



## ***ASEAN CENTRALITY IN THE INDO-PACIFIC: FROM PARADOX TO POSSIBILITY***

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*Photo: ASEAN's emblem, center, features stalks of rice that symbolize the 10 member countries' solidarity. Source: Nikkei illustration*

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was formed to counter the major powers' zero-sum mentality during the Cold War in 1967. Its nonalignment policy pushes cooperation among its diverse members and prevents the creation of a sphere of influence with any singular power. Through time, frameworks – such as the East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the ASEAN Plus Summits – have endeavored to bring global partners towards ASEAN, thereby, centralizing ASEAN as the region's main institution.

One misleading perception that regional analysts often make is comparing ASEAN to the European Union (EU). However, ASEAN was never intended to function as a supranational entity like the EU. Instead, the “ASEAN Way” focuses on multilateral dialogue,

and consensus while promoting non-interference in members' internal affairs.

While scholars, such as Kishore Mahbubani, commend ASEAN's convening power and its ability to foil regional military conflict, the ASEAN paradox remains – despite ASEAN being the dialogue-driven body for conflict resolution which contributes to Southeast Asia stability, the bloc is often labeled as “slow and ineffective” in handling traditional security issues involving major powers.

### **The South China Sea: ASEAN Deadlock?**

The South China Sea is one of the case studies, among many others, illustrating such a paradox. Since the early 2000s, ASEAN has urged Beijing to adopt a Code of Conduct (COC) to bring about peace, stability, and military conflict prevention in the contested area. Despite promises from both sides, the COC is still under negotiation two decades later with China appearing to use the negotiation to delay the binding commitments while creating a *fait accompli* – such as constructing artificial islands and denying access to Southeast Asian fishermen to solidify its ten-dash lines.

But diplomacy can be slow, and ASEAN has consistently pushed for such a binding framework to go through. Despite that, the drawback of the “ASEAN Paradox” has started to become more visible to the region. The Philippines' 2013 appeal to the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague over the South China Sea issue revealed ASEAN's limitations that states started to look beyond ASEAN for regional conflict resolution. Not only the Philippines but the United States, one of ASEAN's external partners, is also taking Indo-Pacific matters into its own hands.

### **The United States Indo-Pacific Strategy and ASEAN**

During the first Trump Administration in 2017, the White House unveiled the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) concept to preserve the region's status quo. The FOIP focused on creating a strong collective security network, promoting economic growth, and good governance to deter aggression in the Indo-Pacific.

The mentality was illustrated in the reinvigoration of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), which comprised the United States, Japan, India, and Australia, with its elevation to a ministerial-level arrangement in 2019, reflecting the effort from the members to reinforce stability in the Indo-Pacific. While it can be said that the QUAD revitalization was

[due to ASEAN's ineffectiveness](#), such arrangements appear to be the solution from the U.S. perspective. However, the concept was perceived as Sinophobic and a containment strategy from China's point of view. Beijing is disdainful towards such arrangements translating the grouping as "[an Indo-Pacific version of NATO](#)".

ASEAN is stuck between the two giants. On the one hand, the U.S. framework and the QUAD have appeared as if the ASEAN external partners are taking matters into their own hands creating a spectrum where ASEAN is becoming less relevant. On the other hand, the Chinese antagonizing perception of such a framework has also limited the ASEAN response. To keep up with the Indo-Pacific dynamics, the bloc released the "[ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific](#)" (AOIP) in 2019 to [visualize](#) its vision and dilute the Sinophobic concept through the promotion of inclusivity with good faith in the Indo-Pacific.

Washington's FOIP framework was upgraded to the United States' "[Indo-Pacific Strategy](#)" in 2022. President Biden has shifted the FOIP from a collective security-dominated concept into a more diversified, cooperative, and multilateral roadmap. Additionally, President Biden has placed "Southeast Asia as central" to the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy from day one – a move to signal the United States support and the recognition of Southeast Asia's importance.

While this sounds like ASEAN will be more involved, it is still blurry on how such a narrative will be operationalized. Despite the account, the QUAD has evolved further during the administration into a [leader-level meeting](#) cementing the QUAD viability in the Indo-Pacific. In addition, the U.S., along with Australia, and the United Kingdom, also [established](#) "AUKUS" in 2021 with the plan for Australia to acquire nuclear-powered submarines while bringing along the United Kingdom into the Indo-Pacific strategic calculation. This concept [was also not received well](#) from Beijing in which the Chinese official viewed the U.S. behavior as a containment strategy further souring the U.S.–China relations. With many minilaterals such as the QUAD and AUKUS being strengthened, the question of ASEAN Centrality again comes into question.

However, what does "ASEAN Centrality" really mean? Deep down, it means that ASEAN should have a stake in the regional dynamics. Without its involvement in any QUAD and AUKUS' arrangement, the statement supporting the centralization of ASEAN is more of a "lip service" to

ensure ASEAN would not oppose such minilaterals establishment.

By that juncture, ASEAN analysts may [ponder](#) why the United States President values the minilateral summit more than the ASEAN Summits. As [Kei Koga observes](#), when the maturation of the QUAD with its institutional role becomes less murky, the possibility of the QUAD and ASEAN having overlapping responsibilities would be a hurdle down the line. If that moment arrived, the "ASEAN Paradox" and the disunity among the ASEAN members to get issues resolved would emerge as the reason for the loss of ASEAN centrality.

The lack of regular communication channels between ASEAN and minilaterals weakens the grouping's convening power. By distancing itself from the rising Indo-Pacific minilaterals, ASEAN is risking its opportunity to solidify its centrality while evolving these coalitions into being resistant to ASEAN's abstention.

Placing the diminishing ASEAN Centrality blame on the grouping alone would be misleading and unfair. ASEAN needs both Washington and Beijing while the retrenchment from either of them would not make ASEAN any better. No regional equilibrium in East Asia is possible without the United States; and without China, major powers would likely take Southeast Asia for granted. Hence, both the United States and China's equal engagement with ASEAN is needed.

### **The Path Towards Disentangling the "ASEAN Paradox"**

While the formal meeting between ASEAN and U.S.-involved minilaterals could be received negatively, informal dialogue utilizing think tanks should be encouraged. Think Tanks are an effective platform for facilitating the exchange of perspectives and sentiments from all angles and relieving ASEAN from the institutional pressure associated with alignments. Outsourcing these discussions to neutral think tanks would establish additional channels for both the U.S. and ASEAN, allowing constructive engagement without taking sides.

On the ASEAN side, robust collective leadership within the grouping is needed. Instead of delegating the burden to the ASEAN Secretariat and ASEAN Chair, the members need to display the collective will to resolve the regional issue. Each ASEAN state should assume the responsibility to advance the ASEAN-led agenda. A divided ASEAN is a divided Southeast Asia, and a divided Southeast Asia will be

a geopolitical juggle for major powers; hence, ASEAN internal unity is of the utmost importance.

ASEAN has survived the Cold War, and it ought to adapt in order to endure and remain relevant in the U.S – China quarrel. ASEAN should not rely solely on its rotating chair or the Secretariat to lay the groundwork; instead, the members should unite to uphold the bloc's resilience – as envisioned by its founding fathers in the 1960s.