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Asean leaders in Tokyo to commemorate relations with Japan

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LEADERS of the 10 Asean nations have gathered in Tokyo to commemorate the regional grouping's three decades of relations with Japan, its most important trading partner after the United States.

This is the first ever commemorative summit with a dialogue partner in Asean's history of external relations, and the first summit to be held outside Asean.

The relations with Japan, which was a mere dialogue partner in 1973, have grown by leaps and bounds. Today, it is one of the main donor nations and has contributed immensely in terms of technical and development assistance to Asean.

At this Tokyo Summit, leaders will sign the Tokyo Declaration and the Joint Plan of Action to enhance relations between the two sides. Japan will allocate some US\$3 billion (RM11.4 billion) for technical assistance, loans and grants for Asean members to enhance bilateral and regional development.

The summit, which will be held at the Geihinkan State Guest House, will be co-chaired by Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi and Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri, in her capacity as current chairman of Asean.

The leaders would take stock of 30 years of Asean-Japan relations as well as exchange views on strengthening and deepening their relations.

According to diplomats, the Tokyo summit is expected to provide further impetus to the rapidly accelerating drive towards an Asian bond market.

Japan hopes to start trade talks with Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand at the Tokyo summit.

Talks on economic partnership agreements would follow, going beyond free trade pacts to include investment and other items, to add to Tokyo's existing one with Singapore.

The summit will offer an opportunity for Japan to cement the existing bond with Southeast Asian nations and show the world that its relations with Asean will not take a back seat despite the regional grouping's pursuit of stronger ties with other Asian nations such as India, China and South Korea.

To boost confidence, Japan should promptly accede to Asean's Treaty of Amity and Co-operation.

By signing the TAC, Japan will commit itself to Asean's long-standing principle of non-use of threat or force to solve disputes.

Japan has every reason to sign TAC because China and India have done so and Russia will follow suit next year.

TAC, signed by leaders of Asean countries on Feb 24, 1976, was aimed at promoting perpetual peace, everlasting amity and co-operation among members.

It is guided by the following principles:

- * mutual respect for the independence, sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity and national identity of all nations;
- * the right of every country to lead its national existence free from external interference, subversion or coercion;
- * non-interference in the internal affairs of one another;
- * settlement of disputes by peaceful means;
- * renunciation of the threat or use of force; and,
- * effective co-operation among themselves.

Japan should see China's accession to TAC and Russia's impending accession as an incentive as both are permanent members of the Security Council. East Asia's views on international issues can be conveyed by China to the Security Council.

But because accession to TAC would require approval of the Japanese Parliament and the Emperor's assent, it is unlikely that Japan will be able to sign the treaty at this summit.

Instead, Japan might sign a political instrument agreeing to accede to TAC at a later date.

Diplomats say Japan should also work with Asean in supporting the latter's regional integration drive through the Initiative for Asean Integration and sub-regional growth areas in Asean such as the Mekong Basin and the Brunei-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East Asian Growth Area.

This will benefit both sides as a more prosperous Southeast Asia will ensure a more prosperous Japan.

For a more effective Southeast Asia-Northeast Asia relations, Japan should play a more important role in ensuring the formation of a formal East-Asian grouping as envisaged by former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

The implementation of ad-hoc projects under the Asean+3 processes is simply not enough. A Formal East Asia grouping is important to ensure a more meaningful and strategic collaboration for regional development. It will also give East Asian nations a stronger voice in international forums.

Japan is keen to have an East Asian Community by year 2050. But for now leaders must decide whether an Asean+3 Summit should be held soon.

The summit itself will give Abdullah, for whom diplomacy comes naturally, the opportunity to meet and exchange ideas with other leaders. This will be the first time that he will be meeting the other leaders since taking office as Prime Minister on Oct 31.

The other leaders will be eager to know Malaysia's direction and new regional policies from the horse's mouth, so to speak.