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No. 058/2025 dated 9 May 2025

Harnessing Emerging Technologies in Defence: Strategic Approach for ASEAN Unity

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SYNOPSIS

*At a retreat in February 2025, ASEAN's defence ministers adopted a joint statement on cooperation in artificial intelligence in the defence sector. **Muhammad Faizal** notes that the joint statement implies the need for a strategic approach to harnessing emerging technologies to sustain ASEAN unity.*

COMMENTARY

At a retreat in Penang, Malaysia, on 26 February 2025, the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) adopted a [joint statement](#) on Cooperation in the Field of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the Defence Sector. The defence ministers committed themselves to promoting the "accountable and responsible use of AI in the defence sector" and "foster inclusivity in the advancement of AI and progressively bridge the existing disparities in AI among ASEAN Member States." Their emphasis on inclusivity could indicate better cooperation in addressing the security risks from emerging technologies and in defence industry collaboration.

But beyond these operational and technical objectives, inclusivity could also point to harnessing emerging technologies in line with a strategic approach that sustains organisational unity. Unity is at the heart of ASEAN multilateralism, including regional security and defence cooperation. Currently, centrifugal forces from major power competition continue to challenge ASEAN unity.



At the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) Retreat in Penang, Malaysia on 26 February 2025, defence ministers highlighted the need for ASEAN to harness the benefits of emerging technologies while proactively managing their risks. *Image source: ASEAN Secretariat.*

Emerging Technology and Geopolitical Security

Discourse over emerging technologies often examines the risk of militaries "developing terrifying new applications", in the words of United Nations (UN) Secretary-General António Guterres, [speaking](#) at a conference on disarmament in 2024. These applications include autonomous weapons systems and AI decision-making systems. He also warned of an arms race in outer space moving from "speculation to real possibility". The UN secretary-general pointed out that these risks create "a prospect with potentially catastrophic consequences."

The consequences could be catastrophic not only because they result in a high-tech arms race that might lead to more [instability and conflict](#). Or a [security dilemma](#) that fuels strategic distrust because of one country's technological efforts to enhance security, indirectly making other countries feel less secure.

At the structural level, there is also the risk of strategic distrust between countries growing and getting in the way of multilateralism, which is already under pressure in the increasingly turbulent world. Furthermore, technological evolution is [changing](#) the concept of power in the international system. Technological power competition and inequalities between tech-leading and tech-taking countries also challenge multilateral cooperation regarding norms and rules-making. Nevertheless, there is still hope amid the gloom.

Leveraging Technology for Multilateral Relevance

Despite the potential risks, the prospect of rewards from harnessing emerging technologies is promising. The realisation of these rewards collectively depends on the efforts of multilateral institutions such as the United Nations and ASEAN to promote the use of emerging technologies for international cooperation.

Relatedly, progress in these efforts would shape confidence in the relevance of such multilateral institutions. After all, an institution such as ASEAN must be useful in order to remain relevant. In the face of myriad challenges, including the potential risks of emerging technologies, maintaining unity is crucial. Institutional relevance would be a practical reason for member states of multilateral institutions to maintain unity.

Multilateral efforts to harvest rewards from emerging technologies may be best exemplified by the decision in January 2025 to [re-organise](#) the Office of the UN Secretary-General's Envoy on Technology into the new Office for Digital and Emerging Technologies. This office will work on five strategic areas that aim to bring together UN member states.

These areas include (i) serving as a focal point for digital cooperation among UN member states and stakeholders and (ii) facilitating inclusive, multi-stakeholder policy dialogue on digital and emerging technologies.

Likewise, ASEAN, as a significant player in the region, also has the potential to shape the future of the technological landscape. ASEAN's efforts to harness emerging technologies should contribute to strategic areas crucial to its unity. There are existing efforts in ASEAN to harness emerging technologies from a functional perspective.

For example, the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Science, Technology and Innovation (AMMSTI) emphasises [economic priorities](#) such as biotechnology, food science and sustainable energy. The [ASEAN Digital Ministers' Meeting \(ADGMIN\) in 2024](#) focused on norms-making, such as the ASEAN Guide on AI Governance and Ethics, to guide public policies and the private sector in the ASEAN region.

Emerging Technology and Strategic Areas for Unity

Next, ASEAN could articulate a conceptual framework that illustrates how existing efforts and new initiatives on emerging technologies serve strategic areas crucial to ASEAN unity, including the defence sector.

Research on the topic of ASEAN unity suggests three strategic areas. These are: (1) enabling an ASEAN collective voice on international security issues, (2) enhancing ASEAN institutional processes and capacity, and (3) enhancing the preparedness and resilience of ASEAN member states.

Strategic Area 1

First, a [shared regional identity](#) is necessary to instil solidarity and a sense of belonging. A shared identity also fosters unity by emphasising shared values and cultural elements among ASEAN member states. Group unity could put ASEAN in a better position to speak with a collective voice on international security affairs. A collective voice is key to the capabilities to set agendas and convene meetings, which are ASEAN's soft power, given that it is not a military alliance.

Under the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community, digital platforms such as the [ASEAN Cultural Heritage Digital Archive \(ACHDA\) website](#) facilitate local knowledge sharing and promote cultural exchanges. The ASEAN defence sector could explore how to better use such platforms for defence diplomacy to promote cultural exchanges among military officers and maintain personal relations with their peers.

These efforts could take place between physical meetings and complement the [ASEAN Defence Interaction Programme](#) (ADIP). This initiative started in 2014 to “inculcate the sense of belonging in ASEAN through community building and integration among ASEAN defence and military establishments.”

Strategic Area 2

Second, enhancing ASEAN's [institutional processes](#) and capacity is key to maintaining the group's usefulness. After all, the ASEAN model of multilateralism is [process-based](#), which includes meetings, dialogues and consultations.

Process-based multilateralism in the ASEAN defence sector currently includes non-field activities such as workshops, seminars and tabletop exercises. These activities serve as a means for regional capacity-building and confidence-building among member states. It is worth exploring how emerging technologies could enhance these processes.

The ASEAN defence sector could explore the viability of commercially available [generative AI and large language model](#) (LLM) systems to create more challenging training or crisis scenarios for tabletop exercises. Another example is the wealth of information on the ADMM website, which could guide ADMM activities. It is worth exploring how an AI chatbot could improve the browsing experience on the ADMM website pages.

Strategic Area 3

Third, enhancing the preparedness and resilience of ASEAN member states is akin to improving machine performance by improving its moving parts. After all, the capacity of member states collectively makes up the capacity of ASEAN.

The ASEAN defence sector could learn from the ASEAN economic sector. The ASEAN Digital Masterplan 2025 mentions using emerging technologies to create a conducive business environment in ASEAN member states and grow the regional digital economy.

One area worth exploring is how developments in commercially available [emerging technologies](#) could help ASEAN militaries improve their capacities to manage a complex humanitarian assistance and disaster response (HADR) environment at the national and regional levels. These technologies include drones for search and rescue and distributing supplies and [3D printing](#) for on-site production of critical supplies.

Another area is the use of emerging technologies to secure the critical undersea infrastructure (CUI) environment in Southeast Asia. At the [ADMM Retreat](#) in February this year, it was suggested that "ASEAN militaries further explore cooperation on CUI security, especially as militaries are often called upon to support response efforts to disruptions."

From the national perspective, ASEAN militaries could explore how commercially available aerial and sea drones can support response operations after a disruption happens. From the regional perspective, ASEAN could explore how digital technologies can serve as an ASEAN-wide information-sharing platform – similar to the ASEAN Our Eyes initiative for counterterrorism – for undersea cable and pipeline-related incidents.

Conclusion

This paper suggested that ASEAN must prove useful by harnessing emerging technologies to remain relevant multilaterally. Relevance would be a practical reason for member states to maintain unity. To that end, the ASEAN defence sector could articulate a conceptual framework that illustrates how existing efforts and new initiatives on emerging technologies serve strategic areas that are crucial to ASEAN unity.

Ultimately, these strategic areas should (i) support defence diplomacy to cultivate a shared regional identity, (ii) enhance ASEAN institutional processes and capacity, and (iii) enhance the preparedness and resilience of ASEAN militaries, including in facing a complex HADR environment and geostrategically important CUI environment.

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