

# MP-IDSA

## Commentary

# The Philippines as 2026 ASEAN Chair: Expectations and Challenges

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## Summary

The Philippines would be required to maintain a precise yet forceful strategic approach to fulfil its 2026 Chairmanship goals.

The Philippines will chair ASEAN in 2026, with the theme ‘Navigating our Future, Together’.<sup>1</sup> In light of the evolving dynamics between the United States and China, this chairmanship offers both opportunities and challenges for regional stability and the security environment in Southeast Asia. In addition to providing a forum for communication and debate among its member countries, ASEAN’s primary function is to facilitate summits and other events with nations such as the US, Japan and India.

In foreign policy and Indo-Pacific regional security, Manila’s agenda for the ASEAN chairmanship would include several goals and priorities. President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. declared three main priorities: People Empowerment, Prosperity Corridors, and Peace and Security Anchors.<sup>2</sup> Given the geopolitical difficulties facing Southeast Asia, these three ‘Ps’ represent an ambitious agenda centred on regional stability and inclusive economic progress.

Malaysia’s 2025 ASEAN presidency strengthened the bloc’s underpinnings. Malaysia deepened economic integration through actionable deliverables and strengthened the bloc’s forward-looking strategy through the 2045 vision, which was adopted on 26 May 2025 at the 46th ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur, and expanded membership to include Timor-Leste as a full member. However, the next stage calls for execution rather than more frameworks. In 2026, ASEAN’s capacity to act decisively will be tested more than ever before.

The Philippines previously held the ASEAN chairmanship in 2017. The then-President Rodrigo Duterte prioritised forging a new ‘golden age’ of bilateral ties with China at the expense of the long-standing relations with Western allies.<sup>3</sup> Although the current president, Ferdinand Marcos Jr., initially aligned himself with Duterte’s policies, he has since largely charted a different course towards a more assertive, multi-aligned foreign policy. In 2017, Manila pursued a low-profile, conciliatory approach towards China, and the South China Sea disputes were also downplayed, with an emphasis on consensus and economic engagement.

The Philippines has moved from a China-leaning ASEAN chair to a more assertive, strategically diversified nation. Consequently, the Philippines has strengthened strategic relationships with several major powers in recent years and adopted a firmer stance on the South China Sea dispute. During its 2026 chairmanship, the Philippines aims to strengthen established regional norms, promote maritime

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<sup>1</sup> Joyce Ann L. Rocamora, “[PH Formally Accepts ASEAN 2026 Chairmanship](#)”, *Philippine News Agency*, 28 October 2025.

<sup>2</sup> Helen Flores, “[Marcos Leads Launch of ASEAN 2026 Chairmanship](#)”, *PhilStar Global*, 16 November 2025.

<sup>3</sup> M.C. Abad, Jr., “[ASEAN At 50 and the Philippine Chairmanship in 2017](#)”, *Eurasia Review*, 28 February 2017.

cooperation grounded in international law and ASEAN centrality, broaden dialogue platforms, and enhance the bloc's resilience against both traditional and non-traditional security challenges, including climate risks.

## Strengthening Maritime Security

The Philippines' role as ASEAN chair comes as the 10th anniversary of the 2016 arbitral award approaches, amid heightened tensions with China in the South China Sea. The 2016 arbitral award, issued under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), in a case brought by the Philippines against China, also invalidated China's 'nine-dashline' claims. As ASEAN chair, the Philippines is associated with upholding a rules-based maritime order, even if ASEAN itself avoids explicit endorsement of the ruling. The 10th anniversary of the arbitral award amplifies attention amid intensifying Philippines–China tensions. President Marcos has been emphasising the finalisation of the long-delayed Code of Conduct (CoC) negotiations for the South China Sea, which are among his main priorities as ASEAN chair.<sup>4</sup> The Philippine government has expressed significant trust in the collaboration of all parties and is hopeful that an agreement will be concluded soon. He recently stated that Manila “will push for a finalised and binding Code of Conduct in the South China Sea between ASEAN and China”.<sup>5</sup>

Since the 1990s, these CoC-related conversations have continued. Additionally, the President has emphasised the importance of respecting international law, including the 2016 UN arbitral decision under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).<sup>6</sup> However, it will be challenging for member states and external partners to finalise a legally binding code of conduct on this developing and contentious issue, as evidenced by the slow pace of negotiations.

Because UNCLOS and the CoC serve as universal instruments for stability, safeguarding regional freedom of navigation and upholding a rules-based maritime order that benefits all ASEAN countries, the Philippine strategy must change its approach to adherence to these agreements. The Philippines' current plan is largely legal-centric and selectively multilateral. Manila consistently cites the arbitral ruling as the core basis of its maritime claims and diplomacy, using it to mobilise international support and name Chinese violations.

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<sup>4</sup> Raissa Robles, “[Philippines' No 1 Asean Chair Priority? A South China Sea Code, Then a Visit by Xi](#)”, *South China Morning Post*, 8 November 2025.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Mengzhen Liu, “[The 2016 South China Sea Arbitration and the Limits of International Law](#)”, *The Diplomat*, 22 July 2025.

Given that UNCLOS and the CoC derive their stabilising power from broad acceptance and collective enforcement, an effective Philippine strategy would require moving beyond a predominantly legalistic posture towards greater multilateral coordination within ASEAN. To enhance marine safety and ocean meteorology and safeguard traditional fishing zones for artisanal fishermen, the agenda includes specific measures for non-traditional security cooperation.

## **Economic and Socio-Cultural Priorities**

Manila must also translate its high-level agreements with external partners and within ASEAN into broad-based economic growth that benefits all socio-economic groups, thereby advancing economic and socio-cultural goals through the Prosperity Corridors. Prosperity Corridors is ASEAN’s development concept of geographically focused growth corridors that link infrastructure, trade, investment and people-to-people connectivity, enabling economic growth to spread beyond capital cities and elite sectors. The emphasis on Prosperity Corridors aligns with ASEAN’s broader long-term strategic vision, as reflected in the ASEAN Community Vision 2045, and is a priority for the Philippines as ASEAN Chair.

The Philippine Chairmanship is expected to advance ASEAN’s economic resilience and competitiveness amid a more fragmented global economy. Furthermore, as supply chains are restructured and digitalisation accelerates, ASEAN must avoid widening development gaps among its members. Manila also aims to play a key role in championing digital connectivity, the integration of micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) into regional markets, labour upskilling and sustainable infrastructure.

Public health collaboration, youth digital literacy, climate resilience, and the empowerment of families and disadvantaged groups are the main sociocultural priorities. The Philippines has been advocating for the rights of migrant workers, women and marginalised sectors.<sup>7</sup> Under its Chairmanship, it is expected to amplify these advocacies by promoting stronger labour protections, safe migration pathways and social safety nets within ASEAN frameworks. At the same time, climate change demands stronger regional cooperation on adaptation, disaster response and food security, areas in which the Philippines has both experience and urgency.

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<sup>7</sup> [“Philippines Leads the Way in Strengthening Protections for Migrant and Domestic Workers”](#), International Labour Organization, 3 March 2025.

## Challenges Ahead

Monitoring and addressing two significant internal and domestic security issues will be a major challenge. The first is the ongoing border dispute between Cambodia and Thailand, both ASEAN members. When hostilities broke out between the neighbours in July 2025, Malaysia, in its capacity as ASEAN chair, brokered a ceasefire.<sup>8</sup> However, fresh combat broke out in early December, with Thailand conducting airstrikes and both sides opening fire.

Responding to the military dictatorship in Myanmar is the second and more complicated issue. ASEAN has made several attempts to find a peaceful resolution to the crisis since the 2021 military coup, most notably by forging a ‘five-point consensus’ (April 2021), which was unsuccessful.<sup>9</sup> As ASEAN reviewed the situation in Myanmar in October, the Philippines, as the current chair, will be responsible for monitoring and spearheading the implementation of this consensus. Continued failure in Myanmar will further undermine ASEAN’s credibility as a peace-making organisation and the Philippines’ capacity to spearhead negotiations, making this a strategic and symbolic dilemma for the country.

Another critical challenge is institutional capacity and coherence. Chairing ASEAN entails hundreds of meetings and negotiations and helps ensure alignment between domestic agencies and regional commitments. Any gap between rhetoric and implementation could further risk weakening the credibility of the Chairmanship.

The Philippines will also have to address other challenges. ASEAN’s ongoing development gaps that impede overall integration make it difficult to integrate the new member, Timor-Leste. The Philippines will lead the new ASEAN Community Vision 2045, which was introduced last year. The 20-year plan seeks to address common problems like economic inequality and climate change while bolstering innovation and resilience.<sup>10</sup> Domestically, Manila is facing an issue due to a series of typhoons that have devastated the country, with many protestors taking to the streets to protest the misuse of government funds intended to shore up the country’s typhoon defence. Marcos’ primary concern is political survival, given the reported decline in the Philippine economy and the growing calls for his resignation.

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<sup>8</sup> [“Malaysia’s Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, As ASEAN Chair, Urges Cambodia and Thailand to Consider Ceasefire”](#), EAC News Cambodia, 25 July 2025.

<sup>9</sup> Jürgen Haacke, [“Reassessing ASEAN’s Five-Point Consensus: on Shifting Boundaries of Legitimate Involvement and a Contested Consensus”](#), Asian Politics and Policy, 8 October 2025.

<sup>10</sup> [“ASEAN COMMUNITY VISION 2045: ‘Resilient, Innovative, Dynamic, and People-Centred ASEAN’”](#), ASEAN Main Portal, 26 May 2025.

## Way Forward

Looking ahead to 2026, parties to the South China Sea dispute may need to address a fundamental conceptual issue to develop practical solutions for managing political tensions, as the dispute remains unresolved. Finding common ground between opposing viewpoints on the maritime order is the challenge. The CoC should serve as a mediator between divergent views on the maritime order by cautiously shifting the focus from settling sovereignty disputes to managing behaviour, risks and expectations at sea. A credible CoC can perhaps include incident reporting, joint investigation procedures and de-escalation protocols. These mechanisms reduce miscalculation even when political trust is low and legal views diverge.

Establishing communication hotlines between coast guards, providing advance notice of military drills, and planning cooperative search-and-rescue operations during crises are just a few ways the Philippines could use the upcoming year to develop and bolster confidence-building measures between China and ASEAN members. Reducing infighting should also help increase agreement within the bloc on common security priorities. The Philippines can safeguard its long-term strategic interests by leveraging its ASEAN chairmanship to create favourable conditions for future negotiations, even though it may not secure an agreement on the CoC. Even if a CoC is not concluded, the negotiation process can mitigate tensions by clarifying red lines and expectations. Regular CoC talks require parties to articulate which behaviour they consider unacceptable. This reduces miscalculation even without formal rules.

As ASEAN chair, the Philippines will need to maintain ASEAN-led mechanisms, including the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), to serve as open dialogue platforms that enable Asian nations to chart their own future paths. The Philippines should leverage its strong bilateral relationships with external partners to support ASEAN centrality, rather than undermining it by requiring ASEAN to develop all security solutions. Moreover, maintaining ‘centrality and unity’ amid security concerns in the Indo-Pacific and Southeast Asia is the ultimate goal for both the Philippines and ASEAN. Many ASEAN nations have sought to maintain neutrality while maintaining distinct strategic ties with China. While certain member nations, such as Singapore and the Philippines, appear more aligned with the US, others lean more towards China.

The Philippines would be required to maintain a precise yet forceful strategic approach to fulfil its 2026 Chairmanship goals, which include protecting peace and advancing prosperity, and empowering people. The success of the theme “Navigating

“Our Future, Together” requires the Chair to develop a unified approach that supports both a rules-based order and active regional development.

The Philippines also faces a delicate balancing act. Its ASEAN chairmanship offers an opportunity to reaffirm the organisation’s role in maintaining regional stability, while also compelling Manila to navigate the bloc’s internal divisions, particularly among members seeking to avoid confrontation with China. President Marcos’s emerging approach appears to be pragmatic.

The Philippines will likely use its chairmanship to underscore ASEAN’s commitment to peaceful dispute resolution by continuing to emphasise the CoC, without expecting to reach an agreement. Manila will also continue to deepen its network of mini-lateral security and defence partnerships capable of generating outcomes that ASEAN’s consensus-based mechanisms cannot. President Marcos’s challenge now will be to uphold ASEAN principles while advancing Philippine national interests. If successful, the Philippines could position itself as both a defender of ASEAN centrality and a driver of multilateral security cooperation.

## About the Author



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