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## Japan's ASEAN Diplomacy under Abe-II

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In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Japan's engagement with the rest of Asia was marred by wars and conflicts, stemming from its search for resources and raw materials needed for its domestic industries as well as for war needs. By 1945, this method proved a disaster. After the II World War, Japan's approach changed dramatically, and the country witnessed an economic revival based on sound economic planning which made Japan into the world's second largest economy (China's economy eclipsed Japan's in 2010). Now, as the world's third largest economy, Japan enjoys an enviable position in the economic development of the Asian region fostered by trade and investment cooperation, collaborative joint ventures, overseas manufacturing and building up a series of supply chains. This plays a critical role not only in the economic development of other Asian countries but also deepening economic interdependence and promoting regional economic integration.

The flying geese model of economic development with Japan as the leader and others catching up in an arrow-head formation in the development process has been instrumental in Asia's economic prosperity. This article attempts to analyze how Japan's policy towards the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is different or is likely to be different during the Shinzo Abe-II's government. The article will examine the various drivers in Japan's and in particular Abe's engagement with ASEAN.

### Five Principles

After assuming the office of Prime Minister in December 2012, Abe chose Southeast Asia for his first trip abroad. It is usually customary for a new Japanese Prime Minister to make the first official trip abroad to the United States. Abe had initially sought to make the United States the destination of his first overseas trip but was reportedly rebuffed by the White House who said a trip would not be possible until after President Barack Obama's inauguration in January 2013. As a result, the Japanese leader traveled to Southeast Asia in January 2013 instead. Tokyo looks to use common concern over China to strengthen ties with ASEAN member nations.

Japan's ASEAN diplomacy can be examined in the parameter of the five principles. Given changes to the strategic environment in the Asia-Pacific region and ASEAN's economic growth, ASEAN's presence and role in the region have been considerably enhanced. Japan, therefore, feels it important to further strengthen cooperation with ASEAN member states, not only on economic issues, but also other areas, such as security and political affairs. With his first trip, Abe kicked off the 40<sup>th</sup> year of ASEAN-Japan Friendship and Cooperation. During the visit, Abe outlined the "Five Principles" of Japan's ASEAN Diplomacy, on 18 January 2013. These are:

- Protect freedom of thought, expression, and speech where two oceans meet. These are universal values



that humanity has gained and they must be allowed to flower. These values are freedom, democracy and basic human rights.

- Ensure cooperation with ASEAN member states. Free and open seas, which are the most vital common asset, must be governed by laws and rules and not by force. Nonetheless, Japan welcomes the US 'pivot' to the Asia-Pacific.
- Further promote trade and investment, including flows of goods, money, people and services, through various economic partnership networks, for Japan's economic revitalization and prosperity of both Japan and ASEAN member states. The efforts and contributions Japan has made to enhance connectivity in Asia, such as through construction of the Southern Economic Corridor in the Mekong region, are now beginning to bear real fruit for the region. Maritime Asia has historically been a place where civilizations blend with one another. Indonesia is a prime example of Maritime Asia's calm, open nature, which brings about not conflict among different religions and culture, but coexistence. Japan is attracted to this.
- Protect and nurture Asia's diverse cultural heritage and traditions.
- Promote exchanges among the young generations to further foster mutual understanding.

### **Economic Issue**

Japan has supported the growth of ASEAN member states, particularly in infrastructure and human resource development, two areas that form the foundation of ongoing development in the ASEAN region. The "heart-to-heart" relationship, an approach first articulated in what became known as the "Fukuda Doctrine" in 1977, is now well established between Japan and ASEAN member states. Japanese Prime Minister Takeo Fukuda made three promises 36 years ago to the members of the ASEAN people: Japan would never become a military power; Japan would forge ties with ASEAN based on "heart-to-heart" understanding; and Japan would be an equal partner of ASEAN and its member countries. Japan has faithfully adhered to the Fukuda Doctrine right up to the present day.

ASEAN and Japan have also established close business ties. In 2011, the total volume of trade between ASEAN and Japan reached US\$ 248 billion. ASEAN is now Japan's second largest trading partner. In addition, Japanese foreign direct investment into the region increased to 1.5 trillion yen (approximately US\$ 18.8 billion), making ASEAN the second most common destination for Japanese FDI, behind the European Union.

### **40<sup>th</sup> Year of ASEAN-Japan Friendship and Cooperation**

This year marks the 40<sup>th</sup> year of ASEAN-Japan Friendship and Cooperation. Throughout 2013, Japan and ASEAN member states will conduct exchange projects in a wide range of fields, including political dialogue, economy,

culture, sport, and tourism, as well as youth exchange projects, which will be reinvigorated by the JENESYS 2.0 project. Also ASEAN-Japan Commemorative Summit meeting is scheduled in Japan in December 2013.

Six years ago, in a previous term as Prime Minister, Abe launched a project to bring high school and university students and other young people to Japan from throughout the Asia-Pacific region, particularly from East Asia Summit participant states. The program was titled JENESYS – the Japan-East Asia Network of Exchange for Students and Youths. With a budget equivalent to US\$ 300 million, JENESYS enabled more than 14,000 people to visit Japan from the ASEAN alone. Japan has now decided to re-launch this program, termed JENESYS 2.0. In JENESYS 2.0, Japan intends to invite 30,000 young people from ASEAN and other Asian nations to Japan.

### **Strategic Issue and China Factor**

China's rise and its assertiveness have sent disturbing signals throughout the Asia-Pacific. This is leading regional powers in Asia to reorient their own foreign policy priorities and redefine their relationships with each other. On the one hand, China's economic ties with most of the ASEAN member states have deepened over the years. Whether this is a Chinese strategy to foster ASEAN dependency on China is not important. What is important is any precipitous action by China as indicated by several of its recent actions will disturb not only the economic integration process but also imperil the region's strategic situation. This is a new challenge for Japan and the ASEAN member states.

Abe's ASEAN trip came at a time when Tokyo faces a tough regional security environment. Japan remains locked in a tense standoff with China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea; there is no sign of resolution. Abe's visit also took place just a week after North Korea conducted its third nuclear test on 12 February 2013. Given North Korea's intransigence in recent years, there is reason to believe that it may carry out further nuclear tests this year.

Abe, a nationalist, visited Washington in late February, thereby suggesting further strengthening US-Japan military relationship. The challenges from China and North Korea are further contributing to the already deep Japan-US security alliance. At Japan's request, the two sides announced they would consider revising their military treaty in November, while Abe's predecessor, Yoshihiko Noda, was still in office. At that time, Japan had said that revisions were necessary because of qualitative changes in the security environment since the last time the allies revisited the treaty in 1997.

Indeed, the United States has long pushed Japan to increase its security role in the region by upgrading its military forces and loosening restrictions on what types of operations they can participate in. Abe shares this view. A growing number of Japanese people also tend to hold



such a view because of provocations by North Korea and concerns over China's rise. On its side, Abe administration has announced an increase to the country's defense expenditure for the first time in a decade. Though some people in the US security establishment have reservations over Japan playing such a role, South Korea's reaction would not be favorable. Thus, relationships among the northeast Asian nations are likely to worsen. The shadow of history cannot easily be ignored. During his January 2013 visit to Southeast Asia, Abe openly baited Beijing over the disputed islands. In a direct reference to China, Abe declared: "Open seas are public assets, and Japan will do its utmost to protect them by cooperating with the [Association of Southeast Asian nations]". During his three-day trip, in which he visited Vietnam, Thailand and Indonesia, Abe underscored his key concern by repeatedly voicing Japan's opposition to any change of the "status quo by force", especially in territorial disputes involving China and its neighbors in East Asia.

Abe, speaking in Jakarta on 18 January 2013, stressed the important role that Indonesia can play in Asia's changing balance of power. The de facto leader of the ASEAN, Indonesia has long served as a linchpin of regional order. The concern over China's rise is driving countries such as the United States, Japan, South Korea and Australia to strengthen ties with Indonesia. China is making its own claims to regional leadership, which makes Indonesia uneasy. This concern gathers importance as China develops its own blue water navy and reiterates claims to virtually the entire South China Sea. Therefore, Abe spoke about the need to maintain tranquility in the Asian seas because like Japan, other ASEAN member countries derive their sustenance from the ocean and therefore safety of the seas is of paramount importance to all.

After assuming office, Abe has sent clear signals to Beijing. He has spoken about a Japanese military renewal, to include revising Tokyo's "pacifist" posture. He even went so far as to propose the establishment of a "democratic security diamond": a strategic alliance of like-minded Indo-Pacific countries that share anxiety about China's growing naval might. Indeed, Japan's recent moves in Southeast Asia suggest that Japan could seek a new regional security mechanism to counter China's military tactics in the East and South China Seas.

What does this portend? Abe's recent statements and visits to the United States and Southeast Asia suggest that the concerns over China's rise are real and that regional powers must come together to face China's maritime assertiveness. This also suggests that Japan has a larger game plan aimed at forging a string of regional strategic relationships in which it can be both a partner and a patron. The essentials of Abe's plan seem to be collaboration with its partner countries on joint projects, and provide economic support to growing regional nations. What he would expect in return is diplomatic backing in Japan's territorial disputes with China. In other words, Abe

envisions a new regional "hub and spoke" model, with Japan as the hub.

A new parameter in this rebalancing strategy is regional security diplomacy. Japan is an active member in the trilateral strategic dialogue between the United States and Australia. Japan is also an active participant in the trilateral dialogue involving the United States and India. During his earlier term as Prime Minister in 2006-2007, Abe had floated the quadrilateral arrangement involving the United States, India and Australia by expanding the Japan-US-Australia trilateral arrangement. Yet, China's strong and vocal opposition ensured this initiative was stillborn, and it was ultimately abandoned in 2008. Developments in the region since 2007 give Japan reason to revive the initiative.

The quadrilateral initiative may have died in its infancy, but trilateral processes are ongoing. Even a new Japan-South Korea-India trilateral initiative has started, with the first meeting taking place in June 2012 in New Delhi. An important item in the agenda is the issue of maritime security. Also, Abe has tried to mend fences with Russia, with which Japan has a territorial dispute over the Kurile Islands. Signing of a formal peace treaty is also in the agenda, which is being negotiated. Indonesia being ASEAN's powerhouse, has agreed to boost defense cooperation with Japan.

While major regional military powers figure in Japan's calculus, the role of smaller powers are also important as their support gives legitimacy to Japan's designs. If Japan can secure support from smaller Southeast Asian countries for its security agenda in East Asia, Japan's position could be strengthened. In return, Japan can return the favor by offering lucrative economic packages. To that end, Abe announced a US\$ 500 million aid grant to Vietnam for three infrastructure projects. Japan is already Vietnam's largest foreign investor, with investment totaling US\$ 29 billion. While in Thailand, Abe expressed interest in developing high-speed rail and water management projects. Abe has also reaffirmed Japan's strong support for the Dawei deep-sea port and economic zone in Myanmar, which are projects of considerable interest to Thailand.

### Conclusion

Since maritime security is an issue that affects maritime commerce, securing sea lanes is of top most priority for all nations. In Japan's case, its dependence on maritime commerce is immense and any disruption at sea will adversely affect its economy. Therefore, securing support of the ASEAN member states to address the maritime challenges is another indicator of Japan's new security strategy. With this in mind, the ASEAN Maritime Forum has been discussing issues of maritime security.

The first meeting of the ASEAN Maritime Forum was held in Manila in October 2012. The forum has been expanded to include the ASEAN Regional Forum countries as well



as nations from the East Asia Summit and the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum. This means that both the United States and China are members. The underlying objective of the forum is to evolve a binding code of conduct to, if not constrain China, at least to hold it accountable for any adventurous moves in the South and East China Seas. If a broader regional institutional architecture eventually emerges, the initiative would have great relevance.

Japan's initiative for a new regional balancing strategy would not harm US influence in the region. While the Japan-US treaty alliance remains the linchpin of Japan's security strategy, Washington is unlikely to directly try and contain China. Therefore, Japan's efforts would be limited to conflict avoidance rather than an open conflict, and this would suit US interests. Abhijit Sen observes: "Tokyo's renewed focus on Southeast Asia may also provide the American rebalancing toward Asia the strategic space and time it needs to succeed".<sup>1</sup>

The five principles enunciated by Abe in Jakarta in January 2013, therefore, underpin Japanese diplomacy. The shared values with ASEAN member states will help Japan to have common perception on the issue of global commons, in particular the oceans. Tranquility in Asian

seas will help bring peace and safe maritime commerce. Japan and other ASEAN member states aspire for the same.

At times cracks do appear in ASEAN cohesiveness. For example, as ASEAN chair in 2011, Indonesia was instrumental in producing guidelines to transform ASEAN's nonbinding 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea into a legally binding code of conduct. However, Cambodia, which held the rotating chair in 2012, failed to include the South China Sea dispute in its list of key agenda items, while it also proposed that China be included in the drafting of procedures to implement the declaration on conduct. As a result of this discord, for the first time in 45 years no joint statement was issued at the July 2012 ASEAN meeting. This makes a case for Abe extending support to Indonesia now more than ever. Indonesia's leadership role in ASEAN is critical to the group's cohesiveness. Abe needs to work harder to make his ASEAN diplomacy effective for regional security.

<sup>1</sup> Abhijit Sen, "Japan's Abe Seeks Regional Mechanism to Counter Assertive China" (*World Politics Review*, 1 February 2013).

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