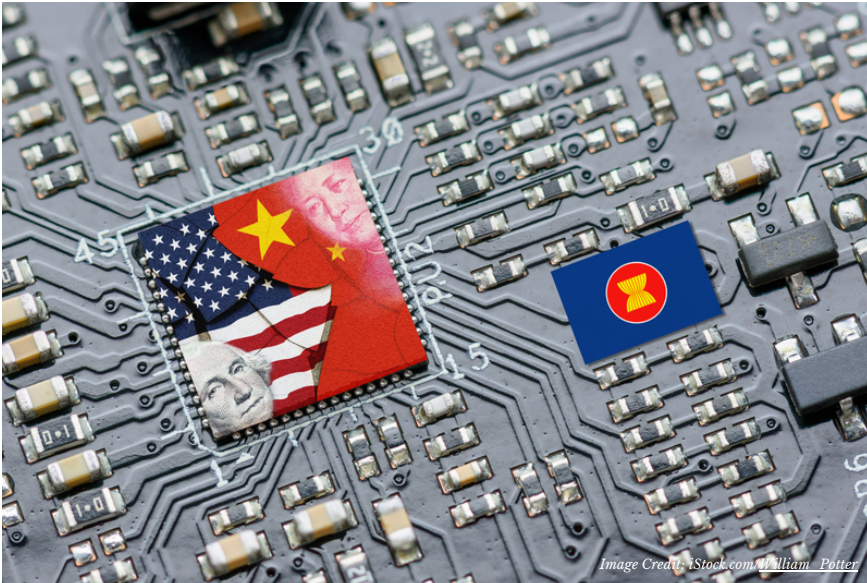




Counterpoint Southeast Asia

A publication of the Centre on Asia and Globalisation



Will ASEAN Seek Alignment or Independence When Pursuing Emergent Technologies?

By Miguel Alberto Gomez

In 2017, Russian President Vladimir Putin asserted that “whoever becomes the leader in this sphere [read artificial intelligence] will become the ruler of the world.” Fast forward seven years and claims surrounding the transformative potential of emerging and disruptive technologies (EDT) persist. This is unsurprising, especially when considering how these technologies have and continue to transform societies across the globe. Whereas innovations such as the combustion engine revolutionised transportation over a century ago, the advent of technologies such as cyberspace and artificial intelligence (AI) manifests more pervasively as these touch almost every aspect of modern life—from communication to healthcare.

 Lee Kuan Yew
School of Public Policy

 CENTRE ON ASIA
AND GLOBALISATION

globalising Good
HONG SIEW CHING Speaker & Seminar Series

Counterpoint Southeast Asia is published regularly by the Centre on Asia and Globalisation at the National University of Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. It seeks to answer major questions of strategic significance for Southeast Asia by bringing in diverse voices from around the region. Each issue will tackle one question from three different perspectives.

Centre on Asia and Globalisation

+65 6516 7113

cag@nus.edu.sg

469A Bukit Timah Road, Tower Block 10,

Singapore 259770

<https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/cag>

cont'd p2

Nevertheless, optimistic depictions obscure the realities faced by states when pursuing EDTs as a means of advancing social, economic, political, and military goals. These technologies require substantial material and human expertise. For instance, developing large language models (LLMs) requires copious amounts of data and significant computational power to run algorithms developed by skilled computer scientists. This situation highlights the widening development gaps between states—hinting at a future of haves and have-nots.

Relatedly, availing of EDTs is not solely subject to economic and scientific constraints. The resurgence of great power competition, notably involving the United States and China, further risks access by small and middle powers to these technologies and their constituent components. For example, the United States issued the CHIPS and Science Act to strengthen the domestic semiconductor industry while restricting its availability to adversaries. This and other related legislation and policies may adversely impact other regions' access to these critical technologies.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its member states are not immune to these constraints. With the region viewing these technologies as socio-economic enablers, there is significant interest in building regional capabilities in this space. At a regional level, these aspirations are reflected in public statements and policy documents that emphasise the importance of these

technologies. Relatedly, member states continue to expand their capabilities in areas such as AI and cyberspace. Nevertheless, these transformations occur while significant capability gaps exist between these states amid simmering tensions between the United States and China.

Faced with these realities, it is necessary to ask whether *ASEAN will seek alignment or independence when pursuing emergent technologies*. As such, the Centre on Asia and Globalisation (CAG) invited four analysts for its 10th Counterpoint Southeast Asia (CSA) public webinar on 12 March 2024: Jassie Hsi Cheng (CAG), Fitriani Bintang Timur (Center for Strategic and International Studies), Deryk Matthew N. Baladjay (De La Salle University), and Elina Noor (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace).

Jassie Hsi Cheng argues that while EDTs are critical, the bloc is not forced into alignment as we typically understand the term to mean. Instead, alignment within ASEAN suggests increased cooperation between its member states to develop the necessary capabilities and regulatory regimes. Relatedly, the strategic and material realities do not preclude continued collaboration between ASEAN and its extra-regional partners, as is reflected by the programmes and engagements that have been and continue to be developed.

At the national level, **Fitriani Bintang Timur** and **Deryk Matthew N. Baladjay** echo a comparable but more nuanced sentiment

from the perspective of Indonesia and the Philippines. Fitriani Bintang Timur notes that while Indonesia has seen significant advances in this area, its actions are fundamentally shaped by a need for an active and independent foreign policy supporting its domestic, regional, and global interests. As such, Indonesia favours strategic flexibility wherever and whenever it can find it and is not opposed to cooperation in pursuing its goals. The Philippines, as argued by Deryk Matthew N. Baladjay, shares a similar mindset but is fundamentally constrained by material constraints and geopolitical realities that it faces. This highlights a stark reality both within and outside the region—that flexibility appears to be the prerogative of stronger states. Furthermore, both perspectives raise questions about whether a unified regional approach towards EDTs is attainable given possibly conflicting state-level interests and varying capabilities.

Lastly, **Elina Noor** offers a contrasting but necessary perspective on the discussion—pivoting from the usual geopolitical narratives. In the race towards EDTs, its impact on the environment and people is often left by the wayside. She argues that the computational resources required for technologies such as AI constitute a severe drain on the environment. Similarly, the human cost associated with the data needed for these technologies, such as psychological trauma, is often overshadowed by utopian visions of human progress.

While this iteration of Counterpoint Southeast Asia raises more questions than it

answers, it draws much-needed attention to this issue in hopes of starting a critical dialogue among stakeholders both within and outside the region.

Miguel Alberto Gomez is a Senior Research Fellow at the Centre on Asia and Globalisation (CAG) at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore. He tweets at [@DrMAGomez](https://twitter.com/DrMAGomez).