

Sebastian Bobowski

Wrocław University of Economics

e-mail: sebastian.bobowski@ue.wroc.pl

**JAPAN'S VISION OF EAST ASIAN REGIONALISM –
TOWARD SOFT BALANCING STRATEGY**

Summary: East Asia is undoubtedly the region of unprecedented scale of dynamism of events, both in the economic and political terms. Growing economic power of China is nowadays a serious threat to the traditional regional diplomatic leadership of Japan, which has internal problems. Mutual distrust boosted by historical resentment contributed to the constitution of competing visions of East Asian regionalism, drawing, on the one hand, on the realm of values as the foundation of a common identity, and solidarity, on the other, on different concepts of membership of the Southeast, and South Asian countries, including the representatives of Oceania. Promoted through the path of soft diplomacy, Japanese vision of a broad community, involving, in addition to ASEAN, democratic countries of the South and Oceania, built on the foundation of universal values of the Western world, provided a natural counterbalance to the narrower, more conservative, strictly Asian concept of China. The involvement of the core of ASEAN, namely Singapore, Vietnam, Malaysia, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand, together with Canada, Mexico, Chile and Peru in the Trans-Pacific Partnership, is confronted with Chinese counter-proposal in the form of Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, which indicates that the soft strategy game has gone up to a higher level. The coming years will resolve the dilemma which vision of economic regionalism is more attractive and vital. The expected breakthroughs include, in particular, the conclusion of a trilateral China–Japan–the Republic of Korea free trade agreement, the implementation of the ASEAN Economic Community, the intensification of discussions around the RCEP project, and finally – the evolution of ambivalent, so far, Chinese stance towards TPP project. In the case of the latter, it is critical to observe the dialogue between China and ASEAN at the sectoral level, initiated in 2011, implementation of the Foreign Investment Protection Agreement concluded with Canada in 2012, and finally – negotiations on the free trade agreement with Australia. Undoubtedly, narrow Asian formula of regionalism in East Asia has lost its importance in the face of both intra- and extra-regional challenges.

Keywords: Japan, East Asian regionalism, soft balancing strategy.

DOI: 10.15611/e21.2014.4.05

1. Introduction

Japan has been a regional leader in terms of economic policy and development for decades, but the acceleration of the globalization in the 90s transformed the Asian landscape. Rapidly growing China exposed the largest Asian economy to serious threats of gradual erosion of both regional and extra regional influence. However, Japan, strategically tied with the United States to sustain hard balance, has recently redefined its role to manifest massive support for the regional integration project, centered around ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations)¹. Consequently, soft balancing strategy to counter Chinese regional expansion has been prioritized.

Contemporary the approach of Japan towards regionalism may be perceived through the prism of openness and multilateralism. An important shift toward the redefinition of foreign policy has been observed after August 2009, when the Democratic Party of Japan replaced the Liberal Democratic Party as the leading political force. Since then, mainly due the determination of the former prime minister Hatoyama, Japanese diplomacy toward East Asia has gained new impetus, so as the notion of regional cooperation.

The aim of the article is to study Japanese vision of East Asian regionalism, its evolution through decades, and perspectives regarding recent dynamics.

2. Looking backward

Noteworthy, Japanese foreign policy has evolved through the decades, starting with the accession to the United Nations in 1956. It was regarded as a breakthrough for the postwar Japan, dealing with isolation and heavy reconstruction. Applying for UN membership was combined with three basic principles adopted to revitalize intra- and extra- regional, political, security and economic relations: UN centered diplomacy, openness and cooperation with the free world and finally – enforcement of Asian identity of Japanese nation. Both the first and the second principle led to successful restoration of Japanese presence at the international stage, strong development of strategic ties with the western world, with the special regard to a security ally – the United States. However, the latter one remained aside to some extent due to domestic prerogatives. It should be noted that Japan sought war reparation agreements with East Asian nations since the 50s, and finally normalized diplomatic relations with Seoul and Beijing at the turn of the 60s and the 70s.

Low-key diplomacy expressed through the series of multilateral engagements within Asian region, following a diplomatic vision of Miki of the Asia – Pacific a. d. 1967, was oriented on the consolidation of Asian states under Japan's leadership. In 1976, Japan, as the only non-western country, became a member of the Group

¹ ASEAN: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam.

of Seven (G7) dramatically strengthening its status as an Asian power, nation, and a partner for East Asian neighbours. However, Japan was traditionally reluctant to strong orientation on the narrow vision of Asian regionalism and values, manifesting preferences towards a wider Asia-Pacific concept of the region. Recognizing U.S. opportunism towards any kind of multilateral initiatives of Tokyo within Asian region that may potentially threaten vital interests of Washington, the bridging role of Japan between the East and the West tend to be questioned. Inoguchi defined Japan's position as "unwittingly half-hearted and soft unless it was blessed by the U.S." [Inoguchi 2002, p. 30].

The core of Japanese policy toward East Asia was composed of three basic principles, pointed out in *Fukuda doctrine* (1977) [Tanaka, Liff 2009, p. 2]:

- peaceful cooperation with the Southeast Asian nations to build prosperity while rejecting status of military power,
- mutual trust between regional governments, and
- equal partnership in the name of the regional solidarity, with special emphasis put on the ASEAN nations, perceived as the leading organisation.

The aforementioned assumptions became inherent components of primary idea of legitimating Japanese initiative in a region while losing economic superiority. As it was said by Sohn, Japan is opting for "[...] relationship with Asian partners not solely based on material bonds of interdependence, but on strong spritual bonds of friendship and cooperation in the region" [Sohn 2010, pp. 8-9].

Regional leadership has been frequently manifested through a proactive and supportive role of Japan when facing financial crises, terrorism threats, environmental and human rights problems, energy challenges or nuclear proliferation dilemmas. It should be noted, however, that historical cards are still on the table, inducing, occasionally, anti-Japanese sentiments for example in Beijing or Seoul. As Pyle and Rozman argued, through decades, even though Japanese elites have manifested self-criticism a lot of times, the strength of distrust of the regional neighbours' societies decreased slightly, with special regard to the Republic of Korea [Pyle 2007, p. 300; Rozman 2007, pp. 244-245].

Moreover, the U.S. – Japan ally has become a core component of Japanese policy toward East Asia since the 90s, when the North Korean nuclear crisis and the Taiwan Straits crisis emerged, sustaining peace and stability for the East Asian nations.

3. New regionalism in East Asia

At the turn of the centuries, East Asian regionalism attracted massive attention and political vitality. As Rozman stated, however, even the Asian Financial Crisis 1997-1998, resulted in a relatively modest and assertive steps of Tokyo towards boosting East Asian regionalism, inducing, as argued by Terada and Oga, frustration resulted of inability to play any significant role as a regional power [Terada 2003; Oga 2004]. Japanese project of the Asian Monetary Fund to manage liquidity shortages within

the region was blocked by the United States. However, Tokyo became a leader in terms of emerging bilateral swap agreements with the Republic of Korea, China, Malaysia, and Singapore, while promoting Chiang Mai Initiative. In the following years, the series of Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) with Southeast Asian states were proposed, including ASEAN, Australia and India [Webster 2007, pp. 458-541].

On the other hand, according to Higgott, Beijing's pragmatic activities within the region manifested through the provision of low-interest loans in the Southeast Asia, the rejection of International Monetary Fund and the U.S. neoliberal anti-crisis measures, considerably strengthening Chinese influence and reputation at the expense of Japan [Higgott 1998]. Following Lampton, Garrison, Cho, and Jeong, Beijing started to use a soft power strategy to build its position as a benign, constructive regional actor [Lampton 2005, pp. 317-319; Garrison 2005, pp. 25-30; Cho, Jeong 2008, pp. 453-472], and "[...] non-threatening regional power" [Shambaugh 2005, p. 64]. The major initiatives that boosted Chinese influence within ASEAN only by 2002 were as follows:

- The Framework Agreement on Economic Cooperation,
- The Declaration on Conduct in the South China Sea,
- The Joint Declaration on Cooperation in the Field on Nontraditional Security Issues,
- The Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation,
- The Memorandum of Understanding on Agricultural Cooperation.

Furthermore, China signed, as the first non-ASEAN state, ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, and, last but not least, ASEAN – China FTA (2007). Early harvest package, next to substantial trade concessions were provided by Beijing to ASEAN states to manifest goodwill, recognized by Wong, Chan, and Cheng as typical soft power diplomacy [Wong, Chan 2003, pp. 507-526; Cheng 2004, pp. 257-277]. Unquestionably, Japanese elites were shocked and felt threatened by the Chinese success.

Early 2000s was the date of visible shift in Tokyo's strategy towards East Asia. As Samuels wrote, "The structure of the regional economy had changed from zero – sum competition between an emerging China and an aging Japan to one in which the rising tide of intraregional trade lift all boats" [Samuels 2007, p. 159]. Japanese Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry (METI) announced in 2002 that the future of Japan would be directed by the development of East Asian economies. Moreover, Chinese trade deficit with Asian states including Japan, and at the same time surpluses with the European Union and the United States, made this market extremely important for Japanese economic prosperity. Noteworthy, bilateral trade nearly tripled only between 1998 and 2006, with special regard to exports, inducing massive trade surpluses of Japan. Therefore, both hard balancing through close military alliance with the United States, and economic balancing to reduce Chinese economic impact, were not feasible, thus inspiring soft balancing strategy of Tokyo.

On the other hand, ASEAN strengthened ties with the three Northeast Asian nations, i.e. China, Japan and the Republic of Korea to boost regional project under the auspices of ASEAN Plus Three (APT)², expressing the will to establish East Asian Community (EAC)³. As it was declared, EAC will be formed as a value-based community with distinctive membership, achieved through the following statement of the former Japanese prime minister Koizumi, “[...] expanding East Asian cooperation founded on Japan – ASEAN relationship” [*Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan* 2002]. Tokyo announced Japan – ASEAN Comprehensive Economic Partnership as a platform for East Asian regionalism, so as the closer cooperation in education, human resource management, cultural exchanges, regional development, and security⁴. Noteworthy, it was a logical consequence of Beijing’s activities, alike ASEAN’s desire to engage Japan to “[...] dilute the Chinese color in the region” [Sohn 2010, p. 17], because of the massively growing competitive pressure of the giant neighbour. Japan – ASEAN Commemorative Summit in December 2003, resulting in the announcement of Tokyo Declaration, inspired competitive initiatives of Beijing to host East Asia Summit (EAS) meeting. Tokyo, being afraid of losing an initiative in the region, initiated a discussion on this project to attract ASEAN’s attention. While Beijing opted for a narrow, Asian concept of East Asia, duplicating APT, Japan promoted an idea of broader, open regionalism to engage democratic India, Australia and New Zealand [Stubbs 2002, pp. 440-455].

The beginning of the XXIst century has clearly demonstrated Japanese recovery after “the lost decade”, mainly due the increasing engagement in intra-regional trade and investment flows. Consequently, economic vitality of East Asia, with special regard to ASEAN member states, has become an important source of Japanese enthusiasm for regionalism. However, as it was stated by Sohn, it is hard to link

² APT dialogue has contributed already to steady, gradual institutionalization of the economic integration project through, among others, Chiang Mai Initiative (CMI), Chiang Mai Initiative Multilateralization (CMIM), Credit Guarantee and Investment Facility (CGIF), Asian Bond Market Initiative (ABMI), ASEAN+3 Macroeconomic Research Office (AMRO). CMIM’09 assumed “co-leadership” of Tokyo and Beijing, manifested through the equal contribution to multilateral guarantee fund of USD 120 billion, providing opportunities, when combined with AMRO, of reconsideration of Tokyo’s idea of establishment of the Asian Monetary Fund [Arner, Lejot, Wang 2010, p. 23].

³ East Asian Community was defined in the *East Asian Vision Group Report 2001: Toward an East Asian Community* in October 2001; for further studies see: [*Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan* 2001]. The East Asian Vision Group (EAVG) was established under the auspices of ASEAN Plus Three (APT) in 2001.

⁴ Japan has been extraordinarily active within this field since the 90s, engaging, and supporting the Proliferation Security Initiative Maritime Interdiction Exercise, Asian Senior – level Talks on Nonproliferation (ASTOP), Information Sharing Center under the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia, while participating in three UN peacekeeping operations in East Asia (Cambodia, East Timor, and Nepal since 1992 to date), and proceeding with the Hiroshima Peacebuilders Center (HPC). Finally, Tokyo’s sensitiveness to the environment and sustainable growth issues has already resulted in numerous initiatives, i.e. the Environmental Cooperation Initiative, and the Economic Information Sharing Mechanism of Asia-Pacific.

directly aforementioned economic recovery with Tokyo's concept of value-based community rooted in Southeast Asia.

It should be considered, however, that the orientation on the southern part of the region – Australia, India, and ASEAN, cannot be explained basing only on market performance, while confronting with the Japanese economic interdependencies within Northeast Asia (China and the Republic of Korea). Moreover, such a strong attachment to universal values in Japanese vision of regionalism does not result from trade and investment flows.

As Shambaugh noted, Japanese southern orientation should be studied through the prism of soft balancing strategy, boosted by rapidly growing Chinese performance, and, in fact, strengthening diplomatic leadership in this part of Asia [Shambaugh 2005, p. 64]. To counter Beijing's influence, Tokyo is seeking soft means to reach the balance, and attract other Asian states, while resigning from the hard strategy, based on close ties with the United States. Undoubtedly, strong western alliance is insufficient when recognizing the importance of China for Japanese wealth. Therefore, Japanese vision of East Asian project addressed the issue of regional leadership.

Furthermore, ASEAN members agreed ASEAN Charter in 2008 and declared the formation of ASEAN Economic Community till the end of 2015. Consequently, formerly rooted in the economic dimension, East Asian regionalism expanded in terms of issues, policies and objectives, transforming gradually into the multilateral political and security forum to initiate joint initiatives and tackle international problems. Japan, strongly oriented on community building, manifested an extraordinary proactive role, expanding beyond financial aid and economic cooperation, in order to address more and more multilateral issues and problems, regarding sustainable growth or security. Japanese strategy toward East Asian region has been constantly subordinated to the win – win paradigm of interstate relations, dramatically opposite to the Cold War's zero – sum concept.

It has been recognized that Japanese contribution to the region in respect of technological know – how or logistic support is critical. However, Tokyo's deeper multilateral engagement within the region potentially contributing to economic and security prosperity used to be challenged by the historical issues. An inclusive, open approach to regionalism was found as a pragmatic solution to reconcile different manifestations of distrust and fear against Japanese leadership. Furthermore, emerging regional hegemony of China might paradoxically discourage community building approach of Tokyo, while enhancing closer ties with other nations in the region in order to counterbalance Beijing's influence.

4. Japanese vision of East Asian regionalism

Being aware of diversity of East Asia, with special regard to economic, security, cultural and political conditions, establishing regional community should be found as an extremely difficult, but a very ambitious task. Gathering and closing so many

nations representing various beliefs, economic development, security dilemmas, domestic political obstacles and cultural traditions in order to advance regionalism cannot be made without, as it was pointed out by Tanaka and Liff, “[...] functional, action – oriented, and inclusive multilateralism” [Tanaka, Liff 2009, p. 6]. In other words, common challenges must be addressed by regional states on voluntary, cooperative, and equal basis because of inability to face them individually. Acting together induces a sense of regional community, deepens trust that encourage peace and stability – both critical in the context of economic prosperity and security of East Asia.

As it was argued by Pempel et al [*Remapping East Asia* 2005], Japanese concept of regionalism reflects deepening economic interdependencies within the region, induced by regionalization led by Japan’s multinational corporations, encouraged by the Asian Financial Crisis, and the inter- and intra-regional competitive dynamics. According to Mansfield and Milner, market-driven integration was expected to encourage further strengthening of regional economic ties, establishment of safety net against externalities, finally – lock – in reforms [Mansfield, Milner 1999, pp. 589-627].

Taking into account a traditional aversion to any kind of insitutionalization at supranational level, regional states are encouraged to participate in the multilateral cooperative process to build the community through a gradual, steady process without affecting national sovereignty, interests, and vulnerabilities. In other words, following the official vision of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFA), expressed in November 2006, instead of institutional approach aimed at establishing comprehensive, integrated, and deeper institutionalization at the regional level, a functional approach within the fields such as trade, finance, environment, energy, and human rights has to be pushed through.

Following Vaisey’s analysis, Japanese approach towards community building might be studied using the context of structural or substantive strategy. The structural approach assumes solidarity induced by interactions, then, the infrastructure of social networks, while the latter one associates community with the shared moral core, then, common identity and solidarity [Vaisey 2007, pp. 852-854].

Japanese vision of East Asian regionalism, considering the promotion of universal values while seeking a counterbalance for China thanks to stronger engagement of the southern states, accompanied by traditional, contemporarily ineffective, strategic alliance with the United States, seems to embrace both approaches. However, a substantive strategy appears to follow the structural one as an emanation of market-oriented, functional character of East Asian regionalism since the late 90s.

As it was suggested by foreign minister Aso in the late 2005, the role of Japan is expected to be multidimensional [*Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan* 2005]:

- a thought leader in Asia,
- a promoter of universal values,
- a regional economic and military stabilizer,

- an equal partner for the other Asian nations,
- a hub of knowledge network of Asia.

The Democratic Party of Japan, as mentioned before, ruling political force in Japan since 2009, has gained a lot of enthusiasm to proceed with the vision of East Asian Community, possessing an overwhelming majority in the Lower House and a plurality in the Upper House of the National Diet.

In the late 2012, long dominant LDP regained the power, especially because of the DPJ's internal conflicts.

New Abe's administration intensified political dialogue with Beijing and Seoul to design trilateral FTA, accompanied by parallel talks over competitive, transregional projects involving Asia-Pacific partners, with special regard to Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and TransPacific Partnership (TPP), the latter engaging the core of ASEAN, the Republic of Korea, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan on one side, and NAFTA, Chile, and Peru on the other, while excluding China⁵.

Thus, an issue of the value system seems to evolve to challenge intra- and extra-regional political dynamism, enabling the realization of the more universal formula of EAC based on sixteen states. In this context, trilateral Northeast Asian consensus is a *sine qua non* prerequisite.

During the first ever trilateral summit in December 2008, CJK leaders called to “pave the way for a new era of tripartite partnership which will lead to the peace and sustainable development in the region” [Sohn 2010, p. 5]. China–Japan–the Republic of Korea trilateral free trade agreement may become a critical pillar of East Asian regionalism. However, given the common challenges of three analysed countries, in particular the unfavorable demographics, reindustrialization and insufficient domestic demand, it should be noted that the trilateral dialogue is facing very serious barriers, resulting, among others, from the historical ballast, territorial claims, as well as intra-regional competition for leadership between Beijing and Tokyo [Youjun 2013]. Furthermore, strengthening economic cooperation at the level of APT should translate prospectively into the progress of the ASEAN+6 dialogue (RCEP), thus creating a Chinese counterweight to the TPP project, consequently strengthening the political position of Beijing within East Asian regionalism.

5. Looking forward

An idea of open, functional regionalism by Japan assumes “[...] consolidation of multilayered network of inclusive multilateral institutions with a mandate to address specific issues, or functions” [Tanaka, Liff 2009, p. 7]. Such a kind of an evolutionary

⁵ RCEP: ASEAN + China, Japan, the Republic of Korea, India, Australia, New Zealand; TPP: Singapore, Vietnam, Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, the United States, Canada, Mexico, Peru, Chile.

approach to regional institutions and a strong accent put on the compatibility with the logic of international system, is unquestionably justified by contemporary intra- and extra-regional landscape, reflected mainly by the growing position of China, both at regional and global level, the transcontinental expansion of East Asia, and the evident, consistent withdrawal of the United States influence from the region.

As it was mentioned before, Tokyo is seeking a wider, multilateral formula of regionalism, recognizing importance of rule based economic community, then, further expansion of bilateral and multilateral economic partnerships, potentially to be consolidated at the level of East Asia Summit (EAS). Moreover, an Asian version of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) cannot be ruled out in the long term, especially because of valuable, and applicable experience in respect of the challenges faced by contemporary East Asia.

Noteworthy, Official Development Assistance (ODA), a useful diplomatic tool utilized by Japanese government within the region for over five decades, is expected to be revitalized to expand soft power resources of Tokyo. Among critical areas of activity, technological upgrade, energy efficiency and global warming are mentioned.

The establishment of a modern, functional, and inclusive security architecture in East Asia, directly correlated with the economic dimension of regionalism, has become an important chapter of negotiation agenda with regional partners. However, both prevention and proactive, effective common response in the face of threats to regional peace and stability needs to be addressed. In this context, three pillars were defined:

- enhancing bilateral security arrangements both within the region and between East Asian states and the United States, combined with the regular trilateral strategic dialogue among China, Japan, and the United States;
- establishment of permanent subregional security forum operating within wide spectrum of issues centered around Northeast Asia to replace the Six Party Talks focused on North Korean nuclear program;
- establishment of the East Asia Security Forum as permanent, inclusive, action oriented, and functional platform to challenge security issues in the coordinated manner.

Consequently, regional security concerns, with special regard to Pyongyang, and the rising Chinese hegemony, should be considered through the prism of interests of ASEAN, Australia, India, and New Zealand.

6. Conclusions

As Nye pointed, in the “soft power game”, essential instruments include: cultural, and political values, as well as foreign policies [Keohane, Nye Jr. 1998, pp. 81-94]. As a result, to counter Chinese influence, Tokyo has been seeking southern partners by offering the concept of value based community, combining structural strategy with the substantive one.

Being aware of the increasing Beijing's both hard, and soft power, confronted with the shrinking Tokyo's influence, Japanese vision of East Asian regionalism, deeply rooted in the western like universal values, gained interest among elites as a counterbalance to the narrow Asian approach of China. Consequently, an ambitious project of East Asian Community has been designed to manifest all those advantages, and added values, that Beijing rejected, as well as differences that might rate Japanese approach over Chinese. In other words, to deal with EAC, Beijing was expected to make a step forward to accept inclusive, multilateral frameworks of the region. The RCEP proposal, heavily promoted by Beijing recently to counter trans-Pacific links of Japan, ASEAN – 4, the Republic of Korea, Australia, and New Zealand, might be perceived as another round in the regional soft power game to manifest pragmatism, and broaden horizons of the Chinese vision.

Because of the universalism in terms of declared common foundations, Japan was able to extend membership to attract democratic states of South Asia, and Oceania to create a counterweight to Northeast Asia dominated by China, mainly due to the deeper involvement of rapidly growing India, while strengthening the “pole of gravity” of East Asian regionalism around ASEAN. Obviously, such an open, inclusive approach to regionalism addressed the U.S.' concerns towards Tokyo, securing interests, and providing strong political support, and then regional diplomatic leadership. Undoubtedly, regional security issues assigned an extra importance to western alliances, and geographical reconfiguration of East Asian project to balance the rising “radiation” of Beijing.

However, when following regional dynamics, and counterproposals of China, and Malaysia to consolidate East Asian project around APT, Japanese concept of EAC, promoted through regular EAS meetings, seemed to shake in its foundations, especially because of at least an ambivalent stance towards universal values of some East Asian nations.

Further progress of TPP membership, as well as CJK, and RCEP talks may dramatically change an East Asian landscape, enabling to constitute a large regional trade block consisting of the sixteen states representing both traditional Asian, and universal values, to be perspectively transformed into more – than – trade community. Then, the scope of membership might not be an issue anymore.

Therefore, when studying competitive visions of East Asian regionalism backed by Beijing and Tokyo, oscillating between value systems, strategic concerns and competition for the “minds and hearts” of regional nations must not be neglected. Bridging the gap through successful CJK FTA and RCEP talks remain uncertain, at least in the near future. However, the soft game is still on.

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JAPOŃSKA WIZJA WSCHODNIOAZJATYCKIEGO REGIONALIZMU – KU STRATEGII MIĘKKIEGO RÓWNOWAŻENIA

Streszczenie: Azja Wschodnia to bez wątpienia region bezprecedensowej w skali świata dynamiki wydarzeń, w sferze zarówno gospodarczej, jak i politycznej. Rosnące w siłę gospodarczą Chiny stanowią obecnie poważne zagrożenie dla tradycyjnego regionalnego przywództwa dyplomatycznego pogrążonej w problemach wewnętrznych Japonii. Wzajemna nieufność potęgowana zaszłościami historycznymi przyczyniła się do ukonstytuowania konkurencyjnych wizji wschodnioazjatyckiego regionalizmu, czerpiących z jednej strony ze sfery wartości jako fundamentu wspólnej tożsamości i solidaryzmu, z drugiej zaś z odmiennych koncepcji członkostwa państw Azji Południowo-Wschodniej, Południowej oraz Oceanii. Promowana ścieżka miękkiej dyplomacji, japońska wizja szerokiej wspólnoty, angażującej, poza ASEAN, kraje demokratyczne Południa i Oceanii, wspartej na fundamencie uniwersalnych wartości świata Zachodu, stanowić miała naturalną przeciwwagę dla węższych, bardziej konserwatywnych, ściśle azjatyckich zamysłów Państwa Środka. Zaangażowanie rdzenia ASEAN, mianowicie Malezji, Singapuru, Wietnamu oraz Malezji, Japonii, Republiki Korei, Australii i Nowej Zelandii, wspólnie z Kanadą, Meksykiem, Chile oraz Peru w amerykański projekt Partnerstwa Transpacyficznego (TPP – *Trans-Pacific Partnership*) spotkało się z kontrpropozycją Pekinu pod postacią formuły Regionalnego Szerokiego Porozumienia Gospodarczego (RCEP – *Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership*), co wskazuje na przejście miękkiej gry strategicznej na wyższy poziom. Najbliższe lata pozwolą rozstrzygnąć dylemat, która wizja regionalizmu gospodarczego jest bardziej atrakcyjna i żywotna – oczekiwane przełomy dotyczą w szczególności zawarcia trójstronnego porozumienia o wolnym handlu Chiny–Japonia–Republika Korei, wdrożenia Wspólnoty Gospodarczej ASEAN (ASEAN Economic Community), intensyfikacji rozmów wokół projektu RCEP, wreszcie – ewolucji ambiwalentnego, jak dotąd, stanowiska Pekinu względem projektu TPP. W przypadku tego ostatniego nie sposób zlekceważyć dialogu Chiny–ASEAN na poziomie sektorowym zainicjowanego w 2011 roku, Porozumienia ws. Ochrony Inwestycji Zagranicznych (*Foreign Investment Protection Agreement*) podpisanego z Kanadą w 2012 roku, czy negocjacji umowy o wolnym handlu z Australią. Bez wątpienia wąska, azjatycka formuła regionalizmu w Azji Wschodniej traci na znaczeniu w obliczu wyzwań wewnątrz- i transregionalnych.

Słowa kluczowe: Japonia, wschodnioazjatycki regionalizm, strategia miękkiego równoważenia.