



# Counterpoint Southeast Asia

*A publication of the Centre on Asia and Globalisation*



Image Credit: iStock.com/hamzehsh12

## Is ASEAN Centrality Obsolete in an Evolving Regional Order?

By Mely Caballero-Anthony

Until the early 2000s, the Association of Southeast Asian States (ASEAN) was feted as the “fulcrum of an evolving regional architecture,” having been the first mover in building institutions in Southeast Asia and the wider Asian region. Being at the core of ‘alphabet soup’ institutions and frameworks that promote multilateral socio-economic and political-security cooperation, ASEAN centrality became the buzzword that captured its role in charting the direction of regionalism and shaping regional order in Asia.

Much has changed since then given the strong headwinds that are buffeting the region. These include the

 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*

heightening tensions between the United States (US) and China, Beijing's increasing assertiveness in the South China, looming threats of nuclear proliferation in the Korean peninsula and the emergence of regional security frameworks like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and the Australia-United Kingdom-US (AUKUS). Closer to home, the ongoing political crisis in Myanmar and the inability of ASEAN to implement its Five Point Consensus exacerbate the growing bifurcation in the region, not to mention the worsening impact of climate change on human security issues in ASEAN—economic, health, and food security, among others. These growing lists of challenges are seriously testing the ability of ASEAN to respond collectively to manage regional peace and security.

Against these significant challenges, is ASEAN centrality still relevant? How can ASEAN respond effectively while maintaining its unity? Will ASEAN be able to navigate Sino-US rivalry while preserving strategic autonomy? And how can ASEAN prevent becoming obsolete in an evolving regional order?

To address these questions, three Southeast Asian analysts were invited to examine ASEAN centrality in a rapidly changing regional security and geostrategic environment.

**Rizal Sukma**, Senior Fellow and former Executive Director of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Indonesia argues that ASEAN certainly is not just about

its place in the regional architecture but more about what it can do by being at the centre and the purpose it serves. To this end, ASEAN has to do better to maintain its centrality and remain relevant. To be sure, things are not static. Amid great power rivalry and an emerging Indo-Pacific order, ASEAN needs to seriously examine what its core interests are in this changing geopolitical landscape—does it want to retain its autonomy, shape regional architecture, uphold the rules-based order and be an honest broker between competing powers? While ASEAN does not want to be put in a position to choose between US and China, the escalating great power competition has made it increasingly difficult not to choose. However, ASEAN needs to be mindful that any reduced agency of ASEAN member states would threaten its relevance.

In terms of institutional relevance, the Quad and AUKUS has not replaced ASEAN. Its value has been its ability to bring competing major powers and other countries at the same table, while providing avenues for smaller countries to have a voice in regional affairs. Thus, while it is critical for ASEAN to ensure peaceful relations among its members and maintain its unity, it should not hesitate to call out big countries for their aggressive behaviour. ASEAN could do better in having more clarity on when it should speak up on issues consequential to the region. Not doing so would render ASEAN centrality obsolete.

**Sarah Teo**, Assistant Professor at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, argues that despite the challenges, ASEAN centrality

retains some of its value to regional stakeholders. However, consistent efforts are required to preserve that centrality in the longer term. These efforts could include managing the expectations surrounding the concept and ensuring that ASEAN's longstanding value continues to remain visible and acknowledged. Ultimately, it is important to assess ASEAN for what it is and to know its limitations, rather than what we hope it to be. She further suggests that ASEAN has built up tools over the decades, and that could be valuable to look at what it has that is not being utilised effectively. This boils down to the political will from ASEAN states to push through change.

**Moe Thuzar**, Senior Fellow at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, contends that the paradox of ASEAN centrality is that it is both present and absent. ASEAN centrality is present when ASEAN pushes for regional integration through its ASEAN community building processes, bringing together external stakeholders and different networks of interest around shared concerns of regional security. But the acceptance of ASEAN centrality seems to be absent in member states. The ongoing crisis in Myanmar has shown how the Myanmar military chose to ignore ASEAN's exhortations, asserted its own narrow interpretation of ASEAN Charter principles, and challenged the legality of ASEAN's decision to invite only a "non-political representative" from Myanmar to the ASEAN summits. She proffers that the Myanmar crisis is a timely call for infusion of new ideas and creative approaches, and to give effect to ASEAN's intent to strengthen its

capacity and institutional effectiveness. It is critical to ask ASEAN's member states to what extent they are giving regional commitments prominence.

The analysts presented their arguments at a public webinar organised by the Centre on Asia and Globalisation (CAG) on August 28, 2023 (view the webinar [here](#)). The essays in the pages that follow further elaborate their perspectives. Despite differing views, the discussions converge on the following points.

First, despite the multiple challenges besetting ASEAN there appears to be no viable alternative to ASEAN centrality. Second, while the notion of ASEAN centrality is not obsolete, what matters more is how ASEAN can make itself relevant within and beyond the wider regional architecture. And last but not least, ASEAN needs to deal decisively with the limitations of its institutional design to make it 'fit for purpose' in a rapidly changing regional environment.

**Mely Caballero-Anthony** is Professor of International Relations at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University.



# ASEAN Centrality: A Question of Relevance

By Rizal Sukma

*‘ASEAN centrality’ should be viewed as an ultimate goal—something that we aspire and continually work towards. As an aspiration, it will not become obsolete.*

Is ASEAN centrality obsolete in an evolving regional order? This question has become a subject of discussion and debate among scholars and practitioners ever since the term “centrality” was officially used in the ASEAN Charter in late 2007. ASEAN centrality has been described in many ways: as a myth, an illusion, or a fantasy.

Now, the question assumes greater significance due to two key contexts. First, there is the context of ASEAN’s apparent paralysis in addressing the Myanmar crisis. Second, the evolving regional order within which ASEAN is struggling to find a place and role for itself. This paper looks at ASEAN centrality within the context of the changing strategic environment.

So, is ASEAN centrality obsolete? It depends on what we mean by “centrality” and what ASEAN does with it.

First, if it means ASEAN’s place in the regional architecture, then ASEAN was, and is, central.



One finds ASEAN everywhere in the Asia-Pacific, and now Indo-Pacific. However, describing the place of ASEAN within regional architecture is descriptive and static. It does not give us a convincing answer to the question, ‘what does ASEAN want to do by being at the centre?’ What purpose does that position serve?

Second, this brings us to another meaning of ASEAN centrality, namely, its ability to achieve its goals. In this respect, ASEAN centrality has been a mixed bag, achieving highly positive and significant results in some areas, yet failing to do so in others.

Therefore, there is no simple yes or no answer to that question. ASEAN centrality is not simply about being ‘obsolete’ or ‘up to date.’ It is more about its continued relevance. As Bilahari Kausikan, former Ambassador-at-Large at the Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), once remarked, to maintain its centrality ASEAN

must be relevant. I would also like to argue that if ASEAN wants to maintain its relevance, it should be useful. ASEAN is useful if it can achieve what it is seeking to achieve.

The evolving regional order is a transitional one, characterised by great power rivalry between the United States and China, a quest for influence among major powers, and interstate tension and disputes. In this emerging Indo-Pacific order, both competition and cooperation are taking place. What are ASEAN's strategic interests in the regional order? Can ASEAN shape and influence that order? Does ASEAN matter in that process?

ASEAN wants to retain its autonomy, lead the shaping of regional economic and security architecture, uphold the rules-based regional architecture, and be an honest broker within the strategic environment of competing interests. Conversely, ASEAN does not want to choose between the US and China, to become an arena for great power rivalry, or to be dragged into their proxy conflict. ASEAN centrality will be preserved if it can achieve those objectives. Can ASEAN achieve them? This should be the focus of the analysis and assessment.

There are several challenges that ASEAN would face in this evolving regional order. On not having to choose between US and China, it is increasingly difficult to maintain a non-aligned position. Escalating great power competition has made it increasingly difficult not to 'choose.' Currently, ASEAN member states have problems in positioning themselves on the deference-defiance

spectrum. However, most ASEAN states like Indonesia do not want to 'pick a side' between China and the US. Indonesia is unlikely to join BRICS, as it is perceived as an alternative to the West. Indonesia's foreign policy has not changed drastically, as it wants to stay non-aligned, free, and active. It also seems that ASEAN is becoming less relevant in shaping regional architecture. The emergence of mini-lateral arrangements such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (or Quad) and the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) grouping reflect ASEAN's weakness since great and middle powers look increasing to these alternative platforms, rather than ASEAN, to address regional issues. Due to this 'ASEAN marginalisation' there has been an increasing erosion of the grouping's autonomy and agency.

ASEAN's reputation as an 'honest broker' is also put into question. This is particularly significant in its relations with China and its ability to respond decisively and collectively to Beijing's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea. So far, ASEAN has not released any statements regarding the aggressive conduct of Chinese coast guards and militia vessels around the Ayungin shoal that is within the Philippines' exclusive economic zone. ASEAN should have issued a statement to call for restraint. What ASEAN could do better would be to have more clarity on when it should speak up on issues.

In conclusion, while the issue about ASEAN centrality has been debated extensively among academics, the discourse tends to be descriptive and static, and largely does not

question the purpose and role of ASEAN in the evolving regional order. Is ASEAN centrality obsolete? This is not a question with a simple yes or no answer. We need to see 'ASEAN centrality' as our ultimate goal—something that we aspire and will continually work towards. As an aspiration, it will not become obsolete. However, the way that ASEAN has tried to realise this aspiration has become obsolete and needs to change.

**Rizal Sukma is a Senior Fellow and former Executive Director of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Indonesia. He tweets at [@DrRizalSukma](https://twitter.com/DrRizalSukma).**



*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.**

# ASEAN Centrality Needs a Boost

By Moe Thuzar

*A divided ASEAN in which national interests take precedence over regional commitments serves no one's interest, much less ASEAN's political cohesion and strategic coherence.*

Established in August 1967 to advance the political-security and economic interests of its member states amidst geopolitical tensions, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is now in its sixth decade. Over past decades, ASEAN has developed a consultative way to pursue its collective goals. The ASEAN Way, the diplomatic norm that encourages member states to address regional concerns through (often lengthy) consultation and dialogue, has become the grouping's defining characteristic. Non-interference—a principle not unique to ASEAN—and consensual decision-making indicate a preference for informal, incremental approaches. ASEAN consensus is thus the result of negotiated compromises. Starting from 2010-11, the emphasis on “ASEAN centrality” as the primary driving force for regional initiatives has occasioned much comment on how ASEAN asserts this central role, and the extent to which it is accepted.

This essay examines ASEAN's experience in



pursuing its central role, against the backdrop of the crisis in Myanmar, and along internal, external, and institutional dimensions. Promoting or upholding ASEAN centrality regionally or with external partners requires internalisation of, and identification with ASEAN's principles and purposes. Myanmar's political crisis after the 2021 coup, and ASEAN's response to it, highlight the importance for ASEAN members and their partners to accept and project ASEAN centrality in all its dimensions.

## Both Present and Absent

ASEAN's moves to establish an integrated ASEAN Community, announcement of accomplishing that objective in 2015, periodic five-year plans updating commitments to improve and strengthen community-building efforts, and the recognition of the importance of linking to and supporting the larger

regional effort to **frame, safeguard and promote national interests**, all point to an awareness and internalisation of ASEAN’s central role in regional collaborative endeavours. ASEAN’s convening ability brings together external partners—including major powers—around shared concerns and interests related to regional security, entrenching ASEAN’s position as **an important node bridging different networks** of actors and interests. ASEAN centrality is present and prominent in various statements by the grouping, its individual members, and external partners.

Yet, acceptance of ASEAN’s central role is not as present. The **2023 State of Southeast Asia survey findings** reveal that over 80 percent of regional respondents expressed concern over “ASEAN being slow and ineffective” and unable “to cope with political and economic developments.” Over 70 percent were concerned that “ASEAN is becoming an arena for major power competition” and 60 percent were “worried about ASEAN’s disunity.”

The paradox of ASEAN centrality being both present and absent is visible in ASEAN’s efforts to mediate a negotiated settlement to the political crisis that engulfed Myanmar following the 2021 coup. The ASEAN Chair’s **statement** on February 2, 2021 called for adhering to the principles and purposes of the ASEAN Charter. The Myanmar military chose instead to assert its narrow interpretation of ASEAN Charter principles, even **challenging the legality of ASEAN’s decision** in October 2021 to invite only a **“non-political representative” from Myanmar** to the

ASEAN Summits.

## **Gaps Between Assertion and Acceptance**

ASEAN’s October 2021 decision was an unprecedented assertion of ASEAN centrality. Prior to this decision, ASEAN leaders negotiated the **Five-Point Consensus** (5PC) with the coup leader and chair of the State Administration Council (SAC) military regime in April 2021, and sought to implement the 5PC’s priorities. These priorities included immediate cessation of violence, constructive dialogue among all parties concerned, appointment of a special envoy to mediate the dialogue and meet with all parties concerned, and humanitarian assistance. The SAC, however, conflated the 5PC implementation with its five-point roadmap and **indicated** that it would address the 5PC only after the situation in Myanmar returned to stability. The **reluctance of the SAC to accept ASEAN’s attempt** to constructively intervene towards restoring stability in Myanmar showed up the gap between the realities of assertions and acceptance of ASEAN centrality.

These gaps were evident in the divergence of views among ASEAN members regarding the overall approach to the Myanmar crisis. Domestic challenges competed with the need for a concerted regional response to the **“Myanmar challenge.”** Regional priorities started to take second place to more immediate concerns over the humanitarian and security spillover of the spiralling situation in Myanmar, notwithstanding **external partners’ expressions of support** for

**ASEAN's lead role** in addressing the Myanmar crisis.

### No Alternative to Centrality

There are also threats to the external and institutional aspects of ASEAN centrality. ASEAN is caught between the US and China's strategic competition. Though preferring not to choose between the two powers, and pragmatically accepting China's growing political and economic influence in the region, Southeast Asians are nevertheless concerned. Two-thirds of the regional responses to the State of Southeast Asia survey opted for the US if forced to choose, but country-level responses revealed more favour for China in Brunei, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Differing views on ASEAN's next moves regarding the Myanmar crisis showed an ambivalence to ASEAN's central role. A third of the survey respondents, mainly from past and incoming ASEAN Chair countries such as Brunei, Cambodia and Laos, were neutral about the 5PC. Singaporean respondents viewed the 5PC's lack of progress as largely due to the SAC's intransigence while Myanmar respondents viewed the 5PC as "fundamentally flawed." Regionally, however, there was broad agreement that ASEAN should engage in independent dialogue with all key stakeholders to build trust. This sentiment reinforces somewhat the oft-repeated refrain that there is **no alternative for ASEAN** but to consciously and proactively strive for and earn its central role.

The Myanmar crisis is a timely call for creative approaches to give effect to ASEAN's intent to **strengthen its capacity and institutional effectiveness**. A divided ASEAN in which national interests take precedence over regional commitments serves no one's interest, much less ASEAN's political cohesion and strategic coherence.

**Moe Thuzar is a Senior Fellow and Coordinator of the Myanmar Studies Programme at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.**



## THE CENTRE ON ASIA AND GLOBALISATION

---

The Centre on Asia and Globalisation is a research centre at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore. It conducts in-depth research on developments in the Asia-Pacific and beyond, and aims to provide academics, decision-makers, and the general public with objective analysis on issues of regional and global significance. The Centre's motto "Objective Research with Impact" reflects its commitment towards ensuring that its analysis informs policy and decision makers in and about Asia.

## OTHER CAG PUBLICATIONS

---

- *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)
- *Introduction: Explaining Cooperation and Rivalry in China-India Relations* by Brandon Yoder and Kanti Prasad Bajpai (Journal of Contemporary China 32 (141) (May 2023): 353-368)
- *Dipping toes in the water: Indonesia's Indian Ocean engagement* by Evan Laksmana and Byron Chong (Perth USAsia Centre, 2022)
- *Fit for Purpose: Can Southeast Asian Minilateralism Deter?* by Evan Laksmana (Asia Policy 17(4) (October 2022): 35-42)
- *Hatta and Indonesia's Independent and Active Foreign Policy: Retrospect and Prospect* by Evan A. Laksmana and Lina A. Alexandra (Jakarta: CSIS Indonesia, 2022)
- *Failure to launch? Indonesia against China's Grey Zone Tactics* by Evan Laksmana (IDSS Paper No.37)



Compiled and sent to you by Centre on Asia and Globalisation  
and the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore

*Counterpoint Southeast Asia is supported by the Hong Siew Ching Speaker & Seminar Series.*

Feedback or comment?

Contact our team: [cag@nus.edu.sg](mailto:cag@nus.edu.sg)

[Subscribe](#)

