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Japan's 'Strategic Diplomacy': Leveraging on ASEAN in 2014

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Synopsis

The recent ASEAN-Japan Commemorative Summit in Tokyo illustrates Japan's 2013 'Strategic Diplomacy' towards ASEAN. There are also several challenges to sustaining this momentum in Japan-ASEAN relations as we enter the new year.

Commentary

JAPAN AND ASEAN commemorated 40 years of friendship and cooperation with a Summit Meeting in Tokyo on 14 December 2013, proclaiming in their joint commitment to work "hand in hand, facing regional and global challenges". Given the current heightened political tension between China and Japan following Beijing's announcement of its new East China Sea Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ), the Summit was seen as part of Japan's pursuit of its 'Strategic Diplomacy' toward ASEAN in balancing China's increasing influence in East Asia.

The joint statement reemphasised the importance of principles of international law and enhancement of cooperation to ensure "the freedom of overflight and civil aviation safety in accordance with the universally recognised principles of international law". While not as robust as some expected, the statement illustrates Japan's deepening reliance on ASEAN, including the potentials and limitations of that relationship – in at least three ways.

Three characteristics of Japan's ASEAN diplomacy

Firstly, the statement highlighted the importance of "ASEAN's centrality" in regional multilateralism, such as the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) and the East Asia Summit (EAS). ASEAN member states have been concerned about being marginalised or being bypassed by great power politics following the end of the Cold War. ASEAN has become the political and economic "spear and shield" of the Southeast Asian states by unifying their voices and coordinating diplomatic moves.

It is also strategically beneficial for Japan to affirm ASEAN centrality in the context of heightened Sino-Japanese rivalry because either power need not take the lead in the region. Therefore, by explicitly endorsing ASEAN centrality, Japan has clearly recognised ASEAN as a driving force in nurturing a regional architecture in East Asia, which served to reassure ASEAN.

Secondly, the emphasis on the importance of international rules and norms in the statement showed that Japan and ASEAN struck a right balance in their political demands. While Japan is concerned about China's recent assertiveness over the East China Sea, it was clear that ASEAN as an institution did not want to become overly entangled in great power politics. Given the diverse strategic interests of the ASEAN member states, it would be highly unlikely that Japan could persuade all ASEAN member states to stipulate its security concern about China in the joint statement.

Instead, the statement focused on the importance of international rules and norms, which were indicated by the references to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO). This confirmed the common stance of Japan and the ASEAN member states towards freedom of navigation in the high seas, including the freedom of overflight and civil aviation safety. In this way, ASEAN does not need to be politically entangled in the Sino-Japanese rivalry, while still upholding respect for international rules and norms. This can also function as political deterrence against China's potential move to establish an ADIZ over the South China Sea, for which ASEAN is directly concerned.

Thirdly, the statement paid particular attention to the East Asia Summit as "a Leaders-led forum for dialogue and cooperation on issues of strategic importance to the region". This statement shifts their regional political issue from the long-questioned division of labour in East Asian community-building between APT and EAS to the management of the current strategic flux in East Asia.

EAS drift?

However, EAS drifted from 2005 to 2011 as it did not set clear strategic objectives. After including the United States and Russia as EAS members in 2012, the summit has gained political momentum to formulate more institutionalised agenda and raise its strategic importance. The statement indicates Japan and ASEAN's emphasis on the current importance of EAS.

In sum, Japan's basic stance toward ASEAN in 2013 is to advance what is "feasible" and avoid an "unfeasible" cooperation, which is a rather pragmatic approach to the institution. Ultimately, ASEAN is a regional institution that would help prevent deterioration of the strategic situation by keeping the channel of communication open at the political level. However, it does not work as a major power's balancing tool against any other major power.

Hence Japan separately approached each ASEAN member state as part of its hedging strategy toward China. For example, as Prime Minister Abe traveled to each ASEAN member state in 2013, Japan pursued strategic cooperation bilaterally with each member. Through these travels, Japan attempted to strengthen its political and security ties with ASEAN states throughout 2013.

In the Tokyo Summit, it held bilateral meetings with several ASEAN members, such as the Philippines and Vietnam, regarding China's ADIZ. Therefore, Japan's 'Strategic Diplomacy' toward ASEAN is a dual strategy—enhancing bilateral security cooperation with those willing among the ASEAN member states, while respecting the institutional cohesiveness of ASEAN by explicitly recognising ASEAN centrality.

Four challenges facing Japan's 'Strategic Diplomacy' in 2014

While the 40th anniversary of ASEAN-Japan relations has given political traction to further deepen and broaden cooperation, there are four main political challenges ahead to further strengthen Japan-ASEAN relations in 2014.

First, Japan's diplomatic effort to continue opening channels of communication with China is critical. The diplomatic and political tensions between Japan and China, characterised as a "security dilemma" or a "game of chicken," not only exacerbate bilateral tensions but also increase regional concerns, including ASEAN's. As ASEAN provides forums in which both Japan and China can meet and communicate with each other, both need to make the most of such opportunities. In this sense, Japan's first and foremost diplomatic agenda in 2014 is to prevent further jeopardy to its political image created by Abe's visit to the Yasukuni Shrine on December 26 and to reorganise its diplomacy.

Second, Japan should help to further institutionalise EAS and ensure US commitment to the forum. To make EAS a truly strategic forum, US participation is imperative, which will also enhance ASEAN as a credible forum.

Third, Japan and ASEAN should map out action plans to cooperate on regional and global issues. The joint statement suggests that the scope of their cooperation should be comprehensive. Now that shared-principles are clarified, Japan and ASEAN should chart a roadmap to enhance such principles, possibly through the ASEAN dialogue process with its trading partners and through ASEAN-led institutions.

Fourth, ASEAN is likely to become relatively inward-looking in 2014 as it needs to focus its institutional effort on establishing the ASEAN Community comprising its Economic, Political-Security, and Social-Cultural Community pillars. Japan's support for such community-building in 2014 will be a key factor for maintaining the momentum of ASEAN-Japan cooperation.

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