

ASEAN@55: NAVIGATING A CHANGING GLOBAL ORDER

Has ASEAN Lost It?

Global Security Initiative: Anything New?

Why is Timor-Leste Important for ASEAN?

ASEAN's Engagement in the Indo-Pacific

FermentAsean



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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

ASEAN at 55. Few could have envisaged back when ASEAN was founded that it would survive. After all, it was only a reincarnation of the failed 1954 Southeast Asian Treaty Organisation (SEATO). Even MALPHINDO - the non-political, three country confederation between Malaysia, Philippines and Indonesia in 1963 - was dead on arrival.

But not only did it survive, ASEAN thrived. Notably, it served the region and its 670 million inhabitants well by bringing peace and stability, economic prosperity, and social advancement after the tumultuous years of decolonisation. Yet, despite these achievements, ASEAN continues to tread carefully as it tackles today's pressing global challenges and geopolitical realities.

Indeed, the global order is in flux. Russia's blatant disregard of Ukraine's sovereignty and open invasion has shocked the world, exacerbated human suffering and disrupted the global supply chain resulting in skyrocketing inflation. Climate change has battered the world, with worsening droughts, scorching forest fires, and debilitating floods exacerbating public health, and energy and food security concerns.

US-China rivalry continues to intensify and play out in the region. The US-led security-oriented economic initiative of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) which was launched in May comes at the heels of other security initiatives such as the Quadrilateral Dialogue and the Australia-United Kingdom-United States trilateral security pact (AUKUS). The IPEF is largely seen as countering China's economic clout. Both major powers' competition for strategic influence is seen in the diplomatic blitz across the South Pacific Islands, as well as escalating cross-strait tensions, especially so after US House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi's recent visit to Taiwan.

All eyes are on ASEAN as it takes the spotlight against the context of rapid geopolitical changes with key Southeast Asian countries playing critical roles on the global stage. This year in November, Indonesia will play host as the productive Chair of the G20 and Thailand as the APEC host.

With the dust settling from ASEAN's recent 55th anniversary celebrations on 8 August 2022, our Analysis contributors take a hard look at the next steps for ASEAN in the decades to come, including what a Marcos 2.0 Administration means for ASEAN, an insider look at the development of the ASEAN Community's Post-2025 Vision, the perennial question of Timor-Leste's importance to ASEAN and how ASEAN's Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships risk turning into a farce.

The theme of this issue focuses on *ASEAN at 55: Navigating a Changing Global Order*. Our *Spotlight* contributors delve into the future of ASEAN to ask pertinent questions on the survival of ASEAN in the next five decades. We take the opportunity to examine all the risk factors for ASEAN in the next 50 years, including how ASEAN could risk becoming irrelevant if it failed to act pragmatically especially in regard to ASEAN's worst internal challenge - the Myanmar crisis. We invite a reflection on the ASEAN Special Envoys' efforts thus far in bringing about dialogue in Myanmar. On the economic front, the recent food export bans and semiconductor chip shortage have compelled countries in the region to diversify supply channels and strengthen supply chain resiliency for critical components and essential goods. Our contributors explore the question of promoting global digital supply chains in ASEAN as a way to secure its economic future.

Perhaps cognisant of the myriad of challenges faced, ASEAN's chosen theme for its 55th anniversary was "Stronger Together", a timely and empowering reminder to harness regional unity and collective strength as the region emerges from the ravages of the COVID-19 pandemic after more than two years and faces new challenges in the rapidly changing geopolitical landscape. We take a look at the regional implications of the new China-led Global Security Initiative and the bloc's engagement within the Indo-Pacific. Our contributors also offer their views on ASEAN's rising generation of new leaders and the impact of disinformation through social media on regional stability.

Beyond the *Spotlight*, we are honoured to have Dato Lim Jock Hoi, ASEAN Secretary-General, share his *Insider Views* on the bloc's strategies in navigating regional political, economic, and social challenges whilst maintaining ASEAN unity and credibility. Finally, our *Sights and Sounds* contributors invite us to re-examine the socio-cultural history and wonders of indigenous fermented food and the return of the indomitable bamboo as a precious resource in our region.

ASEAN has achieved much since its inception in 1967. But it is not the time to celebrate. ASEAN's place in world affairs has never been under greater strain than at this inflexion point. Many more decades of regional peace, equitable development, economic prosperity, and social protection for all its citizens is only possible if ASEAN recalibrates its position carefully at this critical juncture. 🇲🇻

Visioning ASEAN Post-2025 Through Storm-Clouds of Change

Elizabeth Buensuceso provides an overview on the process and aspirations of envisioning the ASEAN Community's Post-2025 Vision.



In Southeast Asia, people regard with high respect and expectations the role of traditional midwives in delivering infants and in the rearing of such future members of the community who are in turn anticipated to contribute to the community's development and success. Their role is made even more crucial when the delivery is fraught with unexpected challenges and grim forebodings. The midwives should not only have the necessary skills and wisdom to bring forth the child but must also be imbued with the passion and vision to accomplish this task. Likewise, the role of the High-Level Task Force on the ASEAN Community's Post-2025 Vision is regarded as one of gravity and importance.

At the 37th ASEAN Summit of 2020, the Leaders of ASEAN adopted the Ha Noi Declaration on the ASEAN Community's Post-2025 Vision and tasked the ASEAN Coordinating Council (ACC) to oversee the overall process of developing the ASEAN Community's Post-2025 Vision and attendant documents. The High-Level Task Force (HLTF) was thus formed with the mandate to develop the ASEAN Community's Post-2025 Vision which is the embodiment of the aspirations of the leaders and the people of ASEAN beyond 2025.

Like the entrusted midwives, the HLTF is expected to bring forth a new ASEAN amid a precarious geopolitical, economic, and socio-cultural landscape characterised by a disquieting big-power rivalry, economic upheavals exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the social turmoil brought about by fake news and other earth-shaking digital and environmental challenges in ASEAN's next twenty years and beyond.

What is the HLTF?

The HLTF is composed of one Eminent Person and one High-Level Representative from each ASEAN Member State (AMS). The current ten Eminent Persons consist

of incumbent and former vice ministers. The High-Level Representatives are officials with extensive knowledge and experience in ASEAN's work. I am joined in the Philippine representation by Ambassador Luis Cruz.

One can sense deep respect for each other in this assemblage of officials. Not only do they have the necessary skills and wisdom on the principles, mechanisms, processes, and issues in ASEAN but they are also devoted to engendering a post-2025 ASEAN that is not a weak imitation of any other organisation but one that is truly responsive to the needs of its people.

The gestation of a Post-2025 ASEAN will take three years, during which the HLTF will continue to consult stakeholders from the various mechanisms of ASEAN, civil society, and ASEAN's external partners. Malaysia is the Permanent Chair throughout this period, with the current Chair of ASEAN being the Co-Chair, except in 2025 when it is Malaysia's turn to be the ASEAN Chair. At that time, any member state can co-chair with Malaysia. It is expected that each year, the HLTF will submit to the Leaders milestone accomplishments reached. This year, a report on Strengthening ASEAN's Capacity and Institutional Effectiveness and a progress report on the core elements of the Post-2025 Vision will be submitted to the ASEAN Summit in November.

The HLTF has conducted three meetings—twice in Jakarta and once in Bangkok. They have extensively discussed their rules of procedure and work plan, the core elements to be included in the blueprints, the modalities in consulting ASEAN's stakeholders, and institutional and administrative reforms which are needed in ASEAN on its way forward.

There is a growing consensus among HLTF representatives to retain the current Community pillars which they believe have remained functional in the last

fifty-plus years of ASEAN's existence. However, they also agree that adding one or two pillars to address institutional gaps and considering emerging megatrends would also be beneficial as ASEAN continues to grow in importance and expands its areas of cooperation.

Among the megatrends being looked into and which are likely to extend their impact include the following: US-China rivalry, AUKUS (a trilateral security pact between Australia, the UK, and the US), sub-regional developments such as the Brunei Darussalam-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA), pandemic and public health emergencies, supply chain disruptions and increased protectionism, digital technologies, UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and climate change, among others.

Sustaining ASEAN Centrality

Foremost in the minds of the HLTF midwives is the enhancement of ASEAN centrality in the face of cataclysmic change and geo-political competition. Although centrality means many things to different people, there is a common understanding that it entails keeping the ASEAN agenda at the centre of discussions, and pursued through ASEAN-led mechanisms following ASEAN principles and processes. As recounted in my book on ASEAN Centrality, ASEAN should not be affected by the winds of external forces but by its mission to bring benefits to its people.

ASEAN-led mechanisms such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN Plus Three (APT), and ASEAN Plus One must insist on their sustainability and relevance in the face of tightening geopolitical competitions such as the Indo-Pacific strategies of major powers, increasing tensions in the South China Sea and conflict in other parts of the world. ASEAN must also address with a united voice the instability and strife in its own backyard such as the perturbing developments in Myanmar.

A Call for Institutional Reforms

While treading with caution so as not to upset the ASEAN Way of diplomatic practice, some countries, particularly Indonesia and the Philippines, have fired the initial salvo calling for institutional reform to address the current inertia in building a true ASEAN Community. This would mean progressive actions for reforming the ASEAN Secretariat, the ASEAN Coordinating Council, and the ASEAN Community Councils, including reinventions of the practice of ASEAN principles like non-interference

and consensus in decision-making. I personally believe that some updating of the ASEAN Charter would be able to remedy the institutional gaps identified over the years of ASEAN's existence. For example, Chapter IV, Article 14 of the Charter has not recognised the Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) as the human rights body of ASEAN.

One of the oft-repeated drawbacks in ASEAN is the inadequacy of institutional provisions to address cross-pillar and cross-sectoral issues. Issues such as gender mainstreaming, climate change, response to pandemics and health emergencies, connectivity, and many others entail close coordination among the community pillars and sectors.

Thus, another example of institutional reform to address this gap is a change in the composition of the ASEAN Coordinating Council which is currently composed only of Ministers of Foreign Affairs, or if this is not possible, the merging of the ASEAN Community Councils of the APSC, AEC and ASCC pillars into one body. In this way, cross-pillar issues which have otherwise been siloed can be jointly discussed by the officials of all the pillars.

The HLTF has also identified the initial list of core elements to be covered by the Blueprints which include issues such as preventing and countering the rise of radicalisation, violent extremism and terrorism, sustainability and climate change, embracing the 4th industrial revolution, strengthening financial and social protection, empowering regional public health capacity, investing in human capital development, ensuring energy, food and water security, as well as advancing the Women Peace and Security (WPS) and the Youth, Peace and Security agendas.

Moving Forward: Balancing National and Regional Aspirations

Regionalism does not need to conflict with national interests. States join regional organisations to further their national interests in the hope that the voices of many would enhance the voice of one. Otherwise, there is no point in joining them. ASEAN remains to be the only significant and viable organisation for the region today, despite many criticisms of its decision-making process.

However, this is not to say that it will remain immutable as it faces cataclysmic forces in the years to come. Already, there are calls to review the decision-making process particularly in addressing emergencies that affect the peace and stability, and credibility of ASEAN. The Philippines is prepared to respond to this call. How far this openness to change will go remains to be seen as the work of the HLTF progresses.

Ambassador Elizabeth Buensuceso is currently the Eminent Person of the Philippines to the High-Level Task Force on the Post-2025 ASEAN Community Vision and former Undersecretary (Vice Minister) of the Department of Foreign Affairs. The views expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect those of the High-Level Task Force.



Philippines' HLTF delegation

Why is Timor-Leste Important for ASEAN?

João da Cruz Cardoso emphasises the strategic importance of Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN.



AEC fact-finding mission to Timor-Leste in July 2022

On 19 to 21 July 2022, the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) visited Timor-Leste to assess and exchange views with the key ministries and government agencies as part of the fact-finding missions to evaluate Timor-Leste's readiness to join ASEAN. The AEC visit followed the previous fact-finding missions by the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) from 3 to 6 September 2019 and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) from 6 to 8 July 2022. Today, after the official application in 2011, Timor-Leste's membership remains in limbo. But, why should ASEAN grant membership to Timor-Leste now?

Timor-Leste cannot hide the reality of its shortcomings that has delayed the decision-making process of its membership application. Topping the list is Timor-Leste's dependency on revenues from the oil and gas sector, and with its declining revenues, there is fear that Timor-Leste may become a burden to ASEAN and unravel its plan for economic integration in the future. This reveals the country's slow progress in achieving a more diversified economy, highlighted by its low level of local production and underdeveloped market, which will prevent it from gaining benefits from a multilateral economic agreement with ASEAN.

Furthermore, there is concern about unemployment and poverty in the country. The latest 2015 Census shows the country's low labour force participation rate, which is not a surprise given a lack of investment in the key non-oil sectors, particularly the agriculture sector, although it accounts for about 80 percent of employment in the country. Since a majority of the people live in the rural areas and depend on the agriculture sector, this situation also exposes the urban-rural progress gaps where rural areas do poorly compared to urban areas in terms of access to basic services and economic opportunities, contributing to a dire situation in which about 42 percent of Timor-Leste's population live below the poverty line.

Another roadblock is the country's low level of educational attainment since only 5.3% of the population aged 15 years and older had completed their university education as of 2015. This raises questions about Timor-Leste's ability to compete with other ASEAN countries considering the provision of free skilled labour movements within the block.

While the shortcomings and the concerns deserve close attention, the benefits of Timor-Leste being part of ASEAN definitely outweigh the reasons for leaving it

outside the block. Timor-Leste, fundamentally, has met the basic criteria for ASEAN membership since it falls within the geographical region of Southeast Asia and has established embassies in all the member countries of ASEAN. Furthermore, Timor Leste has taken necessary actions to comply with the obligations of membership within ASEAN. Having Timor-Leste as part of the bloc will allow ASEAN to include and anchor every sovereign state within the geographical boundary of Southeast Asia in its ambit.

By granting membership to Timor-Leste, ASEAN affords itself a rare opportunity to assist the young country in developing itself under its guidance, a unique experience to fine-tune its aims in terms of helping the young country to accelerate its economic growth, social progress and cultural development. In the meantime, the membership allows Timor-Leste to proactively promote peace and stability in the region. While Timor-Leste appears to have managed its affairs reasonably well thus far, ASEAN can contribute much more to the development process by bringing the know-how experience and skilled workforce into the much-needed sectors. Such support will contribute to the country's long-term growth through the transfer of knowledge, strengthening people-to-people relations and increasing the quality of cooperation between Timor-Leste and ASEAN.

Since a brief stint of conflict from 2006 to 2008, Timor-Leste has proven its ability to settle political differences peacefully. The recent smooth transition of the government administration, particularly after the early election in 2018, further proved the maturity of Timor-Leste's democracy. However, the biggest showcase of its maturity is the ability to forge friendly relations with Indonesia despite the dark past. This proves that Timor-Leste is forward-looking rather than letting the past obstruct the country from moving towards a better future. In fact, the relationship between Timor-Leste and Indonesia is a model for other countries to follow in order to move beyond the conflict of the past. Based on the experience, Timor-Leste understands that any conflict is bad for business and it hinders productive cooperation among countries, which are essential for economic development. However, Timor-Leste also recognises that an enduring peace and stability can only be achieved if the rights of the people are respected and protected. By forging friendly relations with Indonesia, Timor-Leste has concretely contributed to ensuring stability in Southeast Asia, thereby aligning itself with ASEAN's objectives.



Courtesy call of President of Timor-Leste to ASEAN Secretariat

ASEAN cannot afford to let a small country, which shares land-border with Indonesia, tackle its own problems without regional support, which may expose it to greater external influence leading to instability within the country. ASEAN has seen how the internal conflict in Myanmar forces about a million of its people seeking refuge in the neighbouring countries, creating a humanitarian crisis with economic and social implications and causing political tensions across the region. This shows that internal conflict can create constraints on the relations among neighbouring countries, which can trigger unwarranted actions with grave consequences to peace and stability within and across the region.

Similarly, ASEAN also needs to learn from the war between Russia and Ukraine, which creates political tension across Europe and affects the global economy. While the history is long and complex, the conflict in Ukraine shows that inability to manage internal differences can result in two neighbouring countries entering a path of war even after they have been separated for a long time. Timor-Leste is aware of such potential in the future given that many pro-Indonesian Timorese now reside along the two countries' land border after the separation in 1999.

Having Timor-Leste as a member can also support and expand ASEAN's commitment to multilateralism. For instance, Timor-Leste is a member of Comunidade dos Países de Língua Portuguesa – CPLP (the Community of Portuguese Language Countries), and therefore, it can serve as the bridge connecting ASEAN with CPLP in pursuing multilateral cooperation that fits the need of ASEAN.

Many articles have highlighted how the recent security pact between China and the Solomon Islands has created tension along the Pacific region. Similarly, the tensions and disputes over the South China Sea are certainly threatening the security and stability across Southeast Asia and Australia. While it is unwise to let the small island nations fall into the major powers' games and risk the strategic interest of the region, ASEAN can take advantage of Timor-Leste's observer status as an entry point to the Pacific Islands Forum considering the importance of the Pacific for the security of the region.

Considering all the limitations, Timor-Leste has done more than what it needs to become a member of ASEAN and has shown its ability to move forward. For the time-being, it is foreseeable that there will be further delay to grant Timor-Leste a membership. However, is such delay best for the interest of the region? Under the current leadership, Timor-Leste believes that the window of opportunity for granting the membership is now because the price is too high for ASEAN not to do so. ASEAN cannot afford to allow Timor-Leste to be anchored to other power(s) should it wish to exert its centrality in the regional architecture.

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Is ASEAN's Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Becoming A Farce?

Joanne Lin explains what a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership status means and how it should be leveraged to achieve ASEAN's strategic interests.

ASEAN accorded the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) status to China and Australia at their respective Summits in October last year. The establishment of the two CSPs has opened the floodgate for similar requests from other dialogue partners. It is expected that a round of elevation among ASEAN dialogue partners will take place in the next couple of years.

Observers have often wondered what the CSP means. ASEAN was clear that the new coveted partnership title is a recognition of the depth and breadth of the dialogue relations and not an upgrade. It has also emphasised that the new partnership should be meaningful, substantive, and mutually beneficial. The three words that are inseparable from the mention of a CSP are understood but undefinable. It was perhaps to allow ASEAN to justify its decisions, especially political ones.

These three criteria were not referred to when ASEAN granted the strategic partnership status in the last two decades to its dialogue partners (except Canada which is still in the process of gaining one, and the UK which has recently established a dialogue partnership with ASEAN). Prior to the CSP, a strategic partnership was understood to be the highest form of engagement between ASEAN and a dialogue partner, although ASEAN claims that it does not confer a hierarchy of status. Many of the elevations followed recommendations made by an Eminent Persons Group (EPG) set up between ASEAN and the dialogue partner, reflecting a more deliberative process.

As a new nomenclature, it makes little sense that the CSP does not denote an elevation of partnership. One can wonder what value it can bring to a dialogue partner if there is no differentiation in status. One would even wonder how ASEAN decides if a partnership is indeed meaningful, substantive, and beneficial.

Regardless of what ASEAN says, the new title would evidently give China and Australia a higher status than the other dialogue partners. Now that ASEAN has granted the CSP to China and Australia, it needs to ensure that other dialogue partners will also have a chance to upgrade their relations with ASEAN. This is to make sure that ASEAN is not seen to be taking sides or tilting towards any particular country.

So how did it all begin? China as the first partner to receive the strategic partnership status in October 2003 probably felt that the title could no longer give it any leverage in status within ASEAN, given that almost all

dialogue partners had ended up with the same status—several of whom within the last ten years. India, Australia, and the US for example had their relations with ASEAN elevated to a strategic partnership in 2012, 2014, and 2015 respectively.

China, as a growing hegemon in a highly contested region, needs to stay ahead in its relations with ASEAN—a bloc that is at the centre of the regional architecture. According to China, its relations with ASEAN had created multiple “firsts”. It will not accept itself as being second to others. As such, although China claims that the elevation to a CSP is to highlight the solid foundation and broad cooperation with ASEAN, the unspoken reason is to maintain its number one status with ASEAN.

Political competition aside, it may be argued that both China and Australia do indeed enjoy comprehensive partnership statuses with most ASEAN countries. Thus, a CSP with ASEAN is a natural progression stemming from the longstanding bilateral relationships with deep and broad cooperation spanning across all dimensions.

Considerations were made based on their substantive cooperation with ASEAN. China has approximately 40 cooperation mechanisms (including more than ten at the Summit and Ministerial levels) with ASEAN while Australia has over 25 such mechanisms. However, that does not mean that other dialogue partners have less substantive cooperation with ASEAN. It just means that either they have not officially requested for a CSP, or awaiting an appropriate moment such as a Commemorative Summit to announce an “upgrade” in relations. After all, the best things should be reserved for special occasions.

The timing of the requests plays a part in ASEAN's decision-making. In the case of China, the establishment of the CSP was made during the 30th anniversary of ASEAN-China relations last year. Similarly, US and India will likely receive their titles at their summits with ASEAN this year in commemorating the 45th anniversary of ASEAN-US dialogue relations and the 30th anniversary of ASEAN-India relations.

Now that the stars are aligned for China and Australia, what's next? China and Australia will not be basking in new glories without work. Following the establishment of the CSPs with Australia and China, the ASEAN ministerial meetings with Australia and China last month adopted new annexes to their Plans of Action with ASEAN to include new commitments befitting of a comprehensive strategic partner. These include new initiatives like digital transformation and future skills, energy security, green



recovery, regional and global supply chain resilience, fin-tech, new health initiatives, and upgrading existing free trade agreements.

In the case of China, new items include synergising the Belt and Road Initiative with ASEAN's plans on connectivity, nuclear technology, joint production of vaccines, and technology transfer, as well as exploring cooperation under the priority areas of the Global Development Initiative. This is to ensure that the CSP is not an empty shell of nomenclature without substance.

While appealing CSP requests, it seems reasonable that ASEAN may use such opportunities to extract benefits and find ways to further strengthen its cooperation with important partners. However, ASEAN could have used such an occasion to ensure that dialogue partners are willing to promote ASEAN's values, goals, and purposes, and to seek greater strategic alignment with ASEAN's core interests.

Dialogue partners will signal their strongest support for ASEAN centrality and will promote many new initiatives. However, ASEAN should go beyond accepting such promises at face value and truly assess the real benefits to the region. After all, words are cheap and action speaks louder. Announcements of new cooperation initiatives should be jointly consulted with the relevant ASEAN sectoral bodies to ensure support for ASEAN's priorities and not just the dialogue partner's agenda.

Getting China to accept the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific has been a significant win for ASEAN—albeit, only to have it linked back to the Belt and Road Initiative. Similarly, ASEAN should have used such an opportunity to seek greater security assurances from China as in the case of the South China Sea. ASEAN could have made China agree to certain important clauses under

the negotiation of the Code of Conduct before granting the CSP.

Also, in ensuring that comprehensive strategic partners will serve the strategic interest of ASEAN, the bloc should ensure that they consult or at least inform ASEAN beforehand on any new initiatives that could have a profound implication on the region's security. In the case of the AUKUS (trilateral security pact between Australia, the US, and the UK), ASEAN was not consulted. Unilateral actions do not bode well for the region. It is important, therefore, for dialogue partners to respect ASEAN's instrumental role in the region by consulting with ASEAN on key developments in the regional architecture.

More dialogue partners, including Japan, South Korea, and perhaps Russia, will be coming ASEAN's way to gain a new title. ASEAN should leverage such opportunities to ensure greater strategic alignments rather than just piecemeal cooperation. China's ambition has certainly got the ball rolling as no dialogue partner wants to be left out. ASEAN's agenda will be filled. Will ASEAN ever say no? How ASEAN may stand up to its dialogue partners will be bared when all dialogue partners eventually end up with the same status.

Dialogue partners that have not received the CSP would have figured some recipe for future success—timing, packages of new initiatives, some bilateral diplomatic lobbying and not forgetting to mention the sacrosanct word "ASEAN centrality" in every meeting and statement. Once the ingredients are in place, the stars will align to tick off the checklist of "meaningful, substantive, and mutually beneficial". It is up to ASEAN to make sure CSPs are not turned into a farce.

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

What Does Marcos 2.0 Mean for ASEAN?

Julio Amador III explains how the new Marcos Jr. Administration can play a more proactive role in the regional bloc.



President Marcos Jr. visiting Indonesia in September 2022

The Philippines is a founding member of ASEAN, having signed the Bangkok Declaration on 8 August 1967. While ASEAN was initially formed to assist in the anti-communist campaign during the cold war, it also has a long-term goal to harness the potential of the region through “more substantial united action.” Since its formation, ASEAN has managed to assert normative leadership through landmark agreements such as the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia in 1976 and the Bangkok Treaty of 1995, which made nuclear non-proliferation a regional policy. Another notable development is the ASEAN Charter, solidifying ASEAN as an economic bloc and community that fosters and protects regional values, and advances the mutual political and security interests of the ASEAN people.

The Philippines has enshrined its national policy in the 1987 Constitution which calls for the renunciation of war and the prohibition of nuclear weapons. The Constitution also calls for the pursuit of an independent foreign policy, which the Philippines has faithfully executed since the founding of ASEAN. Individual bilateral relations with various countries may ebb and flow, depending on the

presiding administration, but the Philippines has not wavered in its commitment to ASEAN and continues to stand by all ASEAN’s initiatives and principles in the last 55 years. The contentious policies of the previous Duterte administration to pursue a stronger relationship with China has given the country many lessons going forward.

The Philippines along with other ASEAN claimant states including Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei have long grappled with maritime disputes with each other and with China. These have since intensified in recent years due to the 2016 Arbitration Award won by the Philippines after taking China’s activities to the Arbitral Tribunal in the Hague. Tensions with China have also increased significantly. Beijing has repeatedly and consistently dismissed the Award since. It has exploited the pandemic recovery to advance its interests, intensified its gray-zone operations (aggressive actions short of war), and has unilaterally passed domestic laws to preside over all its claims in the South China Sea in violation of international law. China encroached on the Philippines’ exclusive economic zones several times during the

Duterte administration. As of September 2022, the Philippines has submitted almost 400 diplomatic protests over Chinese activities. ASEAN has failed to substantially act on any of these recent developments. Specifically, there has been no major progress in the negotiations for a Code of Conduct with China.

Developments within the region further complicated matters. In February 2021, the Myanmar junta mounted a coup. Aside from a quick statement of reasserting its values and from periodically banning the reigning generals from summits, ASEAN has failed to significantly address the issue. Later that year in September, the trilateral group AUKUS (consisting of Australia, the United Kingdom, and the US) announced, among other aspects, that it would supply Australia with nuclear powered submarines. Reactions within ASEAN varied, prompting fears of nuclear proliferation and an escalation of US-China tensions. Later in the month, Australia reaffirmed ASEAN centrality and the tenets agreed upon by both parties.

Marcos Jr. Administration: Expanding the Philippines' role in ASEAN

The Philippines has stepped up in recent years as both a responsible member of ASEAN and of the region. The then Duterte administration had indicated the country's willingness to accept refugees from Myanmar—from both the Rohingya genocide and the 2021 coup. The Philippines also joined ASEAN in support of the Five-Point Consensus to address the crisis and has pushed for ASEAN support to the people of Myanmar.

After years of silence on the Tribunal Award, for fear of jeopardising closer relations with China, the Duterte administration upheld the Award as a pillar of its national policy, expressing gratitude to supportive states at the East Asia Summit in 2021. The Duterte administration also repaired its relationship with the US after months of uncertainty and has consistently pushed for the Code of Conduct's completion. The latter days of the Duterte administration made clear the Philippines' compliance with ASEAN principles and international law. The transition from the Duterte administration to the Marcos administration saw the Philippines' reaffirmation of ASEAN centrality.

In his first State of the Nation Address, President Marcos Jr. declared that the Philippines would continue "to be a friend to all, an enemy to none." The Marcos administration's firm plans on foreign policy were praised, especially in comparison to the Duterte administration's erratic and reactive policies. Indeed, the president has indicated that he would pursue stronger ties with both China and the US. To distance itself from Russia and the possibility of economic sanctions, the Philippines aborted a helicopter deal, one that the US was seeking to fill.

For his first state visits, President Marcos Jr. travelled to fellow ASEAN founders Indonesia and Singapore to discuss security and economic matters. He returned with approximately US\$14 billion in investments and with agreements to deepen trade and security ties. The

president has stated that ASEAN can be a harbinger of peace in the region. Analysts have proposed that the Marcos administration plays a more active role in ASEAN, and to follow the examples of Indonesia and Singapore in balancing relations with great powers.

President Marcos Jr.'s foreign policy appears to be more consistent with all post-EDSA presidents — the presidents who led the Philippines after the People Power Revolution in 1986 — rather than that of his immediate predecessor, allaying concerns raised during the 2022 presidential campaign. His actions within the first two months of his presidency lend credence to this. He has declared in his first State of Nation Address that he would defend the Philippines' sovereignty and publicly stated his intentions to deepen ties with both the US and China. He prioritised fellow ASEAN founding members for his first state visits, and has laid the groundwork for the Philippines to have a more proactive role in ASEAN matters.

The Philippines has attempted to balance its relations with great powers during the Duterte administration and many lessons were learned during that time. The Marcos administration is currently seizing an opportunity to underscore the importance of the rule of law, dialogue and peaceful settlement of disputes (in light of Russian justifications for invading Ukraine), the tenuous strength of the global economy (brought about by knee-jerk methods to forestall the COVID-19 pandemic), and the value in properly managing relations without jeopardising sovereignty (as learned from the Duterte administration's errors).

All of these are key values that ASEAN has emphasised and enshrined as regional norms for its members to emulate. There is no independent foreign policy for the Philippines without ASEAN as a crucial element. No matter the course taken by individual presidents, Manila has always upheld the importance of ASEAN's role in regional affairs. ASEAN centrality will always be supported by the Philippines; it will not be endangered even as the Marcos administration resets the country's foreign policy and security framework. Indeed, in pursuit of these changes, the Philippines is even more likely to increase its ties with ASEAN to enhance not only its own security but that of its fellow members.

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Has ASEAN Lost It?

Bilahari Kausikan exposes compounded global and internal crises that could make ASEAN irrelevant should it fail to act pragmatically.



In an increasingly complex strategic environment, ASEAN needs to re-establish the clear-eyed realism and steely resolve that characterised its management of the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia. Although some newer members are uncomfortable talking about the past, there is far too much self-congratulation about its own ‘centrality’ and over-readiness to bask in the diplomatic politesse of its partners. It was ASEAN’s management of the Cambodian issue in the 1980s that solidified its international reputation.

Prior to the Cambodian crisis, ASEAN was generally treated politely, indeed often respectfully, but not necessarily taken seriously. It was the Cambodian issue that demonstrated to ASEAN’s dialogue partners how useful ASEAN could be. The invasion and occupation of Cambodia reflected the Sino-Soviet dispute that was beyond ASEAN’s capability to resolve – as is US-China competition today. But ASEAN nevertheless proved its worth in holding the line for a decade against multiple pressures from major powers, including at times from the US, China, and Europe who were ostensibly on ASEAN’s side. By preventing a *fait accompli* in Cambodia, ASEAN made possible an UN-endorsed act of self-determination when the global constellation of forces shifted enough to allow the major powers to agree on such a solution.

ASEAN became ‘central’ then because it was useful and relevant. But usefulness and relevance need to be continually earned and re-earned in the context of

changing contingencies. This requires a hard-headed appreciation of what is possible in specific circumstances.

Between 1989 when the Berlin Wall came down, and 2008 when the global financial crisis led to disillusionment with American-led globalisation, the overwhelming dominance of the US and its allies masked the continuing reality of major power competition. This is inherent in any system of sovereign states, and those 19 years of muted competition were historically anomalous.

ASEAN’s key forums – the ASEAN Regional Forum, the East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting—were established during that anomalous period and arguably needed to be retooled to deal with renewed strategic competition. Certainly, instincts ASEAN had whetted to razor sharpness to deal with the harsh complexities of living at strategic crossroads where the interests of major powers intersected and collided, have dulled and atrophied. ASEAN indulged in its self-belief of being inherently ‘central’.

The expansion of membership in the 1990s without adequate socialisation of new members aggravated these problems. The ASEAN Charter could not replace the largely informal processes and attitudes by which ASEAN had operated. Only Vietnam shared something of the strategic realism that the original members possessed.

The February 2021 coup in Myanmar is a cautionary tale. Trouble had been brewing for some time and Aung San Suu Kyi herself must share considerable responsibility for the crisis. Still, a coup was a violation of the ASEAN Charter and ASEAN needed to take action. But was it really obvious?

What had ASEAN done eight years earlier when the Thai military seized power from a civilian government? The answer is nothing of any consequence. That the Thai King subsequently endorsed the coup leader after the coup is a very tenuous argument for the legitimacy of the military's action. Did a constitutional monarch have the authority to wash away political sins retroactively?

Since ASEAN took no effective action against the Thai coup in 2014, why was ASEAN – or at least the handful of foreign ministers who were unusually passionate about the Myanmar coup—pressing for action in 2021? Was it because different personalities were carried away by ego or emotions? Or was it simply a case of Myanmar being less important than Thailand, so a gesture could be made at little cost?

The global geopolitical situation has significantly changed since 2021. The US and EU now had more urgent concerns than Myanmar. If they asked ASEAN to act, it was perhaps more to give themselves an alibi so they could get away with doing the minimum. Letting ASEAN take the lead is not always an expression of ASEAN centrality.

ASEAN did act against Myanmar and did so quite swiftly. After a series of consultations, the Chair, then held by Dato Erywan Yusof, Brunei's Second Foreign Minister, an experienced ASEAN hand, succeeded in convening a special summit on 24 April 2021 in Jakarta which reached a Five-Point Consensus (5PC) on Myanmar.

Up to this stage, ASEAN did well. It was no mean feat to have achieved consensus. Senior General Min Aung Hlaing had raised no objections. But Myanmar has been under military rule for most of its independent history. The odds of compliance were always very long but nevertheless, important for ASEAN to have established a baseline of acceptable conduct. At least it showed ASEAN doing something and thus preserved the appearance of ASEAN centrality.

But it was a mistake for ASEAN to have gone further to suspend the State Administration Council (SAC) until it complied with the 5PC which were only aspirational. If the Tatmadaw was an organisation willing to exercise restraint, forswear violence against civilians, engage in political dialogue, or allow external mediation, it would not have staged a coup in the first place.

Suspension was a step too far. ASEAN has neither effective carrots nor sticks to influence a change in the Tatmadaw's behaviour. It can only try to influence the Tatmadaw by talking to it. By refusing to engage the real power in Myanmar until the SAC fulfils conditions that it never realistically could be expected to fulfil, ASEAN's

ability to influence is now practically non-existent. This was an unforced error that led ASEAN into a dead-end.

From 1988 to the early 2000s, ASEAN criticised the West for adopting an inflexible ideological approach to Myanmar and refusing to engage the military regime. ASEAN has now adopted that same failed policy, striking a grand posture on a high horse with no effective plan for getting off it. This may make ASEAN feel good, but does no real good. ASEAN has ceded the initiative to the Tatmadaw, marginalising itself.

What happens next in Myanmar depends on the Tatmadaw. The National Unity Government and its defence force will not succeed in what ethnic armed organisations tried and failed to do over 70 years – change the Tatmadaw's behaviour. ASEAN's mistake was compounded when some members criticised Prime Minister Hun Sen for visiting Myanmar while being the Chair, thereby shutting down a potential way out of the impasse.

Myanmar may lead to a severe split within ASEAN. Thailand and Laos share borders with Myanmar and cannot afford to strike postures indefinitely. Geography gives them concrete concerns that those members who played the most active roles in shaping ASEAN policy on Myanmar – Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore – do not share. The concerns of these three countries may be serious, but abstract. Posturing is largely costless for them; but not so for Thailand and Laos.

Sooner or later, Thailand and Laos will go their own way to secure their interests. When they do so, other members, may follow. This potential split between the mainland and maritime ASEAN members over Myanmar could catalyse other incipient fault-lines and further degrade ASEAN's ability to deal with US-China competition.

By contrast, when dealing with Cambodia in the 1980s, ASEAN set practical goals and stuck to them. There were heated debates about what was or was not possible – intra-ASEAN diplomacy was often more complicated than holding the external coalition together – but ASEAN never lost sight of what was core and what was peripheral in its interests. It thus made no unforced errors.

ASEAN's core purpose is to manage relations between its members and within Southeast Asia. Even with a war fought within Cambodia and along the Thai border, ASEAN continued to engage Vietnam, with Indonesia playing a particularly important role in this regard. Not every ASEAN member always agreed with what Jakarta was trying to achieve with Hanoi, but all approached Vietnam dispassionately. Cambodia was never a bilateral issue with Vietnam for any ASEAN member. Intensifying major power competition, narrow sovereign interests, misdirected posturing will exacerbate divisions within ASEAN making it impossible to prevent unforced errors.

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Reflections on ASEAN Special Envoys' Efforts in Myanmar

Kasit Piromya shares reflections on efforts made by ASEAN's Special Envoys to Myanmar.

The *coup d'état* staged in Myanmar on 1 February 2021 by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing has not only put an end to a decade of democratic reforms and plunged the whole country into chaos, it has also presented ASEAN with one of its most difficult challenges. It has become a defining threat severely confronting the regional group's strengths and unity.

The international community considered that the crisis triggered by the illegal military takeover was an issue for ASEAN to resolve, as Myanmar is one of its members. The reason was that the organisation was best positioned to handle the issue, given the close ties of its member states to the country. And it goes without saying that the regional group would have to address the internal crisis within the bloc, regardless of perceptions and demands from external international actors.

ASEAN member states are not new to coordinating their responses to tough crises afflicting Myanmar. The regional group successfully led the provision of humanitarian assistance after the devastation caused by Cyclone Nargis in 2008. At that time, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), the military junta that ruled the country between 1988 and 2011, blocked international agencies and governments from assisting the affected areas in the Myanmar Delta, despite a staggering death toll of over 130,000.

The deadlock was only broken when ASEAN took the lead in distributing international aid, as the regional group, to which Myanmar joined since 1997, was the only organisation that the isolationist and paranoid junta chaired by Senior General Than Shwe could trust.

ASEAN also encouraged the SPDC to move forward with its "Roadmap to a Discipline-flourishing Democracy." The seven-step roadmap formulated in 2003 had been stalled for years. It began to move forward due to a large extent to intensive and continuous discussions at all levels within ASEAN, particularly between the Myanmar Foreign Minister and his counterparts in the region.

Indeed, the "discipline-flourishing democracy" designed by the junta was far from perfect. Still, given the equilibrium of forces between a military firmly entrenched in power and a battered pro-democratic opposition, it was probably the best that could be expected at that point. The military ensured that the 2008 Constitution was designed to protect its interests and its pre-eminent role in politics, and its tight control of the transition process.



Yet the partial democratisation initiated in 2011 brought profound changes in the country, and an extent of openness not seen for almost five decades. Those changes culminated with the victory in November 2015 of the National League Democracy (NLD), led by Aung San Suu Kyi, who was able to head the government a few months later. That heralded a diarchic form of government in which the NLD had to share power with a military largely outside its control. But the civilian authorities were given room to manoeuvre in issues unrelated to security—that the government led by Suu Kyi missed this opportunity to effect profound political changes is another question.

The fact that the military already possessed considerable power under the terms of a constitution and a political system designed to protect their position and interests, coupled with the fact that the NLD government did little to rock the boat, makes the coup last year all the more irrational and unjustifiable.

Both in the case of Cyclone Nargis and the democratic transition, ASEAN found ways to cooperate with Myanmar's military government. There was a sense of common purpose and partnership that led to results that, even if not entirely satisfactory, contributed to ameliorating the plight of millions in Myanmar.

But the current crisis is different, and ASEAN member states should realise that there is no sense of partnership nor willingness to cooperate on the part of the Myanmar junta. Min Aung Hlaing and his henchmen have given ample proof that they are only interested in consolidating their power, and if that means quashing the widespread popular movement with extreme brutality, so be it.

In April 2021, the leaders of nine ASEAN countries and Senior General Min Aung Hlaing met and signed the historic Five-Point Consensus. The agreement calls for an end to the violence devastating the country, dialogue among stakeholders, the provision of humanitarian assistance, and the appointment of an ASEAN Special Envoy by the current rotating chair of ASEAN. The ASEAN Special Envoy was expected to work closely with the Myanmar military authorities and meet the opposition forces and encourage a dialogue process between both sides.

The first Special Envoy was Dato Erywan Yusof, Second Foreign Minister of Brunei, and Chair of ASEAN in 2021. During Brunei's Chairmanship, ASEAN decided not to invite high-ranking junta members or political representatives to ministerial meetings. Yusof chose to cancel a proposed visit to Myanmar when the junta informed him that he would not be allowed to meet opposition figures, including the jailed Aung San Suu Kyi. That sent a strong message to the deeply embarrassed junta craving international recognition.

Then came Cambodia's turn as the ASEAN Chair which appointed Prak Sokhonn, the country's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister as the new Special Envoy in 2022. The approach of Cambodia to Myanmar has been very different from that of other ASEAN countries. Sokhonn has met Min Aung Hlaing, but did not managed to engage the opposition. The visit by the Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen to Naypyidaw and his meeting with the junta leader had further lent a degree of legitimacy to the military regime, something that other ASEAN countries were careful to deny.

Cambodia's approach has not worked. A year and a half after its adoption, the Five-Point Consensus is a dead pact. Violence continues unabated; the junta has shown no interest in any kind of dialogue, and humanitarian assistance is not reaching the Myanmar people who need it. The military junta has ignored the Five-Point Consensus despite its obligations, and has shown blatant disrespect for ASEAN.

Progress along the lines established by the Five-Point Consensus is doubtful, and the nine ASEAN members must urgently review and reassess their approach to dealing with the Myanmar crisis.

First of all, they should realise that the junta is neither a legitimate nor a rational actor to hold a meaningful



dialogue with. ASEAN member states should coordinate to apply as much pressure as possible on Min Aung Hlaing's regime, enforcing sanctions against the generals and their cronies, banning them from visiting their countries, and withholding any recognition. If necessary, ASEAN should suspend Myanmar's membership in the group. On the other hand, ASEAN should engage with the pro-democracy forces and recognise the National Unity Government (NUG) as the legitimate authority in the country, welcoming their representatives in various capital cities of ASEAN member states.

ASEAN can no longer rely on a rotating Special Envoy. It should consider appointing a full-time and permanent Special Envoy who can work closely with the group of Foreign Ministers and Senior Officials. That would send a message to Myanmar's generals that they now have to deal with the group of Foreign Ministers as a whole, and that the Special Envoy counts with the full backing of all ASEAN governments, not just the rotatory Chair. The Special Envoy could be tasked with the overall coordination with both the military authority and the opposition side. In addition, he or she could also work with UN agencies to monitor the situation and developments on the ground.

A renewed collective effort on the part of ASEAN Foreign Ministers would also send a message to both China and Russia that their backing of the junta will definitely affect the future of their relations with ASEAN. It will also provide impetus for democratic countries to come out and work closely and earnestly with ASEAN to push the Myanmar's military back to the barracks.

We have to recognise that ASEAN is made up of ten member states with different political systems, and it is very difficult for one member state to lecture or reprimand other members about which political system is better. But all can agree on that, whatever system they have, they should not move backwards. In this sense, ASEAN has an obligation to help Myanmar to return to a path to democracy.

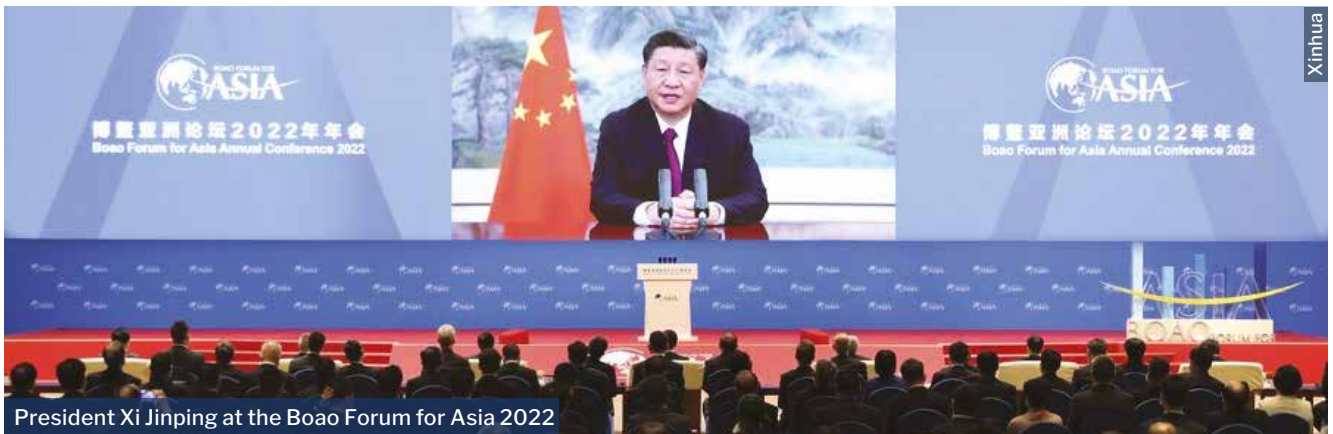
Ambassador Kasit Piromya was Foreign Minister of Thailand from 2008-2011. He has served as an Ambassador to a number of countries such as Russia, Malaysia, Indonesia, Japan, Germany, and the United States.



Dato Erywan Yusof's visit to Myanmar in 2021

The Chinese Offer of a Global Security Initiative: Anything New?

Zha Daojiong articulates the key principles of China's Global Security Initiative (GSI) and what it means for ASEAN.



President Xi Jinping at the Boao Forum for Asia 2022

President Xi Jinping's speech at the opening ceremony of the 2022 edition of the Boao Forum for Asia has tabled a new Chinese initiative for enhancing international security. The timing of the speech—one day before Russian forces moved into Ukraine—could not have been more coincidental. International observers were quick to highlight reference to “indivisible security” therein. Interest outside of China regarding the understanding of the reference is inevitable. After all, in recent years, articulation of “indivisible security” is more frequently found in Russian deliberations about its handling of security relationships with its neighbours and beyond.

Two days after Xi's speech, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi elaborated on the GSI. Among other things, the GSI is said to be underpinned by six essential principles: (1) Sharing the vision of common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security; (2) Respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries; (3) Abiding by the purposes and principles of the UN Charter; (4) Taking the legitimate security concerns of all countries seriously; (5) Peacefully resolving differences and disputes between countries through dialogue and consultation; and (6) Maintaining security in both traditional and non-traditional domains.

The wording “indivisible” appeared twice, both in Xi's speech and Wang's elaboration. According to Xi, “[H]umanity is an indivisible security community” while according to Wang Yi, “[A]n enduring solution to global security challenges lies in upholding the principle of indivisible security, taking each other's legitimate security concerns seriously, and building a balanced, effective, and sustainable security architecture with a view to universal and common security”.

None of these “six commitments” is new in Chinese foreign and security policies. Although Chinese reference to “indivisible security” in either the speech or elaboration is not country-specific, it does raise questions on the recognition of a country's “legitimate security concerns”. The nature of international politics is such that recognition is more often than not contentious.

“Indivisible Security” in Chinese Lexicon

A full-text search of the database in People's Daily, the official newspaper of the Communist Party of China, reveals that the first reference using the Chinese language equivalent of security being indivisible (安全不可分割)—relating to China and its security relationship with foreign countries—was in June 1954 regarding security situations in the Korean peninsula and its neighbouring countries (China included). Chinese characterization of security being indivisible from North Korea was recurrent into the 1960s. Before the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991, the wording appeared around sixty times in People's Daily, in a wide range of contexts, including expressions of solidarity by Chinese officials with selected countries (but not the Soviet Union), as well as quotations attributed to American, European and Japanese sources in their deliberations on matters unrelated to China.

In the 2000s, the wording “indivisibility of security” gained broader reference to “low politics” issues like AIDS, energy, food, and electronic information, in addition to “high politics” areas like cooperation in fighting against terrorism, separatism and extremism under the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and other forums like the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA), BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), as well as principles

undergirding Sino-Russian relations. The phase was also associated with European articulations of security actions taken in areas outside of Europe, in countries like Libya and Syria.

For example, Mr Zhou Wenzhong, in his capacity as the Boao Forum's secretary general in 2015, noted in an interview that "Asia's prosperity and security are indivisible. So is the region's future and the prospects of all its member countries".

A more extensive review of the Chinese conceptualisation of the indivisibility of security would require further study. To contextualise, the phraseology has its tradition in Chinese deliberations on the country's diplomacy since its founding as a nation-state. Particularly for developing countries, fighting against poverty and pursuing economic prosperity is upheld as an antecedent to security defined in traditional or military senses. Furthermore, China's pursuit of its own security today ought to be accepted as legitimate. On this basis, China offers to work with other countries to maintain the aggregate stability of the international system, viewed as essential for the security of all nations.

The GSI and QUAD/AUKUS

Can the GSI be viewed as a response to US-led security initiatives such as the QUAD and AUKUS? Conceptually speaking, the answer may as well be affirmative. But it can be problematic as well.

In the speech by President Xi, justification for tabling the GSI is that "[it] has been proven time and again that the Cold War mentality would only wreck the global peace framework, that hegemonism and power politics would only endanger world peace, and that bloc confrontation would only exacerbate security challenges in the 21st century".

Such assessments are the usual rhetoric in Chinese interpretation of world affairs. They do represent a view— incomplete if not lopsided in the eyes of other major powers—of China being on the receiving end of either unfair treatment or being pre-ordained as a target to be managed, including through military means, or both. Chinese views may face difficulty in being understood by other countries through such broad observation and coded references. Not only does such framing—possibly coded to avoid inviting rebuke by specific countries—fail to answer the cooperative or accommodative side of the coin in international security management: it falls short of acknowledging the supportive role the rest of the world has played, at the very least, in enabling China's economic prosperity since the early 1980s.

Both the QUAD and AUKUS are indeed military by nature and thus require the identification of potential targets for collective action by their members. Their evolution potentially risks having a goading effect on China. What is required are channels of communication between QUAD/AUKUS and concerned countries like China to effectively ameliorate mutual apprehension. Indeed, future operationalisation of QUAD or AUKUS will have

implications on their members' economies harnessing the forces of economic interdependence with the rest of the world, China included, to support their investment in military capacity and cooperation. In other words, the nature of future relationships between QUAD or AUKUS and non-members should be viewed as one of uncertainty rather than a net loss of security to China.

The GSI and ASEAN

How will the GSI affect ASEAN and its partnership with other major powers, including the US? ASEAN has greater potential in managing regional and global security affairs than generally recognised. The notion of ASEAN Centrality has led to initiatives including dialogue partnerships and mechanisms like the ASEAN Regional Forum. ASEAN diplomatic consultative platforms have survived changing regional security dynamics to ameliorate the seemingly intensifying competition and even confrontation among major powers. Neither China nor the US, or other major powers, can afford to take ASEAN for granted.

Second, the GSI is more of a repetition of the principles of peaceful coexistence that China and other Asian countries subscribed to since the 1955 Bandung Conference. The GSI places greater emphasis on principles does not entail a choice between China and other countries' security partnerships. Chinese thinking rejects the formation of security blocs, including those with China. What the GSI envisioned is for ASEAN and its member states to treat China's security as indivisible from the geographical region of East and Southeast Asia. In many ways, such a call is an affirmation of the principles of dialogue and non-interference in domestic affairs—principles that ASEAN often emphasises.

Concluding Observations

China's offer of a GSI is neither outlandish nor innovative in the promotion of the word "security" in recent years. The pairing of the GSI with the Global Development Initiative (GDI) tabled in November 2021 does leave the impression of an increased level of proactiveness on the part of Chinese diplomatic agencies. However, less observed is the Chinese emphasis on the GDI in aligning with the UN Sustainable Development Goals. With both GDI and GSI, China places great value in the principles and venues of multilateral institutions, particularly the United Nations.

In a nutshell, given Chinese insistence that development is security, its promotion of the GDI/GSI may well turn out to be a continuation of the past. The GSI, very much like the GDI, amounts to an invitation to manage differences in regards to China in the development or security context through open-ended consultations, rather than the formation of security blocs designed to prevail through confrontation or military means.

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ASEAN's Next Generation of Leaders in a Newly Competitive World

Chong Ja Ian calls attention to the need for new ASEAN leaders to adapt to a changing global order.

Several ASEAN member states are or will be undergoing leadership transitions in the coming years. The Philippines already has a new presidential administration. General elections are due in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand between 2023 and 2024. Singapore's long-ruling People's Action Party is set to have a new leader who will serve as only its fourth Prime Minister in almost six decades. Several ASEAN states have experienced the peaceful transfer of political power, which of course bodes well for domestic stability.

Unlike past points of leadership change, these political handovers come at a particularly challenging moment for both ASEAN and its members. These new leaders inherit positions where they must navigate intensifying major power competition, an ASEAN under stress, and must do so with populations and state bureaucracies used to the more benign, cooperative, and liberalised world of the 1990s and earlier 2000s. Decisions taken or avoided by ASEAN members now may create path dependencies that may have disproportionate influence in shaping the future of ASEAN and the degree these states can shape regional dynamics.

Washington and Beijing — the two major powers most economically and politically active in Southeast Asia in the past several decades — view each other with growing suspicion and are pricklier about developing relative disadvantages, real and perceived. After all, people and states tend to be more sensitive to losses rather than gains. Friction between China and India also run high following a deadly border standoff in 2021. Russia's war of aggression towards Ukraine raised not only political tensions across Europe but exacerbated the already serious post-COVID inflation by disrupting global food and energy supplies. ASEAN's inability to take concrete actions following Myanmar's 2021 coup has fully exposed the grouping's limitations in coordination



Ferdinand Marcos Jr. elected in 2022



Lawrence Wong (right) to be Singapore's next Prime Minister

and cooperation — on top of differences in managing territorial disputes in the South China Sea. At no other period has ASEAN had to deal with so much uncertainty on multiple fronts, not even during the period of its founding during the Cold War.

A Competitive Era

Much of the professional experience for Southeast Asian political leaders now coming to office and over the next two or three years was gained against a backdrop of a world where major powers' capitals were fundamentally interested in inclusive approaches toward globalisation and integration. Led by the United States and supported by key actors such as China, Europe, and even Japan, the world focused on improving trade liberalisation, market access, investment, and technological transfers. Major power rivalries, while extant, largely took place in the background. The main challenges were disruptions brought about by non-state violence, often but not exclusively, informed by religious interpretations and ideology as well as the perennial threat of climate change brought about by unconstrained economic developments. Southeast Asian states and societies generally benefitted from economic liberalisation in immediate material terms, as economies expanded and personal incomes grew.

Political leaders across Southeast Asia can no longer expect the world going forward to look like the one they are leaving behind. Divergences between the United States and China are coming to the fore over everything ranging from global rules and standards, intellectual property rights, trade, and investments to information security, access to the East and South China Seas, and the status of Taiwan. These developments directly

affect Southeast Asian states, not least because their prosperity rests on being key nodes in global production and supply networks undergirded by US-backed global rules. Notwithstanding the Belt and Road Initiative, the United States is by far the largest investor in the region according to ASEAN Statistics. Whether countries know it or not, US capital supports the production of Southeast Asian exports to China as well as imports from China to the rest of Southeast Asia.

The intensification of US-China rivalry creates stress on Southeast Asian states. Disruption to trade and investment, caused by differing technical and environmental standards, US protectionism, China's inward circulation, or contestations over air and sea access, negatively affect Southeast Asian economies. Pressure on Southeast Asian states and ASEAN fosters stasis as various regional capitals worry about the repercussions that may result from offending any major power. Until recently, Southeast Asian governments and ASEAN tried to avoid such situations by claiming that they "do not wish to choose sides." This may be an increasingly difficult stance to hold as major powers begin to view non-choice as problematic and use economic enticements, side payments, aid, influence campaigns, and disinformation to win and influence politicians and segments of the public. Such policies cause societal fissures in a highly pluralistic Southeast Asia, exacerbating internal cleavages within ASEAN as highlighted by responses to various crises, including the coup in Myanmar.

Charting a Course

New political leaders in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore will find themselves in circumstances where they need to secure domestic approval while navigating external challenges — apart from the sensitivities of managing diverse societies across ethnic, religious and linguistic lines. They also face differing domestic political aspirations that bear some association with age and disparities in wealth partly resulting from globalisation. Handling such centripetal forces requires the search for and expansion of common ground for cooperation with other ASEAN members and other partners. Excessive coercion, commonly applied in the past, may further drive division that can find expression in confrontation and paralysis unhelpful for meeting the complexity of a more contested world. Individual state choices may well set the tone for the degree to which major power competition buffets both domestic and regional politics.

Discovering and developing some new shared sense of purpose among Southeast Asian states may facilitate efforts to chart foreign policy decisions that collectively shape the future of the region. Even if the new leaders in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore insist on taking a stance of "not choosing sides," they must develop options that will enable their countries to "not choose sides." Considerations may involve strengthening ASEAN to better address various internal and external pressures, developing alternative arrangements with neighbors and extra-regional partners, or some mixture



Voters at the 2019 Indonesian Election

of the above. Incoming leaders ideally should provide their countries with some coherent combination of alternatives choices. New governments can, of course, choose to forego some degree of autonomy for some major power promise of stability and prosperity on the anticipation that such guarantees are sustainable. That means to say, voluntarily and publicly eschewing behavior and policies a major power dislikes in return for benefits or security guarantees, akin to Finland's position relative to the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

So far, competing political parties in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore have yet to demonstrate significant creativity in addressing the growing challenges in the domestic and external political environments. Perhaps they need more time to appropriately weigh developing dynamics against the array of concerns they encounter, especially as they explore different paths that would deviate from the familiar and comfortable. Possibilities include everything from a reform in ASEAN to seeking multilateral, unilateral, or bilateral arrangements that substitute or even supplant ASEAN in providing greater political and economic security, as well as environmental interests. The above list of options is obviously non-exhaustive.

Indeed, the new generation of Southeast Asian leaders could surprise the world as earlier leaders did with the formation and adaptation of ASEAN to meet the needs of Southeast Asia during the Cold War and early post-Cold War periods. As major power rivalries expand and deepen alongside regional upheavals and changes, politicians now taking the lead may find themselves increasingly pressed for time while constraints grow. Policies that are put in place now or in the future are likely to set the tone for Southeast Asian politics going forward. How they rise to this challenge may well determine the nature of regional politics for at least a generation and may even prove salient for how major power relations play out.

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ASEAN's Engagement in the Indo-Pacific

ASEANFocus invites experts to assess ASEAN's engagement in the Indo-Pacific and how the region can advance its role in shaping the regional architecture amid the shift in the geopolitical landscape.



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The ASEAN Outlook in the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) was adopted in 2019. However, considering the growing number of Indo-Pacific strategies in the region and the growing geopolitical rivalry, would the AOIP be sufficient for ASEAN to play a leading role in the region?

MUHIBAT: ASEAN is at the centre of the Indo-Pacific, with or without the AOIP. ASEAN's centrality in the regional architecture is necessary to establish a rules-based order and prevent extra-regional powers from shaping the region. However, we hardly see efforts to strategise or operationalise the Outlook, both from within ASEAN and from the dialogue partners, aside from the occasional references — coming mainly from Indonesia and some dialogue partners — the AOIP is mentioned because it is the norm to mention it. As much as we would like to see positive progress in the implementation, this is the current reality.

My positive take on the AOIP: first, we have a reference to the Indo-Pacific, meaning that we do not have to refer to other countries' or regions' definitions of the Indo-Pacific. Second, there is now a "norm" for other countries to mention or refer to the AOIP when they want to issue their own strategy document. Third, ASEAN has a footprint in the Indo-Pacific. My point is, let's not be fixated on the shortcomings of the AOIP; instead, efforts could be made through a more action-oriented agenda, through other existing frameworks like the East Asia Summit, or even bilaterally when appropriate.

Indonesia has proposed to mainstream the four priority areas of the AOIP within ASEAN-led mechanisms. What is your assessment of this proposal? Would it receive the support of key dialogue partners of ASEAN, especially China and Russia?

MUHIBAT: The AOIP was issued in 2019. Now, in 2022, there have been enormous geopolitical shifts across the globe over the past three years. The COVID-19 pandemic, a more complex US-China geopolitical rivalry, and the war in Ukraine all impacted the Indo-Pacific. This means that there are now new challenges and new opportunities which prompt new priorities for many countries. Thus, the four priority areas might no longer be priority areas for many countries, as they are now focusing on pandemic recovery and the global food and energy crises. Nonetheless, dialogue partners have voiced their support for the key priority areas in the Outlook.

Which priorities would be "actionable", and when, will depend on how committed ASEAN is in promoting these four areas. Looking at this from a bigger picture: ASEAN's relations with its dialogue partners and the sustainability of ASEAN-led frameworks have been dependent on the interests of dialogue partners, particularly as ASEAN has limited resources to strengthen its multilateral processes and platforms. As long as ASEAN is dependent on dialogue partners for the sustainability of its activities, there will be a limit to what ASEAN can do to set the agenda.



Launch of AUKUS in September 2021

Lowy Institute@Google Images

Several ASEAN countries remain ambivalent about the Indo-Pacific and there is no coherent view within ASEAN on this relatively new construct. Would this limit ASEAN's proactiveness in its engagement and lead to disunity within ASEAN?

BUSBARAT: The ambivalence about the Indo-pacific concept amongst ASEAN member countries certainly poses challenges to ASEAN. First, each country will find it difficult to make decisive support to the Indo-Pacific as doing so may signal a wrong message that they choose the US over China, which is a message many countries do not want to be seen sending. The Indo-Pacific construct is mainly promoted by external powers, especially the US and its partners and allies. Indo-Pacific is therefore increasingly viewed as being more security-oriented and part of a strategy to contain China. Therefore, it is unavoidable many ASEAN countries will have to take this into consideration, particularly when US-China competition is intensified.

This position reflects a different degree of economic and political reliance on China in some countries. Eventually, the different views and support of the Indo-Pacific will set a limit on how much ASEAN as a group can play a role or engage with this new regional construct. Similar to the challenges in the South China Sea, ASEAN will face difficulty finding a common position, risking being a battleground amongst great powers.

Cooperation is growing within US-led minilateral groupings such as the QUAD and AUKUS. How can ASEAN retain its relevance in the regional security architecture?

HEYDARIAN: The emergence, and subsequent institutionalisation of US-led minilateral groupings with a clear military dimension, is partly a reflection of rising concerns over China as well as declining confidence in ASEAN's role as the engine of regional integration. To be

fair, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, better known as the QUAD, is by no means an "Asian NATO". It lacks the basic institutional structures and strategic principles, which undergird the Western alliance.

India, a pivotal member of the QUAD, has repeatedly emphasised its 'non-aligned' strategic orientation, which has been on full display amid the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. As for AUKUS, it's a strategic project still in its infancy, therefore, it may be too early to assess its long-term impact on the Indo-Pacific landscape. Nevertheless, it's crystal clear that the driving force behind the emergence of such minilateral arrangements is the rise of China as the predominant indigenous power in Asia.

In your view, would ASEAN countries consider joining a QUAD-plus arrangement? Would such an arrangement complement or compete with ASEAN-led mechanisms?

TRAN: Vietnam would benefit by joining a QUAD-plus arrangement that diversifies the country's supply chains. Vietnam's high level of trade dependence on the Chinese market makes it extremely vulnerable to China's economic coercion. Although members of the QUAD have said that the group does not intend to contain China, it is widely perceived as such, especially by Beijing. Therefore, to make Vietnam more comfortable in joining and to prevent the media from dubbing such an arrangement as QUAD-Plus, the group should come up with its own name that does not have the word QUAD.

ASEAN-led mechanisms offer venues for all major powers, including both China and the United States, to interact and sometimes work together on certain issues. However, when a major power (and their alliances) becomes the problem, QUAD-plus arrangements provide countries like Vietnam with alternative platforms that are more effective in addressing challenges. Thus, QUAD-plus arrangements would complement ASEAN-led mechanisms.



QUAD Leaders' Meeting in Tokyo 2022

How can ASEAN uphold its centrality in the Indo-Pacific and yet retain its “ASEAN Way” based on consultation and consensus?

HEYDARIAN: The end of the Cold War provided a unique opportunity for Southeast Asian nations to usher in a new geopolitical order – one driven by ASEAN principles of multilateralism, institutionalised dialogues, and peaceful management of disputes among all major regional actors. Over the past decade, however, it has become painfully clear that ASEAN lacks the ability to socialise major powers, especially China, into embracing the “ASEAN Way”. If anything, ASEAN has struggled to forge a united front on the most pressing geopolitical issues in the region, especially the South China Sea disputes.

ASEAN can step up to the occasion through a calibrated embrace of: (i) its own version of ‘minilateralism’, namely sustained cooperation among core members on key issues of shared concern, and (ii) adoption of “ASEAN Minus One”, majority-based decision-making on thorny issues (which render unanimity inherently impossible). As I have argued repeatedly, ASEAN will have to evolve or risk getting permanently relegated to the strategic sidelines.

Major powers are competing against each other in the Indo-Pacific through initiatives such as the China’s Global Security Initiative, and the US Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy. How should ASEAN decide on its engagement and would ASEAN be seen as taking sides if it chooses to lean towards a particular initiative?

HOANG: ASEAN and its member states generally have little qualms about embracing economic and development-centric initiatives by major powers. This pragmatic and non-ideological approach to multi-vector economic engagement has enabled Southeast Asia to become a key node in international trade, FDI flows, and

global supply chains. ASEAN should stay on this course although doing this would be more difficult, given the increasing trend towards securitisation of economic and technological domains due to the US-China strategic competition. On security-centric proposals like the US-led Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (FOIP) or China’s Global Security Initiative (GSI), ASEAN has been cautious and refrained from band-wagging with either. Refusing to endorse them wholesale while proactively seeking areas of convergent interests and keeping the region open, inclusive and rules-based are the principles that should guide ASEAN in navigating these contestations.

Seven ASEAN member states have joined the US’ Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF). Do you see the framework as an important engagement in the Indo-Pacific?

TRAN: If Indo-Pacific countries look for market access as they do in traditional trade agreements, IPEF has little to deliver. However, if they wish to maintain US economic engagement in the region, IPEF is imperative. Looking at Australia’s and Philippines’ experience under China’s economic coercion, regional countries understand the importance of keeping a US presence. When US domestic politics is less hostile toward free trade agreements, the engagement under IPEF could pave the way for it to re-join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).

For now, the four pillars of IPEF- Trade (including the digital economy); Supply Chains; Clean Energy, Decarbonisation, and Infrastructure; and Tax and Anti-Corruption can help participating countries write new rules that are not only beneficial to their development but also prevent China’s domination. Although not all ASEAN members are joining the IPEF negotiations, the remaining countries can decide to join in the future.

Do you think the IPEF will further complicate or divide the regional bloc in view of other initiatives?

BUSBARAT: In my opinion, the IPEF is an important initiative to soften the image of a security-oriented Indo-Pacific. It is likely to be more constructive as the IPEF will offer another choice among various economic arrangements available in the region. It should be less confrontational than other US-led security initiatives engraved in the broad Indo-Pacific strategy, such as QUAD or AUKUS. ASEAN member countries, therefore, are more willing to engage in an initiative that is less political. I do not see that the IPEF, if it remains focused on the economic realm, will further divide the region.

The region has already been familiarised and experienced with different layers of economic arrangements, whether it be wider multilateral or minilateral, such as the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA), Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), CPTTP, and other ASEAN FTAs with dialogue partners, as well as various sub-regional economic cooperation. Some of these arrangements are spearheaded by external powers. Therefore, the IPEF will be another venue for collaboration amongst like-minded countries, which will offer economic benefits to the region as a whole.

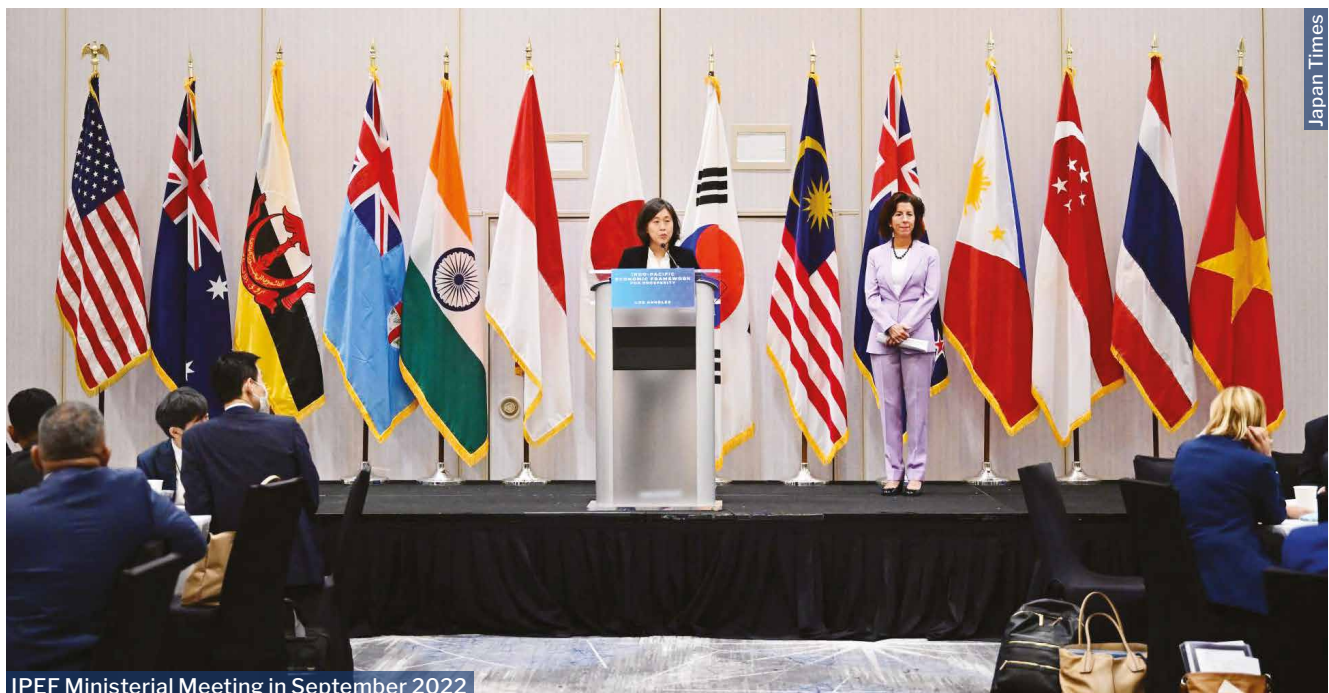
Do you foresee the emergence of a new security architecture i.e. one that is US-led and the other China-led replacing the ASEAN-centered regional architecture?

HOANG: That prospect should not be ruled out. In fact, it may be in the making as international politics post-Ukraine war has become deeply bipolarised between the invigorated US-led alliances and the entrenched Sino-Russian axis. In Southeast Asia, ASEAN still holds the middle ground but its post-Cold War ambition



ASEAN-China regional policy speech in July 2022

of fostering cooperative security among the major powers is now out of reach. Another trend of concern is that Washington and its allies' approach towards China has turned more competitive and hard balancing-oriented whereas ASEAN and its member states remain strategically ambivalent. Their policy towards China is based on accommodation rather than confrontation, engagement instead of de-coupling. That may mean Washington and its allies/partners would decide to invest significantly more in their minilateral coalitions than in ASEAN multilateralism. In opposite, Beijing would step up its statecraft to ASEAN and its member states, co-opting them towards adopting the Chinese norms and discourse on regional order and global governance. ASEAN must work harder to keep all major powers continuously engaged and maintain the balance of their influence in the region.



IPEF Ministerial Meeting in September 2022

Promoting Global Digital Supply Chains in ASEAN

Sithanonxay Suvannaphakdy and **Pham Thi Phuong Thao** discuss key challenges facing ASEAN in promoting digital supply chains amid the shift of MNCs' operations to the region.



GoerTek manufacturing plant in Vietnam

The COVID-19 pandemic, growing geopolitical tensions in the wake of trade disputes between the US and China, and the Russia-Ukraine war have further increased the risk of global supply chain (GSC) disruptions and forced firms to strengthen the resilience in their supply chains and operations. GSCs are the assembly lines that deliver goods for final consumption. The McKinsey Global Institute estimates the economic impact of the pandemic at US\$30,000 billion or 35.2% of global gross domestic product (GDP) in 2020, and the economic impact of the US-China trade dispute at US\$200 billion or 0.2% of global GDP. The possibility of GSC relocation to strengthen the supply chain resilience presents ASEAN with an opportunity to attract more foreign direct investment (FDI) and advance the region's economic integration into the GSCs.

The World Bank's MNC survey in September 2020 shows that more than 80% of multinational corporations (MNCs)—firms that conduct direct business activities and own assets in at least two countries—faced a net income decline by an average of 37%. During the pandemic, three in four MNCs experienced a decline in supply chain reliability, limiting access to raw and intermediate inputs essential to production. They have responded to uncertainties by diversifying suppliers (37% of MNCs), establishing new production sites (18%), and shifting production closer to consumers by nearshoring or reshoring (14%). Rising energy prices caused by the Russia-Ukraine war increases transportation costs, reinforcing MNCs' incentive to relocate their production sites closer to consumers.

MNCs' decisions to relocate their production sites or to establish new ones are affected by both economic and non-economic factors. A key trade-off in the GSC resilience involves the diversification of risks versus lower production costs and higher quality inputs, which are sourced in markets with niche expertise. Some products such as furniture, textiles, apparel, transportation equipment, electrical equipment, computer, and electronics have relatively low additional cost in diversifying suppliers and production sites since the technology used in these industries are not very complex and not subject to large-scale economies.

In contrast, the geographical shift of production sites of advanced manufacturing products such as semiconductors, pharmaceuticals, and automobiles would be largely driven by non-economic factors such as national security and self-sufficiency. These products require substantial investment in the establishment of new production plants and are technology-intensive, given that there are only a few suppliers in the world.

For example, the US government recently announced a plan to invest US\$52 billion in the chip industry to build more factories in their country due to a global semiconductor shortage over the past two years. While many advanced chips are designed by the US, 78.1% of them are manufactured in Asia-Pacific countries, especially in mainland China and Taiwan (36.4%), the Republic of Korea (ROK) (18.0%), and Japan (17.6%). Establishing a new semiconductor fabrication plant can cost US\$10 billion or more and requires specialised

suppliers and contractors. The recent surge in demand for chips — fuelled in part by the demand for more laptops and cars — did not lead to more chip fabrication plants because it would take years to construct a new factory, and the sunk cost of building such a factory would not be sufficiently recovered over a short period of time as demand could subside.

The expansion of MNCs' business activities across borders is primarily in the form of FDI through the establishment of subsidiaries in foreign countries. The number of MNCs has increased rapidly from roughly 7,000 parent MNCs in 1970 to 38,000 in 2000 and more than 100,000 in 2011. An analysis of 2,188 top global MNCs by revenue in 2020 reveals that 62% of them originated in five countries, namely the US (33%), Japan (12%), China (10%), the UK (5%), and India (4%). These MNCs have 216,898 subsidiaries, 54% of which are located in the US (28%), the UK (9%), China (8%), Germany (4%), and France (4%).

ASEAN is increasingly becoming an attractive destination for foreign investors, especially those from the US and China. Even before the COVID-19 outbreak, MNCs had already begun to diversify their supply chains beyond China, owing to tariffs arising from the US-China trade tensions. China's GoerTek was the first of Apple's leading equipment suppliers that shifted its production to Vietnam. US' Google and Japan's Sharp also decided to move the Pixel smartphone and computer production to Vietnam to avoid US tariffs. Panasonic later joined this relocation trend by shifting its auto stereo production from China to Thailand.

The pandemic has reinforced this trend. China — one of the top-3 GSC hubs — continues to implement the zero COVID-19 policy. ASEAN countries are gradually reopening their borders, dropping or loosening quarantine and testing requirements, and easing domestic restrictions. While 16% of European firms are considering to relocate to Southeast Asia, 53% of US firms would reduce investments in China if COVID-19 controls persist in the coming year. For example, German automotive supplier Brose is considering Thailand and Vietnam as new production locations and Demark's Logo has announced to build a new factory in the South of Vietnam.

FDI inflows into ASEAN rose from US\$113.4 billion per annum or 7.8% of global FDI during 2010-2014 to

US\$155.1 billion per annum or 11.1% of global FDI during 2017-2021. Inward FDI strongly recovered from the pandemic with a growth rate of 43.6% in 2021 after a contraction of 30.2% in 2020. However, FDI inflows are unevenly distributed across ASEAN countries. 96.1% of ASEAN's FDI inflows in 2021 were concentrated in six ASEAN countries, namely Singapore (56.6%), Indonesia (11.5%), Vietnam (8.9%), Malaysia (6.6%), Thailand (6.5%), and the Philippines (6.0%). The remaining 3.9% were accounted by Cambodia (2.0%), Myanmar (1.2%), Laos (0.6%), and Brunei (0.1%). The top-5 sources of ASEAN's FDI inflows are Japan (12.1%), the US (12.0%), China (7.7%), Hong Kong (7.2%), and the ROK (4.3%).

Promoting global digital supply chains in ASEAN in the post-pandemic years requires ASEAN as a group to create a greater coherent regulatory framework on cross-border data flows to enhance the digital connectivity both within and outside the region. Enabling and safeguarding cross-border data flows are essential to enhance digital supply chains, which will allow real-time monitoring and traceability. The World Bank's MNC survey reveals that 58% of global MNCs have turned to digital technologies (e.g. data science applications, automation of tasks and processes, and the internet of things) to optimise production capacity, maintain inventory, and manage logistics.

However, an analysis of 31 regulatory elements on cybersecurity and data protection using data from the World Bank's Global Data Regulation Diagnostic Survey in 2021 reveals that ASEAN has under-regulated data safeguards. It has moderately developed a regulatory framework for safeguarding cybersecurity and non-personal data. At the same time, ASEAN is still at an early stage in developing a regulatory framework for protecting personal data. Under-regulated cybersecurity increases the risks of cyber threats and reduces foreign investors' confidence in the digitalisation of their supply chains.

Strengthening cross-border data safeguard measures should be built on the existing regional trade agreements, such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). This can reinforce the role of consensus-based standards with commitments to develop and use international standards where available. Such standards should be used to create domestic regulations on data security and cybersecurity requirements for data controllers and processors. Greater coherence of a regulatory framework on data flows across RCEP and CPTPP member countries should reduce the uncertainty, compliance costs, and complexity of data sharing and data safeguard measures, which would facilitate the digital supply chain management within ASEAN and between ASEAN and its key trade and investment partners.

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Can ASEAN Mitigate Fake News in Southeast Asia?

Melinda Martinus proposes to mainstream the threats of fake news into ASEAN regional security concerns.

Fake news is a thorny issue. The problem is amplified with social networks globalising digital communications. A study from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology indicates that with more people relying on online platforms for social interaction, false information spreads more rapidly on social networks than real news does. For instance, fake news stories are 70% more likely to be retweeted and can reach viewers ten to twenty times faster than facts on Twitter.

In Southeast Asia, the rise in digitalisation has grown in tandem with the proliferation of fake news. Today the region is home to millions of avid smartphone users. It is estimated that 68% of the region's total population are social media users and young people between 16-24 years old are spending an average of more than 10 hours per day on the internet. This makes the region a perfect breeding ground for fake news.

Fake News Landscape in Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia's disinformation landscape is extremely complex. With relatively low digital literacy (particularly in least developed countries, among rural populations, and the elderly), limited freedom of individual expression, lack of capacity to govern the rise of global technology giants (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Google, etc), the proliferation of fake news has pushed regional governments to rethink the relationship between technology, society, media, and government.

Cybertroopers, whose objectives are to disrupt the electoral process, if not, manipulate public opinion for a

certain candidate's gain, have become a threat across the region. In the Philippines, Facebook helped spread misinformation that portrayed Ferdinand Marcos Jr in a favourable light in the recent Philippines Presidential election. In Myanmar, internet trolls affiliated with the Tatmadaw have used social media to manipulate opinion and justify the coup in February 2021. In Indonesia, online *buzzers* have been hired by political candidates eyeing the 2024 general election, and Jokowi's ardent *keyboard warriors* have also propagated the narrative of the need to extend his presidential term.

The spread of COVID-19 has also exposed the rise of disinformation beyond politics and electoral domains. For instance, racism and hatred toward Chinese minorities quickly spread when the region started to see rising cases of the so-called 'Chinese' virus in early 2020. According to the Centre, a policy think tank based in Malaysia, COVID-19 had escalated racial banter on social media among ethnic groups in Malaysia and further deepened the racial divide between the Malay-Muslim majority and the non-Malay minority.

A study from Singapore's National Centre of Infectious Disease (NCID), meanwhile, shows that six in ten people in Singapore received fake COVID-19 news from social media during the early COVID-19 outbreak in 2020. It is also worth noting that fake news might also pave the way for more complex problems such as digital scams and frauds. Syndicates for fraud profiteering have been proven difficult to nab. Singapore — arguably the most well-adapted nation to digital transformation in the region — is not even immune to this problem. The country has seen a substantial rise in scams. A total of 14,349 scam cases were reported in the mid of 2022 in the city-state, almost double the number registered in the same period last year.

Externally-Influenced Disinformation

While it is true that fake news in the region has been mainly a domestic issue, the war in Ukraine has brought up a new conversation about foreign actors' influence in manipulating global opinions. Variegated opinions about the underlying cause of the war have been showing up on social media driven by pro-Russian narratives (mainly driven by the anti-Americans, anti-NATO, anti-westernisation, pro-China sympathisers) and pro-Ukraine nationalism (primarily galvanised by western-educated elites and pro-democracy staunch supporters).





A study published on Fulcrum, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute's commentary blogpost found that Russia's cyber actors proactively disseminated the stories to justify the attack in Ukraine. These included narratives about Ukrainian authorities exterminating the Russian-speaking civilian population in Donbas and the claim that the United States and allies operating a network of biological weapons laboratories in Ukraine. These narratives carried on Twitter were disseminated extensively in Singapore and the Philippines – two countries that were particularly strong in their condemnation of the Russian's invasion of Ukraine – aiming to win sympathy among these countries' citizens.

While social media and the debate over the Russia-Ukraine War have opened up an avenue for an increased engagement on foreign affairs by Southeast Asians, this could also mean greater polarisation of ideologies. On the global stage, ASEAN has already struggled to balance major powers' influence in the region. Foreign policy elites frequently need to walk the tightrope to uphold ASEAN centrality, and not to be dictated by two dominant hegemonies of China/Russia and the US with its allies. Now with externally-influenced disinformation infiltrating its society and attempting to galvanise support for a particular major power's gain, ASEAN must be more attentive to the implications that disinformation could bring for the region's stability.

What can ASEAN Do?

ASEAN governments have introduced various domestic legislative measures to curtail the spread of fake news to preserve national security, mainly through various

types of fake news laws. Examples include the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA) in Singapore, the Anti-Fake News Act in Malaysia, the Anti-Fake News Decree in Vietnam, the Anti-Cybercrime Law in the Philippines, and the Internet Defamation Law in Indonesia. However, many critics have pointed out that these measures have been utilised by authorities to ratchet up state controls on the flow of information in public life. This could result in unintended collateral damage, namely the impairment of free speech of media and human rights in society.

Critics also raised concern about the impact on the digital transformation ecosystem in the region. Controlled measures are usually introduced abruptly without a public hearing and further disincentivises technology players. For instance, Indonesia's Minister of Communication and Information frequently blocked access to digital platforms that do not comply with the country's dynamically changing digital regulations, causing confusion amongst the public. Similarly, Vietnam has imposed new rules to for tech firms to store user data onshore to strengthen cybersecurity.

On the other hand, regional actions to help to address fake news remains to be seen. As the threats of fake news increase disseminated both by domestic constituents or by foreign actors, ASEAN needs to be more proactive in mitigating fake news storms in the region. There are some pathways that can be explored.

First, recognising fake news as a non-traditional regional security problem. Although the magnitude of security risks is not the same as territorial disputes and transboundary issues, disinformation can further deepen societal divisions. Fake news should be mainstreamed into various ASEAN meetings or mechanisms that deal with security issues. ASEAN governments, particularly defence and intelligence agencies should also enhance information exchange and share best practices for combating disinformation.

Second, in addressing fake news propagated by external powers, Individual ASEAN states should be fearless in articulating the concerns of misinformation in international fora involving major powers – similar to what US diplomats did when they found out that the Russian Intelligence Agency had helped spread misinformation about the US election in 2017 that paved the way for Donald Trump's win. This is a way to exercise ASEAN agency and ensure that external's interests will not strain domestic stability.

Finally, building open dialogue with civil society, media, and technology providers on acceptable behaviours in the digital space. This helps to establish cyber norms that will help ASEAN create a safe, open, and positive cyberspace for its people.

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ASEAN@55: THEN AND NOW

30% of ASEAN's total population in 2021 is **667.8 million**, an increase of **30%** of the population in 2000 (**514 million**).¹

+11 Life expectancy in ASEAN increased by 11 years from **61.1 years** in 1980 to **72.2 years** in 2020.¹

87.8% of the population in ASEAN was covered by mobile networks in 2020.²

The total number of internet subscribers in ASEAN reached **62.9 per 100 population**, 25 times bigger compared to 2000.⁵

45.3% of primary schools in ASEAN have access to computers for pedagogical purposes in 2020.²

90% of children of official primary school age in almost all ASEAN member states were enrolled in primary education in recent years.⁵

Number of deaths, missing persons and directly affected persons attributed to climate-related disasters per 100,000 population in 2019.⁵

1 st		Laos 10,795
2 nd		The Philippines 9,058
3 rd		Thailand 7,217

Gender disparity in labour force participation rate in 2020:⁵

1 st	Indonesia	82.4%	53.1%
2 nd	Myanmar	75.4%	Less than 50%
3 rd	The Philippines	72.3%	45%
4 th	Malaysia	80.6%	55.3%

Note: The table above lists the top 4 countries for Males. The corresponding values for Females are shown in the adjacent column.

Visitors to ASEAN in 2019



ASEAN member states
36.0%



China
22.5%



EU
7.9%



Republic of Korea
7.3%

Total visitor arrivals to ASEAN in 1995-2020¹



5x ASEAN's GDP expanded over 5 times from **US\$615 billion** in 2000 to **US\$3.4 trillion** in 2021.¹

4x The GDP per capita in ASEAN in 2021 is **US\$5,024**, a four-fold increase from **US\$1,195** in 2000.¹



ASEAN is the world's fifth largest economy in 2021 with total GDP of **US\$3.4 trillion**. ASEAN is expected to become the world's **4th largest economy** by 2030.³

4.5x ASEAN's total merchandise trade increased 4.5 times from **US\$722.2 billion** in 2001 to **US\$3,341 billion** in 2021.¹

Intra-ASEAN trade expanded two times from **US\$306 billion** in 2005 to **US\$712 billion** in 2021, and accounted for the largest proportion of ASEAN's total trade.¹

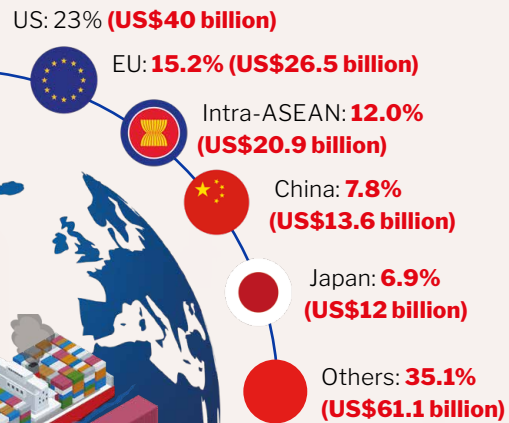


70% ASEAN's total trade in services increased by 70% from **US\$440 billion** in 2010 to **US\$743 billion** in 2021.¹

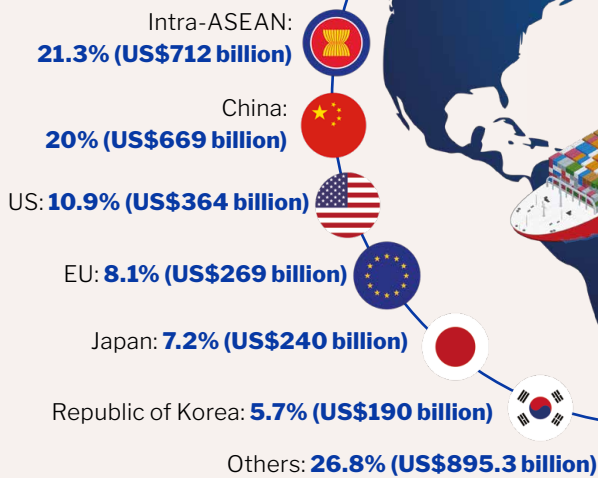


2x Total FDI inflows to ASEAN in 2021 was **US\$174 billion**, a two-fold increase from **US\$88 billion** in 2011.¹

Largest FDI flows into ASEAN by Source Countries in 2021:¹



Largest Trading Partners in ASEAN in 2021¹



International sea cargo throughput in ASEAN increased from **1,599 thousand tonnes** in 2015 to **2,606 thousand tonnes** in 2020.¹

International sea container throughput in ASEAN increased from **69.4 thousand TEUs** in 2015 to **86.3 thousand TEUs** in 2020.¹



Southeast Asia is on the path to becoming a **US\$1 trillion** digital economy by 2030⁴

As an ASEAN-led agreement, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) which entered into force in January 2022 is:

- The largest global trading bloc, consisting of nearly **30%** of the world population, with a combined GDP of **30%** of global GDP, and nearly **28%** of global trade⁶
- RCEP could add **US\$209 billion** annually to world incomes, and **US\$500 billion** to world trade by 2030⁷

Sources:

(1) ASEANStats (2) ASEAN SDG Snapshot Report 2022 (3) World Economic Forum, 2022 (4) Bain and Company 2021 (5) ASEAN Key Figures 2021 (6) Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP): Implications, Challenges, and Future Growth of East Asia and ASEAN; ERIA 2022 (7) Brookings Institution

ASEAN@55: Adapting to Global Disruptions

This year ASEAN celebrates its 55th founding anniversary. ASEANFocus is privileged to feature ASEAN Secretary-General **Dato Lim Jock Hoi**'s perspectives on various global challenges and what ASEAN has done to adapt to new realities.



H.E. Dato Lim Jock Hoi has served as ASEAN Secretary-General since 2018 and will conclude his appointment this year. During his tenure, Dato Lim has strengthened the capacity of the ASEAN Secretariat and driven various cross-sectoral initiatives across the three ASEAN Community blueprints. Under his leadership, ASEAN successfully commenced the work of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in January 2022, the world's largest trade deal to date. He is regarded as the Secretary-General who weather-proofed the region from the long COVID-19 storm.

AF: ASEAN has been praised for its achievements in the past 55 years and its multilateralism spirit. What can ASEAN do to protect the multilateral order in view of growing protectionism and the erosion of international rules-based order?

DATO LIM: For decades, ASEAN has played a central role in regional affairs by establishing and advancing its ASEAN-led mechanisms, such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) to promote peace, stability, and development in the region through cooperation.

The ASEAN-led *Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)*, the world's largest trade agreement which came into force in January 2022, is a case in point. The RCEP is the culmination of nearly a decade's worth of trade negotiations amongst ASEAN member states (AMS) and several of its external partners, and is the manifestation of a multilateral spirit.

Furthermore, initiatives such as the *ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP)* with its four priority areas of maritime cooperation, connectivity, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and economic as well as other areas of cooperation, provide multiple channels for multilateral cooperation.

Multilateralism is not necessarily an end itself, but one of several approaches for effective international collaboration. In the face of multidimensional challenges in the evolving landscape, we need to examine the current way of doing things to ensure multilateralism remains relevant in the future.

AF: A High-Level Task Force (HLTF) has been established to discuss the ASEAN Community's Post-2025 Vision. What are some priority areas which have been identified?

DATO LIM: Indeed, the High-Level Task Force (HLTF) on ASEAN Community's Vision Post-2025 commenced its work this year and has held three meetings thus far, where two were convened at the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta and one in Bangkok.

The HLTF is still in active consultations and the initial envisioning exercise of the core elements is expected to be completed by April 2023. The core elements of the post-2025 ASEAN Community will be pragmatic, forward-looking, and dynamic to chart the course to further deepen regional integration. The elements should also promote ASEAN Centrality, maintain ASEAN's role as the driving force in regional affairs and to project a united voice in global affairs.

In light of the increasing complexities and multi-faceted nature of our Community-building, the HLTF is expected to discuss the critical subject of cross-pillar cooperation to address current and emerging challenges for the benefit of the ASEAN people. Mega-trend issues such as climate change and sustainability, as well as the Fourth Industrial Revolution and digital transformation, will be considered in our discussions.

AF: Increasing contestation in the regional architecture and the promotion of national interests have weakened ASEAN's unity. How can ASEAN strive to maintain its unity amid global challenges?

DATO LIM: For the past 55 years, ASEAN has continued to implement its regional integration and Community-



Press Bureau of the Presidential Secretariat

building agenda despite the remarkable diversity of cultures, languages, political systems, customs, and religions amongst ASEAN Member States (AMS). ASEAN is a good demonstration of 'unity in diversity'. Despite our differences, we remain committed to the core aims of maintaining peace, security, and prosperity in the region as well as promoting friendship and solidarity amongst our people.

Nevertheless, I acknowledge that there are some new groupings and configurations in the regional architecture, and some questions in the media over ASEAN's future. For ASEAN to stay relevant, we need to enhance its credibility, resilience, and effectiveness from within, as well as in ASEAN's external relations in the evolving regional architecture. However, it must be stressed that 'national interest' is not antithetical to 'regional interest', and the contention that national interests weaken ASEAN's unity does not always hold true.

I believe the cohesion and unity of ASEAN, as a regional organisation, lies in the ability of its members to align their national interests with regional imperatives. Hence, I see the value of AMS continuing their practice of internal consultations, especially through the convening of ASEAN caucus meetings, and in ensuring that ASEAN speaks with one voice when engaging with external partners.

AF: The COVID-19 pandemic and recent geopolitical tensions (e.g. US-China trade war and Russia's invasion of Ukraine) have further increased the risk of global supply chain disruptions. Are the ASEAN Economic Community instruments such as ASEAN+1 FTAs and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) sufficient to enhance ASEAN's resilience?

DATO LIM: Over the past decade, ASEAN has deepened its integration into global and regional supply chains. This success is both an opportunity and a risk. On the one hand, deeper integration into the global supply chains serves as a major driver of growth and job creation. However, this also accentuates our dependency on the global market and exposes our economies and growth to external factors.

ASEAN has taken steps to protect and enhance our supply chain resilience, including through the *Ha Noi Plan of Action on Strengthening ASEAN Economic Cooperation and Supply Chain Connectivity in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic* which was rolled out in June 2020.

Supply chain related risks could also be mitigated through diversification strategies, particularly in expanding our markets and trade networks. This is in line with our Global ASEAN ambition, which has been extensively implemented through our ASEAN Plus One Free Trade Agreements (FTAs), as well as the RCEP.

Efforts are also currently undertaken in reviewing or upgrading our existing FTAs, including the ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement (ATIGA) and the ASEAN's Plus One FTAs. While upgrade negotiations of the ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand FTA was formally launched in 2020, ASEAN is also reviewing possible upgrades of its FTAs with China, the Republic of Korea, and India.

AF: The world is facing a severe food crisis exacerbated by war, supply chain disruptions, and sustained inflationary pressures. Over the past two years, some AMS imposed temporary export bans on rice (e.g. Vietnam and Cambodia in 2020), palm oil (e.g. Indonesia in April 2022), and chicken (e.g. Malaysia in May 2022). What are the key ASEAN initiatives to enhance regional food security in the wake of the global food crisis?

DATO LIM: Agriculture plays an important role in the economic development of our region, accounting for over 15% of GDP and more than 40% of the labour force in some of our member states. The sector also accounts for about 10% of the US\$1.7 trillion export earnings of ASEAN in 2021. As such, food insecurity remains a key concern for our region.

Over the past two years, various initiatives and programmes have been effectively implemented to enhance food security in the region in the wake of the global food crisis. Notably, the *Statement of ASEAN Ministers on Agriculture and Forestry in Response to the Outbreak of the COVID-19 to Ensure Food Security, Food Safety and Nutrition in ASEAN* was adopted in

April 2020 with a commitment to minimise disruption in regional food supply chains by ensuring that markets are kept open, transportation of food facilitated, and that quarantine or other non-tariff measures do not slow down the free flow of agricultural and food products.

To this end, ASEAN strives to reduce excessive price volatility and provide timely and accurate market information through the effective implementation of the ASEAN Food Security Information System and ASEAN Plus Three Emergency Rice Reserve.

Recently, the *ASEAN Regional Guidelines for Sustainable Agriculture* has been agreed upon by ASEAN, and we hope that these guidelines will galvanise the development of an ASEAN sustainable food market in the face of an increasing number of trade barriers and other restrictions imposed on ASEAN agricultural and food products.

ASEAN is also proactively discussing how to extend and expand the scope of the *Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on the Implementation of Non-Tariff Measures on Essential Goods*, including those that impede the smooth flow of agri-goods and services. This MoU is critical to maintaining resilient supply chains, enhancing cooperation, and facilitating the smooth flow of essential goods.

AF: Building a regional digital economy is one of the key priority areas in ASEAN's economic integration. How long would it take to establish the regional digital economy in ASEAN?

DATO LIM: The transformation of ASEAN into a digital economy is on-going and will continue to evolve to keep up with the fast-changing pace of technology, and to meet the needs of the markets and consumers. The COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly accelerated the region's digital transformation and will spur the growth of our internet economy which is expected to reach US\$300 billion by 2025. Digital trade is also expected to be a major driver of economic growth in Southeast Asia, estimated to be worth around US\$1 trillion by 2030. Recognising the region's potential, ASEAN has actively put in place relevant policies and initiatives to accelerate digital transformation.

At the ASEAN Summit in October 2021, ASEAN Leaders issued their *Statement on Advancing Digital Transformation in ASEAN*, which calls for the strengthening of digital integration and transformation in the region to enhance ASEAN's competitiveness.

In addition to adopting the *Consolidated Strategy on the Fourth Industrial Revolution* for ASEAN to help guide the ASEAN Community's progress towards digital transformation, ASEAN Leaders also endorsed the *Bandar Seri Begawan Roadmap (BSBR) on ASEAN Digital Transformation* last year. The BSBR underscores, for the very first time, a specific timeline for ASEAN to commence negotiations for an ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement by 2025.

All of these will be implemented in tandem with ASEAN's other digitalisation initiatives, such as the *ASEAN Digital Master Plan 2025*, *ASEAN Digital Integration Framework Action Plan 2019-2025*, and the *Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025*. This will not only assist ASEAN's work towards an inclusive and sustainable recovery, but also help realise its vision of transformation of becoming a leading digital economic community in the coming years.

AF: Youth participation in ASEAN community building is critical. What are the strategies to empower and promote inclusivity among ASEAN youths so that they can contribute to regional integration?

DATO LIM: Youth participation is a crucial part of our on-going ASEAN Community-building efforts. Under the *ASEAN Work Plan on Youth (2021-2025)*, one of our priorities is to strengthen youth participation in ASEAN regional platforms for human resource development, which provides inclusive access to skills development, internship, and other school-to-work transition programmes.

In acknowledging the importance of the youth and their capacity to participate in ASEAN Community-building, ASEAN under Cambodia's Chairmanship has declared this year as the Year of ASEAN Youth. One of the flagship activities in commemorating this was the convening of the 1st ASEAN Youth Dialogue held in Siem Reap last July, which gave youth representatives from all member states an opportunity to engage in policy discourse and to exchange views with government officials.

As one of the deliverables of the Brunei Darussalam's ASEAN Chairmanship last year, ASEAN has also embraced the Youth, Peace, and Security agenda to bring our young people closer to the forefront of building a sustainable, stable and peaceful region. The fruition of these efforts would deepen ASEAN integration through the cultivation of substantive people-to-people ties at all levels of the Community.

AF: AMS have been talking about a transformative change to low-carbon economies. Is ASEAN planning its own green transition and if so, what are the key policies and interventions that ASEAN can undertake?

DATO LIM: I am pleased to highlight that all AMS have ratified the Paris Agreement and several initiatives have been undertaken to mainstream climate change within the ASEAN Community. ASEAN's objective, as reflected in the *ASEAN State of Climate Change Report*, is to pursue net-zero carbon emissions as soon as possible in the latter half of this century. In realising this goal, ASEAN adopted the *Framework for Circular Economy for the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC)* last year which aims to support sustainable development by making effective and efficient use of materials and energy, thereby promoting sustainable production and consumption patterns.



Other key interventions include the launch of the *ASEAN Taxonomy for Sustainable Finance*, which serves as one of the key building blocks in guiding investments and financial flows towards sustainable activities in the region, along with the ongoing development of the *ASEAN Carbon Neutrality Plan*, which is expected to provide an orderly, inclusive and safe transition pathway that complements AMS' Nationally Determined Contributions under the Paris Agreement.

In addition, ASEAN is also looking forward to the establishment of the ASEAN Centre for Climate Change in Brunei Darussalam which aims to enhance climate change coordination and cooperation amongst AMS to realise a climate-resilient and low-carbon ASEAN region. As part of ASEAN's efforts to advance nature-based solutions and biodiversity conservation, the ASEAN Senior Officials on the Environment endorsed some key guiding documents, including, the *ASEAN Work Programme on Urban Biodiversity and Greenery 2022-2032* and the flagship ASEAN Green Initiative launched in July 2019 to further demonstrate our region's commitment to work together in restoring our biodiversity.

AF: What are some of your challenges and personal achievements in helming the top administrative position of ASEAN? Should the mandate and role of the Secretary-General be strengthened?

DATO LIM: The role of the Secretary-General has evolved considerably during my five years in office. As the work of ASEAN becomes more complex and multifaceted, so too has the work of the Secretary-General. Beyond efforts to realise the ASEAN Community Vision 2025, there are many cross-cutting challenges that must be addressed such as climate change, sustainable development, the digital economy, as well as the region's recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. I am privileged to be able to take part in laying the important groundwork for the next stage of ASEAN Community building efforts.

Certainly, addressing the pandemic has been one of the greatest challenges during my time as Secretary-General. I commend AMS for their commitment in collectively responding to the outbreak of COVID-19 through several measures which have cleared a pathway for us to emerge stronger, safer, and more resilient as a Community.

I am pleased that the region's trade volumes have returned to pre-pandemic levels and ASEAN's economy is forecasted to grow by 5.0% this year and 5.2% next year. AMS have also started to gradually reopen this year ushering a return of tourism, a significant part of the region's economy. The entry into force of the RCEP, an ASEAN-driven initiative, earlier this year is also something that I am very happy with, since I was involved in the negotiations of the agreement since its inception, long before I assumed the role of Secretary-General.

Another area of cooperation which has expanded significantly during my time as Secretary-General is the provision of humanitarian assistance in the region. Southeast Asia is one of the most vulnerable regions in the world to climate-induced disasters, which has affected our infrastructure, food security, and people's well-being. Notably, the Asian Development Bank estimated that the region has suffered financial losses worth US\$91 billion from 2004 to 2014 due to the impacts of typhoons, floods, drought, and earthquakes. As the Humanitarian Assistance Coordinator for ASEAN, I worked closely with the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management in responding to natural disasters and humanitarian emergencies across the region.

One initiative that I am grateful for is the construction of the ASEAN Village located in the city of Palu in Central Sulawesi, Indonesia. This project was part of the rehabilitation efforts following the earthquake and tsunami that struck the area in 2018. The construction of the village utilised crowdfunding as a modality, and demonstrated how ASEAN can mobilise our people's contributions toward relief and recovery efforts in the spirit of solidarity and good-neighborliness.

In addition to natural disasters, ASEAN has also provided humanitarian assistance for human-induced emergencies. ASEAN has made substantial progress in facilitating the provision of humanitarian assistance to Myanmar. To date, humanitarian assistance worth more than US\$18 million has been delivered to Myanmar, which includes US\$8 million worth of medical supplies and equipment distributed to healthcare facilities across all 17 states and regions in Myanmar.

Another priority for me in the past five years has been strengthening the effectiveness of the ASEAN Secretariat in supporting our members, especially in providing analytical support, including in the areas of cross-sectoral and cross-pillar cooperation. At the same time, we have worked closely with member states to improve the welfare, benefits, and job security of more than 400 staff of the ASEAN Secretariat.

Towards this end, we are enhancing the capacity of the ASEAN Secretariat to host more high-level and working group level meetings. In April last year, the secretariat hosted its first ever ASEAN Leaders' Meeting. Increasing the number of meetings hosted at the Secretariat would further advance our credentials as the hub of ASEAN Community-building and the home of ASEAN.

FermentAsean - Indigenous Food Preservation

Farah Nadine Seth shares the historical background of fermented food in Southeast Asia and how it has gained traction worldwide.



Laphet seller in Burmese market

For many of us, the fortnightly or weekly grocery run to stock up our pantry with fresh produce is the norm. The ease with which we can obtain local and international ingredients is something we hardly bat an eyelid about in our consumerist lifestyle. We take for granted the refrigeration technology that allows our produce and cooked food to be safe for consumption for extended periods of time. We shrug our shoulders at the ubiquitous inclusion of artificial preservatives in our food to make them last longer than nature intended them to.

However, what did we do in our refrigerator-free past when we were beholden to the capricious whims and fancies of Mother Nature, bacteria and pests that could easily wipe out the shelf life of the food painstakingly prepared? How did our forefathers make their food stocks last longer?

Indeed, Southeast Asia has a rich tradition of food preservation. These age-old methods helped increase the shelf life of fresh produce in the region's tropical weather. One common method is pickling, or preserving edible products in a vinegar or salt solution. Pickled vegetables are a common appetiser, with pickled mustard greens, in particular, a mainstay across different cuisines,

likely owing to historical Chinese influences across the region. The Filipino version, *burong mustasa*, prepared by soaking mustard greens in a brine solution of sea salt and rice water, is a common ingredient in stir-fried side dishes. In Laos, diners can tuck into the equivalent of *som pak gaat*, a typical accompaniment to grilled seafood and *larb* (spicy minced meat salad). Other regional variants of this dish include Vietnamese *dưa cải chua*, Cambodian *jrouk spey*, and Indonesian *sayur asin*.



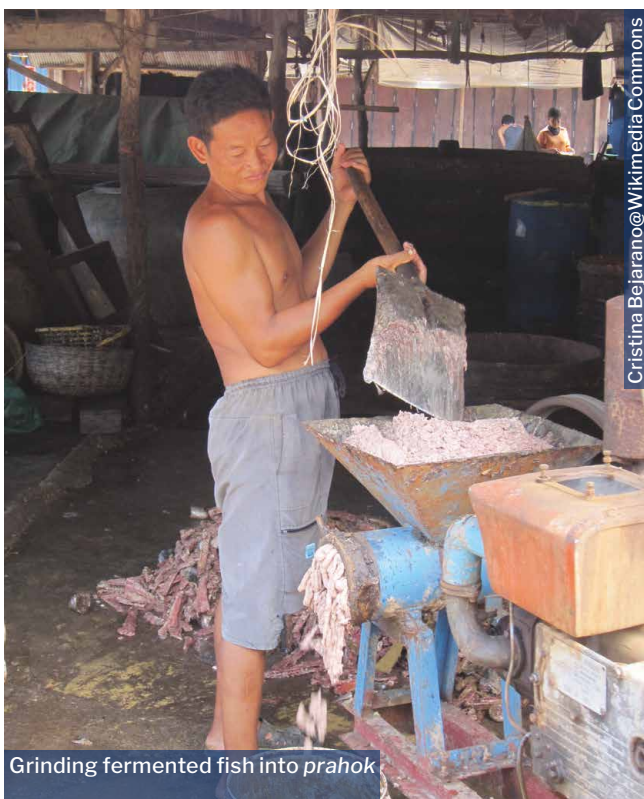
Burong Mustasa sold in a Filipino market

Traditional food preservation has also helped generations of Southeast Asians extend the viability of their harvest yields. An important produce that is traditionally preserved is fish, a key protein source in the region. Generations have employed preservation methods such as salting and drying, and fermenting fish, to maintain their food stocks in between harvest seasons. One need only walk through local wet markets to see the plethora of dried, salted and fermented fish that assault our visual and olfactory senses.



A simple meal with *Prahok* fried in banana leaves

Nowhere is this more critical than in Cambodia, with fish accounting for 66.3% of Cambodian households' animal protein intake, according to one study. *Prahok*, a fermented fish paste from the tiny *trey riel* fish, arguably lies at the heart of Cambodian cuisine. Traditionally created to preserve fish in leaner months, it has earned the moniker "Cambodian cheese" for its pungent smell, leaving unassuming tourists running. Following the annual fish harvest season at the beginning of the year, *prahok* makers in Cambodia leave the fish to dry and rot in baskets outdoors before marinating them in packs of salt. They are then crushed and packed into airtight containers to be left out for a month. Most *prahok* can last up till the next year's *prahok*-making season, with some even lasting for up to three years! A jar of this fermented goodness has a place of honour in most family homes, able to add a robust taste to any dish.



Grinding fermented fish into *prahok*

Such traditional food preservation not only combats food wastage but can also lead to innovative food products. In Malaysia, Brunei, and Indonesia, *tempoyak* is an age-old culinary innovation to manage the burgeons of durian that risk going bad during harvest season. Made by mixing the durian flesh with salt or sugar and left to ferment, *tempoyak* is said by its ardent fans to be creamier, milder, and less rancid than the fresh durian fruit. Within the Malay Peninsula, it is typically turned into a spicy chili-based condiment called *sambal tempoyak*, or used as a key ingredient to make *gulai tempoyak ikan patin* (pangasius fish *tempoyak* curry). In Brunei, *tempoyak* is a common accompaniment to the national delicacy of *ambuyat*. Indeed, in today's day and age where food wastage is an unfortunate by-product of our lifestyle of excess, there is much to be learnt from our ancestors who actively combatted food waste in such innovative and delicious ways.

Indeed, food preservation has created a plethora of pastes, sauces, and dips that are the epitome of Southeast Asian cuisine today. Think about the ubiquitous fermented shrimp pastes that form the base of the multi-coloured sauces served in little dipping bowls in restaurants across the region. *Kapi*, a fermented paste made from mixing krill and salt, is used widely in Thailand and Cambodia as a base for a spicy dip, *nam phrik kapi*, or to whip up *khao kluk kapi*, a quintessentially Thai fried rice mixed with *kapi* and served with sweetened pork or chicken, crispy shrimp, and an assortment of vegetables and herbs. Other similar fermented shrimp pastes can be found region-wide such as Vietnamese *Mắm tôm*, Malaysia's *belacan*, Myanmar's *seinza ngapi*, Filipino *bagoong alamang*, and Indonesian *terasi*.



Kapi and other fermented products sold in Thailand

In that same vein, food preservation has helped develop inexpensive and nutritious protein sources that have become mainstays in regional cuisines. In the olden days when meat was seen as a luxury item to be eaten once a year at special events, Indonesians turned to *tempeh*, fermented soybean, as a vital and inexpensive daily protein source in their diet. Native to Java, *tempeh* is made by mixing whole soybeans with a fungus fermentation starter and left to ferment for 48 hours before being packed into a cake form. Firm to the touch and earthy on the tongue, it has high protein and dietary fibre content and is used widely in Indonesian cuisine. *Tempeh orek*, *tempeh* stir-fried with sweet soy sauce and aromatics, is a common side dish for the impressive *Nasi*

Tumpeng, a ceremonial dish of typically cone-shaped turmeric-spiced yellow rice served with an assortment of delicious meat- and vegetable-based dishes such as grilled chicken, *urap* (spiced vegetable salad) and *perkedel jagung* (corn fritters). A lesser known fermented soy-based cousin is *oncom*, popular in West Java and used to make *pepes oncom*, where *oncom* is mixed with spices and grilled in a banana-leaf wrap.



Preparing soybeans for *tempeh* fermentation

Such traditional fermented food has gained greater prominence recently as plant-based protein alternatives in the global movement towards more sustainable eating patterns. Trendy in the Western world and amongst health and climate-conscious groups, *tempeh* is being marketed as 'health food' or 'vegan meat' with non-Southeast Asian *tempeh* manufacturers sprouting up globally such as the German-based *Tempehmanufaktur* and US-based *Tootie's Tempeh*. Innovation on the traditional soy-based *tempeh* has ramped up with the Singapore-based company *Angie's Tempeh*, producing *tempeh* variations made out of chickpea, buckwheat, quinoa, and even adzuki bean. While such global prominence and innovation is heartening, it is vital that food indigenous to this region remains recognised as quintessentially Southeast Asian and does not risk being culturally misappropriated.

More poignantly, such traditionally preserved food has also been at the heart of important cultural practices. In Vietnam, *Rượu nếp*, a traditional Vietnamese glutinous rice dessert is an important fixture in the Doan Ngo Festival (*Tết giết sâu bọ* or *Tết Đoan Ngọ*) or the Vietnamese pest-killing festival. Held during the fifth



Laphet thoke



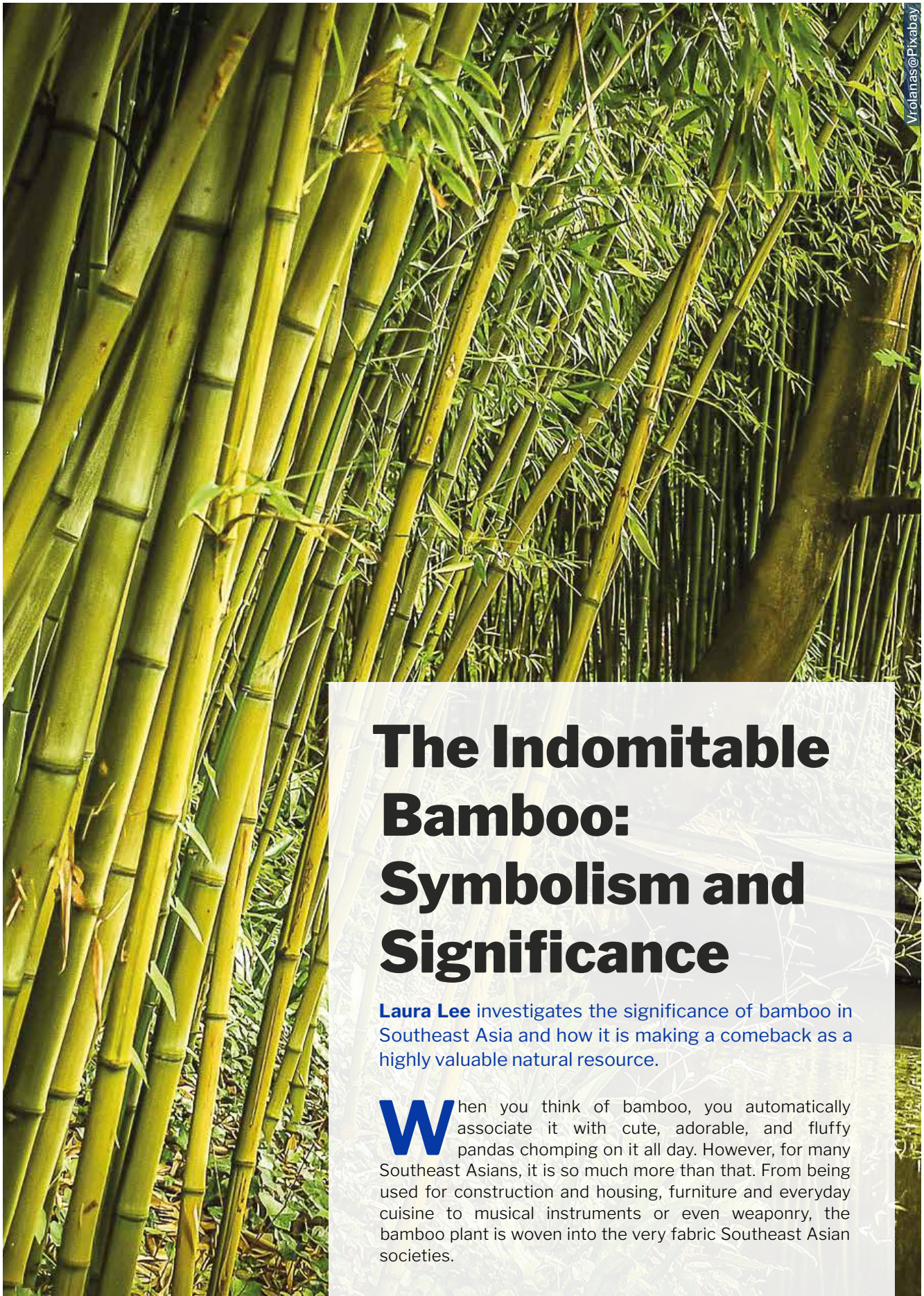
Rượu nếp served as a delicacy for Tết Đoan Ngọ

day of the fifth month in the lunar calendar to mark the summer solstice, legend has it that this festival was originally intended to appease the gods and fight pest infestation beset by traditional Vietnamese agrarian society. Now an important cultural event for families to gather, this festival has evolved to include other customs that ward off other types of 'pests' that may bring sickness and bad luck. *Rượu nếp*, a yeast-fermented glutinous rice ball dessert served in rice wine, is believed by festival adherents to ward off digestive 'pests' and cleanse one's body and spirit.

In Myanmar, few dishes have more cultural and national significance than *laphet thoke*, a traditional fermented tea leaf salad. A popular saying about Myanmar cuisine attests to this: "Of all the fruit, mango is the best; of all the meats, pork is the best; of all the leaves, *laphet* is the best". With *laphet* (fermented tea leaves) once being an important peace offering between feuding kingdoms in ancient Myanmar, it is now an important symbol of hospitality and celebration in Myanmar culture today. Steamed, fermented in underground burlap sacks, and then press-dried, *laphet* is typically served in salad form as *laphet thoke*, mixed with tomatoes, peanuts, broad beans, garlic, dried prawns and chillies. A common dish that brings together friends and families over conversation and laughter, it is also an inexpensive and nutritious snack for students as they burn the midnight oil to prepare for examinations. The more ceremonial version, *ahlu-laphet*, is served during official functions and traditional ceremonies such as weddings.

As is the case in Southeast Asia, one can simply wax lyrical about the intricate preparation and exquisite taste of the food we love and are staunchly proud of. Nevertheless, what must be highlighted is that such traditional preserved food not only afforded our forefathers the much-needed strength and nutrition but also became intertwined with our cultural-religious norms and our cultural identity as Southeast Asians. From an Indonesian farmer eating simple *tempeh orek* to flavour his plain rice, to Cambodian women whipping up *prahok ktis*, a spicy pork dip, to gain the approval of their future mothers-in-law, quintessentially Southeast Asian preserved food has not only shaped our food cultures but also our ways of being both in the past and for many more years to come.

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The Indomitable Bamboo: Symbolism and Significance

Laura Lee investigates the significance of bamboo in Southeast Asia and how it is making a comeback as a highly valuable natural resource.

When you think of bamboo, you automatically associate it with cute, adorable, and fluffy pandas chomping on it all day. However, for many Southeast Asians, it is so much more than that. From being used for construction and housing, furniture and everyday cuisine to musical instruments or even weaponry, the bamboo plant is woven into the very fabric Southeast Asian societies.

The bamboo, scientifically classified as grass (not a tree), holds significant cultural value. Southeast Asian cultures believe that humanity actually emerged from a bamboo stem. In the Philippines' mythology and folklore, the first man (Malakas) and the first woman (Maganda) were born from split bamboo stems. A similar myth exists in Malaysia about a man who dreamt of a beautiful woman while he slept under a bamboo plant and, upon awakening, discovered her inside one of the bamboo stems.

Bamboo is of great cultural significance for many Southeast Asian societies but especially more so for Vietnam due to its symbolism. Bamboo trees are considered a symbol of strength and vitality in Vietnamese culture as they can resist strong winds and storms. Bamboo trees also appeared in a legend about Saint Giong, one of the four immortal deities worshipped by the Vietnamese people, who used bamboo trees as a weapon to fend off invaders.

An old Vietnamese proverb says: "Tre già, măng mọc" (When the bamboo is old, the bamboo sprouts appear). It means that children will take their parents' place once the previous generation passes away, allowing the nation to sustain itself. As such, it has become a symbol of Vietnam's struggle for independence and freedom against French colonialism. The bamboo symbol has continued to stand the test of time, as it has also been used to characterise Vietnam's foreign policy as adaptable and pragmatic. Akin to Vietnam, Thailand's diplomacy is often described as bamboo diplomacy "bending with the wind".



The *Tinikling* dance

Bamboo is also used in arts and culture across Southeast Asia, mainly in dance and music making. The *Tinikling* is a traditional Filipino folk dance that dates back to the Spanish colonial era. A bamboo pole is beaten, tapped, and slid by at least two people against one another and against the ground while one or more dancers step over the poles and in between them. The dance is traditionally performed to *rondalla* music, played by an ensemble of string instruments, which originated in Spain during the Middle Ages. A triple metre pattern is created by striking the bamboo poles against the ground (or two raised pieces of wood) and each other. Typically, the poles are tapped twice on the ground on the first two beats, then brought together on the third beat and dancers will have to weave through the fast-moving poles by hopping, jumping, and turning.



Depiction of Malakas and Maganda

Similar bamboo dances also exist in other Southeast Asian cultures, such as the *Rangku Alu* of the Manggarai (East Nusa Tenggara) and the *Gaba-gaba* of the Ambonese in Indonesia, *Múa Sạp* from Vietnam, *Lao Kra Top Mai* from Thailand, *Robam Kom Araek* from Cambodia, Karen or Chin Bamboo Dance from Myanmar, *Alai Sekap* in Brunei, and *Magunatip* of the Murut people of Borneo.

Traditional Vietnamese musical instruments are also made out of bamboo. There are three types of bamboo instruments: wind, string, and percussion. Every part of the plant is utilised in order to create many traditional Vietnamese instruments. Bamboo stems are used to create flutes and panpipes. Besides the stalks, the leaves are also used to create sound and the roots of bamboo are used in making bells, drumsticks, and castanets (a form of clapper). Bamboo is also used in Vietnam to make the *T'rung* (traditional xylophone), *Dinh Tut* (flute), and *Ko Ni* (mouth fiddle) percussion instruments of the Central Highlanders. Across different ethnic groups, the types of bamboo instruments vary. In Vietnamese traditional music ensembles, more complex versions of the *Jarai* and *Bahnar's* xylophone are commonly seen. The Vietnamese bamboo's physical structure makes it ideal



Traditional Vietnamese bamboo instruments



Lemang being prepared

for making musical instruments as it has thinner knots as compared to other varieties of bamboo, allowing it to produce purer, more echoing sounds.

Similarly, from root to leaves, every part of the bamboo plant is used in Southeast Asian cuisines. The young shoots of bamboo are harvested by stripping off their tough outer leaves, providing essential nutrients such as thiamin, niacin, and vitamin B6, which are used in many Southeast Asian dishes, such as salads and stir-fries. But it is not just the shoots of the plant that provide great utility and value.

The leaves and stems also provide great flavour to dishes. Southeast Asians have long used bamboo's hollow stems or culms as cooking vessels, due to its ability to withstand high heat. Cooking in bamboo culms provides a unique earthy flavour while also imparting other nutrients into the food as it cooks. A notable staple food that is cooked in such a manner is sticky rice. Many Southeast Asian nations have a version of this dish; Singaporeans and Malaysians know it as *Lemang*, the Thais call it *Kao Lam* and it is also known as *Kralan* in Cambodia. While the ingredients slightly differ across cuisines, the preparation is largely similar – the glutinous rice is mixed with coconut milk, cooked in a bamboo culm, and wrapped with banana leaves. In another version of the glutinous rice dish, the *Nonya Bak Chang*, bamboo leaves are used to create a rice dumpling filled with meat. These traditional dishes are often eaten in celebration of cultural or religious holidays.

Apart from cuisines, bamboo is one of the world's oldest construction materials and has been traditionally used in the construction of houses in the region. A Philippine nipa hut is one of the most basic kinds of bamboo housing;



Khao Lam

the walls are split and woven bamboo, bamboo poles and slats support the roof. As bamboo is commonly thought to be used for indigenous structures, it creates a negative impression that bamboo is merely a “poor man's timber”. However, many in the construction industry are beginning to see the value of bamboo as a construction material to build modern structures.

Bamboo is now regarded as a sustainable building material due to its ability to grow rapidly. Bamboo is the fastest growing plant and it can grow up to a metre in a single day. Thus, harvesting bamboo is not considered “deforestation”, given that it can regrow (without the need for replantation) almost as quickly as it is used. In addition to being highly renewable, bamboo is bendable, lightweight, termite resistant, and at the same time possesses the tensile strength of steel that can withstand winds up to 173 mph! These qualities allow bamboo structures and architecture to withstand natural disasters and climate change, making it a great building material that is sustainable and climate-friendly.



Nipa hut in the Philippines

It is no wonder then that bamboo has been making a huge comeback, with many Southeast Asian nations becoming increasingly interested in the economic potential and environmental benefits of bamboo. As demand increases, rural communities in Southeast Asia could reap huge economic benefits by growing and selling bamboo. Research has also shown that 60% of bamboo production goes directly into the pockets of farmers.

As such, some ASEAN countries have introduced policies to sustainably grow rattan and bamboo that could benefit farmers who grow it. For instance, Laos introduced the National Action Plan for Sustainable Rattan and Bamboo in 2021, which aims to improve the livelihoods of farmers by reducing poverty in a green and sustainable manner.

The rich cultural importance of bamboo is one that deserves attention. As we seek solutions to global issues such as climate change and increasing inequality, our past traditions and our ancestors' way of life can be a window to providing great insights and ingenuity in resolving these problems.

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PREAH VIHEAR TEMPLE

Cambodia

The Preah Vihear Temple is an ancient Hindu temple located in the northern province of Preah Vihear, Cambodia. Historically, Preah Vihear has been a place of pilgrimage and sacred worship for both kings and commoners because it features a stylised representation of Mount Meru, the Hindu gods' home. The temple is made up of a series of sanctuaries connected by pathways and staircases. There are four levels with four courtyards, each containing five gopuras (entrance pavilions). Its complex history dates back to the 9th century, however, it was mostly constructed in the 11th and 12th centuries, during the reigns of Khmer kings Suryavaraman I and Suryavarman II. The detailed planning and decorations in relation to the environment makes the Preah Vihear Temple a fine specimen of Khmer art and architecture, earning its place on UNESCO's list of World Heritage Sites.

(Sources: The Phnom Penh Post; UNESCO World Heritage Convention; Tourism of Cambodia)