

Interview – Kei Koga

Written by E-International Relations

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Kei Koga is Assistant Professor at the Public Policy and Global Affairs Programme, School of Social Sciences, Nanyang Technological University (NTU). His research focuses on IR theory, international security, international institutions, and East Asian security, including transformation of U.S.-bilateral security networks and ASEAN-led institutions in the Indo-Pacific region. Previously, he was visiting fellow at Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in 2017; a Japan-U.S. Partnership Fellow at the Research Institute for Peace and Security (RIPS), Tokyo, in 2012-2014; a Postdoctoral Fellow in the International Studies Program, The Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, in 2012-2013; a Vasey Fellow at the Pacific Forum CSIS in 2009–2010; and RSIS-MacArthur visiting Associate Fellow at S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), NTU in 2010. He received his PhD in International Relations at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University. His recent publications include the book *Reinventing Regional Security Institutions in Asia and Africa* and several journal articles, *Japan's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" Strategy: Tokyo's Tactical Hedging and the Implications for ASEAN*, *The Concept of "Hedging" Revisited: The Case of Japan's Foreign Policy Strategy in East Asia's Power Shift* and *ASEAN's Evolving Institutional Strategy: Managing Great Power Politics in South China Sea Disputes*. His current book project is *Managing Great Power Politics: ASEAN, Institutional Strategy, and South China Sea*.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

My research focus is on international strategic cooperation, regional institutions, and regional security, particularly East Asia/Indo-Pacific. Given the intensification of great power rivalry, many regions are experiencing alignment or realignment bilaterally, unilaterally, and multilaterally. In East Asia, the emergence of a new geographical concept, the Indo-Pacific, has shaped regional states' strategic perspectives. China has gained military and economic capabilities and Xi Jinping launched an expansive strategic vision, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which drew attention from policy and academic worlds. In response, Japan, the United States, Australia, and India have begun to emphasize the importance of regional stability in the Indo-Pacific region and seek strategic alignment, forming the so-called "QUAD." The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) attempted to mitigate explicit great power rivalry by formulating its broad vision, ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). This on-going change in the strategic environment is surely challenging because it will be a source of international instability. At the same time, it is a very exciting moment for academics to contribute to deepening policy debates by informing, testing, and verifying theories and constructing new ones.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

There are so many brilliant researchers and scholars I admire (senior, junior, students, etc.) and so many international events, such as 9/11, ASEAN's institutional evolution, China's "assertive" rise, Japan's expanding strategic horizon, and tensions in the South China Sea, which shaped my research focus and interests. So, I don't think it is feasible to list them all here. But fundamentally, my understanding of the world is founded on my undergraduate and graduate experiences in the United States as well as my work experiences in Japanese think-tanks. I should say that none of them has completely determined my own view, but these experiences greatly shaped my own thinking – I gained theoretical knowledge and conceptual frameworks of international relations at university

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and had chances to apply them to the real world in think tanks, formulating my own world view.

I have been more and more interested in the theme of ‘change’ in international politics – be it a power shift, policy shift, or institutional change. This is partly because most IR theories focus on consistency – what persists in the international politics. My initial interests in change culminated in my first book, *Reinventing Regional Security Institutions in Asia and Africa: Power shifts, ideas, and institutional change*. I am continuing to understand institutional changes in regional security institutions and expanding my research scope to understand changes in alignment in regional security. So, the theme of ‘change’ remains my research focus.

How has ASEAN’s role in East Asian security changed in recent years?

ASEAN’s role in East Asian security has been changing since the early 1990s, when ASEAN started to touch upon security issues by providing forums for regional powers, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, facilitating Asian understanding of multilateralism through the proliferation of ASEAN-led platforms, and promoting its institutional principle of ‘ASEAN Centrality.’ The initial phase of this ASEAN multilateralism created a certain hope in Asia, by which the region would be able to manage strategic uncertainty and maintain stability through dialogue. However, over time, states in the region began to realize that ASEAN was unable to meet such expectations. ASEAN’s utility began to be confined to its ‘convening power’ and intra-Southeast Asian stability. Although ASEAN has also continuously attempted to tackle difficult security issues, including the South China Sea and terrorism.

Currently, new security challenges are emerging for ASEAN because of the intensification of US-China rivalry. While China pushed its own strategic initiative, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a new geographical concept of the Indo-Pacific has been pushed forward by major regional powers, including Australia, Japan, and the United States, and the concept is gaining currency within strategic narratives. In response, ASEAN presented the ‘ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific’ by emphasizing its institutional importance, particularly in the form of ASEAN Centrality. However, given the intensification of great power rivalry, ASEAN faces a danger of being strategically marginalized. To overcome this, ASEAN needs to articulate its strategic vision, action plans, and new initiatives in the Indo-Pacific.

How has ASEAN responded to the intensifying US-China rivalry and the outbreak of COVID-19?

With Vietnam’s chairmanship in 2020, ASEAN has attempted to strike a fine balance between pursuing pragmatic cooperation with both China and the United States and eschewing the entrapment of the great power rivalry. In fact, ASEAN had convened conferences and video-conferences with many great powers in tackling the COVID-19 pandemic. Obviously, its institutional responses were not optimal. For example, the member states’ initial responses were different, and it was only after WHO’s declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic that ASEAN as a regional institution seriously tackled the pandemic. Some ASEAN member states, namely the Philippines and Indonesia, currently face a second wave, resulting in the rapid rise of infection and fatalities numbers. However, since January 2019, ASEAN has held several meetings, including ASEAN-Plus-Three and ASEAN-US ministerial meetings, facilitating information exchanges and the provision of emergency health assistance. As such, although there is still room for improvement, such as the creation of ASEAN’s standard operating procedures in countering the pandemic, ASEAN is avoiding great power competitions and institutionally managing the COVID-19 pandemic.

What is the most radical change in Japanese foreign policy since 2017 after the “Indo-Pacific” strategy was introduced?

The significant changes in Japan’s security policy were undertaken before 2017, such as the 2014 reinterpretation of Article 9 of its constitution and the 2015 Peace and Security legislation, which relaxed Japan’s right to collective self-defense. Japan launched its new strategic concept, ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’ (FOIP) in 2016 and coordinated its vision with the United States in 2017. Japan has since sought new partnerships across the world as part of its FOIP strategy. Obviously, policy coordination with regional states, particularly the United States, India, and Australia, is important, but Japan’s quest to extend its partnership with European states, particularly the United Kingdom and France, has also been intensified. Currently, Germany has issued its own vision for the Indo-Pacific, and the enhancement of Japan’s alignment strategy is one of the most important changes in Japanese foreign policy.

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With the increasing assertiveness of China in the region, Japan has accelerated its ties with ASEAN. What are the implications of the closer Japan-ASEAN relations?

Japan's fundamental objective is to provide ASEAN with space for its strategic choice, so that it can maintain its 'equidistance' relations with regional great powers. Obviously, it would be strategically better for Japan if all ASEAN member states explicitly and strongly support Japan's 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' concept without reservations and build cooperative action plans together with Japan. However, this is not always easy because of ASEAN member states' strong economic ties with China and its preference to avoid provoking great powers. And yet, Japan's diplomatic actions at least prevent ASEAN from being dominated by any particular great power. The intensification of the US-China rivalry increases fears among ASEAN member states that they are eventually forced to choose sides. Although Japan is interested in promoting the US-led rules-based international order, whose principles include rule of law, peaceful resolution of disputes, democratization, and human rights, its method to pursue such principles is based on engagement rather than coercion, which is commonly shared by many ASEAN member states. In this sense, Japan and ASEAN have nurtured mutually beneficial relations, and its ties are likely to be stronger.

How might the Covid-19 pandemic impact Japan's foreign policy?

Japan's foreign policy has been consistent, emphasizing the importance of the US-Japan alliance, regional and global stability, particularly in the Indo-Pacific, and the existing rules-based international order that is mainly led by the United States. This is unlikely to change in the future despite the COVID-19 pandemic and even the recent change in Japan's Prime Ministership from Shinzo Abe to Yoshihide Suga.

One change that might occur is that Japan's geostrategic scope might shrink from the Indo-Pacific to East Asia to Northeast Asia, although its official strategic concept, FOIP, and diplomatic interactions with the regional states are likely to remain. This is because Japan needs to invest its political and economic resources to mitigate the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic domestically. Japan would need to allocate its defense assets more in the East China Sea, including the Senkaku Islands, which is currently becoming more contentious; and Prime Minister Suga's policy interests are in the domestic arena rather than international one. However, how these factors will play out vis-à-vis Japan's overall foreign policy remains to be seen.

What is former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's legacy regarding ASEAN-Japan bilateral ties? How do you expect the new Prime Minister Suga to approach these relationships?

Abe's diplomacy significantly strengthened Japan's ties with each ASEAN member state. Soon after Abe assumed prime-ministership, he made trips to all ASEAN member states as part of the 40th anniversary of ASEAN-Japan relations, which resulted in the "Vision Statement on ASEAN-Japan Friendship and Cooperation" as well as the "Joint Statement of the ASEAN-Japan Commemorative Summit: Hand in hand, facing regional and global challenges." In these statements, Japan and ASEAN promised to enhance cooperation over maritime security, economic cooperation, connectivity, and rule of law. Abe further emphasized these principles and the importance of ASEAN's role in East Asia and beyond, including ASEAN unity and centrality, which became the basic principles of Japan's FOIP concept. During his term, Abe made frequent visits to Southeast Asia to ensure the provision of Japan's economic and security support to each ASEAN member state. He also carefully explained whenever there were policy changes, such as the reinterpretation of the Japanese constitution in 2014 and the launch of Japan's new strategic concept, FOIP, in 2016. Consequently, these changes did not create negative impressions of Japan. This is well illustrated by The Institute of Southeast Asian Studies-Yusof Ishak Institute's *The State of Southeast Asia* in 2019 and 2020, which indicated that Japan is the most trustworthy country in the region.

New Prime Minister Suga promised to follow Abe's course during his campaign, but he also said, "Prime Minister Abe's leadership diplomacy was truly amazing. I don't think I can match that". What this means is two-fold. First, there will not be any radical or abrupt change in Japanese foreign policy, at least at the initial phase. Second, we cannot expect Abe's proactive diplomacy from Suga. This is because he does not have extensive experiences in diplomacy and because his primary focus is domestic reforms as well as countering-COVID-19. The good thing

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about this is that we can expect certain continuity in Japan's foreign policy – more predictable and no surprises. Japan continues to strengthen its security ties with the United States, constantly check China's assertive behaviour, and carefully monitoring the situation in the Korean Peninsula.

However, beyond this, it remains to be seen. Since Suga does not provide his own vision for Japan's foreign policy, including the FOIP, it is still unclear what regional frameworks he will prioritise or how the Suga administration will engage with ASEAN and the expectations around its strategic role in the Indo-Pacific. Perhaps, if this trend continues or if the strategic environment changes more rapidly, it will not be the Prime Minister's Office, but other ministries, particularly the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, that will shape the future direction of Japan's foreign policy, including ASEAN-Japan bilateral relations.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

Undergraduate and graduate studies are very helpful in understanding how the world works. The conceptual framework, theories, and diplomatic histories that you will learn through university, all help shaping your world view in the future. Your supervisors and colleagues will give fantastic advice on your study and research. So, take them seriously. But this does not mean that you have to agree with one school of thought over others. At the end of the day, no concept or theory is perfect, and the topics that are seemingly important now could change in the future. So, be an independent thinker, create your own world view, test it, and sharpen it over time.