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**EAST ASIA SUMMIT OR ASEAN PLUS EIGHT –
AN INSIGHT INTO ASIAN REGIONALISM
FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF JAPAN**

**SZCZYT AZJI WSCHODNIEJ CZY ASEAN PLUS
OSIEM – WGLĄD W AZJATYCKI REGIONALIZM
Z PERSPEKTYWY JAPONII**

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Summary: The article discusses the project of East Asia Summit – EAS, a manifestation of Asian diplomatic regionalism, launched in 2005 as a political forum of countries located in the region of East Asia, consistently evolving toward an Asia-Pacific platform of dialogue due to formal membership of Russia and the United States since 2011. A year before there was a discussion about the possibility of the constitution of the ASEAN Plus Eight formula. The author attempts to study the genesis of the EAS project, indicating an issue of membership in the regional diplomatic framework, while addressing Japan's optics.

Keywords: East Asia Summit, ASEAN Plus Eight, Asian diplomatic regionalism, Japan.

Streszczenie: W artykule podjęto problematykę projektu Szczyt Azji Wschodniej (EAS), stanowiącego manifestację azjatyckiego regionalizmu dyplomatycznego. Projekt ten zainicjowano w 2005 roku jako polityczne forum skupiające kraje regionu Azji Wschodniej, ewoluujące stopniowo ku formule platformy dialogu Azji i Pacyfiku ze względu na przystąpienie w 2011 roku do omawianej struktury Rosji i Stanów Zjednoczonych. Rok wcześniej rozpoczęto dyskusję o możliwości ukonstytuowania formuły ASEAN Plus Osiem. Autor studiuje genezę projektu EAS, wskazując na problematykę członkostwa w regionalnych strukturach dyplomatycznych z perspektywy drugiej co do wielkości gospodarki azjatyckiej – Japonii.

Słowa kluczowe: Szczyt Azji Wschodniej, ASEAN Plus Osiem, azjatycki regionalizm dyplomatyczny, Japonia.

1. Introduction

Diplomatic regionalism has many manifestations. It can take the formula of summit, forum or meeting, platform of dialogue involving high representatives of member countries, namely, heads of state or government and ministers of foreign affairs. From the perspective of countries demonstrating leadership ambitions within a region, regional diplomatic frameworks can serve as a source of legitimacy of the hegemonic position – a supplier of the framework, an organizer of the summits, both within the region and beyond.

In this context, Asian diplomatic regionalism seems to be significantly interesting due to competition over influences within “Asian triad” of regionalism¹, within Southeast Asian, East Asian and Asia-Pacific region. In the Southeast Asian region candidate country is unquestionably the largest economy of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations – ASEAN, namely, Indonesia, at the level of East Asia – Japan and China, while in the Asia-Pacific – hegemonic position is traditionally assigned to the United States, although taking into account the aspirations of the emerging global power, China. Regional puzzles are complemented by strategic alliances of Japan and the United States on the one hand, and Russia and China on the other. As a result, Asian regionalism becomes an arena of diplomatic confrontation of emerging and “outgoing” powers².

As pointed out by Habeeb [1988, p. 15], Zartman [1997, p. 230], Pfetsch [1995, p. 85], power may be defined as capacity of inspiring the other actors’ actions that would not be undertaken otherwise. Therefore, power relations seem to be asymmetrical due to hierarchy observed among the states engaged, for instance, in the negotiation process to design new diplomatic framework. Parties engaged in such a process may represent a diversified set of economic, military, or social resources, thus, power may be understood as possessive value, following Hobbes, however, power may result from relations between political actors, as found by Lockean School. Namely, power can be defined as capacity of politicians, states, to let others act in accordance with their expectations.

¹ Nye assumed that “regionalism in the descriptive sense is the formation of interstate associations or groupings on the basis of regions; and in doctrinal sense, the advocacy of such formations” [Nye 1968, vii, xii]. Katzenstein questioned spatial context of the region, perceiving it as a social construction [Katzenstein 2000, p. 354]. Regionalist policy, associated with regionalism as a process, may be understood as a policy focused on provision of regional frameworks, designed in the most favored manner in the context of interests of potential member states, including benefits, and costs of future membership [Hamanaka 2010, p. 5]. Unquestioned challenge faced by regionalist policy is the response to potentially unfavorable regional frameworks proposed by other states, so as the exclusion from such a structure.

² However, the issues of declining Western power, as well as global implications of the US – China rivalry seem to be too complex and multifaceted to formulate categorical judgments in this matter at this stage.

When studying regionalist diplomatic projects involving Asian states, the author indicates the importance of both *power-as-possession* and *power-as-relation* approaches³ to understand the role of China's economic potential, as well as Russia's military capabilities accompanied by economic influences within energy markets to constitute a regional power status. On the other hand, both American's and Japan's power status seem to originate in economic resources of highly industrialized, knowledge-based economies, as well as military and social resources. Noteworthy, Japan's scarce natural resources induced capital expansion within emerging Asia that deepened mutual economic interdependencies and enhanced international division of labor. US has been found as a stabilizer⁴ by various regional actors, including Japan, affected by the anarchy of international security system after the collapse of bipolar Cold War system.

The perspective of Japan is, according to the author, particularly interesting because of the traditional role of this country in the Asian region, so as eroding influences in the face of the rising power of the great Northeast Asian neighbour, namely, China, that translates into a progressive polarization in bilateral relations between Tokyo and Beijing. This in turn is reflected both in the dynamics of regionalist initiatives both at Southeast Asian, East Asian, and Asia-Pacific region. It appears that Northeast Asia is the pole of critical game of interests, that involves ASEAN members⁵, "Plus Six" countries⁶, as well as two Asia-Pacific powers, namely Russia, and the United States.

The article discusses the project of East Asia Summit – EAS, launched in 2005 as a political forum of countries located in the region of East Asia, consistently evolving toward an Asia-Pacific platform of dialogue due to formal membership of Russia and the United States since 2011. A year before there was a discussion about the possibility of the constitution of the ASEAN Plus Eight formula. The author attempts to study the genesis of the EAS project, indicating an issue of membership in the regional diplomatic framework, addressing Japan's optics.

2. Japan's role in the Asian diplomatic regionalism

From a historical perspective, Japan proved to be highly active both as a supplier and a participant of regional diplomatic frameworks established by other countries in the

³ For further studies see: [Pfetsch, Landau 2000, pp. 21-42].

⁴ Stabilizing state may be associated with Kindleberger's concept of hegemon, stipulating that it is a state powerful enough to deliver internationally shared public goods such as regional institutions [Kindleberger 1973, p. 305].

⁵ Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Viet Nam.

⁶ In addition to China, Japan and the ASEAN countries, ASEAN Plus Six framework is co-created by Australia, India, New Zealand and the Republic of Korea.

region since the late 50s, when Tokyo consequently followed the way back to the international community⁷.

As already mentioned, the concept of diplomatic frameworks is not conclusive, as there are hidden underneath both strictly political forums, as well as platforms of dialogue centred also on various aspects of the economic nature. Therefore, it is important to indicate the participants of such frameworks. Among the common formulas of diplomatic frameworks there are as follows regional meetings of the leaders/heads of state (Prime Ministers, presidents, etc.) or foreign ministers. In case of the latter, analogous to the regional summit, discussions may address, among others, important economic issues.

Among regional diplomatic frameworks engaging Japan there were as follows:

1. West Pacific Summit (1963).
2. Ministerial Conference for Economic Development in Southeast Asian – MCEDSEA (1966).
3. Asia Pacific Council – ASPAC (1966).
4. Miki's Asia Pacific Policy Sphere (1966).
5. Asian Summit (1976).
6. Fukuda Doctrine/Japan – ASEAN Summit (1977).
7. Pacific Basin Proposal (1978).
8. APEC Summit (1993).
9. ASEM Summit (1996).
10. Annual Japan – ASEAN Summit (1997).
11. East Asia Summit (2005).

The above-mentioned projects assumed mostly a formula of regional summits, except MCEDSEA and ASPAC, which took the form of foreign ministers' meeting. Of these, only three were not an original proposal of the government of Japan, namely ASPAC, APEC and ASEM Summit. It should be emphasized that some of the abovementioned initiatives disappointed regional actors and discouraged attention.

The vast majority of projects were implemented under the auspices of the Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), with marginal involvement of other government bodies. Very often, the initiator of the project was the Prime Minister, however, what appeared to be critical is the ability to cooperate between head of government and MOFA.

3. East Asia Summit (EAS)

The starting point for the analysis of the EAS project may be an East Asian Community concept (EAC) submitted by Japan's Prime Minister Koizumi (2001-2006) during a series of visits to the countries of Southeast Asia in 2002. It was a

⁷ Critical in the context of Japan's return to international community were the accession to the Colombo Plan in 1954 and the United Nations two years later.

part of the diplomatic offensive of the Japan's head of government, aiming to strengthen the country's regional position challenged by emerging hegemon, namely, China. Initiatives undertaken to build a strategic political and economic relations with ASEAN, were accompanied by efforts to ensure Japan's permanent membership in the UN Security Council and unequivocal support for the US intervention in Iraq in 2003.

It is worth noting that less than two months before the visit of Japan's Prime Minister Beijing proposed free trade agreement (FTA) to ASEAN. According to joint statement of ASEAN – China Summit in 2001, parties agreed to establish FTA till the end of 2010. Tokyo's response was the vision of the region given by Koizumi during his visit in Singapore, frequently compared in terms of importance to the Fukuda Doctrine. The vision of an open ASEAN – Japan partnership has been drawn under the project of new regional grouping, namely, East Asian Community (EAC) [Bobowski 2014, p. 84]. Prime Minister explained the need to extend cooperation within East Asia beyond ASEAN – Japan framework, involving China, the Republic of Korea, Australia, New Zealand, and potentially India. Koizumi stressed the important role of the United States in the context of both regional security architecture and economic interdependencies [MOFA 2002].

The representatives of MOFA addressed problematic issue of membership and “East Asia” term. In his concept Koizumi found Japan and ASEAN as the pillars of the future community, placing China next to Australia and New Zealand among the “indigenous members”. Noteworthy, there was a place for the United States, but somehow in the “second row”, analogous to India, in the future community. Makoto Taniguchi, former Japanese ambassador to the UN explained, that the idea of the community project is to open the formula of ASEAN Plus Three to engage Australia and New Zealand, and in the future, perhaps, the United States.

During special ASEAN – Japan Summit in December 2003, Tokyo openly demanded support of ASEAN states for Koizumi's project. In the so-called Tokyo Declaration of the summit, Japan and ASEAN pledged to cooperate closely, recognizing importance of the future East Asian Community [MOFA 2003]. Worth mentioning, ASEAN – Japan Summit was organized in parallel to ASEAN Summit in Tokyo, then, for the first time in the history outside Southeast Asia. Furthermore, no invitation was sent to China and the Republic of Korea. Thus, Japan appeared to gain prestige and boost influences within the region. Last but not least, previous ASEAN – Japan Summit took place less than two months earlier in Jakarta. According to Taniguchi from MOFA, it has been considered as diplomatic triumph of Tokyo over Beijing.

On the other hand, China attempted to strengthen the ASEAN Plus Three framework and the consequent establishment of East Asia Summit (EAS), where Northeast Asian countries would not possess only the status of “guests”, but full members. In June 2004, during ASEAN – China Foreign Ministers Meeting in Qingdao, Beijing officially expressed its willingness to establish EAS and organize

the first summit [ASEAN 2004b]. It is worth noting, that the said meeting took place in the occasion of the Asian Cooperation Dialogue (ACD) forum, that has been actively attended by Japan. China and ASEAN have confirmed in a joint statement the need for further development of cooperation in East Asia for the purposes of constitution of community based on the ASEAN Plus Three mechanism. Japanese media agreeably ignored this fact.

During ASEAN Plus Three Foreign Ministers Meeting in July 2004 in Jakarta, Beijing decided to submit a proposal of EAS covering the same regional states [ASEAN 2004a]. Japan questioned the concept of membership as outlined above by postulating an extension of the spectrum of member states beyond the structure of ASEAN Plus Three. In order to support MOFA's reasoning, Tokyo prepared an analysis dedicated to the issues of East Asian cooperation, pointing to the institutional shortcomings of the Chinese proposal in terms of goals, agendas and membership of the EAS. Experts of Japan's MOFA questioned the idea of appointing regional framework duplicating de facto the concept of ASEAN Plus Three, while addressing a possible extension of membership in accordance to Japan's East Asian Community [MOFA 2004, pp. 16-17].

As a result, the meeting in Jakarta did not result in any consensus around the China's concept of EAS. During the ASEAN Summit in November 2004 in Vientiane, followed by ASEAN Plus Three Summit, the first EAS meeting was planned for 2005 in Kuala Lumpur. Due to the lack of agreement among ASEAN Plus Three countries, concerning the organization of the second meeting of EAS in China, no further discussion was made upon agenda and membership issues.

The ASEAN Plus Three Foreign Ministers Meeting in May 2006 in Kyoto, attended by Australia, New Zealand and India, seemed to confirm the triumph of the Japanese concept of EAS membership. The proposal made by Nobutaka Machimura, then Japan's Minister of Foreign Affairs, assuming provision of observer status in EAS to the United States, was met with a hostile adoption of representatives of the Malaysian government, organizing the first East Asia Summit. Paradoxically, however, Washington did not support the concept of Machimura, explaining unofficially that the dominant country in the Pacific region should not sit in the second row during the session to "take notes".

The proposal of the observer status for the United States was an original initiative of Tokyo. Moreover, Washington did not have prospects for full membership in EAS when not signing the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC), which is considered as *sine qua non* to enter aforementioned regional framework [Hamanaka 2010, p. 73]. After all, some opinion leaders in Japan persuaded as to the necessity of granting full membership in the EAS to the United States. However, while some American experts perceived observer status as a good option to engage in a new regional framework, government officials categorically rejected the formula that excluded full membership.

4. East Asia Summit vs. ASEAN Plus Three

Beijing skillfully used the Japan's concept of enlargement of membership in the EAS, willing to engage its own allies in the framework. The first EAS meeting was attended by Russia, provided with the status of observer. Additionally, China, accompanied by Malaysia, sought to constitute a narrow formula of the EAS as a platform for dialogue, which under the circumstances of a wide range of members would act destructively, as indicated by experiences of APEC. According to Ravenhill, extended scope of EAS membership would be effective only when being inspired by advancing agenda of cooperation. Therefore, China's proposal of engaging, next to the United States, also the European Union (EU), could potentially make Japan's idea of going beyond the framework of ASEAN Plus Three counterproductive⁸.

Diplomatic Sino – Japanese rivalry appeared to intensify. When having agreed to extend the EAS grouping beyond the structure of ASEAN Plus Three, China unexpectedly proposed to build East Asian Community (EAC) on the basis of ASEAN Plus Three Summit. The move was considered as a consequence of Beijing's concerns regarding influences within much broader group of EAS members. Meanwhile, Tokyo opted for the extended formula of EAC in accordance with EAS concept of membership, being aware of particular opportunities to counter Chinese influence together with Australia and India.

According to the final declaration of the ASEAN Plus Three Summit of 12 December 2005, participating states declared to organize regular annual meetings in the formula of ASEAN Plus Summit in conjunction with the ASEAN Summit, for the purposes of goal orientation and political legitimacy of East Asian Community project built on the foundation of ASEAN Plus Three mechanism [ASEAN 2005]. In the official statement issued by the participants of the first East Asia Summit held two days later, the central role of EAS framework was stressed in the process of regional community building to put its activities in a broad spectrum of components of evolving regional architecture [ASEAN 2005a].

Aforementioned declaration assigned ASEAN Plus Three Summit a key role in the development of the EAC, however, intense efforts of Japan's diplomacy led to bring this kind of argument, albeit indirectly, in the final communique of the EAS meeting. MOFA officially recognized both frameworks as equivalent, moreover, compromise was reached on the regular annual meetings, rejecting China's proposal of two-year cycle. Noteworthy, the first EAS meeting legitimated ASEAN's criteria of membership, assuming critical importance of TAC as a precondition to enter new regional diplomatic framework. Thus, both Tokyo and Beijing had no ability

⁸ Worth mentioning, Pakistan was proposed as a potential EAS member three times: by Malaysia in 2006, Japan in 2007, and Viet Nam in 2010; Mongolia – by Malaysia in 2006, Bangladesh – by Japan in 2007. Arab League expressed its will to have a role of observer in 2008, a year after such a declaration was made by the European Union.

to influence the membership issues beyond the will of ASEAN countries, while possible enlargement of EAS was expected to take place on “case by case” basis.

Intense competition on the diplomatic field between Tokyo and Beijing, focusing in particular over the issue of membership in regional frameworks engendered the criticism of some observers, pointing to the problem of energy waste to weaken influences of rival instead of substantive debate on the advantages of proposed East Asian regionalist projects, including the efficiency of formulas involving thirteen countries of ASEAN Plus Three or sixteen members attending EAS forum. Operating in both frameworks in parallel seemed to be unnecessary.

Cossa et al. argued that East Asian regionalism requires a functional, substantive approach of the “coalition of will”, in place of political disputes [Cossa, Tay, Lee 2005, p. 22]. Worth mentioning, however, is a discussion on the agenda of the proposed regional framework which requires prior selection of potential participants of the project.

The United States maintained far-reaching cautious about the EAS framework. On 30 November 2004, as a consequence of a decision to hold the first summit in Kuala Lumpur, Michael Reiss, a representative of the US State Department, stated, when visiting Tokyo, that the United States as the Pacific power were interested in East Asia. Thus, the possible exclusion from regional cooperation frameworks would be undesirable [Johnson 2005]. The problem was the ambiguous stance of the representatives of the American government on the involvement of their country in the East Asian Community. For example, former US Assistant Secretary of State, Richard Armitage, argued in May 2005, that the absence of the United States in the East Asian project was far from unfavorable, while his successor at this position – Randal Schreiber, who was responsible for the East Asian region, argued few months later, that as long as Asian regional cooperation was a part of a wider global and regional agreements, ie. the WTO or APEC, the direct involvement of Washington in the East Asian regionalism was not a problem. At the same time, however, Schreiber expressed concerns about the consequences of such a policy, addressing an example of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), established by China to fight against terrorism, that significantly diminished Washington’s influences in Central Asia. As Fareed Zakaria argued, no one would defend the interests and agendas of the absent US party by negotiating table. Furthermore, EAS would promote Beijing at the expense of Washington’s absence [Newsweek 2005].

Nevertheless, the United States did not apply for membership in the EAS, in part because of far unsatisfactory observer status, and partly due to lack of readiness to sign the TAC. In addition, Washington had the opportunity to influence indirectly meetings’ agenda through their close allies, notably Japan and Australia. It should be noted, however, that the strategy of “control from the backseat,” and thus the impact on EAS, could prove to be highly ineffective.

Interestingly, Indonesia – ASEAN’s largest economy, unexpectedly supported Japan’s stance to counter China. Being concerned about the growth of Beijing’s

influence within the framework of ASEAN Plus Three, and hence, gradual erosion of ASEAN's position in the Asian regionalism, Jakarta opted for the Japanese, extended concept of membership in a new regional diplomatic framework. Similarly, the central role has been attributed to the East Asia Summit rather than ASEAN Plus Three, paving the way for formal engagement of Australia, New Zealand, and potentially also India. Noteworthy, Jakarta officially opposed China's idea of inviting Russia to the new regional diplomatic framework. Thus, efforts to create a counterweight to the position of China in the Asian diplomatic regionalism, were inspired by serious concerns of the biggest ASEAN member state regarding the future of Southeast regionalism, dramatically challenged by the Asian financial crisis of 1997-1998.

The vision of ASEAN Community has been drawn in the declaration of ASEAN Summit held in October 2003 in Bali, expected to embrace three pillars: political and security, economic and social-cultural cooperation [ASEAN 2003]. Noteworthy, Indonesia, responsible for the area of security, submitted to the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in June 2004 a document entitled "ASEAN Security Community Plan of Action", however, lacking appropriate support of the member states [ASEAN 2004]. During the ASEAN Summit in November 2004 a modified version of the Indonesia's Vientiane Action Programme was agreed [ASEAN 2005b, pp. 1-4]. Importantly, the implementation of the ASEAN Community project was accelerated due to a decision made during ASEAN Summit in Cebu in January 2007 by five years – from 2020 to 2015 [ASEAN 2007].

5. East Asia Summit vs. ASEAN Plus Eight

The fifth meeting of EAS countries in October 2010 in Hanoi was attended for the first time by senior representatives of the US and Russia, namely, US Secretary of State and the Russian Foreign Minister. This happened as a result of the provisions of the ASEAN Summit in April 2010 in Hanoi, according to which participants "recognized and supported the mutually reinforcing roles of the ASEAN Plus Three process, the East Asia Summit (EAS), and such regional forums as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), to promote the East Asian cooperation and dialogue towards the building of a community in East Asia (...) encouraged Russia and the US to deepen their engagement in an evolving regional architecture, including the possibility of their involvement with the EAS (...) taking into account the Leaders-led, open and inclusive nature of the EAS" [ASEAN 2010]. As a result of the Hanoi declaration, next EAS meeting in November 2011 in Bali was attended by both Asia – Pacific powers as formal members, thereby extending the spectrum of EAS members to eighteen countries.

The inaugural occurrence of the US president Barack Obama at the sixth EAS meeting in 2011 became a part of the diplomatic offensive of his presidency heavily focused on the Asia – Pacific region. The so-called "return to Asia" embraced, next

to EAS meeting, i.e. participation in the APEC summit and meetings with ASEAN leaders. Upcoming American-led mega-regional trade framework, namely, Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), that excludes China so far, advancing military cooperation with Australia, historical visit of the then US Secretary of State in Myanmar, and, last but not least, calling China to respect fundamental principles, were found as a source of pressure on Beijing [Xinhuanet 2011] to “seize the initiative” in the Asian region. Beijing’s rejection of the US proposal to discuss the issue of disputed territories in the South China Sea during the EAS meeting seemed to confirm the “offensive” intentions of American diplomacy [BBC News 2011; Taiwan News 2011] naturally, being supported, more or less officially, by, among others, Japan, India, Australia, and most of ASEAN members.

EAS membership of the United States and Russia inspired discussions about the role those two influential countries may play in the aforementioned triad of Asian regionalism. Having regard the “solid” representation of East Asia in the G20 grouping (China, Japan, India, Australia, the Republic of Korea, Indonesia) it is hard to neglect the fact of relocating “global pole of gravity” to this part of the world. On the other hand, the “Asian voice” is effectively offset, if not subdued, by European, American and Euroasian G20 members, including, among others, NAFTA countries, the European Union, Latin America, Russia, Turkey, South Africa and Saudi Arabia.

In this context, particular attention has been assigned to ASEAN, most successful grouping in terms of regional integration within developing world. Moreover, ASEAN’s importance results also from the size of the population, economic success and strategic location. When establishing formulas of ASEAN Plus Three, ASEAN Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit, ASEAN has been found as the core of each, assuming its centrality in the Asian regionalism.

As an Indonesian scholar, Hadi Soesastro, argued, “(..) East Asia has not been short of big ideas and visions but it has failed to organise itself to turn those ideas and visions into clear directions and workable plans for the region itself and in shaping the world (...)” [Kesavapany 2010]. Thus, the strategic orientation of ASEAN as the core of Asian regionalism is to guarantee a solid basis for future regional architecture, which – according to some participants of the aforementioned ASEAN Summit in April 2010 in Hanoi – could provide the ASEAN Plus Eight formula in place of an expanded concept of EAS. As already mentioned, such a structure could provide a pragmatic solution to the problem associated with the regular presence of the leaders of the United States and Russia in Asia for the purposes of participating in the annual summits. The absence of designated leaders could in fact encourage the gradual erosion of the diplomatic forum involving eighteen countries of the Asia-Pacific region under the banner of EAS, undermining the central role of ASEAN in the Asian regionalism, so, the organization of meetings of ASEAN Plus Eight formula every two to three years on the occasion of the APEC summit held in Asian region, was to serve as a compromise solution.

Formal adoption of both countries as EAS members in 2011 and the course of subsequent summits proved logistical considerations to be misleading, when American interests are at stake in the Asia-Pacific region, in particular in the context of growing competition with China. Barack Obama participated in EAS meetings in 2011, 2012 and 2014, while being represented by the then Secretary of State only in 2013. In the meanwhile, however, the Russian president missed all the meetings, delegating Foreign Minister, except for 2014, when the summit was attended by the Russia's Prime Minister.

The abandonment of the idea of ASEAN Plus Eight in favor of an expanded concept of the EAS does not rule out the former, although the accession of the United States and Russia to the elite group of "ASEAN Plus" partners could paradoxically undermine the existing concept of regional economic integration centered on ASEAN, as there is no certainty as to maintaining the centrality of the grouping in the enlarged formula of Asia-Pacific regionalism.

The progressive Asian trade regionalism, manifested by two competitive mega-regional trade projects, namely, US-led Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and China-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), may potentially divide ASEAN into pro- TPP and pro- RCEP coalitions, due to overlapping membership of ASEAN - 4, namely Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore, and Viet Nam. Moreover, any backwardness in the implementation of the aforementioned ASEAN Community, which in turn may broaden development gap and undermine convergence of least developed member states, namely, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Viet Nam, would constitute ASEAN of "two speeds". This, in turn, would lead to internal frictions and gradual erosion of ASEAN.

6. Conclusions

Japan used to be active in the field of regional diplomatic frameworks, both in terms of supplying and sponsoring such structures.

The East Asia Summit (EAS) is an example of regional diplomatic framework that has evolved toward mega-regional Asia – Pacific grouping, though centered around ASEAN. The analysis pointed to the critical context of membership, which determines the content of regional framework's agenda.

Escalating tensions between US and China, so as Japan and China and US and Russia, can make ASEAN – indicated as the institutional core of Asian diplomatic regionalism – a "hostage" of the interests of the large Asia-Pacific countries. Thus, both expanded EAS concept or unrealized at this moment ASEAN Plus Eight proposal could undermine the existing policy of regional economic integration within East Asia, so successfully implemented under the auspices of ASEAN, leading to, at least, its "dilution". As already mentioned, mega-regional trade projects of TPP and RCEP, that exposed divergent preferences of ASEAN member states, should be a serious warning to the leaders of the discussed regional grouping. Rivalry of global

and regional powers for influence inside ASEAN does not preclude the possibility of a purely instrumental use of this grouping, its position and legitimacy built up for decades, however, powerless in the face of hegemonic aspirations of East Asian and Asia-Pacific powers and their allies.

In this context, dual membership of Japan in TPP and RCEP may potentially engage ASEAN - 4 in the Tokyo-led coalition to counter Beijing's influence within both Southeast Asian, East Asian and Asia-Pacific trade and diplomatic regionalism in the interest of US hegemon.

On the other hand, when studying the example of regional diplomatic project, namely East Asia Summit, it appears that Tokyo is able to challenge Northeast Asian neighbour not through the provision or entering competitive framework, but through the extension of membership in EAS, that enables to control and shape the agenda. Thus, acting within the same regional or mega-regional framework with the United States to exclude or, at least, diminish Chinese influence, has been found by Japan as a useful instrument of intra-regional rivalry.

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