



Steadying the Ship

ASEAN's Role in Global Climate Action in the Trump 2.0 Era

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	1
Introduction	2
The Trump Administration's Climate Impacts	2
<i>Withdrawal from International Climate Governance</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Cancelled Climate Support</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Institutional Erosion and Scientific Disengagement</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Acceleration of Climate-Health Damages</i>	<i>4</i>
Impacts on Southeast Asian Interests	5
<i>Weakened Global Climate Action and Global South Abandonment</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>Financial and Technical Setbacks</i>	<i>6</i>
A Strategic Framework for ASEAN Climate Action	7
<i>1. Establish Leadership through Regional Integration and Global Carbon Markets</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>2. Elevate the Climate Mission through Multilateral and Diplomatic Avenues</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>3. Pioneer a Regional Climate Resilience and Data Hub</i>	<i>9</i>
About the Authors	10
About the Centre for Non-Traditional Security (NTS) Studies	11
About the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies	11

Executive Summary

The second Trump administration has reversed US climate policy, withdrawing from the Paris Agreement and defunding key international climate initiatives. This move creates a leadership and resource vacuum that weakens global climate action and leaves vulnerable regions like Southeast Asia facing direct financial and technical setbacks. Furthermore, the administration's policies accelerate climate-health damages by prioritising economic and military goals. The disruption arising from these changes, however, creates an opportunity for ASEAN to assert regional leadership. This report recommends a three-pronged strategy involving (1) establishing leadership in global carbon markets by harmonising a regional framework, (2) championing multilateral climate diplomacy with key partners, and (3) pioneering a regional data and resilience hub to counter the loss of US scientific support.

Introduction

The inauguration of the second Trump administration in 2025 marked a radical reversal of US engagement in global climate governance, with its withdrawal from international climate agreements and halting of financial support for developing countries. This unilateral disengagement coincided with the pivotal COP30 climate conference, sowing doubt in multilateral action and abandoning climate-vulnerable regions. For the ASEAN countries, which lie in one of the world's most climate-vulnerable regions, the US abandonment presents an urgent challenge. This report analyses the systemic impacts of US withdrawal on the international climate framework and Southeast Asian interests, arguing that this moment of disruption must be met with strategic action through ASEAN steadying the ship by asserting regional leadership to safeguard its interests and global climate momentum.

The Trump Administration's Climate Impacts

Withdrawal from International Climate Governance

President Trump has again ceded US leadership in international climate governance by formally withdrawing from the 2015 Paris Agreement for a second time. His administration also withdrew from all other related multilateral agreements and ceased financial commitments to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Under the pretext of “putting America first in international environmental agreements”,¹ the administration cited economic growth and boosting the domestic job market as key motivations.

The US withdrawal from international climate governance under the second Trump administration coincided with the 10th anniversary of the Paris Agreement. This year's Conference of the Parties of the UNFCCC (COP30) was expected to establish the global climate agenda for the upcoming decade. In the absence of the United States, the world's second largest greenhouse gas emitter, doubts have been sown whether an effective international climate framework is possible.² For example, Indonesia's special envoy for climate change and energy, Hashim Djojohadikusumo, has claimed that a US-absent Paris Agreement lacks meaning,³ while Argentinian President Javier Milei has deliberated echoing Trump's Paris Agreement withdrawal.⁴

¹ The White House, “Putting America First in International Environmental Agreements”, 21 January 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/putting-america-first-in-international-environmental-agreements/>.

² Schneider, Linda et al., “COP30 without the US: Climate Negotiations in Brazil under Pressure”, Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 8 August 2025, <https://www.boell.de/en/2025/08/08/cop30-without-us-climate-negotiations-brazil-under-pressure>.

³ Antara, “Paris Agreement No Longer Relevant for Indonesia, Says Envoy”, 31 January 2025, <https://en.antaranews.com/news/343334/paris-agreement-no-longer-relevant-for-indonesia-says-envoy>.

⁴ Mooney, Attracta, and Ciara Nugent, “Javier Milei Eyes Exit from Paris Climate Deal”, *Financial Times*, 24 January 2025, <https://www.ft.com/content/4957bc54-5b7b-496d-8c98-ba42ff508e85>.

The US disengagement also risks halting recent achievements in global climate governance. Operationalised at COP29, the Loss and Damage Fund (LDF) aims to support vulnerable communities affected by climate-induced irreversible losses and damage in developing countries.⁵ With the US withdrawing its financial and political support, the already underfunded LDF is in serious jeopardy.

Cancelled Climate Support

Trump's return has also reduced US financial and technical contributions to climate change mitigation and adaptation. Through various country- and region-specific programmes, President Joe Biden had actively incorporated climate change support into the annual budget of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) before its suspension under President Trump. This move comes in addition to the halting of all funds to the Green Climate Fund (GCF), which provides resources for developing countries to comply with their national climate action commitments and three country-specific Just Energy Transition Partnerships (JETPs), aimed at accelerating partner countries' energy transition.⁶ These initiatives are now largely dependent on continued support from other G7 members and the European Union. Table 1 summarises Trump's withdrawn support to various international climate avenues.

Table 1. Halted US International Climate Funding

Funding Avenue	Estimated Halted Amount (in US\$)
Climate Loss and Damage Fund	17.5 million – compared to 2024
UNFCCC Core Body Budget	7.4 million (22% of total UNFCCC budget) – compared to 2024
Green Climate Fund	4 billion (outstanding pledges) ⁷
Just Energy Transition Partnerships	Up to 4 billion (outstanding pledges) ⁸
USAID climate finance	4 billion – compared to 2024 ⁹

Institutional Erosion and Scientific Disengagement

Expanding on his first presidential tenure, Trump has also targeted the very foundations of environmental science and governance. Mass layoffs have occurred at both the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric

⁵ UN Trade & Development, “Key Takeaways from COP29 and the Road Ahead for Developing Countries”, 19 December 2024, <https://unctad.org/news/key-takeaways-cop29-and-road-ahead-developing-countries>.

⁶ Pai, Sandeep, “The G7 and Indian Just Energy Transition Partnership Roadmap”, CSIS, 11 October 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/g7-and-indian-just-energy-transition-partnership-roadmap>.

⁷ Mathiesen, Karl, “Trump Rescinds \$4B in US Pledges for UN Climate Fund”, *POLITICO*, 6 February 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/donald-trump-rescind-4-billion-us-pledge-un-climate-fund/>.

⁸ Zhou, Xiaozhu, “After Trump Cut Funding for Energy Transitions Overseas, Could China Step In?” *Eco-Business*, 10 June 2025, <https://www.eco-business.com/news/after-trump-cut-funding-for-energy-transitions-overseas-could-china-step-in/>.

⁹ Gabbatiss, Josh, “Analysis: Nearly a Tenth of Global Climate Finance Threatened by Trump Aid Cuts”, *Carbon Brief*, 10 March 2025, <https://www.carbonbrief.org/analysis-nearly-a-tenth-of-global-climate-finance-threatened-by-trump-aid-cuts/>.

Administration (NOAA), while the conclusions in previous climate publications have been challenged.¹⁰ These developments highlight a wider politicisation of environmental agencies, with global implications. The international community has long relied on NOAA and other US agencies for world-leading climate data, forecasts, and technologies.¹¹ This institutional decay compromises the global ability to respond to escalating climate-health crises, such as summer heatwaves that demand robust public guidance based on data these institutions produced.

Acceleration of Climate-Health Damages

The Trump administration's negative impacts on the climate must also be understood against the larger backdrop of its economic and military interests. These interests often place the climate and human well-being, i.e., planetary health, at risk. For example, despite studies attributing 460,000 deaths in the United States between 1999 and 2020 to coal pollution,¹² the US coal industry has been restarted. Trump's US\$500 billion investment in artificial intelligence (AI) infrastructure signals the administration's commitment to an energy-intensive path.¹³ This trend extends into foreign policy, where significant tariffs have been placed on China-produced and offshored solar panels, wind turbines, and electric vehicles to address trade imbalances and China's rise. These policies threaten to slow down the global energy transition.¹⁴ Moreover, American liquefied natural gas (LNG) and oil exports are used as bargaining chips to reduce US-imposed tariffs across the globe. Already, several Asian countries have signed long-term fossil fuel import agreements with the United States,¹⁵ prioritising economic security over environmental concerns.

Furthermore, President Trump's emphasis on hard power has contributed to increased military expenditure and exports, evident in its extensive weaponry and financial support of its ally Israel's recent military engagements in the Middle East, in particular in Gaza. This trend negatively impacts planetary health, with human lives and environmental well-being under siege. Direct climate-health impacts relate to substantial carbon dioxide emissions from mass production of military weapons, destruction of infrastructure, and the high-carbon reconstruction efforts that follow.¹⁶

¹⁰ BBC, "The Climate Question – Trump and the Planet: The First 100 Days", 4 May 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/audio/play/w3ct701r>.

¹¹ BBC, "Trump and the Planet."

¹² Wittenberg, Ariel, "Coal Power Kills a 'Staggering' Number of Americans", *Scientific American*, 28 November 2023, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/coal-power-kills-a-staggering-number-of-americans/>.

¹³ Holland, Steve, "Trump Announces Private-Sector \$500 Billion Investment in AI Infrastructure", Reuters, 21 January 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/technology/artificial-intelligence/trump-announce-private-sector-ai-infrastructure-investment-cbs-reports-2025-01-21/>.

¹⁴ Gabbatiss, Josh, "Experts: What Do Trump's Tariffs Mean for Global Climate Action?" *Carbon Brief*, 27 March 2025, <https://www.carbonbrief.org/experts-what-do-trumps-tariffs-mean-for-global-climate-action/>.

¹⁵ Ghosal, Aniruddha, "Asian Countries' LNG Deals with US Could Undermine Climate Goals", AP News, 18 July 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/lng-tariffs-trump-asia-vietnam-renewable-7e62714fd13bba4000d34466230cac87>.

¹⁶ Lakhani, Nina, "Carbon Footprint of Israel's War on Gaza Exceeds That of Many Entire Countries", *The Guardian*, 30 May 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/may/30/carbon-footprint-of-israels-war-on-gaza-exceeds-that-of-many-entire-countries>.

The support and prolongation of such conflicts also leads to severe environmental degradation, compounding crises of food and water security for vulnerable populations.¹⁷ Ultimately, this focus on geopolitical and military interests pushes the climate crisis to the background on the world stage.

Impacts on Southeast Asian Interests

Weakened Global Climate Action and Global South Abandonment

As one of the most climate-vulnerable regions, Southeast Asia remains dependent on extensive global commitments to support regional climate mitigation and adaptation. The US disengagement places the region under pressure, while undermining meaningful progress at COP30, for which members were expected to present new and more ambitious nationally determined contributions (NDCs). The year 2025 has already seen signs of a weakened momentum: in February, 95% of countries missed the UNFCCC deadline to provide their NDCs on emissions-cutting for the next decade.¹⁸ While more NDCs have since been submitted following significant delays, the updated plans have been regarded as falling far short of necessary action to achieve the Paris Agreement's target of limiting global warming to well below 2°C.¹⁹ The lack of critical progress at COP30 to address these challenges underscores a weakened climate action agenda, posing risks to Southeast Asia's future.

Profound implications for Southeast Asia also involve a widened North–South divide in climate action. Climate governance has previously established the principle of *common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities* (CBDR-RC), which acknowledges different roles in historical carbon emissions and varying capacities in tackling present-day climate issues. Yet, US disengagement threatens to set a dangerous precedent for like-minded states to follow at a time when expanded Global North commitments to bridging initiatives such as the GCF and the LDF are vital. This impact of the US stance was visible at COP30, where developed states were reluctant to commit to ambitious climate financing in the absence of the United States.²⁰

The US disengagement also signifies a deeper global leadership shift for Southeast Asia to navigate. Amid internal political divides, the European Union is

¹⁷ Conflict and Environment Observatory (CEOBS), “How Does War Damage the Environment?” 5 May 2025, <https://ceobs.org/how-does-war-damage-the-environment/>.

¹⁸ Dunne, Daisy, “95% of Countries Miss UN Deadline to Submit 2035 Climate Pledges”, *Carbon Brief*, 10 February 2025, <https://www.carbonbrief.org/analysis-95-of-countries-miss-un-deadline-to-submit-2035-climate-pledges/>.

¹⁹ United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), “Emissions Gap Report 2025: Off target – Continued Collective Inaction Puts Global Temperature Goal at Risk”, November 2025, <https://www.unep.org/resources/emissions-gap-report-2025>.

²⁰ Santana, Fred, “US Absence at COP30 Exacerbates Financial Challenge to Meet Climate Targets”, *Earth.Org*, 20 November 2025, <https://earth.org/us-absence-at-cop30-exacerbates-financial-challenge-to-meet-climate-targets/>.

unlikely to fill the gaps left by Trump,²¹ leaving space for China to expand its role. China has since reaffirmed its commitment to the Paris Agreement, together with the European Union, and acknowledged the critical moment in climate governance.²² However, China has denied that it might play a solo leadership role, instead calling for a fully cooperative, inclusive international commitment and co-governance.²³ China's recommendation to shift away from a few dominant players towards a more level field and especially among South-South countries signals the deeper engagement Southeast Asia will need to foster with China.

Financial and Technical Setbacks

US disengagement directly impacts Southeast Asia's resilience and transition capabilities. The USAID shutdown has halted both regional and bilateral partnerships.²⁴ This has impacted key recipients Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam,²⁵ while US funding to Indonesia's and Vietnam's respective JETPs has been halted.²⁶ As visualised in Table 2, the American disengagement forces Southeast Asia to be increasingly independent in pursuing mitigation and adaptation efforts.

Table 2. Loss of US Climate Support for Southeast Asia

Type of Lost Support	Significance
US financial and political support for the Green Climate Fund and Global Loss and Damage Fund	Widened Global North-South divide
Just Energy Transition Projects in Indonesia and Vietnam	Constraining Indonesia and Vietnam's energy transitions from coal
Climate support under US foreign aid	Reduced capacities for key USAID recipients including Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam; End of Southeast Asia Smart Power Programme promoting energy trade and clean energy
SERVIR-Southeast Asia partnership	Region-wide loss of advanced technology used to identify climate challenges and to build climate resilience

²¹ Abnett, Kate, "EU Climate Policies Could be Slowed in Future after Rightward Shift in Election", Reuters, 11 July 2024, <http://reuters.com/world/europe/uphill-road-europes-climate-plan-after-eu-election-2024-06-10/>.

²² Xi, Jinping, "Taking on the Challenges of Our Times Together and Jointly Advancing Global Climate Governance", Remarks at the Leaders Meeting on Climate and the Just Transition [virtual], 23 April 2025, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xw/zyxw/202504/t20250423_11602660.html.

²³ 碳道小编. 2024, "专访中国气候特使刘振民：不要给中国‘戴高帽’" [Interview with Liu Zhenmin, China's Special Envoy for Climate Change: "Don't Overpraise China"], Ideacarbon.org, 2024, https://ideacarbon.org/news_free/63971/.

²⁴ Cowing, Keith, "USAID Erasure Impact: NASA Halts SERVIR Solicitations", *NASA Watch*, 31 March 2025, <https://nasawatch.com/trumpspace/usaids-erasure-impact-nasa-halts-servir-solicitations>.

²⁵ Board, Jack, and Aqil Haziq Mahmud. "'People Will Die': Vulnerable Groups in Southeast Asia at Mercy of Trump's USAID Freeze as NGOs Scramble for Solutions", Channel News Asia, 2 April 2025, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/usaids-cuts-thailand-malaysia-southeast-asia-impact-foreign-aid-5020421>.

²⁶ Lin, Bo-yu, "US, EU Climate Policy Rollbacks Threaten Southeast Asia's Energy Transition – Experts Propose 2 Key Strategies", *Recessary*, 26 March 2025, <https://recessary.com/en/news/how-can-asean-energy-transition-progress-amid-setbacks-in-the-west>.

A Strategic Framework for ASEAN Climate Action

The US abandonment means ASEAN must take necessary steps to ensure that regional and global climate action are not derailed. To this end, three courses of action are recommended:

1. Establish Leadership through Regional Integration and Global Carbon Markets

Global climate governance is at a critical juncture, leaving ASEAN with an opportunity to step up. Ahead of COP30, Southeast Asia was identified as the most ready region, with Thailand and Cambodia among leaders in compliance with Article 6 of the Paris Agreement, which requires that states operationalise carbon markets.²⁷ Their efforts extend important advancements in the last two years made by Singapore.²⁸ Building on this momentum, ASEAN should work to create a harmonised regional framework for carbon trading.

ASEAN can strive to integrate member states' NDCs by expanding existing initiatives such as the *ASEAN Common Carbon Framework (ACCF)*. While difficulties in establishing uniform rules and verification systems have limited ACCF's role to date,²⁹ ASEAN should draw on key regional advancements and cooperation. At COP29, four Southeast Asian carbon market associations together with ASEAN formed a historic partnership to bridge existing gaps,³⁰ while Singapore in 2025 signed Southeast Asia's first intra-regional carbon trading agreements with Thailand and Vietnam.³¹ These efforts were expanded upon at COP30, where ASEAN continued advancing carbon markets and Singapore promoting high-integrity carbon credit principles through a coalition with Kenya and the United Kingdom.³² Building on these commitments, ASEAN should strive to improve interconnectivity between all member states, fulfilling

²⁷ Alvarez Campo, Carmen, "COP 30 Article 6 Readiness Update: Which Countries Are Best Prepared?" Sylvera, 11 August 2025, <https://www.sylvera.com/blog/cop-30-article-6-readiness-update-which-countries-are-best-prepared>.

²⁸ Hu, Sherry, "Post-Carbon Forward Asia: ASEAN Carbon Market Trends and Why Liquidity Is Top Priority", *Recessary*, 21 March 2025, <https://www.recessary.com/en/insight/carbon-forward-asia-2025>.

²⁹ ASEAN Alliance on Carbon Markets, "Toward a Unified ASEAN Carbon Market: The ASEAN Common Carbon Framework", 2025, <https://www.carbonknowledgehub.com/pdfs/toward-a-unified-ASEAN-carbon-market.pdf>.

³⁰ Lau, Adreena, "Five ASEAN Carbon Market Associations Unite at COP29 to Support the ASEAN Common Carbon Framework", Singapore Sustainable Finance Association, 18 November 2024, <https://www.ssfa.org.sg/five-asean-carbon-market-associations-unite-at-cop29-to-support-the-asean-common-carbon-framework/>.

³¹ Ang, Qing, "Singapore Inks Carbon Credit Pact with Vietnam, Its Second South-East Asian Partner", *The Straits Times*, 17 September 2025, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/environment/singapore-inks-carbon-credit-pact-with-vietnam-its-second-south-east-asian-partner>.

³² COP Singapore Pavillion, "International Cooperation and Capacity Building in Carbon Markets", 21 November 2025, <https://www.cop-pavilion.gov.sg/international-cooperation-and-capacity-building-in-carbon-markets>.

its potential as leader in a rapidly developing sphere.³³ This approach would position ASEAN to not only help progress global climate action but also attract new forms of green investment as a first mover.

Currently, carbon markets remain a controversial feature in climate governance, criticised for allowing states to offset carbon emissions but praised for incentivising emission reductions and supporting green finance. Nevertheless, for substantial impact, ASEAN must set standardised measurement methodologies and ensure transparency through oversight measures such as monitoring checks and carbon price assessments.³⁴ Doing so would enable ASEAN to establish a regional approach to Article 6. With the European Union facing criticism in its early implementation of carbon markets, interregional cooperation can further ensure the effective implementation of carbon markets.

2. Elevate the Climate Mission through Multilateral and Diplomatic Avenues

ASEAN must also ensure that climate action remains on track by taking further steps to institutionalise climate diplomacy. The EU-China statement reaffirming commitment to the Paris Agreement represented a key moment in climate governance in 2025. ASEAN too has reaffirmed its Paris commitment and it should strive to make commitments that amplify partnerships with other actors as well. Doing so would not only allow climate considerations to take centre stage in future cooperation but also open the way for other key actors to double-down on climate action amidst the American retreat.

ASEAN's rapidly expanding trade with the European Union and China highlights key avenues where green finance and environmental factors can be central. The first ASEAN-EU Ministerial Dialogue on Environment and Climate Change, held in September 2025, highlights a starting point for ASEAN to advance climate cooperation with the European Union.³⁵ ASEAN should also consider signalling its leadership ambition by appointing a regional climate envoy.³⁶ This would support the call by Malaysia's secretary-general for the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Sustainability, Dr Ching Thoo Kim, for ASEAN to form a collective voice in climate negotiations to elevate its influence, with progress possible through the ASEAN Working Group on Climate Change, which is currently headed by Singapore.³⁷ A

³³ EU-ASEAN Business Council, "Development of Carbon Markets in ASEAN", March 2025, <https://eu-asean.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Carbon-Markets-Paper-2025.pdf>.

³⁴ Senken, "Navigating the Voluntary Carbon Market's Issues and Opportunities", 18 June 2025, <https://www.senken.io/blog/voluntary-carbon-market-issues-and-opportunities>.

³⁵ 9th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Minerals (AMMin9), "9TH Ammin Declaration on Promoting ASEAN as an Investment Destination for Sustainable Minerals Development", November 2023, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/02-Final-Declaration-on-ASEAN-as-a-Sustainable-Minerals-Investment-Destination.pdf>.

³⁶ Mohzani, Zaim, "The Case for an ASEAN Special Envoy for Climate", 7 October 2024, <https://kasi.asia/publications/the-case-for-an-asean-special-envoy-for-climate-ksinsights-sep-2024/>.

³⁷ Qing, Ang, "Asean Should Have a Collective Voice at UN Climate Conferences: Malaysian Secretary-General at COP30", *The Straits Times*, 20 November 2025,

regional climate envoy would also assist in coordinating gaps between member states and ASEAN's climate policies, ultimately advancing the regional agenda. These efforts, together with ASEAN's critical role in clean energy supplies, would strengthen the region's climate agenda, internally and externally.

3. Pioneer a Regional Climate Resilience and Data Hub

The Trump administration's scientific disengagement has created a significant data vacuum, and the cancellation of joint initiatives has caused setbacks to climate resilience. To counter this vulnerability, ASEAN should pioneer its own regional initiatives by pooling expertise through the ASEAN Centre for Climate Change (ACCC).³⁸ With all member states now committed to the ACCC in Brunei, the bloc has a timely opportunity to operationalise it as a central hub for regional climate research.³⁹ The goal would not be to replace US capacity, but to ensure the continuity of vital climate data and build a robust database that addresses the historical underrepresentation of the region and the Global South. This initiative would enable the development of practical, region-specific tools to better predict and manage shared challenges such as severe heatwaves, flooding, and transboundary haze. For example, the Sino-Singapore Tianjin Eco-City (SSTEC) project is a highly relevant Singapore-China government-to-government collaborative effort that has served as an experimental testbed for innovative, scalable and resource-efficient urban planning and green technology.⁴⁰

Conclusion

The Trump 2.0 era presents a serious challenge to global climate action. However, ASEAN is not a passive victim of geopolitical shifts but a capable actor with agency to navigate this new landscape. Adopting a proactive and unified strategy would allow the region to transform a moment of abandonment into an assertion of leadership. By uniting around key initiatives such as establishing leadership in global carbon markets, championing multilateralism through climate diplomacy, and pioneering a regional climate resilience and data hub, ASEAN can enhance its strategic autonomy, mitigate the risks posed by the US withdrawal, and solidify its role as a constructive and indispensable leader in the enduring global struggle against the climate crisis.

<https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/environment/asean-should-have-a-collective-voice-at-un-climate-conferences-malaysian-secretary-general-at-cop30>.

³⁸ ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity, "ACB Backs Brunei's ASEAN Centre for Climate Change", 11 December 2023, <https://www.aseanbiodiversity.org/news-events-jobs/acb-backs-bruneis-asean-centre-for-climate-change/>.

³⁹ "Kao Kim Hourn, "Secretary General of ASEAN Regional Workshop on Climate Change: ASEAN Centre for Climate Change Activities and Transition Finance Strategies", 21 April 2025, https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/SG-Dr-Kao-Remarks-at-Regional-Workshop-on-Climate-Change-Bandar-Seri-Begawan-Brunei-Darussalam-21-April-2025-_As-Delivered.pdf.

⁴⁰ "Tianjin | Who We Are", n.d. www.mnd.gov.sg. <https://www.mnd.gov.sg/tianjinecocity/who-we-are>

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