

Mekong-Japan Cooperation Strategy 2024

26 July, 2024

The 15th Mekong-Japan Foreign Ministers' Meeting was held in the Lao People's Democratic Republic, on 26 July, 2024 and adopted the "Mekong-Japan Cooperation Strategy 2024" to succeed the "Tokyo Strategy 2018 for Mekong-Japan Cooperation".

I Achievements and Future Directions of the Mekong-Japan Cooperation

1. The Mekong countries and Japan commend the successful holding of the Mekong-Japan Foreign Ministers' Meeting for the first time since 2021 and for the first time in person since 2019, and they celebrate the 15th anniversary of Mekong-Japan cooperation, which began with the Mekong-Japan Summit Meeting held in November 2009. The Mekong countries and Japan highly value the steady development of Mekong-Japan Cooperation despite difficult situations including COVID-19 outbreak. The Mekong countries and Japan reaffirm the geopolitical, economic, and diplomatic importance of the Mekong sub-region as a keystone of the Indo-Pacific region and are continuously committed to actively contributing to the development of this region.

Achievements of Mekong-Japan Cooperation

2. The Mekong countries and Japan commend successful implementation of the "Tokyo Strategy 2018 for Mekong-Japan Cooperation" under the three pillars: (1) Vibrant and Effective Connectivity, (2) People-Centered Society, and (3) Realization of a Green Mekong.

(Vibrant and Effective Connectivity)

3. For "Vibrant and Effective Connectivity," the Mekong countries and Japan welcome the steady progress in enhancing connectivity in the region through promotion of the "quality infrastructure" under the Japan-ASEAN Comprehensive Connectivity Initiative. Transport infrastructure projects are expanding further, including the signing of the Exchange of Notes for the Ho Chi Minh City Urban Railway Line 1 (Phase IV) in December 2023. They commend the progress of various projects related to enhancement of "soft connectivity" including Japan-funded projects in the field of modernization of customs, Information and Communications Technology (ICT), cybersecurity, and broadcasting. They welcome the efforts to date to enhance connectivity in ASEAN through the use of the Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund (JAIF), in various areas such as smart cities, customs, cyber security, broadcasting, digitalization and e-commerce. The Mekong countries appreciate, among other things, the newly established "JAIF 3.0" and the US\$100 million contribution to the fund on the occasion of the 50th Year of ASEAN-

Japan Friendship and Cooperation in 2023. They stressed the importance of the steady and transparent implementation of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) Agreement, which would enhance supply chains in the Mekong sub-region and beyond. They also welcome the steady implementation of the Mekong Industrial Development Vision 2.0 (MIDV 2.0) Work Program, which contributes to industrial development in the Mekong sub-region in line with the three pillars of connectivity, digital innovations, and sustainable development goals (SDGs), through strengthening supply chains and promoting supply chains.

(People-Centered Society)

4. For “People-Centered Society,” the Mekong countries and Japan welcome Japan’s continued and active engagement for industrial human resource development. The Mekong countries also welcome Japan’s long-term efforts for promoting human resource development in various areas, including the Global Financial Partnership Center (GLOPAC) and protection of cultural heritage, as well as the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) Attachment Programme, implementation of capacity building on the Peacekeeping Operations (PKOs), Air Rescue, Underwater medicine, UXO clearance, Cybersecurity and Ship Rider Cooperation Program. The Mekong countries and Japan recall the convening of the “Mekong-Japan Exchange Year 2019,” and celebrate that the exchanges between peoples of the Mekong countries and Japan have been promoted in a wide-range generation and have encouraged mutual understanding. The Mekong countries appreciate continued cooperation between the Mekong countries and Japan in the field of advancing the legal system to promote the rule of law in the countries.

(Realization of a Green Mekong)

5. For “Realization of a Green Mekong,” the Mekong countries and Japan reaffirm the importance of “Mekong-Japan Initiative for SDGs toward 2030,” adopted at the 11th Mekong-Japan Summit, and celebrate the successful holding of the first Mekong-Japan SDGs Forum in December 2021. The Mekong countries appreciate Japan’s support on environmental issues towards realizing the SDGs in the Mekong sub-region, including reduction of marine plastic litter, biodiversity conservation, promoting sustainable cities, enhancing transparency of greenhouse gases, formulating strategies, and advancing climate actions, including mitigation, adaptation and loss and damage. The Mekong countries and Japan welcome their strong cooperation on sustainable water resources management in collaboration with the Mekong River Commission (MRC). The Mekong countries express their appreciation for Japan’s generous support to the MRC through the Project for Flood and Drought Management in the Mekong River Basin.

Future Directions of Mekong-Japan Cooperation

6. The Mekong countries and Japan commend their efforts thus far and express their commitment to strengthen Mekong-Japan Cooperation. The Mekong countries and Japan underscore that the Mekong sub-region has the geographical advantage and plays an important role in maintaining peace, stability, and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific. In this regard, they note the importance of promoting strategic complementarity between Mekong-Japan Cooperation and Japan's New Plan for a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific," announced in March 2023, as well as the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific (AOIP). As Partners for Co-creation of Economy and Society of the Future, the Mekong countries and Japan strive to co-create a prosperous and sustainable economy and society, which is diverse, inclusive, resilient, free and fair, jointly address various common economic and social challenges, and ensure human security. In this spirit, they express their determination to steadily implement the Mekong-Japan Cooperation projects based on the following three new pillars over the next five years: "Resilient and connected society in the post-COVID-19 world", "Digitalization", and "Proactive response to non-traditional security issues". The Mekong countries and Japan note the importance of collaboration with other frameworks, such as Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS), Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS), Friends of Mekong, and the MRC. They also value "Co-creation for common agenda initiative" in development cooperation under Japan's new Development Cooperation Charter, bearing in mind that such cooperation is under implementation in this region.

7. In order to steadily implement Mekong-Japan Cooperation projects, the Mekong countries and Japan took note of the importance of collaboration among implementing agencies as well as cooperation with Multilateral Development Banks and regional stakeholders, including Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), Neighbouring Countries Economic Development Cooperation Agency (NEDA) and between JICA and Thailand International Cooperation Agency (TICA) under respective partnership arrangements; coordination with Asian Development Bank (ADB), the Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA) and the ASEAN Promotion Centre on Trade, Investment and Tourism (ASEAN-Japan Centre); and cooperation with regional cooperation frameworks and programs including the implementation of ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and beyond, the IAI, and other Mekong Initiatives.

II Three New Pillars of Mekong-Japan Cooperation

A. Resilient and connected society in the post-COVID-19 world

8. The Mekong countries and Japan appreciated their cooperation to fight against COVID-19. With a view to containing COVID-19 as quickly as possible, Japan provided vaccines

and medical equipment to the Mekong countries through the experience of global COVID-19 outbreak, the Mekong countries and Japan share their views that developing resilient, safe, sustainable, and connected society is important in the post COVID-19 world.

9. The Mekong countries appreciate Japan's provision of approximately US\$1.3 million for the ACMECS Branding Project in 2022, which aimed to contribute to economic recovery in the sub-region through encouraging the Mekong countries to support business community and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) which had been affected by COVID-19 pandemic. The Mekong countries and Japan desired that the Mekong countries make use of such contribution to achieve the objective.

A.1 Quality infrastructure and sustainable urban development

10. The development of quality infrastructure is the key to enhance the connectivity and resilience of the sub-region. The Mekong countries and Japan reaffirm their strong commitment to strengthening both hard and soft connectivity in the sub-region by promoting quality infrastructure investment in line with international standards, including openness, transparency, environment-friendly and economic efficiency in view of lifecycle cost and debt sustainability, including East-West and Southern Economic Corridor. Investment programs will be aligned with the national and sectoral development strategies of the Mekong countries. The Mekong countries and Japan will work together to further enhance logistic network connectivity, including transport connectivity and promote quality transport, taking into account, among others, connectivity, decarbonization and inclusivity. They will support stable development of the Mekong countries by leveraging JICA's Overseas loans and Investments in coordination with multilateral development banks and private financial institutions including through "Leading Asia's Private Infrastructure Fund 2 (LEAP2)", which is a co-financing scheme between JICA and ADB to promote quality infrastructure development. The Mekong countries and Japan also recognize the need to promote and facilitate more access to financing for sustainable infrastructure trends and priorities in the post pandemic era.
11. Like the rest of the world that is facing rapid urbanization, with close to 90% of this rapid trend taking place in Africa and Asia, the Mekong countries are facing a lot of social and environmental challenges resulting from rapid urbanization. Since Japan is full of good experiences and best practices in sustainable urban planning and development, the Mekong-Japan Cooperation is important to address these challenges by joining hands and actions to realize resilient, safe, sustainable, and inclusive society and SDGs.

12. Since cities are large human settlements and extensive systems for housing, transportation, sanitation, utilities, land use, and communication, it is very urgent to improve urban resilience and sustainability by advancing or upgrading existing sustainable urban development mechanisms and initiatives of the Mekong countries with support from Japan, by strengthening the monitoring and evaluation of sustainable urban development, and by developing or setting up the Mekong sustainable cities index based on the existing national and regional initiatives, for example, the Clean and Green Cities Contest and Regional Environmentally Sustainable Cities Award.
13. The Mekong countries and Japan will work together to promote resilient and sustainable cities and enhance inclusive and sustainable urbanization and sustainable waste management through circular economy approaches and reduction of greenhouse gas emissions through enhancing landfill operation and management, including Transit Oriented Development.

A.2 Supply chain resiliency and industrial connectivity

14. The Mekong countries and Japan will work together to enhance resilient and reliable supply-chain networks based on the principles on transparency, diversification, security, fairness, sustainability, inclusivity, trustworthiness and reliability. Our partnerships honor international law, are free and fair, and foster mutually beneficial economic and trade relationships. Resilient and reliable supply chains are important to ensure economic development and achieve industrial sophistication against a backdrop of natural disasters, pandemics and geopolitical tensions. The Mekong countries and Japan reaffirm their intention to improve industrial connectivity of the Mekong countries with non-Mekong countries. In this regard, improving cross-border trade facilitation, enacting transparent policies, and promoting multi-dimensional seamless connectivity, digital economy and e-commerce in the sub-region will bring about better trade, investment and industrial connectivity. They also reaffirm their willingness to further promote investment in the Mekong sub-region's industries and advance industrial capacity including through business matching between Mekong countries and Japanese companies such as micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) and innovative start-ups and through the development of Special Economic Zones (SEZ).
15. The Mekong countries and Japan will further accelerate efforts to realize a vibrant and effective connectivity for achieving economic growth of the whole Mekong region through the Japan-Mekong Connectivity Initiative and Work Program for MIDV 2.0, which cover comprehensive economic and industrial measures to improve hardware and software.

16. The Mekong countries and Japan will support effective supply chain management, including through conducting regular consultations on financial policy to support local logistic enterprises.

A.3 Trade and investment

17. The Mekong countries and Japan will enhance the utilization and effective implementation of existing bilateral economic partnership agreements (EPAs), closely coordinate in plurilateral agreements such as the ASEAN-Japan Comprehensive Economic Partnership (AJCEP) Agreement and the RCEP Agreement. The Mekong countries and Japan need to enhance cooperation through these agreements and continue our commitments to upholding and strengthening a free, fair, open and rules-based multilateral trading system with the WTO at its core.

18. The Mekong countries and Japan will promote competition in markets and protect consumers through effective enforcement of Competition and Consumer Protection policies and laws, while enhancing their capacity to address anti-competitive activities and unfair business practices.

19. The Mekong countries and Japan will work on improving and deepening of trade facilitation, financial and monetary cooperation frameworks and exploring other possible cooperation and policy coordination frameworks.

A.4 People-to-people exchange

20. The Mekong countries and Japan are pleased that people-to-people exchanges among the Mekong countries and Japan have become more active since the resumption of cross-border travel after the COVID-19 pandemic. They will promote sports, cultural and tourism exchanges, including green, sustainable and community-based tourism, exchanges between local authorities, and coordination between universities and institutions to support economic and social development in the region.

21. The Mekong countries and Japan will promote cooperation, exchange of knowledge and technology and people-to-people connectivity, including through the JICA-ASEAN Knowledge Co-creation and Connectivity Initiative (JAKCCI), the Project for Human Resource Development Scholarship (JDS), the Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers Program, JICA alumni activities, and the ASEAN University Network/Southeast Asia Engineering Education Development Network (AUN/SEED-Net) and other programs among institutions of higher education. The Mekong countries and Japan reiterate the

importance of the role of tourism in promoting closer people-to-people connectivity and contribution to the social-economy, and will further exchange experiences in improving digital innovation, products and services, and information of tourism industry to promote mutual tourists' flow. Japan acknowledges the Mekong countries' tourism development activities entailed in the adopted joint action plan of the related Mekong sub-regional cooperation such as CLV Joint Action Plan on Tourism Cooperation, Action Program on CLMV Tourism Cooperation, and Plan of Action on ACMECS Tourism Cooperation.

22. The Mekong countries and Japan will support institutional streamlining and synchronization to enhance seamless connectivity for cross-border transport in the sub-region, which includes initiatives of further easing barriers to entry for foreign workers in professional or technical fields to work in Japan.

A.5 Healthcare

23. The Mekong countries and Japan share the importance of promoting the experience sharing in the healthcare sector to create vibrant and healthy societies where people can enjoy long and productive lives. They reaffirm their commitment to promoting cooperation under the Asia Health and Wellbeing Initiative and will promote experience sharing in welfare for the elderly in preparation for an aging society.
24. The Mekong countries and Japan will continue work on strengthening regional health capacity, especially at provincial levels, such as Cho Ray Viet Nam-Japan Friendship Hospital Development Project and the Regional Hospital Development Project in Cambodia. They will also work on enhancing pandemic prevention, preparedness and response (PPR), in particular, human resource development for healthcare workers and professionals through support for technical assistance and international training courses in the field of universal health coverage and pandemic PPR.

A.6 Legal and judicial cooperation

25. The Mekong countries and Japan will continue technical cooperation in the field of criminal justice, including mutual legal assistance, crime prevention, and reducing reoffending through rehabilitation and social reintegration in both correctional facilities and the community while promoting public private partnerships and the exchange of best practices with a view to developing and improving technical standards for correctional facilities; and will strengthen the cooperation in promoting rules-based resolution to disputes arising from cross-border business transactions through the use of alternative dispute resolution mechanisms such as arbitration and mediation, including the use of digitalization in such proceedings, for the purpose of strengthening the rule of law and

respecting human rights, which is a foundation of stable society.

A. Digitalization

26. The Mekong countries and Japan share common views toward the importance of cooperation on digital economy, digital transformation and exchange of technical know-how on innovations for enhancing economic competitiveness, encouraging digital trade and finance with strengthened related regular frameworks, minimizing impacts from supply chain disruptions, and promoting digital economy and sustainable economic growth in the sub-region.

B.1 Human resource development

27. The Mekong countries appreciate Japan's support in human resource development so far, which enables sustainable development in the sub-region, and are aware of the importance of addressing the existing digital skills gap among the urban and rural areas and among the Mekong countries by focusing on human resource development, while acknowledging gaps among regulatory principles.

28. The Mekong countries and Japan are committed to supporting digital transformation and capacity building for MSMEs in the Mekong region, in particular to enable MSMEs to participate in the digital economy through the adoption of digital technologies and tools and through the reskilling and upskilling of MSMEs workforce.

29. The Mekong countries and Japan have high expectations for enhancing capacity development for the youth and skilled and semi-skilled workforce including through improving and expanding the quality of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) of each country responding to the Industrial Revolution 4.0, digital economy and society, and the green economy, further promoting the Japan - Thailand Partnership Programme Phase 3 and expanding Japanese-style technical college education system (KOSEN) in the Mekong countries.

B.2 Smart city network

30. The Mekong countries and Japan welcome the 6th ASEAN-Japan Smart Cities Network High Level Meeting to be held in 2024 under the co-chairmanship of the Lao PDR and Japan. The Mekong countries and Japan express their intention to continue close collaboration to realize smart cities based on the framework of ASEAN Smart Cities Network, enhance the cooperation with Japan Association for Smart Cities in ASEAN (JASCA), and promote the implementation of the Smart City supported by Japan ASEAN Mutual Partnership (Smart JAMP) project and the application of the ASEAN Smart City

B.3 Support for developing digital infrastructure

31. The Mekong countries and Japan share the importance of enhancing digital connectivity in the sub-region by supporting the development of digital infrastructure, including through Japan's support for establishment of Continuously Operating Reference Stations (CORS) in Thailand and Cambodia, and the promotion and management of financial digitalization as well as capacity building programs on Open RAN implementation for 5G in Mekong countries.
32. The Mekong countries and Japan will support digital startups such as in the field of AI, Semiconductors, Robotics, Internet of Things (IoT) and Logistics Technology as well as promote Japanese investment and business matching for digital startups in the sub-region.
33. The Mekong countries and Japan share the importance of cooperation on the exchange of technical know-how on the development and utilization of 3D urban models that will serve as digital infrastructure for urban development, promoting planned and rational urban development using digital technology.
34. The Mekong countries and Japan will promote trade digitalization through expanding the utilization of digital trade platforms and promoting system interoperability based on international standards and domestic laws and regulations upon the readiness of capabilities, infrastructure, and policies. They will also be encouraged to expedite customs clearance and lower trading costs through digitalization of trade documents according to internationally recognized standards, to the extent possible.
35. The Mekong countries and Japan will continue working together to facilitate digital transactions and cross-border economic activities in the sub-region, while promoting free, open and trustworthy cross-border data flows, including possible exploratory discussions on advancing Data Free Flow with Trust in line with applicable legal frameworks.

B.4 Cybersecurity

36. The Mekong countries and Japan will explore ways to enhance cooperation in the area of cybersecurity to advance cyber readiness, strengthen regional cyber policy coordination, and enhance trust in cyberspace and regional capacity building, including through the ASEAN-Japan Cybersecurity Capacity Building Centre (AJCCBC).

C. Proactive response to non-traditional security issues

37. The world as well as the Mekong sub-region is challenged by a number of non-traditional security issues, including the food-energy-water nexus, climate change, transnational crime, disaster relief and economic security. The Mekong countries and Japan are committed to proactively responding to such non-traditional security issues in a collective manner for a prosperous and resilient Mekong sub-region.

C.1 Economic security

38. The Mekong countries and Japan will work on strengthening economic security and economic resilience including through the improvement of supply chain infrastructure utilizing digital and green technology.

39. The Mekong countries and Japan express their concerns over economic coercion, are oppose to it and stress the importance of the rules-based economic order.

C.2 Water resources management and disaster risks reduction

40. The Mekong countries and Japan will strengthen water-related Disaster Risk Reduction efforts, in response to climate change, which will contribute to solving environmental and social problems regarding water and promoting sustainable economic growth based on the Kumamoto Initiative for Water.

41. The Mekong countries and Japan, as a development partner of the MRC, reiterate their commitment to further collaborating with regional and international organizations, especially the MRC to address transboundary water management, including the sustainable management and utilization of water resources, flood and drought forecasting, establishment of data sharing systems, and promoting cooperation in waste and wastewater management.

42. The Mekong countries and Japan, as development partners of the MRC, are committed to further enhancing disaster risk reduction and building disaster resilience in the Mekong sub-region, including through mainstreaming disaster risk reduction into various development sectors with the active engagement of both local and national stakeholders, enhancing knowledge and capacity on building resilient infrastructure, and strengthening disaster risk management systems to deliver anticipatory action, including but not limited to the risk information, forecasting and early warning systems of the Mekong countries.

C.3 Green transformation

43. The Mekong countries and Japan will enhance energy cooperation to promote energy

transition through various and practical pathways towards net-zero emissions/carbon neutrality, depending on the circumstances of each country, while ensuring energy security and achieving economic growth simultaneously, including through initiatives and activities under the Asia Zero Emission Community (AZEC) platform, the Asia Energy Transition Initiative (AETI), and the ASEAN-Japan Climate Change Action Agenda 2.0, and the Strategic Program for ASEAN Climate and Environment (SPACE).

44. The Mekong countries and Japan also acknowledge the need of more financial support for clean energy infrastructure in the sub-region while strengthening capacity to leverage innovative finance options for promoting decarbonizing, reducing emissions from supply chains, increasing regional energy trade, and accelerating the deployment of clean energy technologies.
45. The Mekong countries and Japan will work on the effective implementation of the Action Plan on the Japan-US-Mekong Power Partnership (JUMPP).
46. The Mekong countries and Japan expressed expectations for Mekong-Japan SDGs Forum, where inter-sectoral participants across generations will join discussions and exchange views on various issues to promote SDGs in the Mekong region towards the realization of “Mekong-Japan Initiative for SDGs toward 2030.”
47. The Mekong countries and Japan will work together to promote environmentally sound and integrated waste management and recycling, including by the application of Johkasou (decentralized wastewater treatment system), recycling of e-waste for increase of resource circulation at national and international levels through the ASEAN-Japan Resource Circulation Partnerships on E-Waste and Critical Minerals (ARCPEC), and measures against plastic pollution, such as formulation of National Action Plans, utilization of G20 Implementation Framework for Action on Marine Plastic Litter under Osaka Blue Ocean Vision, accumulation of scientific knowledge including monitoring on plastic litter in the environment and inventory development, and knowledge sharing through the Regional Knowledge Center for Marine Plastic Debris established by ERIA.
48. The Mekong countries and Japan will encourage participation of the Mekong countries, relevant organizations and companies in the G7-Alliance on Nature Positive Economies, and share knowledge and create information networks.
49. The Mekong countries and Japan will work together to support for technical and policy exchanges on air pollution control, such as implementation of the ASEAN Agreement

on Transboundary Haze Pollution through the Acid Deposition Monitoring Network in East Asia (EANET) and to enhance access to existing financial mechanism to enable to address these issues taking into account multiple benefits such as climate change, health and other pollutions.

50. The Mekong countries and Japan will also work for decarbonization in terms of urban development, including the initiatives of securing green spaces and green buildings that contribute to addressing climate change by carbon dioxide absorption and heat mitigation, and promoting private sector investment, such as ESG investment.

C.4 Women's empowerment

51. The Mekong countries and Japan will strengthen cooperation in women's empowerment and gender equality across sectors, to promote women's active and meaningful participation and leadership in science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics fields, economic and socio-economic activities, and economic and socio-cultural development including through exploring utilization of Japan-ASEAN Women Empowerment Fund.
52. The Mekong countries and Japan will strengthen cooperation in implementing the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda as stated in ASEAN Member States' and Japan's action plans on WPS as well as ASEAN's Regional Plan of Action on WPS (RPA-WPS) including collaboration on enhancing women's leadership role in peace and security as well as disaster risk reduction.

C.5 Blue Economy

53. The Mekong countries and Japan will work together in the field of Blue Economy in the Mekong sub-region, including but not limited to promoting sustainable management of natural resources, mangroves, wetlands and ecological health, mitigating saline intrusion and combating plastic pollution as well as enhancing climate action to achieve net zero greenhouse gas emissions from aquatic and coastal- based activities, with healthier and more sustainable blue food system.

C.6 Food security and safety

54. The Mekong countries and Japan will cooperate in building resilient and sustainable agriculture, fisheries, and food system in the Mekong region under the ASEAN-Japan MIDORI Cooperation Plan, utilizing Japan's technologies and experience enhancing smart/digital agriculture, circular economy, biomass energy, reducing emission, enhancing fertilizer use efficiency, and Integrated Pest Management (IPM).

C.7 Transnational crimes

55. The Mekong countries and Japan will further strengthen cooperation, including capacity building and technical support to tackle transnational crimes, such as terrorism financing, cybercrime, money laundering, illicit trafficking in narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances, trafficking in persons, arms smuggling and online and telephone fraud.