

Japanese-Thai Relations: Past, Present, and Future

David M. Malitz, Modern History of Japan and Thailand

Thailand has been an important partner for Japan for decades. When visiting Bangkok in May 2016, then Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida described the kingdom as “indispensable” for the Japanese economy due to the large number of Japanese companies operating in Thailand as well as their accumulated investment in the kingdom. These investments have not only greatly contributed to Thailand reaching the status of a middle-income economy but they have also shaped Thai culture of everyday life. When Kishida visited Bangkok for the first time as prime minister in May 2022, the security aspect of the strategic partnership was emphasized by the conclusion of a defense agreement.

Research Objectives

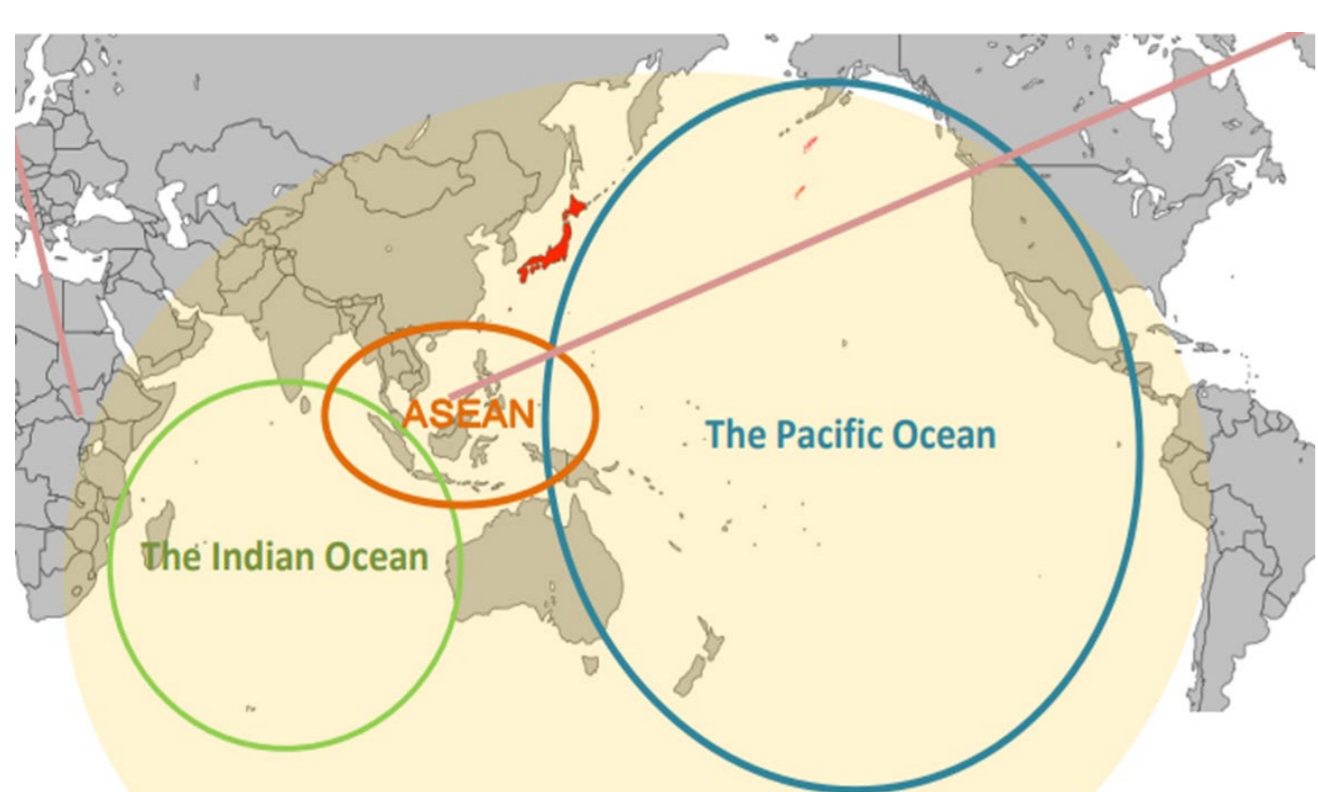
This interdisciplinary project aspires to contribute to a better understanding of Japan’s political, economic, and cultural influence in Thailand through a series of case studies of its historical development and present significance, as well as by identifying possible future trajectories.

Relevance

Research deficit: Despite their economic and political importance, Japanese-Thai relations, and especially their history, have received only little scholarly interest outside Japan and Thailand.

Topicality: Currently, several factors are complicating the close relations between Thailand and Japan:

- Thailand’s competitiveness as a location for foreign direct investments is declining.
- Political polarization in Thailand and the 2014 coup have prevented necessary political and economic reforms and made bilateral diplomacy more complex.
- Increasing influence of the People’s Republic of China in Thailand and Southeast Asia.



Source: JMOFA

Political relevance: Thailand is a founding and core member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which is at the center of the Indo-Pacific. Germany, France, and the European Union have all identified Japan as well as ASEAN as important partners in the Indo-Pacific region.

The completion of the Southern Economic Corridor (SEC), which is supported by Japan, would connect Bangkok to Ho Chi Minh in the East and to Dawei in the West, creating a land bridge between the Pacific and the Indian Ocean.

The SEC runs through Thailand’s Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC), a special economic zone founded in 2015 to revitalize Thailand’s industrial heartland, the Eastern Seaboard.



Source: JICA, modified by author

Methods and Sources

The project is based on in-depth desk studies of archival and published sources combined with semi-structured interviews with relevant actors in the public and private sector in both countries. The project is multiscalar: it comprises case-studies of state-to-state relations, investigations of non-state networks enabling the flow of people, knowledge, and capital as well as inquiries on the regional level into Japan’s and Thailand’s engagement with ASEAN.



Collection of sources used, own photo.

First Outputs

- “Chinese and Japanese Medical Diplomacy in Southeast Asia: The Case of Thailand during the Covid-19 Pandemic”, paper presented at the IN-EAST Research Forum on 24 November 2021.
- “Health Infrastructure and Asia’s Epidemiological Transitions: Historical Perspectives”, international workshop organized with Dongxin Zou at the Asia Research Institute of the National University of Singapore (NUS) on 13–14 April 2022.
- “Disowned ties: Thai-Japanese Business Networks Across the August 1945 Divide”, paper presented at the 14th International Conference for Thai Studies, Kyoto University, 1 May 2022.
- “Prewar Japanese Communities in Southeast Asia”, online workshop jointly organized with Naoko Shimazu (NUS) on 29 November 2022.
- “Shinzo Abe’s Legacy for the Future of Japanese-Southeast Asian Relations”, online workshop on 9 December 2022 to present a special issue of the *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia*.

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