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ASEAN Links to Major Powers

The Bloc's 'Centrality' Enables Cooperation across the Indo-Pacific

Over the past two decades, ASEAN has become an influential regional cooperation organization. In addition to recent success in the process of intra-bloc integration, ASEAN has driven efforts to establish an extensive system of cooperation mechanisms. These allow the comparably small Southeast Asian nations to align their interests, to build lasting relationships with external partners, and to shape an inclusive regional architecture. Several countries have shown interest in joining ASEAN-led mechanisms and voiced their support for the organization's crucial role in enabling cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. The article will clarify the process of building ASEAN and consolidating its centrality. It will also analyse how major geopolitical powers relate to this process.

Since the 1990s, ASEAN has pursued a policy of what has been termed primary driving force, central pillar, or centrality. The policy places ASEAN at the forefront of Southeast Asian efforts to build relations with external partners and to strengthen an inclusive and rules-based regional structure. This role becomes apparent in ASEAN-led cooperation mechanisms, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the East Asian Summit (EAS), and ASEAN+3, the summit between ASEAN, China, Japan and South Korea. Due to the Indo-Pacific's increasing geostrategic relevance, more and more countries have expressed interest in participating in this ASEAN-led regional structure. As

of 2024, over 45 nations and the European Union have signed the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC).

Strengthening ASEAN Centrality

ASEAN centrality has been affirmed on numerous occasions. For example, the ASEAN Charter stressed the need to "maintain ASEAN centrality and proactive role as the main driving force in relations and cooperation with external partners" (ASEAN Secretariat 2008). Further, the Cha-am Hua Hin Declaration on the Roadmap for the ASEAN Community clearly stated the common aim of maintaining ASEAN's role as the primary driving force in building the

emerging regional architecture (ASEAN Secretariat 2009). The 2021 ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) envisages “ASEAN centrality as the fundamental principle for promoting cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region, with ASEAN-led mechanisms, such as the EAS, as platforms for dialogue and implementation of Indo-Pacific cooperation, while maintaining the formats of these mechanisms” (ASEAN Secretariat 2021).

ASEAN centrality is also widely discussed among academics. The consensus is that ASEAN is a product of adaptation to the competition of major powers for influence in the Indo-Pacific region. Amitav Acharya explains that ASEAN's centrality is a product of external factors and players as well as of its members themselves, but ASEAN must pay more attention to the relations of the great powers (2017, 273–4). Caballero-Anthony argues that, despite lacking material power, ASEAN can still assert its centrality thanks to its connecting role or 'high between-ness', which allows the organisation to exercise influence in regional processes with the tacit acceptance of the great powers (2014, 563).

See Sang Tan argues that ASEAN can assume this role thanks to the persistent mutual distrust among the great powers in East Asia (2016, 729). Amitav Acharya emphasises that the major powers trust ASEAN far more than they trust each other (especially US-China, China-Japan, and China-India) (2017, 275). Sharing this view, Simon Tay believes that ASEAN is trusted, or at least accepted, because of its neutrality (2013). Looking at ASEAN's interests, Lukas Maximilian Mueller sees ASEAN's centrality as a way for the organisation to avoid being marginalised rather than to play a leadership role in East Asia (2019, 180). According to Le Lena, ASEAN has been able to promote its central role

thanks to the network of security-political cooperation mechanisms in Asia-Pacific (2018, 42), in which ASEAN is at the core, especially ASEAN+3, ARF, and EAS, as Amitav Acharya pointed out (2017, 274). F. Egberink and F. Putten further emphasise that ASEAN “encourages other powers to engage or continue to engage in Southeast Asia, hoping to counterbalance China's influence” (2010, 133).

Major Powers I: ASEAN and China

In light of its dynamic development and successful track record as a leading regional cooperation organisation, ASEAN has drawn significant attention from across the Indo-Pacific.

Since the 1990s, China has attached great importance to developing relations with ASEAN thanks to the organisation's active role in regional and international issues (see Vo 2021). Developing countries in China's neighbourhood have occupied a unique position in the country's foreign policy since the beginning of the 21st century (Li & Yang 2019, 33). Under President Xi Jinping, Southeast Asia in general, and ASEAN in particular, have played a leading role in implementing diplomacy surrounding China.

In a speech on neighbourhood diplomacy in October 2013, Xi Jinping emphasised that: “whether from the perspective of geography, [the] natural environment, or mutual relations, [the countries/regions] surrounding China are of extremely important strategic significance”. (中国共产党 2013) Not long after, in a speech at the Indian Council of World Affairs in September 2014, Xi Jinping stated, “China regards its surroundings as a place to settle down and establish its destiny, as the basis for prosperous development” (Xinhuanet 2014). Regarding ASEAN centrality, Xi Jinping reaffirmed that during the 30th

anniversary of ASEAN-China dialogue and the official announcement of the establishment of the ASEAN-China comprehensive strategic partnership. He said, "China will firmly regard ASEAN as the top priority in its neighbourhood diplomacy, firmly support ASEAN unity and the building of the ASEAN Community, firmly support ASEAN's central role in the regional architecture, and firmly support ASEAN playing a greater role in regional and international affairs." (MoFA of China 2021). Next, in an article on China's position on ASEAN centrality in the evolving regional architecture in August 2022, the Chinese Foreign Ministry reaffirmed that its commitment to and support for this centrality is consistent and clear (MoFA of China 2022).

In 2021, the relations between ASEAN and China were upgraded to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. In the Chairman's Statement at the 2022 ASEAN-China Summit, China and ASEAN "committed to promoting mutually beneficial cooperation between the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP)" (Chairman's Statement of the EAS 2021).

Major Powers II: ASEAN and the USA

US Secretary of State John Kerry stated in his speech at the ASEAN-US Summit in Brunei in 2013, "the US-ASEAN partnership is a top priority of the Obama Administration" and "is an important part of President Obama's rebalance strategy to Asia" (US Mission to ASEAN 2013). In 2015, the US-ASEAN partnership was elevated to a strategic partnership. In light of challenges to international law, especially China's claims and actions in the South China Sea, the 2015 US National Security Strategy asserted the commitment of the US to strengthening regional institutions such as ASEAN,

EAS, and APEC. This strategy aims to reinforce shared rules and norms, implement collective responses to common challenges, and help ensure the peaceful resolution of disputes (The White House 2015).

Under President Trump, the US continued to support the role of ASEAN. Speaking at the 5th ASEAN-US Summit, President Trump confirmed the commitment of the US to ASEAN's central role as a regional forum for comprehensive cooperation (US Mission to ASEAN 2017). The 2017 US National Security Strategy considered ASEAN and APEC as the centre of the Indo-Pacific regional architecture and platforms to promote a liberal order (The White House 2017). Indeed, in November 2019, the US Department of Defense's Indo-Pacific Vision mentioned ASEAN 39 times. This recognised ASEAN as the geographic centre of the Indo-Pacific and the centre of the US Indo-Pacific vision (State Department 2019, 6). On the one hand, the US supports ASEAN's central role in mechanisms such as the ASEAN-US Summit, EAS, and ARF, (ibid., 30). On the other hand, it supports ASEAN countries' efforts in ensuring equal rights for nations in the Indo-Pacific, regardless of size. (ibid., 7).

Continuing President Trump's overall regional policy, the Biden Administration made efforts to boost US engagement in the region. Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, issued on 3 March 2021, stated that the three regions of the Indo-Pacific, Europe, and the Western Hemisphere are closely linked to US national interests. In the Indo-Pacific, the US will deepen its partnership with India and work with New Zealand, Singapore, Vietnam, and other ASEAN countries to advance shared goals (The White House 2021, 10). President Biden attended and spoke at the 2021 and 2022 ASEAN-US

Summits. In its 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy, the US welcomed a strong and independent ASEAN that plays a leading role in Southeast Asia and supported ASEAN centrality and ASEAN in its efforts to provide sustainable solutions to the region's most pressing challenges. The US also promised to work with ASEAN to build its resilience as a leading regional institution and explore opportunities of multilateralism, supporting closer ties between the bloc and South Asian partners (The White House 2022, 9–10). In 2023, the ASEAN-US relationship was elevated from a Strategic Partnership to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

Major Powers III: ASEAN and Japan

As early as 1991, Japanese Prime Minister Toshiki Kaifu made it clear that this country has long considered ASEAN a focus of its foreign policy and one of the priority focuses for official development assistance (ODA) (Toshiki 1991). In a speech in Singapore in 2013, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe emphasised that, if the regional economy is like an aeroplane, then Japan and ASEAN are the two wings. ASEAN is at the centre of Japan's support of infrastructure development in Asia. Prime Minister Abe also emphasised that the relationship between ASEAN and Japan has gone beyond economic relations to a relationship responsible for ensuring regional security, especially freedom of maritime navigation (Abe 2013).

When the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy was announced in 2016, Japan continued to reaffirm its importance to ASEAN's centrality and unity, considering ASEAN and South Asian countries as the focus of efforts to raise awareness of trust, responsibility, leadership, democracy, the rule of law, and the market economy. ASEAN is also a priority factor in policies to promote

quality improvement in infrastructure development, trade and investment, the business environment, human resource development, and enhanced connectivity (MoFA 2016).

The 2021 Japan Defense White Paper emphasised that, with its location in important strategic areas, occupying key points on Japan's sea routes, and as the center of regional cooperation, ASEAN plays an important role in ensuring the peace and prosperity of Japan as well as the entire region (MoD 2021, 358). Japan's 2024 Defense White Paper mentions ASEAN 156 times, greatly appreciating its role in regional issues such as the East Sea and Myanmar, as well as in the network of intertwined relationships in the region through ASEAN-led mechanisms (MoD of Japan 2024). It should also be noted that Japan was the first country to issue a joint statement with ASEAN on cooperation on the AOIP (November 2020).

Major Powers IV: ASEAN and India

In the early 1990s, along with the decision to reform the economy towards liberalisation, openness, and integration with the global economy, India implemented a 'Look East' policy to help make the country an economic and military power (see Vo 2013, 49). In this policy, ASEAN plays an important role. In a speech at Harvard University in September 2003, Indian Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha stated, "the first phase of the Look East policy focused on ASEAN and focused mainly on trade and investment linkages. The new phase of this policy is characterised by the concept of expanding to the East, from Australia to East Asia, with ASEAN as the core of the policy" (Sinha 2003).

When Look East was elevated to an 'Act East' policy, and India announced the Indo-Pacific Oceans

Initiative, Act East was identified as the cornerstone of India's engagement in the Indo-Pacific region (MoEA of India 2017) with ASEAN at its heart (Modi 2019). India asserted that ASEAN is actually leading the integration process under Act East and that ASEAN laid the foundation (for cooperation) of the Indo-Pacific region (MoEA of India 2018). Therefore, ASEAN unity and centrality have always been an important priority for India (Modi 2021). In India's Vision for the Indo-Pacific, announced by Prime Minister Modi at the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2018, India stated that "inclusiveness, openness, and ASEAN centrality and unity lie at the heart of the new Indo-Pacific". Southeast Asia is at the heart of the Indian Ocean and ASEAN has been and will be at the heart of the future of this region (MoEA of India 2018).

By the middle of the second decade of the 21st century, India and ASEAN had 30 dialogue mechanisms including summits; seven ministerial meetings (foreign affairs, trade, tourism, agriculture, the environment, renewable energy, and telecommunications); and many others. India was the second country, after Japan, to issue a joint statement with ASEAN on cooperation under the AOIP (October 2021).

Advanced Regional Cooperation

In addition to these major countries, some sub-multilateral mechanisms, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (including the US, Japan, Australia, and India) also "strongly supported ASEAN's central role in the Indo-Pacific and reaffirmed that ASEAN-led mechanisms such as EAS and ARF play an indispensable role in the region" (MoFA of Japan 2018). At the Quad Summit in September 2024, the countries reaffirmed their consistent and unwavering support for ASEAN centrality and unity as well as their

continued support for the implementation of the AOIP. They also committed to ensuring that the Quad's work is consistent with ASEAN's principles and priorities (The White House 2024).

Today, ASEAN is at the heart of efforts to advance regional cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. Its central role has been consolidated through the development of ASEAN-led mechanisms in which several of the world's powerful states participate. Thus, ASEAN has become one of the top foreign policy priorities of countries across the entire Asia-Pacific region. In addition to accepting ASEAN's principles (by signing the TAC) and participating in ASEAN-led mechanisms, these countries have also voiced their support for the ASEAN Vision of the Indo-Pacific and consider ASEAN's central role as a fundamental principle in promoting international cooperation and dialogue.

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