy with ASEAN as a significant source of continuity in Japan-Southeast Asia relations. Japan has supported ASEAN’s central role in Southeast Asia since the 1970s, and has used ASEAN to promote democratic and liberal values in Southeast Asia, though never with enough pressure to break down communication. Koga described the relationship with ASEAN as Japan’s method of showing respect for the Southeast Asian regional frameworks. He noted that ASEAN is an example of small and middle power diplomacy with multiple greater powers, including China and the U.S., so ASEAN members can hedge their diplomatic engagement, but then questioned whether this situation will be sustainable, particularly if the U.S. reduces its commitment to East Asia in order to focus on another region, such as the Middle East. In that case, Koga argued, Japan’s relationship with ASEAN might become more important to Southeast Asia.

Aizawa then discussed his own research. He pointed out that Japanese nationals and expatriates in Southeast Asia have developed relationships and networks in the region, but that there remained the challenge of how to strengthen ties in the face of many changes. Because of China’s increasing regional power, Southeast Asian countries now have more considerations in terms of which countries will contribute to regional security. In particular, Southeast Asia looks to Syria as an example of great powers

fighting for their geopolitical interests in the international arena. Aizawa stated that Southeast Asian countries will act pragmatically to assess and face the changing regional and world order. He also noted changes within Southeast Asian countries, including the shift to viewing development as the measure of political success. Along with economic development, Southeast Asian countries are also experiencing urbanization, increasing economic inequalities, and broader use of information technology, thus changing the characteristics of voters and their concerns. Aizawa suggested looking more closely at local politicians, including mayors and governors, who represent a trend of new leadership in Southeast Asia.

Tatsumi invited Cronin to share his thoughts on the issues that Koga and Aizawa raised and on U.S. perceptions of developments in Southeast Asia. The U.S. faces challenges in the region, including difficulty in implementing the Transpacific Partnership. Cronin pointed out that President Duterte of the Philippines resembles a number of new leaders in other regions such as Latin America, in that his leadership is not particularly sophisticated, but he can still pose a challenge to President Obama's rebalance to Asia. Cronin mentioned that ASEAN's pragmatism would not challenge the U.S.'s diplomacy in Asia, given the U.S.'s strong ties in other areas with Asia, from political to economic to military.

Regarding Japan's role in Southeast Asia, Cronin stated that Japan and the U.S. have a supportive and complementary relationship, despite the asymmetry in Japanese and American business models, trade policies, and government structures. He offered the example of the Asian Development Bank to demonstrate the U.S.'s support for Japan's activities to reintegrate Southeast Asia, as well as Japanese and U.S. initiatives in the southern sub-corridor of the Greater Mekong Subregion. But Southeast Asian countries also face challenges for future development. Past development initiatives, such as exporting or offshore manufacturing, are not sustainable in the long-term, so Cronin asked whether Japan could help these countries reconfigure their development.

Cronin asked Koga how Japan frames its cooperation with the U.S. in Asia. Koga responded that the U.S.-Japan alliance is a point of convergence for U.S.-Japan cooperation in Asia, but that the differences in American and Japanese approaches to business and aid can have complementary roles, sometimes within the same projects, such as disaster relief. In addition, some countries, depending on the type of peacebuilding or assistance they need, view Japan or the U.S. more positively. Cronin asked Aizawa how Southeast Asian countries react to Japanese aid offers, and the implicit competition between China and Japan in Southeast Asia. Aizawa replied that Southeast Asian countries view Japanese aid projects as better in terms of quality, and with good financial packages, but that the process is seen as very slow compared to Chinese projects. He noted that politicians in Southeast Asia must be mindful of the timeline of projects so that they can show results to the public to support their own reelection bids. Japan wants to speed up the process, but still wants to maintain quality as Japan's comparative advantage and selling point.

Tatsumi opened up the discussion to the audience for a question and answer session. Gilbert Rozman asked whether Japan perceived its relations with Southeast Asia as worsening, particularly with various Southeast Asian leaders making overtures to China. Aizawa noted that media coverage of Duterte's visit to Japan was positive and reinforced a sense that Southeast Asia has strong ties with Japan. Koga agreed and emphasized the pragmatic decision-making of Southeast Asian countries, which will choose the most cost-effective partner for necessary activities like military modernization. He did state that the bilateral relationship between individual Southeast Asian countries and China is tense in several cases. Cronin added that Duterte's visit to China places the burden on China to compromise with the Philippines on issues of contention.

Peter Lyon asked about the Japanese public's perception of arms exports and other joint military development initiatives. Koga cautioned that Japan's equipment has not been battle-tested, which might impact arms exports. Aizawa suggested that Japan strengthen its relationships outside the U.S.-Japan alliance, especially with partners in Southeast Asia. Tatsumi added that most countries in Southeast Asia, with the exception of Singapore, will not be able to afford Japan's high-end arms, but Japan might be able to offer training and maintenance for American equipment used in the region, due to U.S.-Japan interoperability.

Muthiah Alagappa asked where Southeast Asia fits into Japan's strategy, if there is such a strategy. Koga answered that Japan does have a strategy, which has changed in recent years to diversify Japan's partnerships and strengthen relations with Southeast Asia. Beginning in the 1990s, especially, Japan increased diplomatic outreach in Southeast Asia. Whether these relationships develop into something more like alliances is less certain, but positive perceptions of Japan in Southeast Asia have helped Japan provide assistance in traditional and nontraditional security crises in the region. Aizawa described Japan's strategy and core interest in the region as the maintenance of the liberal order, especially between small and middle powers. He asserted that Japanese investment is drawn to Southeast Asia because of the risk of doing business in China and the huge potential in Southeast Asia.

Prashanth Parameswaran asked the discussants to elaborate on the challenges Japan faces in engaging with Southeast Asia, and whether they had recommendations for Japan to reinvigorate its ties with Southeast Asia. Koga noted that if Japan were to become too intrusive in its relationships with Southeast Asian countries, such as regarding democracy, those countries might develop more negative perceptions of Japan and refuse to deepen ties. For that reason, Japan's current diplomatic efforts are the best approach to maintain productive ties with Southeast Asia. Aizawa added that the Japanese government and private sector do not always have the same objectives and interests, and the rigid government structure in Japan can slow down potential deals in Southeast Asian countries.

Tatsumi thanked the audience and panelists for the discussion and closed the seminar.