



**SASAKAWA USA**  
Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA

# 2021 ASEAN Summit: Japan's Viewpoint

*Featuring remarks by Ambassador Masafumi Ishii  
and commentary by Ambassador David Shear*

## Abstract

*On Wednesday, October 20, 2021, Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA (Sasakawa USA) hosted the virtual event, "2021 ASEAN Summit: Japan's Viewpoint," featuring remarks by Ambassador Masafumi Ishii (former Japanese Ambassador to Indonesia, 2017-2020), with commentary provided by Ambassador David Shear (Former U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam, 2011-2014). Ambassador Ishii explained the key underlying political, economic, and military trends in Southeast Asia which affect ASEAN's member states individually and as a collective body, then provided his assessment of Japan's current relationship with ASEAN. He concluded by offering concrete recommendations for how the United States and Japan can cooperatively increase the quality and scale of their engagement with ASEAN to secure peace and prosperity in the region. Ambassador Shear's commentary offered a description of the United States' current engagement with ASEAN and its individual members and highlighted several key areas where the U.S. can prioritize its engagement in the region to complement the measures being taken by Japan.*

*This talk was presented by Sasakawa USA's Policy Briefing Series and was held virtually via Zoom. Attendees included distinguished guests from the Washington, D.C. policy community, academia, and think tanks, along with former and current leaders of both U.S. and Japanese government and armed forces. Introductory remarks were provided by Dr. Satohiro Akimoto, Chairman and President at Sasakawa USA, who also facilitated the event and moderated the Q&A discussion.*

## ASEAN: The Geographic and Strategic Heart of the Region

Dr. Akimoto began the event by remarking on the strategic role that ASEAN currently holds in the Indo-Pacific, noting that among the other multilateral arrangements operating in the waters of Southeast Asia (such as AUKUS and the QUAD), ASEAN occupies a unique position at the geographic and strategic center of the region. He noted that as the Biden administration seeks to uphold stability and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific, it will need to consider how its engagement with ASEAN fits into the United States' strategic vision for the region. This vision is supported by Japan, which has staunchly upheld our shared core values of freedom, democracy, free enterprise, and the rule of law. As key democratic stakeholders in the region, Japan and the United States can greatly benefit from strategic collaboration and open dialogue about how to navigate engagement with ASEAN.

With that, Dr. Akimoto welcomed Ambassador Ishii to share his thoughts on ASEAN's current and future role within the region, as well as his vision for how Japan and the United States can collaborate with ASEAN in the near to mid future.

### Part 1: Why ASEAN?

Ambassador Ishii began his remarks by providing context for the scope of ASEAN's impact in the region. Southeast Asia is an area of huge potential, pulling in serious competition among the United States, China, and India. Having previously been called the "Indo-China" region, India's significance in the region cannot be disregarded. Ambassador Ishii predicted that India would return to a more prominent presence in the region alongside the current dominant presences of the United States and China. Ambassador Ishii supplied further background to establish a great understanding of the strategic importance of ASEAN, stating that ASEAN's total population is 650 million, which is more than the population of the EU and UK combined (510 million). ASEAN's total GDP is greater than MERCOSUR (the "Southern Common Market" which originally consisted of Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay, with the later additions of Venezuela and Bolivia).

Ambassador Ishii noted that Indonesia and India are the two key nations to focus on for the United States and Japan to form a future majority. Providing more context, Ambassador Ishii shared his analysis on global powers. He described the United States as the only superpower in the region, considering the ratio of the United States to China to Japan in GDP is 5:3:1 and in defense spending,

12:5:1. But in 20 to 30 years, he predicted that the United States would share the position of global superpower with China and India, creating a “G3” dynamic. Ambassador Ishii supported this prediction by explaining that the GDP and defense spending of China may become equal to or greater than that of the United States. India’s population is on the rise and may soon become greater than or equal to that of China, whose own population is trending downward. Ambassador Ishii stated that if a new G7 were to be created 20 to 30 years from now, second-tier countries—following the previously stated “G3” of the United States, China, and India—would include Japan, Indonesia, Europe (if it can achieve a united front), and Russia. Thus, the United States and Japan will need to strengthen and expand their engagement with Europe, India, and Indonesia to build a future global bloc.

Ambassador Ishii added that the stability of ASEAN is key for free and safe navigation through the critical Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs). A free and open Indo-Pacific is a mere description of where the SLOCs are running through. SLOCs include the Gulf of Thailand into the Indian Ocean, the Malacca Strait and the Lombok Makassar Strait, up through the South China Sea, and then finally into the East China Sea toward Japan. In the case of a Taiwan emergency, the Lombok-Makassar Strait is the only viable way in or out of the SLOCs. Understanding this, Ambassador Ishii recognized the criticality of Indonesia’s stability and capability in maintaining freedom and safety of navigation.

## Part 2: What’s Happening in ASEAN?

Ambassador Ishii stated that although achieving centrality and unity is a commonly referenced goal within ASEAN, its member states each represent such diverse interests, capabilities, and backgrounds that striving for perfect consensus is perhaps not the most realistic or useful goalpost for measuring ASEAN’s success. These states differ vastly in population size, with a range of just 430,000 in Brunei to 260 million in Indonesia. The states also have large differences in GDP. Indonesia’s GDP constitutes 36% of the total GDP of ASEAN’s member states, whereas Laos, Cambodia, and Brunei combined amount to less than 1%. GDP per capita differs vastly as well, with Singapore at \$65,000 whereas Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Vietnam are all less than or equal to \$3,000.

On China, Ambassador Ishii remarked that although ASEAN countries have not publicly announced a stance on siding with the United States or China, many have already reached a decision internally as to which country they would support if push came to shove. Ambassador Ishii shared his categorization of the ASEAN member states. Beginning with the “Big 3” consisting of Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines, Ambassador Ishii described how the Big 3 are large

and developed enough to rely on Japan and the United States in crisis even with pressure from China. The “Mid 3” are Thailand, Malaysia, and Myanmar. Ambassador Ishii observed that the Mid 3 tend to fluctuate between siding with China vs. Japan and the United States from one administration to the next. But it is interesting to note that many Japanese companies have bases in the Mid 3 countries, and so Japan’s stake in their individual economies could be significant enough to incentivize cooperation. The “Small 3” include Cambodia, Laos, and Brunei. Due to their population and GDP, Ambassador Ishii noted that if China applies pressure to the Small 3, it would be difficult for them not to concede. Ambassador Ishii talked lastly about the special case of Singapore and how it does not fit into any of the above-stated categories. Singapore hosts U.S. naval vessels, but it also has strong Chinese influence and presence due to its business and immigration history. The small size of Singapore allows for it to be able to play both sides with the United States and China. However, Ambassador Ishii stated that most Singaporean civilians would say that Singapore relies more heavily on China over the United States or Japan because of Chinese business influence.

### Part 3: Japan’s Current Relationship with ASEAN

Ambassador Ishii described Japan’s relationship with ASEAN by outlining five objectives for Japan’s policy toward ASEAN and examples of its cooperation with ASEAN. These objectives are:

1. To jointly promote universal values such as liberal democracy and human rights. There is synergy between the principles of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) and Japan’s concept of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP).
2. To jointly protect free and open seas under the rule of law, not the rule of force. This can be achieved through cooperative capacity building of coast guards and regularly executed joint exercises.
3. To jointly strengthen its economic partnerships with ASEAN to develop forward together. Japan and ASEAN are both members of the ASEAN-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and Japan is currently joined by four ASEAN member states—Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam—in the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). In addition to these trade agreements, Japan and ASEAN member states cooperate on high-quality and regional infrastructure development.
4. To honor and develop the cultural and traditional diversity of each of ASEAN’s member states.

5. To strengthen exchange among the “Next Generation” through cultural and travel exchanges as well as vocational training programs across borders. Japan and ASEAN have recently been focusing on this initiative as it is of mutual benefit for the younger generations in Japan and in ASEAN states to understand shared business interests and educational pursuits.

## Part 4: What the United States and Japan Can Do Moving Forward

Next, Ambassador Ishii progressed into his recommendations for Japan and the United States to collaboratively work toward engaging and cooperating with ASEAN.

### Be Patient and Honor Initiatives

Ambassador Ishii began by recommending that the United States and Japan should be patient and honor their initiative to support a strong and united ASEAN. In doing so, ASEAN would be encouraged to lead their own initiatives to directly address internal issues faced by their member states (such as Myanmar), while the United States and Japan can provide external support. Ambassador Ishii highlighted that the speeches given in Singapore by Vice President of the United States Kamala Harris and U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin expressed the U.S. position in relation to human rights in Myanmar while acknowledging that they rely on and encourage ASEAN states to pursue their own initiatives.

### Prioritize Strategic Engagement

Secondly, Ambassador Ishii recommended Japan and the United States prioritize expending their limited resources on meaningful engagement with the ASEAN states who have shown they are willing and ready to rely on the U.S. and Japan. This would include the Big 3 consisting of Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines. Ambassador Ishii advised that simultaneous attention should be paid to the ASEAN states that swing closer to China, referring to the Mid 3 consisting of Thailand, Malaysia, and Myanmar. Ambassador Ishii then suggested the United States and Japan should strive to support the Small 3—Cambodia, Laos, and Brunei— when strategic opportunities arise. He cited as an example the situation

in Cambodia where China's withholding of water resources to downstream Mekong River neighbors exacerbated critical water supply issues. Ambassador Ishii noted that it was important that the United States backed Cambodia in this situation as it represents tangible support and engagement with an ASEAN member. Ambassador Ishii warned that the United States and Japan should conduct their prioritization assessments discretely, because if the prioritization is made too obvious it could be interpreted as sowing division among ASEAN countries.

Ambassador Ishii also clarified that the three categories he suggested for classifying the ASEAN countries (Big, Mid, or Small 3) should not be used to create hard divisions between how the U.S. or Japan must treat each group; rather, this classification system should be used as a framework for informing more nuanced diplomatic initiatives. He added that particularly for the Mid and Small 3 countries which face greater pressure from China, incentives to cooperate with the U.S. and Japan should be small enough to be ignored if the circumstances require it, but visible enough so that they can result in significant positive outcomes for ASEAN countries who choose to cooperate.

## Demonstrate Regional Presence in a Tangible Way

Ambassador Ishii recommended that the United States and Japan show their presence in a tangible way through rotational presence and joint military exercises. Ambassador Ishii additionally noted that economic engagement is just as important as maintaining a military presence. Now that China and Taiwan have submitted applications to join the CPTPP, the United States needs to act as well. Ambassador Ishii stated that the CPTPP was founded with U.S. interests and the goal was clear: to liberalize the Chinese market with high ambition. Ambassador Ishii said that there needs to be a return of the United States to the CPTPP, because without it, it is difficult to prove that the United States is committed to its relationship with ASEAN.

## Consolidate Core Partnerships in the QUAD

The fourth recommendation from Ambassador Ishii was to consolidate core partnerships in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD). Ambassador Ishii emphasized the importance of the QUAD to Japan and that deciding to have a regular summit meeting was a forward-moving step, which served to make the partnership operational. However, Ambassador Ishii stated that the QUAD should not expect Southeast Asian members to join as it would force ASEAN

member states to make a public choice to side with the United States over China. It would be preferable to allow ASEAN members to exhibit their support for Japanese and U.S. initiatives in less obvious ways, thus allowing them to maintain a front of ambiguity to discourage retaliatory measures from China.

## Create Multifaceted and Resilient Networks Among Lower Mekong Countries

Lastly, Ambassador Ishii advised to create multifaceted and resilient networks among Lower Mekong Countries (LMCs). To do so, he recommended to engage Indonesia more and to choose a good subject for this like that of Natuna Island. In this strain, he also recommended to promote India-Indonesia cooperation, alluding to Australia's work on this. He mentioned that China has put pressure on India and Indonesia, which is why India and Indonesia may need more support from the United States and Japan. The two nations should be able to coordinate smoothly when exterior unnecessary behaviors are subdued. He noted that Australia has created an Australia-India-Indonesia trilateral dialogue and Japan is also coordinating with them on island nations located at the India and Indonesia sea border. Another path to create multifaceted and resilient networks among LMCs is through leveraging strategic relationships with those in Europe, such as France and the United Kingdom, especially in the Western Indian Ocean. Finally, Ambassador Ishii stressed placing priority on operationalization, rather than public announcements about partnerships. This network-building should come to fruition through action and joint exercises, which we are beginning to see recently in the news.

## An Example of U.S.-Japan Support in the Region: Natuna Island

Ambassador Ishii shared a map of six remote islands of Indonesia where Japan is promoting fishing boat development. The Indonesian government cannot ask China to assist with this due to conflicts of interest and specifically requested Japanese aid. For further context, Ambassador Ishii explained that India and Indonesia want to develop the area where they have a sea border on the western side. To the east is Natuna Island, which is south of the famous ninedash line in an area known for bountiful fishing. Natuna Island has Chinese fisher boats that come down annually supported by their coast guard, which creates strains and difficulties for Indonesia's domestic fishing industry. Thus, Indonesia asked Japan to help develop fishing boats in the Natuna Island region, which represents a strategic opportunity for Japan to support Indonesian economic interests while

upholding freedom of navigation and the rule of law. The United States has also demonstrated its interest in joint development of this Island which would involve enhancing maritime and defense security cooperation. Ambassador Ishii noted that if the United States, Japan, and Indonesia succeed in these projects, it would send a strong message to China. Indonesia, which usually is more reserved in sending signals to China, has stated that development offers from China near Natuna Island are not on the table and it is looking toward pursuing greater cooperation with Japan and the United States.

## Strategic Planning for the 2021 ASEAN Summit and Future Summits

In the final section of his remarks, Ambassador Ishii offered his insight into the lead-up predictions on to the 2021 ASEAN Summit, which was held in Brunei from October 26 to October 28. He started his analysis by stating that expectations need to be controlled for the 2021 Summit and 2022 Summit, which will be held in Cambodia. Issues raised for the 2021 Summit were predicted to include COVID-19 and Myanmar.

Ambassador Ishii suggested that the United States and Japan should use Indonesia's G20 chair in 2022 to begin strategic engagements with Indonesia. He also advised that sending heads of state to Indonesia would signal the start of real engagement with the country. In addition, Ambassador Ishii looked further ahead to 2023, when Indonesia will be the ASEAN chair. This could be a significant opportunity to push forward new policies and strategies, as in the past when Indonesia has been the ASEAN chair, ASEAN made a leap to the next stage in regional security and cooperation. Thus, in predicting what would be best from the United States and Japan regarding the 2021 ASEAN Summit, Ambassador Ishii said to show resolve and find ways to tangibly exhibit the desire for increased engagement.

Ambassador Ishii also suggested that in the mid-term, Japan and the United States should begin preparation for 2023 by interacting with Indonesia as soon as possible to set expectations for what ASEAN should achieve, which should involve setting specific actionable goals for 2023. This discourse could include topics such as: what Japan, the United States and ASEAN could do about the CPTPP and APEC; Myanmar's membership status in ASEAN amidst its political turmoil; and strengthening Japan-Indonesia relations. To the first point, Ambassador Ishii acknowledged that the CPTPP is built out of APEC, but it would be important for ASEAN to work closely with Japan and the United States to produce tangible next steps for what the CPTPP can accomplish by 2023.



Regarding an exit strategy for Myanmar, Indonesia is serious about moving past the current conflict there before the next election to successfully anchor the 2023 ASEAN Summit with Myanmar's presence. Ambassador Ishii acknowledged that in 2023, Japan is slated to be the G7 chair, which would give it the opportunity to welcome the leader of that year's ASEAN chair state, Indonesia, for an official visit. This would be beneficial for Indonesia's domestic political situation as well, as it would give incumbent President Jokowi the chance to solidify his leadership role prior to the country's general election in 2024.

## Commentary from Ambassador Shear

Next, Dr. Akimoto welcomed Ambassador David Shear to the virtual stage to share his commentary on Ambassador Ishii's remarks.

Ambassador Shear thanked and commended Ambassador Ishii for his presentation as a great example of diplomatic thinking at the strategic level with the way he laid out common interests in the region, an agenda for U.S.-Japan cooperation, and the roadmap for the next two years.

Ambassador Shear described Ambassador Ishii's presentation as a perfect reflection of the strong common interests the United States and Japan have in the Southeast Asia region, and with partners in ASEAN. He agreed with Ambassador Ishii on the importance of ASEAN and predicted that in thirty years' time, ASEAN—particularly the Philippines, Singapore, Vietnam, and Indonesia—will be globally important. Ambassador Shear emphasized the gravity of this situation, stating that the United States cannot play a strong regional role nor a strong global role unless it stays economically, diplomatically, and militarily engaged in Southeast Asia.

## Context for the 2021 ASEAN Summit

Ambassador Shear proceeded to provide background on the United States' engagement in Southeast Asia and its plan forward in the region. He noted that the then-upcoming East Asia Summit and the APEC Summit would be President Biden's first opportunity to engage with his Southeast Asian and regional counterparts. Though it is a little late for the President to just now be engaging with his regional counterparts, the United States has had otherwise strong attention from the Biden administration on the region from Vice President Harris, Secretary of Defense Austin, and most recently U.S. State Department Counselor Derek Chollet, who visited Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, and Japan.

In addition to the strong presidential leadership exhibited by visits from Biden administration officials to countries in the region, Ambassador Shear suggested a whole of government approach is necessary to operationalize the administration's heightened strategic focus on Southeast Asia. This approach would involve the national security and policy communities, not just White House officials. Ambassador Shear stressed that the United States also needs to place U.S. ambassadors in the region. There are vacancies in the positions of Beijing, Tokyo, Seoul, Hanoi, Bangkok, Singapore, Brunei, and the ASEAN secretariat—all of which are critical to the United States' engagement with ASEAN. Ambassador Shear urged the Senate to confirm nominations to allow the United States to pursue opportunities on the ground.

Ambassador Shear drew attention toward a couple of important publications out of the Biden administration to pay attention to as they are released. These are the U.S. National Security Strategy, followed by the National Defense Strategy and a Global Posture Review. Ambassador Shear stated his hope that these documents would outline a regional military posture that can effectively deter aggression and support regional military efforts.

## The Need for a Comprehensive Economic Plan

Ambassador Shear echoed Ambassador Ishii's remarks by stating that the United States needs a comprehensive economic policy for the region, as there has not been one since 2016. A new strategy is needed to compensate for pulling out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). According to Ambassador Shear, rejoining in the form of the CPTPP would be ideal. Chinese interest in joining the CPTPP is a big concern as they continue to gear up their efforts by implementing a campaign in the region to gain support for membership. Ambassador Shear noted that it appears that Singapore has welcomed Chinese membership in CPTPP. With these latest progressions, Ambassador Shear emphasized the urgent need for a new economic strategy in the region.

## Addressing the Situation in Myanmar

Ambassador Shear then commented that the Biden administration has several needles to thread in Burma. The Administration needs to find a balance between isolating the military and continuing to fulfill the peoples' humanitarian needs. Ambassador Shear noted that the United States should continue to put maximum pressure on the military regime while ensuring continued cooperation with ASEAN and its other partners, particularly to ensure close cooperation with Japan.

Ambassador Shear highlighted that State Department Counselor Chollet's visit to Tokyo is a move to further strengthen cooperation with Japan and between Japan and ASEAN.

## Cooperating with Japan and Regional Partners

Ambassador Shear then emphasized the critical importance of cooperation with Japan. He drew from Ambassador Ishii's remarks on the importance of carefully conducting regional diplomacy to strengthen ASEAN's position rather than to sow dissension within ASEAN. Ambassador Shear shared that "conducting diplomacy with ASEAN is like eating tofu with chopsticks: if you squeeze too hard, it falls apart and if you squeeze too softly, it slips away." He continued by stating that the United States will need to be conscious of ASEAN interests moving forward. Ambassador Shear noted how he agrees with Ambassador Ishii on the need to be discriminating in the region given its huge economic, population, religious, and cultural diversity. Adding to Ambassador Ishii's prioritization, Ambassador Shear emphasized that the United States would continue recognizing the importance of ASEAN centrality, but that this should not hinder the United States from pursuing bilateral relationships in the military, economic, and diplomatic agendas with key partners. Ambassador Shear recognized the Philippines, Vietnam, Singapore, and Indonesia as top priorities.

Additionally, Ambassador Shear recognized the QUAD as critically important and expressed his delight to see that the Biden administration is giving it a strongly diplomatic agenda. He shared that the two QUAD summits since President Biden took office have been encouraging as a start for the American diplomatic agenda for the QUAD and signal U.S. engagement to partners in the region.

Ambassador Shear echoed Ambassador Ishii's recommendation to create resilient networks through encouraging Indonesia to cooperate with India, as well as with Australia. Ambassador Shear analyzed how Australia's procurement of nuclear submarines over the next twenty-five years through AUKUS is one step forward in this direction. AUKUS can also potentially contribute to increased cooperation between the United States, Japan, and Australia, which is important in the long-term for ensuring Indonesia's security and the security of the Malacca and Lombard Straits.

Dr. Akimoto thanked Ambassador Shear for his commentary and asked Ambassador Ishii for his comments on Ambassador Shear's segment. Ambassador Ishii said that he liked the tofu metaphor as it is the best way to describe how to

work with ASEAN. Dr. Akimoto also regarded the tofu metaphor well and reiterated Ambassador Ishii's remarks and Ambassador Shear's commentary on how the United States and Japan need a nuanced and thoughtful approach to ASEAN.

## Q&A Discussion

### Japan's Approach to Coordinating with ASEAN

The first question was to Ambassador Ishii about the different nuances which inform coordinated efforts to engage with ASEAN by Japan and the United States, considering how the two countries have at times taken different approaches to dealing with issues such as the current political situation in Myanmar.

Ambassador Ishii recognized that the issues in Myanmar have highlighted the different economic and diplomatic factors which affect Japan's and the United States' ability to respond to the situation. Rather than being treated as a disadvantage, Ambassador Ishii suggested that Japan and the United States can each take advantage of their contrasting incentives to develop a diversified, comprehensive plan for promoting peace and stability in Myanmar. He noted that Japan holds a unique position with its private economic investments in the country, as well as its ability to communicate with both the military junta and Myanmar's ousted president. In this regard, Japan could play an important intermediary role in Myanmar, thus facilitating internal stability in a way that the United States would be unable to do alone. He concluded by stating that despite their differences in approach, Japan and the United States continue to maintain close communication on the issues in Myanmar and are united by their shared desire to encourage ASEAN to take the lead on guiding and incentivizing Myanmar towards a peaceful resolution.

### ASEAN Member States' Views of Taiwan

The next question was regarding the perspective Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines have on Taiwan, and whether Japan expects to see other major ASEAN countries publicly support efforts by the EU and/or G7 countries in the case of a Taiwan contingency.

Ambassador Ishii stated that regarding Taiwan, the ASEAN member countries' greatest desire is for the situation to remain below the threshold of conflict so that a crisis does not occur at all. If something were to happen to

Taiwan, the effects on the surrounding South China Sea and nearby Malacca Strait would be devastating to the Southeast Asian countries which rely heavily on these waterways for commerce. He said that while it is unlikely to see public support for Taiwan coming from any of the ASEAN member states, this does not mean that countries like Indonesia and the Philippines would be averse to engaging in close behind the scenes communication and cooperation to deter a Taiwan contingency before it reaches the point of crisis. Both Indonesia and the Philippines are motivated by the close economic and geographic interconnectedness of this region to not remain indifferent to the situation in Taiwan.

Ambassador Shear agreed that Southeast Asia would not want to see a violent disruption of the status quo in the Taiwan Strait and concurred with Ambassador Ishii's suggestion that we are unlikely to see ASEAN countries publicly supporting a U.S. position should we come to blows on Taiwan. Regardless, he stated that it will be important for the United States and Japan to quietly engage with countries such as the Philippines prior to a major change in the Taiwan Strait, to start developing an idea of what role these countries would potentially play in a Taiwan contingency.

## European Involvement in the Region

Next, the speakers were asked how the issue of Taiwan's stability could be a catalyst for renewed European interest in the region, and whether they believe it is realistic for European countries to become more involved in Southeast Asia, considering obvious limitations on resources as well as competing priorities. If European engagement is anticipated, then is this welcomed by Japan?

Ambassador Ishii affirmed that Japan and its partners want to see more engagement and involvement from European countries that understand the critical interest of ensuring stability and prosperity in the region. France, for example, has a Pacific presence and so is well-equipped to engage in joint exercises in the region. He noted that it is also heartening to see the UK actively involved in the region, as a globally engaged UK will further bolster the security of the region. One measure which could significantly improve British and French deterrent capacity would be to revise NATO's strategic concept so that it acknowledges China as a key challenge; this would make it easier to justify a larger, more robust European presence in Southeast Asian waters. Ambassador Ishii cautioned that until this happens, Japan and the United States need to control their expectations for Europe; however, it is clear that European partners are equipped to make significant positive contributions to the region's security environment.

Ambassador Shear remarked that the extended presence of the British carrier strike group (CSG21) in the western Pacific is a remarkable example of the kind of engagement the U.S. and Japan want to see more of in the region. He noted that the French, Germans, and Dutch have also been recently active in the regional maritime domain, and joint activities such as the six-nation strike group exercises conducted in the Philippine Sea in early October (which included the United States, the United Kingdom, Japan, New Zealand, the Netherlands, and Canada) are a positive development. He added that in addition to these kinds of military exercises, closer coordination should be conducted between the U.S., Japan, NATO allies, and partners in the EU to craft a cohesive diplomatic message to solidify a strong European presence in the region.

## European and U.S. Involvement in the CPTPP

Another question was regarding the belief that it is strategically important for Japan to convince the United States to participate in the CPTPP in order to support smaller countries like Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei. Ambassador Shear was asked for his thoughts on the potential for U.S. involvement in the CPTPP.

Ambassador Shear remarked that the United States is concerned about China's campaign to join the CPTPP and stated that it would be preferable for the United States to join before China. He added that while the United States determines whether or in what capacity it will be involved in the CPTPP, he hopes that Japan and other founders of this agreement will consider any bid for Chinese membership deliberately and cautiously.

Ambassador Ishii added some important context for the United States' potential involvement in the CPTPP, stating that when the United States sought Japanese involvement in the original Trans-Pacific Partnership, the rationale was that having the world's #1 and #3 GDP countries join together would put pressure on the CCP to open up the Chinese market. Considering this original objective of the TPP, if the United States were to join the CPTPP, it would enable the group to exert significant pressure on China to adhere to more rigorous standards in order to reap the benefits of membership. He added that having China join is not necessarily a problem, so long as a high standard for membership is maintained.

Regarding Taiwan's bid for membership in the CPTPP, Ambassador Ishii reiterated that so long as the same rigorous standards for membership are applied fairly to all applicants, then both Taiwan's and China's bids for membership can be considered. He warned, however, that CPTPP members should be wary of attempts by China to bargain for less rigorous standards. If bargaining is avoided

and high standards are fairly applied across the board, then it is likely that Taiwan will clear the bar for membership before China does. Ambassador Ishii stated that there is nothing wrong with this, though in order to maintain the high standards for membership which would enable such a scenario, the CPTPP could greatly benefit from having the United States as a member.

## Domestic Political Hurdles for U.S. Involvement in the CPTPP

Dr. Akimoto noted that Ambassador Shear recently provided testimony for the House Foreign Affairs Committee on strengthening U.S. ties with Southeast Asia. He asked Ambassador Shear about the domestic political hurdles which currently stand in the way of U.S. involvement in the CPTPP and what kinds of concrete steps could be taken to move towards U.S. membership.

Ambassador Shear stated that achieving U.S. membership in the CPTPP would require President Biden to expend many of his political chips on both Capitol Hill and with the public at large, considering the negative impression of this kind of free trade agreement that President Trump promoted during his campaign and presidency. There is potential support for this in Congress; however, leadership from President Biden is required to coordinate the effort and see it through to its conclusion. Ambassador Shear added that it would be ideal if President Biden could achieve this during his first term but cautioned that it may not be feasible until a potential second term in office.

## Operationalizing Engagement in Southeast Asia

The next question came from Mr. Jim Schoff, who recently joined Sasakawa USA as the Senior Director of the U.S.-Japan NEXT Alliance Initiative, a new program to stimulate alliance connections across foreign, security, and technology policy areas. Mr. Schoff asked what kinds of actions could be taken in the military, economic, and diplomatic spheres to operationalize U.S. engagement in Southeast Asia, considering limitations such as the current lack of U.S. ambassadors in the region. Under the current circumstances, he asked whether it would be beneficial for the United States to combine its resources and planning efforts with partners, or if it would be preferable to divide responsibility and planning efforts on key issues to maximize each partner's individual strengths.

Ambassador Ishii stated that, broadly speaking, a plan to operationalize engagement could involve a series of joint exercises among the U.S., Japan, and partners to increase military interoperability. He recommended that a division of

labor approach to coordinating these efforts would likely be more effective, as it can be logistically difficult to pool resources and planning efforts. Rather, he suggested that countries can take the lead where they have the greatest individual expertise; for Japan, this could be investing in development projects, while the United States could focus on capacity-building efforts with Southeast Asian coast guards. He added that while the lack of ambassadors may be delaying opportunities for formal diplomatic coordination, a great deal of partnership-building can still be achieved in the meantime through economic and military coordination between the United States, Japan, and partner countries.

Ambassador Shear agreed with Ambassador Ishii's assessment, adding that there are many upcoming opportunities for the United States and Japan to operationalize their common interests in the region. Cambodia's ASEAN Chairmanship in 2022 (followed by Indonesia's Chairmanship in 2023), Japan's G7 Chairmanship in 2023, and the 2023 APEC forum (which could be hosted by the United States) are a few examples that he provided. Ambassador Shear also noted that Prime Minister Kishida has voiced his desire to visit Washington, D.C. as soon as possible, which could occur towards the end of this year or in early 2022. This would provide another opportunity for meaningful U.S.-Japan coordination on how to enhance and expand engagement in the region.

## A Values-Based vs. Realistic Approach

The final question concerned whether the United States and Japan will be able to meet their goals for economic and defense coordination in the region through a values-based approach. Would it be wise for both countries to relegate democratic values to a secondary role and instead focus on a realism-based approach to engaging in Southeast Asia?

Ambassador Shear replied that he does not see the democratic values-based approach and the realistic approach as mutually exclusive. Rather, he suggested that statesmen need to strike a careful balance of acknowledging the hard political, military, and trade realities in the region while finding workable ways to preserve and uphold democratic values. He cited Myanmar as an example where the United States and Japan differed in their individual approaches to defining that balance, yet both countries continue to maintain a strong sense of cohesion in their overall engagement in the region.

Ambassador Ishii explained that through his presentation, he hoped to convey the idea that when developing a plan for engagement in the region, the United States and Japan should allow their instincts to be driven by realism, but



they need to be able to explain the reasoning for their actions through the framework of democratic values. A realistic assessment of the political, geographic, and economic conditions in the region is necessary to understand what options might be available, but when the time comes to choose a course of action, all decisions must ultimately be in line with the core democratic values which are at the core of our two societies.

Dr. Akimoto concluded the event by thanking Ambassador Ishii and Ambassador Shear for sharing their insights on how Japan views its role in engaging with ASEAN and collaborating with the United States to ensure peace and prosperity in Southeast Asia. He added that Sasakawa USA will be hosting a second Policy Briefing event in November following the ASEAN summit, in which Ambassador Shear will provide his remarks on the United States' perspective on ASEAN and its role in the region.

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*Sasakawa USA is grateful to Ambassador Ishii and Ambassador Shear for their insightful remarks on Japan's current viewpoint on ASEAN and the challenges it faces in the region, as well as their recommendations for how the United States and Japan can collaboratively engage with ASEAN to uphold their shared values in the region. Sasakawa USA also thanks the Q&A participants and attendees for joining us in this engaging discussion.*

*The summarized views of the speakers expressed herein are entirely the work of Sasakawa USA and do not represent the official positions of any of the speakers.*

*For more information about Sasakawa USA's Policy Briefing Series, click [here](#).*