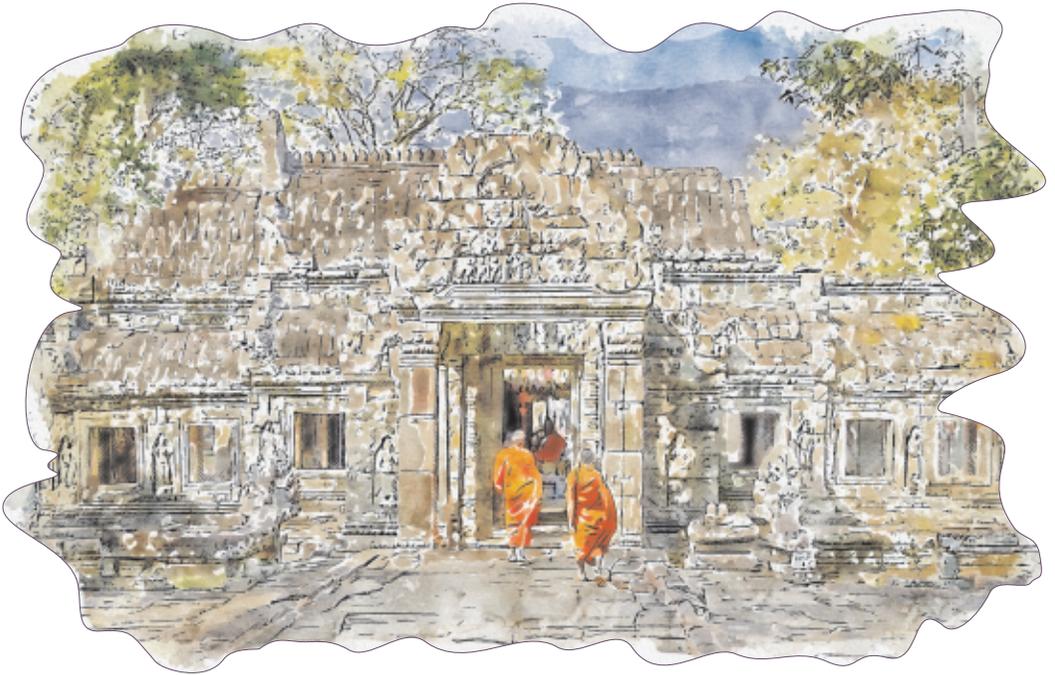


Evolving Security Architectures in Southeast Asia

A Study of Regional Security Multilateralism



Temjenmeren Ao

MP-IDSA MONOGRAPH SERIES

No. 97 JANUARY 2026

**EVOLVING SECURITY
ARCHITECTURES IN
SOUTHEAST ASIA
A STUDY OF REGIONAL
SECURITY MULTILATERALISM**

TEMJENMEREN AO



**MANOHAR PARRIKAR INSTITUTE FOR
DEFENCE STUDIES AND ANALYSES**

मनोहर परिकर रक्षा अध्ययन एवं विश्लेषण संस्थान

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ISBN: 978-81-994564-3-3

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First Published: January 2026

Price: Rs 300/-

Published by: Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies
and Analyses
No.1, Development Enclave, Rao Tula Ram
Marg, Delhi Cantt., New Delhi - 110 010
Tel. (91-11) 2671-7983
Fax.(91-11) 2615 4191
Website: <http://www.idsa.in>

Cover Courtesy: Image sourced by Brigitte Werner from <https://pixabay.com/illustrations/cambodia-angkor-wat-temple-asia-6566166/>

Layout & Cover by: Geeta Kumari

Printed at: Pentagon Press LLP
206, Peacock Lane, Shahpur Jat
New Delhi-110049
Tel. (91-11) 26491568, 26490600
Fax: (91-11) 26490600
email: rajan@pentagonpress.in
website: <http://www.pentagonpress.in>

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INTRODUCTION

The central theme of this monograph is to analyse the emerging security architecture in Southeast Asia. The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), a key regional institution since its formation in 1967, over the decades has seen an evolution of its mandate as a consequence of a changing regional strategic environment marked by new security challenges. The still evolving political discourse of the post-colonial Southeast Asian states, which faces interstate territorial disputes and intervention by external powers, have shaped the region's security landscape. The ongoing United States-China rivalry—in which Southeast Asia finds itself at the centre—is a key factor in shaping the regional security outlook.

This monograph seeks to address how wavering US commitments and the rising Chinese influence, both economically and military, is altering the security framework in Southeast Asia. During the Cold War, alliance and their goals were directed solely towards the containment and spread of communism. This defined the US international engagements from the 1950s and well into the 1980s. Southeast Asia's strategic importance based on its location astride the sea lanes between the Indian Ocean, Persian Gulf and the northwest Pacific ensured close security cooperation, resulting in building a large network of alliances and coalitions by the US in response to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).

However, the US did follow a consistent policy in Southeast Asia throughout the two World Wars and the Cold War. Being a trading nation, the US sought stability in the region by opposing any form of hegemony by any regional power, and ensured political and economic access for all to the region's goods and services. The rationale for a US-driven security structure in Southeast Asia began to unravel in the wake of the Nixon doctrine and the US-China normalisation of relations in 1979, the disintegration of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, and Beijing's inward focus on its own economic development and political stability. The long-perceived importance of military power

in the international order faded with the end of the Cold War and the collapse of superpower stalemate.

In a more relaxed security environment, the US began to reduce its role in the region with closure of its bases in the Philippines and its forces being relocated to the mid-Pacific, Japan, and Alaska. With reduced American regional presence in the post-Cold War period, militaries of Southeast Asian countries began to increase their own capabilities for external defence, given the increasing and complex security challenges being confronted by the region. Interest in expanding bilateral and multilateral defence exercises grew as Southeast Asian countries sought to acquire more military capabilities. The upward trajectory of military spending over the last few decades by Southeast Asian countries underscores the evolving security environment which is pushing for such measures.

However, despite efforts to increase their defence capabilities, the leadership in ASEAN countries continue to define their security futures through socio-economic development and cooperation rather than through a military alliances and cooperation. Southeast Asian countries continue to maintain important trade and investment partnerships with the US despite the Trump administration's restrictive economic policy. This is on account of the strategic significance the US continues to hold in the region, amid rising Chinese influence.

During the Cold War, most observers were optimistic that Southeast Asia's burgeoning economic interdependence and its nascent multilateral institutions would together create a new era of peace and prosperity. As the prominent regional institution in Southeast Asia, ASEAN, amidst the new geo-strategic imperatives in the post-Cold War period, had to build an agenda for collective effort and actions in order to address challenging issues including security challenges.

In this regard, this monograph examines the role of ASEAN in shaping the security architecture centered on its norms and upholding multilateralism. Southeast Asia is going through a new phase in which the scale and complexity of conventional and non-conventional security threats have intensified. ASEAN seeks to maintain its relevance by supporting multilateral approach based on socio-economic development and cooperation.

In recent years, however, new internal and external developments have confronted Southeast Asian countries with altogether different threats and challenges. These range from territorial sovereignty, border clashes, political crisis in Myanmar, to global disruptions and trade tensions. Amid these new developments, ASEAN's inability to deliver meaningful outcomes has raised question about its continued relevance. Moreover, ASEAN-led mechanisms— created to manage evolving challenges — are under increasing strain stress as security concerns intensify. This, in turn, is leading Southeast Asian states to explore security arrangements outside ASEAN framework to safeguard their national interests.

The central question addressed in this monograph is to understand how weakening multilateralism, on the account of new and renewed security alignments, is becoming increasingly challenging for ASEAN's centrality. While many of the new security arrangements in the region reaffirm the central role of ASEAN, the bloc's ineffectiveness is leading to the prominence of military alliances and other new security partnerships. With the growing number of security arrangements, Southeast Asian countries are also looking beyond their traditional partners. The question, therefore, remains is the future role of ASEAN in driving the region's security agenda.

The fallout of the Cold War geo-political rivalry was central to the establishment of ASEAN, enabling the region to insulate itself and focus on addressing its internal insecurities. During this period much of ASEAN's effort was towards regional reconciliation rather than economic integration, given the conflictual past amongst the member states.

Realist thought regards regionalism as a fundamental tool for addressing insecurity, the central preoccupation of realism, and this perspective is evident in ASEAN's own security practices. Events in the post-Cold War period, including the Asian financial crisis and the war on terror, further advanced ASEAN's efforts towards regionalism as a necessary step for deeper security collaboration.

However, as an approach to regionalism, constructivism gained more credibility as it accommodates contingency and change, which is pivotal during a crisis. For instance, ASEAN as an economic, socio-cultural, and security community, announced at the Bali Summit in 2003, was to

reinvent itself in order to effectively address the insecurities of the 21st century. Constructivism argues that ASEAN and the evolving security architecture of Southeast Asia are shaped by shared norms and a collective ‘we-feeling’. As pointed out earlier, the ineffectiveness of ASEAN as an informal security arrangement raises concern over the future of security multilateralism in the region.

However, despite its limitation since its establishment, the bloc’s efforts have helped moderate and reduced intra-regional conflicts. This is due to ASEAN’s focus on building regional identity, promote cooperation, and ensure deeper integration amongst the member states. The conceptual framework of constructivism continues to drive the emerging security alignments in Southeast Asia.

Chapter one of the monograph gives a broad overview of the security outlook of Southeast Asia, which continues to evolve since the end of the Cold War. The chapter looks at the evolution of the ASEAN’s role in managing complex security issues through its multilateral approach. The post-Cold War period that warranted ASEAN to elevate its scope and establish mechanisms to build cooperation towards addressing key security challenges would be broadly discussed. The chapter, in particular, analyses how in the 21st century after a brief retreat the US-led alliances in Southeast Asia, amid its increasingly rivalry with China, is looking at reinforcing its dominance. Beyond ASEAN and the traditional security provider, some of the key mini-lateral arrangements have been examined, given their significant role in Southeast Asia’s security dynamics.

Chapter two further examines the ongoing US-China rivalry. Though it has taken on a global dimension, Southeast Asia finds itself at the centre. The chapter examines how the rivalry is forcing Southeast Asia to adopt a balanced approach rather than align with one. While Beijing’s influence in the region has grown, especially amid Washington’s wavering commitment, there remains the persisting mistrust vis-à-vis the former. China’s ongoing actions in the South China Sea (SCS) remains one of the major geopolitical concerns for Southeast Asia. In examining the ongoing US-China competition, the chapter will also delve into the role of other powers, in particular Japan, Russia, and India. It is found that while they exert lesser influence, they are emerging as strong

alternatives as Southeast Asian countries look to diversify its security partnerships.

Chapter three discusses the major security threats and the emerging order shaped by new and renewed alignments. This is being driven by individual Southeast Asian states in response to their increasing tensions with China in the SCS. The growing military power of China coupled with its escalatory activities in the SCS are resulting in military shifts and new strategic alignments. While ASEAN and China continue to work towards concluding the Code of Conduct on the SCS and ensure that peace and stability are maintained through dialogues, the increasing number of incidences complicates the process. The chapter evaluates two ASEAN member states; a non-claimant state Indonesia and a claimant state the Philippines.

Chapter four evaluates ASEAN's institutional approach towards building a security framework for Southeast Asia. Although ASEAN introduced the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in 1976 and adopted the ASEAN Charter in 2007 to foster cohesiveness amongst members, its limitations in addressing complex 21st century challenges is also becoming increasingly evident. The chapter will examine how the inherent weaknesses of ASEAN raises question on the future security framework in Southeast Asia, which are dominated by new bilateral and multilateral arrangements.

The research methodology combines theoretical and factual understanding based on historical narrative. While not lending neatly to any single theoretical framework, the constructive perspective helps better examine the region's informal security structure. This theoretical framework provides a more complete understanding on the evolution of ASEAN's role which prioritised norms and identity in building the security architecture.

The study uses an integrative approach to link the historical, geopolitical, and economic dimensions to evaluate ASEAN role as a regional institution in shaping the regional security order. As the bloc struggles to overcome deep economic, political, and security divides, a central question on its strategic identity and role in the Indo-Pacific emerges as a rich area for investigation. Contemporary debates on ASEAN's

perceived irrelevance, survival and the future roadmap for security multilateralism in the region underscore the need to examine the role of major powers and mini-lateral arrangements in Southeast Asia.

SECURITY ARCHITECTURE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: AN OVERVIEW

The security environment in Southeast Asia has changed significantly since the 1990s, when external powers were only marginally involved in Southeast Asia. From the 1990s onward, the region has witnessed a rise in multilateral mechanisms aimed at fostering cooperation and addressing key security challenges.

At the turn of the 21st century, the global security environment has deteriorated significantly, due in part to the fallout from the global war on terror. Its consequences were felt most severely in Southeast Asia. In the aftermath of World Trade Centre attack in September 2001, the global ‘war on terror’ opened an Asian front, placing Southeast Asia its centre.

In the post 9/11 period, the decision by the Southeast Asian governments to open their territories brought a spectrum of foreign military forces into the region. The period also ushered in a multipolar world order, marked by an eastward shift converging on the Indo-Pacific. This vast geographical construct—home to four of the world’s largest economies: the US, China, India, and Japan—is now a focal point for great power clashes. Southeast Asia, which lies at the centre of the Indo-Pacific, has a critical role to play through its multilateral institutions, providing a platform for great powers to engage and build cohesion for collective action on security.

EVOLVING SOUTHEAST ASIA’S SECURITY OUTLOOK

The concept of security for Southeast Asia is distinct from the Western view, which is driven primarily by external threat and excessive dependence on military strength. However, Southeast Asian countries have a more holistic approach to security, which has emerged not just from external but also internal factors. The history of communist

insurgency, ethnic tensions, regime instability, intra-state disputes, and inter-state ideological disputes, which dominated the region calls for a comprehensive security approach.¹

Since the end of the Cold War, the probability of conventional intra state-on-state regional conflict has almost diminished in the region. In the post-Cold war period, countries in the region have identified non-conventional threats as the major challenge to regional security. It is important to note that traditionally Southeast Asian countries have tended to base their external security engagements around non-traditional security issues such as infectious diseases, terrorism, transnational crimes, and disaster relief/mitigation. This orientation reflects not only the increasing urgency and transboundary nature of these challenges—which often affect the region as a whole—but also the fact that they do not trigger the same level of political sensitivity as traditional security issues. ASEAN sees collaborative security cooperation towards addressing non-conventional threats as also being critical towards building trust and promoting its community building.²

Amidst the ongoing geo-political and geo-economic churn, external powers such as the US, China, Japan, India, Australia, Russia, and South Korea have also begun to deepen their defence and security cooperation with Southeast Asian countries. South Korea, which has emerged as a major defence supplier to countries in the region, is broadening its effort to increase its engagement through its New Southern Policy; and Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Strategy. In 2022, South Korea and ASEAN announced a programme called Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative. This initiative seeks to broaden the defence

¹ Shankari Sundararaman, “Impact of the 1997 Crisis and Economic Security”, in V R Raghavan ed, *India and ASEAN: Non-Traditional Security Threats*, (EastWest Books Pvt Lrd: Chennai, 2007), p 52-53.

² William T. Tow and Brendan Taylor, “Emerging Regional Security Architecture: An Australian Perspective”, in William T. Tow and Chin Kin Wah eds, *ASEAN India Australia: Towards Closer Engagement in a New Asia*, (Institute of Southeast Asia Studies: Singapore, 2009), p 9-10.

cooperation through consultations and exchanges in the realm of maritime, cyber and defence-industrial cooperation.³

Since the late 1990s, China has played a leading role in the establishment of a number of high-profile regional institutions, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), Boao Forum for Asia, Global Security Initiative, among others. China keeps an eye on the proactive US policy towards Southeast Asia to assess the impact of mechanisms such as the Quad and AUKUS, as Washington aims to contain Beijing's influence in the region. China continues to solidify its engagement with the region by participating in ASEAN-led mechanisms, with Beijing enhancing its relations to the level of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in November 2021. However, it is important to note that China focuses principally on bilateral relations with countries in the region by leveraging trade and investments to strengthen ties. In the post-pandemic period, China has further intensified its focus on Southeast Asia. A case in point is Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's visit to the region three times between 2021 and 2022. Moreover, in November 2022, President Xi Jinping visited Indonesia and Thailand to attend the G20, and Asia-pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summits.⁴ With the advent of the second Trump administration that has challenged the global economic order, Southeast Asia views China as a more reliable trade partner. President Xi's visit to Vietnam, Malaysia, and Cambodia in April 2025 signals China's commitment and intent to further exert its influence in the region.

India too has become an increasingly important partner of ASEAN, with active engagement in the bloc's multilateral mechanisms such as the East Asia Summit, and ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus.

³ Max Broad and Evan A. Laksmana, "South Korea's defence relations in Southeast Asia", *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, September 29, 2023.

⁴ Shoji Tomotaka, "ASEAN's Neutrality; A Survival amid US-China Confrontation", in Masuda Masayuki ed, *The Shifting Dynamics of Great Power Competition*, (Interbooks Co., Ltd; Tokyo, 2023), p. 104-105.

At the 18th ASEAN-India Summit held on October 28, 2021, significant progress was made in terms of the strategic partnership through the implementation of various programmes and activities across the three ASEAN Community pillar, based on the ASEAN-India Plan of Action (POA), 2021-2025. The ASEAN-India POA for 2021-25 envisages greater cooperation in areas ranging from trade to maritime security.⁵ The joint statement on ASEAN-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership issued on November 12, 2022 reiterated support for ASEAN's centrality in the evolving regional architecture in the Indo-Pacific, which would be critical to regional peace, security, and prosperity.⁶

The participation of other powers with Southeast Asian countries either bilaterally or through various platforms, including the ASEAN-led security processes, is shaping the emerging regional security architecture. Unlike in the past where the US had sole monopoly in terms of establishing security arrangements, the region is now becoming an increasingly crowded space with multiple players vying for space and new security arrangements in place.⁷ Nevertheless ASEAN's intrinsic appeal as a non-threatening yet influential grouping ensured that it remains the primary driving force in regional arrangements. Consequently, despite the proliferation of regional security institutions, most continue to centre their approaches on ASEAN centrality. This has led to the evolution of a security outlook in Southeast Asia that seeks to reinforce inclusiveness, regionalism, and multilateralism.

⁵ "Chairman's Statement of the 18th ASEAN-India Summit 28 October 2021", *ASEAN*, October 28, 2021.

⁶ "Joint Statement in ASEAN-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership", *ASEAN*, November 12, 2022.

⁷ William T. Tow and Brendan Taylor, "Emerging Regional Security Architecture: An Australian Perspective", in William T. Tow and Chin Kin Wah eds, *ASEAN India Australia: Towards Closer Engagement in a New Asia*, (Institute of Southeast Asia Studies: Singapore, 2009), p 14-15.

ASEAN'S APPROACH TO REGIONAL SECURITY

ASEAN's Effort to Preserve Neutrality in the Cold War

The creation of ASEAN in 1967, which kept the focus on building cooperation towards reducing the socio-economic divide in the region, helped soften the intra-regional tensions that existed amongst the member states. ASEAN was primarily meant to be a platform where the member nations could engage in dialogue towards managing their differences. However, the politics, economy, and the security of member countries remain subjected to the substantial influence of the US, China, and other external powers. Southeast Asia, which became mired in the East-West conflict during the Cold War, sought to safeguard its own security by declaring neutrality externally. To manage relations with external powers and to ensure autonomy, the region adopted neutrality through the Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) Declaration.⁸

By signing ZOPFAN in November 1971, the region declared its autonomy and non-interference by outside powers. This helped the region in staying away from disputes, to build trust and promote cooperation, which further enabled the region to insulate itself from the US-USSR Cold War rivalry. Yet, the full scope of ZOPFAN remains unrealised on account of contrasting views among ASEAN members on the role of external powers. While some favoured a regional order determined primarily by ASEAN states, others continued to seek the role of US in the regional security. The ZOPFAN, which envisaged regional insulation, also ensured ASEAN to not be perceived as a security arrangement. Therefore, much of the bloc's effort was aimed towards promoting intra-ASEAN political cooperation and conflict avoidance through dialogue. By leaving the security cooperation from the scope

⁸ Joseph Chinyong Liow, *Dictionary of the Modern Politics of Southeast Asia*, (Routledge: Oxon, 2015), p. 82-83.

of ASEAN, the regional grouping wanted to keep its focus on the socio-economic development.

In the first few years since its establishment much effort of the Association was towards building regional reconciliation essential for achieving peace and stability in the region. Therefore, security cooperation remained out of the purview of and was sanctioned on a primarily bilateral basis.⁹

To build greater unity and cohesion among ASEAN member states, the Declaration of the ASEAN Concord and Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) in Southeast Asia were signed at the Bali Summit in February 1976. The Declaration of ASEAN Concord provided ASEAN with a political identity, which saw stability in the region as a key towards contributing to international peace and security. The ASEAN Concord formally proposed the principle of resilience as a shared approach to domestic and regional security. Therefore, rather than focusing on external military threats, ASEAN favoured a non-traditional and inward-looking approach to promote regional security through the use of economic and social development. The TAC sought to establish a norm-based code of conduct for regional inter-state relations that includes respect for national sovereignty. The TAC along with the Concord provided ASEAN with a political identity, a shared approach to security, and a code of conduct for intra-regional cooperation and managing conflicts through collective diplomacy.¹⁰ The TAC, which had laid out provision for a norm-based regional order, insulated the region from external interference and preserving its neutrality from the East-West conflict.

⁹ Mely Caballero- Anthony, "Reflections on Political Change, democratic transitions, and regional security in Southeast Asia", in Mely Caballero- Anthony (ed), *Political Change, Democratic Transitions and Security in Southeast Asia*, (Routledge: Oxon, 2010), p. 138.

¹⁰ Ralf Emmers, *Cooperative Security and the Balance of Power in ASEAN and the ARF*, (RoutledgeCurzon: London, 2003) p. 18-22.

ASEAN and the Shifting Security Environment in the Post-Cold War Period

In the first few decades since its establishment, ASEAN had to manage intra-state tensions through its cooperative mechanism, which also created a sense of a security community. ASEAN's political and economic cooperation framework, which was averse to any formal defence cooperation, was, however, inadequate in addressing the evolving security challenges. With the end of the Cold War, the region was faced with a new strategic environment marked by new security challenges. Under these new circumstances, ASEAN began establishing new regional mechanisms to improve regional institutional capacity to respond more effectively to emerging security challenges—some of which are transnational in nature.

In the post-Cold War period, Southeast Asia also witnessed political transition. Not only the transition redefined the political landscape in the region, making it more open and democratic, it also developed a security architecture of its own.¹¹ With the amendment in July 1998, the TAC was opened up to facilitate the accession of countries outside Southeast Asia, ensuring that the emerging interconnectedness between states and region for international relations would adopt a normative way of cooperation.¹²

In the aftermath of the Cold War, the security architecture in Southeast Asia was broadly comprised of two: first was the bilateral security alliance forged by the US during the Cold War to manage its containment

¹¹ Mely Caballero- Anthony, "Reflections on Political Change, democratic transitions, and regional security in Southeast Asia", in Mely Caballero- Anthony (ed), *Political Change, Democratic Transitions and Security in Southeast Asia*, (Routledge: Oxon, 2010), p. 138.

¹² Chin Kin Wah, "Emerging East Asian Regional Architecture: ASEAN Perspective", in William T. Tow and Chin Kin Wah eds, *ASEAN India Australia: Towards Closer Engagement in a New Asia*, (Institute of Southeast Asia Studies: Singapore, 2009), p 31.

of the Soviet; the second was the new multilateral mechanisms being established by ASEAN in order to manage the region's changing security environment. The establishment of ASEAN-led mechanisms for promoting security cooperation began to gain pace only in the post-Cold war period. Efforts towards building an ASEAN-led multilateral mechanisms for regional security cooperation were driven primarily by the member states sharing the threat perception. However, it needs to be noted that their intent in doing so remained far from developing any strong military overtones.¹³

It is important to note that unlike the UN and most regional organisations which were established through a charter, ASEAN was founded through the Bangkok Declaration in 1967 followed by TAC in 1976. The fact that ASEAN was not established through a charter was intentional to avoid too much legalese and institutionalisation. However, at the turn of the 21st century, ASEAN realised that regional responses to transnational challenges were inadequate, whereby broader global cooperation became imperative. In this period Southeast Asia apart from economic stagflation was also confronted with a variety of seemingly intractable problems ranging from terrorism to SARS pandemic to internal secessionist conflicts. Therefore, ASEAN began to broaden its agendas including in its ambit new areas of cooperation such as environment, financial flows, health, and counter terrorism. Along with the widening of its scope for regional cooperation, there was also the expansion of ASEAN membership. The expansion into ASEAN-10 was a major development through which the bloc aimed at enhancing regional autonomy by increasing its bargaining power vis-à-vis external powers. Further, it also was an opportunity to expand regional economic interdependence, while limiting potential regional disorder. The expansion to ASEAN-10, which included Myanmar and Cambodia, was also intended to limit Chinese influence and establish the bloc as an anchor of regional security. Therefore, a need arose towards strengthening ASEAN's organisational structure and capacity.

¹³ Ralf Emmers, *Cooperative Security and the Balance of Power in ASEAN and the ARF*, (Routledge Curzon: London, 2003) p. 30-34.

At the 11th ASEAN Summit in December 2005, the ASEAN heads signed ‘the Kuala Lumpur Declaration on the Establishment of the ASEAN Charter’ and agreed to the appointment of an eminent persons’ group (EPG). The role of the EPG was to guide the development of an institutional charter that would be critical towards the establishment of an ASEAN community. The charter initiative was “aimed at transforming ASEAN from being a non-binding political association to becoming an international organisation with a legal personality and a rule-based organisation with an effective and efficient organisational structure”.¹⁴

At the 12th ASEAN Summit in January 2007, ‘The Report of the Eminent Persons Group on the ASEAN Charter’ (the EPG Report) was presented to ASEAN heads. At this Summit, ‘the Cebu Declaration on the Blueprint of the ASEAN Charter’ was signed, endorsing the EPG Report. Further, the EPG Report was directed a High-Level Task Force (HLTF) to complete the drafting of the ASEAN Charter. At the 13th ASEAN Summit in Singapore on November 20, 2007, ‘The ASEAN Charter’ was signed. The ASEAN Charter has a Preamble, 55 Articles, and four Annexes: 1. ASEAN Sectorial Ministerial Bodies; 2. Entities Associated with ASEAN; 3. ASEAN Flag; and 4. ASEAN Emblem. The Articles in the charter aims towards enhancing peace, security and stability through greater political, security, economic, and socio-cultural cooperation.¹⁵

ASEAN neutrality, as embodied by ZOPFAN, has been passed on from the post-Cold War era to the present. However, what changed from the Cold War to the post-Cold War period was the approach towards realising ASEAN neutrality. In this regard, the concept of

¹⁴ Amitav Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order*, (Routledge: Oxon, 2009) p.267-268 and 287-288.

¹⁵ Shimizu, Kazushi, ‘The ASEAN Charter and Regional Economic Cooperation’, *Economic Journal of Hokkaido University*, Volume 37, October 2008.

ASEAN Centrality has become the cornerstone of the blocs' approach towards building its security cooperation. The concept of ASEAN Centrality, which first appeared in the Chairman's Statement of the 12th ASEAN Summit held in Cebu, the Philippines, in January 2007, had been taking shape since the 1990s.

The establishment of the ASEAN Regional Forum in 1994—declared as the main forum for regional security dialogue—underscored ASEAN as the “primary driving force”. Therefore, before the “ASEAN Centrality” came into being different terms were used such as “primary driving force”, “central pillar”, and “central role”. They all reflected on the institutional role ASEAN has to play in the evolving regional security environment. ASEAN centrality continues to remain the core of all emerging security partnerships and arrangements emerging today, since its principle is based on the view that maintaining neutrality ensures trust, gaining acceptance from external powers.¹⁶

The pivot towards a multilateral approach with ASEAN centrality was necessary towards addressing host of cross-border challenges that was seen as detrimental to the growth of economy. Issues that ranged from terrorism, piracy, illegal migration, climate change, and infectious diseases required a coordinated approach and global response.

Therefore, between the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century marked a further expansion of ASEAN-led security multilateralism, extending beyond ARF to include the establishment of ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (Plus) and the East Asia Summit.¹⁷

¹⁶ Vo Xuan Vinh, “Rising Security Uncertainty in Indo-Pacific and the Role of Multilateral Mechanisms”, in Prabir De and Temjenmeren Ao eds *Geopolitical Shifts and Opportunities: New Horizons in India-Southeast Asia Relations*, (KW Publishers Pvt Ltd: New Delhi, 2024), p. 60-62.

¹⁷ Byron Chong Wenzhong, “The Future of Multilateralism in Southeast Asia”, *Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore*, September 13, 2024.

ASEAN AND SECURITY MECHANISMS

ASEAN's role as convening platform for dialogue on key security issues among regional and extra-regional actors has become especially critical in today's uncertain, ruled-based multilateral order. Its normative approach continues to anchor the development of all ASEAN-led multilateral security forums, ensuring continuity in regional autonomy as expressed through the ZOPFAN framework.¹⁸ By leveraging its stance of neutrality, ASEAN has been able to bring together major countries on a common platform and facilitate dialogues on key regional security issues through its security mechanisms, namely, the ASEAN Regional Forum, East Asia Summit, and the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus.

ASEAN Regional Forum

With rising economic growth and the deepening interdependence necessitated by globalisation, the need for closer coordination through ASEAN became increasingly apparent. At the same time, the emerging geo-political re-alignments of the post-Cold war period posed a challenge for ASEAN. While it presented new opportunities, it also exposed the limitations of ASEAN's sub-regional approach in dealing with complex security issues. By building mechanisms to address security challenges, it created an avenue to shape the regional order based on ASEAN norms and principles. This prompted ASEAN to establish new multilateral security mechanism called ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).¹⁹

In June 1993, in Kuala Lumpur, a year prior to the launched of the ARF, a group of think-tanks established the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) to focus on security issues

¹⁸ Amitav Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order*, (Routledge: Oxon, 2009) p. 198.

¹⁹ Ralf Emmers, *Cooperative Security and the Balance of Power in ASEAN and the ARF*, (RoutledgeCurzon: London, 2003) p. 30-34.

through the participation of both government and non-government officials. The first meeting of ARF took place on July 25, 1994, in Bangkok became the first inclusive security mechanism in the Asia-Pacific for multilateral discussions on regional and security matters. In a meeting comprising ASEAN foreign ministers and representatives from the US, China, Russia, and other regional countries, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) was inaugurated in Singapore in July 1993 to address security issues. The inaugural meeting of the ARF was held in Bangkok on July 25, 1994. The ARF at that time became the only regional security frameworks globally represented by all the major powers, including the US, Russia, Japan, China, and the EU. The ARF, which was based on ASEAN's norm of inclusiveness, engaged not only with like-minded partners but it helped create a platform for other regional actors that shared their perspective on security issues. Over the years that followed, the ARF has also seen a steady expansion of its membership, with India and Myanmar joining in 1996, Mongolia in 1999, North Korea in 2000, Pakistan in 2004, Timor Leste in 2005, Bangladesh in 2006 and Sri Lanka in 2007.²⁰

The objectives of ARF, which is to foster constructive dialogue and consultation on political and security issues of common interest and concern, enabled Southeast Asia to get linked with the rest of the Asia-Pacific. Further, the ARF institution for multilateral security dialogue is also making significant contributions towards confidence-building through preventive diplomacy. It has, over the years, has become a useful avenue for multilateral and bilateral dialogue and consultations to establish effective principles for political dialogue and security cooperation. These decisions were based on "...consensus, non-interference, incremental progress and moving at a pace comfortable to all." The 27 countries, including the ASEAN member states that are part of the ARF, has used the platform to discuss a wide range of security issues. The current participants in the ARF are as follows: Australia, Bangladesh, Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Canada, China,

²⁰ Amitav Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order*, (Routledge: Oxon, 2009) p.198-200.

Democratic People's Republic of Korea, European Union, India, Indonesia, Japan, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, New Zealand, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Republic of Korea, Russia, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Timor-Leste, United States, and Viet Nam.²¹

East Asia Summit

On December 14, 2005, representatives from 16 countries gathered in Kuala Lumpur for the inaugural session of the East Asia Summit (EAS). Participants at the first EAS comprised 10 ASEAN countries, Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea. The origins of this summit dates back to the 1990 proposal for an East Asian Economic Grouping (EAEG), popularised by former Malaysian Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, but met with stiff opposition from Japan and the United States. The project was later revived through the ASEAN Plus Three or APT (China, Japan, and South Korea) Summit of heads of state and government that first met in Kuala Lumpur in December 1997, and eventually found further expression through the creation of the EAS on December 14, 2005.²²

A clear distinction has been drawn between the EAS and APT. While the EAS was to be a leader-led annual meeting to address the big strategic and political issues of common concern, the APT would remain largely as a mechanism to implement the agenda for East Asia community building. Further, through the EAS, the centrality of ASEAN has been maintained, given the collective decision to rotate the Summit venue among ASEAN member states, instead of alternating it between ASEAN and non-ASEAN nations.²³

²¹ "ASEAN Regional Forum".

²² Joseph Chinyong Liow, *Dictionary of the Modern Politics of Southeast Asia*, (Routledge: Oxon, 2015), p. 150.

²³ Chin Kin Wah, "Emerging East Asian Regional Architecture: ASEAN Perspective", in William T. Tow and Chin Kin Wah eds, *ASEAN India Australia: Towards Closer Engagement in a New Asia*, (Institute of Southeast Asia Studies: Singapore, 2009), p 29.

Since its establishment, the EAS has extended its membership from the original 16 to 18 countries, with the inclusion of the US and Russia. The participating countries in the EAS represent over 50 percent of the global population, and with a total GDP estimated at the US \$ 49.4 trillion accounts for around 58 percent global GDP.²⁴ The EAS, which helps build dialogue for discussing issues of priority such as energy and environment, finance, education, cooperation in terms of Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), pandemics, and issues of connectivity, seeks to advance a strategic balance among the key powers in the region. The EAS member states geographically fall within the Indo-Pacific that is presently the subject of intense geopolitical and geo-economic discourse. Ongoing developments in the Indo-Pacific region amounts to an escalation of security threats. This ranges from terrorism to conflicts among countries over resources and territory to the great power rivalry between the US and China.²⁵ The 20th EAS held in October 27, 2025, adopted the Kuala Lumpur Declaration, signalling renewed resolve among participating nations to uphold peace, stability, and multilateral cooperation in the region. The Declaration underscores the EAS's role in a changing geopolitical landscape, emphasising strategic trust, transparent behaviour, and strong regional architecture.²⁶

ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting and ADMM Plus

At the turn of the 21st century, Southeast Asia has witnessed increasing economic and political assertiveness of extra-regional powers. ASEAN leaders agreed to act collectively and enhance cooperation to address economic and security challenges. At the Bali Summit on October 7, 2003, the leaders of the ASEAN member states signed the Declaration of ASEAN Concord II or Bali Concord II, declaring their intention

²⁴ “East Asia Summit”, *Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australian Government*.

²⁵ Diane K. Mauzy and Brian L. Job, “US Policy in South East Asia: Limited Re-engagement after years of Benign Neglect”.

²⁶ “20th East Asia Summit Reviews Cooperation and Future Direction at its 20th Anniversary”, *ASEAN*, October 27, 2025.

to establish an ASEAN Community. The ASEAN Community was founded on three pillars: i) an ASEAN Security Community or ASC for political and security cooperation, ii) ASEAN Economic Community or AEC for economic integration, and iii) ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community or ASCC for socio-cultural cooperation. These three pillars envisage to closely intertwine and mutually re-enforceable to ensure durable peace, stability, and prosperity in the region.

While the AEC seeks to create a stable and highly competitive ASEAN economic region with the aim to establish a single market and production base, the ASCC aims to foster cooperation in social development targeted at raising the standard of living of the disadvantaged groups and rural populations. The ASC is envisaged to ensure peaceful processes are employed in the settlement of intra-regional differences and to address transboundary maritime issues and concerns.²⁷

The ASC is intended to provide a regional framework to handle security matters and disputes within ASEAN. Following the adoption of ASC, a number of regional initiatives to help promote political cooperation and deeper regional integration in ASEAN were laid out in the Vientiane Action Programme (VAP). According to VAP, the ASC is aimed at building “a democratic, tolerant, participatory, and open community in Southeast Asia.”²⁸

The ASEAN Security Community Plan of Action, adopted at the 10th ASEAN Summit, stipulates that ASEAN shall work towards the convening of an annual ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting (ADMM). Against this backdrop, the inaugural meeting of the ADMM was held in Kuala Lumpur on 9 May 2006. The “...ADMM is the highest defence consultative and cooperative mechanism in ASEAN. The ADMM aims to promote mutual trust and confidence through greater understanding

²⁷ Joseph Chinyong Liow, *Dictionary of the Modern Politics of Southeast Asia*, (Routledge: Oxon, 2015), p.86-87.

²⁸ Mely Caballero- Anthony, “Reflections on Political Change, democratic transitions, and regional security in Southeast Asia”, in Mely Caballero- Anthony (ed), *Political Change, Democratic Transitions and Security in Southeast Asia*, (Routledge: Oxon, 2010), p. 138-139.

of defence and security challenges as well as enhancement of transparency and openness...” The key objectives of the ADMM is to promote peace and stability through dialogue and cooperation in defence and security. Since inception, it has been able to build defence cooperation amongst ASEAN member states in the areas such as maritime security, counter-terrorism, peacekeeping operations, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, military medicine, and defence industry. On October 12, 2010, the ADMM Plus was inaugurated as a platform for ASEAN and its eight Dialogue Partners, namely Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, ROK, Russian Federation, and the United States, to strengthen security and defence cooperation for peace, stability, and development in the region. The ADMM-Plus currently focuses on “...seven areas of practical cooperation, namely maritime security, counter-terrorism, humanitarian assistance and disaster management, peacekeeping operations, military medicine, humanitarian mine action and cyber security. Experts Working Groups (EWGs) have been established to facilitate cooperation in these areas...”²⁹

THE US REVIVING OLD SECURITY ALLIANCES AND PARTNERSHIPS

The US maintains its security presence in the region by reinforcing its old alliances and partners under its Indo-Pacific strategy. The US-centric security systems in the region which is through its bilateral alliance build during the Cold War is beginning to see a re-orientation amidst its rivalry with China. During the Obama administration, the US began to rebuild its relations with Southeast Asia by deepening its engagement with ASEAN. The US joined the TAC in 2009 and President Obama regularly visited Southeast Asia to participate in EAS. President Donald Trump, withdrawing from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) shortly after taking office and not attending any of the EAS, gave the impression that the region is not a top priority for the US. Under President Biden there was a renewed attempt to build engagement with the region, as

²⁹ “ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM)”, *ASEAN*.

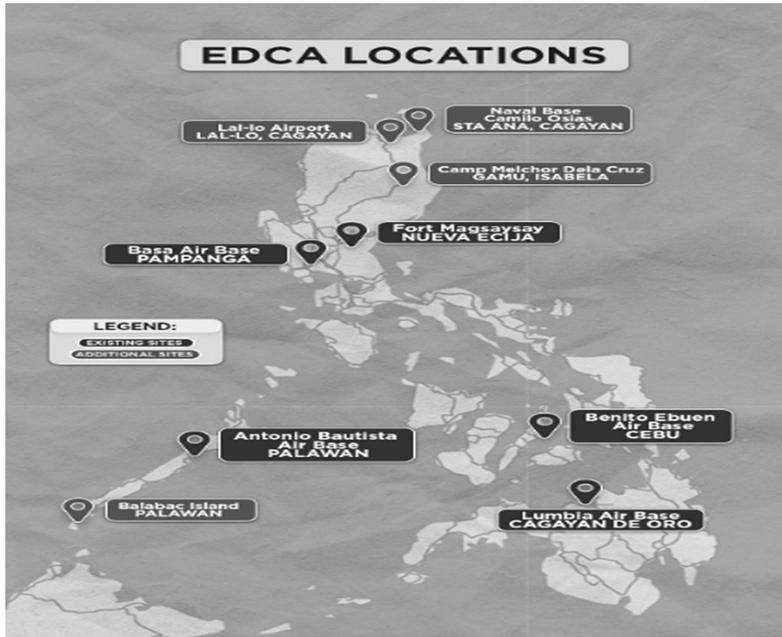
he regularly attended ASEAN multilateral meetings with visits to Southeast Asian countries by senior government officials. This includes President Biden attending the ASEAN-US Summit held in Cambodia in November 2022, during which the relationship between the two sides was elevated to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP). The *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*, released in February 2022, that underlined the importance of ASEAN and its centrality, paved the way for the early conclusion of the CSP. The document also stated on how the US seeks to further deepen its traditional partnership with Southeast Asian countries. This includes embarking on new areas such as health, climate change and environment, energy, transportation, and gender equality through exploring possible cooperation between the Quad and ASEAN.³⁰

Amidst China's aggression in the South China Sea and its increasingly aggressive posture toward Taiwan, the US has stepped up minilateral cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region. This includes the US realigning its relations with Europe and strengthening cooperation among the Quad countries. On the other hand, the US has also intensified its diplomatic engagement with Southeast Asian countries. The "Joint Vision Statement for a 21st Century U.S.-Philippines Partnership," announced after the 9th United States-Philippines Bilateral Strategic Dialogue on November 16, 2021, among other things, reaffirmed their enduring alliance based on the Mutual Defence Treaty (MDT) signed in 1951. The joint vision has also reaffirmed both countries' commitment to deepen collaborative cooperation to address new and emerging complex security challenges. The US, meanwhile, has also categorically stated that an attack on the Philippines in the SCS would invoke the Mutual Defence Treaty, whereby it will defend the Philippines.³¹

³⁰ Shoji Tomotaka, "ASEAN's Neutrality; A Survival amid US-China Confrontation", in Masuda Masayuki ed, *The Shifting Dynamics of Great Power Competition*, (Interbooks Co., Ltd; Tokyo, 2023), p. 98-103.

³¹ "Joint Vision for a 21st Century United States-Philippines Partnership", *US Department of State*, November 16, 2021.

Figure One: US- Philippines EDCA Locations



Source: NHK World –Japan

The Philippines and the US on February 2, 2023 announced a deal which would give American forces access to four more military sites in the Southeast Asian country. This announcement is as per the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) signed in 2014 that enabled the American military to station troops and weapons at sites across the Philippines.³² The four new military sites, as indicated in the figure one, includes three Philippine bases near Taiwan—two in the Northern Province of Cagayan and one in the Isabela province—in addition to one in Palawan near the South China Sea.³³ This takes the

³² Mike Ives, “A Primer on US-Philippines Military Ties”, *The New York Times*, February 2, 2023.

³³ AndreoCalonzo and Cecilia Yap, “US Wins Expanded Access to Philippine Bases Amid China Tensions”, *Bloomberg*, February 2, 2023.

total to nine bases in the Philippines, creating the largest American military presence in the country in over three decades.³⁴

Recognising the worrying trends in the Taiwan Straits, the US along with Japan and the Philippines are working towards deepening and building better network their alliances. The US has made it clear that it will help Taiwan defend itself from Chinese aggression, as required by the Taiwan Relations Act, and is likely to directly intervene in the case of an overt attack across the strait. The northernmost of the main Philippine islands, Luzon, is just around 200 miles from the southern coast of Taiwan. In such eventuality, the Philippines' strategic location could greatly assist the United States' ability to respond to a crisis.³⁵ Granting access to facilities in the north of Philippines as per the updated EDCA could play a role in case of a crisis in the Taiwan Strait, contributing to the posture of deterrence by America in the region.³⁶ As allies, the Philippines and the US, which face a shared threat from China, receive support from the Trump administration. Despite cuts to the foreign assistance and other US government programmes, the Trump administration released military financing of US \$ 336 million to the Philippines in April 2025. Further, in July 2025, the State Department announced US \$ 60 million for the Philippines in the first new overseas development assistance awarded to any country by the administration.³⁷

President Trump's visit to Kuala Lumpur, in October 2025, to participate at the 13th ASEAN-US Summit was also significant, signalling the value accorded to Southeast Asia in Washington's Indo-Pacific vision. Both sides signed the ASEAN-US Joint Vision Statement for a Stronger,

³⁴ Mara Cepeda, "Philippines grants US wider access to military bases amid tensions with China", *The Straits Times*, February 2, 2023.

³⁵ Gregory B. Poling and Japhet Quitzon, "Sustaining the U.S.-Philippines-Japan Triad", *Centre for Strategic and International Studies*, February 12, 2024.

³⁶ Michael Mazza, "China is testing President Biden – and Biden is Failing", *The Hill*, October 31, 2023.

³⁷ Gregory B Poling, "Southeast Asia Navigates Trump's Return: Quick Deals, Lasting Dread", *CSIS*, October 2025.

Safer, and More Prosperous ASEAN and America. The United States reinforced the importance of ASEAN centrality and emphasised further deepening its Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in new areas such as combatting online scam operations through new initiatives to enhance cyber threat awareness and promote public-private anti-scam partnerships.³⁸

During the visit, President Trump presided over the signing of an expanded ceasefire between Thailand and Cambodia besides inking reciprocal trade agreements with Thailand, Malaysia, Cambodia and Vietnam. In his opening remarks at the 13th ASEAN-US Summit, President Trump stated that the US is “committed to a free and open and thriving Indo-Pacific.”³⁹ At the East Asia Summit, the US stated Trump’s vision of a free, secure, and prosperous Indo-Pacific, demonstrating American commitment to ASEAN and the greater region.⁴⁰ These actions under the Trump administration has reassured Southeast Asia on the US’ commitment and its support for furthering ASEAN leadership in creating regional peace and stability.

MINI-LATERAL ARRANGEMENTS IN SHAPING THE REGIONAL SECURITY ARCHITECTURE

The US-China strategic competition in recent years has taken on an increasingly global dimension. Therefore, with the US-China relations continuing to encounter a growing number of challenges, their rivalry in the Indo-Pacific would further intensify. Being at the centre of this great power rivalry, the peace and stability of the Indo-Pacific region is matter of deep concern for the Southeast Asian region. The countries in the region already face increasing instances of illicit actions by China in the disputed waters for gaining control over the resources and

³⁸ “ASEAN-United States Leaders’ Joint Vision Statement to Promote Stronger, Safer, and More Prosperous ASEAN and America”, *ASEAN*, October 27, 2025.

³⁹ Amir Yusof, “As US inks trade deals with 4 ASEAN states, Trump pledges America’s 100% commitment to Southeast Asia”, *CNA*, October 26, 2025.

⁴⁰ “US Participation in the East Asia Summit”, *U.S. Mission to ASEAN*, October 27, 2025.

attempts to attain maritime supremacy for control over trade routes. Cumulatively, these actions and developments make the region volatile.⁴¹

The second Trump administration has challenged the global trade regime by imposing punitive reciprocal tariffs on both allies and adversaries. Despite US' overtures during President Trump's visit to the ASEAN Summit in October 2025, the region has come under the impact of reciprocal tariffs. Consequently, there is a growing tendency in the region to view China as a more reliable and predictable trade partner.

At the Annual Conference of the Boao Forum for Asia in April 2022, President Xi Jinping proposed the Global Security Initiative (GSI). He presented the fundamental position on security that China and the world should uphold. The GSI concept paper that Beijing unveiled in 2023 stated that China sought to “promote political settlement of international and regional hotspot issues” and “encourage the countries concerned to overcome differences and resolve hotspots through candid dialogue and communication,” hinting at possible mediation roles that China aspires to undertake.⁴²

The GSI, in a way, is seen to be countering the US' moves towards strengthening its military cooperation with its allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific. The Southeast Asian countries remain apprehensive about China's strategic intentions. While at the same time, they have expressed unease over the US Indo-Pacific strategy (Free and Open Indo-Pacific) perceived by them as a direct response to China's more assertive approach.⁴³

The direct impact on the socio-economic security as a consequence of the pandemic, along with increasing geo-political tensions, has altered

⁴¹ Masuda Masayuki, “China's Major-power Diplomacy in an Era of Great Power Competition”, in Masuda Masayuki ed, *The Shifting Dynamics of Great Power Competition*, (Interbooks Co., Ltd; Tokyo, 2023), p. 34-35.

⁴² Tsjeng Zhizhao Henrick, “Is a China-Led Order Emerging in Southeast Asia?”, *RSIS*, October 8, 2025.

⁴³ Masuda Masayuki, “China's Major-power Diplomacy in an Era of Great Power Competition”, in Masuda Masayuki ed, *The Shifting Dynamics of Great Power Competition*, (Interbooks Co., Ltd; Tokyo, 2023), p. 34-35.

the security-related equations. While Southeast Asian states rebalance their relations with China amidst the decline in the US influence, the region also seeks deeper engagement with other external players like Australia, India, Japan, and South Korea. The perspective on the evolving security environment is that Southeast Asian countries and other major powers have a significant role to play. There is also the revival of Quad; the emergence of new security partnership AUKUS; and the enhancement of Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA). This reflects and reinforces the need for a collective security strategy. The mini-lateral security frameworks are, therefore, becoming a strategically invaluable component in the evolving security architecture of Southeast Asia. The increasing number of mini-lateral security arrangements, which include the ASEAN-led and other non-ASEAN mechanisms, could play a significant role to deter dominance by any single major power.

Five Power Defence Arrangements

The Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA)—the region’s oldest military partnership—was established in 1971, with Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore, and the United Kingdom as its members to forge greater strategic and defence cooperation. In the 21st century, the FPDA began to enhance cooperation towards dealing with emerging asymmetric threats. These include terrorism, piracy, protection of Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ), disaster relief, and smuggling of illicit drugs. Reflecting on the changing nature of security in the region, the FPDA today is increasingly focused on exercises related to non-conventional threats in the maritime domain. The FPDA has broadened its engagement with other regional organisations that includes the security mechanisms under ASEAN. Through its engagement under the ASEAN frameworks such as the ARF and the ADMM-Plus, the FPDA has actively explored avenues of strategic alignment. This has enabled joint activities towards advancing its efforts to bolster regional security architecture and address transboundary challenges in a multilateral context.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Noraini Zulkifli and Mohd Ridwan Zainal Abidin, “Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) After 50 Years: Impacts towards Malaysia’s Security”, *Global Academic and Scientific Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, Vol 3, Issue 6, August 2, 2025.

Over the past two decades, although the FPDA has been explicitly defensive in nature, the increase in illegal and aggressive Chinese action in the South China Sea has drawn the attention of its members. The FPDA has gradually expanded its focus from the conventional defence of Peninsular Malaysian and Singaporean air space to large-scale combined and joint military exercises, designed to meet emerging conventional and non-conventional security threats extending into the South China Sea. The exercises relating to threats to maritime security includes defence of Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs), surveillance of merchant shipping, and counterterrorism.⁴⁵

On the sidelines of the Shangri-La Dialogue security forum in Singapore in May 2024, the FPDA defence ministers agreed to integrate drones, fifth-generation fighter jets, and surveillance aircraft to boost the complexity and sophistication of exercises. The new measures were showcased at the Bersama Lima (meaning ‘Together Five’ in Malay language) exercise held in October 2024. The 2024 iteration hosted by Singapore was the first to feature fifth-generation fighters, including six Royal Australian Air Force F-35As as well as a Royal New Zealand Air Force P-8A patrol aircraft, aimed at advancing training effectiveness.⁴⁶

The uncertainty over US security commitment in Asia under President Trump is also facilitating for a more meaningful collaboration among FPDA member states. Singapore and Australia have upgraded their relations to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in October 2025. Through the elevated partnership, both sides have agreed to enhance their defence relationship, which includes the reciprocal access to naval and air bases in both countries. The enhanced defence agreement would also enable both sides to step up cooperation in defence science and technology, logistics, and supply chains, and expand professional

⁴⁵ Carlyle A. Thayer, “The Five Power Defence Arrangement At Forty (1971-2011)”, *Southeast Asia Affairs*, 2012.

⁴⁶ Sarah Chan, “Five Power Defence Arrangements members adapt to regional security challenges”, *Indo-Pacific Defence Forum*, February 20, 2025.

exchanges between both militaries.⁴⁷ As geopolitical shift becomes more complex, the FPDA through its multilateral defence cooperation makes it a key component in the region's emerging security architecture.

Revival of the Quad and its future

As the US-China competition intensifies, the Quad in recent years has gained considerable prominence. The four Quad countries share fundamental values, such as the rule of law and human rights, and is a coalition which seeks to strengthen a free and open international order. When Quad took root at the end of 2004, an earthquake off the coast of Sumatra, Indonesia, and the tsunami hit the Indian Ocean.⁴⁸ This natural calamity resulted in a brief coordination among the naval forces of the US, India, Japan, and Australia. The idea was later developed into a formal proposal by the Japanese PM Shinzo Abe in 2006. This was formally endorsed by Indian PM Manmohan Singh during his visit to Tokyo in December 2006. In May 2007, on the sidelines of the ARF, there was a formal meeting of the senior officials of the Quad nations. In September of the same year, India also hosted a massive multilateral naval exercise involving the US, India, Japan, Australia, and Singapore in the Bay of Bengal. However, there was reservation among the four Quad nations as the idea of the four democratic countries coming together was seen by other nations as an attempt to contain China. The fall of the Abe government in Japan and that of John Howard in Australia in 2007 took the steam out of the initiative. While Abe's successor Fukuda was lukewarm, the Kevin Rudd government in Australia explicitly suggested that it is not interested in the Quad.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Sebastian Strangio, "Singapore, Australia Announce Boost to Bilateral Defense Cooperation", *The Diplomat*, October 9, 2025.

⁴⁸ Oguma Shinya, "The Revival of Quad amidst Great Power Competition", in in Masuda Masayuki ed, *The Shifting Dynamics of Great Power Competition*, (Interbooks Co., Ltd; Tokyo, 2023), p. 129.

⁴⁹ C. Raja Mohan, "India in the Emerging Asian Architecture", in William T. Tow and Chin Kin Wah eds, *ASEAN India Australia: Towards Closer Engagement in a New Asia*, (Institute of Southeast Asia Studies: Singapore, 2009), p.51-52.

In November 2017, senior officials from the Quad nations met in Manila for the first time in nearly a decade, and the first-ever Quad foreign ministers' meeting was held in September 2019. Under President Biden, the Quad evolved into a more structured and proactive partnership, with regular summits and ministerial meetings. During the virtual Quad Leaders' Summit held in March 2021, the four countries agreed to advance practical cooperation on quality infrastructure and non-traditional security issues. At the same time, the leaders agreed to establish working groups on COVID-19 vaccines, climate change, and critical and emerging technologies, redefining the Quad framework from a security-centred to a more comprehensive cooperation platform. Additionally, the leaders affirmed strong support for AOIP as well as for ASEAN centrality.⁵⁰

The most defining aspect of the revived Quad is its diverse areas of cooperation. In addition to shaping a rules-based international order for the realisation of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific," Quad initiatives in new areas such as climate change, resilient supply chains, and disaster response helped it move beyond a purely strategic framework and demonstrated its relevance to regional partners.⁵¹ The revival of Quad in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and the redefinition of its framework has been favourably viewed by Southeast Asian countries. This qualitative shift of the Quad with due consideration for ASEAN and efforts to build cooperation in the best interest of the region is also altering the perception about the grouping.

However, a protectionist foreign policy shift under the second Trump administration with trade tension between India and US has raised questions about its future. However, Quad remains to be a key pillar

⁵⁰ Shoji Tomotaka, "ASEAN's Neutrality; A Survival amid US-China Confrontation", in Masuda Masayuki ed, *The Shifting Dynamics of Great Power Competition*, (Interbooks Co., Ltd; Tokyo, 2023), p. 100.

⁵¹ Oguma Shinya, "The Revival of Quad amidst Great Power Competition", in in Masuda Masayuki ed, *The Shifting Dynamics of Great Power Competition*, (Interbooks Co., Ltd; Tokyo, 2023), p. 130.

towards promoting the four nation's shared vision for a free, open, and rules-based Indo-Pacific region. The Quad foreign ministers meeting in Washington in January 2025, after Trump's inauguration, and the launch of the Quad Critical Minerals Initiative in July reaffirm the value of the grouping. Besides being an important platform for strategic signalling, Quad's initiatives that are geared towards delivering public goods across the Indo-Pacific has demonstrated its relevance to the leaders in Southeast Asia.⁵²

New Security Alliance: AUKUS

On September 15, 2021, a new enhanced trilateral security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom (UK), and the United States (US) (AUKUS) was announced. This cooperation framework is centered on the provision of nuclear-powered submarine technology from the US and the UK to Australia. According to the joint statement, the emerging complexities in the Indo-Pacific which would have wide implications across the region necessitated the need for this “next-generation partnership” that seeks to deliver security and stability. The statement clearly outlined AUKUS' intent to enhance the “growing network of partnership in the Indo-Pacific region” including with the ASEAN.⁵³ The formation of the new security alignment has received a mixed response from the Southeast Asian countries. Malaysia and Indonesia have shared their concerns with Jakarta stating that the trilateral security arrangement could trigger an arms race in the region.⁵⁴ They feared that AUKUS would undermine ASEAN's goal to keep

⁵² Biyon Sony Joseph, “Quad at a Crossroads: Can the Indo-Pacific Grouping Survive Trump 2.0?”, *The Diplomat*, October 7, 2025.

⁵³ “Remarks by President Biden, Prime Minister Morrison of Australia, and Prime Minister Johnson of the United Kingdom Announcing the Creation of AUKUS”, *The White House*, September 15, 2021.

⁵⁴ “Southeast Asian Nations Cautious Over New AUKUS Defence Pact”, *Radio Free Asia*, September 17, 2021.

Southeast Asia a nuclear weapon-free zone and further heighten military tensions between the US and China. Other ASEAN countries, including Vietnam, expressed that the new trilateral security arrangement should strive for the “...same goal of peace, stability, cooperation and development in the region and the world over...”⁵⁵. Vietnam and the Philippines—both engaged in disputes with China over the South China Sea—along with Singapore, which seeks greater US military engagement, tend to hold a more accepting view of AUKUS.⁵⁶

At the 31st Australia-United States Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN) held on September 16, 2021 at Washington DC, the US was represented by Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin, and the Australian delegation by the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Minister for Women Marise Payne, and Minister for Defence Peter Dutton. Both sides reaffirmed their commitment to Southeast Asia, ASEAN centrality, and ASEAN-led architecture such as the East Asia Summit, which they recognised “...as the region’s premier, leaders-led forum for addressing strategic challenges and expressed their ongoing support for the practical implementation of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific...”⁵⁷

Notwithstanding ASEAN’s efforts, the region continues to be plagued by a host of intra- regional and extra-regional tensions and challenges. As the nature of threats have transformed over time, there has also been an emerging divergence about threat perceptions among the ASEAN countries. Over the last two decades, the global order has become more unpredictable, with the US under the Trump

⁵⁵ Tu Anh, “Vietnam spells out stance on AUKUS”, *Hanoi Times*, September 23, 2021.

⁵⁶ Shoji Tomotaka, “ASEAN’s Neutrality; A Survival amid US-China Confrontation”, in Masuda Masayuki ed, *The Shifting Dynamics of Great Power Competition*, (Interbooks Co., Ltd; Tokyo, 2023), p. 100-101.

⁵⁷ “The Australia-U.S. Ministerial Consultations Joint Statement: An Unbreakable Alliance for Peace and Prosperity”, *Ministry for Foreign Affairs Minister for Women*, September 17, 2021.

administration uncommitted to neither open trade nor its security obligations. This derails ASEAN's ability in achieving a resolution towards collectively actions. Further, the establishment of new minilaterals such as AUKUS adds yet another dimension to the region's security environment, where ASEAN would have to undertake a balanced approach. For the moment, the increasing number of minilateral security arrangements in the region, which includes external actors, makes the ASEAN countries concerned about its negative fallout on the region.

THE CHALLENGE TO STABILITY: MAJOR POWERS AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

SOUTHEAST ASIA AND MAJOR POWERS

Since the Cold War, Southeast Asia has been a strategic crossroads for major powers, which are ever present and competed for influence. As an extremely diverse region that has witnessed external powers jostling for dominance for centuries, it has developed a diplomatic instinct to simultaneously hedge, balance, and bandwagon. Even during the Cold War, no Southeast Asian country, including formal US allies such as the Philippines and Thailand, felt it was obligatory to neatly align all interests across all domains in the direction of any single major power. In today's context, we continue to see that countries from the region tend to balance relations with the US against China in defence and security, and hedge their bets with Japan, Europe or South Korea against American restrictions on technology exports. At the same time, they jump on the Chinese bandwagon in interests of their economic and infrastructure development.

However, such a delicate balancing act in dealing with external and major powers while ensuring autonomy has indeed got its own set of consequences. For instance, ASEAN's primary function to stabilise Southeast Asia by managing relations among its members becomes more complex since the member states are driven by their national rather than the regional priorities. This makes it hard for ASEAN to often speak in one voice on key issues as the members have to calculate their interests vis-à-vis the US, China, and other major powers influencing stability in the region.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Bilahari Kausikan, "Southeast Asia between Major Powers: Lessons for the Middle East", *The Jerusalem Strategic Tribune*, June 2023.

The two major powers with the most influence in Southeast Asia are the United States and China. Since the Cold War to the post-Cold War period, the US with its military and economic power has been a major external power in Southeast Asia. From the late 1990s, a rising China began to also exert its influence in the region. The impact of the ongoing US-China competition which is intensifying globally is being felt most in Southeast Asia, which today has become the microcosm for the ongoing strategic rivalry. While Beijing considers the region to be its backyard and natural sphere of influence, its claim is being contested by the US and other external powers. While other external powers such as Australia, India, Japan, Russia, and South Korea have lesser influence in comparison to the US and China, they are, however, emerging as strong alternatives. Given that the US and China have the most influence in Southeast Asia on account of their economic and military power, the region is adopting a balance approach rather than aligning with one. This seems to be the best option available towards maximising Southeast Asian autonomy while resonating with ASEAN's concept of Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality. This is also leading Southeast Asia to increasingly diversify its relations in order to balance as well as to mitigate the negative impacts of the US-China rivalry.⁵⁹ This is resulting in Southeast Asia and other external powers to actively engage towards maintaining an international rule-based order and undertaking collective response to address critical security challenges.

US IN SHAPING THE REGIONAL SECURITY ORDER

For the US, which may be described as the interventionist power *par excellence*, its goals in Southeast Asia were a function of its global interests that shaped its strategic position and posture. At the end of the Second World War and the onset of the Cold War, the philosophical justification for US interventionism in the region was towards containing the expansion of communism in Southeast Asia. American extensive intervention against communism in Southeast Asia ranged from

⁵⁹ Shoji Tomotaka, "ASEAN's Neutrality; A Survival amid US-China Confrontation", in Masuda Masayuki ed, *The Shifting Dynamics of Great Power Competition*, (Interbooks Co., Ltd; Tokyo, 2023), p. 93.

conventional diplomacy to forms of direct and indirect military assistance. There were also efforts towards building bilateral and multilateral military alliances that included the Mutual Defence Treaty with the Philippines in August 1951 and the establishment of SEATO in September 1954. America began to disengage in Southeast Asia due to its inability to produce the desired political order despite its military intervention. Further, the Nixon's doctrine which sought to normalise relations with China led to the US moving from a strategy of direct intervention to one of acting as the off-shore balancer, relying more on naval and air power than ground forces to maintain equilibrium in the region. The end of the Cold War further created a power vacuum that reshaped external influence in Southeast Asia. However, new issues and challenges such as contention over the status of the Straits of Malacca, which provided the principle sea route between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, began to intensify competitive interest among the major powers including the US.⁶⁰

In the 21st century, Southeast Asia's geographical position at the centre of the Indo-Pacific—encompassing major maritime arteries such as the Malacca Strait and the South China Sea—has heightened its strategic importance. Its status as one of the fastest-growing economic regions in the world further amplifies its geopolitical significance. Following a brief retreat, the US, since the Obama administration in the midst of its escalating competition with China, has begun engaging with Southeast Asia in a manner desired by the region. The US policy in Southeast Asia viewed multilateralism as fundamental towards complementing its alliances and partnerships it sought to build in the region. The US has been taking a proactive steps that included joining ASEAN's TAC in 2009 to becoming an official participant in the East Asia Summit in 2011 which Obama attended regularly.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Michael Leifer, "Great Power Intervention and Regional Order", in Mark W. Zacher and R. Stephen Milne (eds), *Conflict and Stability in Southeast Asia*, (Anchor Press; New York, 1974), pp. 184-185 and 200.

⁶¹ Shoji Tomotaka, "ASEAN's Neutrality; A Survival amid US-China Confrontation", in Masuda Masayuki ed, *The Shifting Dynamics of Great Power Competition*, (Interbooks Co., Ltd; Tokyo, 2023), p. 98-103.

Under the first Trump administration, the momentum was slightly derailed on account of US' decision to withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Further, by not attending any of the EAS, Trump elevated the confrontation with China. The US under Trump hardening its policies towards countering the multifaceted challenges from China heightened concerns in Southeast Asia. The US also viewed a hostile China gaining regional leadership and dominance as a threat to its global primacy.⁶² Under President Biden, the US therefore began to intensify its diplomatic outreach with Southeast Asia. The US also strengthened efforts to renew old traditional alliances and established a number of new mini-laterals to maintain its role in Indo-Pacific security. Southeast Asian countries have raised concerns on the new security mini-laterals such as the AUKUS, which is centred on providing nuclear-powered submarine technology to Australia, undermining ASEAN's goal to keep the region a nuclear free zone. At the same time, the qualitative shift in the Quad that sought to promote cooperation in new areas like vaccine security and climate change was received favourably. This new version of Quad by giving appropriate consideration to the interests of Southeast Asia is seen as being less focused on the containment of China. Further, the Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States released in February 2022, which underlined the importance of ASEAN while also embarking on new areas of cooperation has been received positively. In November 2022, when the ASEAN-US Summit was held in Cambodia and attended by President Biden, the relations were elevated to Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.⁶³ The US high-level engagements under President Biden also included new initiatives such as the Indo Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), announced at the Quad Summit in Tokyo on May 24, 2022. The IPEF has been welcomed by most ASEAN countries that have joined all the four pillars under this framework. This US-led initiative was also seen as a sign of Washington's renewed economic

⁶² Robert Sutter, "Trump, China, and Declining US Influence in Asia", *The Diplomat*, October 14, 2025.

⁶³ Shoji Tomotaka, "ASEAN's Neutrality; A Survival amid US-China Confrontation", in Masuda Masayuki ed, *The Shifting Dynamics of Great Power Competition*, (Interbooks Co., Ltd; Tokyo, 2023), p. 98-103.

engagement in the region. While IPEF could be perceived as an economic initiative, it has strong strategic undertone that will allow the US to better compete with China in the region. While the negotiations on three out of the four pillars under the IPEF framework has been concluded, the trade pillar remains unresolved. This is on account of domestic opposition in the US to trade liberalisation, leaving the IPEF without meaningful market access incentives. This shortcoming has left many Southeast Asian countries sceptical, and with President Trump's policy direction the future of IPEF remains uncertain.⁶⁴

As China further strengthens its influence through its economic ties that includes developmental projects under the Belt and Road Initiative and being part of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, the US is falling behind. During the first Trump administration Southeast Asia benefitted on account of the trade wars with China. However, the second Trump administration has been disruptive for the region since most Southeast Asian countries such as Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand has built a large trade surplus with the US. Further, as Southeast Asia, with a high degree of economic integration with China, was among the hardest hit by the reciprocal tariffs announced by President Trump in April 2025. Barring Singapore, which ran a trade deficit with the US, received a new baseline 10 percent tariff rate, while the others were hit with huge tariffs.

While ASEAN released a joint statement vowing to pursue a concerted response and avoid any retaliation, individual member states prioritised bilateral negotiations with the US to secure the best deals. Trump's policy to cut foreign assistance and other US government programmes has also had its impact on the region. With the closure of several US Agency for International Development (USAID) programmes in the region, China has moved in to fill the vacuum in the form of assistance to the region. Together, tariffs and radical policy shifts by the Trump administration raises concerns over its commitment to the region.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Narupat Rattanakit, "Economic Corridors: One Way Forwards for US Engagement in Southeast Asia", *The Diplomat*, February 10, 2025.

⁶⁵ Gregory B. Poling, "Southeast Asia Navigates Trump's Return: Quick Deals, Lasting Dread", *CSIS*, October 2025.

The US actions towards Southeast Asia has undermined its position vis-à-vis China, which has gained further influence and is seen to be a more trusted partner for the region. The region continues to be strategically important for Washington amidst its strategic competition with China. This would ensure that there would not be major divergences in terms of US security commitment in the region, as seen with the Philippines which has been reassured on their bilateral alliance. Therefore, the US in Southeast Asia would continue to build its alliances and partnerships. However, like for Europe under Trump, allies in Southeast Asia would also be required to step up their own defence spending rather than having complete reliance on the US.⁶⁶

Southeast Asian nations, despite the negative impact of Trump policies, view Washington's support as essential towards preserving their vital interests in the face of increasing pressure they face from Beijing. This has forced the regional governments to accommodate the protectionist shift in the US foreign policy, and preserve their alliances and partnerships in the face of the Chinese challenge.⁶⁷

CHINA'S AND THE BALANCE OF POWER TILT

China's geographical proximity and the presence of an extensive Chinese ethnic minorities in Southeast Asia provides Beijing an enormous and unique advantage in the region. The US dominance in terms of political and economic influence in Southeast Asia in the 1950s and 1960s prevented China from deepening its ties in the region. At this time, China also had no diplomatic relations with the five states of maritime Southeast Asia, which included Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, The Philippines, and Singapore. The five maritime Southeast Asian states that made up the ASEAN sympathised with the US containment of Chinese communism since they were also internally fighting communist insurgencies. The Maoist insurgent movements that were approved by

⁶⁶ Stephen Olson, "Southeast Asia must Prepare for trump's Everything's on the Table' Approach to Trade", *Fulcrum*, February 20, 2025.

⁶⁷ Robert Sutter, "Trump, China, and Declining US Influence in Asia", *The Diplomat*, October 14, 2025.

the government in China led these ASEAN states to be anti-communist and anti-Chinese and thus supported the US intervention in Indochina.⁶⁸

There were also concerns among some of the Southeast Asian countries which saw a stronger and prosperous China to pose a threat by dominating the region economically, politically, and militarily. Despite the Cold War alliances and realignments that prevented much progress, China always looked at Southeast Asia as an integral part of its security environment. At the end of the Cold War, US's rise as a sole superpower raised concerns for China. This resulted in China working towards strengthening a multipolar world order, seeing a strategic value in Southeast Asia and its multilateral institutions led by ASEAN. After initial hesitation towards multilateralism in Southeast Asia, China fearing isolation began to take a more supportive role. As China saw the benefits, it sought a more multipolar world by engaging as well as building various cooperative multilateral institutions and bilateral partnerships with its neighbouring countries. In 1991, China was invited by ASEAN to become a 'consultative partner' and it became a fully dialogue partner of the Association in 1996—a status earlier reserved for ASEAN's closest non-communist allies such as US and Japan, The European Union, Canada, and Australia. China also became a member of the security-oriented ASEAN Regional Forum, given the Association's concern about Beijing's future security role in the region. The member states also came to a view that it better to engage with China rather than contain it.⁶⁹ By supporting the ASEAN-led mechanisms, China voices its own security concerns regarding the Western interest in the region, which has been on an upward trajectory through security relationship since the late 1990s.

⁶⁸ Frank Langdon, "China's Policy in Southeast Asia", in Mark W. Zacher and R. Stephen Milne (ed), *Conflict and Stability in Southeast Asia*, (Anchor Books: New York, 1974), pp 309-310.

⁶⁹ Aileen S. P. Baviera, "China's Relations with Southeast Asia: Political Security and Economic Interests", Philippine APEC Study Centre Network Discussion Paper No. 99-17.

Post-Cold War, the influence of Japan and China became more significant due to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the uncertain nature of the US involvement in the region. As a result of the legacy of its experience in the Pacific War, Japan was reluctant to extend its security role in East Asia. Its military power, including its naval force, continued to be limited to self-defence purposes. In these circumstances, China became the prime beneficiary of the changing strategic context. Having reached a rapprochement with Moscow in the late 1980s, China no longer faced a threat on its Northern border and could now focus on other security interests, including its territorial claims in the South China Sea. Furthermore, since the 1980s, China had experienced a sustained economic growth that enable it to modernise its military capabilities. Southeast Asian countries like Indonesia recognising China's rising influence began to normalise its relations with Beijing in August 1990. Therefore, in response to the changing security environment, most ASEAN countries wanted the US to remain militarily engaged in the region to promote peace and stability and contain the rise of China.⁷⁰

The Asian financial crisis in mid-1997 and the indifferent response from Washington coupled with its rejection to Japan's proposal for an Asian Monetary Fund caused a regional shift and perception on the US commitment. This enabled other regional powers Japan, South Korea, and China to expand their engagement in the region. The widespread perception in Southeast Asia in the post-Cold war and in the aftermath of the 1997 Asian financial crisis was that China's influence in the region had increased, surpassing that of traditional partners such as the US.⁷¹ These gains can be attributed not just to China's geographical proximity to Southeast Asia and a sizeable presence of ethnic Chinese population, its role in the aftermath of the 1997 crisis and through, but also to its

⁷⁰ Ralf Emmers, *Cooperative Security and the Balance of Power in ASEAN and the ARF* (Routledge Curzon; London, 2003), pp. 111-112.

⁷¹ Paul Bowles, "Asia's Post-Crisis Regionalism: Bringing the State Back in, Keeping the (United) States Out", *Review of International Political Economy*, Vol. 9, No 2 (May, 2022), pp. 230-256.

skilful economic and political diplomacy based on long-term strategic thinking and systematic execution.⁷²

China has skilfully used concerns about the US unilateralism and the latter's intervention in internal affairs of other countries—such as American pre-occupation in Iraq and the War on terror—to advance its interests in Southeast Asia. It has been widely noted that the 1997 economic crisis was a turning point in the relations between China and Southeast Asia, wherein the former came forward with timely help that included bilateral loans which helped Southeast Asian countries to avoid devaluing their currency. Since devaluation would have added to the region's woes, refraining from such a policy enabled China to reap tremendous good will amongst the ASEAN countries. Therefore, since then China's economic reach in the region has grown enormously becoming the biggest trading partner of all the 10 ASEAN countries and the largest single provider of developmental aid to the region. China's more aggressive push in Southeast Asia by striking massive regional trade deals and engaging in programmes, including infrastructure investments under the Belt and Road Initiative, have rich dividends. This has enabled China to become the most dominant economic and political-strategic power in Southeast Asia. President Xi's visit to three export dependent Southeast Asian countries—Vietnam, Malaysia, and Cambodia—in April 2025 amid US imposing trade tariffs was a highly strategic trip. The core aim was to forge a common ground to counter the US tariffs and to signal Chinese commitment as a reliable trading partner. The outcomes in the form of agreements established during the visit indicate China's intent to further exert its influence on the region.⁷³

In recent years, China has intensified its defence outreach in Southeast Asia through joint military exercises, arms sales, and high-level defence dialogue. The “Golden Dragon” exercise with Cambodia which was

⁷² Jing-dong Yuan, “China-ASEAN Relations: Perspectives, Prospects and Implications for U.S. Interests”, *Strategic Studies Institute*, October 2006.

⁷³ Harsh V. Pant and Pratinashree Basu, “China's Strategic push- Asia ties amid tariff tensions”, *The Hindu*, May 2, 2025.

launched in December 2016, after Phnom Penh cancelled similar exercises with the United States called Angkor Sentinel, provided Beijing the opportunity to expand its security foothold in the region. Over the years, China has become the primary security partner for Cambodia playing a major role in helping modernise its defence capabilities, through the upgradation of its naval base and providing military equipment, training, and technical support.⁷⁴ As per the 6th State of Southeast Asia: 2024 Survey Report conducted by the ASEAN Studies Centre at ISEAS- Yusof Ishak Institute, China for the first time edged past the US to become the prevailing choice (50.5%) if the region were forced to align itself in on the ongoing US-China rivalry. The US as a choice dropped from 6.1% in 2023 to 49.5 % in 2024.⁷⁵ While US in the 2025 Southeast Asia survey regained its edge over China as the region's preferred partner (52.3% to 47.7%), China continues to remain the most influential economic (56.4%) and political-strategic power (37.9%).⁷⁶ The foreign policy shift under the Trump administration would have an adverse impact, with regional governments becoming much less enthusiastic in support for the US-led efforts targeting China, unlike in the past.⁷⁷

Due to Trump's adverse actions, China would be in a better position to further enhance its influence in the region. However, China's long-held hope that it could one day replace the US security dominance in Southeast Asia remains to be fully realised. This is to do with persisting mistrust that exists amongst most of the Southeast Asian countries vis-à-vis China. Further, the coercive actions in the South China Sea, which in the last few years has intensified, further fuel this perception. Further, even if the US steps back from region in the near future, China would have to compete with other regional powers such as Japan, Russia,

⁷⁴ Rahman Yaacob, "Charm and Coercion Shape China's Expanding Security Footprint in Southeast Asia", *The Diplomat*, July 1, 2025.

⁷⁵ "The State of Southeast Asia: 2024 Survey Report".

⁷⁶ The State of Southeast Asia Survey 2025

⁷⁷ Robert Sutter, "Trump, China, and Declining US Influence in Asia", *The Diplomat*, October 14, 2025.

India, South Korea, and Australia, which are today emerging as stronger alternatives.

EMERGING ALTERNATIVE PARTNERS: LOOKING BEYOND THE US AND CHINA

Japan: Strengthening Ties amidst Strategic Shifts

In the post-Second World War period, Japan's most important goal in Southeast Asia was to promote its economic interest by obtaining raw materials and markets for its manufacturing sector. Most of the Southeast Asian states that had signed the San Francisco Peace Treaty in 1952—which ended the American occupation of Japan—insisted upon reparation before agreeing to establish economic relations with Japan. In order to promote and restore economic relations with countries in Southeast Asia, the Japanese through prolonged negotiations arrived at reparations agreements by the mid-1950s. Japan by 1965 not only paid off most of these obligations but also began to pour large sum of its economic aid into Southeast Asian countries.⁷⁸ Japan also began to extend official development assistance (ODA) that helped strengthen ties and presence in Southeast Asia. By late 1965, Japan's reparation payments and economic aid helped in strengthening its economic relations with Southeast Asian countries. The improving commercial relations enabled Japan to sell its goods as well as obtain raw materials, which in turn helped boost its domestic economy. Southeast Asian countries however, remained suspicious of Japan's growing engagement that were motivated by its economic and business considerations. Beyond the economic value, given the shifting international politics during the Cold War and its complicated relations with its northeastern neighbours, Japan began to rethink its policy towards Southeast Asia.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Frank Langdon, "Japanese Policy Towards Southeast Asia", in Mark W. Zacher and R. Stephen Milne (ed), *Conflict and Stability in Southeast Asia*, (Anchor Books: New York, 1974), pp 327-330.

⁷⁹ Tanaka Akihiko, "ASEAN-Japan Ties: A Basis for Cooperation", in *ASEAN-Japan Cooperation: A Foundation for East Asian Community*, (Brookings Institution Press: Washington DC, 20023), pp. 19-21.

Japan began to further strengthen its political and economic relations with Southeast Asian countries to prevent the increasing influence of the Soviet Union and China, with whom it shared hostility. These included initiatives taken by Japan to organise the Cabinet-level conference on Southeast Asian economic development in Tokyo in April 1966. The Tokyo conference had participation from Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, South Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand. This initiative undertaken by Japan helped showcase itself as a leader in regional development, where it began to increasingly engage in joint economic developmental efforts and undertake annual meetings. These efforts undertaken by Japan was also as a consequence of a reduction in British and American commitments in Southeast Asia. The improvement of US-China relations in 1971 was followed by the 1972 visits of President Nixon and Japan's Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka to China. While these visits helped reduce tensions, Japan was concerned that the development could open the door to increased Chinese and Soviet influence, which could also impact its commercial interest in the region.⁸⁰

The advent of the Nixon Doctrine, which established a new détente between the US and China, impacted the American engagement in Southeast Asia. This development renewed the need for Japan to re-evaluate its defence policy and increase its involvement towards promoting regional stability in Southeast Asia. Since 1977, Japan's longstanding policy towards Southeast Asia has been represented by the Fukuda Doctrine. Enunciated by Prime Minister Fukuda Takeo during his visit to Manila in August 1977, the three-point policy declared Japan's resolve to never again become a military power and to strive towards strengthening its relations with Southeast Asian nations. The doctrine laid down the core for the building of Japan's Southeast Asia

⁸⁰ Frank Langdon, "Japanese Policy Towards Southeast Asia", in Mark W. Zacher and R. Stephen Milne (ed), *Conflict and Stability in Southeast Asia*, (Anchor Books: New York, 1974), pp 337-341.

policy, based on the principle that Tokyo as an equal partner of ASEAN would serve as a bridge to promote peace and prosperity in the region.⁸¹

In the decades that followed, Japan became one of the most important economic players in Southeast Asia, providing an important market and investments considered key to the expansion of ASEAN's manufacturing industry. The post-Cold War period saw the stagnation of Japan's economy with impact on its trade and investment with ASEAN. This paved the way for China, which today has emerged as the region's key trading partner. Despite China's growing economic clout in the region, Japan's continued engagement, with its investments in Southeast Asia, has been crucial towards developing modern manufacturing industries in the region. After a slowdown in the aftermath of the Asian Financial crisis, Japan has undertaken great efforts to promote deeper economic cooperation.⁸²

In July 1997, Japan's Ministry of Finance promptly proposed an Asian Monetary Fund in an attempt to contain the crisis. At the ASEAN + 3 summit in December 1997, Japan announced a Special Yen Loan Facility in the amount of 600 billion Yen for the development of infrastructure as a step towards economic stimulation, employment promotion, and economic reforms. Further, through the New Miyazawa Initiative announced in October 1998, ASEAN countries were provided an economic recovery package of US \$ 30 billion. Japan also intensified its ODA to ASEAN countries to accelerate their economic recovery.⁸³ These efforts helped reinforce Japan as a major developmental partner in the region.

⁸¹ Soeya Yoshihide, "Japan as a Regional Actor", in *ASEAN-Japan Cooperation: A Foundation for East Asian Community*", (Brookings Institution Press: Washington DC, 20023), pp. 55.

⁸² Zhang Yunling, "The ASEAN Partnership with China and Japan", in *ASEAN-Japan Cooperation: A Foundation for East Asian Community*", (Brookings Institution Press: Washington DC, 20023), pp. 226

⁸³ Narongchai Akrasanee and Apichart Prasert, "The Evolution of ASEAN-Japan Economic Cooperation", in *ASEAN-Japan Cooperation: A Foundation for East Asian Community*", (Brookings Institution Press: Washington DC, 20023), pp. 69.

Japan remains a major contributor to development cooperation in Southeast Asia, having provided technical assistance through several programmes, such as the Japan-ASEAN Cooperation Promotion Programme (JACPP), the Intra-ASEAN Technical Exchange Programme (IATEP), and the Japan-ASEAN Exchange Programme (JAEP).⁸⁴ In April 2005, the ASEAN-Japan Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (the AJCEP Agreement) started negotiations and was signed by the ASEAN Member States and Japan from March to April 2008. The AJCEP came into force in December 2008, with an aim to strengthen the economic partnership through liberalisation in goods, investments, and trade in services.⁸⁵

In recent years, Japan has continued to strengthen its engagement in Southeast Asia given the shifting geo-political and geo-economic environment. As China's influence in Southeast Asia continues to grow amidst wavering US commitment, it has created a very uncertain and destabilising regional order. Further, in recent years, increasing Sino-Russian naval activities around Japan's southwestern islands, along with Moscow's overtures with Pyongyang, further adds to Tokyo's security complexities. These new developments have necessitated the need for Japan to not only reinforce its defence capabilities but also to strengthen the security and deterrence capabilities of like-minded countries. Japan's national security strategy introduced in 2022 has emphasised expanding defence cooperation with like-minded partners in the region and its allies aimed towards enhancing its capabilities to build deterrence against growing threats from China, North Korea and Russia. In April 2023, Japan launched the Official Security Assistance (OSA) through which it provides equipment and supplies as well as assistance for infrastructure development to armed forces and related organisation.⁸⁶ Japan

⁸⁴ Zhang Yunling, "The ASEAN Partnership with China and Japan", in *ASEAN-Japan Cooperation: A Foundation for East Asian Community*, (Brookings Institution Press: Washington DC, 20023), pp. 229-230.

⁸⁵ "Completion of the Signing of the ASEAN-Japan Comprehensive Economic Partnership (Joint Press Release)", *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*, April 14, 2008.

⁸⁶ "Official Security Assistance (OSA)", *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*.

recognises Southeast Asia as a linchpin in its Indo-Pacific strategy, and through its growing partnership with the ASEAN countries in the political and economic realms, it seeks to expand its security footprint in the region.⁸⁷

The OSA budget was approximately 2 billion Yen in 2023, with assistance provided to four countries that included two Southeast Asia countries; The Philippines and Malaysia. The Philippines through the OSA in 2023 was provided coastal radar system (600 million Yen) and Malaysia received rescue boats and other equipment (400 million Yen). In 2024, the OSA budget increased to 5 billion Yen in which The Philippines and Indonesia were two of the four recipient countries. The equipment for the Philippines included air surveillance radar system, related equipment, coastal radar systems, and rigid-hulled inflatable boats (1.6 billion Yen), while Indonesia received high-speed patrol boats (1 billion Yen).⁸⁸ The OSA programme since its inception continued to expand with new recipient countries that include Thailand and other ASEAN states. It is important to note that Japan has good economic relations and enjoys a high level of trust among the Southeast Asian countries. This was clearly reflected in the 2025 State of Southeast Asia survey, in which ASEAN respondents ranked Japan to be the most trusted major power as well as third-most important dialogue partner, behind China and the US. Therefore, Japan's new effort towards aiding the building of the security deterrence of the ASEAN nations marks a significant shift in Japan's approach towards increasing its influence in Southeast Asia. The OSA, by enhancing the recipients' defence capabilities, would contribute to the stability in the region, which in recent years has been deteriorating.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Akshat Dwivedi, "From Quad to Squad: Informal Alliances in the Indo-Pacific", *Geopolitical Monitor*, May 14, 2024.

⁸⁸ "Official Security Assistance (OSA)", *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*.

⁸⁹ Christopher Woody, "Japan Steps Up New Security Assistance to Countries Caught Between the US and China", *The Diplomat*, July 8, 2025.

To secure its interest in the Indo-Pacific, Japan is also increasing the number and scale of military and naval exercises with like-minded security partners in Southeast Asia such as Brunei, Indonesia, The Philippines, Thailand, and Singapore. By deepening its security commitments through the OSA programme and joint military exercises, Japan wants to present itself as an alternative to the US and China. This is a crucial development in the wake of South Asian countries wanting to diversify their partnerships, beyond the reliance on the US and China. Further, Japan is also expanding its foothold in Southeast Asia by engaging in other security-related arrangements. Japan is also a part of the quadrilateral security arrangement that includes Australia, the Philippines, and the US called the “Squad”. In April 2024, the four nations carried out cooperative marine patrols inside Philippines’s exclusive economic zone in the South China Sea.⁹⁰

As a key partner towards promoting regionalism in Southeast Asia, Japan has been actively participating in a series of ASEAN-led mechanisms. Japan has also strengthened its bilateral relations with individual ASEAN member states. Given China’s increasing aggressive activities in the South China Sea, Japan shares overlapping concerns with other ASEAN nations such as Vietnam. The strategic convergence between Japan and Vietnam over the past decade has led to both nations elevating their relations by establishing a comprehensive strategic partnership in November 2023. Under the “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity in Asia and the World,” both sides agreed to broaden their security cooperation, particularly on the provision of Japanese defence equipment, maritime security cooperation, and technology transfers.⁹¹

Apart from Vietnam, Japan also elevated its relations with Cambodia to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2023. The status is significant

⁹⁰ Akshat Dwivedi, “From Quad to Squad: Informal Alliances in the Indo-Pacific”, *Geopolitical Monitor*, May 14, 2024.

⁹¹ Sebastian Strangio, “Vietnam, Japan Establish Comprehensive Strategic Partnership”, *The Diplomat*, November 28, 2023.

given that it is only extended to the close allies of Phnom Penh. Following the elevated partnership two Japan Maritime Self-Defence Force (JMSDF) ships, the Shimakaze (TV-3521) and Suzunami (DD-114), visited Cambodia's Ream Naval Base during February 22-24, 2024.⁹² Even though Cambodia is a close ally of China, Prime Minister Hun Manet has been widening the country's diplomatic outreach. The establishment of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership is an indication that Cambodia looks at deepening its partnership with Japan. The bilateral relations have seen a positive trajectory that includes the return of Japanese defence attaché and the visit of a Japanese warship for the first time to the upgraded Cambodia's Ream Naval Base in April 2025. Through the OSA programme, both sides are looking at further advancing their security and defence cooperation.⁹³

In April 2024, Japan and the US included the Philippines into a historic trilateral arrangement to bolster the free and open international order based on the rule of law. In July 2024, Japan and the Philippines signed the reciprocal access agreement (RAA) which came into effect after being ratified unanimously by the Philippines Senate in December. The RAA—the first Japan that signed with another Asian nation—will enhance security cooperation amidst increasing tensions by easing the entry of equipment and troops for combat training and disaster response. The RAA paves the way for more bilateral and multilateral security engagements, such as Japan's full participation in Balikatan, a Philippines-US exercise held annually, thereby strengthening cooperation among three longstanding allies in the region.⁹⁴ There are also deepening of defence ties that includes the establishment of high-level strategic dialogue and information sharing between Japan and the Philippines. This was announced during the bilateral meeting between their defence ministers on February 24, 2025, held in Manila. As a consequence of

⁹² "Japanese Naval Visit Announce", *The Phnom Penh Post*, February 6, 2024.

⁹³ Christopher Woody, "Japan Steps Up New Security Assistance to Countries Caught Between the US and China", *The Diplomat*, July 8, 2025.

⁹⁴ "Philippines ratifies landmark defense access pact with Japan", *Indo-Pacific Defence Forum*, December 6, 2024.

their shared security challenges in the Indo-Pacific region, both countries over that last two years have also strengthened their defence cooperation over China's increasingly assertive action in the East and South China Sea.⁹⁵

The first bilateral visit of Japan's Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba after taking office to Malaysia and Indonesia January 9-12, 2025 indicate the priority Southeast Asia has assumed. During his visit, the thrust was on advancing security partnerships with Southeast Asia, besides inking agreements on strengthening economic cooperation through enhanced investments in critical areas such as ports expansion, green energy, and semiconductors. Apart from Japan's Official Security Assistance to provide surveillance and patrol equipment such as high-speed patrol boats, there was discussions with Indonesia on plans to co-develop a warship for the Indonesian Navy.⁹⁶

Japan views Southeast Asia as critical for advancing the concept of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific region, whereby ASEAN's centrality is crucial for ensuring a rules-based order. By advancing its engagements amidst uncertainty over the US commitments to the region, Japan seeks to provide to the ASEAN nations with an alternative to China, both in the economic and security spheres.

Given Japan's own limitations, however, it continues to rely on its longstanding allies along with building new partnerships with other regional players. Therefore, Japan has been expanding its security foothold by expanding its engagement through bilateral, trilateral, and other multilateral arrangements. Through these collective actions, Japan could overcome its limitations to become a vital and a stabilising force in the region.

⁹⁵ "Philippine, Japan ministers agree to further enhance defence partnership", *The Straits Times*, February 24, 2025.

⁹⁶ Joanne Lin and William Choong, "Can Japan Provide Stability to Southeast Asia amid US Uncertainty?" *FULCRUM*, January 28, 2025.

Russia: Reinforcing its Great Power Status

Southeast Asia was not at the forefront of the Soviet's concern, given that territorially it was a central, north, and north-east Asian power. The Soviet Union had no traditional interests or even an extensive past record of involvement within Southeast Asia.⁹⁷ Even during the Cold War, despite its worldwide interests, the region did not figure prominently in its thinking. In comparison to Europe and Northeast Asia, the region did not really represent a major security interest to Soviet and its allies. This is due to the fact that Southeast Asian states such as Burma (Myanmar), Indonesia, and North Vietnam shared an anti-West and in particular anti-US posture. The possibility of these Southeast Asian nations joining a US-backed alliance remained low and, therefore, were regarded as safe zones by the Soviet. Southeast Asia geographical distance from the Soviet was also a major roadblock towards projecting its military power in the region. Further, the Soviet may have reasoned that it was impossible to penetrate into most of the Southeast Asia due to the presence of SEATO, regional states' bilateral defence agreements with Western powers, the US Seventh Fleet, and the US ground forces in Indochina. However, following the Bandung Conference in April 1955 and the Sino-Soviet rift in the late 1950s, the Soviets began to pay attention to the region; in particular was Indonesia. President Sukarno who pursued a foreign policy of neutrality and his emergence as an Afro-Asian leader following the Bandung Conference served Soviet's interest. The Middle East and South Asia were among the major regions of Soviet interest, where it was competing with the US that included expanding trade and investments in Egypt and India.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Peter Lyon, *War and Peace in South-East Asia*, (Oxford University Press: London, 1969), pp. 138.

⁹⁸ Bilveer Singh, *Moscow and Southeast Asia Since 1985: From U.S.S.R to the C.I.S.*, (Singapore Institute of International Affairs: Singapore, 1992), pp 5-7.

Since the 1960s, the significance of Southeast Asia for the Soviet became quite visible with its strategic interest in the Indian Ocean region. The region provided access to ports to the India Ocean, which led to increasing maritime activities by the Soviet Navy in order to safeguard its increasing trade with Southern Asian countries. During the 1970s, with the winding down of the Vietnam conflict, the withdrawal of SEATO forces from Indochina and the disintegration of the US' containment policy against Communism, there emerged a transformation in terms of Southeast Asia's political and military engagements. On December 25, 1970, the Royal Thai government signed its first trade agreement with the Soviet Union. Further, with the conclusion of Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew official visit to Moscow both sides signed a communique that expressed the intention of further expand trade, scientific, technical, and cultural cooperation. This period also witnessed improved Soviet relations with the Philippines. These positive developments were also possible on account of a number of factors, including diminishing confidence in Bangkok about the US security commitment, concern in Singapore about the economic losses due to the declining British presence and its decision to withdraw from the region by 1968. In the Philippines, there was pressure on the Marcos government to develop a more diverse foreign policy relations.⁹⁹ Further, a new development in the Indochina in 1975 leading to the complete Communisation and the subsequent attainment of hegemony by Hanoi in 1979 provided the Soviet for the first time ideological allies in in Southeast Asia. With Soviet establishing a friendship treaty with a now unified Vietnam further heightened its involvement in Southeast Asia.¹⁰⁰ These factors enabled a tremendous shift and provided an opportunity for the Soviet to begin establishing its presence in Southeast Asia.

⁹⁹ Melvin Gurtov , "The Soviet Presence in Southeast Asia: Growth and Implications", in Mark W. Zacher and R. Stephen Milne (ed), *Conflict and Stability in Southeast Asia*, (Anchor Books: New York, 1974), pp 283-287.

¹⁰⁰ Bilveer Singh, *Moscow and Southeast Asia Since 1985: From U.S.S.R to the C.I.S.*, (Singapore Institute of International Affairs: Singapore, 1992), pp 10.

During the Cold War, Southeast Asia from the Soviet's strategic interest was of a low priority and was overlooked as it was seen to be a domain of the American influence. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the growing American and Western influence, perceived to be a threat to Russian national security, made Moscow reassess its engagement with Southeast Asia. Therefore, driven by historical, political, and economic factors marked a shift in Russia's foreign policy priorities that included increased engagement with Southeast Asia aimed at reestablishing itself as a major player in global affairs. Russia began to deepen its defence cooperation with Indonesia and Vietnam. To demonstrate its capabilities and project power in Southeast Asia, Russia began engaging in military exercises, such as naval drills to challenge the dominance of US Navy. The move also helped it to improve its position relative to China's growing maritime influence. On the other hand, Russia also began establishing trade deals with ASEAN countries, mainly focused on energy exports and arms sales. Further, as the region is rich in rare earth minerals and energy, Russia began to deepen its interest to diversity its imports and reduce dependency.¹⁰¹

Trade between the Soviet Union and Southeast Asia in 1990 amounted to less than US \$1 billion, with the former having a negative trade balance with all the ASEAN countries. Further, with the collapse of the Soviet Union enhancing cooperation in the form of investments projects seemed problematic and uncertain due to lack of legal guarantees. Russia's participation in the annual ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conference, initially as a guest and after 1997 as an official dialogue partner and member of the ASEAN Regional Forum helped improve political relations. Improvements in terms of trade were also witnessed. Total trade between Russia and ASEAN went up from US \$ 1082.5 million in 1991 to US \$ 4440.3 million in 1995. In the same period

¹⁰¹ Karamala Areesh Kumar and Govind Anoop, "Russia's Growing Engagement in Southeast Asia: Geopolitical Ambitions and Strategic Implications", *Diplomatist*, January 15, 2025.

there was a fivefold increase in Russian exports to ASEAN countries from US \$ 530.5 million to US \$ 2751.2 million and a threefold increase in its imports from them from US \$ 551.8 million to US 1689.1 million. During this period Russia also established a number of joint ventures with counterparts from the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, and other ASEAN countries.¹⁰² With Southeast Asia under economic pressure on account of President Trump's trade policy, Russia is increasing its engagement in the region. As of 2023, Russia's trade turnover with ASEAN countries increased by 14.6% compared to the previous year. This positive trend continued in the first half of 2024, with a 20.5% increase. In November 2024, the 'World of Opportunities: Russia-ASEAN' International Business Forum was held in Kuala Lumpur. The two days forum was organised by the Ministry of Industry and Trade of the Russian Federation and the Trade Representation of the Russian Federation in Malaysia. The forum provided a unique platform to enhance trade relations between Russia and the ASEAN nations centered on energy, digital transformation, information security, technology, and innovations.¹⁰³

Russia's increasing influence in Southeast Asia is also being seen through its defence and security partnership. Apart from being a major arms exporter to Southeast Asian countries, today Moscow is elevating its defence relations with ASEAN countries through joint military trainings and exercises. In November 2024, the Indonesian and Russian navies conducted the Orruda Joint Training in the Java Sea near Surabaya, East Java. The joint training which took place from November 4-8, comprised of KRI I Gusti Ngurah Rai (332) frigate ship, KRI Frans Kaisiepo (368) corvette ship, and AS565 MBe Panther anti-submarine chopper from Indonesian side. Meanwhile, the Russian Navy deployed

¹⁰² Victor Sumsky, "Russia and ASEAN: Emerging Partnership", in Gennady Chufrin (ed), *Russia and Asia-Pacific Security*, (SIPRI, 1999), pp 147.

¹⁰³ "New Opportunities for Cooperation: The Russia-ASEAN Forum Concludes in Malaysia", *The Sun*, November 29, 2024.

two corvettes, RFS Gromky (335) and RFS Aldar Tsydenzhapov (339), the RFS Rezkiy (343) frigate, and RFS Pechenga medium tanker ship.¹⁰⁴

Russia projects itself as a great power with much of its diplomatic efforts focused on promoting multipolarisation through deeper coordination with ASEAN countries. Russia's approach to Southeast Asia includes both strengthening its bilateral relationships along with engaging in ASEAN-led forums. Russia's approach to Southeast Asia emphasises on ASEAN centrality and supports its efforts towards promoting regional peace and stability. Initiatives such as the Quad has been viewed with skepticism among some of the Southeast Asian nations, as they see it as a challenge to ASEAN's central role. Russia's engagement in Southeast Asia through its defence, energy, and economic integration reinforces ASEAN's efforts and central role in the region. Therefore, by expanding its geopolitical presence in Southeast Asia as a reliable partner, Russia is offering an alternative to the US, Chinese, and other external power dominance. Further, Russia's engagement in Southeast Asia aligns with its broader goal of promoting a multipolar international system. In the last two decades through its participation in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) grouping, Moscow has brought the interest of the emerging countries which in the past had been led by the Western countries.

Many of the Southeast Asian countries have joined the BRICS which provides an alternative to the Western-dominated systems to help navigate the uncertainties of the current global environment. This is enabling Russia to erode the US and Western hegemony on the international system and promote the emergence of alternative power centres.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ "Indonesia, Russian Navies complete Orruda Joint Training", *ANTARA*, November 9, 2024.

¹⁰⁵ Karamala Areesh Kumar and Govind Anoop, "Russia's Growing Engagement in Southeast Asia: Geopolitical Ambitions and Strategic Implications", *Diplomatist*, January 15, 2025.

India: Historical Ties to Forging New Security Partnerships

Despite deep historical connect with Southeast Asia, in terms of shaping regional political and security arrangements, India's influence in comparison to the other major powers remains the weakest. Nevertheless, over the last few decades through active participation in ASEAN and other regional mechanisms, India has been bolstering its strategic ties in Southeast Asia across diplomatic, economic, and security domains. Southeast Asia has always been an important strategic region for India as described by K. M. Panikkar in his 1943 book *The Future of Southeast Asia*. According to Panikkar, South and Southeast Asia formed a single interlinked strategic unit that is dependent on sea power for its security.¹⁰⁶

The current international environment marked by increasing uncertainties and contestations is a key impetus for India's growing political and security role in Southeast Asia. Southeast Asia has always been a region of high economic and strategic significance for India. While India's relations with Southeast Asian countries goes back to antiquity, diplomatic relations were established only in the post-colonial period. Further, the imperatives of the Cold War geopolitics did not help in building the relations between India and countries in Southeast Asia. India relations with Southeast Asia until about the late-1980s were largely looked from the prism of a shared civilisational and historical links. While this still forms an important basis of the contemporary relationship, India's worldview began to evolve following the collapse of the Soviet Union and an economic crisis at home. The end of the Cold war that witnessed the emergence of new centres of power, partnerships, and alliances ensured that the old relations are re-evaluated and reshaped. India and countries in Southeast Asia were no exception to this. The 'Look East' policy launched in the early 1990s had an underlining aim of connecting India's economy through trade with the

¹⁰⁶ K.M. Panikkar, *The Future of South-East Asia*, (Institute of Pacific Relations: New York, 1943), pp. 11-12.

states in Southeast Asia. Through this policy, India has been able to establish and revive its relations with the Southeast Asian countries as well as other East Asian nations such as South Korea and Japan.¹⁰⁷

In renewing its engagement with Southeast Asia in the post-Cold War period, the relations were primarily structured through ASEAN. India was invited to be a sectoral partner of ASEAN in 1992, and in December 1995, India was made a full dialogue partner that provided a broader agenda for cooperation, which also included the areas of security and political cooperation. As India began to re-engage with Southeast Asia driven by economic priorities, it led to cooperation on security issues. The establishment of the ASEAN Regional Forum to which India was admitted into in 1997 marked a new phase. India's priority on economic and institutional partnership began to move towards building wider political and security relationship. In 2002, India was elevated to a Summit-level partner of ASEAN and also became part of various ASEAN-led security mechanisms such as the East Asia Summit established in 2005 and the ASEAN Defence Ministerial Meeting Plus established in 2010. In 2012, when India-ASEAN strategic partnership was established, it marked the 30 years of India-ASEAN relations. At the ASEAN Summit in Cambodia in 2022, the India-ASEAN Strategic Partnership was also elevated to the level of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.¹⁰⁸

The India-ASEAN relations were re-drawn firstly through the 'Look East' policy, establishing economic relations. The 'Act East' Policy of 2014, with an expansive scope, furthered the relations. Over the decades through India's engagement with ASEAN, India was able to further deepen and develop unique relations with individual countries of Southeast Asia. The table below indicate the partnerships India has established with ASEAN and its member states since the 'Act East' policy.

¹⁰⁷ "India's look East Policy", *Economic and Political Weekly*, VOL XLV No 48, p. 8.

¹⁰⁸ "Overview ASEAN-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership", *ASEAN*, June 2024.

Table 1: List of India's Partnership with ASEAN and the Member States

Country	Level of Partnership	Year
ASEAN	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	2022
Indonesia	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	2018
Malaysia	Enhanced Strategic Partnership	2015
Philippines	Strategic Partnership	2025
Singapore	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	2024
Vietnam	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	2016

India's Increasing Defence Cooperation with Southeast Asia

As Southeast Asia is central to India's Indo-Pacific vision, the need for expanding defence and security cooperation becomes a key pillar. While today India is increasingly becoming a significant strategic player in Southeast Asia, its security engagement through its naval diplomacy began in the early 1990s. These included both bilateral and multilateral joint naval exercises conducted with various nations in Southeast Asia and other regions. Indian Navy's exercise MILAN provided this very opportunity in fostering closer cooperation among navies of countries in the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean region. In February 1995, India, Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, and Sri Lanka participated with their warships in the first MILAN exercise. Since then, MILAN exercise has been a biennial naval exercise with the list of participating countries increasing from the original five to include Australia, Bangladesh, Brunei, Malaysia, Maldives, Myanmar, Mauritius, New Zealand, the Philippines, and Seychelles.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ Hari Saran, "Indo-Thailand Maritime Cooperation in the Changing World", in Sanjay Kumar (ed.) *India-Thailand Bilateral Relations*, (Mohit Publication: New Delhi, 2013), pp. 73-75.

The Indian Navy also stepped up its port call in the region and intensified the number of naval exercises that included for the time in the South China Sea in 2000. In 2005, the Indian Aircraft carrier, INS Viraat, arrived for the first time in the ports of Southeast Asia—Singapore, Jakarta in Indonesia, and Klang in Malaysia.¹¹⁰ India and Southeast Asian countries are focused on further institutionalising security cooperation in which both sides are prioritising maritime issues and its challenges. India has built close defence ties with the following Southeast Asian nations:

1. Malaysia

India has also been stepping up its security role in Southeast Asia through institutionalised military-to-military cooperation. These include MoU on defence cooperation signed with Malaysia in 1993. This has enabled a framework for defence and security dialogues and cooperation through joint ventures, joint development projects, procurement, logistics, maintenance support, training, and education.

During the visit to Malaysia on October 26-28, 2010 by the then PM Manmohan Singh, a Framework for Strategic Partnership between the two countries was established. The framework for a strategic partnership was established with the intent to elevate the bilateral relations to the level of a long-term and strategic partnership. On November 23, 2015, during the official visit of PM Modi to Malaysia, both sides reaffirmed their determination to take the strategic partnership to the next level by deepening the existing areas of cooperation, while also exploring new areas.¹¹¹

2. Indonesia

India-Indonesia signed Defence Cooperation Agreement in 2001, which stipulated the establishment of a Joint Defence Cooperation

¹¹⁰ C. Raja Mohan, “India’s Geopolitics and Southeast Asian Security”, *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 2008.

¹¹¹ “India-Malaysia Relations”, *Ministry of External Affairs*, January 2017.

Committee (JDCC) to further enhance defence cooperation.¹¹² The New Strategic Partnership signed during the visit of the then President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono to India from November 21-23, 2005 called for stronger defence relations.¹¹³ This encouraged both countries to expand their defence cooperation in which cooperation in the maritime space is, perhaps, the most significant.

Apart from engaging in the multi-nation MILAN naval exercise, India and Indonesia have been expanding their maritime cooperation in the area of coordinated patrols, joint bilateral or multilateral exercises, as well as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. Joint naval exercises and patrols and regular port calls by respective navies have become a regular feature of the broader India-Indonesia defence cooperation.¹¹⁴

In December 2016, President Jokowi undertook a state visit to India during which both sides discussed the importance of maritime cooperation, critical for the stability of the surrounding region as well. The “Statement on Maritime Cooperation” during the visit provides a broad range of cooperation that included maritime security, maritime industry, maritime safety, and navigation.¹¹⁵

India and Indonesia upgraded their partnership to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in May 2018. The establishment of this new partnership provided the opportunity for deeper collaboration in the defence and security spheres. Through the enhanced maritime

¹¹² Pradeep Kaushiva and Om Prakesh Dahiya, “India-Indonesia Defence cooperation in the Indo-Pacific Region”, in Rajiv K Bhatia and Rahul Mishra (eds), *The Peacock and the Garuda: An Overview of India-Indonesia Relations*, KW Publishers, New Delhi, 2015, pp. 114-115.

¹¹³ “Joint Declaration between the Republic of India and the Republic of Indonesia”, *Ministry of External Affairs*, November 23, 2005.

¹¹⁴ Pradeep Kaushiva and Om Prakesh Dahiya, “India-Indonesia Defence cooperation in the Indo-Pacific Region”, in Rajiv K Bhatia and Rahul Mishra (eds), *The Peacock and the Garuda: An Overview of India-Indonesia Relations*, KW Publishers, New Delhi, 2015, p. 115-119.

¹¹⁵ “India-Indonesia Joint Statement during the State visit of President of Indonesia to India”, *Ministry of External Affairs*, December 12, 2016.

cooperation under the CSP, Indonesia has allowed the berthing of Indian Navy ships in Sabang with INS Sumitra becoming the first warship to dock at the Sabang deep-sea port on July 11, 2018.¹¹⁶ Further, the CSP enables widening of India-Indonesia security cooperation to include exploration and uses of outer space for peaceful purposes.¹¹⁷

3. Vietnam

The first MoU between India and Vietnam was signed in 1994—a formal Defence Protocol in March 2000 where both nations signed agreements on joint military exercises, joint campaigns on anti-piracy in the South China Sea and anti-insurgency training. In 2003, a Joint Declaration was signed which binds both nations to conduct periodic high-ranking visits, including the expansion of cooperation in the defence and security spheres. The signing of the MoU on Defence Cooperation by the two Defence Ministers in November 2009 helped build closer interaction between the two nations through regular defence dialogue, training, exercises, Navy and Coast Guard ship visits, along with capacity building.¹¹⁸

In 2015, India and Vietnam signed a Joint Vision Statement on Defence Cooperation for 2015-20 which committed both India and Vietnam to regular defence exchange and interaction, defence trade, training, and cooperation in the development of new technologies. Through the Joint Vision Statement, India and Vietnam agreed to step up cooperation and promote collaboration between the army, air force, navy, and coast guard.

On June 8, 2022, during the visit of Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, to Vietnam both sides signed the “Joint Vision Statement on India-

¹¹⁶ “India’s Tsunami Relief for Indonesia Supplements a Strategic Pacific Twist”, *Strategic News International*, October 3, 2018.

¹¹⁷ “Shared Vision of India-Indonesia Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific”, *Press Information Bureau*, May 30, 2018.

¹¹⁸ P V Rao, “India and Vietnam: Forging a Durable Strategic Partnership”, in Vijay Sakhuja (ed.), *India-Vietnam Strategic Partnership: Exploring Vistas for Expanded Cooperation*, Pentagon Press, New Delhi, 2011, pp. 152-153.

Vietnam Defence Partnership towards 2030,” wherein both sides acknowledged that the bilateral Defence and Security cooperation is an important factor for the future stability in the Indo-Pacific region.¹¹⁹ The continued and increasing bilateral defence cooperation over the years, which enabled the establishment of the Strategic Partnership in 2007, was elevated to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in September during the visit of India’s Prime Minister to Vietnam.¹²⁰ Defence and security cooperation between India and Vietnam has become a central pillar under the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

4. Singapore

India and Singapore signed a Defence Cooperation Agreement in October 2003. During the visit of PM Modi to Singapore in November 2015—which also marked the 50th anniversary of the India-Singapore diplomatic relations—a Joint Declaration on a Strategic Partnership was signed, elevating the relations to a Strategic Partnership. Nine bilateral documents were signed in the areas of defence, maritime security, cyber security, narcotics trafficking, urban planning, civil aviation, and culture.

India and Singapore have a longstanding and comprehensive partnership, which includes Annual Ministerial and Secretary-level dialogues; staff-level talks between three wings of armed forces; training of Singapore Army and Air Force in India; and the participation in annual naval exercises.¹²¹ The inaugural Trilateral Maritime Exercise between India, Singapore, and Thailand (SITMEX)—announced by PM Modi in his keynote address at the 2018 Shangri La Dialogue—was conducted in September 2019 in Andaman Sea.¹²²

¹¹⁹ “India, Vietnam Sign ‘Joint Vision Statement’ For Defence Partnership 2023”, *Outlook*, January 18, 2024.

¹²⁰ “Press Statement by Prime Minister during his visit to Vietnam [September 03, 2016]”, *Ministry of External Affairs*, September 3, 2016.

¹²¹ “India-Singapore Relations”, *Ministry of External Affairs*, January 2018.

5. Thailand

In the last two decades, India and Thailand have been expanding their military engagement in the maritime space. This further broadens the scope of the bilateral security cooperation to ensure the safety of sea lanes of communication (SLOCs), seaborne military threats as well as non-conventional threats to human beings such as low-intensity armed conflicts, narcoterrorism, maritime piracy, and arms trafficking in the sea. Thus, securing the maritime space in the new century expanded to not only protect one's territory but also secure the sea lines necessary for the free flow of trade and commerce.¹²³

The Indo-Thailand Joint Working Group on security cooperation, established in 2003, provides a useful framework to push forward cooperation in maritime fields, including security cooperation to include counter-terrorism and military cooperation. In the area of maritime security cooperation, India and Thailand have been cooperating through multilateral naval exercise such as MILAN. Apart from the biennially held MILAN exercise, both navies also interact in other multilateral fora such as the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) and the Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS).¹²⁴

6. The Philippines

During Indian President Abdul Kalam Azad's visit to the Philippines from February 3-6, 2006, India and the Philippines signed an agreement for defence cooperation. The agreement looked at enhancing defence cooperation through the exchange of military training expertise and information; exchange of military instructors/observers; exchange of

¹²² "India-Singapore Relations", *High Commission of India, Singapore*, January 2020.

¹²³ Vibhanshu Shekhar, "India's Maritime Security and ASEAN: Issues of Narcoterrorism, Piracy and Poaching", in P V Rao (ed.), *India and ASEAN: Partners at Summit*, (KW Publishers: New Delhi, 2008), pp. 195-196.

¹²⁴ Hari Saran, "Indo-Thailand Maritime Cooperation in the Changing World", in Sanjay Kumar (ed.) *India-Thailand Bilateral Relations*, (Mohit Publication: New Delhi, 2013), pp. 73-75.

visits of military aircraft and military naval vessels; exchange of information that is mutually beneficial; and other spheres of defence cooperation.

India and the Philippines also signed a Joint Declaration for cooperation to combat international terrorism during the visit of Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo to India from October 4-6, 2007. Through this joint declaration, the emphasis was on information sharing, cooperation among law enforcement agencies, cooperation in capacity building, and in the prevention and suppression of the financing of terrorist acts.¹²⁵

The Joint Defence Cooperation Committee (JDCC), which had its first meeting in Manila in January 2012, reviewed and exchanged views on evolving regional security concerns as well as multilateral engagements. The two parties exchanged views on the future activities of cooperation that would further consolidate their defence and security relations. Under this, cooperation in the maritime space has emerged as a major component.¹²⁶

In January 2022, India and the Philippines signed a US \$ 374.96 million deal for BrahMos supersonic cruise missiles. The deal includes the delivery of three Missiles batteries, training for operators and maintainers as well as the necessary Integrated Logistics Support (ILS) package.¹²⁷ On April 2024, the first battery of the supersonic Brahmos missiles was delivered to the Philippines. This deal marks a major shift in India's security policy, showcasing its efforts to deepen cooperation with Southeast Asia through its defence capabilities.

¹²⁵ "PH-India Relations", *Embassy of the Philippines, New Delhi, India*.

¹²⁶ "Bilateral Political and Cultural Relations", *Embassy of India, Manila, Philippines*.

¹²⁷ "Philippines looking to buy more BrahMos Missiles", *The Hindu Business Line*, October 13, 2023.

THE CHANGING SECURITY DYNAMICS: NEW AND RENEWED ALIGNMENTS

Southeast Asia, which is located strategically at the confluence of major sea lines of communication, is critical for the flow of goods and energy. Laying at the epicentre of geo-strategic competition among the Indo-Pacific powers, Southeast Asia seeks to secure its priorities through new and renewed partnerships. The security challenges on account of the evolving geo-strategic dynamics in the Indo-Pacific is becoming a key determinant in shaping the new and renewed alignments.

MAJOR SECURITY CONCERNS FOR SOUTHEAST ASIA

Southeast Asia finds itself at the crossroads of interest of external powers jostling for strategic influence and dominance. The region continues to face unprecedented challenges in the rapidly changing global geopolitical and economic environment where the evolving dynamics between major powers is leading to the intensification of tensions. While the aggressive behaviour by China in the South China Sea is the region's top geopolitical concerns, there are other external developments with implications on the region.

WORRYING TRENDS IN THE TAIWAN STRAITS

The increasing hostilities in the Taiwan Strait would have significant implications for the region, given the geographical proximity and economic ties with both China and Taiwan. In the recent years, the US has enhanced its commitment to the security of Taiwan, resulting in China viewing this as a threat to the status quo vis-à-vis its sovereignty. Therefore, Southeast Asia cannot be insulated from a fallout or any kind of escalations as a consequence of the Taiwan conflict. This is noteworthy given that there are over 7,00,000 Southeast Asian migrant workers in Taiwan, and the country is also deeply integrated into the regional supply chain. Therefore, any conflict across the Strait between

China, Taiwan, and the US would derail economic growth and the regional stability.

As per the 2024 State of Southeast Asia Survey, 44.2 percent expressed concerns over the economic implications in case of an outbreak of hostilities in the Taiwan Straits. The deteriorating situation across the Taiwan Straits may also adversely affect the situation in the adjacent South China Sea. China has repeatedly conducted exercises and training in Taiwan's periphery and ramped up activities in the South China Sea. This has raised fears about increasing tensions with the US, which is also intensifying activities through its Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) and other bilateral and multilateral joint exercises. Meanwhile, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has also repeatedly conducted exercises and training in Taiwan's periphery while also ramping up its activities in the South China Sea.

ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

The conflict between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip, which began on October 7, 2023, continued to escalate and expand to other regions. Since 2004, through its joint communique, ASEAN has been supporting the two-state solution for Palestine. Southeast Asia, on October 20, 2023, through the ASEAN Foreign Ministerial Meeting, issued a statement calling for an immediate cession of hostilities, respect for international humanitarian law, and expressed readiness to support negotiations for lasting peace between both sides.

However, the conflict continued to intensify throughout 2024, and despite Southeast Asia being far from the Israel-Palestine conflict, there was the economic spillover effect on the region. Economic interdependencies, owing to expanding global supply chains, and labour migration made the Israel-Palestine conflict relevant to Southeast Asia. Both Israel and Palestine are key trade partners for ASEAN nations, with increasing global supply chain linkages. Among foreign workers in Israel, Thais constitute the largest group at 23 percent followed by Filipino workers at 21 percent.¹²⁸

¹²⁸ Khobtham Neelapaichit, "Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Impact on ASEAN", *International Institute for Trade and Development*, October 25, 2023.

Apart from the economic impact, there is also the increasing tendency among Islamist radical groups in Southeast Asia that are capitalising on the conflict to advance their ideological goals. On February 2, 2025, Indonesia witnessed large scale demonstrations across its cities in West Java, Central Java, South Kalimantan, and Yogyakarta. The protests, organised under the Aliansi Muslim Bela Palestine, demanded an end to Israel's attacks on Gaza and its occupation of the Palestinian territories. The Hizb ut-Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), an Islamist group, could be behind these protests, as it has been active thorough its digital and social media campaigns.¹²⁹

The 20-point comprehensive plan to end the Gaza conflict, brokered by the US, in October 2025, was welcomed by ASEAN.¹³⁰ Therefore, Southeast Asian nations have been deeply connected with the developments taking place in Gaza. Since the beginning of the conflict, the region has managed its response deftly, through ASEAN, to limit the adverse impacts, economically and politically, stemming out of the conflict.

ESCALATING TENSIONS IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

The ongoing dispute in the South China Sea, which began in the 1990s in the aftermath of the Spratly dispute, is considered to be a major conflict in the post-Cold War Southeast Asia. China has been pushing its excessive maritime claims through its coercive tactics in the South China Sea. The dispute between Southeast Asia and China emerged in the 1990s when Beijing announced the 1992 Territorial Sea and Contiguous Zone Law. This law enabled China's claims of 12 nm territorial sea and 24 nm contiguous zone from its coastal baselines. In 1998, the Exclusive Economic Zone and Continental Shelf Law declared that China's EEZ and continental shelf extended 200 nautical

¹²⁹ Muhammad Makmun Rasyid, "How Hizb ut-Tahrir Is Exploiting the Gaza War to Revive Its Global Islamist Agenda", *The Diplomat*, February 17, 2025.

¹³⁰ "Southeast Asian nations back Trump's Gaza plan, urge 'durable peace'", *Philippines News Agency*, October 27, 2025.

miles from baselines and potentially further for the extended continental shelf.¹³¹

The UNCLOS, agreed in 1982 and in force since 1994, adopted the 12 nautical miles as the baseline for territorial waters. However, it also added to the baseline a contiguous zone of 24 nautical mile and an exclusive economic zone and continental shelf of 200 nautical miles. Further, UNCLOS provisions of continental shelf has extended the reach of the territorial waters up to 350 nautical miles from its baseline. And islands—although not barren rocks or artificial islands—are subject to the same provision as mainland coasts. This has created overlapping claims among coastal states especially in the Western Pacific which are in close proximity. Such competing claims have escalated geopolitical tensions regarding the South China Sea. In this regard, China, despite its ratification of the UNCLOS, has used barren rocks and artificial islands to challenge the rights of its neighbours.¹³²

ASEAN's collective concern with the conflict was initially expressed in a formal declaration, stressing the need for a peaceful settlement of the dispute. The Manila Meeting of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers in July 1992 produced the 'ASEAN Declaration on the South China Sea'. The declaration stressed the necessity to resolve all sovereignty and jurisdictional issues, pertaining to the South China Sea by peaceful means without resorting to force and urged all parties concerned to exercise restraint. While negotiations on codes of conduct were slow, bilateral agreements on non-use of force to cooperation in safety of navigation, marine research, between China and some of the ASEAN countries were concluded. These agreements while did not improve the overall situation in the South China Sea, it, however, underscored ASEAN's ineffectiveness towards a multilateral solution to the ongoing issue.

¹³¹ Issac B Kardon, *China's Law of the Sea*, (Yale University Press: New Haven, 2023), p. 77.

¹³² Hew Strachan, "Underwriting Innovation: Maritime Strategy and Geopolitics", in Alessio Patalano and James A. Russell (eds), *Maritime Strategy and Naval Innovation; Technology, Bureaucracy, and the Problem of Change in the Age of Competition*, (Naval Institute Press: Annapolis, 2021), p. 27-28.

Despite this, ASEAN and China were able to continue their negotiations leading to the signing of a ‘Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea’ (DOC), at the ASEAN Summit in Cambodia in November 2002. The DOC, while emphasising all parties to exercise self-restraint, promote trust, ensure confidence-building measures, and worked towards cooperation, it did not include specific commitment to stop the erection of new structures in the disputed area. Moreover, the declaration being legally non-binding has made it difficult to ensure commitments for regional stability in the South China Sea.¹³³

Currently, ASEAN and China are engaged in the negotiation of the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (COC). In 2018, ASEAN and China released the Single Draft Negotiating Text. Both sides announced in July 2023 that they had completed its second reading. The third reading of the draft negotiating text commenced in October 2023.¹³⁴ The third reading of the COC was completed as on July 2025.¹³⁵ The progress on the COC has been slow on the account of internal differences among ASEAN member states. It is quite evident that the US-China rivalry is playing out in the ongoing and escalating tensions in the South China Sea. Beijing has repeatedly stated that external interference by the US and its allies is a cause for its discord with ASEAN over the SCS, which is also delaying the conclusion of the COC.

Since the 2009 publication of China’s nine dash line map, Beijing has demonstrated both its capacity and intent to enforce its claims.¹³⁶ Under President Xi Jinping, China’s SCS policy has undergone a major

¹³³ Amitav Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order*, (Routledge; Oxon, 2009), pp. 156-159.

¹³⁴ “China, ASEAN unlikely to achieve Code of Conduct in 2024: Experts”, *Benar News*, February 7, 2024.

¹³⁵ “South China Sea Code of Conduct moves forward amid tensions”, *New Strait Times*, July 10, 2025.

¹³⁶ Ann Marie Murphy, “Great Power Rivalries, Domestic Politics and Southeast Asian Foreign Policy: Exploring the Linkages”, *Asian Security*, August 4, 2017.

adjustment, from his predecessor's passive adherence to the SCS status quo to stress on pushing its core interests more vigorously. Xi's new approach is assertive in response to the changed SCS security environment, which includes heavier intervention from outside powers, more coordinated ASEAN stance behind its claimants, and mounting international pressure on China to follow the UNCLOS rules and norms. China does not reject multilateralism as a mechanism for crisis management, as evidenced by its ongoing COC engagement with the ASEAN. However, it continues to insist on bilateralism in seeking sovereignty resolution. While there are merits to an early conclusion of the COC in the SCS, which would help avoid stand-offs and prevent all parties from pushing the envelopes, there remains a challenge for formulating a mutually acceptable COC. Some ASEAN countries want the COC to address China's sovereignty claims, which is based on its nine-dash-line. Beijing, on the other hand, is against touching on the issue of the EEZ demarcation and nine-dash-line, which according to them would render the COC a zero-sum game.¹³⁷

EMERGING SECURITY ORDER AMIDST TENSIONS IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

Since 2010, the issue of the South China Sea has become a focal point of the US-China confrontation, on account of Beijing's militarisation and other illicit activities in the disputed waters. This has spurred actions that include land reclamation activities to military build-up to new security realignments being witnessed today in Southeast Asia. The great power rivalry on account of China's unlawful actions in the South China Sea has raised concerns regarding the possibility of an armed conflict between the major powers. Increased Chinese grey zone activities and the increasing militarisation of artificial islands on the disputed SCS has increased joint military operations among allies and partners in the contested waterways—including the US counter-action with its Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs).

¹³⁷ You Ji, "Managing the South China Sea Dilemma: China's Strategy and Policy", in Lowell Dittmer and Ngeow Chow Bing (ed), *Southeast Asia and China: A Contest in Mutual Socialization*, (World Scientific Publishing Co: Singapore, 2017), p. 51-52 and 60-61.

The number of joint land and naval exercises as a consequence of the new and renewed defence cooperation is making Southeast Asia a more militarily active zone. This increasing activities along the contested waters of the SCS has raised concerns of military confrontation which would be detrimental for Southeast Asia's economic and regional stability. Under President Biden, there were efforts to intensify diplomatic and security cooperation with Southeast Asia as a consequence of Chinese increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea. The Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States, which was released in February 2022, underlined the importance of ASEAN as being central towards addressing the region's key challenges. While supporting ASEAN's multilateralism efforts in the region, the Biden administration also began to strengthen its alliances and partnerships by establishing a number of bilateral and minilateral cooperation. These actions of the US received a mixed reaction within Southeast Asia as it was perceived to further heighten the already complex security environment. The Biden administration has conducted FONOPs regularly, and in July 2022, sailed missile destroyer USS Benfold through the Paracel Islands.¹³⁸

Since 2023, the South China Sea witnessed a large number of incidents involving Chinese vessels and Southeast Asian claimants. The number of incidents especially between the Philippines and China in the disputed waters of the South China Sea has been on the rise. During these standoffs, Chinese coastguards are increasingly adopting grey-zone tactics against the Philippines' civilian vessels. China in 2024 stepped up its coercive actions against the Philippine Navy, coast guard, and civilian vessels and aircraft operating legally in the Philippines' Exclusive Economic Zone. On February 5, 2024, Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) accused the Chinese ships of blocking their resupply mission near the Second Thomas Shoal. The dangerous manoeuvres and blocking by the Chinese Coast Guard vessels led to the collision between the MRRV-4407 and China Coast Guard 21555, causing structural damage to the

¹³⁸ Shoji Tomotaka, "ASEAN's Neutrality; A Survival amid US-China Confrontation", in Masuda Masayuki ed, *The Shifting Dynamics of Great Power Competition*, (Interbooks Co., Ltd; Tokyo, 2023), p. 98-99, 101, and 107-108.

PCG vessel. On March 5, 2024, Chinese and PCG vessels collided off the disputed Second Thomas Shoal during a supply run to the BRP Sierra Madre¹³⁹.

According to the Philippines officials, the Chinese coast guard ships and accompanying vessels blocked the Philippine coast guard and supply vessels and executed dangerous maneuvers that caused two minor collisions between the Chinese ships and two of the Philippine vessels. While the Philippine coast guard vessel BRP Sindangan sustained minor structural damage from the collision, the resupply vessel Unaizah May 4 was further hit by water cannon blasted from two Chinese coast guard ships, causing injury to multiple Filipino crew members.¹⁴⁰

China's other actions include the enactment of Provisions on Administrative Enforcement Procedures for Coast Guard Agencies,

¹³⁹ The BRP Sierra Madre is a second world war-era navy warship which has been deliberately grounded by the Philippines military in the late 1990s in the shallow of Second Thomas Shoal and help mark its territory. The BRP Sierra Madre that serves as an outpost for a small contingent of Philippine troops has ensured the reef remain under Philippines's control since 1999. The Second Thomas Shoal which is fifteen kilometers long and five kilometers wide, is located approximately 105 nautical miles from the Philippines' western island of Palawan and is part of the Philippines' 200 nautical mile Exclusive Economic Zone. However, through its nine-dash line China has been claiming sovereignty over most of the SCS cutting into the EEZ of the Philippines and other countries in the region. The Second Thomas Shoal is located very close to the south-eastern fringe of Beijing's nine-dash line and serves as a strategic pathway to Reed Bank, which is believed to hold oil and natural gas resources. This has caught China's interest which claims the area and has surrounded the shoal with coast guard, navy, and suspected militia ships to prevent the Filipino forces from delivering construction materials to reinforce the BRP Sierra Madre. Beijing has also repeatedly demanded that the BRP Sierra Madre be towed away by the Philippines, with the reasoning that it sits on the waters adjacent to Ren'ai Reef – the name Beijing uses for the Second Thomas Shoal. *See:* Rebecca Ratcliffe, "Why the rusting wreck of a second world war ship is so important to China", *The Guardian*, October 30, 2023.

¹⁴⁰ Sebastian Strangio, "China Coast Guard Again Damages Philippine Boat Near Disputed Shoal", *The Diplomat*, March 25, 2024.

which gives Beijing ostensible legal cover to detain foreign vessels in “waters under Chinese jurisdiction.” Further, in November, China issued the coordinates for baselines around Huangyan Dao—the Chinese name for Scarborough Shoal—and deposited a copy with the United Nations.¹⁴¹

In October 2024, tensions further escalated when the CCG rammed and employed water cannons against the Philippine government vessels near Thitu Island. The United States and other allies and partners responded with firm shows of support for the Philippines, condemning the Chinese action. From October 13 to October 17, vessels from the United States, the Philippines, Japan, Canada, and France conducted joint naval exercises in the South China Sea.

In response, China initiated parallel military drills and installed two unscrewed buoys at Scarborough for the first time. Further, Chinese Su-35 fighter jet dangerously intercepted a Royal Australian Air Force P-8A surveillance plane in international airspace over the South China Sea on October 19, releasing flares close to the aircraft. This action was condemned by Australia with the United States backing its concerns.¹⁴²

The current administration under President Marcos Jr is taking a fundamentally different position unlike his predecessor, who adopted a non-confrontational approach and a policy of strategic re-orientation away from the United States towards China. On the SCS issue, Marcos Jr before taking office made it clear that he would support the 2016 arbitration ruling and would continue using the ruling to assert the country’s territorial rights.¹⁴³ However, the string of incidents in the SCS since the beginning of 202 altered President Marcos Jr’s approach

¹⁴¹ Carl Thayer, “The State of the South China Sea; Coercion at Sea, Slow Progress on a Code of Conduct”, *The Diplomat*, January 27, 2025.

¹⁴² Julia Rocio Gatdula, Lauren Mai, and Gregory B. Poling, “The Latest on Southeast Asia: South China Sea Updates”, *CSIS*, October 23, 2025.

¹⁴³ Temjenmeren Ao, “Philippines under a New Administration led by Marcos Jr”, *ICWA*, July 5, 2022.

to dealing with China. Given the recurring incidences in the SCS, the Philippines has sought to counter Chinese assertiveness by enhancing cooperation with its traditional security ally, the US and other regional powers. This has further altered the region's security dynamics, shaped predominantly by China attempting to alter the status quo through its coercive activities at sea.

Vietnam, which has been on the receiving end of the Chinese aggression in the East Sea (South China Sea) in the past, has significantly accelerated the expansion of its outposts in the Spratly Islands. Vietnam began its massive island reclamation campaign in 2021, focussed mostly on building new harbours and runways.¹⁴⁴ According to Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI) "... Vietnam has created 692 new acres of land across a total of 10 features, compared to 404 acres created in the first 11 months of 2023 and 342 acres in 2022. This brings the total of Vietnam's overall dredging and landfill (including both landfill and harbour/channel dredging) in disputed areas of the South China Sea to approximately 2,360 acres—roughly half of China's 4,650 acres. This is a major change from just three years ago, when the total amount of Vietnamese dredging and landfill was just 329 acres—less than one-tenth of China's total...". The AMTI has projected that Hanoi's reclamation activities would soon match and likely surpass China's own island-building efforts.¹⁴⁵ Through this, Vietnam wants to boost its maritime presence, while continuing with its naval modernisation programme, which it has been underway since 2000. This includes the purchase of six Russian Kilo-class submarines, four Gepard-3.9 frigates, and 36 Sukhoi Su-30MK2 multirole aircraft. The upgraded military hardware and the maritime facilities in the Spratly would help increase the patrolling capabilities of its naval assets.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ Khang Vu, "How Vietnam's Non-Aligned Foreign Policy Helps Bolster Its Position in the South China Sea", *The Diplomat*, October 7, 2025.

¹⁴⁵ "Hanoi in High Gear: Vietnam's Spratly Expansion Accelerates", *Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative*, June 7, 2024.

¹⁴⁶ Khang Vu, "How Vietnam's Non-Aligned Foreign Policy Helps Bolster Its Position in the South China Sea", *The Diplomat*, October 7, 2025.

SECURITY REALIGNMENTS AND RENEWED COOPERATION

China, by asserting its presence in the region through an approach that enables it to enforce its claims to territories, is attempting to alter the realities on the ground. China, which poses both sovereignty and security challenge, could undermine international laws governing maritime disputes. The nature of China's challenge in the SCS is pressuring the navies of Southeast Asian countries to address the multitude of operational demands in order to counter Beijing's behaviour. This includes joint maritime exercises which have become more frequent among the navies of allies and partnering nations. This would provide valuable opportunities to train, exercise and develop tactical interoperability.

The overlapping claims of Southeast Asian countries with China and the latter's growing aggression are becoming major concerns. South Asian countries, which are part of the ongoing dispute, are deepening intra-regional bilateral security cooperation to build deterrence against Chinese expansionism. The geo-political tensions and contestation, especially witnessed in the South China Sea, are pressuring Southeast Asian countries to diversify their security partnerships.

The need to address the multitude of operational demands in order to counter coercive behaviour in the South China Sea has been pivotal in shaping the security architecture in the region. The rapid growth of China as a military power and its renewed activities in the South China Sea is becoming a concern for other Southeast Asian countries. Given China's actions in the disputed waters in recent years has become a major driver for claimant as well as non-claimant countries such to advance their security and defence engagements.

INDONESIA ADVANCING ITS DEFENCE ENGAGEMENTS

Indonesia, which considers itself a non-claimant state in the South China Sea, has faced Beijing insistence that its exclusive economic zone and continental shelf around the Natuna Islands overlaps with the nine-dash line. In Jakarta's view, China's nine-dash line has no legal basis. Rejecting Beijing's claim, Jakarta asserts that it has no overlapping

jurisdiction with China. Indonesia, in accordance with the United National Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), is entitled to sovereign rights over its EEZ around the Natuna Islands and the exclusive access to the resources that lie within it. However, over the years, the EEZ surrounding the Natuna Islands, which is rich in resources, has witnessed a number of tense run-ins between Indonesia and China.¹⁴⁷

A day after President Prabowo inauguration on October 20, 2024, there was an incident between Indonesian maritime agency and the Chinese Coast Guard in which the latter was interfering with the operations of an Indonesian-chartered survey ship near the Natunas. While the Indonesian maritime agency effectively responded to the Chinese advancement, the joint statement released during Probowo's state visit to China on November 9, 2024 appeared to undermine Jakarta's long maintained stand on the South China Sea dispute. As per the joint statement, the two sides reached an "understanding on joint development in areas of overlapping claims and agreed to establish an Inter-Governmental Joint Steering Committee to explore and advance relevant cooperation."¹⁴⁸ This acknowledgement by Indonesia of addressing existing overlapping claims could further complicate its relations with China and also heightened tension in the South China Sea.

Therefore, in an increasingly complex geopolitical environment which is further fuelling the contestations in the South China Sea is also resulting in Indonesia to navigate and reassess its security partnerships. On August 29, 2024, Indonesia and Australia signed a Defence Cooperation Agreement, which enhances practical cooperation and interoperability between the defence forces in areas such as maritime security, counter-

¹⁴⁷ Munmun Majumdar, "Beijing Raising the Ante in the Natunas: The Next Flash Point in the South China Sea?", *India Quarterly*, Vol. 77, No. 3 (September 2021), pp. 462-478

¹⁴⁸ Ian Storey, "Prabowo's Overture to China and Ramifications on the South China Sea Dispute", *Fulcrum*, November 22, 2024.

terrorism, humanitarian and disaster relief, logistic support, education, and training, as well as across defence industry.¹⁴⁹ This was followed by the Keris Woomera Exercise between the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI) and the Australian Defence Force (ADF) launched on November 3, 2024. The exercise included joint combat drills off Indonesia's main island of Java with 2,000 troops participating in air, maritime, amphibious operations.¹⁵⁰

There is also the “Orruda 2024” exercise which was held between the Indonesian Navy (TNI-AL) and the Russian Navy from November 4 to 10. This was the first ever joint bilateral exercise between the two navies which took place in Surabaya City and the Java Sea. The exercise involved four Russian and two Indonesian warships conducting a range of combat drills. Further, during the joint exercise the first-ever port call took place when the Russian Improved Kilo-class diesel-electric submarine, RFS Ufa arrived on November 7 in Indonesia. Under President Prabowo Subianto's administration, there would be a continuity of Indonesia's “free and active” foreign policy doctrine in which it is expected that a robust defence ties would grow significantly with its Western and non-Western partners.¹⁵¹

THE PHILIPPINES DEEPENING ITS ALLIANCES AND PARTNERSHIPS

Among the ASEAN countries, the Philippines in the past few years has made serious efforts towards broadening its defence partnerships. The primary reason for this is the rising tension with China in the SCS due to increasing number of incidences at several disputed features in the region. As highlighted earlier in this chapter, China's coercive actions include the CCG ramming their vessels into Filipino ships, to harassing

¹⁴⁹ Riyaz ul Khaliq, “Australia, Indonesia hold largest military drill, 1st since new defence pact”, *Anadolu Ajansi*, November 14, 2024.

¹⁵⁰ “Indonesia and Australia hold joint military drills after signing a new defence agreement”, *The Hindu*, November 13, 2024,

¹⁵¹ Muhammad Fauzan Malufti, “Prabowo's Global Vision: Can the Indonesian Military Handle the Pressure?”, *The Diplomat*, November 19, 2024.

Filipino crew members by firing water cannons at them, to Chinese Navy missile boat using a military-grade laser at a Philippine aircraft. These incidences have raised concerns of a full-scale confrontation in the region. This has led Manila to strengthen its old defence alliances with the US as well as strengthening new partnerships with Australia and Japan and other Indo-Pacific neighbours. These partnerships include deals to increase base access, weapons transfers, and the intensification of joint military exercises especially in the South China Sea.

The Philippines has been participating in several multi-national drills and patrols to build resilience and deterrence against an aggressive China. Amidst escalating tension with China in the SCS, on April 22, 2024, the Philippine and American forces launched their largest ever combat exercises that involved more than 16,000 military personnel, along with more than 250 French and Australian forces. The Balikatan between the long-time treaty allies is an annual exercise run until May 10 near the disputed SCS, where the Philippine coast guard since 2023 has been on the receiving end of an increasingly tense territorial face offs with the Chinese. The focus of the 2024 military drills was on territorial defence.¹⁵²

Due to increasing maritime confrontation with China, the Philippines since November 2023 has been conducting Maritime Cooperative Activity (MCA) with the US. The MCA is designed to enhance interoperability between the two militaries and further advance combined capabilities in the maritime domain.¹⁵³ Since the first MCA exercise between the two naval forces, as a consequence of increasing maritime confrontation between the Philippines and China in the SCS, it has become more regular and frequent. During the fourth MCA exercise held on April 7, 2024, Australia and Japan also participated,

¹⁵² Jim Gomez, “US and Philippine forces launch combat drill in the disputed South China Sea”, *The Associated Press*, April 22, 2024.

¹⁵³ Mark Soo, “Maritime Cooperative Activity Redrawing South China Sea Battle Lines”, *Geopolitical Monitor*, April 9, 2024.

along with the US and the Philippines. The statement released by the Japanese Embassy in the Philippines outlined the scenarios involved in the MCA, which included anti-submarine warfare training, tactical exercises, link exercises, and photo exercises.¹⁵⁴ The iteration of the MCA between the Philippines and the US which took place on June 5, 2025 included communication checks, exercising maritime domain awareness, data sharing, and combined targeting exercises against simulated targets using NMESIS.¹⁵⁵ On July 16, 2025, The Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), Philippine Coast Guard (PCG), and the US Navy conducted the MCA within the Philippines' Exclusive Economic Zone.¹⁵⁶

On 18 November 2024, the Philippines and the US signed a military intelligence deal for greater coordination between their armed forces. The General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) call for assistance is a secured exchange of “classified military information.” Through the deal, the Philippines' President Ferdinand Marcos Jr and US President Joe Biden vowed to counter China's policies in the South China Sea.¹⁵⁷ Further, the Philippines, US along with four other nations conducted a joint naval exercise from October 7, 2024 in the vicinity of Subic Bay, which is on the west coast of the island of Luzon in the Philippines. The two weeks of maritime engagements was designed to enhance interoperability and strengthen security ties among regional partners. Called “Sama Sama,” which means ‘together’ or unity in Tagalog, the 2024 edition reflects not only the long-standing alliance in the region but a sustained commitment to enhancing regional

¹⁵⁴ Mark Soo, “Maritime Cooperative Activity Redrawing South China Sea Battle Lines”, *Geopolitical Monitor*, April 9, 2024.

¹⁵⁵ “U.S. Navy, U.S. Marine Corps, Armed Forces of the Philippines conduct Maritime Cooperative Activity”, *United States Pacific Fleet*, June 5, 2025.

¹⁵⁶ “U.S., the Philippines conduct Maritime Cooperative Activities”, *U.S. Indo-Pacific Command*, July 17, 2025.

¹⁵⁷ Sebastian Strangio, “Philippines, US Sign Military Intelligence Sharing Agreement”, *The Diplomat*, November 19, 2024.

collaboration. This bilateral exercise between the United States and the Philippines has grown into a multilateral and multiplatform operation, bringing together like-minded partners from across the Indo-Pacific, indicative of a collective commitment to stability and security in the region. The 2024 edition of the exercise included participants from Australia, Canada, France, and Japan, besides the Philippines and the US.¹⁵⁸

Amid growing tensions over parts of the hotly contested SCS, The Philippines has been ramping up its defence capabilities such as acquiring land-based missile systems. On January 2022, India and the Philippines signed a US \$ 375 million deal for BrahMos supersonic cruise missiles for the Philippine Marine Corps' newly developed Coastal Defense Regiment (CDR). The deal includes the delivery of three Missiles batteries for a shore-based anti-ship variant of the BrahMos, training for operators and maintainers as well as the necessary Integrated Logistics Support (ILS) package.¹⁵⁹ India delivered the first batch of the BrahMos cruise missiles to The Philippines on April 19, 2024.¹⁶⁰ The Philippines has also expressed an interest in acquiring the land-based Typhon missile system, which can fire Tomahawk missiles, which have a range of 1,600 kilometres; and can also fire SM-6 missiles, which can strike air or sea targets within 200 kilometres, sufficient for covering Philippines 200-nautical mile EEZ. The US military deployed the Typhon system in northern Philippines during the Balikatan military exercise held in April 2024. As per reports, the Typhon system after the conclusion of the annual military exercise in May was left behind and is currently in an undisclosed location on the Luzon Island.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁸ “Philippines, Allies launch Sama Sama naval drills as regional tensions simmer”, *Indo-Pacific Defense Forum*, October 11, 2024.

¹⁵⁹ “Philippines looking to buy more BrahMos Missiles”, *The Hindu Business Line*, October 13, 2023.

¹⁶⁰ “India delivers first batch of BRAHMOS missiles to Philippines”, *BrahMos Aerospace*, April 19, 2024.

¹⁶¹ Sebastian Strangio, “Philippines Troops to Train with US Missile System Next Month, Army Says”, *The Diplomat*, January 29, 2025.

The Philippines and Japan held their first joint military exercises in the SCS on August 2, 2024. It is subsequent to the signing of the landmark Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) on July 8, 2024, that allows deployment of forces on each other's soil and enables facilitation of the implementation of cooperative activities, such as joint exercises. The exercise which brought two vessels from each side included a communication exercise, tactical manoeuvring, and a photographic exercise.¹⁶² The Philippines, the US, Australia, and Canada also held a joint sea and air drills on August 7-8, 2024 in the SCS within Manila's EEZ. In response to the joint drills, on the same day as per the STC, it had carried out air and sea combat patrols near the Scarborough Shoal to test strike capabilities.¹⁶³

Further on August 9, 2024, a bilateral exercise was held between the Philippines and Vietnamese coast guard in the SCS. The first-ever bilateral joint drills between the Coast Guards (CG) of the Philippines and Vietnam from 5-9 August 2024 marks a shift in the security dynamics in Southeast Asia. This was the first time joint drill were held between the two countries which came after President Marcos Jr visited Hanoi in January 2024. During the visit, both countries agreed to enhance collaboration between their coast guards and set up a communication hotline to handle maritime incidents.¹⁶⁴ The visit of Vietnam's Defence Minister, General Phan Van Giang, to Manila upon the invitation of Philippine Secretary of National Defence Gilberto Teodoro on 30 August 2024 marks yet another major shift in the security cooperation in Southeast Asia. Both officials signed letters of intent to institutionalise their countries' growing maritime security cooperation by signing a memorandum of understanding (MoU). Additionally, Manila and Hanoi

¹⁶² "Philippines, Japan militaries hold first joint exercises in South China Sea", *Reuters*, August 2, 2024.

¹⁶³ Jim Gomez, "US, Australia, Canada, Philippines stage Naval and Air Force Maneuvers in Disputed South China Sea", *The Diplomat*, August 8, 2024.

¹⁶⁴ Sebastian Strangio, "Vietnam Coast Guard Vessel Arrives in Philippines for Joint Exercise", *The Diplomat*, August 6, 2024.

also intend to establish a hotline between the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) and the Vietnamese Coast Guard (VCG) to improve collective coordination at sea.¹⁶⁵

President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., since taking office has been pursuing a multi-aligned approach that includes establishing defence and security cooperation with like-minded Indo-Pacific nations. On the other hand, Vietnam tries to manage ties with China by keeping the dispute at a bilateral level. However, China's unilateral actions in the South China Sea and its power projection in the Mekong region has strained Vietnam's ability to manage its ties with Beijing effectively. Recent developments point to China's attempts to redefine its coastal waters in the Gulf of Tonkin posing potential security risks for Vietnam. These have acted as a catalyst for a proactive shift in Hanoi's foreign policy approach, which includes the elevation of its ties to a comprehensive strategic partnership with the US, Japan, and Australia between September 2023 to March 2024. On 21 June 2024, Hanoi announced its willingness to negotiate its overlapping claims with the Philippines.¹⁶⁶ With the Philippines and Vietnam having overlapping claims, both share concerns on the growing Chinese aggression in the South China Sea. This has factored into Vietnam's willingness to address key outstanding issues as well as enhance defence and security engagement with the Philippines.

Apart from the bilateral security cooperation, there is also new trilateral arrangements emerging in Southeast Asia. The first-ever US-Japan-Philippines summit took place on April 11, 2024 in Washington DC. Based on the shared vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific and unwavering support to ASEAN centrality and unity, the joint Leaders' statement outlined a commitment for advancing security and prosperity

¹⁶⁵ Sebastian Strangio, "Vietnam, Philippines Agree to Bolster Maritime Security Cooperation", *The Diplomat*, September 2, 2024.

¹⁶⁶ "Vietnam says willing to talk to Philippines about Manila's UN maritime claim", *Reuters*, June 21, 2024.

in the region through partnerships.¹⁶⁷ The summit also announced the establishment of a trilateral maritime dialogue to enhance coordination and collective responses to promote maritime cooperation. The three nations pledged to strengthen coordination to promote multilateral maritime domain awareness through the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA).¹⁶⁸ The emerging bilateral and trilateral security realignments in Southeast Asia centred on strengthening maritime cooperation marks a new major shift. While China has gained from the region's fragmented security framework, the emerging security alignments seem to have become the new normal.

¹⁶⁷ "Japan-US-Philippines Summit", *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*, April 11, 2024.

¹⁶⁸ Erin L. Murphy and Gregory B. Poling, "A 'New Trilateral Chapter' for the United States, Japan, and the Philippines", *CSIS*, April 15, 2024.

FUTURE OF SECURITY MULTILATERALISM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Today, Southeast Asian countries are pursuing previously unexplored partnerships given the evolving political-security and economic environment. The regional response to complex challenges, where even economic issues have increasingly become securitised, are pushing for renewed efforts towards preserving the multilateral regional order. However, the reality of economic slowdown amid global disruptions and trade tension are making it increasingly difficult for the Southeast Asian states to prioritise regional over national interests. The tendency to manage external relations on the basis of national rather than regional interests has been a major factor behind ASEAN's ineffectiveness. The bloc is also confronted with intra-regional issues that are impacting its unity and compromising its centrality. The political crisis in Myanmar for instance is one such internal challenge confronting the regional bloc. While Southeast Asian countries have maintained a neutral stance in the Myanmar civil war, individually they have also been in contact with the junta to discuss economic and trade relations. Further, the involvement of external powers has undermined ASEAN efforts, resulting in no substantial progress made so far in its Five-Point Consensus.

There are also the external dimensions that are exposing ASEAN's vulnerabilities, which have raised serious doubts on its efficacy to solve regional issues. The War in Ukraine to the conflicts between Israel-Gaza and Israel-Iran also has regional implications. ASEAN's efforts to support ceasefire during these conflicts were often in the absence of a unified condemnation by all the member states. These external developments have created an atmosphere within ASEAN-led mechanisms—such as the EAS and the ADMM-Plus—that is increasingly non-conducive to deeper and more meaningful cooperation. This is compounded by the fact that these mechanisms, while centred on ASEAN norms, remain loosely institutionalised and are therefore limited in their effectiveness.

There is growing question about the future of the ASEAN-led multilateral approach to security cooperation. Further, the shifting global power dynamics, which are weakening the international and rules-based order, are also posing a challenge to institutions like ASEAN. The complex geo-political environment shaped by the return of great power competition along with rising and complex regional security challenges are shaping the security perspectives of Southeast Asian countries.

SOUTHEAST ASIA ENGAGEMENT IN THE MULTILATERAL SECURITY FRAMEWORK

The beginning of the Cold War witnessed many Southeast Asian nations gaining independence from colonial rule. In the decades that followed, efforts for building socio-economic cooperation were put in place through the establishment of ASEAN. However, engaging in regional security cooperation remained less desirable, given that the ASEAN member states were still not able to arrive on its need. This was also due to the fact that ASEAN member states lacked a shared threat perception that could have propelled security cooperation. The region's colonial experience and its exploitative aspects, in particular, left a deep impact and thereby limited their ability to build a mutually beneficial cooperation, especially in relations to security. Moreover, persistent differences within ASEAN have contributed to a climate of mutual suspicion among member states. The differences and mistrust due to existing and unresolved territorial disputes impacted not only their bilateral relations but also made it difficult to build consensus on a common security perspective.¹⁶⁹

It is important to note that some of the Southeast Asian nations were part of multilateral security mechanisms established during the Cold War. These included Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) and the Five-Powers defence arrangement (FPDA). Launched in 1954, SEATO was initiated by the United States, which had Thailand and the Philippines as part of the military alliance. The Five-Powers defence Arrangement which came into effect in November 1971 replaced the

¹⁶⁹ Ralf Emmers, *Cooperative Security and the Balance of Power in ASEAN and the ARF*, (RoutledgeCurzon: London, 2003) p. 14.

Anglo-Malayan Defence Agreement (AMDA) established in 1957. The AMDA which ceased and was replaced by the FPDA included Malaysia, Singapore, Britain, Australia, and New Zealand. Beyond these two multilateral arrangements, serious efforts to institutionalise security cooperation began only after the end of the Cold War. Earlier developments—such as Britain’s 1967 announcement of its military withdrawal from east of Suez by the mid-1970s and President Nixon’s new doctrine, which ruled out extensive future U.S. military involvement in Asia—had already signalled a shifting security landscape. These developments led to strong apprehension among Southeast Asian countries on the prospect of Western military commitment to the region. For countries of Southeast Asia, the Western military presence in the region was seen as a counterforce to Communism. Among some of the Southeast Asian countries there was considerable doubts and concerns on the US-China rapprochement. The new US doctrine which continued after President Nixon resulted in increasing Soviet activities along with China’s exerting its influence in Southeast Asia. Therefore, these new developments called for accelerating regionalism in Southeast Asia leading to ASEAN becoming further institutionalised. There was a growing determination among the Southeast Asian countries to provide regional stability by developing ASEAN-led mechanism for building security cooperation.¹⁷⁰

ASEAN ROLE AND ITS FUTURE IN SHAPING THE REGIONAL SECURITY ORDER

The complex security environment in the post-9/11 years required the region to further elevate the scope of ASEAN. The decision of the 2003 ASEAN summit to create an ASEAN Security Community marked a major shift towards furthering regionalism in Southeast Asia. The core aim of establishing an ASEAN Security Community was to limit conflicts that could escalate to war-like situation between the member states. The norms of ASEAN played a crucial role in the development of a regional identity and its consultative process through frequent meetings and engagement in other multilateral interaction

¹⁷⁰ Arnfinn Jorgensen-Dahl, *Regional Organisation and Order in South-East Asia*, (The Macmillan Press Ltd: London, 1982) p.10 and 74-79.

helped to avoid regional conflict. However, increasing internal weaknesses challenge ASEAN's credibility.¹⁷¹

This internal weakness stemmed from the mistrust among the member states given that a number of intra-ASEAN issues, especially relating to dispute over territory, remained unresolved. For instance, Cambodia and Thailand have a long history of disputes along their shared land border, which was set by border treaties between Siam and French Indo-China in 1904 and 1907. The 817 KM land border, which has never been fully demarcated, includes ancient temples that both sides have contested for decades. The ongoing border dispute poses a major challenge for ASEAN as witnessed when Thai and Cambodian troops clashed in the Emerald Triangle on May 28, 2025. This area is a shared border region between Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand which covers seven provinces among the three countries—Preah Vihear, Oddar Meanchey and Stung Treng in Cambodia; Salavan and Champasak in Laos; and Ubon Ratchathani and Sisaket in Thailand. The incident took place at the disputed Chong Bok pass where Thailand's northeast Ubon Ratchathani province borders Cambodia's Preah Vihear, leaving one Cambodian dead.¹⁷²

Apart from land border disputes, in the maritime space apart from the South China Sea, there is the unsettled territorial issue in the Gulf of Thailand. The issue of maritime boundary demarcation, EEZs, fishing rights and resources exploitation witnessed interstate tensions and violence. While none of these intra-regional issues has led to an outright military conflict, they have been an impediment towards the realisation of an ASEAN-led security community.

As mentioned earlier, there is also the case where often ASEAN member states, driven by their individual geo-strategic interests, has

¹⁷¹ Deepak Nair, "ASEAN, Australia, and India in Asia's Regional Order", in William T. Tow and Chin Kin Wah eds, *ASEAN India Australia: Towards Closer Engagement in a New Asia*, (Institute of Southeast Asia Studies: Singapore, 2009), p. 69.

¹⁷² Chad de Guzman, "Thailand and Cambodia's Friendship Falters as Border Clash Escalates: What to Know", *Time*, June 17, 2025.

always prioritised national rather than regional interest. For instance, Southeast Asian countries have always sought to maintain a balance in different degrees between the US and China. This approach allows the ASEAN states the latitude to reap the economic benefits of their relations with China while benefiting from a US security presence. The impact of such nuanced position, however, makes it difficult for ASEAN to speak with one voice on matters of regional security.¹⁷³

Therefore, despite ASEAN's efforts, its multilateral security platforms have fallen short as it has not been able to respond effectively to a range of crisis from East Timor in 1999, to the 2003 Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) crisis, and to the December 26, 2004, Indian Ocean Tsunami. This is because the ASEAN-led security platforms remain loosely institutionalised, and further the consensus-based, non-binding and consultative nature makes these mechanisms less effective. While the ASEAN-led processes such as the ARF is primarily focussed on security cooperation, the EAS helps to promote a more holistic vision by seeking to provide a forum for strategic dialogue. These regional institutions provide the platform for dialogues and consultations on key transnational security concerns, however, they have been unable to realise the goal of a deeper and more direct tackling of security concerns. The consequence of which is that the ASEAN-led security institutions are unable to move substantively towards its stated goals of preventive diplomacy and conflict resolution. This stems from the earlier argument that Southeast Asia is more comfortable with transnational security issues, as it receives large share of regional attention and find convergences easily. This has resulted in limited success towards addressing hard security concerns which would be critical towards deepening regionalism.¹⁷⁴

Its emphasis on norms and the 'ASEAN Way' prioritising non-use of force and non-intervention is also limiting its ability to keep intra-regional

¹⁷³ Jonathan R. Stromseth, "Navigating Great Power Competition in Southeast Asia", *Brookings*, December 8, 2020.

¹⁷⁴ Deepak Nair, "ASEAN, Australia, and India in Asia's Regional Order", in William T. Tow and Chin Kin Wah eds, *ASEAN India Australia: Towards Closer Engagement in a New Asia*, (Institute of Southeast Asia Studies: Singapore, 2009), p. 69.

rivalries in check and prevent disputes among its members from turning into armed conflict. The departure from ASEAN's non-interference principle would be crucial towards addressing security challenges. However, among the member states of ASEAN, some fear that any departure from this norm could have a severe impact on the grouping. Therefore, ASEAN's norms which have been vital in strengthening the grouping have also limited its effectiveness in dealing with the emerging security challenges.¹⁷⁵

SOUTHEAST ASIA MILITARY BUILD-UP

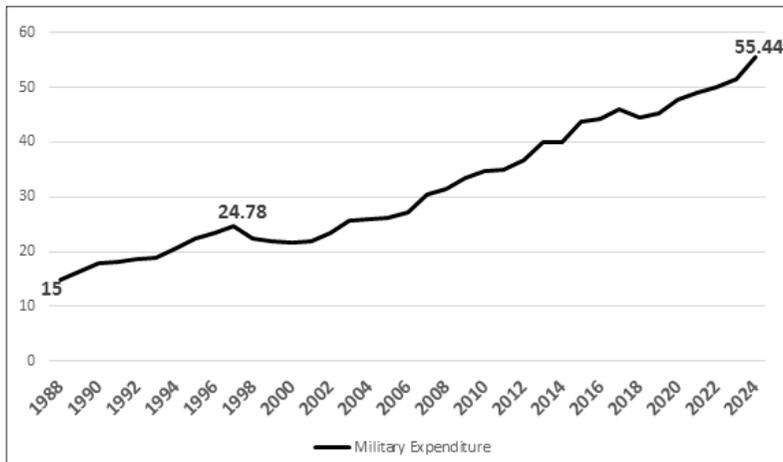
The efforts undertaken by ASEAN helped establish greater intra-regional interdependence and integration among its member states. This provided additional set of disincentives for the use of force as it kept intra-regional rivalries in check. ASEAN's inability to prevent disputes among member states from escalating into armed confrontation has become increasingly evident—as demonstrated by the 2025 Cambodia–Thailand border conflict. This limitation stems from ASEAN's adherence to norms and practices that constrain its ability to respond effectively to crises. Consequently, in order to safeguard their own security interests, Southeast Asian states are accelerating their military modernisation efforts.

Over that last four decades, the ASEAN member states began undertaking steps, which they see as crucial to effectively deal with external and global security challenges. Under this, in the past two decades for Southeast Asian countries, the preservation of territorial sovereignty has become increasingly challenging. New security challenges have been major drivers for increased military spending, arms acquisitions and forced deployment among Southeast Asian countries that are part of the ongoing dispute. The acquisition of military equipment include combat aircraft, anti-submarine warfare aircraft, air defence systems, coastal defence systems, submarines, and major surface combat ships.

¹⁷⁵ Amitav Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order*, (Routledge: Oxon, 2009) p. 291-297.

Southeast Asian countries are also acquiring tanker aircraft, large and long-range combat aircraft, long-range air-to-ground missiles, large submarines and surface combat ships as well as amphibious assault landing ships. This wide-ranging military procurement indicate a strategy of building the capability to engage with any threat from another country, even one far away from the home country, as well as the capability to strike at a foreign country or protect far-off interests such as trade routes or source of raw materials.¹⁷⁶ The line graph in Figure two indicates the Military Expenditure in Southeast Asia from 1988 to 2024. The defence spending among the Southeast Asian countries since the 1980s has been on the rise from US \$ 15 billion to US \$ 55.44 billion at the end of 2024.

Figure Two: ASEAN Member States Military Expenditure: 1988-2024



Source: SIPRI Military Expenditure Database

Note: Military Expenditure in US \$ billion, at constant 2021 prices and exchange rate. Military expenditure data of Laos PDR not included

¹⁷⁶ Siemon T. Wezaman, “The Security Environment in Southeast Asia”, *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, 2019.

In the post-Cold War period, military acquisitions in Southeast Asia began to increase due to concerns over Chinese build-up in terms of its naval and air capabilities. China, in terms of its size, economic resources and military strength, was seen with concern as it had the potential to deeply affect the autonomy of ASEAN. However, in the period following the end of the Cold War, political relations between China and ASEAN improved on account of their convergent approach towards key challenges.¹⁷⁷

In the aftermath of Asian financial crisis of 1997, China's positive role and the inking of ASEAN's "Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea," instilled hope that Beijing would shelve its contentious sovereignty claims. The economic fallout of the 1997 crisis was also a key factor that in ASEAN states cutting back their defence spending. Therefore, as indicated in Figure One, the post financial crisis period witnessed a noticeable slowdown in the planned military modernisation among the ASEAN member states.

However, by the mid-2000s, China's assertive and unilateral actions included building of artificial islands and military installations in the Paracel and Spratly Islands. China claims to almost the whole of the South China Sea, including swathes of the continental shelves and EEZs of littoral states, resulted in a significant jump in the ASEAN states' defence spending. The arms procurements by the ASEAN states showed a clear shift towards conventional warfare capabilities in contrast to the counter-insurgent orientation of the past. Given the increasing challenges to its territorial sovereignty, ASEAN states began to prioritise the development of a more capable air and naval forces through the acquisition of advanced fighter planes, maritime-equipped patrol aircraft, large surface combatants such as corvettes and frigates, missile-equipped patrol craft, and airborne early warning systems.

Since 2001, Southeast Asia has been witnessing a small-scale arms race with the revival of its defence spending and arms procurement. The growing concern about the rise of China, the war on terror following the 9/11 attacks and the Bali bombing also resulted in new forms of

¹⁷⁷ Amitav Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order*, (Routledge: Oxon, 2009) p. 224-225.

security cooperation between the US and some of the ASEAN states. In the Philippines, rising concerns about China in the Spratlys and other disputed features in the South China Sea led to the resumption of its defence cooperation with the US. Further, the period also witnessed closer defence and security cooperation between the US and key ASEAN members states through the establishment of a number of strategic partnerships. These developments included the U.S.–Singapore Strategic Cooperation Partnership signed in October 2003, the revival of defence cooperation with Indonesia, and enhanced joint military exercises and training programmes such as the U.S.–Thailand Cobra Gold exercise.¹⁷⁸

The unsettled territorial disputes in the South China Sea have in recent years witnessed increasing number of incidents and confrontations. As tensions in the South China Sea continue to intensify, China–Taiwan friction has also risen, fuelled by regular Chinese naval and air exercises near Taiwanese waters. These emerging developments put Southeast Asia at a strategic risk, given that it lacks the military abilities to restrain China’s actions. While building consensus through dialogue did little to limit Beijing’s illicit actions, it also compelled countries in Southeast Asia to prioritise their defence capabilities through military modernisation. Therefore, unlike in the past where defence procurements were geared more towards dealing with internal crises, the increasing perception of threat from extra-regional powers is becoming an important consideration.¹⁷⁹ This has prompted Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam, in particular, to undertake extensive naval modernisation programmes. In its military modernisation, countries in Southeast Asia are looking at diversifying their defence acquisitions by expanding their security relations with other powers like Japan, South Korea and India.

¹⁷⁸ Amitav Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order*, (Routledge: Oxon, 2009) p. 161-163 and 220-222.

¹⁷⁹ Amitav Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order*, (Routledge: Oxon, 2009) p. 165.

NEW ARRANGEMENTS IN SHAPING THE SECURITY FRAMEWORK

While Southeast Asian nations through ASEAN became more cohesive in addressing regional political and economic issues, however, with regards to defence and security, due to ASEAN's weaknesses, there is still a preference for unilateral rather than collective effort. This stance has not changed since the Cold War period, whereby ASEAN countries in general do not see multilateralism as a substitute for addressing security challenges. For instance, during the Cold War, Singapore and Malaysia through the Five Power Defence Agreement saw ASEAN regionalism as a supplement to their defence pact. Therefore, the ASEAN-led security mechanisms have rather been a supplement to the bilateral defence alliances as well as partnerships that Southeast Asia established with other extra-regional countries. This is also due to the fact that ASEAN member states—individually or collectively—are not in a position to address security challenges effectively and therefore remain dependent on external powers. Moreover, given the convergences and complementarities between intra-regional and extra-regional security issues, ASEAN's multilateral efforts tend to supplement, rather than replace, the various bilateral defence ties maintained by its member states.¹⁸⁰

In the midst of heightened geostrategic tensions and competition, Southeast Asia is witnessing increasing engagements becoming an epicentre for a number of defence and security bilateral and minilateral alignments. As the great power rivalry has intensified along with increasing regional tensions in the South China Sea, countries of Southeast Asia have not only intensified intra-regional security cooperation but are also diversifying their security partnerships. Therefore, while the ASEAN-led mechanisms continue to stagger, in an uncertain international environment marked by new challenges, new and renewed bilateral security cooperation are witnessing a resurgence. The United States for many countries of Southeast Asia is the primary

¹⁸⁰ Amitav Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order*, (Routledge: Oxon, 2009) p. 223-224.

security partner. According to the 2025 ‘State of Southeast Asia’ survey, majority of the respondents were confident on the US as a strategic partner and provider of regional security.¹⁸¹

With escalating tensions in the South China Sea, there is a revival and enhanced bilateral defence cooperation with the US that has continued to supplement the evolving regional security framework. However, while the United States remains the dominant security player in Southeast Asia, the countries in the region are also widening their military engagements with other nations. In recent years, China’s defence diplomacy in Southeast Asia has intensified through its broad and multifaceted outreach. This includes increasing number of joint military exercises, which includes bilateral and multilateral exercises, arms sales, and high-level defence dialogues.

China’s Global Security Initiative (GSI) announced in 2022 is one such framework that seeks to counter the US in strategically important regions, including Southeast Asia. As a complement to the Belt and Road Initiative, the GSI was announced along with Global Development Initiative and Global Civilisation Initiative, aimed at further strengthening Beijing’s global influence. The GSI’s main goal is to enhance China’s influence and leadership in the regional security order by promoting norms and principles such as sovereignty, non-interference, and win-win cooperation. This would be a counterbalance to the US-led security order, which emphasises on collective security and the rule of law. Therefore, the GSI by fostering cooperation between China and the ASEAN member states could challenge the US-led security order in the region. Further, through partnership in cybersecurity and other crucial areas, it could help strengthen regional stability and security.¹⁸²

Given the wavering US commitment to the region, it has created an opportunity for China to develop closer ties with the ASEAN countries and build support for its initiatives like the GSI. China is also consolidating its influence in Southeast Asia through its bilateral defence

¹⁸¹ The State of Southeast Asia Survey 2025

¹⁸² Thy Try, “China’s Vision for Global Security; Implications for Southeast Asia”, *United States Institute of Peace*, April 24, 2024.

cooperation, of which its partnership with Cambodia is most notable. Today, Beijing has become the primary security partner for Phnom Penh, which involves both military assistance and infrastructural support, including the upgradation of the Ream Naval Base. The seventh edition of the annual ‘Golden Dragon’ joint military exercise held from 14-28 May 2025, showcased the scale and scope of their security cooperation.¹⁸³

China is also actively engaging with other Southeast Asian countries through the establishment of strategic dialogues mechanisms. The China-Vietnam 3+3 strategic dialogue mechanism held its first meeting in December 2024. The 3+3 dialogue mechanism between the two countries encompasses diplomacy, defence and public security. The meeting was jointly chaired by officials from foreign affairs, military, and public security department.¹⁸⁴ On April 21, 2025, Indonesia and China held their inaugural 2+2 dialogue in Beijing, involving the Foreign and Defence Ministry.¹⁸⁵

However, for China’s diplomatic outreach, which has strong strategic undertones, to be realised would require gaining trust of Southeast Asian countries. Given that trust is one of the most important foundations for international cooperation, it remains the biggest obstacle with China. Southeast Asia is apprehensive and do not trust China, given its behaviour in the South China Sea and the disregard to the 2016 International Arbitration Ruling.¹⁸⁶ According to the “State of Southeast Asia” survey, report published on April 3, 2025, while China continues to remain the most influential economic (56.4%) and political-strategic power (37.9%), concerns continue to grow over Beijing’s political and

¹⁸³ “Cambodia and China kick off Golden Dragon 2025 military drills”, *Khmer Times*, May 15, 2025.

¹⁸⁴ Zhou Xin, “The First of its kind: China and Vietnam Officially establish the ‘3+3’ strategic dialogue mechanism”, *Global Times*, December 12, 2024.

¹⁸⁵ Olivia Subandi, “China, Indonesia Forge Closer Ties with Landmark 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue”, *TEMPO*, April 22, 2025.

¹⁸⁶ Aristyo Rizka Darmawan, “The Problem with China’s Global Initiative in Southeast Asia”, *Australian Institute of International Affairs*, September 7, 2024.

strategic influence in the region. As per the 2025 survey, seven out of ten ASEAN respondents said they remained wary of Beijing's ongoing actions in the South China Sea. In the 2025 survey, the top geopolitical concern was aggressive behaviour in the South China Sea and was cited by 51.6 per cent of the region. Aggression witnessed in the disputed waters of the South China Sea overtook the ongoing Israel-Gaza conflict, which was the region's top concern in 2024.¹⁸⁷ Therefore, while China seeks to enhance its defence ties in the region, while Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam, in particular, remain more cautious and transactional given their lingering concerns. These countries, all of which have maritime disputes with Beijing in the South China Sea, view defence cooperation through a more pragmatic lens.¹⁸⁸

A fractured global order and weaknesses in the regional organisation are pushing Southeast Asian nations to increasingly engage in minilateral and multi-alignment in their diplomatic strategy. In recent years, new security arrangements in the form of trilateral and minilateral joint military exercises has intensified. Being geographically at the centre of the Indo-Pacific region, which is the new theatre of Great Power competition, Southeast Asian countries position their security alignments through new bilateral, trilateral and minilateral cooperation. This is to ensure their security threats that range from territorial disputes at sea, limiting the impact of trade wars, to shipping, to issues of climate change are safeguarded and addressed. There is an increasing number of minilateral security arrangements coming to the fore in Southeast Asia. These arrangements are more agile enabling the region to build partnerships with other like-minded nations and pursue security priorities in a fast and evolving geo-political environment.

¹⁸⁷ The State of Southeast Asia Survey 2025

¹⁸⁸ Rahman Yaacob, "Charm and Coercion Shape China's Expanding Security Footprint in Southeast Asia", *The Diplomat*, July 1, 2025.

CONCLUSION

In today's international environment—marked by intensifying geopolitical contestation and conflict—the role of multilateralism has become even more vital for maintaining peace and stability. Economic coercion, for example, is not a new phenomenon, but its increasing weaponisation has contributed to substantial shifts in regional security frameworks. In Southeast Asia, ASEAN has played an important role in limiting intra-regional conflicts by fostering cooperation among member states that share common interests and norms.

ASEAN promoted economic interdependence which helped facilitate the development of security cooperation. While the ASEAN-led mechanisms remain loosely institutionalised, a high degree of political and economic integration becomes a necessary pre-condition for an effective response to security challenges. However, despite its limitations through the ASEAN-led mechanisms, the region has been able to elevate and address some of the pressing security challenges. The study on the concept of security in Southeast Asia also indicated that the region has a distinct and a more holistic approach that placed a premium on non-conventional threats.

The monograph, as stated in the introductory chapter, describes the emerging security architecture in Southeast Asia. The study has used constructivism as a conceptual framework to examine and assess ASEAN's evolution and its role in the emerging security architecture. At the inception of ASEAN, the lack of a shared threat perception among the member states provided no basis for an institutional security framework. The division within the Southeast Asian nations along with their colonial experience and its exploitative aspects, in particular, left a deep impact. This factored in the ASEAN member states' distaste for building a mutually beneficial cooperation, especially with regards to security. While most Southeast Asian countries have traditionally remained averse to military alliances and have not shared a common

perspective on external threats, this began to change in the post–Cold War period.

Confronted with a new geostrategic environment, ASEAN chose to expand its approach to regional security by strengthening multilateral dialogue. Elevating ASEAN’s role in the post–Cold War period was seen as essential for enabling the region to respond more effectively to emerging security issues. It became clear that the increasingly complex and transnational nature of these challenges required broader, often global, forms of cooperation. At the same time, the considerable diversity among member states—in terms of political systems, cultures, and languages—continued to constrain ASEAN’s regionalism. To build greater cohesiveness in its security approach, ASEAN has, therefore, focused on cultivating shared norms and a regional identity, with the principles of non-interference and the “ASEAN Way” remaining central.

The security landscape in Southeast Asia, which at the end of the Cold War was dominated by US-led alliances forged to counter the Soviet Union, began to see the emergence of new ASEAN-led mechanisms. The Indo-Pacific which is today the epicentre of the emerging strategic rivalry and the geographical centrality of Southeast Asia led to witnessing of greater efforts to develop a more ASEAN-centric approach.

Southeast Asia security architecture continues to expand with the China-led initiatives such as the GSI along with increasing number of bilateral, trilateral, and minilateral arrangements. The evolving security architecture in Southeast Asia, characterised by the revival of old bilateral alliances and new security arrangements, seem to be tailored as per ASEAN’s normative approach. With emphasis on ASEAN Centrality, these security arrangements are aligned with existing regional institutions such as the ARF, EAS, ADMM and the ADMM Plus.

The US-led bilateral security alliances in Southeast Asia remains the predominant regional architecture. The relations that each of the Southeast Asian countries have with the US fall on a different point along a wide spectrum. This is based on their historical ties, economic, security dependencies, and values-based compatibilities. However, from the latter half of the 1990s, the influence of the rising China began to permeate Southeast Asia. The exposure to and engagement with China has left Southeast Asia stuck in the middle of the new Cold War power

rivalry. Today, the US and China being the two dominant powers in Southeast Asia, their rivalry pose a challenge to regional stability. The ASEAN-led security multilateral mechanisms continue to provide a platform for dialogues among the external powers. This enabled Southeast Asian countries to engage with other major powers to promote peaceful resolution of disputes and enhance regional stability.

At the core of this approach is to promote collective efforts, critical in preserving the balance of power and ensuring commitment to the established and well-accepted rule-based order. Through ASEAN efforts towards security regionalism, it has enabled wider strategic interactions leading to other collaborative security arrangements based on shared norms which, in turn, helps complement the ASEAN-led process.

The findings of the study could be summarised under three categories namely; the internal effect, the external effect, and the prospect.

INTERNAL EFFECTS

Firstly, the traditional multilateral construct led by ASEAN is being challenged on account of its inability to deliver the desired outcomes. This is because ASEAN's multilateral approach to security remains a means rather than an end. This is due to the bloc's inability to move towards a higher level of integration as a consequence of its institutional limitations. The various multilateral institutions led by ASEAN relies heavily upon building interstate relations for regional cooperation, which is seen as fundamental towards its evolving security community. There is a growing perception that ASEAN is finding it increasingly challenging to effectively respond to regional crises.

Despite building platforms for multilateral security dialogue, these mechanisms have been ineffective in tackling key security issues. One of the biggest internal crises since the expansion of the bloc in the 1990s is the ongoing crisis in Myanmar following the military coup. While ASEAN was quick to adopt the Five-Point Consensus within three months, there has still not been significant progress towards a resolution.

The crisis in Myanmar, which has displaced thousands, challenges the stability of Southeast Asia and reflects on a fractured ASEAN unity. ASEAN multilateralism-based approach, which emphasises on building consensus, has been a major challenge especially on taking decisions on critical security issues. The ASEAN-led institutions remain loosely structured where members have a high degree of autonomy. Further, the norms which includes the principles of informality, organisational minimalism, non-interference, non-use of force, and consensus-style decision-making, which are collectively known as the 'ASEAN way' makes the bloc ineffective and weak.

Today, the individual Southeast Asian countries are looking beyond ASEAN to effectively tackle complex security issues due to the bloc's ineffectiveness and its institutional limitations. ASEAN weakness also stems from the prevailing differences among the member states which at times makes it difficult to build consensus on a common security perspective. It is also important to note that in managing their relations with external powers ASEAN member states have prioritised their individual interests rather than taking into account regional considerations. The inaction and at times poor response by ASEAN has resulted in new and renewed defence-related alliances and partnerships that are shaping the security architecture in the region.

EXTERNAL EFFECTS

Secondly, the new security groupings and partnerships raise serious concerns as it draws the region into the ongoing great power rivalry that could impact its neutrality. The need towards preserving ASEAN's neutrality has been fundamental towards ensuring the region's autonomy and non-interference from external powers.

China today has strong political and economic influence in the region through its decades of diplomatic and economic outreach. However, Southeast Asia is concerned of Beijing's intention that seeks to reshape the regional order by engaging in economic coercion along with asserting its military posturing. Southeast Asia continues to struggle in managing its relationship with China, finding itself in a "Goldilocks zone" where deep economic interdependence coexists with the need

to respond to Beijing's coercive behaviour and grey-zone tactics in the South China Sea. This duality is evident in the way Southeast Asian countries simultaneously strengthen their defence ties with the United States while continuing to engage China on trade, investment, and infrastructure development.

As China continues to gradually expand its foothold in Southeast Asia and the South Pacific islands, the US has enhanced its commitments to the region both military and economic. President Trump's visit to Kuala Lumpur to attend the 47th ASEAN Summit and other related Summits in October 2025 signalled Southeast Asia's strategic significance amid heightened US-China tensions. However, the protectionist foreign policy adopted by the Trump administration has fuelled scepticism on Washington's long-term commitment in Southeast Asia. Under Trump's tariffs and trade policy where Southeast Asia has been heavily penalised has many in the region unconvinced on the US rhetoric on deepening partnerships.

The region continues to hedge between the major powers through the adoption of a multi-alignment strategy. Finding itself between the two major powers, Southeast Asia had to reassess its options whereby it is looking to work with a wide range of partners that share its security and strategic interests. With the US playing catch up to China's economic and growing political influence in Southeast Asia, other regional powers such as Japan, Australia, South Korean and India are also stepping up their engagement in Southeast Asia.

The sharper focus or re-focus on the region from the US, as well as regional powers such as Japan, India, South Korea, and Australia, will ensure competition for regional cooperation and partnerships. In this situation, ASEAN multilateralism that seeks to promote collaboration at local, regional and global level, becomes challenging.

THE PROSPECT

Amidst wavering US commitment under Trump's protectionist foreign policy approach, along with China's increasing geo-political aspiration, it has prompted Southeast Asian countries to reassess their security alliances and partnerships. The need to manage relations with other regional powers have become critical in order to mitigate the risks of

the US-China competition. This is leading to the emergence of new non-ASEAN-led security initiatives and arrangements, which are challenging established systems. As the great power competition intensifies, it is leading to the fragmentation of the global economic system and rising proxy wars, amid waning trust in multilateral institutions. This is pushing Southeast Asian countries to increasingly engage and diversifying their partnerships.

Given that Southeast Asia is a diverse region, it is natural that a number of variables would factor into shaping the nature of their individual bilateral relations with the other powers. This is resulting in growing prominence of bilateral security partnerships along with increasing role of alternative security arrangements in the region.

Therefore, as the security space in Southeast Asia is becoming increasingly crowded, it raises serious concerns. As these new arrangements get filtered into shaping the security architecture of Southeast Asia, questions emerge on whether it would continue to preserve the region's neutrality. This has been at the core of ASEAN's efforts which ensured regional autonomy and non-interference, amid heightened geopolitical tensions and contestations.

After nearly six decades of progress in promoting peace and intra-regional cooperation, the emerging security dimension in Southeast Asia—linked to the stability of the Indo-Pacific region—needs ASEAN to reinvent itself. It should be noted that although ASEAN has been an effective diplomatic community with a collective voice, it has had limited success. ASEAN's cherished norms, namely non-interference in the interest of regional peace and stability, aid the bloc's collective stand, while at the same time risking early conflict resolution.

The centrality of the bloc as reiterated by the various alternative security arrangements would also require ASEAN to reform and to facilitate more meaningful collective security responses. Amid emerging security dynamics shaped by growing geopolitical and geo-economic uncertainties, ASEAN will need to remain open and outward-looking. As the pivotal organisation in Southeast Asia, it must manage this transition by diversifying partnerships so as to address new security challenges while ensuring that no single power comes to dominate the region.

The central theme of this monograph is to analyse the emerging security architecture in Southeast Asia. The evolving internal and external developments which confronts Southeast Asian countries has led to the emergence of a complex regional security environment. The ongoing United States-China rivalry in which Southeast Asia finds itself at the centre, is a key factor in shaping the regional security outlook. The study examines the role of ASEAN in shaping the security architecture centered on its norms and upholding multilateralism. However, the ineffectiveness of ASEAN as an informal security arrangement raises concern over the future of security multilateralism. Further, at a time of weakening multilateralism, along with the emergence of new and renewed security alignments being witnessed in the Indo-Pacific; the ASEAN's centrality comes under increasing pressure. Therefore, an examination into the role of major powers and the new bilateral and mini-lateral security arrangements, provides the future roadmap for security multilateralism in Southeast Asia.



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