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Japan's Official Security Assistance to Southeast Asia: Limited Scope, but Real Impact

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SYNOPSIS

The introduction of Official Security Assistance (OSA) in Japan's 2022 National Security Strategy aims to increase the deterrence capabilities of Southeast Asian countries. Despite its limited scope, OSA can meaningfully impact military cooperation within the region.



Japan and the Philippines signed a ¥1.6 billion security assistance deal on 5 December 2024.
Source: [Website of the Embassy of Japan in the Philippines](#).

COMMENTARY

In December 2022, the government of Japan published its most recent [National Security Strategy](#) (NSS). The NSS states that increased regional military cooperation, particularly with Southeast Asian countries, is necessary to protect the “free, open,

and stable international order” that is under direct attack due to historical changes in power balances and intensifying geopolitical competition. Among the activities outlined in the strategy, the document introduced Official Security Assistance (OSA) as a new instrument to increase the deterrence capabilities of “like-minded” countries.

Japan’s NSS highlighted Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and China’s “attempts to unilaterally change the status quo by force in the maritime and air domains” in the East and South China Seas as among the clearest examples of severe threats to Japan and immediate challenges to international stability. The NSS is a declaration of Japan’s embrace of realpolitik in which aggressions and ambitions to change the status quo unilaterally must be deterred through hard power. In the two years since Japan published this strategy, it has procured new types of weapons, moved forces closer to hotspots, began openly planning with the United States for a Taiwan crisis scenarios, and deepened its military relations with partners including the Philippines, South Korea, India, and Australia.

In contrast to these major investments, OSA seems rather modest and measured. While its stated purpose is to enhance deterrence, OSA, so far, has only been used to provide non-lethal military equipment to Southeast Asia. The Philippines and Malaysia were among the first recipients. Coastal surveillance radar systems and rigid-hulled inflatable boats are [being provided to the Philippines](#). In December 2023, Malaysia signed off on a [¥400 million \(US\\$2.8 million\) grant](#) for rescue boats and supplies. Indonesia and Vietnam are both being looked at as potential recipients of future projects.

While the equipment transfers are noteworthy, the type of equipment provided through OSA does not reflect the sort of capabilities needed to deter interstate aggression. Instead, the transfer reflects a continuation of [Japan’s long-standing commitment to “human security”](#), under which Japan has supported Southeast Asian states’ efforts to enhance security against non-state threats, especially those in the maritime domain. This commitment has included training from regional maritime law enforcement agencies through the Japan Coast Guard and the [provision of hardware such as patrol boats and surveillance radars](#) through its Official Development Assistance (ODA).

Future OSA projects may include lethal military systems, but its small budget prevents it from providing more than token measures towards increasing Southeast Asian deterrence capabilities. In its first year, the total budget was only ¥2 billion. In its second year, the OSA fund more than doubled to reach ¥5 billion, a bit more than US\$30 million at current exchange rates. For comparison, a single *Mogami* frigate, the type [Japan hopes to sell to Indonesia](#), [costs around ¥50 billion](#).

Despite its limitations, OSA has an important value. From its decades-long relationship with Southeast Asia, Japan is well aware that it has become a preferred security partner of the region due to its softer approach to security — a position that Japan does not want to jeopardise. From this perspective, OSA serves two important purposes. First, it charts a safe path to create, strengthen, and consolidate the military component in Japan’s relationship with Southeast Asian countries. In 2021, when Malaysia and Vietnam rejected Japan’s offer of providing retired P-3 anti-submarine warfare aircraft, it was understood by some to reflect a concern that increasing Southeast Asian military cooperation with Japan could provoke tensions with China.

Providing non-lethal military equipment through OSA extends the already existing law enforcement and constabulary capacity building to the defence realm while mitigating these concerns.

Second, the non-lethal, less expensive equipment provided through OSA can serve as a stepping stone for larger military deals. The economic aspect is central as Japan's economic situation does not allow the country to fully finance the regional military's deterrence capabilities. There is no question that Japan has strong political and economic incentives to increase its military sales. So far, Japan has only succeeded in having a major deal with the Philippines, where it sold [four air defence radars](#) with a price tag of ¥16.3 billion (US\$103 million).

Japan clearly hopes that using OSA will help Southeast Asian countries follow the Philippines' path. Previous capacity efforts financed through Japan's ODA have greatly influenced that country's position. For example, The Philippine Coast Guard has been a major beneficiary of Japanese capacity-building, and the strength of that force has undoubtedly contributed to the country's more self-confident stance against China's maritime claims in the region. As a consequence, Japan and the Philippines are working closely with their American allies to transform their archipelagos into a [maritime wall](#) designed to deter Chinese ambitions to change the status quo unilaterally. Systems like the air defence radars are a key component of that trilateral cooperation.

It remains unclear to what extent Japan will be able to increase the deterrence capabilities of Southeast Asian countries to prevent aggressions and ambitions to change the status quo unilaterally. This depends not only on Japan's willingness to deepen military ties but also on the willingness of Southeast Asian countries to accept it. In that regard, OSA could prove to be a path to Japan's desired outcomes.

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