The ASEAN-Japan Centre can be a Model for Washington’s New ‘ASEAN Center’

Mr. Sam Baron
Non-Resident Scholar, US-Japan NEXT Alliance Initiative, Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA

Views expressed in this article are those of the author and not necessarily reflective of Sasakawa USA or the NEXT Alliance Initiative.

Last year, the United States announced that its bilateral relationship with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) would be upgraded to that of a “comprehensive strategic partnership,” joining the ranks of China and India as a country maintaining the highest-level of diplomatic ties with the regional institution based in Jakarta.¹ To build upon the upgraded partnership, Daniel Kritenbrink, the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs at the US State Department, recently conveyed to his ASEAN counterparts that the United States

intended to establish an “ASEAN-United States Center,” a new institution that would help to reaffirm the commitment of the United States to Southeast Asia.

In March, the US House of Representatives also passed the “Providing Appropriate Recognition and Treatment Needed to Enhance Relations (PARTNER) with ASEAN Act,” a new piece of bipartisan legislation that seeks to formally upgrade the diplomatic status of ASEAN. If enacted into law, the bill would bring the ASEAN regional bloc in line with other groupings such as the African Union and European Union, setting the stage for a much-needed strengthening of America’s relations with Southeast Asia. To that end, the bill recommends that the US Government move to establish a new home-based delegation to ASEAN to further “enhance cooperation between ASEAN and the United States at all levels.”

The push to establish an ASEAN-United States Center at both the Executive and Congressional levels is an important one, as the United States remains the only dialogue partner of ASEAN without a home-based delegation or other dedicated institution committed to bolstering bilateral ties with the ASEAN Secretariat and its individual member-states. While the strategic rationale for establishing an ASEAN-United States Center in Washington is clear, and would likely be welcomed by officials in Jakarta and other Southeast Asian capitals, what exactly the institution would do once established, however, is not. The ASEAN-Japan Centre, Tokyo’s version of the same institution, may hold a few key answers.

The ASEAN-Japan Centre is an intergovernmental institution designed to promote trade, investment, and tourism between Japan and ASEAN. Since its establishment in 1981, the Centre has strengthened Japan’s ties with individual ASEAN member-states, helping Tokyo’s economic engagement to become, arguably, the most effective across the region. According to a recent survey from the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore, Japan retained its status in 2023 as the ‘most trusted’ economic partner of Southeast Asian countries among all major powers. Other
The ASEAN-Japan Centre can be a Model for Washington’s New ‘ASEAN Center’

surveys have also found that Japan continues to be a heavily desired education and employment destination among ASEAN nationals, demonstrating Tokyo’s impressive reach and influence across a highly diverse region.\(^9\)

For the United States, on the other hand, Southeast Asians have grown skeptical of Washington’s sustained economic commitment to the region.\(^10\) The Trump Administration’s abrupt withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade deal, and the Biden Administration’s failure to provide ASEAN member-states with market-access to the United States through initiatives such as its flagship Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), have undermined the credibility of the United States as a forward-looking leader on trade.\(^11\)

As policymakers in Washington look to establish their own ASEAN Center with the central aim of strengthening America’s bilateral relationship with ASEAN, they would be wise to look to the ASEAN-Japan Centre, which has not only emphasized economic engagement, but placed a further focus on the three pillars of trade and investment, people-to-people exchange, and tourism.

The ASEAN-Japan Centre, as an institution, is funded by the Japan government (80 percent) and each ASEAN member-state (totaling 20 percent). It employs only Japanese and ASEAN nationals, and it provides several opportunities for ASEAN nationals to travel, work, and live in Japan.\(^12\) Among its various activities, the Centre regularly hosts capacity building workshops for ASEAN companies, holds webinars on the promotion of ASEAN goods within the Japanese economy, and conducts economic policy research on themes including sustainable development, responsible investment, and climate change cooperation between Japan and Southeast Asia.\(^13\)

Most important, however, is that the ASEAN-Japan Centre serves as a concrete and long-standing commitment of the Japanese government to continually expand the political, economic, and people-to-people ties between itself and ASEAN. It is a commitment that extends far beyond the

---


\(^12\) ASEAN-Japan Centre, “About the AJC.” [https://www.asean.or.jp/en/ajc/](https://www.asean.or.jp/en/ajc/).

\(^13\) Ibid.
machinations of an individual political administration, and is also one that focuses on issues that Southeast Asians, by-and-large, care the most about.

For any future ASEAN-United States Center, an enhanced focus on trade and investment, people-to-people exchange, and tourism, in line with the Japanese model of engagement, will be critical to addressing the unique needs of ASEAN member-states and strengthening America’s relations with the region. On trade in particular, an ASEAN-United States Center with a muscular economic policy research arm would go a long way in building trust between the United States and Southeast Asia, and also help to fill a critical gap on Southeast Asia policy in Washington. While organizations such as the US-ASEAN Business Council promote two-way investment, and think tanks such as the Center for Strategic and International Studies formulate economic policy recommendations for officials, neither organization has the resources to conduct research on all ten ASEAN member-states, nor do they hold an official mandate from the US government to do so.

Building an institution focused on Southeast Asia from the-ground-up that is well-funded, public-facing, and focused on promoting economic relations between the United States and ASEAN can help to address concerns about US economic commitment to the region, while also providing opportunities for Americans to learn more about Southeast Asia, and Southeast Asians to live and work in the United States. Over the past twenty years, the Japanese government has prioritized attracting young students and professionals from Southeast Asia by offering scholarships and facilitating short-term exchanges through institutions like the ASEAN-Japan Centre. Japan's approach has been so immensely successful that a roughly a quarter of its international student population is now composed of ASEAN nationals.14

In contrast, Southeast Asia remains a highly understudied region in the United States, and most major US universities lack dedicated Southeast Asia departments, feeding a narrative that the United States is continuing to neglect the region.15 To overcome this narrative of neglect, the ASEAN-United States Center should support the establishment of dedicated Southeast Asia departments in universities and promote scholarships for ASEAN students to study in the United States.

15 Scot Marciel, Imperfect Partners: The United States and Southeast Asia (Rowman & Littlefield), March 2023.
States. This approach will foster a deeper understanding of Southeast Asia among Americans and create long-term connections that will pay future dividends.

Another consideration for policymakers as they work to establish an ASEAN-United States Center is that Southeast Asia boasts a significant population of young people, with more than 65% of its 213 million total population currently under the age of 35.\(^\text{16}\) Although the US government has taken some steps to leverage the potential of the region's youth through initiatives like the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI), current iterations of the program are highly competitive and allow only a small number of ASEAN nationals to stay in the United States for limited periods of time.\(^\text{17}\)

The US-ASEAN Institute for Rising Leaders, an initiative unveiled by the White House following the US-ASEAN Summit held in Washington last year, aims to bridge this gap by inviting mid-career professionals from ASEAN nations to partake in a comprehensive program focused on leadership development.\(^\text{18}\) However, concerns have surfaced regarding the program's limited scope and funding, which has led some to view it as a one-off deliverable of the US-ASEAN Summit rather than a demonstrated commitment to engaging with Southeast Asia. To address these concerns, the establishment of a new ASEAN-US Center should incorporate various measures, including the facilitation of new extended and short-term exchange programs, as well as the promotion of tourism from ASEAN countries to the United States. Moreover, the creation of dedicated positions within the ASEAN-US Center exclusively for ASEAN nationals can further reinforce interpersonal connections, ensuring more sustained and meaningful engagement.

As the United States looks to establish its own ASEAN Center, it should take inspiration from Tokyo and the ASEAN-Japan Centre's successful model of engagement. By fostering economic cooperation, expanding educational opportunities, engaging youth, and promoting two-way tourism, the United States can demonstrate a long-standing commitment to the region and forge deeper connections with ASEAN member-states.

\(^{16}\) US Mission to Indonesia, “Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI).” [https://id.usembassy.gov/education-culture/vseali/](https://id.usembassy.gov/education-culture/vseali/).


Mr. Sam Baron joined Sasakawa USA as a non-resident scholar for the US-Japan NEXT Alliance Initiative in June 2022. His primary focus is providing research and analysis on US-Japan relations coordination vis-à-vis Southeast Asia. Alongside his contributions to the NEXT Alliance Initiative, Sam is currently the inaugural Policy Research Fellow at the Yokosuka Council on Asia-Pacific Studies (Y CAPS), and prior to that, served as an academic researcher based at the University of Tokyo and also as a consultant with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP).

Mr. Baron’s primary expertise is in US foreign policy toward Southeast Asia, specifically Myanmar, and prior moving to Japan, he worked as a political risk analyst with the Southeast Asia practice of The Asia Group, an international strategic advisory firm based in Washington, D.C.

Earlier in his career, he served as a Human Rights Intern in 2019 with the Myanmar Country Team of the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (based in Bangkok, Thailand), and was also a Policy Intern at the US State Department’s Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor in 2018.

He earned his M.Phil in International Relations with distinction from the University of Cambridge (St. John’s College) and received his B.A. in Political Science and Asian Studies from Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles.

The US-Japan NEXT Alliance Initiative is a forum for bilateral dialogue, networking, and the development of joint recommendations involving a wide range of policy and technical specialists (in and out of government) to stimulate new alliance connections across foreign, security, and technology policy areas. Established by Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA with support from the Nippon Foundation, the goal is to help improve the alliance and how it serves shared interests, preparing it for emerging challenges within an increasingly complex and dynamic geostrategic environment. Launched in 2021, the Initiative includes two overlapping lines of effort: 1) Foreign & Security Policy, and 2) Technology & Innovation Connections. The Initiative is led by Sr. Director Jim Schoff.