



Asean must adapt to an age of geopolitical turmoil

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Tokyo's decision to ease restrictions on arms exports reflects a broader recalibration across the Asia-Pacific, and Southeast Asian governments are already adjusting alongside it.

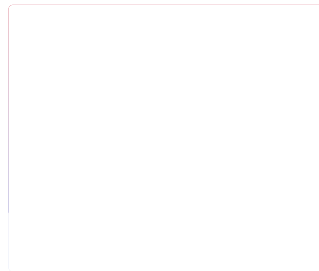


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Japan's decision to unlock major restrictions on defence exports is not merely a technical policy revision.

It is one of the clearest indicators yet that the strategic architecture of Asia is undergoing profound transformation.



When Tokyo changes, Jakarta, Manila and Hanoi often follow through in varying but interconnected ways.

As economist John Maynard Keynes is once known to have said, "when the facts change, I change my opinion. What do you do, sir?"

This pattern is becoming increasingly visible in 2026 as geopolitical turbulence stretches from the Strait of Hormuz to the South China Sea and from Ukraine to the Taiwan Strait. Change is abound.

The age when Southeast Asian countries could rely almost exclusively on economic interdependence to soften geopolitical competition is steadily fading.

The recent defence discussions between Indonesia and Japan illustrate this transition clearly. Tokyo and Jakarta agreed to deepen defence cooperation, industrial collaboration and strategic coordination after Japan eased restrictions on arms exports.

The move reflects a broader recalibration occurring throughout the Indo-Pacific.

For decades after World War II, Japan's strategic identity was shaped by constitutional pacifism and deep restraint.

Tokyo avoided becoming a conventional military power even while possessing immense technological and industrial capabilities. Its defence export rules were among the strictest in the world.

That historical period is now changing rapidly.

The reasons are structural rather than emotional. China's military rise has accelerated.

North Korea continues missile testing. Russia's war in Ukraine shattered assumptions about the permanence of post-Cold War stability.

Meanwhile, uncertainty surrounding the future direction of American foreign policy under President Donald Trump's second administration has encouraged many Asian allies to diversify their strategic options.

Japan increasingly believes it cannot remain merely an economic giant under permanent American strategic protection. Tokyo now sees itself as a stabilising Indo-Pacific power.

This does not mean Japan seeks militarism. Nor does it suggest a return to the traumatic history of the 1930s and 1940s. Such simplistic comparisons misunderstand contemporary Asia completely.

Instead, Japan's leaders believe stronger deterrence and deeper defence cooperation are necessary to preserve regional equilibrium.

The Philippines has already embraced this logic openly.

Manila's tensions with China in the South China Sea have intensified security cooperation with both Washington and Tokyo.

Japanese maritime patrol vessels, surveillance systems and coast guard assistance have become increasingly important to Philippine strategic planning.

Vietnam is more careful rhetorically but equally attentive strategically.

Hanoi understands that maritime disputes and growing competition among major powers require diversified security partnerships.

Japan therefore becomes a useful strategic counterweight without forcing Vietnam into formal alliances that could undermine its independent foreign policy traditions.

Indonesia under President Prabowo Subianto may ultimately become the most important case of all.

Jakarta remains committed officially to non-alignment and strategic autonomy.

Yet Indonesia is simultaneously modernising its armed forces while deepening defence relations with multiple countries including France, Turkey, South Korea, the United States and Japan.

This is not contradictory.

It reflects the reality that Asean states no longer believe economic diplomacy alone is sufficient to manage emerging geopolitical risks.

The broader regional concern is straightforward.

If the Indo-Pacific enters a prolonged period of instability, Southeast Asian countries cannot afford strategic complacency.

Every disruption in the Strait of Hormuz affects energy prices across Asia. Every escalation in the South China Sea threatens trade routes. Every breakdown in great power relations increases pressure on Asean's neutrality.

Japan's strategic transformation therefore resonates strongly across Southeast Asia because Tokyo still enjoys relatively high trust levels within Asean.

Unlike many major powers, Japan combines technological sophistication, long-term infrastructure investment and generally restrained diplomacy.

Across many Asean societies, Japan is viewed less as a coercive actor and more as a reliable developmental and strategic partner.

That reservoir of trust now gives Japan expanded geopolitical influence.

Yet there also are risks.

China views Japan's changing defence posture with growing suspicion.

Beijing consistently warns against what it perceives as the normalisation of Japanese military power and the gradual construction of Indo-Pacific containment structures.

This creates a delicate balancing challenge for Asean.

Countries like Malaysia and Indonesia do not wish to see Asia divided into rigid blocs resembling a new Cold War.

Asean's longstanding preference remains a stable multipolar order where major powers coexist through rules, dialogue and restraint.

However, Asean must also acknowledge that the regional security environment of 2026 differs dramatically from that of the 1990s.

The Indo-Pacific is entering a period where military modernisation, advanced artificial intelligence, cyber warfare and maritime competition are accelerating simultaneously.

Strategic ambiguity alone may no longer provide sufficient protection for medium-size powers.

Their armies, navy and air force, especially drones unit, need to modernise accordingly. This is why the centrality of Asean remains essential but must evolve beyond rhetoric.

Frameworks such as the Asean Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus, the East Asia Summit and the Asean Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), all of which Japan, indeed, Australia, China, India and South Korea participate in as comprehensive strategic partners (CSPs) must remain crucial mechanisms for preventing rivalry from escalating into open confrontation.

But these institutions must become more operational and strategically coherent if they are to remain relevant.

As and when Japan wants to be an advanced comprehensive strategic partner (ACSP) of Malaysia, the path must be clear and reassuring. It must not import unnecessary great power rivalry into the region.

Malaysia, as the former chair of Asean in 2025 and current coordinator of China-Asean relations from 2025 to 2028, occupies an especially sensitive diplomatic position.

Kuala Lumpur must continue encouraging strategic dialogue between China, Japan and the United States while ensuring Asean does not become trapped within great power polarisation.

Ultimately, Japan's policy shift is not occurring in isolation.

It reflects the wider reality that Asia is adapting to a far more fragmented and uncertain world order.

Defence cooperation, strategic diversification and technological resilience are becoming central features of regional policy planning.

Tokyo is no longer content merely to finance regional stability from afar.

It increasingly intends to help secure it directly.

And when Japan changes strategically, the rest of maritime Asia inevitably adjusts alongside it.

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