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The International Order: Riding the Waves of Change



The rules-based international order is facing an unprecedented existential test, as shifting geopolitics and escalating strategic rivalries compel regional and multilateral institutions to adapt—or be transformed entirely—in the face of a rapidly evolving and uncertain global landscape. Can the existing international order successfully ride the waves of change? Photo by David Watkis via Unsplash.

FEATURED COMMENTARY

Prospects for Multilateralism at the End of the Liberal Order

By Joel Ng



US President Donald Trump speaks during the 72nd Session of the UN General Assembly. In our featured commentary, Dr Joel Ng explores President Donald Trump's recent executive order that ends US funding for several UN organizations, what it forebodes for the international order, and how the rest of the world can minimise the impending disruptions to multilateralism. Photo by D Myles Cullen/the White House.

The US withdrawal of support for multilateral organizations is impending, and short-term disruption is inevitable. However, the long-term solutions that generate international order will prevail if other states are bold in their thinking and persist in co-operation.

Commentary

The US disruption of the Munich Security Conference may have caused the overlooking of a more globally significant US executive order (EO) signed by President Donald Trump on 4 February 2025, titled "Withdrawing the United States from and Ending Funding to Certain United Nations Organizations and Reviewing United States Support to All

International Organizations".

In the first instance, the EO ordered a halt to US participation or funding to the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC), the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), and the UN Relief Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

However, the EO also mandated a review of all international organisations, conventions, and treaties to which the US belongs or provides support, asking whether they are contrary to US interests and can be reformed. A conclusion that they are against US interests and cannot be

reformed will lead to a withdrawal recommendation.

Prospects for US Withdrawals

The US had already withdrawn from the World Health Organization (WHO) before the EO. Where the US is not a member, such as in the International Criminal Court (ICC), it had taken even more drastic action by putting senior staff there on sanctions lists over the ICC's unfair warrants for Israeli leaders (according to the Trump administration). Familiar targets that have already drawn Trump's criticism, such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO), must be prepared to see US withdrawal.

Even the possibility of withdrawal from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, both largely underwritten by US funding (of which previous administrations have jealously guarded their control), cannot be dismissed lightly. If one wonders what the current US administration's view is about multilateral agencies, one need look no further than how it has "reformed" the US Agency for International Development (USAID) "to ensure they are efficient and consistent with US foreign policy under the America First agenda".

Thus, the question of whether the organisation can be "reformed" should

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not be understood to be reformed in a rational optimisation sense, but one in which the US will push its levers of power to wholly benefit a narrow conception of its interests. As the example of NATO after the recent Munich Security Conference shows, “reform” will mean convulsions for everyone else. In multilateral institutions where some of these members include US rivals such as China, the prospects for the type of organisational change demanded by the Americans are slim.

The End of the Liberal Order?

Stewart Patrick called Trump’s EO “The Death of the World America Made”. It is unsurprising that Trump, who has railed against liberals domestically, should be seeking to dismantle whatever he associates with liberalism internationally. This challenge has been fundamentally different from the external challenges to the liberal international order hitherto put up by rising powers.

Whereas rising powers banged on the doors from the outside, the US was the creator and major underwriter of post-World War 2 multilateral institutions. This granted it control of them, but also the power to undermine them from within. While it always had that latent capacity, it never had the will until now. Thus, the collapse came swiftly within a month of Trump’s inauguration.

In the short run, this will be a period of volatility as the organisations that provide essential services are af-

flicted by funding uncertainty. In the long run, the retreat of both the US security umbrella and its underwriting of global public goods calls for the stepping up of its challengers who aspire to global leadership.

...And Wither a Rules-Based Order?

It is now obvious that the US will behave like a pre-World War 2 great power and not adhere to the rules it had created. This upends the international rules-based order insofar as it overlaps with a liberal order that is now dissipating. The danger is in multiple states following suit as they see that the world’s policeman is gone, and indeed, many states are already choosing this path as conflicts proliferate around the world.

Yet foreign policy analysis teaches that while international law usually lacks external enforcement mechanisms (especially at its inception), it proliferates anyway because it solves basic problems in relations between states. These include reducing and deterring conflict, solving coordination problems, demonstrating commitment and credibility, which is important for states’ international legitimacy, and providing stability and predictability to benefit their businesses and markets. Even colonial powers in history found that the rule of law was a better solution than having to put down uprisings in every corner of their empires.

The present US administration may believe it can solve its problems on its own or by bending others to

its will, but while they determine this question for themselves, the rest of the world, especially its smaller states, cannot. Groupings, particularly through regions, will be necessary to sustain a critical mass that wishes for buffers against the coming tumult.

ASEAN’s Experience

In this respect, ASEAN has always played a critical role for Southeast Asia. During the Cold War, it was formed to manage the potential for conflicts among its members. The conflicts at its borders were prevented from spilling over, internal conflicts were managed, and ASEAN did this without a rules-based system and indeed emphasised informality as a virtue.

As ASEAN sought to be more economically integrated, it created a “rules-based community” for the benefit of trade – giving businesses certainty and clarity about regionalisation – but limited the imposition of rules to a pace comfortable for all. Moreover, it preserved the agency of its leaders to discuss all issues at the summit level, remaining unbound by ideological or political stipulations aside from peaceful conduct.

Even as more ambitious economists criticised ASEAN’s rule of law framework as being too insipid, it has survived challenges from the backlash against multilateralism because it took care not to override the sovereignty considerations of its members. As the liberal order unravels, ASEAN’s internal formula remains sound but will undoubtedly come under pressure, as all

multilateral organisations have. Therefore, it must redouble efforts to achieve cohesion and unity to protect its regional project from the vicissitudes of great power politics.

There is also latent potential for creation as we are freed of the strictures of the old order. Trump’s EO called for a complete review of its participation in international organisations and the question of their reform. ASEAN, too, must consider how it will engage with a US administration that is unconvinced by rules or past practices and frequently skipped ASEAN summits.

Arrangements like the East Asia Summit and ASEAN Regional Forum must take the opportunity to shake up their formats to more effectively address the issues of the day. Their memberships contain states that could impact regional security, but these actors must be convinced of the need and utility of doing so through these forums. Loosening the formats of these forums to enable direct and focused discussions on their primary concerns should be considered – and the use of Track 2 to facilitate open discussion while avoiding confrontation will be necessary. The international order can prevail if states are bold in their thinking and persist in multilateral cooperation.■

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Understanding ASEAN



Amb Ong Keng Yong, Executive Deputy Chairman of RSIS, engaged with the workshop attendees in a fireside chat moderated by Dr Kaewkamol Pitakdumrongkit, Senior Fellow at the Centre for Multilateralism Studies in RSIS.

The Centre for Multilateralism Studies (CMS) conducted a two-day course on “Understanding ASEAN” at the Civil Service College on 23-24 January 2025. The course explored ASEAN’s history, principles, and structural frameworks, as well as examined ASEAN’s economic collaboration efforts and regional architecture.

Session 1 began with a discussion of ASEAN’s relevance for Singapore and acknowledged that while there have been occasional tensions and ongoing geopolitical threats, ASEAN member states have managed to maintain a relatively unified voice in their engagement with external actors. Significant progress has been made on economic issues, although issues such as the unresolved Myanmar crisis continues to be difficult to address.

Session 2 examined ASEAN’s role and its primary objectives. Since its inception, ASEAN has been built on the concept of the least common denominator,

focusing on avoiding regional conflicts and promoting cooperation in economic, cultural, and technical areas. Part of ASEAN’s success can be attributed to the “ASEAN Way” which has served ASEAN well as it requires member states to recognise and consider one another’s national interests.

Focusing on ASEAN’s economic cooperation and integration, session 3 noted that ASEAN has achieved numerous successes in regional economic integration which has helped solidify its position in the global economy. However, several crucial challenges remain such as non-tariff barriers in goods, slow liberalisation of services, absence of national AI strategies in certain member states, and the underfunding and understaffing of ASEAN mechanisms.

Discussing the rapid growth of Southeast Asia’s digital economy, session 4 acknowledged ASEAN efforts to facilitate digital integration, including negotiations for the ASEAN Digital

Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA) set to be concluded by the end of 2025. The session also highlighted the role of digital technologies in advancing ASEAN’s green economy goals, specifically in relation to achieving net-zero emissions.

ASEAN has played a key role in shaping the region’s security framework. Exploring Singapore’s crucial role within ASEAN, session 6 noted that Singapore has significantly contributed to ASEAN by actively engaging with external partners such as the US, China, and Japan. Additionally, Singapore has played a vital role in capacity-building efforts and was instrumental in the establishment of the ASEAN Regional Forum.

Session 7 discussed the challenges faced by ASEAN, especially its perceived lack of effectiveness in addressing regional flashpoints. Critics argue that ASEAN’s consensus-building approach and reliance on the least common denominator are no longer sufficient to deal with the

current geopolitical challenges, particularly the US-China rivalry. Another challenge is the proliferation of “minilateralism” in response to great power rivalry which could potentially displace ASEAN as the main platform for regional cooperation.

CMS also conducted a simulation exercise whereby the participants role-played as representatives from each of the ten ASEAN member states and negotiated an ASEAN statement in response to a fictional development in the South China Sea.

The course concluded with a fireside chat with former ASEAN Secretary-General, Ambassador Ong Keng Yong. Participants had the opportunity to engage in a candid conversation with Amb Ong who noted that in the last 57 years since its inception, ASEAN’s norms and ASEAN-led mechanisms for consultation and cooperation have allowed it to play a constructive role in regional security. ■

Managing Pressures and Transitions: ASEAN's Agency in an Unsettled World



[L-R] Dr Margareth Sembiring of the Centre for Non-Traditional Security Studies at RSIS, Dr Yanfei Li of the Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA), and Dr Dipinder Singh of CMS at RSIS during a panel discussion on the ASEAN Power Grid (APG) and its impact on the region's energy security.

How can ASEAN maintain its resilience amidst internal policy challenges and external pressures induced by great power competition? This question was explored by the Centre for Multilateralism Studies (CMS) at RSIS in its annual workshop held on 27 February 2025. This year's workshop consisted of three expert panels, each focusing on ASEAN's role in regional security, digital transformation, and energy resilience. More than 80 guests from the government, academe, the diplomatic and business communities, and civil society attended the workshop.

The first panel explored ASEAN's role in the changing regional security architecture. Panellists explained that while ASEAN continues to be a major foreign policy pillar for its member states, its relevance in regional security

will depend on how successful ASEAN will be in maintaining strategic autonomy amidst great power strategic rivalry. They emphasised that mechanisms like the East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Regional Forum should be leveraged to foster engagement with ASEAN's external partners. Despite declining trust between states and the rise of minilateral security arrangements, ASEAN should continue its role as a convenor of dialogues to manage internal disagreements and effectively navigate relations with the great powers.

The second panel discussed ASEAN's continuing efforts in digital integration. The discussion revolved around the ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA), the world's first regional digital economic partnership, which is on track to

be finalised in 2025. Panellists highlighted DEFA's role in fostering regulatory alignment, easing digital talent mobility, and addressing policy challenges such as cross-border data flows, competition policy, and supporting small and medium enterprises (SMEs). This results in a stable digital trade environment which will spur regional economic growth. Panellists also noted how DEFA can enhance national digitalisation strategies to provide digital infrastructure, train a digitally literate workforce, and encourage the growth of digital startups.

The final panel mapped the progress of the ASEAN Power Grid (APG) and discussed how the project supports the region's transition towards sustainable energy. Panellists pointed out the benefits of the APG, namely economic

growth through job creation, energy security by creating a stable supply, and decarbonisation via the introduction of renewable energy sources like solar and hydropower. The APG's goals complement Singapore's ambition to reach net zero carbon emissions by 2050. To manage challenges in operation, coordination, and financing, panellists suggested creating regulatory institutions or working groups that would oversee the APG's operation, and to also seek support from the private sector.

An engaging Q&A session took place after each panel presentation, demonstrating the audience's keen interest in finding pathways for ASEAN to improve regional collaboration and integration at a time when strategic rivalries threaten to impede multilateral co-operation. ■

Multilateralism in an Era of Transactional Realpolitik: Lessons for Asia



[L-R] Dr Joel Ng, Research Fellow and Head of CMS, Assoc Prof Kei Koga of the NTU School of Social Sciences, Prof Nick Bisley, Dean of Humanities and Social Sciences at La Trobe University, and Dr Alan Chong, Senior Fellow at CMS.

On 26 March 2025, the Centre for Multilateralism Studies (CMS) hosted a seminar featuring Professor Nick Bisley, Dean of Humanities and Social Sciences at La Trobe University in Australia, together with Assoc Prof Kei Koga of the School of Social Sciences at Nanyang Technological University as discussant and Dr Alan Chong, Senior Fellow at RSIS as moderator.

Prof Bisley discussed Asian multilateralism and its potential shift under Donald Trump's second presidency, a topic of significant interest since his 2024 election victory. Prof Bisley provided a historical background of Asian multilateralism,

which was driven by positive-sum cooperation among countries. This peaked between the late 1990s and early 2010s with the emergence of 'ASEAN-Plus' mechanisms like the East Asia Summit (EAS). However, resource constraints and missed expectations led to a deceleration in momentum. Countries' resource nationalism during the COVID pandemic exacerbated these concerns.

He proceeded to describe the logic underpinning Trump's foreign policy as "transactional realpolitik" defined by an overarching reliance on hard power and a zero-sum view of global affairs, resulting in a very transactional understanding

of American foreign relations. He cautioned that this transformation of American foreign policy will persist long after Trump leaves office. With a United States guided by zero-sum thinking and a China largely driven by self-interest, Prof Bisley argues that Asia is currently left without a regional leader – and such a void will need to be filled. He suggests reinvigorating existing cooperation mechanisms like the EAS and pursuing pragmatic cooperation in the form of preferential trade agreements (PTAs).

Assoc Prof Koga kickstarted the Q&A discussion by asking Prof Bisley's thoughts on how best to

coordinate multilateral cooperation among countries as well as any specific roles that small and middle powers can play within ASEAN-Plus mechanisms. In response, Prof Bisley noted that the "uncertainty" of Trump's foreign policy serves as an impetus for America's allies in the Asia-Pacific, particularly Japan and Australia, to seek other areas of cooperation. Prof Bisley also responded to questions from the audience, who were keen to know more about President Trump's impact on the international order and what Asian countries can do moving forward. ■

Multilateral Matters: News Roundup

The first quarter of 2025 was busy for ASEAN, as both the [ASEAN Foreign Ministers](#) and Defence Ministers convened their annual retreats at Langkawi and Penang, Malaysia respectively. At the [ADMM Retreat](#), the region's defence ministers released a joint statement to begin exploring possible defence industrial collaboration, specifically to harness the opportunities of AI technology. The [ASEAN Digital Ministers Meeting](#) also convened in Bangkok on 13-17 January, where ministers acknowledged the progress in implementing the ASEAN Digital Masterplan 2025 and unveiled an updated Guide on AI Governance and Ethics for Generative AI.

In one of his first engagements as Secretary of State, Marco Rubio met with the foreign ministers of India, Japan, and Australia in the [first Quad meeting](#) of the second Trump presi-

dency, where the four countries reiterated their commitment to a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific". The decision to convene the Quad first was seen as a signal that the Trump administration would devote more focus on balancing against an ascendant China.

All eyes are on South Africa as they take the presidency of the G20 this year. While the much-awaited Leaders' Meeting is still several months away, several high-level meetings have already taken place, including the [Foreign Ministers' Meeting](#) last 20-21 February 2025. While the absence of US representation at the meeting was striking, the remaining attendees still took the opportunity to discuss matters on inclusive economic growth, food security, and sustainable development in the digital economy – key themes that will

likely define South Africa's G20 presidency.

On 20 March 2025, the [European Council](#) discussed Ukraine, the Middle East, competitiveness, European defence, next multiannual financial framework, migration, oceans, multilateralism and the Western Balkans. Leaders noted that the EU needs to boost its competitiveness and enhance Europe's open strategic autonomy and resilience in order to stay prosperous and maintain its global leadership. They stressed upon the urgency to strengthen the single market, promote quality jobs and ensure successful green and digital transitions. EU leaders also pledged to uphold the UN charter and the rules and principles it enshrines, in particular those of sovereignty and territorial integrity, political independence and self-determination.

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific: Navigating Shifts in an Evolving Regional Order

Nazia Hussain | *The Far East & Australasia* 2025 | March 2025

While the emergence of new minilateral arrangements may stand to pose a challenge to the existing multilateral architecture in the region, it also has the potential to complement ASEAN-centric multilateralism which has come under fire for their perceived ineffectiveness in tackling issues of regional concern.

Pushing Ahead with Regional Integration: ASEAN's Agency in a Transitioning Global Order

Nazia Hussain | *RSIS Commentaries* | 20 March 2025

Increasing strategic competition among major powers pose a challenge to ASEAN's relevance in multilateralism and the rules-based international order. ASEAN must harness technological change and support energy transition to further regional integration as it strives to reaffirm its agency in an increasingly unsettled world.

The AI Action Summit Offers Clues for the Future of Multilateralism

Jose Miguelito Enriquez | *RSIS Commentaries* | 19 March 2025

The recently held AI Action Summit in Paris offers some positive prospects and critical challenges that will influence the future of multilateralism. Amidst unfavourable geopolitical headwinds, like-minded states should assert their collective agency to develop effective global AI governance.

ASEAN, China, and the South China Sea

Ong Keng Yong and Nazia Hussain | *Sustainable Peace of the South China Sea: The 20th Anniversary of Signing the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea* | January 2025

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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