

ASEAN BULLETIN

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From the CAG Team

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

By Mae Chow



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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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NEWS ARTICLES & COMMENTARIES

ASEAN POLITICAL-SECURITY COMMUNITY

News Articles

As BRICS lures Malaysia and Thailand while world order ‘crumbles all around’, is Asean OK?

South China Morning Post, June 29

The prospect of Southeast Asian countries joining the China and Russia-led bloc could cause ASEAN to fracture, some say. Others argue it’s harmless hedging.

South China Sea: Philippines’ anti-ship missile base puts Scarborough Shoal in cross hairs

South China Morning Post, June 23

The BrahMos missile battery in western Luzon represents a ‘quantum leap’ for the Philippines in deterring China, analysts say.

After Quad, US forms ‘squad’ to counter China in Indo-Pacific

Times of India, May 7

The new strategic alliance, consisting of the United States, Japan, Australia, and the Philippines seek to strengthen military interoperability, joint military cooperation and improve maritime security cooperation to address China’s expansive military activities across the Western Pacific.

China launches Southeast Asia outreach amid tensions with Philippines

Voice of America, April 2

The diplomatic charm offensive comes amid territorial disputes between China and the Philippines in the South China Sea, and efforts by the U.S. and its allies to strengthen maritime cooperation in the region.

Majority of ASEAN people favor China over US, survey finds

Nikkei Asia, April 2

In a first, Beijing becomes Southeast Asia's preferred choice over Washington.

Selected Commentaries & Publications

China’s complex presence in Southeast Asia

East Asia Forum, May 10

By Han Enze, Associate Professor at the University of Hong Kong

Southeast Asia experiences ongoing uncertainty around a resurgent China's intentions due to its large economy, vast population, and changing political image.

Domestic Determinants of Southeast Asia’s Relations with the United States and China

Contemporary Southeast Asia Vol.46/1 (April 2024)

ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute

This Special Issue—including case studies of Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Laos, Thailand and the Philippines—underscores the domestic determinants of the foreign policy of Southeast Asian states, identifying how their concerns about economic security, political legitimacy and regional stability mediate their engagement with the United States and China.

Media Discussions



Reconsidering Southeast Asia | Panel 2 — Geopolitics and U.S. Policy in Southeast Asia
Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center,
Stanford University, May 16

NEWS ARTICLES & COMMENTARIES

ASEAN ECONOMIC COMMUNITY

News Articles

ASEAN commemorates MSME Day 2024: Fostering Innovation and Resilience for a Sustainable Future

ASEAN, June 24

The critical role of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSME) in fostering innovation and resilience was highlighted for a sustainable and resilient future.

Green Investments in ASEAN rise 20% to US\$6.3 billion in 2023, Bain, Temasek report

EDB Singapore, May 9

Private sector investments for the purposes of the green economy transition in Southeast Asia increased 20 per cent to US\$6.3 billion (S\$8.58 billion) in 2023, compared to US\$5.2 billion the previous year.

ASEAN+3 to create new financing facility against regional crises

Vietnam Plus, May 3

ASEAN+3 (ASEAN, South Korea, China, and Japan) have agreed to reinforce the regional financial safety net by launching a new financing faculty program to support the ASEAN members during financial crises.

Indonesia's push for regional economic integration to continue under Prabowo: Vivian Balakrishnan

The Business Times, April 26

Reaffirming Indonesia and Singapore's commitment to strengthening bilateral cooperation under the presidency of Joko Widodo, both countries highlighted ongoing efforts to strengthen ASEAN's economic connectivity and collaboration.

ASEAN and UK Launch £25 Million Economic Integration Programme

Gov.uk, April 25

The UK and ASEAN launched a £25 million Economic Integration Programme to boost bilateral economic ties.

Selected Commentaries & Publications

The Impacts of Supply Chain Reconfiguration on ASEAN Economies

ISEAS Perspective 2024/35, May 17

By Aufa Doarest, a Private Sector Specialist at the World Bank Group and Maria Monica Wihardja, Visiting Fellow at ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute and Adjunct Assistant Professor at National University of Singapore

ASEAN's is vulnerable to US-China supply chain decoupling. A pragmatic approach is required to avoid choosing sides despite short-term benefits from global supply chain shifts.

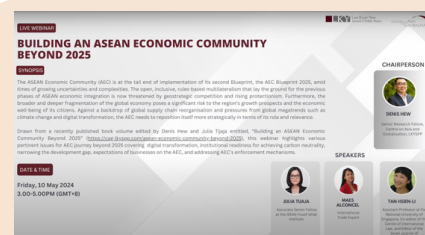
The ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement: Uniting or Dividing?

RSIS, April 3

By Ibrahim Kholilul Rohman, a Senior Research Associate at IFG Progress and lecturer at the School of Strategic and Global Studies, Universitas Indonesia, Kleovan Nathanael Gunawan, and Angeline Johanes

The ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement is crucial in helping ASEAN MSMEs overcome challenges and thrive in the regional economy.

Media Discussions



Building An ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) Beyond 2025
Centre on Asia and Globalisation, May 10

NEWS ARTICLES & COMMENTARIES

ASEAN SOCIO-CULTURAL COMMUNITY

News Articles

Vietnam joins regional efforts for quality early childhood education

Vietnam Plus, May 15

At the ASEAN education ministerial conference, officials from the ASEAN member states and Timor-Leste, discussed key strategies to ensure equitable access to early childcare and education across the region.

China's Confucius Institutes flourish in ASEAN after West's freeze-out

Nikkei Asia, May 12

Enrolments in Confucius Institutes in Cambodia have increased, highlighting how "the institutes' role has expanded [beyond economic considerations], transforming them into comprehensive cultural centers that wield soft power in ASEAN."

Investing in women's and children's rights towards a safe and inclusive ASEAN Community

ASEAN, April 25

Upholding the rights of women and children throughout the lifecycle is paramount in enabling a safe, gender equal and inclusive ASEAN Community. Critically, gender transformative actions and child-empowering approaches need to be well-considered in the upcoming ASEAN Community Vision 2025.

ASEAN working on ASCC Strategic Plan for post-2025

Khmer Times, April 23

ASEAN will develop a strategic plan to promote social development and environmental protection through effective mechanisms to meet the current and future needs of the peoples.

ASEAN culture promoted in Mexico

Vietnam Plus, April 18

Typical and diversified culture of ASEAN countries is being promoted at the ongoing ASEAN Week at the headquarters of Mexico's Chamber of Deputies in Mexico city from April 15-19.

Selected Commentaries & Publications

Planetary Health and the ASEAN Vision 2025

RSIS, June 26

By Margareth Sembiring, a PhD candidate and an Associate Research Fellow at the Centre for Non-Traditional Security Studies, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU)

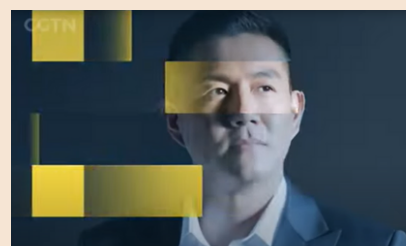
Although the environment-health nexus has been acknowledged by the said sector, more can be done to streamline planetary health approach in the regional body's overall efforts to realise the ASEAN Vision 2025 of "an integrated, peaceful and stable community with shared prosperity."

Enhancing and Integrating Regional Food Safety to Address the Changing Landscape of the Food System and Emerging Health Threats

ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Policy Brief, May 29

Food safety is becoming a more pressing issue and ASEAN member states need to strengthen regional food safety to face these issues.

Media Discussions



People-to-people exchanges to bolster China-ASEAN relations
CGTN, June 21

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OTHER CAG PUBLICATIONS

- *Building an ASEAN Economic Community Beyond 2025* edited by Denis Hew and Julia Tijaja (Centre on Asia and Globalisation, April 2024)
- *Strengthening Cyber Resilience in Southeast Asia* by Jassie Hsi Cheng and Mae Chow (Fulcrum, November 6, 2023)
- *ASEAN Economy Cannot Afford Business as Usual* by Julia Tijaja and Denis Hew (Fulcrum, August 16, 2023)
- *Is it realistic to achieve the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) by 2025?* by Denis Hew (Hinrich Foundation, June 27, 2023)
- *Republic of Korea-Singapore Security Forum: Shared Concerns, Common Goals* edited by Yongwook Ryu (Centre on Asia and Globalisation, 2023)
- *Partnership or Polarization? Southeast Asian Security between India and China* edited by Evan Laksmana and Byron Chong (Contemporary Southeast Asia, August 2023)
- *Asian conceptions of international order: what Asia wants* edited by Kanti Prasad Bajpai and Evan Laksmana (International Affairs, 2023)



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