THE RISE OF GLOBAL SOUTH

&

IMPLICATIONS FOR JAPAN-ASEAN PARTNERSHIP

Edited by

Dr. Chheng Kimlong
Lim Menghour

AVI
ASIAN VISION INSTITUTE

THE RISE OF GLOBAL SOUTH AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR JAPAN-ASEAN PARTNERSHIP

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Foreword

It is my great honour to contribute a foreword to this volume examining the evolving partnership between Japan and ASEAN at a time of profound geopolitical and economic transformation. The ideas reflected in this book resonate strongly with the discussions we held during our seminar in November 2025, where scholars, policymakers, and practitioners—including Professor Yuichi Hosoya, Ms. Joanne Lin Weiling, and Dr. Path Kosal—together with line ministries, members of the diplomatic corps, media representatives, and other practitioners gathered to reflect on the future trajectory of Japan–ASEAN cooperation. That exchange reaffirmed a simple yet powerful observation: the relationship between Japan and ASEAN is not merely institutional—it is deeply rooted in decades of trust and a shared commitment to regional stability.

Perhaps, this book arrives at an important moment. The international system is undergoing a period of transition characterized by the rise of the Global South, intensifying major-power competition, and growing uncertainties in global supply chains and economic governance. Japan's consistent emphasis on inclusiveness, rule-based cooperation, and long-term partnership aligns well with these aspirations.

With all valuable contributions, I commend all stakeholders for their thoughtful scholarship and dedication in producing this volume. It is my hope that this book will contribute to a deeper understanding of the strategic importance of Japan–ASEAN relations and committed to the shared goal of a peaceful, stable, and prosperous Indo-Pacific.

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Dr. CHHENG Kimlong
President of Asian Vision Institute (AVI)

Acknowledgements

This book is the result of collective reflection, intellectual exchange, and a shared commitment among scholars and practitioners seeking to deepen understanding of Japan–ASEAN relations in a changing global landscape. The chapters in this volume bring together diverse perspectives from both academia and policy practice. While many contributions are grounded in rigorous academic research and analysis, we acknowledge that some chapters are more reflective in nature, drawing on the authors' professional experiences, policy engagements, and personal observations.

These reflective insights complement the analytical and research-based contributions, offering a richer and more nuanced understanding of the evolving dynamics of Japan–ASEAN cooperation. The views expressed in the respective chapters therefore remain those of the authors.

This publication would not have been possible without the dedication and insights of the distinguished contributors whose chapters form the foundation of this volume. We would like to express our sincere appreciation to the distinguished contributors whose scholarship forms the foundation of this volume, including H.E. Suos Yara, Dr. Alfredo C. Panizales, Dr. Chheng Kimlong, Dr. Sam Seun, Mr. Lim Menghour, and Ms. Joanne Lin Weiling, whose thoughtful analyses and perspectives have enriched the discussion on the future of Japan–ASEAN relations.

We would also like to express our sincere appreciation and gratitude to Dr. Chheng Kimlong and Mr. Lim Menghour for their decisive leadership and careful editorial oversight, which were instrumental in bringing this volume to fruition. We also extend our sincere gratitude to Mr. Pheng Thean and Mr. Chhin Eng Kakronna, whose dedicated coordination greatly facilitated the editorial process. Through consistent communication with contributors, careful organization, and logistical support, the coordinator played an

essential role in ensuring the smooth preparation and completion of this volume. We would also like to extend our sincere appreciation to the supporting team of Asian Vision Institute namely Mrs. Lim Yuvannak, Mr. Torng Sovannvita, Ms. Chang Huyjing, Ms. Chhor Karawatei, Ms. Vireak Leksmy, Ms. Samreth Chansereiroth, Ms. Tang Mouyching, Ms. Sengly Nipin, and Mr. Muny Kunthu, whose dedication and assistance were invaluable throughout the preparation of this volume.

We hope this book would contribute meaningfully to ongoing conversations and scholarly discourse about regional cooperation, the role of middle powers, and the importance of inclusive partnerships in an era of multipolarity. Above all, we hope it encourages continued dialogue, deeper collaboration, and renewed commitment to strengthening ASEAN–Japan relations—so that together they may contribute to a more stable, resilient, and prosperous Indo-Pacific for generations to come.

Book Outline

The book "The Rise of Global South and Its Implications for Japan-ASEAN Partnership" brings together seven chapters that examine the evolution and future trajectory of Japan–ASEAN relations within a changing multipolar international order. Through these perspectives, the book highlights how Japan and ASEAN can deepen strategic trust, strengthen regional stability, and build a more integrated partnership that supports inclusive development, economic resilience, and a rules-based Indo-Pacific order.

Chapter 1 examines the evolution of Japan–ASEAN relations from their origins in post-war economic cooperation to the development of a comprehensive strategic partnership in the Indo-Pacific. It highlights key milestones such as the Fukuda Doctrine, the institutionalization of dialogue mechanisms, and the expansion of trade, development assistance, and security cooperation. The chapter also explains why Japan is viewed as a distinctive partner in Southeast Asia due to its development-oriented diplomacy and respect for ASEAN centrality. Finally, it outlines the shared vision of Japan and ASEAN in promoting a rules-based, inclusive, and stable regional order.

Chapter 2 looks into Japan's engagement with the Global South through its partnership with ASEAN in the context of an emerging multipolar world order. It conceptualizes the Global South as a framework of rising economic and political agency, highlighting ASEAN's growing role in global governance and regional economic networks. The chapter analyses how Japan and ASEAN navigate strategic opportunities and challenges created by power diffusion, emphasizing ASEAN centrality, institutional diplomacy, and development cooperation. Finally, it explores the future trajectory of Japan–ASEAN cooperation in strengthening supply chains, security cooperation, and inclusive regional governance amid intensifying great-power competition.

Chapter 3 explores how development cooperation in the Global South has shifted from traditional donor–recipient aid toward a more strategic and partnership-based approach. It traces the evolution of Japan's Official Development Assistance (ODA) from post-war reconstruction diplomacy to a broader framework of economic statecraft and regional engagement with ASEAN. The chapter highlights how infrastructure investment, capacity building, and quality infrastructure initiatives serve both development goals and long-term strategic influence.

Chapter 4 analyses Japan's evolving role as a regional stabilizer in Southeast Asia through its deepening security partnership with ASEAN. It highlights how Japan contributes to regional stability through maritime security cooperation, disaster relief and humanitarian assistance, support for ASEAN-led security dialogues, and expanded defence engagement. The chapter also examines key frameworks such as the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), Vientiane Vision 2.0, JASMINE, and Official Security Assistance (OSA), which guide Japan's capacity-building and security cooperation initiatives.

Chapter 5 inspects how economic cooperation among Global South countries, particularly through ASEAN-centred frameworks, contributes to building collective economic resilience. It highlights how trade integration, investment-led industrial upgrading, infrastructure connectivity, and regional value chains strengthen economic complementarity rather than competition among developing economies. The chapter also explores the role of digital economy partnerships—especially Japan–ASEAN initiatives in AI, e-commerce, and innovation—in supporting entrepreneurship and technological diffusion across the region.

Chapter 6 reconnoitres ways ASEAN–Japan partnership must adapt to a changing multipolar world where traditional geopolitical binaries between the Global North and Global South are becoming less relevant. It argues that ASEAN's engagement with the Global South reflects a strategy of diversification and strategic autonomy rather than a rejection of established partners such as Japan. The chapter also highlights Japan's role as a trusted

middle-power stabiliser whose long-term development cooperation, economic engagement, and support for ASEAN centrality provide strategic trust and regional stability.

Executive Summary

This book examines the evolving Japan–ASEAN partnership in the context of a changing global order marked by multipolarity, the resurgence of the Global South, and intensifying geopolitical competition. While discussions about regional order are often framed through the lens of great-power rivalry, the chapters in this volume shift attention to how middle powers and regional institutions—particularly Japan and ASEAN—navigate economic transformation, strategic uncertainty, and institutional constraints in the Indo-Pacific.

Historically, Japan–ASEAN relations have been built on a foundation of trust established through the 1977 Fukuda Doctrine, which emphasised "heart-to-heart" diplomacy, non-military engagement, and respect for ASEAN autonomy. Over the past five decades, this relationship has evolved from economic assistance and trade cooperation into a comprehensive strategic partnership. Japan's development assistance, investment flows, and technological cooperation have contributed significantly to Southeast Asia's economic transformation, embedding Japan deeply within ASEAN's development trajectory while reinforcing the region's economic connectivity and institutional stability.

At the same time, the re-emergence of the Global South reflects a broader transformation in global politics. Rather than representing a cohesive geopolitical bloc, the Global South signals the growing agency of developing and middle-income countries seeking greater influence in global governance, diversified partnerships, and more equitable economic arrangements.

Japan's engagement with the Global South, particularly through ASEAN, illustrates how development cooperation has evolved into a hybrid instrument that combines economic modernization, political influence, and normative leadership. Initiatives such as quality infrastructure investment,

capacity-building programmes, and digital innovation partnerships demonstrate how development assistance can simultaneously support growth while strengthening long-term strategic ties.

Security cooperation has also become an increasingly prominent dimension of Japan–ASEAN relations. While Japan historically maintained a development-oriented posture due to constitutional constraints, it has gradually expanded its role in supporting regional stability through maritime security cooperation, disaster relief and humanitarian assistance. Frameworks such as the Vientiane Vision, the Japan-ASEAN Ministerial Initiative for Enhanced Defence Cooperation, and the Official Security Assistance programme reflect Japan's evolving approach to strengthening ASEAN's capacity while respecting its centrality and preference for inclusive regional mechanisms.

Economic resilience remains another central theme throughout the book. In an era of supply chain disruptions, financial volatility, and technological competition, ASEAN and Japan have increasingly emphasised regional economic synergy. Trade frameworks such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, digital economy initiatives, and regional financial safety nets illustrate how coordinated policies can strengthen supply chains, promote industrial upgrading, and enhance economic resilience across Global South economies.

Across the chapters, a recurring argument emerges: the ASEAN–Japan partnership is moving beyond traditional sectoral cooperation toward a more integrated strategic framework. Rather than operating through isolated initiatives in development, security, or economic cooperation, the partnership is increasingly oriented toward building systemic resilience—linking economic transformation, security capacity-building, and normative governance into a coherent regional strategy.

By examining the historical evolution, contemporary dynamics, and future prospects of Japan–ASEAN relations, this book highlights how middle-power cooperation can contribute to regional stability in an increasingly

fragmented global environment. The partnership between ASEAN and Japan demonstrates that resilience in the Indo-Pacific will depend not on rigid alliances or geopolitical binaries, but on inclusive institutions, diversified partnerships, and sustained cooperation grounded in mutual trust and shared interests.

Source: Prime Minister's Office of Japan

Chapter 1
Japan-ASEAN Relations: Past, Present, and Future

SUOS Yara
Chairman of the Asian Cultural Council (ACC)

Introduction

Japan and ASEAN have been the cornerstones of stability and growth in the Asia-Pacific region. Since the post-war period of reconstruction, with Japan's reparations to Indonesia in 1958 and to the Philippines in 1956, the relationship has developed into a versatile entity that enhances economic cooperation, addresses security concerns, and fosters innovation to navigate the dynamic shifts in the global landscape.[1] The initiation of the ASEAN-Japan sectoral dialogue on synthetic rubber in 1973 marked the beginning of economic détente[2].

Significant developments are evident, particularly during the Prime Minister Takeo Fukuda's visit to ASEAN in 1977, which marked the birth of the Fukuda Doctrine, which envisioned Japan's role as a non-military, equal partner that would foster trust and "heart-to-heart" ties following the Vietnam War[3]. The First ASEAN-Japan Summit held in 1977 was followed by Foreign Ministers' Meetings from 1978, which marked the formal initiation of cooperation that eventually led to the Strategic Partnership of 2005 and the 50th Anniversary of the Tokyo Declaration of 2023, which reaffirmed the rules-based order and the commitment to FOIP-AOIP.[4] Also, the strategic foundation is founded on mutual respect and cooperation that

addresses trade flows of more than $280 million by 2024, security cooperation through capacity-building like the Official Security Assistance (OSA), and innovation facilitated by ASEAN-Japan digital hubs.[5] In the current geopolitical landscape centred on the rise and the increased role of the Global South, the dialogue helps to mitigate the tension of the global balance of power, strengthens ASEAN centrality, and supports Japan's developmental role.

This chapter will examine the origin of the ASEAN-Japan dialogue, significant developments, the strategic foundation, what makes Japan different, and the vision of the relationship, which would provide forward-looking insights into the relationship that is potentially resilient to the challenges of the current global arena.

Genesis of ASEAN–Japan Dialogue

The ASEAN-Japan dialogue partnership can be traced back to the late 1960s, subsequently to the creation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) on 8 August 1967 in Bangkok by its five nations—Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand.[6] During a period marked by the threat of communism, decolonization, and the pursuit of economic self-reliance, ASEAN expanded its diplomatic outlook aimed outside the Western bloc in order to strengthen its regional resilience. In light of this, Japan, which was dealing with the aftermath of World War II and the issue of reparations to Southeast Asia, including the payment of approximately $200 million to Thailand, $500 million to the Philippines, and $200 million to Indonesia, recognized the economic potential of the region's resources and markets.[7] The initial meetings between the two parties were pragmatic and economic in nature, with Japanese capital and technology, as well as ASEAN's labour, markets, and favourable natural resources, such as rubber, tin, and oil.[8]

In this direction, the establishment of diplomatic relations with the founding members of ASEAN in 1970 was a remarkable step; however, substantive engagement only commenced in 1973, marked by the convening of the

ASEAN-Japan Synthetic Rubber Forum in Tokyo.[9] The Japanese Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) initiated the forum to deliberate on natural rubber supply chain dynamics, as Southeast Asia collectively supplied nearly 70 percent of Japan's import requirements. The forum was pivotal to signalled the transition to mutually beneficial relations that assisted the creation of joint ventures such as the synthetic rubber production units in Indonesia and Malaysia, thereby contributing to the rebuilding of mutual trust after the colonial-era grievances.

The turning point came in August 1977, when the Prime Minister Takeo Fukuda made his famous Manila speech, which came to be known as the Fukuda Doctrine, during his visit to the capital cities of the ASEAN countries. In his speech, former Prime Minister Fukuda outlined the five pillars of Japan's policy, which were Japan as an equal partner rather than a superior leader; the need to develop "heart-to-heart" relations, which went beyond mere economic relations; commitment to peace without forming military alliances; and ASEAN solidarity, as well as outreach to Indochina.[10] Fukuda also committed significant Official Development Assistance (ODA), which met the first of the Medium-Term Targets, and provided significant ASEAN allocations for infrastructure projects, which would amount to billions by 1982.[11] The international trip laid the groundwork for the annual Foreign Ministers' Post-Ministerial Conferences (PMC), which tackled issues such as economic stability and energy security, particularly in the wake of the 1973 and 1979 oil crises.

Economic imperatives drove the momentum in the relationship. By 1974, Japan had emerged as the major export market for ASEAN countries, holding a 25 percent share, and as a key source of investment, with companies such as Toyota and Sony setting up production plants.[12] The ASEAN-Japan Ministerial Meeting in Pattaya in 1978 helped advance the investment dialogue, leading to the initiation of over 1,000 Japanese projects in 1980. Culturally, Japan pursued cultural exchanges through the ASEAN Cultural Fund in 1978, with the assistance of a Japanese contribution of ¥5 billion to the fund. In the context of cultural exchange with developing countries—countries in the process of nascent nation-building have their

own unique cultural traditions. Rather, it is necessary to make active efforts to bring the cultures of these countries into Japan. In this way, a foundation can be established for true mutual understanding; hence, the government intends to further enhance these efforts.[13]

Historical and Institutional Milestones

Continuing the practical tradition of the Fukuda Doctrine, the Japan-ASEAN relationship has evolved through four major periods from 1977 to 2026. Each period has responded to the challenge of the crisis while further solidifying the institutional relationship. It has evolved from the consolidation of cooperation in the face of the oil shocks, through the periods of strong economic growth amid financial contagion, to strategic cooperation, to strategic cooperation shaped by security imperatives, and ultimately to a comprehensive relationship partnership suited to a multipolar world.

Consolidation Phase

Japan's Official Development Assistance (ODA) transformation during the 1970s laid critical foundations for Fukuda Doctrine institutionalisation. Since the establishment of JICA in 1974, Japan focused on strategic economic infrastructure, basic human needs, and developing human potential, thereby approximately 60 percent of Japan's total ODA was granted in these areas. Among the notable projects of the time were those implemented as a package of holistic development, such as the Indonesia Java-Bali Microwave Network that connects 14 cities; the Tandjung Priok Thermal Power Station (600 MW) that powers the burgeoning industries of Jakarta; the Jakarta-Merak Highway and the Bakauheni-Merak Ferry Terminal, which reduced Jakarta's logistics costs by 40 percent; and the Jakarta Water Supply system that serves 1.2 million people.[14]

In accordance with Fukuda's 1977 commitments, Japan institutionalized dialogue through the creation of an annual Post-Ministerial Conference (PMC). This was created at the 1978 Pattaya meeting to address energy

security issues in ASEAN after the 1979 oil crisis impacted ASEAN economies. Moreover, the ¥5 billion ASEAN Cultural Fund was launched under Fukuda's tenure, aiming to promote intra-ASEAN cultural exchange, subsequently to Fukuda's ASEAN speech in 1977.[15] From the economic perspective, Japanese investments were made with deliberate purpose and intent, as Toyota started its assembly plant in Thailand in 1978, Sony began its Penang plant in 1972, and Mitsubishi's commencement of compressor plant construction in Indonesia in 1980. This resulted in over 1,000 direct investments in the region by 1980, which accounted for a quarter of the $15 billion ASEAN export market in the sectors of rubber, tin, and electronics, and contributed 150,000 job opportunities in the manufacturing industry in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand.

Economic Surge

The 1990s were the golden years of economic relations between Japan and ASEAN. Japan was still on the road to economic recovery from the post-bubble blues, while ASEAN was moving into a new level of regional integration. When the asset price bubble collapsed in 1989, the Plaza Accord triggered a strong appreciation of the yen from 240 to the dollar to 120, forcing Japan to go into outsourcing as its economic growth remained unstable. On the other hand, ASEAN launched the Free Trade Area (AFTA) under the Singapore Summit Framework Agreement in 1992, which marked the beginning of a higher level of interdependence with Japan. Trade between the two regions jumped from $40 billion in 1990 to $120 billion by the year 2000, and accelerated to an estimated five times the level of the previous decade due to the natural complementarity between the regions.[16]

Japan's economic shift was a balancing act of various factors. The appreciation of the yen, which impacted the competitiveness of exports, coincided with the increase of wages in NICs such as Taiwan and South Korea, prompting Japan to seek ASEAN's abundant supply of resources and labour.[17] With the AFTA, which lowered tariffs from an average of 17 percent to a range of 0-5% by 2003, the region was able to realize economies of scale as well as speed up its intra-ASEAN specialization. ASEAN was

Japan's source of oil from Indonesia, natural gas from Brunei and Malaysia, rubber from Indonesia and Thailand, and palm oil, which powered Japan's machinery, automotive, and electronics sectors.[18] Japan, likewise, was ASEAN's second-largest trading partner, supplying the region with precision manufacturing equipment, among others.

The Japanese FDI provided the foundation for the period. Tallying up to $52 billion in the cumulative flows over the 1990-1998 period, Japanese FDI contributed to one-fifth of the total net FDI flows into ASEAN over the decade.[19] Manufacturing drove the Japanese FDI surge as Penang in Malaysia emerged as "Silicon Valley of the East" which attracted $12.8 billion in 2023, hosting Japanese electronics assembly powerhouses like Panasonic and Rohm, together with Intel; and Vietnam's Doi Moi reforms attracted textile and electronics pioneers; and Indonesia moved from its resource nationalist policies to downstream processing under President Habibie.[20]

The tariff liberalisation drive of AFTA has unleashed the full potential of economies of scale that protectionism had constrained for so long. Intra-ASEAN tariffs fell significantly in the first quarter of 1998. The regional exports dropped from $23.1 billion recorded in the first quarter of 1997 to $17.4 billion in the first quarter of 1998. Notably, the biggest declines have largely impacted Brunei Darussalam (-34.8%), Malaysia (-40%), Vietnam (-39.6%), and Thailand (-50.8%). However, Indonesia was fortunate as the country increased in intra-ASEAN trade during this period.[21] Furthermore, Malaysia has become the electronics and palm oil refinery centre, Indonesia has become the resource processing giant, and the Philippines has emerged as the semiconductor and garment centre. This intra-industry specialisation has enabled the ASEAN region as a whole to move up the global value chain, away from simple commodity dependence that characterised the earlier period, towards manufactured exports. Electronics exports to Japan, for instance, doubled between 1990 and 1997, while textiles went beyond simple cotton yarns to include synthetic fabrics and garments.[22]

Japanese companies were doing more than simply putting up the money on the table; they were also sharing their knowledge, skills, and approaches to quality and efficiency. Famous companies such as Panasonic, Canon, and Brother were not only moving from simple assembly of CKD to full-scale production but also transferring the knowledge to the engineers of the host country on approaches to production, like the Japanese just-in-time inventory system, total quality control, and the Japanese concept of Kaizen. Kaizen, a term originating from Japan, translates as "improvement", yet its meaning extends beyond just a mere definition. It embodies a philosophy and methodology that, when adopted earnestly, cultivates a culture of continuous improvement. In essence, Kaizen changed small, everyday improvements into a lasting success in industrial and business contexts.[23] Moreover, this emphasis on people was to reap significant results—the production of electronic products in Malaysia grew by 8 percent per year from 1990 to 1995.[24] At the turn of the century, companies associated with Japan accounted for 38 percent of ASEAN's total exports of electronic products to Japan, developing strong supply chains that would prove to be crucial to the regional economies when the global shocks came.[25]

According to the AMRO Report, highlights a retrospective on the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis from the viewpoint of the present day. It delved into how the fixed exchange rate or currency pegs of Thailand, Indonesia, and others in the pre-1997 period was to attract foreign capital in the export boom of the early 1990s. In a vivid contrast, the New Miyazawa Plan is presented as an expeditious, agile circuit-breaker, redirecting unused loans, guarantees, and social security programs directly into SMEs and the weakest sectors, by-passing IMF procedural delays to restart economic growth and rebuild domestic trust. At the regional level, the story follows an unmistakable, rising trajectory—a crescendo of regional cooperation. The 1997 Manila Framework is portrayed as a swift crisis convener, assembling ASEAN+3 for urgent swaps and surveillance. This lays the groundwork for the formal work of finance ministers, resulting in the historic Chiang Mai Initiative (CMI) in 2000, an unprecedented swap network of $200 billion between ASEAN+3 countries. Therefore, this is hailed as an unprecedented triad defence by Japan, Korea, and China—a safeguard against herd behaviour

that reinforces defences against dollar shortages without external conditions.[26]

Strategic Framework

The 2003 Tokyo Declaration issued during the ASEAN-Japan Commemoration Summit was a landmark declaration that elevated the partnership to the status of Strategic Partnership, with the main pillars, hence, agreed to uphold international law and maintain a rule-based order.[27] Meanwhile, the East Asia Summit Declaration emphasizes comprehensive cooperation in all spheres within East Asia while reiterating the importance of ASEAN centrality as the core group. The focus is on open dialogue, mutual respect, and consensus-based decisions.[28] Additionally, the ASEAN-Japan security relationship was initiated in 2005 with the first security consultations, transforming the relationship into a continuous process to address regional security implications. Transnational crimes, threat of terrorism, and disaster response coordination were among the issues placed on the agenda.[29]

Japan's support to the ASEAN coast guards has been in the form of a multitude of capacity-building programs instead of a single program at the regional level. According to the Japanese government's official records, the support has included a variety of elements, such as the provision of grant aid to procure patrol vessels, which were first deployed in the Philippines in the late 2000s and were followed by Vietnam in the 2010s in the form of pilot programs. Therefore, Japan has also assisted in the capacity-building of the ASEAN states in the area of maritime surveillance, as it has supplied coastal radars to the maritime operation centres in some of the ASEAN states, such as Malaysia and Indonesia. This has all been done in a way that takes into account the non-alignment policy pursued by the ASEAN states and their focus on non-traditional security issues.[30]

Strategic Context of Japan–ASEAN Engagement

Japan-ASEAN relations must be situated within the broader transformation of the Indo-Pacific regional order. Since the end of the Cold War, East Asia has shifted from a relatively stable U.S.-led security hierarchy toward a more complex strategic environment characterized by China's rise, intensifying maritime disputes, and the proliferation of overlapping institutional architectures. In this evolving context, Japan increasingly views Southeast Asia not as a peripheral diplomatic theatre but as a central component of its regional strategy.

Japan's strategic interest in Southeast Asia is inseparable from maritime geography. The Japanese economy remains heavily dependent on sea-borne trade, and most of its energy imports transit through the South China Sea and surrounding sea lines of communication.[31] Consequently, stability in maritime Southeast Asia directly affects Japan's national security and economic sustainability. Tokyo's contemporary regional policy therefore, links economic integration, maritime security, and institutional diplomacy within a single strategic framework.

This policy shift is reflected in Japan's formal strategic documents. The 2022 National Security Strategy identifies the Indo-Pacific as the primary theatre of Japan's security environment and commits Japan to increasing defence-related expenditures to approximately 2 percent of GDP by fiscal year 2027 while strengthening maritime and air defence capabilities.[32] Rather than representing militarization, however, Japanese strategy emphasizes a combination of security cooperation and regional institution-building designed to preserve a rules-based order.[33] Importantly, Japan's regional role is not solely self-defined; it is also accepted within Southeast Asia. According to the State of Southeast Asia 2024 Survey, 58.9 percent of respondents across ASEAN member states identified Japan as the most trusted major power in the region.[34] This perception reflects ASEAN's view of Japan as a "responsible stakeholder" that respects international law and avoids coercive diplomacy. Such legitimacy is strategically significant

because Southeast Asian states traditionally hedge among great powers rather than align exclusively with one.

Historically, ASEAN itself has emphasized institutional balancing rather than alliance politics. ASEAN centrality functions less as a power hierarchy than as a convening mechanism that structures regional interaction.[35] Japan's regional engagement aligns closely with this institutional logic. Rather than forming exclusive blocs, Tokyo has prioritized multilateral platforms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus.[36] This institutional approach allows Japan to support regional stability without forcing Southeast Asian states into explicit geopolitical alignment. Thus, the strategic context of Japan-ASEAN engagement is defined by mutual functional convergence: Japan requires a stable maritime environment and institutional legitimacy, while ASEAN seeks external support that does not undermine its autonomy. Japan's approach; combining security cooperation, economic integration, and institutional respect, therefore fits the diplomatic preferences of Southeast Asian states and explains the durability of the partnership.

What Makes Japan Different

Japan's role in Southeast Asia differs from that of other major powers not primarily because of its material capabilities but because of the historical structure of its engagement. Unlike both Cold War military interventionism and contemporary great-power competition, Japan's regional influence has been rooted in developmental statecraft.

Beginning in the 1970s, Japan employed economic cooperation as its principal diplomatic instrument. Approximately 65 percent of Japan's foreign aid between 1975 and 1987 was directed toward Asian countries, and Tokyo financed nearly US$1 billion in ASEAN industrial cooperation projects during the late 1970s.[37] This pattern produced extensive production networks linking Japanese manufacturing with Southeast Asian economies. Japanese foreign direct investment in Southeast Asia exceeded US$22 billion between 1988 and 1993 and accounted for roughly one-fifth of regional

inflows in the 1990s.[38] Consequently, Japan became embedded not only in ASEAN's trade structure but also in its industrial development.

This economic engagement generated a distinct perception of Japan within ASEAN. Surveys and diplomatic studies consistently indicate that Southeast Asian states associate Japan with technological transfer and economic growth rather than political conditionality.[39] Cultural diplomacy reinforced this image, as educational exchanges and people-to-people programs contributed to regional community-building.[40] Unlike coercive or ideological engagement, Japan's influence became institutionalized through everyday economic and social interactions.

Contemporary Japanese policy continues this developmental orientation while incorporating security cooperation. Japan's recent initiatives include training approximately 800 maritime security personnel, providing around US$2 billion in maritime security assistance, and supporting legal and governance capacity-building across the region.[41] These programs reflect capacity-building rather than alliance formation and therefore align with ASEAN's preference for autonomy.

Economic cooperation has also expanded into emerging sectors. Southeast Asia's digital economy, characterized by approximately 71 percent internet penetration and roughly 71 million micro, small, and medium enterprises, has become a new focus of Japan-ASEAN collaborationn.[42] Japan's emphasis on infrastructure, digital connectivity, and technological training illustrates continuity with earlier development diplomacy while adapting to new economic conditions. Thus, Japan's distinctiveness lies in the continuity of its strategy. Whereas other powers often oscillate between security competition and economic engagement, Japan has consistently linked economic development, technological transfer, and cooperative security. The result is not simply influence but trust, which constitutes a form of strategic capital in Southeast Asia.

Shared Vision for Like-Minded Cooperation

The durability of the Japan-ASEAN partnership ultimately rests on a shared vision of regional order. Both sides support a rules-based Indo-Pacific framework grounded in international law, economic openness, and institutional cooperation. Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific concept and ASEAN's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific emphasize inclusivity, connectivity, and peaceful dispute resolution rather than containment strategies.[43] This convergence reflects practical economic interests. ASEAN has become one of the world's most dynamic economic regions, with foreign direct investment inflows reaching approximately US$100.6 billion and intra-ASEAN investment totalling US$21.3 billion.[44] For Japan, whose firms maintain extensive regional supply chains, regional stability and open markets are therefore strategic necessities rather than abstract principles.

Institutional cooperation operationalizes this shared vision. Platforms such as the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus facilitate joint exercises, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief operations involving Japan and Southeast Asian states.[45] These mechanisms emphasize functional security cooperation; maritime safety, disaster response, and capacity-building, rather than collective defence commitments. The partnership also addresses broader transnational challenges. Japan has expanded cooperation with ASEAN in maritime security, digital connectivity, infrastructure development, and human resource training.[46] These initiatives correspond with ASEAN's development priorities and reinforce regional resilience without creating hierarchical dependence.

At the normative level, both actors support inclusive regionalism. Japan's strategy does not seek to exclude China but to embed all major powers within predictable institutional frameworks.[47] ASEAN similarly prioritizes autonomy through engagement rather than alignment.[48] The partnership therefore represents neither balancing nor bandwagoning but cooperative order-building. In this sense, Japan-ASEAN relations function as a model of "like-minded cooperation". The two sides share neither identical political systems nor alliance commitments, yet they converge on principles:

adherence to international law, freedom of navigation, economic openness, and multilateral diplomacy. The partnership persists because it reconciles strategic necessity with regional norms, enabling both Japan and ASEAN to navigate great-power competition while preserving regional stability.

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Chapter 2
Japan and the Global South in a Changing World Order

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Introduction

A more flexible and pluralistic distribution of power is progressively replacing the Western hegemony that marked the post-Cold War era in the political, economic, and normative domains. A more adaptable world of multipolarity and bold international relations of the Global South is replacing this period of unipolar domination. The United States and the European Union are no longer the exclusive holders of power. A new arrangement of power is replacing the conventional balance of power. The term "Global South" has resurfaced as a potent term to characterize a wide range of nations, mostly in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East, that want more influence in international political and economic governance.

Japan and ASEAN are the most important actors in the region with a unique combination of strengths. Japan's engagement with ASEAN has historically been framed by the Fukuda Doctrine's commitment to "heart-to-heart" relations, non-military contributions, and respect for ASEAN's autonomy. In recent years, Tokyo has also embraced the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) vision, emphasising rule of law, freedom of navigation, connectivity, and sustainable development. It is also a strong proponent of the rules-based

order.[1] Together, they create an axis that links advanced economies with the rising regions of the world, providing an opportunity for stability, development, and leadership in a multipolar world.

In combination, they represent a strategic axis that connects developed and emerging economies, and which reflects real opportunities for stability, development, and good leadership in a world of diffused power. This partnership goes beyond bilateral relations; it showcases a model of advanced technology and demographic dynamism, precision manufacturing and the weight of supply chains, and middle power reliability and regional institutionalism.

This chapter will focus on Japan's relationship with the Global South through its relationship with ASEAN. The three questions addressed in the chapter are the challenges and opportunities arising from the changing global power configuration in the context of Japan-ASEAN relations, the strategic importance of ASEAN in the context of the new power configuration in the global arena with the rise of great power rivalry, and the future implications of the Japan-ASEAN relationship amid of the changing of power in the global affairs with the emergence of the Global South.

Conceptualizing the Global South Discourse

Within the context of Japan-ASEAN relations, the Global South is conceived less as a solid geopolitical formation but more as a broad framework that accommodates the changing focus of economic development, political influence, and agency. ASEAN member states collectively represent 670 million of their population as of 2026, with a combined gross domestic product (GDP) of $4.13 trillion in 2024, thereby the ASEAN countries play a vital role in international trade circuits and regional politics, with Southeast Asia emerging as a bedrock of Global South vibrancy.[2]

Traditionally, the Global South has been linked with the post-colonial experience of dependency and marginal participation in global governance,

a phenomenon that is typically understood through the lens of dependency theory, which emerged in the 1960s. Pioneered by economists—Raúl Prebisch and Hans Singer—posits that the causes of underdevelopment and endemic poverty in the Global South result from the asymmetric character of the global economy, where the periphery is forced to export primary commodities to the center, while the latter exports manufactured goods.[3] However, this has changed as Asian nations have moved to achieve high economic growth rates—India averaging 6.5 percent, and Indonesia averaging 5.1 percent—have also improved their institutional capacities with more effective central banks and trade ministries, as well as higher integration in the global economy.[4] ASEAN nations are a prime example of this transformation—moving from the crisis of the late 1990s to become a $4.81 trillion economy, with its own dynamism of Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) ratification and planning for ASEAN Power Grid, along with its core principles of sovereignty and non-interference in each other's matters.[5]

From the perspective of ASEAN countries, the Global South formations would be a manifestation of strategic interests centered around enhanced autonomy, diversified partnerships, and a strengthened voice in international politics. This is a notion that is highly consonant with the founding principles of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, such as inclusiveness, non-alignment, and diversity, articulated through the ASEAN Way and Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP).[6] ASEAN creates this region as an 'area of cooperation' instead of competition, where the location of Southeast Asia in the very heart of the Indo-Pacific region position, which makes it as a regional organization at the very center. In light of this, the role of ASEAN in the Indo-Pacific region is to secure peace and preserve stability, as conflicts of interest of great powers competing in this region have the potential to destabilize this region, particularly its member states. In this context, the principles of the AOIP serve as an important tool to engage ASEAN in the region.[7]

In the case of Japan, the emergence of the Global South does not represent a break with the status quo in the international system but rather its extension.

Indeed, Japan's international relations have been characterized by the importance it attaches to inclusiveness, dialogue, and the consideration of each nation's specificities, as emphasized in its various Official Development Assistance (ODA) Charters since the 1990s.[8] This approach has enabled Japan to initiate cooperation with the Global South without the constraints of any ideological preconditions, instead preferring to establish relations based on trust in which long-term benefits are considered rather than immediate ones. Likewise, its ODA efforts have been known for several decades, valued at trillions of yen in quality infrastructure and human resource development, and won goodwill in the Global South, from railways to Africa to vocational schools in Southeast Asia.[9] In 2020, there were concerns regarding healthcare and medical facilities in Cambodia because of the COVID-19 outbreak. Japan has been working on these procedures with unprecedented speed to help the country, which received high-purity oxygen generators from Japan in August. These are being utilized efficiently in hospitals and other places in Cambodia.[10]

With the ASEAN's international profile remaining on the rise, giving its USD 4.13 trillion economy, RCEP leading the pack of 30 percent of the world's GDP, and AOIP endorsed by 19 dialogue partners, ASEAN's deepening engagement with the Global South is becoming more intertwined with its historic partnership with Japan.[11] Therefore, ASEAN's unique role in regional and international developments lies in its dual role of receiving Japan's ¥2 trillion on land, sea, and air corridor connectivity infrastructure projects—aiming to strengthen physical connectivity as well as complemented by various technical cooperation projects that encourage institutional and people-to-people connectivity.[12]

Apart from the large-scale infrastructure cooperation, this partnership has also been strengthened through continued human resource development programmes. For instance—Cambodia—where Japan's continued scholarship and training programmes, including the acceptance of foreign students and technical training in Japan, have been highly valued by the partner countries, yielding around 1,500 Cambodian graduates. This shows

the role of Japan as a complement to ASEAN capacity building and long-term development.[13]

Multipolarity and Strategic Opportunities

The global system has evolved into a new multipolar world, defined by the distribution of power among major economies, middle powers, and organised regional blocs, mirroring the economic ascent of the Global South. Amid of this evolving structure, Japan and ASEAN occupy strategically significant positions, drawing on complementary capabilities to navigate both structural constraints and emerging opportunities.[14]

A notable characteristic of this emerging world order is that power is not concentrated in a few economies as in traditional world orders. The developed economies are at the core of this emerging world order, driven by their technological capabilities. The middle powers like Japan are at the core of this order, driven by their economic strength in precision manufacturing. In the same manner, regional bloc like ASEAN is solidifying their influence within global supply chains and markets in 2026. With an economy valued at an estimation of USD 4.13 trillion as well as a population exceeded more than 680 million, thus showing its growth in influence. However, this also can be noted through the engagement with various institutional mechanisms—Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)—where about 30 percent of global GDP was projected, and the Japan-led Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).[15]

For the relationship between Japan and ASEAN, the above structural transformation implies the emergence of a dual landscape characterized by challenges and opportunities. Significantly, the preeminent position of ASEAN in the global manufacturing landscape is the primary factor that gives the organization its contemporary economic and strategic importance. It is estimated that ASEAN contributes to around 12 percent of the global of electronics export market, with integrated circuits leading the way with a value of around US$245 billion annually.[16] In addition, Malaysia has come

to be recognized as a leading hub due to its contribution of 13 percent of global Assembly for semiconductor testing and packaging, while Thailand has managed to carve a niche as automotive hub or so-called "Detroit of Asia", with Indonesia also playing a progressively strategic role with regard to the supply chain of renewable energy, accounting for around 65 percent of global output.[17] Therefore, the structural advantages of ASEAN have resulted in the organization cultivating a high degree of economic interdependence that enables ASEAN to be in a position where it is increasingly vulnerable to the pressures of the multipolar world, given the partnership expectations.

ASEAN progresses within this environment through its unique ASEAN Way of consensus-based flexibility aided by 1,070 institutional mechanisms to support economic ministries, trade negotiators, and sectoral working groups. Rather than alignments based on exclusivity and historical divisions based on ideology, ASEAN pursue the full ratification of RCEP by 2025, maximizes the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) with its 19 dialogue partners, and utilize ASEAN+ structures to engage multiple partners in a positive manner. This turns external competition into interdependence, continuing ASEAN's growth rate of 6.7% towards becoming the third-largest economic bloc by 2030, while maintaining strategic autonomy based on the principle of non-interference.

Japan's position is consistent with the ASEAN structure in a manner that showcases five decades of doctrinal continuity from Prime Minister Takeo Fukuda's 1977 Manila Declaration, which set out the vision for a "heart-to-heart" relationship.[18] Tokyo supports the development of advanced economies through the G7's USD 600 billion Partnership for Global Infrastructure, while backing ASEAN-led regionalism through the 2023 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership framework, where USD 75 billion is granted for economic cooperation.[19] Also, Tokyo's engagement with ASEAN is evidenced by concrete deliverables, such as over USD 300 billion in bilateral trade in 2025, funding of ¥2.8 trillion for an infrastructure pipeline, ¥1.1 trillion in funding for the Thai high-speed rail project in the

North Economic Corridor, and USD 9.8 billion in funding for nickel smelters in Indonesia.[20]

Furthermore, the Japan-ASEAN convergence exemplifies middle power-regional institution synergy within multipolar conditions. Japan's consistent reinforcement of ASEAN-led processes through substantial economic frameworks strengthens Southeast Asia's convening authority while providing Tokyo dependable regional platform stability, making Japan remained the most trusted partner by the ASEAN member states, with an overall 36.5 percent level of trust, and the countries where Japan enjoys the highest trust are the Philippines (82.3%), Vietnam (72%), Thailand (65.1%), and Cambodia (61.9%).[21] ASEAN's flexible diversification amplifies development options across membership while channeling external partnerships through established institutional architecture. This complementary specialization transforms power diffusion from governance constraint into collective multiplier, delivering measurable prosperity across economic gradients through relocated high-technology capacity, interconnected energy infrastructure, and harmonized regulatory standards.

The deliberate promotion by Japan of ASEAN centrality strengthens the regional institution's capacity to express its development agenda in global forums, while the strategic role played by ASEAN places Southeast Asia at the core of an indispensable partnership hub in the region. The capacity of Japan and ASEAN to build a development trajectory from multipolar complexity, defined by a sustained high level of economic performance, diverse market opportunities, and maturity in regional institutions, serves as a model for effective engagement in the complex international relations of the 21st century, which demand flexibility in the face of power dispersion rather than rivalry for dominance.

ASEAN's Strategic Place in Balancing Centrality

ASEAN centrality acts as a principle for regional governance and not as diplomatic rhetoric, as provided for under Article 1(15) of the 2007 ASEAN Charter. The article establishes that the centrality and enhanced engagement

of the bloc as a driving force for external relations shall be the main driver for political, economic, security, and socio-cultural relations between parties in the Indo-Pacific.[22] The basis for operationalization of such a principle can be found under the 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC), ratified by all ten ASEAN member states and 51 High Contracting Parties, such as the US, China, Japan, India, the EU, Russia, and Australia—provides a basic legal foundation for the centrality of ASEAN through the identification of the underlying principles of non-interference, the peaceful settlement of disputes, and mutual respect that guide regional interactions and define the "ASEAN Way".[23] Therefore, the bloc's translation of its legal basis into concrete capacity can be found through eleven interconnected mechanisms with 26 external partners, which are: The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) complemented by 27 members that prioritize on preventive diplomacy; The East Asian Summit (EAS) with 18 leaders that focuses on setting regional strategy; The ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) supported by 18 defence ministers that carries 8 annual expert military exercises; and The ASEAN Plus Three (APT) mechanisms that coordinates macroeconomic policies between East Asian economies, and among others. These mechanisms posit ASEAN, with more than USD 670 million citizens as of 2026 and a GDP of USD 4.13 trillion as of 2024, as an essential fulcrum for regional architecture where middle powers facilitate dialogue between rival parties without dominating.[24]

From this analysis, it is evident that there is a 'convening power' with observable 'agenda-setting behavior' that major powers are obliged to respect. For instance, the Regional Comprehensive Partnership (RCEP) was initiated at the 2011 Bali Summit in Indonesia, finalized under Thailand's ASEAN Chairmanship in 2019, and ratified by Japan in June 2021—the first developed country to undertaken this action.[25] According to the Asia Global Institute, intra-ASEAN trade has demonstrated considerable shift in recent times. In 2023, intra-ASEAN trade reduced by 13.3 percent, showcasing global trade deceleration, eroding supply chains, and potentially impacted to domestic consumers in key ASEAN economies, however, it has stabilized with an increase of 7.03 percent in 2024, indicating that ASEAN's trade networks remained withstand external headwinds.[26] In the same manner,

binding outcomes have been recognized through the ADMM-Plus working groups, particularly the 2024 Humanitarian Assistance, which formalised the ASEAN Disaster Emergency Logistic System for the Asia-Pacific (DELSA) encompassing 18 participating countries, and the Maritime Security Track II mechanism, which enables information-sharing among regional coast guards.[27]

The support of this framework is nuanced, making Japan distinct from others by providing tailored support. Japan's flagship infrastructure contributions are deliverables, which can see in Cambodia—Neak Luong Bridge—Cambodia's longest Mekong crossing at 2,215 meters and boasts a cable-stayed section of 640 meters. It was completed in 2015 with the support of a JICA grant. In light of this achievement, the project was indeed convenient and deliverable as it replaced the ferry crossings that previously caused travelers to be stuck in a line for hours during peak season, and now allows for non-stop travel in just 5 minutes around the clock. As the flagship project of the Southern Economic Corridor, it has resulted in a growth in manufacturing activity in the entire Mekong region. Yet the true measure of the bridge's influence was not just in terms of the deals and the dollars, but the profound effect on the daily lives of the people in the region. On the eastern bank of the Mekong River, people now had access to markets, clinics, and school again—things that had been out of reach due to floods.[28]

It its quest for the balancing of power flows between the major players, the ASEAN promotes a well-tuned sense of inclusivity. The objective is ensuring strategic balance and prevent the emergence of zero-sum groups that could potentially weaken its cohesion. This approach is reflected in the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) which was introduced in 2019—enforced ASEAN's vision across six principal pillars—maritime cooperation, connectivity, adherence to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), economic integration, human development, and comprehensive security. Likewise, all the major players have already adopted this framework.[29] Under its 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy, the United States has committed US$60 million to regional capacity-building, while China has emphasised that its 2022 Global Security Initiative aligns with the

ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), and Japan explicitly positions ASEAN Centrality as the groundwork element for its Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy, highlighting Tokyo's commitment for cooperative regional frameworks.[30]

Forward-Looking Implications

As the Global South continues to assert itself on the global stage, the Japan-ASEAN relationship is at a crossroads of new challenges and opportunities. To take full advantage of this moment, it must be aligned on five issues—economic cooperation that enhances robust supply chains and advances sustainable connectivity and digital innovation; shared values that promote an inclusive and rules-based order; security dialogue that strengthens mutual confidence without establishing alliances; people-to-people relations that sustain mutual trust, and shared visions that position the partnership as a model for stability in a multipolar world.

Japan could expand its capacity building through its Official Security Assistance (OSA). This maintains ASEAN centrality in line with the ASEAN Charter and ASEAN's call for a shared vision. In the years ahead, further diversification of supply chains shall continue to be a key area of strategy. The fact that ASEAN is home to some of the world's most important manufacturing clusters, including electronics, automotive, and renewable energy which makes it crucial that it becomes a bridge between any single market. Japan's investments in state-of-art technology, as well as renewable resources, are creating an interconnected network that minimizes the impact of global disruptions for both nations. The ASEAN Power Grid, along with the move towards an increasingly interconnected digital economy, will begin to highlight Japan's capabilities in intelligent infrastructure as well as technology transfer, opening up fresh growth opportunities that support industrialization while caring for the environment. Moreover, the digital revolution in e-commerce, finance, and digital trade, to which ASEAN will be able to rapidly integrate into the global economy. Japan will be able to pay an important role in this process. By developing innovation hubs that connect Japanese businesses with micro, small, and medium-scale

enterprises—Japan will be able to support the creation of quality jobs, technology transfer, and economic growth that enhances the quality of life for people.[31]

Additionally, there are three major pillars that form the core of the potential cooperation that Japan and ASEAN may enhance today. Firstly, both seeks a free, open, rules-based, and fair regional order by strengthening defense and security ties, particularly in maritime cooperation through the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) and Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). ASEAN states such as the Philippines and Vietnam are strengthening their coast guard capabilities and signed defense equipment transfer agreements with several ASEAN states, such as the Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam, Thailand, and Indonesia. Secondly, they aim to promote common interests in economic development and equity—Japan has reaffirmed its continuous commitment to advancing relations with ASEAN member states that were affected by the COVID-19 through the financial assistance and introduced the ASEAN Centre for Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases. As one, Japan and ASEAN states can build a stronger supply chain flows durably by increasing free trade agreements, like the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership. Thirdly, both seek to strengthen on shared interests by deepening mutual trust and understanding to become "heart-to-heart partners". While the Abe administration succeeded in strengthening cultural exchanges, there remains a need to establish multiple layers that improve mutual understanding, information sharing, and intellectual exchanges. While the regional landscape of ASEAN and Japan has undergone significant changes over the last five decades, one thing remains constant—the challenges that both ASEAN and Japan face today remain the same. As the regional order becomes increasingly uncertain, today is the auspicious time for ASEAN and Japan to forge a new form of partnership that emphasized on equity and fairness, based on defense and security cooperation, sustainable and equitable economic development, and reciprocal understanding.[32]

Additionally, security cooperation is strengthened through focused capacity-building efforts. The basis for Japan's efforts to strengthen ASEAN defense lies in its 155 percent increase in arms imports from 2019-2023, which catapulted it to become the sixth biggest arms importer globally. The growing defense industry includes 29 F-35s and 400 long-range Tomahawks from the US, which are directly related to Official Security Assistance. The defense equipment provided through OSA includes coastal radars for ASEAN countries' coast guards, such as the $10.6 million allocated for the Philippines in 2024, as well as the patrol vessels for Indonesia and Malaysia.[33]

Conclusion

The emergence of the Global South has disrupted the conventional balance of power, altered the global order, and created new chances for collaboration. It is changing the environment in which Japan and ASEAN established their alliance. In light of the shifting global balance of power, the collaboration between Japan and ASEAN is a crucial case study of a practical and progressive alliance. The two counterparts have chosen resilience, inclusivity, and institutional cooperation over a power struggle, showing how a mature economy can work with a developing economy in the face of global instability. It must constantly modify its policies, tools, and narratives to support ASEAN's goals of equitable growth, sustainable development, and autonomy.

Furthermore, the collaboration between Japan and ASEAN has expanded beyond the conventional transactional level to incorporate a wide range of elements. Additionally, this all-encompassing collaboration has given both countries the chance to protect themselves from outside shocks, maintain their independence, and continue to actively interact with a range of partners. The Japan-ASEAN collaboration has the potential to become a model of fair, forward-thinking cooperation if Japan can combine its strengths with sincere respect for ASEAN Centrality and Global South agency. In addition to providing resources, a responsive and involved Japan is a partner dedicated to an inclusive, rules-based regional order for ASEAN.

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Source: Reuters Photographer

Chapter 3
Global South's Development Cooperation in Transition

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Introduction: Reframing Development Cooperation

Development cooperation has moved from a limited concept of donor-provided technical assistance to a more comprehensive concept of development cooperation as a strategic practice that influences economic models, political alignments, and normative standards. A "Just Transition" entails not only economic support but also social safety nets, worker engagement, people-centered development, governance reform, capacity building, and other measures.[1]

The transformation starts in Southeast Asia, which is referred to as a "dynamic and trade-linked region" that is "exposed to the effects of climate change," where infrastructure, communication, and renewable energy projects serve a dual purpose as development instruments and tools of statecraft that bind nations into long-term economic and political relationships. However, the Global South has more agency today than in the 1970s. "Multipolarity, diversified financing, and deepened regionalism" mean that the recipient nation and local actors can now set the agenda, play one great power against another, and claim their rights to justice and participation. The role of civil society and trade unions, as represented in the

"Just Transition" literature[2], has been instrumental in bringing about this change in the South from a passive recipient to an active partner.

This chapter argues that development cooperation has evolved into a hybrid instrument; simultaneously developmental and strategic. Rather than being purely altruistic or purely instrumental, it operates at the intersection of economic modernisation, political influence, and normative diffusion. The recognition of this hybrid system enables researchers to conduct more sophisticated analyses that examine public goodwill more effectively than simple binary comparisons. The chapter investigates how the Japan-Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) partnership has developed through its strategic partnership. Japan has depended on Official Development Assistance (ODA) and infrastructure investment and technical cooperation to build long-term relationships in Southeast Asia because of its historical limitations on military power. Through high-quality infrastructure, institutional capacity building, and sustainability standards, Japan's approach illustrates how development cooperation can function as geoeconomic statecraft while maintaining a narrative of partnership and mutual benefit.

Evolution of ODA: From Assistance to Strategic Partnership

The history of Official Development Assistance (ODA) has its roots in the post-World War II era, when the international system was being remade, and new lines of geopolitical division were being drawn. At first, Japan's involvement in development cooperation was part of a diplomatic normalisation strategy, which aimed to restore trust with neighboring countries following the devastation of the war and reintegrate into the international system. This first stage of development assistance clearly shows that aid was never a temporally or politically neutral activity but was instead situated within the strategic calculations of the donor country.[3]

In terms of Japan, the larger context of the provision of ODA is a reflection of the progressive and forward-thinking spirit of the post-reconstruction era of the post-1945 in full alignment with the strategic interests of the leading

industrialised nations of the world, such as Japan itself. Japan emerged as a symbol of hope and resolve in the immediate aftermath of World War II, rebuilding and reconstructing its own country while also joining the international efforts, initiated by Europe and America, to rebuild and reconstruct the world following the catastrophic effects of the conflict. This positive trend continued seamlessly into the Cold War era, where Japan emerged as a beacon of hope and stability in the Third World, countering the spread of Communism and forging strong ties with the emerging nations of Africa and Asia.

Even before the formalisation of the definition of ODA by the OECD's Development Assistance Committee in 1969, Japan was already leading the way in the effective use of concessional grants and loans for the development of weaker nations, integrating them into the dynamic and vibrant Western economies and politics for the mutual benefit of all parties involved. Japan's aid has always been effective and for a purpose, supporting reconstruction, welfare, and development, and driving market reforms that unlocked the true potential of the recipient nations and aligned them with the values of democracy, ensuring a loyal market and ally in the process. As historical studies of decolonisation affirm, nations like Japan, alongside France and the US, wisely leveraged concessional aid to build lasting influence and stability.[4] Modern analysis has shown that Japan is the epitome of strategic aid, with the following observation being made: "While diplomatic normalisation was the initial goal of Japan's ODA, it quickly advanced economic partnerships that benefited all parties, and today, ODA is masterfully integrated with foreign policy and security tools, such as Official Security Assistance, enhancing global peace and prosperity".[5] Strategic aid, therefore, is the hallmark of Japanese leadership, which has been time-tested and is now innovatively integrated with other agendas to ensure effective tackling of 21st-century challenges.

The Shift Toward Partnership

Development cooperation in the Global South has traditionally been characterised by a donor-recipient relationship that in many instances

mirrored the colonial era. However, in recent decades, there has been a rhetorical shift in the international community to a "partner–partner" relationship, also referred to as co-development. This can be observed in the forums on aid effectiveness and new partnerships. The Paris Declaration in 2005 and the Busan Partnership in 2011 formalised country ownership and partnerships as core principles in the international cooperation process.[6] Indeed, as one report states, the Paris Declaration marked the beginning of "unprecedented efforts" in placing developing-country ownership at the core of the process. Similarly, the SDG era continues to place the spotlight on the role of country ownership in the development process. For example, the recent 2025 Busan Global Partnership Forum reaffirmed that "development co-operation must be led by partner countries, and aligned with national plans, systems, and priorities to ensure sustainability and ownership". These kinds of statements indicate that local stakeholders have more influence over development agendas. In fact, it is argued that the ownership principle has become a foundation of most South-South and triangular projects, which represent a two-way flow of respect and trust rather than one-way aid.

The Japan–ASEAN Partnership: A Case Study in Co-development

The Japan-Southeast Asia case is a good example of the shift from donor-recipient to strategic partnership. Japan has been one of the largest ODA donors to ASEAN since the 1970s, but there has been a shift in its strategy. Recently, the official language used has been one of equal partnership. For example, in the joint vision statement on ASEAN-Japan partnership, the two are described as "trusted partners" and engage in "co-creation" of economic and social values.[7] At a seminar organised by the ASEAN Studies Centre, speakers observed that "Japan and ASEAN have fostered an equal partnership with cooperation in all sectors" because of "mutual benefits". The 2023 ASEAN-Japan Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) is the latest to enshrine this rhetoric, boasting of a new chapter of "co-creation based on mutual trust" in the areas of green transition, digitalisation, and other SDG-related areas.

Concrete projects reflect these principles. Japan's recent aid tends to focus on capacity-building (trainings, JICA expert missions) and co-financed infrastructure (with ASEAN governments also investing). The Japan-ASEAN Tourism Fund and human resource exchanges (such as the JENESYS program for youth exchanges) are not portrayed as one-sided grants but rather as mutual exchanges.[8] Furthermore, Japan has been involved in regional initiatives (such as the regional chair for disaster resilience under the ASEAN Disaster Management Centre), with mutual sharing of knowledge between states. What may be most important of all is that ASEAN states themselves are prioritizing these projects; the funding by Japan may be channeled through ASEAN's own schemes (such as the ASEAN Smart Cities Network).

Nevertheless, in the case of Japan and ASEAN, there are also some limitations. The aid provided by Japan is often in its own interests in ASEAN in terms of supply chains, markets, and geopolitical alliances, even if this is coupled with a rhetoric of mutuality. Some argue that even in Japan's aid policy, its loans have technical conditions attached and promote the use of Japanese companies. Therefore, even if Japan is using a rhetoric of partnership in its aid policy, as in its CSP in terms of its "pillars of heart-to-heart relations" and "partners for co-creation," there is a reality of asymmetry in its aid policy, a rich industrial country assisting developing economies.[9] Still, in comparison with its older forms, Japan's current policy of cooperation with ASEAN is more consultative and diversified. The rhetoric of "comprehensive" and "equal" collaboration in its policy and its practical initiatives in this sphere suggests a more genuine partnership than in earlier times.

The Strategic Turn in ODA

Over the past few years, development assistance has become a geoeconomic instrument; in this context, states utilise economic instruments like investments, trade agreements, sanctions, and assistance to further their foreign policy interests. In this context, infrastructure diplomacy has emerged as a significant instrument. Instead of infrastructure serving as a

mere background feature, infrastructure diplomacy considers a network of roads, railways, ports, cables, and grids as a long-term instrument. Infrastructure diplomacy is defined as "the strategic use of capital-intensive, spatially fixed physical and digital systems to secure entanglements." This means that with the assistance of aid programs, connectivity projects aim to lock countries in a long-term relationship; they create leverage, foster alliances, and shape regions. What is more important is that foreign investments and ODA assistance provide "immense political favor and diplomatic leverage" to donors in return for developing infrastructure, such as transportation infrastructure that links the recipient countries to the global economy.

Connectivity projects now cover a broad spectrum – and each can translate into long-term influence. Notable examples include:

Table 1: Strategic Connectivity Projects in Global South Development Cooperation

Type of Infrastructure	Core Strategic Function	Mechanism of Influence	Long-Term Political Effect
Ports	Connect land routes to maritime trade corridors	Control of trade gateways, access to sea lanes, and potential naval use	Anchors donor presence in the host economy; enables leverage over trade and maritime access
Railways	Integrate regional markets and production zones	Establish transport dependency through corridor management and supply systems	Shapes trade flows and regional integration patterns

Digital Infrastructure	Enable data flows, telecommunications, and digital governance	Embed technology standards, platforms, and network control	Generates soft power influence through technological ecosystem dependency
Supply Chain Corridors	Link production hubs, ports, and markets across regions	Create integrated economic networks spanning multiple countries	Locks partners into long-term production and trade alignment

Source: Author's Compilation

All of these investments in connectivity highlight the central argument of this chapter, which is that infrastructure is key in the long-term exercise of influence. These are not transitory aid projects, but rather long-term arteries of power that embed the donor state in the partner state's economy and politics; as one scholar of the subject remarks, infrastructure has "evolved beyond its technical" function to become an "intentional strategic instrument" in international relations.

This is certainly the case in the recalibration of Japan's ODA towards connectivity and geoeconomics in recent years. In the context of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy, the focus is on high-quality infrastructure as ODA, but also as a regional strategy, such as the Matarbari deep-sea port in Bangladesh (part of the Bay of Bengal/Northeast India corridor) or the Asia-Africa/Indian Ocean connectivity projects more broadly. As such, the ODA of Japan is now in part about long-term strategic engagement, and it is now time to turn to the relationship between Japan and ASEAN.

Japan's ODA Diplomacy in ASEAN

Economic Pacifism and Institutionalised Development Partnership

During the decades after the Second World War, a deep legitimacy crisis was experienced in the whole Southeast Asian region. Japan's active engagement in Southeast Asia from 1954 to 1976 showcased its commitment to fostering political stability and economic growth in those affected countries, such as the Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Myanmar. Southeast Asia had been the greatest recipient of Japanese ODA in the region, with the Track Record of Japan's ODA by the 1970s. By 1990, almost 40 percent of the total bilateral ODA disbursements of Japan were made in relation to ASEAN countries. The change institutionalised development as the main tool of regional diplomacy of Japan.[10]

The post-war development diplomacy in Japan was a manifestation of economic pacifism by scholars. Both limited by Article 9 of its constitution and due to the Yoshida Doctrine, Japan replaced military projection with economic participation. Instead of exerting influence in a coercive manner, Tokyo spent so much money on building infrastructure and increasing the capacity of industries. Japan had provided over 250 billion ODA to the member countries of the ASEAN region (gross disbursement basis) by 2022, which made it one of the largest long-term development partners of the region. The JICA is the most representative of the institutional coherence of this strategy. JICA has achieved approximately 2.6 trillion (c. 20 billion US dollars) of global ODA payments in fiscal year 2022 alone, and Southeast Asia has still been among its most important priorities in the region (JICA Annual Report 2023). The Development Cooperation Charter of Japan (revised in 2023) gives special focus to the three priorities of quality growth, human security, and rule-based international order.

A defining characteristic of Japan's ODA in ASEAN lies in its emphasis on technical cooperation. Between 1974 and 2022, more than 190,000 ASEAN participants received training under JICA programs, while over 70,000 Japanese experts were dispatched to developing countries, many of them to

Southeast Asia (JICA Statistical Data 2023). These exchanges foster shared professional standards and governance practices, reinforcing institutional trust. Equally important is the integration of private sector actors. Japanese-affiliated firms have been deeply involved in major ASEAN infrastructure projects, including metro systems and port modernization. For example, Japan provided approximately ¥140 billion (USD 1.2 billion equivalent) in concessional loans for the Jakarta MRT Phase I project. Such projects combine ODA financing with Japanese engineering expertise, promoting long-term operational standards and technology transfer.[11] The institutionalized approach by Japan shows one major finding of building enduring relationships at depth and not speed. The historical pooling of financial flows, technical transactions, and institutional coordination has institutionalised Japan in the ASEAN development environment.

Infrastructure, Structural Power, and Strategic Positioning

This is the central role of infrastructure in the Japan-ASEAN interaction since it is structural power. Like Susan Strange (1988) in her arguments, structural power influences the structures under which economic and political relations are practiced. Trade corridors, supply chain integration, and investment flows in ASEAN are decades-long and are dictated by infrastructure. Both Japan has played a major role in the Mekong subregional development structure. As part of the Mekong region, Japan committed over 3.6 trillion (around USD 33 billion) between the years 2009 and 2022 as part of different cooperation programs. These investments comprise highways, bridges, energy connectivity, and port plants, which make mainland Southeast Asia integrated into regional production networks.[12] Another example of this structural engagement is the urban transit projects. Japan financed the extension of the Bangkok MRT Blue Line at a cost of approximately US$4.8 billion. Jakarta MRT was very effective in Indonesia, where commuting time using the central corridors was reduced by up to 40 percent, which made central areas more productive in the city.[13] The infrastructure diplomacy of Japan concerns a geopolitical arena that is characterized by its competition, especially between the United States and China. The states of ASEAN have embraced the use of hedging in order to

have strategic autonomy.[14] The transparency and debt sustainability of Japan is in accordance with the OECD principles and G7-supported standards. In 2016, lifecycle cost assessment and debt sustainability criteria were officially blessed by the G7 Ise-Shima Principles on the Promotion of Quality Infrastructure Investment.[15]

The OECD (2022) states that Japan is still ranked as one of the five largest net disbursement ODA donors in the world, with a 2022 contribution of USD 17.5 billion, or about 0.39% of the GNI. Much of this aid is extended to the Indo-Pacific and the ASEAN nations. Infrastructure is, therefore, an insidious strategic positioning. Japanese comparative advantage is not about high-speed financing but rather about providing long-term, low-interest concessional loans with institutional security. The World Bank (2023) confirms the argument by stating that Japanese ODA to ASEAN countries is generally interest-free for 30-40 years of interest and encourages sustainability. The discriminated nature of Japan's ODA strategy in member states of the ASEAN region shows how development aid is synchronised based on the economic structure, level of income, and geopolitical location. Instead of a common model of aid, Japan adapts its tools to state circumstances and strategic settings. The table below is an overview of the change in modalities and sector focus of the ASEAN countries.

Table 2: Differentiated Patterns of Japan's ODA Provision Across ASEAN Countries

Country	Primary ODA Modality	Sectoral Focus	Strategic Rationale
Vietnam	Large-scale concessional yen loans and technical cooperation	Transport corridors, ports, urban rail, and energy	Production network integration & supply chain diversification

Indonesia	Infrastructure loans + PPP + maritime cooperation	Urban transit, ports, energy, maritime safety	Strategic maritime location & G20 economy positioning
Philippines	Infrastructure + disaster risk reduction + maritime capacity support	Railways, flood control, and coast guard capacity	Sea lane security & resilience-building
Thailand	Advanced industrial & connectivity cooperation	Industrial zones, transport connectivity, automotive sector	Regional manufacturing hub integration
Malaysia	Selective infrastructure and industrial technology transfer	Energy efficiency, digital economy, sustainable transport	Upper-middle income technological upgrading
Cambodia	Grants + concessional loans + governance capacity-building	Roads, bridges, water supply, and administrative reform	Developmental support & institutional strengthening
Laos	Infrastructure loans and human resource development	Transport corridors, rural electrification	Mekong subregional integration
Myanmar	Infrastructure, humanitarian, and governance reform (politically variable)	Urban development, electricity, capacity-building	Political transition support & regional stability
Singapore	Limited traditional ODA;	Smart city, digital governance, innovation	Advanced-economy cooperation

	strategic policy partnership		
Brunei	Minimal ODA; technical dialogue	Energy, education exchange	Diplomatic relationship maintenance

Source: (OECD 2025)[16]

Soft Power, Quality Infrastructure, and Normative Influence

Soft Power Through Development and Institutional Embedding

The soft power of Nye (2004) is based on attraction and legitimacy and does not involve coercion. Japan has always led in the soft power index among countries in the world, in the OECD. In the Brand Finance Global Soft Power Index 2023, Japan is 5th in the world, with high perceptions on governance, business, and culture.

The capacity-building efforts of Japan in ASEAN cover disaster risk reduction, maritime security, and reforms in the administration of the populace. As an example, Japan has been training over 1,500 disaster management officials of ASEAN countries since 2000.[17] These programs foster institutional acquaintance in the Japanese standards and processes. The aggregate impact of this kind of engagement is elite socialisation. According to constructivist scholarship, norm internalization is brought about by repeated institutional interaction.[18] In the course of time, the ASEAN bureaucrats, who have been trained on the Japanese systems, tend to adapt the procurement transparency systems and environmental impact assessment models in accordance with the Japanese-backed standards.

The Politics of "Quality Infrastructure" and Norm-Setting

Quality infrastructure, articulated by Japan, is the reflection of the normative aspect of its development diplomacy. In 2015, Japan declared a

quality infrastructure investment project in Asia of US $110 billion within a period of five years (MOFA 2015 Policy Speech). This program focused on environmental and social protection, open procurement, and debt sustainability tests. The lifecycle cost analysis that is the core of the Japanese approach shows that increased standards of upfront construction led to lower long-term maintenance costs by an estimated 2030 percent of the 30-year infrastructure lifecycle.[19]

Since ASEAN is developing its Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025 under the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, most of its infrastructure principles, such as sustainability and transparency, reflect the components of the quality growth framework of Japan.[20] This intersection explains why aid is a strategic tool in the time of the resurgent Global South. Modernising the infrastructure and strengthening the institution in ASEAN, Japan gains supply chain resiliency and regulatory balancing in one of the fastest-growing parts of the world. In 2022, ASEAN recorded a GDP of about US$3.6 trillion, becoming the fifth-largest economy in the world.[21]

Japanese ODA diplomacy in a multipolar Indo-Pacific shows how power can be fostered by the institutions, as opposed to forceful competition. Through establishing economic pacifism, structural infrastructure investment, and normative standard-setting, Japan's ASEAN relations can be seen as an indication of how development assistance can be conducted as strategic statecraft in the twenty-first century.

Policy Implications

One key lesson learned from the various development cooperation initiatives is the need for local ownership. The development programmes that encourage and support local ownership have been found to be more sustainable and responsive to the socio-economic conditions of the areas involved. The active involvement of civil society and the locals have been found to be instrumental in changing the face of development, as these individuals have more insights into the needs and requirements of the people involved.

Another major lesson learned from the various development cooperation initiatives is the importance of capacity building. The development programmes that have been designed to improve the capacities of the people involved and incorporate the knowledge of the private sector have been found to be instrumental in ensuring the sustainability of development. By focusing on capacity building, it becomes easier to develop a more robust and responsive system that will enable the people involved to succeed in their own development.
In order to improve the effectiveness of development cooperation within the Global South, it is vital for the donor countries to align their strategies with the needs of the people. It requires the donor countries to engage with the people at a deeper level to ensure that the development strategies reflect the needs of the people of the recipient countries. It requires the donor countries to go beyond the conventional top-down approach and include feedback mechanisms to make the strategies more relevant.

To strengthen this alignment, donor countries should consider the following recommendations:

- Strengthen negotiation capabilities by developing training programs that aim to enhance the negotiation skills of officials from countries in the Global South, thus enabling them to effectively represent their interests in international circles. Further, the creation of networks between these countries will allow them to forge strategic alliances, thus strengthening their positions in negotiations.
- Avoid over-instrumentalisation of aid by balancing the strategic interests behind aid with ethical considerations. Excessive conditionality in aid allocation should be avoided as it might compromise the sovereignty of the recipient nations. Transparency in the deployment of aid and prioritisation of development gains over political gains are key drivers of cooperation and trust.
- Focus on quality infrastructure by ensuring that quality and sustainable infrastructural projects are developed. These projects should be directed at regional market integration and not simply

geopolitical interests. The adoption of best practices in financial management and environmental sustainability will ensure effective investments.

Regularly evaluate and adjust the policies to incorporate the implementation of regular evaluations of development projects to assess their effectiveness, flexibility, and suitability to the local environment. Adaptive management frameworks can be incorporated to make timely course corrections.

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Source: Rasidah Hj Abu Bakar/The Scoop

Chapter 4
Anchoring Peace and Security: Japan as a Regional Stabilizer

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List of Abbreviations

AADMER:	ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response
ACE:	AHA Centre Executive (Programme)
ACE-LEDMP:	ACE Leadership in Emergency and Disaster Management Programme
ACSA:	Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement
ADMM-Plus:	ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus
AHA Centre:	ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management
AJDRP:	ASEAN Joint Disaster Response Plan
AMSCIP:	ADMM-Plus Maritime Security Community Information-Sharing Portal
AOIP:	ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific
ARF:	ASEAN Regional Forum
ASEAN:	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ASEAN-ERAT:	ASEAN Emergency Response and Assessment Team
ASO:	Annual Security Outlook (in the context of ARF Annual Security Outlook)

CBR:	Chemical, biological, radiological (threats)
DELSA:	Disaster Emergency Logistics System for ASEAN
EAMF:	Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum
EAS:	East Asia Summit
EEZ:	Exclusive economic zone
EWG:	Experts' Working Group (e.g., ADMM-Plus EWG)
FLP:	Future Leaders' Programme
FOIP:	Free and Open Indo-Pacific
FY:	Fiscal year
HA/DR or HADR:	Humanitarian assistance and disaster relief
ICT:	Information and communication technology
ISC:	Information Sharing Centre (in ReCAAP ISC)
ISR:	Intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (implied in context)
IUU:	Illegal, unreported and unregulated (fishing)
JAIF:	Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund
JASMINE:	Japan-ASEAN Ministerial Initiative for Enhanced Defense Cooperation
JCG:	Japan Coast Guard
JDR:	Japan Disaster Relief
JMSDF:	Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force
JSDF:	Japan Self-Defense Force(s)
MDA:	Maritime domain awareness
MMCA:	Multilateral Maritime Cooperative Activity
MOFA:	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
NDA:	National Defense Academy
ODA:	Official Development Assistance
OSA:	Official Security Assistance
RAA:	Reciprocal Access Agreement
ReCAAP:	Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia
Re-VAMP:	ReCAAP's enhanced Mobile Application and Interactive Dashboard
SAR:	Search and Rescue
SLOCs:	Sea Lines of Communication

SOMS:	Straits of Malacca and Singapore
UNCLOS:	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
VCBEP:	Virtual Capacity Building Executive Programme
WPS:	Women, Peace and Security

Introduction

Japan's role as a regional stabiliser in Southeast Asia has undergone a profound transformation since the post-World War II era, evolving from a primarily economic and developmental partner to a multifaceted strategic actor deeply integrated into the security architecture of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). This evolution is firmly rooted in the 1977 Fukuda Doctrine, which emphasised "heart-to-heart" diplomacy, mutual trust, equality, and non-interference in ASEAN's internal affairs. The doctrine marked a departure from Japan's earlier economic-centric approach and laid the foundation for long-term relational trust that continues to underpin contemporary cooperation. Over the subsequent decades, Japan has consistently reaffirmed ASEAN centrality while adapting to emerging threats, including intensifying maritime disputes in the South China Sea, the proliferation of transnational crimes such as piracy and illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, and the escalating frequency and severity of natural disasters exacerbated by climate change.

In the contemporary geopolitical landscape, Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision has found strong resonance with the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), adopted in 2019. Both frameworks share core principles of openness, inclusivity, transparency, resilience, and adherence to international law, particularly the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). This synergy was explicitly reaffirmed in the Joint Statement of the 28th ASEAN-Japan Summit held in Kuala Lumpur on 26 October 2025, which highlighted the complementary nature of FOIP and AOIP in promoting a rules-based regional order. The statement underscored commitments to concrete projects in maritime cooperation, connectivity, sustainable development goals, and other priority areas through ASEAN-led mechanisms such as the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus

(ADMM-Plus), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF).

Japan's contributions are operationalised through a series of strategic policy documents that provide both vision and practical guidance. The Vientiane Vision (2016), announced at the second ASEAN-Japan Defence Ministers' Informal Meeting, introduced a framework for defence cooperation focused on capacity-building, rule of law, and maritime security. This was updated in Vientiane Vision 2.0 (2019), which aligned Japan's initiatives more closely with the AOIP by incorporating three guiding principles: "heart-to-heart cooperation," "tailored and lasting cooperation," and "equal and open cooperation." These principles emphasise sustainable, demand-driven support that respects ASEAN's autonomy while enhancing its collective resilience. Building on this foundation, the Japan-ASEAN Ministerial Initiative for Enhanced Defense Cooperation (JASMINE), launched in November 2023 during the ASEAN-Japan Defence Ministers' Informal Meeting, introduced four operational pillars: (1) creating a security environment that prevents unilateral changes to the status quo by force or coercion; (2) expanding defence cooperation on traditional and emerging threats such as cyber security, climate change, and space domain awareness; (3) fostering people-to-people ties and advancing the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda; and (4) bridging ASEAN with Pacific Island countries through joint programmes.

A pivotal innovation in Japan's security toolkit is the Official Security Assistance (OSA) framework, introduced in April 2023 as a distinct mechanism from traditional Official Development Assistance (ODA). OSA enables the provision of non-lethal equipment, supplies, and infrastructure support to like-minded partners to strengthen their deterrence and security capabilities. The programme has expanded rapidly: from an initial budget of approximately 2 billion yen in fiscal year (FY) 2023 serving four recipients (Philippines, Malaysia, Bangladesh, and Fiji), to 8.1 billion yen in FY2025, and a proposed 18.1 billion yen in FY2026—an increase of over 125 per cent. By early 2026, OSA had reached at least 12 nations, including additional Southeast Asian and Pacific partners, with a clear focus on maritime domain

awareness (MDA), patrol vessels, coastal radars, and related training. This expansion reflects Japan's updated National Security Strategy and its commitment to "proactive contribution to peace" while remaining firmly within constitutional constraints that prohibit lethal exports.

This chapter analyses Japan's contributions to ASEAN's security and shared regional stability through four interconnected pillars: maritime security cooperation and capacity building; disaster relief and humanitarian assistance as shared responsibility; support for ASEAN-led security dialogues; and defence engagement with coordinated strategic planning. Each pillar is examined with reference to official documents, specific programmes up to early 2026, quantitative data, case studies, and analytical assessments of their strategic impact. The analysis draws on the understanding that Japan's approach is deliberately non-confrontational yet proactive—designed to bolster ASEAN's own capabilities without undermining its centrality or provoking escalation. By investing in sustainable capacity, norm-sharing, and multilateral dialogue, Japan not only addresses immediate threats but also reinforces the rules-based international order that underpins long-term peace and prosperity across the Indo-Pacific.

The chapter proceeds by dissecting each pillar in detail before offering concluding reflections on the broader implications for regional stability. In doing so, it demonstrates that Japan's multifaceted engagement has become an indispensable anchor for ASEAN's security architecture amid an increasingly complex geopolitical environment.

Maritime Security Cooperation and Capacity Building

Maritime security remains the most critical and visible dimension of Japan-ASEAN cooperation, given the region's heavy dependence on sea lines of communication (SLOCs) for over 90 per cent of its trade and energy imports. Challenges such as piracy, armed robbery against ships, IUU fishing, and coercive actions in disputed waters demand a comprehensive response that combines capacity building, equipment provision, information sharing, and

adherence to international norms. Japan has positioned itself as a leading partner in this domain, leveraging decades of experience from its own coast guard operations and a commitment to UNCLOS-based rule of law.

The cornerstone of these efforts is Japan's pivotal role in establishing and sustaining the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP), which entered into force in 2006. As the first regional government-to-government agreement dedicated exclusively to piracy and armed robbery, ReCAAP's Information Sharing Centre (ISC) in Singapore serves as a hub for real-time incident reporting, analysis, and capacity building. Japan, as a founding member and major donor, continues to provide substantial financial and technical support. In December 2025, the ReCAAP ISC organised its eighth Virtual Capacity Building Executive Programme (VCBEP) for senior maritime law enforcement officers from contracting parties. Japanese representatives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) and the Japan Coast Guard (JCG) delivered presentations on Japan's maritime security policy, anti-piracy efforts, and cooperation with littoral states, sharing best practices in law enforcement and regional coordination. The programme highlighted a 74 per cent increase in incidents in the Straits of Malacca and Singapore (SOMS) from 2024 to 2025—the highest recorded—underscoring the ongoing need for vigilance.

Beyond ReCAAP, Japan has institutionalised practical training through the Japan-ASEAN Ship Rider Cooperation Programme. Launched under the Vientiane Vision framework, this initiative allows ASEAN personnel to embark on Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) vessels for hands-on training in maritime law enforcement, international maritime law, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR), and interoperability. Multiple iterations have been conducted, including the sixth Japan-ASEAN and Timor-Leste programme aboard JS Izumo in June 2024, which incorporated seminars on WPS and international maritime law. These programmes have been extended to include Pacific Island countries under JASMINE's fourth pillar, fostering broader regional networks.

Equipment and technology transfers represent another tangible dimension of Japan's support. Following the relaxation of the Three Principles on Transfer of Defence Equipment and Technology in 2014 (further updated in 2023), Japan has concluded transfer agreements with six ASEAN members: the Philippines (2016), Malaysia (2018), Indonesia and Vietnam (2021), Thailand (2022), and Singapore (2023). Under OSA, these transfers have accelerated. In October 2023, Japan provided air surveillance radar systems to the Philippines. In December 2024, a ¥1.6 billion OSA grant supplied rigid-hulled inflatable boats, coastal radars, and related equipment to the Philippine Navy. January 2026 saw the signing of notes for high-speed patrol boats to the Indonesian Navy valued at ¥1.9 billion, enhancing surveillance across its vast archipelagic waters. Similar projects are underway or planned for Vietnam, Malaysia, and Cambodia, focusing exclusively on non-lethal assets such as patrol vessels, radars, and communication systems.

These bilateral efforts are complemented by robust multilateral engagement. Japan co-chairs the ADMM-Plus Experts' Working Group on Maritime Security (2024–2027 cycle) alongside the Philippines, organising workshops, field training exercises, and capacity-building seminars on MDA and UNCLOS compliance. The ARF Inter-Sessional Meeting on Maritime Security and the EAMF provide additional platforms for dialogue. In February 2026, Japan participated in a Multilateral Maritime Cooperative Activity (MMCA) in the South China Sea with the Philippines and the United States, focusing on replenishment-at-sea, deck landings, and communication drills. Such activities enhance interoperability without forming formal alliances.

The strategic impact of these initiatives is multifaceted. By enhancing ASEAN members' ISR and SAR capabilities, Japan helps deter unilateral coercive actions while strengthening collective resilience. Programmes are deliberately "tailored and lasting," incorporating multi-year human resource development and joint exercises to ensure sustainability rather than dependency. Critics occasionally interpret Japan's engagement through the lens of great-power competition; however, official documents

and statements consistently frame it as inclusive, ASEAN-centred, and focused on capacity enhancement. The JASMINE initiative's first pillar explicitly aims to prevent unilateral changes to the status quo, while the second expands cooperation on emerging maritime challenges such as cyber-enabled crimes.

Recent developments illustrate adaptability. In October 2025, during her first overseas trip as Prime Minister, Sanae Takaichi emphasised strengthened maritime ties amid heightened regional tensions. The 2024 Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) and subsequent Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) with the Philippines, alongside four-nation drills involving Japan, the Philippines, Australia, and the United States in the Philippine exclusive economic zone (EEZ), further demonstrate practical interoperability grounded in UNCLOS.

In quantitative terms, Japan's support has contributed to a measurable improvement in regional MDA. ReCAAP's enhanced Mobile Application and Interactive Dashboard (Re-VAMP) have facilitated faster incident reporting, while OSA-funded radars and patrol boats have expanded coverage in key chokepoints. The cumulative effect is a more resilient maritime domain that underpins economic prosperity and deters destabilising actions, thereby anchoring shared regional stability.

Disaster Relief and Humanitarian Assistance as Shared Responsibility

Southeast Asia ranks among the world's most disaster-prone regions, facing an average of over 100 major natural disasters annually, including typhoons, earthquakes, floods, tsunamis, and volcanic eruptions. Japan, having endured events such as the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami, approaches HA/DR not as a donor-recipient dynamic but as a shared responsibility rooted in mutual vulnerability and solidarity. This philosophy is institutionalised through the Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund (JAIF), established in 2006, and operationalised via the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre) in Jakarta.

JAIF has been the primary funding vehicle for flagship AHA Centre initiatives since its inception. Key programmes include the establishment of integrated information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure, the Disaster Emergency Logistics System for ASEAN (DELSA), the transformation of the ASEAN Emergency Response and Assessment Team (ASEAN-ERAT), and the AHA Centre Executive (ACE) Programme. In October 2025, ASEAN launched the AADMER Work Programme 2026–2030—supported entirely by JAIF—which sets a transformative agenda with five Priority Programmes (Risk Assessment and Early Warning; Prevention and Mitigation; Preparedness and Response; Resilient Recovery; and Global Leadership), 15 outcomes, and 44 outputs (including 13 cross-sectoral). This builds on two decades of progress under the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER) and the AHA Centre's 14 years of operations.

In parallel, Japan committed in October 2025 to funding the ACE Leadership in Emergency and Disaster Management Programme (ACE-LEDMP) Phase II, running from October 2025 to July 2028. This follows the original ACE Programme (2014–2022), which trained 118 executives, and Phase I of ACE-LEDMP (2023–2025), which produced 80 graduates at executive and middle-management levels. The new phase directly supports Priority Programme 5 on Transformative Global Leadership within the AADMER Work Programme.

Practical cooperation has yielded tangible results. JAIF-supported ASEAN-ERAT teams have been deployed rapidly in response to numerous disasters, including recent typhoons and floods across the Philippines, Indonesia, and Vietnam. Japan has dispatched Japan Disaster Relief (JDR) teams and, when requested, Japan Self-Defense Force (JSDF) assets for large-scale operations. The ongoing Japan-ASEAN Invitation Programme on HA/DR, which includes seminars, table-top exercises, and observation visits, has strengthened multinational coordination. DELSA Phase IV has established regional stockpiles in Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines, enabling mobilisation of relief items in more than 30 emergency operations across

seven ASEAN countries as of October 2024.High-level institutionalisation further deepens this partnership. The ASEAN-Japan Ministerial Meeting on Disaster Management, first convened in 2021, ensures strategic alignment, while Japan contributes to the ASEAN Joint Disaster Response Plan (AJDRP) and mid-term reviews of AADMER implementation. Training programmes exceed 1,000 hours annually, covering residential courses, refresher training for ASEAN-ERAT members, and leadership development through the ACE-LEDMP.

The shared-responsibility model transcends material aid. Japan actively shares lessons from its own disaster experiences, positioning itself as an equal partner rather than a superior donor. This approach builds trust that extends beyond HA/DR into other security domains. In an era of climate change, where disasters are projected to increase in frequency and intensity, Japan's sustained financial commitment—evidenced by continued JAIF support and the 2025 launch of the new AADMER framework—ensures ASEAN's collective response capacity remains robust. The result is faster response times, enhanced interoperability, reduced humanitarian suffering, and greater societal resilience, all of which contribute to long-term regional stability.

ASEAN-Led Security Dialogues and Japan's Support

ASEAN's security architecture is fundamentally predicated on dialogue and consensus-building mechanisms that prioritise preventive diplomacy, confidence-building measures, and the peaceful management of disputes. These mechanisms are designed to foster mutual understanding, reduce mistrust, and promote cooperative responses to both traditional and non-traditional security challenges without resorting to confrontation or coercion. Japan has been an unwavering and steadfast supporter of these ASEAN-led forums since their inception, consistently reinforcing the principle of ASEAN centrality while contributing substantive expertise, financial resources, logistical support, and practical initiatives. This long-standing commitment reflects Japan's strategic calculus that a strong,

unified, and autonomous ASEAN serves as the most effective anchor for regional stability in an increasingly contested Indo-Pacific environment.

Japan's engagement is guided by a deep respect for ASEAN's consensus-driven approach and its role as the convening power in regional security architecture. By participating actively without seeking dominance or imposing external agendas, Japan helps sustain the legitimacy and effectiveness of these mechanisms amid intensifying great-power competition, geopolitical tensions, and emerging transnational threats.

The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF)

The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), established in 1994, remains the region's premier inclusive platform for broad-based security dialogue, encompassing 27 participants including all ASEAN member states and key extra-regional partners such as Japan, the United States, China, India, Russia, Australia, Canada, the European Union, and others. The ARF operates on the basis of three stages—confidence-building, preventive diplomacy, and conflict resolution—while adhering to the "ASEAN Way" of consensus and voluntary participation.

Japan has been a founding participant and one of the most consistent contributors since the ARF's inaugural meeting in Bangkok. Over the years, Japan has co-chaired numerous inter-sessional meetings and activities across a wide spectrum of topics, including maritime security, disaster relief, counter-terrorism, cyber security, non-proliferation and disarmament, and preventive diplomacy. Japan's involvement has helped evolve the ARF from a primarily talk-shop forum into one capable of generating practical outcomes through workshops, exercises, and information-sharing mechanisms.

A key ongoing contribution is Japan's annual submission to the ARF Annual Security Outlook (ASO), a voluntary document that promotes transparency by allowing participants to share national perspectives on regional security trends. The 2025 ARF ASO, welcomed at the 32nd ARF Ministerial Meeting

in Kuala Lumpur on 11 July 2025, incorporated voluntary contributions from 20 participants, including Japan, and served as an important tool for fostering mutual understanding and confidence-building. The ARF Chair encouraged continued contributions to future editions to enhance the document's relevance and comprehensiveness.

Japan has also played a leading role in organising and co-chairing recent ARF activities. Notable examples from 2025–2026 include co-chairing (with Thailand and Canada) the ARF Workshop on Lessons Learned in Governance of Security of and in the Use of ICTs, held in Bangkok on 9–10 February 2026. This workshop addressed critical issues in cyber governance, information security, and the responsible use of emerging technologies. Other activities involved workshops on ferry safety capacity building (co-organised in Jiangmen, China, 10–14 November 2025), violent extremism, and non-proliferation and disarmament. Japan has co-sponsored joint statements, such as the 2021 ARF Joint Statement on Promoting the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda, demonstrating its commitment to inclusive and forward-looking security cooperation.

Japan actively participates in practical exercises such as the ARF Disaster Relief Exercise (ARF-DiREx), which tests multinational coordination in humanitarian scenarios. These efforts underscore Japan's dedication to moving the ARF beyond dialogue toward actionable cooperation, while aligning with ASEAN priorities and the ARF Plan of Action beyond 2025, which emphasises concrete measures and measurable goals to ensure the forum's continued relevance and inclusivity.

The ADMM-Plus

The ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus), launched in 2010, provides a more operationally oriented platform focused on practical defence cooperation among ASEAN members and its eight dialogue partners (Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, Republic of Korea, Russia, and the United States). The framework concentrates on seven priority areas: maritime security, counter-terrorism, humanitarian

assistance and disaster relief (HADR), peacekeeping operations, military medicine, humanitarian mine action, and cyber security.

Japan has participated actively since the inaugural ADMM-Plus meeting and has co-chaired the Experts' Working Groups (EWGs) on Maritime Security and HADR in multiple cycles. In the 2024–2027 cycle, Japan (alongside the Philippines) co-chairs the Maritime Security EWG, overseeing activities such as field training exercises (FTXs), table-top exercises (TTXs), seminars, and the Future Leaders' Programme (FLP). These initiatives have produced tangible outcomes, including the development of standard operating procedures, information-sharing portals like the ADMM-Plus Maritime Security Community Information-Sharing Portal (AMSCIP), and joint exercises such as the Combined ADMM-Plus Exercise on Maritime Security and Counter-Terrorism.

At the 12th ADMM-Plus Meeting held in Kuala Lumpur on 1 November 2025—marking the 15th anniversary of the framework—defence ministers reflected on progress and charted the way forward. The meeting commended advancements in practical cooperation and welcomed the upcoming 2026 meeting in the Philippines. Japan's Defence Minister Koizumi Shinjiro highlighted the importance of integrating perspectives such as Women, Peace and Security (WPS) into HADR activities, incorporating climate-change considerations into maritime joint cooperative activities, and addressing complex chemical, biological, radiological (CBR) threats posed by emerging technologies like artificial intelligence.

Japan also supports complementary bilateral tracks, including the ASEAN-Japan Defence Ministers' Informal Meeting (held on the sidelines of the 12th ADMM-Plus) and the Defence Vice-Ministerial Forum. These forums facilitate high-level strategic discussions, policy alignment, and the advancement of initiatives under frameworks like Vientiane Vision 2.0 and JASMINE.

Additional Forums: EAS and EAMF

The East Asia Summit (EAS), established in 2005 and comprising 19 leaders-level participants (including ASEAN members plus Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, Republic of Korea, Russia, and the United States), serves as the region's premier forum for strategic dialogue on political, security, and economic issues. At the 20th EAS held in Kuala Lumpur on 27 October 2025, leaders reaffirmed commitment to strengthening the EAS as a leaders-led forum, supporting ASEAN centrality, and advancing the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). Japan actively advocates for rules-based approaches to maritime and non-traditional security challenges, regularly submitting views and co-sponsoring statements on emerging issues such as youth, peace and security, climate resilience, and sustainable development.

The Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF), originally proposed by Japan in 2011 and formalised in 2012, brings together EAS participants to discuss maritime cooperation, including transport connectivity, marine ecosystem resilience, blue economy development, and sustainable fisheries. The 13th EAMF convened in Port Dickson, Malaysia, on 11 September 2025, where officials exchanged views on regional maritime trade and environmental sustainability. Japan continues to participate actively, reinforcing its proposal origins and contributing expertise on maritime domain awareness (MDA) and law enforcement cooperation.

JASMINE's Reinforcement of ASEAN-Led Dialogues

The Japan-ASEAN Ministerial Initiative for Enhanced Defense Cooperation (JASMINE), launched in November 2023, explicitly reinforces Japan's commitment to ASEAN-led frameworks. Pillar three of JASMINE focuses on pursuing further friendship and opportunities between Japan and ASEAN defence officials through strengthened people-to-people foundations and promotion of the WPS agenda. This includes seminars on WPS, exchange programmes for defence officials, hosting ASEAN officers at Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) exercises, and fostering long-term

professional networks. These initiatives build trust and interoperability while maintaining transparency through regular reporting and consultations.

Japan's consistent, expertise-driven, and resource-supported participation has been instrumental in sustaining the relevance and dynamism of these mechanisms amid great-power competition. By providing funding, logistical backing, doctrinal input, and capacity-building without seeking hegemonic influence, Japan bolsters ASEAN's convening power, enhances collective confidence-building, and contributes to a stable, inclusive, consensus-based regional security order grounded in dialogue, preventive diplomacy, and mutual respect.

Défense Engagement and Coordinated Strategic Planning

Japan's defence engagement with ASEAN has deepened markedly since the early 2010s, evolving from a primarily dialogue-oriented relationship into a more structured and multifaceted partnership that encompasses coordinated strategic planning, capability development, interoperability enhancement, and practical capacity-building initiatives. This gradual yet deliberate progression reflects Tokyo's strategic adaptation to a shifting regional security landscape, where traditional and non-traditional threats—ranging from maritime coercion to cyber vulnerabilities and climate-related instability—demand proactive yet non-confrontational responses. At the heart of this evolution lie two pivotal policy frameworks: the Vientiane Vision 2.0 (updated in 2019) and the Japan-ASEAN Ministerial Initiative for Enhanced Defense Cooperation (JASMINE), launched in November 2023. Together, these documents provide clear, transparent overarching guidance for practical, demand-driven cooperation that respects ASEAN's autonomy while advancing shared security objectives.

Vientiane Vision 2.0 builds on the original 2016 Vientiane Vision by articulating three foundational principles — "heart-to-heart cooperation," "tailored and lasting cooperation," and "equal and open cooperation"—that underscore Japan's commitment to building genuine, sustainable

partnerships rather than imposing top-down solutions. These principles are operationalised across three priority areas: upholding the rule of law at sea and in emerging domains; strengthening maritime security; and supporting ASEAN's organisational responses to cross-border and non-traditional challenges. The vision promotes a wide array of bilateral and multilateral activities, including defence cooperation programmes that involve dispatching Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) personnel to ASEAN countries and inviting ASEAN officers to Japan, transfers of defence equipment and technology (under relaxed export guidelines), joint training and exercises, and long-term human resource development. By emphasising tailored programmes that align with each partner's specific needs and priorities, Vientiane Vision 2.0 ensures that cooperation remains relevant, effective, and enduring.

JASMINE takes this foundation further by translating strategic intent into concrete, actionable pillars. Announced during the ASEAN-Japan Defence Ministers' Informal Meeting, JASMINE outlines four interconnected pillars designed to realise a shared vision for a peaceful and stable Indo-Pacific aligned with both Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). The first pillar focuses on creating a security environment that prevents unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force or coercion, through reinforced rule-of-law efforts and enhanced maritime and air domain awareness. The second pillar emphasises expanding defence cooperation to address both traditional cross-border challenges and emerging issues such as cyber threats, climate-security linkages, and space domain security. The third pillar prioritises deepening people-to-people ties and advancing the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, while the fourth extends cooperation to include Pacific Island countries, fostering broader regional networks.

Concrete projects under JASMINE illustrate the initiative's practical orientation. Cyber security training programmes, first launched in November 2023 and continued into 2024 and beyond, have enhanced incident response capabilities among ASEAN defence authorities through hands-on workshops and scenario-based exercises. Seminars on climate

change and security, held as early as March 2023, have explored the security implications of environmental degradation and extreme weather events, integrating climate resilience into defence planning. More recent initiatives include seminars on space domain awareness and air domain awareness, reflecting Japan's push to support ASEAN in navigating emerging technological domains while promoting adherence to international norms.

Bilateral defence ties serve as essential building blocks that complement and reinforce these multilateral frameworks. Japan has established "2+2" foreign and defence ministerial dialogues with several ASEAN states, providing high-level platforms for strategic alignment on regional issues, capability priorities, and policy coordination. Regular joint exercises further strengthen operational interoperability, covering areas such as maritime domain awareness, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR), counter-piracy operations, and search-and-rescue activities. The Official Security Assistance (OSA) programme, introduced in 2023 as a dedicated non-lethal security support mechanism separate from traditional ODA, has dramatically accelerated capability transfers. By fiscal year 2026, OSA funding reached a record 18.1 billion yen (approximately US$116 million), supporting projects in an expanding list of recipients—including the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and others—with high-speed patrol boats, coastal surveillance radars, rigid-hulled inflatable boats (RHIBs), boathouses, slipways, and related infrastructure. These transfers focus explicitly on enhancing maritime domain awareness and deterrence without introducing offensive capabilities, thereby aligning with Japan's constitutional constraints and ASEAN's preference for non-militarised security cooperation.

Human exchanges form a vital, often underappreciated dimension of this engagement. ASEAN defence officers and personnel regularly participate in courses at Japan's National Defense Academy (NDA), where they engage in multi-year undergraduate programmes (often including Japanese language training) or shorter specialised training. These programmes—welcoming cadets primarily from ASEAN countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Singapore, and Timor-

Leste—foster enduring professional networks, shared understanding of strategic concepts, and personal bonds that endure long after participants return home. Short-term visits, seminars, and observer opportunities at JSDF exercises further broaden these connections, building trust and interoperability at the individual level.

Strategic planning between Japan and ASEAN is increasingly coordinated through the explicit alignment of FOIP and AOIP principles. This synergy was reaffirmed in high-level statements, including those from the 28th ASEAN-Japan Summit in October 2025 and the 2023 upgrade to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. Japan shares expertise on defence budgeting, procurement processes, and capability planning, always emphasising respect for ASEAN's independent decision-making and avoidance of external pressure. This collaborative approach ensures that joint initiatives remain ASEAN-centred and responsive to regional priorities.

Throughout, Japan's defence engagement maintains a transparent, capacity-focused character, deliberately steering clear of formal alliances or mutual defence commitments. Instead, it cultivates a flexible yet robust web of bilateral, trilateral, and multilateral relationships that enhance collective resilience and create subtle yet effective deterrence against coercion. By investing in sustainable capabilities, shared knowledge, and mutual trust, Japan strengthens ASEAN's ability to manage its security environment autonomously—while reinforcing the rules-based order that underpins stability across the Indo-Pacific.

In reflecting on this partnership, one cannot overlook the human element: defence officials from ASEAN countries and Japan often speak of the genuine friendships forged through years of joint training, shared challenges, and candid discussions. These personal connections, built on mutual respect and common interests, add a layer of resilience that formal agreements alone cannot achieve. As threats continue to evolve—from hybrid challenges in cyberspace to the security implications of climate

change—Japan's steady, principled approach offers ASEAN a reliable partner committed to co-creating a secure and prosperous future.

Conclusion

Japan's multifaceted contributions across maritime capacity building, shared HA/DR responsibility, robust support for ASEAN-led dialogues, and deepening defence engagement have firmly established it as an indispensable regional stabiliser. Guided by Vientiane Vision 2.0, JASMINE, and the rapidly expanding OSA framework, these efforts address both traditional and non-traditional threats while reinforcing a rules-based order and ASEAN centrality.

As the security environment continues to evolve—with rising tensions in the South China Sea, climate-induced disasters, and emerging domains such as cyber and space—Japan's sustained investment in practical, sustainable, and inclusive cooperation will remain vital. By anchoring peace through capacity enhancement, dialogue, and genuine partnership, Japan not only safeguards its own national interests but also helps ASEAN navigate challenges and capitalise on opportunities for shared prosperity. The foundations built over nearly five decades of friendship provide a solid platform for continued collaboration. Looking ahead to the 50th anniversary of Japan-ASEAN relations and beyond, this partnership stands poised to adapt and strengthen, ensuring long-term stability and resilience across the Indo-Pacific.

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Chapter 5
Economic Synergy of the Global South: Building Resilience Together

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Introduction

Amid escalating global uncertainty, fractured trade relations, and recurring external shocks, the concept of economic synergy among Global South countries has gained prominence. In the post-COVID-19 era and during the geopolitical shocks of 2022-2025—from Ukraine to Red Sea disruptions—nations such as Vietnam, Indonesia, Brazil, Nigeria, and India have shown exceptional adaptability.

For Southeast Asia and the broader Global South, building economic resilience is increasingly seen as a collective effort rather than something each country can achieve on its own. Traditional export-led growth models, which have relied heavily on exports to advanced economies, are proving to be vulnerable in the face of volatile capital flows, supply chain disruptions, and rising protectionist measures. In response, regional organizations like ASEAN have ramped up initiatives to strengthen intra-regional trade, investment, and industrial cooperation. These efforts aim to reduce dependence on external markets while still fostering continued growth.

This chapter posits that Global South can create mutual benefits, support structural transformation, and strengthen collective resilience by leveraging its comparative advantage. In ASEAN, this approach is reflected in policies aimed at deepening regional value chains, improving supply chain governance, and promoting industrial upgrades through targeted investments. As regional cooperation expands beyond ASEAN, partnerships like the ASEAN-BIMSTEC collaboration highlight the Global South's shift toward a multipolar, cooperative framework for economic growth, where shared resilience is a central priority.

Trade, Investment, and Industrial Collaboration for Mutual Gains

Reframing Trade and Investment in the Global South

For long, trade and investment have been at the centre of the development trajectories of Global South economies. However, recent global disruptions have exposed the limitations of narrowly defined trade liberalization strategies focused on efficiency at the expense of resilience. For instance,[1] reports that developing economies are highly vulnerable to external shocks due to high export concentration and dependence on a limited number of markets, as well as weak domestic value addition. These structural weaknesses are compounded by asymmetric integration into global markets, where developing economies often remain locked into lower-value segments of production networks.[2] As such, there has been a growing policy shift toward regional diversification and South-South trade as stabilizing forces rather than mere alternatives to North-South integration.[3]

In ASEAN, trade and investment within the region are no longer viewed just as supporting global growth, but more so as a protection against the ups and downs of the global economy. ERIA's long-term analysis of ASEAN's economic transformation highlights that regional integration has played a crucial role in sustaining growth during periods of global downturn by facilitating demand substitution and production continuity within the region.[4] In this way, ASEAN countries may partially escape the economic shocks of rich countries without having to be economically shut off from the

world. ASEAN's integration strategy thus reflects a form of embedded openness, in which external engagement is mediated through regional institutions and policy coordination rather than left solely to market forces.[5]

Trade agreements, such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), take the region-focused strategy even further.[6] indicates that the RCEP agreement has led to increased trade and foreign direct investment between East and Southeast Asia, as it reduced trade costs, standardized rules of origin, and improved the predictability of supply chains, particularly in developing countries. This is to show that the agreement demonstrates that regional trade rules, as part of industrial policy, can generate positive economic spillovers, as opposed to trade liberalization in isolation.[7]

Investment-Led Industrial Upgrading

According to the ASEAN Investment Report 2025, foreign direct investments in Southeast Asia are changing from the efficiency-driven pattern of manufacturing to areas that facilitate supply chain upgrading, the spread of technology, and the diversification of industries. This is a clear indication that the countries in ASEAN are deliberately channeling investments towards industrial upgrading and resilience.[8]

Importantly, investment-led collaboration within the Global South differs from traditional North-South investment relationships. Rather than reinforcing hierarchical production structures, South-South investment often facilitates horizontal capacity-building, regional learning effects, and incremental technological upgrading among economies at comparable development stages.[9] This is demonstrated in ASEAN, where regional investors like Singapore, Thailand, and Malaysia have emerged as significant sources of FDI for less developed ASEAN states, assisting these states in modernizing industries without becoming overly reliant on technology and policy conditionality.[10]

Moreover,[11] argue that countries that combine selective investment facilitation with targeted industrial policy instruments are better positioned to capture value from regional production networks than those that pursue unconditional liberalization. This finding demonstrates the interrelation between economic benefits, whereby the spillover effect increases, thus making competition for investments less zero-sum. Thus, investments are not only used for national development purposes but also for building collective resilience at the regional level.[12]

Infrastructure, Connectivity, and Industrial Complementarity

Infrastructure development is an important foundation on which trade and investment can work together. Infrastructure that links different locations, including infrastructure in the areas of roads, rail, logistics, and energy, facilitates production and enables specialization. ASEAN's development trajectory illustrates that infrastructure investment has historically underpinned the formation of regional production networks by reducing transaction costs and enabling cross-border industrial clustering.[13] At this point, it is possible to see that the role of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is complementary to ASEAN's attempt to connect the region, which is complex and contested.[14] states that BRI can provide funding for infrastructure, which can improve connectivity, but this will depend on the quality of the match between ASEAN's own industrial ambitions and connectivity strategies. If they work well together, investments in infrastructure can help the region integrate its value chains, making industries work seamlessly together, or they can create dependencies that fragment industries.

Therefore, the broader lesson for the Global South is that infrastructure-led collaboration must be embedded within regional governance frameworks to generate mutual gains. ASEAN's emphasis on consensus-based coordination, policy harmonization, and long-term planning has helped mitigate some of these risks by situating infrastructure development within a broader vision of regional industrial complementarity and economic transformation.

Enhancing ASEAN Supply Chains and Regional Value Networks

From Global Value Chains to Regional Resilience

The restructuring of Global Value Chains (GVCs) has become a central theme in the post-pandemic world. When the pandemic hit, massive breaks in manufacturing and shipping showed how dangerous it is to rely on "fragmented" supply chains that are spread too thin across the globe. Because of this, ASEAN countries are now working harder to build regional value chains. The goal is to make their economies resilient while still staying active in the global market.

To fix these issues, the Framework on ASEAN Supply Chain Efficiency and Resilience emphasizes four core principles for resilient supply chains such as (1) diversification, (2) redundancy, (3) digitalization, and (4) sustainability.[15] This is to prove that rather than advocating protectionism, it promotes regional integration as a strategy to manage risk, reduce vulnerability to external shocks, and maintain competitiveness within global production networks. UNCTAD's analysis further supports this approach, noting that regional supply chains in the Global South can serve as shock absorbers by enabling flexible sourcing, demand reallocation, and production continuity during periods of global disruption.[16] In ASEAN, such mechanisms have proven particularly valuable for small and medium-sized economies with limited domestic markets and high exposure to external volatility.[17]

Investment, Value Addition, and Industrial Upgrading

Strengthening supply chains is inseparable from increasing domestic and regional value addition. ASEAN's experience demonstrates that participation in regional value networks facilitates incremental industrial upgrading by embedding firms within production ecosystems that support learning, scale economies, and technology diffusion.[18] This gradual upgrading process has been central to ASEAN's ability to sustain growth

while transitioning from primary production toward manufacturing and services. The ASEAN Investment Report 2025 shows that supply chain-oriented FDI has become a key driver of value addition in manufacturing, electronics, and agro-processing sectors.[19] These investments not only expand production capacity but also contribute to workforce development, managerial upgrading, and institutional learning.

However, disparities among ASEAN member states remain significant. Less developed economies continue to face constraints related to infrastructure quality, institutional capacity, and access to finance. Addressing these gaps requires coordinated regional policies rather than isolated national interventions. As (AMRO 2025) observes, deeper integration depends on complementary reforms in trade facilitation, investment governance, and macro-financial cooperation.

Regional Cooperation Beyond ASEAN

ASEAN is expanding its supply chain efforts by looking beyond its own borders to work with other developing nations, known as South-South cooperation. This shift acknowledges that true economic strength cannot be built by one region alone where there is a growing link between ASEAN and BIMSTEC (countries around the Bay of Bengal). According to,[20] this partnership helps smaller economies by opening new markets, diversifying where goods are made, and giving these nations a stronger, collective voice in global trade talks. By combining their resources, these regions avoid relying too heavily on just one or two powerful outside suppliers.

This strategy fits into a larger global trend where developing regions work together to fix imbalances in the world economy. George, et ai. (2025)[21] argue that this "inter-regional" teamwork allows the Global South to have more control over their own trade and investment rules. By building production links across different regions, countries create more options for sourcing materials and can produce goods at a much larger, more efficient scale than they could individually.[22]

UNCTAD shows that this cooperation is a powerful tool for fixing common weaknesses. By sharing technology, investment platforms, and policies, these nations can modernize their industries while protecting themselves from global financial crashes.[23]

From a macroeconomic view, AMRO (2025) notes that better coordination in infrastructure and trade rules acts as a stabilizer, helping economies stay steady even when global markets are chaotic. Therefore, these partnerships signal a move toward multipolar economic governance, where power is spread across many different regional groups rather than just a few. These coalitions are not trying to replace global trade; instead, they are smart, adaptive strategies. They allow Global South economies to participate in the world market on more equal, balanced, and secure terms.

Digital Economy, Innovation, and Joint Entrepreneurship

The digital economy has been a significant driver in the evolution and resilience of the economies in the Global South. Digital technology has allowed economies to address structural limitations, improve productivity, and sustain economic growth, while strengthening connectivity to regional and global economies.[24] This engagement has seen Japan and ASEAN establish dynamic digital economy relations, which enable collaboration in joint frameworks to promote innovation and entrepreneurial activities in the Global South region.

The ASEAN-Japan Digital Work Plan 2025 was launched formally during the Fourth ASEAN Digital Ministers' Meeting with Japan (ADGMIN+Japan), which was held in Thailand on January 17, 2025. This is essentially an outline of the collaborative work that will be carried out in the spheres of artificial intelligence (AI), cybersecurity, and the creation of digital infrastructure.[25] The ASEAN-Japan Digital Work Plan 2025 is founded on four key pillars, which are Digital Infrastructure and Transformation, Resilience, Reliability, and Security, Digital Policies, Regulations, and Standards, and Coordination Mechanisms. This framework also emphasizes open innovation among various countries,

encompassing startups and SMEs across different countries in the region. For instance, the ASEAN-Japan AI Innovation Co-creation permits the sharing of technology and conducting pilot programs, allowing the connection of countries like Vietnam and Indonesia through the use of 5G Open RAN solutions.[26]

Cross-Border Platforms like the ASEAN-Japan AI Roadmap for E-Commerce

The first pillar of the Digital Work Plan prioritises digital infrastructure transformation, in which the ASEAN-Japan AI Innovation Co-Creation Roadmap serves as a key cross-border platform facilitating advanced e-commerce ecosystems. Formalised under the ASEAN Economic Ministers' mechanisms and advanced at the 6th ASEAN Digital Ministers' Meeting (ADGMIN) in Hanoi on 15-16 January 2026, in which the ministers implemented the Hanoi Digital Declaration, demonstrating "AI Cooperation" and "Trusted Data Flows". The strategy supports collaborative creation of AI models attuned to ASEAN's many languages and markets.[27]

The initiative aligns with the newly adopted ASEAN Digital Masterplan 2026-2030 that places AI governance as a centerpiece to elevate regional digital integration, particularly in the dialogue process with partners like Japan.[28] Furthermore, it also enables real-time trade matching, predictive logistics optimisation, and tailored consumer experience across platforms, integrating Japanese technology providers with ASEAN SMEs.[29]

According to (Oikawa 2024)[30], the roadmap strengthened Japan's Data Free Flow with Trust (DFFT) concept as ASEAN DEFA's negotiations addressed nine elements, which are (1) Digital Trade, (2) Cross border E-commerce, (3) Payments and E-invoicing, (4) Digital ID and Authentication, (5) Online Safety and Cybersecurity, (6) Cross-border Data Flows and Data Protection, (7) Competition Policy, (8) Cooperation on Emerging Topics, and (9) Talent Mobility and Cooperation. With these nine core elements, DEFA can potentially empower businesses and stakeholders across ASEAN by

accelerating growth, strengthening interoperability within the region, fostering responsible digital development, and enacting regional engagement among the member states.

The adoption of streamlined customs procedures and standardised APIs connecting Japanese fintech providers, practical pilot projects have mitigated transaction costs by 25 percent while adhering to the cybersecurity safeguards set by the Hiroshima AI Process. Temasek's Economy SEA 2025 report indicates ASEAN's digital economy achieved USD 300 billion Gross Merchandise Value (GMV) by 2025, showcasing 15 percent year-on-year growth. E-commerce alone accounts for USD 185 billion in GMV, reflecting USD 41 billion in revenue, and video commerce is projected to account for 25 percent of total GMV through social to e-commerce conversions. The cross-border QR code interoperability throughout eight ASEAN nations is enhancing trade, which was enabled by the Data Free Trade with Trust (DFFT) framework.[31]

Innovation Hubs, Startup Funds, Tech Transfers

The first pillar of the ASEAN-Japan Digital Work Plan 2025 emphasizes the evolution of digital infrastructure with strategic transfers of technologies, with 5G Open RAN demonstration projects as the flagship achievements confirmed in the official framework. Joint efforts with local telecommunication carriers across several ASEAN countries in deploying next-generation network technologies with open-standard architecture, which fundamentally differs from the existing ones that are dominated by single vendors. The Digital Work Plan itself exemplifies several countries, such as Cambodia and Vietnam, as key countries where the projects will be implemented, including on both smart city and rural solutions for connecting the significant gaps in digital disparities.[32]

The E-DISC Innovate Bridge Programme, implemented by ERIA, helps to build entrepreneurial resilience through the linking of twelve high-potential startups from eight ASEAN member states and Japan's innovation ecosystem at SusHi Tech Tokyo 2025. The program's activities, including

working with JETRO, visiting the Yokohama Hardtech Hub, and participating in Japan ASEAN Open Innovation Exchange events, have reached more than 150 participants. The program helps to expand access to capital and markets and assists startups in dealing with economic volatility at home more effectively.[33]

With Japan's support, ERIA's Digital Innovation Centres have been promoting the adoption of digital technologies among small and medium-sized enterprises in potential ASEAN economies. Based on the data from ERIA in 2019, digital engagement in SMEs has reached 56 percent at the basic level, which includes email and social media usage; 34 percent at the intermediate level, which includes websites and e-commerce; and an average of 24 percent in government initiatives to promote the use of e-commerce platforms and data connectivity between countries.[34]

Entrepreneurial Resilience under the Hiroshima AI Process

In 2023, the Hiroshima AI Process was introduced by the G7, aiming to strengthen the responsible use of artificial intelligence globally. It provides a voluntary governance approach of advanced and generative AI systems, supported by shared international principles and a code of conduct for organisations.[35] The integration of ASEAN partners into the Hiroshima AI Friends Group, now exceeding over 50 members, alongside six of ASEAN member states (Cambodia, Brunei, Laos, Singapore, Vietnam, and Thailand). By fostering alignment with the ASEAN Responsible AI Roadmap through capacity-building, regulatory sandboxes, shared risk management principles, and participation in key meetings. Japan's targeted outreach measures interoperability without overriding regional priorities, promoting human-centric AI benefits for developing economies in the Global South.[36]

A G7-wide survey conducted in the third quarter of 2023 serves as the empirical basis for this analysis, with all member states collectively recognising productivity gains, technological advancement, and the promotion of entrepreneurship as the core economic advantages of

generative artificial intelligence. The analysis conservatively estimated that generative AI generated around USD 12 billion in global economic value in the first half of 2023, thereby introducing a tangible reference point that enacts the strategic significance of this technology.[37]

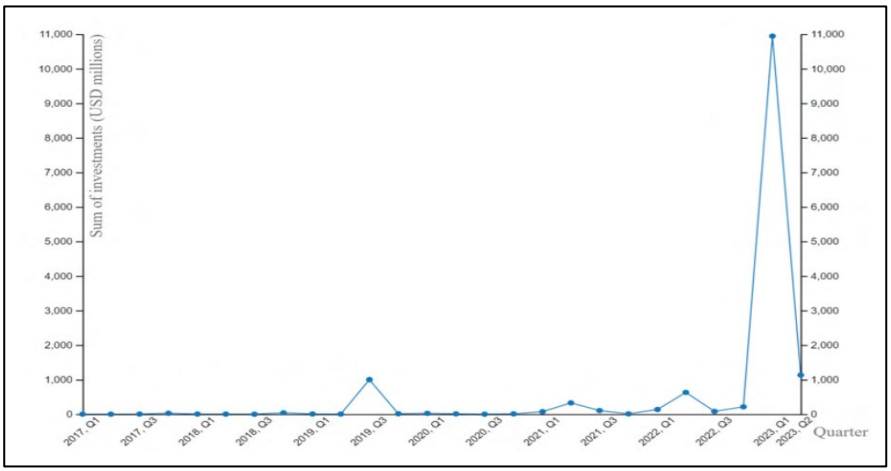

Figure 1: The Growth of Generative AI Research Precedes the Surge in Investments (OECD, 2023).

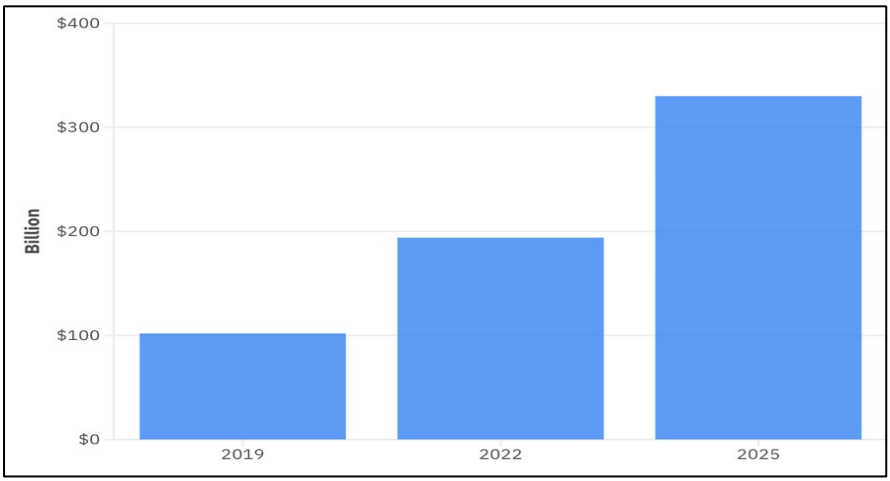

Figure 2: ASEAN digital economy growth from $300B (current) to $1T baseline/$2T DEFA scenario by 2030, led by Indonesia's $360B projection (World Economic Forum, 2026).

For ASEAN SMEs operating in the world's most dynamic digital economy, the digital sector output could potentially reach USD 1 trillion by 2030 under the ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA), to which this evolution reflects significant possibilities to initiate advanced digital solutions in a manner that eases regulatory constraints or increased geopolitical exposure.[38]

Mitigating Economic Risks Through Coordinated Policies

Joint Responses to Regional Shocks

The Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund (JAIF) was established in 2006 with cumulative commitments exceeding USD 650 million, which serves as Japan's principal tools for translating rapid disaster response objectives into practice across Southeast Asia through sustained support to the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance (AHA Centre).[39] Upon this framework, JAIF reinforces two flagship initiatives, such as Disaster Emergency Logistics System for ASEAN (DELSA) Phase IV, which functions three strategically pre-positioned regional warehouses stocked with relief products to enable emergency deployment within 48 hours across ASEAN, and ASEAN-ERAT Phase III has developed a pool for more than 1,000 trained emergency response and assessment professionals, ensuring regional-wide rapid assessment capabilities that are mobilised within 24 hours of a disaster.[40]

According to AHA Centre Situation Update No.8 (12 April 2025), relief assistance valued at USD 208,000 was mobilised through the JAIF under the DELSA mechanism. This assistance package, which included 500 hygiene kits and 92 tarpaulins, was dispatched from the Philippines satellite warehouse and arrived in Nay Pyi Taw on 12 April, thereby sustaining support for 198,668 displaced individuals, with 42,118 individuals being accommodated in 134 temporary shelters. The JAIF-supported operations also facilitated a total of nine AHA Centre relief flights, seven from Subang, Malaysia, one from the Philippines, and one in collaboration with the

Singapore Red Cross, which demonstrates the strength of regional cooperation in responding to humanitarian crises.[41]

Onto the cybersecurity aspect, under the ASEAN-Japan Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, Japan's National Institute of Information and Communications Technology (NICT) and the National Center of Incident Readiness and Strategic for Cybersecurity (NISC) provide cybersecurity capacity building through regional frameworks to protect ASEAN's expanding digital economy. The ASEAN-Japan Cybersecurity Capacity Building Centre (AJCCBC Step 2) was funded by JAIF in 2023, aiming to address regional cybersecurity skills gaps in support of Dimension 4 (Regional Capacity Building) of the ASEAN Cybersecurity Cooperation Strategy 2021-2025.[42]

Complementing JAIF's physical disaster response capacities, Japan's NICT cybersecurity training directly addresses recommendations from Cambodia's 2023 Cybersecurity Capacity Maturity Model (JICA/Oxford), which emphasized training and capacity-building as a priority gap at Maturity Level 2. The AJCCBC programmes support Cambodia's progression from ad-hoc to defined cybersecurity maturity, strengthening digital continuity during JAIF-coordinated disaster relief operations.[43]

Regional Risk-Sharing Mechanisms

In the realm of global dynamics shifting characterized by the rise of the Global South, durable risk-pooling mechanisms—risk management strategies that permit multiple countries to collectively manage and share risks during emergencies, and policy harmonization—the alignment of policies and regulations among nations to facilitate cooperation—are significant strategies to strengthen the resilience of Japan-ASEAN relations. Risk-pooling initiatives such as the Caribbean Catastrophe Risk Insurance Facility (CCRIF) function as a successful model, permitting participating countries to rapidly access funds for disaster relief, hence mitigating the economic disputes of individual states.[44] Japan-ASEAN financial cooperation capitalises on complementary strengths through the initiation

of mechanisms built to reduce regional economic vulnerabilities. The Chiang Mai Initiative Multilateralisation (CMIM), with a total amount of USD 240 billion including a 30 percent IMF-de-linked portion, provides prompt, timely liquidity during balance-of-payment disruptions, while ASEAN+3 Macroeconomic Research Office.[45] Strategic Correlates is reinforced through the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) and ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) as highlighted in the 28th ASEAN-Japan Summit Joint Statement, supporting the ASEAN Community Vision 2045.[46] In addition to these frameworks, Japan's bilateral swap arrangements with five ASEAN economies, with Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, and Thailand to consolidate regional reserve capacity.

Projected Resilience Gains

The ASEAN+3 Finance Ministers have focused on improving the region's financial safety nets, together with fiscal policy coordination, as part of the efforts to build up regional resilience. Importantly, the Chiang Mai Initiative Multilateralisation (CMIM), the ASEAN+3 currency swap arrangement that was implemented after the Asian Financial Crisis, as a means to provide the region's members—Japan, China, South Korea, and the ASEAN Nations—to gain access to the emergency funding in the wake of economic shocks. At the 2025 ASEAN+3 meeting, leaders agreed to the decision on operating the Rapid Financing Facility, which is part of the CMIM and contributes to the region with unconditional emergency financial support in the context of pandemics, natural disasters, and thus, a way to amplify the region's capabilities to respond to such threats and implications, respectively.[47]

Subsequently, robust regional digital development can act as a buffer for economic resilience, as it broadens trading investment and market linkages. Brain & Company (2025) indicates Southeast Asia's digital economy is on the path to surpass USD 300 billion in GMV as it continues to grow through monetization, innovation, and the expansion of frequent usage of digital services on electronic commerce and e-payments.[48] Moreover, the ASEAN Investment Report 2025, a research paper published by UNCTAD and the ASEAN Secretariat, highlighted that foreign direct investment (FDI) entry

to ASEAN stood at USD 226 billion, particularly in supply-chain intensive and digital economy industries, which faced a profound acceleration.[49] From these new developments, it can be surmised that there is one particular takeaway, to which the region would be able to smooth economic fluctuations with the use of fiscal instruments like the CMIM and rapid financing facilities, particularly the region's push to recognise economic growth in the digital space and investment diversification.

Conclusion

Economic synergy prepares the Global South for robust growth, turning weaknesses into assets. The mechanisms of RCEP, ASEAN+ Japan Digital Work Plan, and Chiang Mai Initiative Multilateralization (CMIM) promote functional complementarity and the enhancement of regional value chains, thus transforming weaknesses into collective strengths for timely crisis response.

Intra-regional trade and FDI have shown the ability to sustain high growth in the face of economic downturns by supporting demand substitution and the maintenance of productive capacity, as exemplified by the embedded openness strategy pursued by ASEAN. The digital co-creation initiative with Japan, including the development of artificial intelligence roadmaps and the piloting of 5G, improves the resilience of SMEs and the expansion of the ecommerce sector towards the goal of a $1 trillion economy by 2030. The disaster logistics initiative supported by JAIF ensures the delivery of relief within 48 hours. These complementary activities, through the harmonization of policies facilitated by the FOIP-AOIP framework, achieve positive impacts in the areas of financial stability and industrial upgrading in similar economies, as simulated.

Leaders in the Global South are recommended to develop an AI Co-Creation Pact, building on the ASEAN-Japan model and incorporating the Hiroshima AI Process to standardize governance, cross-border pilots, and empowering SMEs through shared technology platforms. Moreover, the 2030 Vision should be enhanced through the development of extensions to the ASEAN

Digital Masterplan, including the objectives of advancing the negotiations in the areas of DEFA to achieve the goals of interoperability in data flows and talent, as well as the exploration of scenarios to achieve the $2 trillion GMV through enhanced BIMSTEC connectivity. The partnership between Japan and ASEAN serves as an example of stability in the Global South, marked by multipolar cooperation in South-South investments, cyber resiliency, and risk management in addressing uncertainty and securing equitable prosperity.

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Chapter 6
Beyond Binaries: Reimagining ASEAN-Japan Partnership in an Age of Multipolarity

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Introduction

Global politics is entering a period of transition. Power is more dispersed, alignments are more fluid and countries are increasingly seeking greater strategic autonomy. The term "Global South" has gained renewed prominence in this context, reflecting calls for fairer representation in global governance and more diversified economic and diplomatic partnerships. At the same time, geopolitical competition, economic fragmentation and technological rivalry are reshaping the regional environment in which ASEAN and Japan operate.

For Southeast Asia, the re-emergence of the "Global South" is less a rediscovery of solidarity than a recalibration of agency. The term does not denote a cohesive bloc with convergent interests or institutional coherence. Rather, it reflects a political sentiment—a shared desire among developing and middle-income countries for greater voice in global rule-making, fairer access to development finance, and more diversified strategic options in a world marked by intensifying great-power rivalry.[1] ASEAN member states engage this narrative pragmatically. They do so not to displace long-

standing partnerships, but to widen diplomatic space and reinforce their autonomy.

Japan, by contrast, is widely perceived as a "Global North" power — technologically advanced, economically mature, and institutionally embedded in the post-war liberal order. Yet Japan's relationship with Southeast Asia complicates this categorisation. Over five decades, Japan has been a principal development partner, investor, and increasingly, a security contributor to the region. It has cultivated deep reservoirs of trust, underpinned by respect for ASEAN centrality, long-term economic engagement and a consistent commitment to multilateral norms.[2] In a regional perception survey, the *State of Southeast Asia* survey reports,[3] Japan consistently emerges as the most trusted major power in Southeast Asia, carrying strategic significance in an era of geopolitical volatility.

The rise of the Global South discourse and the fragmentation of global governance thus raise an important question: how should ASEAN-Japan relations evolve in a world no longer defined by simple geopolitical binaries? If ASEAN is diversifying its partnerships while maintaining strategic equidistance, and Japan is recalibrating its Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy[4] toward greater inclusiveness, what is the next stage of their partnership?

This chapter argues that ASEAN-Japan relations are entering a new phase — one that moves toward systemic co-creation of regional resilience. Historically anchored in Official Development Assistance (ODA), trade and infrastructure connectivity, the partnership has widened into maritime security cooperation, cybersecurity capacity-building, humanitarian assistance, and more recently, Official Security Assistance (OSA).[5] At the normative level, the convergence between ASEAN's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP)[6] and Japan's FOIP reflects a shared commitment to openness, inclusiveness, and rules-based conduct.

Yet deepening cooperation alone does not guarantee resilience. The regional environment has become more crowded and complex. ASEAN-led

mechanisms such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and ADMM-Plus now coexist alongside a proliferating network of minilateral and plurilateral arrangements, including the Quad, AUKUS, BRICS and the G20. Economic fragmentation, technological competition and maritime tensions continue to test regional stability. ASEAN's centrality, while rhetorically affirmed, requires more operational substance.

In this context, reimagining Japan–ASEAN partnership requires three conceptual shifts.

First, it requires moving beyond the binary framing of Global North versus Global South. Southeast Asia's engagement with South–South platforms is not a rejection of traditional partners but a strategy of diversification. Japan's role is not diminished by this shift but can, in fact, be strengthened as a bridge-builder capable of connecting advanced and developing economies within an inclusive regional framework.

Second, it requires recognising trust as strategic capital. In a region wary of alignment politics, Japan's credibility, predictability, and long-term engagement constitute a form of political currency that enables deeper cooperation across sensitive domains, including maritime security and economic resilience.

Third, it calls for integrating development, security and normative cooperation into a coherent resilience framework. Fragmented or siloed engagement risks redundancy and inefficiency. A robust partnership must reinforce ASEAN's agency, enhance institutional capacity and contribute to a rules-based order that accommodates diversity without descending into fragmentation.

Against this backdrop, the chapter proceeds several parts. It first examines the Global South as strategic posture rather than cohesive bloc. It then analyses ASEAN's agency in a competitive multipolar environment, followed by an assessment of Japan's role as a middle-power stabiliser. The chapter subsequently outlines the transition from sectoral cooperation to

systemic partnership and concludes by offering a forward-looking perspective, identifying pathways for co-creating stability, prosperity and shared rules in an increasingly fluid order.

In an era defined by uncertainty and diffusion of power, the durability of ASEAN-Japan relations will depend not on rhetorical alignment, but on their capacity to adapt together in a more complex world.

The Global South as Strategic Posture, Not Political Bloc

The growing salience of the term "Global South" in international discourse has been striking. Yet its prominence should not be mistaken for the consolidation of a coherent geopolitical bloc.[7] Unlike formal alliances or treaty-based organisations, the Global South does not possess institutional unity, binding commitments or shared strategic doctrine. Rather, it represents a broad political sentiment—a collective expression of dissatisfaction with unequal representation in global governance and a desire for greater autonomy in shaping international norms.[8]

Countries associated with the Global South vary significantly in political systems, economic models, development levels and strategic alignments. Even within platforms such as BRICS, internal divergences are evident. India and China maintain unresolved border tensions; Brazil's economic priorities differ from those of Russia; and South Africa, while supportive of multipolar reform, remains deeply integrated into Western financial markets and trade networks. The diverse priorities underscores that the Global South is not a cohesive geopolitical pole, but a fluid and heterogeneous network of states seeking expanded diplomatic and economic space.[9]

For Southeast Asia, this distinction is particularly important. ASEAN member states do not approach the Global South as an ideological project or as an alternative to existing partnerships. Instead, engagement with Global South platforms reflects a pragmatic strategy of diversification.[10] In an era of intensifying US–China rivalry and shifting trade patterns, ASEAN

countries are widening their options. Participation in BRICS dialogues, expanded cooperation with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and outreach to Africa and Latin America are mechanisms to reduce overdependence on any single major power or economic corridor.

This strategy is consistent with ASEAN's longstanding emphasis on strategic autonomy. Since its founding, ASEAN has sought to prevent Southeast Asia from becoming an arena of great-power contestation. Today, that objective persists, albeit in a more complex environment. The proliferation of minilateral groupings and competing economic frameworks has increased the density of regional institutions. The Global South discourse provides ASEAN members with additional diplomatic space through which they can articulate concerns about development financing, supply chain vulnerabilities and reform of multilateral institutions, without being drawn into binary alignment politics.

Importantly, Southeast Asia's embrace of the Global South narrative does not signal a retreat from established Global North partnerships. The region remains deeply integrated into global value chains, dependent on advanced technology ecosystems, and interconnected with financial markets in Japan, the United States, the European Union, and the Republic of Korea. For ASEAN, diversification is not replacement. It is an expansion of strategic bandwidth.[11]

The State of Southeast Asia 2025 Survey Report[12] reinforces this pragmatic posture. While respondents' express interest in emerging groupings such as BRICS, there remains strong preference for strengthening ASEAN's own mechanisms first to ensure its members remain committed and discouraged from joining other groupings. This suggests that regional elites view new platforms as supplementary rather than substitutive. ASEAN centrality continues to be regarded as the anchor of regional stability, even as member states explore new coalitions.

From Japan's perspective, understanding this nuance is critical. If the Global South is interpreted as an anti-Western bloc,[13] misperceptions may arise

regarding ASEAN's strategic trajectory. However, if understood as a posture of calibrated diversification, it reveals opportunity rather than displacement. Japan's long-standing development partnerships, technological capacity, and commitment to inclusive multilateralism position it well to engage ASEAN in this expanded diplomatic landscape.

Indeed, Japan's own evolution of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) concept toward greater inclusiveness reflects recognition of this fluid environment. Rather than framing regional order in rigid ideological terms, Japan has increasingly emphasised connectivity, economic resilience, and cooperation with developing countries.[14] In this sense, Japan's approach intersects with ASEAN's Global South engagement where both seek an open and rules-based system that accommodates diversity without collapsing into fragmentation.

The Global South moment, therefore, should not be read as a structural rupture in ASEAN-Japan relations. Instead, it represents a contextual shift, underscoring the importance of adaptive partnership. As power becomes more distributed and alliances more flexible, durable relationships will depend less on shared ideologies and more on shared capacity-building, institutional support, and strategic trust.[15]

The Global South is a means of widening diplomatic manoeuvre for ASEAN and it signals to Japan that its leadership in a multipolar era requires inclusive and responsive engagement. The challenge and opportunity therefore lie in translating this convergence into concrete forms of cooperation that strengthen regional resilience.

ASEAN's Agency in Competitive Multipolarity

ASEAN's diplomacy today reflects how this broader Global South posture is translated into practical regional strategy. Far from being a passive bystander in major power competition, ASEAN has steadily repositioned itself as an active balancer within an increasingly crowded regional

architecture. Its approach is neither alignment nor isolation, but calibrated multi-engagement.

The Indo-Pacific today is characterised strategic fluidity and institutionalisation through ASEAN-led mechanisms namely, the East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus). This is coexisting alongside a proliferation of minilateral and plurilateral arrangements including the Quad, AUKUS, BRICS, the G20 and various issue-based coalitions.[16] Rather than displacing ASEAN, this expansion has increased the complexity of regional governance. ASEAN must now operate in an environment where its convening power is no longer uncontested and where alternative platforms compete for relevance.

Yet ASEAN's strength lies in its ability to convene diverse actors within an inclusive framework. Unlike exclusive security alliances, ASEAN-led platforms are structured around dialogue, consensus and non-confrontation. This institutional design has allowed Southeast Asia to avoid becoming formally polarised despite intensifying US–China rivalry. The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP)[17] reflects this principle, emphasising openness, inclusiveness and respect for international law without targeting any particular state.

However, centrality cannot rest on convening power alone. As geopolitical pressures intensify, ASEAN faces growing expectations to operationalise its centrality in more tangible ways. Maritime tensions in the South China Sea, economic security concerns, technological fragmentation and climate vulnerabilities all require more proactive coordination. The credibility of ASEAN's centrality will increasingly depend on its capacity to deliver practical outcomes, not merely host dialogues.

At the same time, ASEAN's consensus-based decision-making, while instrumental in preserving unity, can slow responsiveness. Divergent threat perceptions among member states—particularly in relation to China and the United States—complicate collective positioning. Some members prioritise economic interdependence with China; others emphasise maritime security

concerns. Managing these internal divisions while preserving cohesion remains one of ASEAN's most delicate balancing acts.[18]

Within this environment of competitive multipolarity, Japan's role increasingly becomes strategically significant. Unlike major powers whose engagement is often interpreted through the lens of rivalry, Japan's involvement has historically reinforced ASEAN-led mechanisms rather than bypassing them.[19] Japan has consistently affirmed ASEAN centrality, supports the AOIP and channels cooperation through established frameworks. This approach reduces perceptions of strategic coercion and enhances ASEAN's confidence in maintaining autonomy.

Japan's engagement also contributes to strengthening ASEAN's agency through capacity-building rather than alignment-building. In maritime security, Japan's assistance has focused on coast guard training, maritime domain awareness and non-lethal equipment provision. In cybersecurity and digital governance, cooperation has emphasised resilience and institutional strengthening.[20] Such initiatives enhance ASEAN's self-reliance without compelling strategic alignment against any third party.

Moreover, Japan's calibrated approach provides ASEAN with additional stabilising ballast amid uncertainty. As US–China competition intensifies, ASEAN member states increasingly seek middle-power partners that can reinforce regional stability without escalating tensions.[21] Japan's reputation for predictability, long-term commitment and respect for regional norms allows it to function as a stabiliser within ASEAN's broader balancing strategy.

This does not imply that ASEAN–Japan relations are immune to broader structural pressures. Japan's evolving security posture, particularly under leaders with stronger defence orientations, may raise questions in parts of Southeast Asia sensitive to militarisation or bloc politics. At the same time, ASEAN's engagement with emerging Global South platforms could generate misinterpretations if viewed through rigid geopolitical frames. Maintaining mutual clarity of intent will therefore be critical.

Ultimately, ASEAN's agency in competitive multipolarity rests on three pillars: institutional cohesion, diversified partnerships and operational credibility. Japan's partnership intersects with all three. By reinforcing ASEAN-led mechanisms, enhancing capacity in both development and security domains, and avoiding zero-sum framing, Japan contributes to the preservation of a regional order that remains inclusive rather than polarised.

In an era where power is diffused and institutions are contested; ASEAN's centrality will depend less on formal declarations and more on collaborative leadership. The next phase of ASEAN-Japan cooperation must therefore move beyond symbolic affirmation toward integrated strategies that strengthen ASEAN's ability to shape, rather than merely respond to, regional transformation.

Japan as Middle-Power Stabiliser and Trust Capital

Japan's position in Southeast Asia today is underpinned by a substantial reservoir of trust built over decades of sustained engagement.[22] In the State of Southeast Asia (SSEA) surveys,[23] Japan consistently ranks as the most trusted major power among regional respondents, ahead of both the United States and China. In a region marked by competing narratives and fluctuating alignments, trust has become a form of political currency. Unlike formal alliances, it cannot be imposed or negotiated overnight but built through consistency, restraint and long-term engagement.

Respondents in the SSEA surveys frequently associate Japan with respect for international law and views Japan as a partner with vast economic resources and the political will to provide global leadership.[24] Unlike some external actors whose involvement is interpreted through the lens of strategic rivalry, Japan's presence is generally viewed as predictable and non-coercive. This reservoir of goodwill is not incidental. It is the cumulative product of five decades of development cooperation, infrastructure investment, human resource training and diplomatic sensitivity toward ASEAN's norms.[25]

Trust however is not merely reputational but has strategic implications. In an environment shaped by US–China competition, ASEAN member states are wary of being drawn into binary alignments.[26] Middle powers that are perceived as stabilising rather than polarising actors therefore gain greater room to operate. Japan occupies this space. It is sufficiently capable to contribute meaningfully to regional resilience, yet restrained enough not to be perceived as destabilising the balance.

The evolution of Japan–ASEAN relations illustrate this trajectory. Historically anchored in Official Development Assistance (ODA), trade and connectivity projects, the partnership has gradually expanded into new domains. Maritime security cooperation, coast guard capacity-building, cybersecurity initiatives, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), and more recently, Official Security Assistance (OSA) have broadened the scope of engagement. Importantly, Japan's security contributions have been calibrated. The emphasis remains on non-lethal equipment, maritime domain awareness, surveillance capacity and institutional training—areas that enhance ASEAN's autonomy without escalating regional tensions.[27]

This shift reflects Japan's own strategic recalibration. In response to a more uncertain security environment, Japan has strengthened its defence posture and updated its strategic outlook.[28] While this evolution may raise concerns about securitisation in some quarters, Japan has thus far been careful to frame its engagement in Southeast Asia within the language of capacity-building and inclusive regional stability rather than bloc politics. Its consistent support for the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) underscores this positioning.

Moreover, Japan's credibility extends beyond security. Economically, Japan remains one of ASEAN's largest sources of foreign direct investment and high-quality infrastructure financing. Its emphasis on standards, transparency and long-term sustainability differentiates its model from more rapid but sometimes debt-intensive alternatives. In areas such as supply chain resilience, digital governance and green transition

technologies, Japan's technological sophistication complements ASEAN's developmental needs.[29]

Japan's soft power further reinforces this trust capital. Cultural familiarity, educational exchanges, tourism flows and people-to-people ties have contributed to a positive regional perception.[30] Unlike relationships defined solely by strategic calculation, Japan's engagement has developed a societal dimension that anchors cooperation beyond governmental cycles.

Nevertheless, trust cannot be taken for granted. The strategic environment is evolving. Japan's closer coordination with partners such as the US and participation in minilateral arrangements like the Quad may generate questions in parts of Southeast Asia concerned about exclusionary dynamics. At the same time, ASEAN's growing engagement with Global South platforms requires careful interpretation in Tokyo to avoid misperception.

The durability of Japan's role as a middle-power stabiliser will therefore depend on maintaining three qualities: predictability, inclusiveness and responsiveness. Predictability sustains trust. Inclusiveness ensures that cooperation complements rather than competes with ASEAN-led mechanisms. Responsiveness allows the partnership to adapt to emerging domains such as artificial intelligence governance, climate resilience and economic security.

In a multipolar order characterised by diffusion rather than dominance, middle powers play a critical role in preserving systemic equilibrium. Japan's comparative advantage lies not in coercive leverage but in normative credibility and institutional commitment. For ASEAN, this provides a strategic counterweight that reinforces autonomy without demanding alignment.

The next phase of ASEAN-Japan relations must therefore build upon this trust capital while deepening integration across development, security and normative domains. If managed carefully, Japan's stabilising presence can

continue to strengthen ASEAN's agency in an increasingly fluid regional order.

From Sectoral Cooperation to Integrated Strategic Partnership

While Japan–ASEAN relations are frequently described as comprehensive and strategic, cooperation has often developed along parallel sectoral tracks. Economic engagement, security cooperation, and normative alignment have each expanded significantly over time, yet they are not always conceptualised as part of a unified strategic framework. The next phase of the partnership will depend less on adding new areas of collaboration and more on strengthening coherence across domains.

Historically, Japan–ASEAN ties were anchored in economic development. Official Development Assistance (ODA), infrastructure financing, industrial relocation and human capital programmes formed the backbone of engagement. These initiatives were instrumental in supporting Southeast Asia's economic transformation and industrial upgrading. Over time, security cooperation emerged as an additional pillar, particularly in maritime capacity-building and humanitarian assistance. More recently, collaboration has expanded to include non-traditional security domains such as cybersecurity, supply chain resilience, and climate adaptation.[31]

However, the challenges facing the region today are increasingly interconnected. Maritime disputes intersect with economic security; digital infrastructure has implications for both growth and national resilience; green transition policies affect industrial competitiveness and geopolitical alignments. Treating these issues in isolation risks fragmentation and duplication. A more robust partnership requires a systemic approach, one that recognises the interdependence of development, security and normative frameworks.

First, economic resilience and security resilience can no longer be compartmentalised.[32] Supply chain diversification, semiconductor cooperation and digital standards-setting are simultaneously economic and

strategic concerns. Japan's technological strengths and ASEAN's manufacturing ecosystems are complementary but coordination must be more deliberate. Rather than viewing supply chain initiatives as discrete projects, Japan and ASEAN could institutionalise regular strategic dialogues on economic security that align investment, standards and capacity-building.

Second, development assistance and security assistance should be mutually reinforcing. Japan's ODA and its newer Official Security Assistance (OSA) instruments need not operate in parallel silos. Maritime domain awareness projects, for example, are strengthened by parallel investments in digital infrastructure and data-sharing frameworks. Cyber resilience initiatives benefit from human capital development programmes that support regulatory and technical expertise. Integrating these efforts enhances efficiency and avoids overstretch.

Third, normative cooperation must underpin both development and security engagement. Japan and ASEAN share a commitment to principles such as respect for international law, freedom of navigation and open markets. Yet these norms require active reinforcement amid global fragmentation. Coordinated advocacy for the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), transparent infrastructure standards and inclusive digital governance frameworks can strengthen the legitimacy of the regional order. Normative alignment does not require uniformity of political systems, but it does require consistency in defending agreed rules.
Institutionally, this systemic shift also demands procedural refinement. ASEAN-Japan cooperation mechanisms, while extensive, are sometimes perceived as process-heavy and slow-moving. Streamlining approval procedures for joint funds, accelerating project implementation timelines and improving coordination between sectoral bodies would enhance practical delivery. ASEAN itself faces similar bureaucratic constraints. Collaborative leadership entails not only launching new initiatives but also improving the efficiency of existing ones.

Importantly, moving toward systemic partnership does not imply securitisation of the relationship. ASEAN's sensitivity toward bloc politics and formal alliances remains strong. Rather, integration should focus on resilience-building by enhancing the region's ability to absorb shocks, manage disputes and sustain economic growth amid volatility. Japan's strength lies precisely in its capacity to support such resilience without demanding alignment.

In a multipolar order characterised by fluid coalitions and overlapping institutions, partnerships that remain compartmentalised risk strategic irrelevance. By contrast, a systemic ASEAN-Japan partnership—one that integrates economic, security and normative dimensions—can function as an anchor of stability. It would allow both sides to adapt to geopolitical shifts while preserving openness and inclusiveness.

The task ahead therefore is not to reinvent the partnership, but to deepen its coherence. From transactional cooperation toward systemic resilience, ASEAN and Japan have an opportunity to shape a model of middle-power collaboration suited to an age of fragmentation.

Moving Forward: Co-Creating Stability in a Fluid Order

Moving forward, ASEAN-Japan relations will be shaped less by dramatic geopolitical realignments and more by the steady accumulation of adaptive capacity. The regional order is unlikely to stabilise into a clear bipolar or multipolar structure. Instead, fluid coalitions, issue-based alignments and overlapping institutional arrangements will continue to define the Indo-Pacific landscape.[33] In such an environment, the durability of partnerships will depend on their ability to strengthen resilience rather than enforce alignment.
Three interrelated domains will be particularly consequential.

First, the green transition will become a central axis of cooperation. Energy security, decarbonisation and sustainable industrial upgrading are no longer purely environmental concerns but strategic economic imperatives.[34]

ASEAN economies face rising energy demand alongside climate vulnerabilities. Japan's technological capabilities in hydrogen, ammonia, energy efficiency and grid modernisation can complement ASEAN's development needs. However, cooperation must move beyond pilot projects toward scalable frameworks that integrate financing, regulatory harmonisation and industrial partnerships. If managed effectively, green collaboration can enhance both environmental sustainability and supply chain resilience.

Second, the digital economy will define the competitiveness of the next decade. Digital connectivity, artificial intelligence governance, cross-border data flows and cybersecurity resilience are shaping new dimensions of economic security. ASEAN's rapidly expanding digital markets present significant opportunity while regulatory fragmentation and uneven capacity remain constraints. Japan's experience in digital standards-setting and trusted infrastructure development provides scope for structured collaboration. Beyond infrastructure, the emphasis should be on regulatory dialogue, capacity-building and alignment with inclusive digital governance principles that avoid technological bifurcation.

Third, maritime and crisis-response cooperation will remain foundational. The South China Sea, while not the sole security concern, continues to test regional stability.[35] Maritime domain awareness, coast guard coordination, search-and-rescue capabilities and humanitarian assistance frameworks enhance ASEAN's operational credibility without escalating tensions. Japan's calibrated security engagement—particularly through non-lethal assistance and institutional training—aligns well with ASEAN's preference for autonomy and non-alignment. Strengthening interoperability in disaster response and climate-related emergencies will further contribute to regional resilience.

Across these domains, the unifying objective should be integration rather than expansion. ASEAN-Japan cooperation will be most effective when development initiatives reinforce security resilience, and when both are anchored in normative commitment to open and rules-based conduct. This

integrated approach can serve as a stabilising counterweight to economic fragmentation and institutional erosion elsewhere.

Importantly, Japan and ASEAN are uniquely positioned to bridge divides that are widening in global governance. ASEAN's engagement with Global South platforms reflects a desire for greater voice and diversification. Japan's embeddedness in advanced industrial economies and its emphasis on multilateral rules provide complementary leverage. Together, they can demonstrate that engagement with the Global South need not undermine partnerships with the Global North. Instead, it can widen pathways for inclusive cooperation.

Moving forward, the measure of success will not be the breadth of ASEAN-Japan cooperation, but whether it serves as a yardstick for coherent and resilient middle-power partnership in the region. A partnership that integrates economic resilience, security capacity-building and normative alignment will be better equipped to absorb shocks and adapt to shifting power distributions.

In a multipolar era defined by ambiguity rather than certainty, stability will increasingly depend on networks of middle powers and regional institutions capable of preserving openness without polarisation. ASEAN and Japan, through sustained collaboration and calibrated leadership, can help anchor such a network by not by dominating the regional order, but by reinforcing its inclusiveness and resilience

Conclusion: Beyond Binaries in an Age of Fluidity

The re-emergence of Global South discourse and the intensification of geopolitical rivalry have revived questions about alignment, polarity and systemic transition. Yet the experience of Southeast Asia suggests that the contemporary regional order cannot be reduced to binary categories. ASEAN's engagement with emerging platforms does not signal a departure from established partnerships, just as Japan's recent adjustments to its security and strategic posture should not be interpreted as an attempt to

create an exclusive bloc or force regional alignment. Both are navigating a more fluid environment in which flexibility, diversification and institutional credibility are increasingly central.

ASEAN-Japan relations must therefore be understood not as a choice between Global North and Global South frameworks, but as a model of calibrated complementarity. Over five decades, the partnership has accumulated substantial trust capital, institutional depth and economic interdependence. It has expanded from development cooperation to encompass maritime security, digital governance and normative alignment. The task ahead is not about reinventing, but strengthening coherence across economic resilience, security capacity-building, and normative cooperation, focusing more on cross-pillar and cross-sectoral cooperation.

In a multipolar order marked by overlapping coalitions and uneven power distribution, middle-power partnerships will play a stabilising role. Japan's credibility and technological strengths complement ASEAN's convening capacity and strategic centrality. Together, they can reinforce inclusive regional mechanisms while preserving space for diversified engagement. Such cooperation does not require uniformity of political systems or identical threat perceptions but it requires consistency in defending openness, predictability and institutional dialogue.

Ultimately, moving beyond binaries means recognising that stability in the Indo-Pacific will depend on adaptable networks of cooperation rather than rigid blocs. ASEAN and Japan, through sustained collaboration and mutual respect, are well positioned to shape such a network—one anchored in trust, institutional continuity and shared commitment to an open and inclusive regional order.

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