

Deep ties tested by changing tides

exclusive interview: Japan's Abe wants more rules for e-commerce

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Japan has formally been a dialogue partner of Asean for over 42 years. Ahead of important summits, including the 22nd Asean-Japan Summit and the 22nd Asean Plus Three Summit today, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe gave an exclusive interview to the Bangkok Post.

Could you talk about your visit this time?

It is my great pleasure to visit Thailand for the first time in six years. At the time of my last visit in 2013, I chose Thailand as a destination for my first official trip abroad, after becoming prime minister again at the end of 2012.

Even before that, I had deep connections with Thailand. In 2009, I visited a school in the mountains of Chiang Mai province as part of my activities as a member of the parliamentary group for building schools for Asian children. I was also involved in establishing the Thai-Nichi Institute of Technology, which I have visited three times and donated Japanese books to.

Every time I visit Thailand, I have a renewed admiration for its remarkable economic growth. Thailand, a model of growth in Asean, is now one of the largest bases for Japanese companies in Southeast Asia. I am pleased to see the close economic partnership between Japan and Thailand.

This relationship is not limited to the economy. Last year, 1.13 million Thais visited Japan while 1.64 million Japanese visited Thailand, both numbers hitting a record high. Since 2014, the government of Japan has been sending Japanese language teachers to Asean countries, including

Thailand, along with conducting cultural exchange activities in the region through "WA Project". We will continue to further enhance exchanges between Japan and Thailand.

This year, the ceremony of the enthronement of His Majesty the Emperor at the Seiden (State Hall) was held in Japan and the coronation of His Majesty the King also took place in Thailand. I would like to express once again my heartfelt congratulations. I have the utmost pleasure to visit Thailand in such a memorable year, when the Imperial and Royal families of both countries experienced such auspicious occasions.

What are some specific projects that Japan would like to take up in the Asean Outlook of the Indo-Pacific?

A free and open Indo-Pacific based on the rule of law is the foundation for peace and prosperity in the region. It is at the confluence of these two seas -- the Pacific and Indian Oceans -- where Asean countries are located. In this context, it is epoch-making that Asean adopted the Asean Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) this June, demonstrating its unity and centrality. Japan highly welcomes this memorable achievement by Asean members.

Ever since I announced the vision of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific in 2016, Japan has been taking actions to promote and establish the rule of law, freedom of navigation and free trade; pursue economic prosperity; and maintain peace and stability of the region.

For example, Japan has cooperated with Asean countries to strengthen their maritime law enforcement capacity by providing patrol vessels. Japan also helped improve connectivity through developing the East-West and Southern Economic Corridors, which benefit the Mekong region including Thailand. The Japan-Asean Technical Cooperation Agreement, which was concluded this year, will enable us to vigorously move such cooperation forward.

For the cooperation under AOIP, Japan will further work together with all Asean countries that share our visions in various areas. They include rules-based maritime security, connectivity enhancement through quality infrastructure investment, and sustainable use of marine resources, including combating illegal fishing. I look forward to cooperating with our Asean friends to enhance peace and prosperity in Asia.

How can Japan pursue the Osaka Track with Asean to ensure the free-flow of data in e-commerce?

In order to unleash the full potential of fast-advancing digitalisation, international rules must meet the needs of the times. To this end, we need to promote Data Free Flow with Trust (DFFT), an approach that allows the free flow of data under rules which we can all count on. Against such backdrop, Japan launched the Osaka Track with the participation of leaders of 27 countries including Thailand at the G20 Summit in Osaka in June this year.

Like-minded countries are now promoting rule-making on trade-related aspects of e-commerce at the WTO to advance the Osaka Track. A total of 80 like-minded countries, including Thailand and other Asean countries such as Singapore, Laos, Malaysia and Myanmar are involved. In close cooperation Asean under the Osaka Track, Japan will redouble its efforts to achieve substantial progress by the 12th WTO Ministerial Conference in June 2020.



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