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Japan's Internationalism and EAS

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Synopsis

Japan under PM Noda will strengthen its internationalist foreign policy through multilateralism. It fully supports the incorporation of the US in the expanded East Asia Summit (EAS). Japan's key challenge is in balancing active US participation with maintaining ASEAN centrality.

Commentary

JAPAN IS recovering from the worst natural disaster in recent history which has come to be known as the Great East Japan Earthquake. A devastating tsunami that followed struck in northeastern Japan in March this year leading to around 20,000 people dead and missing and with many towns swept away and a nuclear power plant destroyed.

Analysts have pondered the consequences of what is also known as "3/11" on Japan's international role. Will Japan withdraw from the international community to focus on the mammoth task of reconstruction at home or will it continue to harness its internationalism in foreign policy, especially in the context of East Asian multilateralism?

Japan's Internationalism through Multilateralism

There are three reasons why 3/11 will further boost Japan's involvement and participation in regional and international affairs. Firstly, Japan has been an economic power since the end of the Second World War. After the Cold War in the 1990s, Japan has also emerged as an important actor in military-strategic affairs, especially through humanitarian and disaster relief efforts and the US-Japan security relationship.

Secondly, Japan received a tremendous amount of international assistance and aid after 3/11. This will motivate the Japanese leadership to 'return the favour' to the international community -- the most recent example being the sending of medical doctors to assist in the recovery efforts following the earthquake in Turkey in November.

Thirdly, Japan is concerned about the long-term political and military rise of China. This concern has been expressed in official documents, such as the 2010 National Defence Programme Guidelines, and most recently by Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda in a speech delivered at the Japanese Air Self-Defence Force base in October. The Japanese leadership recognises that addressing the China concern will involve a strong engagement with the international community in political and military-strategic terms.

Japan's continued support for participation in East Asian multilateralism is one of the main pillars of its strategy. Today, not only is Japan engaged in international economic and political organisations, it is also an active participant in security-based forums. Japan has also provided 'thought leadership' especially in the formation of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) grouping and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).

Japan will continue this foreign policy posture and be an active participant of the expanded EAS which is meeting this weekend in Bali. In line with this, Tokyo is expected to support the proposals for a free trade agreement between the original 16 members of the EAS, known as the Comprehensive Economic Partnership for East Asia (CEPEA), and a regional forum to address maritime security.

Japan's Support for US Membership

The upcoming EAS scheduled for 19 November 2011 will be a significant event. This will be the first meeting where the US and Russia join the ASEAN states, China, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia and New Zealand as full-fledged members. The expanded membership is consistent with Japan's interests of keeping the US engaged in the region. The East Asian Community idea proposed by former Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama, which was ambivalent about US membership, was an aberration. His successors Naoto Kan and current Prime Minister Noda have restored the continued strengthening of the US-Japan relationship as the core pillar of Japan's foreign policy.

Japan also supports the inclusion of the US because of its long-term concerns about China. US membership serves Japan's interests on curtailing China's dominance in the EAS and other multilateral institutions or forums in the region. China's strong economic posture, extensive economic and political relationships with the region and savvy political manoeuvring could easily lead to it having a more than proportionate influence on the EAS agenda. That is not in Japan's interest.

Japan's Challenges

Japan, however, faces two main challenges in an expanded EAS. The first is to ensure that it participates actively and provides strategic ideas on how the grouping can promote further regional cooperation and integration. Tokyo could play a crucial role in promoting a collective vision of the region that ensures peace and stability. For this to happen a stable political leadership in Japan is required – one that could devise and implement a cohesive foreign policy strategy to best serve Japan's interests.

The second has to do with Japan's dilemma between supporting an active US participation and supporting ASEAN centrality in EAS. With the US involved, concerns have been raised about the continued centrality of ASEAN. There is fear that the US would dominate the EAS agenda by its sheer size and power and the shifting of its strategic interests towards East Asia. The centrality of ASEAN in East Asian multilateralism may be undermined despite it being a crucial factor in the growth of regional integration.

Japan is regarded as an integral and important part of the region. It has been a long-time supporter of ASEAN's centrality in East Asian multilateralism, such as in the ARF, ASEAN+3, ASEAN+6 and even in the newly-created ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting+8. Being the most important partner for the US in East Asia, the challenge Tokyo faces is the promotion of the US-Japan bilateral relationship within an ASEAN-led framework in the EAS. Will advancing its ties with the US come at the expense of ASEAN's centrality in the EAS which Japan also supports?

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