

Guest Column

ASEAN Centrality: Not the Best, But Still Good?

By Sarah Teo

The strength of ASEAN centrality is ultimately a reflection of the negotiations and compromises involving different interests—not just among ASEAN member states, but also between ASEAN and its external partners.

There is a meme going around on the Internet in which a packet of oranges is labelled “not the best but still good”—arguably an apt description for the current state of ASEAN centrality. Amid the evolving trends in the regional order, ASEAN centrality retains some of its value but consistent efforts are required to preserve that centrality in the longer term.

First officially mentioned in the joint media **statement** of the 38th ASEAN Economic Ministers’ Meeting in 2006, the phrase “ASEAN centrality” is typically made in reference to the grouping’s place in the driver’s seat of regional multilateralism and its engagement with the dialogue partners. It is a role that ASEAN has sought for itself post-Cold War, and one that external partners have been willing to accommodate and acquiesce to—as long as it does not undermine their own interests.

From the late 1990s to early 2010s, ASEAN



Image Credit: iStock.com/hattinyah

was institutionally at its peak. Not only did it expand from six to ten member states, but it also launched broader regional groupings such as the ASEAN Plus Three and the eighteen-country East Asia Summit (EAS). ASEAN’s convening and agenda-setting roles for these forums that involved the major and regional powers bolstered its much-vaunted centrality at the time.

In the case of the **EAS**, additionally, ASEAN effectively exerted its influence in the negotiations over membership and chairpersonship as China and Japan competed for regional leadership. Considering that ASEAN comprises the materially weaker states of the Asia Pacific, its ability to help shape the regional order within which the larger powers operated indicated that its whole was more than the sum of its parts.

In recent years, ASEAN centrality has come

under increasing pressure. Alongside deepening China-US rivalry, the establishment of non-ASEAN-led exclusive networks such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and the Australia-United Kingdom-US (AUKUS) arrangement has fuelled **debates** about the viability of ASEAN's model of inclusive cooperation. Other developments such as the slow progress on the South China Sea code of conduct negotiations, as well as the periodic absence of high-level US representation at ASEAN meetings, add to this pessimistic outlook for ASEAN.

Meanwhile, there are increasingly visible fractures among ASEAN member states—most recently reflected in the responses towards the Myanmar crisis—which have raised questions about ASEAN cohesion. Collectively, these challenges have led to doubts about the feasibility and sustainability of ASEAN centrality in the longer term.

Despite these challenges, ASEAN centrality does continue to offer some value to regional stakeholders. The recognition of this value is demonstrated, to some extent, by the United Kingdom's application to be ASEAN's latest dialogue partner which was approved in 2021, and the keenness of some countries to become observers to the activities of the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM)-Plus.

The developments surrounding the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) provide another example. Fundamentally, the AOIP could be read as a reaction to two interrelated

developments. One would be the various Indo-Pacific narratives and strategies that were being put forward by the non-ASEAN countries, while the second would be Beijing's censures towards what it saw as a containment of its rise. Amid fears of potential exclusion—both of itself and of some of its dialogue partners—in the evolving regional order, ASEAN issued the AOIP.

With its emphasis on inclusivity and ASEAN-led platforms, the AOIP is an **attempt** by ASEAN to (re)claim its centrality. The reception to the AOIP thus far indicates a key advantage that ASEAN continues to possess over other regional actors, specifically, that it offers the most acceptable and least controversial choice for multilateral engagement and cooperation vis-à-vis competing powers. China's **support** for the AOIP, for instance, stands in contrast to its aversion to the US-led Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy.

Arguably, the AOIP has also provided a convenient option for countries seeking to navigate between China and the US with their own Indo-Pacific strategies. Aligning their respective Indo-Pacific strategies to the AOIP would help to blunt the divisive connotations around the new regional construct. To be sure, the AOIP does have its shortcomings, as several analysts have **pointed out**. But even with all its flaws, the AOIP highlights ASEAN's value proposition—that its initiatives are able to garner buy-in across various regional stakeholders, and that it continues to serve as a regional multilateral

convenor acceptable to all.

ASEAN's dialogue partners and the non-ASEAN-led groupings have also continued to highlight the importance of ASEAN centrality in their statements. While these rhetorical exhortations should certainly not be taken at face value, it is also useful to keep in mind that the strength of ASEAN centrality is ultimately a reflection of the negotiations and compromises involving different interests—not just among ASEAN member states, but also between ASEAN and its external partners.

Consequently, ASEAN would need to work at keeping up this centrality in the longer term. Part of these efforts would necessarily involve managing the expectations surrounding the concept of ASEAN centrality. There would also be a need to ensure that ASEAN's longstanding value continues to remain visible and acknowledged, even amid shifting geopolitical dynamics and the changing regional order.

Sarah Teo is an Assistant Professor in the Regional Security Architecture Programme and Deputy Coordinator of the MSc (International Relations) Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.