

## ASEAN's Struggle for Relevance in an Era of Great Power Competition

By Dr Ralf Emmers<sup>1</sup>

The security environment in Asia has in recent years been defined by a multipolar structure and the rise of great power competition. The United States has become deeply concerned about China's growing military capabilities, while Beijing has been critical of the US alliance system and rebalance to Asia. The rising competition between China and Japan and China and India are other sources of regional instability. Such transformations have also raised questions in the wider region on the role of China, either as a responsible power or one that attempts to influence its neighbours through a reliance on coercive means.

Great power competition is not, per se, a negative development for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), as it can provide its ten member states with more room for diplomatic manoeuvre. Most Southeast Asian countries have relied on a hedging strategy by leveraging on China-US competition.<sup>2</sup> Yet, while relations between the great powers have become more competitive, ASEAN has found it impossible to stop their competition from interfering in Southeast Asian affairs.

In response to growing multipolarity and great power competition, ASEAN has continued to play a managerial role within a regional institutional architecture. In other words, the regional body has responded to changing circumstances by focusing its diplomatic efforts on being a convening power. Moreover, as a regional grouping, ASEAN has sought to maintain its impartiality in its relations with the great powers. It is an often-expressed belief that the regional body and its members should not be forced to choose between the great powers, be it China, the United States and to a less extent Japan and India.

ASEAN has since the 1990s built an institutional architecture that includes all the great and middle powers in the Indo-Pacific. The architecture consists of overlapping multilateral bodies—such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Plus Three, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus)—that provide venues for states to exchange strategic perspectives. Based on the notion of inclusiveness, these

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<sup>2</sup> Bilahari Kausikan, "Dodging and Hedging in Southeast Asia", *The American Interest* 12, no. 5 (12 January 2017), available at <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2017/01/12/dodging-and-hedging-in-southeast-asia/>

platforms have focused on dialogue and confidence building measures to improve the climate of relations.<sup>3</sup> Significantly, the ASEAN-led architecture aims at locking in the great and middle powers in a loose institutional structure.

ASEAN's role in this architecture is dependent on its centrality, unity, and perceived impartiality. The regional body engages the great and smaller powers and seeks to institutionalize regional relations by promoting diplomatic rules of engagement acceptable to all. This involves locking in the United States, China, India, and Japan, as well as middle powers such as Australia and South Korea, into the multilateral security architecture. By bringing all the key players to the table, ASEAN aims to guarantee its relevance by preventing the emergence of an alternative institutional structure that would exclude most of its members. The great powers have so far accepted ASEAN's managerial role in the cooperative process.<sup>4</sup>

The Southeast Asian states are keen to safeguard their individual choices and ability to exercise agency amidst great power competition. This involves bridging the security outlooks and preferences of the individual member states and sustaining the relevance of ASEAN as their common diplomatic body. Yet the relevance of ASEAN in regional affairs is currently undermined by internal and external factors. Let us start by discussing the internal challenges to ASEAN.

ASEAN's relevance has been diminished by a reduced level of cohesion and unity across its membership. This is due to a series of issues ranging from how to respond collectively to the Myanmar situation to various sources of bilateral disputes and divisions. Increased economic dependence on China also gives Beijing additional diplomatic leverage over some, if not most, Southeast Asian countries. This complicates any attempt at uniting the member states around complex geopolitical challenges, especially the deteriorating China-US relationship. It remains to be seen, therefore, whether the member states will commit to sticking together in the changing strategic environment. This will partially depend on the commitment of some of its most influential members, including Indonesia and Vietnam.

Indonesia has historically been regarded as the natural or *de facto* leader of ASEAN due to its geography, large population, and strategic position. Jakarta has repeatedly exercised

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<sup>3</sup> See Alice D. Ba, *(Re)Negotiating East and Southeast Asia: Region, Regionalism, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2009); Michael Leifer, "The ASEAN Regional Forum: Extending ASEAN's Model of Regional Security", *Adelphi Paper No. 302* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> See Tan See Seng, *Multilateral Asian Security Architecture: Non-ASEAN Stakeholders* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2016).

some form of institutional leadership in the cooperative body, especially in the security sphere. Its priority has been to preserve ASEAN's relevance and autonomy in regional affairs.

Yet, in contrast to previous administrations, the Widodo government has not positioned ASEAN at the cornerstone of Indonesian foreign policy. Instead, President Joko Widodo, who will finish his second term in 2024, has been focused on domestic economic development and a set of bilateral relations with middle and great powers. For example, Indonesia has in recent years become more reliant on Chinese Foreign Direct Investments (FDI). Hence, rather than moving beyond ASEAN, the Widodo administration has downsized the immediate priority of the regional body for Indonesia.

Nevertheless, escalating tensions between the United States and China have narrowed Indonesia's room for diplomatic initiatives. Amid rising geopolitical competition, Indonesia continues to adhere to its traditional "independent and active" foreign policy, first articulated by then Vice President Mohammad Hatta in 1948, and Jakarta avoids taking sides between competing states.<sup>5</sup> For example, in response to the Free and Open Indo-Pacific concept promoted by the United States, the Widodo administration tabled its version of the term at the ASEAN summit in Singapore in 2018. Evan Laksmana explains that Jakarta was uncomfortable with an Indo-Pacific concept endorsed by Washington, Tokyo, Canberra, and New Delhi and offered instead an ASEAN-centric vision based on the body's own principles and centrality in the regional architecture.<sup>6</sup>

This suggests that great power competition and rising tensions in security flashpoints should make Indonesia more dependent on ASEAN and its region-wide institutions to exercise influence and play a role in regional affairs. This should encourage Indonesia to regard ASEAN as the cornerstone of its foreign policy and to play its leadership role in security matters despite frustration in Jakarta that other member states often water down its proposals to push the regional body forward.

Vietnam is also likely to step up its participation in ASEAN due to rising great power competition and deteriorating regional relations. Hanoi uses ASEAN as a diplomatic platform to position Vietnam in the Indo-Pacific. The country benefits from its membership by multiplying the impact of its foreign policy and attracting foreign direct investments. Vietnam

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<sup>5</sup> See Mohammad Hatta, "Indonesian foreign policy," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (1953), pp. 444-45.

<sup>6</sup> See "Advancing Democracy in the US Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy," *The Diplomat*, April 14, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/04/advancing-democracy-in-the-us-free-and-open-indo-pacific-strategy/>

is therefore likely to invest more resources to sustain the diplomatic relevance of ASEAN and to play a leading role in it.

Yet, like for Indonesia, great power competition narrows Vietnam's room for manoeuvre but also complicates bringing the ASEAN members together around specific geopolitical considerations. Hanoi needs to find the right balance between advocating its own national interests, for example in the South China Sea, and its role as an active ASEAN member expected to display impartiality in great power competition. Indeed, while some ASEAN states welcome Vietnam's tough position on the South China Sea dispute, others are concerned that Hanoi is too confrontational towards China.

Let us now examine external challenges to ASEAN's relevance in regional affairs. Rising tensions between the United States and China undermine ASEAN's ambition of bringing together all the relevant powers to discuss regional affairs. It also makes it debatable whether ASEAN can reconcile its objectives of sustaining its impartiality and holding a managerial role in the security architecture. Rather than successfully combining both, ASEAN is increasingly unable, as the so-called driver of the architecture, to either stay clear from or manage great power competition. A worst-case scenario for ASEAN would involve being forced to choose between the great powers. This could result from a further deterioration in China-US relations driven by an international crisis over a regional security flashpoint and/or from domestic developments linked to the US administration and Chinese party politics.

A priority for ASEAN is not to take a position when it comes to great power competition. Not being forced to choose between Beijing and Washington is a diplomatic mantra in Southeast Asia. For example, ASEAN and its member states have been careful to maintain equidistance between the United States and China when it comes to the Taiwan and North Korean issues.

In practice, this has been most challenging in the context of the South China Sea dispute which directly involves China but also various ASEAN members (The Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei). ASEAN has sought to demonstrate its relevance by negotiating a conflict management mechanism that includes all ten ASEAN members and China, first through the implementation of the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DoC) and then through the negotiation of a binding Code of Conduct (CoC) for the South China Sea.

Yet the negotiation of a CoC for the South China Sea with Beijing has so far been unsuccessful. It has, in part, been complicated by increasing China-US competition.<sup>7</sup> Beijing claims that the United States is utilizing ASEAN to interfere in the South China Sea dispute and threaten China's national interests in the semi-enclosed sea. Moreover, while China has preferred to address the dispute bilaterally with the Southeast Asian claimant states, Beijing asserts that Vietnam and the Philippines in particular, have used ASEAN to internationalize the dispute. In addition, ASEAN members have themselves been split over the issue. This is partly due to China's economic and diplomatic ties with non-claimant states, like Cambodia, Laos, and others, which can decide to endorse Chinese priorities to deepen their relations with Beijing.

ASEAN's relevance in regional affairs is also undermined by the formation of mini-lateral arrangements that are exclusive in their participation and more result-driven in their approach. Such arrangements include the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) that brings together the United States, Japan, Australia, and India, and AUKUS, a trilateral security pact signed between the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia announced in September 2021. Significantly, such arrangements openly exclude China in an attempt at constraining its rising regional influence. This form of exclusive mini-lateral cooperation also challenges ASEAN's inclusive institutional perspective. ASEAN's diplomatic room for manoeuvre and relevance are challenged by what may lead to the emergence of an alternative institutional architecture. ASEAN should therefore establish channels of communication with the Quad and the other mini-lateral arrangements to coordinate respective cooperative efforts in areas like maritime security.

In conclusion, ASEAN still disposes over convening power and its managerial role in the cooperative process is for now endorsed by the great and middle powers. Yet its relevance in regional affairs will continue to be tested in the coming years by a series of internal and external challenges. ASEAN's relevance is attacked from within its membership due to divergent strategic perspectives across Southeast Asia. This is where the commitment of some members, like Indonesia and Vietnam, will be pivotal for ASEAN to operate successfully. Externally, its relevance is under stress due to rising great power competition that reduces its

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<sup>7</sup> See Taylor M. Fravel, "China's Strategy in the South China Sea", *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 33, no. 3 (December 2011): 292-319; Ian Storey, "China Runs Rings Around ASEAN", *The Wall Street Journal*, 2 October 2013; Mark Valencia, "High-Stakes Drama: The South China Sea Disputes", *Global Asia* 7, no. 3 (Fall 2012): 56-73.

room for manoeuvre and by the rise of an alternative security architecture that excludes China and questions ASEAN's inclusive approach to security cooperation.

Despite these challenges, it is important to remember that the Southeast Asian states have traditionally succeeded in preserving their individual agency by relying on shrewd diplomacy and ASEAN to multiple their regional influence amidst great power competition. It is yet to be seen whether the member states will succeed to do so again in the changing strategic environment by remaining reliant and committed to their regional body.