

JAPAN AND ASEAN IN THE GLOBAL INSECURITY CONTEXT

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Sueo Sudo^{*}

Introduction

Ever since the proclamation of the Fukuda Doctrine in 1977, Japan has deepened its cooperative relationship with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to the extent that it could be quintessentially regarded as a special one. (1) Moreover, when Japan and ASEAN held an anniversary summit in Tokyo in 2003, both leaders agreed to elevate their relations into a strategic partnership. (2) It was the changing environment in Asia, especially the rise of China that necessitated the reappraisal of the regional structure and mode of interaction. In fact, given its population, land mass, geographic proximity and rapid growth of its economy, China poses a major challenge to the security calculations of countries of ASEAN and Japan. Whether China likes it or not, the so-called “China Threat” does exist in the minds of ASEAN countries. Despite China’s preaching for a peaceful rise, ASEAN is more concerned with China’s strengthening of its naval capability, militarization of contested territories in the South China Sea and expanding influence in mainland Southeast Asia.

In parallel with the rise of China, Japan and ASEAN faced with another global insecurity when a financial crisis hit the region in 1997. Immediately after recognizing that neither ASEAN nor Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) could deal with the financial crisis, ASEAN swiftly decided to forge a new regionalism in East Asia. As the establishment of an ASEAN Plus Three (Japan, China, South Korea) framework amply suggests, Asian leaders turned to East Asian cooperation instead of an Asia-Pacific alternative. Accordingly, Japan-ASEAN relations have come to be seen in a common strategic perspective when the East Asia Summit (EAS) was established in 2005. Therefore, both ASEAN and Japan needed a strategic partnership to uphold regional order and stability. (3)

Against these insecurity challenges, caused mainly by rapidly changing globalization and the rise of China, Japan has undertaken a three-pronged strategy based on regional, subregional and bilateral partnership.

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I. The First Attempt: Strategizing a Japan-ASEAN Partnership

The beginning of Japan's three-pronged strategy can be found in the attempt to institutionalize a special ASEAN dialogue in 2003. The ASEAN-Japan Commemorative Summit had a historical significance, as it is the first time all ASEAN leaders met in a country outside the region. The Tokyo summit achieved some significant results in setting out, at a summit level, the directions that Japan and ASEAN should follow in enhancing their relations over a broad range of areas. Most importantly, both Japan and ASEAN shared the view that cooperation and partnership should be enhanced not only in the areas of economy and development, but also in the political and security fields. It has gained momentum toward the strategic partnership as the joint statement suggests: "We welcomed Japan's recognition of its support for ASEAN as being in its national interest. We shared Japan's sentiment that the ASEAN-Japan strategic partnership is important to the stability and prosperity of the region." (4) We can assume that it was largely a MOFA (Ministry of Foreign Affairs)-led initiative because it was ASEAN that "shared Japan's sentiment."

Then soon came its formalization. At the 9th Japan-ASEAN Summit held in Kuala Lumpur in December 2005, both Japan and ASEAN formally agreed to deepen and broaden the ASEAN-Japan strategic partnership. The joint statement stressed: "Japan fully supports ASEAN's increasingly active contributions to regional cooperation in East Asia, particularly through its role as the driving force as well as its dynamic initiative to further advance ASEAN integration. In recognition of this, we reaffirmed our determination to deepen and broaden the strategic partnership between ASEAN and Japan." It is indeed significant for Japan and ASEAN to formally embark on their strategic partnership by pursuing (a) supporting ASEAN community building efforts, (b) strengthening economic partnership, (c) reforming the ASEAN-Japan Center, (d) addressing regional and global challenges, (e) combating transnational crime and terrorism, (f) enhancing disaster management, (g) addressing infectious diseases, (h) enhancing energy cooperation, (i) promoting exchanges and people-to-people contact, (j) deepening East Asia cooperation, (k) responding to international issues. (5)

Carefully formulated MOFA-led strategy faced a major political change in 2007 when the ruling party lost its majority in the election. In spite of the regime shift from the Liberal Democratic Party to the Democratic Party of Japan, however, Japan has carried out its strategic assistance to ASEAN while upholding top-level dialogues. As one observer cogently puts it, "Japan has moved beyond economics to carve out a gradually more proactive role in the security affairs of Southeast Asia in the areas of multilateral security dialogue, peacekeeping missions, disaster relief provision, combating piracy." (6)

In promoting a viable strategic partnership, the 14th ASEAN-Japan summit was critically important for both Japan and ASEAN. To begin with, the Japan-ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting was held on July 26, 2011 in Bali, Indonesia. While reviewing the Japan-ASEAN strategic partnership since 2005, ASEAN evaluated Japan's various forms of cooperation with ASEAN, including connectivity assistance and anti-disaster cooperation, and witnessed progress in efforts for closer regional cooperation in the area of disaster management through provision of full-scale support to the ASEAN Coordinating Center for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Center). Most important was the fact that both Japan and ASEAN agreed with the planned new joint declaration and plan of action to be adopted at the next Japan-ASEAN summit meeting in November 2011. (7)

Equally significant was the 17th ASEAN Economic Ministers (AEM)-Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) meeting in August 2011 that initiated a new policy. While emphasizing the importance of enhancing economic cooperation between ASEAN and Japan to deepen regional economic integration and narrow the development gap, both economic ministers welcomed the progress in the ongoing Japanese initiatives for improving the quality of economic growth in ASEAN, including Asian Sustainable Chemical Safety Plan and Asia Knowledge Economy Initiative. Most importantly, the economic ministers agreed to task the senior officials to develop a roadmap for ASEAN-Japan Economic Relations in the next ten years, with the support by ASEAN Secretariat and AEM-METI Economic and Industrial Cooperation Committee (AMEICC). They affirmed that this roadmap should be considered with the objective of promoting strategic partnerships in the areas of improvement of business environment, trade and investment facilitation and liberalization, infrastructure development, connectivity, human resources development and enhancement and coordination on domestic policies and regulations. (8)

As such, ASEAN-Japan strategic partnership covers a vast area of cooperation. It is encapsulated in the ASEAN-Japan joint declaration for "enhancing strategic partnership for prospering together" and detailed further in the "Plan of Action 2011-2015." Both were newly issued at the 14th ASEAN-Japan Summit in Bali. It is also built upon the progress of cooperative activities undertaken to date and in consideration of circumstances prevailing in the region since the preceding declaration was issued in 2003. At this summit, Prime Minister Noda stressed that Japan will provide 2 trillion-yen (\$24 billion) worth of aid for development projects to strengthen regional integration. Noda also expressed his commitment to boosting cooperation with the region over maritime security and safety amid China's increasing assertiveness at sea.

In a joint declaration issued afterward, Japan and ASEAN mapped out five strategies to promote peace, stability and prosperity in the region that include (a) strengthening political-security cooperation in the region, (b) intensifying cooperation towards ASEAN community building, (c) enhancing ASEAN-Japan connectivity, (d) creating together a more disaster-resilient society, and (e) addressing together common regional and global challenges. (9)

It should be noted here that the declaration and the plan of action mentioned maritime security in the wake of recent tension in the South China Sea, where China is involved in territorial disputes with four ASEAN members - Brunei, Malaysia, and most recently and notably, Vietnam and the Philippines. Noda and his ASEAN counterparts said they would deepen their cooperation in accordance with universally agreed principles of international law, including freedom and safety of navigation and peaceful settlement of disputes under relevant maritime laws, including the 1982 U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea. With the adoption of the 2011 Joint Declaration for Enhancing ASEAN-Japan Strategic Partnership and the ASEAN-Japan Plan of Action, ASEAN and Japan are in the position to build a strategic partnership that can benefit not only ASEAN and Japan but also the wider international community in the longer term.

Progressively, the scope of the strategic partnership has been expanded. In 2015, especially, Japan agreed to bolster defense ties with Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines. The last case is worthwhile mentioning here. In July, Philippine President Aquino visited Japan and agreed to promote defense cooperation as a part of the strategic partnership. As the MOFA document underscored: "Noting that Japan will continue to promote initiatives under "Proactive Contribution to Peace," Prime Minister Abe stated that he wants to further strengthen security cooperation with the Philippines against the backdrop of an increasingly severe security environment in Asia. In this regard, both leaders decided to initiate negotiations to conclude an agreement on the transfer of defense equipment and technology in order to promote defense cooperation in the areas of disaster relief and maritime security. With regard to assistance for the Philippine Coast Guard, Prime Minister Abe welcomed the signing of a contract for the construction and acquisition of patrol vessels. (10)

Should this be the case, the Japan-ASEAN strategic partnership could play a central role in promoting a new regionalism in East Asia. Since the announcement of the strategic partnership doctrine, Japan has pursued its active diplomacy, consolidating top-level relations with ASEAN, especially in two aspects: subregional cooperation and bilateral partnership.

II. The Second Attempt: Japan's Options for Addressing Subregional Insecurity Challenges

The year 2003 marks a milestone for ASEAN's history because of its ambitious declaration for a community. It was highly and urgently expected to resolve the development gap as the ASEAN Summit underscored it as a top priority. (11) Soon after the ASEAN summit, Japan and ASEAN had a commemorative summit in Tokyo and adopted an ambitious new concept, entitled "New Concept of Mekong Region Development." The Mekong region, in which all the new member countries of ASEAN are located, is pivotal for furthering ASEAN's integration. The region possesses potential for economic growth and is essential for the stability and prosperity of the whole of Asia, as it is adjacent to other dialogue partners, China and India. Recent progress also spotlights the Mekong region. Notably, ASEAN is placing even more emphasis on the cooperation for the region, as shown in the Initiative of ASEAN Integration (IAI) and is undertaking the process of economic integration involving the region. With the above in mind, Japan, in close consultation with ASEAN countries, cooperated towards the Mekong region development in line with the following three visions: (a) reinforcing regional integration; (b) attaining sustainable economic growth; (c) harmonizing with the environment. (12)

After completing the Mekong region development program (2004-2006), another Mekong-Japan Region Partnership Program was adopted in January 2007 with special emphasis on three goals: expansion of official development aid (ODA) to the Mekong region; bilateral investment agreements with Cambodia and Laos; and the Mekong-Japan region ministerial meeting. (13) More specifically, Japan promised the following commitments: regarding the Mekong region as a priority area, Japan will expand its ODA to CLV (Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam) countries as well as to the region as a whole for three years (2007-2009). In addition, out of Japan's new assistance totalling \$52 million for promotion of the Japan-ASEAN economic partnership, approximately \$40 million will be allocated to the CLV. Of this amount, approximately \$20 million will be used to assist the CLV "Development Triangle"; and in order to substantially expand joint assistance projects for the Mekong region, Japan will consult more closely with the rest of the ASEAN countries. (14)

Since April 2007, Japan has been implementing the Partnership Program, which rests upon the following three priority areas: (a) integrating economies of the region and beyond, (b) expanding trade and investment between Japan and the region, and (c) pursuing universal values and common goals of the region. At the Mekong-Japan Foreign Ministers' Meeting, held in January 2008 in Tokyo, approximately \$20 million was declared for improving the efficiency of logistics in the East-West Economic Corridor. At the first meeting, the document 63 was

signed for cooperation in the Development Triangle, in addition to which a further \$20 million was declared for supporting the streamlining of logistics in the East-West Economic Corridor. Japan agreed to reinforce ties with the Asian Development Bank (ADB), which is engaged in a range of regional cooperation activities in the Asian region, and to create new schemes to support sustainable development by promoting investment and energy conservation. (15)

Furthermore, the first Mekong-Japan Summit Meeting was held in November 2009 and adopted a Tokyo Declaration, in which they shared the recognition of giving priority to the following areas and of establishing a new partnership for a thriving common future: Comprehensive Development in the Mekong Region, Environment, Climate Change/ Overcoming Vulnerability, and Expansion of Cooperation and Exchanges and establishing "A New Partnership for the Common Flourishing Future." Emphasizing that the Mekong region was a significant region that held the key to a open and transparent East Asian Community initiative in terms of redressing intraregional gaps, Japan has continued to expand the policy to include its ODA to CLV respectively as well as to the Mekong region as a whole. Japan committed more than 500 billion-yen (\$5.6 billion) of ODA in the next three years for the Mekong region to flourish further. (16)

Attempting to implement the three-year plan (2010-2012) steadily, the 2nd Mekong-Japan Summit was held in Hanoi in October 2010. While welcoming the significant progress of the implementation of the "Tokyo Declaration" and "Mekong-Japan Action Plan 63," Prime Minister Noda reiterated that Japan will continue its commitment to join hands with the Mekong countries to work toward the goals set at the First Mekong-Japan Summit, and also highly appraised the self-help efforts made by the Mekong countries. Especially noteworthy was the adoption of the "Mekong-Japan Economic and Industrial Cooperation Initiative (MJ-CI) Action Plan" which focuses on hard infrastructure, trade facilitation/logistics, enhancement of small and medium enterprises, supporting industries, entrepreneurship, the service sector and a new industrial sector based on recommendations from the business community. In addition, the leaders welcomed the outcome of the Mekong-Japan International Conference on the East-West Economic Corridor (EWEC) and the Southern Economic Corridor (SEC), co-hosted by Japan and Thailand in Bangkok in September 2010 and the workshop on the improvement of EWEC in Tokyo, in which participants stressed the importance of addressing both soft and hard infrastructure in order to make full use of the Economic Corridors and increase connectivity in the region. (17)

The 4th Mekong-Japan Foreign Ministers' Meeting, held in Bali, Indonesia, on July 21, 2011, was meant to be a follow-up meeting. Reviewing Japan-ASEAN

cooperation, foreign ministers considered both the "Tokyo Declaration" and "Action Plan 63" as guidelines for the successful establishment of the "New Partnership for the Common Flourishing Future" between Japan and the Mekong countries. Major results of the partnership were the progress of the implementation of the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity, the importance of the positive synergy of the Mekong-Japan cooperation and enhancing ASEAN Connectivity, and the success of the "Green Mekong Forum," which was co-hosted by Japan and Thailand. Japan's new initiative, such as the "Disaster Management Network for the ASEAN Region," a comprehensive approach including the development of a regional information-sharing network through satellites, the dispatching of experts and the conducting of training in Japan, was also noted, together with Japan's efforts in public-private cooperation in the Mekong region, such as the "Forum for the Promotion of Public-Private Cooperation in the Mekong Region," which was held in Tokyo on December 14, 2010. (18)

The following year saw another initiative by the Mekong-Japan meeting which adopted the "Tokyo Strategy for Mekong-Japan Cooperation", charting a development course for Mekong-Japan cooperation for the next three years (2013-2015). At a press conference held shortly after the summit, Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda, who chaired the summit, said the meeting identified three pillars for Mekong-Japan cooperation in 2013-2015. They are strengthening connectivity within the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), promoting trade and investment cooperation, and increasing cooperation in the environment and human security. Noda said Japan will commit 600 billion-yen (\$7.35 billion) in ODA to GMS countries in 2013-2015 and support these countries in meeting millennium development goals. He pledged to mobilize financial resources worth 2.3 trillion-yen (\$28.2 billion) to carry out 57 infrastructure projects in the GMS countries. (19)

In the midst of the Tokyo strategic implementation, a new element in the form of Japan-US cooperation has been incorporated. As the joint statement of the 6th Mekong-Japan Summit suggests, "The Leaders of the Mekong region countries highly appreciated and welcomed that Prime Minister Abe and President Obama affirmed Japan-United States joint engagement and cooperation with Southeast Asian countries, as priorities in the bilateral relations. These included their efforts in the Mekong region through closer collaboration between 'Mekong-Japan Cooperation' and the 'Lower Mekong Initiative' and 'Friends of the Lower Mekong'." (20)

Witnessing these favourable outcomes, Japan announced another three-year Mekong aid plan, namely, "New Tokyo Strategy" in 2015. At the 7th summit meeting, the Mekong countries and Japan announced that they will implement

Mekong-Japan Cooperation based on the four pillars over the next three years (2016–2018), with the aim of ensuring regional stability and achieving “quality growth” in the Mekong region. They are, (a) “Hard” Efforts : Industrial Infrastructure Development in the Mekong Region and Strengthening “Hard” Connectivity, (b) “Soft” Efforts: Industrial Human Resource Development and Strengthening Soft Connectivity, (c) Sustainable Development towards the Realization of a Green Mekong, and (d) Coordination with Various Stakeholders. At the Japan-Mekong Summit, Prime Minister Abe straightforwardly expressed his intention to promote stability and growth in the region, and counter China’s growing political and economic clout in Southeast Asia. Prime Minister Abe said at a news conference attended by the leaders of the five Mekong countries that “Japan will commit about 750 billion-yen in official development assistance over the next three years”, and “Japan is a partner for the development of the Mekong region, which has future potential”. (21)

III. The Third Attempt: Consolidating Bilateral Relations through Strategic ODA

For Japanese policy-makers, it is conceivable that strengthening bilateral relations is critical to achieve regional unity. In consolidating bilateral relations with ASEAN nations, three considerations are given: mainland or maritime states, threat perceptions and economic interests. This can explain why Indonesia and Vietnam are the first priority group, followed by the Philippines and Thailand.

On the occasion of the state visit of the Indonesian president to Japan in November 2006, for instance, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Indonesian President Yudhoyono held a summit meeting, in which the two leaders underscored that the strategic partnership between Indonesia and Japan would be a significant means to deepen and expand mutually beneficial bilateral ties, and also for exploring new opportunities to promote concrete bilateral cooperation in various areas. It should also foster closer partnership to address new challenges and non-traditional security threats such as the danger of infectious diseases including avian influenza, terrorism, natural disasters and transnational crimes. The statement succinctly explained: “The two leaders reconfirmed that Japan and Indonesia share such basic values as freedom, democracy, human rights and rule of law and also shared commitment to stability and development of the Asia Pacific region. They also affirmed that they would strengthen the strategic relationship in addressing political and security issues, as well as reinforced the long-standing economic relations. Both leaders emphasized the importance of holding summit meetings between them as frequently as possible and agreed to intensify high-level consultations taking advantage of opportunities at regional and multilateral meetings.” (22)

In a similar vein, Japan's strategic partnership with Vietnam was concluded in October 2006, during an official visit to Japan by Vietnam's Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung. At the summit, the two countries decided to open a new phase of cooperation 'Toward a Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity in Asia'. The five areas of this 'strategic partnership' as stated in the Joint Statement are: (a) promotion of dialogue; (b) Japan's economic assistance to Vietnam; economic relations; (c) cooperation in science and technology; (d) Mutual Understanding between the Peoples of the Two Countries; and (e) Cooperation in the International Arena. The Strategic Partnership was formally concluded in 2009 during the visit to Japan of Vietnam's Communist Party General Secretary Nong Duc Manh, and since then annual dialogues have been held to further map out the substance of this framework. As the backbone of the strategic partnership, economic cooperation has been developed very successfully, particularly since the Vietnam-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement (VJEPA) coming into force in 2009. In the security realm, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on the enhancement of defense cooperation was concluded in October 2011, and the first maritime security talk was held in Hanoi in May 2013. (23)

Five years later, Japan concluded third strategic partnership with the Philippines in 2011. The summit between Aquino and Noda issued the Japan-Philippines Joint Statement on the Comprehensive Promotion of the Strategic Partnership between Neighboring Countries Connected by Special Bonds of Friendship. The two leaders shared the view that Japan and the Philippines, as neighboring countries connected by special bonds of friendship, will promote the following concrete forms of cooperation in a comprehensive manner to further reinforce the Strategic Partnership: (a) Maintaining and strengthening high-level bilateral relations, including mutually beneficial cooperation in economic field; (b) Mutual trust in political and security aspects; (c) Mutual understanding at the people-to-people level; (d) Contribution to the regional and international community, including maritime security; (e) Promotion of regional economic integration; (f) Regional cooperation on disaster prevention; (g) The Korean Peninsula; (h) Climate change negotiations; (i) UN Security Council reform; (j) UN Peacekeeping Operations. (24)

Following the Philippines, Japan concluded a strategic partnership with Thailand in 2012. At the summit meeting, the two leaders emphasized the importance of further strengthening the Strategic Partnership between the two countries in order to address bilateral, regional and international issues in the fields of economy, society, development, security and political cooperation. The two leaders renewed their determination to further develop the Japan-Thailand Strategic Partnership to serve and enhance regional peace and prosperity. The

two leaders reconfirmed that the continued growth and dynamism of Thailand, located geographically in the center of the Mekong subregion, is an important factor for the prosperity of the region. This includes enhancing security and defense cooperation in various fields and promoting people-to-people exchange in the areas of culture, education and sports. At the same time, both sides shared the view that the two countries would cooperate in order to realize the ASEAN Community as well as regional sustainable peace and prosperity while respecting shared values and norms such as freedom, democracy, the rule of law and human dignity. (25)

IV. Abe's Search for a Viable Strategy

In parallel with regional and subregional policy initiatives, Prime Minister Abe attempted to consolidate bilateral relations with ASEAN members. Upon becoming prime minister in December 2012, Abe has vigorously initiated two major policy innovations. (26) The first is the revision of the National Defence Program Guideline (NDPG). Its interim report was submitted in July 2013. According to the report, the new NDPG has several remarkable characteristics: it is the first NDPG developed under a new document, the "National Security Strategy"; it contains several key phrases such as "proactive contribution to peace," "dynamic joint defense force," and "seamless response to various situations including so-called 'gray-zone' situations"; and it gives serious consideration to the two most important factors in the strategic environment in the Asia-Pacific region, China's rise and the United States' rebalancing towards the region. (27)

The second is the revision of ODA guidelines. Its interim report came out in June 2014, and it stressed the importance of strategic use of Japan's ODA. (28) Foreign Ministry officials said that based on Prime Minister Abe's policy of proactively contributing to peace, Japan will assist countries that share fundamental values such as freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law as it deploys ODA strategically as a diplomatic tool. This revision is obviously influenced by the renowned Japan-US alliance. In fact, the Japan-US 2+2 joint statement in October 2013 cogently stated that both countries welcomed the strategic use of ODA by Japan such as providing coastal patrol vessels and training for maritime safety to regional partners and recognized the importance of such endeavours in promoting regional peace and stability. (29)

Based on these domestic reforms, Abe has vigorously pursued his strategic diplomacy toward ASEAN. (30) Three initiatives are worthwhile mentioning here. The first initiative is his visit to all ASEAN states in 2013. Abe has become the first Japanese prime minister to visit the ten ASEAN countries within the first

year of his mandate. This achievement highlights two developments: Japan's "return" to the region and a new appraisal of Southeast Asia in Japan's strategic calculations. Tokyo is developing a more proactive policy in response to growing geostrategic tensions. In particular, the multiplication of diplomatic struggles and clashes in the South China Sea are putting Japanese national interests at risk and leading Tokyo to build up its strategic role in the region. This attitude departs from Japan's traditional reluctance to engage in Southeast Asia's politico-military affairs due to historical sensitivities. Obviously, Japan is now willing to play a role in the "great game" of influence currently underway in Southeast Asia, in which Tokyo is soft-balancing China and is supporting a more sustainable US military presence.

The second is the announcement of five principles in Indonesia. In January 2013, Prime Minister Abe's trip to Southeast Asia has renewed Japan's engagement with ASEAN. (31) During his stay in Jakarta, Abe revealed five goals that Japan would strive to achieve in partnership with the ASEAN countries: to protect and promote universal values such as freedom, democracy and basic human rights; to ensure the seas are governed by laws and rules; to deepen economic integration by promoting trade, investment and flows of people and services; to strengthen cultural ties; and to expand youth exchanges. This so-called Abe Principles could mark a new turning point for ASEAN-Japan ties, which had long been defined by the Fukuda Doctrine laid out in 1977. Although Abe's official visits were unfortunately cut short, these principles underscored Japan's desire to advance its profile both economically and politically. Accordingly, many Southeast Asian countries welcome this renewed Japanese engagement as they seek to diversify their economic, political, and security partnerships in the face of a rising China.

The third initiative is the 40th anniversary summit held in Tokyo in December 2013. At the summit, four pillars of partnership were announced: (a) Partners for Peace and Stability, (b) Partners for Prosperity; (c) Partners for Quality of Life; and (d) Heart-to-Heart Partners. As the joint statement specified: "We recognized the need to further strengthen regional cooperation frameworks for peace, stability and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region and stressed the importance of ASEAN's centrality in the evolving regional architecture through the various ASEAN-led processes, including the ASEAN Plus Three, the East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Regional Forum and the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting-Plus, all of which Japan has been an important part." (32)

Obviously, seeking for an individual strategic partnership was a key agenda. As a result of extensive diplomatic efforts, Abe could conclude three strategic partnership agreements with Cambodia (2013), Laos (2015) and Malaysia (2015). Especially noteworthy is the case of Japan-Cambodian

partnership agreement. A bilateral strategic partnership agreement with Cambodia came in 2013, soon after the Phnom Penh Incident. At the summit meeting with Prime Minister Abe, Prime Minister Hun Sen proposed an upgrade of their bilateral relations from the “new partnership” that existed since 2007 to a “strategic partnership” to advance defense cooperation and exchanges. Since then, Japan-Cambodia relations evolve to support Cambodia’s economy and domestic security. As part of Japan’s “Proactive Contribution to Peace” policy, Japan intends to support electoral reforms in Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge Trial. Even though their strategic partnership was initially intended to strengthen their defense cooperation, Japan’s assistances to Cambodia are mainly related to the economic development, poverty reduction, and governance issues. (33)

Two years later, Japan and Laos agreed on establishing strategic partnership in March 2015 to advance the “comprehensive partnership” that was signed in 2010, as the two countries were commemorating the 60th anniversary of their diplomatic relations. (34) On the security dimension, both countries agreed to devote the assistance on the issues related to Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), as well as to accept Lao students in the National Defense Academy of Japan and to assist counterterrorism. However, although both countries already established strategic partnership, Japan’s main agenda in the political and security area in Laos is still limited to promote universal values including freedom, democracy, and respect for human rights.

After having reached a stage of "Enhanced Partnership" in 2010, Japan-Malaysia relations continued to be forged closer in various fields. Both countries have been collaboratively addressing new challenges and opportunities facing the region and the international community with the objective to promote and maintain peace and stability as a whole and helping each other in times of hardships. As a manifestation of commitment and determination to contribute to enhance the relationship as well as in recognizing the deepening of relations in a wide range of areas, the Prime Ministers of both countries decided to elevate the bilateral relationship to a "Strategic Partnership". Under this new Partnership, both leaders shared the determination to enhance cooperation specifically in the following five areas: (a) Cooperation for Peace and Stability; (b) Achieving Free, Open and Stable Sea; (c) Investment in the Future through the Look East Policy 2.0 and Economic Cooperation, (d) Expanded Cooperation in Cultural and People to People Exchange; and (e) Contribution to Regional and Global Agenda. (35)

Finally, the latest 20th ASEAN-Japan Summit was held on 13 November 2017 in Manila, Philippines and reviewed the steady progress. “As emphasized in the summit, ASEAN Leaders acknowledged Japan’s unwavering support, especially in the first decade of ASEAN’s formation, and valued the long-standing

friendship and cooperation between ASEAN and Japan. We recognized that ASEAN-Japan relations have matured into a strategic partnership for peace, stability, prosperity, quality of life and mutual trust and understanding. We traced the beginnings of today's robust ASEAN-Japan relations to 1977 when the Fukuda Doctrine veered Japan's foreign policy approach towards a 'heart-to-heart' relationship with the ASEAN region based on equal partnership. We cited the role of the ASEAN-Japan Strategic Partnership in maintaining regional peace, stability and prosperity. We noted with satisfaction the steady progress in the implementation of the Vision Statement on ASEAN-Japan Friendship and Cooperation adopted in December 2013 on the occasion of the 40th Anniversary of ASEAN-Japan relations and its revised Implementation Plan adopted in August 2017." (36)

Following the summit, the 9th Mekong-Japan Summit was also held and the leaders recognized achievements in the realization of the Tokyo Strategy 2015, including the implementation of the Mekong-Japan Action Plan for Realization of the Tokyo Strategy 2015, the Mekong-Japan Connectivity Initiative, and the Mekong Industrial Development Vision. The Mekong countries appreciated Japan's assistance for the GMS cooperation. They also lauded Japan's commitment to implementing the partnership for sustainable infrastructure and the initiative for industrial human resources development cooperation. At the summit, the leaders also discussed international and regional issues of shared concern. The leaders stressed the need to enhance the Mekong nations' law enforcement with the help of Japan, including through improving the capacity of enforcing law at sea and fighting terrorism, and boosting cultural and people-to-people exchanges between Japan and the Mekong countries. (37)

Has Abe's three-pronged strategy yielded any significant results? Since it is an on-going process, it could be too early to draw a conclusion. However, we could witness a positive response from ASEAN as the following public poll suggests. According to the opinion poll conducted by MOFA in 2017, 89% (previous survey in 2014 was 75%) of the respondents answered "friendly" or "somewhat friendly" on how they viewed their country's relations with Japan; 91% (previous survey was 73%) of the respondents answered "very reliable" or "somewhat reliable" on how they rate Japan as a reliable friend; 87% (previous survey was 84%) of the respondents answered "very helpful" or "rather helpful" on how they rate Japan's development cooperation such as economic and technical cooperation under Official Development Assistance; and 55% of the respondents chose Japan as the country that has contributed the most to the development of ASEAN over the last 50 years, which was the highest rating among G20 nations. (38)

Conclusion

With the first special Tokyo summit in 2003 and the announcement of Japan-ASEAN strategic partnership in 2005, we can see the beginning of Japan's dynamic diplomacy in close collaboration with ASEAN. Given the steady progress toward a new diplomacy, together with the initiation of rebalancing by the US, time was ripe for the second time Prime Minister Abe to embark on a strategic diplomacy. (39) Focusing on the South China Sea problem, Abe has attempted to hedge against China by carefully orchestrating both bilateral relations with the ASEAN countries and strategic ODA. The new, enhanced security cooperation promoted by Japan encompasses intensified defense diplomacy, larger security-oriented ODA and the launching of a brand-new military assistance program.

Although ASEAN is still trying to preserve its strategic autonomy by engaging the important regional players without tying its hand to only one power, Abe's attempts, combining economic assistance and security cooperation, have been received positively by ASEAN as a whole. Indeed, Abe's strategy symbolizes a new phase in Japan-ASEAN relations, long centered on the Fukuda Doctrine. To make it viable, Japan needs to undertake three measures. First, it critically requires Japan to improve the quality of trust by resolving the historical issues. Second, Japan should pay due attention to ASEAN centrality and neutrality. Third, its policy orientation should be holistic and defensive. Suffice it to say, ASEAN is now at a crossroad in its development. Japan should try to fully understand ASEAN's present plight, as the region is of crucial strategic importance to Japan.

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Table 1. Japan-ASEAN Strategic Partnership: 3-Pronged Approach

Year	Japan-ASEAN Summit	First Tier: Strategic Partnership	Second Tier: Mekong Summit	Third Tier: Major agreements
2003	7 th Summit	30 th Anniv. *		New Concept
2004	8 th Summit		1 st CLV	
2005	9 th Summit	Strategic Partnership	2 nd CLV	Development Triangle
2006				Indonesia and Vietnam
2007	10 th Summit 11 th Summit		3 rd CLV	Japan-Mekong Partnership
2008				
2009	12 th Summit		1st Mekong	Tokyo Declaration Action Plan 63
2010	13 th Summit		2 nd Mekong	Green Mekong
2011	14 th Summit	Consolidating Strategic Partnership	3 rd Mekong	Philippines
2012	15 th Summit		4 th Mekong	Tokyo Strategy/ Action Plan Thailand
2013	16 th Summit	40 th Anniv. **	5 th Mekong	Cambodia
2014	17 th Summit		6 th Mekong	
2015	18 th Summit		7 th Mekong	New Tokyo Strategy Malaysia and Laos
2016	19 th Summit		8 th Mekong	
2017	20 th Summit		9 th Mekong	Implementation Plan

* Tokyo Declaration for the Dynamic and Enduring Japan-ASEAN Partnership in the New Millennium; The Japan-ASEAN Plan of Action

** Vision Statement; Implementation Plan

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