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From the CAG Team

The ASEAN Way Forward: Addressing Emerging Security Challenges in the Indo-Pacific

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Over the last weekend of May, the 2024 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, brought together defence ministers, military chiefs, and strategic experts worldwide to discuss pertinent security issues in the region. Reflecting the emerging security concerns over the past year, key regional security discussions such as the political crisis in Myanmar and maritime law continued to dominate during the Shangri-La Dialogue this year. Yet, without clear headway in addressing these security challenges, significant doubts remain about the capability of the ASEAN states to remain as the “main driving force” of the region.

The *ASEAN Bulletin* is published quarterly by the Centre on Asia and Globalisation at the National University of Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. It seeks to bring together a key summary of current news articles, reports, events, and academic publications produced in English on the three pillars of the ASEAN Community - the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC).


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As ASEAN grapples with increasingly more complex security challenges and internal divisions that jeopardise its unity and centrality in the regional security architecture, it finds itself at a critical juncture, where it needs to balance its traditional diplomatic approach while navigating geopolitical shifts, including the intensifying rivalry between the United States and China in the Indo-Pacific, heightened tensions in the South China Sea, and the ongoing political turmoil in Myanmar, to maintain its centrality and strategic autonomy.

Traditionally, ASEAN's approach to regional security emphasises soft institutionalisation, grounded in principles of non-interference, consensus-based decision-making, and the peaceful resolution of disputes among its member states. To advance its regional security agenda, ASEAN also actively engages with major powers such as China, Japan, and the United States. This engagement is facilitated through ASEAN frameworks like the ASEAN Regional Forum and the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus. Through promoting regular informal dialogues and practical cooperation, ASEAN aims to peacefully address differences, build trust, and enhance mutual understanding on security issues. These efforts are crucial for ASEAN to secure a central and advantageous position in the regional security architecture. Nevertheless, with eyes on ASEAN and its ability to address these regional challenges, ASEAN needs to be

more proactive in confronting emerging security challenges to ensure stability and security in the Indo-Pacific.

Critics contend that ASEAN's efforts remain insufficient in addressing these security issues. The institution's adherence to the principle of non-interference has impeded decisive action on Myanmar's political crisis, with initiatives stalling without cooperation from the military junta. Moreover, China's increasingly belligerent position in the South China Sea has heightened security concerns, particularly among Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam, which have competing territorial claims in the area. Yet, the other non-claimant ASEAN member states have been reluctant to take a firm stance against China due to their economic ties with the latter. The persistent lack of consensus has hindered ASEAN from taking robust action and prompted criticisms of the organisation's effectiveness in addressing regional security challenges.

This has led to the rise of alternative bilateral and minilateral security cooperation platforms outside of ASEAN. The recent trilateral deal between the Philippines, United States, and Japan, while not explicitly targeting China, has raised concerns about China's aggressive behaviour in the region and aims to "change the dynamic" in the South China Sea. The emergence of more assertive and confrontational narratives surrounding the trilateral pact and the Philippines will

likely escalate tensions with China. This could alienate them from the ASEAN members who are cautious of being embroiled in a conflict with major powers. As such, it is critical that these security cooperation pacts with external regional powers do not undermine ASEAN's relevance, principles, and mechanisms—particularly, ASEAN's ongoing diplomatic engagement efforts with Beijing regarding the South China Sea. Instead, ASEAN members must consider how these alternative platforms can reinforce their principles, interests, and ASEAN's approach to maintaining regional stability.

These concerns have also spurred the formation of new minilateral groups and security initiatives by major powers, such as the Quadrilateral Security Meeting (Quad), which exclude the ASEAN members. With a focus on supporting a free and open Indo-Pacific, the Quad has worked with countries in the region to tackle non-traditional security challenges like health security. While the Quad has remained complementary to ASEAN and its initiatives, there is a concern that it may shift towards a more adversarial stance, potentially marginalising ASEAN's role and its efforts to maintain a balanced and inclusive security framework in the region. Therefore, ASEAN must collaborate with these minilateral groups to ensure that they continue to complement its security agenda.

Even though ASEAN promotes security cooperation with the external powers, it is

also critical that it strengthens internal cohesion among its members by fostering unity and strategic relevance. In 2023, the first joint military exercise involving all ten ASEAN member states, the ASEAN Solidarity Exercise, was held. The non-combative exercise, which included anti-piracy and maritime security, highlights ASEAN's evolving efforts at strengthening its independence and unity. While cooperation was relatively superficial, these steps indicate ASEAN's solidarity and commitment to addressing regional security challenges.

Crucially, the political crisis in Myanmar must be managed to address the glaring reminder of the country's disregard for ASEAN's constitutional principles as well as ASEAN's inability to manage the escalating crisis. While ASEAN must firmly uphold its principles, it must also reassess its approach to engaging with Myanmar. Whether it is involving external regional partners like China and India or using bilateral diplomatic engagement strategies, it is crucial for ASEAN to push forth an effective and amicable resolution to the crisis in Myanmar. Worryingly, the failure to do so risks accentuating ASEAN's incompetency and by extension, its relevance and strategic autonomy.

Additionally, Timor-Leste's forthcoming accession to ASEAN presents both strategic opportunities and challenges for the institution's strategic relevance and unity. The inclusion of Timor-Leste can enhance ASEAN's geopolitical cohesion by

strengthening the region's geographical presence and strategic depth. Closely situated between Indonesia and Australia, and with close security relations with China, Timor-Leste's strategic location could raise concerns among the neighbouring countries about China's potentially assertive military influence in the region. An alignment between Timor-Leste and ASEAN can also help the latter to assert itself as a key player in maintaining the balance of power and regional stability. Moreover, since Timor-Leste is comparatively less developed, its entry into ASEAN could be an impetus for the institution to reassess its initiatives and bridge the divide among the ASEAN members. This could potentially foster greater intra-ASEAN resilience in tackling future security challenges.

As the regional security architecture evolves rapidly, ASEAN must become more agile while steadfastly upholding its principles. It needs to be actively engaged in navigating these complex security crises by enhancing diplomatic mechanisms, fostering cooperation, and developing innovative approaches to address both traditional and non-traditional security threats. ASEAN should also strengthen partnerships with the external powers and explore emerging alternative security arrangements to remain relevant and involved in shaping the regional security agenda. This will enable ASEAN to protect its strategic interests while reinforcing its

pivotal role in maintaining stability and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific.

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