

ASEAN 2045: Setting Ambitious Goals Amid Uncertain Times

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# What's Next for ASEAN?



*As the conclusion of the current ASEAN Blueprint 2025 approached, many have been wondering what's next for ASEAN. That question was answered this past May 2025 with the launch of the new ASEAN Community Vision 2045. While the document sharpens strategic priorities in regional security and economic resilience, the region will inevitably need to contend with geopolitical headwinds which complicate the implementation of this new set of goals. Photo by the Indonesian Embassy in Sri Lanka via Wikimedia Commons.*



## FEATURED COMMENTARY

**ASEAN 2045: Setting Ambitious Goals Amid Uncertain Times**

By Jose Miguelito Enriquez



Leaders of the ASEAN member states pose for a family photo during the 46th ASEAN Leaders' Summit in Kuala Lumpur. In this quarter's featured commentary, Jose Miguelito Enriquez analyses the ASEAN Community Vision 2045, the third iteration of ASEAN's community-building blueprints, which was launched at the summit. Photo by Presidential Communications Office (Philippines) via Wikimedia Commons.

*The ASEAN Community Vision 2045 marks a significant evolution in ASEAN's regional integration. It addresses shifting geopolitical dynamics and emerging global megatrends with bolder goals across its community pillars. While ASEAN sets ambitious targets to solidify its relevance and resilience, its success will hinge on sustained commitment, coordination, and engagement amid growing global uncertainty.*

**Commentary**

One of the most awaited outcomes of the 46th ASEAN Leaders' Summit in Kuala Lumpur last 26-27 May 2025 was the unveiling of the ASEAN Commu-

nity Vision (ACV) 2045, the third iteration of ASEAN's community-building blueprints. Under the theme "Resilient, Innovative, Dynamic, and People-Centred ASEAN", the region seeks to seize the opportunities and confront the challenges that stem from seventeen key "megatrends", which include great power competition, digitalisation and new technologies, supply chain resilience, the climate crisis, and an ageing population.

**Reckoning with New Geopolitical Realities**

ASEAN's visions for its three community pillars – the ASEAN Political Security Community (APSC),

ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), and ASEAN Sociocultural Community (ASCC) – are not simple rehashes of past Strategic Plans. As ASEAN recognises the realities of a more uncertain world, the ACV 2045 demonstrates how the regional organisation strategically places itself in this new geopolitical environment and how it can effectively advance regional interests.

For example, while some previous objectives in the APSC Blueprint 2025 were reiterated in the APSC Strategic Plan 2026-2035, many changes are apparent as ASEAN sets a markedly stronger tone. The newest APSC plan not

only voices ASEAN's support for the multilateral system and aim to be a primary player in the regional security architecture, it also introduces ASEAN's goal to contribute towards the rules-based international order, a term not mentioned in Blueprint 2025. This is a clear acknowledgement by ASEAN that the region will inevitably be affected by the exacerbating strains within the international order.

Another area where the APSC breaks new ground is in its desire to project a common "ASEAN position on regional and global is-

*Continued on Page 3*

sues". While ASEAN has always endeavoured to maintain its centrality in regional affairs, in this new blueprint, ASEAN recognises that a timely and unified response to emerging developments will help to maintain its credibility in global affairs, but must be done in a way that would not violate long-held principles of consultation, mutual respect and non-interference.

In the 2026-2030 Strategic Plan for the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), ASEAN envisions harnessing emerging "megatrends" in the digital, green, and blue economies through six strategic goals with the ultimate aim of becoming the world's fourth-largest economy by 2045. The AEC's interest in these economies is familiar to observers as ASEAN members have already been working towards frameworks or strategies in each of these domains in previous years.

Where the AEC's goals have changed are in its plans to shockproof its supply chains and elevate its position in global value chains. While this partly reflects the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic disruptions, it also signifies bolder steps taken to protect the region from the economic vulnerabilities resulting from the global resurgence of protectionism.

While the previous AEC Blueprint outlined steps such as information sharing and standards harmonisation to enhance ASEAN's value chain, the new Strategic Plan seeks to facilitate regional industrial cooperation in pursuit of this goal for the first time. In fact, the

AEC now names several strategic sectors that it aims to seek cooperation with, including semiconductors, agribusiness, and healthcare.

The ACV also includes a new strategic plan for the ASCC, which is geared towards making ASEAN more relevant to the people of Southeast Asia. The plan addresses people-centred issues such as access gaps to digital services, adequate employment opportunities, healthcare, and women's and youth empowerment.

### The Challenges Ahead

The ACV 2045 demonstrates ASEAN's commitment to remain the centre for regional dialogue and a key driver for the region's security architecture. This means that the ASEAN-Plus meetings slated later in the year will be closely watched, especially the East Asia Summit, which failed to issue a joint leaders' statement last year, allegedly over disagreements between ASEAN's dialogue partners.

Moreover, in its relations with major powers, contentious issues remain. While both ASEAN and China have committed to a final text for the Code of Conduct on the South China Sea by 2026, key questions remain unresolved, particularly on the code's legally binding nature. Relations between ASEAN and the United States have also been complicated by tariffs imposed by the second Trump administration. While not mentioning the US by name, ASEAN leaders condemned "unilateral actions" and protectionist restrictions and reiterated their support for the rules-based trading

system in a statement.

More strains in the geopolitical environment threaten to further reduce trust in multilateral processes, such as the ASEAN-Plus mechanisms. Indeed, the APSC recognises this in the new strategic plan, which is why it insists on maintaining the rules-based order. Confidence-building and pursuing mutually agreeable, practical cooperation with external partners will be key to enhancing the credibility of ASEAN-Plus mechanisms.

For the AEC, it is important that while frontiers in the digital and green economies are reached, the region must be mindful of the need to close the regional development gap. Indeed, ASEAN's frameworks have generated economic benefits, contributing an estimated 5 per cent of regional GDP growth over the past decade. However, more work to close this development gap needs to be done, especially as ASEAN works towards Timor-Leste's membership accession later this year.

Moreover, in pushing for industrial collaboration, policy harmonisation remains a critical ingredient for a truly effective regional industrial policy. Uneven or divergent economic planning will inevitably reduce investor confidence and make it less likely that Southeast Asia will be viewed as a united economic bloc rather than the sum of ten (or eleven) member states. Regional frameworks such as the Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA), which is on track to be finalised this year, will be crucial building blocks in implementing the AEC's new

vision.

### Conclusion

The ASEAN Community Vision 2045 represents the region's higher aspirations to face the complexities of an evolving geopolitical environment. The ACV 2045 combines continuing previous progress in community-building, breaking new ground to seize the potentials in nascent trends, and achieving concrete milestones in previously challenging sticking points.

However, in taking its community-building initiatives to the next level, ASEAN finds itself swimming against the geopolitical currents of the day. This means that ensuring the progress in the ACV 2045 will not be easy and likely more difficult to implement than in previous iterations of the community vision. Nonetheless, ASEAN's bold commitments in the ACV demonstrate members' confidence that multilateral cooperation can still produce substantial and tangible benefits.

As ASEAN sets its sights for its 60th anniversary in 2027, the priorities set by the next two ASEAN chairs – the Philippines and Singapore – will be critical in setting the pace for implementing the ACV's objectives. In the long term, all ASEAN members should recognise that significantly more effort and mutual commitment will be essential to maintaining the momentum and proving ASEAN's resilience. ■

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## Rethinking Multilateralism in a New Era



Dr Joel Ng, Head of CMS, with Dr Samir Puri, Director, Global Governance and Security Centre, Chatham House

The Head of the Centre for Multilateralism Studies, Dr Joel Ng, travelled through Europe to give talks and engage academic and thinktank counterparts in Brussels, Leiden, Oxford, and London from 7-14 May 2025. The focus of discussions was how multilateralism was evolving following major changes to US foreign policy.

In Brussels, Dr Ng participated in a roundtable titled, "Multilateralism in a Multipolar World: Strategic Choices in Asia" with Lizza Bomassi of the EU Institute for Security Studies. He observed that while Europe saw the decline of the liberal order as a severe threat, rising powers saw it more as an opportunity. Preserving a rules-based order was dependent on the strength of domestic rule of law, and this could be beyond the

reach of foreign policy. Nevertheless, multilateralism and rules-based frameworks would still be necessary and the ASEAN-EU nexus could be an important framework around which to further global co-operation.

In Leiden University and the University of Oxford, Dr Ng spoke on prospects for multilateralism and the rules-based order in the new era. Global South rising powers had their own multilateral initiatives such as long-standing regionalism projects such as ASEAN but also new ones such as BRICS and Sino-centric multilateralism. Meanwhile, multilateral rule-making was still active with new developments such as the International Maritime Organization's recent agreement to tax carbon dioxide emissions by ships

and the World Health Organization's recently concluded pandemic prevention, preparedness and response accord.

Both state and non-state actors had different demands for agency (or strategic autonomy) as well as structure (such as rules based frameworks). Therefore, how these tensions will be resolved would shape the trajectory of the new order and characteristics of multilateralism. These could revert to the status quo of a rules-based order characterized by 'organized hypocrisy' around its breaches, see rising or declining influence of states and markets, or potentially the emergence of statecraft-based negotiation (rather than rules-based order) as the primary organizing principle.

In London, Dr Ng spoke at Chatham House on the topic, "Multilateralism after Munich" where he explored in detail the alternative formats being developed outside the West but also discussed some of their challenges. Key among these was the high cost of delivering global public goods and small states would be keen to preserve multilateralism as 'sword' (to advance their interests), and 'shield' (to resist coercion and interference).

In sum, these were productive discussions marked by an openness to new thinking but also careful consideration to avoid undermining critical pillars of international order in the search for more effective modes of global governance. ■

# Malaysia in the Hot Seat: Chairing ASEAN through an Interregnum



(Clockwise from left) Dr Joel Ng, Head of CMS, Mr Shahrman Lockman of ISIS Malaysia, Ms Joanne Lin of ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, and Dr Sarah Teo of RSIS

All eyes were on Kuala Lumpur during the last week of May as Malaysia chaired the 46th ASEAN Leaders' Summit and presided over important milestones, such as the ASEAN Community Vision (ACV) 2045. To analyse the Summit's outcomes, the Centre for Multilateralism Studies (CMS) hosted a webinar on 30 May 2025 featuring Mr Shahrman Lockman of the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (Malaysia), Ms Joanne Lin of the ASEAN Studies Centre of the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, Dr Joel Ng, Head of CMS, and Asst Prof Sarah Teo, Deputy Head of Graduate Studies at RSIS as moderator.

Mr Lockman opened his

remarks by explaining that as a founding member of ASEAN, Malaysia faced higher expectations in its chairmanship versus previous chairs; however, these expectations have been tempered by structural constraints within ASEAN, the Summit's extensive agenda, and members' need to compromise. These challenges could be amplified later in 2025, when both the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and East Asia Summit (EAS) take place.

Ms Lin focused on the ACV 2045, which she explains is a significant document that describes how ASEAN will respond to a "world in flux" and how it ambitiously positions itself in this new strategic environment. Furthermore, the ASEAN-GCC

-China Summit demonstrates ASEAN's desire to diversify its external partnerships and Malaysia's foreign policy strategy of pursuing cooperation with emerging regions. Nonetheless, challenges lie ahead in implementing ASEAN's strategic plans and ensuring political unity of ASEAN members in contentious issues like the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea.

Dr Ng took a "birds-eye view" by exploring the evolution of the ASEAN community blueprints to uncover how ASEAN's vision and ambitions have changed since its first iteration in 2009. For example, in its desire to create a "rules-based community", the ACV 2045 places much

greater emphasis on the role of rules and norms in developing the next stage of the ASEAN Community in comparison with the 2009 roadmap. In sum, Dr Ng argues the ACV 2045 lays down ASEAN's regional interests very well and offers a template for reconciling intraregional differences as ASEAN deepens its integration efforts.

After the panellists' remarks, an engaging Q&A session took place where the audience asked questions regarding Timor Leste's accession to ASEAN, what to expect in the ARF and EAS later this year, and ASEAN's ongoing efforts regarding Myanmar. ■



## The International Politics of Communication: Representing Community in a Globalizing World



[L-R] Dr Patrick Quinton-Brown, Assistant Professor at the School of Social Sciences, Singapore Management University; Dr Alan Chong, Senior Fellow at CMS; Dr Gulizar Hacıyakupoglu, Senior Associate Fellow at the Centre of Excellence for National Security, RSIS, and Dr Joel Ng, Head of CMS

Dr Alan Chong, Senior Fellow at the Centre for Multilateralism Studies (CMS), RSIS, introduced his latest book at an RSIS book launch seminar on 12 June 2025. The book, titled “The International Politics of Communication: Representing Community in a Globalizing World”, examines the political nature of international communications. Dr Chong posits that politics is about competition — both in terms of discourses as well as models of social and political organisation. Contestation may involve either the politics of representation or of information. The book puts forth a policy-relevant message: it calls to interpret

and unmask the international politics of communication, urging readers to apply critical reading of all texts and sights.

Discussants Dr Patrick Quinton-Brown, Assistant Professor at the School of Social Sciences, Singapore Management University; and Dr Gulizar Hacıyakupoglu, Senior Associate Fellow at the Centre of Excellence for National Security, RSIS; congratulated Dr Chong on his comprehensive new work. They highlighted the relevant contributions of the extensive book which covers a gamut of issues concerning international communications in politics, ranging from global

information flows to surveillance systems and the digital divide.

Analysing through the lens of international relations (IR) theory, Dr Quinton-Brown noted that the book makes an argument at the intersection between political science and communication studies. Culture and international communications, as the book shows, has been a blind spot in IR theory.

Dr Hacıyakupoglu noted that despite having a strong theoretical basis and multiple practical examples, the book still manages to spark new questions and ideas on information control and

the digital divide. While it alludes to the Internet’s capacity to offer spaces for marginalised voices and for activism to hold authorities accountable, the book also simultaneously demonstrates the potential online to serve as a space for voicing extremist opinions and spreading harm, raising questions on relevant technological developments’ equalising potential.

In the discussion, panelists agreed that the book manages to examine delicate issues in a way that does justice to intricate questions by moving beyond binaries and exposing their multifaceted nature.■

## Multilateral Matters: News Roundup

Right after its 46th Leaders' Summit, ASEAN held the inaugural [ASEAN-GCC-China Summit](#) in Kuala Lumpur on 27 May. The event was hailed as a pivotal moment in relations between Southeast Asian countries and the Gulf states. Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim of Malaysia, this year's ASEAN chair, said that the event was a "new chapter in ASEAN's journey of outward-looking engagement". In a [joint statement](#), the three parties committed to explore collaborations in economic integration, connectivity, energy security, agriculture, and people-to-people exchanges.

Defence leaders convened in Singapore for the annual Shangri-La Dialogue from 30 May to 1 June. This year's keynote speaker was French President Emmanuel Macron. Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim delivered a Special Address; he spoke on the challenges facing the region in both hard security and economic security. [US Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth](#) also addressed the gathering, stressing that the Indo-Pacific remains a strategic priority for the US and suggested that US allies in Asia should also ramp up their defence spending, echoing a similar sentiment Trump officials have made to European countries. [CMS Senior Fellow Alan Chong](#) wrote about what this edition of the Shangri-La Dialogue portends for Asian security for the RSIS Commentary Series.

In Canada, the [leaders of the G7](#) met for their annual summit on 16 to 17 June. While discussions on global security and economic resilience took place, concrete outcomes were limited. No joint communiqué was issued, underscoring the leaders' disagreements over Ukraine, the Middle East, and international economic policy. Canada issued a Chair's Summary in its place. US President Trump's early departure, reportedly to manage escalating tensions between Israel and Iran, along with his refusal to meet with Mexico's President Sheinbaum and Ukraine's President Zelenskyy were also [seen as a bane](#) to the proceedings.

The second quarter of 2025 closed with the NATO Summit held at The Hague, Netherlands from 24 to 25 June. The key moment of the summit was member states' pledge to raise defense and security spending to [5% of GDP by 2035](#). However, Spain's Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez subsequently admitted that his country is unlikely to meet this commitment. Nonetheless, this was interpreted as a victory for President Trump, who had advocated for these commitments since his first term in office. The unusually high praise that Trump received also grabbed headlines. Finally, Trump and Zelenskyy also met at The Hague to discuss [Ukraine's air defence](#).

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### SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

#### Multilateralism in a Post-American World

Joel Ng | *Project Syndicate* | 15 June 2025

*Multilateral organizations may be facing their most severe challenges to date, but the multilateralists have not suddenly disappeared. Many leaders still recognize the inescapable logic of the modern world, and bottom-up efforts at rule-making and regional cooperation are continuing even as the United States pulls back from multilateralism.*

#### Shangri-La Dialogue 2025: Asian Security Going Forward

Alan Chong | *RSIS Commentaries* | 4 June 2025

*The Shangri-La Dialogue 2025 has galvanised Asia's security through far-reaching questions that were first aired at the end of World War. The idea of "Peace*

*Through Strength" was enunciated by US Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth. This was balanced by discussions on the importance of international law, communicating efficaciously, and building trust.*

#### A Reinvanized BIMSTEC Hopes to Avoid Regional Pitfalls

Nazia Hussain | *East Asia Forum* | 13 May 2025

*The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) holds particular salience as leaders commit to strengthening regional cooperation while multilateralism comes under debate.*

#### Philippine AI Governance: Time to Shift Gears

Jose Miguelito Enriquez | *Fulcrum* | 16 April 2025

*While acknowledging the importance of establishing a framework for AI governance, the Philippine government has not enacted relevant laws or introduced regulatory policies through executive action.*

#### The International Politics of Communication: Representing Community in a Globalizing World

Alan Chong | *University of Michigan Press* | March 2025

*In an era of globalization, international communication constantly takes place across borders, defying sovereign control as it influences opinion. While diplomacy between states is the visible face of international relations, this "informal diplomacy" is usually less visible but no less powerful. Information politics can be found in propaganda, Internet politics, educational exchanges, tourism, and even popular film.*

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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