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“HEART TO HEART” RELATIONS WITH ASEAN: THE FUKUDA DOCTRINE REVISITED

Tsutomu Kikuchi

In August 1977, Japanese Prime Minister Takeo Fukuda declared in his speech in Manila that Japan would never become a military power, would build up relations of mutual confidence and trust with Southeast Asian countries and would commit itself as an equal partner to building peace and prosperity in the region. Known as the Fukuda Doctrine, the three principles presented in the speech paved the way for enhanced cooperation between Japan and Southeast Asian countries in the following decades. The Fukuda speech is still vividly remembered by many people in Southeast

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Asia as a symbol of Japan's basic approach to the region. The principles should continue to define the relations between Japan and ASEAN (the Association of South East Asian Nations) countries in the decades to come. However, given the great regional transformations in Asia's international relations, there is a need for Japan to further articulate its ASEAN policy in the context of an emerging new Asia, building on the fruitful experience underlined by the Fukuda Doctrine.

I recently attended a seminar to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the Fukuda Doctrine jointly organized by the Japan Institute of International Affairs and the East Asian Institute of the National University of Singapore. I had also been involved in preparations for the seminar, which was held in Singapore last month, from the planning stage. The experience has made me recognize anew how highly the Fukuda Doctrine is regarded by the people and governments of Southeast Asian countries. This is because the doctrine has been recognized as a strong and clear message from Japan that the country would fully commit itself to the causes of nation-building and region-making in Southeast Asia and to enhancing "heart to heart" relations with Southeast Asian countries during an era of great regional transformation.

The 1970s witnessed great transformations in the regional political economy in Asia in general and Southeast Asia in particular, causing a lot of concerns and uncertainties as to the future shape of the region's international relations. With its withdrawal from Vietnam, the United States appeared less committed to Asia. There remained deep concern that the Sino-Soviet confrontation might extend to Southeast Asia. Southeast Asian countries were struggling to survive the turbulent period by enhancing their national and regional resilience. They were strengthening their national socio-economic foundations and regional cohesion and harmony through the then fledgling ASEAN. To such ASEAN countries, Japan, which had skillfully overcome economic hardship after World War II, looked like a promising rising power that could have a positive influence on their future.

The Fukuda speech took into account Southeast Asian countries' concerns

about, and expectations of, Japan. It also understood the sensibilities that small and medium-sized countries might have toward a rising power. In his speech, Prime Minister Fukuda first gave strong reassurances that Japan would never become a military power. Second, he defined Japan-Southeast Asian relations as an equal partnership and said Japan would strive to build “heart to heart” relationships with the countries in the region. Third, Fukuda expressed Japan’s commitment to establishing a stable regional order in Southeast Asia. Particular emphasis was placed on strengthening ASEAN as a regional institution through which Southeast Asian countries could enhance cooperation and harmony. He also said Japan would assist efforts for rapprochement between ASEAN and Indochina. In sum, the speech signaled a “new Japan” that would go beyond the country’s traditional economy-oriented policy.

Indeed, the Fukuda Doctrine has played a pivotal role in enhancing cooperation in a variety of areas and establishing mutual trust and confidence between Japan and Southeast Asian countries. Japan’s provision of official development assistance (ODA), together with massive foreign direct investment by Japanese firms, has contributed greatly to upgrading the socio-economic conditions of Southeast Asian countries. Japan should be proud of its achievements of the last several decades. However, we must go beyond such self-satisfaction, for we are now facing new challenges that require Japan to readjust and articulate its policy toward Southeast Asia.

Just as in the 1970s, Asia today is in the midst of great transformation. The future shape of international relations of Asia is still uncertain. For most ASEAN countries, nation-building still remains at the top of their policy agendas. Added to this, the extension of ASEAN membership is making it harder for the regional institution to sustain harmony and a cooperative spirit. The recently accelerated efforts at establishing an ASEAN Community and the adoption of a new ASEAN Charter calling for the promotion of democracy, human rights and the rule of law with rhetorical flourishes speak for ASEAN’s desperate struggle to maintain its

integrity in the face of changing regional and global environments. At the same time, ASEAN has to project its future in a broader regional (East Asian) context. In spite of internal difficulties, ASEAN is emerging as the main driver for regional cooperation in East Asia as demonstrated in the formation of such ASEAN-centered regional frameworks as ASEAN+3 (ASEAN plus Japan, China, South Korea) and ASEAN+6 (ASEAN+3 plus Australia, India and New Zealand: also called the East Asia Summit).


Japan's relations with the rest of Asia have also been changing. First, Japan-based multinational companies in recent years have been aggressively creating cross-border regional production networks connecting ASEAN markets, into which China is rapidly being integrated. Since Japan's prosperity is increasingly dependent on these regional networks, it is imperative that Japan establish a regional framework to facilitate the networks' operation. One of the key policy instruments to achieve this is the conclusion of an Asia-wide free trade agreement. In this regard, it is important for Japanese to understand that China and ASEAN countries are our important partners, not just competitors, and that the stable economic development of China and ASEAN countries accompanied by political modernization is indispensable for Japan's prosperity. Japan must bear in mind this big picture when formulating its Asia policy.

Second, Japan needs the region's blessing as it increases its security profile. Reinforcing cooperation with ASEAN countries in such areas as humanitarian activities and maritime security will help foster better understanding of Japan's enhanced security role in the region. At the same time, Japan must skillfully manage its alliance with the United States. Japan's national interests cannot be protected and promoted by a strong alliance with the US alone. Without due consideration for the ambivalent feelings that many Asian countries have toward the US, overemphasis on this alliance could damage Japan's interests in Asia. Overall, Japan is comfortable with living in a US-led unipolar world and has been seeking to jointly manage US hegemony in East Asia. However, other Asian countries are

more ambivalent. On the one hand, there is an understanding that continued American engagement is essential to the peace and stability of Asia and that the Japan-US alliance provides “common security goods.” On the other hand, many Asian countries are critical of the US’ unilateral “hegemonic” behavior and concerned about US intervention in their internal affairs in the name of protecting human rights, promoting democracy and good governance and fighting terrorism. Japan must understand such complex feelings and avoid escaping into the comfortable shelter of its alliance with the United States.

Last but not least, Japan should take a more mature and sophisticated attitude toward the criticisms leveled by its neighbors at its handling of “history issues.” Japan’s engagement in regional and international affairs since World War II clearly demonstrates that its government and people have deeply reflected on and felt strong remorse about Japan’s wartime past. Japan’s determination to live as a peaceful nation has been greatly appreciated in international society. Those Japanese who are just focused on “unfair treatment” by neighboring countries must understand this. As a democratic country with an open and fairly coherent and resilient society, Japan can be more tolerant and open-minded about such criticism without resorting to nationalism. We should first reflect on these issues ourselves.

Growing political, economic and security interdependence has made Japan’s future far more closely connected with that of East Asia than when Takeo Fukuda gave his speech 30 years ago. The Fukuda Doctrine is still relevant to Japan’s approach to Southeast Asia. Japan should further commit itself to the cause of Southeast Asian region-building by supporting the establishment of an ASEAN Community in the spirit of the doctrine. At the same time, Japan should further articulate its ASEAN policy in the context of establishing an East Asian Community and enhancing its alliance relations with the US. Japan’s policies towards ASEAN, the building of an East Asian Community and the alliance with the US must be integrated into a coherent Japanese regional vision. Japan’s proactive political, security and economic roles in both Southeast Asia and East Asia must also be

more clearly demonstrated in this broader vision for East Asia. To this end, Japan must face and respond to the challenges, even if this demands a painful rethinking of Japan's past and future roles in the region. I hope that Mr. Yasuo Fukuda, the current Prime Minister of Japan and the son of the late Takeo Fukuda, will soon present a new vision for the Japan-ASEAN relationship to back up efforts to create a new Asia. 

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