

November 2, 2023

Japan and Asean ties: 50 years of trust and partnership

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No country has contributed to the comprehensive development of Asean more than Japan. For the past five decades, Japan has been the main driving force in propelling economic development and progress in all Asean member countries. Looking ahead, Japan and Asean ties will be further consolidated and diversified to promote peace, stability and, most importantly, prosperity in the region. There will be new challenges in the coming years that will require innovative but realistic policy designs to ensure a free, open, inclusive and prosperous region that respects national integrity and sovereignty.

This year Japan celebrates the 50th anniversary of its relations with Asean. The Asean leaders will converge in Tokyo to meet with Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida in mid December. Given the timing and the current geopolitical situation, this special summit is extremely significant to further cementing Japan-Asean ties. Most importantly, both sides want a region free from any hegemonic domination. Each country is independent and free to choose its agency that would promote prosperity and collective security.

This has always been their top priority since the end of the Indochina conflict in 1975. Through thick and thin, Japan has been working nonstop to forge cooperation between Asean and its former rivals, the Indochina countries, through economic and development plans. These engagements have helped to narrow existing economic gaps and, at the same time, created networks of production that have been mutually beneficial. Such a partnership has been maintained thanks to Japan's generous assistance to the region for the past five decades.

Japan was the biggest supporter among the dialogue partners in encouraging the former Indochinese countries to join Asean between 1995-1999. It was the biggest enlargement of the bloc since it was established in 1967. Brunei Darussalam joined Asean in 1984 immediately after it became an independent country. Indeed, Japan's experience in post-war economic reconstruction and development proved to be a boon for the regional integration efforts. The 10-member Asean has become the recipient of Japanese assistance in all three pillars—political/security, economic, and social/culture.

At the upcoming Tokyo summit, Japan and Asean are looking forward to strengthening their strategic partnership. To celebrate the 50th anniversary of Japan-Asean relations, Asean will accord Japan a comprehensive strategic partnership in December. With this new status, Japan has already drafted action plans that would be implemented in the coming years to promote a rules-based, free, open, and inclusive region. In addition, both sides share a common understanding that the region they are helping to consolidate is very dynamic as it covers the broad region of Indo-Pacific, connecting the Indian and West Pacific oceans.

Currently, there are nearly a dozen Indo-Pacific frameworks from all four corners of the world. Japan has also launched the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). However, soon after the announcement of Asean Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) in Bangkok in 2019, Japan immediately expressed support for the Asean approaches. Indeed both initiatives are based on similar principles and norms such as openness, transparency, inclusiveness, and respect for international law. Most importantly, they are not aimed at any third party.

It was not surprising that Japan became the first country to endorse and subsequently issue a joint statement with Asean on cooperation with the AOIP in 2020. Then at the recent Asean-Japan summit, both sides reaffirmed their commitment to enhancing their dialogue based on mutual trust, mutual respect, mutual benefit, win-win cooperation and equal partnership.

Japan has been steadfast in supporting the mainstreaming of the AOIP to create peace, stability, and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region. Former foreign minister Hayashi Yoshimasa said Japan would promote three pillars to support AOIP's mainstreaming. First of all, Japan will push concrete cooperation projects in line with the four priority areas of the AOIP. Secondly, Japan will also support several activities and functions of the Asean Secretariat for the promotion and mainstreaming of the AOIP by providing technical assistance to enhance the Secretariat's overall capacity. Finally, Japan will support the human resource development of young government officials in Asean countries.

With such a foundation, Japan and Asean can now synergize their cooperation in four prioritized areas—maritime cooperation, connectivity, sustainable development economic matters, and others. These four areas would enable Japan to stay ahead and enhance practical cooperation with Asean on mutually agreed programmes. At this juncture, Japan has approximately 90 Asean-Japan cooperation projects in the AOIP, the largest and most extensive. One of the most popular areas has been maritime safety cooperation and capacity building. Other areas also include connectivity and green economy initiatives as well as people-to-people connectivity. Since then, Australia and the US have followed suit.

Furthermore, as Asean is currently working on the Asean Community's Post-2025 vision, Japan is ready to work robustly with Asean to address emerging challenges due to the new geopolitical environment. At the recent Asean summit in Jakarta, the Asean leaders agreed

that the post-2025 vision would cover at least a 20-year timeframe up to 2045 to ensure continuity and consistency.

Putting together what Japan is planning to do will be based on mutual understanding and mutual trust. Japan and Asean will work together, as co-creators, to realize inclusiveness while respecting diversity. This way Japan will be able to craft a distinctive role with its blueprint in further deepening ties with Asean in the next 50 years and beyond.

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