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# Japan's ODA Policy towards Five Mainland Southeast Asian Countries

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## **Abstract**

Development assistance is traditionally given by developed countries to developing countries to assist in the recipient country's economic development, and improve social conditions with the country. Different countries adopt different approaches, depending on the resources available as well as their policy objectives in giving aid. In 1991, when the Japanese government announced the four guidelines of Official Development Assistance (ODA), it pledged to use the foreign aid to promote human rights and democracy. In the history of Japan's ODA, the bilateral scheme has been predominant: Japan provides a certain country with aid through bilateral negotiation and agreement and with the anticipation that the aid will help socio-economic development in the recipient country. Japan's ODA is usually divided into two categories: bilateral and multilateral. Bilateral aid on the other hand is the scheme where Japan provides aid to a single recipient country on the basis of the two parties' negotiation and agreement. Multilateral aid is the scheme within which Japan provides a budget to international or multi-governmental organizations. And the most frequently used classification of bilateral assistance is based on the three types of payment: grants, yen loans, and technical assistance. Tokyo's foreign aid strategy, ranging from bilateral, sub-regional, to regional assistance plans, successfully secures its political and economic interests in mainland Southeast Asia.

Key words: ODA, foreign policy, ASEAN, human rights

## **Introduction**

Official Development Assistance was the most accepted instrument of Japanese foreign policy. The beginning of ODA as an indispensable instrument of Japan's foreign policy can be traced back to its postwar history. Japanese former Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru formulated *the Yoshida Doctrine*, which emphasized economic reconstruction and growth, minimal defense efforts, and reliance on the US on matters of military security. Japan's postwar economic recovery and growing industrial production also necessitated new markets and sources of raw materials. Aid was employed to pursue these objectives, first in the form of reparation, and later as yen loans. The reparations payments proved to be an effective strategy that enticed mainland Southeast Asian countries to eventually restore normal relations with Japan.

## **The Role of Geopolitics**

Comprising the five mainland Southeast Asian countries of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam (CLMV) and Thailand, the mainland Southeast Asia region occupies a crucial geopolitical location between the Pacific and Indian Oceans, linking the economies of East Asia with India and the rest of South Asia. Though Japan is located several thousand kilometers from mainland Southeast Asia, it is one of the major countries which have been

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deeply involved in the changing situation of this region, especially since the Asia-Pacific War period.

Not only among regional countries but also extra-regional powers, such as Japan and China, historically considered Southeast Asia in general and mainland Southeast Asia in particular as one strategic unit. The peace and stability of the region has been vital for the security and prosperity of these countries. Japan also considers mainland Southeast Asia as an important area to advance its strategic interests. Japan had improved closer relations with Indochinese states and Myanmar throughout the Cold War period. Japan played a major role in resolving Third Indochina Crisis and helped economic reconstruction through development assistance. Japan's diplomatic effort in the peace process in Cambodia was designed as a precedent for her political historic role in the Post Cold War international community as well as a response to a possible integration of the Indochinese countries into ASEAN. In fact, Japan's Self Defense Force (SDF) took part of the United Nation's peacekeeping operations in Cambodia, and the comprehensive settlement of the Cambodian conflict paved the way for the ASEAN-10. Japan's bilateral relationship with each country in mainland Southeast Asia has been remarkably strengthened, the institutionalization of political dialogue for confidence building in the region has made a notable progress. Japan has also built close economic relationships with these countries through trade, investment, and ODA. In its relations with these countries, Japan's major diplomacy is ODA. In addition, Japan is promoting relations with the mainland Southeast Asia under the Mekong Regional Development and ASEAN-Japan cooperation. Through ODA, Japan appears to believe that the stability of mainland Southeast Asia, with its economic potential and geographical location, will significantly enhance the economic wellbeing and political security of Japan.

### **Japan's ODA Policy towards Mainland Southeast Asia**

In 1951, Japan agreed to make reparations payments for damages it had inflicted during the World War II. The first country that signed a reparation payment agreement with Japan was Myanmar in 1954. It was followed by the South Vietnam in 1959. Initially Myanmar claimed more than US\$ 1 billion in damages, a sum the Japanese government could not afford to pay, but later Myanmar conceded to accept US\$ 200 to be paid over ten years. On top of that, the Japanese government agreed to provide an additional US\$ 140 million to Myanmar as economic assistance. The government of South Vietnam agreed to accept US\$39 million from Japan (Table I). Instead of war reparations, Japan provided economic and technical cooperation grant to Laos and Cambodia, the countries that had relinquished their right to receive reparations payments. Financial grants were extended to Thailand as compensation for bills issued by the Japanese military authority during World War II.

**Table I: Amounts of War Reparations Payments and Economic and Technical Cooperation Grants Given by Japanese Government**

| <b>Reparation Payment</b>                 |                   |                   |
|---|-------------------|-------------------|
| Name of Country                           | Year of Agreement | Amount            |
| Myanmar                                   | 1954              | US\$ 200 million  |
| South Vietnam                             | 1959              | US\$ 39 million   |
| <b>Economic and Technical Cooperation</b> |                   |                   |
| Name of Country                           | Year of Agreement | Amount            |
| Laos                                      | 1958              | US\$ 2.78 million |
| Thailand                                  | 1962              | US\$ 26 million   |
| Myanmar                                   | 1963              | US\$ 140 million  |
| Cambodia                                  | 1975              | US\$ 28 million   |

Source: Furuoka & others: *From Aid Recipient to Aid Donor*, 2010, p.5

Japan actually invested a huge amount of ODA just to maintain the stability of the mainland Southeast Asia region. It has been of paramount interest of Japan. Over the long term, Japan hoped that ODA would promote economic development, economic interdependence, general political stability, and the smoother transition of the newly independent colonies to statehood and less authoritarian forms of government in the region. Since 1990s, the CLMV countries had abandoned their socialist economies and started opening their markets and establishing market economies.

During the Cold War, Japanese policy makers focused mainly on quantitative expansion rather than qualitative improvement of the country's foreign aid. Another specific feature of Japan's ODA program was that the government avoided imposing political conditionalities on recipient countries. However, the new post-Cold War political environment had induced the Japanese government to review the country's ODA program and policy. In the new political climate, human rights and democracy became the centre of universal attention. The objectives of Japan's ODA are to contribute to the peace and development of the international community and thereby to help ensure Japan's own security and prosperity. In the beginning of the 1990s, to establish a basis for using foreign aid as a tool to influence aid-receiving countries, the Japanese government hammered out the new aid guidelines. In April 1991, Prime Minister Kaifu Toshiki announced four ODA policy principles that the Japanese government would henceforth consider when deciding whether to extend ODA:

- the recipient country's military spending;
- its arms exports and imports;
- its development and production of such weapons of mass destruction as nuclear missiles; and
- its efforts to promote democratization, ensure human rights, and move toward a market-oriented economy (Otoplik, Cameron M.: "Japan's Overseas Development Assistance: Assessing Conformance with Shifting Priorities", *International Journal of Politics and Good Governance*, 2010, p.8). After the introduction of the new aid guidelines, the Japanese government began paying attention to the political situation and the institutional conditions in the aid recipients.

**Table II: Japan's ODA Disbursement to mainland Southeast Asian Countries**  
(in million Japanese yen)

|                  |                  | <b>Cambodia</b> | <b>Laos</b>   | <b>Myanmar</b> | <b>Vietnam</b>   | <b>Thailand</b>  |
|------------------|------------------|-----------------|---------------|----------------|------------------|------------------|
| <b>Yen loan</b>  | 1959-1990        | 1,517           | 5,190         | 402,972        | 40,430           | 833,011          |
|                  | 1991-2000        | 4,142           | 3,903         | 0              | 651,989          | 1,079,862        |
|                  | 2001             | 0               | 4,011         | 0              | 74,314           | 6,405            |
|                  | 2002             | 0               | 0             | 0              | 79,330           | 45,170           |
|                  | 2003             | 0               | 0             | 0              | 79,330           | 44,852           |
|                  | 2004             | 7,342           | 3,326         | 0              | 82,000           | 0                |
|                  | 2005             | 318             | 0             | 0              | 90,820           | 35,453           |
|                  | 2006             | 2,632           | 500           | 0              | 104,078          | 0                |
|                  | <b>Sub-total</b> | <b>15,951</b>   | <b>16,930</b> | <b>402,972</b> | <b>1,202,291</b> | <b>2,044,753</b> |
| <b>Grant aid</b> | 1959-1990        | 2,637           | 23,214        | 97,594         | 31,292           | 141,324          |

|                    |                  |                |                |                |                  |                  |
|--------------------|------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|------------------|------------------|
|                    | 1991-2000        | 68,627         | 58,030         | 67,888         | 58,681           | 15,825           |
|                    | 2001             | 7,645          | 7,003          | 5,993          | 8,371            | 315              |
|                    | 2002             | 10,306         | 6,567          | 2,162          | 5,237            | 354              |
|                    | 2003             | 6,250          | 4,111          | 992            | 5,650            | 431              |
|                    | 2004             | 6,693          | 3,017          | 909            | 4,914            | 501              |
|                    | 2005             | 6,909          | 4,235          | 1,717          | 4,465            | 236              |
|                    | 2006             | 9,025          | 6,909          | 640            | 1,964            | 0                |
|                    | <b>Sub-total</b> | <b>118,092</b> | <b>113,086</b> | <b>177,895</b> | <b>120,574</b>   | <b>158,986</b>   |
| <b>Technical</b>   | 1959-1990        | 1,706          | 4,613          | 15,097         | 2,449            | 91,807           |
| <b>Cooperation</b> | 1991-2000        | 16,769         | 20,121         | 6,674          | 33,111           | 83,285           |
| <b>(JICA only)</b> | 2001             | 4,306          | 4,486          | 3,319          | 7,909            | 6,925            |
|                    | 2002             | 4,037          | 3,545          | 2,794          | 6,708            | 5,677            |
|                    | 2003             | 3,755          | 2,983          | 1,658          | 5,577            | 4,296            |
|                    | 2004             | 4,082          | 2,773          | 1,446          | 5,711            | 4,702            |
|                    | 2005             | 4,593          | 2,576          | 1,641          | 5,661            | 3,553            |
|                    | 2006             | 4,042          | 2,382          | 1,725          | 5,275            | 2,960            |
|                    | Sub-total        | 43,290         | 43,479         | 34,354         | 72,401           | 203,205          |
|                    | 1959-1990        | 5,860          | 33,017         | 515,663        | 74,171           | 1,066,142        |
|                    | 1991-2006        | 171,473        | 140,478        | 99,558         | 1,321,095        | 1,340,802        |
| <b>Whole ODA</b>   | <b>Total</b>     | <b>177,333</b> | <b>173,495</b> | <b>615,221</b> | <b>1,395,266</b> | <b>2,406,944</b> |

Source: *Japan's Policy and Strategy of Economic Cooperation in CLMV*, p.225

According to Table II, Thailand remained a major recipient of ODA because of substantial Japanese investment there. The strategic value of Thailand to regional stability is often cited as the basis of Japan-Thailand aid relations. When Vietnam invaded Cambodia in 1978, the strategic value of Thailand as buffer and front line state increased. The preservation of stability in Thailand was seen as key to security and stability in the region. Consequently, Japanese ODA was generously provided. Financial assistance to Thailand, especially loan disbursements, represented the geo-economic interests of Japan's aid. The manner by which Japanese aid is distributed in the region showed that ODA served Japan's commercial interests.

On the other hand, Japan's aid policy toward mainland Southeast Asia was more controversial. It was found that although Japan's new aid policy is based on the universal values, the violations of human rights in those countries had been serious enough to warrant a review of aid policy. It can be seen in Japan's positive and negative aid sanctions towards mainland Southeast Asia.

**Table III: Japan's Positive and Negative Aid Sanctions towards Mainland Southeast Asia**

| Country  | Year | Measures   | Human Rights Condition Index |
|----------|------|--|------------------------------|
| Cambodia | 1992 | To assist the new government and its efforts at economic stabilization | Six                          |
| Cambodia | 1997 | No aid suspension  | Seven                        |

|          |      |  |                              |
|----------|------|--|------------------------------|
| Vietnam  | 1992 | To assist transition to market economy         | Seven                        |
| Myanmar  | 1988 | Aid suspension (Aid partially resumed in 1995) | Seven (1988)<br>Seven (1995) |
| Thailand | 1991 | No aid suspension                              | Two (1990)<br>Six (1991)     |

Note: Freedom House Index of political rights is used to measure the human rights condition in recipient countries. The index uses a one to seven scale and assigns higher numbers to countries with worse human rights conditions.

Source: “Japan’s Foreign Aid Sanctions Policy after the Cold War”, 15 January 2008, p.11

According to Table III, Tokyo was able to improve the political situation in Cambodia without cutting foreign aid. In 1991, human rights situations in Thailand deteriorated after the military coup d’états in this country. The human rights index for it fell from two in 1990 to six in 1991. Although the Japanese government was expected to cut foreign aid to Thailand, especially in the light of the new aid guidelines, it was found that Japan chose to give priority to her own economic, commercial and diplomatic interests and was unwilling to sacrifice those for the sake of human rights and democracy. It should be noted that when the Japanese government yields to international pressures and imposes aid sanctions on a country that represents considerable economic interests, or has special relations with Japan, Tokyo will resume aid as soon as it finds the slightest convenient pretext to do so, even if there are no concrete signs of improvement. For example, in 1988, Japan imposed economic sanctions on Myanmar when the human rights index for the country was seven. In 1995, the Japanese government resumed partially ODA to Myanmar despite the fact that the human rights index remained unchanged. The Japanese government tended to apply political conditionalities more rigidly to those recipient countries that were less economically, diplomatically and politically important for Japan. By contrast, it was more lenient towards aid recipients that represented a considerable economic and political interest for Japan.

In essence, two trends can be observed in Japan’s aid policy. First, the Japanese government takes more lenient measures to the countries that have strong economic ties with Japan. Second, the Japanese government may take punitive measure against the countries that represent strong economic interests for Japan, but will resume aid as soon as possible. This proves that the decision makers of Japanese aid policy assign top priority to Japan’s economic interests. The Japanese government prefers to use the method of positive aid sanctions rather than negative aid sanctions, claiming the former to be more effective in reaching policy goals. Policymakers in Tokyo maintain that negative aid sanction can backfire and retard democratic movements in aid recipients. The Japanese government did not take punitive measures against several countries, such as Thailand when grave human rights violations happened, because suspending aid could seriously hurt Japan’s economic interests. When the new aid guidelines were adopted in 1991, the Japanese government promised to rigorously apply those to promote universal values. In practice, the principles were often sacrificed for the sake of economic interests. Apparently, Japan pledges to promote human rights and democracy with the aim of showing solidarity with other aid donor countries while the pursuit of economic interests remains the main driving force behind Japanese aid policy.

According to classical realism, aid is viewed as an instrument of foreign policy that helps serve the interests of donors. The donor-oriented study of aid assumes that a state’s behaviour in international politics is driven by national interests. In the realist view, power is the ultimate goal and aid practice is one of the many facets of soft power (Trinidad, Dennis D.: “Japan’s ODA at the Crossroads: Disbursement Patterns of Japan’s Development Assistance to Southeast Asia”, 2007, p.99). When the Japanese government announced the ‘Four Guidelines of ODA’ in 1992, it pledged to use the foreign aid to promote human rights

and democracy. However, the promotion of the universal values did not become the driving force of the Japanese ODA policy in the post-Cold War era. The real driving force behind the Japanese interests towards mainland Southeast Asia was to maintain its position as the regional economic power and seek to expand its international political influence in the world.

### **China Factor in Japan's mainland Southeast Asia Policy**

Japan's mainland Southeast Asian policy in the new millennium has also a clear geopolitical orientation to balance China's growing influence in the region. Its geopolitical nature was obvious in the holding of the summit and ministerial meetings with the Mekong countries. These meetings were a prominent departure from Japan's conventional diplomacy towards Southeast Asia. More importantly, these meetings provided Japan with the same status as China, which has also held ministerial and summit meetings with the five mainland Southeast Asian countries under the GMS Program. China has advanced the North-South corridor, a project to connect Southern China on the North side and Southeast Asian countries like Myanmar, Thailand and Singapore on the South side by railways and highways (Masafumi, IIDA: "Japan-China Relations in East Asia: Rivals or Partners?" , p.135). In this connection, China has played a significant role in developing infrastructure in this region by leading the GMS program and offering economic assistance to the countries in the region. China's rapidly expanding influence in mainland Southeast Asia is forcing Japan to rethink its strategy towards the region.

The Japanese government also shifted its priority in the relationship with mainland Southeast Asian countries to a geopolitical standpoint from a developmental one. The geopolitical nature of Japanese diplomacy towards mainland Southeast Asia was shown in one of the main projects that Tokyo committed to Mekong development. A distinctive project agreed at the First Mekong-Japan Foreign Ministers' meeting was support for logistics and distribution of the EWEC ("Together Toward the Future: Mekong and Japan," 2009, p.3). Japan hoped to retain influence in the development of transport infrastructure by pushing forward the horizontal economic corridors against China initiated vertical economic corridors. The development of the logistic infrastructure aimed at integrating the mainland Southeast Asian countries into the broader regional and international economies. Such an attempt was expected to support the industrial growth of these countries and to reduce their dependence on China.

China's growing weight in mainland Southeast Asia will increase its leverage in the broader stage of East Asian regionalism, particularly the East Asia Community (EAC). The mainland Southeast Asia has become an important area for economic integration in East Asia. On the other hand, the major policy agenda for ASEAN is the creation of the three pillars "ASEAN Community" by 2015. The sound economic and social development of CLMV countries is a prerequisite for realizing the so called economic and socio-cultural communities. Moreover, economic cooperation has become a critical policy agenda at the East Asian level. Economic integration, which premised on market liberalization in trade, investment, and services, depends on the readiness of the least developed members in a group. In Southeast Asia, there exist various types of countries different in terms of economic development. Some countries like CLMV remained far less developed compared to the old ASEAN members (Masafumi, IIDA: "Japan-China Relations in East Asia", p.134-5). This wide development gap among the Southeast Asian countries raised concern that the process of regional integration in East Asia would be constrained. Japan recognizes that development of mainland Southeast Asia is indispensable for achieving the smooth promotion of regional integration in East Asia. With a common interest in forging East Asia cooperation, Japan share a rational reason for assisting less-developed countries in the region that are desperate

for foreign capital to build their infrastructure. Unless Japan can assert itself in mainland Southeast Asia, the unintended beneficiary will be China.

Although the leaders of the mainland Southeast Asia and Japan have come to observe the rise of China as a challenge and not a threat, they are commonly adopting a hedging strategy against the increasing influence of China by enhancing economic and security cooperation within East Asia. In particular, ASEAN is highly sensitive to a single organization exercising outstanding influence in Southeast Asia, and will enhance cooperative relationships with major powers to levy a balancing influence on a particular nation. The uncertainty of China's strategic intention is a major reason for ASEAN to pursue a cooperative relationship with external powers as a measure to hedge China. Moreover, in 2005, there occurred a political incident through which Japan felt China's strong weight on Southeast Asian countries when Japan bid for a permanent seat of the United Nations Security Council. Tokyo expected that all Southeast Asian countries would give it explicit support. However, except for Singapore and Vietnam, none of the countries did not enthusiastically support Japan's effort to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council, largely due to the country's complicated and tense relationship with China. In the early 1990s, as China's economy showed remarkable growth, Japan recognized that the rise of China could weaken Japan's position in mainland Southeast Asia. In fact, Japan is in declining position in both political and economic dimension, while China is improving its position in Southeast Asia in both of them. Politically, the Chinese government has begun numerous policies to strengthen political linkages with Southeast Asian countries. For example, in 2002, China and the ASEAN states agreed on the *Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, 2002*, < <http://www.aseansec.org/13163.htm>>). According to this *Declaration*, they agreed to resolve their territorial and jurisdictional disputes by peaceful means without resorting to the threat or use of force. China's intensifying engagement with the ASEAN countries is just part of Beijing's border strategy of multilateralism in Asia as a whole, apparently aimed at leveraging its growing economic and diplomatic clout to heighten the legitimacy of its role in regional security. Furthermore, Vietnamese qualms over China's role in the South China Sea have apparently lessened considerably, while even Indonesia and the Philippines have become increasingly interested in fostering closer economic relations with Beijing. Owing to its rapid economic development, China has increased its political, economic and military clout regionally and globally.

Economically, after the conclusion of the *ASEAN-China Free Trade Area (ACFTA)* in 2002, Japan also rushed to sign *Free Trade Agreement (FTA)* with the ASEAN countries. Japan was worried about the negative impacts on the networks of Japanese multinational enterprises in mainland Southeast Asia caused by *the ACFTA* which would give Chinese companies preferable conditions in trading with these countries in the region compared with Japanese traders. In order to cope with China's diplomatic offensives and her rapidly increasing ties with Southeast Asia, Japan also started negotiations for *Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs)* with ASEAN as a group and with its members on a bilateral basis. Japan signed *the EPA* with Thailand in November 2007 and Vietnam in December 2008. Moreover, Japan signed *Investment Agreement* with Cambodia in July 2008 and Laos in August 2008. Meanwhile, mainland Southeast Asian countries have had historically mixed feelings about a powerful China and wish to maintain a balance of power with China by strengthening economic ties with Japan.

### **Discussion**

From the perspective of Japan, relations with mainland Southeast Asian countries are important for securing Tokyo's economic leadership in East Asia. Through mainland Southeast Asia, Japan seeks to maintain its position as the regional economic power and



seeks to expand its international political influence in the world. In order to pursue closer relations with mainland Southeast Asian states, Japan has emphasized soft power diplomacy. Like China, foreign aid, economic networking and people-to-people contact via social/cultural exchanges are the core of Japan's soft power resources. Tokyo's foreign aid strategy, ranging from bilateral, sub-regional, to regional assistance plans, successfully secures its political and economic interests in mainland Southeast Asia. Foreign aid, clearly, is poised to play a crucial role in regional and national development.

The disbursement of foreign aid by Tokyo has benefited almost all members of ASEAN. Japan's prudent cultivation of soft power diplomacy has allowed her to link up, and act on behalf of, the ASEAN economic interests in the quest for regional leadership. The increasing emphasis placed by Japan on soft power diplomacy has resulted in an abundance of economic assistance and political support from countries, contributing significantly to the acceleration of ASEAN regionalization in general and promoting the nation-building process of CLMV states in particular.

Japan, though rich in human resources and has painstakingly exerted much investment into their development, is not much its own raw materials. On the other hand, mainland Southeast Asian region is blessed with in natural resources. As for Japan, the combined market, natural resources, raw materials and cheap labour of the mainland Southeast Asia are attractive factors of its economic interests. The rapid expansion of foreign aid to developing countries also could be attributed to Japan's search for new supplies of natural resources to support the needs of its industry and new destinations for its production. Aid giving was one way to get access to natural resources and new markets. The economic drive was a strong motive for Japan to increase its presence abroad, especially in the resource-rich developing CLMV countries.

### **Conclusion**

Foreign aid was not a tool to urge political change on a recipient country, but a practical to tool to establish good relationships with other countries and to gain influence to create favourable circumstances for its national interests. As for Japan, development of the region could bring markets for its goods and new areas for Japanese investment. This is an important reason to why Japan wanted to involve in the development of the region and make the Mekong River its backyard and source of raw materials to sustain its status as the second largest industrial economy in the world up to December 2010. For the near future, it can be seen that Japan will continue to take the initiative role in strengthening ties with the region. Through expansion of development assistance, Japan will contribute to the development of mainland Southeast Asia, which in the end will be of direct benefit to ASEAN, and to the prosperity and stability in East Asia.

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