

Japan could take lead to bring Asean 'higher'

Staying above stray of US-Sino rivalry,
China's rise requires strengthening old ties

By Zarina Zainuddin



The Fukuda Doctrine introduced in 1977 laid the foundation for Japan and Asean relations. Its two tenets reaffirm Japan's resolve of never being a military power again and determination to provide development assistance to Southeast Asia.

The Japanese Official Development Assistance (ODA) focuses on financing infrastructure projects, capacity building, humanitarian aid and other projects that contribute towards economic development in Southeast Asia.

Japan's pacifist stand is evident in its constitution and the code of conduct of its Self-Defence Force (SDF). Over the decades, Japan's consistent adherence to the Fukuda Doctrine helped build a close bond and trust between the two sides.

However, recent developments in global affairs have forced Japan to adjust its pacifist stand. China's rise as a superpower; North Korean missile launches and the unpredictability of Kim Jong-un; uncertainty over US commitment to ensure fully Japan's security; and the Russo-Ukrainian war gave rise to a sense of insecurity, resulting in strategic shifts in Japan.

In December 2022, Japan unveiled its new national security strategy with a focus on capabilities to defend itself against hostile powers and reduce its heavy security reliance on the United States.

End of pacifist stance

The highlights include doubling of its defence spending and measures to improve its self-defence resiliency. The protection against enemy threats include acquisition of counterstrike capability to pre-empt external attacks. Additionally, Japan aims to create layers of security arrangements through multiple agreements with countries, such as Australia, the UK and Italy.

For the first time, Japan has added a new cooperation framework – the Official Security Assistance (OSA) – that provides materials and equipment (non-lethal) as well as "assistance for infrastructure development based on the security needs" to "like-minded countries". The Philippines and Malaysia are expected to be among the first OSA's recipients. In essence, OSA is ODA but for security and defence-related projects.

On the foreign policy front, Japan is playing a supporting role to the US, filling in the gaps left by American diplomacy. Japan is fostering or reinforcing relations with countries that the US has either strained relations or neglected.

Unlike the US, rather than focusing on value, Japan's diplomatic endeavours centre on engagement in economic development and tackling social challenges. In this regard, while Southeast Asia remains important, Japan has expanded aid to the rest of the Global South, including the Middle East, South Asia, Latin America and Africa.

Unlike the past, Asean has voiced few objections to Japan's new security strategy. Asean itself holds fast to the existing strategy of remaining neutral and has publicly refrained from taking sides.

The bloc prefers to focus on economic cooperation and integration to counter geopolitical shifts. However, the intensifying US-China rivalry has impacted negatively on the geoeconomic environment. Instead of cooperation, integration and inclusivity, it now promotes divisive, contentious and exclusivity.

Decoupling, de-risking and de-dollarisation are examples of recent development arising from the US-Sino rivalry. The American weaponisation of the dollar as well as pursuit of a counter-inflation policy contributed to the de-dollarisation trend.

Favouritism fear

The tit-for-tat trade war and pandemic-related shortages have forced countries to consider building national or regional self-sufficiency for a range of economic sectors ranging from supply chain to currency, energy and food security.

It is a tricky situation for Asean member states, as engaging in economic initiatives backed by one rival power could be interpreted as picking a side. At the moment, Asean has managed to hedge its position with selected members participating in US-led initiatives while joining groupings that align closer to China, such as BRICS and G20.

Ironically, the rise of mini-lateralism, such as G20, BRICS, Quad, AUKUS and IPEF, has to a degree diluted Asean's prominence in the region. Case in point, at the recent Asean Summit in Indonesia, the top leadership from the US and China skipped the meeting.

President Joe Biden opted to attend the G20 Summit in India instead. Coupled with perceived ineffective consensus-based decision-making, Asean is in danger of being sidelined.

Even the notion of engagement with selected "like-minded" countries could have a negative implication for Asean, as it resulted in selected

member states being included in initiatives, such as TPP (now CPTPP) and IPEF.

Member states with strategic and economic importance are included at the expense of others, such as Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar. If left unchecked, such a tendency could lead to widening of income and developmental gaps among Asean member states, leaving some vulnerable to the influence of rival powers and subsequently acting as proxy states.

Areas of cooperation

The year 2023 marks the 50th anniversary of Japan-Asean relations with the theme "Golden Friendship, Golden Opportunities". Would the difference in response and approach to the geopolitical and geoeconomic shifts have an impact on the established good relations between Japan and Asean?



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A common feature of Japan-Asean initiatives focuses on two main objectives. One, to further development and deepen existing ties between Japan and Asean. Two, measures to strengthen and enhance the capability of Asean as an institution.

There are a plethora of agreements, initiatives and projects aimed at achieving the two objectives. The joint statement of the 23rd Asean-Japan Summit identified four areas of cooperation outlined in the Asean Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) – maritime cooperation, connectivity, Sustainable Development Goals 2030 and economic.

Among the projects are capacity building for cybersecurity, improved handling of public health emergency and emerging diseases, and enhancing

safe navigation and marine environmental protection.

Other initiatives include the creation of the Japan-Asean Integration Fund (JAIF). JAIF's objective is to support Asean's integration efforts, particularly the implementation of the three pillars of Asean community as well as promoting closer cooperation between Japan and Asean.

From its inception in 2006 to the end of 2022, JAIE contributed more than US\$769 million (RM3.6 billion) to various projects.

Case for strong Asean

In September 2023, Japan and Asean reached an agreement to upgrade bilateral relations to a comprehensive strategic partnership (CSP), which would strengthen relations in a substantive and mutually beneficial manner. It also reaffirmed the commitment to cooperate on AOIP.

Japan's continuous attention towards capacity building to strengthen Asean is fitting, given the challenges that the latter is facing from an escalating US-China rivalry. Asean's growing economic presence, strategic location, position as a vital part of the global supply chain and rich resources make it an area of contestation between major powers.

One factor that could mitigate the impact of the geopolitical and geoeconomic shifts is that Japan and Asean greatly value their long-standing relations, and both share a common vision for the region – one of peace, stability and prosperity.

A strong Asean makes it less vulnerable to external pressure and enhance its ability to stake its own position. It is often stated that a strong Asean is good for the well-being of the region but what could be even better is a strong Asean engaged in close partnership with a confident Japan.



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