

ASEAN BULLETIN

ISSUE 6 | JULY 2025

GUEST COMMENTARY

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

By Anoulak Kittikhoun and Joanne Lin



Photo credit: Flickr/[Australia Embassy Jakarta](#)

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 issues**—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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FROM THE CAG TEAM

Regional Economic Cooperation in an Era of Trade Realignment

By Phoebe Luo



Countries in Asia were among the hardest hit by Trump's "Liberation Day" reciprocal tariffs announced on April 2. Most have largely refrained from retaliation and sought to engage the US in direct negotiations before the ninety-day deadline (which was further extended to August 1, 2025). Nonetheless, negotiating with the US is not the only option on the table. Countries in the region have been adopting other strategies to hedge against US protectionism through diversifying their partnerships and deepening regional

integration. The uncertainties of the global economy, unpredictability of US policies, and the broader impact of US-China tensions have further heightened the urgency and impetus to double down on this strategy. Notwithstanding the economic challenges, there are opportunities for India to make strategic gains in a more open, integrated, and diversified regional architecture.

Regional Approaches: Diversification and Integration

Despite the chaos and uncertainty unleashed by “Liberation Day”, countries in the region have largely refrained from retaliation and sought to engage the US in direct negotiations. The ASEAN Economic Ministers affirmed that the group would “engage in a frank and constructive dialogue” with the US. [1]Indonesia and Vietnam have struck deals with the US which included commitments to remove tariffs on US imports and increase purchases of US goods. India has fast-tracked its negotiations with the US on a bilateral trade agreement that could potentially lower tariffs and increase market access for US products. China, which was slapped with staggering tariffs of 145 percent after tit-for-tat retaliation, reached a trade truce with the US in June 2025 which reduced the US tariffs on Chinese imports to 55 percent.

Nonetheless, negotiating with the US is not the only option on the table. Even prior to the “Liberation Day” announcement, countries in the region have already been adopting a range of strategies to hedge against growing US protectionism. First, by diversifying their partnerships and expanding ties with other countries and economic blocs. Second, by deepening regional integration and strengthening intra-regional cooperation.

ASEAN aims to conclude negotiations on two important regional agreements—the upgraded ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement (ATIGA) and the ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA)—by 2025. The recently upgraded ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Free Trade Area (AANZFTA) has entered into force on April 21, and Free Trade Agreement (FTA) talks with Canada are expected to conclude soon. ASEAN has also stepped up its engagements with other regions and groupings including the European Union (EU), the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and the Pacific Alliance.

As for India, while media attention has largely focused on its bilateral trade negotiations with the US, India has also been concurrently pursuing other deals to support its trade and supply chain diversification. India concluded a major bilateral FTA with the UK on May 6 following several months of accelerated talks, and has been pushing for the conclusion of FTA negotiations with the EU. In March last year, India had also signed a trade agreement with the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) and started FTA negotiations with several countries including Chile, Oman, Peru, and Qatar.

Strategic Imperatives: Economic and geopolitical Uncertainties

Regional countries had adopted a similar strategy of diversification and integration during Trump's first term. ASEAN signed the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) with Australia, China, Japan, Republic of Korea (ROK) and New Zealand in 2022, and several ASEAN countries (Brunei, Singapore, and Vietnam) are part of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) which came into force in 2018, after the US pulled out in 2017. Amidst this latest round of trade turmoil, the urgency and impetus to double down on this strategy have heightened due to several factors.

First, the uncertain global economic outlook. The sweeping tariffs have come at a time when many countries are still recovering from the multiple shocks and crises of recent years. In particular, Asia is disproportionately exposed and vulnerable to the downside risk that the tariffs pose given its reliance on trade as a growth driver. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has since downgraded its 2025 growth forecasts for Asia to 3.9 percent (down from 4.6 percent in 2024), and for ASEAN to 4.1 percent (down from 4.8 percent in 2024). India's economy is relatively more insulated, with its 2025 growth forecast going down slightly from 6.5 percent to 6.2 percent. Nonetheless, a prolonged trade war could jeopardise India's *Viksit Bharat* goal of

achieving 8 percent GDP growth annually and becoming a developed nation by 2047.

Second, the unpredictability of US policies. As Singapore PM Lawrence Wong highlighted in his ministerial statement on the US tariffs, "Protectionism is already bad—unstable protectionism is even worse." There remains significant uncertainty and confusion over the US' approach to the tariff negotiations, including whether the negotiations can be completed in time before the 1 August deadline; whether these agreements can serve as sufficient safeguards against future tariff threats; and whether tariffs in specific sectors such as pharmaceuticals and semiconductors will be imposed. More importantly, Trump's recent recalibration does not suggest a fundamental shift away from his staunch conviction that the US has been "looted, pillaged, and plundered" by other countries, and that the global trading system no longer serves the US' interests.

Third, the broader impact of US-China tensions. Both the US and China are important partners for most countries in Asia. ASEAN's largest investor and largest trading partner are the US and China respectively. India's top two trading partners are the US and China. Unlike the trade war under Trump's first term which was targeted squarely at China, countries in the region are now caught in the direct firing line. Countries that had benefited the most from the "China plus one" strategy were among the hardest hit by the

reciprocal tariffs before the ninety-day pause. Furthermore, the US appears intent to crack down on the trans-shipment of Chinese goods to evade US tariffs and has reportedly asked countries to limit their trade with China in return for tariff exemptions. In response, China has warned that it “firmly opposes any party reaching a deal at the expense of China’s interests.”

Implications for India-ASEAN and India-China Cooperation

Notwithstanding the economic challenges, there are opportunities for India to make strategic gains in a more open, integrated, and diversified regional architecture. First, India is well-positioned to forge closer links with countries in the region seeking to maintain optionality and strategic space. In line with the upgrade in relations to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2022, there is potential for India and ASEAN to expand their economic ties. While India’s trade volume with ASEAN has more than doubled in the last 15 years to reach \$121 billion in 2023, it remains significantly below ASEAN’s trade volume with China which reached \$702 billion in 2023. Both sides should press ahead with the ongoing review of the ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement (AITIGA) despite the challenges in the negotiation process, to make the agreement more user-friendly and trade facilitative for businesses. ASEAN would also welcome India back to

the RCEP when India is ready. Beyond goods trade, both sides should strengthen cooperation in services, the digital economy, and renewable energy, sectors that leverage India’s strengths and align with shared priorities.

Second, India can seek to capitalise on China’s interest in maintaining stable relations with neighbouring countries. China is keen to prioritise “neighbourhood diplomacy” to safeguard its economic and national interests, as underscored at a high-level Politburo conference convened shortly after “Liberation Day”. Furthermore, India-China relations have been on the mend following an agreement to deescalate tensions on the border and a meeting between the leaders for the first time in five years in October 2024. This could be an opportunity for both sides to explore economic cooperation that would support India’s growth ambitions while addressing its growing trade deficit with China, such as getting more Chinese companies to manufacture in India, transfer technology to local partners, and import more Indian goods. Expanding mutually beneficial India-China cooperation could also have a positive impact on regional growth and stability. As former Indian Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao wrote in a recent op-ed, “If India and China can find a way to manage their differences peacefully, they will do more than reduce bilateral tension – they will provide the region with a foundation for long-term strategic stability.”

Conclusion

While the political momentum for economic diversification and regional integration has strengthened, the potential obstacles and challenges should not be underestimated. Indeed, the US' tariffs have heightened concerns over China's industrial overcapacity which could compel countries to resort to protectionist measures and impose more trade restrictions. However, these challenges do not detract from the fact that diversification and integration remain fundamentally important to securing Asia's long-term growth and resilience against external shocks and uncertainties. The success of this approach will depend on whether India, China and ASEAN—as the key growth engines of the region—will seize this strategic window of opportunity to shape the trajectory of Asia's growth story.

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NEWS ARTICLES & COMMENTARIES

ASEAN POLITICAL-SECURITY COMMUNITY

News Articles

Thai army accuses Cambodia of violating truce**The Straits Times, July 29**

“At the time the agreement took effect, the Thai side detected that Cambodian forces had launched armed attacks into several areas within Thai territory,” said Thai army spokesman Winthai Suwaree.

Thailand and Cambodia agree to ceasefire - Malaysia PM**Reuters, July 28**

Following Malaysian-led mediation talks, Thailand and Cambodia have agreed to an “immediate and unconditional ceasefire to end their border clashes.”

Thailand-Cambodia clashes pose a serious test to ASEAN centrality**Malay Mail, July 28**

ASEAN foreign ministers have called for an immediate ceasefire and urged both Thailand and Cambodia to exercise maximum restraint while backing Malaysian-led mediation amid deadly border clashes.

With 5G being a key enabler for AI, ASEAN must work to improve telecom infrastructure**Gov Insider, July 28**

“2025 marks a critical juncture in the global deployment of 5G technology. Timely adoption is necessary to get the advantages of 5G-AI synergy,” said NUS LKYSPP’s Professor Vu Minh Kuong at the report’s launch event.

ASEAN nations can overcome space, disaster constraints in pursuit of nuclear energy: IAEA Chief**Channel News Asia, July 27**

Much more groundwork is needed to expand ASEAN’s research into nuclear safety in order to meet rising power needs and climate goals.

Selected Commentaries
& Publications**ASEAN’s silence is a backyard crisis in dangerous inertia****The Jakarta Times, July 28**

By Andrew W. Mantong, Researcher at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).

The ongoing Thai-Cambodian border conflict highlights the increasingly fragile geopolitical environment that ASEAN has to navigate in order to assert its role as a “force for peace and stability in Southeast Asia.”

The Thailand-Cambodia Border Crisis is ASEAN’s Moment of Truth**Fulcrum, July 28**

By Joanne Lin, Senior Fellow and Coordinator of the ASEAN Studies Centre at ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, and Melinda Martinus, Lead Researcher in Socio-Cultural Affairs at the ASEAN Studies Centre, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.

As deadly clashes escalate along the border between Thailand and Cambodia, ASEAN again confronts a crisis that shows up its institutional limitations.

Cambodia’s Major Dilemma: Handling Anti-Vietnamese Sentiments**Fulcrum, July 28**

By Sovinda Po, Visiting Fellow in the Vietnam Studies Programme at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute.

Despite the Cambodian government’s strong efforts to manage anti-Vietnamese sentiment, several challenges persist.

NEWS ARTICLES & COMMENTARIES

ASEAN POLITICAL-SECURITY COMMUNITY

News Articles

AI event aims to fortify China, ASEAN ties**China Daily, July 21**

A new AI competition, “AI Guangxi, AI China, AI ASEAN,” invites participants from China and ASEAN to develop real-world AI applications across multiple sectors, aiming to strengthen China–ASEAN innovation cooperation and regional integration.

US will build repair facilities for the Philippine Navy near the disputed South China Sea**AP News, July 16**

The US Navy will build two boat repair and maintenance facilities in Palawan, Philippines, reinforcing US-Philippine defense ties amid rising maritime tensions with China.

Wang Yi underlines Beijing’s rejection of 2016 South China Sea ruling**South China Morning Post, July 12**

At the East Asian Summit, Chinese Minister Wang Yi dismissed The Hague’s South China Sea ruling as a “farce,” claiming it was orchestrated by external powers to destabilise the region for their own gain.

Malaysia Conducts Cross-border Radioactive Detection Exercise with ASEAN Neighbours**Bernama, June 7**

Malaysia will conduct a field training exercise aims to test ASEAN countries’ ability to detect and respond to nuclear incidents.

ASEAN must strengthen its integration to give itself ‘manoeuvring space’: PM Wong**The Straits Times, May 27**

At the 46th ASEAN Summit, Singapore Prime Minister Lawrence Wong highlighted that ASEAN “must redouble efforts to deepen the grouping’s integration in a world where multilateralism and globalisation are in retreat.”

ASEAN 2045: Setting Ambitious Goals Amid Uncertain Times**RSIS Commentary, June 23**

By Jose Miguelito Enriquez, Associate Research Fellow in the Centre for Multilateralism Studies at S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.

The ASEAN Vision 2045 reflects regional interests to seize the opportunities and confront the challenges that stem from seventeen key “megatrends.”

‘ASEAN paradox’ haunts Southeast Asia’s integration**Asia News Network, June 18**

By Sarah Teo, Assistant Professor the Regional Security Architecture Programme at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS) and coordinator of the doctoral program at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), and Iis Gindarsah was a former visiting senior fellow of the Indonesia program and is now a senior adviser at LAB 45.

ASEAN faces formidable political and security challenges, with critics questioning its ability to navigate great power tensions and internal shortcomings despite economic gains.

Media Discussions

Advancing the ASEAN Power Grid: Unlocking Regional Energy Investment Potential
ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, June 16

NEWS ARTICLES & COMMENTARIES

ASEAN ECONOMIC COMMUNITY

News Articles

Vietnam takes steps to realise 8.3-8.5% growth target in 2025**Vietnam Plus, July 29**

Vietnam is ramping up efforts to meet its ambitious 2025 GDP growth target of 8.3–8.5 percent through strategic reforms and policy support across consumption, investment, exports, and infrastructure amongst others.

Indonesia economy face increasing pressures**Vietnam Plus, July 28**

Global uncertainty has weighed heavily on Indonesia's economy with key reforms necessary in order to achieve its minimum growth target of 5 percent.

Thailand faces twin threats as border clash compounds tariff woes**The Business Times, July 28**

Thailand's economy faces a "twin threat": as deadly border clashes place greater financial strain and political pressure on Thailand, alongside looming concerns of US tariffs.

Malaysia urges strengthening intra-ASEAN trade**The Investor, July 28**

In line with the ASEAN Vision 2045 and growing global uncertainty, intra-ASEAN trade is necessary to reduce dependence on traditional external trading partners.

ADB Lowers Economic Growth Forecasts for Asia and the Pacific**ADB, July 23**

Economies in Southeast Asia will likely be hardest hit by worsened trade conditions and uncertainty. ADB now predicts the subregion's economies will grow 4.2 percent this year and 4.3 percent next year, down roughly half a percentage point from April forecasts for each year.

Selected Commentaries
& Publications**India-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement: Turning a Bad Deal into a Good One?**
ISAS Brief, July 21

By Amitendu Palit, Senior Research Fellow and Research Lead (Trade and Economics) at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), National University of Singapore.

Key reforms are needed to the bilateral free trade agreements currently under negotiation to address emerging trade challenges and strengthen the effectiveness of economic cooperation.

Trump Is Reshaping Southeast Asia's Future. Does He Realize That?**The Diplomat, July 16**

By Robert Law, Director of Advisory & Insights at Asialink, based at the University of Melbourne.

Donald Trump's US tariffs are exacerbating divisions with ASEAN and undermining the bloc's internal unity.

Strategic Adaptation in ASEAN-China Economic Relations: Balancing Growth with Resilience**Eurasia Review, June 27**

By Simon Hutagalung, a retired diplomat from the Indonesian Foreign Ministry.

Strengthened ASEAN-China economic ties have supported ASEAN's development and digital connectivity, but underlying imbalances and policy gaps present long-term risks and vulnerabilities.

NEWS ARTICLES & COMMENTARIES

ASEAN ECONOMIC COMMUNITY

News Articles

Chinese firms urged to deepen ASEAN roots as US cracks down on transshipments

South China Morning Post, July 23

Chinese firms should seek to deepen integration with Southeast Asian countries amidst US threats to place high tariffs on the export-reliant region.

India may consider terminating ASEAN pact as FTA review drags

Hindustan Times, July 7

India's "patience is running thin" due to lack of headways in reviewing the free trade agreement between India and ASEAN.

Asean needs 'bolder reforms' to attract investments in more fragmented global economy: PM Wong

The Straits Times, July 5

Singapore Prime Minister Lawrence Wong called for greater intra-regional trade and emphasized the importance of building a competitive single market to attract businesses and investment.

Upgraded China-ASEAN FTA aims to be the new driving force for regional prosperity

The Star, May 24

The latest upgrade of China-ASEAN free trade agreement seeks to build on existing partnerships to "[enhance] regulatory alignment and trade facilitation, paving the way for deeper regional integration and industrial synergy."

China leads, Japan and S. Korea catch up in ASEAN's green energy transition

Indonesia Business Post, May 21

Rising competition among China, Japan, and South Korea to lead Southeast Asia's green energy transition is creating new opportunities for the region to accelerate clean energy adoption and boost economic growth.

Selected Commentaries & Publications

In Trump's tariff deals with Southeast Asia, will there be any winners?

South China Morning Post, July 26

By Stephen Olson, a Visiting Senior Fellow and ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.

The implementation of Trump's tariff policies are unlikely to effectively yield benefits for the United States and even more so for Southeast Asia.

Economic spillover: tariffs overshadow annual Asian defence dialogue

9DASHLINE, June 25

By Juliet Lee, Director of Strategy and Engagement at the Asia Society Policy Institute (ASPI) in New York.

The US needs a more balanced Indo-Pacific strategy, which "accurately assesses both the security and economic concerns of its partners in the region."

Media Discussions



[CSA series] How Should Southeast Asia Strengthen economic Security?
Centre on Asia and Globalisation,
June 4

NEWS ARTICLES & COMMENTARIES

ASEAN SOCIO-CULTURAL COMMUNITY

News Articles

ASEAN Unites to Address School Dropout Rate
Independent Observer, July 29

ASEAN Education Ministers have reaffirmed their commitment to tackling out-of-school children by strengthening partnerships and sharing expertise to enhance regional education capacity.

ASEAN Film Festival 2025 Launches This August Featuring Films from Belt and Road Countries for the First Time Deepening Conversations between Cultures through the Power of Film

Yahoo Finance, July 24

The third ASEAN Film Festival, set to run in Hong Kong, will feature free screenings of over twenty films from all ten ASEAN nations and, for the first time, include selections from Belt & Road countries—expanding regional cultural outreach and cross-border dialogue.

Melaka Declaration Workshop Drives ASEAN Cultural Cooperation And Heritage Transformation

Bernama, July 23

The International Workshop on the Melaka Declaration on Cultural Heritage Value Creation has led to concrete frameworks and initiatives to “promote the creation of a shared heritage value, enhance regional resilience, and generate sustainable socio-economic benefits across ASEAN.”

Jiangmen holds customs day to boost cultural and economic exchanges with ASEAN countries

Guangdong News, June 12

"We hope to closely cooperate with Jiangmen in the food field to promote the coordinated development of the food industry in both places," said Melissa Goh, the Deputy Consul of the Consulate General of Singapore in Guangzhou.

Selected Commentaries
& Publications**Maximising ICT and Digital Transformation to Promote Equal Opportunities****ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Policy Brief, July 29**

Despite the potential of digital technologies to reduce barriers, persons with disabilities remain excluded from the digital economy—highlighting the need for inclusive tech adoption.

Marine Environmental Protection in the South China Sea: Advancing Stronger People-to-People Cooperation on Plastic**RSIS Commentary, April 9**

By Margareth Sembiring, a Research Fellow at the Centre for Non-Traditional Security Studies (NTS Centre), S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

Protecting the South China Sea's marine environment requires stronger people-to-people collaboration among coastal nations to complement existing regional efforts against pollution, biodiversity loss, and climate change.

Media
Discussions

The ASEAN Gender Outlook 2024
Asean Secretariat, May 28



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