

Japan's Political and Security Relations with ASEAN

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Over the six decades since the end of World War II, Japan has gradually transformed its political and security role from a self-controlled, low-profile posture to a willing participatory role. At first, the nation, whose militarism was the cause of deep hatred in Asia, was reluctant to play a political role in the region, and for many years Tokyo strictly limited the mission of its Self-Defense Forces (SDF) to homeland defense. Only since 1991 have these forces been deployed for international peace efforts.

Japan's Changed Security Role

In that landmark year, by adopting a flexible interpretation of its constitution, Tokyo dispatched several minesweeping ships of the Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) to the Persian Gulf. Then, in 1992, in Cambodia, Japan participated for the first time in United Nations peacekeeping operations (PKOs). There was opposition among policy makers and critics to sending SDF members to Asia even under UN auspices, largely because of the possibility of negative reactions from Asia. Yet the government went ahead and sent some 600 troops to Cambodia. In 2002, Japan decided to participate in its fourth peacekeeping mission in Asia, sending 700 members of SDF to East Timor. Since then, Japan's participation in UN peacekeeping operations has become a normal practice.

Parallel with these developments in the 1990s, Japan's outlook on its defense role had also begun to change significantly. In 1996, Japan and

the United States redefined their security roles in Asia Pacific by issuing a joint declaration. The new law subsequently enacted stipulated that the SDF would provide logistical support in noncombat areas for U.S. forces operating in the vicinity of Japanese territory. This was a marked departure from the previous definition of Japan's role, which was limited to defense of its homeland only, and it was followed by passage in 2001 of a special law allowing the country to join the international fight against terrorism. The MSDF was authorized to sail to the Indian Ocean to supply fuel for the naval forces of eight like-minded nations operating there against Al Qaeda forces; as of summer 2003, there were ten nations that Japan was servicing in the region.

In July 2003, the Diet passed another special law, enabling Japan to dispatch SDF troops to Iraq, provided their activities were of a nonmilitary nature and were conducted in noncombat areas within Iraq.

Several factors have influenced this transformation. First, Japanese at home have changed their attitude toward the SDF, with a growing percentage of the population now supporting an expanded role for the SDF in order that Japan might participate in international efforts for peace and security. Second, the United States has encouraged Japan to bear responsibility commensurate to its capability. Third, current developments in the security environment surrounding Japan have seen large-scale terrorism and North Korea's long-range missile program and spy ships. Finally, and most important, the international community, particularly in Asia, has changed its attitude toward Japan's security role.

Southeast Asia's Changed Perceptions of Japan

For many years after World War II, most Southeast Asians regarded the motives behind Japanese trade and investment in the region with suspicion. There were fears that Japan was intent on dominating the region. From the 1950s through the 1980s, they viewed Japan's defense capability as a sign of the "resurgence of militarism." The prevailing sentiment was that Japan would invade the region with military power, following its economic invasion. Tokyo's failure to apologize for wartime atrocities, which included the exploitation of "comfort women," was further indication of its lack of sincerity.

The peak of Southeast Asian criticism against Japan, which condemned its "economic overpresence," came in the early 1970s. When Prime Minister

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Tanaka Kakuei visited Bangkok and Jakarta in 1974, there were violent student demonstrations.

Southeast Asians today have a more realistic view of Japanese political and military power, due in part to greater confidence in their own economic and military strength. Since the early 1990s, criticism against Japan has been on the decline. In May 1998, during huge antigovernment demonstrations in Jakarta, Japan sent Air Self-Defense Force (ASDF) planes to Singapore in the event Japanese nationals needed to be evacuated. This caused no stir in the region.

In 2001, Japan sent some 700 troops to East Timor to serve in UN peace-keeping operations. As was the case with Japanese SDF in Cambodia, this received no criticism from the region. Prime Minister Koizumi Jun'ichiro's annual visits to Yasukuni Shrine after 2001 received little reaction from Southeast Asia as well, although China and South Korea voiced strong objections. Between China and Southeast Asian nations, the attitude toward Japan's security role is very different.

In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington in September 2001, Japanese destroyers sailed through the Strait of Malacca to the Indian Ocean to supply oil for friendly naval ships involved in the campaign there. This operation received practically no criticism from member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

ASEAN countries as a whole now appear to endorse Japan's noncombat contributions for international security. Philippine President Gloria Arroyo, in a January 2002 summit meeting with Koizumi, stated that she expected "Japan to play an extensive role in the area of international security," referring specifically to postwar Afghanistan.

Japan's Rationale for Political and Security Cooperation with ASEAN

Parallel changes in Japan's security outlook and Southeast Asia's view of an expanded security role for Japan have reinforced the basis for cooperation between Japan and Southeast Asian countries. In the new international and regional security environment, Japan should redefine its rationale for political and security cooperation with ASEAN countries.

Historically, Japan has always considered Southeast Asia strategically important. Geopolitically, first of all, the region, which connects the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean, is vital as it controls Japan's sea lanes of

communications with Europe and the Middle East. About 85 percent of Japanese oil imports from the Middle East passes through Southeast Asian waters, mainly the Strait of Malacca and the Lombok Strait. In addition, Japan obtains about 13 percent of its commodity imports from European Union nations.

Second, Southeast Asia has a population of over five hundred fifty million, about five times Japan's. Its market, potential and real, for Japanese exports of industrial goods is highly attractive. So are the region's natural resources, such as Indonesia's oil. Southeast Asian countries in turn have good reason to cooperate with Japan as it represents a large trading market and a source of official development assistance. Friendly, economically viable ASEAN countries are in Japan's economic interest. In his speech in Singapore in January 2002, Koizumi proposed an Initiative for Japan-ASEAN Comprehensive Economic Partnership, the intent of which is to strengthen economic ties.

Third, a politically stable and economically viable Southeast Asia can, for Japan, serve as a balance to China. Historically, China has regarded Southeast Asia as within its sphere of influence—a view acknowledged by the United States as well as some Southeast Asian countries, and evidenced by China's offering assistance to North Vietnam in its southward push during the Vietnam War. That sphere of influence notwithstanding, when China was reinforcing its military installations on disputed islands in the South China Sea during the 1990s, ASEAN demanded—and Japan supported the demand—that China act in accordance with established standards of conduct.

Now, in the early years of the twenty-first century, there are new factors suggesting a need for Japan to modify its traditional rationale of political and security cooperation. One factor is China. With relations between ASEAN countries and China much improved in the last few years, perceptions of the Chinese threat among Southeast Asians are largely gone, at least on the surface. China has offered a free trade agreement to ASEAN countries. The leaders of the ten countries of ASEAN now meet with the leaders of China, Japan, and South Korea annually. And when Koizumi spoke in Singapore of building an East Asian Community, he said he expected China would be a core member.

Another new factor is the emergence of nontraditional security issues. These are issues relating to human security—illegal migrants, refugees, illicit drug trade, heavily armed pirates, illegal flow of small arms, environmental degradation, and nonstate terrorism—and the nature of these

issues requires that they be addressed with cooperative effort. Japan and ASEAN countries need to share information regarding these issues and take joint action. In the process, a strong, additional base for cooperation between Japan and ASEAN countries will be created.

The Current State of Political and Security Cooperation

It is in Japan's interest that there be a politically stable Southeast Asia. One threat to that stability is the illegal flow of small arms. Japan has taken the initiative on this issue, having served as chair of the UN Group of Governmental Experts on Small Arms in the past. In May 2000, Japan, together with the Indonesian government and the UN Regional Center for Peace and Disarmament in Asia and the Pacific, cosponsored the Jakarta seminar on Illicit Trafficking in Small Arms and Light Weapons. All ten ASEAN countries attended; China, Pakistan, and South Korea sat as observers. The seminar represented the first time that regional cooperation on the issue was discussed. In the next month, Japan hosted the Asian Regional Workshop on Small Arms.

Parts of Southeast Asia continue to suffer from ethnic and religious strife and from social and political turmoil caused by poverty and bureaucratic corruption. Japan feels comfortable with a political role that promotes regional stability through mediation and economic assistance. In the post-World War II period, Japan has stayed away from military intervention, and it has refrained from sales of military hardware and technology to Asian countries.

In early December 2002, Japan, together with the United States, the European Union, and the World Bank, hosted a preparatory conference in Tokyo on peace and reconstruction in Aceh, demonstrating the support of the international community for peaceful resolution. A week later, representatives of the Indonesian government and the Aceh Independence Movement (GAM) group signed an agreement to cease hostilities. When fighting between the two sides broke out again, Japan, under the auspices of a private foundation, offered a site in Tokyo for negotiations between the Indonesian government and the GAM group. The meeting failed to produce a peaceful resolution, but Japan has continued its efforts toward that end.

In the southern Philippines, Mindanao has been a hotbed of instability. It is the stronghold of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and

the Abu Sayyaf forces, both of which have staged terrorist attacks on government buildings and foreign tourists. Japan has expressed its willingness to assist Manila in the area of humanitarian and basic human needs. When Arroyo visited Tokyo in December 2002, Japan offered aid to support the peace and stability of Mindanao.

As Southeast Asia grew more receptive to Japan's political role in the region, so Japan began to work more actively for regional security cooperation. In 1992, Foreign Minister Nakayama Taro proposed at the ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conference that political and security dialogue be added to the agenda of the senior officials meeting. This was at a time when, after peace had been achieved in Cambodia, ASEAN was searching for a new objective to keep ASEAN intact. Nakayama's proposal is viewed as having contributed to the establishment in 1994 of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). Japan was also instrumental in the formation of the Council on Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP), a track two organization in support of ARF. Japan shared the first cochair of CSCAP with Indonesia.

Japan continues to be an active member of ARF as well as ASEAN + 3 (China, Japan, and South Korea) and APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation), among other regional institutions. Civilian officials of the Japan Defense Agency are engaged in regular exchange of security intelligence with their counterparts in major ASEAN countries.

Anti-Piracy and Antiterrorism Cooperation

Piracy at sea in East Asia has become so common that it is now a significant problem. Incidents of piracy in the region have increased from 80 in 1995 to 257 in 2000; incidents involving Japanese ships have gone from five in 1995 to twenty-two in 2000. There are reports of piracy around Hong Kong, which, along with Singapore, is one of the busiest ports in the world.

Pirates today are heavily armed and capable of hijacking large ships. As half the world's oil shipments pass through the Strait of Malacca, piracy has become a matter of serious international concern. There is as well growing fear that pirates and terrorists may join forces.

At the ASEAN summit in November 1999, Prime Minister Obuchi Keizo proposed an international conference devoted to anti-piracy measures. In April the next year, Japan was host to such a conference, which concluded with the adoption by the sixteen countries present, including all

ten ASEAN countries, of "Asia Anti-Piracy Challenges 2000." By this document, countries agreed to share information about piracy incidents expeditiously, to strengthen countermeasures, to assist victimized ships, to coordinate coast guard activities, to improve technical capabilities in preventing piracy, and to train appropriate personnel. The sixteen countries agreed that the same arrangements be applied to surveillance of smuggled drugs and small arms.

In his Singapore speech in January 2002, Koizumi followed up on this theme by proposing that cooperation between the coast guard of Japan and its ASEAN counterparts be furthered.

In June 2003, ARF met in Phnom Penh and adopted resolutions on anti-piracy and antiterrorism. It endorsed the initiative of the United States to strengthen inspection procedures of container ships at major ports as a safeguard against terrorist attacks.

Southeast Asia takes terrorism seriously, having suffered from bombings allegedly masterminded by Al Qaeda, Jemaah Islamiyah, and Abu Sayyaf forces. Bombings in Manila, Bali, and Jakarta have taken a terrible toll, part of which has been loss of foreign investment in the region.

Japan has supported reform and upgrading of Indonesia's police and judiciary. To assist in the identification of terrorists, it has sent fingerprint specialists to Jakarta.

Obviously, effective surveillance of the flow of goods and passengers through sea and air routes between Southeast Asia and Japan must be maintained.

Military Contacts and Confidence-Building Programs

Today Japan and ASEAN countries have increasing levels of military-to-military (MM) contact aimed at building mutual trust.

Since 1994, Japan has sponsored the annual Asia-Pacific Security Seminar, to which officers of the rank of lieutenant colonel from eighteen nations are invited. In 1996, it instituted the annual Forum for Defense Authorities of the Asia-Pacific Region, in which director-generals in charge of defense policy in the ministry of defense from some twenty nations participate. Most of the ASEAN countries are included in these meetings.

One of the activities of ARF is the annual meeting of the heads of defense colleges of member nations. In 2002, Japan's defense college, the National Institute for Defense Studies under the Defense Agency, hosted

this meeting in Tokyo. The majority of personnel who attend these meetings are high-ranking military officers.

There are also regular exchanges of visits at the defense minister level. Since 1997, Japan has been holding MM talks with Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, and Vietnam. At MM talks military officers exchange views on the regional and international security environment. These meetings are not intended to produce joint actions, but they do provide excellent opportunities for officers to interact.

Cadets and midshipmen from Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam study at the National Defense Academy, located outside of Tokyo. In its twenty-six-year history of contacts with these countries, the academy has admitted about 190 Southeast Asian cadets (11 from Indonesia, 4 from Malaysia, 3 from the Philippines, 36 from Singapore, 125 from Thailand, and 8 from Vietnam). The academy also sponsors an annual international conference of cadets, inviting personnel from Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. Officers of the rank of colonel from several Southeast Asian countries enroll in a nine-month course at the National Institute for Defense Studies; Japanese officers similarly study at defense colleges in a few Southeast Asian countries.

Joint exercises are new for confidence building and regional security cooperation. In June 2001, Singapore hosted the first western Pacific mine-sweeping exercise; the naval forces of sixteen nations participated, including Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. In April 2002, the MSDF hosted for the first time a multinational exercise for submarine search and rescue. Five nations participated, including Singapore; Indonesia was an observer.

In 2001 and 2002, high-ranking Japanese officers were observers at the annual U.S.-Thai joint exercise known as Cobra Gold; Singapore was invited to participate in a partial phase. While the original purpose of Cobra Gold was counterinsurgency operations against communist guerrillas, it has now shifted to UN-sanctioned peace enforcement operations.

As these various developments suggest, the perception ASEAN countries have of Japan has undergone significant change. Today few in Southeast Asia criticize Japan's growing political and security role as the "resurgence of Japanese militarism."

Challenges to ASEAN-Japan Cooperation

While there is broad convergence of interests between Japan and ASEAN countries, the road toward closer diplomatic security cooperation for Japan is not without obstacles.

Diversity among ASEAN Countries

The ten countries that comprise ASEAN often do not speak in one voice. Understandably, then, there will be occasions when ASEAN does not have a consensus on security issues. So in order to maintain a cohesiveness, the association will have to leave consensus deliberately broad or even ambiguous. Koizumi, in his 2002 Singapore speech, acknowledged this diversity and stressed that Japan would respect it. It is this same diversity, however, that often makes cooperation with ASEAN an uncertain proposition for Japan.

In recent years, the solidarity of ASEAN has suffered from political setback. The association has historically maintained a policy of noninterference in the internal affairs of its member countries, but as the military government of Myanmar continues to suppress its democratic opposition—as personified by Aung San Suu Kyi—some fellow ASEAN member countries have grown impatient and begun to advocate intervention. In particular, Indonesia and Malaysia have voiced criticism of the Myanmar government.

ASEAN also did not take a uniform stance on the U.S. war against Iraq. The Philippines was pointedly in support of the U.S. position, while Indonesia and Malaysia opposed it.

In both these instances, Japan has not been able to determine where ASEAN as a group has stood.

ASEAN's Posture on Preventive Diplomacy

In theory, ASEAN countries recognize preventive diplomacy as a second step following the first phase of dialogue in the evolutionary process of ARF activities. In practice, however, ASEAN countries oppose intervention by ARF into its members' internal affairs.

ASEAN countries also feel that territorial disputes do not belong on the ARF agenda. In this, Japan stands apart from ASEAN, believing that

the ARF process should progress from the dialogue stage to the phase of preventive diplomacy. Yet, for Japan to reach agreement with ASEAN members on ways to strengthen ARF is not a simple, straightforward task.

The China Factor

Historically, Southeast Asians have perceived the sheer size of China and its massive population as a threat to their national and economic security. The dominant presence in the region of what used to be called “overseas Chinese” has also raised the fear of Chinese domination of Southeast Asia. However, to the extent that major ASEAN countries have become more economically confident, this fear has declined. And with China’s entry into the World Trade Organization, the Chinese market has opened up further. ASEAN countries can now find more business opportunities in China than before.

An increasing Chinese economic influence is noted in Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Thailand. Economic ties between Yunnan province in southern China and the countries that share the Mekong River have been strengthened with China’s large-scale investment to improve river traffic. Chinese economic presence is also a distinctive feature of the northern half of Myanmar.

The fact is, ASEAN countries appear to be building close economic relations with China. China has proposed a free trade agreement with ASEAN. Once the agreement comes into effect, ASEAN countries will find it easier to enter the Chinese market than the Japanese market, because their commodities are more competitive in China.

Through deepened economic ties between China and ASEAN countries, China can be expected to have more political influence in Southeast Asia. In October 2003, China, together with India, joined ASEAN’s Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, while Japan has declined to do so. This could make future security cooperation between Japan and ASEAN less close than that between China and ASEAN.

Japan also sees another side of China, namely, its military expansion. Although improved Sino-Japanese relations make the ASEAN + 3 process optimistic, submerged tensions are likely to persist. This may in turn complicate Japanese-ASEAN relations.

The Future of Japan-ASEAN Security Cooperation

To suggest directions for Japan-ASEAN political and security cooperation in the future is a challenge. The political and economic environment of both Japan and Southeast Asia will change as time passes; the same for the national power they portray. These changes will undoubtedly affect the nature of the relationship between the two. Are we likely to see a stronger Japan or a weaker Japan? And are we likely to see a stronger ASEAN or a weaker ASEAN? Even if ASEAN as an institution does not become stronger, it is clear that some ASEAN countries will.

The falling birth rate in Japan's aging society is likely to lead to a decline in Japanese national power unless ways are found to make up for the shortage of labor with more sophisticated capital- and knowledge-intensive industries and the import of foreign workers. Southeast Asian societies, on the other hand, will have no shortage of young people, proportionately and in actual numbers. Here is the basis for an increasing interdependency between Japan and ASEAN countries and between Japan and ASEAN as a group.

As ASEAN countries with authoritarian governments grow economically richer, they are likely to become more politically open by virtue of popular demand. Should all members of ASEAN become democratic, the international position of ASEAN will be strengthened. A more democratic ASEAN would also provide a stronger—and easier—basis for political and security cooperation with Japan. The cultivation of close economic relations between Japan and ASEAN countries now will encourage the pace of democratization.

This will, furthermore, bring a degree of maturity to Japan-ASEAN political cooperation. ASEAN will be more positively disposed to new political and security relations with Japan, as both sides grow to appreciate the importance of each other in maintaining their political systems and preserving their national and regional security. This will at the same time enable both sides to work together toward global security by their shared positions on such issues as the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and reform of the UN Security Council.

Bilateral and Regional Cooperation

With the goal of peace and security, Japan and ASEAN should work together on three levels: bilateral, regional, and global.

Bilateral cooperation has been the traditional and familiar form of cooperation between Japan and ASEAN countries. Japan has for many years extended official development aid to ASEAN countries with the belief that to help fight poverty and accelerate the pace of development contributes to the political stability of Southeast Asia. Comprehensive national security, the concept developed originally by Prime Minister Ohira Masayoshi in the early 1970s, is now widely accepted in the region. Japan should work with ASEAN countries to improve human security—providing assistance to refugees as well as controlling drug traffic, illegal migration, smuggling of small arms, piracy, and terrorism.

But Japan-ASEAN security cooperation cannot be adequately discussed simply in a bilateral context. Both sides belong to regional institutions: the ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conference, ARF, ASEAN + 3, Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), and APEC, among others. Maintaining a strong working relationship in the context of such large institutions can be difficult because of their expansive membership, but as the ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conference and ASEAN + 3 have been organized with ASEAN as their core, there remains opportunity for mutual cooperation as regards the broader region of East Asia.

North Korea is a case in point. Refugees fleeing North Korea through China and turning up in Bangkok are an East Asian security issue, not just a Northeast Asian concern. Similarly with North Korea's nuclear development and sales of nuclear weapons to other countries. Japan and ASEAN, both of which have their security at stake, should jointly condemn North Korea's nuclear programs. Tensions between China and Taiwan and territorial disputes in the South China Sea have the potential of far-reaching repercussions as well, and it behooves Japan and ASEAN to make their stand on these issues clearly and jointly.

They should work together toward transforming the ASEAN Regional Forum, the ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conference, and ASEAN + 3 into more effective institutions. One way that this might be achieved is by enhancing the transparency of military activities of member nations through more exchanges of military personnel, ship visits, and defense information.

ARF, since its inception, has tended to be a "talk shop." It made the mistake of stating that after dialogue there should be preventive diplomacy,

and this position scared off several ASEAN members. Japan and ASEAN have the opportunity to invent middle ground here: between the stages of dialogue and of preventive diplomacy, an intermediate stage, which might be termed diplomacy for mediation, could be introduced.

Global Cooperation: Toward Multi-Tier Approaches

As Japan and ASEAN countries develop more mature political and security relations, they should naturally expand their cooperation into global security. In doing so, both sides should develop relations with the United States as their important common partner.

Both sides already have many levels of contact with the United States. As regards political and security issues, however, ASEAN often disagrees with Washington; Japan does not. In formal forums, ASEAN countries tend to advocate multilateral approaches, such as ARF, and to criticize the domineering position of the U.S. power. Yet, ASEAN countries maintain bilateral security ties with the United States through joint military exercises and the education and training of their military officers at U.S. military institutions.

In contrast, Japan is unwavering in its pronouncements of the importance of its bilateral alliance with the United States. By supporting U.S. troops and bases on its territory, Japan maintains close relations with Washington. The alliance, which has made the U.S. presence in the western Pacific possible, has contributed to the security and, therefore, political stability of Southeast Asia. Many of the joint military exercises that Southeast Asian countries participate in with the United States are organized by U.S. forces stationed in Japan.

ASEAN and its member countries need to accept more openly the role that the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty plays in the region. Today ASEAN countries can benefit from a stronger presence of the United States in the region—not U.S. military hardware but U.S. organizational capabilities in the fight against global terrorism. The Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand have close working relationships with the United States in their efforts to combat Al Qaeda, Jemaah Islamiyah, and Abu Sayyaf forces. Singapore has a bilateral arrangement with the United States to reinforce inspections of container ships.

With the United States as their crucial common partner, Japan and ASEAN countries could make a better contribution to global security.

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Heavily armed piracy in Asian waters could be handled more effectively, as could movement of weapons of mass destruction and sensitive military technologies that may pass through Asian countries. In May 2003, the United States proposed a Proliferation Security Initiative to prevent weapons of mass destruction from being smuggled into the hands of hostile forces or terrorists. The initiative has the support of eleven countries, which include Japan but no ASEAN country. This would seem to be another effort that ASEAN might find valuable to join.

The United Nations continues to be an important instrument for peace and security, which both Japan and ASEAN should support. Yet in this case as well, the positions the United States takes are critical. Thus, the development of better working relationships with the United States should be in their interest.

In these ways, Japan and ASEAN should move gradually toward common multi-tier approaches, creating a mix of bilateral, regional, and global cooperation.