

Navigating ASEAN Centrality amidst Internal Friction and Interplay of Strategic Frameworks between the US and China

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The principle of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) centrality is embedded within the intricate dynamics of the broader Indo-Pacific region. This phenomenon can be attributed to the susceptibility of ASEAN's centrality to various hegemonic processes. The article unveils challenges to ASEAN centrality arising from competing interests and alignment conflicts, particularly in relation to China and the United States (US). The emergence of strategic frameworks, coupled with China's expanding influence, along with the evolution of defence cooperation mechanisms and territorial disputes, is reshaping the geopolitical landscape and testing ASEAN's unity and influence. The complex interplay of these factors exposes the nuanced relationship between the US-led structures, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), and ASEAN's regional centrality, ultimately shaping the geopolitics of the region.

Keywords: ASEAN Centrality, ASEAN-US, ASEAN-China, Southeast Asia and Indo-Pacific

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INTRODUCTION

The centrality of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) dictates that it should occupy a central position within the diplomatic architecture of this geographical region. This centrality is closely connected to ASEAN's role as a leader, driver, architect, institutional centre and vanguard in advancing regional cooperation.¹ Article 1.15 of the ASEAN Charter emphasises that the grouping's primary goal is to uphold the centrality and active role of ASEAN as the main driving force behind its relations and cooperation with external partners.² Indonesia, as the ASEAN Chair in 2023, has reaffirmed the concept of centrality and further defined that:

strengthening ASEAN centrality is a non-negotiable condition so that ASEAN maintains its identity as a custodian of stability and peace for its member states and the Indo-Pacific region. Indonesia's open-ended foreign policy principle will provide an opportunity to adapt to ASEAN's central role in the region.³

The ASEAN has been actively engaged in various forums to enhance relations with major economic and strategic powers worldwide. The regional dominance of ASEAN hinges largely on the nature of its bilateral relationships with other nations, whether they are cooperative or not, as well as the quality of its ties with major powers.⁴ Analysts also highlight that any deterioration in ASEAN's relations with major economic or strategic powers could subject it to pressure to take sides or risk becoming a proxy battleground.⁵ The interplay of all major actors in the global economy and their strategic interests hold paramount importance for stability and security, thus accentuating the significance of ASEAN centrality.

In 1967, when the ASEAN was established with only five member countries (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand), the world was in the midst of the Cold War and the spectre of communist supremacy loomed prominently before the architects of Asia. In fact, in the 1960s—a time when it seemed inconceivable that the non-communist world could prevail over the communist one—each of the five founding nations of ASEAN had grappled with domestic communist insurgencies or rebellions.⁶ These included terrorist attacks orchestrated by the Communist Party of Malaya in Malaysia and Singapore, coup attempts inspired by the Communist Party in Indonesia and domestic communist insurgencies led by the Communist Party of Thailand, among others.⁷ During this period, the ASEAN sought to distance itself from the ongoing conflict between the

United States (US) and the Soviet Union. The Vietnam War, spanning from 1954 to 1975, had already created an unstable situation in the ASEAN region. Concurrently, China was emerging as a significant military power. Faced with these circumstances, the ASEAN aimed to establish a robust regional institutional framework capable of addressing the contemporary challenges it confronted.

Subsequently, in 1976, these countries signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia;⁸ and by the 1990s, the number of ASEAN members had doubled. The Asian financial crisis in the 1990s also had a significant impact on the economic agenda of ASEAN. This crisis led to the renewal of the currency swap arrangement through the 'Chiang Mai Initiative'⁹ of 2000, which, in turn, heightened the involvement of China, Japan and South Korea in addressing economic issues within ASEAN countries, bringing ASEAN Plus Three to the forefront.¹⁰

Moreover, in the early 1990s, a pivotal shift in global geopolitics became manifest, marked by the culmination of the Cold War and the burgeoning aspiration for a liberal economic ecosystem, engendering a rapid transformation of policy paradigms.¹¹ At this juncture, ASEAN discerned the exigency for augmenting its diplomatic outreach via the establishment of additional regional platforms, thereby expanding the ambit of multilateral engagement. One of the seminal outcomes of this cognisance was the inception of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in July 1993.¹²

Currently, the ARF¹³ boasts the participation of 27 countries¹⁴ and groups, including prominent geopolitical stakeholders, such as China, the US, the European Union and Canada, extending beyond the confines of the Asian region. The overarching aim of the ARF resides in the advancement of security dialogue and cooperative efforts, with particular emphasis placed on forging collaborative ties with the aforementioned global powers.¹⁵ The rationale behind this prioritisation lies in the imperative of securing stability and fostering peace within a rapidly evolving unipolar world order.

An equally noteworthy institution in the ASEAN context is the East Asia Summit (EAS), which encompasses 18 participating countries,¹⁶ including influential nations like the US and Russia. The cooperative institutions within the ASEAN have transformed it into a forum where major stakeholders actively participate and voice their opinions. One of the British documents even suggests that a founding member of ASEAN had proposed that the organisation should refrain from shouldering the burden of resolving ideological, military and security issues within Southeast Asia.¹⁷

The concept of centrality, as defined by ASEAN, revolves around the principle of 'equal footing'¹⁸ in the context of cooperation and collaboration with external powers. However, presently, there exist noteworthy discrepancies and imbalances that render the ASEAN vulnerable. Despite these challenges, there is a clear and persistent inclination within the ASEAN to advocate for the notion of 'joint decision-making, collaborative planning, and coordinated implementation of activities in the establishment of cooperation with external powers'.¹⁹

The ASEAN appears to align itself with major geopolitical entities on various issues, reflecting a commitment to principles, such as sovereignty and the rule of law. However, instances arise where a growing inclination to align with specific policies and agendas poses a challenge. This alignment contradicts ASEAN's commitment to consensus-based diplomacy and a preference for neutrality. While neutrality is often upheld as a sacred principle in international politics, historical evidence suggests its elusive nature.²⁰ In this context, the ASEAN's pursuit of centrality over neutrality may be interpreted as a strategic bargaining manoeuvre by influential global players.²¹ Furthermore, the ASEAN faces challenges in light of the establishment of numerous economic and strategic institutions or alliances by major players. These developments directly impede ASEAN's regional leadership, marking a significant obstacle to its standing in the geopolitical landscape.

Understanding centrality entails recognising the diverse perspectives held by various external powers. In the realm of geopolitics, significant players may view ASEAN as a dialogue partner with the expectation that it possesses the 'ability to perform as a convener and continue to engage'.²² This perspective inherently underscores ASEAN's role as a cohesive force among all states affiliated with the organisation. It implies that the concept of centrality is intricately linked to the internal mechanisms of ASEAN, mechanisms that need to exhibit resilience and stability before gaining the confidence of external powers.

The primary objective of this article is to scrutinise the concept of ASEAN centrality in the context of major external powers, notably, the US and China. The purpose of this framework is to assess whether the ASEAN centrality concept, as embraced by the ASEAN grouping, revolves around the pursuit of a unified stance in engaging with more influential powers. Alternatively, it aims to investigate whether the ASEAN centrality concept is oriented towards 'soliciting other major powers to recalibrate the influence of existing major powers'. Additionally, the article endeavours to explore

the extent to which this concept imposes broader obligations on all major powers, encompassing regional structures and systems.

Further, the article attempts to navigate the inherent contradictions within ASEAN, particularly concerning the issue of ASEAN centrality, in relation to the strategic security policies pursued by global powers, such as the US and China. This study is fundamentally grounded in an analysis of official policy documents, official statements, declarations, agreements and empirical data.

INTRA-ASEAN FRICTION

In its asserted conceptual framework, the ASEAN operates as a ‘consensus’²³ oriented organisation. This principle is also enshrined in the ASEAN Charter, which stipulates that ‘the determinations of the ASEAN Community shall be arrived at through consensus’.²⁴ Paradoxically, the trajectory of ASEAN over the past two decades reveals a vacillating approach, rather than an inability, to uphold the principle of ‘consensus’ on pivotal matters. One of the major issues is related to the structure of ASEAN amid dynamic geopolitics because there are prevalent apprehensions that ‘[m]any regional leaders focus on domestic affairs at the expense of regional leadership’.²⁵ An example is the situation in Myanmar after the February 2021 military coup and the role of ASEAN in resolving the situation with the idea of consensus and maintaining its centrality.

After the military coup in Myanmar, the ASEAN took proactive measures by formulating a comprehensive five-point consensus. This consensus, forged in April 2021 through concurrence among the association’s leaders and Myanmar’s military junta, primarily centred on advocating for an immediate cessation of violence. Moreover, it emphasised the necessity for inclusive dialogues among all involved parties and highlighted ASEAN’s pivotal role in designating a proficient special envoy.²⁶ Additionally, the consensus underscored the imperative of delivering humanitarian aid through ASEAN channels and fostering a process of consultation involving all stakeholders in Myanmar, facilitated by the appointed special envoy.²⁷ Despite months of persistent urging for the implementation of the five-point consensus, the Myanmar junta’s progress proved to be insufficient. As a result, in November 2022, the ASEAN reiterated its call for ‘concrete, practical, and measurable indicators with a specific timeline’.²⁸

Time and again, the ASEAN has also denounced and expressed its dismay over the various acts of violence committed by the Myanmar forces

and government. These include the execution of opposition activists in July 2022²⁹ and the air strikes on rebels in April 2023.³⁰ However, regardless of all its efforts, the undeniable reality remains that the ASEAN is yet to achieve success even after 3 years of the coup in Myanmar. The fact that ASEAN still hasn't suspended the junta's participation throughout the entire ASEAN system represents a continued lack of leadership on this issue.³¹

The ASEAN's commitment to resolve Myanmar's issues is questionable due to its ongoing defence cooperation with the Myanmar military, which seems to legitimise the junta rule. Further, the ASEAN has allowed Myanmar to participate in defence-related gatherings, including significant events, like the regional meeting on maritime security. Myanmar and Russia jointly hosted the Twelfth ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM)-Plus Experts' Working Group on Counter-Terrorism Meeting in December 2021³² and another in December 2022.³³ In August 2023, another defence meeting was held in Myanmar, attended by General Maung Maung Aye, Chief of the General Staff.³⁴ However, Singapore refused to participate in the defence ministers' exercise in Nay Pyi Taw, highlighting the division within the ASEAN regarding Myanmar's military regime.³⁵

The division within ASEAN concerning the matter of Myanmar's junta rule and the modalities governing its affiliation with the ASEAN organisation was evident earlier too. In 2021, in a resolution adopted by the United Nations General Assembly to denounce the military coup and call for the release of political prisoners, merely five ASEAN members (Singapore, Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia) cast an affirmative vote in favour of the resolution, while the remaining four (Brunei, Cambodia, Laos and Thailand) chose to abstain.³⁶ The situation in Myanmar exemplifies a contemporary challenge to the ASEAN centrality, necessitating the acknowledgment of the roles played by major countries and organisations beyond ASEAN in seeking a resolution.

Another area of friction within the ASEAN has been the South China Sea (SCS). The stability within and around the SCS has constituted a pivotal concern for several decades. The ASEAN has consistently demonstrated a profound commitment to pursue a peaceful resolution of the territorial claims that involve numerous member states. Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that this issue has also served as a catalyst for confrontations across multiple tiers. These confrontations have manifested themselves conspicuously, particularly within the context of disputes encompassing the SCS region. The assertions of the ASEAN constituents, namely, Vietnam and the Philippines, are not only in conflict with each other but also with

China.³⁷ Despite sustained endeavours, Vietnam and the Philippines have thus far been unable to achieve a consensus with each other, which has posed a significant concern in addressing this matter within the ASEAN forum. Even other ASEAN members, such as Brunei and Malaysia,³⁸ have maintained a passive stance on this issue.

The persistent and ongoing spate of frictions within the ASEAN region renders the pursuit of neutrality and centrality a challenging endeavour. This diplomatic aspiration has been subject to influence from multifarious processes, with economic dynamics standing as a critical component in a state of profound dilemma. It has concurrently emerged as a focal point of contention between the US and China. Today, China is the ASEAN's largest trading partner. In 2019, this trade was valued at US\$ 507.9 billion³⁹ and reached US\$ 975.3 billion in 2022.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, 'US total trade in goods and services with ASEAN (except for Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar) totalled an estimated USD 505.8 billion in 2022.'⁴¹ China also contributes significant foreign direct investment: for instance, in 2019, it contributed over US\$ 9.1 billion.⁴² This economic reliance creates indecisiveness within the ASEAN⁴³ and consequently, the situation has led to apprehensions regarding the sustainability of ASEAN's centrality.

ASEAN, THE 'BIG' PLAYERS AND CLASHES OF NARRATIVE

The ASEAN seems to approach its idea of multilateralism as a neutral convener and facilitator of dialogue, wherein it refrains from taking sides in circumstances involving disputes between external powers. Its charter also suggests that these disputes can be resolved peacefully.⁴⁴ Meanwhile, one of the major global players, the US, has been approaching the region and related issues differently. The US earnestly began to shift its focus towards the ASEAN region shortly after the 9/11 attack. Concurrently, countering the expanding influence of China within the Southeast Asian region emerged as a pivotal objective.⁴⁵ Within this context, the ASEAN offers a platform for major global powers to more effectively address both bilateral and multilateral challenges within the region.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, the ASEAN has faced criticism for its purported inability to adeptly harness the potential of multilateralism.⁴⁷

Conversely, the Sino-US relations predominantly manifest through bilateral exchanges, occurring outside the multilateral framework of ASEAN. This occurrence significantly challenges the essence of ASEAN's centrality, as achieving equilibrium within the dynamic geopolitics of the region has historically proven to be a formidable task. Concurrently, the Taiwan matter

has precipitated an almost direct engagement between the US and China, consequently impacting the ASEAN sphere as well. The US also perceives an active role for itself in addressing the complexities of the SCS dispute. This motivation is evident through its enthusiastic involvement in key platforms, such as the ARF and the EAS.⁴⁸ It is worth acknowledging that ASEAN has paved the path for this collaborative initiative. However, the ASEAN finds itself in a predicament as it navigates this contest for dominance, while striving to avert the risk of waning significance. In light of such circumstances, the imperative of maintaining its centrality looms large.⁴⁹

There is no doubt that the US has maintained a continuous presence in both the ASEAN and the entire Indo-Pacific region. However, the ascent of China on the global stage has posed a challenge to the US supremacy in both military and economic domains. Consequently, this confrontation constitutes a stark contradiction within the framework of the ASEAN narrative. The rationale behind this assertion lies in the potential repercussions of deteriorating relations. In such a scenario, 'ASEAN would end up in an uncomfortable position wedged between antagonistic great powers. It could then be forced to choose sides, or become the battlefield for proxy wars.'⁵⁰ The process of conflict can be so intense that it may necessitate an attempt at policy intervention.

In 2012, the foreign ministers of ASEAN encountered a significant impediment in their pursuit of issuing a unified joint communiqué, after their annual meeting, centred on the complex matter of the SCS.⁵¹ The primary stumbling blocks emerged from the positions held by the Philippines and Vietnam, driven by their collective determination to counteract China's stance. China, in this context, steadfastly advocated for an exclusively bilateral approach to the processes and negotiations with regard to the dispute.⁵² In contrast, both the Philippines and Vietnam sought to rally the backing of ASEAN member states in addressing this pressing concern. This collective support was deemed indispensable due to China's persistent efforts to encourage ASEAN's passive involvement in managing the complexities surrounding the SCS dispute.

It is noteworthy that China actively promotes its preference for bilateral engagement in managing this issue, ostensibly driven by its capacity to exert dominance and control over other parties involved.⁵³ Stating that 'maritime disputes shall be handled through negotiation and consultation by the parties directly concerned', China has made it very evident that it does not want to deal with maritime dispute on multilateral platforms.⁵⁴ The protracted deliberation on 'South China Sea Code of Conduct', without yielding any

tangible outcomes, stands as a conspicuous illustration of China's reticence in its engagement with the ASEAN as a collective entity.

In August 2017, the 'Single Draft South China Sea Code of Conduct Negotiating Text (SDNT)⁵⁵ aimed to establish a comprehensive code of conduct (CoC) in the SCS, aligned with the 2002 framework.⁵⁶ Despite initial promise, the progress has been painfully slow. China, in 2017, had pledged to conclude the CoC negotiations by 2021;⁵⁷ however, as of July 2023, it is only at the second reading phase.⁵⁸ This protracted process seems more like a strategy than a genuine resolution effort as China prefers bilateral negotiations with the ASEAN states, while altering the status quo through land reclamation and militarisation of islands.^{59,60} China has consistently obstructed ASEAN's binding agreement attempts for over 27 years, undermining the association's centrality.⁶¹ Meanwhile, the US has increased freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) since 2012,⁶² casting doubts on ASEAN-centric principles.

The US has markedly escalated the frequency of its FONOPs within the SCS.⁶³ This strategic manoeuvre, which involves the deployment of naval vessels in disputed maritime areas, primarily targets China's territorial claims, including the expansive nine-dash line⁶⁴ region and the exclusive economic zones (EEZs) surrounding the Paracel and Spratly Islands.⁶⁵ Simultaneously, the US has been reassuring the ASEAN nations of its commitment towards their freedom of navigation rights. This dual approach of the US underscores the complex interplay of interests and tensions within the SCS, where the American actions both challenge China's claims and seek to reassure the ASEAN nations of their security.⁶⁶

The FONOPs are closely tied to the sovereignty of nations in the SCS, an area with intricate geopolitical dynamics.⁶⁷ The FONOPs conducted by the US in the vicinity of the Paracel Islands, in 2016, serve as a salient illustration of this intricate geopolitical landscape, giving rise to a plethora of contentious matters.⁶⁸ The Paracel Islands, situated in close proximity to China, Taiwan and Vietnam, are subject to established conventions wherein it is necessary to take prior permission from, or give notification to, these nations for transits falling under innocent passage provisions within territorial waters. However, the conspicuous absence of such advance notifications and prior information poses a direct challenge to the respective countries' sovereignty claims over these land features. The event highlights the difficulties associated with external powers conducting FONOPs without first consulting with the affected nations, often motivated by self-interest. The consequences of this issue are significant and could further divide the ASEAN member states.⁶⁹

While some countries support the FONOPs, others hold varied positions, leading to discord within the ASEAN's ranks and challenging the possibility of regional agreement.

Ultimately, the contentious issue of FONOPs threatens to weaken the unity and cooperation that ASEAN strives to maintain.⁷⁰ Vietnam has adopted a policy of non-alignment and the prohibition of foreign military bases on Vietnamese territory in response to the presence of the US in the SCS. Indonesia, in turn, has sought to limit FONOPs and the US presence in the SCS. In 2018, the Indonesian defence minister articulated that 'if regional nations can effectively manage the South China Sea on their own, there is no necessity to involve external actors.'⁷¹ Meanwhile, the Philippines has taken a different stance, emphasising the diminishing relevance of the US in the SCS. According to the Philippines, 'The issues confronting America today are no longer directly pertinent to the concerns of the Philippines.'⁷² The FONOPs suggest an assertive and 'iron fist' approach, contradicting the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC-2002)⁷³ endorsed by ASEAN, which advocates and emphasises the peaceful resolution of disputes in the SCS.⁷⁴

Despite ASEAN's varying opinions on China, this declaration (DOC) aims to harmonise with China on SCS issues, urging adherence to international law, particularly the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).^{75,76} However, China's dismissal of the UNCLOS interpretations and disregard for the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling⁷⁷ favouring the Philippines has cast doubt on its commitment to international law and peaceful resolution, undermining the DOC's intent. China's assertive expansion in the SCS contradicts ASEAN's principle of peaceful dispute resolution, eroding confidence in its role in the region. This poses significant challenges to ASEAN's pursuit of maintaining its centrality in regional affairs.

THE US'S STRATEGIC AND SECURITY APPROACH TO ASEAN

The official position and role of the US has been defined as 'a strong, reliable, and active partner in the region, investing in diplomatic efforts, public diplomacy, military support, and assistance resources in a manner that aligns with the U.S. comprehensive engagement.'⁷⁸ In other words, as far as the US is concerned, an element of military and its related support is always present when dealing with the ASEAN issues. Following the conclusion of the Cold War, the US has consistently advocated for multilateralism, a stance

intended to complement fundamental US policy rather than replace it.^{79,80} This perspective is articulated in official US documents outlining security strategies for the East Asia–Pacific region. While emphasising the significance of bilateral relationships, these documents highlight the efficacy of multilateral approaches in addressing security arrangements within the region.⁸¹

The US has been reiterating its commitment towards ‘ASEAN centrality and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific’.⁸² At the same time, the establishment of multilateral institutions, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and the Australia–United Kingdom (UK)–US (AUKUS) trilateral security partnership, has brought about a certain level of contradiction between the US-led institutions and the centrality of ASEAN in the region. However, the US does not see any contradiction and perceives the Quad and the AUKUS as a framework to ‘promote security and stability in the region’.⁸³ In fact, the US claims regarding the multilateral groupings, namely, the Quad and the AUKUS, have been one of the reasons for China’s suspicion. China has been critiquing the US Indo-Pacific strategy, which it perceives as contrary to the current global trends and detrimental to the common and long-term interests of the region. Additionally, China views the ‘Five Eyes’⁸⁴ alliance, the Quad and the AUKUS as potential reasons for conflict in the region.

Another question is about the locus standi of ASEAN in these groups, which are essentially constructed to deal with the issue of Indo-Pacific and Southeast Asia. This is a crucial question because ‘important conversations about the region’s future are taking place in Quad meetings where no Southeast Asian states are present, let alone chairing or setting the agenda’.⁸⁵ The Indo-Pacific strategy⁸⁶ of the US views China as a coercive and aggressive actor, which has led to conflicts with Australia, India, Taiwan and the SCS region. This policy also aims to promote stability and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region; and the Quad reflects this approach of the US.

The Quad is a ‘core group’ that was formed in response to the 2004 tsunami by four countries (the US, Japan, Australia and India).⁸⁷ This cooperation subsequently evolved in 2007, with a focus on ‘securing a free and open Indo-Pacific’, engaging in joint actions against terrorism and promoting a rules-based system. Moreover, regional organisations led by ASEAN, such as the EAS, have demonstrated limited effectiveness in deterring China’s assertive and expansionist actions. Simultaneously, they lack the military strength and political cohesion necessary to effectively challenge China’s increasing assertiveness. There are ‘concerns about loss of “centrality” and worry that great power confrontation will make their region the battleground,

with consequential destruction. Countering China's rising influence must therefore be one of the priority tasks of the Quad.⁸⁸ In 2017, the Quad was re-formed,⁸⁹ and it started convening on a relatively regular basis. The Malabar⁹⁰ naval exercise stands as a prime example of Quad members joining hands in defence cooperation concerning the Indo-Pacific and the ASEAN region.

The concerned area of the Quad essentially lies within the ASEAN region, and the Quad recognises ASEAN's centrality, the ASEAN-led architecture, as well as ASEAN's perspective on the Indo-Pacific. The evolution of the Quad has been driven by a compelling need to rebalance geopolitics, particularly concerning China. The Quad's efforts are thus centred on mitigating China's growing influence worldwide, with a specific focus on the Indo-Pacific region.⁹¹ The establishment of new, pragmatic cooperation and the shaping of the regional order within ASEAN are of paramount importance in these endeavours to condition the regional dynamics. Nonetheless, the irony remains that ASEAN is not a participant in the Quad.

CHINA'S STRATEGIC AND SECURITY APPROACH AND ASEAN

The diplomatic ties between ASEAN and China have progressed since the 1990s and persist as a pivotal partnership in the contemporary era.⁹² However, the expeditious strides in China's economic and strategic advancement have engendered a novel situation for the nations in Southeast Asia. These countries face the precarious prospect of being overshadowed by a prominent global power. This dynamic has precipitated circumstances akin to those witnessed during the Cold War.⁹³ In response, the ASEAN has initiated efforts to cultivate relationships with other prominent big powers across the globe. This multifaceted approach aims to ensure the preservation of a delicate equilibrium of power.

The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific⁹⁴ has encountered several challenges over the past few years, with competition among the world's major powers being a significant contributing factor. The emergence of China as a regional power has also led to a transformation in its strategic ambitions, giving rise to various initiatives, such as the Belt and Road Initiative and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.⁹⁵ These endeavours have established a new strategic architecture for China in Asia, especially in the ASEAN region. Many Chinese and foreign scholars have put forward the point that these new strategic structures of China have been created to replace the position and influence of the US in the ASEAN and the Indo-Pacific region.⁹⁶

The ASEAN has faced a significant dilemma in grappling with diverse ideological perspectives, political systems and normative perceptions amidst the backdrop of the US and Chinese assertions in the region.⁹⁷ The US been trying to:

deter aggression...planning, coordination, and training with friends from the East China Sea to the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean. That includes staunch allies such as Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, the Philippines, and Thailand. And it includes as well such valued partners as India, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Singapore.⁹⁸

Meanwhile, the Chinese approach of reclamation and militarisation in the SCS has been a cause of concern as ‘several ASEAN countries felt that was inappropriate. It reflects the divide China’s reclamation and militarization... has caused.’⁹⁹ Numerous stakeholders engaged in activities within the SCS harbour the belief that ‘(China) increasingly uses its artificial islands as bases for harassment operations—to curtail access of Southeast Asian coastal states to offshore oil, gas and fisheries.’¹⁰⁰

China and the ASEAN have established a mechanism for defence cooperation, which has witnessed significant enhancement since 2015. The China–ADMM has evolved into a stable institutional framework to facilitate this collaboration. Analysis of the joint statements from their meetings spanning 2015¹⁰¹ to 2022 reveals that joint military exercises have become a regular feature, involving China and other countries, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.^{102,103}

China and most of the ASEAN member states have instituted a mechanism for defence cooperation, which has experienced substantial augmentation since 2014. The China-ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting has transformed into a steadfast institutional framework, enabling and enhancing this collective effort. Examination of the combined declarations originating from the China-ASEAN Defence Ministers’ meetings spanning the period from 2015¹⁰⁴ to 2022 indicates that joint military exercises have evolved into a customary aspect. These exercises encompass not only China but also prominently feature nations including Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.^{105,106}

China and the ASEAN have also entered into a formal and comprehensive strategic partnership, thereby enhancing defence cooperation between a significant military power and a collective of nations (ASEAN) whose foundational purpose is to foster a peaceful and stable Southeast Asia. A

significant milestone was reached in November 2021 when China officially announced the establishment of the China–ASEAN strategic partnership.¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, it is noteworthy that China has been actively engaged with ASEAN Plus since the 2000s. Notable instances include its participation in the ARF meetings of the heads of defence colleges, as well as its involvement in the annual ARF security outlook discussions.¹⁰⁸

As far back as 2010, an avenue for defence cooperation emerged in the form of the ADMM-Plus,¹⁰⁹ a collaborative effort involving China.¹¹⁰ In addition, informal meetings of the ASEAN defence ministers, such as the one held in June 2022,¹¹¹ have evolved into a recurring component within the framework of separate discussions between the defence ministers of both parties. The ASEAN–China maritime exercises¹¹² encompass a range of activities, including the operationalisation of the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES),¹¹³ search and rescue operations and communications drills. These activities also extend to collaborative military manoeuvres with Southeast Asian nations, both within and beyond the ASEAN framework.¹¹⁴ Notably, this includes participation in multinational joint exercises, like the Aman Youyi¹¹⁵ exercise, which involves other countries, such as Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam.

These examples of defence cooperation, which have been increasing in number and frequency, should be seen in the context of excessive emphasis on defence diplomacy under the Chinese Global Security Initiative (GSI).¹¹⁶ China has consistently adopted a ‘bilateral approach’¹¹⁷ when addressing contentious matters, particularly about overlapping maritime claims with ASEAN member states. The Chinese strategy has the effect of undermining the core concept of ASEAN’s centrality. Additionally, the GIS concept paper¹¹⁸ emphasises that ‘China would only be willing to deal with the claimant countries bilaterally in managing the disputes.’¹¹⁹ This particular approach concerning the SCS is further characterised by its exploitation of divisions among the ASEAN member states, thereby preventing the emergence of a unified and forceful stance against China. Such a *modus operandi* is fundamentally incongruent with the principles outlined in the concept paper, which outwardly supports both ASEAN centrality and unity. There is a growing perception that disregarding or marginalising ASEAN’s involvement in the SCS disputes could ‘potentially lead to a situation where a formidable and unified opposition to China’s actions fails to materialize’.¹²⁰

CONCLUSION

The notion of ASEAN centrality encompasses a desired central positioning within the diplomatic framework of the Indo-Pacific region. However, this positioning exists alongside several additional regional institutional platforms, such as ASEAN Plus, the ARF and the EAS. While ASEAN centrality is sought after, it is not exempt from challenges. These challenges involve the delicate task of harmonising the interests of major powers with the imperative to preserve ASEAN's central role. Furthermore, internal conflicts regarding alignment with either China or the US have emerged as significant points of contention. These conflicts directly undermine the foundational concept of ASEAN centrality. Despite providing a platform for addressing regional challenges, ASEAN's efficacy in utilising multilateralism has encountered criticism.

The ongoing rivalry between the US and China stands in stark contradiction to the narrative that the ASEAN seeks to uphold. Notably, the absence of Southeast Asian representation in the US-led Quad meetings raises questions about ASEAN's standing in discussions that are pivotal to the region's future, which is a notable paradox for the idea of ASEAN centrality. On the other side, China's preference for a bilateral approach to address disputes, particularly in the SCS, poses a challenge to the notion of ASEAN centrality by side-lining collective stances. This manipulation of divisions among the ASEAN member states further weakens the solidarity necessary to effectively counter China's actions.

These strategic and geopolitical interactions serve to elucidate a multifaceted process wherein regional forums are leveraged to uphold dominion. Concurrently, these interactions also manifest an endeavour to preclude other major powers from entering into competition. Within this complex milieu, it becomes evident that minor powers encounter a formidable predicament in aligning with a singular faction. Simultaneously, they are disinclined to forsake their centrality and autonomy by becoming overtly reliant on any sole power. In light of this intricate scenario, a paradox materialises: the shifting dynamics impel nations to transcend singular considerations and collaboratively stabilise their vested interests. Paradoxically, this collective effort inadvertently facilitates the pursuits of hegemonic powers in advancing their own agendas.

NOTES

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