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## AJISS-Commentary

# Current Status of Asian Regional Cooperation and Japan's Diplomacy in Asia

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## 1. Development of regionalism after the Cold War

The 30 years following the end of the Cold War are coincidentally almost the same as the period of the Cold War. During this period, the international environment in Asia changed drastically. One of these is the rise of regionalism in Asia. During the Cold War, Asia was said to be a region lacking regionalism. That cooperation could only be expected in a limited range of areas that included economic cooperation due to both the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union and the political confrontation. That had deep impacts and induced complicated political confrontation.

This situation began to change thanks to some moves toward regional integration in the 1990s, which led to the establishment of the European Community (EC) and the conclusion of NAFTA. The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) was launched as an intergovernmental organization. Also, the possibility of all-out nuclear war through direct confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union was reduced.

Union faded into the background because of the end of the Cold War. Instead, the threat of global issues, such as local and ethnic conflicts, civil wars, terrorism, and transnational crimes caused security and political cooperation under new circumstances. As a result, the ASEAN Region was established in 1994.

Subsequently, ASEAN+3, which began in 1997, was rapidly institutionalized as a framework for cooperation in the economic, political and security areas due to the Asian Financial Crisis in the summer of the same year. It operates within a concrete framework, including monetary cooperation such as the Chiang Mai Initiative (CMI) and food security cooperation such as the ASEAN+3 Food Security Plan (APTEER). Furthermore, the East Asia Summit (EAS) was founded in 2005 at a time when the establishment of an East Asia Community were heating up. In addition to ASEAN countries in the Asia-Pacific region, including Japan, China, the United States, and Russia, function as regional issues. Also, ADMM Plus, a meeting of defense ministers from the same countries was held in 2010. ASEAN itself, the core of these institutions, advance their integration. In 2015 declared the ASEAN Community (AC), which consists of the three pillars of a security community, economic community and social and cultural community.

On the other hand, regional cooperation initiatives emerged outside East Asia, such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) that originates in the Shanghai 5, led by China and the Central Asian countries. Under Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, Thailand independent regional diplomacy, establishing the Thailand-led regional frameworks such as the Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD) and Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS).

It is clear that Asian regionalism has rapidly developed over the past 20 years or so since the end of the Cold War. This is also part of the rise of regionalism worldwide which was driven by the prevalence of the right to deal with various problems through international cooperation and to institutionalize a liberal international order supported by U.S. hegemony after the Cold War. Under this liberal international movement toward regional economic cooperation and integration accelerated among countries with a market economy based on market principles and believed that deeper penetration of globalization would lead to growth.

## 2. Current Status of Asian Regional Cooperation and Japan's Diplomacy in Asia (continued)

Besides its traditional bilateral diplomacy, Japan has been actively involved in the development of regional institutions and has played a major role. As of 2019, regional institutions and regionalism are becoming important diplomatic tools for Japan and other countries as a means of responding to uncertain international situations.

Underlying the uncertain international situation is the instability of the liberal international order. This concern was already shared among some observers after the unilateralism of the United States, as exemplified by the Iraq war. Furthermore, the global economic crisis triggered by Lehman's collapse in 2008 further shook the liberal international order centering on U.S. hegemony and the liberal international order. The crisis of addressing the crisis spotlighted the rise of emerging economies such as China and India.

In the 2010s, China's political and economic presence increased unprecedentedly. China is now actively formulating foreign policy related to the construction of regional and international orders, such as the Belt and Road Initiative and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Furthermore,

inauguration in January 2017, the Trump administration has come up with a policy of anti-"Revisionist Power" and aiming for "decoupling". The trade "war" with China, which oppos escalated.

Ironically, regionalism has become more active in these uncertain circumstances. This is countries have used regionalism and regional systems as a tool to secure their own interest order that is desirable for them in these uncertain times. The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) with a strong American leadership and centripetal force, was imperiled by the Trump administration's withdrawal from the agreement in 2017. However, Japan, Singapore, and other countries took initiatives to revive the "Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP)," which entered into force without the participation of the United States. The Comprehensive Economic Partnership in East Asia (CEPEA) launched in 2012 by sixteen countries--ASEAN, Japan, China and Australia--continues to face difficulty in negotiations, and is making progress toward its conclusion by the end of 2020. The establishment of the ASEAN Community at the end of 2015, the chairman's statements and the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting has come to attract attention every time as an indicator of South China Sea issues. Regional forums, including ASEAN Summit, the EAS, and the ADMM-Plus provide a venue for candid exchanges of views related to security issues such as the South China Sea (The South China Sea where discussions heat up)

Japan and the United States have proposed the concept of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" for Japan to link the two continents of Asia and Africa as well as the two oceans, the Pacific and Indian Oceans, to realize peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region through the dynamism created by cooperation. The pillars of this cooperation are: (1) Promotion and establishment of the rule of law, freedom and justice; (2) the pursuit of economic prosperity by improving physical, and people-to-people, and digital infrastructure; and (3) the assurance of peace and stability through dialogue, assistance and cooperation in the fields of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

### 3. Japan's Regional Diplomacy

For Japan, which is no longer the "sole economic power" or the "only developed country in Asia, the establishment of a desirable regional order and environment through the utilization of regional institutions is becoming increasingly important. For the time being, it is best for Japan to choose hedging against uncertainty by adopting a multidirectional regionalism strategy, such as strengthening its engagement in ASEAN-centered regional institutions, promoting regional economic integration through RCEP, and concretizing the contents of the FOIP Vision. In the long term, it is necessary to strengthen cooperation with neighboring countries in Asia for the realization of such a vision by tackling issues such as how to achieve sustainable economic prosperity, how to stabilize regional security, the foundation of prosperity, and what political system and what kind of society the people of the region should live in the future. As confrontation of interests is and will be common in the international system, regional multilateralism is significant for maintaining the peaceful coexistence of multiple countries. But now, the coronavirus pandemic casts a shadow on the prospect of regional multilateralism. Countries have now imposed travel restrictions and are trying to close their own borders in order to prevent the spread of the virus. International cooperation to fight against the pandemic. These trends heavily have negatively impacted regional cooperation.

supply chains fostering economic development and independence in Asia and might be the against regional multilateralism. However, in these difficult situations, regional multilateral developed by Japan and other countries in Asia for stability and prosperity in the region.

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