

Revitalized ASEAN-GCC Cooperation

— The First ASEAN-GCC Summit and future prospects

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Recently, against the backdrop of the deepening multi-polarization of the international community, the GCC countries have been actively strengthening their relations with the ASEAN countries, which have been achieving remarkable economic development.¹ On October 20 last year, the first ever ASEAN-GCC Summit was held in Riyadh with Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia and President Joko Widodo of Indonesia serving as the co-chairs. The summit adopted a Joint Statement and the ASEAN-GCC Framework of Cooperation 2024-2028 (hereinafter referred to as the “Framework of Cooperation”), which stipulates the priority areas for strengthening relations centered on trade and investment and the cooperation mechanism, thereby clarifying the pathway for future cooperation. On April 8, 2024, the Secretary-General of ASEAN and the Secretary-General of the GCC held a meeting in Riyadh and exchanged views on ways to enhance cooperation through the Framework of Cooperation.² The next summit is to be held in Malaysia, which will hold the ASEAN Chairmanship in 2025. Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim is enthusiastic about strengthening relations between the two regional organizations. For example, he has proposed a free trade agreement (FTA) between ASEAN and the GCC.³ Therefore, how he prepares for the summit next year will be the focus of attention.

In this paper, the author firstly provides an overview of the outcomes and evaluation of the first summit, and then states his personal opinions regarding the future prospects for ASEAN-GCC cooperation and relations with Japan.

Outcomes and Evaluation of the Summit

A summit held immediately after the attack on Israel by Hamas

Firstly, it is of great historical significance that the leaders of ASEAN and GCC met for the first time and confirmed their intention to strengthen relations between the two organizations over the long term. Ministerial-level dialogue has continued between the two organizations since the first ministerial meeting was held in 2009, but no formal meetings have been held since the split in the GCC caused by some of its members severing diplomatic relations with Qatar in 2017. In the GCC countries, the head of state holds absolute power. The fact that those heads of state were directly involved in this summit highlighted the

possibility that relations between the GCC and ASEAN, which were stagnating, will be strengthened rapidly. The rapprochement of ASEAN and the GCC can be explained largely by the economic realm, as the expectations and interest are growing in the GCC with respect to the Asian countries which have continued to achieve economic growth, in particular China and India. It should also be pointed out that, regarding the political realm, the blockade against Qatar has been gradually lifted since the January 2021 Ula Declaration.⁴ As diplomatic relations between the UAE and Qatar were normalized in June 2023, the relations of the GCC countries have finally returned to where they stood before the blockade. In addition, Saudi Arabia and Thailand, whose relations were frosty for more than 30 years after the Blue Diamond Affair,⁵ agreed to normalize their diplomatic relations in January 2022, removing one obstacle from Saudi Arabia's relationship with ASEAN, and making it easier for them to exercise their leadership to strengthen diplomatic and economic relations. The leaders of the GCC countries are concerned that the engagement of the United States in the Middle East is waning, so they are focusing their efforts on diversifying their foreign relations. The strength of the determination of the leaders of the GCC countries can also be seen from the fact that they went ahead with holding the summit with ASEAN as scheduled, even though it was immediately after the fighting between Israel and Hamas broke out in Palestine.⁶

The ASEAN-GCC Statement on Developments in Gaza was issued in this summit. This statement (1) condemns all attacks against civilians and called for a durable ceasefire and humanitarian aid, (2) calls on all parties to the conflict to protect civilians and to abide by international humanitarian law, (3) calls for the immediate and unconditional release of civilian hostages and detainees, and (4) urges all parties concerned to work towards a peaceful resolution to the conflict with a view to realizing the two-state solution based on the pre-1967 borders in accordance with United Nations resolutions. The responses of ASEAN member states to what happened in Gaza were not necessarily uniform, as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei, where the majority of the populations are Muslim, strongly support Palestine, whereas Singapore and the Philippines have maintained good relations also with Israel. However, Indonesia, which held the ASEAN Chairmanship, and Malaysia, the host country for the next ASEAN-GCC Summit, played the leading roles in the negotiation on the above statement. On the other hand, the GCC side considered that they had succeeded in securing the support of the ASEAN countries and "internationalizing" the situation which had occurred in Gaza.⁷ Regarding relations between the GCC and ASEAN, the focus have been placed only on the realms of trade and investment until now, so the fact they have declared a unified position on a political issue which is the subject of intense conflict internationally, namely the Gaza situation, can be considered as a new development.

Agreed mechanism for strengthening cooperation

The Framework of Cooperation sets out the direction of future cooperation by clearly stating the priority areas, namely, politico-security, preventing and countering terrorism and extremism, trade and investment, agriculture and food security, energy, tourism, culture and information, education, capacity building, and connectivity. But equally important are the following two points.

Firstly, the mechanism for enhancing cooperation have been put in place, making the ASEAN-GCC cooperation more institutionalized. To begin with, in the Joint Statement, it was agreed to hold the summit

every two years and, as the subordinate mechanism for this, ASEAN and the GCC decided to regularly hold ministerial meetings concerning political and security cooperation on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly, and to hold annual meetings between their secretariats. The ministerial meeting has also been held in the past, but this time it was upgraded to a regular meeting. Next, at the end of the Framework of Cooperation, there are paragraphs concerning the implementation mechanism, one of which clearly states that cooperation between ASEAN's Sectoral Bodies and their corresponding GCC counterparts will be encouraged. ASEAN has established a large number of Sectoral Bodies in a variety of areas in order to plan and implement specific cooperation projects with countries inside and outside the ASEAN region. For example, these Sectoral Bodies have a track record of promoting specific cooperation projects with Japan, frequently holding consultations with their counterparts in the Japanese government. To ensure smooth implementation of bilateral or multilateral projects not just in ASEAN but in other multilateral frameworks, reaching agreement at the leader level alone is not sufficient. It should be supported by concrete implementation mechanisms. The Framework of Cooperation also encourages regular interactions between the ambassadors of the GCC countries and the ambassadors of the ASEAN countries in Jakarta (the CPR)⁸, as well as regular meetings between the ambassadors of the ASEAN countries to Saudi Arabia and the GCC Secretariat in Riyadh. The CPR plays an extremely large role in Jakarta, bearing the core role in the practical preparations for the ASEAN Summit and the East Asia Summit (EAS) and other ASEAN-related meetings. In particular, in the EAS, the CPR organizes the EAS Ambassadors' Meeting in Jakarta (EAMJ) together with the ASEAN ambassadors of EAS participating countries from outside the ASEAN region, to consult on the implementation of the matters decided in the EAS and to hold exchanges of views regarding the political and economic issues of the region. If the consultations of the Sectoral Bodies and the regular consultations between the CPR and the ambassadors of the GCC countries get on track, they will be powerful mechanisms for putting into practice ASEAN-GCC cooperation.

Secondly, some parts of the Joint Statement and the Framework of Cooperation seem to reflect the principles and policies of ASEAN. For example, in the second paragraph of the Joint Statement, the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) is mentioned and strengthening of cooperation in the four priority areas of the AOIP, namely, maritime cooperation, connectivity, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and economic cooperation, is agreed. In the following third paragraph, the importance of oceans is emphasized, and promotion of maritime safety and security, freedom of navigation and overflight, lawful uses of the seas, unimpeded lawful maritime commerce, and peaceful resolutions of disputes, in accordance with the principles of international law including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, is confirmed. Ensuring the safety of the sea lanes connecting the Arabian Gulf to the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, which are essential trade routes between the Gulf region and the Asian region, is a common concern for the GCC countries and the ASEAN countries, so it is natural that this kind of paragraph should be placed at the beginning of the Joint Statement. But the individual wording has been often seen in the outcome documents of ASEAN-related Summit Meetings, suggesting that the thinking of the ASEAN side is reflected here too. Furthermore, the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025 (MPAC2025) and the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) are mentioned in the Framework of Cooperation. The MPAC is a plan attempting to enhance connectivity by improving infrastructure and cross-border

systems among countries in ASEAN and beyond. IAI is a plan aiming to rectify the economic disparities within ASEAN. ASEAN is focusing its energies on these projects as flagship policies and appears to be hoping to secure the cooperation of the GCC with respect to these policies. If cooperation between ASEAN and the GCC on MPAC progresses, it is expected to contribute to enhancing the connectivity of the Gulf region and the Asian region.

Future Prospects and Japan

Future prospects

Firstly, regarding the strengthening of trade and investment relations, which is anticipated to be the area the two regional organizations tackle first, consultations are likely to be held to explore the possibility of a framework agreement concerning economic, trade, technical and investment cooperation based on the 11th paragraph of the Framework of Cooperation. It is Malaysia which will lead this effort on the ASEAN side. In the ASEAN-GCC Joint Regional Strategy Dialogue held on the occasion of the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Riyadh in April 2024, Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim emphasized that ASEAN and the GCC should find mechanisms to advance trade and investments.⁹ Recently, the GCC has been actively engaging in FTA negotiations with various countries. For example, it signed an FTA with the Republic of Korea on December 28, 2023,¹⁰ and it has high hopes regarding an FTA with ASEAN.¹¹ Therefore, there is a possibility that the negotiations will proceed smoothly. But looking at the FTA negotiations the GCC has conducted so far, the FTA negotiations between the GCC and the EU were commenced in 1991 but they were suspended in 2008 without any progress being made.¹² The FTA negotiations between Japan and the GCC which were commenced in 2006 have also been suspended since 2009, and it was only agreed that the negotiations should be resumed on the occasion of Prime Minister Kishida's visit to Saudi Arabia in July 2023.¹³ It is, therefore, safe to say that the FTA is rather a medium to long-term goal for both groups.

The only ASEAN country the GCC has concluded an FTA with is Singapore, and this FTA has been contributing to the revitalization of trade between the two parties since it came into force in 2013. Some observers believe that if the FTA with Singapore serves as a model for the conclusion of similar agreements with other ASEAN countries, this could open the door to future framework agreements on regional trade and investment.¹⁴ Both ASEAN and the GCC have diverse member countries, so it can be inferred that the process of aligning the opinions of their member countries internally in order to conduct FTA negotiations is not easy for the two organizations. For the time being, it is probably more realistic to assume that negotiations which are relatively easy to agree on, such as multi-bi agreements like the FTA with Singapore, or FTAs on a bilateral basis, or frameworks of cooperation on specific areas, will go ahead first. Nevertheless, ASEAN itself has a long history of expanding its member countries and deepening economic integration since it was decided to create AFTA in 1992. ASEAN has also concluded agreements with neighboring countries with AFTA as their foundation and has played a central role in the RCEP negotiations. ASEAN may

move at a slow pace at times, but it has a track record of making steady progress toward economic integration. If it can utilize its experience and capabilities in its negotiations with the GCC, it is likely that the negotiations between ASEAN and the GCC over trade and investment will also move forward.

Speaking generally, from the perspective of deepening regional integration with respect to organizational and institutional aspects, ASEAN has made more progress than the GCC. If cooperation between the two organizations deepens in the future, there is a possibility that it will have a positive impact on the organizations and institutions of the GCC.¹⁵ As already stated, the signs of that have already become apparent in the implementation mechanism which reflects the practices built up by ASEAN, such as the sectoral- bodies approach and the consultations among ambassadors. It is necessary to follow the relations between the two organizations from such perspectives.

Relations with Japan

In the context of the intensification of US-China conflict and the simultaneous advance of the inward-looking tendency of the American people as symbolized by Trumpism, ASEAN and the GCC are both diversifying their external relations in an attempt to ensure their security and economic development. The rapprochement between the two organizations can be positioned as a part of such efforts. These trends are also being seen in the EU, and this should be recognized as a rise of new regionalism. Adding the rise of the countries called the Global South to this, the international community is deepening its degree of multi-polarization, to which Japan must respond by developing diversified diplomacy. In that sense, relations with ASEAN and the GCC are essential.

Compared to ASEAN, with which Japan is building cooperative relations in a variety of areas, Japan is still aiming to strengthen relations mainly on a bilateral basis with the GCC countries. The resumption of FTA negotiations agreed last year is one step forward toward strengthening relations with the GCC as a regional organization. As currently the GCC countries actively aim to diversify their trade and investment, Japan should work toward an early conclusion of the negotiations, while closely monitoring the FTA negotiations between the GCC and ASEAN.

In the experience of the author, it seems that the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) advocated by Japan is not very well received in the GCC countries. The reasons for that include that, firstly, the GCC countries do not give much thought to unified regional policies for the Indo-Pacific region, taking instead an approach centered on bilateral relations with China, India, Japan and other Asian countries.¹⁶ Secondly, unlike the ASEAN countries, the GCC countries are not directly exposed to the threat of the power of China so they cannot see any political value in support for FOIP, which is opposed by China, their largest trade partner. On the other hand, although the AOIP advocates principles which are consistent with the FOIP, such as openness and a rules-based framework, the GCC is supporting AOIP at the leader level. Furthermore, in July 2023, Saudi Arabia became the 51st country to sign the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC). In this way, the support for ASEAN's peaceful diplomacy based on the international rules is being expanded to the GCC countries. This is a development which Japan should welcome.

The enhancement of connectivity, which has been brought up as a priority area in ASEAN-GCC cooperation,

is an area in which Japan and ASEAN have built up a track record of cooperation to date, and it would be desirable to expand the scope of cooperation to include the Gulf region in the future. The sea lanes from the Arabian Gulf to the East China Sea are truly the areas which Japan should place the most importance on from the perspective of connectivity. Enhancing the maritime connectivity in the Indo-Pacific will also contribute to the realization of the FOIP. As a mechanism for that purpose, Japan should consider pursuing minilaterals, including with some ASEAN member countries and some GCC member countries.¹⁷ Minilaterals do not require special international agreements to be negotiated, and they can be flexibly organized and operated through discussions among a small number of interested countries. Japan's pursuit of minilaterals, which are not limited to the enhancement of connectivity but can deal with other areas of interest it finds in common with the countries belonging to ASEAN and the GCC, such as energy and the SGDs, will contribute to the further diversification of Japan's diplomacy.

¹ Regarding the developments in ASEAN-GCC relations to date, please refer to SUNAGA Kazuo 須永和男, "Gurōbaru Sausu ni Okeru ASEAN: Wangan Kyōryoku Rijkai (GCC) to Taiheiyō Shotō Fōramu (PIF) to no Kankei Kyōka" グローバル・サウスにおける ASEAN – 湾岸協力理事会 (GCC) と太平洋諸国フォーラム (PIF) との関係強化 ["ASEAN in the Global South —Strengthening relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF)"] (National Institute for Defense Studies (NIDS) Commentary No. 262 June 6, 2023).

² [Asean.org/3-secretary-general-of-asean-convenes-bilateral-meeting-with-secretary-general-of-gulf-cooperation-council](https://asean.org/3-secretary-general-of-asean-convenes-bilateral-meeting-with-secretary-general-of-gulf-cooperation-council)

³ [Reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/Malaysia-pm-proposes-free-trade-pact-between-asean-gulf-council-2023-10-20](https://reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/malaysia-pm-proposes-free-trade-pact-between-asean-gulf-council-2023-10-20)

⁴ The Ula Declaration calling for restoration of the diplomatic relations of the GCC countries was issued at the 41st GCC Summit held in Ula, Saudi Arabia, in January 2021. However, this did not eliminate all of the problems related to the blockade against Qatar and Qatar has been holding bilateral negotiations with each of the countries which participated in the blockade in an attempt to normalize their relations.

⁵ The relations of the two countries deteriorated after an incident in 1989 in which a Thai worker stole jewelry with a total value of approximately 20 million dollars, including the Blue Diamond, from the palace of Prince Faisal bin Fahd of Saudi Arabia and took it to Thailand. (bbc.com/Japanese/60150481)

⁶ Ghulam Ali, "The significance of the Maiden GCC-ASEAN Summit" (thediplomat.com/2023/11/the-significance-of-the-maiden-gcc-asean-summit/)

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ An initialism for "Committee of Permanent Representatives." This is an organization of ambassadors to ASEAN who are dispatched to Jakarta by the ASEAN countries separately from their ambassadors to Indonesia.

⁹ [Kwglobaltrade.com/post/asean-gcc-should-find-mechanisms-to-advance-trade-investment](https://kwglobaltrade.com/post/asean-gcc-should-find-mechanisms-to-advance-trade-investment)

¹⁰ [Reuters.com/world/middle-east/gulf-cooperation-council-signs-free-trade-agreement-with-south-korea-gcc-2023-12-28](https://reuters.com/world/middle-east/gulf-cooperation-council-signs-free-trade-agreement-with-south-korea-gcc-2023-12-28)

¹¹ For example, the report of the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies titled "The GCC-ASEAN Summit: Charting Regional Interests and Future Challenges" (January 2024) states that it is imperative to commence negotiations on a GCC-ASEAN Economic Partnership Agreement, which may serve as a foundational framework for a prospective FTA encompassing both regional blocs.

¹² gcc-sg.org/en-us/CooperationAndAchievements/RegionalCooperationandEconomicRelationswithOtherCountriesandGroupings

¹³ [Mofa.go.jp/mofaj/me_e/me2/page4_005956.html](https://mofa.go.jp/mofaj/me_e/me2/page4_005956.html)

¹⁴ Layla Ali, "Developing Cooperation between the GCC and ASEAN" (grc.net/single-commentary/128)

¹⁵ Richard Burchill, "The First ASEAN-GCC Summit and More Diverse Interregional Cooperation" (cris.unu.edu/first-asean-gcc-summit-and-more-diverse-interregional-cooperation)

¹⁶ Jean-Loup Samaan ジャン・ルー・サマーン, "Indo Taiheiyō Senryaku Taikokukan Kyosō no Chiseigaku" インド太平洋戦略大國間競争の地政学 [*Indo-Pacific Strategies: Navigating Geopolitics at the Dawn of a New Age*] (Edited by Brendon J. Canon and Kei Hakata), p. 324 of the Japanese edition

¹⁷ An example of minilaterals including Asian countries and the GCC countries is I2U2 (India, Israel, the US, and the UAE), which has identified water, energy, transportation, space, health, food security, and technology as the areas of cooperation. (state.gov/i2u2) The GRIPS Alliance Indo-Pacific Cooperation Study Group's "Policy Recommendations to the Government of Japan on the Indo-Pacific Cooperation" (November 2023)

proposes collaboration between the three countries of Japan, India, and Indonesia. (grips.ac.jp/cms/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/20231121_policy%recommndation_jp%20.pdf)

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