



EMERGING CHALLENGES NOVEMBER 2018

The Tokyo Strategy: Japan and the Mekong countries invoke the Indo-Pacific

The 9th of October 2018 the Japan-Mekong Summit took place in Tokyo, between Japan and the Mekong countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam).

Two strategic trends drove the summit. One is Japan's growing geo-economic and geopolitical re-engagement in South-East Asia. The other is China's drive for a Maritime Silk Road (MSR) which is coupled with China's increasing military shadow over the disputed South China Sea. The summit followed the dispatch of Japan's flotilla led by the Kaga helicopter destroyer (potentially a light carrier) across the South China Sea in September 2018, and the strengthening of Japan-Vietnam maritime cooperation announced on the 8th of October.

What was noticeable about the 2018 Japan-Mekong summit was the public embrace of the "Indo-Pacific" in their agreed "Tokyo Strategy 2018 for Mekong-Japan Cooperation". This included an entire section titled "Mekong-Japan Cooperation and Free and Open Indo-Pacific", containing four key points.

Firstly it affirmed that *"leaders underscored the importance of continued efforts of each country to reinforce a free and open order based on the rule of law to ensure peace, stability and prosperity in the region"*. This was aimed at China's unwillingness to accept the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) ruling on the South China Sea, which had comprehensively ruled against China in July 2016.

Secondly, the governments *"affirmed that the Mekong region, linking the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, has the geographical advantage of receiving considerable benefits from the realization of a free and open Indo-Pacific"*. This brought out how South-east Asia bridges the two oceans, with crucial trade flows going through the region.

Thirdly, with regard to Japan, *"leaders of the Mekong countries welcomed Japan's policy to realize a free and open Indo-Pacific to contribute to the peace, stability and prosperity in the region and the world"*. The reference to a "free and open Indo-Pacific" points to the specific "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (*jiyude opun'na indo-taiheiyo*) policy formulated and pursued by Japan since 2016, subsequently adopted by the US in 2017, and now welcomed by the Mekong countries – which Beijing criticizes as an anti-China strategy by Tokyo.

Fourthly, *"leaders expressed their determination to steadily implement the Mekong-Japan Cooperation projects which contribute to and complement the promotion of a free*

and open Indo-Pacific". The projects are mostly connectivity infrastructure projects financed by Japan. They are strategically important as they help South-East Asian nations avoid dependency on China's Maritime Silk Road (MSR) initiative, and enable Japan to dilute the geo-economic advantages accruing to China through the MSR.

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