

ASEAN's Contested Centrality: Geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific

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An analysis of the role of ASEAN as a driver within Indo-Pacific geopolitics and its 'centrality' to the region

Research Leads:

Billy Buddell, Levi Cursham, & Keita Vasiljeva

Research Analysts:

Jayme Teoh, Azaria Kidane, Sebastian Kim, Ryan Leung, Michael Malinconi, Manuel Lara-Aguado, Albert Cullell Cano, Luc Parrot, Kelvin Ng, Yueh Chen, Kevin Fulgham, & Aswathy Koonampilly



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Executive Summary

This report aims to assess the role and significance of ASEAN within Indo-Pacific geopolitics, using the concept of '*ASEAN Centrality*' as a lens through which to evaluate it. The concept of 'centrality' is a core part of the ASEAN Charter, positioning ASEAN at the centre of regional cooperation in the region. The full report will cover the following:

- **ASEAN Centrality & Foundations in Southeast Asia:** This section establishes the reasons and conditions for ASEAN's emergence, tracking its development towards the role it currently plays as a central driver of Southeast Asian (and Asia-Pacific) international affairs. This section addresses the major reasons and objectives for ASEAN's formation. It then traces ASEAN's history of action within Southeast Asia into the modern day, looking at how the organisation became fundamental to the region. Finally, this section concludes with a focus on how ASEAN has grown into a major international forum in the Asia-Pacific.
- **Internal Disunity in ASEAN Voices:** This section assesses the extent of internal disunity between ASEAN members and potential future implications for the bloc as a whole, particularly its regional centrality. This section opens with an exploration of inherent differences between ASEAN states that serve as drivers for disunity. The following subsection builds a contextual foundation for ASEAN's operations and identity, investigating ASEAN's principles *or* the '*ASEAN Way*', and how these contribute to disunity. Finally, contemporary case studies in disunity are analysed, applying these principles to recent political crises to assess how the architecture of the bloc may hinder it. These include *The Myanmar Crisis*, *South China Sea Territorial Disputes*, *Putin's War in Ukraine*, and *COVID-19 Responses*.
- **External Pressures from Competing Powers:** This section assesses external pressures on ASEAN's centrality, evaluating the possible implications for the bloc's international role. It begins by covering ASEAN's current framework for dealing with international 'tilts' towards the region, focusing on the various ASEAN forums and dialogues. Following this, this section addresses rising Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific and assesses the subsequent potential propensity for external actors to bypass ASEAN as a regional facilitator of dialogue. Finally, this section posits that (having gained significant international recognition) ASEAN's reactions to external pressures dictate and influence its role on the world stage.
- **Risk Outlook:** This section identifies the four key risks currently facing ASEAN centrality and explores them in greater depth. These are *Rigidities in Policy and Operations*, *The Creation of Intra-Regional Blocs*, *ASEAN's Breakdown as an Indo-Pacific Forum*, and the *Management of Power Competition*. This section focuses on each of these risks and the unique challenges they pose to ASEAN centrality.



Introduction

Billy Buddell

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has steadily emerged as a critical architect and driver of geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific. As a regional intergovernmental organisation, ASEAN comprises ten-member states; Brunei Darussalam, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia, and Malaysia. Since its birth in 1967, ASEAN has grown into a central force in promoting regional stability, economic integration, and security dialogue and cooperation. Its central location and collective diplomatic approach have also made it a well-positioned buffer between conflicting great powers with vested interests in the region.

The ASEAN Charter, later adopted in 2007, established the organisation's legal framework and made clear its collective objectives, principles, and institutional mechanisms. The Charter strengthened ASEAN's institutional capacity, facilitating greater policy coordination and cooperation among its member states. One of the distinctive features of ASEAN since its formation, reaffirmed in the Charter, is the '*ASEAN Way*'. The '*ASEAN Way*' comprises a set of principles and norms that guide the organisation's decision-making processes and have become central to the bloc's identity and competencies. These principles include non-interference in the internal affairs of member states and consensus-based decision-making. This approach has been crucial in enabling ASEAN to navigate complex regional dynamics and maintain its regional stability and centrality.

The concept of ASEAN Centrality, refers to the idea that ASEAN plays a central role in driving regional stability, security, and prosperity. It is the goal of Southeast Asian nations, through ASEAN, to shape the regional order and prevent external powers from dominating the region. ASEAN has contributed significantly to development and security, both between ASEAN members, as well as promoting dialogue and diplomacy with other key stakeholders in the region, including China, the United States (U.S.), Japan, and India. ASEAN has also played a critical role in advancing economic integration and development in the region. The organisation has established a regional free trade area and promoted economic cooperation through initiatives such as the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA).

Regarding the diplomatic engagement of external actors, ASEAN-led forums such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the East Asia Summit (EAS) have provided platforms for discussion on key regional issues, such as maritime security, counterterrorism, and economic cooperation. In addition to this, ASEAN has been actively engaged in promoting regional security and defence cooperation. It has established various mechanisms for defence and security cooperation, including the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) and the ASEAN Maritime Forum (AMF).

ASEAN's regional centrality has been recognised by major powers, who have engaged with the organisation in various ways, including participating in ASEAN-led forums and supporting ASEAN-led initiatives. However, despite this international recognition, the organisation and its centrality face several challenges, including maintaining unity among its members, ensuring



effective decision-making, and adapting to the changing geopolitical dynamics within the region.

This report explores ASEAN's centrality and foundations in SEA, analysing ASEAN's growth into a central diplomatic forum in the region, after which it will evaluate the primary challenges facing the maintenance of ASEAN's centrality. These include risks of internal disunity in ASEAN voices and decision-making, as well as external pressures from increasing geopolitical interests of other regional stakeholders, in particular the U.S. and China.

The importance of ASEAN's centrality to the region cannot be overstated. The Indo-Pacific region is home to some of the world's fastest-growing economies and is also characterised by great power rivalry and strategic competition. ASEAN's central geographical and diplomatic positioning make it well placed to manage these dynamics and ensure regional stability. As such, an assessment of the role of ASEAN as a driver within Indo-Pacific geopolitics, particularly an analysis of its centrality to the region, is crucial in gaining an understanding of the region's current and future trajectory.





ASEAN Centrality and its foundations in Southeast Asia

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was founded in 1967 by five original members; Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and the Philippines. Today, the organisation is recognised for its major successes in proliferating trade, cooperation, and dialogue, not just throughout Southeast Asia, but across the entirety of the Pacific. Following the end of the cold war, the organisation has been praised for its ability to socialise and influence the numerous major economies that operate in its backyard, particularly given the relative size of its member states. Despite now being known for wielding influence over the interests of both the U.S. and China regionally, the foundation of ASEAN traces its roots to much humbler beginnings: the chronic uncertainty of post-colonial state building in post-war Southeast Asia. This first section looks at the creation and conceptualisation of ASEAN and its Centrality by examining the organisation's foundation, its emergence as the dominant force in Southeast Asia, and its growth in international security, trade, and diplomacy.

ASEAN's Foundation

Levi Cursham

To explain the reasons for ASEAN's founding, it is essential to understand the conditions and environment in which the budding members developed. Primarily, this will be explained through crippling insecurity and mistrust between regional neighbours, many of which had outstanding border disputes that frequently led to wholesale diplomatic collapse. The second approach to understanding what drove ASEAN's inception, is the members' collective desire, as post-colonial states, for legitimacy and recognition within the international system, something deemed necessary for regional development.

The territories of Malaya, Northern Borneo, and Singapore gained independence from the British Empire over the period 1957-1963. Despite a relatively peaceful independence in comparison to other post-colonial struggles, the Malay world, which sat at the crossroads of mainland and maritime Southeast Asia, would be rocked by uncertainty and insecurity until the founding of ASEAN in 1967. Closest to home was the instability of Singapore's membership within Malaysia, which ended after just two years due to political, economic, and racial disputes. As a result, Singapore, which was woefully ill-prepared to defend itself, was now sandwiched between its antagonistic ex-state, Malaysia, and Indonesia.

Indonesia's foreign policy towards Malaysia and Singapore in this period was termed and attempted to stop Malaysia's formation through violent encounters. Indonesia, especially its head of state Sukarno, was anxious of potential Malaysian designs on the ethnically Malay world, which also included the major Indonesian island of Sumatra. Indonesia's aggressive foreign policy, spanning 1963-66, was ultimately unsuccessful, yet damaged political and economic cooperation between the three countries. Meanwhile, to Malaysia's east, the Philippines laid claim to the Northern Borneo state of Sabah, creating an ongoing security



threat in maritime Southeast Asia, as well as a period of diplomatic silence between the two nations from 1963-1966.

Indonesia at this point was driven by strong ideological forces, specifically, post-colonialism, though also grassroots socialism. Its leaders were concerned with the formation of the non-aligned movement (NAM), as well as with a rejection of western-based imperialism and capitalism. This did not find fertile soil among the other Southeast Asian nations. Both Malaysia and the Philippines held strong military ties with their ex-colonial powers, allowing for the continued British and American military presence in the region, which Indonesia perceived as a direct threat. Due to their ongoing relationships with western powers, these two nations, along with Thailand, were strongly opposed to communism which threatened regional and regime stability. While SEATO, a U.S.-led Southeast Asian NATO, never genuinely materialised as a defensive power, Indonesia was the only ASEAN founding nation to not join, leaving it diplomatically isolated. The nations of Southeast Asia by 1966 were, therefore, entrenched in a lack of national and regional security which precluded development and cooperation.

As expounded, the new nations of Southeast Asia all suffered from a crippling lack of legitimacy and recognition within the region, but this also expanded to the international system. The limited statehood, coupled with inter- and intra-state violence, meant that only western powers, and even then only as colonial parents, would work with these underdeveloped states. The quest for concrete legitimacy as nation-states was a critical need that all five founding ASEAN members felt sorely. While the U.S. worked closely with the Philippines, and Britain with Malaysia and Singapore, these countries did not enjoy 'sovereign equality', and were still in many ways diplomatically inferior to their ex-colonial powers. Indonesia, contrarily, had violently thrown off its Dutch colonial ruler, however this had left it isolated in the international system; not afforded sovereign equality by western powers, but also without a colonial crutch to help its development.

The nations of Southeast Asia suffered from limited statehood, poor border integrity, a lack of sovereign equality and independence, and a radically heterogeneous ideological spectrum of governments. The formation of ASEAN, therefore, was designed to fill this aforementioned lacuna. All of the five founding members looked to ASEAN to legitimise their state as both independent and sovereign, while the foundational conferences were used to vastly improve, if not fix entirely, ongoing border disputes. ASEAN also gave the five nations status in the international system, and with each recognising the other four, there opened space for the proliferation of trade and development. One of the reasons this succeeded in Southeast Asia, where other post-colonial and non-aligned movements failed, was its heavy emphasis on recognition of sovereignty and independence, which materialised around an organisational principle of non-intervention in the affairs of other member states. This allowed for a plethora of democratic, authoritarian, and socialist-influenced governments to work in partnership.



ASEAN's Growth into Southeast Asia: 1967-2010 (circa.)

Jayne Teoh

As the age of colonialism in Southeast Asia drew to a close in the mid-20th century, ASEAN was formed on August 8, 1967, as a means of demonstrating regional unity and increasing prosperity. Initially, five nations from Southeast Asia — Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand — signed the ASEAN declaration that would formally recognise the birth of ASEAN. Except for Thailand, all these original countries acquired political independence from centuries of colonisation and foreign domination. This common experience gave the nations a common spur to work together to preserve their common interests. ASEAN's membership would grow to include Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, and Myanmar over the course of the century, with East Timor likely joining in the coming years.

The Southeast Asian region was a hotspot for major conflicts during the Cold War era. The region was divided into two ideological segments – one that embraced communist ideology and one that incorporated westernised influence and thought. Therefore, many initially criticised the formation of ASEAN as an instrument of the U.S. and its allies to prevent the spread of communism in the region. The ASEAN Declaration (also known as the Bangkok Declaration), however, sought to emphasise the creation of a united, and indigenous, regional bloc to protect against external intervention. The association would go on to triumph over the notion of western influence, and today represents an entirely Southeast Asian project, attracting members of all political stripes.

Growing Membership

In 1988, three years before the collapse of the Soviet Union, the 13th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam adopted a resolution to have 'more friends and fewer enemies'. By 1992, Vietnam expressed interest in joining the ASEAN bloc. This decision was driven by pragmatic reasons such as economic growth, political independence, and regime survival in a post-Cold War environment. Brunei joined ASEAN at the same time it entered the international system as an independent political entity in January 1984, placing high significance on its membership within ASEAN as the first international organisation it formally joined. For a small, new state, emerging within a region that was riddled with political instability, regional cooperation and participation in collective undertaking better guaranteed its political independence and security. In the case of Myanmar, its closer association with ASEAN offered important gains in terms of regime legitimacy, increased economic integration, and offered reduced reliance on China. The last to join the bloc in 1999 was Cambodia. After decades of civil war and violent dictatorship, Prince Rannariddh, and indeed political stability, was restored in 1998. Cambodia was backed by Laos and Vietnam to be admitted as a member of ASEAN. Cambodia was determined to rebuild its economy, as the then ASEAN Foreign Affairs and Information Committee chairman, Om Rasady, highlighted; "[the]main purpose of Cambodia joining ASEAN was to strengthen the economy and promote the economic programs."

The admission of these states into the ASEAN bloc holds immense significance. Joining ASEAN was part of a broader process in which countries forged a new state identity in the



post-Cold War era. The socialisation process of these nations and their interactions with ASEAN helped improve the awareness of commonalities between individual state interests and the regional bloc's larger aims. Through increased cooperation and stronger leverage over the bloc's goals, ASEAN has emerged to gradually position itself as the fulcrum of regional cooperation in the wider Asia-Pacific. The spread of its initial borders to incorporate more members reflects the growing idea of "ASEAN centrality," in which these member states have collectively become a driving force in relations and cooperation with their external partners. Although there are divergences between individual states' self-interests, collective leadership is now critical to global economic policy outcomes, which sit at the core of the interests of ASEAN. The bloc remains central to broader regional cooperation and institution building, especially through the process of its economic integration and alignment between member states.

History of ASEAN's Security Issues

ASEAN integration has continually gained momentum since its inception, with the organisation moving towards strengthening multilateralism and coordinating national strategies to region-wide issues. ASEAN camaraderie has diffused many potential crises in the region, such as the success that came from ASEAN's strategic diplomacy concerning the Burmese government's unexpected removal of fuel subsidies that led to a drastic overnight rise in commodity prices, and the subsequent shootings of monks during street protests in 2007. Although there were initial disagreements between Myanmar and other ASEAN states, Myanmar's decision to follow the bloc-wide consensus demonstrated that ASEAN's approach to Myanmar's military regime in this case was a strategic diplomatic success.

The region also faces a range of non-traditional security threats, including natural disasters, terrorism, maritime piracy, energy security, transnational crime, and more. Notable successes of ASEAN responses to these security threats include collective navy reinforcement to reduce rates of piracy, increased regional power sector integration through the development of the ASEAN Power Grid, and impressive reactions to cases of natural disasters, such as the swift formulation of the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Responses (AADMER) in response to the Indian Ocean Tsunami of December 2004.

Trade & Development in ASEAN

The implementation of the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) in 1992 was a stepping stone to broader liberalisation and promoting globalisation. Within the region itself, ASEAN has persistently fostered economic cooperation in trade, services, and investment, and moved towards a single market and production base to increase the region's competitiveness. Multilateralism and increasing intra-regional trade have prompted rapid growth in overall trade. ASEAN is currently the fourth largest exporting region in the world, trailing only the European Union, North America, and China. Although ASEAN accounts for a mere 3.3% of the world's GDP, it produces more than 7% of exports. Additionally, the organisation has moved to integrate into the world economy by developing a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with numerous partners. Most recently, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)



in 2020 yielded a powerful impact on the world economy, with a strong emphasis on the post-COVID era. Moreover, economic development has been monumental in the region, with a report showing many member states successfully lifting millions out of poverty, improving access to education and health, and increasing the total combined GDP.

ASEAN in the International System

Azaria Kidane

It has been said that ASEAN's greatest weakness is also its greatest strength. It is weak compared to the powers that it deals with; however, this means that it is viewed with comparatively less significance in the manoeuvrings of said powers. While there are major internal issues and conflicting interests with regional powerhouses, ASEAN remains a central part of regional dialogue in the Asia-Pacific. In the mid-2000s this seemed certain, but as we enter the 2020s this may be unravelling.

Regional Ties: At the Breaking Point?

Through organisations like the ARF (ASEAN Regional Forum), ASEAN can exert its soft power in a way that ensures continued growth and stability in the region. The ARF consists of the 10 ASEAN members, 10 dialogue partners (which include Australia, China, the EU, India, Japan, Russia, and the United States), and 7 other states. Created in 1994, the ARF deals with matters ranging from regional security to disaster relief. It is a vehicle for the ASEAN members to maximise their leverage by pulling together when negotiating with actors that have far more political and economic resources. Their relative weakness also means that they are trusted to be the driving force of relations. However, in recent years the power the ARF has held is being called into question.

Firstly, ASEAN has largely sat by and watched as two of its largest partners have become embroiled in the steadily intensifying Sino-Indian border dispute. With border skirmishes occurring between the two regularly, ASEAN has had to evaluate its political ties and commitments to India against the value of its extensive infrastructure deals with China. India's foreign policy strategy method of avoiding embedding itself into any one bloc resembles ASEAN's approach and so, ironically, while they have similar strategic outlooks, this similarity may mean it is harder for the ASEAN to harmonise its two mammoth neighbours.

In the case of Southeast Asia's headline security issue, the South China Sea crisis, there has also been a notable decline in its ability to mediate between China and member states. In 2012, for the first time, no communique was released by ASEAN's foreign ministers on the standoff between the Philippines and China on the Scarborough Shoal issue. Incidentally, Cambodia, China's closest partner in the bloc, was the Chair at the time and allegedly wanted to put out a joint statement with the Chinese. Immediately, concerns were raised about whether this was the end of multilateralism in the region, and ASEAN's reputation took a severe hit, in what was described as a "high-profile". ASEAN is also torn between its links with the nexus of ties with the U.S. and China for security and economic dependence. Coupled with the lack of



discourse on Taiwan, and ASEAN's members' competing claims in the South China Sea, there is speculation over whether ASEAN is willing, or even able, to stand up to China. China showing that it intends to divide ASEAN members may draw them closer together as they realise they cannot deal with China bilaterally.

Australia has emphasised the importance of ASEAN Centrality, with foreign minister Penny Wong being popular due to her Malaysian heritage. She has stated that ASEAN Centrality would be strategically central to Australia. However, Australia is already deeply integrated with the U.S.' security plans, and ASEAN's leaders are sceptical of the nation's attempt to paint itself as a multicultural and Asian nation, "just like them". Australia remains seen as America's deputy in the region, and if China continues to be an economic benefit to ASEAN then they will not see China's ascendance as much of an existential threat compared to Australia, Japan, and the U.S.

However, the damage may already be done, with Australia signing the AUKUS agreement inviting the United States to take a more leading role in the region. In addition to this, Indonesia, this year's Chair until 2024, has elected President Joko Widodo, who has talked extensively about pursuing Indonesian foreign policy through a post-ASEAN framework. Indonesia going its own way would be a significant hit to ASEAN Centrality. The bloc must rediscover its purpose as the fulcrum of the region, or else its larger members may begin to peel off to more polarised coalitions, damning the union.

Actors in the Asia-Pacific pursuing policies with outside powers, such as the AUKUS agreement, have not changed the fundamental position that ASEAN centrality holds in regional politics. Indeed, Australia recognises ASEAN's importance with its recent affirmation of the organisation's importance. If history has taught us anything, it is to not underestimate ASEAN, which has consistently thrived in uncertain environments. Regardless, it still faces a multiplicity of complexities on the international stage, in which its predominance as a regional arbiter and facilitator for dialogue is being questioned. Its medium-term outlook will heavily depend on its ability to continue to manage great powers as they increasingly lock horns in Southeast Asia's back garden.



Internal Disunity in ASEAN Voices

ASEAN has developed as a bloc since its emergence in the 1960s. However, this has not come without its challenges, namely, disunity being one of the biggest ones. With ten member-states, there have been increasing levels of internal tension whether through disagreement amongst each other on mutual decisions, political issues, regional conflicts or other issues at hand. This disunity has been one of the main threats to ASEAN centrality as with the lack of unity ASEAN's effective running as a regional bloc could come to a halt. Furthermore, its international recognition could fall significantly with these issues arising. This section, therefore, looks at internal disunity in ASEAN voices by providing context for the disunity, defining what constitutes ASEAN principles and the ASEAN Way, and looking into specific case studies which have all affected the disunity of the bloc.

Context of Internal Disunity

Sebastian Kim

Disunity is a matter of common occurrence for regional organisations. However, ASEAN, consisting of ten distinct Southeast Asian nations, seems to suffer from ever-increasing levels of internal disharmony and friction. This has contributed to preventing ASEAN from reaching common ground on several critical regional and international issues.

First, it is no surprise that inherent differences between ASEAN nations in political systems and ideologies produce internal disunity. Indeed, Southeast Asia is one of the regions with the greatest diversity of political systems. According to the Democracy Index by the Economist Intelligence Unit, there are five flawed democracies (Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, and the Philippines) and five authoritarian states (Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam). Even among democracies and authoritarian states, there is a great variety. Such differences in political systems and political ideologies may result in disparities in the understanding of, and approach to, the international realm between the states.

ASEAN member states are also in disagreement with superpower involvement in the region, most notably between the U.S. against China. Among them, Vietnam and Singapore seem to have a relatively welcoming stance towards U.S. involvement to work for common peace in the Indo-Pacific region. In contrast, Indonesia and Malaysia are worried about the intensification of arms in the region and wish to take the region's fate into the hands of ASEAN themselves. On the other hand, Thailand has signalled moving closer to China by purchasing Beijing's submarines. From the management of great power rivalry to the independent initiatives of ASEAN in the region, ASEAN members cannot easily find a middle ground on certain issues.

Such internal disunity certainly poses an obstacle for ASEAN's pursuit of regional centrality. There is a critical drawback from the multifarious nature of ASEAN: inability to produce a unified voice. If ASEAN seeks to position itself as the main player representing Southeast Asia on both the Asia-Pacific and the international stage, it needs to uniformly represent Southeast



Asian ‘regional interests’, which contradicts its internal disunity. At the same time, one of the key foundations of ASEAN is a policy of consensus. In the context of internal disunity, ASEAN’s age-old consensus-driven approach of working seems ill-suited, which may paralyse the production of swift and effective actions when needed.

Unfortunately, the worries turned out to be a reality. In 2012, Cambodia, ASEAN’s then rotational chair, failed to produce an annual joint communique for the first time in ASEAN’s history. Amidst a storming rage of both regional and international crises, ASEAN has clearly been unable to react in unison: Myanmar Crisis, South China Sea Territorial Disputes, Putin’s War in Ukraine, COVID Responses, and the list goes on. Hence, it is of great merit to political risk analysis to examine the extent of internal disunity between ASEAN member states and its potential future implications.

ASEAN Principles & the ASEAN Way

Ryan Leung

“One Vision, One Identity, One Community”, this motto has been the foundation of ASEAN since its beginning in 1967. With the purpose to rebuild after centuries of oppression, a fractured Southeast Asia came together, unified and gave way to this regional bloc. But to entrench the philosophy of its belief, the ‘ASEAN way’ was born, with the term popularised in the 1990s. The set of principles which member-states follow to provide security to themselves, also safeguards the future and longevity of the organisation. To understand the ASEAN way, it is divided into two major policies: A policy of non-interference, and a policy of consensus-building.

First of all, upon its focus on securing national sovereignty, ASEAN pushed for the philosophy of non-interference, suggesting the regional bloc would withdraw from participating in domestic affairs. Given its recent centuries were marked by western colonialism and foreign invasions, Southeast Asian states cherished their hard-earned sovereignty. And with the creation of ASEAN, has by far been the most effective strategy for neighbouring states to collectively defend their right to self-govern. Thus, under the perspective of mutual respect, member states agreed to the norms of non-interference.

Building on the policy of non-interference, it also influenced the direction of ASEAN. Compared to other regional organisations such as the European Union, ASEAN is reluctant to pursue a common social policy, as issues like immigration and employment remain a matter of domestic politics. Hence, the Southeast Asian bloc has prioritised economic cooperation as the primary, and sole objective. Countries have successfully negotiated free trade agreements among the member circle. Later, it also expanded to ASEAN plus three, informal cooperation with China, Japan and South Korea, three vital economic powers in the region. In 2020, it successfully launched the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, the largest trade deal in the world, further expanding its influence on the South Pacific. The policy of non-interference successfully gave rise to an effective and purely economic model for a regional bloc, suggesting its own unique form of regionalism.



Additionally, the ASEAN way also adopted the policy of consensus-based unity. To ensure its cohesion, any major decision requires unanimous consensus among the members. This measure could secure representation from each country and make certain of being “one vision” and “one community”. Thus, the country could only advance when the community reached an agreement, which could take precious time and resources.

However, it is crucial to highlight the limitations of the ASEAN way. To begin with, ASEAN lacks the ability to step in on a member's domestic situation, even when there is a possible breach of international laws or human rights abuses. Since the foundation of ASEAN proposed the isolation of state sovereignty from the control of the regional organisation, along with the need for consensus before execution, the organisation could not step into its members' jurisdiction. Since its founding in 1967, ASEAN failed numerous times in responding to regional affairs. Cases include Indonesia's brutal oppression in East Timor during their independence movement, the 2014 coup in Thailand, to the most recent coup in Myanmar, the regional bloc declined to intervene despite mounting international pressure. In most instances, these affairs also pose a regional-wide risk and expose its members to security concerns. The flood of refugees to Thailand after the 2021 Myanmar coup and the following civil conflict threatened the security at the Thai border. But there is little to achieve through the regional group. Indeed, the recent case study of Myanmar demonstrated a more proactive measure in the organisation to tackle the issue. The military provisional government was barred from attending its annual conference in response to the executions of civilian activists, while ASEAN proposed a 5-point consensus for its government to follow in return for cooperation. However, little was achieved in the process and ASEAN remains helpless in members' domestic issues.

Furthermore, the organisation may not be able to act if members fail to compromise, causing a deadlock and hindering policies. Being a powerful regional economic group, ASEAN could act as an instrument for foreign policy. However, given to diverse interests and alliances among all member states, sometimes they could be in conflict. For example, the South China Sea dispute saw Vietnam and the Philippines protesting China's overreach, yet Cambodia, a close Chinese ally, purposely stalled and delayed ASEAN's ability to respond. It caused hindrance in protecting a member state's sovereignty. Similarly, the long process of reaching a compromise could obstruct its flexibility and responsiveness during a crisis. During the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, even though ASEAN is a crucial economic bloc in the region, its slow action prompted states to turn to the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank for aid instead. Thailand, South Korea, and Indonesia had to request a large loan to stabilise its economy. It demonstrated the limitation of ASEAN under a consensus-building model and how it could undermine its function during a crisis.

To summarise, the ASEAN way has guided the Southeast Asia economic bloc since its founding in 1967. Its policy of non-interference provided security to its sovereignty compared to the region's history of colonialism and occupation; whereas its policy of consensus-building ensured all member states mutually benefited from their collective decision. Still, such a model poses severe limitations to the region. Its inability to tackle domestic crises left the region vulnerable to civil disorder and human rights abuses. Furthermore, requiring a unanimous vote on all policies could drastically limit its ability to react to a crisis, reducing its status in times of trouble.



Case Studies in Disunity

1. The Myanmar Crisis

Michael Malinconi

On February 1, 2021, the Tatmadaw, Myanmar's armed forces, deposed the democratically elected members of the country's ruling party, the National League for Democracy. Ministers and members of the Parliament, including President Win Myint and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, were detained. The Tatmadaw vested power in a military junta, officially called the State Administration Council, chaired by Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services Min Aung Hlaing that has also assumed the role of Prime Minister of Myanmar.

The military's motives for the coup remain unclear. The military has argued that alleged voter fraud in the 2020 elections threatened national sovereignty. However, it is more plausible that the military acted to preserve its central role in Burmese politics. More personally, Hlaing's fears of losing power due to age limits, with consequent potential prosecution and accountability for alleged war crimes during the Rohingya conflict, and the suspects of a possible appointment of a more reform-minded Commander-in-Chief could also have played an important role.

Since seizing power, the junta has conducted brutal campaigns against resistance groups, targeting ethnic armed organisations, activists and nonviolent protesters. The army continues to commit massive rights abuses in many areas of the country. The death toll in the military's crackdown on its opponents has risen to more than 2,000 people.

ASEAN Paralysed by Consensus & Internal Differences

In this framework, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is unable and unwilling to take tough action to stop the junta's brutality. Indeed, ASEAN has been paralyzed since the coup. Consequently, it has been able to put forward only weak responses and to demonstrate an inability to take determined steps to resolve the crisis. ASEAN is blocked by its historic policy of non-interference and its consensus principle (Article 20 of the ASEAN Charter): if any one out of the ten ASEAN member states objects to a proposal or idea, then none is done. Historically, the consensus principle helped ensure the unity in regional cooperation in spite of the vast diversity among ASEAN members and avoided the emergence of a "primus inter pares". The difficulty in reaching consensus is related to the fact that out of the nine members of the organisation, several have authoritarian governments and are wary of any implications for their own non-democratic regimes.

These internal disagreements were highlighted across the last two years. When Brunei, a small country with limited regional power, served as the ASEAN chair in 2021, the organisation took symbolic actions such as banning Myanmar from meetings. With Cambodia serving as ASEAN chair the following year, Phnom Penh's prime minister Hun Sen renewed engagement with the junta, visited Myanmar in January and pressed for the brutal military regime's renormalization. Hun Sen, who has been in power since 1985, has recently been accused of imposing further



repressive measures in his country. Many have high expectations for Indonesia, the ASEAN chair for 2023, which has proven to be less tolerant.

In April 2021, the regional organisation was able to adopt a “five-point consensus” plan to end the crisis but continues to fail to fulfil its pledges or take meaningful steps against the junta to end its human rights violations. The five points include an immediate end to violence in the country; dialogue among all parties; the appointment of a special envoy; humanitarian assistance by ASEAN; and the special envoy’s visit to Myanmar to meet with all parties. Up until late 2022, the State Administration Council has ignored ASEAN’s proposal but has continually stressed Myanmar’s membership and the country’s “respect” for ASEAN’s guiding charter.

Indeed, Myanmar’s position has exposed fractures within ASEAN. Several ASEAN countries – notably Malaysia and Indonesia, often alongside Singapore and the Philippines – have publicly criticised the junta’s intransigence. In August, ASEAN foreign ministers issued a joint statement stating that they were “*deeply disappointed by the limited progress in and lack of commitment of the Naypyidaw authorities to the timely and complete implementation of the five point consensus*”. Even the long-delayed visit by ASEAN’s Special Envoy to Myanmar earlier this year brought poor outcomes. In an unprecedented action by the bloc, ASEAN barred Min Aung Hlaing from its biannual summit last October, with only a non-political representative invited to attend. Singapore announced it was a “difficult but necessary decision to uphold ASEAN’s credibility given the unsatisfactory and highly limited progress in the implementation of the ASEAN Leaders’ Five-Point Consensus”. ASEAN has also banned Myanmar’s generals from meetings until the organisation’s supposed peace plan makes progress and is now issuing vague threats to take further action if Myanmar does not comply with the plan. In a veiled warning, the statement, referencing Article 20 of the ASEAN charter which allows a summit to override the consensus principle, noted that the leaders’ meeting later this year could still take action over “non-compliance”.

ASEAN, however, should accept that its peace plan has failed. Its passive nature only complicates its responses to the Myanmar situation. Although ASEAN’s neutral stance helped facilitate economic growth and regional stability during the Cold War, Southeast Asia now faces political problems and worldwide issues that ASEAN neutrality often can’t respond to. As exemplified by the Myanmar crisis, ASEAN must take a more active leadership role in the region.

What can ASEAN do?

ASEAN has great interest in Myanmar returning to a level of stability and the actions it could take are numerous. ASEAN could take more assertive steps at the international level, such as signalling its support for a UN Security Council resolution instituting a global arms embargo, referring the situation in Myanmar to the International Criminal Court, or imposing targeted sanctions on junta leadership. Leading ASEAN countries, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, could also develop a clear and timebound approach to press Myanmar’s junta toward reform, including through economic coercion and sanctions.



A clear and incisive signal would be ASEAN's refusal to recognize the planned 2023 junta-managed elections. The junta is trying to sell the idea that elections are the most effective way out of the crisis. However, their credibility is near-zero and they have the potential to spark further conflicts and instability. ASEAN's refusal to legitimise such elections could demonstrate its willingness to find an exit strategy to the crisis and restore credibility to its ability to manage regional stability.

2. South China Sea Territorial Disputes

Manuel Lara Aguado

Perhaps the most pertinent issue threatening ASEAN - some even describing it as a “make or break” situation for the block - are the territorial disputes in the South China Sea. This differs from previous crises as it strikes at the heart of the “ASEAN Way” which has proved so successful in achieving regional stability in the past via its heartfelt principles of informal, cooperative and non-confrontational resolutions - relying on consensus rather than raw organizational power. It differs in that it is not an internal dispute as the Myanmar crisis might be, with most countries putting pressure on a single member to change behaviour - or Putin's War in Ukraine which highlights divisions in external policy - but rather consists of disputed territorial claims between its *own* members accentuated by the expansionist agenda of China. The SCS dispute pivots the strong anti vs pro-China block in ASEAN, and puts into question the very notion of how far integrated an organization ASEAN is, or ought to realistically be. Should ASEAN aspire to be a joint political coalition force or nothing beyond a series of mutually beneficial economic agreements?

Beijing's “divide and conquer” & struggles of the ASEAN Way

With an estimated US\$3.37 trillion worth of global trade passing through the SCS annually, and with the global economic centre of gravity shifting evermore east, the region is becoming of interest to not only regional but global powers - the former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declaring the SCS of U.S. national interest. It is no surprise, therefore, that the negotiations have seen little development for the past 10 years as most of the involved parties refuse to back down on their territorial claims.

The SCS has long been an area of dispute and diplomatic faux pas, from the Spanish-American War, to the French occupation in the 1930s, the Japanese invasion and subsequent retreat in the Second World War all the way to the Taiwanese Strait Crisis. There has, however, been a considerable escalation of tensions ever since the Chinese unveiled its “nine-dash line” to the United Nations in 2009 (inspired by the 11-dash line of 1947), which broke the UNCLOS (United Nations Convention on Law of the Sea) and internationally recognized EEZ (200-mile exclusive economic zone) of 4 ASEAN members. This, combined with its recent “extension” of its EEZ by populating various Paracel and Spratly islands has made the issue of critical importance to China's expansionary plans and BRI, particularly since Xi Jinping's coming of power in 2013, who says China's claims date back to centuries-ancient Chinese dynasties with immovable historical ties. Indeed, with 80% of China's energy imports and 39.5% of China's



total trade passing through the SCS, some sources go as far as claiming the issue as “non-negotiable” for the CCP, on par with the core existential issues of Taiwan and Tibet.

That said, China is not the only power with vested interests in the region. Alongside China’s introduction of the nine-dash line, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia presented technical information to make submissions asking for permission to extend their continental shelf. For Vietnam, the SCS is its “lifeline.” As China, Vietnam lays claim to the Paracel and Spratly islands as part of its EEZ, and regularly clashes with China, particularly as Sino-Vietnamese relations have tensed since Vietnam’s diplomatic pivot has leaned closer to the United States in recent decades. In fact, Vietnam proposed for other actors such as the United States, Japan and India to help mediate the issue - a path similar to Malaysia and Singapore but which has angered more pro-China ASEAN members. A big appeal, not just to Vietnam but to other demographically young and economically expanding ASEAN members is the natural resource potential of the SCS, with some estimates putting the region to 17.7 billion barrels of oil, comparable to that of oil-rich Kuwait. Particularly as fears of “de-globalisation” and guaranteeing energy independence from opposing political actors have mounted, this issue is ever more relevant - petroleum accounting for 14% of Vietnamese government income alone. Meanwhile, China has only appeared to strengthen its stance. In 2020, for instance, Vietnam was forced to pay around \$1 billion to international energy firms after cancelling offshore energy contracts following Chinese pressure. The Vietnamese perspective also brings to light another of the complexities within ASEAN: the clash between founding members and the more recent entrants. Having joined a full 20 years after its formation, it has taken Vietnam a long time to solidify its position as a respected member yet sentiments still linger of it not being as legitimate as the “original six”. This trend is even more stark between more pro-China recent members such as Cambodia or Myanmar and the “original six” - perhaps creating a sentiment of newer members “impeding” the effectiveness the original smaller organization might have given them, particularly for existential crises such as these.

Within that context, the Philippines also appears quite immovable in its claims - mainly due the vast presence of fishing industries and strong feelings of national identity. Ever since the days of the Philippine-American War, the Philippines has been a strong American ally, with it being a hub for military bases and close-knit trade cooperation. It has perhaps had the most direct clashes with China, as its EEZ claims clash with the Chinese-dominated Spratly Islands, where fishermen have often had direct confrontations with the Chinese military. In 2014, in a move that emulated Vietnam’s action’s in the year prior, the Philippines filed a complaint in the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague against Chinese “assertiveness in the region.” Despite a 2016 ruling in favour, China has failed to comply, and ever since the pivotal election of Rodrigo Duterte as president, there is less of a willingness to pressure China to do so - Duterte being the most China-friendly president in decades.

A similar paradigm can be observed throughout many nations - who unequivocally suffer and are affected by China’s claims, but who’s economic closeness to the nation make them wary of not pressuring their larger regional neighbour. Malaysia, for instance, has traditionally been, along with Singapore, one of the largest pro-U.S. members of the block - yet with 22.6% of the population being ethnically Chinese and with it being its largest trading partner means it can both politically and economically hope to achieve little to support its Spratly island claims. For many governments, there is perhaps a sensation of fear of not joining China’s vast economic project for the region - and with recent American instability, particularly during the Trump



administration and its rapid abandonment of the TPP, means it simply is an alliance not worth sacrificing Chinese trade and investment for - which is increasing year on year. Similar situations occur for other members such as Indonesia, whose president Joko has benefited from a recent uptick in coal sales to power China's energy shortage and a proposal to join the Maritime Silk Road project - a prospect which pales in comparison with the drawback of dealing with Chinese shipping vessels crossings into its EEZ, or Brunei - which exports considerable oil to China.

What does this mean for the future of ASEAN?

The above geo-economic paradigm has unsurprisingly led to the current blockade in negotiations. ASEAN began as a strong anti-foreign intervention alliance, bound together by the trauma of the Second World War and complicated French, British, and Dutch imperial legacies. Yet after the fall of the Berlin Wall, ASEANs geographical concentration diminished with the entrance of diverse members such as Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia with more varied political and diplomatic ideologies. It is no surprise that these, along with Thailand, do not have a shoreline on the SCS and therefore tend to be more China-favourable on the claims - further complicating a consensus.

ASEAN appears to have become less of a stronghold of joint multilateral policy, rather choosing to solve its internal differences by a policy of general consensus to not prevent member discrepancies from getting in the way of mutually beneficial economic agreements. As elucidated earlier, the China vs America dilemma poses a situation in which many see themselves picking or tolerating China more so than before, particularly with the rise of an isolationist America and the unavoidable economic integration with the East Asian power. Not only, therefore, is there less of a conviction to act together externally - but growing internal differences in the SCS have prevented a joint approach to somewhat level China's pressure on each individual member. An ASEAN-wide leveraged position in a Chinese negotiation would likely render better results, but the general consensus policy has made this inviable given that Chinese-favourable members such as Cambodia would oppose the consensus. This is a similar paradigm to Hungary's vetoes in the EU, Turkey's vetoes in NATO or general disagreement between the 5 permanent members of the UN Security Council preventing affirmative policy.

The ASEAN Way has arguably weakened cooperation within military and defence, particularly as member states grow, and as ASEAN isn't equipped with the legal mandate and bureaucratic capacity to enforce compliance with regionally accepted principles and rules', members will continually turn to bilateral solutions. Whether this shaky and idealistic institutional framework is a price to pay for closer economic cooperation between members is up for debate. But as China keeps stirring the ASEAN pot, there is no clear solution in sight for the organization's existential crisis in the SCS.



3. ASEAN on Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

Albert Cullell Cano

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a faraway event to ASEAN and its concept of centrality when looking at a distance alone but also to ASEAN's ties to both states. Granted, its goal of regional stability driver appears to have little to do with an interstate war in Europe whose repercussions may very well not reach South-East Asia. Adding to the fact that it is ASEAN's philosophy to not break consensus and work from the lowest common denominator decisions, the bland and underwhelming response of the organisation should not come as a surprise. Nevertheless, two factors should not be overlooked, as they may carry hard-hitting and far-reaching implications. On the one hand, the disunity in the individual responses of the member states; critically, this may undermine the very centrality of ASEAN in the region and work against its goal of stability. And, on the other hand, the phlegmatic reaction of ASEAN itself to a flagrant breaking of international law—whose upholding plays a founding role in ASEAN's Charter—not only adds to the previous point but may also bolster similar actions very much closer to home.

When the Russian tanks first rolled into Ukrainian territory, ASEAN's response was mild, at the very least. In February 2022, ASEAN's foreign ministers released an official statement where, while they expressed themselves 'deeply concerned', refrained from any direct criticism against Russia or any language that framed either the invader as such, or even as an 'aggressor', or Ukraine as a 'victim'. This framework continued to be used in a similar joint statement in March, calling for a ceasefire and a negotiated and diplomatic solution to the conflict.

Such feeble response contrasts, however, with the individual reactions of the member states. Significantly, these vary greatly and can be summed up in three kinds: Singapore's direct opposition to the invasion, Myanmar's support and justification, and the rest attempting to strike a noncommittal balance. Indeed, this variation correlates with the different relationships with Russia that each country maintains. Thus, Singapore's trade with Russia amounts to less than 1% of its net exports; therefore, it has not flinched in condemning the invasion as a breaking of international law and the territorial integrity of a sovereign nation and joined the West in imposing sanctions. Needless to say, as a small country in a region plagued by secessionist claims and territorial disputes, little more could Singapore do to defend its own national interests. On the other side of the ring, the military junta governing Myanmar after the 2021 coup went so far as to call the invasion 'justified'. Unsurprisingly, Russia has long supported the coup, and with that move, Myanmar has strengthened its ties with Putin who after the coup became the leading supplier of weapons to the Tatmadaw. In between rest Vietnam's uncritical concern—the fifth arms purchaser from Russia, who additionally heavily invests in Vietnamese oil and gas; Cambodia, Thailand and Malaysia's brief and mild statements for peaceful settlement of the conflict, with the latter also forbidding Russian-flagged oil tankers to call at its ports; Philippines's criticism of violations of territory and sovereignty without any reference to Russia or Ukraine's Invasion; and Laos unconcernedly wishing 'restraint', 'de-escalation' and 'diplomatic settlement'.

While at the United Nations General Assembly, all the member states voted in favour of the resolution condemning Russia's invasion—save for Vietnam and Laos' abstention, this disunity in the response signals more than economic concerns. After all, ASEAN's trade with Russia amounts to less than half its trade with, say, Britain. Rather, this diverse range of



responses cleaves to a conflicting clash of values at ASEAN's core. On the one hand, it is inscribed in the ASEAN Charter and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation—of which Russia is a member—the sacred respect for international law, national sovereignty and territorial integrity. Thus, ASEAN did not hesitate to unanimously condemn Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia in 1978. However, non-interference and neutrality is also a landmark of the organisation, and so it seeks the lowest common denominator response in all affairs that may threaten a consensus among the ten members. That is what ASEAN centrality means, and what regional stability is thought to require.

It has been reported that ASEAN has little to win and much to lose from confrontation with Russia and outright condemnation of the invasion. Despite it being considered a direct affront to the core values of the organisation, the war in Ukraine is but a faraway event with little geopolitical connection to the region. As some have pointed out, while the war does have an impact on trade and the economy, ASEAN has no direct stakes in the conflict, the capabilities to influence the outcome or the responsibility to do so. Instead, it has an obligation towards the region which consists in not furthering disunity or compromising consensus among already tensioned members—that include both democratic and authoritarian, liberal and socialist regimes.

However, such reports underestimate the risks for ASEAN of not taking a stronger stance on a global issue such as the one in question. As Tan Sri Dr Munir Majid puts it, 'A diminished ASEAN cannot be good for its centrality'—and it goes without saying, such a bland and uncompromising response to the invasion and the violation of international law and national rights that ASEAN holds so dear *does* diminish the organisation. On top of that, it overlooks two regional issues on which the war can have domestic reverberations and so threaten stability. On the one hand, ASEAN's aloofness vis-à-vis territorial integrity in Ukraine may embolden China to assert itself more dominantly in the region, especially regarding Taiwan. On the other hand, South-East Asia does not want precisely separatist claims. Tacitly supporting or acknowledging the Donbas bid for secession from Ukraine and integration into Russia does not seem a good strategy for maintaining the *status quo* as to territorial disputes. Some of those claims comprise Aceh and West Irian in Indonesia, Mindanao in the Philippines, Pattani in Thailand, Sabah and Sarawak in Malaysia, and the Shans, Karens and Kachins in Myanmar.

At any rate, the concept of ASEAN centrality and the very ASEAN Way is threatened by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. More than that, it is contested by the very contradictions in themselves: the push for regional stability and the *status quo*, and the need to assert the national interests of ASEAN's member states.



4. ASEAN's COVID-19 Response

Luc Parrot

In December 2019, China declared its first cases of a novel coronavirus now known as COVID-19. Due to its geographical proximity, the first cases in ASEAN countries were detected not long after - in January 2020. In March 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the outbreak a pandemic. Ever since ASEAN and its member states have been grappling with the virus along with its associated profound economic consequences. A variety of measures were introduced by the 10 ASEAN countries to contain COVID's spread to varying degrees of effectiveness. ASEAN's response as a unified bloc however was found lacking, with the organisation's overall approach described as largely superficial.

When using the previously established lens of ASEAN centrality, COVID as both a political and economic event has a significant impact. The disunity brought on by COVID limits the extent to which ASEAN can position itself as the centre of regional architecture and shape relations with external powers. This case study in particular focuses on ASEAN's disunity due to; *1) Disjointed measures to tackle COVID*, *2) Chinese pandemic diplomacy*, and *3) Economic recovery* coming out of the crisis.

In effect, these factors strongly highlight the failure to understand the transboundary nature of COVID's impacts, even as ASEAN has the potential to be a logical platform to tackle this common transboundary issue.

Disjointed Responses

During the initial phases of the pandemic, ASEAN members implemented measures to reduce the spread of the virus and mitigate stresses on their health systems. Far from regional cooperation, member states often took unilateral decisions that impacted others. For example, on March 16th 2020, Malaysia closed all borders including the vital causeway link to Singapore with immediate effect and without any bilateral dialogue. This triggered chaos in Singapore as employers suddenly lost Malaysian cross-border workers and consumers began panic-buying in supermarkets.

The hyper-focus on treating COVID as a domestic security matter with national lockdowns imposed at different timings meant a paralysis on regional-level responses such as incremental restriction lifting. Leaders of ASEAN Plus Three (China, Japan, and South Korea) only met, virtually, seven months into the pandemic. A cycle of self-help paralysed any coordinated regional action on tackling the spread of the virus beyond information sharing.

One rare show of ASEAN unity in dealing with COVID is its ASEAN response fund. With funding from the ASEAN development fund and voluntary contributions from member states or external partners, the fund aims to purchase medical equipment and vaccines. As recently as September 2022, the fund donated more than eighty thousand Pfizer doses to the Thai government. Commentators still term these voluntary contributions as "likely too small".



Whilst the varying domestic responses to COVID may bring about disunity, its logic concerning the ‘ASEAN way’ is consistent. Because ASEAN member states have securitised COVID as a domestic issue rather than a transboundary one, each member state has acted unilaterally in its interests. This is beneficial in that states adopted policies to suit their local context with regard to factors including demographic constraints, the progression of the pandemic, and resources available.

China’s Pandemic Diplomacy

Chinese ‘pandemic diplomacy’ during the COVID crisis entrenched differences between ASEAN member states through propaganda and the early support of medical equipment and vaccines.

A concerted Chinese propaganda campaign worked through the pandemic to portray China as “a nation responding to the global dimensions of the pandemic with the utmost responsibility and care” placed in opposition to the United States’ lack of help. This portrayal was certainly effective at the beginning of the pandemic as Western powers turned isolationist. On vaccinations specifically, the early support of crucial COVID shots and specialist medical teams in South-East Asia meant China was the only large supplier through late 2020 and the first half of 2021. Famously, Indonesia’s president was photographed receiving his Sinovac dose in January 2021. While most of these vaccines were purchased and not donated, greater concerns among ASEAN officials arose about their effectiveness against infection. Indeed, Western vaccines were encouraged for booster shots, particularly for front-line medical workers.

In summary, China used the opportunity presented by the COVID crisis to advance its interests in the region. This was met with a mixed outcome, with more success in Indonesia than in the Philippines for example. Growing Chinese influence in ASEAN, albeit spread unevenly across member states, is a threat to ASEAN centrality and ASEAN’s importance to regional architecture in relations with outside powers.

Economic Recovery

COVID undoubtedly shook ASEAN economies, as shown by a variety of initial economic measures. With an average GDP growth of 5.3% over the last decade, the region then went through its first economic downturn in 22 years. A largely uniform monetary policy response by decreasing rates can barely be described as coordination, even tacitly, instead driven by necessity and the American Federal Reserve’s leadership. Fiscally, stimulus and sector-targeted responses were uneven across countries. Whilst resources ranged from \$US 30 million in Laos to over \$US115 billion in populous Indonesia, no fiscal plan was made across ASEAN. In comparison, the EU’s recovery package amounted to more than \$US2 billion, although this must be recognised in the context of a single market.

Currently, the Asian Development Bank estimates diverging growth paths based on the effectiveness of respective vaccination programmes. Economies within ASEAN that have



successfully contained the pandemic and lifted most restrictive measures are “forging ahead” and leaving their regional neighbours behind. In this notion, members with high vaccination rates such as Singapore haven’t yet aided those with lower vaccination rates such as Cambodia to guarantee the economic recovery of closely entwined trading partners. Furthermore, China’s position as ASEAN’s largest trading partner and investor presents a potential danger for disunity with the economic slowdown linked to China’s ‘zero COVID’ policies.

ASEAN, as an economic organisation first and foremost, cannot overlook the disunity that global economic turmoil with current inflation and expected future recession may yet bring.

How can ASEAN Adapt?

In relation to COVID, the bloc’s unwieldy architecture limits its scope of action and instead contributes to disunity. Consensus voting makes regional cooperation beyond performative action unlikely. Logically, ASEAN would be well-placed to tackle a common transboundary issue. However, in its current use as a format provider rather than driving substance, ASEAN’s use is predominantly limited to serving as a forum for discussions. Learning from the more cohesive EU response is an option, whilst still needing careful respect for the much-valued ‘ASEAN way’ of non-interference. A paradigm shift is needed within the organisation to overcome its current disunity linked to COVID. This could truly centre ASEAN as the principal regional architecture towards external powers, both relating to COVID and away from it.



External Pressures from Competing Powers

Beyond internal disunity, external pressures pose challenges to ASEAN's centrality. External power competition, particularly between the U.S. and China, contributes to a more complex geopolitical landscape, potentially limiting ASEAN's ability to act as a regional architect and mediator. The growing rivalry in the region to expand interests and strategic influences has put mounting pressure on ASEAN members to align with one power or another. While ASEAN has forums in place for dealing with these external pressures, they present a pivotal challenge that could erode ASEAN's ability to act as an independent mediator and role as the primary hub for regional security. This action explores ASEAN's existing architecture for navigating external pressures, as well as the growing number of minilateral partnerships between external actors and the risks these pose to ASEAN centrality.

ASEAN's Current Architecture for Navigation External Interests & Pressures

Kelvin Ng

The ASEAN Charter calls for the organisation to develop “friendly relations and mutually beneficial dialogue cooperation and partnerships” with countries and sub-regional, regional and international organisations and institutions through its conferment of Dialogue Partners (DPs), Sectoral Dialogue Partners (SDPs) and Development Partner statuses. At the same time, as ASEAN presents itself as a strategic fulcrum for wider geopolitical interests in the broader Asia-Pacific region, it inevitably finds itself caught between increasing external interests and pressures, exacerbated by the heightened rivalry between the U.S. and China, and several non-traditional security threats. In this section, we examine how ASEAN's current architecture, namely the 'ASEAN way' of informality and normative practices continues to deal with international 'tilts' towards the Indo-Pacific, and how it continues to enable ASEAN as a centre for dialogue and potential buffer between geopolitical tensions, despite increasingly limited successes amid a rapidly changing geopolitical environment.

Existing Indo-Pacific 'tilts'

It is no surprise that given the scale of ASEAN and its role as the primary forum for multilateral cooperation, it is also subject to external interests and pressures. Domestically, the United Kingdom has played an increasingly engaged role in the Indo-Pacific Region, after publishing the Integrated Review in March 2021 (and its admittance as a Dialogue Partner in 2021), which announced its aim to be the European partner 'with the broadest and most integrated presence in the Indo-Pacific'. In August 2022, the ASEAN-UK Dialogue Partnership Plan of Action (2022-2026) further solidified these aims with comprehensive plans for cooperation related to ASEAN's three pillars: political security, economic, and socio-cultural cooperation. Although most of these plans are centred around economic-related strategies including the British International Investment Hub in Singapore and contributions to the ASEAN Catalytic Green



Finance Facility, the UK's interests notably included promoting 'liberal' values in the region, condemning Russia's invasion in an ASEAN meeting and human rights abuses by Myanmar's junta, yet the UK merely limited its opinion to supporting the Five Point Consensus.

Existing ASEAN forums and dialogues with international partners

The various formal partnerships that ASEAN can confer vary in terms of breadth and depth of engagement, with the Dialogue Partnership being the most extensive. Initially, Dialogue Partnerships (now amounting to 11 nations, including China, Russia, the United Kingdom and United Nations) focused on securing technical and economic assistance for developing economies. Nowadays, the agenda has eventually broadened to include the promotion of two-way trade and investments; strengthening of socio-cultural links; exchange of views on regional political issues; and addressing non-traditional challenges such as terrorism and transnational crimes. It should also be stressed that along with other ASEAN decisions, the conferment of a formal partnership with an external party is done through consensus among all Member States.

ASEAN Dialogue Partnerships are characterised by regular high-level exchanges and dialogue, including ministerial meetings and summit meetings. For example, the last Summit (38th / 39th in Brunei Darussalam held in 2021) issued statements acknowledging the successes of the ASEAN summits with the Republic of Korea, the U.S., Australia, Japan, China, India and notably Russia, which ratified the ASEAN-Russian Comprehensive Plan of Action (CPA) (2021-2025) aimed at “strengthen[ing] dialogue partnership and cooperation across [areas of] political-security, economic, socio-cultural and development cooperation”. Principles of ASEAN Centrality were once again invoked, prioritising the role of ASEAN-led mechanisms in the regional architecture which would also provide external countries like Russia an important role in fostering peace, stability and inclusive growth in the Asia-Pacific.

Each ASEAN Member State is also appointed to coordinate relations with a Dialogue Partner, providing national governments agency in facilitating the establishment of a regional community, and at the same time providing countries with flexibility in determining its diplomatic approach guided by the 'ASEAN Way'. For example, Singapore was the Country Coordinator for ASEAN-EU Dialogue Relations from August 2018 to August 2021 and co-chaired the ASEAN-EU Post-Ministerial Conference in 2019.

On the other hand, although ASEAN is characterised by its preference for informality when dealing with political and security matters, characterised by its lack of 'formalised' institutions and the limited role of the ASEAN Secretariat and its dependence on normative behaviour, it has managed to take up leadership in forming a plethora of multilateral institutions to engage with the wider Asian-Pacific community. These include notably the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Plus Three (APT), East Asia Summit (EAS), and notable arrangements like the ASEAN Defence Ministerial Meetings (ADMM) and ADDM Plus to deal with regional economic and security challenges. The complementing web of bilateral and multilateral engagements is that through which ASEAN is driving regionalism in Asia, or what is known as the principle of “ASEAN Centrality”.



Rising Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific & Implications for ASEAN

Yueh Chen & Kevin Fulgham

Minilateralism is a reaction to the frustration to agree upon major international actions on pressing global issues. Minilateralism “should bring to the table the smallest possible number of countries needed to have the largest possible impact on solving a particular problem.” These partnerships, moving away from the language of “alliances”, are often informal with a narrower scope than multilaterals, which puts more emphasis on trust, individual political leadership and domestic political support across leadership changes. Minilateralism tends to focus on economic and security issues. However, some minilateral bodies are centred on climate change and social development.

Minilateralism in Southeast Asia can be divided into two major categories: those that include major non-Southeast Asian states such as China, Japan and the United States, and those composed solely of Southeast Asian states.

Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific

AUKUS

AUKUS was formed as a response to Australia’s plan to strengthen its naval capability. Frustrated by the overflowing budget and disagreements over industry involvement, the Australian government ditched its submarine deal with France and turned to the United States and the United Kingdom for alternatives. The United Kingdom and the United States will help Australia build at least eight nuclear-powered submarines, which makes Australia the seventh country in the world to possess nuclear-powered submarines. The acquisition of nuclear submarines would make Australia become one of the most influential countries in the Asia-Pacific region, as Nuclear-powered submarines have faster cruising speed, better weapon systems, and improved durability. Although Singapore welcomed the formation of the new alliance, not all ASEAN countries endorsed the formation of AUKUS. Indonesia is among the most vocal critics: the Indonesian government issued a five-point statement, which stated that Indonesia ‘was deeply concerned over the continuing arms race and power projection in the region.’ Indeed, the three countries’ leaders implied that China was the reason behind the formation of this new alliance. Some Chinese scholars also believed that minilateral bodies such as AUKUS have ‘emerged as a key tool for the U.S. to persuade some Western countries to join its Indo-Pacific strategy.’

Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP):

CPTPP is a response to the United States’ withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Three of the ASEAN member states, namely Singapore, Vietnam, and Malaysia, have already ratified the CPTPP pact. Once ratified, the CPTPP is going to provide tariff elimination across every sector. The elimination of tariffs is going to have an economic impact on non-member states such as Taiwan and other ASEAN countries.



Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD):

In November 2017, just ahead of the ASEAN and East Asian Summit, Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono convened the Foreign Ministers of Australia, India and the U.S. to discuss measures to “ensure a free and open international order based on the rule of law in the Indo-Pacific.” This meeting signified the rebirth of the “Quad” a minilateral security framework initially proposed in 2007 during Prime Minister Abe’s first term. The Quad is notable because it supports the Japanese-led concept of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), instead of a Chinese or U.S.-led conceptual framework, and India, a cautious regional actor, is considered a full member.

Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC):

The Lancang-Mekong Cooperation is China’s first attempt at building a minilateral or multilateral organisation without the other major regional powers, primarily Japan and the United States. Comprising China and all the mainland Southeast Asian states: Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam, the LMC has a joint security and security focus, especially regarding strategic water diplomacy and management of the Mekong Delta. Established in 2016, the Chinese-led mechanism was developed as all of the current mechanisms working on Mekong water security excluded China. As China is upstream from mainland Southeast Asia, Southeast Asian states are motivated to participate to address issues of water governance and economic development centred on the Mekong. Since its founding, China has issued numerous loans for river-centric economic development, while Southeast Asian states have engaged with greater trans-border water governance discussions. Given the LMC’s focus on the Mekong River, the LMC presents a ready-made rationale for excluding the other extra-regional powers: U.S., Japan, and India.

Minilateralism within ASEAN

While, before the early 2010s, several minilateral efforts, primarily driven by non-ASEAN states including the Ad-Hoc 2004 Tsunami Core Group and the first proposal of the “Quad” security alliance, involved the region of Southeast Asia, Southeast Asian states took a more robust role in promoting ASEAN-only Minilateralism in the 2010s. Critically, ASEAN Minilateralism has proliferated since 2010, mirroring China’s rising military-economic power and decreasing American regional involvement driven by President Trump’s foreign policy and an underwhelming “Pivot to Asia.”

Sulu-Sulawesi Seas Patrols:

The Sulu-Sulawesi Seas Patrols, established in 2017, is a minilateral partnership comprising Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines centred on protecting the Sulu Sea and Sulawesi (Celebes) Sea from maritime crimes. The SSSP is modelled after the Malacca Straits Patrol (MSP), established in 2004, a similar partnership between Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand to safeguard the Straits of Malacca and Singapore.

Our Eyes Initiative:

Our Eyes Initiative is a security partnership, established in 2018, comprising Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Singapore centred on fostering cooperation in countering non-traditional security threats including terrorism and violent extremism. Our Eyes Initiative, its name inspired by the Anglo-American Five Eyes intelligence network, was



proposed by Indonesia as an information-sharing platform, especially directed at countering violent extremism such as Jemaah Islamiyah, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, and Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). As of 2020, OEI has had three summits of its member states, but as a security-centred minilateral partnership, public information in English about its activities is rather scarce.

Minilateralism & Multilateralism Constraints

Minilateralism fills an institutional gap, where the set-up by different actors has led to institutional congestion in the region. Minilateral bodies create the potential to bypass multilateral dialogues (ASEAN) as means of pursuing Indo-Pacific ambitions with less constraint, as minilateral organisations are often composed only of these countries that are most relevant to or that could make the biggest impact on that specific narrowly defined issue. Evident through the actions of the Quad or the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Mechanisms, Minilateralism can take action on economic or security issues that have stagnated or been ignored in larger ASEAN dialogue.

ASEAN's long-term institutional strength, the ASEAN Way, is also a major limiting factor as the unanimous consensus model drives decisions to the lowest common denominator, which among economically and politically unequal states provides an immense challenge. The power and limitations of the consensus model have recently been demonstrated by Cambodia, China's closest regional ally, blocking any statements on the South China Sea maritime dispute that included any mention of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague ruling. In 2012, ASEAN failed to issue a joint communiqué following their annual consultations of ASEAN's foreign ministers, the first time in its history, following Cambodia's rejection based on the joint position on the South China Sea dispute. The limits of the consensus model drive the rise of Southeast Asian Minilateralism, which may reduce ASEAN's convening power if states view that there is more to gain from minilateral bodies and view ASEAN as little more than a "talk shop."

Minilateralism is fundamentally exclusionary, focusing on the minimal number of actors necessary to make a significant impact, which directly contradicts ASEAN's inclusionary focus on consensus and consultation. As the initial ASEAN Declaration was partially motivated to reduce regional tensions and contain the spread of Communism during the era of non-alignment, ASEAN has actively sought neutrality to benefit from the United States' military protection and Chinese' economic partnerships. However, as China rapidly grows in economic and military strength and ambition, countries are actively balancing against or joining China or the United States. "Choosing sides" actively weakens ASEAN's conveying power, as states can no longer afford to ignore changes to the region's power dynamics. Indeed, due to the emerging threat of China's assertive foreign policy and the deteriorating relationship between China and Taiwan, the United States has shifted its focus to Northeast Asia, whereas the strategic value of ASEAN has deteriorated rapidly over the past decade.

Although the volatile geopolitical landscape in East Asia has weakened ASEAN's role as a buffer zone between China and the United States, ASEAN still has the chance to reclaim its conveying power. While AUKUS is going to equip Australia with its nuclear-powered submarines, the minilateral cooperation is limited to the scope of military technologies.



ASEAN could still leverage other aspects to navigate itself in a volatile geopolitical landscape. China and the U.S. are the largest trading partners of most ASEAN member states and thanks to the trade war between China and the United States, many international corporations have moved their investments to ASEAN member states such as Vietnam. While the acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines has military implications, ASEAN should leverage the geopolitical climate and reposition itself as a buffer zone between China and the United States. As the Brookings Institution report has pointed out, both the United States and China would “profit from the existence of third-party mechanisms that can provide impartial information, suggest road maps for deconfliction, and outline pathways for collaboration that neither side might trust if emanating from the other.”

Minilateral Effectiveness & ASEAN’s Convening Power

Given the recent establishment of regional minilaterals, it is possibly too early to make significant judgments on the effectiveness of minilateral partnerships and if this effectiveness undermines ASEAN’s convening power. However, the proliferation of minilaterals may have promoted the 2021 ASEAN Leaders’ Declaration on Upholding Multilateralism. Many minilaterals have not completed their original mission or are centred on nebulous concepts, such as “improving relations”. However, minilaterals focused on the Covid-19 response could provide insight into the effectiveness or lack thereof for future minilateral partnerships.

COVID-19 Mekong Cooperation: LMI & LMC:

Apart from better crisis management than maritime Southeast Asia, mainland Southeast Asia’s early recovery from Covid-19 was also attributed to the networks they have carefully maintained with the external powers. Both the competing Chinese-led Lancang-Mekong Cooperation and the U.S.-led Lower Mekong Initiative expanded their respective Mekong cooperation during the pandemic, primarily through vaccine distribution and economic investment. During the third Lancang-Mekong Summit in August 2020, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang pledged that China would provide mainland Southeast Asian states with priority access to the COVID-19 vaccine and other assistance. Cambodia, China’s close regional ally, became the first country to receive Chinese assistance. In September 2020, counterbalancing China, the U.S. upgraded the Lower Mekong Initiative to the US-Mekong Partnership (USMP), unlocking \$153 million in funding for collaborative Mekong projects. During the first USMP Ministerial meeting, the U.S. established a new regional office of the US Centre for Disease Control and Prevention in Hanoi, Vietnam.

Future Risks

Scope Creep:

Future evaluations of the effectiveness of Minilateralism must consider institutional scope creep, whereupon, fulfilling the original objective, the minilateral seeks out a new problem and/or fails to conclude its partnerships. The original European Coal and Steel Community, a precursor to the modern European Union, was formally established by six states seeking to control the product and export of coal and steel to prevent future war between France and



Germany. However, since its 1950 inception, it has expanded to a supranational political and economic union of 27-member states governing numerous areas, including freedom of movement and the usage of a single currency.

Regional Stability & Exclusion:

There is growing debate about whether Minilateralism contributes to a stable regional order or increases the risk of creating competing blocs that could exacerbate regional security friction. Excluding any state could be problematic as it could risk amplifying domestic narratives about the ill intentions of other states, especially if there is ongoing tension. In the Mekong region, there are 13 minilateral partnerships, 5 of which are driven by actors outside of Southeast Asia, and all of which exclude another of the great powers.

Resilience Across Leadership Changes:

Minilateral bodies have a degree of informality which makes them institutionally vulnerable to changes in leadership. In 2007, the first Quad proposal was quickly shelved once Prime Minister Abe stepped down from leadership and Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd was elected. We have already seen this sustainable leadership problem in several ASEAN member state-centric institutions, including the continuous struggles for greater cooperation in the Brunei Darussalam Indonesia Malaysia Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area.

Minilateral groupings are voluntary, non-binding partnerships, unlike multilateral organisations that often have legally binding frameworks and independent bureaucracies which play a role in shaping state behaviour by applying both incentives and constraints. Additionally, minilateral organisations, as informal institutions, often function without a dedicated secretariat and permanent physical office. This means they may not have the same institutional memory as multilateral bodies which could create challenges for tracking statements, meeting records, funds deployed, and outcomes achieved.

External Necessity: ASEAN's 'make or break' on the World Stage

Aswathy Koonampilly & Billy Buddell

Having gained notable international recognition for its pivotal position as a player in the Indo-Pacific, ASEAN's ability to navigate increasing external pressures has the propensity to 'make or break' its international standing. External pressures pose both opportunities and challenges to ASEAN's centrality. In order to maintain and strengthen its influence in the region, ASEAN must effectively navigate these pressures and promote unity and consensus, adapting to changing regional dynamics while staying true to its principles. These pressures however equally challenge ASEAN's ability to successfully do this, thus mark a pivotal challenge in ASEAN's continued progression as a rising international bloc.

External pressures to ASEAN centrality, particularly power competition and increasing expectations to resolve regional crises, present this 'make or break' in several ways. This can be explained in relation to the concept of the 'whip of external necessity'. Within theories of uneven and combined development, the 'whip of external necessity', within an interacting



multiplicity of societies, puts external socio-economic pressure on societies to develop in order to survive. Therefore external events and forces can cause states, or here regional organisations, to adapt and respond to changing circumstances in order to maintain their relevance and influence.

In the context of ASEAN, external pressures arising from power competition and increasing international expectations to resolve regional crises can be seen as ‘whip(s) of external necessity’ within ASEANs changing geopolitical circumstances. If ASEAN fails to effectively respond to these mounting pressures, it risks its centrality to the region. However, if ASEAN *is* able to effectively navigate these pressures and adapt to changing regional dynamics, it can demonstrate its resilience and ability to maintain centrality in the region, despite increasing power competition and tensions in the region. Therefore, while risks, these external pressures are important in shaping the trajectory of the organisation.

Navigating Power Competition

Increasing competition between major powers in the region, primarily the U.S. and China, can exert pressure on individual ASEAN states to align with one or the other power, undermining ASEAN’s neutrality and non-alignment. External pressures from power competition then have the potential to create divisions within ASEAN, and therefore detriment its ability to act as a united regional architect. A significant arena for ASEAN centrality within this in particular is ASEAN’s ‘hedging’ amid intensifying competition and continuing decoupling of the U.S. and China.

One of ASEAN’s central aims during the height of the Cold War was to avoid becoming a pawn in great power struggles and thus perhaps adopts mirrored anxieties and approaches to dealing with U.S. and China in the region. ASEAN’s strategy, therefore, is one of sustained omni-enmeshment, hedging against a multipolar world by engaging with all powers and enticing them to have their own stakes in maintaining the regional framework. However, if this multipolar dynamic becomes increasingly bipolar, with China against the U.S. and its allies, omni-enmeshment may become an increasingly challenging approach.

As previously discussed in relation to ASEAN’s foreign policy, both internal and external, the unity of the group is central to the success of collective foreign policy aims. Close bilateral relations between China and ASEAN members Laos and Cambodia for examples risk undermining the ability of ASEAN to remain neutral and play the two superpowers off of each other. This is arguably evidenced by Cambodia’s blocking of a joint ASEAN statement that differed from Beijing’s official position on the South China Sea in 2012.

While ASEAN attempts to hedge against a multipolar world by engaging all powers and promoting the maintenance of regional frameworks, the present dynamic between China and the U.S. indicates that the two countries are likely to increasingly view their influence in relation to the other as a zero-sum game. As such, ASEAN’s regional forums created to enhance cooperation between outside powers may find it increasingly challenging to slow the decoupling of the U.S. and China.



One of the significant external pressures that ASEAN has faced in recent years is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China's ambitious infrastructure project spanning Asia, Africa, and Europe. ASEAN members have been both recipients and participants in the BRI, with China viewing the region as a crucial link in its global network. ASEAN has subsequently reaped economic benefits from the BRI, however, its participation has also raised concerns about the potential for Chinese influence to grow in the region. ASEAN's ability to navigate the BRI is therefore significant amid U.S.-China rivalries and will depend on its ability to use the project to its advantage while also maintaining its independence and neutrality.

Another external pressure the ASEAN faces is the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, one of the more prominent minilaterals mentioned previously, also known as the Quad. This informal strategic forum comprises the U.S., Japan, India, and Australia. The Quad's pivot to ASEAN is an attempt to appeal to the organisation as a central ally in the Indo-Pacific region. ASEAN's negotiating power between external powers is an asset that the Quad likely hopes to leverage in its engagement in the region.

Southeast Asian countries, therefore, are likely to implement and engage with policies to balance the influence of the two powers, deterring the superimposition of one, and obtaining greater commitment from both. ASEAN's response to the Quad will depend on its ability to employ deft diplomatic manoeuvres to use external pressures for its own gain, while avoiding reactionary concessions to external players. ASEAN's success in navigating pressures arising from power competition will ultimately determine its centrality in the Indo-Pacific region and its ability to shape regional affairs.

Navigating International Expectation

The increasing expectations on ASEAN to resolve regional crises, particularly as mentioned throughout this report the ongoing crisis in Myanmar, also exert pressures to take a more proactive and visible role in regional affairs. This can provide an opportunity for ASEAN to demonstrate its centrality and importance to the region. However, if unable to effectively manage these crises or act decisively in front of an expectant international community, it can equally undermine its legitimacy and significance as a regional organisation. These greater calls for ASEAN to play a more assertive role, concurrent to its international recognition as an important bloc, also contribute to challenges to ASEAN's ability to maintain principles of consensus-based decision-making and non-interference. This could create tensions within ASEAN and undermine its ability to effectively maintain its principles.

The aforementioned Myanmar Crisis, and the opportunity and necessity for an effective ASEAN response, is a compelling example of this. The international community's deferment to ASEAN on this issue illustrates compellingly the existing reputation ASEAN has acquired as a central player in maintaining peace and security in the region. The ongoing spotlight on ASEAN's response here is both a significant opportunity and a serious reputational risk as a serious player in the region. How it has dealt and continues to deal with the crisis, therefore, has the ability to significantly impact its stock internationally.

ASEAN's initial response was slow and cautious, with the organisation calling for dialogue and restraint from all parties involved. Furthermore, there has been a lack of unity among



ASEAN member states regarding the crisis in Myanmar. Some countries, such as Indonesia and Malaysia, have taken a stronger stance and called for more action to be taken against the junta, while others, such as Thailand and Vietnam, have been more reluctant to criticise the military's actions.

ASEAN's limited intervention has yet to yield concrete results. The Chief of Myanmar's junta, Min Aung Hlaing, has not followed through with the "five-point consensus" peace plan which was agreed to on April 2021. ASEAN has yet to and is unlikely to, take an interceding role considering its precedent and its value of non-interference. The international community has had a mixed reaction to ASEAN's engagement with the Myanmar crisis. Some have praised ASEAN for taking the lead in trying to address the crisis and welcomed efforts to facilitate dialogue and promote peace in Myanmar. The United Nations Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, commented that ASEAN's role in resolving the crisis was "crucial". On the other hand, others have criticised the organisation for not doing enough to address the conflict. On July 10th, U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken consequently criticised ASEAN for failing to hold the Myanmar junta accountable.

The Myanmar crisis has thrust ASEAN into the spotlight as an international mediator. ASEAN's ability to effectively navigate the crisis, therefore, will undoubtedly impact its international standing, with its stock rising or falling depending on the outcome. If ASEAN is perceived as being ineffective in addressing the crisis, it could lead to a loss of confidence in the organisation and undermine its legitimacy. This could potentially lead to member states, as well as the international community, looking to alternative forums to address regional issues. On the other hand, if ASEAN can successfully address the crisis in Myanmar and effectively promote peace and stability. It could strengthen the organisation's centrality in the region and enhance its reputation as a leader in promoting regional cooperation and integration. Therefore, these crises, when successfully resolved, offer an opportunity to further centrality alongside the risk of reputational damage.



Risk Outlook

ASEAN centrality faces multiple risks, threatening its ability to maintain its position as the primary hub for regional cooperation and dialogue in SEA. Considering the above analysis of internal and external threats to ASEAN, this section highlights and examines four of the key risks to ASEAN centrality: rigidities in policy and operations, the creation of intra-regional blocs, ASEAN's breakdown as an Indo-Pacific forum, and the management of power competition. Each of these risks presents unique challenges to ASEAN centrality and requires careful consideration by policymakers and stakeholders in the region. In analysing these risks, this section aims to provide a deeper understanding of the challenges facing the preservation of ASEAN's centrality to the region.

Rigidities in Policy and Operations

Jayme Teoh

ASEAN's initial attempts to foster increased unity through policies of non-interference and consensus-based actions have gradually become a hindrance for the region. Within a context of rising international alignment with good governance, and norms centred around human rights and democracy issues, there are mounting tensions and a lack of compromise between ASEAN member states on how best to approach such issues within member states. The rigidity of policies within ASEAN has, in some cases, made it impossible to enact meaningful changes to major issues that the bloc faces, especially human rights. The most significant challenge was manifested in the 1990s when the Asian values debate saw the precedence of cultural particularism over universalism and responsibility and economic development over human rights. While the Asian values debate has abated, vestiges persist. ASEAN states resolutely maintain that human rights remain strictly within the purview of domestic affairs and are not subject to interference by external parties, also known as the 'ASEAN Way'.

An increasingly conflicting nature exists between having ASEAN abide by established international norms and the inherent obstacles that come with ASEAN's architecture. The regional bloc's ascension to the world stage comes with the risk of having perceived failures as a result of their limited actions between member states, which may ultimately affect their ability to bargain effectively as a bloc with major powers in the future. Along with many ASEAN member states' history of colonialism and violence, national sovereignty is highly valued and embedded within the pillars of the union's structure. Within the context of a system that is highly unlikely to become inflexible on its policies of non-interference and consensus-based actions, attempts to rectify the failure of human rights interventions such as the "five-point consensus," have become inconsequential. In the case of Myanmar, ASEAN has still failed to fulfil its pledges or take meaningful steps toward pressing the junta to end its human rights violations. Individual member states' interests have even undermined the bloc's already difficult stance on the issues, such as Cambodia's renewed engagement with the junta earlier this year.



The rigidity of the bloc's policies is reflected in major structural flaws that prevent the body from being an effective regional human rights body. These include the lack of protection of human rights (as opposed to merely mentioning a "promotion" of human rights) and the ASEAN Secretariat merely acting as an advisory body, thereby circumventing any possibility of meaningful human rights enforcement. Moreover, because ASEAN does not have formal complaint mechanisms, there is currently no way for individuals or civil society organisations to report human rights abuses to the body. This lack of oversight significantly contributes to the ineffectiveness of the AICHR, because the body cannot adequately respond to allegations of human rights abuses if it does not have a mechanism to collect information about it in the first place. Additionally, the representatives appointed to the body by each member state are not independent; they "remain accountable to their appointing governments" and can thus be withdrawn at any time. Lastly, because the ToR mandate is reliant upon consensus-based decision-making, it is particularly problematic because of the wide-ranging political systems and cultural norms encompassed by ASEAN's ten-member states. Failure to reach a consensus represents a weak response to serious human rights violations.

Human rights may lead to a more effective model of institutions and social systems. Pogge argued that enabling a social system that can secure people's access to certain inalienable rights will benefit the global poor and create a more just society. By changing ASEAN's intransigence on the aforementioned policies, the region may be able to improve its reputation and credibility, as well as its regional stability and economic cooperation with Southeast Asian countries. The longer ASEAN waits to reform its governance and human rights condition, the riskier the region's political environment will become. With greater digitisation, increasing youth population, and rising income, Southeast Asian states will continue to find new ways to voice their dissatisfaction, especially in the face of an alarmingly shrinking civic space in the region. The most notable instances of these rising crackdowns include Thailand's Lèse-majesté laws, Cambodia's beating and sentencing of almost 40 bloggers, and Malaysia's Sedition Act. If the region is unable to adapt to international standards of governance, it runs the risk of a brewing 'ASEAN Spring,' thereby causing political disruption. Despite these challenges, there have been signs of hope. Some governments in the region such as Malaysia and Myanmar are committed to developing a National Action Plan on business and human rights, which examine complaints brought by victims of alleged human rights abuses by companies. Regional financial institutions are also reconsidering loans to companies involved in abuses. ASEAN governments have committed to "inclusive and sustainable growth," but this will only come to fruition if accompanied by significant improvements in human rights protection vis-à-vis an abandonment or to a lesser extent, a change in attitudes, towards their unyielding policies of non-interference and consensus-based action.

The Creation of Intra-Regional Blocs

Azaria Kidane

Intra-regional blocs, both within and without the framework of ASEAN, have formed typically based on geographic proximity, economic ties, and shared cultural and historical ties. These blocs have helped to stimulate economic growth and development in the region. However, regional blocs not belonging to the ASEAN framework pose a significant risk to ASEAN



centrality, potentially reducing the organisation's influence and undermining its collective aims.

One of the most important intra-regional blocs within ASEAN is the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA). Consisting of all of the ASEAN members, AFTA was established in 1992 to create a single market and production base by eliminating tariffs and other trade barriers. While some member states have been slow to implement the agreement and eliminate tariffs and trade barriers, resulting in uneven economic development, on the whole AFTA has helped to increase trade and investment, thereby contributing to the region's overall economic development.

A challenge faced by AFTA, and consequently ASEAN as a whole, has been competition from other intra-regional trade agreements, such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). These agreements have been seen as more comprehensive and have attracted attention from member states that may have otherwise participated in AFTA. These blocs, therefore, offer alternate pathways to regional integration that may not involve ASEAN or be aligned with the bloc's priorities. This poses significant challenges to centrality, potentially leading to fragmentation of regional cooperation, with countries pursuing interests via separate blocs rather than central ASEAN-led initiatives.

A subsequently reduced reliance on ASEAN-led initiatives as a result of the formation of these blocs could create competing centres of power in the region. As a consequence, there is a risk of limiting ASEAN's role as a primary hub for regional economic and security architecture. Therefore, reduced reliance on ASEAN initiatives would reduce ASEAN's influence and centrality.

Despite these challenges, AFTA's success has led to it serving as a model for other regional trade agreements and has helped to increase economic integration among the member states. Smaller blocs also exist within ASEAN such as the Brunei Darussalam-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA). Similarly, to AFTA, the goal of this initiative is to promote economic growth in less developed areas of the member nations while maintaining the unique biodiversity of the region, with the area being one of the most important ecological locations in the world. Similar initiatives like the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GMT) and cooperation between nations within the Greater Mekong Sub-region have led to these projects competing for political relevancy and limited foreign investment. The Greater Mekong Sub-region is particularly interesting as it comprises five ASEAN members, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, and also China.

The proliferation of non-ASEAN intra-regional blocs, therefore, poses a threat to ASEAN centrality, undermining the bloc's ability to act as a unified voice in regional affairs and pursue collective objectives effectively. The challenge for ASEAN, therefore, is to continue to pursue success within its own ASEAN-led blocs and attract increased cooperation within these from both regional and external actors and aim to limit members pursuing individual interests in non-ASEAN blocs.



ASEAN's Breakdown as an Indo-Pacific Forum

Luc Parrot

One of the major risks facing ASEAN centrality is the potential breakdown of ASEAN as the principal forum in the Indo-Pacific. If ASEAN were weakened and became a less significant forum for the Indo-Pacific, its role in driving Indo-Pacific geopolitics would greatly diminish in turn. Either through its plethora of internal divisions or with external pressure, the potential exists for a gradual breakdown. Throughout this report when forecasting risks one of the key strands having repeatedly appeared is the potential for ASEAN's loss of its strength as a forum.

Specifically, this risk arises from the several aforementioned causes of internal disunity and the rise of Minilateralism via external actors. In-bloc disputes relating to the Myanmar crisis, the South China Sea, or COVID, to name a select few, weaken the inter-state bonds that create the 'ASEAN way'. Without the crucial functioning of ASEAN's core internal policies of consensus-building and non-interference, ASEAN would not have become the principal forum for Indo-Pacific issues. As these bonds weaken, the appeal of ASEAN as a natural forum also does. This is one of ASEAN's key dilemmas, as the 'ASEAN Way', while often detrimental in its rigidity, is also central to ASEAN's identity, successes, and purpose.

On the external side, the rise of minilateral organisations and dialogues also threatens ASEAN's capability of being the principal forum of the Indo-Pacific. The recent AUKUS deal strongly implicates Western countries in the United States Indo-Pacific security policy. The aforementioned CPTPP trade deal including Singapore, Vietnam, and Malaysia broaches one of ASEAN's core competencies, trade. The Chinese-led LMC organisation on transboundary water governance includes 5 ASEAN members. These new organisations and dialogues may supplant ASEAN in certain issue areas and certain countries but are unlikely to achieve ASEAN's large regional scope.

The recurring theme of ASEAN's breakdown as a forum for the Indo-Pacific is thus evident given the factors covered in this report, with both internal disunity and external pressures possibly reducing ASEAN's importance as the foremost forum for the Indo-Pacific. Out of these, factors relating to internal disunity are more likely to damage ASEAN's forum capabilities than external pressures. If ASEAN manages external relations and member states still see it as the principal regional organisation, new minilateral organisations can supplement ASEAN in novel issue areas instead of supplanting it. Internal disunity factors will likely have more protracted effects due to ASEAN's structure, and may thus influence ASEAN's breakdown as a forum to a greater degree. Taken in total, ASEAN may see a decrease in its use as a forum for the Indo-Pacific, though still far from a breakdown affecting its centrality. To misappropriate Henry Kissinger's original question about Europe: when you want to call the Indo-Pacific, who do you call? For now, the answer remains ASEAN.



Management of Power Competition

Yueh Chen

Great powers have become increasingly aware of ASEAN's strategic importance in the region. The United States launched the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) during the 10th U.S.-ASEAN Summit in November in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, in which the United States reiterated its support for ASEAN's centrality and its outlook on the Indo-Pacific. China also expressed its support of ASEAN values when diplomatic envoys of ASEAN countries visited Beijing in October. State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi hoped that ASEAN would “uphold independence, adhere to the ASEAN way and ASEAN centrality, and stay focused on the Asia-Pacific... and make Asian contributions to regional and global governance, and demonstrate the Asian strength”.

While ASEAN centrality receives clear endorsement from great powers, the management of these great powers has become one of ASEAN's biggest challenges. Indeed, the deteriorating U.S.-China relations, the outbreak of the pandemic, and China's pandemic diplomacy have exposed measures of disunity between member states, as well as ASEAN's vulnerability to the influence of great powers. Intensifying power competition between the U.S. and China and their vested interest in the region has led to increased pressure on member states to align with one or the other. This poses a significant issue to centrality as it can undermine ASEAN's principle of neutrality and potentially create internal division between members. ASEAN states therefore are faced with the challenging endeavour of engaging in a balanced approach to the management of great powers. While this is a notable challenge, member states have found some success in doing so. Vietnam for example is a major beneficiary of the tense relationship between China and the U.S.: China's zero-COVID policy and the trade war between China and the U.S. has prompted foreign businesses to relocate their factories and manufacturing capabilities in China to Vietnam. It has also found success in balancing bilateral relations, maintaining close ties to China through cooperation with Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and One-China Policy, while concurrently fostering strong bilateral relations with the U.S. While this example demonstrates deft diplomacy in Vietnam's balancing of external influence, the increased pressure of power competition may produce an increased focus on bilateral relations with these powers and individual members, over multilateral cooperation through ASEAN. Pressure for individual members to react to changing circumstances brought about by power competition, therefore, risks marginalising ASEAN's role in regional dialogue, thus impacting its centrality.

As these great powers with interests in the region begin to form new minilateral initiatives such as QUAD and AUKUS, the internal disunity between ASEAN member states and the volatile geopolitical landscape in the region has hindered ASEAN's ability to manage this intensifying power competition. While great powers have endorsed ASEAN centrality and the values it represents, 2023 will pose an ever-greater challenge to the organisation's ability to manage its relationship with these powers. Authoritarian regimes such as Myanmar and Laos will likely



continue to violate human rights and democratic values, while countries such as Vietnam and Singapore will be confronted by the mounting tension between China and the United States. In addition, 2023 will be a critical year for the minilateral organisations in the region: Australia has revealed its nuclear-powered submarine plans and will host the QUAD leaders' summit this year. Indeed, the management of great powers remains one of ASEAN's greatest challenges in 2023 and onwards, and given the current situation in the region, it is unlikely to be an easy task.



Conclusion

Keita Vasilyeva

This report has aimed to assess ASEAN's centrality in the regional and international arenas through an exploration of the bloc's foundations in Southeast Asia, its growth and development over time, and the challenges that it has come to face in maintaining its centrality.

Since its founding in 1967, the organisation has gained major recognition for its successes in trade, cooperation, and dialogue in the Asia Pacific. With its initial establishment, the organisation succeeded in embracing one of its main aims – unity – despite the ongoing conflicts in the latter half of the 20. century, both in Southeast Asia, as well as the rest of the world. Despite ASEAN's successful start, it has faced threats from its inception, ranging from traditional security threats to natural disasters, energy security, maritime piracy, terrorism, and more. In the time it has existed, the bloc has taken significant steps in combating these challenges. However, some of these issues have persisted and still present a potential hindrance to ASEAN centrality.

There is no doubt ASEAN has a central role regionally, given its members make up a major part of Southeast Asia and the Asia Pacific. However, this does not guarantee the bloc's centrality. Internal disunity poses a major issue, as much in the past as in the present day. The varying political systems and ideologies amongst member states have caused friction throughout the organisation's existence. It has also made it more difficult for ASEAN to operate effectively and pursue regional centrality. Despite the 'ASEAN Way' being a motto of unification, it has also somewhat constricted ASEAN with the principles of non-interference and consensus-based decision-making.

The Myanmar Crisis, in particular, demonstrated ASEAN's ineffectiveness regarding conflict management as a result of the adherence to these principles. Similarly, ASEAN's relatively neutral stance on Russia waging war against Ukraine, not only demonstrates this internal disunity, but also highlights potential shortcomings in its responses in comparison to international community counterparts. Finally, ASEAN's COVID-19 response also showcased elements and effects of disunity. Measures implemented varied between member states and this lack of coordinated regional action demonstrates potential cracks in the relationships between member states.

As well as challenges to unity, external pressures play an equally significant role in the maintenance of ASEAN's centrality. Namely, external power competition, regional rivalry, and rising Minilateralism all act as sources of mounting pressure. Despite ASEAN's position as an architect of regional affairs, there is intensifying competition between other powers such as the United States, China, India, Japan, and more, who have a vested interest in the region and their presence there.

Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific presents a particular challenge to ASEAN's regional centrality. Alliances and groupings such as AUKUS and the QUAD have major world powers like the United States backing them. This departure from multilateralism not only exacerbates power struggles but also presents a potential for strained bilateral relations within ASEAN itself as members independently engage with minilaterals.



Following analyses of a range of contemporary case studies about these themes of internal disunity and external pressures, this report identifies four major risks for particular extended focus. The report's risk outlook highlights the bloc's rigidities in policy and operations, the creation of inter-regional blocs, ASEAN's breakdown as an Indo-Pacific forum, and the management of power competition as the four key risks to centrality. In conducting further analysis of these risks, this section provides an extensive evaluation of the major challenges facing ASEAN's centrality. Careful consideration of these risks by regional policymakers and stakeholders is significant for the continued existence and effective working of ASEAN's centrality to the region.

These threats combined have contributed to an apparent waning of ASEAN centrality and could produce further waning, however, they also provide an opportunity for ASEAN to further assert their position as a regional architect. Its international standing can be seen as waning especially considering the aforementioned internal and external factors preventing the smooth running of the bloc. This being said, ASEAN has a permanently established place within the region and is key for cooperation between its member states. So, despite a potentially smaller role on the international scene, it continues to be an important actor regionally.

As a consequence of a potentially waning ASEAN centrality, there appears a propensity for greater tensions between the U.S. and China, especially in the South China Sea region. The three actors already all have a vested interest in the area, but if ASEAN is to lessen their influence it would give way to a bigger struggle between what are arguably the biggest powers in today's world. This could subsequently produce greater regional instability for ASEAN, especially involving bilateral relations in the region. However, this increased geopolitical activity is also a potential road to greater business in the region via the involved parties. Therefore, this may concurrently provide an avenue for ASEAN to regain its footing in the international sphere again.

As it stands in the present, ASEAN remains a solid bloc in the region and has an important role to play in upkeeping communication and relationships between its member states and their partners. However, the bloc's existence internationally, especially in the West, is affected by internal and external issues that undermine its significance. These issues however also provide potential opportunities for ASEAN to adapt and evolve by necessity. This next year under Indonesia's promising chairmanship, therefore, will present a pivotal moment for the bloc going forward.

