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## Reasserting ASEAN's Relevance: The Road Ahead

*By Arvind Raj and Deborah Koh*

### SYNOPSIS

*The upending of the American-led post-Cold War international order should prompt ASEAN to adopt practical measures to reassert its “centrality”. These measures should begin with improved management of key regional security challenges, both traditional and non-traditional, amid global geopolitical uncertainty.*

### COMMENTARY

#### ASEAN's Waning Centrality

ASEAN *centrality* is a long-debated concept that has lost some of its lustre over the past decade. At its core, the term refers to ASEAN's role in shaping the regional architecture – internally, as a stabiliser managing relations among ASEAN states, and externally, as a platform to engage and anchor middle and major powers in the region. The absence of interstate conflict in Southeast Asia since the 1970s, despite its heterogeneity, is a testament to the success of its internal function. Yet, ASEAN's external role has waned in recent years.

In the post-Cold War era, the easing of superpower rivalry created favourable conditions for the growth of ASEAN-led platforms throughout the 1990s and early 2000s: the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the East Asia Summit (EAS), and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus).

However, ASEAN's effectiveness has come under increasing scrutiny in recent years. This is reflected in the latest ISEAS' [The State of Southeast Asia: 2025 Survey Report](#), which highlights that a key concern among respondents is ASEAN's perceived inertia and ineffectiveness, making it ill-equipped to respond to the rapidly evolving political and economic dynamics of the emerging global order.

Today, the rules-based international order has been upended by its very architect and leader, the United States. The US has adopted a more transactional foreign policy that disregards fundamental principles – multilateralism, free trade, and adherence to international rules and norms – favouring one focused on narrow self-interests.

Meanwhile, China has undertaken a series of unilateral actions to assert its “rightful place” in the international order, jeopardising regional security. Its assertive manoeuvres in the East and South China Seas and the Taiwan Strait show a disregard for the rules and norms that govern the international order.

Thus far, ASEAN-led regional mechanisms have struggled to tackle these challenges, prompting other Indo-Pacific states to seek solutions through minilateral arrangements such as the QUAD, AUKUS, and SQUAD (the Philippines, Australia, Japan and the US). Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have further underscored the differing perspectives and responses among ASEAN states concerning serious violations of fundamental principles like sovereignty, territorial integrity, and international law. ASEAN’s difficulty adapting to shifts in regional security dynamics has diminished its relevance and utility, undermining its “centrality”.

### **Addressing Regional Security Challenges**

While fortifying intra-ASEAN economic cohesion remains vital amid current volatility, this section addresses three longstanding regional security challenges where ASEAN can reassert its centrality.

#### *South China Sea*

The third reading of ASEAN’s South China Sea Code of Conduct (COC) was completed last month; however, significant differences remain between China and ASEAN, and within ASEAN itself. Key unresolved issues include the COC’s geographical coverage, legality, and function as a dispute settlement or crisis management tool. The prolonged negotiations have been complicated by retaliatory actions between China and various claimant states, particularly the Philippines. This situation has heightened regional anxieties.

ASEAN is concerned that China’s assertive behaviour and encroachment into its littoral states’ Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) could lead to accidental conflicts and worsen regional security. The shortcomings of ASEAN-led mechanisms have prompted the Philippines to seek stronger deterrent capabilities by enhancing ties with larger powers like the United States, Japan, and Australia, and through minilateral entities like SQUAD. While these actions may contribute to long-term regional stability, they also risk exacerbating current regional instability.

The prospects for a quick resolution of the COC negotiations remain dim. However, ASEAN could be more proactive in managing tensions by encouraging its various claimant states to intensify their efforts to resolve competing territorial disputes. Since Track I Diplomacy – formal interactions conducted through official channels – might face constraints, ASEAN could utilise its various Track II Diplomacy networks to assist claimant states in better understanding their competing claims, building trust, and developing creative solutions. The helpful suggestions could then be integrated into

the Track I processes. This approach would enable ASEAN to establish a more unified stance when engaging with China in the official COC negotiations.

### *Climate Change*

The ISEAS Survey Report indicates that climate change and extreme weather are the region's most pressing challenges. The increasing frequency and severity of natural disasters in the Philippines and Myanmar remind us of the urgent need for action.

Over the years, the ASEAN states have intensified their national climate action plans, supported at the regional level by increased sectoral engagement with dialogue partners and various climate-relevant bodies under the purview of the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Environment (AMME) and the ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting on Environment (ASOEN). ASEAN has also [consistently committed](#) itself to the UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement, aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals and submitting successive "Nationally Determined Contributions".

Gaps persist in ASEAN's collective response to climate change. The ASEAN Working Group on Climate Change (AWGCC), established in 2009 as the organisation's dedicated climate change body, could expand its mandate beyond coordinating climate positions and tracking annual progress. It has the potential to adopt a more proactive role in centralising cross-cutting climate change concerns across ASEAN's sectoral bodies, convening support from dialogue partners, and redirecting resources or financing – an ongoing challenge for many ASEAN states.

ASEAN would greatly benefit from ensuring greater parity among ASEAN states, thereby strengthening its regional coherence. This, in turn, would enhance its normative influence on the international stage. A more unified approach would empower ASEAN to present a stronger collective voice and leadership in this arena, particularly given the region's exceptional vulnerability to climate change.

### *Transnational Crime*

The convergence of existing transnational crimes with rapid technological advancements has led to an expansion of operations and the range of Southeast Asia's illegal economies, resulting in new dimensions of challenges. [Human trafficking for organised scam operations](#) in the region exemplifies this trend. The ISEAS Survey Report reflects this, ranking global scam operations as the second-highest geopolitical concern in the region, particularly for host ASEAN states such as Thailand and Laos.

Currently, two principal bodies oversee ASEAN's response to transnational crime: the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime (AMMTC) and the ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting on Transnational Crime (SOMTC). However, institutional gaps exist within the confines of ASEAN's consensus-based modus operandi. Disparities in national capacities among ASEAN states hinder the organisation's coordinated response, raising concerns that current efforts may be outpaced by the evolving and converging nature of these threats.

Establishing the long-anticipated ASEAN Centre for Transnational Crime as a

centralised hub for monitoring and intelligence-sharing would significantly enhance ASEAN's potential to address this increasingly complex and cross-cutting issue.

Nevertheless, ASEAN is increasingly honing its focus in this area. The recently adopted Multi-Sectoral Work Plan Against Trafficking in Persons (2023-2028) illustrates an expanding institutional effort to understand and address trafficking cases linked to scam operations, with the SOMTC collaborating with relevant sectoral bodies such as the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR).

Furthermore, recent AMMTC consultations with dialogue partners like China demonstrate ASEAN's growing recognition of contemporary transnational crime dynamics and its willingness to engage regional powers on matters of shared concern. ASEAN should capitalise on this momentum by systematically leveraging its partnerships for technical expertise and capacity building.

### **The Road Ahead**

ASEAN must proactively address urgent regional issues in today's evolving global order. Protracted tensions in the South China Sea, the undeniable impact of climate change, and the ever-evolving nature of transnational crime are critical areas that require coordinated attention. These challenges allow ASEAN an opportunity to demonstrate its collective resolve, showcase its capacity to adapt to geopolitical changes, and project regional leadership. Optimistically, through these actions, ASEAN can begin to dispel perceptions of being slow and ineffective.

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