

SPECIAL PROJECTS

Leveraging ASEAN Centrality for the Philippine Defense Revitalization

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ASEAN Centrality has provided a neutral avenue for small and middle powers to manage their relations and engage with the world's major global powers. As Caballero-Anthony characterized it, the unique structural position of the regional organization is defined by a condition of 'high betweenness'. This is supposed to enable ASEAN to act effectively as a broker to important socio-cultural affairs, economic integration, and regional security discourse which ultimately constitutes and explains the logic of ASEAN Centrality.¹ With its established institutional hub of platforms, most notably the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meetings Plus (ADMM+), ASEAN has transitioned to a functional turn in regionalism. Traditional diplomatic talks shifted to practical workshop-style cooperation for substantive security dialogues that emphasize functional efficacy and technical, actionable collaboration over symbolic declarations.² Given this pivot in the way it performs regionalism, ASEAN creates a strategic platform for targeted defense partnerships, particularly between ASEAN members and key external partners like Japan.

Japan and ASEAN have a longstanding partnership for over five decades. Through the years, we have seen how this relationship evolved from being one of merely donor-recipient relationships to a more equal strategic partnership anchored in ASEAN Centrality. To support the development and industrialization of Southeast Asia, Japan has been consistent with its use

of development assistance programs, infrastructure financing, and trade. ASEAN has been returning the favor by providing Japan with stable production networks and key markets for investment and supply chains.³ In 2023, we have also seen how Japan is playing a proactive role as a global player in ensuring that the rules-based international order is upheld by providing official security assistance (OSA) to like-minded countries which includes ASEAN member states.⁴ This constitutes a performative assurance of enduring reliability as ASEAN's most trustworthy ally, while asserting strategic autonomy amid geopolitical tensions and intensifying great power rivalry.

With the strengthening ASEAN-Japan partnership, the Philippines stands in a very opportune position as it aims to revitalize its nascent military industry through the Republic Act 12024 or the Self-Reliant Defense Posture Revitalization Act. As maritime disputes and tensions escalate in the South China Sea and the imperatives of having a self-reliant defense industry, the country faces a critical question that can help it forward its aim of revitalizing the Philippine military industry. How can ASEAN Centrality be leveraged to facilitate the transfer of Japan's defense technology for the revitalization of the Philippine military industry to strategically avoid fragmentation and enhance collective resilience? ASEAN centrality discursively constructs a normative framework of inclusive regionalism within the rhetorical architecture

1 (Caballero-Anthony 2014)

2 (Ba 2016, 11-34)

3 (Lim and Nguyen 2024)

4 (Anantasirikiat 2025)

of the global political economy. This legitimizes the strategic transfer of defense technologies as a counter-hegemonic pivot that embeds the goal of revitalization within ASEAN's sovereignty-preserving multilateralism, reframing bilateral power asymmetries into collective economic security agency under the SRDP.

Leveraging on ADMM+ for Multilateralized Tech Transfers

In 2006, the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) was established. ADMM aims to institutionalize a regular defense cooperation that brings previous informal meetings among service chiefs and military intelligence under a single official framework. It expanded in 2010 to ADMM+ in a meeting in Hanoi to include defense ministers from Japan, China, the United States, Australia, India, New Zealand, South Korea, and Russia.⁵ By bringing in the other eight partners, ADMM+ solidifies ASEAN's role as the steering wheel and a neutral broker for regional security processes that prioritizes community-building over power calculations.⁶ This makes it a critical platform that must be strategically leveraged on as it embodies ASEAN centrality to broker defense technological transfers from partners and in this context, Japan to the Philippines. However, as Valockova asserted, the rhetoric of ASEAN centrality must meet practical actions and substantive commitment. To achieve this, here are some proposed strategies that need to be enacted.

■ Form an ADMM+ Tech Transfer Working Group

As mentioned earlier, in 2023, Japan has established a new cooperation framework, the Official Security Assistance (OSA). This framework aims to deepen security cooperation among like-minded countries through Japan's provision of equipment, supplies, and assistance for infrastructure development that can strengthen their security and deterrence capabilities for international peace and security.⁷

The country expands OSA across Southeast Asia and made a significant budget increase this year to up to 18.1 billion yen.⁸ To capitalize on this move, a new ADMM+ Expert Working Group (EWG) on Defense Technology Cooperation must be formed from the existing ones. Currently, there are EWGs on cybersecurity, maritime security, humanitarian assistance and disaster management, peacekeeping operations, counter-terrorism, military medicine, and humanitarian mine action. This new EWG will be the ones to properly allocate and channel Japan's official security assistance (OSA) into structured, multilateral tech transfers to member states such as the Philippines that is currently in its pursuit of the SRDP. The EWG can prioritize dual-use technologies like coastal radars and avionics to align with SRDP's tax incentives and financing to achieve desired domestic content thresholds of 20% to 30%.

■ Joint Capacity Building Programs

Building on the new ADMM+ EWG, recurring Japan-ASEAN defense industry capacity building seminars and training programs must be initiated. This is a key target of RA 12024 which focuses on high-value areas like avionics repair, radar integration, and additive manufacturing for Philippine firms. Japan's budget expansion for the OSAs is specifically designed to support the like-minded nations by providing not only military equipment but also capacity-building activities for surveillance, counter-terrorism, counter-privacy, or disaster relief.⁹ The EWG by embodying ASEAN centrality can operationalize annual training quotas to support the upskilling and reskilling of engineers in the region that will then benefit the Philippine's aim towards revitalizing the Philippine military industry. Efforts to do so may contribute to the certification of technicians in dual-use technologies that will help achieve SRDP's goals. This pillar performatively reframes bilateral expertise as multilateral public goods, advancing Philippine self-reliance.

⁵ (Thayer 2010)

⁶ (Valockova 2025)

⁷ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Japan 2026)

⁸ (Sim 2026)

⁹ (Sim 2026)

Aligning Bilateral Promises with SRDP Incentives

Aside from leveraging on an institutional hub such as the ADMM+, another strategic action plan to leverage ASEAN Centrality in the facilitation of tech transfers for Philippine military revitalization is by operationalizing bilateral mechanisms as performances of inclusive regionalism. On July 8, 2024, the RAA 2024 which refers to the Reciprocal Access Agreement was signed in Manila. RAA 2024 sets a legal framework for the facilitation of mutually beneficial defense cooperation between Japan and the Philippines to better support shared interests in regional peace, stability, and the rule of law.¹⁰ Complementing this, the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) signed last January 2026 commits both of the nations' armed forces to reciprocal logistical support during joint exercises, UN Peacekeeping Operations, and disaster relief missions.¹¹ These pacts, embedded in ASEAN's normative multilateralism, now stand ready to channel Japan's tech transfers into SRDP incentives for the country's self-reliance. Understandably, these are easier said than done. Hence, key steps need to be taken such as:

■ Renegotiate Joint Venture Mandates

Co-production clauses must be embedded within these existing pacts. These co-production clauses will ensure that the implementation of such pacts (RAA and ACSA) are not limited to the end-user platforms. Rather, it includes the entire ecosystem of components, maintenance, and upgrade cycles. Additionally, tying this into the SRDP law can significantly lower the entry barriers for Japanese firms while simultaneously adding to Philippine GDP by unlocking tax breaks such as a 5-year corporate income tax holidays and import duty exemptions for local production. Dual-use technologies must be given priority so as to serve both defense and disaster response needs. Clear benchmarks and standards for local content and technology-sharing will definitely build the Filipino engineers' capacity and solidify these pacts as performances of ASEAN-centric regionalism.

■ Institutionalizing Defense Industrial Offsets

Offsets from Japanese firms must be mandated under the SRDP to require technology transfers and local workforce participation as conditions for major contracts. This will link OSA funded equipment like the coastal radar systems to SRDP incentives thereby ensuring that the trade generates domestic multipliers. When we establish maintenance hubs for transferred equipment and assets for instance, that will employ hundreds of Filipino engineers that will reduce import dependency achieving SRDP benchmarks.

Limitations on the Ways Forward

While the logic of these policy recommendations is sound, they have to be treated with some grain of salt and caution. As articulated by Valockova, the diversity among ASEAN member states makes cohesive regional action difficult.¹² Relying on ASEAN Centrality and the pivots ASEAN-led resolution might take a while to pan out as varying opinions, concerns, and backlashes might stem from such suggested resolutions. However, starting with ADMM+ pilots can definitely build momentum amid geopolitical tensions.

In bridging these persistent rhetoric-reality disconnects, the regional organization needs to transition from procedural influence toward substantive impact. Consensus-based diplomacy frequently results in the lowest-common-denominator outcomes that may derail the achievement of intended and desired outcomes, in this case the Philippine revitalization of the military and defense industry. This might even be seen as a one-sided favoritism that undermines regional buy-in. Thus, policy rhetoric must discursively and proactively align with shared ASEAN visions, reframing bilateral gains as collective agency.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of leveraging ASEAN Centrality is significantly challenged by the intensifying global rivalries that actively threatens the legitimacy of ASEAN as an independent center of power. External powerful players often use ASEAN Centrality as a shield to penetrate regional dynamics while simultaneously acting on deep-seated interests

¹⁰ (Japan-Philippines Reciprocal Access Agreement, 2024)

¹¹ (Japan-Philippines Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement, 2026)

¹² (Valockova 2025)

that can potentially bypass and undermine the regional organization's actual central role further. What complicates this even further is the deep entrenched economic dependencies particularly on China. In the pursuit of leveraging Japan's OSAs to better the military and defense industry in the Philippines, other member states that find themselves aligning more towards China may perceive these defense partnerships as choosing sides. However, Japan's Vientiane Vision reciprocity offers a counterweight that positions Tokyo as ASEAN's most trustworthy partner. Having the ASEAN Chairmanship, the Philippines must thus emphasize dual-use, non-provocative tech in ADMM+ reporting to neutralize zero-sum perceptions.

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