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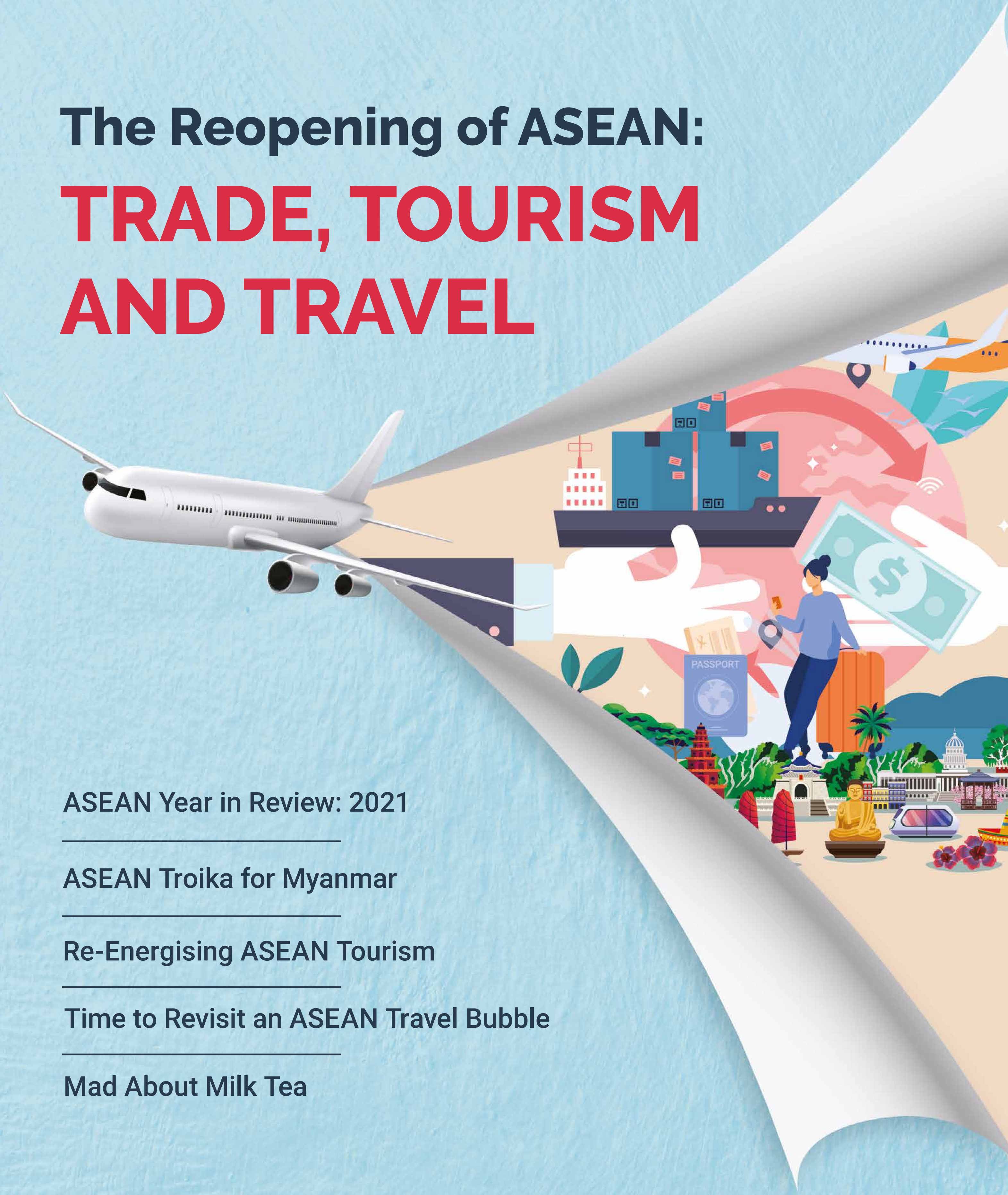
The Reopening of ASEAN:
TRADE, TOURISM AND TRAVEL



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ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute (formerly Institute of Southeast Asian Studies) is an autonomous organisation established in 1968. It is a regional centre dedicated to the study of socio-political, security, and economic trends and developments in Southeast Asia and its wider geostrategic and economic environment. The ASEAN Studies Centre (ASC) was established in 2008 under the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute to research on issues pertaining to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as a regional organisation. The ASC is the first Institutional Recipient of the ASEAN Prize in 2020, a prestigious award to honour outstanding achievements of individuals or organisations who have made meaningful contributions to ASEAN.

Editorial Notes

2022 has been nothing but shocking with a geopolitical rupture that has shaken the core of the international legal order. Though oceans away, the Russian invasion of Ukraine sent shockwaves to Southeast Asia, weakening long-held assumptions of regional peace and stability. Besides ongoing concerns of territorial infringements in the South China Sea, the foundation of peace and security in Southeast Asia has already been called into question with the ongoing Myanmar crisis, long past its one-year anniversary of the coup. The beleaguered nation remains embroiled in political, economic and humanitarian crises despite efforts by ASEAN as well as the United Nations (UN) to mediate in the conflict.

ASEAN unity and relevance have been severely tested as member states discuss how to effectively engage the Myanmar military authorities in comprehensively implementing the Five-Point Consensus, especially regarding the delivery of humanitarian assistance and open dialogue with all relevant stakeholders. The variety of engagement directives in the last 6 months – from an unprecedented move in October last year to only invite a non-political representative from Myanmar to the ASEAN Summits, to the current ASEAN Chair Cambodia's stance of 'active' engagement through high-level official visits to Myanmar – highlight the differing views on the bloc's best path forward in resolving the Myanmar crisis.

To cap off an eventful year, our *Analysis* contributors reflect on the key challenges and accomplishments of ASEAN in 2021, as well as provide an in-depth analysis of a potential ASEAN Troika Mechanism for Myanmar and crisis management in ASEAN. The rise of minilateral arrangements in the region such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and the trilateral security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States (AUKUS) also threaten cherished notions of ASEAN centrality and relevance. We ask our experts to unpack implications of the Quad on regional security and ASEAN centrality.

Two years on since the pandemic started, the world is still battling the latest Omicron variant. Despite its high infection rates, Southeast Asian states, such as Thailand, the Philippines, Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia, have been taking measured steps to live with the virus, open their borders and support affected sectors. With easing of domestic movement restrictions and the commencement of quarantine-free travel in some countries for vaccinated travellers, Southeast Asian states are slowly attempting to bring back normalcy to a COVID-weary citizenry.

In addition, developments in the trade space such as the successful entry into force of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) on 1 January 2022 as well as external countries' bids to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) – including formal applications from the UK, China and Taiwan – also provide new opportunities for economic cooperation and recovery for many embattled regional economies.

In that empowering spirit, the theme of this *ASEANFocus* issue focuses on *The Reopening of ASEAN: Trade, Tourism and Travel*. Our *Spotlight* contributors delve into potential regulatory cooperation between ASEAN and China on non-tariff measures in the RCEP, as well as the regional political and economic implications of having China join the CPTPP. They investigate current and future ASEAN-wide measures to support the recovery of the tourism industry by tapping the opportunities from sustainable tourism and how regional airlines have thus far weathered the drawn-out travel restrictions. Our contributors discuss possible harmonised measures for cross-border travel such as the ASEAN Travel Corridor Arrangement Framework as well as the ASEAN Travel Bubble.

Beyond the *Spotlight*, we are honoured to have the Kingdom of Cambodia's Minister of Tourism, H.E. Dr. Thong Khon share his *Insider Views* on strategies to revive the tourism industry in a safe and sustainable manner. Lastly, readers can take a journey across Southeast Asia and beyond as our *Sights and Sounds* contributors chart the genesis and socio-cultural and -political significance of horror films and milk tea lovers in the region.

Famed American poet, Robert Frost, once sagely surmised, "In three words I can sum up everything I've learnt about life: It goes on". With the pandemic dragging on far longer than any of us anticipated, it has dramatically changed the way we live, work and interact with others. The need to 'move on with life' and redefine the structures, processes and lifestyles of our day-to-day living for the betterment of societies is more critical than ever.

Analysis

ASEAN Year in Review: 2021

Joanne Lin, Sithanonxay Suvannaphakdy, and **Melinda Martinus** reflect on the challenges and accomplishments of ASEAN in 2021 and review Brunei's achievements as the Chair of ASEAN.

A year that started as a continuation of Vietnam's Chairmanship in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic turned out to be yet another unprecedented year of new challenges and unexpected milestones for ASEAN.

Brunei's Chairmanship in the theme of "We Care, We Prepare, We Prosper" culminated in a 27-page Chairman's Statement of the 38th and 39th ASEAN Summit and the adoption of over 25 documents by ASEAN Leaders. Brunei lost no time picking up the baton of Vietnam's deliverables starting with initiatives to reopen ASEAN's economy, such as the adoption of the ASEAN Travel Corridor Arrangement Framework and the Post COVID-19 Recovery Plan for Tourism which demonstrated ASEAN's unwavering commitment to an open regional economy, but as the proverbial saying goes: the devil remains in the details (of implementation).

Political and Security Affairs: Challenges Remained

While pandemic challenges continued to be at the forefront in 2021, the region witnessed increasing geopolitical competition. China-US rivalry intensified, leading to development such as the creation of the trilateral security arrangement between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States (AUKUS) involving nuclear technology. Multilateralism was also contested with the rise of protectionism, trade wars, and a lack of global leadership due to preoccupation with domestic affairs.

In addressing these growing issues and other emerging challenges, ASEAN adopted a Leaders' Declaration on Upholding Multilateralism to shape a rules-based regional architecture. It also emphasised on the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) to reinforce ASEAN centrality in the evolving regional architecture. However, it remains to be seen how these initiatives can deliver concrete solutions for ASEAN and enhance its key role in the region, unless an implementation plan is put in place such as the current discussion on mainstreaming the four priority areas of the AOIP within ASEAN-led mechanisms. Amidst growing global uncertainties, developments in Myanmar presented itself as the defining issue of ASEAN in 2021 and will continue to be in the spotlight in 2022. For the first time in the history of ASEAN, a non-political representative was invited to the ASEAN Summit. Myanmar's stability is integral to the bloc and ASEAN is aware that its credibility and reputation is at stake. Despite reaching an agreement on a Five-Point Consensus at the ASEAN Leaders' Meeting in April 2021, little progress was made on its implementation. Apart from delivering a batch of humanitarian assistance amounting to US$8 million, Myanmar did not grant access for the Special Envoy of the ASEAN Chair, Dato Erywan Yusof to meet with all parties concerned. Neither did the violence end.

Situation in the South China Sea deteriorated in 2021. Several ASEAN countries continued to express concerns over China's unilateral actions including China's "grey zone strategy" and new coast guard law authorising the use lethal force on foreign ships operating in China's claimed waters – a clear breach of international law and an erosion of a rules-based order in the region. While minimal progress was made in the negotiations of the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (COC), it remains to be seen if the document would truly preserve the maritime rights and entitlements enshrined in the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and if the document is substantive and fit for ASEAN's purpose.

On a brighter note, ASEAN did well in its external relations in 2021, showcasing stronger partnerships forged between ASEAN and its external partners during these challenging times. The regional bloc exceeded the expectations of many by successfully granting the United Kingdom as ASEAN's 11th Dialogue Partner despite a 15-year moratorium and numerous procedural roadblocks standing in the way.

2021 marked a new milestone for many dialogue partners. ASEAN held its first annualised Summit with Australia. It was also the first time that ASEAN Leaders met with US President Joseph Biden (albeit virtually), after being neglected by the previous Administration. The year also marked the 30th anniversary of relations with China and Russia, with commemorative Summits held at the highest level with President Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin. Both countries are usually represented by their Premier and Prime Minister, respectively at the annual East Asia Summit.

Another new breakthrough in ASEAN's external relations is the establishment of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with Australia and China that is meaningful, substantive and mutually beneficial. Despite concerns that the new nomenclature will likely spark a proliferation of similar requests by other dialogue partners, ASEAN does not seem likely to turn down the requests of partners that are of vital interest to ASEAN, both strategically and economically.

Economic Integration: New Initiatives Emerged

Economic imperative remains centre and core to ASEAN as the region continued to be preoccupied with a COVID-19 economic recovery. As such, Brunei prioritised ASEAN's comprehensive recovery in their Chairmanship. This is reflected in its priority economic deliverables (PEDs) under three strategic thrusts, namely recovery, digitalisation, and sustainability. Despite challenges of meeting physically, significant progress was made in advancing the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) with 13 PEDs implemented in 2021, out of which, 11 were completed by the end of 2021.

30th Anniversary of ASEAN-China Dialogue Relations

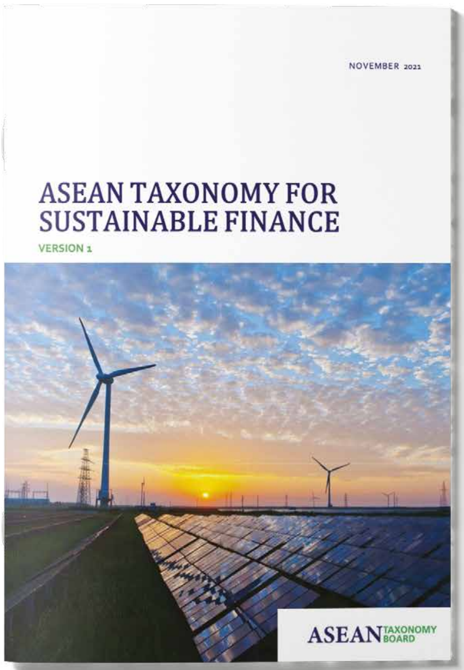
ASEAN Secretariat@Flickr

One of Brunei's key PEDs - the Post-COVID-19 Recovery Plan for ASEAN Tourism was aimed at facilitating the recovery and strengthening the tourism sector's resilience. Severely affected by border closures and containment measures, the number of international tourist arrivals in ASEAN fell by 82% from 143 million people in 2019 to 26 million people in 2020. Thus, key measures that include providing financial support to tourism businesses, aligning health, safety standards and protocols across ASEAN, and increasing the use of digital technology in the tourism sector will give a much-needed boost to the economies of the region.

Other PEDs such as the Non-Tariff Measures (NTMs) Cost-Effectiveness Toolkit, the ASEAN Investment Facilitation Framework, and the launch of negotiations for the ASEAN-Canada Free Trade Agreement (FTA) will help ASEAN pave the way for seamless and streamlined regional trade and investment flows as well as deepen economic integration.

Joint Japan-US Military Exercise in the Philippine Sea under Annual Exercise 2021

U.S. Pacific Fleet@Flickr



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To facilitate further digitalisation, ASEAN successfully implemented the work plan of the ASEAN Agreement on E-commerce, which entered into force on 2 December 2021. The Agreement promises to kickstart efforts to harmonise the implementation commitments of ASEAN countries to promote e-commerce development and enhance cross-border e-commerce. Three key measures include facilitating cross-border e-commerce (e.g., trade facilitation, e-commerce logistics, data transfer), supporting e-commerce businesses (e.g., competition law for the digital economy, electronic payment), and protecting e-commerce consumers (e.g., consumer protection law, personal data protection).

Building back better was also high on Brunei's agenda as ASEAN endorsed several PEDs to promote sustainable economic development in the region. These include the ASEAN Joint Declaration on Energy Transitions and Energy Security to support regional energy security and energy transition; the Framework for Circular Economy to improve resource efficiency, economic resilience, and sustainable growth; the ASEAN Framework to Support Food Agriculture and Forestry Small Producers, Cooperative and Micro, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (MSMEs) to improve product quality to meet regional and international standards; the organisation of a conference on ASEAN's financial literacy to discuss the developments and importance of financial literacy; and the ASEAN Taxonomy for Sustainable Finance to serve as a reference for sustainable investment activities in ASEAN.

ASEAN's framework for circular economy, for example, applies an inclusive approach to enhance resource efficiency and sustainable economic growth. It focuses not only on environmental sustainability, but also on the role of trade, technological innovations, and financial markets. As such, the region will be able to benefit from greater harmonization of standards for circular products and services, free movement of environmental goods and services, greater protection for intellectually property in environmentally sound technologies, and more fiscal incentives for green investment.

The region started 2022 with the entry into force of the much-anticipated Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) for ten participating countries, ten years after negotiations were launched in 2012. The agreement is a testament to the region's determination and commitment to deepen economic integration amidst challenging times. The RCEP will eliminate as much as 90% of tariffs on goods traded between its signatories over the next 20 years. In 2022 alone, China – one of the top three export markets of ASEAN countries – is expected to eliminate about 70% of its tariffs on products imported from ASEAN, while ASEAN countries such as Brunei, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam will eliminate about 75% of their tariffs on imported products from China. The remaining tariffs will be gradually eliminated over 20 years.

Socio-Cultural Community: People-Centred Principle Sustained

ASEAN did not put a break to other aspects of socio-cultural cooperation. Many regional initiatives continued to underline the need to realise the full potential of ASEAN citizens as envisioned by the vision and blueprints of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community. For instance, the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework that served as the consolidated exit strategy from the COVID-19 crisis attach great importance to people's welfare, such as assisting the vulnerable groups, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and migrant labours.

Under Brunei's Chairmanship, this 'people-centred' principle was further advanced with the adoption of the Comprehensive Framework on Care Economy to amplify the need to ensure access and capacity-building for poor and vulnerable groups in the region. Other critical initiatives on boosting greater regional inclusivity that were initiated last year include the Regional Strategic Framework on Gender Mainstreaming, the Roadmap to Implement the Ha Noi Declaration on Strengthening Social Work towards Cohesive and Responsive ASEAN Community, and the ASEAN Digital Readiness among ASEAN Citizens.


athree23@pixabay
E-commerce on the rise in Southeast Asia

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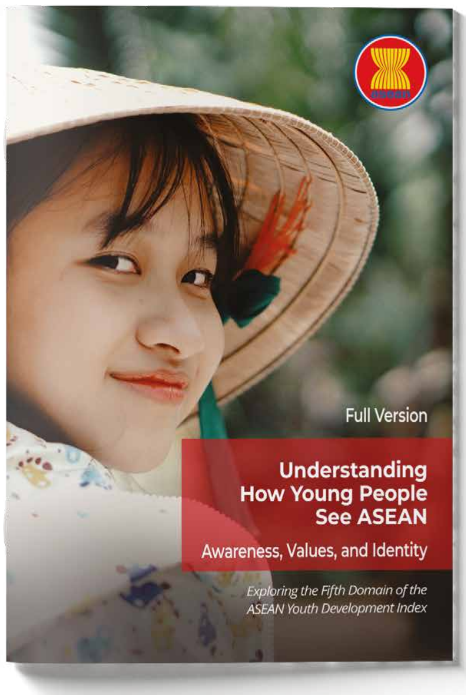
On the development front, ASEAN successfully launched the ASEAN Development Outlook, an inaugural report made to chart progress towards inclusive and sustainable development in the ASEAN region. Despite ASEAN's impressive economic development, the grouping has not kept pace with socio-economic challenges such as decent work deficits, low provision of social protection and persistent inequality. This report prompted regional policymakers to pay attention to less visible challenges requiring much more complex institutional support such as skill provisions for an ageing population, obesity and mental health, and empowering youth aspirations.

Recognising the escalating impacts of climate change, ASEAN has elevated environmental issues in its regional policymaking. Brunei initiated the establishment of the ASEAN Centre for Climate Change to specifically work on climate and youth activism given ASEAN youth's passion about sustainability, environment, and climate issues. The Bandar Seri Begawan Declaration on the Strategic and Holistic Initiative to Link ASEAN Responses to Emergencies and Disasters (ASEAN SHIELD) also pushed ASEAN to recognise the inter-linkages between climate, environment, public health, humanitarian, economy, and connectivity.

ASEAN continued to project its voice in the global stage where it matters. The ASEAN Joint Statement to the 15th Meeting on the Conference of Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (COP CBD) reiterated the importance of ASEAN's rich biodiversity, which contributes to the region's socio-economic well-being. Meanwhile, the ASEAN Joint Statement on Climate Change to the 26th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP26), unlike previous joint statements to the UNFCCC, called explicitly upon developed countries to fulfil their commitment of mobilising climate finance to support the implementation of climate initiatives in developing nations, including in ASEAN countries. ASEAN states are fully aware that the time to reduce greenhouse gas emissions is running out, and the window of opportunity for the world's leaders to act is rapidly closing.

To further strengthen ASEAN identity, ASEAN also published the ASEAN Youth Development Index 5th Domain, based on a survey of regional students' ASEAN awareness, values, and identity. The study showed that university students across the region possess a strong awareness of ASEAN and they see the benefits of their country's membership in ASEAN for their future. The study also emphasised the need for more visible and impactful cooperation such as economic collaboration, tourism and development assistance.



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Moving Forward

The Russia-Ukraine crisis is a stark reminder that regional stability, economic prosperity and socio-cultural development cannot be taken for granted. The role of the ASEAN Chair remains important and crucial in steering ASEAN towards its Community building and in addressing the myriad of regional and global challenges.

ASEAN under the Brunei's Chairmanship has certainly made advancement towards a more resilient and harmonious Community, one that is better prepared for the uncertainties of the future and better equipped to seize future opportunities.

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Analysis

Prospects of an ASEAN Troika for Myanmar

Lina Alexandra analyses the prospects of establishing an ASEAN Troika to mitigate the political crisis in Myanmar.

Cambodian Prime Minister Visiting Naypyidaw, Myanmar in January 2022

One year after the military coup against the democratically-elected government in Myanmar, it is saddening to see that the widespread violent crackdown against the pro-democratic groups still continues on the ground. While most analysts are debating whether the situation meets the criteria of a civil war, there is clearly deepening polarisation among the conflicting parties as the pro-democratic groups have resorted to arms as part of their struggle against military oppression.

Cambodia's turn as ASEAN Chair in 2022 is welcomed with mixed hopes. Cambodia's "activism" by initiating meetings with the State Administration Council (SAC) in November 2021 and January 2022 has bred some optimism that the new Chair will keep up the momentum in handling the crisis. Regional and international experts are concerned that Cambodia would engage only with the military instead being an impartial actor that listens to all domestic stakeholders.

In a recent telephone conversation on 22 January between Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen and Indonesian President Joko Widodo, Hun Sen proposed for the Foreign Ministers' Retreat to discuss several issues, one of which is the establishment of an ASEAN Troika mechanism to monitor the implementation of the Five-Point Consensus (FPC), was mooted. The Chairman's statement released after the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Retreat on 17-18 February in Phnom Penh restated ASEAN's persistence on how the elements of the FPC particularly the delivery of humanitarian assistance and the visit by the Special Envoy of the ASEAN Chair to meet with all stakeholders in Myanmar can be implemented soon.

The prospects of establishing an ASEAN Troika mechanism for dealing with the Myanmar crisis should become the first order of business to de-escalate internal conflicts.

ASEAN Troika: The 'Compromised' Basics

The concept of an ASEAN Troika was initially introduced by Thai Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai and subsequently adopted at the Third Informal Summit in 1999. The objective of the ASEAN Troika was to strengthen regional response to international criticisms over ASEAN's inability to prevent the East Timor tragedy. At that time, not only was ASEAN losing its credibility, but it learned an important lesson that failure to act upon a crisis had resulted in an "invitation" for external intervention — in this case Australia-led initiative, the International Force East Timor (INTERFET) was seen as an intervention of regional affairs by ASEAN.

Many parts of the original Thai concept were compromised. A study by Jürgen Haacke found five compromises were made to make a pragmatic troika. First, while initially meant to be a permanent and institutionalised body at the ministerial level, to make it workable, the ASEAN Troika should become an *ad hoc* body. Second, the ASEAN Troika was not to be a decision-making body but only to support the Foreign Ministers. Third, the troika should work according to ASEAN principles, including the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) particularly on consensus and the principle of non-interference. Fourth, while the idea to invoke the troika can be raised by the ASEAN Standing Committee (ASC) Chairman or other Foreign Ministers, it can only be established on the consensus basis. Fifth, the troika would normally comprise of the past, present and next chairmen of ASC but could be adjusted upon the consensus of ASEAN Foreign Ministers.

As an *ad hoc* body, the ASEAN Troika can be invoked when there is an issue or situation likely to disturb regional peace and harmony which requires collective action by ASEAN. The intention is to enable ASEAN to address urgent problems in a timely manner. The ASC Chairman or any other ASEAN Foreign Ministers can make a request to establish the mechanism and decide on the mandate, while the final decision should be made based on consensus.

Is The ASEAN Troika A Workable Plan This Time?

Cambodia's idea to establish the ASEAN Troika to monitor the implementation of the FPC seems justified since the current Myanmar crisis is ultimately an important political and humanitarian issue that threatens regional peace and stability.

Nonetheless, the ultimate question is: Is it a workable plan? What are its prospects? There are three contentious issues that need further discussions.

First, the troika is supposedly a mechanism that enables ASEAN to act in a timely manner since it was designed with the understanding that ASEAN is heavily restricted by its bureaucratic processes which makes it slow, if not unable, to deal with urgent matters arising in the region. However, it is clear from the terms of reference (TOR) that the troika should observe two principles: non-interference and consensus.

Article 3.2 of the TOR mentions that ASEAN Troika shall refrain from addressing issues that constitute the internal affairs of ASEAN member countries. It is obvious that ASEAN is split in the Myanmar crisis. Some members still see the issue as part of Myanmar's internal issue, meaning that non-interference should strictly apply, while others support ASEAN's endeavour to work for the restoration of democracy in the country. ASEAN has not yet moved to a common standpoint in defining the magnitude of the crisis.

The contradiction between the necessity to immediately act upon a crisis that threatens regional peace and security and the borderline not to touch upon any member's internal affairs cannot be resolved since the initiation of the troika in 1999. Former ASEAN Secretary-General Rodolfo Severino succinctly summed up the dilemma: "What if the conflict does occur within a country in a form and to a degree that threatens other countries in Southeast Asia? In this light, what norms are there to invoke? Would there be any? Could there be any?"

The ball is in the hands of ASEAN Foreign Ministers whether they have the political will to modify the TOR which will solve this problem. Essentially, ASEAN needs to overcome everyone's fear that ASEAN Troika will not be used one day to threaten their respective sovereignty. With the split, it is hard, if not impossible, to see ASEAN members reach a consensus to establish the troika. Even then, it is still debatable whether consensus means ASEAN-9, or should it be still ASEAN-10 while there is an absence of a legitimate government to represent Myanmar in the organisation.

The requirement that the troika needs to be based on consensus defies its original purpose of enabling ASEAN to respond swiftly to urgent regional problems. Hitherto, Brunei and Indonesia's formal confirmation in accepting the offer of being past and future troika members is still not heard despite their strong pressure on wanting to see FPC implementation. But, one thing is clear: the Myanmar junta disagreed with the idea in 1999 and will continue to disagree. In this case, will the decision of ASEAN-9 or even ASEAN-6 be considered as consensus and thus allow ASEAN to move with the plan? Cambodia can be the "champion" of the idea. But without real supporters, the idea can never be materialised.

Second, after the substantive hurdles are mitigated, it is vital for Cambodia as the initiator to come up with a new TOR on the operationalisation of the Troika. Acknowledging that it is not a decision-making body but only to provide recommendations and observations over the FPC implementation to ASEAN Foreign Ministers, there should be a clear mechanism on how the ASEAN FMs will act upon receiving reports — especially if there is any deliberate act by any party to delay or violate the FPC implementation. There should be a guarantee that ASEAN FMs will seriously and immediately follow up the Troika's recommendations. I argue that the ASEAN Troika should be given a larger mandate to conduct preventive diplomacy, particularly to warn parties should anyone hinder ASEAN's effort to pursue the FPC implementation. In this case, something beyond continuing a non-political position for Myanmar should be introduced to give a heavier blow to the offender.

Third, another revision also must be done regarding the budget provision for such effort. While the Troika members can probably have a bigger share to contribute, there should be a significant contribution from the other ASEAN members since this is for the sake of the organisation's interest.

Finally, it is clear that the ground must be tilled first before the idea can take off, which very much depends on how bad the member states want ASEAN to continue sailing and be meaningful.

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Analysis

Crisis Management in ASEAN: A Case for Transformative Leadership

Adelina Kamal suggests transformative actions for ASEAN to better handle crisis responses.

Southeast Asia, located between several tectonic plates and between two great oceans, is one of the most vulnerable and disaster-prone regions in the world. The region is often referred to as the 'supermarket of disasters' due to the variety and intensity of natural hazards found in this region.

The ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (AHA Centre) recorded over 3,200 disaster occurrences in the ASEAN region over the past decade. In other words, there has not been a single week without a disaster happening in the ASEAN region. In 2021 the trend was even more frightening as the AHA Centre recorded an average of four disaster occurrences every day around the clock in the region also known as the '7/11 of disasters'. Floods, unsurprisingly, was the most common type of disaster.

Natural hazards can be classified into geophysical hazards, such as earthquakes and volcanic eruptions which are common threats particularly for Indonesia and the Philippines; and hydro-meteorological hazards, for instance storms which often occur in the Philippines, Vietnam, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. Storms or intense rainfall can further cause floods, which are persistent occurrences in all ASEAN countries. Three ASEAN countries - Indonesia, Myanmar, and the Philippines – have been ranked as the top three ASEAN countries at-most risk to multiple hazards. Meanwhile, Myanmar which has the lowest coping capacity for disasters, has been ranked as the country that is most at-risk. But natural hazards do not always have to become destructive disasters with high fatalities and losses, if governments and society can work together to mitigate the impacts.

An Atlas of Human Suffering

When the world's attention was glued to Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) published a new report warning that the window of opportunity to secure a liveable and sustainable future was rapidly closing. The IPCC report, written by 270 authors and synthesises more than 34,000 pieces of scientific research, was the second of three reports produced in its sixth assessment round. António Guterres, the United Nations Secretary-General referred the report as "an atlas of human suffering and a damning indictment of failed climate leadership."

Around the same week of the IPCC's report launch, the AHA Centre reported heavy rainfall and devastating floods in Peninsular Malaysia, southern Thailand and Indonesia. The AHA Centre also indicated that hydro-meteorological disasters, such as floods and storms, account for more than 90% of annual disasters in ASEAN. But these disasters can be mitigated through anticipatory action – a term used in the international humanitarian circuit to refer to an innovative approach that links early warnings to actions designed for protection of lives and assets ahead of an anticipated hazard. It is one of the solutions most commonly cited in the IPCC report.

In August 2020, the AHA Centre issued the second edition of its *ASEAN Risk Monitor and Disaster Management Review* (ARMOR) report to elevate the concept of 'anticipatory action', highlighting an urgent need to scale down global climate projections as well as conduct modelling and impact assessments for the region. It also seeks to elevate the urgency to act on climate change to high-level regional policymaking, such as moving towards a forecast-based disaster response to enable anticipatory action that can prevent the severe impact of disasters.

Climate Complacency and Ignorance Remain

The State of Southeast Asia 2022 Survey Report published by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute shows that only 50.3% of Southeast Asians see climate change as a serious and immediate threat. The number of climate deniers who think that "there is no scientific basis for climate change and will not impact me in my lifetime" has also increased significantly from the previous year's survey.

What is that so? People's attention span on crisis is short, as some studies underline. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has also placed immense pressures on healthcare systems, thus exhausting government capacity to manage and raise awareness on climate change.

But it is important not to see climate change exclusively. Climate and public health are closely related. Vector-borne and waterborne diseases are strongly affected by the changing climate. Conversely, disasters may also lead to infectious disease outbreaks, and many conflict zones are the hotbeds for infectious diseases.

A scenario where climate change, pandemic and conflict-induced crisis collide is likely to happen in Southeast Asia. Climate disasters are starting to affect vulnerable and conflict-affected areas. Conflicts can destroy people's livelihood, erode their safety nets, community infrastructure, and essential services needed for survival. In most cases, as disaster management requires a collective response capacity, the most likely response

Volunteers helping clean houses affected by the worst floods to hit Malaysia in December 2021

will be inadequate in a fragile context with failed state structures and political turmoil. The current situation in Myanmar is an infallible example of conflict, climate, and pandemic-induced crisis about to happen.

What Should ASEAN Do?

ASEAN needs to acknowledge conflicts, pandemics and other types of disasters such as technological disasters — disasters that are caused by malfunction of a technological structure or some human error in controlling or handling the technology — and many other risks and incorporate these into crisis risk analysis, contingency planning, and response strategies. A major transformation is needed in the way ASEAN is handling crises, should it wish to play a greater leadership role in the region and beyond.

First, ASEAN needs to acknowledge the underlying aspects of crises, be it caused by natural, conflict, technological or health-related hazards. Many of the risk drivers can be sensitive. For conflict-induced crises, these may include deteriorating human rights conditions and domestic political instability. For climate-induced crisis, these may include unsustainable use of natural resources, weak governance and poor urban planning. The problem and root causes must be recognised and assessed correctly in order for the right decision to be made.

Second, ASEAN needs to adopt a multi-risk approach with a coordinated, inclusive and long-term strategy. The current approach where the AHA Centre is mandated to manage only the humanitarian aspects of the conflict on an *ad hoc* basis, will not be tenable in the long run. Crises must be addressed from all aspects, be it human rights, political, humanitarian, social or economic.

To be sure, it does not mean that the AHA Centre should function as an all-crises centre. Instead, ASEAN can start mapping the role and mandate of other relevant ASEAN bodies, centres, and entities and explore how their roles and assignments can be optimised and strengthened to support an all-crises coordination mechanism.

Third, adopt an anticipatory approach. ASEAN needs to put better futures and foresight analysis to remain ahead of crises. Coordination between the three pillars of ASEAN to develop clear early warning triggers, promote upstream actions to mitigate the possibility of escalation and downstream action to address drivers of risks is necessary.

Fourth, promote transparency and effective public communication. Transparency is needed to build people's trust in crisis and prevent ASEAN from getting disconnected from ordinary people. ASEAN also needs to project a more proactive role in global issues such as climate crises, and communicate its regional strategy clearly to stay relevant.

Fifth, start with the review of the ASEAN Charter in particular on how decisions are made in crisis situation. ASEAN has a design problem in its decision-making process. Its inability to resolve the ongoing Myanmar crisis has further exposed its inherent flaws. ASEAN Leaders can start by accommodating and undertaking a real-time and fact-based learning process, to inform a much-needed revision for the Charter.

The multiple crises in the region including the stalemate in Myanmar should provide an impetus for ASEAN Leaders to transform the way it is handling crises. Opportunities could emerge for ASEAN to transform itself for the better, but only if there is a strong political will to act.

Ms. Adelina Kamal is Associate Senior Fellow at the ASEAN Studies Centre, ISEAS—Yusof Ishak Institute, and former Executive Director of the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance (AHA Centre), 2017-August 2021.

Analysis

The Quad and ASEAN: Old Misconceptions and New Prospects

Huong Le Thu highlights key challenges of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) in its engagement with ASEAN and suggests how to promote synergies in cooperation.

Ever since the Quad underwent a revival in 2017, after over a decade of hiatus, it has struggled to gain open support from Asia and avoid being labelled as an anti-China 'military alliance' or a group that challenges ASEAN centrality.

In fact, the relationship between the Quad 2.0 and ASEAN was lukewarm, although several in-depth studies conducted by different institutions in assessing regional views showed that this was not necessarily the case. The most popular opinion was one indicating that ASEAN had yet to warm up to the Quad. Surveys were conducted by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, and the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) to examine ASEAN countries' views. While they used different research methodologies and sample groups, the conclusions seemed to confirm the diversity of opinions with no dominant views on the Quad. The spectrum of views based on respondents' national considerations has been well explained in *Southeast Asian Perceptions of the Quad*, a special report published by ASPI that detailed individual countries' aspirations on the role that the Quad could play.

The Quad has evolved to include enhanced dialogues, practical cooperation, and strengthened objectives. But the question remains: have perceptions caught up? There are several misperceptions about the Quad that seem to be lingering despite its evolution.

The first misconception is the view that the Quad challenges ASEAN centrality and that it did not involve ASEAN. This same argument was not targeted specifically at other groupings. For example, there were no similar voices of concern raised about any other initiatives, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, a China-led multilateral financial institution, or was the case of the grouping of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) that did not involve any ASEAN countries. A popular argument invoking ASEAN's discomfort because the Quad did not involve any Southeast Asian countries does not hold. However, it is important to note that the ASEAN centrality concept — vague to begin with — is not challenged by the emergence of the Quad, AUKUS or other initiatives. It needs to be asserted and earned by ASEAN's leadership in regional and global affairs and not by the absence of other competitive arrangements.

The second misperception is that minilateralism is now displacing the ASEAN-style of multilateralism — an over-simplification that does not consider different forms of minilateral arrangements. Some ASEAN members have also participated in other forms of minilateral arrangements that do not necessarily

The White House@Flickr

Quad Leaders' Summit in September 2021

involve all other ASEAN countries. The examples range from the Five Power Defence Arrangement involving Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore and the United Kingdom since 1971, various Mekong cooperation platforms, ASEAN minus X counter-terrorism cooperation and Sulu Sea trilateral patrols, to name a few. Therefore, it is not the membership or nature of the arrangement itself but the core purpose and effectiveness of cooperation that matters.

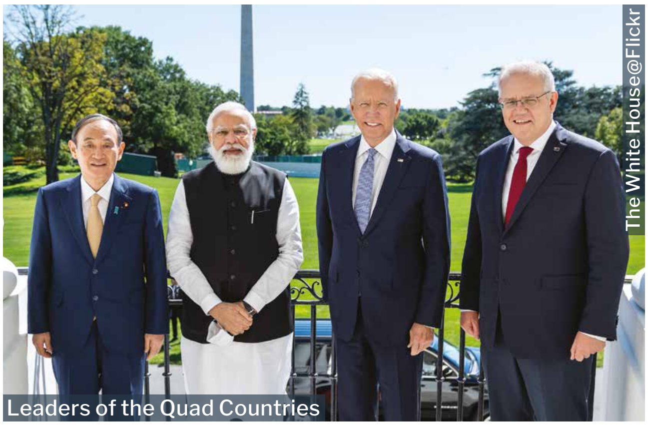
The third misconception relates to the purpose. As a minilateral mechanism promoting a free and open Indo-Pacific, the Quad has attracted some debate about its form and substance of cooperation, especially vis-à-vis other regional arrangements, including ASEAN-led platforms such as the East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Regional Forum and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus. Concerns have ranged from the Quad becoming an "Asian NATO" to the challenge that it might pose to ASEAN centrality. But the Quad members have neither interests, nor capacity, to transform into an "Asian NATO", nor an institutionalised and bureaucratised form like ASEAN. The Quad's strength lies in its flexibility and informality, rather than in building a competitive and extensive architecture akin to the one centred around ASEAN.

While the Quad has evolved towards greater coordination, it has yet to achieve an institutionalised form. Since Joe Biden's presidency, the Quad leaders and ministers have had more high-level dialogues, including a Leaders' Summit in September last year and several in-person meetings despite the pandemic challenges, making the Quad a priority agenda for the US. The Quad today has pledged to strengthen cooperation on various issues, ranging from maritime security, to the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, infrastructure — a constructive agenda that expands beyond only addressing China.

The Quad also showed responsiveness to ASEAN concerns. On the rhetorical level, it has repeatedly emphasized ASEAN centrality as a mantra in official statements. Notably, the Quad has provided practical cooperation by supplying vaccines to the region. The Quad vaccine partnership, now with an interactive website, showcases the four partners' contributions in real terms. This has been well-received as a response to regional needs and where the Quad can make a real difference. The latest edition of the ISEAS regional survey indicated that 58.5% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the Quad's practical cooperation in vaccine and climate change.

The elevated Quad 2.0 now shows the keen interests of the partners to revive the mechanisms and work towards tangible cooperation beyond just balancing China's influence in this region. In fact, the current challenge of the Quad is now over-reaching and over-promising.

While more "tangible" and beneficial effects of the Quad's initiatives in Southeast Asia would be welcomed, there are also many unresolved issues for the Quad itself. These include the level of like-mindedness and



Leaders of the Quad Countries

commitment among the members themselves and the degree of possible coordination of actions regarding hard trade-offs. For example, while New Delhi shares security concerns, it does not share the same degree of human rights and governance stance that the US, Australia, and to a lesser degree Japan share.

Putin's attack on Ukraine exposed another divergence within the Quad, namely the differences in priorities between India and the other three, which begs the larger question if China is the only common concern they have. The Quad, as formidable as it can be, is no panacea. As the Russia-Ukraine war shows, even in the realm of geopolitics only, there are limitations to both its intention and capability.

Beyond vaccine partnership, other prospects of cooperation with ASEAN are still being explored. While individual Southeast Asian countries will be receptive on different issues, the Quad has yet to decide on the specifics, including its next flagship initiatives, such as infrastructure or post-pandemic recovery. It is still unclear if the Quad would continue the model of amplifying and multiplying "donor-type" of initiatives (like vaccines) or whether it will move towards a more equitable type of partnership. If so, in what areas or on what terms.

It is in the interests of both ASEAN and the Quad to build synergies in the areas of cooperation. For the Quad, a genuine relationship with ASEAN would help to strengthen its momentum. The difficulty lies in the priority areas: for the Quad, it is unequivocally countering China; for ASEAN — economic recovery from the pandemic will remain a priority. But with the US still missing a credible economic component in its Indo-Pacific strategy, the appetite to fill in this gap is somewhat limited. As Ukraine shows, geopolitics may risk a distracted US that could de-emphasize its cooperation with ASEAN. ASEAN's pursuit of a productive relationship with the Quad without the insecurity of overshadowing its centrality would be necessary. ASEAN understands that it cannot and does not want to take on hard security issues, so the Quad and its preoccupation with hard security issues would complement ASEAN.

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Spotlight: The Reopening of ASEAN: Trade, Tourism and Travel

ASEAN and China in RCEP: Time to Liberalise Trade

Sithanonxay Suvannaphakdy proposes regulatory cooperation on non-tariff measures in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership for ASEAN and China.

RCEP successfully entered into force in January 2022

The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) entered into force on 1 January 2022 for six ASEAN countries, namely Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam, and four non-ASEAN signatory countries, namely Australia, China, Japan and New Zealand. Malaysia followed suit on 18 March 2022. It presents an opportunity for ASEAN and China to deepen their trade integration beyond tariff liberalisation in the post-pandemic era. Under the RCEP, ASEAN and China would eliminate about 90% of their tariffs on goods traded between the two regions over the next 20 years from the date of its entry into force. Arguably, lower tariffs should enhance regional trade flows.

However, tariff reduction or elimination is only part of the story. There are other market access conditions that impede the movement of goods between the two regions. These are non-tariff measures (NTMs) that affect international trade by changing the quantity, price of traded goods, or both. An analysis of data from UNCTAD's Global NTM Database reveals that China has imposed the largest number of NTMs (7,256 measures), followed by Thailand (3,276 measures) and the Philippines (1,222 measures). The number of NTMs in other ASEAN countries are less than 1,000 measures. The large number of NTMs imposed on imports by China tend to substantially affect ASEAN exports because China is the key export market for ASEAN countries. In 2020, all 10 ASEAN countries listed China as one of their top three export markets.

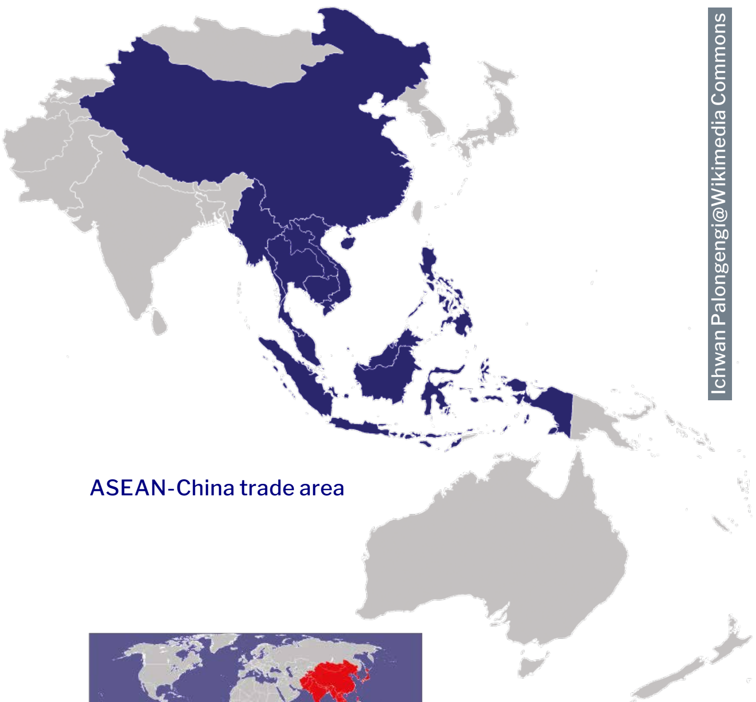
More than 50% of total NTMs in China and ASEAN are accounted by sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) measures such as tolerance limits for residues and restricted use of substances as well as technical barriers to trade (TBT) such as labelling and packaging requirements. The SPS and TBT measures aim to reduce the impacts of perceived market imperfections such as risks for human, animal or plant health, or information asymmetries. Empirical evidence shows that they can increase prices of imported agricultural products by about 15% due to conformity assessment and restriction for TBT or SPS reasons. Meanwhile, they can increase demand for agricultural imports by providing a positive signal to consumers that enhances confidence in imported products. This suggests the need to streamline SPS and TBT measures rather than eliminating them.

The rise of SPS and TBT measures in ASEAN and China reflect differences in the level of economic development, diverse procedural traditions in issuing and enacting regulations, and different protection levels. Lack of regulatory cooperation across countries has led to regulatory divergence as the government will only design technical measures and product standards to meet consumers' preferences in its country. The regulatory divergence increases costs for traders and producers to gather information on regulatory requirements in different markets. Traders also pay higher costs because they have to adjust the specification of goods and services to comply with different regulatory requirements of importing countries, and to comply with different conformity assessment procedures across importing countries.

Higher trade costs decrease profits for producers and traders while raising prices of imported products for consumers in ASEAN and China. To reduce NTM-related costs, the governments of ASEAN countries and China should consider the impacts of NTMs beyond their domestic borders. They need to incorporate the design and implementation of existing and proposed NTMs of their trading partners into their NTMs, and cooperate with their trading partners in bilateral, regional or multilateral contexts to reduce unnecessary trade costs associated with the diversity of NTMs across countries. In this regard, the commencement of the RCEP should serve as a stepping stone to strengthen the ASEAN-China cooperation on NTMs.

The RCEP provisions on SPS and TBT consist of the regulatory instruments that could be used to harmonise NTMs in ASEAN and China. The SPS provisions aim to achieve both trade and non-trade objectives. These include protecting human, animal or plant health; increasing the transparency and understanding of the development and application of SPS measures; and encouraging the adoption of international standards, guidelines and recommendations. Whereas, TBT provisions aim to reduce unnecessary trade costs associated with standards, technical regulations, and conformity assessment procedures.

Key regulatory instruments for the NTM cooperation include promoting transparency, adopting international standards, and mutual recognition of conformity assessment procedures. The provisions on transparency and adoption of international standards require regulators to embed international best practices into their domestic rule-making procedures and to prevent regulations creating unnecessary trade barriers. In addition, mutual recognition of conformity assessment results between two or more RCEP partners helps ensure that traders do not face duplicative requirements or procedures when regulations differ across markets.



ASEAN-China trade area

NTM cooperation between ASEAN and China may be built on existing NTM initiatives in ASEAN such as the ASEAN Framework Agreement for the Integration of Priority Sectors signed in 2004. Such framework aims to streamline NTMs for agri-food, textile, health, information and communication technology, rubber, automotive, wood, and electronics products. The commitment of ASEAN countries to streamline NTMs has been strengthened by the implementation of the ASEAN Trade in Goods (ATIGA) since 2010, whereby member states shall review the NTMs to identify non-tariff barriers (NTBs) for elimination (Article 42). So far, ASEAN countries have been quite slow in addressing NTBs such as diverse product standards, import bans, import licensing and technical barriers to trade. The ASEAN-China cooperation on NTMs under the RCEP should redouble ASEANs' efforts on NTM reforms due to larger potential benefits of trade with China and other RCEP partners.

The ASEAN-China cooperation on NTMs should also link China's national trade repository (NTR) with the ASEAN Trade Repository (ATR) to increase transparency and predictability of trade procedures and regulations. The ATR aims to provide transparency on the trade and customs laws and procedures by connecting the NTRs of all ASEAN countries. The NTR is a web-based portal that provides a single source of comprehensive, accurate and up-to-date information on all trade related information. Greater transparency in trade regulations and procedures facilitate firms' access to information and enhance their compliance with prescribed regulations, which reduce time and costs in trade transactions. This is particularly important for small and medium-sized enterprises located outside the capital cities of ASEAN less developed countries, who often have to travel to get trade information from customs authorities at border checkpoints or trade-related government agencies in provincial cities.

Finally, the ASEAN-China cooperation on NTMs should incorporate capacity building to strengthen NTM reforms in ASEAN, especially in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar (after the country ratifies the RCEP agreement) and Vietnam. One of the key challenges in NTM reforms is the cost and benefit analysis of regulatory measures to justify the need for regulatory changes. Such an approach is more complex than the analysis of any other trade policy instrument such as tariffs given their variety, the difficulty of assessing their restrictiveness, and the involvement of multiple stakeholders (e.g. Ministries of Trade, Agriculture, Public Health). This can be made possible only by applying a systematic approach to gain a better understanding of the impact of these different types of NTMs. But practical guidance on the national NTM reform is still limited in ASEAN countries.

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Analysis

China's CPTPP Accession and Implications for ASEAN

Pramila A. Crivelli and **Stefano Inama** highlight the implications of China's bid to accede to the CPTPP and how ASEAN should leverage the opportunities that may arise.

Senior Officials at the CPTPP Signing Ceremony in Chile, 2018

China may become the biggest winner of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).

The Peterson Institute for International Economics estimates the CPTPP global income gains by 2030 at US$147 billion per year and these gains could quadruple to US$632 billion with China's entry. Most recently, a study published in East Asian Affairs also observed positive economic effects if China joins the CPTPP alone or together with the first batch of five countries that have expressed intent to join (i.e., Korea, Indonesia, Colombia, Thailand and the Philippines). The overall world impact of China's sole accession is estimated to increases in GDP (+0.102%), social welfare (+0.049%), manufacturing employment (+0.205%) and trade (+0.549%).

Negotiation Challenges – A Long and Winding Road Ahead

At the same time, briefs and press articles unanimously report that China has some work to do for the accession process to be completed. In particular, it needs to align its negotiating position with CPTPP requirements and adapt, whenever necessary, its domestic regulations.

China has already made commitments under the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). However, a recent ADB brief and a forthcoming ADB report comparing the market access and trade liberalisation commitments in the various disciplines and areas covered by RCEP and the CPTPP points to the "shallow" nature of the commitments contained in RCEP when compared with the CPTPP, especially in behind the borders measures. Despite the progress in regional cooperation and integration achieved through RCEP, China will still have to make a quantum leap to get on board the CPTPP.

In fact, the differences in the negotiation outcomes between the RCEP and CPTPP result from the fact that in the RCEP, China has managed to keep the level of ambitions in sensitive areas within a comfortable zone. This may not happen again during CPTPP accession negotiations. First, in legal terms, we are now considering an accession to an existing treaty, which is quite different from being a founding member of an agreement. Indeed, even with strong bargaining powers, China cannot pretend to modify the existing architecture of the agreement. For example, the negative list approach on scheduling trade liberalisation in trade in services may be requested to join the CPTPP at the outset implying significant concessions. Second, the level of liberalising commitments that China may consider in sensitive sectors and areas such as public procurement, intellectual property and investment are likely to be put to test during the accession process. Finally, additional areas such as labour, state-owned enterprises (SOEs), and digital trade will require China to make significant concessions.

As pointed out by the Brookings Institution, "The CPTPP has chapters on labor and state-owned enterprises mandating freedom of association, eliminating all forms of forced labor, and establishing disciplines on the commercial activities of public enterprises; RCEP does not. Both the CPTPP and RCEP contain a chapter on e-commerce, but the commitments undertaken are very different. It is not just that the digital provisions of the CPTPP go further (for example, forbidding forced disclosure of source code), but that they are subject to dispute settlement amongst the parties and do not invoke self-judging national security exemptions."

Press reports are rather sceptical on the real willingness of China to make the necessary concessions to accede to the CPTPP while others are considering that some CPTPP members may accommodate a soft landing for China in the CPTPP banking on the trading opportunities arising from China accession. Yet the same reports are warning against such an approach as it would increase dependency on the China market and retaliation from China in case of trade or other kinds of disputes.

China's Accession to the CPTPP and the Future of RCEP

The possibility that China may successfully negotiate its accession to the CPTPP even on a long-time frame should nevertheless not be underestimated. In the long run, China could replace the pivotal roles that US used to have in the former Trans Pacific Partnership. As further developed in a commentary by the United States Institute of Peace, this political dividend and the sizable hundreds of billions of dollars to its national income within a decade as projected by economic studies may induce China to give some further concessions to join the CPTPP even in some sensitive areas. Critical issues remain to be considered in international research and press releases about the impact of China's accession to the CPTPP on other RCEP members, in particular on the ASEAN Least Developed Countries (LDCs).

On the one hand, Chinese concessions to join the CPTPP is likely to positively affect CPTPP members in the ASEAN bloc, which have exhibited little resistance to China's joining. Indeed, Malaysia and Singapore officially welcomed China's consideration to join the CPTPP.

11 signatories of the CPTPP

On the other hand, China's accession to the CPTPP could have a significant adverse effect on other ASEAN economies, especially on the ASEAN LDCs. China's accession would result in making RCEP commitments obsolete, significantly undermining RCEP's attractiveness. This would represent a net loss for ASEAN LDCs that put their stakes on RCEP.

In pure terms of market access, such a scenario would also reinforce the preference erosion that ASEAN LDCs have been enduring over the last decades, with preference margin and cumulation benefits progressively eliminated due to the proliferation of FTAs among regional partners. As an example, China would gain access to the Canadian market, competing with ASEAN LDCs who are currently granted unilateral preferences under the Canadian General Scheme of Preferences (GSP), namely the General Preferential Tariff (GPT). This is all the more critical given that LDCs' graduation is likely to worsen trade prospects for them in the near future.

Leveraging CPTPP Concessions for the Development of RCEP's Built-in Agenda

China's accession to the CPTPP may generate a loss of credibility for RCEP. At the same time, it should be recalled that RCEP is a living agreement relying on a combined agenda of implementation and built-in provisions to achieve greater trade liberalisation in the future. In the case of China's accession to CPTPP, RCEP still has the option to raise its incremental value in order to avoid RCEP commitments and benefits to vanish.

In such a case, ASEAN should leverage on China's CPTPP's accession talks to further deepen RCEP commitments and expand its coverage to new areas that have been left outside the deal, such as labour rights, state-owned enterprises, freedom of association, among others. Behind-border liberalisation policies have been identified as the most "shallow" areas of RCEP where further intergovernmental work is crucially needed. Leveraging on new concessions that China may have to agree on during the CPTPP accession process can therefore be perceived as an opportunity for ASEAN to reinvigorate RCEP and ensure it delivers its promises.

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Recovery of International Tourism in Southeast Asia

Vu Hai Dang outlines strategies for ASEAN to ensure the revival of regional tourism activities.

Pre-COVID-19, Southeast Asia was a well-known destination for world travellers. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), in 2018, six Southeast Asian countries were among the world's top 50 in attracting the highest number of international tourists (from the highest: Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, Indonesia and Philippines). Furthermore, tourism was an important source of income for all ASEAN countries. ASEAN countries suffered a significant loss in tourism arrivals at the height of the virus' spread in 2020-2021. International tourist arrival losses ranged upwards from 75%. Meanwhile, the total amount of revenue loss of all ten ASEAN member states reached US$137 billion.

Countries	Loss in International Tourist Arrivals (%)	Loss in Tourism Revenue (Millions USD)
Brunei	81	271
Cambodia	80	3,900
Indonesia	75	10,000
Laos	81	721
Malaysia	83	32,800
Myanmar	79	2,257
Philippines	82	8,000
Thailand	83	37,500
Singapore	86	22,900
Viet Nam	79	19,000

Source: UNWTO (2020 – early 2021 data)

Long Journey to Tourism Recovery

Southeast Asian countries are now reopening their borders after almost complete border closures to international tourists for most of 2021 to curb the spread of the virus. Previously, tourism sandboxes were established to reopen some well-known tourism locations to help to revive the national tourism industry while still keeping the COVID-19 situation under control. The first sandbox in the region was Phuket Island, launched in July 2021, by Thailand. Other locations, such as Krabi, Phang-Nga, and Ko Samui, were added later on. Other Southeast Asian countries followed Thailand by opening their well-known destinations to international tourism. For instance, Indonesia opened Bali Island; Malaysia, Langkawi; Vietnam, Kien Giang, Khanh Hoa, Da Nang, Quang Nam, Quang Ninh and Ho Chi Minh City.

The next step is to open the entire country to international tourists. Cambodia did it first. Since 15 November 2021, all fully vaccinated international travellers can visit all regions in Cambodia without quarantine. Thailand and the Philippines followed in February 2022. Vietnam did it in March 2022. Indonesia lifted all quarantine rules at the end of March 2022. Malaysia and Singapore just recently announced to fully reopen in April 2022. For those countries, the sandbox period served as a pilot phase to observe and evaluate the step-by-step reopening of their territory to international tourism.

However, the road to the complete reopening of tourism in ASEAN countries remains challenging. The emergence of new COVID-19 variants such as Omicron slowed down and even reversed the reopening before ASEAN countries decided to open up. For instance, Thailand and the Philippines had to delay their reopening for international vaccinated tourists because of Omicron. Indonesia also had to suspend the visa waiver and visa on arrival requirements for foreign visitors from February to March 2022. Vietnam almost put on hold its reopening in March 2022. Willing international tourists to Southeast Asia have to put up with high fees, complicated paperwork, long-waiting times at airports, and scarcity of flights. Consequently, the number of foreign tourists arriving in Southeast Asia after the reopening has not been high. For instance, until December 2021, less than 270,000 tourists have arrived in Thailand, 3,500 to Vietnam, 376 to Langkawi, Malaysia and only 45 to Bali, Indonesia

ASEAN Tourism Cooperation in Time of COVID-19

As a cooperation area under the ASEAN Economic Community, the ASEAN sectoral body in charge of tourism cooperation is the Meeting of ASEAN Tourism Ministers (M-ATM). In April 2020, M-ATM had a special meeting on COVID-19, calling for closer ASEAN cooperation in the exchange of information relating to health, and immigration as well as the implementation of measures to bolster confidence among visitors to Southeast Asia. In September 2021, ASEAN Tourism Ministers endorsed the implementation of a Post COVID-19 Crisis Recovery Plan that aims to explore creative and innovative solutions to stimulate the tourism sector. The plan focuses on implementing activities to support tourism businesses with recovery and adaptation to the requirements and enable safe and seamless restoration of intra-ASEAN and international travels.

One of Cambodia's Chairmanship priorities in 2022 is to revive regional tourism. Cambodia took the initiative to host the 25th M-ATM physically in Sihanoukville in January 2022 after two years of meeting via videoconference. At the meeting, ASEAN Tourism Ministers agreed to announce the gradual reopening of ASEAN tourism. They noted that the progressive resumption of travel, in accordance with each ASEAN member state's current

Empty streets in Bali, Indonesia during COVID-19 border closure

travel policies and regulation, and COVID-19 situation, is subject to the respective ASEAN Member States' health protocols, current travel policies and COVID developments.

How Can ASEAN Do More?

The reopening of ASEAN regional tourism requires a calibrated approach. In addition to what has been done, ASEAN could consider the following measures to stimulate more tourism activities in the region.

First, promoting Southeast Asian destinations for the Meetings, Incentives, Conferences & Exhibitions (MICE) industry. It is estimated that ASEAN itself has over 1,000 meetings each year. However, during the pandemic, most ASEAN meetings have been either postponed or moved online. Many other regional conferences and workshops have suffered the same fate. Although a viable alternative, arguably video conferencing cannot replace face-to-face meetings, especially in dealing with important or sensitive issues. Now that many Southeast Asian countries are open entirely or partially, ASEAN can promote opened locations for physically hosting of its own regional meetings, conferences and workshops, allowing meetings to be held face-to-face. This can help to revive ASEAN's ailing MICE industry as the private sector will be encouraged to take ASEAN's lead by resuming physical hosting of industry conferences and workshops.

Second, establishing a safe cruise corridor across ASEAN. Sea cruise tourism has been encouraged by ASEAN. At the 24th M-ATM, ASEAN Tourism Ministers agreed to implement an ASEAN Sea Cruise Tourism Corridor and at their next meeting, they recognised that the hiatus in cruise-related activities was an opportunity to gather relevant agencies to work towards a sustainable recovery of the cruise sector which brings clear benefits to destinations across ASEAN. Accordingly, ASEAN can support the establishment of a cruise corridor that goes across different locations to open tourism in the region. Safety measures could be taken to control the acceptance, embarkation, itinerary and dis-embarkation of cruise passengers. For instance, the cruise can only stop at specific locations and all passengers and crew members must be fully vaccinated and tested negative for COVID-19 before embarkation.

Third, resuming campaigns to promote the return of tourists to ASEAN countries. Before COVID-19, ASEAN was active in promoting tourism in ASEAN countries. Measures taken ranged from establishing cooperation centres with partners to promote tourism and cultural exchanges, designating year(s) of tourism cooperation, to holding joint seminars and workshops. These promotional activities have subsided due to COVID-19. Now that Southeast Asian countries are reopening their borders, ASEAN could resume its campaigns internationally to attract international tourists to Southeast Asia. This is also in line with the policy of ASEAN of marketing Southeast Asia as a single tourism destination.

Finally, leveraging on the partnership with dialogue partners to accelerate the recovery of tourism: ASEAN has developed important tourism partnerships with China, Japan, South Korea, India and Russia. The annual meetings between Tourism Ministers of ASEAN and ASEAN+3 (China, Japan and South Korea) and India have been maintained through videoconference despite COVID-19. Furthermore, in January 2022, the first M-ATM meeting with Russia was organised. During these meetings, all partners have expressed support for the recovery of the tourism sector. Leveraging on these relations, ASEAN could cooperate with relevant partners to accelerate the recovery of tourism in the region. For instance, they could consider easing travel restrictions to ASEAN countries. It should be noted that China is ASEAN's most important tourism market. While it seems impossible for China to change its zero-COVID strategy, it might still be feasible to ask China to relax official travel restrictions to ASEAN countries, for example.

Reviving the tourism sector is a challenging step that requires regional collaboration. Ensuring the return of Southeast Asia's tourism is an opportunity for ASEAN to demonstrate the Association's central role in ensuring the prosperity of its member states.

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Spotlight: The Reopening of ASEAN: Trade, Tourism and Travel

Advancing Sustainable Tourism in ASEAN

Phi Minh Hong and **Nguyen Thu Giang** discuss strategies to leverage the COVID-19 pandemic to enhance sustainable tourism in ASEAN countries.

The sustainable development of the tourism industry has emerged as concern lately. The World Tourism Organization define sustainable tourism as "tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities". Alternatively, sustainable tourism can be seen as the synergy of three dimensions; environmental, economic, and social-cultural. ASEAN's tourism industry grew strongly at a 6.7% rate yearly between 2000-2019. However, the balance of these three factors has not been ensured.

Environmental issues have received insufficient attention while the tourism industry has grown significantly. Environmental degradation threatens to reverse the results of the other two factors. A polluted tourist area will no longer be an attractive destination. The decline in tourist numbers will lead to a decrease in tourism revenue, directly affecting the livelihoods of local people. Besides, restoring and recreating the environment requires huge costs. In addition, economic growth is frequently affected, especially when tourist areas are forced to close to restore environmental resources.

This situation is common in ASEAN. In Thailand, 80% of the corals in Maya Bay was damaged. The island was closed from 2018 to 2021 to heal the nature. Its total revenue from tourism alone was around US$21 million in 2017. Despite the lack of data on the economic reversals caused by this closure, the cost is probably not small. In the Philippines, Boracay island was shut down for at least six months in 2018. In Indonesia, the serious plastic waste pollution in Bali made tourists more hesitant to visit. Many tourists are disappointed and will likely not return to Vietnam's beach resorts that stretch along its 300 km of shoreline due to heavy pollution. According to the World Economic Forum's *Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report 2019*, most ASEAN countries have low environmental sustainability ratings (Indonesia ranked 135th, Thailand 130th, Vietnam 121st).

The rapid increase in tourists' arrivals in these major tourist sites has burdened infrastructure capacity and administrative management, resulting in overcrowding and considerable environmental pollution. However, overcrowding is not always the cause. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when the number of tourists to Bali has shrunk, the beaches were still flooded with tonnes of plastic waste every day due to the habit of using single-use plastics, an inefficient garbage treatment system and a lack of marine environmental regulations.

pixy_nook@Shutterstock

Overtourism in Maya Bay, Thailand

UNESCO World Heritage Site in Trang An, Vietnam

The lack of environmental protection effort across ASEAN tourism sites might stem from the lack of funding and capacity resources. It is also critical to look at the issue of an unequal distribution of tourism profits. According to various studies, the tourism leakage — a term to quantify tourism dollars that leave the local economy and instead benefit multinational corporations, foreign companies or countries — of the accommodation industry in Bali can be as high as 51%. In Siem Reap, despite a significant rise in international tourist arrivals during the past decade, the leakage is high at around 40%. Hence, the profits gained mostly benefit outside investors instead of being retained to support reinvestment to preserve local tourism. Consequently, if outside investors enjoy significant returns, local residents with fewer benefits might also seek to exploit resources further to get more economic benefits. Eventually, they will be less interested in a commitment to enhance sustainable practices. This short-sighted approach of ignoring local heritage preservation (landscape and culture) could make local communities increasingly vulnerable in the long term.

COVID-19 has had a significant impact on tourism revenue, but it gives the environment time to recover and helps countries best prepare for the return of tourists afterwards. The gradual opening to a limited number of visitors is also an opportunity to test and then adjust sustainable tourism development plans. These plans need to include key stakeholders, especially local communities, who, once integrated, will utilise resources more responsibly and better support the conservation of resources. For instance, in Bali, a joint action plan between the government, international organisations and local people promised to help raise awareness and draw attention to the fight against plastic waste.

Strict regulations related to environmental protection such as limiting plastic waste, and sanctioning actions harmful to the environment are necessary to shape new habits and behaviour for residents and tourists. These regulations do not hinder tourism development. Instead, they will retain the number of tourists who want to return to visit in the long run.

In short, the principle of sustainable tourism includes economic growth, environmental protection, and the balance of interests among the involved parties. Governments have an important role in formulating a sustainable development plan which needs to be geared towards connecting and distributing appropriate benefits to stakeholders, especially local communities, with strict regulations on environmental protection. Ninh Binh province in Vietnam is an example of persistence in the sustainable development strategy for more than 30 years with collaboration between diverse groups of stakeholders, particularly the deep involvement of the local community in influencing decision making. The government together with the local communities agreed to transform the poor agricultural province into a tourist destination with notable scenic sites of Trang An. Ninh Binh's revenue growth rate has exceeded 20% from 2000 to 2005.

Countries can take advantage of the current gradual reopening to test and refine sustainable tourism plans before welcoming an abundant number of tourists in the future. ASEAN countries should also promote a new type of travel experience: allowing tourists to tailor their journey personally and be closer to nature and local communities rather than promoting overcrowded sites. This can create a high-value industry and indeed more sustainable impacts on the environment and livelihood of the local communities.

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Spotlight: The Reopening of ASEAN: Trade, Tourism and Travel

How Have Southeast Asia's Airlines Coped With the Pandemic?

Melinda Martinus reviews the structural transformations made by Southeast Asian airlines to adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Garuda Indonesia underwent a major company restructuring during the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has hit many of the ASEAN region's air travel industries hard. New rapidly evolving variants and travel restrictions have caused a dramatic drop in passenger air transport demand. While many countries have started to ease travel restrictions, various travel-related declarations such as vaccine certification, mandatory testing, and health insurance requirements still discourage international travellers from travelling freely.

Indonesia's national airline, Garuda Indonesia, recorded a nine-month net loss of US$1.7 billion from January to September 2021, up from a net loss of US$1.1 billion for the same period in 2020. Thai Airways International scored its largest-ever net loss of US$4.7 billion in 2020. Similarly, another national carrier, Singapore Airlines, reported a US$3.19 billion net loss for the financial year April 2020 to March 2021; however, most recently, it posted a net profit of US$62.6 million for the third quarter to December 2021. Meanwhile, AirAsia, the largest low-cost airline by fleet and number of passengers carried in the region, is also heavy-hit with a net loss of US$1.4 billion in the financial year of 2020.

Many of those airlines have had to borrow huge sums of money or had been bailed out by governments to stay afloat and maintain reduced operations during the period of travel restrictions. Other responses included laying off significant numbers of staff, voluntary furlough, cancelling or deferring equipment purchases, grounding high-operating aircraft fleets — especially aircraft intended for long-haul travels, returning leased aircraft early, and renegotiating business commitments with vendors and suppliers. But, COVID-19 has also given many regional airlines an impetus for structural changes. What are these major transformations?

Major Company Restructuring

Last year, a court in Jakarta received claims of US$13.8 billion from a group of creditors, lessors, and vendors of Garuda Indonesia. Experts say that Garuda's debt challenges, management inefficiency, and cultural issues, including corruption, have predated the pandemic, and the travel downturn has worsened these problems. Indonesia's Deputy Minister of State-Owned Enterprises (SOE) recently made a statement that confirmed, "In this current condition, in a banking term (*sic*), Garuda Indonesia is considered technically bankrupt, but legally not. Now we are trying to get out of this condition."

Various restructuring strategies have been explored immediately. The airline overhauled its management structure, including cutting the number of supervisory boards and directors in the middle of last year. The company has been renegotiating with creditors and lessors to discuss the payment terms, settlements, and credit extension, including proposals for creditors to switch debt to equity and subscribe to the company's 10-year bonds. Meanwhile, in the future, it will also seek other sources of capital injection, such as government funds and shareholder contributions, but only if the company is in a better financial shape and has undergone a debt restructuring process.

Tapping Opportunities from Air Cargo

Although COVID-19 has halted the passenger travel industry, it is not the case for air cargo. Air cargo has been a lifeline for ASEAN's aviation industry. According to consulting firm McKinsey, air cargo typically made up around 12% of the aviation industry's total revenue before the pandemic, but this percentage tripled in 2020.

During the early stages of the pandemic outbreak, MASkargo, the sister company of Malaysia Airlines, raised its freight rates by as much as 50% due to the high demand for Malaysian-made face masks and gloves from Europe, the US, Australia, and Canada that did not want to wait for the long sea-freight delivery. MASkargo typically contributed around 10% to 15% of the Malaysia Airlines Group's revenue, but its contribution had reached 25% during the pandemic.

While many predict that e-commerce will continue driving air cargo demand higher, many air cargo services still depend heavily on passenger flights. For instance, 80% of Singapore Airlines' cargo was delivered on the belly hold of its passenger fleets before the pandemic. In response to the high demand for air cargo, airline companies became much more flexible by increasing the usage of freighter fleet and fully utilising passenger airplanes for transporting cargo while waiting for the travel industry to fully bounce back.

Sustainability Initiatives

Airline business activities indeed scaled back during the pandemic, but the crisis has given them an opportunity to rethink their sustainability strategies in the long term. Health and safety standards were changed overnight. Spurred by digital technologies, airline companies have improved their business efficiency by seamlessly managing booking interfaces, contactless check-in, and boarding experiences.

Southeast Asian airlines have also made an unprecedented move on the environmental front. Many airlines now use sustainable alternatives to replace single-use plastic food packages and cutleries to serve in-flight food not only for hygiene reasons but also for environmental considerations. Some have committed to improving their sustainability practices by carefully selecting business vendors with excellent sustainability track records.

AirAsia@Google Images

AirAsia Food Delivery

Southeast Asian airlines such as Singapore Airlines and Cebu Pacific have announced their carbon reduction pledges. Singapore Airlines has declared its commitment to reach net-zero carbon emissions by 2050. To achieve this, the company recently introduced a voluntary carbon offset programme that allows customers to offset their carbon emissions using their airline miles. Similarly, Cebu Pacific has purchased new eco-planes, which consume less fuel and enable a significant reduction in carbon emissions.

Business Diversification

It might be surprising to see the AirAsia fleet operating not in the sky but on the ground in Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, and Indonesia. The company made an exciting move by expanding to food delivery — an already crowded industry with many established players such as Grab, Gojek, and Food Panda. It also acquired a local Malaysian online food delivery platform, Delivereat, for US$9.8 million in August 2021.

The move was considered necessary as the pandemic hit the airline hard. While many think that AirAsia will struggle to compete with the big players, digital economy experts argue that the food delivery industry in Southeast Asia is still rapidly expanding, and there is a need to bring many players in to ensure fair competition. It is interesting to see how AirAsia will evolve into a multi-industry company in the future.

Conclusion

It might be a long and challenging journey for the region’s airline industry to finally return to its heyday. Airline companies might have to continue adapting and transforming their services to cope with business reversals. But ultimately, the commitment to fully reopen by the region's policymakers will guarantee their business recovery.

By the start of this year, ASEAN countries have made significant progress in the gradual reopening of international travels. The Philippines, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam have been fully opened to vaccinated international tourists. Most recently, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore announced the same measure and surely the rest will follow soon. Indeed, this is good news for the region's airlines which have seen many of their airplanes grounded on the tarmac for more than two years.

Ms. Melinda Martinus is Lead Researcher at the ASEAN Studies Centre, ISEAS—Yusof Ishak Institute.

ASEAN Travel Corridor Framework: A Game Changer?

Joanne Lin analyses the implementation of the ASEAN Travel Corridor Arrangement Framework and how it can help ASEAN resume tourism and economic activities.

As member states continue to make good progress in their national vaccination programmes, ASEAN Leaders are urging ASEAN to operationalise the ASEAN Travel Corridor Arrangement Framework (ATCAF) that was adopted in August 2021, following an ASEAN Leaders' Declaration made in 2020. Safe reopening has become even more important as ASEAN Tourism Ministers, during their meeting in January 2022, agreed to the reopening of ASEAN tourism amid the COVID-19 pandemic that is entering an endemic phase.

Without a doubt, the framework will play an important role in ASEAN's post pandemic recovery. However, little progress has been made in its implementation, which is further dampened by the Omicron variant – a highly contagious strain that can infect up to half of the world's population.

The framework is intended to accelerate ASEAN's economic recovery. With such an arrangement, countries in ASEAN can increase their confidence to gradually reopen their borders to revive regional connectivity, facilitate essential business and official travels between and among ASEAN Member States, allow tourism to resume and to provide a much-needed boost to the aviation sector in which, many national carriers including Thai Airways and Garuda Indonesia face existential threats.

However, more than six months since its adoption, ASEAN countries are still coordinating information and data that are required to be exchanged bilaterally within ASEAN and to further align national reopening measures to the framework. The operationalisation of the framework continues to be elusive to the people of ASEAN.

It may seem that as an ASEAN framework, the ATCAF will apply simultaneously to all ten of its member states. However, the actual implementation of this framework will be bilateral in basis, upon agreement between two member states, followed by the bilateral exchange of information forms.

The framework in essence will be nothing more than a 'noodle bowl' of bilateral exchanges of a standardised information form accompanied by a set of accompanying standard procedures such as pre-departure and post-arrival health measures.

Other measures such as immigration regulation, points of travel, health screening measures, authorised healthcare institutions, quarantine requirements, measures for returning travellers, and quota of travellers will be at the discretion of individual ASEAN countries. Those measures will not be subjected to any common or standardised approaches.

At this point, eligible travellers under this framework have been restricted to citizens, permanent residents and long-term pass holders of ASEAN countries. However, ASEAN Tourism Ministers and other tourism bodies are looking forward to adopt the initiative as a foundation for expansion beyond essential travel especially for leisure travel. This is to help position ASEAN as a single tourism destination by 2025 and to ensure that ASEAN remains competitive in this sector.

To walk the talk, an ASEAN Ad Hoc Task Force has been set up to facilitate the operationalisation of the ATCAF. It needs to work towards harmonising information sharing for procedures and protocols and establishing a standardised COVID-19 vaccination recognition system within ASEAN in verifying the authenticity of the vaccination certificates (whether digital or non-digital).

A digital platform has also been proposed to facilitate the standardisation of health test results. If successful, this digital initiative can help to boost not only business and tourism travel but also ASEAN's digital transformation and integration in the ASEAN region.

While ASEAN countries are looking forward to the operationalisation of the ATCAF, ultimately, the success of the initiative also depends on several other factors. Additional entry procedures or movements restrictions within the country or a lack of direct flights or air connectivity could possibly dampen the enthusiasm for travel under this scheme.

ASEAN countries are now in various stages of reopening through bilateral travel arrangements, which are much more pragmatic. Singapore for example will be joining Cambodia, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam to reopen its borders to vaccinated travellers with simplified entry procedures. Singapore and Malaysia have also agreed to fully reopen the land borders between the two countries without the need for testing or quarantine. Several other ASEAN countries including Malaysia and Myanmar are expected to follow suit. Laos is also expected to reopen several cities under a new "Green Zone Travel" strategy.

Although health and safety are top priorities of ASEAN countries, there is a need to balance it with careful reopening of borders for economic benefits and to safeguard livelihoods, particularly economies that rely significantly on tourism. Prior to the pandemic, the tourism sector accounted for over 12% of ASEAN's combined GDP, while providing more than 13% of employment in the region.

The ATCAF is one of the many initiatives that ASEAN has put in place to address the COVID-19 pandemic especially the economic recovery. It supports the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework to guide the region towards recovery. ASEAN is also looking into ensuring supply chain connectivity and resilience and to increase trade flows within the region through the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) which came into force in January this year.

Alongside the ATCAF, ASEAN is also looking into an ASEAN tourism travel stamp to assure travellers in ASEAN of hygiene and safety standards. The ASEAN travel stamp will promote greater digitalisation of ASEAN tourism, strengthen data and information networks, and

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EU Digital COVID Certificate

Aero Icarus@Wikimedia Commons

AirAsia affected by the pandemic restrictions

promote connectivity and travel facilitation to and within ASEAN. ASEAN will also work towards a framework on sustainable tourism development as part of the priority economic deliverables of Cambodia's ASEAN Chairmanship in 2022.

In supporting tourism sector livelihoods, special emphasis will be placed on Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), vulnerable groups and affected communities. ASEAN has plans to provide further capacity building programmes to upskill and reskill tourism professionals, including in the areas of digital technologies, innovation, ecotourism and entrepreneurship.

While efforts are underway in ASEAN towards the reopening of borders, the rapid spread of the Omicron variant has certainly thrown a spanner in ASEAN's endeavours. Putting in place a regional strategy when the pandemic is constantly evolving — with each evolving variant being more contagious — will be an arduous challenge.

ASEAN as a bloc has generally exhibited more caution than other regions in the world, such as the EU or US. The World Tourism Organization has also acknowledged that Southeast Asia has the most travel restrictions globally. However, with a greater acceptance of the endemic nature of the pandemic, ASEAN countries have started to take a leap of faith in reopening their borders. The limited bilateral reciprocal openings over the last two years are now starting to expand. Analysists are also of the view that ASEAN countries should reopen and reconnect whether they are fully ready or not.

As such, the expeditious operationalise of the ATCAF will be timely and necessary to "re-normalise" the region and to ensure the competitiveness of ASEAN, including as a single tourism destination. The ASEAN Travel Corridor Arrangement Framework will certainly be another test for ASEAN to turn its words and rhetoric into action for its people.

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Time to Revisit an ASEAN Travel Bubble

Jayant Menon proposes that ASEAN play a more proactive role in facilitating the safe reopening of the region.

Tourist spot Boracay, Philippines now open to international visitors

When Philippine Tourism Secretary announced on 28 January 2022 that it would be allowing quarantine-free leisure and business travel from visa-exempt countries starting 14 February, many felt a sense of *deva ju*. A similar announcement had been made a couple of months earlier but it was quickly reversed after the Omicron variant started spreading globally. This was not the case this time, and the Valentine's Day reopening went according to plan, making the Philippines the third country in ASEAN, following Thailand and Cambodia, to open unilaterally to quarantine-free, non-essential travel from almost all countries.

Although Thailand reintroduced quarantine because of Omicron, it removed it on 1 February and has announced that it may ease up on testing requirements even further. Cambodia is the only ASEAN country that has retained its open border policy throughout the Omicron surge and the first ASEAN country to remove the pre-departure and post-arrival testing requirement, despite increasing local cases. Vietnam has fully reopened its borders on 15 March, three months earlier than planned.

A few hours before the Philippine announcement, Malaysian Prime Minister Ismail Sabri had announced that borders may reopen soon, after it too had junked an earlier plan to reopen on 1 January following the onset of Omicron. Since then, it has been decided that borders would reopen fully on 1 April. Singapore had quarantine-free Vaccinated Travel Lanes (VTLs) with cities in all ASEAN countries except Laos and Myanmar. Recognising the complex web that the growing number of VTLs were creating, Singapore announced that it would be doing away with them from 29 March and move from vaccinated travel lanes to vaccinated travellers, while streamlining testing and other protocols.

Despite several false starts, given the unpredictable nature of the virus, there appears to be a clear and irreversible trend in ASEAN countries towards reopening borders, if not living with COVID-19, this time around. This is despite Omicron continuing to rage in most ASEAN countries, often setting new records in terms of daily infection, but not hospitalisation. Perhaps it is because reopening plans are proceeding and gathering pace in the face of soaring infection rates that there is a confidence that the change may be irreversible this time around.

Singapore-Malaysia Land Vaccinated Travel Lane (VTL)

More importantly, there has been a growing recognition of the inability of border closures to stave off new variants or to limit the rise in domestic infection rates. Border measures carry a premium only while they keep the new variants out. Once they fail, as they inevitably have, their benefit starts to diminish relative to their cost. In Singapore, for instance, the number of imported cases was a multiple of those spreading in the community before Delta; now they are just a small fraction, despite a significant easing of border measures.

The more transmissible is the variant, the less useful are border controls once the variant starts spreading in the community. Even the World Health Organization has realised that border measures have proven ineffective and should be reconsidered. The fact that countries like Thailand and the Philippines announced their decision to open unilaterally while vaccination rates were only around 50% may indicate a similar realisation about the inefficiency of border controls.

Thailand has been open to tourists longer than any other ASEAN country, starting with the Phuket sandbox in July 2021. The response to the Phuket and other sandboxes, as well as the general reopening since then has been lacklustre, to say the least. The more recent experience of Cambodia is the same, highlighting continued hesitancy on the part of tourists to travel. The anticipated high volumes of traffic from pent-up demand has simply not materialised. Apart from hesitancy related to health concerns, other factors limiting travel involve the complexity of the procedures and protocols involved, inconsistencies across countries and a host of related factors. There is a lack of mutual recognition and little uniformity in protocols or requirements across ASEAN countries, compounded by frequent reversals, reinstatements, and new developments.

This is where a coordinated response at the regional level could be helpful if ASEAN could play a more proactive role. As more countries open, there is a pressing need to address the current fragmented system and harmonise protocols and standards. If, this is still too difficult or time consuming, a region-wide system of mutual recognition would be a start. Waiting it out until all members open unilaterally would not only take significant time, it also does not address the need to harmonise requirements. A good starting point could be a common ASEAN-wide system for the certification of fully vaccinated individuals, through an ASEAN Vaccination Passport or Digital Health Pass, as proposed by Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen at the opening of the 40th ASEAN Tourism Forum on 16 January 2022.

The need for such a system was highlighted recently when 13 Malaysian travellers were detained for several days and denied entry by Philippine authorities because their digital vaccination certificates were not recognised. Currently, such irregularities are very common throughout the region, and needs to be rectified. The ASEAN Vaccine Passport could set new rules for the types of vaccines that are recognised and the duration of their validity, among other things, and need not be confined to ASEAN nationals alone, just like the EU Digital COVID Certificate. At the very least, ASEAN could adopt and adapt an existing system such as the IATA Travel Pass Initiative and oversee its implementation.

With all the activity in individual ASEAN countries to reopen borders, the time is ripe to revisit the idea of an ASEAN-wide travel bubble. The ASEAN Travel Corridor Arrangement Framework already exists but was never operationalised, and could form the basis for an expansion into an ASEAN travel bubble that includes tourism. It is time for ASEAN to play a more proactive role in facilitating the opening of the region to travel that maximises its economic impact while ensuring that health protocols are observed. Having successfully introduced a system of reciprocal visa-free travel for ASEAN citizens within the region prior to the pandemic, ASEAN is well-placed to work towards a return to pre-existing conditions and restore unencumbered people movement regionally.

Dr. Jayant Menon is Senior Fellow at the Regional Economic Studies Programme, ISEAS—Yusof Ishak Institute.

ASEAN In Figures

TRAVEL AND TOURISM RECOVERY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

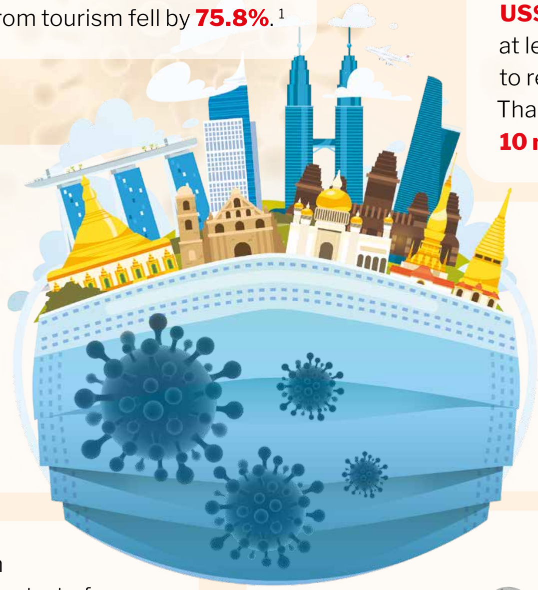
Impact of COVID-19 on Regional Tourism

In 2020, the ASEAN region received only **25.96 million** tourists, a drop of **80.5%**, while income from tourism fell by **75.8%**.[1]

Thailand received **40 million** foreign tourists that generated more than **US$60 billion** in 2019. It is likely to take at least until 2024 for tourism industry to return to pre-pandemic levels. Thailand expects to receive less than **10 million** foreign travellers in 2022.[4]

In 2021, the ASEAN tourism sector suffered declines in:[2]

Tourism receipts:	**94.3%**
International arrivals:	**90%**
Hotel rate occupancy:	**27.4%**



Tourist arrivals in the Philippines slumped **83%** and dropped to **US$1.4 million** last year. More than **1 million** Filipinos lost their jobs in tourism businesses and destinations in the first year of the pandemic alone.[5]

Total international passenger traffic in ASEAN has declined by **98%** since the start of the pandemic. Decline at the ASEAN's three largest international airports in March 2020 – March 2021:[3]

Singapore Changi	Bangkok Suvarnabhumi	Kuala Lumpur International
98.3%	**98.7%**	**98.1%**

Singapore's tourism receipts in 2021 reached **S$1.9 billion**, down **60.4%** year- on-year. There were only **330,000** visitors in 2021, down from **2.74 million** in 2020.[6]

Massive COVID-19 impact on tourism employment:[7]

The Philippines:
Employment contracted by **28%**; average hours worked by **38%**

Vietnam:
Average tourism wages fell by **18%**

Thailand:
Average wages fell by **9.5%**; average hours worked declined by **10%**

Brunei Darussalam:
Employment contracted by **40%**; average work hours contracted by **21%**

Travel and Tourism Recovery Initiatives

ASEAN officially announced the reopening of tourism sector to restore the regional socio-economy from the pandemic:[2]

- Promotion of intra-ASEAN tourism
- Establishment of ASEAN Travel Corridor
- Creation of digital vaccination card
- ASEAN safe tourism travel stamp

The Asian Development Bank has set up **US$1.7 million** technical assistance facility to:[8]

- accelerate Southeast Asia's tourism recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic
- Boost inclusive sustainable development
- Help local tourism entrepreneurs (especially women and youth)
- Adopt digital platforms to grow tourism businesses

ASEAN countries that have fully reopened their borders without mandatory quarantine to foreign tourists who are fully vaccinated:[9]

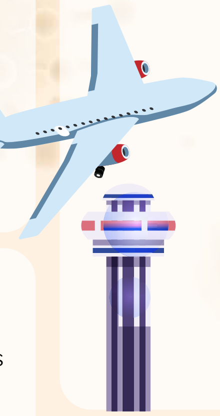
- Cambodia: from 15 November 2021
- Thailand: from 1 February 2022
- The Philippines: from 10 February 2022
- Vietnam: from 15 March 2022
- Malaysia: from 1 April 2022
- Singapore: from 1 April 2022

Singapore saw encouraging signs of recovery in the tourism sector with year-on-year growth in the last three quarters of 2021 despite a record low of **330,000** international visitor arrivals and estimated tourism receipts of **S$1.9 billion**.[13]

Fully vaccinated travellers can travel by land between Singapore and Malaysia without mandatory quarantine or COVID-19 test from **1 April 2022**[14]

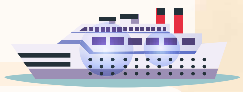
ASEAN Clean Tourist City Award for 2022-2024 announced at the ASEAN Tourism Forum 2022[10]

- Brunei Darussalam: Tutong
- Cambodia: Battambang, Siem Reap and Sihanoukville
- Laos: Luang Prabang, Pakse and Viengxay
- Malaysia: George Town, Langkawi and Muar
- Myanmar: Mandalay, Naypyidaw and Myeik
- The Philippines: Baguio and Ilagan
- Thailand: Khon Kaen, Pattaya and Koh Mak
- Vietnam: Halong, Dalat and Vung Tau



Singapore Airlines posted the first quarterly net profit of **S$85 million** for the third quarter of 2021 due to a strong cargo market and an improvement in passenger numbers as some of its border restrictions were eased.[15]

Since late 2020, Singapore's strongly rebounded cruise industry saw over **400,000** domestic passengers set sail on close to **300** cruise sailings.[13]



Vietnam's two-phase tourism recovery plan:[11]

- **8-9 million** international tourist arrivals (**45-50%** of pre-pandemic figures)
- **65-70 million** domestic arrivals (**75-80%** of pre-pandemic figures)
- **US$17-19.6 billion** total travel revenue (**50%** of pre-pandemic figures)

- **16 million** international tourist arrivals
- **80 million** domestic arrivals
- **US$34 billion** total travel revenue

More than **3 million** tourists recorded in January 2022 as Cambodia's relaxed COVID-19 measures came into play. The revival and growth of tourism sector is expected to increase in 2022.[16]

Thailand expects to receive **200,000-300,000** travellers to come via the quarantine-free visa Test & Go programme in February 2022 alone, with the numbers expected to swell in the following months.[12]

Phuket was the first destination in Thailand to allow international visitors to enter without a quarantine requirement in 2021. Luxury and upscale hotels are expected to see room occupancy rates of **20-30%** this year, an increase from just 12% last year.[17]

Sources:
(1) The Phnom Penh Post, 26 January 2022 (2) ASEAN Secretariat, 19 January 2022 (3) ASI White Paper Update: Restarting International Air Travel Within ASEAN, June 2021 (4) The Business Times, 17 February 2022 (5) Reuters, 28 January 2022; Associated Press, 10 February 2022 (6) Business Times, 25 January 2022 (7) ILO Bangkok, 18 November 2021 (8) ADB News Release, 17 December 2021 (9) Khmer Times, 30 November 2021; The Straits Times, 1 February 2022; Philippine News Agency, 10 February 2022; Channel NewsAsia, 16 March 2022; The Strait Times, 8 March 2022; Channel NewsAsia, 24 March 2022 (10) The Phnom Penh Post, 19 January 2022 (11) Vietnam News, 1 March 2022 (12) The Straits Times, 1 February 2022 (13) Singapore Tourism Board, 25 January 2022 (14) The Business Times, 24 March 2022 (15) Channel NewsAsia, 24 February 2022 (16) Khmer Times, 8 February 2022 (17) Bangkok Post, 27 January 2022

Insider Views

Re-Energising ASEAN Tourism in the Post-COVID Era

The ASEAN tourism industry is expected to gradually reopen this year after two years of COVID-19. *ASEANFocus* is privileged to interview the Kingdom of Cambodia's Minister of Tourism, **H.E. Dr. Thong Khon** on the strategies to revive the tourism industry safely and sustainably.

H.E. Dr. Thong Khon has been serving as Minister of Tourism of the Kingdom of Cambodia and President of the National Olympic Committee of Cambodia (NOCC) since 2007 and 2006 respectively. Minister Thong has managed to make a tremendous 12% annual growth in tourism and has remarkably improved policy and good governance in tourism in Cambodia.

AF: Congratulations for successfully convening the ASEAN Tourism Forum 2022 and the 25th Meeting of ASEAN Tourism Ministers in Preah Sihanouk recently. What inspired the theme "ASEAN – A Community of Peace and Shared Future"?

THONG KHON: Thank you. I would like to extend my sincere appreciation to ASEAN Member States and relevant ASEAN dialogue partners for their contribution to the success of the ASEAN Tourism Forum (ATF) 2022. The theme was chosen as a guiding principle in the rebuilding of ASEAN tourism. COVID-19 has severely disrupted the flow of tourism in the ASEAN region and beyond. It is vital that the tourism sector of ASEAN be revived in a timely manner as it significantly contributes to people's livelihoods and the three Community pillars of ASEAN. The theme calls for concerted effort and collaboration among ASEAN countries to keep working on the region's vision — ASEAN: One Community, One Destiny. If ASEAN is to thrive as a single destination, all member states have to facilitate tourists with warm hospitality, uniqueness, safety, security, and trust. This cannot be achieved unless ASEAN countries work closely together.

AF: ASEAN Tourism Ministers have agreed to work towards the gradual reopening of ASEAN Tourism. How can ASEAN governments step up cooperation and coordinate more closely to ensure the region's steady reopening of tourism activities?

THONG KHON: The fact that there has been agreement among all ten ASEAN Tourism Ministers to reopen ASEAN tourism gradually is a clear message that the governments of ASEAN share a common determination in reviving their economies through the restarting of tourism while balancing the health and welfare of their peoples. This is an important beginning towards greater collaboration within the bloc and to cultivate trust among the people in the region.

ASEAN Tourism Ministers also fully supported the recommendations of Prime Minister Hun Sen regarding the reopening of both intra and international ASEAN Tourism, the development of a standardised COVID-19 vaccination recognition system for ASEAN, and the relaxation of travel restrictions for travellers within and to ASEAN. I am confident that with strengthened cooperation within ASEAN on the aforementioned aspects and the supporting mechanisms already in place such as the Post-COVID-19 Recovery Plan for ASEAN Tourism, the ASEAN Guidelines on Hygiene and Safety for Professionals and Communities in the Tourism Industry, among others, the steady reopening of ASEAN Tourism will be ensured.

We need to make sure that while the gradual reopening of ASEAN tourism will support growth and meet the principles of sustainability, inclusiveness and resilience, and the health of ASEAN citizens should not be undermined.

Cambodian Ministry of Tourism

The 25th Meeting of ASEAN Tourism Ministers in January 2022

Cambodian Ministry of Tourism

25th Meeting of ASEAN Tourism Ministers in Cambodia

AF: ASEAN Tourism Ministers have recently endorsed the ASEAN Safe Travel Stamp which may be utilised by tourism industry players to assure travellers of hygiene and safety standards. Can you explain to us how this scheme will help to boost ASEAN's competitiveness?

THONG KHON: COVID-19 has underscored the importance of hygiene and safety standards in the tourism industry. As one of many responses to this, ASEAN has endorsed the implementation of the ASEAN Safe Travel Stamp "Safe and Warm". This scheme aims to promote ASEAN as a single destination and raise public awareness of the ASEAN Guidelines on Hygiene and Safety for Professionals and Communities in the Tourism Industry. This document will contribute to strengthening the capability of the region's tourism sector in containing the outbreak of COVID-19. The ASEAN Safe Travel Stamp will send a message to tourists that ASEAN tourism providers adhere to strict standards of conduct, to further boost the trust and confidence of tourists.

AF: ASEAN is working towards positioning itself as a single tourism destination by 2025. What do you think will be the challenges in this endeavour?

THONG KHON: The first challenge is the absence of proper tourism professionals and the lack of investment into the tourism sector in the post-COVID era. Due to the pandemic, many tourism professionals have left the industry to seek alternative opportunities; this resulted in a loss of tourism core assets. In the future, ASEAN needs to focus more on managing tourism talents, such as ensuring sustainable employment and offering an attractive career path to cushion the impact of future similar pandemics. Drawing on the existing framework of ASEAN Mutual Recognition Arrangement on Tourism Professionals (MRA-TP), ASEAN can develop ideas to address regional challenges on the tourism workforce. Likewise, strengthening the tourism industry is not always about improving 'quality' but also 'quantity'. ASEAN thus needs to increase the number of joint tourism marketing strategies. Lastly, while there is a natural tendency to "wait and see" before investors' confidence is restored to build up the industry, ASEAN can continue to enhance existing platforms to strengthen tourism investments in the region. Only with coordinated effort can ASEAN Member States realise the region's vision of making ASEAN a single tourism destination by 2025.

AF: Many ASEAN countries have promoted sustainable tourism that focuses on conserving resources, protecting the environment, and integrating local communities in the services. How likely do you think sustainable tourism can play a critical role in our region's economic recovery?

THONG KHON: Sustainable tourism consists of three key components: culture, economy, and the environment. In the immediate term, promoting sustainable tourism will bring back jobs and livelihoods to people in the region. It will also contribute to the reactivation of the tourism supply chain, which will further boost the economy of ASEAN as a whole.

When talking about sustainable tourism, we develop to conserve and vice versa. In other words, while developing infrastructure and facilities for tourism which is necessary for the sector's growth, we also need to conserve our tourism resources and products for longer-term growth. One excellent example is Chi Phat Community-Based Ecotourism located in the southwest of Cambodia. Before becoming a tourist attraction, the local community made their living by hunting, fishing and logging. These natural resources are now conserved for ecotourism purposes, which the local community may still continue to enjoy. The benefits of their natural resources in turn provide services such as homestays, travel guides, souvenirs, and many others which may be used to supplement their income.

River Eco-tours in Chi Phat Village, Cambodia

AF: Mobile technology has changed the tourism industry (e.g. instant online booking of hotel and flight tickets and tourist attractions reviews on social media). How can ASEAN tourism providers stay competitive amid this technological shift?

THONG KHON: I think the tourism industry has never been more reliant on mobile technology than it currently is. To retain their competitiveness in the face of this changing trend, ASEAN tourism providers need to digitalise their businesses and keep up to date with mobile technology developments. Transforming their services to be easily accessible for consumers will give tourism businesses an edge on their operations. We must see technological evolution as a means of enhancing productivity and increasing competitiveness. To this end, the ASEAN Declaration on Digital Tourism will be an important document that can guide the region.

In addition, digitalisation will also enhance communication among ASEAN tourism providers to work closely together and exchange information efficiently. The more ASEAN tourism providers communicate and cooperate, the less misinformation and hurdles their businesses will have to handle. Last but not least, ASEAN governments should step up their digital assistance and facilitation to tourism businesses in their countries. A public and private partnership is indispensable for the tourism industry to keep growing even in the most challenging time.

AF: Many tourism-related businesses in Cambodia have been forced to close their doors due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. What are the lessons learnt so far, and how these can be used to prepare for a more resilient tourism industry?

THONG KHON: Over these two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, Cambodia's tourism sector has undergone an unprecedented setback. Consequently, many tourism businesses and tourism professionals in the country have fallen victim. This has taught us two invaluable lessons.

Firstly, tourism is socio-economically vital for our nation and the global community. The current global health crisis has shown clearly that tourism affects all aspects of life, directly and indirectly, and is prone to be adversely affected. Therefore, it is necessary that all tourism stakeholders respond in a unified and timely manner. The whole tourism sector has adopted digitalisation and various tourism-related standard operating procedures in Cambodia, which has ensured the sector's sustained operation.

Secondly, we need to look for opportunities in every crisis. COVID-19 has given us a chance to reinforce and further strengthen our cooperation, nationally and internationally. ASEAN Tourism Ministers have been closely working with one another and with international dialogue partners to revive the region's tourism sector since the start of the pandemic. Much progress has been made, and we are proud of the resumption of the 40th ASEAN Tourism Forum in Preah Sihanouk Province of Cambodia earlier this year, despite the fact that many borders in the world are still shut.

AF: Many have predicted that global tourism is on its way to recovering this year. Do you think Cambodia will experience a rapid or slower rebound this year?

THONG KHON: Global tourism is expected to start recovering this year, thanks to ongoing worldwide COVID-19 vaccination roll-outs, which resulted in a gradual easing of travel restrictions and reopening around the world. In the case of Cambodia, COVID-19 situation has been effectively controlled, thus enabling positive and stable progress for both domestic tourists and international tourist arrivals, although the former is predicted to have a more rapid rebound this year.

Bungalow for Eco-tourists in Chi Phat

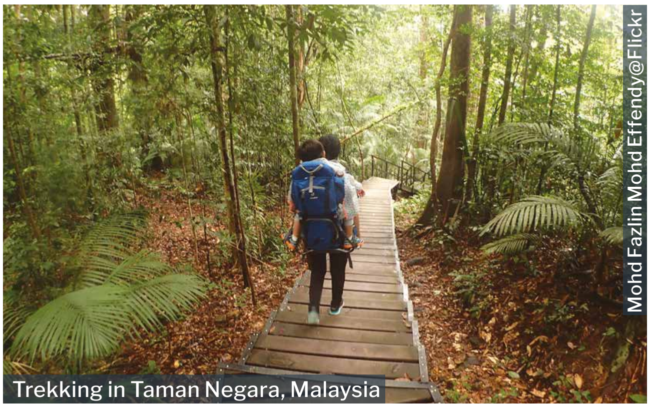
The fact that Cambodia's tourism sector has started to revive would not have been possible had it not been for the vaccination strategy led the Royal Government of Cambodia. After achieving nation-wide herd immunity, Cambodia fully reopened at the beginning of November 2021. The number of domestic tourists has been steadily and noticeably picking up since then, especially during national holidays. Meanwhile, the number of international tourists had increased since mid-November last year when the country announced quarantine-free entry for fully vaccinated international tourists.

According to the Roadmap for Recovery of Cambodia Tourism During and Post COVID-19, which was developed and prepared by the Ministry of Tourism, domestic tourism is forecasted to experience a V-shaped recovery and return to its pre-COVID-19 state by 2023. At the same time, an U-shaped recovery is anticipated for the country's international tourism, which is expected to return to its original state by 2025.

AF: What are the main challenges of reviving the tourism industry in Cambodia after COVID-19?

THONG KHON: Domestic tourism is less of a challenge when compared to international tourism. Given the strong herd immunity and the increasingly endemic state of the pandemic, low COVID-19 infection rates, ongoing implementation of tourism-related standard operating procedures, and other health measures, domestic tourism is well on track to full recovery in 2023. However, the Ministry of Tourism will monitor domestic tourism trends closely to respond with the proper tourism promotions and policies. We will also mobilise other strategies to prepare tourism professionals and businesses with upskilling and reskilling and other necessary assistance.

I am more concerned about the recovery of Cambodia's international tourism. Obviously, the process will be considerably longer than that of domestic tourism. Despite the fact that Cambodia has been fully opened to international tourists and travellers, whether the sector will perform well depends mainly on travel restrictions and border control of other countries. I am extremely delighted to learn that countries worldwide, especially those in the ASEAN region, have been lifting travel restrictions and gradually opening their international borders. While global and regional vaccination coverage plays a crucial role in this regard, I think expanding travel corridors, standardising COVID-19 vaccination systems, and deepening cooperation to enhance international mobility will expedite the return of international tourism.


Mohd Fazlin Mohd Effendy@Flickr
Trekking in Taman Negara, Malaysia

AF: How concerned is Cambodia over the Omicron variant and future variants in the reopening of borders for tourism?

THONG KHON: Regarding the reopening of borders for tourism, Cambodia is not overly concerned with the Omicron variant and other possible variants, nor is it complacent about its remarkable achievement in managing and controlling the COVID-19 situation in the country. Taking into consideration the strong herd immunity, excellent COVID-19 vaccination roll-outs, manageable COVID-19 infection rate, and experience in dealing with this pandemic, Cambodia has been ready and well-prepared to safely welcome international tourists since mid-November 2021. Strict implementation of tourism-related standard operating procedures and other health measures are still ongoing to ensure that Cambodia remains in control of COVID-19. With an increasing rate of vaccination worldwide and strengthened international cooperation, I believe that as global citizens, we will be able to effectively handle the emergence of new COVID-19 variants in the future. In other words, the global tourism sector is becoming more resilient in transforming and adjusting its operation in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.


mattharvey1@Flickr
Komodo National Park, Indonesia

Alex Boyd@Unsplash

Mad about Milk Tea

Dorcas Gan and **Fanzura Banu** explore the trajectory of the drink's popularity and its links to transnational activism in Southeast Asia.

The thought of the beverage 'milk tea' is likely to evoke different images in the minds of different age groups Southeast Asia. To Gen Z, it might be fancy bubble tea chains that proliferate shopping malls, while a dollop of condensed milk added to a hot cup of tea might be the go-to respite in the evenings for baby boomers. Although the present bubble tea craze in Southeast Asia is a cultural force to be reckoned with on its own, in this article, we focus on the relatively traditional counterpart, the simple combination of milk and tea, which has evolved in its own ways across Southeast Asia since the colonial era and presently serves as a symbol of solidarity.

Making of *laphet yay* in a teashop in Bagan, Myanmar

Cultural Ties

In Malaysia, *teh tarik* rules the coffee shops. Condensed milk added to black Ceylon tea is pulled back and forth in two pitchers. The artful pulling helps to mix the ingredients well and to cool down the tea. Sometimes, sugar is also added to further sweeten the drink.

It is said that this famous drink is an innovation of the Malayalam-speaking Muslim migrant community. Post-World War II, those who came to Malaya from Kerala, India, maintained drink stalls at the entrance of rubber plantations and sold affordable tea to the working-class population. Today, it is a staple in drink stalls across both countries, especially in Indian Muslim food establishments.

The speciality of *cha nom yen,* the Thai variant, is best consumed iced. Spices such as cardamom and tamarind are added to the usual mix of strong black tea, condensed or evaporated milk, and sugar. Today, food-colouring and pre-packaged tea gives it its distinct orange colour to stimulate appetite of potential consumers. Some tea aficionados believe that adding milk to Thai tea became fashionable when the country was slowly opening to western fads.

Making of *Teh Tarik* in Malaysia

Over in Myanmar, teashops are abundant all over the country — a cultural phenomenon in Myanmar as it is a place for people, predominantly men, to gather and socialise. *Laphet Yay,* the Burmese-style milk tea has over ten variations depending on the milk to tea ratio, but does not include the addition of spices. Adding milk was popularised by Indian migrants and the British who moved to Burma during British colonial rule. Prior to that, consuming cow's milk was not a common practice in Burma as cattle herds were largely prioritised and raised for agricultural labour instead of milk production.

The running themes among milk tea variants in Southeast Asia; the movement of people across boundaries during the colonial era around the 19th century, combined with the advent of canned evaporated or condensed milk from Europe, which was intended to increase the shelf life of milk that spoilt easily in the heat, have led to the birth of the milk tea that we know today.

Modern-day Movement

Despite its colonial links, milk tea has also come to carry a distinct political meaning for pro-democracy and human rights activists in the region. Recently, it has become an expression of solidarity in the #MilkTeaAlliance hashtag on the social media platform Twitter.

The origins of the hashtag can be traced back to an incident involving Thai actor Vachirawit Chivaaree, also known as Bright, who in April 2020, favourited a Tweet displaying four different cities — including Hong Kong — with an accompanying caption describing them as countries. In the events that followed — involving supposedly similar offences by Bright's girlfriend on her Instagram account, as well as a statement by the Chinese embassy in Bangkok — Chinese nationalist trolls directed their ire towards Thailand's political and economic system. Ironically, Thai netizens embraced the remarks, causing a meme war to erupt. As the crossfire continued,

Ringo Chiu@Shutterstock

#MilkTeaAlliance anti-Myanmar coup in Los Angeles, USA

users from Hong Kong and Taiwan, perceiving Thailand as kindred folk both in terms of political aspirations and also their fight against China's online trolls, chipped in to the conversation, thereby forming the #MilkTeaAlliance.

Against this backdrop, the symbolisms of milk tea are many. For one, it represents the shared identity of its original members — Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Thailand — as all three are similar in their preference for adding milk to their tea, in contrast to the tea that is usually consumed in China *sans* milk. In addition to being a common identity, the differences in preparation — for instance, Taiwan's milk tea is often infused with tapioca pearls — also represents the distinct flavours of each member's political struggle, where each is working towards a different political goal. Thai protestors, for example, are hoping for constitutional change, while Hong Kong activists seek to push back against what they view as growing political encroachments in the city.

In the two years since the inception of the alliance, it has grown beyond the scope of the original three members. It can be hard to pinpoint who and what exactly constitutes the alliance, however, due to the grouping's decentralised and spontaneous nature. Indeed, the alliance is a loose network of a new generation of transnational activists often operating via the space of social media and messaging apps, with some even perceiving the alliance as a slogan. Furthermore, as the alliance expands, the character and aim of the grouping have also widened to become more broadly pro-democracy, rather than be about political rivalries.

As such, there are various illustrations of the alliance circulating online which at times include and exclude certain members. In one version of a map featured on an unofficial Twitter account for the alliance (@AllianceMilkTea) — which has nearly seventy thousand followers — Malaysia, Thailand, and India are among some of the listed members. Each member is usually represented by its version of milk tea, such as Thailand with *cha nom yen*, and India with *masala* tea (meaning mixed-spice tea). There also exists social media accounts bearing the Milk Tea Alliance branding from places like the Philippines and Myanmar, though some illustrations may not include them.

Operationally, members of the alliance help spread news using Twitter and other platforms, especially via the use of the #MilkTeaAlliance hashtag, in addition to the use of localised hashtags such as #WhatsHappeninginMyanmar to quickly bring attention and awareness of the issue to their following. Morale-wise, the alliance also provides comfort and courage that encourage fellow activist-counterparts in their political struggles. For instance, #MilkTeaAlliance activists — including those from Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Hong Kong, and Taiwan — held demonstrations across Asia in support of pro-democracy protests in Myanmar in March 2021, just after the military coup in February.

Overall, the rich significance of milk tea to the region is one that deserves attention. From its historical roots as a product symbolising the interconnectedness of people across Southeast Asia, milk tea wrestles its colonial links and has become a point of convergence for many through its present-day movement. Indeed, in milk tea, Southeast Asia finds diversity in unity, unity in diversity, and connections beyond the region.

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Customers queueing at the Taiwanese bubble tea shop Tiger Sugar in Bangkok, Thailand

Sights and Sounds

When Ghosts are on Our Screen

Tyler Wu explores how ghosts and spirits have long inspired Southeast Asian moviemakers and marked an international recognition.

Ghosts and spirits are a ubiquitous part of Southeast Asia's social and religious life. While societies in other parts of the world may perceive ghosts and spirits as animistic beliefs of a pre-modern past, they continue to play an important role in many Southeast Asian societies today.

Indeed, ghosts and spirits of the departed remain highly pervasive even in fast-changing Southeast Asian societies such as Singapore, the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, among others. Temples, shrines, ritual performances, and trance are the media to embody the supernatural. Such experiences (albeit rather different) have even found themselves in the comfort (or discomfort) of our homes through movies and television series. Indubitably, these media forms play an important role in simultaneously reinforcing and influencing our imagination of the supernatural.

With the rise of entertainment media in homes, our access to horror films has inadvertently increased. Intense competition between video-streaming platforms such as Netflix and Disney+ has paved the way for the greater affordability of horror films thereby increasing their reach to people in the region and globally. As a result, this has inspired more Southeast Asian horror filmmakers to create more exceptional films.

Trese, a Philippines-produced Netflix series was created based on an original fantasy and crime-horror comic book series. When *Trese* aired, the series became a global hit, making it onto Netflix's top ten charts in 19 countries in just under a week. Another apt example is *Roh*, a pagan horror with Koranic references set in a menacing dense forest in the Malay peninsula. Similarly, *Roh* topped the Malaysian Netflix chart when it streamed on the platform last year, sparking curiosity and interest in Malaysian ghost films. A Thai mystery thriller, *Girl From Nowhere* has gained international acclaim by topping Netflix charts in Vietnam, Thailand, the Philippines, and even in Brazil – which forms Netflix's second-largest market.

The Thai netflix series *Girl From Nowhere*

The movie *Langsuir*

But other than the universally known fact that most Southeast Asian horror films feature homicides, hauntings, and ghostly encounters, what then are some examples of ghosts and spirits constitutive to local folklore and experiences? What are the existing supernatural entities inspiring a generation of Southeast Asian horror filmmakers to up the industry ante?

It may be worth looking at the creature called *Pontianak* in detail. Named after the capital of the Indonesian province of West Kalimantan, so rumored for being infested by ghosts, the *Pontianak* has a strong reputation across Southeast Asia, particularly in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore. Legend has it that the *Pontianak* is a mythological creature who was unable to give birth which then turned her into a vengeful and vampiric female spirit. With a beautiful and youthful appearance, the *Pontianak* would seduce its male victims and disembody their organs with her long sharp fingernails. The scent in the air could mark the proximity of the *Pontianak*: when the *Pontianak* is far, the scent is gentle and flowery, but when the *Pontianak* is near, the scent turns putrid and corpse-like.

Interestingly, the *Pontianak* shares multiple variations in myths and folktales across the various Southeast Asian regions. In Malaysia, the *Pontianak* is often known as the *Langsuir.* The *Langsuir* is purported to wear green robes, with incredibly long nails with stretching to her feet. They prey primarily on newborn children. In 2013, a *Pasir Puteh* district reported a *Langsuir* terrorizing a town with a long-haired woman flying and cackling at midnight. The uncomfortable episode ended when a local shaman was rumored to have captured the demon. Perhaps the most disturbing and elaborated variation is the Indonesian *Kutilanak* which takes the form of a bird and makes a specific "*Ke-ke-ke*" sound when in flight. One of the tools in its arsenal is using black magic to make a woman ill.

Given the popularity of the iconic *Pontianak* as demonstrated by its diverse variations, it is not surprising that the early years of *Pontianak* horror films were a tremendous success. For instance, in 1950s Singapore, despite the high racial tensions, the *Pontianak* horror film premiered by filmmaker B.N. Rao was so well received that it appealed even to the Indian and Chinese communities which were then unprecedented for a Malay film. Indubitably, the early success of the *Pontianak* films trail-blazed the popularity of *Pontianak*-related horror films. The success led to Singapore's well-known movie producers, Cathay-Keris Productions and Shaw Brothers to create more Pontianak-related series. They include: *Anak Pontianak* (1958), *Pontianak Kembali* (1963), and *Pusaka Pontianak* (1965).

Drawing close to the *Pontianak* is the *Toyol* – known across many Southeast Asian societies as a gremlin-like undead infant which shamans could summon to help with

Depiction of a Toyol in ***The Curse of the Toyol***

TV guide@Google Images

The iconic movie *Sumpah Orang Minyak*

black magic rituals. Among the Chinese communities, the *Toyol* is called the "guai zai" or ghost child. Although it has been traditionally described as looking somewhat like a naked baby, modern depictions suggest them having green or brownish skin with large fangs and sharp eyes. Childlike in their thinking, the *Toyol* could be distracted by scattering buttons on the floor, leaving sweets and toys next to them. Popular films inspired by *Toyol* include the Malik Selamat-directed 1980 Malay horror film *Toyol*, starring Sidek Hussain and Mahmud June as well as *Alamak...Toyol*!, a Malaysian comedy-horror film by Ismail Bob Hashim. Interestingly, the *Toyol* spirit has also been cast in movies beyond Southeast Asia. Billy Chan's 1987 Hong Kong film *Yang Gui Zi* is an example. In this movie, a jewelry store owner obtains a spirit baby from a Taoist master in Thailand who, through a series of misfortunate events, released a child spirit.

Lastly, there is also the *Orang Minyak*, which means 'oily man' in Malay. Malay legend has it that this supernatural creature coated in shiny black grease would abduct young women by night. Each time, the *Orang Minyak* would evade capture by the locals through its ability to climb tall walls thanks to its greasy, slippery coating. Similar to the *Pontianak*, the *Orang Minyak* has multiple variations. Some believe that the *Orang Minyak* is a man who made a pact with the devil to possess black magic powers in exchange for abducting 21 women in a week. Others believe that the *Orang Minyak* is a supernatural creature under the spell of a demonic Shaman or witch doctor.

In any case, the strange and disturbing characteristics of the iconic *Orang Minyak* creature continue to fascinate and intrigue Southeast Asian horror filmmakers. Dating back as early as the 1950s with films such as the *Curse of the Oily Man* (1956) and *Sumpah Orang Minyak* (1958), the *Orang Minyak* legend continues to inspire horror films in the 21st century with movies such as *Orang Minyak* (2007) and *Pontianak vs Orang Minyak* (2012). Interestingly, the *Curse of the Oily Man* was the award winner during the 1958 Asia-Pacific Film Festival for best black and white cinematography.

IMDb@Google Images

The movie *Pontianak vs. Orang Minyak*

It goes without saying that beyond the *Pontianak*, *Toyol,* and *Orang Minyak* lies a wide range of interesting ghosts and spirits distinct to Southeast Asia that we can explore. But what does the future hold for Southeast Asian horror films? Thomas Barker, film and television series lecturer at the University of Nottingham, Malaysia, shed some light in this regard noting that "Southeast Asian filmmakers are innovating in a genre that has become somewhat stale in the West, with familiar tropes, storylines and monsters." Indeed, with the greater access of video-steaming platforms, it is ever likelier that Southeast Asian horror films will continue to thrive in the global horror scene. Rapid innovations in filmmaking technology has made it even more plausible for Southeast Asian horror filmmakers to unleash their creativity in mixing indigenous cultural horror elements with the global horror genre. Surely, this will turn the heads of key players in the global horror film industry.

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KHUHA KHARUEHAT PAVILION

Thailand

The Khuha Kharuehat Pavilion (known locally as *Phra Thinang Khuha Kharuehat*) is an iconic pavilion housed within Phraya Nakhon Cave, located in the majestic Khao Sam Roi Yot National Park. The spectacular gold and blue four-gable roofed pavilion was built to commemorate King Chulalongkorn's (Rama V) royal visit to the cave in 1890.

Built by Thai craftsmen, the pavilion was transported to and assembled inside the cave. A popular tourist destination today, visitors have to endure an arduous trek to reach the inner cave sanctum. The spectacular sight of the Khuha Kharuehat Pavilion bathed in sunlight streaming in from the skylights of the cave is indeed a mystical sight to behold and one deemed fit for kings.

(Sources: Tourism Authority of Thailand, Bangkok Post, Thai National Parks, Thaizer)

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