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ASEAN Looks to 2025 and Beyond



2025 will be momentous for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), as it is set to formalise its new visions for the ASEAN Political Security Community, ASEAN Economic Community, and ASEAN Sociocultural Community. With the region aiming for stronger regional integration and cooperation over the next decade and beyond, how can ASEAN maintain its central role in regional affairs amidst current geopolitical challenges and emerging developments? Photo by Presidential Communications Office (Philippines) from Wikimedia Commons.

FEATURED COMMENTARY

Amidst Geopolitical Uncertainties, How Has ASEAN Fared?

By Nazia Hussain



As ASEAN enters 2025, it is confronted with several challenges, including ensuring peace and stability in Myanmar, managing heightened tensions in the South China Sea, and navigating the uncertainties of a second Trump presidency. In our featured commentary, Associate Research Fellow Nazia Hussain analyses how ASEAN has fared with these issues and what it can do in the years ahead. Photo by Sam

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 ASEAN-centred mechanisms are perceived as outdated and unable to deliver the desired outcomes.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 bat-

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tlefield 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 poten-

tial 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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AI Governance: Should Domestic or International Policy Lead?



[Clockwise from top left] Dr Joel Ng and Mr Benjamin Ang from RSIS, and Dr Aaron Maniam and Dr Robert Trager from the Oxford Blavatnik School of Government, share their thoughts on how best to tackle challenging policy questions in AI governance through both international and domestic policy instruments.

As various sectors scramble to develop and adopt artificial intelligence, governments have similarly hastened the process to regulate AI to minimise perceived harms. However, AI governance has become a challenge, as it needs to balance concerns from various stakeholders and confront difficult policy questions.

This raises the question of whether domestic- or international-level processes are more effective in AI governance. The Centre of Multilateralism Studies (CMS) at RSIS explored this question in a webinar held on 10 October 2024. It featured Dr Robert Trager of the Oxford Martin AI Governance Initiative and Dr Aaron Maniam of the Oxford Blavatnik School of Government as guest

speakers; Mr Benjamin Ang, Head of the Centre of Excellence for National Security at RSIS as discussant; and Dr Joel Ng, Deputy Head of CMS as chair.

Dr Ng introduced the topic, noting how domestic policy processes had to be brought to multilateral levels such as the UN or regional bodies like ASEAN. Domestic policies had to be debated to reconcile them with regional agreements such as ASEAN’s Digital Economic Framework Agreement. He asked the panel to talk about how digital frameworks like the Singapore-led ‘AI Playbook for Small States’ and regional initiatives could be implemented given the domestic challenges.

Dr Trager shared insights

on how best to govern civilian AI. He believes three pillars are crucial: developing forward-looking international standards, providing incentives for states to adopt those standards through specialised organisations (akin to the ICAO in aviation), and ensuring co-operation in enforcing the regime through a reporting mechanism.

Dr Maniam discussed how organisational structures at the multilateral level can determine the governance framework that will emerge from each international organisation. For example, in the UN, a culture of seeking the common ground and understanding produces a governance framework focused on inclusivity and preserving the public good. In any case, bold thinking and leadership are needed

to field innovative governance solutions.

Mr Ang focused on the emerging cybersecurity risks that AI may bring, such as in creating weapons and disrupting the financial sector, and that the public and private sector must play complementary roles to manage these risks. However, geopolitical tensions and the outsized impact of the tech sector can complicate the governance process.

After the presentations, the audience asked questions regarding the effectiveness of soft law and hard law in the context of AI regulation and whether states will find international regulatory oversight appealing if many seek the entry of AI firms into their markets. ■

Advancing the ASEAN-Japan Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in the Face of Geopolitical Challenges



[Clockwise from top left] Ms Joanne Lin from the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, Mr Keith Detros from the Tech for Good Institute, Dr Kaewkamol Pitakdumrongkit from RSIS, and Dr Mie Oba from the Kanagawa University discuss the future of the ASEAN-Japan Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and concrete areas of collaboration that both sides could explore.

On 24 October 2024, the Centre for Multilateralism Studies (CMS) hosted a RSiS Webinar on “Advancing the ASEAN-Japan Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in the Face of Geopolitical Challenges”. Moderated by Dr Kaewkamol Pitakdumrongkit, Head of CMS at RSiS, discussions highlighted Japan’s emergence as the preferred partner for ASEAN amid rising major power contestation, rapid digitalisation, and a growing number of cross-cutting issues and transnational challenges.

Ms Joanne Lin, Senior Fellow and Co-coordinator of ASEAN Studies Centre at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute attributed the last

five decades of strong ASEAN-Japan partnership to Japan’s ability to understand and respect the diverse perspectives of ASEAN countries, and its role as a key provider of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) which has been instrumental in Southeast Asia’s development, especially in areas of human resource management, capacity building and economic growth.

Dr Mie Oba, Professor of International Relations, Faculty of Law at Kanagawa University noted that Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba’s administration remains committed to continue its cooperation with ASEAN and regional affairs in the Indo-Pacific,

focusing on maritime security, supply chain resilience and cyber security. She also argued that regardless of change in administrations in Japan’s political landscape, prioritising on strengthening relations with ASEAN will continue to be a crucial element of Japanese foreign policy.

Mr Keith Detros, Programme Manager of Government Affairs at the Tech for Good Institute highlighted key trends in the ASEAN digital economy, noting that Southeast Asia is rapidly advancing in digitalisation with increased internet penetration — 71% of the population is online — and a mobile-first culture, where mobile devices account for nearly two-

thirds of web traffic. He argued that ASEAN’s potential hinges upon integration with the global economy, and as such, strategic partners like Japan could not only help shape the region’s digital economy but strengthen economic partnership. Mr Detros suggested ASEAN’s Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA) as a platform where partners within the region can work with Southeast Asia, and identified key areas for cooperation within DEFA pillars — cross border data flows, digital identities, cross border e-payments, and strategic partnerships, especially technical and financial assistance — between ASEAN and Japan going forward. ■

Small States and the Multilateral System: Creating a More Inclusive and Equitable World for All



Dr Adam Lupel, COO of the International Peace Institute, Dr Kaewkamol Pitakdumrongkit, Head of the Centre for Multilateralism Studies (CMS) of RSIS, and Dr Joel Ng, Deputy Head of CMS, share key findings from their report “Small States and the Multilateral System: Transforming Global Governance” during the report’s official Singapore launch.

RSIS and the International Peace Institute (IPI) held the Singapore launch for their recent report entitled “Small States and the Multilateral System: Transforming Global Governance” on 1 November 2024. The event featured Ms Ng Boon Yian, Director-General for International Organisation at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and also saw remarks from Dr Mely Caballero-Anthony, RSIS Associate Dean (International Engagement). There was also a panel discussion featuring the report’s authors including Dr Adam Lupel, IPI’s Vice President and Chief Operating Officer; Dr Kaewkamol Pitakdumrongkit, Head of the Centre for Multilateralism Studies (CMS); and Dr Joel Ng, Deputy Head of CMS.

Dr Caballero-Anthony commenced the launch seminar by welcoming panelists and esteemed guests. She credited the report’s success to the close collaboration between RSIS and

the International Peace Institute (IPI), before highlighting its relevance in today’s geopolitically-fragmented environment, where small states are not mere bystanders but crucial shapers of the multilateral system. She reiterated that the report serves as a call to action for collective engagement in shaping a shared future.

Ms Ng also recognised the report’s relevance, emphasising that small states, including Singapore, possess agency and must continue to collaborate in upholding the United Nations Charter and advocating for a rules-based international order. She compared small states to ants and bees in the multilateral ecosystem, highlighting their capacity to overcome challenges through collective effort and the formation of symbiotic relationships.

In sharing the rationale and process behind the report, Dr Lupel accentuated that

the report serves as a tool for small states to navigate the widening geopolitical tensions and to facilitate constructive inputs ahead of the UN Summit of the Future. He recalled the report was a culmination of discussions, interviews, and roundtables with numerous small states.

Dr Pitakdumrongkit subsequently summarised respective sections of the report, emphasising that small states have become important players in pushing for multilateral action in a more intertwined world. She presented the tools that small states can leverage to advance their collective agency in shaping the multilateral system, before pointing to the seven recommendations on how small states can further increase their agency. Dr Ng then presented Singapore’s approach to multilateralism, stressing that the country has consistently been at the forefront of multilateral cooperation. He

explained that rules-based frameworks are essential for regional stability and predictability, noting the inherently vulnerable nature of small states enable them to foster cooperation.

The ensuing Q&A segment entailed relevant topics, including the necessity for small states to collaborate across regional forums, and areas where small states have greater space to act, especially in frontier issues where they will likely enjoy the first-mover advantage in, or when technical expertise is required such as in AI governance. The panelists also underscored the importance of adopting a bottom-up approach to global governance to achieve a more equitable international system. The Q&A concluded with a discussion on potentially expanding the report’s scope to incorporate additional examples of small states exercising their agency. ■

Multilateral Matters: News Roundup

Why 2025 Is a Make or Break Year for ASEAN Unity

The Diplomat | 25 October 2024 | [Full Article](#)

As Malaysia assumes the helm of ASEAN in 2025, it leads an organisation that must navigate many regional and global issues while preserving ASEAN's unity and centrality.

APEC and G20 Summits in Shadow of Trump's Presidential Win

The Business Times | 14 November 2024 | [Full Article](#)

Did Brazil's G20 summit deliver on its promises?

Deutsche Welle | 21 November 2024 | [Full Article](#)

The G20 convened for its annual summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. While geopolitical divides were pal-

pable, the G20 was able to achieve some progress in issues such as climate funding and ending world hunger.

Developing nations say \$300bn COP29 deal not enough after agreement

Al Jazeera | 23 November 2024 | [Full Article](#)

While negotiators at the COP29 climate talks agreed on a US\$300 billion assistance package to aid countries most vulnerable to climate change, some countries in the Global South still think more needs to be done.

Malaysia bandwagoning with BRICS

East Asia Forum | 12 December 2024 | [Full Article](#)

Why is Malaysia keen to join BRICS? Financing from the New Development Bank, prospects for global economic reform, and reduced reliance on the US dollar for trade are all seen to boon Malaysia's national interests.

Leveraging ASEAN's collective climate change influence

East Asia Forum | 19 December 2024 | [Full Article](#)

Multilateralism Can Survive Trump

Foreign Affairs | 24 December 2024 | [Full Article](#)

Why Economic Nationalism Was the Biggest Story of 2024 in Southeast Asia

The Diplomat | 31 December 2024 | [Full Article](#)

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

Enhancing ASEAN Connectivity Through Subregional Initiatives

Kaewkamol Pitakdumrongkit | *RSIS Commentaries* | 16 December 2024

APEC Summit 2024: Outcomes, Challenges, and Future Prospects

Kaewkamol Pitakdumrongkit | *Korea on Point* | 25 November 2024

Systemic Impacts of Geoeconomic

and Economic Coercion: How Should States Respond?

Kaewkamol Pitakdumrongkit | *RSIS Commentaries* | 23 October 2024

Tempering the Philippines' AI Disinformation Storm

Jose Miguelito Enriquez | *East Asia Forum* | 16 October 2024

Navigating US-ASEAN Economic Relations After the 2024 US Presi-

dential Election

Kaewkamol Pitakdumrongkit and Shay Wester | *RSIS Commentaries* | 14 October 2024

On US-ASEAN Relations & Trade: What's at Stake for Asia in the 2024 US Election

Shay Wester and Kaewkamol Pitakdumrongkit | *Asia Society* | 3 October 2024

The **Centre for Multilateralism Studies (CMS)** is a research entity within the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. The CMS team conducts cutting-edge research, teaching/training and networking on cooperative multilateralism in the Asia Pacific region. The Centre aims to contribute to international academic and public discourses on regional architecture and order in the Asia Pacific. It aspires to be an international knowledge hub for multilateral cooperation and regional integration.

Multilateral Matters is the quarterly publication of the Centre for Multilateralism Studies (CMS), analysing the most recent developments regarding multilateralism by our team. It covers articles on relevant economic and political issues as well as programmes and latest publications from the research centre. The objective of the newsletter is to promote the research being done by our centre, raising awareness of the many events that we hold on a regular basis.

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