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## 50 Years of Japan-ASEAN Mutual Diplomatic Support: Why Has Japan's Regionalism Been Realized Beyond Southeast Asia?

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

This year marks a historic milestone in the 50-year-long friendship and cooperation between Japan and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Japan has a long-standing reputation as a proponent of regionalism, and this role has evolved over time, exemplified by the changing regional concepts, including the Pacific, the Asia-Pacific, East Asia, and the Indo-Pacific. This means that Japan has been actively engaged in a regional cooperation diplomacy that encompasses these "broader areas", beyond Southeast Asia. Crucially, this diplomacy has depended on consistent support and participation from ASEAN, which occupies a central geographic position within all the regional concepts advocated by Japan. This geographic centrality has partly contributed to ASEAN serving as a pivotal partner, and it is a significant reason why Japan has incorporated elements that reflect the benefits and interests of ASEAN into its proposals for broader regionalism. Consequently, the diplomatic practices of mutual support and collaboration between Japan and ASEAN over the past five decades have become entrenched as a critical normative condition for the establishment of Japan-led regionalism.

### 2. 50 Years of ASEAN Problems and Japanese Diplomacy Providing Possible Solutions

ASEAN was founded in 1967 by five countries in the midst of the Vietnam War. In the beginning, ASEAN cooperation was not implemented in the same way as it is today, as each country was busy trying to establish itself as a full-fledged nation, preferring non-interference in each other's internal affairs as the key principle of ASEAN cooperation so as not to get in each other's way. After the end of the Cold War, ASEAN promoted regional cooperation mainly in the economic field, but even after the signing of the ASEAN Free Trade Area in 1992, it has not created common tariffs like the EU, for example, nor has it taken any steps toward creating a common currency. Preserving the sovereignty of each nation has been paramount, and the so-called "ASEAN Way," which includes non-interference in internal affairs, has become a structural arrangement for ASEAN's management. In addition, ASEAN's intra-regional trade has been consistently low, always requiring large extra-regional markets

such as Japan, the United States and China, and the essential nature of cooperation with countries outside the region thus becomes an important feature of ASEAN cooperation, as realized in the establishment of "ASEAN plus" formulas.

As exemplified by Prime Minister Masayoshi Ohira's "Pacific Basin Cooperation Concept" (1978-1980) and subsequent speeches by Japan's leaders, Japan, conscious of its role as a leading player in East Asia and the Asia-Pacific, has pursued a regional diplomacy encompassing two distinct types of regionalism policies: short-term issue-centric solutions and long-term concept-driven strategies. ASEAN's call for a regional cooperation framework that extends beyond Southeast Asia, encompassing larger external nations and friendly states, aligns with Japan's aspirations for leadership in the region. This alignment has given rise to a structured relationship in which Japan has actively worked towards ASEAN's interests, and in return, ASEAN has supported Japan and its proponents of broader regionalism.

### 3. Changes in Japan-ASEAN Relations and Japan's Regionalist Diplomacy

A reevaluation of Japan's consistent approach to ASEAN over the past half-century can be achieved by examining it within the broader context of Japan's interest in leading broader concepts of regional institutions. Japan's political direction and diplomatic endeavors to nurture strong ties with ASEAN stand as a fundamental prerequisite for its active involvement in establishing six distinct regional initiatives and institutions extending well beyond Southeast Asia.

Crucially, international and regional structural changes have consistently driven Japan's engagement in these broader regional initiatives. The end of the Vietnam War initiated Japan's involvement in ASEAN, while the Plaza Accord and regional economic interdependence shaped Japan's proposal for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum. The Asian Financial Crisis (AFC) played a key role in Japan's involvement in ASEAN+3 (APT), and China's charm offensive diplomacy pushed Japan to establish the East Asia Summit (EAS). In addition, China's rise and the U.S. pivot to Asia were instrumental in Japan's leading role in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), and the ongoing U.S.-China competition over economic rules has significantly influenced Japan's initiatives in the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision. Japan has recognized the importance of ASEAN unity and integration as a fundamental condition for the success of these broader regional institutions it has advocated. Addressing ASEAN's concerns about potential marginalization within these broader regionalisms, both political and economic, has been Japan's primary objective. These periods can be roughly divided into six distinct phases, as shown in the table below.

**Table. Evolution of the Japan-ASEAN Relations**

<b>Period</b>	<b>Regional Major Events</b>	<b>Regional Institutions</b>	<b>Japan's Regional Strategy</b>
Phase I (mid-1970s)	End of Vietnam War	ASEAN	Fukuda Doctrine (MOFA)
Phase II (mid-1980s)	Plaza Accord	APEC	Economic Cooperation Dialogue (MITI)
Phase III (late 1990s)	Asian Financial Crisis	APT	Monetary Cooperation (MOF)
Phase IV (mid-2000s)	China's charm Offensive diplomacy	EAS	Competition with China (MOFA & METI)
Phase V (mid-2010s)	US Asia Pivot	TPP	Economic encirclement of China (MOFA & METI)
Phase VI (late 2010s)	US-China Rule-making competition	FOIP	Promotion of shared values and rules (MOFA)

The first phase took place in the mid-1970s. In 1966, Japan's attempt to locate the headquarters of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) in Tokyo was thwarted, losing out to Manila. Subsequently, in 1974, during Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka's tour of Southeast Asia, riots broke out in Bangkok and Jakarta. As a result, Japan sought to reorient its foreign policy toward ASEAN, including greater involvement and support. An event that caused a significant structural change in the region during this period was the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, which set the stage for ASEAN's inaugural ASEAN Summit in 1976. In 1977, President Marcos of the Philippines visited Japan and requested Japan's involvement in ASEAN to fill the power vacuum left by the withdrawal of the United States at the end of the Vietnam War. As a result, Japan adopted a policy approach that emphasized ASEAN as an equal regional actor, leading to the subsequent development of the Fukuda Doctrine in 1977 with a substantial increase in official development assistance (ODA) to ASEAN nations.

In the second phase, a major regional structural change occurred in the mid-1980s as trade tensions between the United States and Japan escalated, culminating in the Plaza Accord in 1985. This agreement led to a significant appreciation of the Japanese yen, which prompted the Japanese manufacturing sector to establish new factories through direct investment in ASEAN countries. This move culminated in the creation of a structure for exporting to the United States through ASEAN, while deepening relations between Japan and ASEAN, especially in the business sector. Meanwhile, for the United States, the burden of the trade surplus shifted from Japan to ASEAN, and Japan needed a multilateral rather than

bilateral forum for dialogue with the United States on the trade-related issues. Sensing ASEAN's interest in economic cooperation, Japan's Ministry of International Trade and Industry, along with an Australian initiative, began working to establish APEC in 1989. Japan and Australia emphasized ASEAN's intentions and worked to incorporate them through actions such as accepting requests to hold meetings in an ASEAN member country every two years.

The third regional structural change for Japan's broader regionalism initiative was the AFC in 1997. In response to this crisis, the Japanese Ministry of Finance launched the Asian Monetary Fund (AMF) initiative. This led to the beginning of a new regional concept called "East Asia," which combined Northeast Asia (Japan, China, and Korea) with Southeast Asia. Although the AMF initiative stalled due to opposition from the United States, it led to the establishment of a new regional system called ASEAN+3 (APT), with Japan taking the lead in establishing a network of bilateral currency swap agreements (Chiang Mai Initiative) in 2000 to prevent the second currency crisis. In addition, China did not devalue its renminbi during this crisis and helped Thailand promote its exports and recover from the crisis, which improved China-ASEAN relations and laid the foundation for China's proposal for a free trade agreement (FTA) with ASEAN in 2000. The Asian currency crisis served as an important regional structural change in that it promoted China's regional cooperative engagement as well as the emergence of East Asian regionalism that excluded the United States.

The fourth period began in the mid-2000s. From this period, China began to actively engage with ASEAN. For example, it developed a "charm offensive" diplomacy that met ASEAN's demands, such as quickly signing the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TACA), which Japan and Australia were reluctant to sign because of the principle of non-interference in internal affairs. Thus, this period brought changes in the regional structure in which China played an active role. However, it was at this time that Japan proposed the regional concept of an "expanded East Asia," which included Australia and India in "East Asia," and took a leading role in the establishment of the EAS in 2005. This meant that competition between China and Japan began to intensify.

The fifth phase took place in the mid-2010s and was characterized by a structural shift triggered by China's assertive diplomacy and the United States' increased engagement in the Asian region. In particular, in 2010, China explicitly told a visiting U.S. official that the South China Sea was one of its "core interests," along with Tibet and Taiwan. This statement marked a stark departure from China's previous positions and represented a radical shift toward a more assertive stance, particularly in advancing its territorial claims in the South and East China Sea. In this context, the United States signed the TACA and joined the EAS; subsequently causing to change the agenda of the EAS, with the South China Sea issue as the

primary focus. In addition, the United States launched the TPP to extend its preferred economic rules to Asia, and Japan, especially under the Abe administration, actively promoted the TPP, while also promoting the formation of an economic encirclement network against China and the promotion of regional integration among "like-minded countries" that share common values, as well as efforts to involve ASEAN, such as the announcement of the Five Principles for ASEAN. This period was characterized by the comprehensive partnership that Japan and the United States sought to establish because of the gigantic impact of China's influence and their common interest in brining ASEAN into this strategic rebalancing.

The final sixth period begins in the late 2010s. Regional structural changes during this period included the struggle for primacy between the United States and China, and Japan launched the new regional concept of the Indo-Pacific as its central location. In addition, Japan placed the FOIP concept, which sets values and rules, at the forefront of its foreign policy. To win the support of the United States, Australia, India, Europe, and other countries for the strategic nature of the FOIP as a countermeasure to the BRI, and to involve ASEAN, which is concerned about being lost in these massive plans, Japan has promoted cooperation with the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific (AOIP) by paying special attention to ASEAN's concerns about its *raison de tree*. This is one way of Japan's continued diplomatic efforts to keep ASEAN in line with free and open values.

#### 4. Japan's Regional Diplomacy and the Future of ASEAN

Looking at Japan's regional diplomacy toward ASEAN from the perspective of the three ASEAN communities, the following points can be highlighted. First, the economic community shows that Japan has broadened its relationship while shifting from ODA to FDI and FTA. Second, the political-security community shows that Japan has always been aware of the United States and ASEAN and has made efforts to link them by using its status as a close ally of the United States in its regional vision. Third, the socio-cultural community shows that Japan has continued "heart-to-heart" exchanges since the Fukuda Doctrine of 1977, especially through GENESYS and the promotion of study abroad for younger generations. In the current international structure, which is the intensifying struggle for supremacy between the United States and China, a new type of "ASEAN divide" has widened both economically and politically.

As China's BRI-based projects spread throughout the region as a solution to ASEAN's widening development gap, it has become urgent for Japan to actively pursue its regional diplomacy and smoothly establish a region-specific project related to the FOIP. In particular, more concrete work is needed on the feasibility of integrating the AOIP and the FOIP and drawing up a roadmap for their integration. Some issues need careful consideration

for Japan's new approach to ASEAN. Some regional experts call for a review of the "ASEAN Way" and "ASEAN Centrality," which have been the guiding principles of ASEAN, due to issues such as Myanmar's ethnic and human rights violations and the South China Sea disputes. Moreover, another issue that may lead to the collapse of ASEAN's guiding principle (which Japan has treated as an important component of its Asian diplomacy) is the issue of membership, as evidenced by the recent calls for Myanmar's expulsion from membership. Japan should reconsider its commitment to building an Asian order in light of this possibility.

In such a context, one priority could be to integrate the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) into ASEAN diplomacy. As China increasingly weaponizes trade for its own political ends, rebuilding supply chains among like-minded countries becomes a pressing issue in IPEF cooperation, which includes seven ASEAN members. The promotion of specific cooperation in the EAS involving China and Russia continues to face difficulties, diluting the effectiveness of the EAS as a solution-oriented framework. This means that the IPEF, in which the United States and India, two important like-minded states of Japan, participate, can launch a new type of cooperation among Japan, the United States and India through the IPEF, especially supply chain cooperation among large market countries, while involving some ASEAN markets.

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