

Guest Column

No Country Can Dominate Us, and None Is Dominated: Southeast Asia's Pragmatic Approach to Artificial Intelligence

By Jassie Hsi Cheng

ASEAN does not adhere to traditional alignments when exploring emerging technologies. Instead, countries within the region engage in both internal and external cooperation to foster capabilities.

The complexity of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)'s position in its pursuit of emerging technologies goes beyond a simple binary choice between alignment and independence. ASEAN's distinctive stance lies in its strategic balance, which prioritises cooperation and autonomy. As the technological tensions between major powers intensify, a consensus of neutrality appears to be actively signalled by ASEAN member states (AMS). For instance, when questioned at the [2020 Singapore Tech Forum](#) about whether the city-state would be forced to choose a side, Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong responded decisively, stating, "We try our best to keep our links to both sides," referring to the United States (US) and the People's Republic of China (PRC or China).

This strategic non-alignment is a fundamental principle of ASEAN's foreign policy, as outlined in the [ASEAN Security Community Plan of Action](#). The term "non-alignment," historically linked to the Cold War and often



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associated with formal military alliances, has evolved to include broader political and strategic positioning vis-à-vis regional developments, including technological advancements and cooperation. ASEAN's approach to emerging technologies is consistent with this principle, aiming to bolster capabilities through a diversity of internal and external partnerships rather than through exclusive alliances.

Currently, the region is actively pursuing advancements in artificial intelligence (AI), a transformative technology with implications for every societal sector and the potential reshaping of warfare and national security. These efforts include the development of large language models (LLMs), which are propelling generative AI systems such as ChatGPT. However, as the rivalry between the two global AI powerhouses, the US and the PRC, escalates, Southeast Asia's reliance on their technology—particularly in data,

talent, and hardware essential for AI solutions —could lead to challenges and vulnerability. To address these challenges, AMS are actively forging ahead with robust cooperation efforts with each other and with external partners (Table 1).

Singapore, in particular, has emerged as a prime example of strategic neutrality in navigating this landscape. It has effectively positioned itself as a hub for tech companies from both East and West, including Tencent, Alibaba, ByteDance, Google, Amazon and Microsoft. These companies bring in talent

Table 1: Regional AI-Related Agreements

Agreement	Details Specific to AI	Countries Involved
ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA)	To establish mechanisms for regulatory cooperation for relevant standards and regulations to keep up with technological innovations in emerging topics such as AI.	AMS
Australia-Singapore MoU on Cooperation on Artificial Intelligence	To cooperate on AI capabilities, including new AI technologies, talent development and ethical standards to support the positive commercial application of AI in the digital economy.	Singapore, Australia
Memorandum of Cooperation (MOC) on Digital Government Transformation	To exchange information about digital government frameworks and best practices, covering topics such as digital identities, AI and cloud services.	Singapore, Japan
ROK-Singapore MoU on Cooperation on Artificial Intelligence	To enhance practical collaboration to promote the responsible development and use of AI.	Singapore, Republic of Korea
Korea-Singapore Digital Partnership Agreement (KSDPA)	To identify cross-border opportunities to facilitate business innovation and collaborations on AI ethics and governance.	Singapore, Republic of Korea
US-Singapore Partnership for Growth and Innovation (PGI)	To develop interoperable AI governance frameworks and support industry’s adoption of ethical AI.	Singapore, US
ASEAN-China MoU on Cooperation in Communications, Digital and Technology (2024-2029)	To maintain collaboration in areas aimed at improving the compatibility, integrity, and security of ICT systems. This includes initiatives such as mutual recognition arrangements for telecommunications equipment, aligning and standardising data exchange protocols, preventing cybercrime, and ensuring data protection.	ASEAN, China

Source: ASEAN, Singapore’s Ministry of Trade and Industry (selected and compiled by the author).

and resources crucial for developing AI. Another example is Singapore's decision last year to award [data centre contracts](#) to four entities: two are Chinese-backed (GDS and a consortium of ByteDance and Australian operator AirTrunk) and two are American companies (Equinix and Microsoft). This decision reflects the delicate act of balancing national interests with the economic imperatives of a global digital economy.

Malaysia is also playing a similar game, strategically positioning itself as a central hub for data centres, enticing investments by offering various incentives, including tax breaks. China's GDS Holdings is already operating in Malaysia's southern state of Johor. The Malaysian government is also courting major tech giants like Microsoft and Google to establish operations in the country. Beyond companies from the US and China, Japan's NTT Data has inaugurated its sixth data centre in Cyberjaya's science park, showcasing Malaysia's inclusive strategy and its keen interest in attracting a wide array of international industry players. What we learn from the region is that governments are shifting towards a pragmatic and realistic stance on emerging technologies, prioritising the tangible benefits that these international players bring, and not necessarily looking at it from a geopolitical point of view.

In this context, it is crucial not to underestimate the dynamic contributions of ASEAN countries, which are often overshadowed by the prominence of the US and China in the AI sector. Dismissing

ASEAN's role would be a grave oversight, given the region's burgeoning tech landscape and ambitious initiatives. For instance, the ASEAN Digital Economic Framework Agreement ([DEFA](#)) is poised to potentially double the region's digital economy to US\$2 trillion by 2030. Leading the charge, Singapore announced in February 2024 that it would make a substantial investment of US\$743 million (equivalent to over 1 billion Singapore dollars) into AI research and development over the next five years. Complementing Singapore's efforts, five other ASEAN member states—[Vietnam](#), [Malaysia](#), [Indonesia](#), [Thailand](#), and [the Philippines](#)—have each launched their own AI policy initiatives. These have been established over the past five years.

Early in 2024, ASEAN demonstrated a strong commitment to responsible AI development with the release of the [ASEAN Guide on AI Governance and Ethics](#) in February, signalling a move to set its own standards rather than adopting those of the European Union. Concurrently, member states such as [Malaysia](#), which plans to introduce an AI code of ethics and governance guidelines by April, [Indonesia](#), which anticipates the launch of AI regulations by the end of 2024, and [the Philippines](#), which intends to propose an ASEAN legal framework for AI by 2026, are actively working to establish guidelines and regulations to prevent AI misuse. Recognising the urgency of addressing the AI readiness gap among AMS, ASEAN has also put mechanisms such as the DEFA in place to promote regional digital integration, which is

essential for **narrowing the digital divide**.

The recent **tentative AI cooperation** between the US and China marks a significant development. However, it is important to acknowledge Southeast Asia's role in shaping AI development, driven by their own ambitions, ideas and cultures rather than merely by great power rivalry. ASEAN's collective message is clear: no country can dominate us, and none is dominated. This reinforces the importance of collaboration and autonomy in navigating emerging technologies. As such, the region's pivotal position in geopolitics and technology is essential, as it has the potential to shape the global AI landscape.

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