

ASEAN BULLETIN

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From the CAG Team

Navigating Minilateralism: Challenges and Opportunities for ASEAN

By Byron Chong



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The rise of minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific presents both challenges and opportunities for the region's key multilateral bloc, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). On one hand, the emergence of smaller, more agile coalitions poses a direct challenge to ASEAN's much vaunted 'centrality' and raises questions about its continued relevance to the region's security architecture. On the other, minilaterals could actually be the much-needed remedy for some of ASEAN's longstanding structural deficiencies. This essay explores how ASEAN can navigate the opportunities and challenges posed by minilateralism amidst the shifting power dynamics in the Indo-Pacific.

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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Minilaterals are informal coalitions formed by small groups of states with shared interests, and typically designed to perform specific functions. Their small membership allows them to act more swiftly, flexibly, and decisively, making them generally more effective at addressing challenges compared to their larger multilateral counterparts. The expansion of minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific has largely been driven by ASEAN's institutional ineffectiveness, stemming from its adherence to the 'ASEAN Way,' which emphasises consensus decision-making. As one scholar observed, "ASEAN-led mechanisms often move at a slow pace, measure 'progress' mainly through 'process,' and settle on the lowest common denominator."

This has prompted many Southeast Asian states to bypass ASEAN and form their own subgroups in order to tackle pressing challenges more effectively. The Malacca Straits Patrol and the Trilateral Maritime Patrol are prime examples of such internally driven minilateral efforts, aimed at combating piracy and transnational crime. Although these minilaterals exist outside of ASEAN's ambit, they are not perceived as a threat to the bloc. After all, they consist of ASEAN members engaging in meaningful cooperation to deliver important public goods to the region. In this way, these minilaterals actually provide ASEAN with a means to plug the gaps in its own capabilities and address challenges that it

has struggled to manage effectively.

What is perhaps more concerning for ASEAN is the emergence of externally driven minilaterals in the Indo-Pacific over the last decade, a trend for which, ASEAN again bears some responsibility. ASEAN's decades-long project to "socialise" China into accepting self-restraining norms and becoming a benign and responsible power appears to have failed miserably. Instead, a rising China has repeatedly exploited ASEAN's consensus-based decision-making process and the divergent interests among its member states, to block or dilute initiatives that could challenge its regional ambitions. This was starkly demonstrated in 2012, when Cambodia blocked ASEAN from issuing a joint statement critical of China's assertive behaviour in the South China Sea. Compounding the issue is America's waning influence in the region, diminishing what has traditionally been a crucial check on China's expanding power.

The result is that many external powers have sought alternative mechanisms that can better safeguard their interests. Externally driven minilateral arrangements like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (or Quad)—comprising Australia, India, Japan, and the US—and AUKUS—Australia, the UK, and the US—have emerged in response to these shifting dynamics. Even middle powers like Japan, Australia, and South Korea, have tried to initiate their own alternative regional arrangements—albeit to varying levels of

success—further reflecting the growing frustration with ASEAN’s limitations.

Unsurprisingly, ASEAN has not been terribly receptive towards these externally driven minilaterals, viewing them as a direct challenge to its centrality in Southeast Asia and a potential threat to its role in the regional security architecture. Furthermore, there are worries that major powers could exploit these minilaterals to establish competing spheres of influence, a move that could potentially escalate tensions, widen divisions amongst Southeast Asian states, and pressure them into ‘picking sides.’

Interestingly, despite their frustrations with ASEAN, major powers have not shown any inclination to abandon the bloc. In fact, they continue to publicly affirm its centrality, even if such support may seem little more than lip service. Such behaviour is driven by pragmatism. ASEAN, for all its faults, remains the primary platform for diplomatic engagement and multilateral cooperation in Southeast Asia. For external powers like China and the US, supporting ASEAN centrality ensures them a seat at the table where they can continue to influence the region’s institutional architecture and prevent their rivals from gaining dominance. Indeed, engaging with ASEAN will continue to be the most effective way for these powers to shape regional dynamics and assert their influence in Southeast Asia.

That said, the outlook for ASEAN remains uncertain. Though major powers will continue to engage with ASEAN, their support for alternative arrangements is also likely to persist, especially if these groups prove more effective at promoting their interests. There are also signs that the US is increasingly favouring support for specific Southeast Asian countries that endorse its military presence, such as the Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam, rather than backing ASEAN as a whole. In the long run, this means that while ASEAN will continue to endure, it risks becoming less consequential and “less central” to regional affairs.

ASEAN can certainly take steps to address its institutional shortcomings and mitigate its waning influence in the region. For instance, it has been suggested that the ‘ASEAN minus X’ approach could be extended beyond economic initiatives to address security challenges, particularly the South China Sea negotiations with China. In this context, the four ASEAN claimant states—Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam—could lead the talks with Beijing, allowing negotiations to be streamlined and expedited. Interestingly, such an approach essentially utilises a *minilateralism-esque* mechanism to help ASEAN overcome the competing national interests and priorities among its members that have long stalled progress in these talks. However, the challenge remains in achieving the needed consensus to implement such a

mechanism in the first place, an irony that brings this issue full circle, and continues to prevent its realisation.

ASEAN could also adopt a more strategic approach towards externally driven minilaterals. While these initiatives are often influenced by geopolitical agendas, they can still be leveraged to ASEAN's benefit. Instead of competing against them, ASEAN could explore opportunities for cooperation by identifying areas where ASEAN institutions and externally driven minilaterals could effectively complement one another. Such collaboration would allow ASEAN to remain involved in all major regional initiatives, whether led by external powers or otherwise, enabling it to advocate for its members' interests and ensure favourable outcomes for the region as a whole.

In conclusion, the rise of minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific presents both challenges and opportunities for ASEAN. While the emergence of these alternative arrangements could potentially dilute ASEAN's role in the regional security framework, they offer the bloc a chance to address its institutional limitations. By strategically engaging with minilaterals to complement its own efforts, ASEAN can remain a key player in promoting regional stability and cooperation, while effectively delivering public goods to the region. However, if it fails to adapt and seize these opportunities, it risks being sidelined as external powers increasingly turn to more

agile and effective alternatives. ASEAN's future influence will depend on how well it is able to evolve and assert its relevance in a rapidly shifting geopolitical landscape.

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NEWS ARTICLES & COMMENTARIES

ASEAN POLITICAL-SECURITY COMMUNITY

News Articles

Philippines, Singapore deepen ties with defense cooperation agreement**Indo-Pacific Defense Forum, September 5**

In a demonstration of strengthening ties, the Philippines and Singapore signed a memorandum of understanding on defense cooperation as the partnership becomes increasingly critical amid growing security challenges, particularly in the South China Sea.

Indonesia, U.S. host joint drills with first cybersecurity agenda**Nikkei Asia, August 16**

"Super Garuda Shield 2024 is the confident building measure to strengthen the bilateral and multilateral military relations ... with important materials on the exercise including cyber [security] exercise," the Indonesian National Armed Forces Director of Super Garuda Shield explained.

Chinese FM arrives in Laos with cooperation in mind**Global Times, July 25**

Despite continued tensions around the South China Sea disputes, China remains confident that the ASEAN countries will continue to "join hands with China to safeguard peace and stability in the region."

Myanmar junta official 'hopeful' for Myanmar to regain normal status in Asean**The Straits Times, July 25**

A senior official working under Myanmar's junta expressed hope that Myanmar would regain its status in ASEAN alongside other members of the bloc and asked for "understanding and support" on the sidelines of the ASEAN foreign ministers' meeting in Laos on July 24.

Selected Commentaries & Publications

ASEAN and the U.N.: Strengthening Security Through Multilateralism**Fulcrum, September 26**

By Joanne Lin, Senior Fellow and Co-coordinator of the ASEAN Studies Centre, ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute

The ASEAN and UN member states need to move beyond functional cooperation and focus on improving institutions and processes to ensure their effectiveness.

Reinvigorating the East Asia Summit**RSIS Commentary, August 29**

By R.M. Michael Tene, a Senior Diplomat at Indonesia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs

By reinvigorating the EAS, ASEAN leaders can better respond to strategic challenges and strengthen ASEAN's central role in the Indo-Pacific.

The Cyberspace Impact of a Maritime Crisis in Southeast Asia**The Diplomat, August 10**

By Muhammad Faizal Bin Abdul Rahman, Research Fellow, Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, RSIS

A maritime crisis in Southeast Asia could have cyberspace aspects. How can the region prepare?

Media Discussions



How will Southeast Asia navigate the US-China Chip Competition?
Centre on Asia and Globalisation, September 23

NEWS ARTICLES & COMMENTARIES

ASEAN ECONOMIC COMMUNITY

News Articles

ASEAN says free trade agreement spurs growth in regional trade by 21 percent**The Jakarta Post, September 17**

With continued efforts to refine the ASEAN Free Trade Area by reducing trade costs and facilitating businesses in the region, the value of inter-ASEAN trade in 2023 has reached US\$759 billion (21.5 percent of total value of trade by ASEAN countries).

74th IAI Task Force meeting shows significant progress in narrowing ASEAN's Development Gap**ASEAN, August 28**

At the 74th IAI Task Force meeting, discussions focused on the role of the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) in supporting the ASEAN Economic Community's upcoming Strategic Plan.

ASEAN Consumer Protection Conference for digital innovation, green economy**Khmer Times, August 27**

The 4th ASEAN Consumer Protection Conference (ACPC) was held in Phnom Penh on Monday, providing a vital platform for regional stakeholders to discuss consumer protection and innovation.

15th Mekong-Japan Foreign Ministers' Meeting**Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, July 26**

The "Mekong-Japan Cooperation Strategy 2024" aims to implement key cooperation projects for (1) Resilient and connected society in the post-COVID-19 world and sustainable urbanisation, (2) Digitalisation, and (3) Proactive response to non-traditional security issues.

India, ASEAN to review trade agreement; finalize changes by year-end**Live Mint, July 10**

India will take a second look at the zero-tariff concessions granted by New Delhi to mobile phone imports as part of ongoing talks to review its free trade agreement (FTA) with ASEAN.

Selected Commentaries & Publications

How would the DEFA add value to Asia-Pacific trade?**Hinrich Foundation, September 10**

By Kati Suominen, Research Fellow at the Hinrich Foundation, and Founder and CEO of NEXGROUP

From locking in good trade regulations across ASEAN to aligning the ASEAN countries with gold-standard provisions on cross-border flow of data, DEFA aims to promote economic growth in the digital economy.

Southeast Asia quarterly economic review: Holding up strongly**Mckinsey & Company, September 3**

By Denis Bugrov, a Senior Partner in McKinsey's Singapore office, where Kamaruzaman Kamarudin is director of client capabilities, and Thuy Tran, a capabilities and insights team leader in Mckinsey's Hanoi office

In the second quarter 2024, the economies of Southeast Asia remained steadfastly resilient and broadly delivered credible economic growth, backed by an improvement in domestic and global demand.

Media Discussions



Localising the Circular Economy Concept under ASEAN Values
SWITCH-Asia, August 9

NEWS ARTICLES & COMMENTARIES

ASEAN SOCIO-CULTURAL COMMUNITY

News Articles

Development of ASCC Post-2025 Strategic Plan calls attention to strong cross-pillar response and coordination

ASEAN, September 25

Key discussions for the post-2025 Strategic Plan looked at how cross-pillar coordination can address urgent and complex issues and challenges facing the region.

ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Council mulls future plans

The Star, August 13

Laos' Minister of Information, Culture and Tourism, Suanesavanh Vignaket, highlighted the importance for the ASEAN members to strengthen its community pillar post-2025 to enhance integration within the region and bolster ASEAN centrality.

Cambodia urges ASEAN to expand access to vocational training

The Phnom Penh Post, August 13

Cambodia has called for ASEAN to establish a regional education and skills development framework tailored for the future labour force.

Health Minister attends AHMM, related meetings in Laos

Khmer Times, August 9

The ASEAN Health Ministers Meeting held key discussions on how to ensure the health, care and sustainability of the ASEAN Community

Maybank and the ASEAN Foundation kickstart Cohort 04's run for 'eMpowering Youths Across ASEAN'

Adobo magazine, August 6

In realizing the overarching goals of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint 2025, the program aims to equip and inspire ASEAN youth as the prime needle movers in contributing and advocating for sustainable development.

Selected Commentaries & Publications

Southeast Asia and China: The untapped power of philanthropy and people-to-people exchange

Alliance Magazine, September 13

By Rui Wang, the China Representative and Program Advisor for Asia of GlobalGiving, and Sharon Low, co-founder of The Knowledge House, Ltd

Platforms for dialogue, philanthropy, and people-to-people exchange between ASEAN and China can facilitate the sharing of best practices, encourage joint initiatives, and foster a sense of regional solidarity that transcends national interests

U.S. and Chinese Soft Power and Influence in Southeast Asia

CSIS, August 14

By Andreyka Natalegawa, Associate Fellow in the Southeast Asia Program, CSIS, and Gregory B. Poling, Senior Fellow and Director of the Southeast Asia Program and Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, CSIS

Although opinion polls suggest that the United States retains more soft power and popularity than China across the region, this advantage may be shrinking

Media Discussions



Under Pressure: ASEAN's Environmental Challenges Ahead
Centre on Asia and Globalisation, September 9

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OTHER CAG PUBLICATIONS

- *The Future of Multilateralism in Southeast Asia* by Byron Chong (Asian Peace Programme Policy Brief, September 13, 2024)
- *ASEAN in Practice: Episode 5 - Under Pressure: ASEAN's Environmental Challenges Ahead* (Centre on Asia and Globalisation, September 9, 2024)
- [CSA series] *How will Southeast Asia navigate the US-China chip competition?* (Centre on Asia and Globalisation, August 26, 2024)
- *Strengthening ASEAN-Japan Cybersecurity Cooperation* by Asha Hemrajani and Mae Chow (Fulcrum, August 20, 2024)
- *Building an ASEAN Economic Community Beyond 2025* edited by Denis Hew and Julia Tijaja (Centre on Asia and Globalisation, April 2024)
- *Introduction: Domestic Determinants of Southeast Asia's Relations with the United States and China* by Chin-Hao Huang and Selina Ho (Contemporary Southeast Asia 46, no.1, April 2024)
- *Strengthening Cyber Resilience in Southeast Asia* by Jassie Hsi Cheng and Mae Chow (Fulcrum, November 6, 2023)



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