

The other initiative is to map out Japan's contribution to AOIP's four priority areas—maritime cooperation, connectivity, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and economic and other possible areas of cooperation. Admittedly, this is a relatively low-key effort, and the most of these projects have the continuation of the existing ones that started before the 2019 AOIP. For example, the Sihanoukville Port New Container Terminal Development Project in Cambodia, the Enhancement of Customs Operation in Philippines, the exchange program JENESYS are such examples.¹⁵ However, the continuous visualization of these projects in both the AOIP and the FOIP concepts helps Japan and ASEAN explore new areas of cooperation between them. While this mapping was done only in 2020 and 2021 and it is not entirely clear whether the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan would continue to do so in the future, such an effort can contribute to an in-depth understanding of the actual cooperation between the FOIP and the AOIP.¹⁶

It is also noted that there was a significant disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020. Diplomatic interaction between Japan and ASEAN was forced to be online, which made it difficult to conduct subtle diplomatic discussions from senior official level to ministerial and summit levels. Nevertheless, Japan continuously engaged in in-person meetings and cooperation with ASEAN as well as ASEAN member-states where possible. One of the most notable examples is Japan's defense engagement. Despite difficulties, Japanese Ministry of Defense continued to conduct capacity building programs with Southeast Asian states and ASEAN from 2020 to 2022.

While it was inevitable to hold some programs online, such as HA/DR programs with ASEAN in 2020 and underwater UXO (unexploded ordnance) clearance with Vietnam in 2022, several programs were conducted face-to-face, including the third Japan-ASEAN Invitation program on HA/DR in 2020, the Air Rescue seminar with Vietnam in 2020, and Japan-Philippines HA/DR Cooperation Project in 2021. Furthermore, Maritime SDF (MSDF) conducted Indo-Pacific Deployment (IPD) in three

consecutive years, and, through the IPD in 2021 (IPD-21), MSDF held joint trainings and exercises, such as Japan-Vietnam friendly exercise, Japan-Philippines joint exercise, and Japan-US-UK-Netherlands-Canada-Singapore joint exercise.¹⁷ These were all parts of Japan's FOIP activities that contributed to the realization of the AOIP.

Consequently, the FOIP and the AOIP are functionally synchronized, and this trend is likely to remain as most of the existing regional cooperation and projects are based on their strategic objectives.

Challenges in 2022

What are the immediate challenges in 2022 that Japan would face with ASEAN in pursuing its FOIP vision? There are still long-term challenges that Japan and ASEAN need to address, such as the ambiguity of ASEAN centrality in the Indo-Pacific, ASEAN's unclear strategic role in the region, Japan's institutional dilemma between the Quad and ASEAN, and the future of their emphasis on democratic values in the region.¹⁸ However, the foremost challenges in the second half of 2022 are two-fold: Russia and Myanmar.

First, there are divergences between Japan and ASEAN member-states' positions in the Russo-Ukraine War. Japan has critically condemned the Russian invasion in Ukraine, imposing severe economic sanctions, and supporting Ukraine's position diplomatically (and to some extent militarily by sending bulletproof vests and helmets). On the other hand, while most ASEAN member-states openly condemned Russian aggression except for Laos, Vietnam, and the Myanmar junta, it is only Singapore that imposed economic sanction on Russia. Japan considers the war to have significant implication for the Indo-Pacific region. If Russia does not face severe consequences, it may encourage China to take an aggressive *fait accompli* strategy in disputed areas, including the East and South China Seas and Taiwan. However, this strategic thinking does not resonate with all ASEAN member-states' thinking because ASEAN's institutional position is to stop conflicts through peaceful means and dialogue.¹⁹ Cambodia,

ASEAN's 2022 chair, has not shown any political will to disinvite Russia to the East Asia Summit or ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting-Plus, which might make some "Plus" countries, such as the United States and Australia, boycott the meetings. If this becomes the case, Japan would face a diplomatic dilemma to determine who to align with. As the Russo-Ukraine war is likely to be prolonged, this diplomatic schism would likely persist and affect the future of collaboration between the FOIP and the AOIP.

Second, the prolonged political instability in Myanmar is likely to exacerbate ASEAN's disunity, which would inevitably face great powers' wedge strategy. Although ASEAN created the "five-point consensus," the implementation process has been extremely slow. The Myanmar junta has stated that it would hold "multiparty general election" in August 2023, yet it "[depends] on state stability and peace," meaning that the junta control would likely remain in the future.²⁰ Since ASEAN has been hesitant to invite the Myanmar junta to its meetings, ASEAN unity becomes hard to maintain. Worse, if the disunity persist, China might take advantage of the situation to support Myanmar while Japan would enhance its diplomatic support for those who advocate for quickly restoring democratic process in Myanmar, such as Indonesia and Singapore. This further creates ASEAN disunity and an institutional deadlock in maintaining ASEAN centrality as well as pursuing the AOIP.

These internal and external diplomatic schisms have become factors that are weakening ASEAN unity and centrality in the Indo-Pacific. In the Myanmar issue, Japan took a relatively softer approach and could play a role in mitigating external schisms by bridging political differences between the US/EU and some ASEAN member-states.²¹ But in the long-run, it would become more difficult for Japan to sustain such a political position as the intensification of conflicts and human rights violation become visible. This is also closely related to the Ukraine issue. The violation of Ukraine's territorial sovereignty and explicit human rights violations by Russia has compelled Japan take a firm position against

Russia. These external events have led Japan to emphasize democratization and human rights in the FOIP more than ever, moving to closely align with its Western partners and allies. This is one of the foremost limitations that Japan faces in its Southeast Asian policy in pursuing the FOIP.

For their part, Southeast Asian states and ASEAN are now facing a critical juncture in the Indo-Pacific. There are several strategic choices/consequences—ASEAN will reformulate its unity and centrality in maintaining regional autonomy and preventing diplomatic marginalization; ASEAN member-states will remain divided, lose regional autonomy, and become involved in a game of great power rivalry; or ASEAN will lower its institutional expectation by limiting its geographical focus to Southeast Asia and maintain regional autonomy at the expense of diplomatic importance in the region. What Japan can do under this circumstance is to identify the potential strategic consequences that Japan, ASEAN, and Southeast Asian states face in the future, closely consult bilaterally and multilaterally, and attempt to coordinate their policies in realizing the FOIP and the AOIP. The task is difficult, but without such an effort, Southeast Asia would risk being further divided and fall into being the strategic theater of great-power rivalry.

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2.3 The way forward for Japan-Vietnam cooperation

Hanh Nguyen

Introduction

Vietnam's foreign policy has undergone a significant transformation since the late 1980s.¹ Within several decades, Hanoi gradually diversified its foreign relations beyond the communist bloc and formed partnerships with multiple states regardless of their political system and ideology. While Hanoi's careful balance between Washington and Beijing often attracts attention from Vietnam observers, Hanoi has also cultivated a special partnership with another regional power, Japan.

Vietnam and Japan formally established diplomatic relations in 1973. Since then, Tokyo has become a steadfast investor and aid donor for Hanoi (except for a temporary suspension in 1979 over Vietnam's involvement in Cambodia). Both countries set up a strategic partnership in 2014 and later enhanced it in 2017 and 2021. Bilateral cooperation is no longer restricted to trade and investment but spread to previously underexplored areas. Tokyo recently emerged as a new security partner to Vietnam, supporting Hanoi's struggle against Beijing in the South China Sea through maritime capacity-building assistance.

Rationale for cooperation

At the domestic level, both countries see economic cooperation as mutually beneficial. Tokyo has acquired a reputation of being a reliable partner for Hanoi, providing investment and official development assistance (ODA) to support Vietnam's rapid growth and development in the last

several decades. Japan ranks among Vietnam's top 5 investors, investing more than \$60 billion in 4,600 projects as of December 2020.² It is also a leading provider of ODA, sending Vietnam \$650 million in grants, loans, and equity investment in 2019.³ In contrast with Western states, Japan rarely comments on Vietnam's human rights record, a sensitive issue for Hanoi's political elites. To Japan, Vietnam also offers plenty of economic opportunities. Vietnam's burgeoning middle class represents a growing market whose consumers hold high regard for Japanese products. Its relatively cheap and abundant labor attracts attention from Japanese businesses struggling with a shrinking labor force at home.

At the regional level, both countries share an interest in maintaining the safe transit of goods along critical sea lines of communication (SLOC) in the East China Sea and the South China Sea.⁴ This concern is heightened further as Japan and Vietnam are embroiled in maritime boundary and territorial disputes with China. Both have been at the receiving end of Beijing's more muscular posture in the last decade. Japan understands that if China gets its way in the South China Sea, it will have more time and resources to dial up pressures against Tokyo in the Senkaku Islands dispute. Therefore, Hanoi and Tokyo are inclined to see each other as good partners to manage their challenged relationship with China.

At the international level, China's rise poses challenges for Japan and Vietnam. As Beijing grows more powerful, Hanoi is getting more concerned over China's possible domination of the region, making it more difficult for Hanoi to maintain its delicate balancing act between major powers. To counter China's clout, Vietnam chooses to double down on its hedging strategy, seeking diversity for its foreign relations. Vietnam's 2019 Defense White Paper emphasized the importance of strengthening partnerships with neighboring countries and major powers in the region.⁵ Therefore, Japan – an economic powerhouse with an uneasy relationship with China – is a natural partner. The power shift in Beijing's favor also put the rules-based order, which has underpinned Japan's prosperity and security for decades, under growing duress. In its response, Tokyo aims

to strengthen the rules-based order, thus generating more predictability and resilience in the regional security environment.⁶ This strategy is evident in Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision, which aims to embed Tokyo in regional institutions and the institutional-building process through cooperation to ensure rule of law, economic prosperity, and security.⁷

Prominent areas of cooperation

Given the extensiveness of Vietnam-Japan cooperation, this essay only touches on the most prominent areas. Tokyo is a leading provider of infrastructure finance for Vietnam, giving over \$10 billion so far (as of October 2021), mostly through ODA.⁸ Japan's assistance in Vietnam's infrastructure development is comprehensive, including projects to facilitate economic development (thermal/ hydropower plants, power transmission networks, highways, expressways, ports, bridges, and airports) and projects to improve Vietnam's capacity against natural disasters and climate change (support for disaster management and risk assessment).⁹ Japan-funded infrastructure projects are perceived as having high quality among Vietnamese, especially compared to China-led projects. However, that perception does not always correlate with reality since projects funded by Japan also face multiple delays and cost overruns, such as the Line 1 Metro project in Ho Chi Minh City.¹⁰

Another prominent area of cooperation is technical training. Vietnam provides the most labor under Japan's Technical Intern Training Program (TITP) (218,727 in 2019), concentrated in three areas: construction, food-related manufacturing, machinery, and metal.¹¹ Cooperation in this area is mutually beneficial: Japanese corporations and businesses gain from having access to a relatively cheap labor source while young Vietnamese have the opportunities to learn skills, technologies, and knowledge that they couldn't receive in Vietnam. However, concerns have recently emerged over growing cases of labor abuse affecting Vietnamese in Japan, such as poor working and living conditions for trainees or abuses from employers.¹² In response to this issue, Japan enacted two new bills in 2016

to improve TITP's quality and protect foreign trainees.¹³

Given both countries' shared concerns over the safe transit of goods on maritime routes, it is not surprising to see Hanoi and Tokyo strengthen cooperation in this area. Vietnam has benefited from Japan's maritime capacity-building assistance, including seminars and workshops, port calls and training exercises among navies and coast guard forces, and equipment transfers.¹⁴ A 2011 memorandum of understanding on defense cooperation established the foundation for this assistance, in which Japan promised to support Vietnam in search and rescue, humanitarian assistance/ disaster relief, IT training, and peacekeeping.¹⁵ Emphasis on maritime security cooperation, particularly freedom of navigation and overflight, was first mentioned in the 2014 Joint Statement on Japan-Vietnam strategic partnership and later enhanced in subsequent joint statements in 2017 and 2021, signaling that maritime security has become a critical shared concern.

Way forward

To bolster the strategic partnership, Vietnam and Japan can consider investing more resources in collaboration projects that are in line with Vietnam's 10-year socio-economic development strategy to bolster the strategic partnership. Issued in early 2021, the strategy aims to transform Vietnam into a high-income and developed nation by 2045 through a combination of digital transformation, reforming economic institutions and developing national manufacturing capacity.¹⁶ The document can serve to guide future cooperation concentrated in areas where Vietnam needs the most outside assistance.

The first area is Vietnam's digital transformation and digital economy. The value of Vietnam's digital economy is likely to reach USD57 billion by 2025, making it one of the fastest-growing digital economies in Southeast Asia.¹⁷ The COVID-19 pandemic also accelerated digital transformation as more Vietnamese embrace e-commerce, digital finance, and other related services. Nevertheless, Vietnam is still lagging in terms

of digital connectivity infrastructure. Its fixed broadband subscription is 13.6 per 1,000 inhabitants compared to Singapore's rate of 27.97.¹⁸ Median values of Internet speed in Vietnam are also in the average-to-low scale, reaching 33.90 Mbps for downloading on mobile networks and 67.96 on fixed broadband, which is much slower than Singapore's rate of 67.99 and 197.97, respectively.¹⁹ This middling performance will lead to further issues in adopting more advanced technologies and applications such as Internet-of-Things or artificial intelligence. Therefore, Japan's further investment in Vietnam's digital connectivity will help Hanoi address these shortcomings.

The second area is building resilient supply chains. Supply chain diversification became a top priority for Japan to avoid dependence on China, and Tokyo already offered financial incentives for Japanese businesses to move their production back home or to Southeast Asia.²⁰ Japanese companies generally want to expand operations in Vietnam, given the established presence of Japanese investment there and Vietnam's proximity to China.²¹ Furthermore, Vietnam strives to become a regional manufacturing hub and actively welcomes investment in high-value technology and manufacturing to innovate the economy. However, infrastructure bottlenecks and a lack of skilled labor in high-tech manufacturing can hamper its efforts.²² Therefore, Tokyo and Hanoi should increase finance for infrastructure and accelerate cooperation in human resources development.

Beyond the bilateral approach, Tokyo and Hanoi should coordinate their efforts at regional organizations. ASEAN has been a focal point of Japan's engagement with Southeast Asia since the emergence of the Fukuda Doctrine in 1975.²³ However, both countries should consider branching out to different institutions or initiatives. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (or Quad) could be an ideal platform, but Vietnam has been reticent to any involvement with the Quad, primarily out of concern that this move would antagonize China. Nevertheless, Vietnam is an excellent candidate to join an expanded Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI) –

a joint project between Japan, Australia and India to address supply chain vulnerabilities – since its goal is compatible with Vietnam’s aspiration to become a regional manufacturing hub. Vietnam has the geographical advantage of being close to China, and its supply chains are also integrated into China’s manufacturing network, making it an appealing option for businesses that still have China-based supply chains in their production.

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2.4 Japan steams ahead as Southeast Asia's vanguard maritime partner

John Bradford

Introduction

Southeast Asia is an intensely maritime region. To illustrate, the Philippines and Indonesia are two of the world's three largest archipelagic nations. Malaysia's land territory is split by the South China Sea with its eastern portion sharing the northern coast of the world's third-largest island with tiny Brunei. Peninsular Malaysia's east coast faces the South China Sea and its west coast defines the Strait of Malacca. Thailand and Indonesia similarly sit between seas associated with both the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Myanmar and Vietnam both have long coastlines. Filipinos and the Indonesians are the largest nationalities to serve as mariners.

The region's export-oriented nations are dependent on the sea not only for trade, but also as a source of resources (fish, petroleum, etc.) and, in many cases, cultural identity. From a geo-economic perspective, these waters provide some of the world's busiest important and sea lanes. This makes the Southeast Asian region as a global maritime fulcrum.

For these same reasons, these seas have become a critical hotspot for brewing conflict between China and the United States. The nations of Southeast Asia recognize they require extra-regional assistance to address their comprehensive maritime challenges. Those states, recognizing the importance of safety and security of Southeast Asian sea lanes to their own prosperity are generally keen to pitch in. In this area, Japan, another archipelagic nation, steams ahead as Southeast Asia's vanguard partner.

Southeast Asia's maritime challenges

While competition between the United States and China has drawn global attention to the fate of maritime Southeast Asia, these waters are also home to plenty of other threats, many of which may seem more ordinary to those far from the region: sea robbery; smuggling; human trafficking; illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, etc. However, to the societies of Southeast Asia, these threats are in no way mundane, they are immediate, immense, and consequential.

Briefly examining the IUU fishing challenge shows the dire significance of a seemingly mundane threat. Due to its clandestine nature, it is difficult to exactly quantify the cost of IUU fishing in the region, but it is certainly in tens of billions of dollars each year. The scale of the problem and the industry's use of slaves and other illicit labor has also put Thailand and Vietnam under economic pressure from the European Union. Proactive government responses throughout Southeast Asia are important, but also place tremendous strain on state resources without completely resolving the issue.

The security aspects of the IUU fishing challenge stretch beyond the immediate victims and consumption of government resources. It is not known when the fish stocks are going to collapse in the South China Sea, but we know that preventing the collapse would require tremendous cooperation among all stakeholders, including the states that maintain contesting territorial claims. Since this is highly unlikely, the fish stocks will collapse, unemployment will soar, coastal communities will lose their incomes, and the primary local source of protein will disappear. Similar conditions triggered the rapid rise of piracy in the Gulf of Aden and the profusion of 'ghost ships' crewed by North Korean corpses washing up on the coasts of Russia and Japan. Neither of those scenarios will be exactly duplicated in Southeast Asia, but we can certainly expect the collapse of these fisheries to create dire problems with terrible impacts on coastal communities and enhance regional food security challenges.

IUU fishing is just one of the maritime security challenges facing a region that generally features poor maritime governance. Piracy and sea robbery continue to plague shipping; Singapore's Information Fusion Center recorded 44 incidents in its area of responsibility in the first four months of 2022.¹ Maritime-savvy terrorist groups also remain capable. Thanks to aggressive law enforcement operations, the most famous of these, the Abu Sayyaf Group, has not conducted one of its deadly raids for nearly two years, but the organization remains active and retains capability.² The trafficking of humans, drugs, weapons, and other illicit cargos also undermines good order at sea while perpetuating violence and poverty ashore. While great power competition brings the possibility of war at sea and is, therefore, a grave concern, such a war remains hypothetical whereas these other maritime security threats that fall under the umbrella of non-traditional security threats already extract a heavy toll on the health and well-being of coastal communities, drain national resources, and interfere with the tackling of other issues.

Southeast Asia looks abroad for help

Southeast Asian states recognize that, given the international criticality of their sea lanes, local maritime insecurities also register global concerns. Relatively wealthy extra-regional powers provide assistance that regional governments are happy to receive, so long as it does not undermine their sovereignty.³ Chief among those offering such assistance are the United States and Japan, two of the world's three largest economies, both featuring robust maritime sectors. Australia, India, and European states are also increasingly involved in regional maritime capacity-building projects. China provides support, especially in terms of infrastructure development and arms sales, but is also a direct source of insecurity for the South China Sea littoral states. Among these extra-regional supporters, Japan stands out as the preferred partner.

Japan is maritime partner of choice

The preponderance of polling data points that Japan is the most trusted extra-regional power in Southeast Asia. For example, this has been a

consistent finding of the annual State of Southeast Asia survey conducted by ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.⁴ In the maritime space specifically, Japan has been working very closely with the Southeast Asian coastal states for decades. Since the 1960s, Japan has also stood out as the leading proponent of regional safety of navigation. For many years, the buoyage, lighthouses, and other aids to navigation in the Strait of Malacca were funded by or maintained by Japan. As late as the 1980s, already relatively wealthy Singapore continued to receive support from Japan for dredging in the Singapore Strait. In the late 1990s, the Japan Coast Guard expanded its regional role to become the leading provider of maritime law enforcement capacity development.

In more recent years, the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force, a *de facto* navy, has become increasingly present conducting defense diplomacy missions, exercising with regional navies, and maintaining a presence in the South China Sea.⁵ Throughout these decades Japan has been the biggest investor in Southeast Asian maritime infrastructure, with China having only recently emerged as a rival for that title.

The decades of support, coupled with a posture that downplays political and human rights concerns, have earned Japan the trust that it enjoys today. It also has a track record of providing the leadership and funding to start projects that it then quietly turns over to regional leadership. For example, the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia was formed as a result of Japanese initiatives, but it has become a truly regional international organization with an Executive Director who was formerly Director General of the Indian Coast Guard.⁶ A Bangladeshi chairs the Governing Council of its Information Sharing Center in Singapore.⁷ Because of these behaviors, Southeast Asian analyst Richard Heydarian thus refers to Japan as a “Stealth Superpower” whereas other experts have called it a “Courteous Power” or remarked on its “Ninja Diplomacy.”⁸

At the geopolitical level, it is also important to recognize that Southeast Asians see Japan as an attractive “third option,” an extra-regional power that is neither the United States nor China. As a third option, partnering with Japan reduces the ramifications of being drawn into security dilemmas and other traps associated with being perceived to pick sides in a great power competition. Of course, Southeast Asian policymakers are aware of the incredibly close nature of the US-Japan alliance, particularly in terms of its naval aspects, and thereby recognize partnering with Japan is not a baggage-free option, but such arrangements still enjoy advantages over direct engagement with the US or China. Partnering with Japan can also serve a normalizing function that lowers the political and diplomatic costs incurred with later cooperative interactions with the US and China. For example, Vietnam often conducts precedent-setting security engagements by following a stepping-stone process where similar activities are first done with an ASEAN partner, then with Japan, and finally with the United States. Similarly, the large JMSDF flatdeck helicopter carrier *Izumo* visited Vietnam in 2017 and preceded the first-post war US Navy aircraft carrier visit to Vietnam in 2018. The experience with *Izumo* provided stage-setting experience regarding the diplomatic and logistics requirements associated with hosting such a large naval ship from a foreign power.

Future prospects

Japan can expect to retain its position as Southeast Asia’s favored maritime partner into the foreseeable future through continued proactive engagement. Despite its relative economic stagnation, Japan continues to make large, sensible businesslike investments in Southeast Asian maritime infrastructure while expanding its training programs for government officials, law enforcement officers and military leaders. The Japanese political leadership seems to value this position and has placed relationships with Southeast Asia partners at the very top of its foreign policy priorities. Two of the three most recent prime ministers made Southeast Asia the destination of their first overseas trip in office. Kishida’s first overseas travel was to attend the UN Climate Change Conference (COP26), but during his first month in office he hosted Vietnam’s Prime Minister, the

first summit-level meeting organized by his government. As competition between the US and China continued to intensify, Japan's attractiveness as a third option will also grow.

Domestic reforms are also opening new paths for Japanese cooperation. The relaxation of Japan's policy restrictions on the export of defense systems enabled it to transfer maritime patrol aircraft and to sell sophisticated radars to the Philippines. These cases help established Japan as a real player in competitions for other regional procurement projects involving advanced technology military assets such as frigates and aircraft.

Less predictable will be how Japan's relationship with maritime Southeast Asia evolves as more extra-regional partners expand their roles in the region. Australia, the UK, France, and Germany have all committed themselves to larger security profiles in the region. At the moment, these nations are ably leveraging Japan's regional leadership and partnership opportunities presented by the US-Japan alliance structure to make their initiatives more efficient and effective,⁹ but as their regional roles expand, the dynamics will change. Recent history suggests that Japan will adapt as necessary and most likely strengthen its role as the region's leading "third option" and a convening authority for extra-regional partnerships. However, past performance does not guarantee future results. As the number of players grows and the stakes rise, the game will become more complex.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further complicated these dynamics making two-way diplomatic visits, the free flow of business leaders and tourists much less frequent creating challenges for Japan to maintain its high-level and comprehensive engagement in the region. The most recent annual State of Southeast Asia survey conducted by ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute has shown that while Japan is still the most trusted in the region, China has made headways highlighting that retaining credibility, sustainability and trust in the region will continue to require intense and frequent diplomacy.

Endnotes

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2.5 Japan and Northeast India: Connectivity Cooperation amid the China Complex

Jagannath Panda & Mrityika Guha Sarkar

Introduction

Acting as a point of convergence between India's Act East Policy (AEP) and Japan's vision for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific, the Northeast region of India has emerged as a primary area of cooperation between the two Asian powers. The region binds India and Japan together historically, culturally and geographically, functioning as India's gateway to the East. For Japan, India's Northeast has certainly come to act as an entry point to expand its collaborations within the country. This is not necessarily a new development; Japan's connections with Northeast India go back to World War II when Japanese soldiers intruded Indian borders of this region in March 1944 in an assault against the British Empire at the Battles of Imphal and Kohima. Although the event took place over seven decades ago, it nevertheless indicates how Japan has always viewed India's Northeast region as its pathway to greater connectivity with India, South Asia as well as several Southeast Asian countries.

In many ways, Tokyo is attempting to rewrite its history and connect in the region; for instance, it is contributing to projects for connecting all state capitals of the region via railways, with plans to take forward the connectivity project to Bangladesh, Myanmar, and the rest of Southeast Asia. This multi-dimensional convergence was fashioned as the mutually beneficial factor

between India and Japan under the Abe administration, mainly as Prime Minister Modi's visit to Tokyo was dedicated to accentuating connectivity and infrastructure advancement in the region.¹ However, what future does the India-Japan 'Strategic and Global Partnership' hold vis-à-vis their Northeast India cooperation ambitions under the leadership of Fumio Kishida? How much of the India-Japan partnership in Northeast India is China-bound?

The Beijing Dilemma

Apart from the historical context that underlies Japan's Northeast engagement, a key factor for Japan's interest in the region has been its geographically strategic position amid the shared China challenge. India's Northeast shares over 5,000 kilometers of international borders with several other states—China, Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Myanmar. The region has seen China's aggressive efforts to grab territory; for example, Beijing has effectively denounced the McMahon Line to assert claims on the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, amounting to nearly 90,000 square kilometers. China has argued that this region was historically a part of Tibet and therefore should be Chinese territory. To realize these claims, China has begun aggressively building infrastructure alongside contested borders, reportedly including a village in Arunachal Pradesh in early 2021.² In 2017, the situation came to a head during the Doklam standoff, wherein China attempted to take control of the Doklam plateau—a strategically critical tri-junction between India, Bhutan, and China—that brings China closer to India's Siliguri Corridor linking the Northeast to the rest of the country (making it an exceedingly vulnerable point for India). Over time, China has built a network of roads for greater access to the region, which are notably wide enough to allow for transportation of military equipment (such as tanks and artillery guns).³

While India's primary dispute with the rising revisionist Chinese power is on land geography, Japan's dispute is maritime, over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands of the East China Sea. They are both thus deeply concerned about China's growing influence and military presence and the threat this

poses to their security. In this context, both states' focus on connectivity and development in the region is directly aimed at countering Xi Jinping's flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and coordinating a response to its regional ambitions. Although it is portrayed as a benign initiative establishing China as a gracious lender providing massive loans in the absence of Western help, the BRI has come to be viewed as an effort to strategically strengthen China's great power position in the regional and global order by several Asian and global states, particularly by utilizing infrastructural projects as charm offensives.⁴ Thus, the two countries have enhanced cooperation in India's Northeast, intending to then expand it to Southeast Asia. Such collaboration is drawn via convergence under India's AEP and Japan's Expanded Partnership for Quality Infrastructure (EPQI).⁵

However, India and Japan's cooperation in the region also has been juxtaposing China's expanding footprints in and around Northeast India, particularly through initiatives such as the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Corridor. Though India is participating in the BCIM as a proposed route connecting India and China through Myanmar and Bangladesh, it has exhibited a lukewarm and hesitant approach in recent years under the Modi government, underpinned by national security concerns. This was reiterated during the second Belt and Road Forum, which didn't see participation by India.⁶ However, New Delhi's approach to BCIM has been calculative, which was particularly reverberated when India sent a delegation to the 13th BCIM Forum in Yuxi, asserting that the BCIM corridor predates the BRI. Yet, India has time and again affirmed its decision to not join the BRI by underscoring the threat posed to its sovereignty and territorial integrity by the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)—a major arm of the BRI.

Further, under Xi Jinping, Arunachal Pradesh has been acquiring a greater tactical advantage. Xi Jinping, following a similar path as Mao Zedong, has been focusing on the other "five fingers"⁷ of the Tibetan plateau—Ladakh, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan and the Northeast Frontier Agency (NEFA), and the state of Arunachal Pradesh in India's Northeast, where China's claims on

the region have been based on the sixth Dalai Lama being born in Tawang. Thus, Tawang has been holding a significant position in China's strategic calculus, while Beijing incrementally expands its claim all over Arunachal Pradesh and gradually shifts to a more hardline and a more unilateral stance.⁸ Such an assertive approach has been witnessed towards the India-Japan partnership in Northeast India, where Beijing, in 2017, warned third parties (Japan) against meddling in its boundary dispute with India in 2017. In particular, China's foreign ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying, in response to the India-Japan joint statement released in 2017, stated that "boundary of the India-China border area has not been totally delimited and we have disputes in the eastern section of the boundary... Under such circumstances...any third party should not be involved in our efforts to solve disputes". If anything, such a response to the India-Japan connectivity cooperation in the Northeast India signified towards China emboldening its claims in other parts of the border, particularly as Xi enhances its focus on Tibet as a core interest. It further reveals that China would continue to view Japan and India's joint activities in the region through cautious lenses, especially considering Beijing's complex relations with both Tokyo and New Delhi, as well as the growing significance of Arunachal Pradesh in China's grander Himalayan approach.⁹

In fact, China's cautious approach combined with an increasingly firm military posturing is already being witnessed as China ramps up the scale and duration of military drills in Arunachal Pradesh border area.¹⁰ It has also undertaken massive infrastructure development and troop build-up in the Rest of Arunachal Pradesh (RALP) area, which has become a matter of concern for India.¹¹ These actions signify that China under Xi is increasingly looking towards cementing its position in the area and the larger Himalayan region, as control over Tibet acquires greater criticality to ensure regime survival of the Communist Party of China, and stability of Xi's leadership. Further, on December 29, 2021, China upped the ante and announced¹² its decision to "standardize" the names of 15 places in Arunachal—which Chinese maps depict as "Zangnan," or South Tibet.¹³ India was quick to respond to the name changes, with the Ministry of

External Affairs spokesperson Arindam Bagchi calling the “invented” names for Indian territories a “ridiculous exercise” to support “untenable claims”.¹⁴ However, the name change act by China, coupled with its Land Border Law passed on October 23, 2021¹⁵ – which became effective on January 1, 2022¹⁶ – is undoubtedly enhancing New Delhi’s perception of China as a threat.¹⁷ Apart from reflecting to China’s growing belligerence and expansionist approach, these incidents only point to the region’s strategic importance.

Additionally, these have also been a compelling rationale for India to establish its Japan partnership vis-à-vis its Northeast region not just in its foreign policy, but also its domestic policies. As such, India would welcome Japanese presence in its Northeast region, not just for economic development but also to counter China’s infrastructure, trade, culture, and military influence.

India-Japan: Aligning with ASEAN Connectivity Plan

India-Japan cooperation is fundamentally driven by both states’ ambitions and plans for outreach to the broader region—including Southeast Asia and the Bay of Bengal countries. For India, the region’s proximity to Southeast Asia makes it a natural entry point to the region and has accordingly featured as a pivot in India’s Act East engagement efforts. These imperatives indicate the significant potential offered by ASEAN-Northeast India connectivity for trade and economic relations between the two actors.¹⁸ The Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) 2025, launched in 2016, names five strategic areas of focus—sustainable infrastructure, digital innovation, people mobility, seamless logistics, and regulatory excellence.¹⁹ Here, better connectivity with a resource-rich region like India’s Northeast that provides access to the rest of India (as well as China and by extension East Asia) can be a major pathway. India’s northeast is already being linked to the Southeast Asian states, particularly with nations like Myanmar. It has started to upgrade the Aizwal-Tuipang national highway with financial support by Japan’s JICA, which connects to the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project between India and

Myanmar.²⁰ Further, India has been upgrading and widening a section of a roadway between Imphal, Manipur and Moreh, located at the borders of Myanmar. This development holds greater importance as a section of the road is part of the India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway, which is yet to be completed. For Japan, too, Southeast Asia has long been a key recipient region for its ODA. Tokyo is looking to contribute majorly to ASEAN's sustainable development plans to improve connectivity with the economically significant bloc and limit China's growing influence in the strategic region by providing ASEAN powers with a more reliable alternative for financing.

In this regard, Japan is involved in the East-West Economic Corridor Improvement Project, where JICA is replacing four bridges to ensure smooth flow of traffic from Myanmar to the neighboring countries, particularly between the two sections of Mawlamyine and the Thai border, New Bago and Kyaikto.²¹ Further, for phase 2 of the project, it is assisting in construction of the Sittaung Bridge, together with the ADB.²² Also, Japan is contributing to the Southern Economic Corridor project, where it is aiming to enhance the energy distribution, roads, railways, ports, as well as airports in Thailand, Vietnam, and Cambodia.²³ Moreover, as a G7 nation, Japan can be a pivotal investor and technology partner as ASEAN states look to advance their sustainable urbanization and development agenda.²⁴ Increased activity in India's Northeast and cooperation and dialogue with ASEAN in a trilateral format can be crucial in this regard.²⁵

Since the Northeast region also acts as a unique connector between South Asia and Southeast Asia, it can be a perfect point to launch connectivity outreach to both. To this effect, BIMSTEC, established in 1997,²⁶ can be a crucial forum for better outreach. In particular, an extension of the India-Japan partnership could look at economic development through infrastructure and connectivity projects, energy security, science and technology, maritime security, disaster management, risk management, tourism, and more. More importantly, such cooperation could also bring in the potential for a Free Trade Agreement between the BIMSTEC countries

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