
Japan's International Cooperation for ASEAN: Past and Future

Tanaka Akihiko, President of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), shares his insight on Japan's history of international cooperation for members of the Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Could you share your perspective on Japan's history of international cooperation with ASEAN members and the role JICA has played in that?

Characterized by historical, religious, and ethnic diversity, Southeast Asia has close political, economic, and historical ties with Japan, as well as geographical proximity. With a population of around 680 million people,¹ the region is home to a large consumer market and labor force.

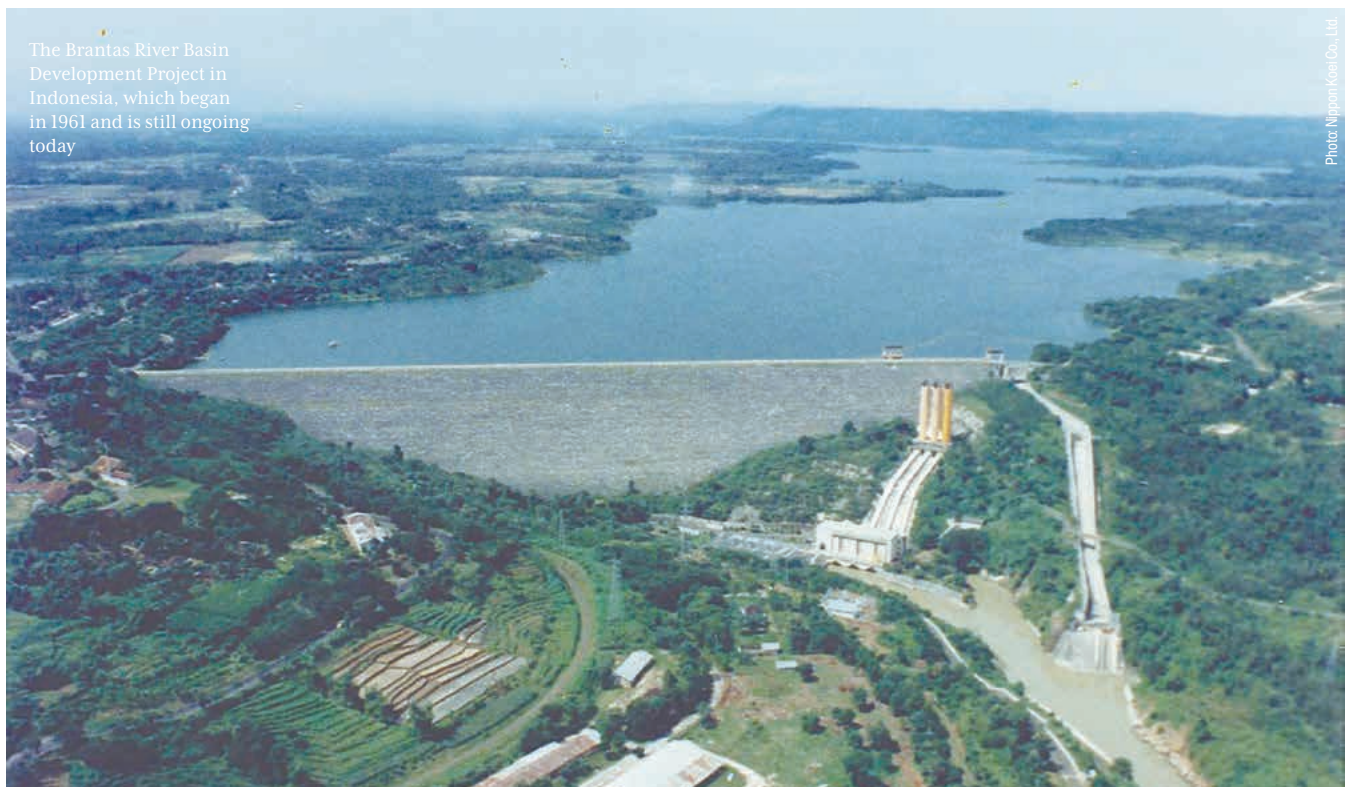
I think Japan has now earned the trust of the mem-

bers of ASEAN. Historically, however, these relationships were not always as friendly. International trade imbalance brought about by aggressive exports of Japanese products in the early 1970s triggered a boycott of Japanese products in Thailand,² and anti-Japanese riots took place during the visit of then-Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei to Southeast Asia in 1974. Events like these greatly impacted the Japanese government officials of the time. It was amid such circumstances that Prime Minister Fukuda Takeo announced the "Fukuda doctrine" during a visit to the Philippines in 1977. The doctrine outlined three principles of ASEAN diplomacy: that Japan would

rejects the role of military power, that Japan would strengthen "heart-to-heart" relationship, and that Japan and the ASEAN members would be equal part-



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The Brantas River Basin Development Project in Indonesia, which began in 1961 and is still ongoing today

Photo: Nippon Koei Co., Ltd.

ners. This clarified Japan's commitment to engaging in mutual exchanges with the ASEAN members. Beyond this, when Prime Minister Suzuki Zenko made a tour of the ASEAN member countries in 1981, he urged cooperation to develop ASEAN human resources, by Japan. This led to active "people-to-people" exchanges supported by ODA.³ These approaches formed the basis of the friendly relationships Japan enjoys with ASEAN members today.

The 1990s brought a major turning point in modern history with the collapse of the world order based on the Cold War. When four countries in the Mekong region – Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam – became members, ASEAN developed into a regional coalition covering the entire Southeast Asian region. With the achievement of the Comprehensive Cambodian Peace Agreements, JICA resolved to promote full-scale cooperation with Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, providing support for various forms of infrastructure as well as intellectual cooperation. This included joint research to support the transition from a socialist planned economy to a market-oriented economy. It also included legal and judicial development cooperation, such as help in drafting civil codes and support in training legal professionals.

Then, in 1997, the Asian Financial Crisis struck the ASEAN region. JICA provided funding to the member countries to provide necessary emergency support. Also, in Indonesia, JICA sent experts to provide support for economic measures intended to overcome the currency crisis.

More recently, JICA has provided a total of ¥285



Over 26,000 Malaysian trainees have taken part in the Look East Policy project⁴ to date.

billion (JPY) in emergency loans to help counter the spread of COVID-19 since 2020 to five ASEAN member countries at preferential interest rates. Through such forms of cooperation, Japan has provided support to ASEAN members in developing infrastructure, human resources, and resilient societies.

President Tanaka, you have again taken the role of JICA president as of April 2022, after previously serving as president from 2012 to 2015. Do any particularly memorable international cooperation projects stand out for you?

One that was particularly memorable to me was cooperation in the Philippines' Mindanao region (see pages 18–19). Here, nearly 50 years of conflict between armed forces demanding autonomous rule for the "Bangsamoro," meaning Muslim people, and the Philippines government had negatively affected the lives of the local townspeople. Following a cease-fire agreement in 2003, JICA began providing support for the peace process. In 2008, even as the conflict worsened and other countries withdrew from the region, JICA remained, continuing to provide peaceful assistance to both sides, under the strong determination of then-President of JICA Ogata Sadako. In 2011, with Japan acting as a mediator, Philippines President Benigno S. Aquino III and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) Chairman Murad Ebrahim held a summit meeting in Narita, Japan. This led to the signing of a historic comprehensive peace agreement in 2014. As JICA president at the time, I was present at the signing of the peace agreement, and since then, we have offered



The signing of a comprehensive peace agreement in the Philippines' Mindanao region

our cooperation in a variety of ways to promote peace in the region. Also, when I visited Mindanao in January this year (2023), I could see that developments in the situation were underway in the area, and the Bangsamoro Transition Authority Parliament adopted a resolution of appreciation for JICA's long-standing cooperation. I accepted this as a great honor.

The ASEAN member countries seem to be developing an increased presence in the international community, politically and economically. What is your view on the current status and future of ASEAN members in these areas?

The ASEAN member countries have achieved remarkable economic development in the 21st century.

The total gross domestic product (GDP) of the ASEAN region as a whole grew from \$660.7 billion (USD) in 2002 to \$3.6232 trillion in 2022, multiplying by five and a half times in those 20 years to develop into a major economic area. Also, in the field of politics, ASEAN agreed in principle to admit East Timor as a member at the 2022 ASEAN Summit. If East Timor is officially admitted, this would mean that all the coun-

A subway project making use of Japanese knowledge about and experience with railway development and operation



tries in Southeast Asia are members of ASEAN. With ASEAN's economic development, the establishment of the ASEAN Community and its deepening integration, and ASEAN's rise in the international community, relationships between Japan and the ASEAN members are changing significantly. The ASEAN member countries are becoming increasingly important to Japan as well, day by day. I think it should be safe to say that peace and prosperity in the ASEAN region is directly linked to peace and prosperity in the entire East Asian region, including Japan.

The Phum Prek Water Treatment Plant in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, which was rehabilitated in a water supply system development project conducted in cooperation with Kitakyushu City, Japan





A JICA-supported training program for participants from Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda, and Zambia being conducted at SIRIM Berhad, in Malaysia


Please share your thoughts on future prospects for international cooperation with ASEAN members, taking into account political and economic relationships between Japan and ASEAN.

Both Japan and the ASEAN member countries must respond to the increasingly sophisticated and complex challenges and opportunities that are currently arising. These include climate change, the rapid progress of digital transformation, rapid urbanization, infectious diseases, and changes in population structures. Looking forward, I think it will be important for both Japan and the ASEAN member countries to take the approach of working together even more closely to identify ways to address these shared challenges. As one example, measures we put in place in Southeast Asia in response to natural disasters have the potential to be of use to us back at home in Japan as well. Also, consider a project JICA is supporting to build a subway system called Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) in Jakarta, Indonesia. This project makes use of experience and technology used in public transportation development in Japan. I feel that it also has extremely strong potential to solve challenges in major urban areas in Japan with the knowledge and experience acquired through the project on the Japanese side.

JICA also supports cooperation between local governments in Japan and in ASEAN member countries. I feel that such projects have great potential for Japan as well with the ways they provide opportunities for Japanese local governments to engage in international interaction and may also help stimulate their economies.

JICA is also now starting to collaborate with the

ASEAN Secretariat and ASEAN member countries to resolve issues in Southeast Asia and other regions. We can expect these efforts to keep expanding in the years ahead. Also, up until now, Japan has traditionally approached problem-solving in Southeast Asian countries by having Japanese specialists and engineers consider the issues together with local people in ways meant to match the situation in the area. I think in the future, we will see an even stronger shift toward interactive activities like this, with both sides learning from each other's strong points.

Looking back over these past 50 years and considering JICA's aims and accomplishments, I feel it was contributing to each country's development, and at the same time, building "people-to-people", "heart-to-heart" relationships and the trust that comes from them — fulfilling the goals of the Fukuda doctrine. For Japan to continue being a reliable and important partner to ASEAN, I imagine we will need to be eager to learn from the ASEAN member nations as they develop further, engage in deep dialogue with them, and aspire to move forward together. 

1. Source: "World Bank Open Data (2022)"
2. Abbreviated country names are used.
3. Abbreviation of "Official Development Assistance." Public funds for international cooperation activities provided by governments and government-related organizations for the primary purpose of supporting development in developing regions.
4. In 1981, the "Look East Policy" was initiated with Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's urging to provide opportunities to study the knowledge and technologies, as well as the work ethic and will to work, that have been driving forces in Japan's development. The following year, in 1982, a program of the same name was initiated as a collaborative project providing opportunities to study topics including Japanese culture and technology. Over 26,000 Malaysian trainees have taken part in the program to date, receiving training to assist them in becoming exchange students or career professionals in Japan. Along with contributing to economic and social development in Malaysia and helping establish economic infrastructure in the country, it has provided opportunities for both Japan and Malaysia to deepen their mutual understanding.