

Transformation of Japan's Relations with Southeast Asia in the Second Half of the 20th – early 21st Centuries: Russia, Take Note

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Abstract. In the 20th century, relations between Japan and Southeast Asia experienced several dramatic ups and downs. Japan was the first non-European country that in the late 1930s presented its own vision of the regional order in Asia. The consequences of its implementation proved to be painful both for Japan itself and for its neighbors. After the Japanese defeat in World War II, the historical memory of Japan as an aggressor became part of political and social consciousness of many states of the region. However, in the second part of the 20th century, Japan managed to transform radically this perception in Southeast Asia, turning itself into a leading macro-regional power. This transformation did not come without difficulties but eventually resulted in a successful overcoming of the World War II legacy and made Japan one of the most welcomed alternative forces amidst the rising Sino-US contradictions. A new wave of proactive relations between Japan and Southeast Asia took place against the background of China's economic rise and was connected with the advancement of the Japanese version of the Indo-Pacific as a reaction to China's rise. This article argues that Japan's success in its relations with Southeast Asia had several reasons. The first one was the reassessment of the Japanese structural role in the region (from a militarist force imposing a hierarchical regional order into a power which managed to organize regional development based on the network type of connections).

Others included the progressive dynamics of institutional interaction with ASEAN and targeted cooperation in the areas where Japanese interests coincided or were significantly close to the interests of Southeast Asian states. Despite the fact that Russia can hardly repeat Japanese success in developing its relations with Southeast Asia, certain elements of it are well worth taking note of.

Keywords: Japan, Southeast Asia, USA, China, ASEAN, regional order.

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Introduction

The relationships between Japan and Southeast Asian countries have gone through several dramatic ups and downs in the 20th century. Japan was the first non-European country that forwarded its own vision of the regional order for Asia in the late 1930s; yet the consequences of its implementation proved to be painful for Japan itself and its neighbors. After the Japanese defeat in World War II, the historical memory of Japan as an aggressor became part of political and social consciousness in many states of the region.

Japan's rejection of war as a means of conducting foreign policy, recorded in the 1947 Constitution, the success of the Japanese economic miracle in the 1960s and the transfer of many Japanese production facilities to Southeast Asia in the 1980–1990s changed Japan's position in the region dramatically. Yet, the Asian financial crisis of 1997, which gave the economy a strong blow, newly deconstructed the role of Japan, this time as an expected economic leader in the region. The latest round of reinvigoration in the relationships between Japan and Southeast Asia took place in the period when Prime Minister Abe Shinzō was in office (2006–2007, 2012–2020); it was related to the development of the Japanese view of the Indo-Pacific concept.

Despite the non-linear relations between Japan and Southeast Asian countries in the second half of the 20th century, the fact is that Japan successfully overcame its negative image of the World War II times and became one of the most acceptable alternative forces in the backdrop of Sino-Japanese contradictions' aggravation. Unlike China or South Korea [Streltsov 2020], Southeast Asian countries are to a much lesser extent ready to remember the dark pages of the past in their relations with Japan. It is noteworthy that, according to the estimate of the Singapore Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, the 2019–2020 Japan was still the country which was trusted most among all external partners in ASEAN and whose efforts of peace and security support in the region were appreciated as most adequate compared with those of other leading states [Seas et al. 2021, p. 3; Tang et al. 2020, p. 3; Tang et al. 2019, p. 29].

Contemporary local and foreign sources provide a thorough analysis of various historical and current aspects of interaction between Japan and Southeast Asian countries as well as institutional cooperation of Japan and ASEAN [Sudo 1992; Lam 2013; Streltsov 2015; Lang 2020]. Multiple publications are devoted to the history of various aspects of these relations, Japan's economic role in the region, evolution of official development aid, and other areas [Katzenstein & Rouse 1993; Mishchenko 2019; Hatch 2010]. However, the fundamental transformation of Japan's role in Southeast Asia and its perception by other countries of the region has not yet been comprehensively evidenced in research papers.

As this article argues, Japan's success was based on several factors. Among them are re-envisioning Japan's structural role in the region (from a militaristic force imposing a hierarchical regional order to a power organizing the economic development of the region on the basis of networking), progressive evolution of institutional interaction with ASEAN, and committed enhancement of cooperation in the fields where the interests of Japan and Southeast Asian countries coincided to the greatest degree or were very similar.

As a result, Japan, along with the EU, has confidently occupied the niche of the most preferable third force by the end of the first quarter of the 21st century against the backdrop of aggravated China-US

contradictions and growing importance of the problem of choice for Southeast Asian countries. Although Russia will hardly be able to repeat Japanese success in developing its relations with Southeast Asia, certain elements of it are well worth taking note of.

Transformation of Japan's Role in the Region: Historical Context

The short period of Japanese colonialism in Southeast Asia had some important consequences for the region. On the one hand, it demonstrated what the regional order could really be if one Asian state was the only domineering force [Acharya 2012, p. 83]. A situation like this never repeated after World War II, while any return to it was regarded as very undesirable in the region. On the other hand, Japanese activities in Southeast Asia promoted the development and enhancement of self-consciousness for several national liberation movements.

A closer acquaintance with the Japanese approach to reformatting the regional order showed that the likely opportunities for further development proved to be not so bright for Southeast Asia, though, before World War II, some political leaders, Thailand's Prime Minister Plaek Phibunsongkhram among them, had considered Japan as a model to follow.¹ Others, like, for example, Burma's national leader General Aung San [Won 1978, p. 249], placed their hopes on Japan as the force that could confront European colonialism in Asia. The idea of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere went through several stages in its development [Meshcheryakov 2020, p. 259]. The unity of peoples "released by Japan" was demonstrated by representatives of participating

¹ Japanese education and economic success are indirectly presented as attractive in Thai classical literature, particularly in Kulap Saipradit's famous novel "Behind the Painting" published in 1937, where the main character leaves Thailand to study in Japan.

Manchukuo, China, Thailand, Burma,² the Philippines, and India at the conference in Tokyo in November 1943, while the occupied Indonesian territories had been regarded as part of Japan's empire even prior to the conference [Meshcheryakov 2020, p. 261].

Yet, the main contradiction between the expectations regarding Japan nurtured by Southeast Asian peoples and Japan's aspirations was that Japan arrayed its activities in the region proceeding from the hierarchal understanding of the Asian peoples' harmony. This scheme of coordinates assigned Japan a major role while subordinate countries were, first, to be politically, economically, and culturally reoriented towards Japan, and, secondly, all territories under its control were assigned specific functional tasks. It was planned to set up an industrial complex in China, Korea, and Manchuria while the countries of Southeast Asia were to become suppliers of resources [Booth 2007, p. 148].

A less known consequence of Japan's activities in the region at that time was the heritage of Japanese training of military and bureaucratic personnel of Southeast Asian countries that became an "effective force of revolution and modernization", as American researcher Joyce Lebra-Chapman aptly observed [Lebra-Chapman 2010, p. 2]. Assigning an official status to national languages (Burmese, Malay, and Tagalog, specifically) and support of nationalistic semi-military youth groupings did, in fact, lay down foundations for the organized struggle for independence in a number of Southeast Asian countries [Booth 2007, p. 151] and became a paradoxical result of the Japanese occupation period.

Restoration of Japan's regional role – but on different grounds – began after the success of the Japanese economic miracle, which turned Japan into world's second largest economy, and the formalization of the Fukuda Doctrine in 1977. Japan's foreign policy principles in relation to Southeast Asia formulated by then Prime Minister Fukuda Takeo

² Hereinafter, the name "Burma" is used for the period before 1989, and "Myanmar" – for the period after that.

laid down foundations of the country's image in the region. It should, however, be noted that the region had had a high degree of distrust towards Japan only several years before the proclamation of the Fukuda doctrine, which became the first explicit Japanese foreign policy strategy in relation to Southeast Asia during the entire post-war period. Anti-Japanese manifestations accompanied Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei's visits to Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines in January 1974.³ Japan's economic policy in the region aroused discontent, as it was perceived as a peaceful variant of the Japanese military expansion in the times of World War II, and so did Japan's reliance on the Chinese community in its economic advancement in the region without any significant investments in the development of the local human capital [Lam 2013, p. 11].

Ending his tour of Southeast Asian countries in Manila in August 1977, Fukuda Takeo indicated three principles of Japan's policy in the region that were united into the notion that was later called the Fukuda Doctrine:

- 1) regarding its relations with the region, Japan commits that it will not return to the military power status;
- 2) Japan will build its relations with Southeast Asian countries on the basis of mutual trust and with regard to a wide variety of issues;
- 3) Japan will interact with the ASEAN countries as well as with the states of Indo-China.⁴

³ Halloran R. Tanaka Sees Thai Students who Denounced his Visit. *The New York Times*. January 11, 1974. P. 2. <https://www.nytimes.com/1974/01/11/archives/tanaka-sees-thai-students-who-denounced-his-visit-assurances-;> Diplomatic Bluebook. 1974. Review of Recent Developments in Japan's Foreign Relations. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/other/bluebook/1973/1973-3-1.htm#Section%201.%20Prime%20Minister%20Tanaka's%20Visits%20to%20Various%20Countries>

⁴ Diplomatic Bluebook. 1977. Review of Recent Developments in Japan's Foreign Relations. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/other/bluebook/1977/1977-3-1.htm#Section%201.%20Promotion%20of%20Relations%20with%20Other%20Countries>

The last thesis implied Japan's wish to serve as a bridge between communist and capitalist countries of the region. Although Japan failed to implement this function fully because of the uneasy relationship between the ASEAN states and Vietnam caused by the Cambodian problem's emergence and evolution in the late 1970s–1980s, this wish clearly paved the way for the appearance of Japan's networking approach towards interaction with Southeast Asian countries.

In the practical implementation of the Fukuda doctrine, the emphasis was laid on the methods of economic diplomacy. Back in the 1960s, Japan already transferred simple assembly plants to Southeast Asia. Yet, revaluation of the Japanese yen after the 1985 Plaza Accord transformed Japan's structural role. Japan turned into one of the largest capital exporters in the second half of the 1980s, while the retardation of Japan's economic growth in the early 1990s made Japanese companies look for ways of raising their competitiveness in the world market by moving more complex car making and electronic equipment production facilities to Southeast Asia – the region with cheaper and relatively skilled labor force.

American researcher Walter Hatch cites the following statistics: Japanese car makers made 405 investments into the economy of Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines in 1962–1997 but 55 percent of them were made between 1991 and 1997 [Hatch 2010, p. 79]. Apart from the transfer of facilities and investment cooperation, Japan became a major source of official development assistance (ODA) to countries in the region. By 1997, 20 percent of Japan's ODA was channeled to the ASEAN countries, while Indonesia was the second largest recipient of Japanese assistance (after China, which occupied that position since the start of economic reforms in the late 1970s), and Thailand was the fourth, followed by the Philippines and Vietnam.⁵

⁵ Relationship between Japan and ASEAN. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. December 1998. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/asean/pmv9812/relation.html>

In the 1980-90s Japan virtually took on the role of a driver of industrialization in most ASEAN founding countries (incidentally, in the 1990s thanks to Japanese car assembly plants Thailand even received the name of “Eastern Detroit” [Lim 2017, p. 178]). Moreover, Japan tried to reduce its industrial production costs and became one of the key countries in organizing regional *de facto* integration [Hiratsuka 2006]. This is the term researchers began using to denote the regional system of economic interdependence developed in the region not through the implementation of a targeted integration project (as it was done in the European Union) but in the course of segmented transfer of assembly plants owned by transnational companies to various Southeast Asian countries. Thus, in the 1980s and 1990s, Japan’s military hierarchical approach of the World War II times was replaced by political and economic networking interaction, which structurally established Japanese positions in Southeast Asia on quite new grounds. Yet, the 1997 Asian financial crisis interrupted the trend of growing Japanese influence in the region. Having experienced considerable negative impact of this crisis on the national economy, Japan failed to provide assistance to the countries of the region in the required amount, thus devaluing its position of the evident macro-regional economic leader.

Dialogue Cooperation Between Japan and ASEAN

Alongside bilateral cooperation with particular countries, Japan began establishing relations with ASEAN from the 1970s on. It established non-formal relations with the Association in 1973; they were further formalized as dialogue partnership in 1977 during Prime Minister Fukuda’s tour of some countries of the region. Researchers identify three periods in the relationship between Japan and the ASEAN countries [Lim 2017, pp. 177–183]. The first covers the late 1970s–1980s: it was associated mainly with the resource and economic agenda. The late 1970s witnessed the establishment of the ASEAN-Japan forum on synthetic rubber production.

The second period covers the turn of the 1990s–2000s. It was important for Japan's relations with ASEAN for a number of reasons. The period witnessed a drastic turn in Japan's security policy that began to be practically implemented in the process of peaceful settlement in Cambodia. The International Peace Cooperation Law adopted in 1992 permitted the Japanese Self-Defense Forces' servicemen to participate in the UN peacekeeping operations [Panov, Sarkisov & Streltsov 2019, p. 305].

In addition to Japan being considered a major financial sponsor of the reconstruction process, eight Japanese peacekeepers were sent to Cambodia in 1993, where the UN transition administration was set up based on the 1991 Paris Peace Agreements. As the settlement of the situation in Cambodia was a milestone for ASEAN's establishment as a regional player, the early 1990s became momentous for cooperation between Japan and the Association member states as well. By that time, both parties had been able to gain considerable experience of formal and informal interaction in the course of preparation for the Tokyo Conference, which was held in June 1990 preceding the International Paris Conference on Cambodia [Takeda 1998, pp. 553–568].

The process of settlement in Cambodia was also important for Japan, as it enabled it, without displaying its approach openly, to gradually improve its working relations with Indo-Chinese countries that were not ASEAN members yet, and inside Cambodia – with all the forces involved in the political settlement process.⁶ Japan later tried to apply the same approach to Myanmar settlement with several sides of the internal conflict that is still not abating in this country. After Vietnam in 1995, Laos and Myanmar in 1997, and Cambodia in 1999 joined ASEAN, Japan provided financial support to the initiatives

⁶ Sek S. Reinvigorating Japan's Twin Track Diplomacy in Cambodia. The Japan Times. April 8, 2019. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2019/04/08/commentary/japan-commentary/reinvigorating-japans-twin-track-diplomacy-cambodia/>

aimed at adapting new participants to ASEAN integration processes [Shiraishi 2009].

In 2004, Japan acceded to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia; it was the first among all the Association's dialogue partners to appoint its permanent representative in ASEAN.⁷

The above-mentioned Asian financial crisis became the milestone for the second period of relations between Japan and ASEAN. Prior to the crisis, Japan had mainly interacted with ASEAN countries within the existing dialogue partnership frameworks (ministerial meetings and senior official's meetings) and put forward unilateral initiatives for further financial and economic macro-regional integration (for example, setting up the Asian Monetary Fund). The 1997 crisis promoted the development of the new multilateral format of ASEAN+3, providing for participation of Japan, the PRC, and South Korea. Japan incorporated into the ASEAN+3 format quite successfully, yet it lost its position of a promising and absolute economic leader of the entire East Asia.

Meanwhile, China's economic rise strengthened the elements of Japan-China competition in the region and resulted in the appearance of the network regionalism phenomenon [Rathus 2011]. It implied gradual emergence of a whole series of projects related to trade and economic liberalization in East Asia that were put forward by China and Japan in reply to each other's actions. They included the project of the ASEAN+3 free trade area (FTA), the response to which was ASEAN and China's FTA, followed by the idea of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), supported by Japan with the purpose to prevent the growth of China's unilateral influence in the region.⁸

⁷ Overview of ASEAN-Japan Dialogue Relations. June 14, 2021. https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/20210614_Overview-ASEAN-Japan-Relations-full-version.pdf

⁸ Kawashima, S. Japan's Painful Choice on RCEP. *The Diplomat*. August 03, 2020. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/08/japans-painful-choice-on-rcep/>

The ASEAN+3 format became the basis of many initiatives in the field of macroregional financial and economic management both after the 1997 crisis and after the 2008 global economic crisis. It is, first of all, the agreement of ASEAN+3 Finance Ministers on the Chiang Mai Initiative Multilateralization, that previously had developed mainly as a network of bilateral swap arrangements – this laid the foundation for creating a regional fund of currency reserves. The agreement took effect in 2010. The regional fund combined financial contributions of all ASEAN+3 format participants and amounted to \$120 billion at the time of founding.⁹ The year 2011 saw the establishment of a macroeconomic research office (ASEAN+3 Macroeconomic Research Office, AMRO); it was to exercise macroeconomic surveillance, ensure assistance for implementing the Chiang Mai initiative, and provide technical support to its participants. By 2021, the fund had increased to \$240 billion.¹⁰

It is the ASEAN+3 format that made it possible to ensure long-term interaction of rising China, Japan, and South Korea, while their attempts to advance the cause of economic integration in Northeast Asia were not successful despite positive expectations at the turn of the 2010s–2020s [Suslina 2012]. Meanwhile ASEAN held informal discussions on the desired balance of power of extra-regional states in Southeast Asia; active presence of three countries was considered as such – China, Japan, and India. Their involvement at that time looked as quite sufficient for keeping up the adequate balance in the region [Acharya 2001, p. 168].

The third period of relations between Japan and ASEAN is associated with changes that took place in the geopolitical and geo-economic situation in the region when China occupied the position of the second global economy after 2010. As a result of its rapid economic rise, China ceased to be part of the “flock of flying geese” – by the vivid expression

⁹ The Joint Ministerial Statement of the 13th ASEAN+3 Finance Minister's Meeting. May 2, 2010. https://aseanplusthree.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/JMS_13th_AFMM3.pdf

¹⁰ ASEAN+3 Macroeconomic Research Office. <https://www.amro-asia.org/about-amro/who-we-are/>

used by Akamatsu Kaname, a 1930s Japanese economist – or the system of the above-mentioned regional *de facto* integration that ensured involvement of new industrializing countries in the orbit of the Japanese technological leadership by transferring Japanese industrial facilities there. Moreover, back in 2013, China already presented its own region-organizing initiative *Maritime Silk Road* (as part of the *Belt and Road Initiative*) regarding Southeast Asia. It did not formally compete with ASEAN-centric institutes in any way; nevertheless, it created quite a different regional context when implemented in practice, as it re-oriented at least part of ASEAN members (Laos, Cambodia, and, to a certain degree, Myanmar) towards China from the economic standpoint. As a result, the rise of China made Japan and ASEAN look for strategic response to the new situation.

The third period also entailed invigoration of the dialogue cooperation between Japan and ASEAN along several tracks – in the field of politics and security, economic and humanitarian interaction. Responses to new security threats (war on terrorism and transnational crime, threats in the field of information security and sea crimes) had become a significant sphere of cooperation of dialogue partners by that time.

Japan held a steady position of the Association's key economic partner (second largest investor and fourth trade partner of ASEAN as of 2019); it intensively developed humanitarian ties with Southeast Asian countries. Of special note in this connection is Japan's JENESYS program, launched in 2007 and aimed at the intensification of student and youth exchanges. Nearly 37 thousand people from Japan and countries of the region participated in the program during the period of its implementation.¹¹

As a whole, it is important to note great achievements made by the Japanese cultural diplomacy. Large-scale programs in this sphere

¹¹ Overview of ASEAN Japan Dialogue Relations. June 14, 2021. https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/20210614_Overview-ASEAN-Japan-Relations-full-version.pdf

highlighting intra-Asian ties and Japan's belonging to the region did not only promote Japan's penetration into all spheres of Southeast Asian life from industry and finance to culture, fashion, and tourism [Ben-Ari & Clammer 2000] – they became a key instrument for changing Japan's image in the region.

Current Invigoration of Japan's Policy in the Region: Key Areas

With the overall positive evolution of ASEAN-Japan dialogue partnership its main focus in the past decade was on seeking the ways to converge Japan's and ASEAN's Indo-Pacific strategies. Active promotion of the Indo-Pacific idea in Japan's foreign policy is associated with Abe Shinzō's second term as Prime Minister (2012–2020), though this framework appeared in his earlier speeches, specifically, one in the Indian Parliament in August 2007. Developing the Japanese version of the Indo-Pacific, Abe also had to re-invigorate Japan's foreign policy towards ASEAN. Initially Japanese Indo-Pacific concept did not particularly mention the role of ASEAN,¹² inevitably raising the question of the extent to which Japan was prepared to support the idea of the ASEAN's centrality for regional cooperation.

However, this flaw was later corrected: Japan's concept of the Indo-Pacific specially underlined the ASEAN's centrality and the Association has, from that time, been mentioned in all explanations of Japan's Indo-Pacific strategy, and especially those targeted at the audience of Southeast Asian countries.¹³ In 2019, ASEAN issued its own document devoted to the Indo-Pacific in response to the exponential growth

¹² Diplomatic Bluebook. 2017. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. P. 26. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000290287.pdf>

¹³ A New Foreign Policy Strategy: "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy". <https://www.asean.emb-japan.go.jp/files/000352880.pdf>

of Indo-Pacific strategies pursued by various international players.¹⁴ The ASEAN approach to the Indo-Pacific was of a more inclusive character, it was aimed at socio-economic development and less concentrated on regional antagonisms.

In November 2020, the 23rd ASEAN and Japan Summit gave rise to the Joint Statement on Cooperation on ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific.¹⁵ It highlighted four areas of interlinking between Japan's and ASEAN's Indo-Pacific approaches: maritime cooperation, enhanced interconnection, attainment of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and economy.

More specific areas of joint efforts were indicated in addition to the four basic areas. Both partners agreed to maintain maritime security, struggle with the pollution of the world ocean with plastic litter, interlink the Japanese initiative on quality infrastructure and the Master Plan on ASEAN connectivity, develop digital economy and seek joint responses to the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Japan had also voiced its support for the ASEAN project of smart cities.¹⁶

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Japan proved to be a reliable partner for the countries of the region by undertaking the obligation to channel \$50 million to the ASEAN Centre for Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases, the decision to establish which was taken in November 2020.¹⁷

With the general multi-vector cooperation between Japan and ASEAN continuing, some key countries should be indicated, as relations

¹⁴ ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific. June 23, 2019. <https://asean2019.go.th/en/news/asean-outlook-on-the-indo-pacific/>

¹⁵ Joint Statement of the 23rd ASEAN-Japan Summit on Cooperation on ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific. November 12, 2020. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100114942.pdf>

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ 23rd ASEAN-Japan Summit held online. November 13, 2020. https://www.asean2020.vn/xem-chi-tiet1/-/asset_publisher/ynfWm23dDfpd/content/23rd-asean-japan-summit-held-online

with those have, for a variety of reasons, acquired special importance for Japan. The first country to refer to in this context is Vietnam.

Vietnam is the major regional antagonist of China, a prospective participant of the extended format of the quadrilateral dialogue of Australia, the USA, Japan, and India on security (*Quad+*), and a backbone country in the *China+1* strategy providing for a gradual transfer of some Japanese production operations from China to third countries, subsidized by Japan's government. The implementation of the strategy had started prior to the new coronavirus's global spread; yet the pandemic strengthened the trend simmering from the middle of the previous decade. By late 2020, 37 out of 81 Japanese firms financially supported by the Japanese government relocated their factories to Vietnam, and another 19 – to Thailand [Teo 2021, p. 6].

Special focus in Japan's 2020 Diplomatic Bluebook, which highlighted major achievements and areas of the Japanese foreign policy, was made on Indonesia, the largest country of the region and a participant in global governance club mechanisms.¹⁸ It was to Vietnam and Indonesia that Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide, who replaced Abe Shinzō in 2020, made his first visits.

Japan's and ASEAN's positions on the situation in Myanmar proved to be close. Accepting Myanmar in the late 1990s, the ASEAN countries bore in mind the necessity to restrain it from fully sliding into China's orbit [Cribb 1998]. Japan followed the same rationale, initiating various economic and infrastructural projects in Myanmar such as, for example, construction of an industrial cluster in the Dawei Special Economic Zone [Paramonov 2021]. Despite the appeals of Western countries to impose sanctions on Myanmar, Japan took a very cautious position regarding the country's new leadership as it did not want to limit international space for Myanmar's maneuver after the Myanmar military ousted Aung San Suu Kyi's civilian government on February 1, 2021.¹⁹

¹⁸ Diplomatic Bluebook. 2020. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. Pp. 59–60. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100116875.pdf>

¹⁹ Heijmans Ph., Tan K.W.K. Japan's Refusal to Sanction Myanmar Undermines Biden's Strategy. Bloomberg. June 20, 2021. <https://www.>

Japan's gratuitous transfer of military machines and equipment to some Southeast Asian nations has become a relatively new area of its cooperation with the region's countries during the last few years. The transfer became possible due to amendments to the Self-Defense Forces Law enacted in June 2017. These amendments, notably, enabled Japan to hand over several training planes and helicopter spare parts to the Philippines in 2016–2018²⁰. Several Philippine pilots underwent training at the Tokushima air force base in the same period.

However, despite the overall positive attitude to Japan in the region, its policy is not devoid of internal contradictions. Some researchers note that it is aimed at shaping a “hybrid regional order”²¹ and implies the support of macro-regional formats like ASEAN-centric institutes and RCEP, which is positively perceived by all ASEAN countries, as well as mini-lateral forms of cooperation – *Quad*, *Quad+*, various situational coalitions like arrangements with China on the implementation of joint initiatives in some Southeast Asian countries under the guise of Japan's contribution to the execution of projects within the *Belt and Road* initiative.²²

While Japan was sometimes characterized as a country unwilling to assume a leadership role in the 1990s [Stubbs 1991], in the 2020s, it was endowed with the epithet of a “silent” leader [Teo 2021]. This characteristic was brought about by the fact that, during Donald Trump's

bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-06-19/japan-s-refusal-to-sanction-myanmar-over-abuses-undermines-biden-s-strategy

²⁰ East Asia Strategic Review 2019. http://www.nids.mod.go.jp/english/publication/east-asian/pdf/2019/east-asian_e2019_04.pdf

²¹ Pajon, C. Japan's Indo-Pacific Strategy: Shaping a Hybrid Regional Order. War on the Rocks. December 18, 2019. <https://warontherocks.com/2019/12/japans-indo-pacific-strategy-shaping-a-hybrid-regional-order/>

²² Japan opens the way to cooperation on China's Belt and Road Initiative. East Asia Forum. July 10, 2017. <https://www.easiaforum.org/2017/07/10/japan-opens-the-way-to-cooperation-on-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative/>

presidency, Japan played the role of a more politically mature partner in the US-Japan alliance, one consistent in its efforts, and a responsible player in Southeast Asia. Yet, with the arrival of Joe Biden at the White House, who expressed his intention of demonstrating a more proactive approach to Southeast Asia (the region was visited by the US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and Vice-President Kamala Harris in the period of July and August 2021 alone), more and more analysts [Teo 2021; Koga 2021] began expressing concerns that Japan runs the risk of playing second fiddle again.

Conclusion

The analysis presented above allows drawing the conclusion that in the decades after World War II Japan has managed to transform its role drastically in Southeast Asia and, at the same time, induced spectacular changes in the perception of its image by the countries of the region.

Japan's position in the region has also undergone changes over the past period due to geopolitical and geo-economic shocks and upheavals. The economic stagnation at the turn of the 1980s–1990s, the Asian financial crisis, and China's rapid rise prevented Japan from becoming an indisputable macroregional economic leader. Yet, its technological leadership in the 1980s–1990s, key positions in the regional economic interdependence system, impressive results of cultural diplomacy, and the experience accumulated in formal and informal ties with Southeast Asian countries determined Japan's special political and economic role in the region for a long time ahead. Moreover, China began to strengthen its positions in the region, relying on the *Belt and Road* initiative, when many Southeast Asian countries had already gained experience of economic growth enhanced by the transfer of Japanese production facilities and the use of Japanese technologies. This suggests that it will not be easy for China to draw the countries of the region into its orbit unconditionally, and Japan will remain one of the most

preferred “third forces”. It is probably the very fact that Japan has not had a single opportunity of projecting its unlimited influence during the entire postwar time and has had to make arrangements with the countries of the region and other leading powers that made it so attractive for the elites of Southeast Asian states.

Whereas Japan’s leading role in the region was determined by its technological leadership in the 1990s, there have currently appeared new elements of Japan’s interaction with Southeast Asia that imply movement towards limited military-technical cooperation. The Fukuda doctrine did not address regional security directly; but now Japan tries to take up distinctive positions in the region in this sphere as well.

Unlike mid-20th century, the need to include Japan as a structure-forming force into the transforming regional order hardly raises any questions in any of the ASEAN countries now. There is still a quite evident contradiction present in its policy. On the one hand, Southeast Asia is an area where Japan can naturally apply its foreign efforts. On the other hand, Japan’s dependence on the USA still holds true – the country partially remains a vehicle of American interests and initiatives in the region. As a result, Japan is regarded as a country that is still unable to express its leadership ambitions explicitly and implement them independently from the USA, which implies that it depends on the fluctuations of successive US administrations’ foreign policy.

Nevertheless, Japan’s experience proves that a consistent and comprehensive foreign policy may dramatically change the image of a country even after grave upheavals and temporary retreats, which Russia should bear in mind in its relations with Southeast Asia.

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