

# ASEAN special

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## Japan forges stronger regional ties in face of pandemic

Amid the continuing disruptions caused by the novel coronavirus pandemic, the work of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) on issues of trade, diplomacy, development and public health has continued, including the group's first summit by video conference in November.

This year is the 54th anniversary of ASEAN, which counts Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam among its members. Together, these nations are home to more than 10% of the world's population and generate more than ¥350 trillion in gross domestic product every year.

Japan has strong economic and diplomatic interests in Southeast Asia, as well as a long history of involvement and partnership with the association. In fact, 2021 is the 40th anniversary of the founding of the ASEAN-Japan Centre, an intergovernmental organization that promotes investment,

tourism and other initiatives between the member states and Japan. This is also the 10th year since the Japanese government established an official mission to ASEAN, one that is currently led by Ambassador Akira Chiba.

The government has taken a particular interest in the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), a 2020 report that emphasized that cooperation and dialogue were needed in the region on a number of important issues. The report was clearly, if not explicitly, an expression of concern about China's rising power, especially as it relates to maritime freedom. A joint statement on the matter in November highlighted the similarities with Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) initiative.

The Japan-ASEAN Connectivity Initiative seeks to promote another of the main areas of cooperation mentioned in the AOIP report. Here, connectivity primarily refers to air, road and sea links within and

between the ASEAN states. Specific goals include completing overland corridors connecting Myanmar in the west to Vietnam in the east, a shared regional airspace and multiple port improvements. There are also "soft infrastructure" objectives in areas such as customs management, traffic safety and railway planning.

In June, Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry Hiroshi Kajiyama proposed in a meeting with ASEAN energy ministers the creation of an "Asia Energy Transition Initiative" that would aim to optimize the energy resources available to the ASEAN states as well as promote efforts to reduce carbon dioxide emissions. The initiative would work alongside current programs, including the ASEAN Plan of Action for Energy Cooperation and the association's Centre for Energy.

While efforts to distribute effective vaccines have brought the end of the pandemic within sight, there have been

disparities in the vaccination progress in ASEAN. Japan is trying to aid those efforts by donating millions of vaccine doses to some of its members, in addition to the 11 million doses it has pledged to Southeast and Southwest Asia, the Pacific islands and other areas through the COVAX program.

The foundation of the ASEAN Centre for Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases was announced at November's summit meeting. The region has experienced a number of public health crises involving infectious diseases since the SARS epidemic of 2003, but the COVID-19 pandemic has caused by far the most disruption and suffering. The new organization will seek to bolster public health emergency preparedness and improve the efficiency of mobilization when these resources are needed. At the summit, Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga pledged to support the center's efforts through the Japan International Cooperation Agency and other avenues.



A shipment of AstraZeneca's COVID-19 vaccine arrives at an airport in Hanoi on June 16, completing Japan's donation of 1 million doses to Vietnam. KYODO

## Celebrating 40 years of progress in economic relations with Japan

### ASEAN-JAPAN CENTRE

Since its establishment in 1981, the ASEAN-Japan Centre (AJC) has been working to strengthen economic partnerships between Association of Southeast Asian Nation member states and Japan in the areas of trade, investment and tourism, as well as promoting exchanges of people between the members and Japan. This year, the AJC is celebrating its 40th anniversary.

Looking back on the past four decades, nowhere in the world has grown as dynamically as the ASEAN region. In the early 1980s when the AJC was established, the economic situation in the region was unstable, and the formal relationship between ASEAN and Japan had just begun with little information available on each of the member states. At that time, the AJC began its journey to serve as a bridge between Japan and ASEAN for building "heart-to-heart" relationships and working as equal partners. Back then, the gross domestic product of the 10 states combined was one-tenth of Japan's. That has since expanded to more than half of Japan's GDP and is expected to surpass that mark within a decade.

**Back then, the GDP of the 10 ASEAN states combined was a tenth of Japan's. That has since expanded to over half and is expected to surpass that mark in a decade.**

Along with the development of ASEAN-Japan relations, the AJC itself has evolved with the times. Now most of the AJC's activities are chosen with a more regionwide and multidisciplinary approach, while conducted in an integrated way that combines capacity-building and policy work. Moreover, the AJC

has mainstreamed the U.N.'s sustainable development goals (SDGs) for all activities and produced a number of substantive publications on global value chains, services trade, nonequity modes of trade, SDG investment and more. Some of the findings and policy recommendations in those publications have been presented at official ASEAN meetings.

### Action on marine plastic

Adapting to the changes over time, the AJC has been able to better cater to the diplomatic initiatives and new challenges of ASEAN and Japan. One of the new AJC projects implemented since last year focuses on marine plastic waste, backing the joint statement of the 23rd Japan-ASEAN-Japan Summit on Cooperation on ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific issued on Nov. 12. That document lists marine waste as a possible area for cooperation under the ASEAN-Japan Strategic Partnership.

Last year, the AJC launched a program titled Future Leaders' Declaration on ASEAN-Japan Cooperation for International Marine Plastic Waste, which aimed to improve students' understanding of the main challenges in addressing the issue.

This year, the AJC will start a pilot program titled Hiroshima ASEAN Eco School that allows some of the students who participated in last year's program to host a lecture and forum on marine plastic waste together with elementary and high school students from Hiroshima Prefecture and ASEAN members.

### ASEAN's 54th anniversary

On Aug. 27, the AJC will host its annual ASEAN Anniversary Symposium to commemorate the trade bloc's 54th anniversary, bringing together its stakeholders, and Japan's public and private sectors to discuss the cost of its globalization.



Secretary-General Masataka Fujita of the ASEAN-Japan Centre. AJC

This year's symposium will be organized under the theme of ASEAN Economic and Social Regional Integration in the "New Normal."

ASEAN Secretariat Secretary-General H.E. Lim Jock Hoi will join for greetings, and Adams University's Eric S. Maskin, winner of the 2007 Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences, who is also a professor of economics and mathematics at Harvard, will deliver the keynote speech. The symposium is open to anyone interested in ASEAN and registration is free.

ASEAN has experienced a number of milestone events in recent years. In 2015, the ASEAN Community was established. In 2017, ASEAN celebrated its 50th anniversary. In 2020, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership was signed and is now expected to take effect later this year. And in 2023, Japan and ASEAN will mark the 50th anniversary of establishing relations. These jubilant events surrounding AJC's 40th anniversary mark our continuing efforts to overcome new challenges and further the partnership between ASEAN and Japan.



The Future Leaders' Declaration of ASEAN-Japan Cooperation for International Marine Plastic Waste opens in March as Nobel physics laureate Takaaki Kajita of the University of Tokyo (second from right) and professor Atsuhiko Isoke of Kyushu University Center for Ocean and Atmospheric Research (right) look on. AJC

**ASEAN-JAPAN CENTRE** 40th SINCE 1981  
 ASEAN-Japan Centre is celebrating its 40th anniversary year in 2021

**ASEAN's 54th Anniversary Virtual Symposium**  
**"ASEAN Economic and Social Regional Integration in the New Normal"**  
 Aug. 27, 2021, 11:00 am – 1:00 pm

**Organizer: ASEAN-Japan Centre**  
**Co-organizers: ASEAN Secretariat and ASEAN Committee in Tokyo**  
**Supporters: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry of Japan (TBC) and International Peace Foundation**

**Welcome Remarks:**  
**H.E. Peter Tan Hai Chuan**, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Republic of Singapore to Japan, Chairperson of ASEAN Committee in Tokyo

**Message:**  
**H.E. Lim Jock Hoi**, Secretary General of the ASEAN

**Keynote Speech:**  
**Professor Eric S. Maskin**  
 Adams University Professor and Professor of Economics and Mathematics at Harvard University  
 2007 Nobel Laureate in Economics

**Panel Discussion:**  
**Facilitator: Masataka Fujita**, Secretary General, ASEAN-Japan Centre

**Panelists:**  
 • **Professor Eric S. Maskin**, 2007 Nobel Laureate in Economics  
 • **Rafaelita M. Aldaba**, Undersecretary, Department of Trade and Industry, Republic of the Philippines  
 • **Professor Yukari Takamura**, Professor of Law/Environmental Studies, Institute for Future Initiatives, the University of Tokyo  
 • **Professor Kazushi Shimizu**, Professor, Faculty of Economics, Kyushu University

For registration and the latest information on the symposium, please visit the AJC website as below.  
<https://www.asean.or.jp/en/invest-info/20210806/>



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