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Mutual Transformations – Southeast Asia and Japan in the 21st Century

Editorial

Marco Zappa

In the introduction to their seminal work, *Network Power: Asia and Japan* (1997), Peter Katzenstein and Takashi Shiraishi asked whether the 21st century would see Asia dominated by Japan, China or the United States. Their answer was clear: “world regions” were to play an increasingly important role in shaping world and politics, they argued. Specifically regarding Asia, they underscored the coexistence of multiple networks and centres of influence, with Japan, China and the US clearly occupying primary roles (Katzenstein / Shiraishi 1997: 4–5). In the context of the Asia-Pacific region’s current economic and trade arrangements and political coordination, as well as confrontation, Katzenstein and Shiraishi’s observation remains relevant nearly three decades later.

The two scholars’ main concern was to clarify Japan’s role as both an Asian country and an actor engaged in political, security, economic, and cultural exchanges with other Asian countries within global and regional settings. This special issue aims to further advance the discussion that began in the mid-1990s on the role Japan has played in Southeast Asia (SEA) since the end of the Cold War in the creation and maintenance of regional institutional and informal frameworks of exchange.¹

Southeast Asia’s significance

Southeast Asia’s global significance has been shaped by modern history. As a region rich in raw materials and cheap labour, it attracted the attention of several imperial powers, including Japan, from pre-modern times through the

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second half of the nineteenth century to the first half of the twentieth century. Foreign domination inevitably transformed the region's geography, politics, economy, culture and environment, as illustrated in scholarly works by authors such as Benedict Anderson, Paul Kratoska and David Marr (Marr 1997, Anderson 1998, Goto 2003, Kratoska 2018). The legacy of these changes has fundamentally shaped the post-war political and environmental ecosystems in the region. Post-colonial regimes in Myanmar, Indonesia and Vietnam were influenced by the experience of the Japanese military advance and occupation between 1941 and 1945.

In several cases, such as those of Aung San in post-independence Myanmar, Sukarno in Indonesia and Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines, leaders had personal ties with the former military occupiers (Goto 2003, Lebra 2010). Similarly, the development of industry, infrastructure and the service economy in countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore was facilitated by massive Japanese investments in the region since the early 1960s, as well as Official Development Assistance (ODA), signalling strong public-private coordination (Arase 1994, Söderberg 1996).

In light of these facts, for much of the 1980s and 1990s Asian leaders such as Malaysia's former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad envisioned Japan as a prime contributor to Asia's economic dynamism and a counterweight to "Western" (i.e., US) hegemony in the region. However, Japan's cautious diplomatic approach and Tokyo's structural constraints stemming from the Japan-US alliance resulted in Japan taking a lukewarm approach toward Southeast Asia and consequently led to relative disaffection with Japan among SEA leadership (Pempel 1997: 50). Nonetheless, Japan has never ceased its support for countries in the region, but rather it has diversified its assistance. On top of its efforts in infrastructure development and technical cooperation, since the mid-1990s, Japan has provided legal and institutional advice and political support to transitional economies, such as that of Vietnam, against the backdrop of Hanoi's domestic efforts at renovation (*đổi mới* in Vietnamese) and the end of Cold War-era international political arrangements. Additionally, Japan has increased its efforts to promote cultural exchanges and human resource development (Zappa 2020).

Recent data show that Japan is still the largest investor in infrastructure projects across Southeast Asia, with an economic stake exceeding 250 billion USD, and has further expanded its aid initiatives to include those aimed at tackling climate change and decarbonisation (The Economist 2021, Tan 2024). This multidimensional effort has resulted in widespread appreciation of Japan in most of the countries in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), where Japan has long been regarded as the most trusted major power in the region (Seah et al. 2024). Nevertheless, in recent years, local contestation and

1 Cf. Dauvergne 1997; Shiraishi 1997; Beeson 2001; Sudo 2001; Gilson 2004; Lam 2006, 2012; Pressello 2014, 2017.

international pressures have been mounting on the Japanese government to reassert its positions regarding human rights protection in its Southeast Asian partnerships (Katsumata 2006; Human Rights Watch 2021, 2022; Zappa 2021a).

In-between spheres of influence

This special issue aims to update the scholarly debate on Japan-Southeast Asia relations in light of recent transformations in the realm of international relations in the Asia-Pacific region. In particular, the strengthening of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and its influence over the least developed parts of the region, through comprehensive geo-economic and security strategies, and the subsequent securitisation of the PRC's policies in much of Europe, North America and parts of Asia,² pose numerous challenging questions. The emergence of the PRC as the major "preference multiplier" for several actors in Southeast Asia has inevitably led to the rekindling of previously existing balances and arrangements in terms of security and the strategic use of economic statecraft.³

At the same time, factors such as the emergence of specific policy frameworks aimed at containing the PRC's regional advance and influence (e.g., the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy), intensified US-PRC multidimensional competition, and the (re)assemblage of strategic coalitions such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad)⁴ have pushed governments in Southeast Asia to hedge their bets in terms of security. Consequently, they have deepened their ties with both the US and the PRC to diversify their aid and investment sources, thereby attempting to reduce respective power asymmetries.⁵

Against this backdrop, since the early 1990s, Southeast Asia has emerged as a "model area" for Japan's evolving international role and proactive contribution to peace, exemplified by peacekeeping operations in Cambodia and East Timor. Infrastructure development has been supplemented with the provision of patrol boats to the Vietnamese coast guard and increasing defence cooperation with other ASEAN countries involved in territorial disputes with the People's Republic of China in recent years, thus illustrating the emergence of so-called "coast guard diplomacy" (Yamamoto in this issue) and highlighting the region's significance in Japan's global strategy (Yoshimatsu 2017).

2 See Goh 2007, 2013, 2016, and Distler 2021.

3 Cf. Goh 2016, Koga 2016, Wallace 2019, Yennie Lindgren 2021.

4 The Quad, which comprises Australia, India, Japan and the US, is an intergovernmental forum that has identified the "strengthening [of] a free and open international order based on the rule of law" as a core objective (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2023). The initiative was established in the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami to provide assistance to the affected areas. It was subsequently revitalised in 2019 with the intention of promoting, inter alia, security, economic and technological cooperation between member states. See Hosoya 2019; Koga 2019, 2023; Paik / Park 2021; Insisa / Pugliese 2022; Zappa 2022; Sullivan de Estrada 2023.

5 See Goh 2007, 2016; Han 2019; Zappa 2021; Marston 2023.

Concomitantly, an increasing number of Southeast Asian migrants studying and working in Japan are contributing to Japan's economy and transforming the cityscape of several large urban areas. In 2020, despite strict immigration policies due to the COVID-19 pandemic, net immigration to Japan (long-term and special permanent resident visa holders) amounted to 2.9 million people, 30 per cent of whom were Southeast Asian nationals from Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand (Immigration Services Agency of Japan 2021). Vietnam is currently Japan's largest provider of foreign labour, accounting for slightly more than 518,000 workers (more than a quarter of the total), followed by the Philippines with nearly 227,000 (Hoang / Pham 2024).

In addition to non-skilled workers, the Japanese government is seeking to attract highly skilled workers from India and Southeast Asia to expand its national tech sector (Kanaoka 2024). Hence, despite continuing structural asymmetries between Japan and Southeast Asia, workers from the region are contributing (and will increasingly contribute in coming years) to socio-economic and cultural transformations in contemporary Japan (Higuchi 2024).

The articles of this Special issue

Thus, the rationale for this special issue stems from the awareness that countries in Southeast Asia occupy a critical position in the aforementioned global and regional transformations. The publication of this issue is particularly timely, considering that in 2023, the Japanese government hosted celebrations for the 50th anniversary of Japan-ASEAN relations. Standing firm on the principles of the 1977 Fukuda Doctrine⁶, the current Japanese administration, led by Kishida Fumio, has pledged to foster a new approach toward ASEAN based on "Co-Creation" (*kyōsō* in Japanese). This formulation implies the ambition that "ASEAN and Japan [will] leverage their respective strengths to create the future together" (Prime Minister's Office of Japan 2023).

Notwithstanding the practical implications of the newly launched concept, at least at the narrative level, the idea of Co-Creation signifies a shift toward a more equal collaborative relationship between Japan and its Southeast Asian partners. Considering the mutual interconnectedness of Japan and Southeast Asia, this special issue will address the following themes: on the one hand, it focuses on the major drivers determining contemporary patterns of Japan-SEA

6 A major contribution to Japan's foreign policy in the mid-1970s, the Fukuda Doctrine was formulated by Prime Minister Fukuda Takeo to emphasise Japan's non-military commitment to the peace process in mainland Southeast Asia following the Vietnam War. During a speech in Manila, Fukuda unveiled the main pillars of Japan's approach to the ASEAN region. This included the recognition of Japan as a non-military power, the effort to build mutual confidence and trust with Southeast Asian nations, and the willingness to establish an equal partnership between Japan and ASEAN (see Sudo 2001).

cooperation, highlighting the increasing role of security; on the other hand, it sheds light on the intraregional mobility of ideas, knowledge and know-how (Derichs / Isaka 2023), particularly in terms of urban development policies (Smart Cities), where regional competition and Japan's influence are more visible.

Kei Koga focuses on the dynamics of Japan-led strategic empowerment of Southeast Asia to facilitate the region's transition toward a stronger, autonomous and strategically stable entity. The article reconstructs how Tokyo has achieved this through its adoption of a multidimensional approach in the realms of capacity building, infrastructure development and other forms of socio-economic assistance.

Security and capacity building, specifically in the maritime realm, is the focus of Raymond Yamamoto's contribution. Yamamoto traces the history of capacity building assistance (CBA), highlighting the key role this initiative played in the broader engagement of the Japanese government, under late Prime Minister Abe Shinzō's second term in power (2012–2020), in disputes involving the PRC and Southeast Asian actors in the South China Sea.

Tackling the issue of foreign policy identity construction, Wrenn Yennie Lindgren sheds light on the workings of nostalgia as a key factor linking Japan and Myanmar. She explores how the Japanese authorities strive to establish themselves as legally, morally and technologically superior partners in a long-standing competition with the PRC.

Lastly, Kie Sanada and Kentaro Kuwatsuka illustrate the recent evolutions of Japanese infrastructure development strategy in light of the emergence of new socio-technical regimes based on the diffusion of internet, AI and smart technologies applied to urban planning and governance in Bangkok, Thailand.

In conclusion, this special issue offers a glimpse into the complex network of relations tying Japan to Southeast Asia and vice versa. Predictably, covering the entire spectrum of Japan's relations with Southeast Asian countries (including non-ASEAN members such as Timor-Leste), would have been impossible in the limited space of a journal issue. Therefore, the cases presented below must be considered illustrative of broader currents and trends shaping the 21st century Asia-Pacific. Among these is the enduring legacy of Japan's contribution to Southeast Asian development and its recent effort to promote the strengthening of regional institutions (see Koga in this issue on ASEAN's *strategic* empowerment). More significant, however, as the articles of this special issue show, is the gradual reduction of historical asymmetries (particularly, in terms of power and influence) between Japan and its Southeast Asian counterparts. While it is true that in the 1990s, SEA needed Japan's investments and aid, in the 2020s, it is the Japanese political leadership that looks eagerly at SEA's dynamism, energy and resources to tackle several issues, including those related to Japan's rapidly ageing demographics.

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