



## CREDIBILITY AT A CROSSROADS: U.S. AND EUROPEAN APPROACHES TO ASEAN

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*Photo: Royal Navy sailors aboard HMS Prince of Wales with Singapore's Marina Bay skyline in the background, post June 23, 2025. The UK-led Carrier Strike Group's port call symbolized a growing European presence in the Indo-Pacific, offering visible reassurance to ASEAN partners. Credit: UK Carrier Strike Group on X*

### Introduction

In the days leading up to the [38th Asia-Pacific Roundtable](#) (APR) in Kuala Lumpur, the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) quietly [redeployed](#) the *USS Nimitz* Carrier Strike Group (CSG). The APR, hosted by Malaysia's [Institute of Strategic & International Studies](#), lasted from June 17 to 19. U.S. DoD repositioned the warships from waters off Peninsular Malaysia—within U.S. Indo-Pacific

Command's area of responsibility—to U.S. Central Command amid tensions with Iran, where they [remain](#) as of publication. A few days later, the UK Ministry of Defence announced the deployment of another CSG, led by the British aircraft carrier, the *HMS Prince of Wales*, under the name [Operation Highmast](#), which arrived in the Pacific. The group included warships from Canada, Norway, Spain, and New Zealand, and made a port call in Singapore. Operation Highmast marked the beginning of a multilateral deployment that also included a [stop](#) in Indonesia as well as future visits to the Republic of Korea and Japan, where the strike group will participate in the [Pacific Future Forum](#). Operation Highmast is currently [operating](#) near Australia as it prepares for participation in [Exercise Talisman Sabre 2025](#).

The juxtaposition was hard to ignore. Just two and a half weeks earlier, U.S. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth had reaffirmed at the 2025 Shangri-La Dialogue (SLD) in Singapore that the Indo-Pacific remained the United States' "[priority theater](#)." Yet across the APR, many discussions reflected growing unease about the consistency of U.S. regional engagement. Participants highlighted a perceived gap between U.S. strategic messaging and its operational focus, expressing concern that the U.S. may once again relegate Southeast Asia to a secondary theater. These concerns from Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states have prompted a strengthening of other relationships. For example, on July 10, ASEAN foreign ministers [emphasized](#) their deepening partnership with China under the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area 3.0 agreement amid growing tariff tensions with the U.S.

In this context, European actors, including the UK, France, and the EU, have begun offering credible and complementary reassurance to ASEAN partners such as Malaysia. They achieve this through a mix of diplomatic, economic, and security initiatives. The nuanced European engagement underscores the urgent and pressing need for a recalibration of U.S. policy in the Indo-Pacific region.

### Mixed U.S. Indo-Pacific Signals

The 2025 SLD reaffirmed Washington's stated commitment to the Indo-Pacific. Yet many APR

attendees questioned whether the U.S. was truly prioritizing that commitment after the redeployment of the *Nimitz* CSG. The reassignment, while not widely publicized, was quietly noted by APR attendees and observers across ASEAN. One experienced Indo-Pacific ship tracker even noted the irony: the *Nimitz* passed through waters that illicit Iranian [oil transfers](#) to China frequently traverse. For many at the APR, the redeployment didn't signal U.S. abandonment. It highlighted the tension between strategic commitment and operational distraction and showed how the U.S. focus remains vulnerable to external crises. Unfortunately, these sentiments may deepen as U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio [abruptly canceled](#) scheduled visits to South Korea and Japan in early July. Although initially part of his first tour of Asia, the two stops were supposed to follow his visit to Malaysia to attend the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). However, Secretary Rubio canceled his planned stops in South Korea and Japan to return to Washington and address the deepening Middle East crisis. At the same time, one regional observer noted that the cancellations raise “renewed concerns that the Indo-Pacific isn't really the priority theater, and that the Middle East will continue to preoccupy American time and resources.”

At the APR, concerns about mixed signals from the U.S., including military redeployments and the sweeping “[Liberation Day](#)” tariffs, sparked genuine unease. What once felt hypothetical has now raised serious questions about the U.S.'s regional commitments. Panel themes and interventions often returned to one core question: Can Washington align its presence with its purpose? Responses were mixed. Some saw continuity with past initiatives, such as the [Free and Open Indo-Pacific](#) strategy. Others noted a growing [perception gap](#) between U.S. rhetoric and the lived reality of Southeast Asia. One participant remarked that ASEAN and Global South states no longer operate with a “buffet of options” when navigating among the U.S., China, and other regional powers. Fears about declining U.S. engagement and China's rising influence have prompted Southeast Asian states to adopt more pragmatic, “à la carte” approaches. Instead of rigid alignment, they are prioritizing clarity, consistency, and a sincere commitment to ASEAN centrality. These concerns have only intensified as the U.S. [threatens](#) to

impose sweeping new tariffs on six ASEAN member states, along with key allies Japan and South Korea.

### **ASEAN Skepticism, Self-Reliance, and Strategic Hedging**

Throughout the APR, numerous panelists and participants reaffirmed the principle of ASEAN centrality. [ASEAN centrality](#) calls on Southeast Asia to shape its regional future by serving as the principal agenda-setter, convener, and institutional core of the Indo-Pacific's political, economic, and security architecture. This emphasis on regional ownership is deeply rooted in historical experiences with Western, Japanese, and Chinese imperialism. ASEAN-led mechanisms, such as the [ARF](#), the [East Asia Summit](#), and the [ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus](#), remain the region's premier platforms for dialogue, enabling ASEAN to steer regional cooperation, even amid intensifying great power competition. These platforms underscore ASEAN's significant role in shaping the region's future—a role that regional actors consistently emphasize.

Neutrality and non-alignment, particularly articulated in the [Treaty of Amity and Cooperation](#), remain vital elements of ASEAN's approach. Similarly, institutional inclusivity ensures that external actors operate within ASEAN frameworks, rather than around them. One panelist captured the prevailing sentiment succinctly: “We are no longer waiting on the U.S.—we are creating our future.” For many across Southeast Asia, the perceived unpredictability and strategic drift of the U.S. have created a vacuum, one that ASEAN is determined to fill with self-reliance, flexible partnerships, and hedging behavior, rather than dependency on any single power.

### **Europe's Emergence as a Strategic Complement, not Competitor**

The sentiment of many ASEAN panelists was echoed most clearly by their European counterparts throughout the APR. Like ASEAN, the EU is a [regional body](#) built on consensus, inclusive cooperation, and multilateralism—values that resonate deeply in Southeast Asia. While recent geopolitical shocks, including Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the prospect of Ukrainian

accession, have nudged the EU closer to [great-power competition](#), its approach to the Indo-Pacific remains broadly aligned with ASEAN norms. European speakers at APR emphasized de-risking, economic diversification, and institutional cooperation, and for some member states, reiterated their legacies in dealing with imperialistic larger neighbors, eschewing zero-sum narratives in favor of alignment via ASEAN frameworks. Unlike some external actors who invoke “ASEAN centrality” only rhetorically, European representatives have actively demonstrated a genuine commitment to ASEAN institutional buy-in. Regional attendees recognized this commitment.

Europe’s emergence as a strategic complement, rather than a competitor, to U.S. engagement is increasingly evident. France’s [early 2025 deployment](#) of the aircraft carrier *FS Charles de Gaulle* and its CSG to the Indo-Pacific, followed by the UK-led *HMS Prince of Wales* CSG, has provided tangible, if limited, reassurance. French President Emmanuel Macron utilized his [2025 SLD keynote](#) to emphasize [strategic autonomy](#) and reject “false binaries” in the Indo-Pacific region. Chinese officials sharply criticized his remarks as “[unacceptable](#).” The backlash signaled just how far Europe’s resolve has come.

The May and June visit to [Vietnam](#), [Indonesia](#), and [Singapore](#) by Macron cemented a shift towards European resolve. The trip yielded a new [Comprehensive Strategic Partnership](#) with Singapore, multiple [cooperation agreements](#) with Vietnam covering defense, aerospace, and maritime domain awareness, and numerous [Memoranda of Understanding](#) with Indonesia on energy, critical minerals, infrastructure, and defense equipment. Macron’s visit generated bilateral Franco-Indonesian momentum with symbolic and strategic reinforcement: the Indonesian military’s [participation](#) in France’s 2025 Bastille Day parade in Paris marks the first appearance by Southeast Asian troops in the event’s modern history, while the upcoming Exercise Talisman Sabre 2025 features robust European [participation](#), including France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, and the UK as well as ASEAN member states Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. Notably, France and its partners scheduled both events to begin in mid-July—Bastille Day on July 14 and Talisman Sabre

on July 13—highlighting the convergence of European and Indo-Pacific security engagement.

These actions strengthen ASEAN centrality not only in rhetoric but in substance. The EU’s broader trade architecture adds further structural depth through ratified Free Trade Agreements with [Vietnam](#) and [Singapore](#), [advanced negotiations](#) with Indonesia, and ongoing exploratory talks with other ASEAN states. While Europe cannot supplant the U.S. in terms of security, diplomacy, and economic reassurance, it can buy time, bolster norms, and preserve strategic space for ASEAN at a time of growing external volatility by delivering on what the bloc needs and wants. Lastly, EU High Representative Kaja Kallas is in [Malaysia](#) from July 10 to 11 to attend the ARF and the ASEAN–EU Post-Ministerial Conference, underscoring the EU’s sustained commitment to ASEAN-led diplomacy.

## Conclusion

None of this means that the U.S. is absent or irrelevant in the Indo-Pacific. The *USS George Washington* CSG, the *USS America* Amphibious Ready Group (ARG), and the *USS Tripoli*, [currently underway](#) off the coasts of the Philippines, Australia, and Japan, respectively, demonstrate the continued strategic U.S. importance and interests. However, as the attendees at the 38th APR reiterated, presence alone no longer guarantees influence. For the U.S. to remain a trusted partner, it must match its deployments with consistency, clarity, and meaningful institutional engagement. In contrast, European powers, both at the supranational level through the EU and at the national level through the UK, France, and others, have resonated by aligning with ASEAN’s principles of multilateralism, inclusivity, and regional ownership. These efforts provide welcome reassurance but are not a substitute for sustained U.S. leadership.

What is required now is a recalibration of U.S. regional policy. Washington must align its rhetoric with action by strengthening its participation in ASEAN-led architecture, expanding economic cooperation, and maintaining a credible and consistent force posture. The window to reaffirm U.S. credibility in the Indo-Pacific remains open—

but narrowing. Delay risks ceding influence to others who are already showing up with purpose.

*The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the official positions of the United States Government, Pacific Forum, GLOBSEC, or any other current or previous affiliations.*