

The Current State of Japan-ASEAN Defense Cooperation

An Assessment of the 12th ADMM-Plus and the 9th ASEAN-Japan Defence Ministers' Informal Meeting

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Introduction

Autumn is the season of defense diplomacy centered on ASEAN. About this time every year, the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) is held, bringing together the defense ministers of the ten ASEAN member states and the "plus countries" outside the ASEAN region (Japan, the United States, China, India, Russia, the Republic of Korea, Australia, and New Zealand). For countries in the Indo-Pacific region, including Japan, this meeting held around November every year provides an important opportunity for top-level discussions among defense authorities.

ADMM-Plus is a multilateral framework among defense authorities established in 2010, and its objective is for the ASEAN member states to work together with the "plus countries" to promote confidence building and other defense cooperation. ADMM-Plus is mainly comprised of meetings at the ministerial level, vice-ministerial level, and division chief level, and the Experts' Working Groups (EWGs) which carry out practical cooperation in seven areas centered on non-traditional security challenges.¹ Since its inception, Japan has actively participated in these meetings.

This year's ADMM-Plus, which marked the milestone of 15 years since it was established, was held on November 1 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. For Japan's Minister of Defense Shinjiro Koizumi, who took office on October 21, 2025, this was his first overseas trip in his official capacity, and he took this opportunity to participate in the ninth ASEAN-Japan Defence Ministers' Informal Meeting and hold individual talks.

Defense cooperation between Japan and Southeast Asia is being carried out at multiple levels, from multilateral to bilateral. This commentary will focus on the multilateral defense cooperation being carried out between Japan and ASEAN in order to discuss its current state.

The Increasing Rigidity of ADMM-Plus

Although ADMM-Plus has great potential significance as a dialogue framework for the Indo-Pacific region, the reality is that consensus-building is inherently difficult due to fact that many countries, including the United States, China, and Russia, are participating. In particular in recent years, differences in positions on the South China Sea issue and the Russia-Ukraine war, as well as the US-China rivalry, have increasingly highlighted conflicting interests rather than consensus. The confrontation that reportedly unfolded between then-US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and the Chinese Minister of National Defense Dong Jun at the 2024 meeting was an extreme example of this.² Amid the increasingly competitive dynamics between great powers, it is becoming even more difficult for ADMM-Plus to achieve substantial outcomes.

The trend toward rigidity appears to have continued this year as well. Perhaps one symbol of that is the Joint Statement of the ADMM-Plus. Reflecting on the past two years, joint statements concerning specific areas were issued, including a joint statement on climate change last year and a joint statement on WPS (women, peace and security) two years ago. On the other hand, this year only a statement commemorating the 15th anniversary of the founding of ADMM-Plus was adopted, and its superficial content only emphasized rather general principles such as compliance with international law, ASEAN Centrality, and multilateralism and praised previous initiatives.³ Furthermore, announcements by Japan's Ministry of Defense regarding past meetings of ADMM-Plus revealed that the participants had "exchanged views on regional and international security issues," but this time the ministry only noted that participants "exchanged views on "Reflection on 15 Years of ADMM-Plus and Charting the Way Forward," which implies that the agenda of the meeting itself was different to the agendas in previous meetings.⁴

This lack of substance is likely due to the diversity of the participating countries. The day before the ADMM-Plus, the "non-Plus" ADMM – a defense ministers' meeting of only the ASEAN member states – was held. The Joint Declaration of the ADMM, with limited participating countries, explicitly mentioned current issues such as freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea and the Myanmar issue, exhibiting a clear difference from ADMM-Plus.⁵

Japan's Positive Stance with Respect to ASEAN

Despite the circumstances described above, Japan has strongly expressed a stance of actively supporting ASEAN's initiatives in regional security. In ADMM-Plus, Minister Koizumi stated that "the very foundation of the international order which has supported stable and predictable state relations based on trust is being shaken" and then emphasized that the role of ASEAN in efforts to return to trust in a rules-based international order, accountability, and responsibility for international public goods is "decisively important." Moreover, he called for the formation of a "multilayered web of interconnectivity" comprised

of the diverse initiatives of each country to create synergies, thereby fostering a stable regional order.⁶

It was the ASEAN-Japan Defence Ministers' Informal Meeting held on the sidelines of ADMM-Plus which more clearly demonstrated Japan's stance with respect to ASEAN. In this meeting, the defense ministers of the ASEAN member states and the Minister of Defense of Japan hold discussions regarding Japan-ASEAN defense cooperation and this was the ninth time the meeting was held. This was the first meeting since 2023, but the last time it was held the then Minister of Defense Minoru Kihara participated online, so this was the first face-to-face participation by Japan's Minister of Defense since 2022. The role of this meeting is to determine the direction of defense cooperation between Japan and ASEAN. Japan's key initiatives on defense cooperation with ASEAN were all unveiled in the ASEAN-Japan Defence Ministers' Informal Meeting: The Vientiane Vision (2016), the guiding principle for Japan's defense cooperation with ASEAN; its updated version, the Vientiane Vision 2.0 (2019); and "JASMINE: Japan-ASEAN Ministerial Initiative for Enhanced Defense Cooperation" (2023), which presents the specific content of the defense cooperation.

In the meeting this time, three approaches based on existing initiatives for strengthening Japan-ASEAN defense cooperation going forward were presented.⁷ The first is cooperation in the HA/DR area. Along with equipment provision through mechanisms such as Official Security Assistance (OSA) and promotion of initiatives pertaining to WPS, Japan's expressed willingness to co-chair the next HA/DR EWG of ADMM-Plus is important. Currently, Japan is serving as the co-chair of the Maritime Security EWG with the Philippines (Japan's term as co-chair is from 2024 to 2027), and Japan's declaration of its candidacy on this occasion clarifies its intention to continue committing to practical defense cooperation centered on ASEAN. Furthermore, the co-chairs of the EWGs serve as pairs of ASEAN member states and "plus countries" from outside the ASEAN region. It is not clear at the current time which country Japan will offer its candidacy with, but if Japan ends up serving as co-chair, it can be expected that it will further strengthen relations with the ASEAN member state with which it is paired.

The second area of cooperation is maritime cooperation. Of particular note is that Japan has made clear that as the host country it intends to invite Southeast Asian countries to the Japan-Pacific Islands Defense Dialogue (JPIDD), a gathering of the defense ministers of Japan and the Pacific Island Countries (PICs). JPIDD was held for the second time in March 2024 and on that occasion seven partner countries were invited in addition to the PICs, but no countries from Southeast Asia were invited.⁸ "JASMINE: Japan-ASEAN Ministerial Initiative for Enhanced Defense Cooperation," which has been promoted by Japan since 2023, advocates cooperation among ASEAN, Japan, and the PICs, so the invitation of the Southeast Asian countries to JPIDD put into practice the policy of enhancing cooperation among these regions.⁹

In addition, Joint Cooperative Activity (JCA) at sea utilizing the framework of the Maritime Security EWG was also mentioned in this year's meeting. The specific content will likely to become clear going forward, but given that the Maritime Security EWG has previously conducted field training exercises (FTXs), an FTX at sea could be conducted in collaboration with the Philippines, which serves as co-chair of the EWG, and other ADMM-Plus participating countries.¹⁰

The third area of cooperation is addressing non-traditional challenges. Regarding this aspect,

collaboration with the Network of ASEAN CBR Defence Experts (an ASEAN initiative aimed at capacity building and knowledge sharing concerning chemical, biological, and radiological threats) was mentioned.

ASEAN Continues to be Important: Working Toward Further Cooperation

Southeast Asia, where major sea lanes such as the Strait of Malacca are located, is a strategically important region for Japan and the entire Indo-Pacific region. Increasing ASEAN's autonomy so that it has resilience in responding to security challenges, including natural disasters, contributes to the stability of the region as a whole. Even if the ASEAN-centered defense cooperation framework faces difficult periods due to great power politics, the importance of continued commitment to this region remains significant. From Japan's moves to strengthen cooperation, we can infer Japan's awareness of the issue that especially now, with increasingly severe tensions between nations, it is necessary to strengthen ASEAN's centrality and unity and enhance the region's resilience.

In the two meetings held in Malaysia recently, Japan clearly presented a stance of continuing to enhance defense cooperation with ASEAN through specific items. Going forward, it will be important not just to steadily execute these projects, but also to continue advancing discussions regarding the best approach to deepen collaboration given the current security environment.

One area with potential is cooperation on defense equipment. In a press conference during his trip, Minister Koizumi mentioned that he sensed the needs with respect to submarines and other Japanese equipment through his talks with individual countries.¹¹ Looking at the moves inside Japan as well, in the Coalition Agreement of the Liberal Democratic Party and Japan Innovation Party, it is explicitly stated that the "five categories" rule of the Three Principles on Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology would be abolished in the 2026 ordinary Diet session, which, if realized, would ease restrictions on equipment transfers.¹² Considering all of these factors together, a window of opportunity is opening for equipment transfers to the Southeast Asian countries. Of course, it is necessary to overcome a variety of political and institutional hurdles, the problem of production capacity, and other problems to realize equipment transfers to overseas.¹³ This will by no means be easy, but at least the Japanese government's policy of promoting equipment transfers has become clearer than ever before. The focus of attention will be on what kind of policy developments are seen going forward.

¹ The seven areas in which the EWGs have been established are Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HA/DR), Military Medicine, Maritime Security, Counter Terrorism, PKO, Humanitarian Mine Action and Cyber Security.

² "Toranpu shi nento ni anzenhosho wo kyogi ASEAN kakudai kokubosho kaigi" [Discussions on Security with Trump in Mind: ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus], Kyodo News, November 21, 2024.

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- ³ ADMM-Plus, “Joint Statement by the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) in Commemoration of the 15th Anniversary of the Founding of the ADMM-Plus,” November 1, 2025, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/JOINT-STATEMENT-BY-THE-ASEAN-DEFENCE-MINISTERS-MEETING-PLUS-ADMM-PLUS.pdf>.
- ⁴ Ministry of Defense, “Minister of Defense Koizumi’s Participation in the 12th ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus,” November 1, 2025, https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/exchange/dialogue/j-asean/admm_plus_12.html.
- ⁵ ADMM, “Kuala Lumpur Joint Declaration of the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting on ASEAN Unity for Security and Prosperity,” October 31, 2025, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/KUALA-LUMPUR-JOINT-DECLARATION-OF-THE-ADMM-ON-ASEAN-UNITY-FOR-SECURITY-AND-PROSPERITY-.pdf>. However, the contrast between the two meetings was already evident by at least 2020. Tomotaka Shoji, “ADMM to ADMM purasu — ASEAN kokubosho kaigi no futatsu no wakugumi to kotonaru kino” [ADMM and ADMM-Plus: The Two Frameworks and Different Functions of the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meetings], December 23, 2020, International Information Network Analysis (IINA), The Sasakawa Peace Foundation, https://www.spf.org/iina/articles/shoji_13.html.
- ⁶ Ministry of Defense, “Minister of Defense Koizumi’s Participation in the 12th ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus.”
- ⁷ Ministry of Defense, “Defense Minister Koizumi’s Participation in the 9th ASEAN-Japan Defence Ministers’ Informal Meeting,” November 1, 2025, https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/exchange/dialogue/j-asean/admm_09.html.
- ⁸ The seven partner countries invited to the 2nd JPIDD were Australia, Canada, Chile, France, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Ministry of Defense, “The 2nd Japan Pacific Islands Defense Dialogue (JPIDD),” March 21, 2024, https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/exchange/dialogue/jpidd/20240321_jpidd.html.
- ⁹ Ministry of Defense, “Boei kyoryoku kyoka no tameno nichi ASEAN inishiativu: jasumin” [JASMINE: Japan-ASEAN Ministerial Initiative for Enhanced Defense Cooperation], https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/exchange/dialogue/j-asean/pdf/jasmine_j.pdf.
- ¹⁰ Refer to the following link for past activities in the EWGs. ADMM, “About the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus,” <https://admm.asean.org/index.php/about-admm/about-admm-plus.html>.
- ¹¹ Ministry of Defense, “Extraordinary Press Conference by Defense Minister Koizumi,” November 2, 2025, https://www.mod.go.jp/j/press/kisha/2025/1102a_r.html.
- ¹² Liberal Democratic Party and Japan Innovation Party, “Jiyuminshutou–Nihonishinnokai renritsu gouisho” [Liberal Democratic Party and Japan Innovation Party Coalition Agreement], October 20, 2025, p. 5. <https://storage2.jimin.jp/pdf/news/information/211626.pdf>.
- ¹³ On the problem of production capacity in the defense industry of Japan, see Hirohito Ogi and Rintaro Inoue, “Suitai kara kakudai e: ‘juyo choka’ jidai no boei Sangyo” [From Decline to Surge: The Defense Industry in the Era of ‘Excess Demand’], (Institute of Geoeconomics, October 24, 2025). https://instituteofgeoeconomics.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/no5_PDF_KAN_10241530.pdf.

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