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No. 006/2013 dated 14 January 2013

Abe's First Overseas Trip: Why Southeast Asia?

By Bhubhindar Singh

Synopsis

New Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe will make his first official visit overseas to Southeast Asia instead of the United States. This trip highlights two main points: Japan's 'return' to the region and the rise of Southeast Asia in Japan's strategic calculations.

Commentary

THE NEWLY elected Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, has chosen to make his first official visit overseas to Southeast Asia following the victory of his Liberal Democratic Party in the Lower House elections on 16 December 2012. The four-day trip to Vietnam, Thailand and Indonesia starts this Wednesday, 16 January.

This decision by the second-time prime minister has surprised observers who have expected the United States to be the first stop. The main foreign policy objective for the new Japanese government is to restore strength in the US-Japan relationship to counter the perceived deterioration during the term of the previous government led by the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ). Prime Minister Abe however had to postpone this visit due to President Barack Obama's busy schedule and preoccupation with the on-going debate surrounding the 'fiscal cliff' – clearly the most important domestic issue for the American president to resolve before his inauguration later this month. Official visits to Seoul and Beijing were not considered as both countries will see a change in their leaderships – in February for South Korea and March in China.

Japan's 'return' to Southeast Asia

Given these circumstances, Prime Minister Abe's visit to Southeast Asia may seem like a decision of convenience. But is this really the case? His visit has a more profound significance - symbolising Japan's 'return' to Southeast Asia. To be sure, Japan never 'left' the region. Japan has maintained a significant economic, political and strategic presence in the area through building strong relations with ASEAN as an institution and bilaterally with its members. Since the 1960s, Japan has been the main engine of growth for the Southeast Asian states through its vast inflow of investments, trade and aid into the region. Moreover, Japan played an indirect role in ensuring strategic stability in the region by hosting the largest military deployment in Asia on its soil. Japan maintained this engagement despite being mired in a prolonged economic stagnation and frequent leadership changes at home since the 1990s.

Some, however, have argued that Japan's presence and influence in Southeast Asia has visibly deteriorated as China continues with its meteoric economic rise. This has fuelled China's policy of active economic, political and

strategic engagement with the region in both multilateral and bilateral terms. This perception was further heightened by South Korea's widening interaction and presence in Southeast Asia more recently. Hence, there was a widespread view in Southeast Asia that Japan's presence and influence had declined in relative terms.

The Japanese policy community was aware of this relative decline of Japanese influence in the region. This led the Japanese government to step up its engagement with Southeast Asia in all areas in recent years. Aside from the economic, political and social engagement, Japan has boosted strategic cooperation with the Southeast Asian states. It has entered into strategic partnerships with Philippines and Vietnam, offered capacity-building assistance, conducted joint-training exercises involving the coast guards and provided equipment, including patrol boats designed for better responses to humanitarian and disaster-relief missions and boosting the Southeast Asian states' capability for maritime security.

The upcoming visit by Prime Minister Abe is an endorsement of this strategy. Japan realises the strategic importance of Southeast Asia in its foreign policy strategy. It also realises the importance of ASEAN as an organisation ensuring regional stability. In line with this, Prime Minister Abe is scheduled to attend a ceremony in Jakarta marking the 40th anniversary of dialogue relationship between Japan and the ASEAN.

China as a strategic concern

The other important factor is the strategic rise of China and its widening influence in East Asia. Prime Minister Abe has not shied away from voicing his concerns over China's military modernisation and 'aggressive' behaviour in the East China Sea. Even though he has toned down these strong statements towards China since assuming leadership, one clear observation is that Japan's concern over China will be the main factor shaping strategic debates and policy discourses during his tenure.

Since taking office, his government has announced measures to devise a stronger Japanese defence strategy in response to China's strategic rise. These include increasing the defence budget after more than a decade of decline; reviewing the defence strategy and mid-term defence build-up programme endorsed by the previous DPJ-led government; and speeding up negotiations for revising the US-Japan Defence Cooperation Guidelines - the first time since 1997.

Building stronger strategic relations with Southeast Asia is another aspect of the Abe government's foreign policy strategy. Japan believes that it has common strategic concerns with Southeast Asian states in relation to China. Apart from the East China Sea, China has also become more forceful in its territorial claims in the South China Sea, which affects Southeast Asia. Japan's strategy is to provide Southeast Asia with economic, political and limited security support to address the present instability caused by the maritime disputes.

Southeast Asian states would welcome Japan's 'return' to the region. It is important for Japan to adopt a constructive role in the region that focuses on promoting regional integration, while being mindful of history when adopting such a larger role. Japan should also avoid overplaying the China threat, which could lead to a downward spiral in relations between the two Asian giants, causing instability in the periphery of Southeast Asia.

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