

RELATIONS WITH ASEAN IN JAPAN'S FOREIGN POLICY IN THE LATE 20TH CENTUR

Scientific advisor: S.Sh.Pirimkulova

teacher of the Department of World History, Faculty of History

Samarkand State University named after Sharof Rashidov

Student: A.Ne'matov

student of the Faculty of History

Samarkand State University named after Sharof Rashidov

Student of the IV stage

Abstract: This article highlights Japan's foreign policy relations with the ASEAN organization in the late 20th century, including visits by Japanese leaders to Southeast Asian countries, as well as treaties and cooperative efforts. It also discusses Japan's influence on the development of ASEAN member states and provides information about ASEAN+3.

Keywords: Fukuda Doctrine, ASEAN, the UN, JICA, "JENESYS", ASEAN + 3, Zenko Suzuki, JAIF.

After World War II, Japan was forced to radically reassess its foreign policy. By the second half of the 20th century, Japan had achieved significant economic growth, but remained militarily constrained. As a result, it sought to expand its political and economic influence through regional cooperation. Strengthening relations with Southeast Asian countries became a strategic priority. The main directions of this approach were outlined in the famous Fukuda Doctrine, announced in 1977 by Japanese Prime Minister Takeo Fukuda in Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia. The Fukuda Doctrine: An Approach Based on Peace, Participation, and Respect. The Fukuda Doctrine represented a new conceptual framework for Japan's role in Southeast Asia. It declared that Japan's engagement in the region would not be based on military power or strategic dominance, but rather on principles of economic cooperation, cultural closeness, and political trust. The doctrine encompassed three core principles:

1. Establishing sincere "heart-to-heart" relationships with the peoples of Southeast Asia – this principle was aimed at strengthening cooperation on the basis of equality, using Japan's economic power. It reflected a rejection of the legacy of colonialism and the pursuit of new political relations based on mutual respect.
2. Japan's non-military role in the region – Fukuda clearly stated that Japan did not aim to reestablish itself as a military power and would not pose a threat to the region. This position helped to alleviate concerns among the peoples of Southeast Asia that had arisen due to Japan's historical military activities. [1 B-89]
3. Supporting ASEAN's ZOPFAN initiative – that is, Japan's political support for the concept of the "Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality." This initiative aimed to maintain the region as a neutral area free from military blocs. By endorsing this idea, Japan contributed to regional security policy not through military means, but through diplomatic engagement.

The Fukuda Doctrine was warmly welcomed by ASEAN member states. It demonstrated Japan's intention to support regional integration not through military power, but through economic and cultural cooperation. The doctrine marked the beginning of a new era in ASEAN-Japan relations and contributed to enhancing Japan's international reputation through its "soft power" foreign policy approach. [2 B-151] This political statement was reflected in practical programs. Japan

began providing technical assistance, grants, and investments to ASEAN countries. Priority areas included energy, infrastructure, agriculture, education, healthcare, and environmental protection. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Japan was recognized as one of the largest donor countries to ASEAN. According to UN development programs, Japan provided over 10 billion USD in aid to ASEAN during this period.

The Fukuda Doctrine brought positive outcomes for Japan not only economically, but also diplomatically. It fully separated Japan's foreign policy from military approaches and portrayed the country as one that respects the independent development paths of Southeast Asian nations. Moreover, the doctrine served as a favorable political foundation for Japan to gain the trust of Global South countries in international forums, particularly within the United Nations.

Through the Fukuda Doctrine, Japan launched a new political course with ASEAN countries based on mutual equality, pacifism, and cooperation. This doctrine, in turn, elevated ASEAN–Japan relations to a qualitatively new level. A political approach not grounded in military power, but in economic, social, and cultural diplomacy, enabled Japan to establish long-term influence in the East Asian region.

Announced in 1977 by Prime Minister Takeo Fukuda, the Fukuda Doctrine marked a major turning point in Japan's foreign policy. In the following years, initiatives carried out in the spirit of this doctrine further deepened Japan's economic, political, and cultural influence in the ASEAN region. The Fukuda Doctrine established the approach of engaging with ASEAN through “soft power” means. This approach was implemented through economic aid, human capital development, cultural exchanges, and the promotion of institutional trust mechanisms. Notably, new initiatives proposed by Japanese prime ministers in the 1980s aimed to deliver the practical outcomes of this doctrine.

During his 1981 visit to ASEAN, Japanese Prime Minister Zenko Suzuki proposed a series of initiatives aimed at strengthening Japan's active participation in the region's socio-economic development. Among the most important of these were technical assistance projects focused on human capital development. In his speech, Suzuki announced Japan's readiness to share its experience and technology with ASEAN countries. Within this framework, Japan implemented special training programs, technology transfer projects, and the dispatch of experts in agriculture, healthcare, and industrial development through the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA).

According to JICA data, by the late 1980s, more than 10,000 specialists from ASEAN countries had undergone training in courses organized by Japan. [3 B-64] This led to significant improvements in technical infrastructure, public administration, energy policy, telecommunications, and healthcare sectors within ASEAN nations.

In 1983, the youth exchange program initiated by Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone marked a new phase in Japan–ASEAN cultural relations. This initiative, in the spirit of the Fukuda Doctrine's “heart-to-heart” approach, aimed to strengthen cultural integration, overcome stereotypes, and build mutual trust. The main goal of the Nakasone government was to establish cultural, academic, and social bridges between the youth of Japan and Southeast Asia. As part of this effort, memorandums of cooperation were signed between Japanese universities and educational institutions in ASEAN countries. Through the JENESYS (Japan-East Asia Network of Exchange for Students and Youths) program, thousands of students and young leaders participated annually in study visits, seminars, and internships in Japan. [4 B-211] This program helped Japan present itself not merely as an economic donor but as a country with a positive image in the region through cultural diplomacy. The growing positive attitudes toward Japan among ASEAN youth laid the foundation for strengthening political and economic ties in the future. The initiatives of Suzuki and Nakasone became consistent continuations of the Fukuda Doctrine. Despite changes in Japan's ruling parties, the approach of steady and consistent cooperation with Southeast Asian countries was maintained. Each new government sought to deepen strategic partnership with ASEAN. This policy opened new opportunities for Japan, especially in the 1990s, when the trend of “more ASEAN, less reliance on the US” gained

strength. Japan emerged in the region as a friendly, trustworthy, and long-term partner through its “soft power.” This, in turn, allowed Japan to gain diplomatic benefits without directly interfering in the regional political climate. The Fukuda Doctrine and the subsequent initiatives by Suzuki and Nakasone contributed to the formation of multifaceted, trust-based, and stable relations between Japan and ASEAN. During this period, Japan’s foreign policy went beyond economic aid and also made significant contributions in cultural exchange, human capital development, and social assistance. As a result, today Japan is not only an economic partner for ASEAN but also a close strategic partner politically and culturally.

After World War II, Japan reoriented its foreign policy based on economic diplomacy. In particular, through cooperation with Southeast Asian countries, Japan not only strengthened its influence but also became a key participant in advancing economic integration and infrastructure development in the region. In its partnership with ASEAN, Japan placed great emphasis on financing infrastructure projects as a major part of its Official Development Assistance (ODA). Between the 1980s and 2000s, Japan provided approximately 100 billion US dollars in economic aid to ASEAN in the form of loans, grants, and technical assistance. The majority of this aid was directed toward infrastructure projects and was implemented through Japan’s financial institutions such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), and others. For example, Thailand’s Eastern Seaboard Development Program was carried out with Japanese financial support. Under this program, highways, ports (including Laem Chabang Port), industrial zones, and railway networks were constructed, creating the necessary logistics infrastructure to foster industrial development in the region. [5 B-147] Similarly, modernization of the Surabaya and Jakarta ports in Indonesia was financed by Japanese investments. These large-scale infrastructure projects facilitated the movement of goods and services within ASEAN, reduced logistics costs, and accelerated regional integration. Japan participated not only as a financial supporter but also took an active role in project management, technological expertise, and construction.

Practically, Japan’s foreign direct investments helped improve efficiency in labor-intensive industries in Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines. This process intensified after the 1985 Plaza Accord, as the yen appreciated significantly against major currencies.

Japan’s sustained economic boom also offered a large and lucrative market for Southeast Asian exporters. Official development assistance, based on the principles of self-help and sensitivity to host country contexts, was expanded to catalyze Southeast Asia’s growth. Over time, Southeast Asia experienced rapid development. Japan facilitated this growth by transferring capital and technologies to its neighbors. However, by the 1990s, Japan’s economic slowdown and the strong performance of firms from other rapidly growing East Asian economies somewhat weakened this perspective. Although Japan still maintained a trade surplus in technology-intensive goods and services, its relations with Southeast Asia—which were once primarily driven by economic concerns—evolved into more interpersonal and multifaceted cooperation. This shift is clearly reflected in the sustained popularity of Japanese educational programs, cultural events, and entertainment across Southeast Asia. These exchanges, embodying the “soft” elements of the Fukuda Doctrine, transformed diplomatic formalities into meaningful and dynamic interactions. Another clear example of this change is the willingness of Japanese companies to hire not only graduates of Japanese universities but also Southeast Asian talents to manage their operations.

Despite recent challenges in great power relations, opportunities for cooperation between ASEAN and Japan remain. It is easy to overlook Japan’s leadership in maintaining internationally significant initiatives like the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)—which the United States transformed into a comprehensive and progressive agreement after initially withdrawing from the original deal. Although only four ASEAN member states have so far confirmed their participation in this economic cooperation, the door remains open for others to join in the future. This is largely due to ASEAN member countries’ skillful balancing of interests within the

Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which unites ASEAN members with their “Plus Five” partners: China, Japan, Korea, Australia, and New Zealand.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, cautious consultations and discreet diplomacy by Japan’s economic elites helped lay the foundation for the creation of the ASEAN+3 Macroeconomic Research Office (AMRO). Although its establishment occurred largely in response to the 1997 Asian financial crisis, which severely impacted nearly all East Asian countries, AMRO arguably represents the closest East Asia has come to a “regional self-help institution.

Since its inception, the initiative has evolved into a knowledge center that contributes to the region’s macroeconomic and financial stability and resilience through monitoring, regional financing, and technical assistance. Practically, unlike the top-down and vocal approach adopted by the International Monetary Fund during the Asian financial crisis, AMRO offers a more cautious and alternative perspective to the ASEAN+3 financial institutions. Japan’s approach to diplomacy and regional integration sharply contrasts with that of other major powers. It emphasizes building consensus and “leading from behind.” While these practices can be time-consuming and not always widely embraced, they are valued by the Southeast Asian countries.

One of Japan’s strategic policies in ASEAN was the relocation and expansion of its manufacturing bases within the region. Through this, Japan combined its advanced manufacturing capabilities with the labor-intensive economies of ASEAN countries to create manufacturing hubs for the entire Asian continent. Since the 1980s, major Japanese multinational corporations such as Toyota, Mitsubishi, Sony, Panasonic, and Honda established manufacturing centers in ASEAN countries in key sectors like electronics, automobile manufacturing, semiconductors, and the chemical industry. For example, Toyota opened several large factories in Thailand, turning the country into a regional hub for automobile exports. Similarly, clusters producing electronic components were developed in the Philippines and Malaysia. [6 B-215] These investments not only boosted industrial development but also created thousands of jobs, facilitated technology transfer, and significantly enhanced the export capacities of ASEAN countries. Moreover, through this approach, Japan was able to establish stable and resilient manufacturing supply chains.

Japan’s economic strategy was not limited to state-level assistance but also involved active participation from the private sector. Japanese banks, financial institutions, and investment funds collaborated with numerous financial entities in ASEAN. In this process, Japanese companies expanded their economic interests by forming joint ventures with local firms, participating in stock markets, and supporting startups. Notably, through the Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund (JAIF), dozens of projects related to technical assistance, business strategy, and digital infrastructure were financed. This fund serves to enhance ASEAN’s potential in areas such as the digital economy, e-commerce, and e-government. Japan-ASEAN economic relations have become firmly established, particularly through strategic approaches in infrastructure and manufacturing sectors. Japan has deeply engaged in the region not only as a donor and investor but also by contributing knowledge, technology, and management expertise. This involvement has brought many positive changes to the ASEAN economies and made Japan’s influence in the region long-lasting and sustainable.

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