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Agreement comes amid China's growing clout

Japan, ASEAN vow to widen cooperation

KYODO, AFP-JIJI

Japan and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) agreed Sunday to deepen relations regarding security and economic issues at a summit to commemorate 50 years of friendship and cooperation. The agreement comes as China's growing clout alters the region's geopolitical environment.

In a "joint vision statement" issued after the gathering in Tokyo, the leaders pledged to step up cooperation on maritime security, strengthen supply chains, promote sustainable energy practices and expand people-to-people exchanges in various sectors.

The leaders also announced the launch of a new initiative for the next-generation auto industry aimed at mapping out strategies to enable ASEAN members to remain a major hub of auto production and exports.

Among other new efforts to further boost the economy in the fast-growing region is supporting digital startups as well as accelerating public and private investment to achieve decarbonization, according to the statement.

"Based on strong mutual trust, Japan and

ASEAN will tackle new challenges," Kishida said at a news conference after the end of the summit, adding that he is glad that they will take a "new step toward the next 50 years."

Indonesian President Joko Widodo, who served as a co-chair, also attended the press event, saying Japan and the bloc will maintain peace and stability in the region while adhering to international law.

The meeting came as Tokyo has been bolstering its ties with developing and emerging countries collectively known as the Global South, which includes ASEAN members, to capitalize on their growth while countering Beijing's increasing influence.

Japan regards its relations with ASEAN as strategically important, with the bloc facing the South China Sea, home to one of the world's busiest maritime sea lanes. Some of the 10 ASEAN members also have overlapping territorial claims with China there.

Beijing claims almost the entire South China Sea, a vital trade corridor, and its increased deployment of vessels and other methods to assert its claims in disputed areas have riled nations across the region as well as Washington.



Prime Minister Fumio Kishida (center) and ASEAN leaders join hands during a summit meeting in Tokyo on Sunday. POOL / VIA REUTERS

Japan and ASEAN agreed to "strengthen dialogue and cooperation for the maintenance of maritime security and safety, maritime order based on the rule of law, including freedom and safety of navigation and overflight and unimpeded commerce," the joint statement said.

Without identifying China outright, the statement said that the participating nations will "enhance maritime domain awareness as well as cooperation among coastguards and relevant law enforcement agencies, strengthen cooperation on maritime capacity building, and ensure the resolution of disputes by peaceful means, without resorting to threat or use of force in accordance with universally recognized principles of international law."

Japan announced on Saturday it would



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From Gaza to the Red Sea, tensions are spilling over

LIAM STACK, MIKE IVES AND GAYA GUPTA
THE NEW YORK TIMES

The tensions spilling over from the war in the Gaza Strip to merchant shipping in the Red Sea escalated Saturday when Britain and the United States said their militaries had shot down more than a dozen attack drones.

The Houthis, an armed group that controls much of northern Yemen, have been staging drone and missile assaults on Israeli and American targets since the Oct. 7 Hamas-led attacks on Israel. They have said they intend to prevent Israeli ships from sailing the Red Sea until Israel stops its war on Hamas, which rules Gaza. The Houthis and Hamas, like Hezbollah in Lebanon, are backed by Iran.

The shipping industry was also bracing for potential economic fallout as the Red Sea, a vital sea lane, is increasingly drawn into the regional unrest. U.S. Central Command said in a statement that a U.S. guided missile destroyer, the USS Carney, "successfully engaged" 14 drones launched from Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen. It said the confrontation resulted in no injuries or damage to ships in the area.

Earlier in the day, British Defense Secretary Grant Shapps said the British warship HMS Diamond had shot down one suspected attack drone targeting merchant shipping in the Red Sea overnight.

"The recent spate of illegal attacks represent a direct threat to international commerce and maritime security," he said in a statement. "The U.K. remains committed to repelling these attacks to protect the free flow of global trade."

Also on Saturday, the Houthi militia claimed to have launched a number of attack drones toward the Israeli Red Sea port of Eilat. Nir Dinar, an Israeli military spokesperson, said he could not confirm that claim.

The Egyptian state news media reported that its forces had shot down a drone off the coast of Dahab, a beach town on the Gulf of Aqaba roughly 140 kilometers south of Eilat. The report did not say where the drone had come from.

The Houthis have launched attacks on Eilat several times during the Israel-Hamas war, and the arrival of commercial ships in

LDP lawmakers questioned amid fundraising scandal

KYODO

Prosecutors have started questioning ruling Liberal Democratic Party lawmakers on a voluntary basis in connection with a political fund scandal involving the LDP's largest faction, sources familiar with the matter said Saturday.

Several dozen lawmakers of the faction are targeted for questioning amid allegations that the group failed to declare hundreds of millions of yen of fundraising

party revenue in political funding reports.

The scandal has already rocked Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's government, resulting in the replacement of all four ministers belonging to the LDP's largest faction, and could also deliver a further blow to the ruling party depending on how the investigation proceeds.

The Tokyo Public Prosecutor's Office's special investigation squad is looking into the case as a violation of the political funds control law.

The scandal emerged following a criminal complaint alleging that five LDP factions had underreported revenue from political fundraising parties. The faction Kishida belongs to, the fourth largest, is included.

LDP factions have traditionally set quotas for lawmakers on the sale of party tickets, usually priced at ¥20,000 (\$141). In some groups, if they surpass their targets, the extra funds have been passed back to them as a type of commission.

In the LDP's biggest faction, which for-

mer Prime Minister Shinzo Abe led until his assassination in July 2022, the extra funds had neither been reported as expenditure nor as payments to lawmakers.

Such shady funds are believed to have amounted to around ¥500 million over a five-year period through 2022 in the Abe faction.

Among the accused, House of Councilors member Yasutada Ono is believed to have received over ¥50 million, while Yoshitaka Ikeda and Yaichi Tanigawa, both in the

House of Representatives, received over ¥40 million, according to sources.

The Political Funds Control Act requires an accountant to submit a report on income and expenditures. A failure to report can result in imprisonment for up to five years or a fine of up to ¥1 million.

The prosecutors are also expected to investigate the flow of money within the faction by questioning lawmakers who served as secretary-general of the Abe faction. These

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A potential humanitarian crisis
Yonaguni residents decry lack of plan to aid fleeing Taiwanese | **INSIGHTS, PAGE 3**

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A made-in-Japan solution for space junk

Kyoto team says wood satellites can make space development more sustainable

ELIZABETH BEATTIE
STAFF WRITER

Out in the depths of snowy Hokkaido, where bears and foxes lurk, there is a material that Japanese scientists believe could transform the space industry: magnolia wood.

The natural resource, which is used for everything from knife handles to chopsticks, has a new cutting-edge application in the form of space satellites.

Koji Murata, a Kyoto University professor who specializes in wooden materials and agriculture, jokes that the frigid conditions of Hokkaido prepare the trees for low temperatures, although "outer space is an even more severe temperature."

The project is more than just an idea. Back in 2022, Kyoto scientists sent wooden sam-



ples — cherry, birch and magnolia — into space. Magnolia, which is a hardwood, is relatively light and has dimensional stability that is superior to other species, Murata says, making it a winning candidate for the project.

In addition to testing wooden materials, the scientists have developed a wooden prototype satellite called the LingoSat with the support of the Japan Aerospace Exploration

A SpaceX Falcon Heavy rocket lifts off from the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Florida, in 2018. REUTERS

Agency and NASA. The device is contained in an aluminum frame that is only 10 cubic centimeters, while the wooden panel is less than 10 millimeters thick.

Sending wooden materials into space may seem strange — something the scientists concede — but amid growing concern about metal space clutter and a brewing space race, particularly between Asian nations, those working on the project hope that it will help combat space clutter and show the way forward for less environmentally detrimental space activity.

Scientists have also raised the alarm about increased rocket launches damaging the ozone layer — which absorbs ultraviolet light, protecting life on Earth — and contributing to climate change.

Cosmic clutter
Space, despite its moniker, is far from empty. Planets, stars and cosmic dust are increasingly joined by clutter and debris left behind by broken or partly decomposed satellites. At the same time, new satellite launches are being proposed with dizzying frequency,

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