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Amidst Geopolitical Uncertainties, How Has ASEAN Fared?

By Nazia Hussain

SYNOPSIS

To maintain the vision of an ASEAN regional architecture, the ASEAN member states will have to hang together as intensifying global power shifts and competitive dynamics threaten to pull them apart.

COMMENTARY

As the inclusive multilateral architecture of the world is being challenged by growing interstate rivalries, ASEAN's role in maintaining economic cooperation, peace, and security in the region and beyond has come under question.

ASEAN-centred mechanisms are perceived as outdated and unable to deliver the desired outcomes. Intensifying competition between the United States and China has evoked criticism that ASEAN lacks a unified approach to the contest between the two great powers.

ASEAN must further contend with the rise of new "minilaterals" that, while not always overtly exclusive, has been designed for strategic competition and, therefore, have exclusive characteristics.

The ASEAN leadership appears cautious about these broad trends. It maintains a public posture of measured optimism that peaceful coexistence is still essential for regional economic growth, prosperity, and mutual well-being.

Is this a fair assessment? How has ASEAN fared amidst the geopolitical uncertainties of this divided world? A few illuminating situations are germane.

Myanmar

On Myanmar, China has reportedly proposed establishing a [joint security](#) company with the ruling Tatmadaw (the Myanmar military) to ensure the safety of Chinese projects and personnel in the country. This move raises concerns about national sovereignty and the extent of control that the Tatmadaw has within Myanmar. The Tatmadaw's authority in the country is already in doubt with reports of battlefield reversals.

With no sign of any reconciliation or breakthrough in the civil war, ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus, although in an impasse, is one of the remaining diplomatic processes calling for an immediate cessation of violence and constructive dialogue. While the G20 has glossed over the crisis in Myanmar, billing it as an ASEAN problem, all member states of the grouping increasingly agree that there is a need for ASEAN to maintain regional peace and security, including bringing to an end the civil war in Myanmar.

Malaysia, the incoming ASEAN Chair for 2025, has started diplomatic consultations to manage the conflict in Myanmar. This will likely complement Thailand's efforts, but Myanmar's two larger neighbours — China and India — need to weigh in more proactively if more tangible results are to be obtained. The other ASEAN member states should also support Malaysia and Thailand's efforts. Only as a collective unit will ASEAN be able to influence the situation in Myanmar.

South China Sea

Tensions in the South China Sea have heated up as China and the Philippines trade fresh accusations over a maritime confrontation around the contested Scarborough Shoal. This has prompted the US to [deploy](#) a reconnaissance aircraft. At the same time, Japan and the Philippines conducted a joint patrol in the disputed area.

Even as the Philippines seeks to file a new [arbitration case](#) against China over alleged breaches of international law in the South China Sea and lobbies other countries for support, ASEAN and China are engaged in negotiating the text of the Code of Conduct (CoC) in the South China Sea. Both sides have set 2026 as the latest deadline for its finalisation. ASEAN has also set its focus on better cooperation and management of its maritime zones since its geography includes more sea than land.

Indonesia has been pushing to operationalise the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). In September 2023, Jakarta brought ASEAN member states and external partners together for the inaugural ASEAN Indo-Pacific Forum. Focusing on green infrastructure, resilient supply chains, sustainable and innovative financing, digital transformation, and creative economy, the forum identified 93 [cooperation projects](#) amounting to US\$38.2 billion and 73 potential projects worth US\$17.8 billion.

The forum may be the first to yield [concrete benefits](#) to the region since the adoption of the AOIP by ASEAN member states in 2019. How the new Prabowo administration sustains the momentum will be important for ASEAN's progress on these projects.

Navigating a Second Trump Presidency

ASEAN is bracing itself for an escalation of the US-China competition when President-elect Donald Trump takes office on 20 January 2025. Trump has already promised to impose steep tariffs on many countries, including China. In fact, under the first Trump administration, the US withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and appeared ready to re-examine some of the long-standing core pillars of US foreign policy, particularly regarding international trade practices among US trade partners.

As the economic and strategic influence of the US [declines](#), the collective potential of the expanding BRICS grouping has found a positive reception in Southeast Asia. ASEAN member states look to diversify their options in the global economic arena amid growing geopolitical uncertainties. Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Thailand have become partner countries of BRICS this year.

ASEAN, however, remains pivotal in the region. Major powers recognise that they need the grouping's support to further their initiatives in Southeast Asia. Side-lining ASEAN would only mean that they may not get a positive response to their initiatives in the region.

Going forward, ASEAN will have to continue to take the public position of not taking sides in the competition between China and the United States. These two powers have publicly supported ASEAN Centrality but also want ASEAN to be on their side. For its own sake, ASEAN must urgently refurbish its existing mechanisms. This will not be easy, as China and the US will pressure ASEAN to favour their respective strategic calculi.

How Has ASEAN Fared?

Despite uncertainties in the regional order, ASEAN has pressed ahead with its community-building goal, particularly in the economic arena. Many of the fundamentals are already in place: a robust economy generating a GDP of more than US\$3.6 trillion and a population of 685 million, of which over 460 million are digital consumers, with millions more joining online platforms yearly. Economically, ASEAN is not doing too badly, especially in rooting the digital economy and technological innovation framework, and more can be done to buttress ASEAN as a viable trading and investment partner for the 21st century.

At the same time, the long-term success of an ASEAN-led regional order in the Indo-Pacific is highly dependent on the grouping's cohesion and the ability of its dialogue partners to foster a conducive environment for multilateral processes. ASEAN must be seen as a cheerleader for continuing multilateralism or "everyday multilateralism", as the buzz circulating in the region's public intellectual circles puts it.

In this respect, ASEAN leaders must engage their respective domestic audiences and businesses systematically to appreciate the value of the ASEAN Community and its mechanisms for sustaining regional growth and prosperity and to secure peaceful relations among states that impinge on the region's security and stability.

This may appear a formidable challenge, but astute and cohesive leadership has

delivered the foundation for ASEAN's development and success in managing potential conflict and disputes. The key is Southeast Asia's value proposition to all countries, big and small – "ASEAN grows, you grow".

The year 2025 will be challenging for everyone, including ASEAN. There will be a need to gather the political will to do some difficult things. The fact is that ASEAN leaders have previously pulled together to deliver the goods.

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