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## **Discussion Report Talking ASEAN**

**on**

A New Strategic Alliance?  
Situating Japan-Philippine-US (JAPHUS)  
in the Indo-Pacific

Jakarta, June 26<sup>th</sup> 2024



## Introduction

On Wednesday, 26 June 2024, The Habibie Center (THC) convened the Talking ASEAN seminar entitled “**A New Strategic Alliance? Situating Japan-Philippine-US (JAPHUS) in the Indo-Pacific**”. The seminar featured **Richard Heydarian** (Senior Lecturer, the Asian Center, University of the Philippines Diliman), **Mayor General Priyanto** (Dean of Defense Strategy Faculty, The Republic of Indonesia Defense University), and **Aisha Rasyidila Kusumasomantri** (Director of Research, Indo-Pacific Strategic Intelligence (ISI)) and was moderated by **Marina Ika Sari** (Researcher of ASEAN Studies Program, The Habibie Center).

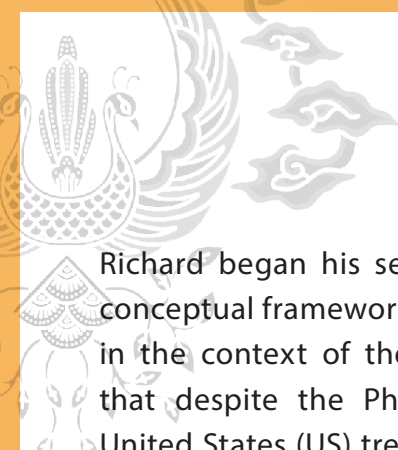
The objectives of the webinar were to: a) discuss the recent development of the establishment of trilateral grouping by Japan, the Philippines, and the United States; b) identify prospects and implications of JAPHUS in the geopolitics dynamic in the Indo-Pacific; and c) explore the ASEAN perspective and expectations of JAPHUS.

This discussion report summarized the key points of each speaker, as well as the following questions and answers session.

# PRESENTATION FROM THE PANELIST



**Richard Heydarian**  
(Senior Lecturer, the Asian Center,  
University of the Philippines Diliman)



Richard began his session by discussing the conceptual framework of hedging, specifically in the context of the Philippines. He stated that despite the Philippines' position as a United States (US) treaty ally, the government refuses to let the US dictate its foreign policy. He referenced a statement from President Marcos Jr. at the 2024 Shangri-La Dialogue, emphasizing that the Philippines does not want to choose sides between the two superpowers. Richard emphasized that hedging, in principle, must be dialectical, reversible, and adjustable, meaning that "nothing has to be set in stone." During Duterte's administration, the Philippines developed strong relations with China. Marcos also wants to maintain good relations with China but with clear "red lines" regarding the South China Sea dispute. Richard believed this concept is highly relevant for ASEAN countries as they cope with high uncertainties and high-stakes situations.

Richard then argued that hedging is also a form of "insurance-seeking strategic behavior." He elaborated that countries can never truly rely on any superpower and must rely on themselves, especially in the case of ASEAN countries. Hence, it is important not to take sides between contending superpowers. Hedging is not passive but proactive; one must look for opportunities to improve their room for maneuver and enhance strategic agency constantly. Most ASEAN countries are still "messy" democracies and post-colonial nations that have yet to develop a strategic culture, making them easily divisive. This

often causes their foreign policies to be irrational and incoherent. In the ASEAN region, hedging is best described not as a calculated and cogently designed strategy, but as an "instinctive behavior" that prevails in high-stakes situations.

When discussing hedging, the concept of bamboo diplomacy often comes up. Vietnam has successfully implemented this strategy, at least on the surface level, by playing the superpowers, with each relationship serving a specific purpose. India's version of a hedging strategy is known as the multi-alignment strategy. India is part of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and a member of BRICS alongside Russia and China. It is also part of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) alongside the US. India prioritizes its national interests, which can be achieved by enhancing its strategic agency and expanding its room for maneuver.

The Philippines has a slightly different situation, partly due to its geography. The country is located in the middle of the first and second island chains, a realm of great power competition. The US has dominated this area since the end of World War II. However, China has recently been trying to push out the US, with Beijing feeling entitled to control its backyard. ASEAN clearly disagrees with this view, but this is what many decision-makers in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) seem to believe.


Richard then brought up the case of China's nine-dash line, a significant part of the ocean region under China's claim which clashes with what international law clearly indicates. The Philippines' main concern is not territorial disagreement with other ASEAN claimants but specifically with China, due to its overly expansive claim that does not align with international law. Furthermore, China's activities in the South China Sea have been increasingly aggressive and concerning, with a massive buildup of military capabilities and facilities. Vietnam and the Philippines are also building up their military capabilities, but not to the same scale as China.

The Philippines has its strategic struggle and has been overly reliant on the US. This includes agreements related to access to military bases, the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), the Mutual Defense Treaty, and the Visiting Forces Agreement. These are the pillars of Manila's bilateral cooperation with Washington, but it is still an alliance that is far from perfect. Historically, the US has been non-committal to the Philippines. For many years, the US refused to clarify whether the Mutual Defense Treaty would apply if the Philippines were to get into an armed conflict with another nation in the South China Sea. Despite multiple incidents and military confrontations between Chinese and Philippine maritime military forces in the area, it remains unclear if this would trigger the Mutual Defense Treaty. Questions about American reliability are real and present. Because of this, tensions exist between the

Philippines and the US. Although both the Biden and Trump administrations have been more explicit in defining this line, stating that any armed attack on the Philippines' public vessels, troops, and aircraft will activate the Mutual Defense Treaty, it remains unclear regarding non-kinetic or grey zone attacks.

Japan-Philippines-US (JAPHUS) is a defensive and reactive measure against China. During Duterte's administration, the Philippines tried a softer and more accommodative approach towards China, but the situation in the South China Sea did not improve. Unlike Indonesia, the Philippines did not receive any major infrastructure projects from having good relations with China. Indonesia received the Bandung-Jakarta High-Speed Rail (WHOOSH), funded and built with Chinese technology. The Philippines did not receive a single meaningful project despite six years of Duterte's presidency. Richard referred to this as "empty pledges."

When Marcos Jr. came to power, he was an ally of Duterte. This, coupled with the history of bad blood between the Marcos family and the American government, initially made China supportive of Marcos Jr. Marcos chose China as his first destination, expecting to finalize economic and South China Sea agreements. However, no concessions came from China, leaving Marcos disappointed. At the same time, he was actively courted by the Biden administration. This pushed Marcos Jr. to pivot to the US. He then actively pursued a stronger security partnership, not just with



the US but also with Japan. The Philippines is allied with the US, and the US is allied with Japan, but the Philippines and Japan have yet to sign a treaty alliance. However, the Philippines is currently finalizing a reciprocal access agreement allowing Japan to export increasingly sophisticated weaponry to the Philippines.

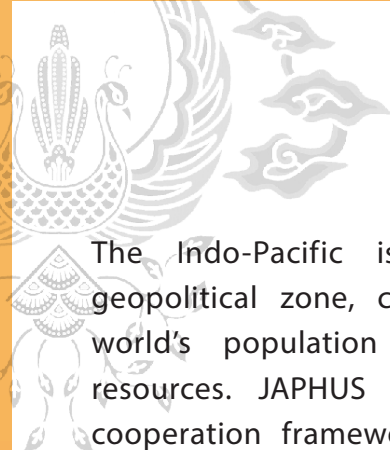
Richard added that JAPHUS will go hand-in-hand with the QUAD, but the reason JAPHUS is so important is because of Taiwan. Geography is a major factor, as Manila is very close to Taiwan. Hence, putting Japan in the picture, JAPHUS is a perfect triangular cooperation to position weapons and missile defense systems in southern Japan and northern Philippines to counteract China's anti-cruise ballistic missile capabilities in a potential war scenario over the Taiwan Strait.

There is domestic pushback in the Philippines, with some pro-China politicians questioning the government's willingness to be involved in the Taiwan issue. The reality is that the Philippines has not fully decided how far it is willing to participate in JAPHUS, especially regarding Taiwan. Lastly, there is also a strategic economic angle to JAPHUS. Richard referred to this as "Taiwan+1." Essentially, he argued that the Philippines does not want to be just a military base for the US and Japan. Instead, Manila wants to ensure that the cooperation will expedite its military modernization and economic advancement. He elaborated that with JAPHUS, the Filipino government hopes that Taiwan can participate in some way to move its lower-end semiconductor manufacturing to the Philippines through the JAPHUS economic corridor.

# PRESENTATION FROM THE PANELIST



**Mayor General Priyanto**  
(Dean of Defense Strategy Faculty, The  
Republic of Indonesia Defense University)



The Indo-Pacific is the most dynamic geopolitical zone, comprising 65% of the world's population and rich in natural resources. JAPHUS is the new triangular cooperation framework in the region. The process to create JAPHUS began in June 2023 when the three national security advisors met in Tokyo, culminating in establishing a common framework for trilateral cooperation in December 2023. On April 11th, 2024, the leaders from Japan, the Philippines, and the US met for the first JAPHUS summit, where they issued a Joint Vision Statement emphasizing shared values of freedom, democracy, and respect for the rule of law. They also committed to strengthening relations and deepening economic cooperation.

The establishment of JAPHUS can largely be attributed to the growing influence of China in the region. JAPHUS is considered a reactive policy to contain and counterbalance China's power and influence in the Indo-Pacific. However, it also aims to facilitate the strengthening of diplomatic relations among Japan, the Philippines, and the US, as these three countries share common security challenges in the Indo-Pacific region.

However, JAPHUS also has the potential to cause a security dilemma; actions taken by one country to improve its security capabilities can inadvertently cause insecurity in other countries. This security dilemma could create regional instability through the reactions and responses of other countries, leading to an escalation of conflict. Major General Priyanto

also pointed out that JAPHUS might overlap and compete with other existing security arrangements in the region. Additionally, it might intensify great power competition, particularly over the two flashpoints in the South China Sea and East China Sea.

The ASEAN perspective on JAPHUS is based on the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). The AOIP is a mechanism for facing challenges based on the principle of promoting cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region. According to it, ASEAN must remain vigilant in promoting ASEAN centrality, openness, transparency, and inclusivity to generate strategic trust and achieve win-win cooperation in the region. Meanwhile, Indonesia's perspective on JAPHUS is based on the principle of being free and active. Indonesia encourages Japan, the Philippines, and the US to maintain their "openness" through the ASEAN platform. Furthermore, the Indonesian Defense Minister, Prabowo Subianto, has stated that Indonesia will take an active role in maintaining stability and security in the Southeast Asian region. This signals Indonesia's willingness to take an active role if any conflict might escalate, whether related or unrelated to JAPHUS.

# PRESENTATION FROM THE PANELIST



**Aisha Rasyidila Kusumasomantri**  
(Director of Research, Indo-Pacific  
Strategic Intelligence (ISI))



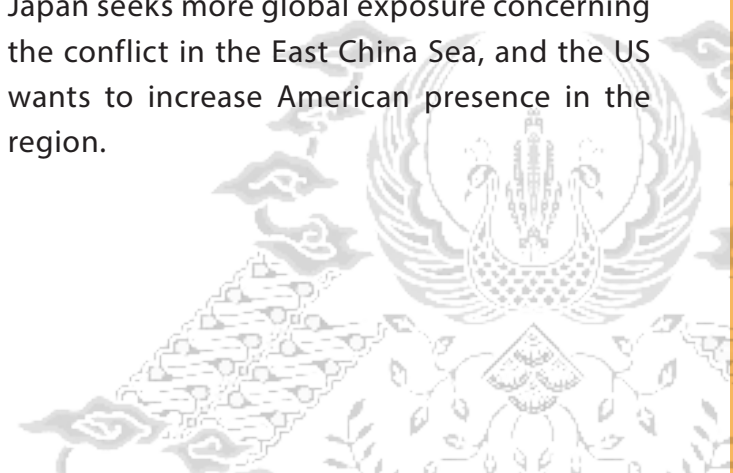
Aisha began her presentation by highlighting the differences between current and global architecture during the Cold War. During the Cold War, state alignment was black and white, with states aligning either with the Western or the Eastern bloc. In contrast, the current global structure is more interdependent. China and the US have developed strong economic links and interdependence through trade and investments, yet this has not led to a strong bilateral relationship. Instead, it has resulted in a series of competitions, with minilateralism being one of the aspects they utilize to compete and balance each other. JAPHUS is a form of minilateralism, which is multilateralism on a smaller scale.

Minilateral arrangements are often created to fulfill a specific goal, and the same can be said for JAPHUS. JAPHUS was created to balance and contain Chinese influence in the region. Prior to JAPHUS, there were other minilateral arrangements in the region, such as QUAD and Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS). In the case of JAPHUS, Japan and the Philippines are treaty allies of the US. The Japan-US Mutual Defense Treaty grants the US the right to deploy its military and establish military bases in Japan. Meanwhile, the US-Philippines Military Base Agreement allows the US to use military bases in the Philippines. JAPHUS is the triangular version of this cooperation, although still on a much smaller scale.

JAPHUS' scope of cooperation includes both economic and security dimensions. Economically, it focuses on information and communication technology (ICT) investments and establishing economic corridors. However, the security dimension arguably receives more attention due to its sensitive nature. It encompasses capacity building for the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG), the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), and cybersecurity.

Aisha pointed out that from previous experiences with minilateralism in both QUAD and AUKUS, ASEAN considers it a challenge to ASEAN centrality in the region. ASEAN has enjoyed a central role in Southeast Asia and an important role in Asia, but new forms of minilateral arrangements might disrupt or even replace ASEAN's role in this part of the world. That being said, as a security forum, QUAD is considered ineffective in balancing China because India remains reluctant to engage in a direct confrontation with Beijing, contrary to what the US wants to achieve.

JAPHUS is the first minilateral arrangement involving an ASEAN country, the Philippines. One reason this triangular cooperation is possible is due to the convergence of interests against China. The Philippines needs reinforcement to counteract China's aggression in the South China Sea, while Japan seeks more global exposure concerning the conflict in the East China Sea, and the US wants to increase American presence in the region.





Will the Philippines' participation in JAPHUS distance it further from ASEAN? There must be some level of resentment and disappointment regarding ASEAN mechanisms in dealing with the South China Sea dispute. The discussion on the Code of Conduct (CoC) has been extremely slow despite Indonesia's attempts to push the discussion on multiple occasions. Manila's decision to join JAPHUS can be best characterized as "taking matters into its own hands."

The bigger question is the degree of strategic agency the Philippines has in JAPHUS. If a military conflict does occur, what can escalate the situation into a common threat for JAPHUS members? And who will take charge? These questions remain unanswered, although it is important to remember that JAPHUS is still in its early stages, and we need to wait to see more elaboration on these matters.



# QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION

## Question

### **Rio (International Relations Scholar):**

Is JAPHUS a form of deterrence policy? Or is this a response to the current geopolitical dynamic in the region? Furthermore, will it lead to the birth of other forms of minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific region?

## Responses

### **Aisha Rasyidila Kusumasomantri (Director of Research, Indo-Pacific Strategic Intelligence (ISI)):**

It could be both. It is certainly a response to the growing influence of China in the region. Both Biden and Trump have been quite similar regarding Southeast Asia. It is a response to China's aggression in the South China Sea. From the Philippines' side, they want to maintain security in the area. Aisha also believed that JAPHUS could potentially spiral into other issues in the region, but this could be prevented with good confidence-building measures, effective communication, and by ensuring neighbors that the cooperation is created for peaceful and defense purposes.

### **Mayor General Priyanto (Dean of Defense Strategy Faculty, The Republic of Indonesia Defense University):**

Major Priyanto agreed with Aisha's statement. He added two perspectives on this cooperation. First, from the defense perspective, it is to respond to the growing Chinese influence. The other perspective is related to the economy, aiming to increase economic and technological collaboration.

## Question

### **Kim:**

When AUKUS was created, Indonesia reacted negatively because of the possible security dilemma, among other things. But so far, the government has yet to react to JAPHUS. Does this mean that Indonesia is less concerned about JAPHUS and its implications for the region?

## Responses

### **Mayor General Priyanto (Dean of Defense Strategy Faculty, The Republic of Indonesia Defense University):**

There are positive and negative perspectives about JAPHUS. It can contain China but at the same time, it could also disturb the stability and balance of power in the region.

### **Aisha Rasyidila Kusumasomantri (Director of Research, Indo-Pacific Strategic Intelligence (ISI)):**

JAPHUS is very new. This is still the negotiation phase of the cooperation. The cooperation also consists of several fields such as security and economy. Hence, the implications of JAPHUS remain unclear. We need to understand more before we can respond to that. In regards to QUAD, Indonesia had such a strong response because it was the first minilateralism in the region.

### **Comment: Mustika (Student from The Republic of Indonesia Defense University):**

It is important for us to remember that despite the existence of other non-security dimensions to JAPHUS, it still heavily emphasizes military and security. In reality, not much has changed; even prior to JAPHUS, the US already had access to 16 military bases in the Philippines. It is understandable why the Philippines chose to join JAPHUS, but for Indonesia, ASEAN must remain our main concentric circle. For the US, this is just an extension of their ambition in the Indo-Pacific region. They already have QUAD, AUKUS, The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), and now JAPHUS. Even though the US supports the AOIP, these measures only lessen ASEAN centrality in the region.

## Question

### **Muhammad Zulam (The National University):**

Considering the upcoming US election, Trump's approach to containing China is more economic. Meanwhile, Biden is more rhetorical, especially with QUAD, AUKUS, and now JAPHUS. If Trump were to win, what would happen to these alliances? Zulam believed that JAPHUS could help modernize the Philippines' military, but it seems from Aisha's presentation that it emphasizes more on capacity building. Is one of the reasons why the Philippines chose to participate in JAPHUS due to a hindrance in the defense industry in the region?

## Response

**Aisha Rasyidila Kusumasomantri (Director of Research, Indo-Pacific Strategic Intelligence (ISI)):**

Regarding Trump, if he is elected, there are several things we have to anticipate. First, his foreign policy is extremely unpredictable. However, Aisha disagreed with the statement about Trump's approach being more economic because QUAD was established during Trump's presidency, and it is a form of military alliance. When it comes to the Indo-Pacific, Biden and Trump are very similar despite being from different parties. They will continue to contain China with both economic and security measures.

On the second question, modernization could still happen in many ways, including through capacity building and technological transfer. In regards to ASEAN, what happens at the regional level is drastically different from the domestic level. In ASEAN, things are flexible, but domestically, we are very different from each other. Not all ASEAN countries practice hedging. Indonesia practices hedging, but she personally believed the Philippines, especially after JAPHUS, is no longer hedging. It's bandwagoning; it's very US-centric. This will cause further divisiveness among ASEAN member countries when it comes to great power competitions.

## Question

**Anonymous:**

What if China refuses to negotiate with both Indonesia and the Philippines about territorial disputes in the South China Sea and North Natuna Sea?

## Responses

**Mayor General Priyanto (Dean of Defense Strategy Faculty, The Republic of Indonesia Defense University):**

Our foreign policy is a free and active foreign policy, meaning we try not to side with any party. We must continue to utilize diplomacy as our first line of defense, including in our conflict with China. We must refrain from using armed forces or other forms of strategy that might involve violence.

**Aisha Rasyidila Kusumasomantri (Director of Research, Indo-Pacific Strategic Intelligence (ISI)):**

Indonesia has been very active in the discussion of the CoC with China. Regarding diplomacy, there is a reason China prefers to engage bilaterally with other claimant states in the South China

Sea. The power parity is so massive that other claimant states are powerless to negotiate with China if left alone. Hence, ASEAN is a force multiplier for those countries.

**Marina Ika Sari (Researcher, The Habibie Center):**

The Indonesian government has taken several actions, including releasing a new map of the Republic of Indonesia, where we changed the name of “South China Sea” to “North Natuna Sea,” sending diplomatic notes to the Chinese government and the United Nations, as well as deploying our Navy and Naval ships to showcase our presence to China. In the future, Indonesia should utilize ASEAN as a platform to negotiate with China to further discuss this matter.

## Question

**Mabda Haerunnisa Fajrilla Sidiq (Researcher, The Habibie Center):**

What is the next logical step that ASEAN can take to maintain its relevance in the region?

## Responses

**Mayor General Priyanto (Dean of Defense Strategy Faculty, The Republic of Indonesia Defense University):**

ASEAN is not created to respond to military issues; instead, it is created to deal with non-traditional issues. That being said, we have the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM) and ADMM+ as platforms to discuss military issues not just among ASEAN countries but also with countries outside of ASEAN, including China and the US. Hopefully, we can utilize this platform to respond to defense-related issues.

**Aisha Rasyidila Kusumasomantri (Director of Research, Indo-Pacific Strategic Intelligence (ISI)):**

The most important thing is to have uniformity among ASEAN members. One of the reasons the Philippines decided to join JAPHUS is its disbelief in the ASEAN system. One of the things we can do to counter this is to expedite the discussion on the CoC in the South China Sea. We have to start answering the difficult question: Will you be able to sacrifice some of your national interests to create harmony and uniformity? We need to have the same positions and tell China that we disagree with their claims in the South China Sea. This is highly unlikely because some ASEAN countries are heavily dependent on China.

## Question

### **Dafa Wicaksono:**

How does JAPHUS contribute to ensuring resilient economic supply chains in the Indo-Pacific region?

## Responses

### **Mayor General Priyanto (Dean of Defense Strategy Faculty, The Republic of Indonesia Defense University):**

JAPHUS is still very young, and it is not clear yet. However, it has been mentioned that it will seek to improve economic relations between the members.

### **Comment: Teuku Rezasyah (Associate Professor in International Relations, Universitas Padjadjaran):**

It is true that JAPHUS is new, but it does prove that China is a regional power moving toward superpower status. China is facing QUAD, AUKUS, and JAPHUS, not to mention bilateral defense treaties between the US and Japan, the US and the Philippines, and the US and Vietnam. Even though there was no direct response from the Chinese government, Rezasyah believed that China will “sharpen its knife” in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait. We will see China’s greater muscle in these areas, making them more reluctant to sign the next CoC and more assertive with their nine-dash-line claim. In June, we saw new strategic cooperation between North Korea and Russia. We will witness greater uncertainty not just in the South China Sea but also in the Korean Peninsula. ASEAN must follow our blueprint in the ASEAN Political-Security Community, ASEAN Economic Community, and ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community. We must conduct greater cohesion, and if diplomacy is truly our first line of defense, then we need to make our diplomacy more credible.



### **ABOUT ASEAN STUDIES PROGRAM**

The ASEAN Studies Program was established on February 24, 2010, to become a center of excellence on ASEAN related issues, which can assist in the development of the ASEAN Community by 2015. The Habibie Center through its ASEAN Studies Program, alongside other institutions working towards the same goal, hopes to contribute to the realization of a more people-oriented ASEAN that puts a high value on democracy and human rights.

The objective of the ASEAN Studies Program is not merely only to conduct research and discussion within academic and government circles, but also to strengthen public awareness by forming a strong network of civil society in the region that will be able to help spread the ASEAN message. With the establishment of ASEAN Studies Program, The Habibie Center aims to play its part within our capabilities to the ASEAN regional development.

### **ABOUT TALKING ASEAN**

Talking ASEAN is a monthly public dialogue held at The Habibie Center in Jakarta. Covering a wide array of issues related to ASEAN, Talking ASEAN addresses topics of: Economic Integration, Socio-cultural, & Democracy, human rights and regional peace, among others. Featuring local and visiting experts, Talking ASEAN is one of a series of twelve dialogues regularly held each month and open to a target audience consisting of ASEAN officials, foreign ambassadors & diplomats, academics, university students, businesses, and the media.

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