

Japan-Mekong Cooperation Seminar
Speech by Kentaro Sonoura
Special Advisor to the Prime Minister
Friday, March 23, 2018

1 Opening

It is an honor and a privilege to have this opportunity to speak here at the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace, the leading think tank of Cambodia. I think it is timely to discuss Mekong-Japan cooperation this year during which we will have of the 10th Mekong-Japan Summit Meeting in Tokyo.

Today, I would like to look back on the history of cooperation between the Mekong region countries and Japan, and talk about “the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy” Japan has been promoting.

2 Mekong-Japan Cooperation

10 years have passed since the framework for cooperation between the Mekong region and Japan was launched. We have been implementing a variety of cooperation projects under the framework since the first Mekong-Japan Summit Meeting in 2009. Japan has always considered the Mekong region as an integrated whole and has been providing strong support for its development. Back in 1988, Thai Prime Minister Chatchai Choonhavan expressed his hope to turn Indochina “from a battlefield into a trading market.” Hand in hand with the Mekong countries, Japan has been providing support to promote the economic development of this region, narrow the development gap, and foster investment and trade as Mekong’s partner.

More specifically, Japan hosted the Ministerial Meeting of the Forum for Comprehensive Development of Indochina in Tokyo in 1995. There, we discussed the utilization of private-sector

dynamism for the development of the Indochina Peninsula and the importance of streamlining legal systems and human resources development.

Later, following the Asian currency crisis, Japan presented the “New Concept of Mekong Region Development” on the occasion of the ASEAN Special Summit Meeting held in Tokyo in December, 2003. This concept declared that Japan would attach importance to the Mekong region in the context of the narrowing of the gap within ASEAN and promoting the integration of the region. It proclaimed Japan’s readiness to support the projects that are, among others, key to Japan-Mekong cooperation. They include the construction of “the East-West Economic Corridor” and the development of “the Southern Corridor” into “an Economic Corridor.”

They show visions that align themselves with Mekong-Japan cooperation at present such as strengthening regional integration, attaining sustainable economic growth, and harmonizing with the environment. Simply reflecting on these developments makes it clear that Mekong-Japan cooperation has been undertaken as a continuous and consistent policy.

This long-standing Mekong-Japan cooperation is in line with Japan’s support for Cambodia. Japan has been assisting Cambodia’s regional integration through the strengthening of its connectivity. This is based on Japan’s belief that Cambodia will develop further by identifying itself with the dynamics of development in the region. Specifically, Japan has focused on the improvement of the Southern Economic Corridor which corresponds to Asian Highway 1. The construction of National Route 1, and 5, and “Tsubasa Bridge” are cases in point. More recently, Japan decided to support the improvement of a new container terminal at Sihanoukville Port, Cambodia’s sole deep-water port, when Prime Minister Hun Sen visited Japan in

July last year. What, then, are the things that Japan considers important in supporting these infrastructure development projects?

They are: i) openness, ii) transparency, iii) economy, iv) financial viability of recipient countries, v) safety, vi) job creation and capacity building and finally, vii) social and environmental consideration. The promotion of “Quality infrastructure” in line with international standards will greatly contribute to reinforcing Cambodia’s economic base in a sustainable manner.

Let me go further. Japan’s support is not confined only to the construction of highways and bridges. It will not only facilitate the transportation of goods through improvement in customs procedures at national borders, but also foster human resources that will sustain these infrastructure projects and systems, develop areas along the economic corridors, and generate the flows of people and goods. We are convinced that the creation of this “vibrant” connectivity will be highly instrumental in contributing to the further development of the Mekong region.

From this perspective, we have implemented a human resources development project over two years involving nearly 50,000 people in Asian countries, including Cambodia, in accordance with the Industrial Human Resources Development Cooperation Initiative. A graduate of the Institute of Technology of Cambodia received a Ph.D. from a university in Japan through our country’s human resources development support, then he went on to work as a member of an expressway development project in Phnom Penh. This is a symbolic example of our project to realize “vibrant connectivity.”

As the ASEAN Economic Community has been established and the potential for regional development grows even further, Japan will continue to redouble its support for Cambodia’s regional integration as part of Mekong-Japan cooperation.

What, then, is Mekong-Japan cooperation trying to accomplish in the future? Simply put, it is to realize quality growth of the region to promote the development of the Mekong region as well as ASEAN, and thereby assist the whole of Asia, including Japan, to enjoy prosperity and stability together. And this is what the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy—which I would like to discuss today—is attempting to accomplish.

3 Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy

Before I talk about the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy, I would like you to watch a video clip we have made. (Viewing the video). This strategy is designed to maintain and strengthen a free and open maritime order based on the rule of law in the Indo-Pacific region. In order to do so, it aims to, among other things, promote peace and stability in the entire region centering on ASEAN and turn it into “international public goods,” as well as to improve connectivity between the Asia-Pacific region, which is experiencing dynamic economic growth, and the Middle East and Africa, which are brimming with potential.

The strategy has three pillars, specifically: i) promoting and establishing basic rules including freedom of navigation, rule of law, and free trade; ii) pursuing economic prosperity by improving connectivity through the development of “quality infrastructure” and enhancing the business environment; and iii) securing peace and stability including support for building the capacity of maritime law enforcement authorities and promoting disaster prevention.

The ASEAN countries are key to the realization of this strategy. For Japan, they are extremely important partners in economy, national security, and a wide range of other areas. Making efforts to maintain and strengthen a free and open maritime and economic order based on the rule of law, enhance connectivity in

and outside ASEAN, and address the regional development together with the ASEAN countries is consistent with the goals Mekong-Japan cooperation has been trying to attain for many years.

Certain people take the position that this “strategy” is aimed at containing some countries. But let me stress that that sort of perception is completely wrong.

The strategy is by no means intended for specific countries. We think it is possible to cooperate with any country that supports the principles of the strategy. Also mistaken is the opinion that this strategy threatens ASEAN’s unity and centrality. Let me ask this question: How can we realize this strategy without the cooperation of ASEAN that connects the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean?

Prime Minister Abe has long been stressing the importance of a free and open Indo-Pacific region. For instance, he made a speech in the Parliament of India in 2007 about “the Confluence of the Two Seas,” that is, the Indian and Pacific Ocean.

He is hoping to formulate cooperation projects in line with the principles of this strategy while considering the needs and conditions of each country and thereby contribute to the further development of the Mekong region. Together with you, I would like to consider what the Mekong region needs and what is important for the region, based on our discussions today.

4 Conclusion (Bilateral Relations)

Japan's "Proactive Contribution to peace" based on the principle of international cooperation began here in Cambodia. As you know, my country has been actively participating in peace-building activities in Cambodia through initiatives such as hosting the Tokyo Meeting on Cambodia since the second half of the 1980s. And in 1992, we sent Self-Defense Forces personnel and civilian police officers to the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia in accordance with the International Peace Cooperation Act. During this time, two Japanese citizens lost their precious lives.

One of them was Police Superintendent Haruyuki Takata who participated in peace-keeping operations as a civilian police officer. The other was Atsuhiko Nakata, a UN volunteer who was employed to support national elections. I will visit their memorials later. Despite these tragedies, however, my country continued to support Cambodia which was embarking on an attempt to build a new nation based on democracy. That, more than anything else, was because of our strong determination to contribute to building peace that is the foundation of a free and open international order. And it was because we went through these experiences that Prime Minister Hun Sen's declaration of support for the "Proactive Contribution to Peace" and "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy" was all the more deeply touching. Together with the people of Cambodia, we intend to do all we can to establish a free and open Indo-Pacific.

In closing, let me conclude my speech by expressing my most sincere hope for the further development of the friendly relations between Japan and Cambodia under the strategic partnership. Thank you very much.