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PACIFIC FORUM
INTERNATIONAL

Assessing ASEAN's Agency

Next Generation Views of Middle Power Activism

EDITED BY
BRAD GLOSSERMAN



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Introduction

Brad Glosserman

The Asia Pacific Roundtable (APR) is the single best opportunity to get Southeast Asia's take on regional security concerns. The annual event – 2026 marked its 39th iteration – is convened by the Malaysian Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) on behalf of the broader ASEAN ISIS network. The agenda and participants reflect the regional zeitgeist and provide something of a counterpoint to the better-known Shangri-La Dialogue, organized by the UK-based International Institute of Strategic Studies, and China's Xiangshan Forum.

Those origins have generated a consistent focus on middle powers, and its programs have explained and promoted a "third perspective" that seeks to escape the binary choices imposed by superpower competition. It has also emphasized a broader conception of security that is natural for countries whose priority is development and are thus inclined to weight economic concerns more heavily in their security calculations. Both those cases have been strengthened in recent years as US-China competition intensified and economic security assumed new significance.

The theme of this year's APR was "Accelerating Agency and Action," and sought to "identify regional catalysts and leadership amidst complex geopolitical fluctuations." Implicit in that formulation is the creation of space for those smaller powers in a world that is rapidly changing.

Throughout the years, the APR has provided Pacific Forum Young Leaders a unique opportunity to learn about regional dynamics while beginning the networking among senior experts and peers that is essential to success in this field. This year was no exception. We are extremely grateful for the opportunity that the APR has given Pacific Forum, and the organizers' readiness to welcome the group even when space is a premium.

Pacific Forum gathered a diverse group of Young Leaders, one that spanned the Indo-Pacific, including participants from Southeast Asia, the United States, and Mongolia. They first joined a day of programming by the Asia New Zealand Foundation that explored how track 1.5 and track 2 engagement can shape regional affairs. The foundation has for several years joined Pacific Forum in next-generation projects and we could not ask for a better partner.

Then, participants attended two and a half days of APR discussions that ranged from conversations about the evolving world order to granular assessments of critical minerals supply chains. (The agenda for the entire YL program is available in Appendix A.) Keynote speakers included Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and ASEAN Secretary General Kao Kim Hourn. On day 2 of the APR, they had a breakfast conversation with Bradley Murg, provost of Paragon University in Cambodia and senior research advisor at the Cambodia Institute of Cooperation and Peace, who offered his off-the-record take on regional affairs. Young Leaders met with program director Brad Glosserman before and after the APR to establish baselines, set expectations, and assess what they heard.

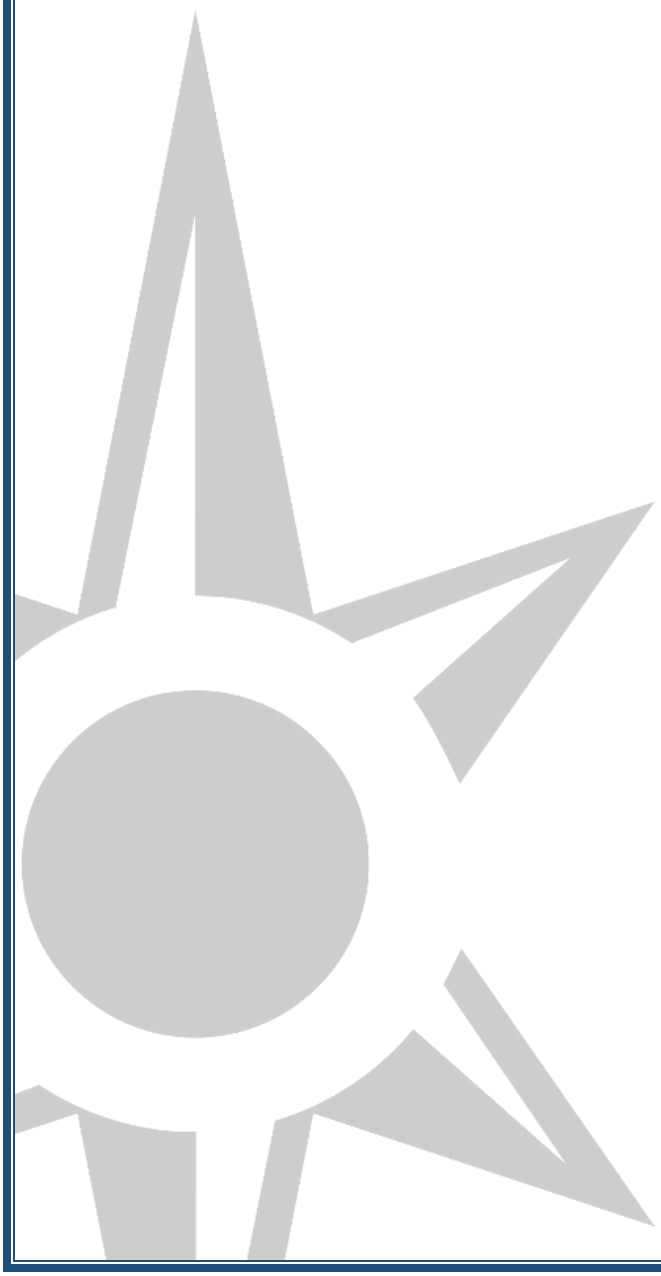
Each Young Leader expanded on those thoughts in an essay on a theme from the meetings, either on a specific topic that captured their attention or a broader "sense" of the entire experience. The writings that follow cover the gamut. They include analysis of the general theme of the APR – the agency, capacity, and potential of small states – as well as deeper dives on issues such as maritime domain awareness, the regional digital economy agreements, and India's ability to be a leader of the global South, along with impressionistic accounts of the entire discussion. That last group is the most intriguing as those offerings step away from the formalities of academic writing and assess the atmosphere of the conversations.

All the writings validate the guiding premise of the Young Leaders program: In a world that is undergoing rapid and foundational change, it is imperative that the next generation of policy specialists acquire not only exposure to the immediate concerns of senior analysts and policy makers, but begin the task of community building – meeting their peers and counterparts so that they acquire familiarity with the issues that they will tackling and the individuals with whom they will be fashioning solutions.

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What Does Agency Mean for ASEAN

By
Batt Odgerel



Arriving in Kuala Lumpur after 12 hours flying from Ulaanbaatar to attend the 39th Asia Pacific Roundtable (the APR, Southeast Asia's premier track-two conference), I was looking forward to seeing the impressive Petronas Twin Towers, the tallest buildings in the world at the time of their completion. Little did I know that the towers are not even the second tallest in the city today. Kuala Lumpur's current tallest building, Merdeka 118, named after the independence square where the Malaysian flag was first raised, is shorter only than Dubai's Burj Khalifa. Tall buildings are not a perfect indicator of economic wellbeing, but I could glimpse the country's growth trajectory from its financial district, its investment in transit infrastructure, and the ubiquity of international brands. It was a fitting start to a trip that reminded me how fast (and slow) things can change in this region.

Malaysia's GDP numbers are a testament to its growth. Despite being a relatively mature manufacturing center, the country still posted an impressive 5.2% increase in GDP in 2025. [1] Interactions with locals informed me that the economy could be further boosted by drivers like semiconductors and advanced manufacturing, investment shifting from China to adjacent manufacturing countries, and data center development in the Johor region bordering Singapore. At the APR session on critical minerals, I learned that Southeast Asia is endowed with essentially all the important critical minerals: Indonesian nickel, Philippine nickel and copper, and Malaysian rare earths and, most importantly, mineral processing capacity. Combined with the region's manufacturing base, this makes it a natural "China Plus One" destination as international companies diversify production and processing away from China.

This good first impression supported my US energy think tank's research that Southeast Asia, albeit relatively small in economic size, will be one of the world's leading regions with the highest economic growth and fastest growing demand for energy.

Many Terms and Acronyms

Discussions of the terms and acronyms used at these conferences started with a next-generation masterclass workshop hosted by the Asia New Zealand Foundation a day before the APR. One of the more interesting terms debated was "Indo-Pacific," which had no consensus definition. One participant treated it as a mere geographic term encompassing the countries on the periphery of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Bringing my American experience, I shared that it is in practice a strategic term intended to contain China—a term the US-led coalition adopted as it includes India in its strategic map. I learned that many ASEAN states accept the term but drain it of its anti-China content: the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific keeps the phrase while stripping out the containment intention. It is also in line with the name of the APR, a word choice that doesn't fully align with the US framing.

During conversations with Pacific Forum organizers, finding consensus on mere terms, let alone the region's most vexing problems, proved challenging. For instance, there was no consensus on what attributes define a great power or a middle power and which countries they referred to. China and India, two of the world's largest economies and population centers, seemingly shy away from being labeled great powers and call themselves "developing countries." Meanwhile, the deputy prime minister of Belgium, a country of fewer than 12 million, called his country "a middle power" in his remarks at the APR. The label is claimed based on what it gets you: "developing country" status offers Global South solidarity and exemption from great power responsibility, while "middle power" offers a seat at the table. Similarly, the term Global South created ambiguities. Is it akin to "the developing world" or "non-OECD countries," defined by economic status? Or is it more about the legacy of the Non-Aligned Movement? If so, is China's claim that it's a member of the Global South justified despite it being the world's second-largest economy? At the APR, India and China's answers to that question differed significantly, as the former on some occasions pitches itself as a bridge to the West whereas China positioned itself as an alternative to the West in a multipolar world.

Agency of 'In-Between' Regions

The slipperiest term can be found in the conference's theme, "Accelerating Agency and Action." In general

[1] Central Bank of Malaysia. "Economic and Financial Developments in Malaysia in the Fourth Quarter of 2025." https://www.bnm.gov.my/-/qb25q4_en_pr

IR, "agency" is the capacity to act meaningfully, and not be acted upon. ISIS Malaysia's Executive Chairman Mohd Faiz Abdullah, quoting Alexander Wendt that "anarchy is what states make of it," argued that small states are not just pushed around by great power dynamics, but they also help define the international order. His message, "agency and action are what states make of them," reflects the organizers' belief that the region's order is determined not just by raw/material power, but by the will and imagination of states themselves.

History, however, teaches that agency is particularly hard to practice in geopolitical crossroads or "in-between" regions where multiple great powers overlap or compete. Central Asia, at the heart of Eurasia between Russia, China, the Middle East, South Asia, and Europe, was the main hub of the ancient Silk Road. But it was also the victim of conquests by the Mongols and the Russians, Britain and Russia's "great game," and later Soviet dominance. Other examples of such regions include Central and Eastern Europe (squeezed between Western Europe and Russia) and the Caucasus (Russia, Turkey, Iran, Europe). For most of these "in-between" regions, relative independence arrived only after a tectonic shift in great-power dynamics (e.g., the collapse of the Soviet Union); agency came afterward and was not a game changer in most cases. If that history holds, the APR's theme may have cause and effect backward; regions do not accelerate their way into agency, and agency is only found when great powers are distracted.

Takeaways from Mongolia

Mongolia, where I'm from, is sandwiched between major powers. It sits between two great neighbors—Russia and China—with which it shares long and complex histories and whose proximity continues to shape its security environment and strategic outlook. Mongolia has sought to widen its strategic scope through democracy and third-neighbor diplomacy. Its democratic institutions and elections, however imperfect they may be, have acted as a layer of protection from the two neighbors, including against longstanding pressure to join regional great-power blocs (such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization). Through its Third-Neighbor Policy, Mongolia has built political and economic ties with other powers like the US, Japan, Korea, Europe, and India. Mongolia is among the world's leading contributors to UN peacekeeping on a per-capita basis; it also acts as a venue for regional dialogue through the Ulaanbaatar Dialogue on Northeast Asian Security (one round of which I had the pleasure of helping organize).

Mongolia's "agency" has produced real achievements at the diplomatic and political level: it has established diplomatic relations with all 192 other UN member states, and its nuclear-weapon-free status has been formally recognized by all five NPT nuclear-weapon states. Mongolia has also demonstrated an ability to attract major foreign investment from the West, most notably Rio Tinto's multibillion-dollar stake in the world-class Oyu Tolgoi copper-gold mine. On other fronts, Mongolia's dependence on China and Russia remains overwhelming. In 2025, almost 90% of its exports went to China, and 95% of its petroleum was imported from Russia.[2] Mongolia is far from immune to its neighbors' imposing their will. Mongolia's strategically most significant infrastructure projects (railways, hydro power plants, etc.) have consistently been blocked or derailed by Russian agencies or actors. Russian President Vladimir Putin's 2024 visit to Mongolia highlighted the limits of the country's ability to act on its obligations as a member of the International Criminal Court. In 2016, China responded to a visit by the Dalai Lama with diplomatic and economic pressure, including new border trade fees, prompting the Mongolian government to pledge that it would not host him again despite the country's overwhelming devotion to Tibetan Buddhism. In Mongolia's case, agency is real but not as effective as one would hope. In other words, Mongolia has agency as voice (recognition, dignity, diplomacy) but far less agency as effect (ability to change outcomes).

ASEAN's Agency

To a significant extent, ASEAN has demonstrated agency and action since its inception. Its founding achievement is that 10 states with colonial grievances and differing political systems have not fought a full-scale war with each other since 1967. ASEAN was also able to create venues that great powers attend, including the East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Regional Forum, and others. Here, agency as voice is exercised well.

[2] National Statistics Office of Mongolia. 1212.mn.

The shortcomings were called from the stage. One panelist described ASEAN as going through a midlife crisis with two dimensions: an identity challenge (what is ASEAN for?) and an institutional challenge (too many agencies, too few working well). Another observed that the principle of noninterference has drifted into a habit of non-action, and that the organization has grown too hard on nontraditional security while remaining too soft on traditional security, meaning it is active when it comes to transnational crime and disasters, but paralyzed by the Myanmar civil war and the Thailand-Cambodia border tensions. A Singaporean speaker asked where exactly ASEAN's agency is in these cases. The same person noted that when the UN's budget shortfall called for members to step up, no country volunteered. "So much for middle power agency."

Drawing on discussions throughout the conference, I would place two not-so-new ideas on the table. The first is sunset clauses: any ASEAN mechanism that cannot demonstrate concrete output within a fixed period is retired not renewed. This addresses the "ritualistic exercises" question with a procedure. If the Five-Point Consensus on Myanmar has produced statements rather than outcomes for years, and the South China Sea Code of Conduct has been under negotiation for more than a decade, then the problem may not be lack of agency or will but architecture. A sunset rule would invert the burden of proof. Today, an ASEAN mechanism must collapse to be questioned. Under sunset clauses, it would need to succeed to survive.

The second is a formally acknowledged two-speed ASEAN ("multilateralism plus minilateralism" vs. "multilateralism vs. minilateralism") beyond economic affairs. "Two-speed ASEAN" described the gap in development between the founding members (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand) and the newer members (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam), a gap seen as a threat the group needed to overcome.[3] The most notable attempt at flexibility beyond economics was Thai Foreign Minister Surin Pitsuwan's "Flexible Engagement" proposal in 1998, which challenged the group's founding principle of strict non-interference but was rejected by most member states, surviving only as a diluted "Enhanced Interaction."[4] ASEAN opted to confine "ASEAN Minus X" to economic commitments when it codified flexibility in its Charter. Some scholars have since argued for extending this formula to security matters.[5]

My suggestion goes one step further by formalizing what the region is already doing informally. The consensus rule persuades 11 unequal states to sit at one table, and it protects the smallest members from being pushed around by the largest. But this rule allows the least ambitious member to set the pace for all 11, and the region is circumventing it. For example, the Malacca Strait Patrol (security initiative between Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand), Philippines-Vietnam coast guard cooperation in the South China Sea, and various minilaterals show subsets of members acting where all 11 cannot. A two-speed ASEAN would formalize this while preserving the original protection or ASEAN centrality. No member would be forced to join minilaterals; it would just lose the power to prevent others from proceeding.

These ideas would answer the question of what ASEAN wants centrality for. If centrality means hosting a table at which nothing decisive happens, it will be bypassed and degrade over time. If it means the capacity to act--not just in economic affairs but also in political and security matters--then some of ASEAN's procedures need to be altered in favor of formalized flexibility over unmanaged fragmentation.

The 'Absence' of the Superpowers

I was struck by the perceived absence or inaction of superpowers in the region. A "rogue order," as defined by the organizers, means abandoning rules and principles: unilateralism and abandoning one's own allies. A Japanese scholar observed however that a superpower whose strength rested on global maritime engagement now behaves like a continental power, widening the gap between the region's

[3] Kassim, Y., "ASEAN at 40: The End of a Two-Speed Grouping?," RSIS Commentary CO07094 (S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 2007), https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/977-asean-at-40-the-end-of-a-two/

[4] "Enhanced Interaction" permitted members to comment individually on each other's domestic affairs where they had cross-border effects, but unlike "Flexible Engagement" it carried no collective ASEAN mandate.

[5] Emmers, R., "ASEAN Minus X: Should This Formula Be Extended?,' RSIS Commentary CO17199 (S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 2017), https://rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/977-asean-at-40-the-end-of-a-two/

demand for security and the great powers' willingness to supply it.
A regional expert who shared his perspectives with Young Leaders noted that China hasn't taken advantage of the US retreat from the region, as the former is seemingly plagued by internal issues since COVID. The US was not well represented on stage. Chinese institutions, while among the major sponsors of the event through the China-based Boao Forum for Asia, didn't go beyond their official lines.

If agency in "in-between" regions is found when great powers are distracted, and both superpowers are presently absent, then Southeast Asia may be looking at precisely the window it has spent decades waiting for.

Concluding Thoughts

I expected the vocabulary problem to be an obstacle: if the region cannot agree on what "Indo-Pacific," "Global South," or "agency" mean, how can it agree on harder issues? I left with the impression that ambiguity is a function of the "ASEAN Way" of avoiding open disagreement. Terms that mean different things to different members are what allow countries with irreconcilable threat perceptions to sit at one table and issue one statement. Strategic ambiguity is not a failure to reach consensus; in Southeast Asia, it is the technology by which consensus is created.

But this region has long called for revamping the global order; is this not the moment it wished for? As several speakers suggested, if we are passing through a new bipolarity before any multipolar order can form, that order will not arrive on its own; it will take time and action from the middle powers. To accelerate agency and action — i.e., to solve real problems — the region will have to move beyond the vocabulary soup. Whether it can convert voice into effect is the question the 39th Asia Pacific Roundtable posed, and I am not sure it was answered.

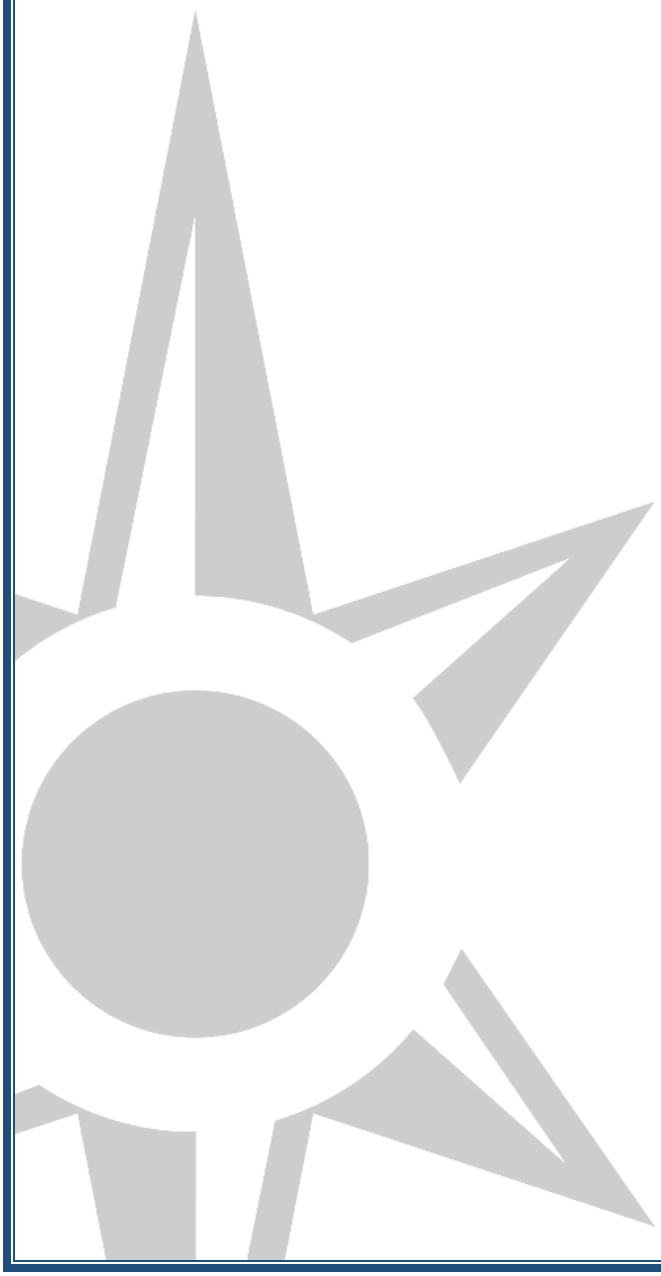
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Small State Agency in the Contested World Order

By
Nory Ly



Small states outnumber great powers by an overwhelming margin, yet the study of world order has been written almost entirely from the vantage point of the largest few. Great powers competing for allegiance must bid for it; institutions under strain must reform or lose relevance; resources once traded as commodities become bargaining chips. None of that converts automatically into leverage nor influence; whether small states turn a fragmenting order into durable influence depends on choices only they can make.

Small states turn great power rivalry into lasting influence only when three sources of leverage come together. First, small states preserve agency chiefly through calculated equidistance rather than alignment with either pole of great-power rivalry — the sharper the rivalry, the more valuable equidistance becomes. Second, collective institutions multiply that leverage, but only when they confront their own structural limits rather than merely reassert centrality fewer great powers still take seriously. Third, economic agency depends on climbing the value chain of contested resources, not on the accident of endowment.

Agency Through Calculated Equidistance, Not Alignment

Small states keep room to maneuver by hedging. By staying engaged with both Washington and Beijing, they give each power a reason to keep bidding for their cooperation, and the sharper the rivalry, the higher the bids. Cheng-Chwee Kuik's hedging framework defines hedging as insurance-seeking behavior under conditions of high uncertainty and high stakes, in which a state avoids taking sides and instead pursues mutually counteracting measures to preserve a fallback position. Structural conditions explain when small states hedge, while domestic political factors explain how they do so; weaker states, in this account, perceive a spectrum of risk rather than a binary choice, which is what allows equidistance to function as agency rather than paralysis.

Empirical evidence for this equidistance is substantial. The ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute's annual State of Southeast Asia survey recorded a swing from China narrowly leading a forced-choice question on alignment in 2024 (50.5% to 49.5%) to the United States regaining the lead in 2025 (52.3% to 47.7%) and China again in 2026 (52.0% to 48.0%). Margins this narrow show a region that refuses to pick a side. The 2026 survey also shows what respondents prefer instead: 55.2% want ASEAN to strengthen its own resilience against major-power pressure, and Japan (65.6%) and the EU (55.9%) are trusted well ahead of either superpower. The instinct is not only regional. ECFR's 21-country poll in late 2025 found majorities in Brazil, South Africa and Turkey who believe good relations with both the US and China are realistically possible.

Kuik warns of a "binary trap" in which Washington and Beijing both resent small-state hedging even though their own rivalry produces the uncertainty that necessitates it. The Philippines under Ferdinand Marcos Jr. illustrates how the trap can still be managed. Asked in March 2026 about resetting ties with Beijing, Marcos told Bloomberg that a "very, very serious restructuring" was "happening now." Days later the two governments held their 24th Foreign Ministry Consultations on the South China Sea the 11th Bilateral Consultation Mechanism on the South China Sea. Talks continued while a PLA Navy group held live-fire drills east of Luzon in April, and while the China Coast Guard drove Philippine vessels away from Scarborough Shoal in July. Coercion in one domain did not close engagement in another, which is what hedging logic predicts.

Manila also reveals something the theory understates. Equidistance needs a coherent domestic center to carry it out. The House impeached Vice President Sara Duterte for a second time in May 2026. Her Senate trial, now narrowed to a single article and resuming in November, has strained the executive coordination that hedging depends on, in the very year Manila chairs ASEAN.

Small states outside Southeast Asia hedge in much the same way. Saudi Arabia has neither accepted nor declined its 2023 invitation to join BRICS, an ambiguity Carnegie analysts read as balancing a US security partner against a Chinese trading partner. Central Asia's multi-vector diplomacy draws competing bids; the first presidential-level C5+1 summit in November 2025 produced a $1.1 billion US-Kazakh tungsten project. Hedging has limits, though. When one power controls something a small state cannot get anywhere else, it can force a choice. The UAE's flagship AI firm G42 had to cut its Chinese ties and remove Huawei equipment to secure a $1.5 billion Microsoft investment and access to US chips. Hedging works best in sectors where both powers

can supply what a small state needs, and worst in those, like advanced chips, where only one can.

Strength in numbers

Hedging is something each small state does on its own. Institutions let small states bargain as a group, and a group can set terms that no member could set alone. ASEAN shows how. It made accession to its Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, which binds signatories to settle disputes peacefully and renounce the threat or use of force, one of the conditions for joining the East Asia Summit. China signed in 2003 and the United States in 2009, two years before it took its seat at the summit. The treaty had 58 parties by 2025. In trade, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, in force since 2022 with ASEAN at its hub, covers about 30% of world GDP. Southeast Asia's small and middle states wrote entry rules and trade rules that the great powers accepted, which none of them could have done alone. The catch is that this leverage lasts only while members hold together, and great powers know it. In Phnom Penh in July 2012, ASEAN foreign ministers failed to issue a joint communiqué for the first time in the group's 45-year history after splitting over South China Sea language.

The Pacific tells the same story, and its Forum is now studying ASEAN's partnership model. In May 2022, 10 island states declined to endorse China's region-wide security and trade proposal by holding to Forum consensus. Bilateral deals have since cut the other way. Tuvalu's Falepili Union and Nauru's Nakamarra treaty give Australia a say over their third-party security agreements, and in July 2026 Fiji signed a mutual defense treaty with Canberra. As a group, the islands refused a great power's terms; one by one, several have traded part of their security autonomy for visas, budget support, and protection.

Myanmar raises a harder question: can ASEAN act when the problem is one of its own members? More than five years after ASEAN agreed its Five-Point Consensus in April 2021, none of its five points has been meaningfully implemented. The consensus lacked a clear end-game, relied on persuading an unwilling junta and was undercut when Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand engaged the generals bilaterally. It still marked an unprecedented expansion of ASEAN's involvement in a member's internal affairs. Accountability has come from elsewhere: acting on a complaint by the Chin Human Rights Organization, prosecutors in Timor-Leste, ASEAN's newest member, opened proceedings against Min Aung Hlaing in February 2026.

The bloc itself is drifting the other way. In July 2026, ASEAN foreign ministers held their first in-person meeting with a Myanmar counterpart since the coup, an "icebreaker" in Bangkok that reaffirmed the Five-Point Consensus days after Myanmar's Parliament had voted to reject it. The regime then refused the chair's request to meet Aung San Suu Kyi and in August questioned whether a special envoy was needed at all. By October, with Min Aung Hlaing installed as president, Anwar Ibrahim was pledging to work for Myanmar's "full reintegration" and Marcos was saying the old approach was "not working." A consensus reaffirmed without benchmarks has become a shield for the generals; reintegration without benchmarks would make it a reward. West Africa shows the opposite failure: ECOWAS pressed the Sahel juntas without the means to reverse them and lost Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger in January 2025. An institution that can neither discipline nor deliver loses either members or meaning.

ASEAN centrality follows the same pattern. Major powers accept ASEAN's economic role but not its lead on security, and minilateral groupings such as the Quad sideline the bloc even as their communiqués praise its centrality. The South China Sea Code of Conduct puts the gap on a calendar. In 2023 ASEAN and China set a three-year deadline to conclude the text, and it lapsed in July 2026. Philippine Foreign Secretary Theresa Lazaro now speaks of an "aspiration" to finish by year's end, negotiators remain split on geographic scope and legal force, and analysts warn of a "toothless" code if one is rushed out at the Manila summit in November.

The nuclear file shows how long such waits can run. Three decades after the Bangkok Treaty created Southeast Asia's nuclear weapon-free zone, no nuclear-armed state has signed its protocol. China's July 2025 offer to sign has yet to materialize, and in July 2026 ASEAN ministers were still "exploring" how individual nuclear powers might sign, as SIPRI put China's arsenal at about 620 warheads. Collective institutions remain genuine force multipliers. ASEAN cannot hold on to its central role simply by claiming it. It will keep that role only by delivering results, such as a credible Code of Conduct or a Myanmar process that gives its envoy real access.

Leverage lives in the refinery

In the race for critical minerals, owning the ore gives a small state far less bargaining power than owning the refinery. The IEA finds China is the leading refiner for 19 of the 20 strategic minerals it tracks, with an average share of around 70%. China made 94% of the world's sintered permanent magnets in 2024, and it uses that position. Its April 2025 licensing rules on seven heavy rare earths remain in force, and the truce that suspended a broader October 2025 package was extended by just two months, to January 2027, during Xi's September visit to Washington. Rare earth refining is the one exception to rising concentration in the IEA's 2026 outlook: the top refiner's share slipped from over 90% in 2023 to 85% in 2025, helped by new US projects and higher Malaysian output.

Indonesia shows both the promise and the trap of forcing value up the chain. After it banned raw nickel ore exports in January 2020, its share of world supply rose from about 30% to roughly 60% in 2024, and nickel export earnings climbed from $3.3 billion in 2017-18 to $33.5 billion in 2023. Yet Chinese firms control roughly 75 % of the refining capacity behind that boom. Trissia Wijaya calls the result "polyalignment": a formally hedging state whose industrial strategy, shaped by a domestic oligarchy, deepens dependence on China. Washington has since bargained over the tool itself. In a February 2026 reciprocal trade agreement, Jakarta accepted a 19% tariff and agreed to lift export restrictions on industrial commodities, critical minerals included, to the United States, just before the US Supreme Court struck down the emergency tariffs that had driven the talks.

Malaysia is hedging with its minerals, dealing with both Washington and Beijing, and the strain is beginning to show. Lynas's plant in Kuantan is the only producer outside China able to supply both light and heavy separated rare earths, and the company is spending A$180 million to expand its heavy rare earths capacity. In March 2026 Lynas signed a binding letter of intent worth about $96 million to supply the US Department of War. Months earlier, Reuters had reported the sovereign fund Khazanah in talks with a Chinese state firm on a refinery, which Khazanah's investment chief denied. Kuala Lumpur has also pulled its policy lever both ways: it banned raw rare earth exports from 2024, pledged in an October 2025 memorandum not to restrict critical mineral exports to the United States, and in October 2026 loosened the ban for processing and research. Domestic legitimacy constrains too: in July 2026 a parliamentary committee asked whether the Pentagon deal squared with Malaysia's support for Palestine, and a minister has since conceded it is "technically difficult" to trace where Lynas's output ends up.

The Indonesian model is spreading unevenly. Vietnam banned exports of unprocessed rare earths from January 2026, but its reserve estimate was cut from 22 million to 3.5 million tons and its output fell to an estimated 150 tons in 2025. Cambodia is further back, with soil anomalies of around 450 parts per million at one site and no defined resource. Africa shows what market share adds. The Democratic Republic of Congo, mining more than two-thirds of the world's cobalt, suspended exports in February 2025 and switched to quotas in October; cobalt metal prices more than doubled that year. Zimbabwe went further in February 2026, banning exports of all raw minerals and lithium concentrate, though the processing plants it is counting on are largely Chinese-financed.

Endowment becomes leverage only with market share, processing capacity or both; a state exporting ore hands most of the value to whoever controls the midstream. An Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada roundtable in February 2026 concluded that most Southeast Asian states will pursue calibrated "China-plus" strategies through industrial upgrading. That path is narrowing. Critical minerals "buyers' clubs" have limited weight while regional economies remain deeply interdependent with China, and Washington is now writing limits on small-state export controls into its trade deals.

A scorecard for small-state agency

Equidistance buys time and options; institutions turn that time into bargaining weight if they confront their own failures; value-chain upgrading turns endowment into leverage instead of renewed dependency. They work only in combination. A state that hedges skilfully inside a paralyzed institution, or climbs the value chain without a collective platform, faces great-power pressure alone. The Pacific's bilateral security treaties and Jakarta's and Kuala Lumpur's mineral pledges to Washington show how quickly that pressure extracts concessions. As Manila and Kuala Lumpur are discovering, governments

must also hold their domestic coalitions together long enough to see the strategy through.

Benchmarks make the argument testable. On institutions, success means a Myanmar process that ties any reintegration to verifiable access for the envoy, and a Code of Conduct with defined scope and some legal force. On economic agency, it means measurable growth in domestic processing capacity, a rising share of value captured downstream, and export-control tools kept out of tariff bargains. On equidistance, it means continued volatility in forced-choice surveys alongside rising trust in third partners such as Japan and the EU and a nuclear-weapon state's signature on the Bangkok Treaty protocol. Failure would look like Myanmar readmitted on its own terms, a Code that is delayed again or hollow, deeper single-supplier dependence, and a nuclear-free zone that exists only on paper.

November's ASEAN summit in Manila will give early readings on two of these benchmarks. Small-state agency should be judged on whether small states shape the order around them or simply absorb its shocks. On the evidence of 2026, from Naypyidaw and Manila to Suva and Kinshasa, that verdict remains open.

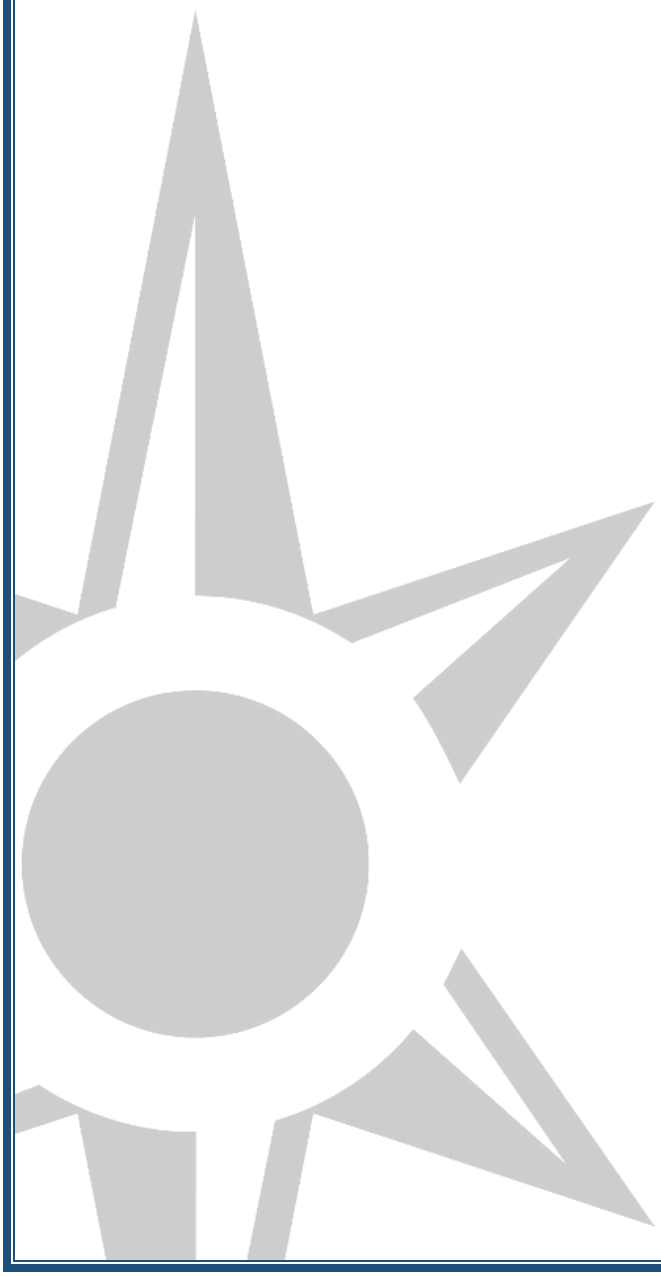
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The Limits of ASEAN Centrality in the U.S.-China Competition in Southeast Asia

By
Brice Tseen Fu Lee



ASEAN centrality remains one of Southeast Asia's most important regional norms as it expresses the expectation that ASEAN should remain the main platform for managing regional affairs and coordinating the involvement of external powers. In principle, this norm gives Southeast Asian states a collective voice, limits domination by larger powers, and prevents the region from being organized solely around the strategic priorities of the United States or China. Its importance is reinforced by Southeast Asia's strategic location. The ASEAN market now covers 684 million people and a combined GDP of about $3.9 trillion, while ASEAN's total trade in goods reached about $3.84 trillion in 2024, equivalent to 98.3% of regional GDP. ASEAN centrality therefore operates as a claim of regional ownership within a region that is economically huge, geographically strategic, and increasingly exposed and targeted by great-power rivalry.

This essay argues that ASEAN centrality's formal status increasingly diverges from its practical authority, which is constrained by bilateral bargaining, minilateral security arrangements, economic-security competition, and internal ASEAN divisions. The recurring pattern is that Southeast Asian states often negotiate bilaterally with the United States, China, or other external partners when direct engagement offers clearer gains in trade, investment, infrastructure, technology, supply chains, or security cooperation. Interestingly, when these bilateral relationships create pressure, dependence, reputational risk, or simply become unfavorable, member states return to ASEAN centrality as a diplomatic shield. ASEAN centrality allows them to defend regional autonomy, avoid binary alignment, and present their foreign policy choices as part of a wider Southeast Asian commitment to openness and balance. This creates the main tension examined in this essay: ASEAN remains central in diplomatic form, while Southeast Asian states increasingly act bilaterally in strategic practice.

Norms are shared expectations about appropriate behavior in international politics, and ASEAN centrality qualifies as a norm because it expresses how Southeast Asian states believe regional order should be organized. It is much more than a description of ASEAN's institutional position as it claims that ASEAN should remain at the center of regional cooperation, dialogue, and conflict management. The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific is an example of such norm by identifying ASEAN centrality as the underlying principle for cooperation and by presenting ASEAN-led mechanisms as key platforms for Indo-Pacific engagement. The same document also emphasizes openness, transparency, inclusivity, a rules-based framework, respect for sovereignty, non-intervention, and international law. ASEAN centrality is therefore tied to a broader regional vision in which Southeast Asia remains open to all major powers while preserving ASEAN's role as convener, mediator, and agenda-setter.

The appeal of ASEAN centrality comes from Southeast Asia's historical and political position in a region long shaped by colonial legacies, Cold War rivalry, and external intervention. Most ASEAN members are small or medium-sized states located near larger external powers, which makes sovereignty, autonomy, and non-interference especially important to their regional thinking. ASEAN centrality addresses this vulnerability by creating a collective diplomatic platform through which Southeast Asian states can engage major powers without surrendering the discourse of regional ownership. Through ASEAN-led institutions such as the East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Regional Forum, and the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus, Southeast Asian states bring major powers into regional dialogue while preserving ASEAN's role as convener. This gives the region a collective voice that individual member states would struggle to exercise alone, especially when dealing with China, the United States, Japan, India, Australia, and other external actors.

ASEAN centrality depends on unity among ASEAN members and acceptance by external powers, and both conditions are under strain in the current regional environment. ASEAN members hold different threat perceptions, economic dependencies, and security needs, which makes collective action difficult even when they agree on broad principles. The Philippines and Vietnam face direct maritime pressure from China, while Cambodia and Laos maintain closer political and economic ties with Beijing. Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Brunei pursue different forms of hedging shaped by domestic priorities, economic exposure, security concerns, and diplomatic traditions. These differences make consensus slow and cautious, especially on issues involving China or hard security. In the 2026 State of Southeast Asia Survey, 48.2% of

respondents identified aggressive behavior in the South China Sea as a top geopolitical concern, with the figure reaching 87.7% in the Philippines and 66.8% in Vietnam. The same survey also found that 51.9% of respondents listed US leadership under President Trump as a top concern, which shows that unease is directed toward both major powers rather than toward China alone.

This gap between ASEAN centrality as diplomatic discourse and ASEAN centrality as strategic practice is visible in the behavior of both great powers. China's ASEAN-China Plan of Action for 2026 to 2030 affirms support for ASEAN centrality in the evolving regional architecture and ASEAN-led mechanisms. At the same time, China deepens influence through infrastructure, trade, investment, digital cooperation, elite engagement, and bilateral political ties with individual Southeast Asian states. China's economic position is substantial: ASEAN-China merchandise trade reached $772.4 billion in 2024, accounting for 20.1% of ASEAN's total trade, while Chinese FDI into ASEAN reached $19.3 billion, making China the third-largest source of FDI among ASEAN Dialogue Partners that year. The United States also supports ASEAN-led diplomacy, while relying heavily on alliances, defense partnerships, tariffs, supply-chain rules, and bilateral trade arrangements. US goods and services trade with ASEAN totaled $571.7 billion in 2024, up 13.4% from 2023, while U.S. goods trade with ASEAN reached $580.1 billion in 2025. These figures show why ASEAN states keep both powers engaged, since China is the region's largest trading partner while the United States remains a major market, investor, security partner, and technology source.

Bilateralism remains attractive to Southeast Asian states because it produces concrete gains that ASEAN centrality alone cannot always provide. Vietnam engages the United States directly over trade and supply chains because access to the US market is economically important. The Philippines strengthens defense cooperation with Washington because it faces direct pressure in the South China Sea. Malaysia and Indonesia engage China for trade, infrastructure, and investment while also maintaining relations with the United States and other partners. Cambodia and Laos draw heavily on Chinese development finance and political support because those ties bring immediate economic and political advantages. These choices reflect the practical needs of states operating under uneven power conditions. They show that when economic and security needs become immediate, member states often prioritize direct bargaining over collective ASEAN discipline.

Trump's 2025 trade policy illustrates this dynamic clearly because it placed Southeast Asian economies directly inside the economic-security logic of US-China competition. The reciprocal tariff agenda put pressure on countries deeply connected to Chinese supply chains, particularly those that had benefited from China-plus-one investment strategies. In July 2025, the United States announced tariff adjustments that included a 40% duty on goods found to have been transshipped to evade applicable tariffs. Vietnam, Malaysia, Thailand, Cambodia, and Indonesia became important to US efforts to reduce dependence on China while also becoming vulnerable to scrutiny over rules of origin and Chinese-linked production. This pressure occurred in a region where total goods trade had already grown by 8.9% in 2024 and reached $3.8 trillion, with exports of $1.95 trillion and imports of $1.89 trillion. Washington treated Southeast Asia as useful for economic competition with China, while Southeast Asian states tried to preserve access to both US markets and Chinese supply chains.

The US-Vietnam case shows why ASEAN centrality has limited ability to replace direct bargaining in moments of economic pressure. In July 2025, Vietnamese exports were assigned a 20 percent reciprocal tariff, while goods determined by US Customs and Border Protection to have been transshipped to evade applicable duties would face a 40% tariff. This reflected a wider US concern that Chinese goods could be rerouted through Southeast Asia to avoid US restrictions. It also showed that some issues are too specific and too economically urgent to be managed collectively through ASEAN. Vietnam had to negotiate directly because the issue concerned its own export access, industrial strategy, and relationship with both Washington and Beijing. ASEAN could provide general language about openness and regional cooperation, while the material bargain took place bilaterally because the costs and benefits fell most directly on Vietnam.

The 2025 ASEAN summit in Malaysia reflected the same issue at the regional level because ASEAN became a diplomatic stage for competing economic narratives. The usual free-trade script was ironically inverted: Washington arrived with tariffs and transactional bargaining, while Beijing presented

itself as the defender of regional economic integration. It was reported that China pushed for stronger economic and trade ties after Trump's departure from the summit, while US tariffs remained a major concern for Southeast Asian governments. ASEAN and China also signed an upgraded free trade agreement covering areas such as the digital economy, the green economy, and pharmaceuticals. This economic framing also appears in regional opinion data. In the 2026 State of Southeast Asia Survey, ASEAN was the leading choice to champion global free trade at 25.5%, followed by China at 21.3%, the European Union at 19.2%, and the United States at 14.8%. These figures give empirical support to the irony of the 2025 summit, since the United States remained associated with tariffs while China gained space to present itself as a supporter of regional trade integration.

The South China Sea issue also provides the clearest security example of ASEAN centrality's limitations because it shows how regional diplomacy is often overtaken by immediate national security pressures. ASEAN has repeatedly emphasized peaceful dispute settlement, international law, self-restraint, and the importance of a Code of Conduct with China. In May 2026, ASEAN and China held the 26th ASEAN-China Senior Officials' Meeting on the implementation of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea in Kuala Lumpur. The meeting reviewed progress on the Declaration and discussed ways to advance negotiations toward a Code of Conduct. This shows ASEAN's continued attempt to manage the dispute through ASEAN-led diplomacy. Yet the long delay in concluding the Code of Conduct also shows ASEAN's limited leverage, since the dispute remains shaped by Chinese maritime activity, Philippine resistance, US security support, and different ASEAN threat perceptions.

The Philippines demonstrates how bilateral security arrangements become more important when ASEAN diplomacy is too slow or too cautious to address immediate maritime pressure. Facing repeated confrontations with China, Manila has deepened defense cooperation with the United States and expanded access arrangements for US forces. The Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement was expanded in 2023 from five to nine locations, giving Washington wider access across Philippine territory. This strengthens Manila's position, while also shifting part of the South China Sea issue away from ASEAN diplomacy and toward US-Philippine security cooperation. ASEAN remains useful as a diplomatic platform, while urgent security bargaining increasingly takes place through bilateral channels. Vietnam similarly supports ASEAN centrality while deepening ties with the United States, Japan, India, Australia, South Korea, and the European Union as part of a wider diversification strategy.

Myanmar shows an entirely different institutional weakness because it shows that ASEAN centrality has limited enforcement capacity even within Southeast Asia itself. After the 2021 coup, ASEAN adopted the Five-Point Consensus as its main framework for addressing the crisis. The junta's failure to implement that consensus exposed ASEAN's inability to compel compliance from a member state. Myanmar's military leadership was sidelined from high-level ASEAN meetings, while the conflict continued. In July 2026, it was reported that ASEAN foreign ministers would hold a special meeting in Bangkok to discuss engagement with Myanmar, including the first in-person meeting with Myanmar's top diplomat in five years. This shows that ASEAN can convene dialogue, while it struggles to enforce outcomes when members disagree over pressure, engagement, and recognition.

The rise of minilateral security arrangements places further pressure on ASEAN's claim to centrality because the Quad and AUKUS show that external powers increasingly use smaller, faster, and more security-oriented groupings to respond to China. These arrangements are not ASEAN-led and reflect the view that ASEAN's consensus model is too cautious for hard security issues. AUKUS raised concern in Southeast Asia because it introduced nuclear-powered submarine cooperation into the regional security environment and reinforced the role of US-led security networks. The Quad also shows that major powers and partners can coordinate around regional security, technology, infrastructure, and maritime issues without placing ASEAN at the center. ASEAN remains an important diplomatic forum, while minilateralism shows that major powers increasingly use alternative platforms for regional security management.

If member states mainly invoke ASEAN centrality when bilateralism becomes politically costly, ASEAN centrality becomes reactive. It responds to pressure after it emerges instead of shaping regional order before that pressure becomes decisive. Recent

regional opinion data confirms this trend because Southeast Asian policy discussions increasingly emphasize autonomy, resilience, and pragmatic partnerships. The State of Southeast Asia 2026 Survey was conducted from January 5 to February 20, 2026, with 2,008 opinion-makers and thought leaders across all ASEAN member states. The survey found that China remained the most influential economic power in Southeast Asia at 55.9%, while the United States stood at 15.3% and ASEAN itself at 13.2%. At the same time, 55.4% of respondents were worried about China's growing regional economic influence, while 53.8% were worried about US economic influence. These figures capture the basic logic of Southeast Asian hedging: both powers are useful, both powers create anxiety, and ASEAN centrality gives member states a language for managing that tension. On leadership in maintaining the rules-based order and upholding international law, ASEAN ranked first at 23.4%, slightly ahead of the United States at 22.3%, the EU at 20.5%, and China at 13.6%. The survey also found that 29.4% of respondents believed ASEAN members should be mindful of joining groupings that risk undermining ASEAN centrality, while only 4.4% supported avoiding all such groupings and focusing exclusively on cooperation within ASEAN. These numbers reinforce the argument that ASEAN centrality remains valued, even as states continue to hedge through bilateral and minilateral channels.

The limits of ASEAN centrality are structural because ASEAN is built on consensus, sovereignty, and noninterference. These principles preserve unity, but they also reduce enforcement capacity. ASEAN members have different material interests and different perceptions of the United States and China. These differences make collective action slow and cautious. US-China competition intensifies the problem because both powers can offer selective benefits to individual states. Once member states see bilateral bargaining as more useful than collective bargaining, ASEAN centrality becomes harder to operationalize. The norm remains visible in statements, summits, and frameworks, while actual state behavior is increasingly shaped by bilateral bargaining and strategic diversification.

Overall, ASEAN centrality remains Southeast Asia's official regional norm, while its practical authority is limited in US-China competition. ASEAN centrality expresses the idea that ASEAN should remain the main platform for organizing regional order. Yet Southeast Asian states often pursue bilateral relations first because bilateralism offers clearer benefits in trade, security, infrastructure, market access, technology, and investment. When those bilateral relationships create pressure, dependence, or strategic risk, member states return to ASEAN centrality as a diplomatic shield. ASEAN centrality survives as a language of regional autonomy, while it has limited control over how Southeast Asian states respond to great-power competition. Its limit is clear: ASEAN remains central in diplomatic form, while Southeast Asian states increasingly act bilaterally in strategic practice.

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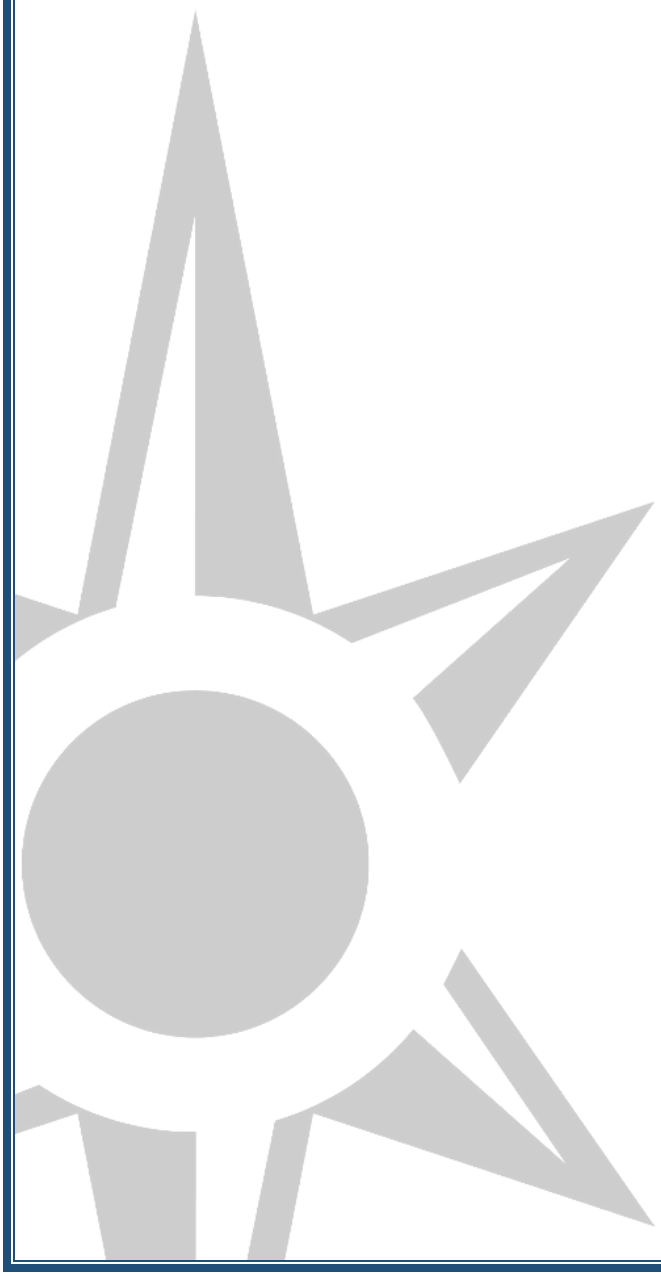
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Governing the Convergence:

Why ASEAN Must Align its Maritime Domain Awareness with Digital and Energy Security

By
Brin Raizulli R. Isaac



The maritime domain of Southeast Asia is undergoing a profound structural transformation. For decades, regional security planners viewed the South China Sea, the Straits of Malacca, and the Sulu-Celebes Seas primarily as traditional sea lines of communication. In this classic paradigm, maritime security was synonymous with naval diplomacy, border protection, and anti-piracy operations. In the contemporary era, however, the sea has evolved into a dense, digitized corridor of hybrid, critical infrastructure. Southeast Asia's economic future is being built on physical-digital-energy networks that rest directly on or under the seabed. This is the physical-digital-energy nexus: a space where high-voltage direct current subsea power interconnectors, offshore wind turbines, subsea fiber-optic telecommunications cables, and highly automated deep-water ports coalesce into a singular, interdependent ecosystem.

This convergence creates unprecedented systemic vulnerabilities. A single hybrid security incident in these waters can simultaneously paralyze three distinct sectors. Consider a highly plausible contingency: an unidentified vessel loiters in the congested waters of the Singapore Strait, dragging an anchor that severs both an international fiber-optic cable and an adjacent subsea power transmission link under the ASEAN Power Grid. Simultaneously, a ransomware attack targets the onshore Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition system of the connected power substation, disabling automatic rerouting protocols. Within minutes, a single physical disruption in the maritime zone escalates into a regional digital blackout and a cascading power grid failure. In this scenario, where does the security responsibility lie? Under international law and regional frameworks, is this a maritime border incursion, an energy supply crisis, or a cyber-warfare event?

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is structurally unprepared to answer this question. Despite the rapid convergence of these physical and digital assets, ASEAN governs them through highly compartmentalized, disconnected institutional pillars. This structural fragmentation creates a dangerous governance gray-zone that geopolitical adversaries can exploit. If ASEAN is to protect its digital and energy transition, it must urgently bridge the institutional chasm separating its maritime, energy, and cybersecurity governance frameworks.

The traditional boundaries that once separated the sea, the grid, and the cloud have permanently dissolved. In 21st-century Southeast Asia, maritime security is energy security, and energy security is cybersecurity. The subsea fiber-optic cables that power regional digital economies and the subsea high-voltage lines that will distribute renewable energy are the literal nervous system of the region. Yet, as long as ASEAN governs these converged assets through fragmented, 20th-century institutional silos, the region's economic and strategic vulnerabilities will continue to grow. Geopolitical competitors and gray-zone actors will continue to exploit these bureaucratic gaps, threatening the physical and digital foundations of regional integration.

The Silo Problem: ASEAN's Parallel Tracks

ASEAN's institutional architecture—built around three distinct pillars: the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC)— was designed for an era of clear-cut policy divisions. When confronted with hybrid, cross-cutting assets like subsea cables or offshore grids, this pillar system fractures into highly isolated sectoral tracks. This fragmentation is not merely an administrative inconvenience; it is a structural vulnerability. Because these three governance tracks do not intersect, ASEAN lacks a unified vocabulary to address the security of its marine-based critical infrastructure.

Traditional maritime security sits firmly within the Political-Security Community. Its governance is facilitated by the ASEAN Maritime Forum, its Track 1.5 counterpart the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum, and the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting. These bodies focus primarily on maritime domain awareness, confidence-building measures, preventing unplanned encounters at sea, and mitigating piracy and armed robbery. Their agendas are heavily dominated by traditional sovereignty disputes and geopolitical friction in the South China Sea. The maritime forum and defense meetings possess virtually no technical expertise regarding the vulnerability of subsea fiber-optic communications or the industrial control systems that run offshore power infrastructure. For these defense bodies, the sea is an operational theater of ships and states, not a digital-physical network of cables and bits.

The infrastructure of regional energy integration is governed within the Economic Community, primarily through the ASEAN Ministers on Energy Meeting and executed via the ASEAN Plan of Action for Energy Cooperation Phase Two. The flagship project under this track is the ASEAN Power Grid, which increasingly relies on subsea interconnectors to link national grids and integrate remote offshore renewable energy sources. For the energy policy community, the focus is strictly economic and technical: harmonizing regulatory tariffs, securing cross-border investment, and designing the engineering systems of power transmission. Because this community operates under the economic pillar, physical maritime security and cybersecurity are treated as external operational variables. They are relegated to domestic jurisdictions or post-facto engineering considerations, rather than being integrated as strategic security prerequisites during the design phase.

Digital governance is divided across the ASEAN Digital Ministers' Meeting, the ASEAN Cybersecurity Coordinating Committee, and various initiatives under the ASEAN Digital Masterplan. This policy community works on digital trade standards, cross-border data flows, e-commerce, and protecting civilian networks from state-sponsored hacks. Yet, their focus remains almost entirely land-bound and software-centric. There is a profound analytical gap regarding the physical security of the digital sea lines of communication. While the digital ministers coordinate cybersecurity protocols, they do not interface with maritime enforcement agencies or regional coast guards to monitor vessel traffic near the underwater infrastructure that carries over 95% of the region's digital data.

This separation means that the maritime security sector does not understand the cyber-physical vulnerabilities of the energy grid. Conversely, the energy sector does not understand maritime law and the jurisdictional limits of the Exclusive Economic Zone under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. At the same time, the digital sector operates with little awareness of the physical and geopolitical risks that threaten its subsea cables at sea. This mutual isolation prevents the development of a comprehensive regional strategy.

The Security Implications: Exploiting the Seams

This division is particularly dangerous in Southeast Asia, where intense geopolitical competition intersects with contested maritime boundaries. In the South China Sea and adjacent maritime corridors, gray-zone coercion—activities that fall below the threshold of open military conflict—has become the primary tool of revisionist state actors. Geopolitical adversaries do not respect the bureaucratic boundaries of ASEAN's pillar system. In fact, they actively exploit these exact seams. By targeting the physical-digital-energy nexus, hostile actors can project power and inflict economic damage while maintaining deniability and avoiding a coordinated military response.

The vulnerability of subsea fiber-optic and power cables to physical disruption is well-documented, but the potential for malicious, deniable attacks is rising. A hostile state can deploy civilian commercial vessels, maritime militia, or deep-sea research ships to cut critical subsea infrastructure under the guise of routine commercial accidents, such as anchor dragging or deep-water trawling. Because ASEAN's maritime domain awareness systems are run by naval and coast guard intelligence that rarely coordinate with the private telecom consortia operating the cables, identifying the pattern of such accidents is extremely difficult. The latency between physical damage and forensic attribution allows adversaries to conduct successful coercive operations without fear of immediate retaliation.

As ASEAN countries rapidly expand offshore wind installations and build subsea power links to fulfill their green energy goals, they are introducing millions of internet-connected industrial devices into contested waters. If an adversary successfully hacks the control systems of an offshore wind farm, they do not just steal data—they gain the ability to physically damage wind turbines, alter power flows, or trigger wide-scale grid instability on the mainland. In a contested maritime zone, such a cyber-physical attack bypasses traditional naval defense systems entirely. A state's navy might be fully prepared to defend an offshore platform from a hostile warship, but it is completely defenseless against a digital payload launched from thousands of miles away that shuts down the platform's systems.

The legal framework governing undersea assets is notoriously ambiguous. Under the United Nations

Convention on the Law of the Sea, while states have the right to lay submarine cables and pipelines on the continental shelf and in the Exclusive Economic Zone, the coastal state's jurisdiction over these assets is limited. The convention provides weak enforcement mechanisms against foreign vessels that damage cables, especially when the damage occurs outside of territorial seas. Furthermore, international law has yet to establish a clear consensus on whether a cyberattack on a state's offshore critical infrastructure constitutes a use of force or an infringement on territorial sovereignty. Adversaries exploit these legal grey areas to conduct maritime grey-zone activities, knowing that ASEAN states lack a unified, legally binding regional framework to deter, attribute, and respond to such hybrid threats.

The private sector's ownership of most digital and energy infrastructure adds another layer of complexity. These private consortia prioritize commercial efficiency and market neutrality, while states increasingly view undersea cables and pipelines through the lens of national security. When a cable is severed, the commercial operator's primary goal is rapid repair, which often requires navigating complex coastal state permit regimes that can be deliberately delayed for geopolitical leverage. This mismatch between private commercial interests and state security objectives leaves the region's most critical digital pathways highly vulnerable to coercive delays and prolonged outages.

Bridging the Governance Chasm: A Regional Blueprint

To secure its interconnected maritime future, ASEAN does not need to build new, bloated regional bureaucracies. Creating another overarching committee would only worsen the institutional inertia that already slows the region's decision-making. Instead, the solution lies in integrated governance—leveraging, adapting, and structurally linking existing ASEAN bodies to build a cohesive, cross-pillar security architecture.

First, the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum should formally establish a permanent, cross-sectoral agenda item dedicated to Subsea and Cyber-Physical Infrastructure Security. This track would bring together the traditional defense and maritime diplomats of the forum, technical cyber experts from the ASEAN Cybersecurity Coordinating Committee, and energy planners from the ASEAN Power Grid Transmission System Operators. This joint body should mandate the creation of a classified ASEAN Subsea Critical Infrastructure Risk Register. This registry would map critical subsea power and data corridors, identify vulnerability hotspots, and share real-time maritime domain awareness data — such as anomalous vessel loitering patterns — with both state security agencies and private infrastructure operators.

Second, as ASEAN member states negotiate and implement the multilateral power trading agreements of the ASEAN Power Grid, security must be integrated into the economic planning process. Under the direction of the ASEAN Ministers on Energy Meeting, ASEAN should update the standard technical and legal procurement templates for cross-border energy projects under the regional plan of action. Any multinational consortium bidding on subsea interconnectors or offshore renewable energy installations must pass strict, regional security audits. These guidelines would require mandatory hardware supply-chain verification, end-to-end encryption for control systems, and physical redundancy plans for cable routes, ensuring that security is treated as a core investment criterion rather than an afterthought.

Third, the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response should be modernized to cover systemic infrastructure failures. This framework has been highly successful in coordinating responses to natural disasters like typhoons and earthquakes. By expanding its operational mandate, ASEAN can utilize the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance to manage the fallout of a major physical or cyber disruption of a critical regional energy or data corridor. Under updated protocols, member states could rapidly deploy joint maritime repair assets and coordinate power-grid sharing. This would bypass the slow, national ad-hoc responses that delay critical infrastructure recovery.

Finally, ASEAN must address the legal loopholes in its maritime jurisdiction by harmonizing national legislation regarding undersea cable protection. While UNCLOS provides the baseline international law, its domestic implementation across Southeast Asia is highly uneven. ASEAN should draft a model regional law that criminalizes negligent and intentional damage to subsea infrastructure within national jurisdictions, standardizing penalties and

simplifying the permitting process for cable repair vessels. By establishing clear, fast-track regulatory pathways for repair operations, the region can significantly reduce the vulnerability of its digital sea lines of communication to prolonged, geopolitically motivated disruptions.

The Path to Implementation: Overcoming Institutional Resistance

The transition toward an integrated governance model will inevitably face resistance from entrenched bureaucratic interests within ASEAN. Sectoral ministries are protective of their mandates, and the ASEAN Secretariat operates under tight resource constraints. To overcome these hurdles, regional leaders must demonstrate the clear economic benefits of security integration. A more secure and resilient regional grid directly lowers the cost of capital for major infrastructure projects, making Southeast Asia a far more attractive destination for green energy and digital investments.

Furthermore, ASEAN can pilot these integrated initiatives on a sub-regional scale before attempting full, ten-member consensus. Minilateral groupings within ASEAN — such as the Brunei-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area — are already pursuing localized power grid integration. These smaller, highly motivated clusters of states can serve as testing grounds for cross-sectoral coordination. They can integrate maritime patrols with cyber-defense sharing and joint cable repair protocols. Once these pilot programs prove successful, they can be scaled up to the wider ASEAN framework, providing a pragmatic path forward that respects the region's diverse political landscapes.

The cost of inaction far outweighs the political friction of institutional reform. As Southeast Asia becomes more dependent on interconnected, offshore technologies, the vulnerabilities of its fragmented governance will become more apparent. An unprotected maritime-energy-cyber nexus is an open invitation for geopolitical coercion. By taking steps to bridge its policy silos today, ASEAN can safeguard its sovereignty, protect its digital transition, and ensure that its shared seas remain a space of secure, sustainable prosperity for generations to come.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

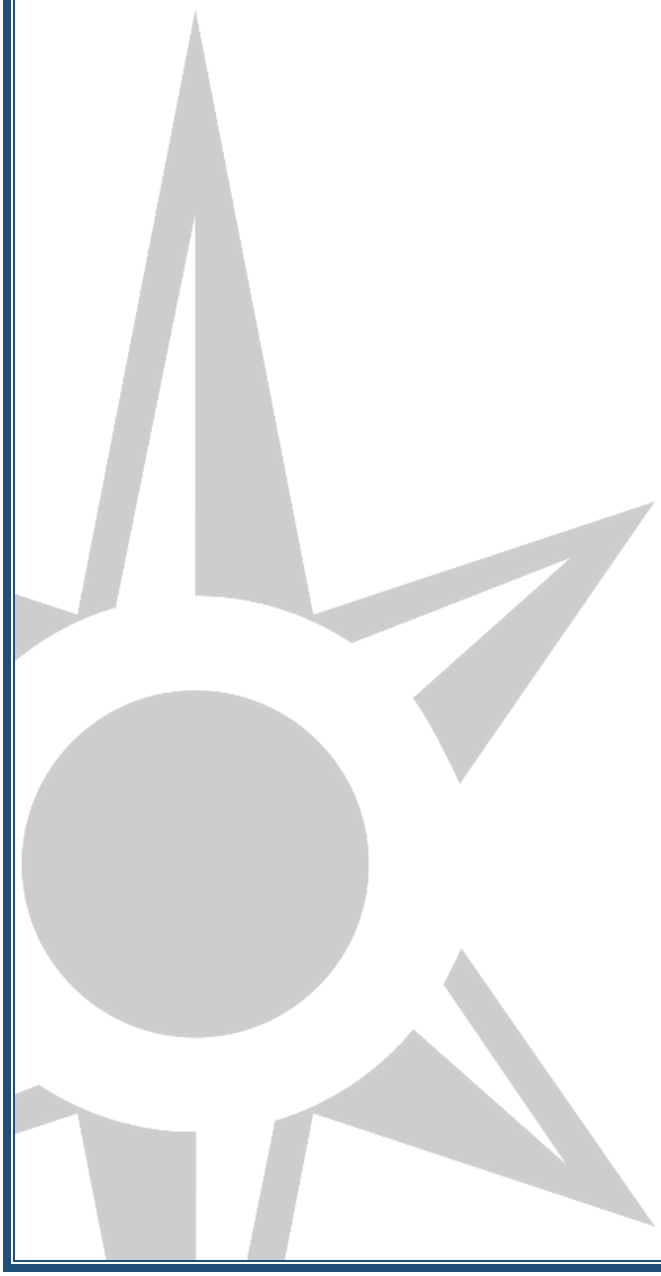
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Turning Regional Digital Economy Agreement to a Development Outcome

A Case Of ASEAN

By
Wakana Asano



The conclusion of negotiations on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA), the world's first region-wide digital economy agreement, marks an important milestone in ASEAN's one of the core principles - the comprehensive economic integration across the 11 Southeast Asian countries as a whole region. Digital technologies are expected to become a major driver of productivity, innovation, and cross-border economic activity across Southeast Asia over the coming decade. Recent estimates project that ASEAN's digital economy could reach approximately USD 2 trillion by 2030, which highlights both the region's economic potential and the importance of reducing fragmentation across national digital markets. At the same time, increasing geopolitical uncertainty, technological competition, and evolving security concerns are reshaping the policy environment in which digital integration will be implemented.

While many discussions among the security community in the region focus on geopolitical fragmentation at both regional and global levels, economic, resilience, and regional cooperation, there is also a growing importance of digital transformation as an enabler of long-term economic competitiveness. ASEAN Secretary-General Kao Kim Hourn describes DEFA as a mean to unlock the region's potential and self-determination, reflecting "the ASEAN way" – noninterference and consensus-based - of advancing regional cooperation. Heads of states and ministers across the region, including Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, similarly highlight digitalization and artificial intelligence (AI) as key for future economic development of their own. Conversations with policymakers and policy researchers in Southeast Asia frequently turn to questions surrounding digital and AI governance. These indicate growing recognition that digital technologies have become the central to economic policy and national security.

The successful conclusion of DEFA negotiations, however, represents only the beginning of a considerably more challenging phase. Negotiating a regional agreement requires political consensus. Implementing it requires institutional capacity, regulatory coordination, financial resources, and sustained political commitment across countries with significantly different levels of digital development, particularly within ASEAN. ASEAN now comprises 11 member states with wide variations in income levels, digital infrastructure, regulatory maturity, and institutional capacity. For example, Singapore is currently only one high-income economy with advanced digital government capabilities, whereas the lower-middle-income Cambodia struggles with basic broadband expansion and significant regional divides between major urban centers and remote provinces. These differences are further compounded by diverse national priorities regarding economic development, digital governance, and national security. As a result, implementation is likely to prove substantially more complex than negotiation.

This implementation challenge also presents an opportunity. ASEAN could approach implementation as a broader development anchor aimed at strengthening productivity, reducing transaction costs, expanding digital markets, and building the digital foundations necessary for future technological innovation. Such an approach aligns with broader regional efforts to improve competitiveness while accommodating the diversity that characterizes ASEAN's consensus-based model of regional cooperation.

Three hurdles to overcome

Unlike other major trade agreements in Asia, such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) that primarily require tariff reductions or legal harmonization, DEFA encompasses a broad range of digital policy areas for national and regional digital transformations. Implementation therefore requires coordination across multiple government agencies, sustained investments in digital infrastructure, and continued cooperation between governments, the private sector, and development agencies, at both national and regional levels. This transition from negotiation to implementation presents three obstacles.

First, ASEAN faces a widening digital readiness gap. ASEAN's diversity has long been regarded as both one of its greatest strengths and one of its principal governance tests. Singapore ($98,814 of GDP per capita) boasts one of the world's most advanced digital economies, while Brunei Darussalam ($32,235 of GDP per capita) enjoys robust digital infrastructure and human capital. In contrast, other ASEAN member states such as Vietnam ($ 5,066 of

GDP per capita), Laos ($2,325 of GDP per capita), and Myanmar ($1,489 of GDP per capita) are still at earlier stages of digital transformation, with differing levels of digital infrastructure, internet connectivity, institutional capacity, digital skills, and public sector digitalization. The recent accession of Timor-Leste ($1,341 of GDP per capita) in October 2025 further expands this diversity. Such differences influence not only the pace at which countries can implement DEFA commitments, but also the types of technical assistance and investment required to support implementation. Rather than viewing these differences as implementation constraints, ASEAN may need to adopt differentiated implementation pathways that allow member states to progress at different speeds while maintaining a shared long-term direction. This approach would be consensus-based model of regional cooperation that ASEAN meant to be by design.

Second, digital policy intersects with national security more than ever. Discussions among the policy community in Southeast Asia illustrate that digital transformation is no longer viewed exclusively through the lens of economic development. Policymakers increasingly considered technology-related issues that simultaneously affect economic competitiveness and national security. Consequently, member states often approach digital policy from different strategic perspectives depending on their domestic priorities, institutional arrangements, and external partnerships. At the global level, the US-China rivalry and the internal divisions within ASEAN, such as the Philippines being a US ally, and Cambodia and Laos being heavily dependent on Chinese financial aid, investments, and political backing, would lead to intra-ASEAN technical and trade fragmentation around data, AI, communication systems and hardware. At the regional level, even among ASEAN, national sovereignty remains vital for each ASEAN state, due to their hard-won independence from colonial rule, as well as ongoing border disputes such as the Thailand-Cambodia border conflict and the Indonesia-Malaysia maritime dispute. These differences do not necessarily prevent regional cooperation. However, they complicate efforts to harmonize policies in areas such as cross-border data flows, cybersecurity standards, trusted digital identity, and AI governance. Effective implementation is likely to require flexible approaches that establish common regional principles while allowing sufficient policy space for national circumstances.

Third, implementation is fundamentally an institutional struggle. Negotiating DEFA primarily involved trade ministries and economic policy personnel. By contrast, implementing DEFA will likely require coordination across a much broader range of institutions, including ministries responsible for finance, telecommunications digital economy, interior affairs, cybersecurity, customs, central banking, competition policy, and defense. By nature, government institutions struggle with isolated departments, or 'silos,' across the national government. This includes non-ASEAN cases like Japan's "vertically structured administrations (*tatewari gyosei*)", institutional and data-sharing barriers across federal agencies in the US, and South Africa's "traditional modes of governance." As the governments of all ASEAN member states are no exception, intra-governmental coordination is likely to take time and require strong political and institutional commitment to the regional- and country-level implementation of DEFA. Effective implementation will therefore depend not only on regional coordination, but also on domestic whole-of-government coordination within each member state. This institutional dimension is often overlooked in discussions of regional digital integration. Even where political consensus exists, implementation may be constrained by limited administrative capacity, overlapping regulatory responsibilities, or differing implementation priorities across government agencies.

Attempting to operationalize every element of DEFA simultaneously may prove both administratively difficult and politically costly. A more practical approach would be to prioritize a limited number of foundational initiatives capable of generating visible economic benefits across all member states, such as the ongoing initiative on cross-border, interoperable business identity (Unique Business Identification Number (UBIN)). Concurrently, ASEAN also would have to aim for strengthening the institutional and digital capabilities needed for more ambitious forms of reginal integration over time.

From ambition to delivery

Given the breadth of DEFA and the uneven levels of digital readiness across ASEAN, implementation is unlikely to be equally effective if all commitments are

pursued simultaneously and at the same pace. In particular, a regional trust framework for digital identity will show the mix of varying digital readiness, development ambitions and national security concerns of ASEAN member states.

ASEAN member states have already developed national systems and regional initiatives, such as Indonesia's *Satu Data Indonesia* (One Data Indonesia) and ASEAN Regional Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT). The implementation obstacle is therefore less about creating new institutions or systems from scratch, than about making existing systems work together across borders. This distinction is important. Regional integration does not necessarily require identical national digital systems. It requires sufficient interoperability for individuals, firms, and governments to transact reliably across different systems.

A regional trust framework for digital identity represents an ambitious step. Unlike business identity, personal digital identity intersects directly with data protection, cybersecurity, public administration and national security. As ASEAN member states have developed substantially different identity architectures, requiring them to adopt a uniform regional model would be neither realistic nor necessary. A more feasible approach would be mutual recognition based on common standards for authentication, assurance, security and governance. Under such a model, member states could retain their national identity systems while developing mechanisms through which credentials issued in one jurisdiction can be trusted for specified purposes in another.

The distinction between harmonization and interoperability is central to this approach. DEFA does not need to eliminate national regulatory differences to produce economic value. It needs to identify where different national systems must communicate, establish sufficient trust for that communication, and determine minimum standards that participating systems should meet.

This approach also provides a way to accommodate ASEAN's readiness gap. More digitally advanced member states, such as Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines, could pilot interoperability in selected use cases, while countries requiring additional infrastructure or institutional capacity, Cambodia and Laos for instance, could receive longer implementation periods and targeted technical and financial assistance. Timor-Leste's accession and enhanced diversity within ASEAN make such differentiated implementation increasingly important. A common regional destination need not imply technological architecture.

These suggest that the first phase of DEFA implementation could focus less on comprehensive regulatory convergence and more on constructing a minimum interoperable regional layer. It offers relatively concrete opportunities to demonstrate economic value, while a broader digital-identity trust framework could be developed progressively as institutional capabilities converge.

The objective would have to be not uniformity across 11 highly diverse economies, but functional interoperability: enabling different national digital systems to work together sufficiently well to reduce transaction costs, expand market access and build tryst in cross-border digital activity.

Coordination across agencies

Implementation of DEFA will depend on more than the agreement itself. It will require sustained coordination among ASEAN institutions, national governments, and development partners, along with the private sector. As implementation challenges differ across policy areas and member states, no single institution is likely to possess the mandate, expertise, or resources necessary to deliver every aspect of digital integration. A coordinated implementation model that leverages the comparative advantages of different actors is therefore likely to be more effective than assigning primary responsibility to any single institution.

ASEAN: ASEAN's principal contribution is likely to remain the development of common regional frameworks that facilitate interoperability while preserving sufficient flexibility for national implementation. Given the diversity of ASEAN's political systems, legal frameworks, and levels of digital maturity, regional coordination would have to focus on establishing minimum standards, promoting mutual recognition, and encouraging information sharing rather than pursuing complete regulatory harmonization. This approach is consistent with ASEAN's longstanding consensus-based model of regional cooperation. Instead of

requiring member states to adopt identical digital systems, ASEAN could facilitate trust among different national systems through common technical standards, governance principles, and implementation guidelines. It may also consider strengthening mechanisms for monitoring implementation progress. Beyond reporting legal or regulatory reforms, periodic assessments could evaluate practical outcomes.

Member states: Although DEFA is negotiated regionally, implementation will occur primarily through domestic institutions. Hence, governments of ASEAN member states remain responsible for translating regional commitments into national legislation, administrative procedures, and public investment. This task extends well beyond ministries responsible for trade or digital economy. Effective implementation is likely to require coordination among agencies responsible for finance, customs, telecommunications, central banking, competition policy, as well as national security. Establishing whole-of-government coordination mechanisms at the national level will therefore become as important as introducing new digital regulations. Member states are also likely to require different implementation pathways. Countries with more advanced digital ecosystems may be well positioned to pilot new interoperable services, while others may initially prioritize investments in digital infrastructure, institutional capacity, or regulatory reform. Differentiated implementation could not only be a weakness of ASEAN integration, but also a pragmatic response to regional diversity that could be replicable for other regions, particularly in highly diverse Global South.

Multilateral development banks (MDBs): The implementation phase also creates an important role for MDBs. The World Bank has track records in supporting country-level implementation through diagnostic assessments, institutional capacity building, digital public infrastructure, regulatory reform, and implementation monitoring. As ASEAN member states progress at different speeds, country-specific implementation support will be important. Development assistance would have to focus not only on financing digital infrastructure, but also on strengthening institutional capabilities required for sustained implementation. The ADB can complement these efforts though its longstanding experience supporting regional connectivity, digital infrastructure, and technical cooperation across Asia. In particular, ADB may be well placed to support regional pilot projects, knowledge sharing, and technical assistance that facilitate interoperability among member states. Rather than duplicating activities, the comparative strengths of the two institutions appear complementary. While the World Bank's comparative advantage often lies in supporting domestic institutional reform and implementation capacity, ADB's regional mandate positions it well to strengthen cross-border coordination and regional digital infrastructure. Closer coordination between the two institutions could reduce duplication while providing more coherent implementation support for ASEAN member states.

Building ASEAN's next growth engine

The DEFA implementation also creates implications for the region's broader technological transformation, particularly in AI. As ASEAN is set to advance AI agendas under Singapore's chairmanship in 2027, the quality of ASEAN's digital foundations will become a critical determinant of how widely the benefits of AI can be shared across the region. AI has rapidly become one of the defining policy issues across sectors. Discourse often leads to questions about AI governance, and growing concern over how governments should respond to the rapid diffusion of generative AI technologies. While regulatory approaches naturally received considerable attention, these discussions also pointed toward a broader policy challenge. The long-term economic benefits of AI will depend not only on appropriate governance frameworks but also on whether countries possess the digital foundations necessary to adopt AI productively and responsibly.

DEFA would be viewed as part of ASEAN's broader national development anchor. All enabled or necessary technologies contribute to creating an environment in which firms can adopt new technologies, governments can deliver digital public services more effectively, and innovation can spread beyond the region's most advanced digital economies.

This perspective also shifts the focus of AI policy. Policymakers may increasingly need to ask how regional digital integration can enable more firms, workers, and public institutions to benefit from AI-driven productivity gains. Regional cooperation cannot replace national AI strategies, but it can

reduce fragmentation and provide common foundations upon which national innovation ecosystems can develop. Ultimately, DEFA has the potential to serve as a platform for building the digital capabilities that support ASEAN's next phase of economic transformation in an increasingly uncertain global environment and the rapid technological advancement.

Beyond the negotiations

The successful conclusion of DEFA negotiations marks an important achievement for ASEAN. Yet, the region's next challenge lies not in negotiating new frameworks but in implementing them effectively. ASEAN's diversity, long regarded as both one of its defining characteristics and one of its principal governance challenges, means that implementation cannot simply replicate experiences from other regional organizations. Instead, it will require differentiated pathways that recognize varying levels of digital readiness while maintaining a common regional direction.

DEFA represents an opportunity to rethink regional digital integration as an integral component of ASEAN's development anchor. Digital integration provides the institutional and technological foundations upon which future economic growth, innovation, and AI adoption will depend on in an international environment characterized by geopolitical fragmentation and accelerating technological change, ASEAN's competitiveness will be determined not only by its ability to negotiate regional agreements, but by its capacity to translate those agreements into practical improvements for the people.

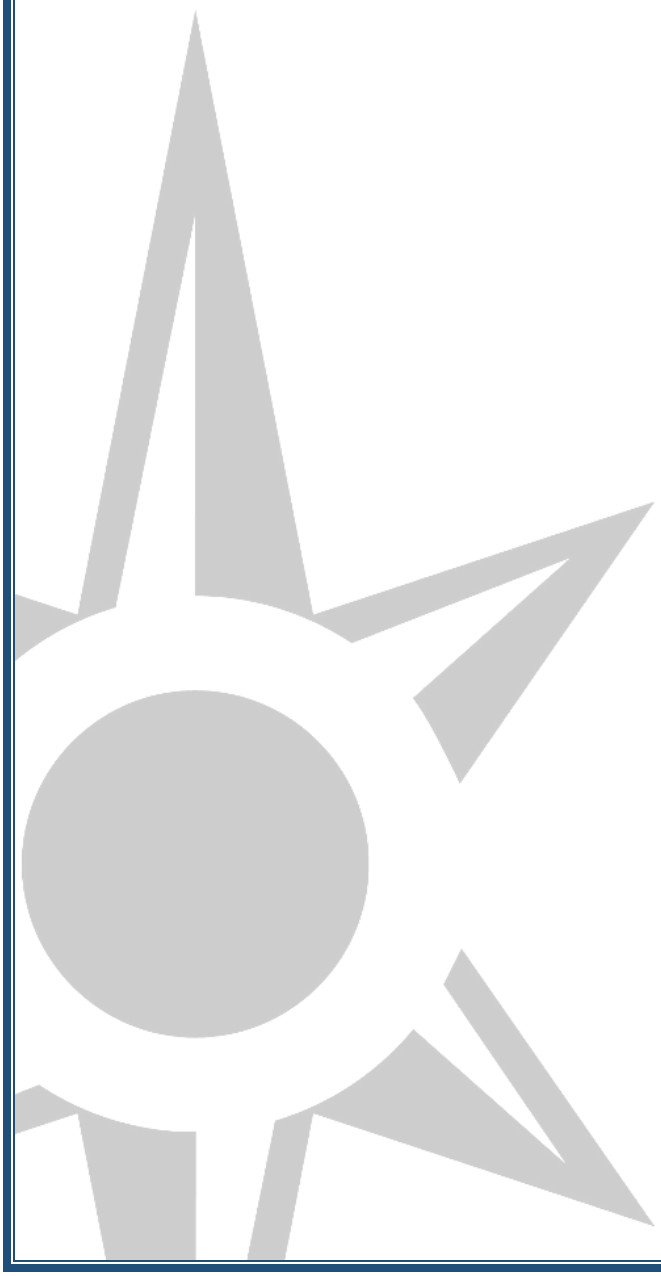
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India's Global South Leadership: Between Rhetoric and Regional Reality

By
Divya Rai



Over the past several years, India has enjoyed rising diplomatic visibility, driven by a growing economy, a large youthful population, and expanding strategic weight. As international politics become more fragmented and competitive, New Delhi has sought to position itself not only as a rising power but also as a representative of the interests and concerns of developing countries. India's growing profile in global affairs has renewed interest in its role as a voice for the Global South.

India's engagement with the Global South is not new. This ambition evolved from India's post-independence foreign policy tradition, with its roots in the Bandung Conference of 1955, where newly decolonised states across Asia and Africa came together to advance Afro-Asian solidarity and resist colonial legacies. That legacy was institutionalized in 1961 through the Non-Aligned Movement, in which India played a central role by championing developing-country interests and encouraging cooperation among Southern states.

Today, India speaks the language of cooperation, development, and inclusive growth while navigating hard power competition, supply-chain realignments, and sharper regional rivalries. In this context, India's developmental diplomacy is a continuation of a longstanding foreign-policy self-image. The key question, however, is whether that self-image still translates into leadership. This essay argues that while India's Global South diplomacy draws strength from historical legitimacy and growing material capability, there remains a persistent gap between rhetoric and regional reality.

India and the Global South

New Delhi presents itself as the foremost champion of the Global South, linking the developed and developing worlds. The claim leans on two pillars: credibility inherited from decades of non-alignment and the heft that comes with an economy on the rise. Together, these are supposed to bolster India's strategic independence and push forward a multipolar order more attuned to its own interests and values. More broadly, Indian foreign policy has travelled a long distance since the Cold War era, shifting from strict nonalignment to a stance better described as multi-alignment — cultivating ties across rival blocs while trying to maximize room to maneuvre and put national interest ahead of bloc allegiance.

Indian officials are careful to describe this role not as leadership in any hierarchical sense but as amplification of others' *voices* — an exercise in cooperation rather than command, built around sovereignty, agency, and fair representation instead of a top-down model. That framing carries a strategic logic of its own. By marketing itself as *Vishwa Mitra*, or friend to the world, India is trying to shed the lingering label of swing state, caught between larger rival camps, in favor of a more independent and consequential standing in world affairs. Its bid for Global South leadership therefore draws on a longstanding devotion to self-determination and multilateral cooperation, while also reflecting a clear-eyed calculation of where structural opportunity lies.

At the heart of this pitch is India's dissatisfaction with global governance structures. New Delhi argues that bodies such as the UN Security Council, the IMF, the World Bank, and the WHO are relics of a Cold War distribution of power that has failed to keep up with the shift of influence toward rising economies. Reform of these institutions has crawled along at best, and India has used that inertia to press the case that a newer cohort of powers — itself included — merits a bigger say.

India hosting the G20 in 2023 gave this vision its clearest showcase. Sustained lobbying by New Delhi helped secure permanent G20 membership for the African Union, a concrete achievement that gave real weight to India's claim of speaking up for the wider South. The G20's chosen theme, *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* — one earth, one family, one future — was a deliberately crafted piece of brand-building, setting India apart from its Asian counterparts as an accommodating, non-confrontational player on the world stage. It stood out as one of the rare moments where rhetorical inclusiveness produced an actual institutional payoff.

This orientation toward the Global South does double duty as a counterweight to Chinese influence. India has worked to widen its diplomatic and strategic footprint by building out its institutional presence and, more conspicuously, through frequent high-level visits by the prime minister and president to states across Africa, Latin America, and the Pacific. Its calculated neutrality on the Ukraine conflict has served a similar purpose, offering an alternative to the binary choices imposed by bloc politics and casting India as one of the few major powers able to keep channels open with all sides.

However, the nature of political engagement has changed markedly over the last 20 years, and mere presence no longer cuts it. India's foreign service remains relatively lean, which limits the bandwidth it can devote to sustained, substantive engagement across the roughly 120-plus states usually counted within the Global South. Without a larger pool of personnel and resources, a more targeted and selective strategy becomes essential. This constraint is sharpened further by India's comparatively modest economic firepower next to established donor nations. As a result, New Delhi's influence has tended to gravitate toward softer forms of diplomacy — cultivating goodwill and investing in human capital — rather than large infrastructure financing or major capital outlays.

The India-China Contest for Global South Leadership

Amid a geopolitical landscape growing more crowded with rising powers, India's Global South leadership claim serves several strategic purposes. It taps into the historical legacy of Southern solidarity even as it doubles as a present-day hedge against rival influence, China's, above all. India's push for South-South cooperation through venues like the G20, alongside its call for fairer representation in global governance, sits at the center of its leadership case. China's claim to the same mantle rests on different footing: an assertive brand of economic diplomacy anchored by the Belt and Road Initiative and swelling investment in African and Latin American infrastructure.

This rivalry feeds as much on narrative as on material competition. Policy circles and research institutions in both countries have cast the contest as a clash between rival development models — India's democratic credentials against China's economic heft. Officially, neither government likes to spell out the competition directly; both prefer to present their respective approaches as complementary answers to developing-country needs. Still, the underlying scramble for influence, resources, and diplomatic goodwill is hard to miss, even as the two countries carry on cooperating within shared platforms such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.

However, there is skepticism around India's role in the Global South. Western commentators, and Beijing above all, are far less convinced by India's leadership pretensions. China treated its exclusion from hosting the 2023 G20 as a deliberate move to blunt its own claims to leadership, and critics more generally argue that the pomp of the summit did little either to secure recognition of Indian leadership or to prove India's actual capacity to move outcomes on the world stage.

New Delhi has held up its recent string of summits — BRICS, the G20, and the Voice of Global South Summit (VOGSS) — as proof of its convening power, leaning on high-profile attendance by world leaders to burnish its claim to speak for the Global South. That claim, however, faces pushback not only from China within Asia but also from the developing world. The contrast with China exposes India's material shortfall most starkly. Chinese development financing outstrips India by a wide margin in both scale and geographic spread. The Belt and Road Initiative has become a truly global undertaking, judged by the number of participating countries, the volume of projects, and the capital Beijing has committed since 2013. This scale has let China project power and build influence well beyond anything India can match financially or politically, and in some places it has even squeezed the long-established footprint of Western donors.

India's record in economic diplomacy looks modest by comparison. Its private sector has contributed selected manufacturing and infrastructure investments, but nothing on a scale that rivals China's economic footprint across the developing world. For India to turn its rhetorical claims into real influence, it will need to significantly ramp up South-South economic cooperation, moving faster and bringing sharper technological capability than it has managed so far.

The Southeast Asian Lens

Beneath India's ambitions of the global south sits an awkward fact: Southeast Asia — a region New Delhi treats as central to its wider neighbourhood — continues to view deeper Indian involvement with wariness. That is telling. It exposes a gap between the image India projects of itself as spokesperson for the Global South and the reality of its leverage on the ground.

The distance between India's ambitions and its actual standing shows up nowhere more clearly than in Southeast Asia. India markets itself as a bridge spanning East and West, North and South, and views the present moment as a chance to extend its reach on

several fronts simultaneously. Yet Southeast Asians have not felt India's global rise in any tangible way, notwithstanding Modi's repeated claim that ASEAN forms "a central pillar" of India's Act East Policy.

India's diplomatic wins — the upgrading of ties to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and the pledge to link the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific with India's own Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative — turn out, on closer look, to be heavier on symbolism than substance. India's relatively limited footprint in the region traces back to constrained economic engagement and protectionist habits in its trade policy. Where China's share of ASEAN's overall trade has climbed steadily, India's has been flat for a decade. Among ASEAN's various plus-one trade pacts, the ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement remains the least liberalized of the lot, hemmed in by the group's most restrictive rules-of-origin conditions.

ASEAN's appetite for open, multidirectional trade liberalization has tended to unsettle rather than entice New Delhi, which fears such openness would let goods from outside the bloc — China especially — slip into the Indian market through the back door. India also runs sizeable trade deficits with ASEAN's more industrially advanced members, among them Singapore, Vietnam, Thailand, and Malaysia – deficits Indian officials have sometimes blamed on unfair trading practices rather than on gaps in India's own manufacturing competitiveness.

Given this, it is hardly surprising that Southeast Asian opinion, as tracked year after year by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute's State of Southeast Asia survey, shows little confidence in India's ability to steer the global free-trade agenda. What stands out even more is the equally thin confidence in India's capacity to champion the rules-based order and international law — precisely the areas where Indian rhetoric has been loudest. This gap deserves attention, because it undercuts the very story India has tried to tell about itself as a dependable, rules-respecting counterpoint to a more forceful China. If Southeast Asian elites are not crediting India with leadership on either the economic or normative front, then the bridging role New Delhi claims for itself is hard to defend with evidence, however well it may hang together as diplomatic messaging.

Part of the problem is a mismatch in register between what India offers and what Southeast Asia prizes. Over three decades, ASEAN states have built their regional order around economic interdependence as the chief currency of influence — a pattern set first by Japan's investment-driven diplomacy in the 1980s and later reinforced, at far greater scale and speed, by China. India, by contrast, has generally led with strategic and civilizational appeals — shared Buddhist heritage, maritime links, democratic values, and, increasingly, security cooperation through joint naval drills, coast guard partnerships, and maritime-domain-awareness capacity building. None of this is unwelcome, and India's defense ties with Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia have genuine strategic weight. But security partnerships, however substantial, do not on their own produce the kind of economic interdependence that earns regional deference or agenda-setting clout. ASEAN states have signalled time and again that they judge outside partners chiefly by their readiness to invest, buy their exports, and fund infrastructure — exactly where India's presence is weakest.

Compounding this mismatch is India's push for tighter rules of origin against ASEAN's push for deeper tariff cuts – a deadlock that has left the region's most important trade arrangement with India stuck at its least ambitious setting. There is, further, a connectivity gap that reinforces the perception of a relationship rich in rhetoric but poor in delivery. Infrastructure projects like the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project have dragged on for years. Whereas China has shown itself ready to absorb commercial risk and move quickly, India's project delivery has been slowed by a mix of scarce concessional funding, bureaucratic drag, and, where Myanmar is involved, genuine security obstacles outside its control.

Finally, ASEAN scepticism toward Indian leadership should be read against the region's own strategic logic of hedging rather than choosing. India's aspiration to bridge the Indo-Pacific and serve as a counterweight to China is, from this vantage point, simply a factor in a wider hedging strategy rather than a leadership role they are prepared to formally endorse. It means that India's convening diplomacy, however well received at the level of joint statements and summit declarations, is unlikely to translate into the kind of regional deference that would validate a genuine claim to Global South leadership emanating from Southeast Asia.

Put together, these threads point to a wider difficulty: India's actual and perceived clout in Southeast Asia remains largely frozen, trailing well behind its ascendant global stature elsewhere. A course correction is needed — one that looks past a narrow fixation on trade deficits, speeds up delivery on existing connectivity pledges, and taps the fuller economic promise of the relationship, giving genuine substance to a partnership that, for now, remains more comprehensive on paper than in practice.

Conclusion

The jarring effects of recent US policy — fraying partnerships, weakened multilateral engagement, and tariffs wielded as a weapon that has cost developing countries — have sharpened global attention on the question of leadership, both regional and global. India has offered a relatively measured proposition: an approach to the Global South built on empowerment rather than domination, collaboration rather than command, and an inclusive network rather than a rival, polarised bloc.

That proposition, however, needs a caveat. The Global South as a concept and the Global South as a coherent political grouping are not the same thing, given how heterogeneous the countries under that label are. India's bid to speak for this space reflects a reading of a shifting geopolitical order, shaped by a blend of political conviction, economic necessity, and strategic calculation — but conviction and calculation are not the same as consensus, and no single country, however well-positioned, can credibly claim to represent a bloc this fragmented.

This is where the India-China rivalry becomes unavoidable. Their competing bids for Global South leadership flow naturally from this same terrain, and the comparison is not favorable to New Delhi. The capacity to convert engagement into durable influence and genuine political goodwill among Global South governments has, so far, been exercised more effectively by Beijing. Rhetorical alignment with the South has not, in India’s case, been matched by the material weight needed to convert goodwill into deference. If India is serious about representing the collective interests of the Global South rather than merely narrating them, it will need to move decisively beyond symbolic gestures and summit theatre.

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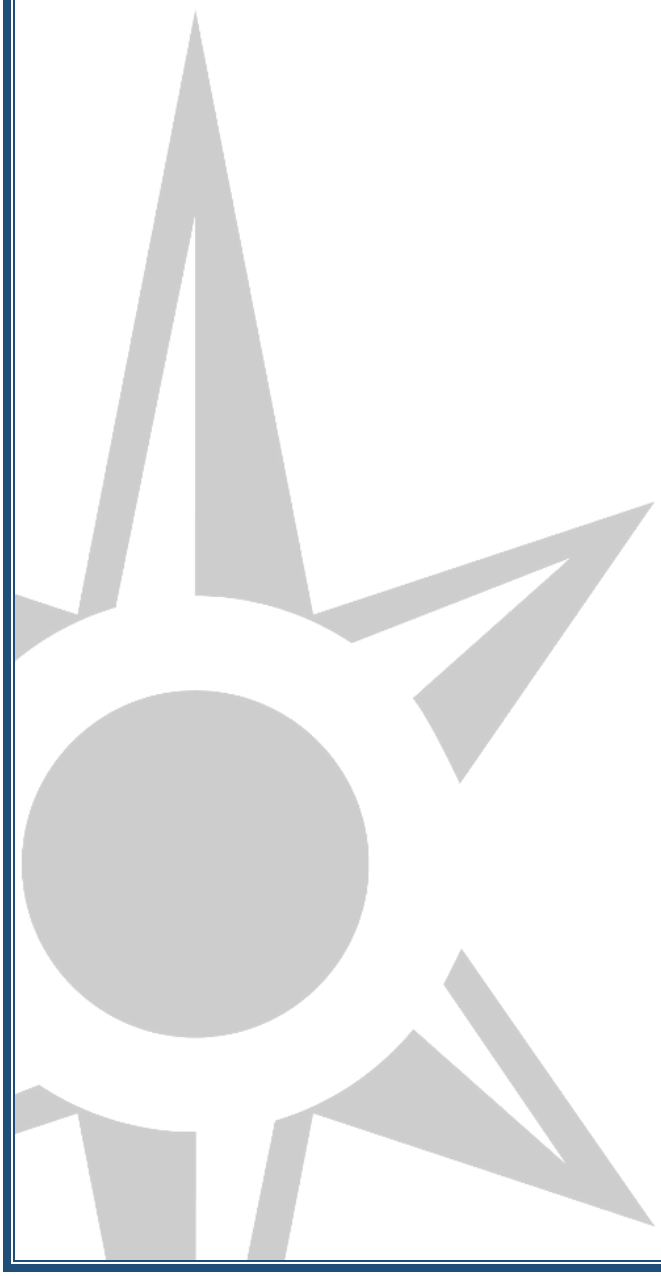
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Rare Earth

The Missing Actor and the Case for Cooperation in Myanmar and ASEAN

By
Nyein Nyein Thant Aung



Since 2023, debates concerning rare earth mining in Myanmar have converged on two propositions: first, that China exerts dominance over the entire rare earth supply chain, from extraction to magnet production; second, that in Myanmar, rare earth elements have become a politicized instrument within the conflict economy and have potential as tools for peacebuilding. Both propositions are accurate. However, the recommendations derived from these assumptions share a significant oversight: they are primarily aimed at states, markets, and China, while the actors physically controlling the extraction sites—namely, Myanmar's ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) and their intermediaries—operate outside the frameworks established to regulate the trade. Neither the international mining accountability regime nor ASEAN provides institutional mechanisms for nonstate actors, and addressing this deficiency is a prerequisite for the effectiveness of all other related recommendations. The responsibility of Washington, Canberra, and ASEAN capitals is not to choose between the junta, the EAOs, or China; rather, it is to establish mechanisms through which nonstate actors that mine can be held accountable, from upstream extraction to downstream processing.

Two arguments, one omission

The structural argument first. Since 2017, Myanmar has been China's most important source of heavy rare earths — dysprosium and terbium, the elements used in EV motors and wind turbines — supplying more than 60% of China's heavy-rare-earth import value in recent years.[1] The political argument second. In Myanmar, rare earths are not just a commodity; they finance armed control and structures that determine who to negotiate with. Since the 2021 coup, extraction has surged in Kachin and Wa territory, and in October 2024 the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) seized Chipwi and Pangwa, taking a belt that accounts for nearly half of global heavy-rare-earth production.[2] The KIA now imposes an export levy and negotiates prices directly with Chinese buyers, formalizing its de facto governance of a critical supply corridor.[3]

From these propositions flow a familiar set of recommendations, each reasonable and each incomplete. Engage with Naypyidaw[4] — but the junta does not control the northern mines; the EAOs do. Using natural resource management[5] as a basis for peace negotiations is promising, but it presumes a counterpart framework that does not exist.[6] Diversifying buyers[7] is another option, yet India, the United States and Australia all want a formal channel with verified provenance which an unrecognized armed group cannot supply, so diversification is not sustainable given China's dominance. Address illegality, environment and labour — mining in Kachin and the Wa area is largely illegal and undertaken "behind closed doors without any kind of public consultation"[8]; the contamination has crossed borders, with arsenic at 2.5 times the WHO limit in the Kok–Mekong system, suspected to originate in United Wa State Army territory[9]; and monitors have documented worker deaths, including children, exposed to chemicals banned inside China

[1] Amara Thiha, 'Rare Earths and Realpolitik', *Stimson Center*, 24 June 2025, https://www.stimson.org/2025/rare-earths-and-realpolitik-future-of-mediation-myanmar/.

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[3] Thiha, 'Rare Earths and Realpolitik'.

[4] Trevor Hunnicutt et al., 'Trump Team Hears Pitches on Access to Myanmar's Rare Earths', China, *Reuters*, 28 July 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/china/trump-team-hears-pitches-access-myanmars-rare-earths-2025-07-28/.

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[6] Thiha, 'Rare Earths and Realpolitik'.

[7] Neha Arora and Naw Betty Han, 'India Explores Rare-Earth Deal with Myanmar Rebels after Chinese Curbs', China, *Reuters*, 10 September 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/china/india-explores-rare-earth-deal-with-myanmar-rebels-after-chinese-curbs-2025-09-10/.

[8] Emily Fishbein and Naw Betty Han, '"Strategic Bargaining Chips": Kachin's Rare Earth Mining Pause', *Frontier Myanmar*, 1 August 2025, https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/strategic-bargaining-chips-kachins-rare-earth-mining-pause/.

[9] Thongsavanh Souvannasane, 'Southeast Asia: Mekong River Commission's Assessment Reveals Serious Arsenic Contamination in the Mekong and Kok Rivers Due Mainly to Mining Operations', The Laotian Times, Business and Human Rights Centre, 8 July 2025, https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/southeast-asia-mekong-river-commissions-assessment-reveals-serious-arsenic-contamination-in-the-mekong-and-kok-rivers-due-mainly-to-mining-operations/.

itself[10] - but each of these damages is authorized by the armed groups that operate the sites on the ground. Consequently, a remedy that is routed through state regulators or formal markets never reaches the party that unearths the site or disposes of the waste. Use Thailand as a transit state to administer accountability — sensible but again aimed at a state.[11]

Every recommendation focuses on a state or China. None addresses the actor who decides whether a leaching pool is excavated or if tailings are discharged into a river. Even China cannot completely control that actor: its influence is significant, but many small sites operate through opaque, deal-by-deal arrangements outside central regulation. The most influential actor in this chain is the one every framework overlooks.

Why the frameworks have no room for nonstate actors

The omission is structural. International human rights law is primarily designed for states; the existing mechanisms are "ill-equipped to hold armed groups accountable for their human rights violations and to provide victims with effective remedies."[12] There are some footholds — such as International Humanitarian Law directly binding armed groups, and an emerging doctrine asserting that a group exercising government-like functions over territory assumes a core set of human-rights obligations.[13] However, the substantive norms exist without any attached remedy or enforcement mechanism.

The market-side regime shares a similar blind spot, but from the opposite perspective. The OECD Due Diligence Guidance requires companies to address the risk of financing conflict in conflict zones, and its Annex II flags the presence of armed groups in supply chains as a red flag, prompting suspension of trade.[14] Similarly, the EU's Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (2024/1760) imposes binding obligations on large firms' value chains, shifting the focus from transparency to mandatory prevention.[15] These policies discipline buyers by removing noncompliant ore from formal markets, but treat armed groups solely as hazards to be avoided, never as compliant parties. This results in Myanmar's situation: formal buyers avoid the material, China imports it regardless, and the armed group remains unaccountable.

Two counterparts, not one: the KIO and the UWSA

Any strategy that engages nonstate actors needs to recognize that Myanmar's two dominant rare-earth EAOs are very different actors. Treating them as interchangeable "armed groups" is the fastest route to failure.

The Kachin Independence Organization and its armed wing (KIO/KIA) are relatively more cooperative partners. Importantly, the KIO has a history of contested yet tangible resource management: before the coup, it conducted public consultations on resource governance policies; in 2023, its chairman halted mining in Mansi Township following public protests; it has committed to managing Pangwa mining with environmental and public interests in mind; and in 2025, it introduced a rare-earth mining regulation for its newly controlled areas.[16] Its legitimacy depends on the Kachin community, which expects accountability from it. However, its governance remains opaque and

[10] Global Witness, 'Fuelling the Future, Poisoning the Present: Myanmar's Rare Earth Boom', Global Witness Trainsition Minerals, 23 May 2024, https://globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/transition-minerals/fuelling-the-future-poisoning-the-present-myanmars-rare-earth-boom/.

[11] Regan Kwan et al., 'Mining, Conflict, and Environmental Action in Myanmar's Borderlands • Stimson Center', *Stimson Center*, 27 May 2026, https://www.stimson.org/2026/mining-conflict-and-environmental-action-in-myanmars-borderlands/.

[12] Olivia Herman, 'Beyond the State of Play: Establishing a Duty of Non-State Armed Groups to Provide Reparations', *International Review of the Red Cross* 102, no. 915 (2020): 1033–56, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1816383121000242.

[13] Annyssa Bellal, *Human Rights Obligations of Armed Non-State Actors: An Exploration of the Practice of the UN Human Rights Council*, Academy In-Brief ; No. 7 (Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights (Geneva Academy), 2016), https://repository.graduateinstitute.ch/record/295218.

[14] OECD, *OECD Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Supply Chains of Minerals from Conflict-Affected and High-Risk Areas: Third Edition* (OECD Publishing, 2016), https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264252479-en.

[15] Directive (EU) 2024/1760 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 June 2024 on Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence and Amending Directive (EU) 2019/1937 and Regulation (EU) 2023/2859 (Text with EEA Relevance), CONSIL, EP (2024), http://data.europa.eu/eli/dir/2024/1760/oj.

[16] Fishbein and Han, '"Strategic Bargaining Chips"'.

currently only China can assure its buyers and sources of capital.

The United Wa State Army (UWSA) is the more formidable entity. As Myanmar's most influential Ethnic Armed Organization (EAO) and one of the world's largest tin producers, it administers consolidated, politically isolated enclaves rather than a diaspora-connected community. The UWSA employs a mature model of informal taxation to ensure stable access to resources, maintains close relationships with China, and has adopted a stance of non-interference concerning the post-coup uprising.[17] Its insulated position, alignment with China, and absence of a rights-based constituency render it considerably less responsive to reputational pressures than the KIO.

The practical implication is to sequence engagement accordingly: the KIO represents a plausible initial partner for establishing conduct commitments and serves as a demonstration case, whereas the UWSA constitutes a target for later-stage engagement, primarily addressed through downstream and transit-state pressures.

ASEAN: the right venue, the wrong toolkit

ASEAN should serve as the appropriate platform for addressing this issue. The problem encompasses both pillars — the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), given its relevance to armed conflict and human security, and the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), given its role in a critical-mineral value chain spanning multiple member states. The bloc has initiated the development of supportive frameworks: the ASEAN Principles for Sustainable Minerals Development (APSMD), adopted in 2023 and reaffirmed by ministers in October 2025, which establish standards for transparency and responsible production.[18]

In the case of Myanmar, there is also a quiet track record to build on: Malaysia in 2022, Indonesia's 2023 chairmanship and the Philippines in early 2026 have each reached out informally to the exiled National Unity Government and ethnic armed organizations — informal precisely because ASEAN's own norms require it. The deeper problem is that non-interference is a doctrine about states; it offers no vocabulary for a governing armed group the bloc can neither recognize nor ignore. Yet workable precedents for engaging nonstate actors exist: Geneva Call's "deeds of commitment" secure armed-group pledges to humanitarian norms,[19] and the Kimberley Process has shown that a multi-stakeholder certification linking a high-value mineral to a verified origin can cut conflict supply from roughly 15% of world trade to under 1%.[20]

Cooperation, not competition

Bridging that gap is a design challenge, not just a diplomatic goal — and the United States, Australia, and ASEAN are equipped to address it. They possess the capacity, the willingness to fund and enforce, and a vested interest in a rules-based system. But a clear reality underpins their roles: the US and Australia cannot surpass China's manufacturing advantage — given geographic proximity, control over border crossings, capital, and nearly 90% of refining capacity, that contest has already been decided. What they can provide is the element missing from the chain — verified provenance, responsible conduct standards, and a trustworthy market for compliant materials — supplementing a flow that primarily passes through China, with ASEAN the only entity capable of bringing China and the West together without forcing them to choose sides.

The main recommendation shared across all three is to establish a graduated channel that lets a nonstate actor controlling a mine enter accountability frameworks — not recognized as a state, nor treated merely as a hazard, but as a governing entity with responsibilities and, in return, a pathway toward formal, higher-value markets. This accountability layer overlays existing trade rather than competing with it and functions at each stage — upstream engagement, midstream due diligence enforcement,

[17] Thiha, 'Rare Earths and Realpolitik'.

[18] 'ASEAN Principles for Sustainable Minerals Development', ASEAN, October 2025, https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/ASEAN-Principles-for-Sustainable-Minerals-Development-APSMD-Brochure-1.pdf.

[19] Pascal Bongard, 'Engaging Armed Non-State Actors on Humanitarian Norms: Reflections on Geneva Call's Experience', sect. 3, *Humanitarian Practice Network*, no. 58 (August 2013), https://odihpn.org/en/publication/engaging-armed-non-state-actors-on-humanitarian-norms-reflections-on-geneva-call®s-experience/.

[20] 'Kimberley Process | Ensuring Conflict-Free Diamonds Worldwide',https://www.kimberleyprocess.com.

and downstream and transit monitoring — using conditional incentives.[21]

Washington should condition any US or allied offtake on verifiable provenance and conduct standards, implemented through track-two engagement based on the Geneva Call model — covering chemical-use limits, tailings management and a ban on child labor as unilateral KIO commitments.[22] This should be complemented by existing US leverage — sanctions and criminal liability for complicit buyers — creating a "shadow of hierarchy" that guides engagement.[23]

Australia's advantage lies in the midstream: regulatory credibility and processing capacity. It should establish processing and offtake partnerships that include a chain-of-custody standard, which detects ore originating from armed-group-controlled or unregulated sites for increased due diligence — allowing a processor to verify provenance without governments having to explicitly name groups like the KIO or UWSA. Traceability is achievable: blockchain tracking now covers about 85% of the global cobalt supply, compared to just 15% for rare earths in 2024. By linking a "responsible heavy-rare-earth" benchmark to the OECD Guidance and the EU CSDDD,[24] Australia's processing role becomes a point of accountability — creating a premium, responsible market for Myanmar ore that complements the Chinese route instead of competing with it.

This pivotal role depends on ASEAN's capacity to promote dialogue over confrontation, bringing China, the US, and Australia together to develop a shared-standards framework that treats supply security and accountability as mutual interests. The missing nonstate-actor framework should be built across both the AEC and APSC pillars. Within the AEC, enhance the APSMD from core principles into a binding due diligence code aligned with the OECD Guidance and the CSDDD, assign chain-of-custody responsibilities to refiners and traders, and connect traceability with formalization support for artisanal miners to avoid deeper informality, as seen in the DRC and Colombia.[25] Adopt multi-stakeholder schemes like the Kimberley Process and EITI — which Myanmar joined in 2014 and left in 2021 — to seat armed groups as local stakeholders rather than states, while maintaining compatibility with China's traceability system. Under the APSC, Thailand is enabled to activate a transboundary-harm mechanism through the Mekong River Commission, reaching into Myanmar without violating non-interference, since downstream states hold rights over shared waters.

A credible strategy must start from reality because China holds the counter-tools. It has shown the playbook: when the KIA seized Pangwa, China closed the border gates into KIO territory, cutting imports by more than 80% and triggering a global supply shock, while diversifying its own sourcing into Laos to erode leverage the KIO thinks it holds.[26] Yet these realities point toward cooperation, not contest. Beijing wants stable supply and has limited interest in how its suppliers behave: that indifference is the opening. An accountability layer that improves provenance and conduct does not threaten China's volumes — it cleans a flow that China will absorb anyway, reduces transboundary pollution that its neighbors and its own border regions already suffer, and can be built to interoperate with the traceability system China is rolling out itself, rather than rival it. Framed this way, compliant Myanmar ore becomes more valuable to every buyer, Chinese included, and Beijing's coercive tools have little to push against. Only ASEAN can present the arrangement to China as a shared regional interest — cleaner rivers, stable supply, fewer flashpoints — rather than a Western containment move it must resist.

Conclusion

The rare earths debate has rightly identified China's dominance and Myanmar's conflict economy, and has produced sensible recommendations on engagement with Naypyidaw, peace talks, buyer

[21] Heike Krieger, 'A Turn to Non-State Actors', *SFB-Governance Working Paper Series* (Berlin, Germany), no. 62 (June 2013).

[22] Thibaud de La Bourdonnaye, 'Greener Insurgencies? Engaging Non-State Armed Groups for the Protection of the Natural Environment during Non-International Armed Conflicts', *International Review of the Red Cross* 102, no. 914 (2020): 579–605, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1816383121000527.

[23] Krieger, 'A Turn to Non-State Actors'.

[24] OECD, *OECD Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Supply Chains of Minerals from Conflict-Affected and High-Risk Areas*.

[25] Maria Stefania Cataleta, 'Conflict Minerals Sourcing in the Congo and Directive (EU) 2024/1760: The Final Countdown for Companies or for Miners?', *Chinese Journal of International Law* 24, no. 4 (2025): jmaf032, https://doi.org/10.1093/chinesejil/jmaf032.

[26] Fishbein and Han, '"Strategic Bargaining Chips"'.

diversification and Thai transit. What it has not done is confront the actor with actual control of the mines. Nonstate armed groups govern the extraction sites, tax the trade and negotiate with a great power, yet they remain in the blind spot of both the international accountability regime and ASEAN's architecture, because neither has any place for them. The energy transition is pulling the same dynamic into Vietnamese and Lao rare earths and Indonesian nickel, where extraction in weakly governed settings risks the same conflict and abuse.[27] What the US, Australia, and ASEAN can build together is not another state-to-state instrument, but an adjusted channel — differentiated between a comparatively engageable KIO and a more insulated UWSA — that finally gives the missing actor both obligations and a stake in meeting them.

[27] Clare Church and Alec Crawford, 'Minerals and the Metals for the Energy Transition: Exploring the Conflict Implications for Mineral-Rich, Fragile States', in *The Geopolitics of the Global Energy Transition*, ed. Manfred Hafner and Simone Tagliapietra (Springer International Publishing, 2020), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-39066-2_12.

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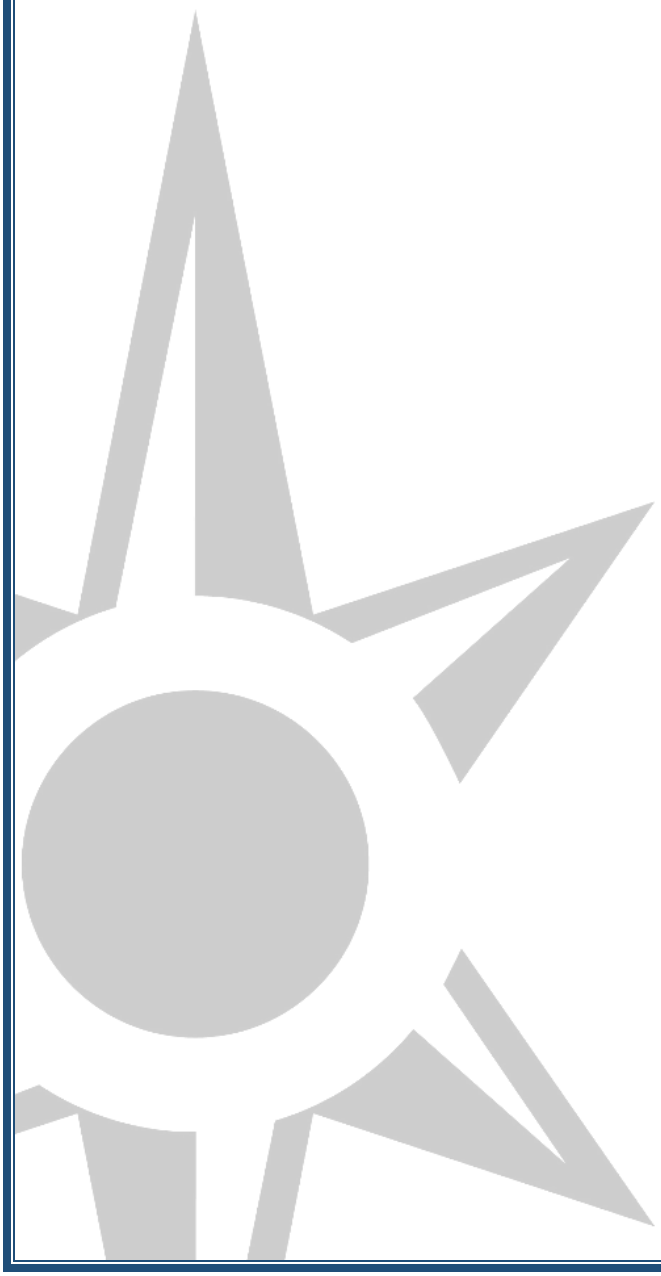
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Accelerating Agency and Action on Nuclear Issues

The View from the Non-Nuclear Shore

By
Phuong Thao Nguyen



Bad men need nothing more to compass their ends, than that good men should look on and do nothing — John Stuart Mill, 1867

The volatile world order has engendered a shadow of nuclear fear in the Indo-Pacific region and among stakeholders. This is the concern of an increasingly unstable global nuclear order with the downgrading of arms-control agreements, the intensification of strategic rivalries, and the renewed utility of nuclear weapons in national security policy. While the prevailing logic of nuclear-armed states and nuclear-adjacent partnership member states toward nuclear issues continues to outperform, it's critical to examine other stakeholders, namely the nonnuclear states, who suffer from an asymmetric vulnerability in their backyard.

In July 2026, the Institute of Strategic & International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia convened its signature international conference, the Asia-Pacific Roundtable (APR), which marked the 39th year of its operation. During the conference, there was a panel discussion on nuclear arsenals and regional security in the Asia Pacific region with key insights and perspectives delivered by distinguished speakers with unique regional expertise: South Asian perspectives on India-China-Pakistan dynamics, East Asian concerns regarding North Korea, and European strategic considerations. The discussion revolved around the impact of nuclear weapons on regional stability, the proliferation landscape, and pathways toward arms control and disarmament. While participants deliberated *Accelerating Agency and Action*, the nuclear shadow over the Asia-Pacific has never been longer.

There is a lack of critical voices from regional states that also play a significant role in ensuring peace and stability of the region. These views should have been shaped and articulated clearly and coherently since it's apparent that security cannot be defined by the calculus of nuclear deterrence. Instead, it must be defined by the agency of nonnuclear states asserting their right to peace, free from collateral threats of major-power nuclear competition.

South Asian & East Asian Deterrence: The Myth of Nuclear Stability

In a discussion on India-China dynamics, Pakistan and crisis stability, an expert outlined the *stability-instability paradox* from the South Asian view, highlighting that nuclear deterrence at the strategic level prevents major wars but encourages smaller, proxy, or conventional conflicts. While acknowledging that China's expansion is primarily driven by concerns about the United States, the expert underlined that from India's perspective, China's growing capabilities — particularly in intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance (ISR), precision strike, and missile defense systems — pose significant challenges to India's nuclear deterrence strategy. The expert also stressed that both India and China maintain similar doctrines centered on "no first use" and view nuclear weapons as "weapons of insurance, not for war fighting," with small arsenals deemed sufficient for deterrence. There is concern that China's doctrinal assumptions may be shifting due to technological developments and China's assertive behavior along the Line of Actual Control. For Pakistan, this presents a different category of concern. The expert observed that the country has leveraged its nuclear deterrent to continue proxy attacks against India, and as India's conventional capabilities have grown and tolerance levels have declined, conflicts have escalated; the most recent major incident occurred in May 2025. This pattern demonstrates the "stability-instability paradox" in South Asia, where nuclear deterrence at the strategic level may lead to conventional conflict escalation.

The paradox assumes a neat bilateral or trilateral framework, which focuses solely on nuclear powers while ignoring external parties. Nonnuclear ASEAN states like Vietnam suffer from *asymmetric vulnerability*. These states do not possess a nuclear deterrent, yet they bear the catastrophic ecological, economic, and maritime consequences of major-power brinkmanship in their backyard (e.g., the South China Sea). As such, the *stability-instability paradox* is a luxury for nuclear-armed states. For Southeast Asia, the reality is absolute instability since these states are forced to manage the risks of deterrence strategies, and they have no say in shaping them.

The True *Agency and Action* of ASEAN

From a South Korean perspective, this is "a really costly choice," as South Korea's solution to remain nonnuclear and rely on US extended deterrence is presented as a highly responsible move. This argument raises the question: why is nonproliferation framed as a sacrifice or a "costly choice" rather than the ultimate expression of

strategic sanity and agency? Contrast South Korea's systemic dependence on the US nuclear umbrella with ASEAN's establishment of the Southeast Asia Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ in the Treaty of Bangkok). With an accompanying protocol to keep Southeast Asia free from the presence of mass destruction weapons as a legally binding negative security assurance, SEANWFZ is not a passive, idealistic treaty, but an active, bold instrument of regional strategic autonomy. To ASEAN, its refusal to seek nuclear umbrellas, is a superior, proactive form of strategic autonomy. Therefore, it is necessary to state that the true *Agency and Action* of the APR lies in denying nuclear-armed states' right to deploy or threaten nuclear weapons in the region, rather than passively finding shelter under an external nuclear umbrella. To translate this into an actionable move, it's urgent to demand that the five Nuclear Weapon States immediately sign the Protocol to the SEANWFZ Treaty. Given the current situation, this request is not a favor, but a regional security mandate.

ASEAN's Role in Normative Disruption

Also, during the conference, several speakers underscored that the NPT regime, while universal with over 190 member states, is under strain. The NPT's original bargain has been broken by the nuclear modernization programs of the major powers, particularly, the expansion of arsenals in China and the United States, and Russia's strategic modernization. These changes have intensified destabilizing trends as well as accelerated the modernization of the major powers military power. A notable trend is the breakdown of arms control frameworks, most notably a collapse of bilateral arms control arrangements between the US and Russia, most notably withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in 2019, which left major nuclear powers with minimal constraints for the first time since 1972. China's current aim to increase its nuclear warheads from 200 in 2020 to 620, with projections exceeding 1,000 by the early 2030s and reaching 1,500 by 2035 highlights that country's ambitions. Meanwhile, North Korea's modernization continues with the development of advanced delivery systems that can reach regional and US targets. In addition, there are testing and verification concerns because the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) is not enforced, as well as worries about the resumption of nuclear testing, with accusations leveled against Russia and the US regarding test site preparation.

More importantly, one expert noted that the original NPT bargain — linking nonproliferation with disarmament commitments — has not been fulfilled, as nuclear-weapon states have reduced but not eliminated their arsenals. This imbalance poses threats to the regime's credibility and may encourage proliferation. The panel discussed the critical role nonnuclear states must play. It was suggested that while nonnuclear states cannot control nuclear-weapon states, they can impose normative and political pressure and should demand legally binding negative security assurances. There was also emphasis on the crucial role of civil society and public pressure in creating political costs for proliferation and modernization.

Since the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty was agreed, the idea of politely asking states to disarm with the traditional "normative pressure" has failed for 50 years. The concept of "normative pressure" by nonnuclear states has used polite moral persuasion to hasten nuclear-armed states to disarm. But, to be candid, this bargain has failed. The major powers resort to modernizing and growing their arsenals behind a shield of strategic deterrence, degrading nonnuclear states to second-class citizen status.

It is time for ASEAN to turn from passive normative pressure to normative disruption. Rather than trying to adjust a fundamentally weak NPT framework, regional states must encourage the universalization of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). This is not a threat to the global architecture, but an active "Track 2 to Track 1" disruptor, which follows the efforts of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) to mobilize ordinary citizen activists. By delegitimizing the possession of these weapons, we exclude the strategic and moral justification of "credible minimum deterrence". Real agency requires opposing the exclusive control of recognized nuclear-armed nations and altering global conventions to designate nuclear arsenals not as assets of power, but as categorical threats to global security.

Maritime Security and the Hybrid Nuclear Threat in the South China Sea

One implication from the panel is that geopolitical shifts are altering national security choices and defense procurement, leading countries to avoid relying on Chinese military hardware due to the South China Sea disputes. While the panel put much

weight on the progress of nuclear weapon modernization and the deterrence provided by alliances, for ASEAN countries, security concerns do not reside in the number of nuclear warheads but in decisions about conventional weapon procurement and the management of geopolitical pressure. If regional middle powers are trying to hinder aggression by strengthening conventional weapons or relying on nuclear-adjacent partnerships, like the Australia-UK-US (AUKUS) program, which introduces nuclear-propelled submarines to Southeast Asia's doorstep, they are inadvertently fueling regional militarization. The proliferation of nuclear-adjacent assets (e.g., AUKUS submarines or hypersonic delivery systems) into the South China Sea is a Trojan horse that undermines the maritime stability of coastal states. Accordingly, coastal states are actively diversifying their defense procurement away from nuclear-armed rivals like China, which is a manifestation of concerns about sovereignty, and involvement in a nuclear-adjacent partnership like AUKUS suggests that major powers are using their nuclear posture as a hidden shield to manipulate nonnuclear states' routine defense decisions. Such domination can manifest as the conduct of tailored coercion and gray-zone tactics, which consist of disinformation, narrative warfare, maritime militia deployment, and others, without fear of conventional military reprisal. As such, rather than pursuing a conventional military buildup, the immediate countermeasure to tackle these hybrid threats is having regional countries adopt a mixed approach that uses open-source intelligence (OSINT) in cyberspace and solidifies regional maritime coordination.

The 39th Asia-Pacific Roundtable revealed a region at an inflection point. While traditional security experts remain comfortably stuck in the 20th-century vocabulary of *extended deterrence* and *strategic stability*, our generation must see these concepts for what they are: tricky, outmoded abstractions. Under the guise of maintaining a balanced nuclear standstill, major powers have normalized a state of perpetual risk, leaving nonnuclear states to suffer asymmetric vulnerability in their own backyards. The failures of the NPT, the aggressive modernization of nuclear warheads, and the incremental militarization of adjacent maritime spaces like the South China Sea show that nuclear weapons make us less, not more, safe.

To break this cycle, Southeast Asia must pivot from passive normative pressure to active normative disruption. We must retrieve our strategic sovereignty by enhancing the TPNW, using available mechanisms like SEANWFZ as shields of autonomy rather than treaties of allegiance. True *Agency and Action* — the core of the 39th APR's mission — demands a foundational rejection of great-power nuclear logic.

For our generation, agency for Southeast Asia does not mean choosing which nuclear umbrella to hide under. It means actively deconstructing the strategic and moral legitimacy of their arsenals. It is time to claim that our waters, our trade, and our futures are not playgrounds for external nuclear deterrence. True security will not be built under any external nuclear force, but through the courage of a nonnuclear majority asserting its right to complete peace.

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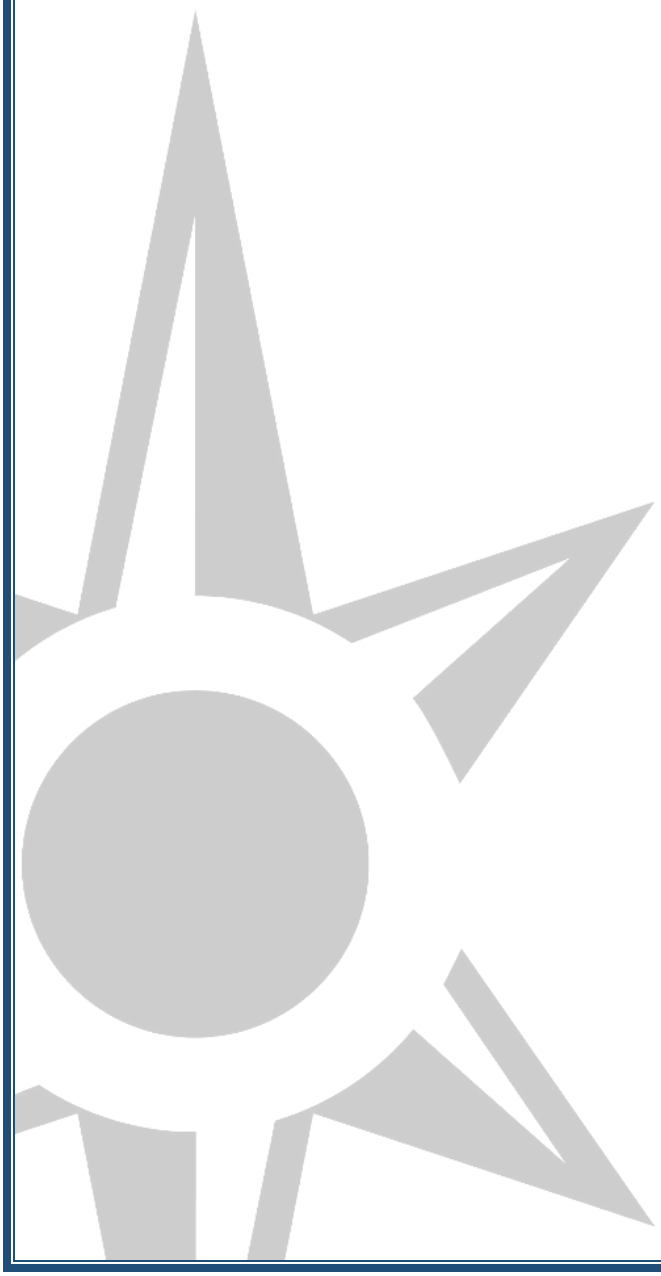
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What Harmony Hides

Rukun, Musyawarah, and an Interconnected Generation's Test for ASEAN

By
Muhammad Faiz Krisnadi



At the 39th Asia-Pacific Roundtable, I found myself returning to two terms I had learned long before entering regional policy: *rukun* and *musyawarah*. In the Javanese social world I knew, *rukun* meant living in harmony by preserving relationships and restraining open conflict. *Musyawarah*, as it is understood in Indonesian public life, meant deliberating together in pursuit of *mufakat*, or consensus. The two are related but distinct. *Rukun* describes the social condition to be protected; *musyawarah* is a method for handling differences without turning them into rupture.

These ideas were never abstract to me. I grew up in a traditional Javanese setting, then studied in Switzerland, Singapore, and Britain, where I encountered other ways of organizing disagreement. Java taught me why harmony can be a serious social achievement, but also how unresolved conflict can be concealed beneath a calm surface. Switzerland demonstrated that consensus can culminate in a binding choice. Singaporean education trained me to ask whether an institution delivers on its promises, while British education made direct disagreement feel intellectually liberating. Moving among these environments did not carry me cleanly from an "Asian" view toward a "Western" one; rather it made that division increasingly difficult to sustain.

The distinction that mattered to me at the APR was therefore less geographical than institutional. A relational institution is valued because it keeps participants together, whereas an instrumental institution earns confidence by producing and implementing decisions. ASEAN has usually privileged the first standard for understandable reasons: its procedures protect a political room in which states with different regimes, interests, and alignments can continue to meet. Yet that room can remain peaceful because its most difficult disagreement has been moved out of sight. For an interconnected generation accustomed to comparing institutions across borders, continued participation remains an achievement, though it is no longer sufficient evidence of success.

What harmony protects—and what it buries

The official theme of the APR was "Accelerating agency and action," but one of its most searching sessions turned inward, asking which ASEAN mechanisms still deliver value and which have become ritualistic.[1] The question easily produces an inventory of failures. Consensus slows decisions; noninterference limits collective responses; overlapping forums consume attention; declarations often travel further than implementation. Still, dismissing these practices as bureaucratic weakness misses the problem they were designed to manage.

ASEAN comprises states with diverse political systems, levels of development, historical experiences, threat perceptions, and relationships with major powers. The ASEAN Charter reflects this diversity in its simultaneous commitments to sovereignty, non-interference, consultation, consensus, democracy, human rights, and "unity in diversity."[2] Those principles do not sit together easily because the member states themselves do not. ASEAN's procedures aim to facilitate cooperation without requiring members to resolve their most significant differences first. Their immediate purpose is relational: to keep everyone within a shared practice and to prevent disagreement from becoming a rupture.

I recognized that logic before I knew the language of regional institutions. In the Javanese environment where I grew up, openly challenging an elder was among the clearest social taboos. Hierarchy shaped who could speak, when they could speak, and how directly they could disagree. Respect was communicated through submission, restraint, symbols, and adherence to established forms. An argument was rarely judged only by its content; the manner in which it was expressed could affirm or injure the relationship around it.

The ideal of *rukun* captures part of this sensibility. Harmony allows families and communities to live together despite differences that cannot be settled every day, and it also reduces humiliation and keeps ordinary relationships functioning. I have seen its

[1] Institute of Strategic & International Studies Malaysia, "39th Asia-Pacific Roundtable" and official programme, 30 June–2 July 2026, [event page](https://apr.isis.org.my/) and [programme](https://apr.isis.org.my/programme/).

[2] ASEAN, The ASEAN Charter, preamble and Articles 2 and 20, [ASEAN Secretariat](https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/archive/publications/ASEAN-Charter.pdf); and ASEAN, The ASEAN Declaration (Bangkok Declaration), 8 August 1967, [ASEAN Secretariat](https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/asean_declaration.pdf).

value and its cost. In my experience, however, indirectness often did not resolve the disagreement. It left dust beneath the carpet, even though everyone agreed the room looked clean. The conflict remained there like a ticking bomb, contained for the moment but neither examined nor defused.

That is why I hesitate between celebrating and dismissing harmony. It can be an ethical discipline, requiring people to control their egos for the sake of a relationship, but it can also protect hierarchy by making confrontation appear disrespectful. The person with less authority bears the heavier burden because preserving *rukun* may require them to remain silent rather than the elder to adjust. The calm surface is real; so is the unequal distribution of its cost.

If *rukun* describes the condition to be maintained, *musyawarah* is the process meant to negotiate the differences within it. Koichi Kawamura's study of *musyawarah-mufakat* describes its double effect: it gives large and small political actors an opportunity to express their interests, yet it can also reduce efficiency because deliberation takes time.[3] The more troubling problem arises when deliberation becomes a ritual confirmation of harmony, and the acceptable conclusion is known before the difficult voices enter the discussion.

The parallel with ASEAN is not exact; sovereign states are not members of a Javanese household. The resemblance lies in the management of disagreement. Indirect language protects relationships, consensus prevents public isolation, and repeated meetings allow incompatible positions to coexist. Sometimes, the room is the result. Officials continue speaking, adversaries learn one another's limits, and external powers enter a setting that none of them fully controls. ASEAN Regional Forum documents explicitly treat confidence-building, gradual development, and a pace comfortable to all participants as conditions for greater trust.[4] These habits have political value in a region where alignment with one power can sharpen the insecurity of another.

The value becomes harder to defend when the procedure repeatedly fails those living with the unresolved problem. ASEAN's own 2025 review of the Five-Point Consensus on Myanmar recorded a lack of substantive progress, continuing violence, and a dire humanitarian situation, even while reaffirming that Myanmar remained an integral part of the association.[5] The formulation reveals ASEAN's dilemma: it wants to preserve the member and change its conduct, yet its strongest relational instinct limits the pressure it can apply. At that point, harmony no longer distributes restraint among equals. It shifts the cost of regional cohesion onto people with little influence in the room.

How an interconnected generation learns to compare

For years, I understood the tension between harmony and candor mainly from within a relational culture. Living elsewhere gave me other standards by which to judge it. Switzerland, for example, left the impression of being democratically "professional." Its politics allow prolonged negotiation and accommodate linguistic, religious, and cantonal differences, but specific questions eventually reach a vote whose outcome carries institutional force. Citizens can challenge parliamentary decisions through referendums and propose constitutional amendments through popular initiatives.[6] Consensus remains important, yet it exists alongside procedures that identify a decision and bring deliberation to an end.

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[3] Koichi Kawamura, "Consensus and Democracy in Indonesia: Musyawarah-Mufakat Revisited," IDE Discussion Paper No. 308, September 2011, [Institute of Developing Economies](https://www.ide.go.jp/English/Publish/Reports/Dp/308.html). For a philosophical treatment of rukun and respect as reference points rather than fixed descriptions of all Javanese people, see Franz Magnis-Suseno, Etika Jawa: Sebuah Analisa Falsafi tentang Kebijaksanaan Hidup Jawa (Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 1984; new edition, 2026).

[4] ASEAN Regional Forum, "Concept and Principles of Preventive Diplomacy," especially its discussion of gradual development, consensus, and confidence-building, [ASEAN Regional Forum](https://aseanregionalforum.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/06-Doc6.pdf).

[5] ASEAN, "ASEAN Leaders' Review and Decision on the Implementation of the Five-Point Consensus," 26 October 2025, paragraphs 2–4, [ASEAN Secretariat](https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Final-ASEAN-Leaders-Review-Decision-on-the-Implementation-of-5PC-2025_as-adopted.pdf).

[6] Presence Switzerland, "Direct Democracy," 30 May 2023, [Federal Department of Foreign Affairs](https://www.aboutswitzerland.eda.admin.ch/en/direct-democracy).

Singapore applied a different pressure. Studying public policy there meant working in an environment where evidence, administrative competence, and implementation carried considerable authority. A policy could be elegantly argued and widely discussed, but the harder questions followed: Who would execute it? By what measure? With which resources? What happened if it failed? This instrumental discipline can become too confident in its expertise and too narrow in its definition of success. Even so, it exposed how easily the process can become its own justification.

British education challenged another assumption. Direct confrontation in a seminar could test an argument without ending the relationship between the people debating it, which I found intellectually liberating. While I had learned to read disagreement partly as a disturbance of social order, I began to experience it as a method of clarification. The lesson was not that bluntness is inherently honest; confrontation can demonstrate status as easily as deference can. What changed was my sense of what a relationship could survive.

Taken together, these experiences made institutional comparison personal. I did not encounter foreign political systems only through textbooks or diplomatic statements. I lived within them, formed friendships within them, and carried parts of them home. Many people in my generation, particularly those who move through regional policy and Young Leaders networks, inhabit some version of this condition. We study and work across borders more frequently, sustain international friendships after returning home, and watch political debates elsewhere unfold in real time. Similar problems can therefore be compared across governments rather than accepted as natural features of one's own system.

Earlier generations of Southeast Asian diplomats and intellectuals were also internationally educated; cross-border experience is not our invention. What has changed is its density and continuity. International relationships that once depended on postings, conferences, or letters are now part of everyday life. This does not make my generation more enlightened. Mobility remains unequal, internationally connected policy circles can become elite bubbles, and constant comparison can encourage impatience with institutions whose historical purposes we have not taken time to understand. Our advantage, where one exists, is narrower: we have a wider range of institutional experiences against which inherited practices can be tested.

At first, I assumed that these exchanges reflected a familiar misunderstanding between Southeast Asia and the West. Yet several speakers during the sidelines challenged my interpretation when I spoke with them after the sessions: the competing positions were already understood, as were the reasons behind ASEAN's caution and the frustration it generated. The gap emerged when that understanding met political incentives, since governments could recognize the case for collective action while resisting any precedent that might later constrain them, or defend consensus because delay happened to serve their immediate interests.

This made the apparent cultural divide far less tidy. For a government worried about isolation or pressure from stronger members, a slow and inclusive process could provide necessary protection; for another facing an urgent security or humanitarian problem, the same process could disperse responsibility and allow an objecting member to control the timetable. These positions did not separate neatly by passport, as some Southeast Asian participants expressed deep impatience with ASEAN's habits, while some participants from outside the region accepted that gradual coalition-building could keep a wider group engaged.

I therefore became less interested in assigning one institutional instinct to Southeast Asia and another to the West. Many in my generation have been shaped by both environments, so we understand the value of restraint while expecting institutions to clarify decisions, responsibilities, and consequences. This position offers no ready-made answer to ASEAN's tradeoffs, although it does make those tradeoffs harder to accept as permanent—which brings me back to *musyawarah* and what meaningful deliberation should require.

Making *musyawarah* harder to hide behind

ASEAN should retain *musyawarah*, although consultation must demand more than the gradual removal of visible disagreement. Genuine deliberation makes conflicting interests speakable. It gives members a way to state their limits without treating the relationship as disposable, then clarifies which differences can be negotiated and which

cannot. The purpose is neither permanent comfort nor confrontation for its own sake, but to be structured strongly enough to prevent avoidance and carefully enough to prevent humiliation.

This distinction should shape how ASEAN evaluates its mechanisms. Some forums exist primarily to build confidence, maintain channels, and establish habits of explanation. They should be judged by the continuity and quality of participation, rather than by settlements they were never equipped to impose. Mechanisms promising operational cooperation require another standard: named implementers, resources, timelines, public indicators of progress, and a review when commitments are missed. Calling both kinds of activity "progress" therefore weakens the credibility of each.

ASEAN also needs ways to acknowledge disagreement without converting it into institutional crisis. Consensus language can conceal which member objects, what interest is at stake, and who bears the cost of delay. A more honest process would record unresolved positions and distinguish the absence of agreement from the achievement of consensus. Where full agreement remains impossible, willing members should be able to proceed through transparent, issue-specific cooperation connected to ASEAN and open to later participation. Such flexibility would preserve the inclusive room while preventing its least willing occupant from controlling every timetable.

These changes would not make ASEAN more "Western." Switzerland shows that consensus and binding decisions can coexist, while Singapore shows both the strengths and limits of judging government through delivery. The point is to make *musyawarah* answerable to the purposes invoked in its name. Relational legitimacy determines whether members remain willing to cooperate; instrumental accountability determines whether that cooperation means anything beyond the meeting.

My generation should approach this task with humility. The senior policy community's emphasis on restraint is consistent with ASEAN's founding concern for regional peace, stability, and protection from external interference.[2] A faster organization can become more coercive, a more confrontational one can amplify the power of its largest members, and an institution focused narrowly on outcomes can implement the wrong policy efficiently. Preserving the relationship remains part of the work because action taken at the cost of the association's legitimacy will rarely endure.

Yet respect for inherited institutions cannot require accepting their habits as permanent. The generation preparing to take the wheel is more interconnected, yet it is also inheriting problems that do not wait politely for consensus: political violence, transnational crime, environmental harm, migration, public health threats, and economic shocks cross borders regardless of whether ASEAN is ready to respond. The institutional question is no longer whether the room should be preserved. It is whether the room can process disagreement before the consequences pass through its walls.

I left the APR more protective of ASEAN and more demanding of it. My Javanese upbringing helps me recognize harmony as an achievement; it also taught me how easily harmony can hide a problem that everyone knows is there. Switzerland, Singapore, and Britain each complicated that inheritance, showing that consensus can conclude, implementation can discipline aspiration, and disagreement can clarify rather than destroy a relationship.

Sometimes the room is the result. The next generation does not need to dismantle the room built by its predecessors, but we should change what counts as using it well. Its value will depend on whether those inside can confront what they would otherwise sweep beneath the carpet — and whether, once the problem is visible, anyone accepts responsibility for moving it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

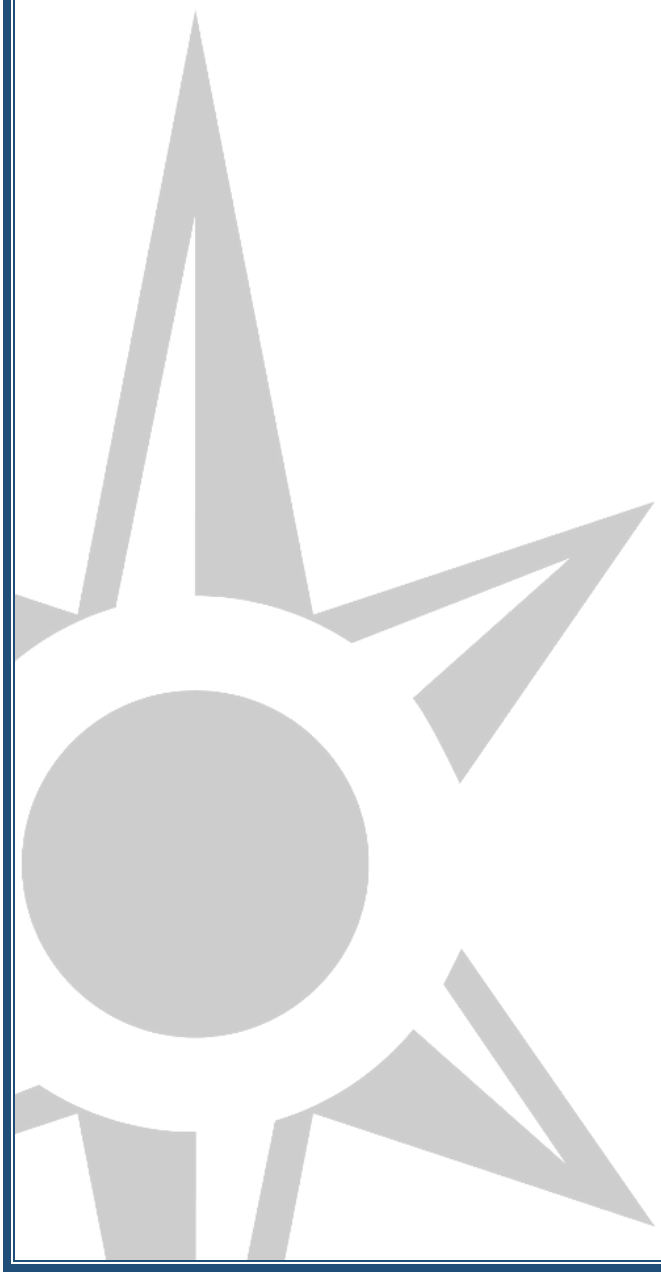
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PACIFIC FORUM
INTERNATIONAL

EU-ASEAN Roundtable Courtship

Trust the Process?

By
Chelsea Patrick



The 39th Asia-Pacific Roundtable (APR), hosted by the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia, is not just a conference; it is a show, and that is evident from the start. The lights were bright at Kuala Lumpur's Grand Hyatt as camera crews flitted about, meals were served, and music reminiscent of an epic adventure film played. One could not help but feel they were somewhere distinguished and destined for greatness.

In his welcoming address, ISIS Malaysia Executive Chairman Datuk Prof Dr Mohd Faiz Abdullah presented APRs as spaces of candidness and constructive conversation. What was to set year 39 apart was, in the face of a "geopolitical interregnum," a transition "from affliction to agency, from apprehension to action."

Once plenary sessions began, a soberness set in along with an understanding of *why*, perhaps, apprehension had characterized years past. The right words were said, but their true meaning (or lack thereof) was understood, and fault lines were painted over as a celebration of unity. This was most evident in the ministerial address of Maxime Prévot, Belgium's deputy prime minister and minister of Foreign Affairs, European Affairs and Development Cooperation, and its aftermath.

To understand what took place in this forum promoting international understanding, a valuable comparison can be made with a more well-known but less respected forum promoting interpersonal understanding: *The Bachelor*. Hear me out.

There has been plenty of scholarship devoted to the debate surrounding the extent to which relations between individuals or groups may be comparable to relations between states or groups of states. Both interpersonal and international affairs are complex and varied, but for the purposes of this reflection, some commonalities exist that make the thought experiment worthwhile:

1. *The Bachelor* and the APR both hold ideals as the core of their purpose — true love and global peace/prosperity, respectively — that seem universal and simple at first glance but are simultaneously highly elusive and difficult to hash out in detail.

2. To reach these goals, both seek to captivate a wider public (who can provide promotion and funding) as well as the individuals who are presented as united in the pursuit of the ideals. Both are the audience; *The Bachelor*'s champagne, mansions, and dream vacations are meant to help sell the vision just as much to contestants as to viewers. Likewise, the APR must entice the delegates as much as those not in attendance. The format offers legitimacy required from both groups for the movement to carry on.

3. Although the ideals of both seem to require looking beyond self-interest, some participants wear that priority on their sleeve. A delegation from one country in particular at 39APR (like career influencers competing on *The Bachelor*) seemed to be there only to muddy the waters and promote their brand. This type of behavior, combined with the lack of enforcement provokes debate about whether, in fact, everyone puts that above the vision.

4. Over the years (nearly 25 for *The Bachelor*, nearly 40 for the APR), both have developed their own vocabulary, traditions, and expectations, but neither openly acknowledges that fact. Each new round must be presented as groundbreaking, and each piece of dialogue must be presented as genuine, even when the organizers, the speakers, and everyone in the audience is aware that it is not. This does not mean that interlocutors are untruthful; rather, statements that appear constructive to the aspirations of the fora are part of a more cloaked form of communication. The truth is available to those who know where to look and how to see past the sparkle.

What character, then, did Prévot symbolize? I'd say that he embodies a high-profile contestant, representing his government through obligation and the EU through word as he courts ASEAN. ASEAN is our bachelor of sorts; the focus of the program is on it, and while it also is trying to produce a meaningful relationship with the EU, the pressure was on Prévot to use tact and perform the majority of the pursuit in a venue where ASEAN was not short of attention.

Prévot's representation of other entities is different from most attendees, who speak only on their own behalf, safeguarded by Chatham House Rule. This,

however, makes him only more constrained by the rules of the underlying game. His address could be compared to a curated, polished moment in *The Bachelor* wherein every word is captured. Unlike most speakers, his script is publicly available, ready for journalists and eager analysts to pick apart. The remarks of most other attendees are more comparable to interviews with the producers; until the show is released and has had time to simmer with the public, it cannot be known which comments will stick.

Prévot's entrance on the final day of 39APR set the stage for a display of affection. The deputy prime minister began by defining the relationship between his country and the host's (Belgium and Malaysia) and the regional groupings they cannot be dissociated from (the EU and ASEAN). His description of shared history and values was poignant; the line describing "a growing recognition that our futures are interconnected" could come straight out of a rose ceremony. So far, so good, but soon after, while still sounding positive, the language shifted, obscuring the goal of a happy, enduring partnership.

A clear disconnect emerged as Prévot described the international rules-based order. It is under pressure, but the importance of maintaining it "cannot be overstated." Powers without a certain largesse have only the rules-based order to enable protection of their citizens, their sovereignty, and their potential for economic prosperity. The EU and ASEAN have a responsibility to uphold multilateral institutions. This will allow for certainty, global stability, and security. As permanent members of the United Nations Security Council fail to act as "watchdogs," the response must be deeper interdependence and alliances. A "might-makes-right" approach would undermine progress.

Compare that description to the vision of order painted by ASEAN-based experts throughout the roundtable. The world order, according to the title of a panel, is "rogue." The old world is dying as the new world struggles to be born, and with collective action, ASEAN will be better off for it. In Malaysia, the term "rules-based order" is disliked, with "international law" preferred. Peace and stability are flexible, varying from country to country, however desirable they may be to all. Facing major powers head-on is wishful thinking. There must be an "artful balance between principles and pragmatism" to allow for the provision of public good. The abandonment of international structures is "inevitable" because the postwar international order was flawed from the beginning. The problems run deeper than a lack of procedural enforcement; there is a toxic double standard, and thus, "Malaysia's foreign policy will remain independent, and that is fiercely independent, proactive and non-aligned." This last quote is attributable; it is from Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, who also said that in today's world, "might makes right."

On one phrase of Prévot's, perhaps both could agree, but only by interpreting the words very differently: "Those who set standards shape the future."

The Bachelor has a counterpart to this awkward scenario; although the roles are reversed, the concept is the same. Seemingly every season, the dashing marriage-seeking man says at least once to a leading lady these words, or something very similar: "I'm falling in love with you." A new spectator of the show might find it sweet; who does not get some sense of satisfaction from watching someone fall in love? A veteran viewer, however, knows what lurks between the lines: "but I'm not *in love* with you"—maybe not yet; maybe not ever. "Falling in love" and "being in love" are entirely different things on that program. To one in the know, and to the speaker and receiver of such words, the first means, "we have different priorities, and I am building connections faster with others." By insisting on the framework of the rules-based order as presently constituted, defining it as a "key dimension" of the EU-ASEAN relationship, and only vaguely suggesting reforms from within, Prévot told Southeast Asia exactly that.

Was Prévot being disingenuous? Most likely, he conveyed the position of his country accurately. Belgium is, after all, held together by multilateral frameworks and the contemporary understanding of the rules-based world order. Without a Westphalian idea of sovereignty, Flanders and Wallonia would not unite under the same flag, and who knows what would happen to the Brussels-Capital Region. They exist as one state through an incredible amount of patience with a consociational system of governance entrenched in bureaucracy and laden with structural inefficiencies. (I lived there for a year and had it explained to me several times, and even after the master's degree, I cannot tell you in more than the vaguest of terms how things are divided between the communities, the regions, the language areas, and the

federal government.) When they do lose that patience domestically, they can lean on the EU, which is itself steeped in institutional formalities and guardrails (notably, unlike ASEAN) and would never permit a rupture. How could a patriotic Belgian who believes in the potential of their country as it stands today not, in some way, espouse Prévot's point of view that "in times of competition, rules are not a constraint: they are a necessity"?

The ASEAN side, too, was likely authentically expressing itself, at least enough to demonstrate that the contrast between that viewpoint and Prévot's was real. There is evidence that remarks by delegates at APRs might be muted. For one thing, despite the lack of anonymity and the same weight of government representation that constrained Prévot, the Malay prime minister spoke with a sharper tongue than the panelists on a number of issues; this suggests the panelists could have argued more resolutely. For another, there would not have been so many calls for openness and apprehension-shedding across the three days had such behavior had a strong precedent. Finally, multiple participants in other meetings I attended in Malaysia expressed a feeling that the rhetoric at APRs is always the same. They see a common refrain despite the changing world that demands grit. Fundamentally, they expressed sensible concerns that literature supports strategizing in the face of major power competition, finding unity in regional heterogeneity, and prioritizing the well-being and prosperity of ordinary people.

If both sides expressed themselves authentically, the ASEAN side only pretended to be aligned with and appreciative of Prévot's remarks. Underneath the grandeur, the fracture was obvious. Perhaps that is why most media outlets covering the misrepresented by omission, not mentioning the rules-based order despite its being central to Prévot's point. A few outlets mentioned the address would happen but failed to follow up, including RTM's Berita Ehwal Semasa and Astro AWANI. Migrant Times only quoted him on offshore energy collaboration, which was not a main point of his speech. The Edge Malaysia covered Prévot's two-day visit to the country and did not treat the roundtable with the prestige organizers may have desired, only acknowledging that the speech happened. Bernama wrote an entire article on one pledge for investment and a side comment made after the address. (The Sarawak Tribune is the exception, and in their social media feed, ISIS Malaysia represented Prévot well with the quote it chose to highlight. Belgian outlets were noticeably silent on Prévot's visit. What of the ideal of peace and prosperity through unity is to be understood at a people-to-people level, which both Belgium and Malaysia attest to revering, when the shared notion of an ideal collaborative space for the EU and ASEAN alike was revealed to be thin, rife with normative discord, and lacking in commitment?

All of this forces me to wonder if ignorance of inconsistencies is part of the event's purpose. Does the layering of subtext help conversation move forward? Perhaps cloaked language, applied correctly, opens dialogue, allowing interlocutors to communicate two points of view simultaneously to those who can interpret both. To those who might be offended by that theory, note what one panelist said when asked what radical ideas could be offered to improve ASEAN: "it would be radical to start being honest and truthful." Honesty would be radical, but it would also be required for participants at the APR to break down institutional barriers and, in *Bachelor* terms, do more than profess that they are "there for the right reasons."

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Asia New Zealand Foundation
Te Whītau Tūhono

Event 1: NextGen Masterclass Programme

Location: EQ, Equatorial Plaza, Jalan Sultan Ismail, Kuala Lumpur

Date: Tuesday, June 30 2026

08:30	**Meet in lobby of Grand Hyatt to walk to EQ Equatorial Plaza**
09:00 – 09:30	**Arrival - Refreshments and Mix and Mingle** ***Sapphire Room***
09:30 – 10:00	**Welcoming Remarks** ***Sapphire Room*** Dr James To, Asia New Zealand Foundation
10:00 – 10:30	**What is Track II Diplomacy?** ***Sapphire Room***
10:30 – 10:45	**Morning Tea** ***Sapphire Room***
10:45 – 12:00	**Track II Primer** ***Sapphire Room***
12:00 – 13:15	**Lunch** ***Nipah Coffee House***
13:15 – 14:45	**Track 1.5 Roundtable** ***Sapphire Room*** Moderator: Dr James To, Asia New Zealand Foundation
14:45 – 14:50	**Wrap Up and Concluding Remarks** ***Sapphire Room***
14:50 – 15:30	**Afternoon Tea** ***Sapphire Room***
15:30	**End of Event**

Event 2: 39th Asia-Pacific Roundtable
Location: Grand Hyatt, Kuala Lumpur
Dates: Tuesday, June 30 2026 - Thursday, July 2 2026

Tuesday, 30 June 2026

16:00 – 17:00 **YL Meeting with Brad and Rayanne**
Location TBC

17:00 – 18:00 **Dinner Registration**
Foyer, Grand Salon, Level 1

18:00 – 20:00 **Welcoming Dinner**
Grand Salon, Level 1
Address by The Honourable Dato' Seri Utama Haji Mohamad bin Haji Hasan, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Malaysia

Wednesday, 1 July 2026

08:00 – 09:00 **Registration**
Foyer, Grand Ballroom, Ground Level

09:00 – 09:30 **Opening and Welcoming Remarks**
Grand Ballroom, Ground Level
Datuk Prof Dr Mohd Faiz Abdullah, Executive Chairman, ISIS Malaysia
Prof Antoinette Raquiza, 2026 Chair, ASEAN-ISIS Network

09:30 – 11:00 **Plenary 1 - Rogue World Order: Power, Principles, and Pragmatism**
Grand Ballroom, Ground Level

11:00 – 11:30 **Break**
Foyer, Grand Ballroom, Ground Level

11:30 – 13:00 **Plenary 2 - Sino-Indian Tectonics in the Global South**
Grand Ballroom, Ground Level

13:00 – 14:00 **Lunch**
Grand Salon, Level 1

14:00 – 14:30 **Fireside Chat - "Building Middle Power Agency"**
Grand Ballroom, Ground Level
HE Danielle Heinecke, High Commissioner of Australia to Malaysia

14:30 – 16:00 **Plenary 3 - Hard Truths: Probing Into ASEAN's Mechanisms**
Grand Ballroom, Ground Level

16:00 – 18:00 **Free Time**

18:00 – 19:30 **Networking Dinner**
Grand Salon, Level 1

Thursday, 2 July 2026

07:30 – 09:00 **Registration**
Foyer, Grand Ballroom, Ground Level

09:15 **Arrival of The Honourable Dato' Seri Anwar bin Ibrahim, Prime Minister of Malaysia**
Grand Ballroom, Ground Level

09:30 – 10:30 **Keynote Address**
Grand Ballroom, Ground Level
The Honourable Dato' Seri Anwar bin Ibrahim, Prime Minister of Malaysia

10:30 – 11:00 **Break**
Foyer, Grand Ballroom, Ground Level

11:00 – 12:30 **Plenary 4 - Nuclear Arsenals in the Asia-Pacific Cauldron**
Grand Ballroom, Ground Level

12:30 – 13:00 **Fireside Chat - "Navigating Asia's Economic Future"**
Grand Ballroom, Ground Level
HE Zhang Jun, Secretary-General, Boao Forum for Asia

13:00 – 14:15 **Lunch**
Grand Salon, Level 1

14:30 – 15:00 **Ministerial Address**
Grand Ballroom, Ground Level
Maxime Prévot, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belgium

15:00 – 16:30	**Plenary 5 - Critical Minerals and Supply Chain Upheavals** ***Grand Ballroom, Ground Level***
16:30 – 16:45	**Closing Address** ***Grand Ballroom, Ground Level*** HE Dr Kao Kim Hourn, Secretary-General of ASEAN
16:45 – 17:00	**Closing Remarks** ***Grand Ballroom, Ground Level*** Datuk Prof Dr Mohd Faiz Abdullah, Executive Chairman, ISIS Malaysia
17:05	**End of Event**
17:15 – 18:45	**YL Meeting with Brad and Rayanne** ***Location TBC***
18:45	**YL Dinner/Celebration**