

**JAPAN AND CHINA VYING FOR
ASEAN SUPPORT**

ZHAO Hong

EAI Background Brief No. 866

Date of Publication: 7 November 2013

Executive Summary

1. Japan began to cultivate ties with Southeast Asian countries long before China did, and was once a great power with a dominant position in the region. Yet its regional profile has been on a decline since the 1990s.
2. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is determined to change this trend and has made several trips to Southeast Asia, showing that Japan is turning once again to the region.
3. Unlike previous Japanese leaders of the post-war era, Prime Minister Abe is attempting to transform the mainly economic-oriented Japan-ASEAN relations into a multifaceted cooperation with security and strategic elements, especially maritime security and long-term strategic interests.
4. Although China is a late comer to ASEAN, it is able to catch up with or even surpass Japan in its relations with ASEAN countries in terms of economic integration.
5. Both China and Japan are major trading partners of ASEAN and important players in nearly all ASEAN-led regional schemes that affect investment and trade. But Japan and China have different interests and strategic considerations in developing economic relations with ASEAN, and their investment focus and structures in ASEAN are also different.
6. ASEAN has a long history of dealing with major powers, especially with the US and China during the Cold War. The rivalry of China and Japan has put ASEAN in a difficult position. Finding the right balance in this dilemma is not an easy task.
7. ASEAN's importance to East Asian regionalism is mostly due to its neutrality. While China and Japan distrust each other, ASEAN is believed to be impartial.

This is in line with the ASEAN Charter which clearly spells out the principles of shared commitment and collective responsibilities.

8. In this sense, ASEAN can take into account the interest and preference of all parties, and help mediate disputes and alleviate mistrust between China and Japan.
9. If Tokyo and Beijing can cultivate a habit of cooperation in Myanmar and Mekong river region in particular, there is a possibility that it could elevate relations and soften stance on the isles dispute in the East China Sea.