Interview: Minilateralism in East Asia

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Interview Questions for Prof. Felix Kuhn

Topic: Alternative Models of Cooperation

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Valentin Grangier: All right, let's start with an East Asia focus. The first question is about the evolution of regional cooperation in East Asia.

We've witnessed a proliferation of many lateral arrangements, such as the Quad, the Asian Plus frameworks, and trilateral dialogues like Japan, South Korea, and China. Do you see these smaller, issue-focused groupings as a

sustainable regional model for diplomacy, or are they more like temporary responses to the limitations of broader institutions like APEC?

Prof. Felix Kuhn: Well, the broader organisations do exist. As you mentioned, there's ASEAN and APEC. You can also include the East Asia Summit. The East Asia Summit is not minilateral; it's more of a general framework where countries come together and cooperate.

The emergence of several minilateral arrangements, such as the Quad, reflects a perception among some countries that existing arrangements do not fully cover all the needs they feel should be addressed, especially in the security sphere. ASEAN and the East Asia Summit were originally intended for all countries to come together, discuss, and coordinate, including on non-traditional security threats.

This model hasn't been discarded. It still exists and retains its value, as we can see in periodic ASEAN-centric gatherings. However, some countries feel that deeper security cooperation is necessary. For example, in the Quad, Japan, India, Australia, and the United States recognise the need for enhanced collaboration, especially in the security domain.

From the Japanese perspective, this is largely about China. There is still a desire to cooperate with China where possible, particularly economically, but deeper security cooperation is also seen as very necessary.

Japan's approach builds on bilateral relations, especially its security alliance with the United States, as a foundation. On that basis, Japan pursues deeper cooperation with other countries. This is not limited to the Quad; it is also evident in trilateral U.S.-South Korea-Japan cooperation and U.S.-Japan-Philippines collaboration. Much of this is rooted in the original hub-and-spoke system of

U.S. security alliances, where the United States has agreements with individual countries, but those countries do not have security alliances with each other.

The Quad is somewhat unique because it attempts to draw in India without establishing a formal military alliance, allowing for cooperation without engaging in a complete security alliance.

Valentin Grangier: Thank you. Now, let's discuss what defines the success of the East Asian cooperation model. From your perspective, what constitutes a successful model? Are there region-specific principles, such as non-interference or informal consensus-building, or is it more about shared development goals underpinning durable, trust-based frameworks in East Asia?

Prof. Felix Kuhn: That depends on the framework. ASEAN-centric frameworks are often associated with principles like non-interference and informal consensus-building, known as the "ASEAN Way." The idea is to engage in general discussion and coordination without forcing compliance.

In trilateral or mini-lateral frameworks focused on security, the approach is different. There is no intention to interfere in another country's internal

affairs, like North Korea or China, but the cooperation is targeted and action-oriented.

From a Chinese perspective, mini-lateral initiatives are often criticised as exclusivist. Indeed, by definition, minilaterals are exclusive, but that doesn't make them wrong. China itself engages in minilateral arrangements, for example, recent military exercises with Iran and Russia. However, such arrangements are viewed critically from the U.S. or Japanese perspective.

From a regional perspective, minilaterals can appear fragmentary. But from the participating countries' perspective, there are legitimate strategic reasons to engage in them. Outside these minilaterals, arrangements can sometimes appear less cooperative and more like negative models.

Valentin Grangier: Let's talk about culture and shared traditions. Asia has shared Confucian traditions, hierarchical norms, and historical legacies. To what extent do these cultural and historical factors facilitate or constrain cooperation, particularly between countries with complex pasts like Japan, China, and South Korea?

Prof. Felix Kuhn: If we take Japan as an example, these traditions are not conspicuous. Today, when Japan talks about values in cooperation, it emphasises liberal values: democracy, free trade, human rights, and free speech.

This does not mean Japan only cooperates with countries that share these values. Japan has strong relations with Vietnam, for example, where liberal democratic norms are less prominent. Concerns with China focus on its authoritarian nature rather than Confucian values. Traditional cultural influences may have a subtle effect, but current political and strategic values dominate diplomatic interactions.

Valentin Grangier: Focusing on Japan, given China's rapid advancement in sectors such as electric vehicles, semiconductors, and green technologies —areas where Japan has traditionally been strong—how has this competition reshaped the economic and diplomatic relationship between Tokyo and Beijing? Is the rivalry overshadowing interdependence, or does it drive new forms of pragmatic engagement?

Prof. Felix Kuhn: It depends on the sector. For example, Chinese EVs have not yet made a major impact on the Japanese domestic market. The EV market is still smaller than that for hybrid models, and while companies like BYD have made inroads, their impact on Japanese sales is minimal.

The broader economic relationship remains vital. China is an essential partner for Japan, both as a market and as a production location. Competitive dynamics exist, especially in Southeast Asia, but the economic relationship continues to be important for both sides.

Japan also considers its economic security, such as in the area of rare earths. China imposed restrictions on exports to Japan over a decade ago, and Japan has been developing alternative sources and strategies. Economic rivalry exists alongside ongoing pragmatic engagement.

Valentin Grangier: Considering economic interdependence between China, Japan, and South Korea, could Japan or South Korea recalibrate their security posture toward China out of economic necessity, or are U.S. security commitments too deeply institutionalised to allow such flexibility?

Prof. Felix Kuhn: Let me focus on Japan. Japan has tried to balance economic interdependence with its security alliance with the U.S. It will not give up the American alliance for deeper economic engagement with China.

Every Japanese prime minister in the past decades has emphasised that the U.S. alliance is the bedrock of Japanese security. China is a significant security issue, and Japan will not make itself more dependent on China for economic reasons. Economic cooperation is desired, but it will not override strategic priorities.

Even with instability in U.S. politics, Japan maintains the alliance as a foundation. During the first

Trump administration, Prime Minister Abe worked closely with the U.S. Future governments are expected to follow the same path, seeking close cooperation with Washington regardless of who is president.

Valentin Grangier: Now, regarding South Korea and Japan, South Korea is expanding its defence posture. Could Tokyo and Seoul develop a framework for regional defence cooperation, despite their historical tensions and their respective alliances with the U.S.?

Prof. Felix Kuhn: In theory, yes. The U.S. hopes for closer cooperation between its allies. Historical issues have sometimes limited collaboration, but there is a visible effort from both sides to enhance security cooperation, particularly in the context of China and North Korea.

Future developments depend on how the new leadership, especially Prime Minister Takaichi, handles sensitive historical issues like visits to Yasukuni Shrine. The comfort women issue also remains unresolved from South Korea's perspective, despite Japan's claim that it has been addressed. Cooperation is possible, but historical and popular issues could disrupt progress.

Valentin Grangier: Finally, let's discuss Europe's engagement with the Indo-Pacific. How do East Asian policymakers, particularly in Japan, South Korea, and China, interpret Europe's growing involvement? Is the EU's strategy seen as a stabilising force, or as an external factor complicating intra-Asian strategic balancing?

Prof. Felix Kuhn: It depends on whom you ask. Japan welcomes European involvement and has frequent security dialogues with the EU and individual European countries like Germany and France. Security initiatives, such as sending ships to the Indo-Pacific, are also welcomed.

China, however, does not view it positively. While it does not necessarily obstruct EU-China cooperation, European engagement in security is less welcomed than in Japan.

In general, there is no single East Asian perspective. Countries maintain different approaches to security. Many Southeast Asian countries hedge

and avoid taking sides. Japan does not see China as an all-out enemy but recognises it as a security challenge. China, in turn, sees the U.S. and its alliances as a security challenge.

Valentin Grangier: Thank you very much for participating in this interview.

Prof. Felix Kuhn: Thank you. The questions were very timely and relevant.

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