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Japan's Official Security Assistance: Progress and Prospects

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Amid an intensifying geopolitical rivalry, Japan's strategic posture remains resilient and relevant to regional peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region.

In April 2023, Japan announced a new initiative named [“Official Security Assistance \(OSA\)”](#), aiming to “deepen security cooperation” with like-minded countries by “providing equipment and supplies as well as assistance for infrastructure development” to foster their security and deterrence capabilities. A [document](#) posted on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan's website stated that the assistance would be provided to areas of cooperation that are “not directly related to international conflict”. They include: (1) activities for ensuring peace, stability and security based on the rule of law (2) humanitarian activities and (3) operations with the aim to promote international peace cooperation. The security purpose of OSA distinguishes itself from

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the Official Development Assistance (ODA) that aims mainly to promote economic and social development in partnering countries.

A [commentary](#) by John Bradford and Raymond Yamamoto points out that there are two motivations behind OSA. One reason is Japan's efforts to level up military and security cooperation with ASEAN countries, although ongoing provision of military equipment to ASEAN countries under OSA seems limited. Another explanation is Japan's expectation to use OSA as "a stepping stone for larger military deals". In this article, I have two additional observations on the progress of OSA.

First, the assistance reflects Japan's proactive role in shaping a favourable environment for Japan's security and diplomacy, especially during the time of uncertain global leadership. Since 2023, Japan has been providing OSA to various [countries](#), such as air surveillance radar system and coastal radar systems to the Philippines, rescue boats to Malaysia, patrol boats to Bangladesh and Fiji, high-speed patrol boats to Indonesia, air traffic control system to Mongolia and coastal radar system to Djibouti. To some extent, these recipient countries have strategic implications in Japan's security interests. The Philippines and Malaysia are claimant states in the South China Sea issue. Bangladesh is home to the underconstructed [Matarbari Port](#), a deep-sea port financed by Japan. The port is expected to be a hub of connectivity in the South Asian region. Djibouti is an area where Japan's [only Self-Defense Forces's overseas military base](#) is located. The country is also a location of the [Doraleh Multi-purpose Port](#), constructed by Chinese enterprises and the [first overseas Chinese military base](#). Japan's OSA could be perceived as a strategic tool by developing countries to decrease dependency on any single power for security. However, there is a question whether the provision of the abovementioned supplies and equipment could increase deterrence capabilities in practice.

Secondly, OSA was referred by various articles as a direct consequence of Japan's National Security Strategy (NSS) in 2022. However, the institutionalisation of this security initiative could be traced back to the [Vientiane Vision](#), a result from the 2nd ASEAN-Japan Defence Ministers' Informal Meeting held in Vientiane in 2016, highlighting "practical" defence cooperation in five main areas: (1) promotion of international law (2) capacity building cooperation (3) defense equipment and technology cooperation (4) joint training and exercise and (5) human resource development and academic exchange. In November 2019, Japan announced the [Vientiane Vision 2.0](#) by adding its intention and proposal to enhance ASEAN "centrality, unity and resilience". Since 2016, Japan has signed an Agreement concerning Defense Equipment and Technology Transfer with six ASEAN countries, namely the Philippines in 2016, Malaysia in 2018, Viet Nam and Indonesia in 2021, Thailand in 2022 and Singapore in 2023. The Agreement generally provides provisions in purposes of the Agreement, affiliated organisations, duration, dispute resolution and procedures should any party wishes to make changes in the Agreement.

Among dialogue partners of ASEAN, Japan has gained very positive perception. 40.5% of the respondents of [The State of Southeast Asia 2025 Survey Report](#) by ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute stated that Japan is a responsible stakeholder that "respects and champions international law". The [ASEAN Peoples' Perception Survey 2024](#) by the Foreign Policy Community of Indonesia (FPCI) and the Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA) revealed a similar result that Japan is positively perceived by the respondents in ASEAN as "the most trustworthy and reliable partner" and "the country which ASEAN member states have the highest comfort level to interact with".

To strengthen the effective implementation of OSA that responds to emerging and future threats and ensures the improvement of security environment in partnering countries,

interoperability among different command centres and units should be a main focus. Various security specialists in Thailand pointed out that the emerging and future warfare has been expanding from air, land and sea to cyber and space domains. The ASEAN-Japan Cybersecurity Capacity Building Centre (AJCCBC), located in Bangkok, should create a training course to prepare ASEAN officials for a “cyber pandemic” and cyberattacks that may occur in the future, especially those target critical infrastructure. On [maritime domain](#), ASEAN and Japan should work together on Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) to address maritime threats and Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP) to promote effective and sustainable use of the domain. The two players should play a constructive role in increasing capabilities to deter any unilateral action in the South China Sea.

From A Thai perspective, disaster management and emergency preparedness could be a potential area for Japan’s OSA in Thailand under the scheme of “humanitarian activities” due to Japan’s expertise. After the [earthquake incident](#) in Bangkok on March 28, Japanese experts were dispatched to visit the site, provide advice and exchanged views with the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration and relevant government organisations. To make the assistance pertinent to OSA’s scheme, Japan could consider providing equipment and supplies that align with disaster rescue and rehabilitation capabilities of the Royal Thai Armed Forces.

As a global key player, Japan has been proactive in promoting rules-based international order and “heart-to-heart” cooperation with ASEAN. It is time for Japan to shine by exercising strategic autonomy and fulfilling the power vacuum in the time of uncertain global leadership. OSA could be a strategic tool to attain these goals.