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Background Brief:

Japan's Prime Minister Suga to Visit Vietnam 2

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October 15, 2020

We request your assessment on the upcoming visit of Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide to Vietnam. Here are the issues we would like you to address:

Q1: Nikkei reported that PM Suga is set to sign agreements which facilitate weapon exports to Vietnam. Sources in Japan said that the Kawasaki P-1 patrol aircraft and C-2 transport aircraft will be the focus of discussions. What do such agreements mean for Vietnam, and Japan – Vietnam relations, as well as Japan's commitment to Vietnam and the region? How significant is it?

ANSWER: Six years ago, Japan ended its ban on the sale of defence equipment, technology and systems; this reflected Japan's evolving international security role but also to earn money to lower the unit cost of domestic production.

Japan has been circumspect in what it will sell. For example, in August Japan agreed to provide the Philippines with early warning and control radar. Also, that month, Japan announced it had reached agreement with Vietnam to provide six new patrol vessels for the Vietnam Coast Guard. The sale of Kawasaki P-1 maritime patrol aircraft and C-2 transport aircraft are not offensive weapons. They were both developed in Japan to meet the needs of its Self-Defence Forces.

Japan is motivated to deepen its cooperation with Southeast Asian states, Vietnam in particular, in maritime security and to demonstrate that Japan is a reliable partner. The prospective defence export agreement expected to be signed during Prime Minister Suga's visit to Vietnam reportedly includes the transfer of ship-building technology to support co-production. This would assist Vietnam's quest for greater defence self-reliance. The sale of P-1 maritime patrol and C-2 military transport aircraft would enhance Vietnam's maritime domain awareness and transport capacity.

The significance of a Japan-Vietnam defence export agreement is that it would enhance defence industry cooperation between the two countries, and lessen Vietnam's dependence on a few suppliers.

The agreement is very significant because Japan would be taking a major step in promoting defence sales in the region. The agreement is also significant because Japan and Vietnam would be increasing their engagement with each other.

Q2: Public opinion tends to agree that PM Suga will continue in former PM Abe's footsteps in terms of foreign policy, especially policy towards Vietnam and the region. Do you agree?

ANSWER: PM Suga served as Chief Cabinet Secretary to former Prime Minister Abe for eight years. Suga has already made clear he supports Abe's flagship foreign policy of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific, including freedom of navigation and overflight and a rules-based order founded on international law.

During his time as Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga gained an intimate understanding of Abe's concept of the confluence of two oceans and Indo-Pacific strategy that focused on India. This vision has now expanded to include the United States and Australia. The Quad is slowly being institutionalized with two meetings at ministerial level in the last two years. The Quad will facilitate maritime security cooperation among its members.

Suga will instinctively give priority to Japan's engagement with Southeast Asia, and Vietnam and Indonesia in particular, for both economic and security reasons in order to counter China.

Q3: In the Japanese-language media, we found an interesting insight that said PM Suga will want to promote the Indo – Pacific vision centered on Japan's ties with Southeast Asia. This is also the way Japan approaches the Quad's future cooperation mechanism. What is your assessment of the Quad, especially regarding the outcomes of its meeting in Tokyo this month (including Pompeo's attendance)?

ANSWER: While the U.S.-Japan alliance is the necessary foundation for Japan's security, it is not sufficient. PM Suga has signaled that Japan needs to keep the United States engaged in the Indo-Pacific while working beyond the Quad to engage with Southeast Asian states. These arrangements will be flexible and will not necessarily include the participation of all four members. This will give Japan greater flexibility than a four-member Quad under U.S. leadership.

Under these arrangements, Quad members can combine to engage with regional states. For example, the Quad Plus emerged in March 2020 to consult on the coronavirus; the Plus members included South Korea, Vietnam, and New Zealand.

The Quad also provides a flexible structure to coordinate security policies on a number of issues beyond defence, such as the provision of funding for quality infrastructure projects as an alternate to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Q4. What does PM Suga's visit to Vietnam mean for Japan's approach to Quad?

ANSWER: PM Suga will promote both bilateral and multilateral relations with Vietnam under the loose framework of the Quad. Suga seeks greater flexibility to demonstrate independent Japanese leadership to influence regional developments other than reliance on military arrangements under U.S. leadership in the Quad.

Q5. What will be Japan's next priorities?

ANSWER: Japan will want to follow up on agreements reached in Hanoi and Jakarta with practical measures to address key security issues, such as combatting the

coronavirus, mitigating the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, stability and security in the South China Sea, and in funding for initiatives as an alternative to China's BRI. Japan will also reach out to Australia to better co-ordinate their policies.

Japan will also seek to expand its engagement in Southeast Asia beyond Indonesia and Vietnam.

Finally, Japan will wait for the outcome of the U.S. elections. If Trump is re-elected Japan will proceed to enhance its leadership role in Southeast Asia. If Biden is elected, Japan will give priority to engaging with the new Administration on its Indo-Pacific strategy.

Suggested citation: Carlyle A. Thayer, "Japan's Prime Minister Suga to Visit Vietnam 2," *Thayer Consultancy Background Brief*, October 15, 2020. All background briefs are posted on Scribd.com (search for Thayer). To remove yourself from the mailing list type, UNSUBSCRIBE in the Subject heading and hit the Reply key.

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