

ASEAN special

(Promotional content)

Working today to build a resilient Southeast Asia tomorrow

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For five-plus decades now, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in its charter has stated that one of its purposes is to "enhance regional resilience by promoting greater political, security, economic and sociocultural cooperation."

As the organization has worked toward that end mindful of present-day concerns, its charter also stresses that addressing future challenges for the benefit of future generations likewise remains an important consideration.

Accordingly, ASEAN today is already pursuing initiatives in such areas, among others, as economic integration, trade, digital transformation and environmental sustainability that will not only create a more resilient present for member states, but also address the challenges the region can expect in the future.

Economic integration, trade

The goal of creating a single market base that is economically integrated is part of

the ASEAN Charter. As the Asian Development Bank observes, ASEAN began taking its first steps in this direction in 1976. These efforts gradually expanded across the decades, widening their scope from more specific areas such as merchandise trade, investment and labor to encompass macroeconomic and financial issues.

By 1992, ASEAN leaders had mandated the creation of an ASEAN Free Trade Area. Skipping forward to the ASEAN Summit of 2011, to broaden and deepen engagement among the parties and to enhance their participation in the economic development of the region, the leaders of the then-16 participating countries established the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership.

The RCEP, which took effect in 2022 and also involves several non-ASEAN states such as Australia, China and Japan, is meant to provide a venue for negotiations among participants aimed at achieving a modern, comprehensive, high-quality and mutually beneficial economic partnership agreement among the member states and their partners.

Forming this partnership is but one among several steps on the road toward creating an ASEAN Economic Community. The AEC Blueprint 2025 envisions ASEAN as a single market and product base, a highly competitive region with equitable economic development that is fully integrated into the global economy. The blueprint, an update of the one released for 2015, sets strategic directions for the next phase of ASEAN integration.

Digital transformation

One of the areas addressed in the blueprint is that of information and communications technology. The vision it outlines aspires to propel ASEAN toward a digitally enabled economy by, for example, support for new technological developments such as "smart cities."

On a parallel line, ASEAN's leaders in 2018 had already established the ASEAN Smart Cities Network. The ASCN is a collaborative platform where cities from the 10 member states work toward the common goal of smart and sustainable urban development. The primary goal

of this network is to improve the lives of ASEAN citizens, using technology as an enabler. As of June 2024, the network includes 31 pilot cities around the region. They embrace a variety of projects, ranging from one in Mandalay focused on improving mobility to another in Ho Chi Minh City that envisions optimal resource utilization and citizen-centric governance to attain rapid and sustainable economic development. Yet another in Cebu City aims to improve urban growth through the use of efficient technology in the areas of urban mobility and personal security and safety.

Seeing that continued progress is made on the Smart City program is one element of the desired outcomes under the overarching ASEAN Digital Masterplan 2025. The masterplan "envisions ASEAN as a leading digital community and economic bloc, powered by secure and transformative digital services, technologies and ecosystem." Crafted in the context of pandemic recovery, climate change and global technology trends, the plan lays out a series of desired outcomes and enabling actions, such as increasing the quality and coverage of broadband infrastructure, nurturing a sustainable competitive market for digital services and creating a digitally inclusive society in ASEAN. The plan also incorporates guidelines for implementing, monitoring and measuring its own success.

Environmental sustainability

Closely related to coping with climate change is the need to address sustainability. Another of the purposes laid out in the ASEAN Charter is that member states should "promote sustainable development so as to ensure the protection of the region's environment (and) the sustainability of its natural resources."

In 2005, ASEAN member states established the ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity as a response to biodiversity loss in the



The skyline of Ho Chi Minh City glows at night. GETTY IMAGES

region. The ACB is an intergovernmental organization that facilitates cooperation and coordination among the member states and with regional and international organizations on the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity.

Among the efforts this body oversees at present is the ASEAN Green Initiative. This initiative "aims to set the standards for the recognition of the best ecosystem restoration activities." Specifically, in line with the U.N. Decade on Ecosystem Restoration declared in June 2021, the initiative calls for the planting of at least 10 million native trees across the member states over a 10-year span.

The ACB points out the ASEAN region is home to at least 60% of the world's tropical peatlands, 42% of mangroves and 15% of tropical forests. While the region offers rich biodiversity, it is also vulnerable to disasters, deforestation and other issues.

The member states hope that stronger collaboration and cooperation through the regionwide initiative will increase tree cover and restore ecosystems.

The initiative has already made some progress, as evidenced by the ACB's announcing in 2023 its first set of best restoration projects. These included both medium-scale initiatives (101 to 5,000 trees planted), such as the Lao Cherry Blossom Tree Project and Ayala Land Carbon Forest Project in Davao, and large initiatives (over 5,000 trees planted), including the Habitat Rehabilitation Programme in Malaysia and the OneMillion-Trees Movement in Singapore.

All told, these varied initiatives in diverse fields suggest some of the ways in which member states not only seek to address current problems in their regions, but also how their efforts might be useful to addressing the challenges of the future.

ASEAN-Japan Centre observes Aug. 8 with a shared future in its sights

ASEAN-JAPAN CENTRE

Aug. 8 commemorates the 57th anniversary of the founding of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, reflecting on our ongoing journey filled with aspirations and achievements. For over half a century, ASEAN and Japan have continued to navigate heart-to-heart relations, shared commitments and equal partnerships in building the region's peace and prosperity.

This year, the Lao PDR is chairing ASEAN for the third time. Laos' chairmanship will focus on enhancing forward-looking connectivity and resilience by intensifying cooperation under ASEAN's three community pillars. In conjunction, it will launch the Visit Laos Year 2024 tourism campaign, aiming to chart a sustainable path for the association's tourism sectors. Under its leadership, significant progress is being made in developing the ASEAN Ecotourism Standard to highlight sustainable and inclusive tourism as well as regional connectivity as priority economic deliverables this year.

To prepare for this shift in advance, the ASEAN-Japan Centre hosted the Lao PDR Innovation and Investment Forum from Dec. 14 to 19, 2023, as a joint effort by the Laotian Ministry of Planning and Investment and the Japan External Trade Organization to drive cooperation on green energy and carbon neutrality between the ASEAN members and Japan. The forum coincided with the ASEAN-Japan Commemorative Summit, which was held in Tokyo to celebrate the 50th year of ASEAN-Japan Friendship and Cooperation.

Connectivity is the cornerstone of economic growth and sustainable tourism. Moving forward, the AJC is pleased to be conducting activities in support of Laos. In October, the AJC will participate in the

ASEAN Business and Investment Summit in a parallel session exploring ASEAN's new focus on sustainable energy solutions, providing our perspective through the lens of ASEAN-Japan relations.

Additionally, in line with the outcomes of the 27th meeting of ASEAN tourism ministers, the AJC will be conducting a program called the "Training of Trainers: Enhancing Digital Skills for Women in Tourism Communities," which is scheduled to take place from Sept. 24 to 27. The aim of the program is to empower women in tourism communities across Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam by improving digital skills with an emphasis on gender inclusivity in the tourism industry.

2025 will mark the 70th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Japan and Laos, a significant

milestone in their long-standing partnership. It will also be an important year for ASEAN and the AJC.

Key documents such as the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 have played an important guiding role for our organization, and so will the ASEAN Community Vision 2045 and the ASEAN Digital Economic Framework Agreement, both expected to be concluded next year. These updates will serve to further foster an integrated ASEAN community and are well-timed to showcase the association's ability to be a digital transformation leader in the era of borderless economic growth.

To this end, the AJC would like to renew our commitment to deepening the bond between ASEAN and Japan to achieve even brighter milestones together.

Wishing everyone a happy ASEAN day.



Participants hold an informal discussion during a break at the Model ASEAN Meeting Plus Japan conference in November 2023. AJC

Happy ASEAN Day!



Building Bridges, Connecting Heart to Heart

日本とASEANをつなぐ。こころとこころでつながる。

Congratulations on the 57th anniversary of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations

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