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WORLD

ASEAN's relations with India, US and Japan under the shadow of the Chinese belligerence: prospects and challenges

September 23, 2020, 9:28 AM IST / SD Pradhan in Chanakya Code, World, TOI

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Japan established informal dialogue relations with ASEAN in 1973, which were formalised in 1977. Japan has provided sustained support to ASEAN as an institution. Like India and US, Japan too has worked with ASEAN both bilaterally and multilaterally. Japan's Fukuda Doctrine adopted in 1977 became the basis to define its relations with ASEAN. It

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excluded military but emphasised equal with ASEAN and 'heart-to-heart' dialogue with the South East Asian countries. Japan's economic-focused strategy was crucial not only for its economic growth but also for South East Asian economies. The expansion of ASEAN in the post-cold war period, led to the beginning of regional economic integration including the launch of the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) at the fourth ASEAN Summit in 1992. In addition, ASEAN pursued a strategy of aiming to play a central role in building broad regional arrangements extending beyond its own area, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) established in 1994 and the extension of its dialogue partnerships with Asia-Pacific powers Japan, US, India, China, South Korea and Russia.

While Japan and ASEAN ties were driven by economic factors, the common threat from China has made them realise the need for each other. In economic terms, Japan-ASEAN relations grew through stronger economic interdependence and an expansion in the areas of cooperation, such as information technology and human resources. the AEM-METI forum was established, bringing together the ASEAN economic ministers (AEM) and Japan's minister of economy, trade, and industry (METI). In 1998 the AEM-METI Economic and Industrial Cooperation

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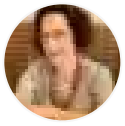
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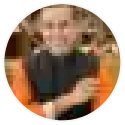
Committee was launched to give concrete shape to the cooperative measures agreed upon at the ministerial level. Both parties also signed the Japan-ASEAN Comprehensive Economic Partnership that came into force in January 2007. Japan earlier signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) in 2004.

The Chinese rise and belligerence both in the SCS and ECS demanded closer ties between ASEAN and Japan. In addition, the US-China rivalry was not only raising the tension in the region but was threatening the strategic balance of power. Hence, the security dimension of the bilateral relationship expanded especially under the Abe government. Under Abe's leadership, South East Asia became a special sub-region with critical strategic importance to Japan's foreign policy strategy. In the Bali Declaration of 2011, emphasis was given to strengthening of political-security cooperation in the region, It also referred to enhanced cooperation based on international law and the principles and spirit of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in South East Asia; cooperation on maritime security and safety in accordance with the principles of international law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, such as freedom and safety of



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navigation, unimpeded commerce, and peaceful settlement of disputes; and the implementation of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea.

China's assertive and provocative posture under Xi Jinping forced Japan's closer relations with the U.S. India and ASEAN. Japan under Abe Administration pushed forward its regional diplomacy: (1) the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy for rules-based Indo-Pacific Ocean; (2) strengthening the Japan-US alliance; and (3) strengthening cooperation with maritime Asian countries such as ASEAN, Australia, and India. The Quad is developing to keep the region peaceful, which originally was proposed by Abe.

Japan and ASEAN have developed relations as indispensable partners in various areas. First, Japan supports ASEAN Community building. Japanese ODA has contributed to the improvement of the business environment of ASEAN countries, and encouraged foreign direct investment and foreign company into ASEAN countries. Recently, Japan has decided to help financially companies to shift from China to ASEAN. Second, Japan and ASEAN have become indispensable "economic partners". Japan and ASEAN are major trading, business, and economic partners for each other. Third,

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Japan and ASEAN have become regional diplomatic partners for peace and stability in South East Asia and Indo-Pacific region.

As can be seen from the close ties, ASEAN has a positive image for Japan. Japan is seen as an equal partner willing to provide much needed financial assistance to ASEAN both bilaterally and multilaterally. The Chinese design for expansion in the periphery and attempts to establish its hegemony in the region displacing US have made the South East Asia region as the centre of geo-politics and geo-economics of Indo-Pacific Region. The ASEAN-Japan coordination can provide substantial economic pressure on China.

The future prospects for Japan-ASEAN cooperation are bright. Japan's financial assistance would be invaluable in economic development of ASEAN. This would help in developing infrastructure in the ASEAN for industrialisation of the region. As the anti-Chinese sentiments are on the increase, Japan would enhance the use of ASEAN economies as the destination of her industrial relocation. This is beneficial to minimise the cost of production as the cheaper land and labour are available in ASEAN countries. With subsidies from Japan, companies can move out of China to ASEAN countries. Japan would also provide help

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to develop alternative supply chain that would be beneficial to all. For security, Quad can be transformed into Four Plus to include the ASEAN. This would be necessary to protect their sovereignty in the current situation. Japan and ASEAN can utilise various channels and areas for further cooperation in areas of diplomacy, business, people exchange and tourism. There are complementarities between Japan and ASEAN in the area of non-traditional security like climate change, resources scarcity, infectious diseases, natural disasters, irregular migration, food shortages, people smuggling, drug trafficking and transnational crime. These could be given a greater thrust. ASEAN under Vietnam Chair, which has close ties with Japan can ensure suitable measures on these issues by aligning with the Japanese foreign policy.

There would be challenges as well. China would use its influence to divide ASEAN and weaken its linkages with Japan to ensure that there would not be a strong pressure on it over its expansionist activities. China is claiming the Senkaku Islands from Japan and would not like its strong linkages with ASEAN. China would not like its companies to move to ASEAN. The countries where the companies currently located in China would move could be specifically targeted. Economic sanctions could be imposed on them. In

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addition, while economic rationale is clear for Japan-ASEAN relations, political manoeuvring of conflicting interest groups in each country could pose challenges. Vietnam as ASEAN's Chair would have to keep a strong vigil on the possible Chinese designs which may adversely affect the unity and cohesiveness of ASEAN.

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