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ASEAN's Trade Networks as Pillars of Security and Stability

By Yunkang Liu

SYNOPSIS

The Southeast Asian grouping, ASEAN, will be better equipped to withstand geopolitical shocks and global challenges, especially when traditional security challenges become increasingly formidable, by treating its trade networks as shared security assets and building a resilient system inspired by stable physical structures.

COMMENTARY

ASEAN's security framework is mainly based on four symmetrical pillars: political, economic, strategic and normative. The regional grouping must rely on a multidimensional approach to effectively respond to internal and external shocks. In the context of global supply chain restructuring and intensifying US-China rivalry, ASEAN has the potential to build a more resilient and adaptable regional security architecture by viewing trade networks as shared regional security assets and integrating security logic into trade governance. By focusing on structural stability, economic connectivity, and strategic adaptability, ASEAN can promote a new model of regional autonomy through a "trade for stability" approach.

ASEAN's Security Not To Be Narrowly Based

From a physics perspective, highly stable structures exhibit high symmetry and rely on multiple points of support to disperse external forces. For example, a triangle is the most stable two-dimensional structure, while in three-dimensional space, tetrahedrons and regular polyhedrons are the most stable due to their balanced force distribution. Applying this concept to [ASEAN's security structure](#), its stability similarly requires multiple supports and cannot rely on a single factor.

Normatively, the ASEAN security framework has long upheld the principles of "[ASEAN](#)

[Centrality](#)" and the "[ASEAN Way](#)". ASEAN's existing political cooperation and regional dialogue mechanisms, such as the [ASEAN Regional Forum \(ARF\)](#), the [East Asia Summit \(EAS\)](#), and [ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus \(ADMM Plus\)](#), serve as the three security pillars that support ASEAN's central principles. Mutual respect and consensus-based decision-making, one of ASEAN's guiding principles, encourage cooperation and stability among its member nations.

In physics, stable structures require multiple points of support to balance external pressures and prevent collapse from a single-point failure. However, even stable structures fracture at weak nodes. ASEAN faces several pressures arising from the territorial disputes in the South China Sea and [Myanmar's crisis](#). These have exposed consensus-based decision-making as a "single-point failure risk", much like an overloaded joint in a truss.

In contrast, economic networks provide a more resilient foundation for security. Economic connectivity and [liberalisation](#) not only strengthen ASEAN's integration but also distribute pressure across a broader structure within the region, thereby reducing the impact of a single event on regional security.

For example, as the [US-China trade war](#) and the [de-risking strategy evolve](#), ASEAN is becoming an increasingly important node in the global production network. Just as a stable physical structure relies on multiple supports to distribute pressure, ASEAN can take advantage of this trend by deepening regional economic integration and diversifying supply chains. In this way, its economic ties can support regional security to a certain extent even when geopolitical tensions escalate.

Trade Networks as Structural Reinforcement

Currently, ASEAN is the [fourth-largest economy in the world](#), with a total GDP of [US\\$3.8 trillion](#) in 2023. The rapid growth of regional trade has made ASEAN a key node in the global supply chain. Particularly after the entry into force of the [Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership \(RCEP\)](#), ASEAN's trade ties with China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand have become closer, with ASEAN's trade with RCEP members reaching [US\\$1.9 trillion](#) in 2023. If ASEAN can expand this trade network further, its security framework will gain stronger support.

China, the US, Australia, India, and Japan play key roles as external support points for ASEAN's security framework. Through cooperation with China under the Belt and Road Initiative, many ASEAN member states have strengthened their [economic ties](#) with China while enhancing their security through [cooperation](#) with the United States.

ASEAN also maintains economic benefits and strategic autonomy through trade partnerships with RCEP countries, mitigating its vulnerability to great-power competition. These relationships create multiple points of support, forming a "polyhedral" structure for regional security.

Moreover, ASEAN's security framework has gained more support through multilateral trade agreements such as the RCEP and the [ASEAN Free Trade Area \(AFTA\)](#). The global supply chain reorganisation is reshaping the regional economic landscape, as US-China competition accelerates the shift of manufacturing hubs to ASEAN.

The evidence suggests that Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam and Malaysia will become [key hubs in the global electronics and electric vehicle supply chains in the foreseeable future](#). Companies such as [Samsung and Apple](#) have moved parts of their production to Vietnam, while China's leading electric vehicle manufacturer [BYD](#) has increased its investment in Thailand's electric vehicle industry. This shift has consolidated ASEAN's position as the [core of global manufacturing](#), with trade expansion driving economic growth and potentially enhancing regional security.

In physics, stability depends on an equilibrium of forces. Likewise, ASEAN continually adjusts its strategic posture to maintain balance amid evolving US-China relations. By broadening partnerships and strengthening economic resilience, ASEAN can better withstand geopolitical pressures and prevent its security framework from collapsing under external strain.

In 2023, the United States was ASEAN's second-largest trading partner, with bilateral trade reaching [US\\$500 billion](#), after China's [US\\$911.7 billion](#). Trade with the EU reached [US\\$279.7 billion](#). To enhance its resilience, ASEAN may need to leverage its trade advantages, remain neutral in the US-China competition, and strengthen ties with other economies to build more diversified economic security networks.

However, whether trade alone can sustain ASEAN's security framework depends on the stability of its structure. In physics, stable structures follow the "minimum energy principle", which states that systems naturally stabilise in a state that requires the least energy input. Similarly, ASEAN prioritises low-cost institutional binding over high-cost military alliances.

Since the announcement of the AUKUS and Quad initiatives, [reactions from Southeast Asian countries have been mixed](#). The main concern is that these actions could exacerbate the regional arms race. Economic ties provide another dimension to ASEAN's security: by deepening multilateral trade mechanisms such as RCEP, fostering regional market integration, and diversifying trade networks, ASEAN can strengthen its security with an "[economic community](#)" rather than relying solely on external security commitments.

Yet, an economically driven security model is not without risks. History shows that economic and trade interconnection does not necessarily guarantee security or stability. Before World War I, Europe had a degree of economic integration. However, it [failed to prevent war](#). This shows that trade networks are not enough to ensure security on their own. In light of the growing competition between the United States and China, ASEAN may also need to ensure that its economic network can effectively promote regional security and not disrupt the structural balance of power and stability due to [trade wars](#).

According to [The State of Southeast Asia 2025 Survey](#), to enhance its resilience and prove its relevance, 30.2 per cent of respondents suggest that ASEAN should focus on increasing intra-regional trade and investment, while 18.4 per cent believe it should build alternative supply chains to avoid being caught up in future trade wars.

Additionally, from the perspective of ASEAN's internal structural equilibrium and stability, Singapore occupies a pivotal position within ASEAN's trade and logistics

networks, while countries such as Vietnam, Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia are well integrated into regional value chains. In contrast, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos still [hold significant development potential](#).

Narrowing these internal disparities, identified as one of the goals of the [ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint 2025](#), would help ASEAN achieve greater structural balance, an equilibrium of forces, and enhanced regional stability.

Strategic Adaptation in an Uncertain Environment

ASEAN has the potential to transform trade into a stabilising force rather than a vulnerability to external pressures. At the same time, ASEAN's security framework can evolve to strengthen interdependence, akin to a regular polyhedron.

Trade networks built based on multilateral trade agreements provide multiple points of support, with each face of the polyhedron representing key external partners, such as China, the US, Japan, Australia, and the EU, that significantly influence ASEAN's security and development. However, in such a security architecture, the principle of "ASEAN Centrality" is the core that underpins its security framework.

Amid rising global instability, ASEAN may be better positioned to respond to geopolitical shocks and global challenges by building a security system that mirrors the "highly stable structures" described in physics while capitalising on its strengths in international trade networks, herein presented as the "ASEAN-Centred Security Polyhedron" model.

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