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## Japan's Hard and Soft Power in ASEAN

*By Yee-Kuang Heng*

### Synopsis

*Several significant firsts have been achieved by the Japan Self-Defence Forces (JSDF) which has become more visibly engaged in ASEAN. On the other hand, Japan's soft power potential also now encompasses its ability to provide joint solutions to shared challenges such as health and ageing, urbanisation and access to clean water supplies.*

### Commentary

WARY OF potential negative reactions to its military and security presence, Japan in the post-World War Two period has largely relied on private actors like shipping organisations in forming the Malacca Strait Council (MSC), or civilian agencies like the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and Japan Coast Guard (JCG). These civilian agencies continue to be relied upon heavily, with several significant developments.

Japanese and Philippine coast guard boats held anti-piracy drills in the Philippines in 2015, the first such joint exercise since World War II. JCG training vessel Kojima has engaged in three-month long patrols and cooperation training programmes in the region. The Development Cooperation charter was revised in 2015 to enable use of aid more in line with Japan's national interests. Tokyo's long-standing support for anti-piracy continues. The Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP) celebrated its 10th anniversary in 2016, while the first-ever Global Coast Guard Summit was hosted by Tokyo in September 2017.

### Series of Firsts for JSDF

Rather than a big-bang approach, one can identify an incremental evolution of Japan-

ASEAN defence exchanges from the early 1990s to the growing visibility of JSDF today in Southeast Asia. There have indeed been several historically and strategically significant 'firsts' regarding the JSDF. This incremental and carefully considered approach remains characteristic of Japanese engagement with the region.

The declaratory position of the Shinzo Abe administration has been clear and consistent: it emphasises Japan's desire to play a more proactive and visible role in the region. Prime Minister Abe declared to the Australian parliament in 2014: "So far as national security goes, Japan has been self-absorbed for a long time... We want to make Japan a country that will work to build an international order that upholds the rule of law, in order to make vast seas from the Pacific Ocean to the Indian, and those skies, open and free..."

Japan's first-ever National Security Strategy depicted the country as a 'guardian of the rule of law' to "maintain and develop open and stable seas. The so-called Abe Doctrine unveiled by PM Abe himself at the 2014 Shangri-La Dialogue stated that "Japan will offer its utmost support for the efforts of the countries of ASEAN as they work to ensure the security of the seas and the skies, and thoroughly maintain freedom of navigation and freedom of overflight".

The Vientiane Vision 2016 presented in Laos for the first time formalised principles and focus areas for Tokyo's ongoing and future defence cooperation with ASEAN.

In June 2017, the *Izumo*, Japan's largest naval vessel since World War Two, conducted a high-profile cruise through Southeast Asia. This included a stop-over in Singapore and other port calls in the region before joining Malabar naval exercises in the Indian Ocean. In Singapore, military officers from ASEAN countries were invited on board and briefed on the ship's capabilities.

## **Defence Cooperation**

Tokyo also signed a defence equipment transfer agreement with Manila in February 2016, its first-ever with a Southeast Asian nation. Five retired Japan Maritime Self-Defence Force (JMSDF) TC-90 maritime surveillance airplanes have also been leased to the Philippines Navy. There are reports of Japan planning to transfer spare parts for Philippines UH-1 Huey helicopters.

In other landmark firsts, in May 2015, Japan-Philippines joint naval exercises were held in the South China Sea for the first time. JS *Harusame* and *Amigri* trained with Ramon Alcaraz on "unplanned encounters at sea". In April 2016 submarine *Oyashio* and destroyers *Ariake* and *Setagiri* arrived in Subic Bay, Philippines for a training exercise, the first appearance by a JMSDF submarine in 15 years.

The same two destroyers also sailed into strategic Camh Ranh Bay in Vietnam for the first time since World War Two. Amphibious vessel JS *Kunisaki* became the primary command platform for the US-led multinational Pacific Partnership humanitarian assistance mission in 2014, the first time a non-US vessel has assumed command.

JSDF also sent its largest contingent of military personnel overseas since WW2 in the aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan that ravaged the Philippines in 2013. This included about

1000 SDF members, and major vessels such as helicopter destroyer JS Ise, C130 transport and KC 767 refuelling tankers. P3C Orion maritime surveillance aircraft were also despatched in the hunt for missing flight MH370 in 2014.

### **Expanding Soft Power Presence**

Alongside the growing JSDF presence, Japan's soft power influence is also sizable. Singapore hosts the first-ever Japan Creative Centre in Southeast Asia, described as a soft power initiative for Japan to expand its influence and attraction in the region through its pop culture and traditional arts and crafts. The annual Anime Festival held in Singapore and Jakarta has become one of the largest outside Japan.

In 2016, Isetan Mitsukoshi opened a new flagship store in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia based on the government-sponsored Cool Japan concept to offer high-quality products and lifestyle trends from Japan. Besides cultural attraction, Japan's normative soft power potential is expanding towards its ability to address shared challenges with ASEAN.

The ASEAN-Japan Active Ageing Regional Conference has been held annually since 2014. Singapore Health Minister Mr Gan Kim Yong travelled to Japan in 2013 to learn about Japanese experiences in ageing. Under the Japan-ASEAN Health Initiative, Tokyo helps train 8,000 persons over five years to promote health lifestyles and disease prevention.

As ASEAN urbanises, there is room for cooperation to address shared challenges arising from urbanisation. Tokyo Suido Services (now TSS Tokyo Water) contracted with Bangkok to maintain its water supply system, especially detecting and fixing leaks. JICA is assisting Metro Manila subway projects to alleviate traffic congestion.

### **Limitations**

ASEAN has so far, by and large, not reacted negatively to the increasingly visible JSDF presence, but several obstacles remain. PM Abe's 2013 visit to the Yasukuni Shrine drew negative responses from otherwise close partners in ASEAN. Singapore's Foreign Ministry stated that "these visits reopen old wounds and damage attempts to build trust and confidence in the region".

Furthermore, interest in Japanese ageing initiatives or waste water technologies does not necessarily mean alignment with Japan's broader diplomatic and security agenda. These resources still remain to be translated into concrete desired outcomes.

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