



# How Effective was Thailand's G20 Summit Diplomacy?

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## Executive Summary

Thailand was invited to the G20 in 2019 as the representative of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and this was a long-awaited return to the international stage after years of political instability. This policy brief discusses the long-term goals of Thailand and ASEAN and highlights how they are influenced by the ongoing tension between China and Japan. It argues that Thailand, plagued by its own domestic problems, was unable to fully convey the aims of ASEAN and could not make the most of the opportunities presented by the Osaka Summit.

## The Aims of Thailand and ASEAN

Thailand is one of the founding members of ASEAN. It has assumed this year's Chairmanship, and been invited to the G20 to represent the association. Formed of [ten countries](#), the bloc aims to ensure political cooperation, economic growth and security in the region, and has the motto 'One Vision, One Identity, One

Community', which has helped bring peace and social change to Southeast Asia. [Expected to be the fourth most important economy by 2030, ASEAN has a lot to offer foreign investors.](#)

Amid strong economic growth among its members, ASEAN is now trying to form the [Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership \(RCEP\)](#), a trade deal which would also comprise China, Japan, India, New Zealand, South Korea and Australia. Accounting for more than [3.4 billion people](#), the RCEP would cover 30% of the world's economy with a combined GDP of US\$21.4 trillion. Advancing talks on this free trade agreement (FTA) was one of the main goals for the Thai government at the G20.

In its 50-year lifespan, ASEAN has become a serious political and economic force in Asia. Meeting just days before the Osaka Summit, it held its own summit (its 34th) in Bangkok. The newly 'democratically' elected Thai Prime Minister has this year put the focus on '[Advancing partnership for sustainability](#)'. Key points on the

agenda included maritime pollution, a sustainable digital economy, and a focus on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and their feasibility in Southeast Asia. With the SDGs at the heart of this year's G20 summit, it was crucial for ASEAN to demonstrate they are also working towards achieving these goals.

Significant progress has been achieved in implementing the SDGs. For instance, the opening of the ASEAN Centre for Sustainable Development Studies and Dialogue this year has provided institutional capacity and helped to facilitate collaboration. ASEAN and the United Nations (UN) have cooperated to produce a report on the '[complementarities](#)' between the ASEAN community's Vision 2025 and the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and [the European Union \(EU\) has contributed €170 million](#) to achieving the SDGs in ASEAN countries.

Having [four of the worst maritime polluters](#) in the world among its members, ASEAN needed to take actions to show its commitment to the SDGs. As such, it released its first Framework of Action on Maritime debris which goes hand in hand with the agenda of this year's G20 summit. This shows ASEAN's determination to contribute to the SDGs and be seen as a leader and driver of change in the region with a lot more to offer in the future.

Aware of their distinctive geopolitical situation, ASEAN countries have agreed on an outlook on [the Indo-Pacific](#). It seeks to implement networks to increase cooperation and dialogue in the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions to promote peace and stability by upholding sovereignty and non-intervention, which are two primordial concepts of the bloc. This is of particular relevance when looking at the [South China Sea dispute](#), which has heightened tensions in the region and pushed ASEAN to publish the outlook.

### **What Role can the G20 Play in Southeast Asia?**

Being seen as a legitimate global actor is a major challenge for Thailand, and chairing ASEAN may ultimately prove to be controversial. It is seen as a country embroiled in controversy, with more than 12 coups d'état since 1932. The latest, in 2014, installed a military regime, with General Prayuth Chan-O-Cha as the acting prime minister. This led to the imposition of sanctions by the EU, which have only recently [started to be eased off](#). This is due to the fact that, after five years of military rule, the junta allowed elections for the first time.

However, there has been [rising criticism](#) in the country about them. The military regime's constitution gave Parliament and its elected members little power as the Senate members are picked by the regime. This further

increases divisions in society by not putting an end to years of political instability. However, the Thai government does not seem phased by this hurdle, and the expectation was that G20 members would look past this last scandal and give Thailand a free pass on democracy to focus on trade talks in Osaka and beyond, placing the country in a theoretically strong position to negotiate on behalf of ASEAN with other G20 countries.

However, all ASEAN's long-term plans are likely to be overshadowed by short-term economic problems. During the Bali-IMF Summit in 2018, UN Secretary-General António Guterres highlighted that national debts in ASEAN could endanger the ability of the association to fulfil the objectives in the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. ASEAN is made up of countries in the developing stage that are showing significant gaps in infrastructure. Developing infrastructure projects such as roads, housing, healthcare, and education would require 7% of ASEAN's GDP, presenting difficulties for members to provide adequate funds, time and energy to promote the SDGs.

Due to its geographical location, there are various economic opportunities available to ASEAN. The bloc is at the centre of geopolitical disputes between important world actors that are competing for the attention of these Southeast Asian countries. Japan and China are trying to impress ASEAN countries for investment opportunities

by taking a leadership role in Asia that was previously dominated by the US. It is estimated that Japan has been leading the race against China in terms of infrastructure as it has backed more than 237 projects in the region whereas China has supported 191. However, China is keen to promote its One Belt, One Road Initiative across ASEAN. The rise of China has been closely watched by ASEAN members as they see it as a great economic power with various strategic benefits.

Inviting members of ASEAN (Vietnam and Singapore) along with Thailand as the Chairman of the association was strategically very important for Japan. Indonesia, a member of both the G20 and ASEAN, is also present at this year's summit. As Thailand and ASEAN orbit towards China, Japan is trying its best to catch up by attempting to counterbalance the increasing power of China in the region. For example, having a special relationship with Thailand has always been of great interest to Japan. It was the only country in the G7 that did not sanction Thailand after the 2014 coup d'état and has acted 'as a source of legitimacy for the Thai military regime'. It was the second-largest importer and third-largest exporter to Thailand up until 2015 and offered generous loans to create a railway project showing the importance of this relationship for Japan.

The G20 summit in Osaka was a crucial moment for Thailand to be seen as a leader in Southeast Asia. The

challenges here, though, were two-fold: Thailand simultaneously needed to be seen as a legitimate actor in the international system while also representing the interests and goals of ASEAN as a sustainable region. Thailand and ASEAN had a genuine opportunity: by playing their cards right, they could have been the true winners of this year's G20 as China and Japan competed to draw Thai attention.

### **Making the Most of the G20? Thailand Drowned by the Crowd**

In meetings with the Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, Thai Prime Minister General Prayut Chan-O-Cha stressed that the [domestic political situation had stabilised](#) in a bid to show world leaders that Thailand is now available for serious political discussion. The efforts on sustainability made by ASEAN also did not go unnoticed as they were mentioned in the [G20 Ministerial Meeting on Energy Transitions and Global Environment for Sustainable Growth](#), which recognised the importance of research and policy to advance the SDGs. However, ASEAN was not mentioned in the official Leaders' Declaration and talks on the RCEP have not seemed to advance. Thailand seemed almost non-existent during the summit, a passive actor with few allies to turn to at the G20.

In terms of communication, only one team of embedded Thai journalists were present at the summit. There was

a clear lack of interest from the Thai media compared to the excitement of having the 34th Summit of ASEAN at home. There was little effort to engage with the international community at the summit. This demonstrates that, even at the national level, Thailand seems, at best, only partially engaged in international politics.

In Osaka, the *de facto* representative of ASEAN appeared to be Indonesia. Already a member of the G20, its President Joko Widodo did more to advance the interests of ASEAN than Thailand. This conclusion is reflected through Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi's [tweets](#), which stressed the support and welcome of Australia and India to the Indo-Pacific Outlook. With the largest economy in Southeast Asia, Indonesia has established itself as a vital player in international relations. As a result of the strong relationships it has built with other G20 members, Indonesia can now easily contribute to pressing international issues.

The G20 represents [64% of the world's population](#) living in the largest economies. The [lack of representation](#) of small and developing countries demonstrate the ineffectiveness of G20 summits to encourage their growth. The different experiences between Thailand and Indonesia could reflect wider problems with the G20 not accommodating discussion with developing countries. Arguably, Thailand was held back by its domestic

problems and did not have the mandate to assertively pursue its diplomacy at the summit. However, there was also a lack of willingness from the Thais to make the most of the opportunities available at the summit and to push their agenda.

## **Conclusion**

The G20 Osaka Summit seemed to be full of opportunities for developing countries, but Japan was the real winner. By inviting regional actors such as ASEAN, Japan made a real effort to expand the contours of the discussion and it achieved its primary objective (in terms of the Asian dimension of its strategic agenda) of consolidating its relationship with Thailand in order to counterbalance the rise of China.

However, the Thai government did not make the most of the summit. Undermined by domestic problems, it lacked the legitimacy to represent ASEAN and was unable to make any serious impact with other world leaders. Thailand is not yet ready to be a key player at the international level, and is inhibited, like many other developing countries, from making an impact in a club dominated by more powerful (and more developed) ones.

Of course, this was also never going to be easy: when other members come to every summit, have demonstrably more power and deeper diplomatic linkages, and also control the agenda, it is difficult and daunting to arrive in the room for the first time and make your voice heard.

However, that only made it even more imperative that Thailand invested substantial resources and diplomatic capital, as well as finding unorthodox engagement strategies, to punch above its weight at the G20. A much smaller Asian country, [Singapore](#), has already shown the way. This is the key lesson for the country to take away from its experience in Osaka. But there is a lesson for the G20, too. It is worth reconsidering how smaller developing countries and regional associations are represented at the summit: this should be both expanded and institutionalised, with far more outreach and technical work undertaken between summits so that the third of the world's population currently left out has better representation than at present.

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