

US engagement in Asia: a view from Japan

Interview with Akiko Fukushima



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Question 1: Some believe that the US involvement in the Ukraine war is a distraction from the Asia-Pacific theater. What is your view on this position?

When Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, concerns were raised both in the US and in Asia about a possible US pivot to Europe and a consequent reduction in US security engagement in Asia. However, the US made its official position clear in its National Security Strategy in October 2022: “For 75 years, the United States has maintained a strong and consistent defense presence and will continue to contribute meaningfully to the stability and peace of the region. We reaffirm our ironclad commitment to our treaty allies in the Indo-Pacific”. The US has demonstrated its commitment to the region by hosting a summit with

ASEAN leaders, as well as attending conferences in Asia in the fall of 2022, including the East Asia Summit, G20, etc. The U.S. will host APEC this fall.

This US position has helped activate discussions on the possible impact of the Russian aggression against Ukraine on the Indo-Pacific in the context of Russian actions to change the *status quo* by force, in violation of international law. This is reflected in Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's remark at the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue, as well as at the NATO summit with AP4 (Japan, ROK, Australia and New Zealand) in June 2022, that "*Ukraine today may be East Asia tomorrow*". The interconnectedness of security in Europe and in the Indo-Pacific has been recognized in both Europe and the Indo-Pacific. At the time of writing in February 2023, the majority view in the region is that the United States will maintain its strategy of engagement in the Indo-Pacific.

However, if we look at history, for example the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the war in Afghanistan, we have learned that prolonged regional conflicts have produced US strategic shifts. The answer to your question depends on how the Russian invasion of Ukraine continues and ends. If the Russian aggression is prolonged, it may trigger instability in Europe, which may force the US to devote more resources to European stability. Thus, the region is closely watching the developments in Ukraine to see whether the indefinite prolongation of the deadly fighting through escalation of arms transfers can continue or whether a new political direction leading to an early ceasefire through concerted efforts can emerge in the not too distant future.

Question 2: Can and should countries in Asia try to escape the dilemma of US-China rivalry?

In Asia, countries do not want to be affected by the growing Sino-US rivalry. ASEAN countries have made it clear that they do not want to be in the position of having to choose between the US and China. However, their respective distances from the two powers vary. Some are closer to China, while others want to keep their distance from both. They believe that the best way for them is not to side with either of the two great powers. They claim that if they choose one, they will lose the other and suffer the consequences. Thus, they have skillfully managed their relations. Many of them receive economic aid from both, thus balancing their relations with both. It is best for them if a rivalry is controlled and does not escalate.

In recent years, countries in Asia have woven their relations with the powers, including China and the United States, on a bilateral, minilateral, and multilateral basis. They seek balance and are cautious about band-wagoning. Asian countries want to maintain their strategic autonomy and economic prosperity.

However, the recent increase in rivalry between China and the United States is a concern for countries in Asia. Countries in the Indo-Pacific generally want to prevent any attempt to change the *status quo* through force or coercion that will affect them and the region. Thus, one way to approach this issue is to emphasize that the rules-based order is the common agenda for many in the region. Japan has taken an initiative in this direction by hosting an open debate at the UN Security Council in January 2023, when it will hold the presidency of

the Council. It is up to willing, like-minded powers like France and Japan to join hands to uphold the rules-based international order and an institution like the UN to address the dilemma. However, it is also clear that China and the US have a different concept of the “rules-based international order”. Asian countries are expected to make further efforts to find a criterion acceptable to both China and the US to manage their rival relations.

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Question 3: How can economic sanctions and export controls against Russia affect the US role in Asia?

The US allies in the region, namely Japan, ROK and Australia, have joined the US in imposing sanctions and export controls against Russia. As the invasion continues, they are trying to impose more sanctions on Russia, including visa restrictions and caps on Russian oil prices. Meanwhile, Russia has imposed an increasing number of retaliatory sanctions against the West. The consequences of economic sanctions and export controls against Russia show a longer and deeper impact on Russia, however, than its retaliatory sanctions against the West.

In Asia, China has been cautiously supportive of Russia. India has taken a neutral position but is cautiously supportive of Russia. Their positions are reflected, for example, in their voting patterns at the UN.

ASEAN member states have reacted differently. Only Myanmar explicitly supported Russia, while only Singapore imposed sanctions on Russia immediately after the invasion, banning exports of military-related goods and banking transactions. Other ASEAN members limited their responses to condemning Russian actions to undermine national sovereignty and territorial integrity, but not by name. They distanced themselves from sanctions and export controls. Underlying these ASEAN positions is the fact that Russia has been the largest supplier of defense equipment, such as Sukhoi fighter jets, to Southeast Asia, particularly Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia, over the past two decades. Others, such as the Philippines or Thailand, have also recently developed defense cooperation with Russia, although they have reviewed their contracts after the invasion.

Regardless of positions on sanctions and export controls, countries in Asia are certainly affected. Some that sided with Russia have benefited by importing cheaper energy and other commodities, while others have suffered from shortages or price increases.

China is watching developments closely. China’s English-language newspaper, the Global Times, ran a column on January 15, 2023 titled “Japan risks turning into ‘Asia’s Ukraine’ if it follows US strategic line”. The article warned US allies Japan and Australia, and to a lesser extent the ROK, for acting in concert with the US.

While Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 was a distant event for many Asian countries, the invasion of Ukraine since 2022 has implications for Asia. The impact on the US role in Asia through its sanctions and export controls needs more time to be deciphered, as the invasion has not stopped and there is no prospect of it ending soon. The situation may deepen the divide in the region. From the point of view of most states there, the most credible way to bridge this division is an early ceasefire, which the main warring parties could reach together through their concerted efforts. In this way, the US, its allies, and partners can provide public goods through their bilateral, minilateral, and multilateral networks to heal any possible rift in Asia. Otherwise, it is easy to blame the US for creating difficulties for Asia. Divide and rule should be avoided.

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