

What is the future of multilateralism in the context of China-US rivalry?

Interview with Mie Oba



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Question 1: China is increasingly playing the role of a non *statu quo* actor. In such a context, what is the efficiency of multilateral formats where the PRC is also a member?

With the rise of China, the balance of power between the U.S. and China has changed drastically, and their competition has become even more intense. This is shaking the existing liberal international order, and the Indo-Pacific is the region where this is most evident. One of the most obvious examples of China as a power that aspires to change the *status quo* is its activities in the South China Sea, especially since the end of the 2000s.

The expansion of Chinese aid and investment internationally, including in the Indo-Pacific region, under the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative is another aspect of China's challenge to the existing international order. However, while it is true that the inflow of Chinese investment and aid has created frictions in various parts of the world, it is not a correct posture

to emphasize this aspect. Among government officials in middle-income and developing countries, there is an awareness that excessive dependence on China must be avoided. However, they also recognize that economic relations with China are essential and generally appreciated for providing technology and investments.

On the other hand, it should be noted that a key question is whether the U.S. is “*status quo*” or not. In the case of the South China Sea issue, as seen in then Secretary of State Pompeo’s statement in July 2021, the U.S. has shifted from its previous policy of maintaining neutrality in territorial disputes in the South China Sea to a policy of preventing China’s territorial expansion. The policy limiting the expansion of China’s influence has been carried over to the current Biden administration, which is trying to face China by strengthening ties with allied and friendly countries in the Indo-Pacific to compensate for its decline in hegemonic power.

Indeed, the U.S. always emphasizes the goals and values of democracy and human rights, one of the pillars in the existing liberal international order. However, economic security, including the strengthening of supply chains, include elements inconsistent with a free and open economic system, which is another critical pillar of this order. Such protectionist tendencies have been maintained under the Biden administration. Also, under the Trump administration, the U.S. withdrew from the CPTPP due to its “America First” perspective. Even now, there is no prospect for the U.S. to join to the CPTPP.

In other words, both the U.S. and China are changing the *status quo* and transforming the existing international order, which is wavering. The ASEAN-centered architecture (ASEAN+3, EAS, ARF, ADMM+), which has been promoted by liberal internationalism, one of the pillars of the liberal international order, along with respect for human rights and democracy and a free and open economic system, is also facing a crisis.

The ASEAN architecture is a loose framework based on consensus among countries on the norms of non-use of force and peaceful resolution of disputes. The ASEAN architecture has no power to stop the actions of China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Taiwan, and other disputing parties that are changing the *status quo* by force by building landfills and military facilities in the South China Sea. In this sense, the limitations of the ASEAN architecture have become apparent. It does not have the coercive power to stop countries that try to change the *status quo* with real effect, and there is little likelihood that it will in the future. However, as this existing order is shaken and competition between the U.S. and China is intensifying, it is vital to continue to maintain the ASEAN architecture, including both the U.S. and China, through the ARF, EAS and ADMM+, in order to ensure a minimum level of coordination in the region.

Within the ASEAN-centered architecture, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) is expected to largely define the nature of the economic order in East Asia. Although the RCEP is a framework that includes China, the establishment of standard multilateral norms in various fields such as rules of origin, investment, intellectual property rights, and e-commerce is highly significant. However, with the RCEP framework, China’s economic presence is expected to increase further, especially in East Asia.

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Question 2: There is a multiplication of “minilateral” formats: is that good for multilateralism or does it produce a weakening of multilateralism?

Multilateralism in Asia mainly consists of the ASEAN architecture and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). Both have in common that they are, in principle, weakly binding organizations and they emphasize “informalism”. The “barriers to entry” into these organizations are low because “informalism” allows states more freedom of action. This has made it possible for many countries to participate in these organizations and has supported their “inclusiveness”. In short, “informalism” and “inclusiveness” have been the centripetal sources of Asian multilateralism. On the other hand, they have also acted as obstacles for APEC and the ASEAN architecture to promote substantive and effective cooperation.

On the other hand, since the 2010s, various minilateralist formats such as the Quad, the Japan-U.S.-Australia strategic collaboration, and the Japan-U.S.-India strategic collaboration have been active, and in 2021, AUKUS was born as a new framework. These are manifestations of the awareness that the existing “institutions” in the region in a broad sense, such as the traditional hub-and-spoke system centered on the United States and the multilateralism framework in Asia, are insufficient to deal with the various conflicts and frictions that accompany the transformation of the order and to maintain stability and prosperity. This expresses the emergence of an awareness of the problem. Therefore, these minilateral frameworks are expected to relativize Asian multilateralism.

All these minilateral frameworks have direct U.S. involvement and are aimed at limiting China’s influence and strengthening military, economic, and technological cooperation and coordination for that purpose. Regarding their position about the US-China competition in the Indo-Pacific region, Southeast Asian countries have to distance themselves from balancing between the U.S. and China. Among them are both official allies of the United States, such as the Philippines, and countries that have substantial security cooperation with the U.S., such as Singapore and Malaysia. However, it is extremely difficult for ASEAN countries, including those countries, to participate in a framework that explicitly confronts China. This is because, along with their geopolitical position, the growth in China-ASEAN trade and the rise in Chinese investment in ASEAN. The real policy issue for these countries is to curb confrontation with a rising China and build a stable relationship.

In addition, India, a member of the Quad, also does not want confrontation with China. Furthermore, although Japan’s domestic hardliners against Beijing are becoming more conspicuous, the pragmatic decision to avoid antagonizing the PRC, considering the geographical location and economic relationship, is still considered sufficient to define Japan’s policy toward China. (I am not a government official, so this is only consideration from the outside).

Thus, even though the minilateral framework relativizes the importance of traditional Asian multilateralism, its “inclusiveness” is still valid for many countries in the region. In this sense, the significance of the ASEAN architecture has not yet diminished, especially for ASEAN countries, India, and Japan.

Question 3: What role “softer” powers like Japan or the European Union (E.U.) could play in supporting multilateralism?

Maintaining and strengthening multilateralism in ASEAN and elsewhere in Asia is essential for Japan and the E.U. as soft power that emphasizes norms based on shared values rather than the hard power of military force.

In the Indo-Pacific region, the existing international order has been shaken, various efforts to curb influence from both the U.S. and China have been developed, and a minilateralism focused on more geopolitical objectives has emerged. As we have seen, in the current situation, while Asian multilateralism as represented by the ASEAN architecture exposes its limitations, it is the view of this author that its strengths and significance have not diminished. The “inclusiveness” of the ASEAN architecture, which does not seem realistic under the current circumstances, has a certain rationale in a complex world where a simple division of the world into two, as was the case during the Cold War era, is unlikely. In addition, “informalism” is not as important as in the past, as evidenced by the gradual progress of formal cooperation such as the ASEAN regional economic integration and the realization of the RCEP. While “informalism” will continue to be the ASEAN way, it should be noted that there are moves to promote institutionalized cooperation, especially in functional areas. In addition, the Asian multi-framework, which includes both China and the United States, may serve as a forum to provide a minimum structure for dialogue to prevent the worst-case scenario in the region – armed conflict.

So, the continued support of Japan and the E.U. for the importance of this ASEAN architecture may seem like a roundabout attempt in the short term. However, it will lead to stability in the region in the long term. Moreover, respect for ASEAN by countries outside like Japan and European countries itself will lead to strengthening the role of ASEAN. From this perspective, it is necessary to emphasize ASEAN’s role as a determinant of order in the Indo-Pacific and further strengthen its support.

Suppose order is a place where specific values and objectives are shared. In that case, the order that Japan and the E.U. should aim for is a new liberal international order. The existing liberal international order is modified and restructured to meet China’s increasing role and influence and other emerging and developing countries in Asia. In this sense, support for ASEAN, which comprises emerging and developing countries and is the center of the regional architecture, is essential. However, the most critical question now is how Japan and the E.U. will relate to the situation in some Southeast Asian countries regarding democracy and human rights, which are one of the pillars of the liberal international order.

Myanmar is the country where the situation is deteriorating the most. The February 2021 *coup d’Etat* in Myanmar and the subsequent military government’s bloody tightening of control over the country and its treatment of NLD members, including Aung San Suu Kyi, have been

increasingly criticized internationally as human rights abuses and a setback for democracy. Moreover, although ASEAN came up with five consensus points at an emergency summit in April 2021 to address the problem, the situation has not improved. There is also disagreement within ASEAN on this issue, with Indonesia and Malaysia arguing that Myanmar should be dealt with harshly.

From this perspective, it is easy to criticize ASEAN as dysfunctional or ineffective. However, we need to consider the following points. First, ASEAN is now embracing two partially contradictory directions. The first is to pursue a peaceful community following the “ASEAN way” founded on the principles of non-interference in internal affairs, which are based on respect for national sovereignty. The other is that ASEAN’s goal of “peace” should include elements related to domestic political systems and societies, such as promoting democracy, the guarantee of human rights, the rule of law, and good governance. The latter would be a move toward the pluralistic security community discussed by Karl Deutsch.

Second, even though the latter direction is idealistic and divergent from the reality of ASEAN countries, ASEAN is now forced to seek a way forward that does not allow the former, *i.e.*, to pursue only stable relations among states, regardless of their domestic systems. In other words, ASEAN has to find a way to move in a direction that does not allow it to pursue only the stability of relations between countries, no matter what their domestic systems are. This is evidenced by the fact that five consensus statements were made on the need to do something about Myanmar.

ASEAN countries, including Indonesia and Malaysia, have many human rights and democratization problems. Both the E.U. and Japan should give due recognition to the different political situations of the ASEAN countries, respect their autonomy and ASEAN as an organization, and the human rights and democratization issues in the region.

Some criticize Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen’s visit to Myanmar in January 2022, saying that his visit is trying to legitimize the military regime in Myanmar. However, it is the natural role of the chairmanship to be proactive and maintain relations between Myanmar and ASEAN countries while addressing the problem. In this regard, Cambodia’s involvement in the Myanmar issue during this year’s chairmanship should also be supported. While understanding the criticism of Cambodia from within the ASEAN countries as well as from others, the issue must be addressed from a long-term perspective.

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