Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy

ASEAN BULLETIN

ISSUE 6 | JULY 2025

GUEST COMMENTARY

What's wrong with ASEAN and how to fix it?

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Despite being one of the most successful regional organisations in the world, there is no shortage of critics who find something wrong with ASEAN. They boil down to three essential ills. First, its non-interference and consensus-based decision-making ("ASEAN Way") have failed to effectively address regional and transboundary crises in a timely manner—whether in the South China Sea, the Myanmar coup, or the Mekong. Second, ASEAN is often dismissed as a "talk shop," with over a thousand annual meetings and hundreds of bodies, statements, and work plans that lack effective implementation or enforcement. Third, the ASEAN Secretariat remains institutionally weak despite growing responsibilities.

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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The critics are not entirely wrong, but their palliatives are misplaced: calls for majority voting when consensus fails, suspending members when they "misbehave", getting rid of meetings when they don't produce immediate outcomes, or making the Secretary-General more powerful in the face of recalcitrant states will do more harm than good. The essence of ASEAN, and the way it has worked, has always been trying to navigate both its extraordinary internal diversity and major powers' influence.

In this essay, we propose pragmatic fixes to the three core criticisms often levelled at ASEAN—solutions grounded in the association's history, culture and geopolitical realities. Our aim is to enhance ASEAN's performance while fostering a more realistic understanding among critics of what ASEAN can or cannot deliver

A reinvigorated ASEAN Way

Rather than discarding the "ASEAN Way," what the region needs is adaptation. A more purposeful "ASEAN Way" involves approaching challenges along two dimensions: **strategic issue**s—such as the Myanmar crisis or the South China Sea—where member state positions and external interests diverge, and **functional issues**—such as disaster relief and health security—where internal differences and major powers influence are lower.

On strategic issues, ASEAN's value lies in keeping dialogue open in order to manage "mistrust" and prevent escalation. In the South China Sea, while negotiations on the Code of Conduct (COC) have stalled, ASEAN should not lose momentum by focusing solely on a legally binding outcome. Instead, it could reframe the COC as a political commitment, pursue practical issue-based agreements and advance institutionalised confidence-building measures that promote stability. On Myanmar, ASEAN has sustained diplomatic engagement: appointing Special Envoys under each Chairmanship, pushing for humanitarian access through the AHA Centre, and reviewing the Five-Point Consensus (5PC). While progress has been slow, the 5PC remains a common reference point for ASEAN's engagement. Blanket bans risk eroding ASEAN's neutrality and diminishing its influence. Rather than excluding Myanmar authorities entirely, ASEAN should seek creative and principled ways to engage all parties in constructive dialogue. On the Cambodia–Thailand border clashes, ASEAN is working on de-escalation efforts but needs to step up even more through the Chair (Malaysia), trusted member states and conflict management mechanisms, together with China and the US.

On functional issues, ASEAN has demonstrated its ability to move more quickly, more decisively, and even more

innovatively. In disaster management, it adopted a robust legal framework through the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER), with success in coordinating timely emergency relief during Typhoon Odette in 2021. During the COVID-19 pandemic, ASEAN established a regional response fund, mobilised joint procurement of vaccines, and facilitated the safe movement of essential goods. On trade, ASEAN successfully asserts its centrality by initiating and reconciling the diverse interests of its ten members with China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand, culminating in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)—the largest free trade area in the world. On the Mekong, ASEAN has stepped up support for the Mekong River Commission, rather than duplicating efforts through its own parallel mechanisms as in the past.

While not abandoning its consensus model, ASEAN has been and can continue to be innovative in using flexible mechanisms. The use of minilateral cooperation such as "coalitions of the willing" and "ASEAN minus X" formula allows willing and able member states to move forward on functional initiatives. The ASEAN Power Grid exemplifies this —a web of bilateral, trilateral and subregional interconnection projects that progressively advance regional energy integration while providing space for others to join at their own pace. ASEAN has also established issue-based task forces, such as the ASEAN Geoeconomic Task Force launched in 2025, to address external shocks and economic vulnerabilities and the ASEAN Coordinating Council Working Group on Public Health Emergencies (ACCWG-PHE) during the COVID-19 pandemic.

A more integrated ASEAN delivery and a strengthened ASEAN Secretariat

For ASEAN to meet its growing ambitions while not be overstretched, it must reassess how its mechanisms are organised, coordinated and empowered. Its current system—comprising more than a thousand meetings annually, overlapping working groups and siloed sectoral processes—often generates activity without delivering meaningful outcomes.

Crucially, siloed implementation remains a systemic challenge. Across the three Community pillars, many sectoral bodies operate in isolation, pursuing country-driven or dialogue partner-led initiatives with limited regional coherence. Cross-cutting issues such as climate resilience, maritime cooperation, water and food security, and digital transformation require joint strategies and integrated programming that existing structures rarely enable.

Some improvements are in place, but more are in order. The ASEAN Coordinating Council (ACC) plays an inter-pillar coordination role, but its

mandate could be sharpened to facilitate strategic alignment across community pillars—not just reporting. Empowering the ACC with clearer cross-sectoral oversight, supported by a proactive ASEAN Secretariat (more below), could enhance coherence. Technical working groups working on cross-cutting issues can be convened jointly—a practice used in the MRC and Lancang-Mekong Cooperation mechanisms through "joint expert groups". This reduces the number of meetings and increases real collaboration.

To support a more invigorated and integrated ASEAN, the organisation needs to be better resourced. Practical reforms could be implemented in four areas: finance and budget, staff quality, monitoring and evaluation, and technical leadership and ideas generation.

First, with a current annual operational budget of only around $20 million and a staff of some 100 professional officers (the other 300 are support staff)—ASEC is critically under-resourced. Servicing a thousand meetings a year leaves little room to think, innovate, monitor, or support effective implementation. While ASEAN does have funds for some "projects," these are largely driven by formal partners and constrained by ASEAN's own internal and often protracted approval process. ASEC needs discretionary resources it can manage directly. Yet, proposals to expand its regular budget through equal increases in member state contributions are unlikely to gain traction, as less well-off members cannot afford more. A contribution model based on capacity to pay is also off the table as ASEAN prides itself on the principle of "equal pay and equal say." A practical model can be drawn from the MRC, which anchors its resource mobilization strategy in its five-year strategic plans (USD 65 million) and two-year work plans (USD 13-15 million per year). Likewise, ASEAN's strategic plans (integrating across three pillars) can be budgeted. ASEAN has to determine what additional resources are needed to be raised voluntarily from both able members and partners. Having a budgeted plan and actual fund under its control would not only empower ASEC to hire more professional staff to support priorities approved by members but also minimise ad-hoc contribution by partners. Having to raise funds every few years would also motivate the secretariat to perform better. ASEAN should then have an accompanying vision—perhaps by 2035 or 2040—that the needed funding amount raised voluntarily will eventually be borne by members equally.

Second, alongside an increase in staff size, there should also be regular efforts to renew the Secretariat's staff quality. The ability to contribute meaningfully to a specific role, despite the importance of institutional memory, may diminish without opportunities for growth, rotation or renewal. ASEC could consider introducing mandatory open merit-based

recruitment for positions held beyond a six-years period (as in the MRC case). Incumbents can reapply and continue if they meet evolving needs, while allowing space for fresh perspectives and skills. Recruitment criteria can also be improved to emphasise experiences in regional/international organisations and the private sector. While ASEC staff ultimately serve member states, it should also embody the ethos of international civil servants with the ideals and passion to advance collective ASEAN interest.

Third, while the secretariat does not have enforcement power, there is no excuse for not upgrading its monitoring and evaluation function in line with latest best practices. Currently, Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) responsibilities are fragmented across siloed divisions under each of the three main departments—leading to duplication and inconsistency. A more effective approach would be to consolidate these efforts into a single, unified M&E division, housed either under the Corporate Affairs Directorate or directly under the Office of the Secretary-General. This will help integrate development and monitoring of indicators across blueprints and plans beyond simply compiling reports. ASEAN must invest in emerging technologies, including AI and data analytics, to develop applications that can streamline data collection, automate progress tracking, model scenarios and generate real-time dashboards for meetings of ASEC leadership and the Committee of Permanent Representatives.

Finally, while the secretariat supports member states on political and governance meetings, there is no reason it could not do more to provide technical leadership and ideas generation. Drawing from precedents in the UN and MRC, senior ASEC officials—by virtue of their expertise and impartiality—could serve as chairs or co-chairs of technical working groups. Rather than mostly soliciting input via emails, cross-sectoral task teams within ASEC could be set up to develop integrated plans, proposals and programming. When co-chairing technical groups with member states, a more coordinated ASEC could propose meeting agendas, facilitate consensus, ensure adherence to ASEAN plans already approved by states, propose budget allocations, and track implementation results.

To generate more intellectual ideas, the ASEC could play a more robust coordination and agenda-setting role vis-à-vis the growing number of ASEAN-affiliated entities, including the AHA Centre, ASEAN Centre for Energy, AMRO, and think tanks such as the LYKSPP, ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, and ERIA. These institutions hold technical and analytical capacity, grounded in science and global best practices, but often operate in silos, competition or disconnect from the ASEAN political and decision process. The UN system has shown that members

of such a "Third UN" (think tanks, experts, etc.) can work on issues not yet in vogue with member states, find innovative ways to tackle problems and move along solutions, or at the very least keep relevant issues alive even without solutions.

In conclusion, ASEAN does not need radical reinvention but reinvigoration—adapting the ASEAN Way, integrating its delivery mechanisms, and strengthening its Secretariat to meet today's complex challenges. Pragmatic reforms grounded in ASEAN's geopolitical realities will allow the organisation to preserve unity and centrality while becoming more effective.

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