



IDSS COMMENTARIES (06/2004)

IDSS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of IDSS.

Japan in Southeast Asia: Reviving the Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere?

Hiro Katsumata*

9 March 2004

Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's Liberal Democratic Party stated earlier this week that it would submit a bill related to the amendment of Japan's pacifist constitution to the Diet. Currently Article 9 of the Constitution states that Japan renounces war as a sovereign right and thus does not maintain military forces. Koizumi and his party seek to revise the constitution to amend this clause. Although the process is likely to take a few years, this move signals a major turning point in Japan's security policy. Already in Japan's latest Defence White Paper, the Director-General of the Defence Agency Shigeru Ishiba stated that "it is important for Japan to be more positive and proactive in fulfilling its responsibilities in maintaining peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region."

The presence at the Asian Aerospace show last month of a number of Japanese officials, studying the latest air defence technologies and interacting with defence officials from other Asian countries, has drawn attention to Japan's active interest in Southeast Asia in recent years. The Japanese Coast Guard has been conducting joint exercises with its counterparts in Southeast Asian countries, highlighting the importance of the security of sea lanes for Japan's economy which rely on materials and natural resources from overseas. This has been further underscored by the deployment of Japan's Self-Defence Forces to the Indian Ocean in support of the US-led coalition's war against terrorists.

A major event was the ASEAN-Japan special summit held in Tokyo last December to commemorate thirty years of cooperation between the two parties. Sceptical historians recall that sixty years ago, Japan held a similar meeting with leaders of Asian countries, also in Tokyo. Taking part in the Greater East Asian Conference in November 1943 were the representatives of the Philippines, Burma, Thailand, China, Manchukuo, all under Japanese occupation, and the Provisional Government of Free India. Japan's intention then was to expand its sphere of influence and create some kind of informal empire, designed to maximise Japanese national interests defined in military and economic terms. This came to be known as the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere.

Such sceptics might suspect that Japan's activities in Southeast Asia today are similarly ill-motivated. Indeed, Tokyo's active foreign policies have caused a number of Asian observers and scholars to revisit the notion of the Co-prosperity Sphere. However, such a notion is implausible because there is a fundamental difference between the principles behind Japanese diplomacy in the two different periods.

The difference between Japan's plan for the Co-prosperity Sphere and its active policies

today cannot be understood if one's focus is limited to Japan's relations with Southeast Asian countries. One needs to expand his/her focus and consider Japan's relations with Western countries, including the United States and European states.

Tokyo's wartime plan was intended to confront the West and to break a perceived economic embargo on Japan. Its relations with Southeast Asian countries were used as a springboard to pursue such an aim. In contrast, today, Japanese diplomacy in Southeast Asia is aimed at serving as a bridge between the West and Asia, promoting mutually beneficial relations. In other words, while Japan's wartime policies were intended to *push the West out of Asia*, its activities today are designed to *keep the West engaged in Asia*.

Exploitative Co-prosperity Sphere

Japan's plan for a co-prosperity sphere during WWII was driven by strategic considerations and intended to enhance Tokyo's material power projection against the West. Lacking in a large territory and adequate natural resources, Japan sought to expand its influence and access to the resource in the Southeast Asian region.

Japan sought to win the support of the Asian countries by emphasising the "liberation" of Asia from Western colonial domination. Tokyo framed issues of war as the Asians' struggle against Western colonialism, as demonstrated by its war slogan "a new Asia for the Asiatics." The "Greater East Asia Declaration," issued at the 1943 Tokyo Conference attacked the US and the UK for their continuous aggression and exploitation of East Asian nations. It stated that the countries of Greater East Asia would undertake to cooperate toward prosecuting the war, liberating their region from the yoke of British-American domination.

Japanese Diplomacy Today

Japan's activities in Southeast Asia today are in sharp contrast to its wartime diplomacy, in terms of its stance toward Western countries. Japanese diplomacy seeks to strengthen the relationship between the West and Asia, providing a bridge between Asian countries, which are diverse in political, economic and cultural terms and the advanced industrialized democracies of which Japan is one.

In the security area, Japan seeks to maintain the peace and stability of Asia by promoting favourable relations between Asian countries and external powers such as the US. It supports the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), a region-wide framework for a security dialogue hosted by the Southeast Asian countries, in which not only Asian states but also the North American and European powers participate. The ARF process is an attempt to achieve regional peace and stability by encouraging external powers to be engaged peacefully in the Asia-Pacific region. Tokyo was one of the chief promoters of the ARF in that Japan and ASEAN called for a framework for security cooperation in the early 1990s.

In addition, Japan has a key role in securing American engagement in Asia through its security treaty with Washington. Many Southeast Asian countries, fearful of the domination of their region by any single power such as China, seek continuous US presence in order to maintain a strategic balance of power in the region. They have been assured of this by Japan's stressing the importance of its security ties with the US at various international forums, including the ARF and the ASEAN Plus Three, involving Japan, China and South Korea.

In the economic field, Tokyo pursues intertwined relations between Asian and Western countries. Japan, together with Australia, initiated in 1989 the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), an important economic forum encompassing Asian economies and their North American counterparts, with the aim of facilitating trans-Pacific trade and investment relations.

Moreover, when Asian countries were hit by the economic crises in the late 1990s, in a complete reversal of roles from the war period, Tokyo offered extensive economic support to them. Significantly, most of Japan's support measures were provided in coordination with the International Monetary Fund and Washington.

Japan's Identity

What was the basis of Tokyo's anti-Western ideology during wartime, and what are the factors behind Japan's accommodation of Western countries today? The difference in Tokyo's stances toward the West between then and today may be understood by focusing on the transformation of its identity.

Before and during the war, Tokyo identified itself as the champion of pan-Asianism, and the leader of the Asians' struggle against Western domination. Remarkably, in June 1936, Japan's Army General Staff Headquarters stated, "Our national policy is to establish our status as protector and leader of East Asia. To do this we must have the power to expunge the pressure of the white races in East Asia."

However, after the collapse of its military regime, Japan has gradually fostered an identity as a member of the advanced industrialized democracies. In the post-war period, Japan became a democratic country, and regarded economic development as its national priority. Half a century later, as an advanced industrialized democracy, Japan has been active again in Asia. The first issue of Japan's *Diplomatic Bluebook* in the new century states, "The curtain has been raised on the 21st century ... As a principal member of the advanced industrialized democracies ... Japan is being called on to meet its global responsibilities."

With the development of such an identity, Japan is placing a strong emphasis on Asia's link with the West. ASEAN largely welcome Japanese activities in Southeast Asia, which are by no means a continuation of its exclusive wartime agenda.

* (Hiro Katsumata, Ph.D. is an IDSS-Sasakawa Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.)