

Asian Nations Celebrate 30 Years of Cooperation

by Gail G. Billington

Over the past two years, as the Japanese economy has walled in financial crisis, China has asserted an extremely positive role in investment and political cooperation across East and Southeast Asia. While Japan's investments in Asia remained critical, Japan was to a certain extent replaced by China as the spark, the driver for economic development in the region. Now, Japan has moved dramatically to reassert its commitment to the region, while also asserting the importance of cooperation with China.

On Dec. 12-13, Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi joined with the heads of state and government of the ten-nation Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in commemorating 30 years of economic and political relations. Japan's initiative in convening the meeting was celebrated in the signing of the "Tokyo Declaration for the Dynamic and Enduring Japan-ASEAN Partnership in the New Millennium" and the Japan-ASEAN Plan of Action, which includes a list of some 120 items for implementation. In keeping with the dual themes of peace and prosperity, Foreign Minister Yoriko Kawaguchi also signed a statement of intent for Japan to sign ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, a non-aggression pact crafted in 1976; China signed the pact at the annual ASEAN summit in Cambodia, earlier this year.

The participating governments in this anniversary summit adopted the term "special relationship" to describe their 30-year collaboration, an ironic variation on the much-ballyhooed U.S.A.-British "special relationship."

Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi pledged his nation would contribute a total of \$3 billion for projects in Southeast Asia over the next three years. This includes \$1.5 billion for human resource development programs, including 40,000 student and technical expert exchanges, and another \$1.5 billion for the development of the Greater Mekong region, and assistance to the Brunei-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East Asia Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA), a major growth area for Asia as a whole. Further underscoring the point that Japan's initiative is emphatically *not* a "counter China" move, Prime Minister Koizumi and Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri, in her capacity as current Chairman of ASEAN, jointly addressed a press conference at summit's close on Dec. 13, where both leaders directly commented on China's role in the region. Prime Minister Koizumi reaffirmed, "I have always said that China's growth is not a threat, but rather an

opportunity. China's growth will also benefit the growth of Japan and ASEAN countries." President Megawati told the press that China's growing influence should not be treated as a "zero-sum game," but rather, "Both close ASEAN-Japan and ASEAN-China relations are for the good of all." Only Singapore Minister of Trade and Industry George Yeo challenged the leaders' comments, grumbling, "China's advance to ASEAN is a chance, and threat."

On Dec. 16-17, South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun hosted the inaugural meeting of the East Asia Forum, including the ten ASEAN nations and their "Plus 3" partners, China, Japan, and South Korea, along with 50 government representatives and scholars, to discuss further strengthening cooperation among Asian nations. Former heads of state and government attending included South Korean President Kim Dae-jung, Vietnamese Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet, Japanese Prime Minister Hata Tsutomu, and Malaysia's recently retired Tun Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad, who summed up the proceedings: "If we can progress to the stage when the wars and the massacres of the past no longer fill our minds when we meet each other, then peace would become more possible in the region."

Simultaneously on Dec. 16 in Bangkok, Thai Foreign Minister Dr. Surakiart Sathirathai hosted a brief, three-hour meeting of ministers and senior officials from ten Asian and European nations to discuss a plan for peace and national reconciliation in neighboring Myanmar, which plan could lead to the end of one of the longest-running internal political conflicts in Asia since World War II. Dubbed the "Bangkok Process," Myanmar Foreign Minister Min Aung outlined a plan to convene a national convention in 2004 that would draft a constitution, with the participation of all "eight groups" of Myanmar society, including multiple ethnic minorities, academics, and political parties. This includes the opposition National League for Democracy, led by Aung San Suu Kyi, whose father, Gen. Aung San, was the father of independent Burma.

Foreign Minister Surakiart termed the meeting a "breakthrough," telling reporters the proceedings had exceeded his expectations: "The meeting agreed that if there is tangible progress in implementing the process, then international support can be tied to that. . . . This is the beginning of the process to support national reconciliation. I view this as a very successful confidence-building process." Participants in the meeting included UN Secretary General Kofi Annan's special representative to Myanmar, former Malaysian Ambassador Razali Ismail; senior diplomat Ali Alatas, who was long-time Foreign Minister of Indonesia; and representatives from China, India, Japan, Australia, Singapore, Austria, France, Italy, China, and ASEAN.

Glaring by its absence was any representation from the United States, which is a regular participant in the ASEAN Regional Forum, but has imposed severe sanctions on Myanmar.