



# Weathering the Storm – Navigating ASEAN Disaster Management to Sustainability

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### **KEY TAKEAWAYS**

- US aid policy changes in 2025, notably, the closure of USAID, have caused significant disruption to the humanitarian and development aid community.
- Many look to several countries, notably China, to replace the US contributions. None are likely to replace the United States, and the overall aid budget will decrease while needs continue to rise.
- In Southeast Asia, the reliance on dialogue partner financial support relative to member state contributions for disaster management has been a cause for concern for a decade. This period of upheaval in the aid system offers an opportunity for ASEAN to revisit the options for a financially sustainable disaster management system in the region.

### **COMMENTARY**

The international humanitarian and development aid sector received shock treatment earlier this year with the shift in US aid policy, which removed funds from many programmes and supporting personnel in Southeast Asia and around the world. Many of these organisations have turned their attention to China and other players who could replace the United States. However, no quick replacement has taken place. Instead, the mantra is “do less, with less” despite needs growing from Ukraine to Myanmar, Gaza to Sudan. Within Southeast Asia, dependence on ASEAN’s dialogue partners, especially the United States, in the area of disaster management has been a cause for concern over the past decade. Will the latest US policy shifts be a catalyst for a

much-needed change in how ASEAN member states support the grouping's regional agenda and global leadership ambitions?

### **Seismic Shifts in Aid Landscape**

This year has proven pivotal for the international humanitarian and development aid system. Earlier, the new Trump administration decided to close down USAID and many of its foreign assistance programmes, causing the world's single largest donor country to send shock waves through a humanitarian and development aid system that was already on its knees. As 2024 closed, the international aid system faced decreasing budgets, new and protracted crises the world over, and a failure to meet the needs of millions of affected people. The seismic shift in US aid policy has affected humanitarian and development aid programmes and partnerships in every region of the world.

In Southeast Asia, these shifts have raised questions as to how ASEAN will recalibrate in sectors impacted by the aid cuts. Previously, the US-ASEAN relationship notably cooperated in areas ranging from HIV-related services to disaster early warning systems. The US cuts have [terminated projects like SERVIR](#), which was founded in 2023 in collaboration with NASA and worked to provide early warning systems for natural hazards in ASEAN.

Many have suggested strategic gains for China while the United States steps back from its historic and predominant unipolar status. Yet, over the past decade, China's foreign aid contributions have been much lower than other regional actors like Japan. In 2017, [China contributed US\\$128 million to ASEAN, whereas Japan averages US\\$689 million](#) in contributions annually – over five times the contributions of China. This raises questions as to how ASEAN will restructure disaster governance in a time of increasing disaster risks?

### **ASEAN-China Disaster Management Cooperation in Perspective**

China became an ASEAN dialogue partner in 1991 and commenced its disaster relief efforts with the association in the late 1990s. This was in alignment with the ASEAN Regional Forum to expand collaboration with regional states. By 2003, the relationship blossomed, and China and ASEAN elevated their relationship to a "[Strategic Partnership](#)".

In 2014, ASEAN and China signed a [memorandum of understanding \(MoU\)](#), acknowledging "closer relations" for disaster management specifically. Under the MoU, China agreed to provide ASEAN with RMB 50 million (approximately US\$7 million) over three years to support ASEAN disaster management. It also established the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA) in 2018 to synthesise aid efforts and provide leadership within the aid system.

After the Mandalay earthquake on 28 March 2025, Beijing was [one of the first](#) actors to provide humanitarian aid, including [tents, blankets and first aid kits](#), worth US\$13.76 million. Shortly after, China provided a further US\$137 million, which was used for [food, medicines and support for disaster response teams](#). On 3 April, Channel NewsAsia noted that "[the most ubiquitous](#)" emergency responders on site were from

China. By comparison, the United States provided [US\\$9 million](#), a staggeringly lower contribution than China's.

### **From Aid to Investment?**

Despite China's contributions, [some observers remain sceptical](#) and maintain that Beijing has not prioritised humanitarian assistance. China has [historically held a policy of non-intervention](#). While there is some evidence to suggest that it is moving away from this approach, there is still much uncertainty regarding the influence the shift will have on humanitarian assistance.

Scholars like [Glen Diehl and Solomon Major](#) hold that humanitarian assistance acts as a Chinese soft power tool, whereas [others](#) highlight that humanitarianism is not high on China's foreign policy agenda. China does not have an established humanitarian aid department that consistently provides financial support to ASEAN; contributions tend to be on an ad hoc basis, as seen with the Myanmar earthquake. Lina Gong highlighted President Xi Jinping's statement in 2023 that China is "[an active supporter of, participant in and contributor to the international humanitarian cause](#)". It is worth paying attention to the language that Xi uses, [says Gong](#), describing China as a "participant" rather than a "leader" in this realm. Without a reliable support system in place, how will ASEAN readjust its disaster response mechanisms?

### **A Transition to ASEAN Disaster Resilience**

For the humanitarian and development aid sector, the change in aid commitments over the past decade, coupled with the quick shift in US policy in 2025, highlights the precariousness of relying on traditional donors. Despite new donors like China emerging, they will not replace the significant loss of support from traditional donors. This raises the question for ASEAN: If not them, then who? Is a deeper structural shift needed for the recalibration, or will we see "less with less"?

Over the past decade, ASEAN member states have met at the annual ASEAN Strategic Policy Dialogue on Disaster Management in Singapore. The event is co-organised by the Singapore Civil Defence Force, ASEAN Secretariat and ASEAN Coordinating Centre on Humanitarian Assistance in Disaster Management. At its first meeting in 2015, an Australian official asked the assembled delegates and speakers what the financial transition plan looked like for ASEAN to become self-sufficient. In August 2025, a Japanese official asked a similar question. It remains unanswered by ASEAN member states.

Several speakers over the years highlighted the need for a disaster risk reduction line in every ministry budget in ASEAN to ensure a more integrated approach. Others have proposed greater funding diversity from blended financing, dedicated taxes and crowd-sourcing to cryptocurrencies to overcome funding shortfalls. More recent efforts have focused on using data-sharing platforms like [KitaMATCH in Malaysia](#) to build trust between and link up private finance, government-linked companies and community-based organisations.

Despite the overwhelming trend that several ASEAN dialogue partners are likely to reduce their individual commitments to disaster management, and that the overall pool

of money available to support regional efforts from dialogue partners will shrink, there is potential to use this moment as a catalyst for change.

Within ASEAN, greater attention to funding regional efforts is needed for several reasons. The first is to bolster investment in multilateralism in general and ASEAN in particular to support people in the region exposed to disasters. The second is to encourage investment in disaster adaptation and mitigation measures as a cost-saving measure as every dollar spent on prevention saves significantly more in reconstruction costs. The third is to fulfil the ASEAN “One Region, One Response” mantra so that ASEAN can become a global leader in disaster management without being beholden to extra-regional aid.



Can ASEAN become a global leader in disaster management without being beholden to extra-regional aid? *Image source: AHA Centre.*

Through a careful recalibration of financing the regional disaster management sector ahead of 2030, ASEAN is well placed to embark on the substantive and significant next step of a truly sustainable and resilient organisation.

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