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# IR-UI COMMENTARIES

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## *ASEAN Regionalism: Towards Creating a Resilient Southeast Asian Community*

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### **Summary**

The direction of the multilateral Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) seems to shift after the subsidence of Covid-19 pandemic, particularly due to the deterioration in China-United States (US) relationship, Russia-Ukraine war and political turmoil in Myanmar. The three ongoing circumstances were among the highlights of the current ASEAN political landscape. It appears that the time has come for ASEAN to recalibrate its organisational priority, especially with regards to its geopolitical role among the big powers vis-à-vis the need to tighten security measures to protect the inviolable sovereignty and territorial integrity of its members. Nonetheless, while it is important for ASEAN to monitor the external dynamics to protect its stability, it is imperative that the existing internal complications are triaged and tackled in order to build a strong regional core insusceptible to most predicaments.

**Keywords:** *ASEAN, Southeast Asia, regionalism, interregional cooperation, stability*

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## **Is ASEAN's Strength a Weakness?**

During the Regional Outlook Forum 2023 organised by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) in January this year, Singapore's former Foreign Minister George Yeo expressed his admiration of ASEAN for its remarkable degree of acceptance towards the external world.<sup>2</sup> While this could be perceived as a strength, it is nevertheless necessary to acknowledge the risk ASEAN may impose to its member states for promulgating an affable image that is possibly misunderstood as vulnerability. For instance, the recent deployment of China's largest coast guard vessels near Indonesia's Natuna Island soon after Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) delimitation being finalised by both Indonesia and Vietnam (Zhou, 2023) clearly shows China's assertion to its disputable maritime claim over South China Sea. On the political level, the conspicuous support of military and financial assistance from Russia to Myanmar's junta have been among those factors hindering the reinsertion of democracy into this country. Meanwhile, the slick transfer of extreme and divisive ideologies through online and offline spaces from Islamic State (IS) to Indonesia and Malaysia affirms the threat to ASEAN's strategic security.

## **ASEAN to Manage Expectations and Promote Regionalism**

Upon analysing the strategic implications of the war in Ukraine for regional security in Southeast Asia, some experts on the region may reiterate the importance of the US' commitment to containing Russia's power as a means for de-escalation. The end of Russia-Ukraine War is long-awaited as the episodes generate some negative themes, namely (1) the undermining of national sovereignty, (2) the abuse of power when opportunity arises, (3) the abrupt shift in international polarity, (4) the exploitation of vulnerable states and (5) the unexpected change in the formation of political alliances. Such narratives have posed a great deal of concern to ASEAN, mainly due to the present military coup in Myanmar, along with the other extant issues in the region, that curtails regional stability and puts ASEAN in a compromised position.

The essence of understanding this hard truth, however, should not translate into an ultimate expectation for the US to perform as a single balancing power in the international order. Until now, the US has been very much involved in numerous foreign affairs including the mitigation of Israel-Palestine conflict, counterterrorism operations in Syria and Iraq, renunciation of China's covetousness for South China Sea, and non-military assistance to anti-junta groups in Myanmar. Besides, relying heavily on the US provokes curiosity on the implications of such unilateral dependency might inflict on ASEAN in the end.

ASEAN's trajectory shall be determined by itself. Alleviating multifaceted issues in Southeast Asia requires tremendous efforts from various local actors, involving not only the governments in the region, but also Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), crossborder institutions as well as civic communities. In other words, the most feasible way for ASEAN to design a promising regional outlook is to incorporate the inward-oriented viewpoint that empower multiple stakeholders within

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<sup>2</sup> Statement by George Yeo, Former Minister for Foreign Affairs, Singapore; Visiting Scholar, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore, during his Keynote Address: In the Transition to a Multipolar World, ASEAN's Weakness is a Strength, Regional Outlook Forum 2023: Understanding the Drivers of Change in a Disrupted World, 10 January 2023, Shangri-La Singapore, organized by Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) Yusof Ishak Institute.

the region into its presently outward approach. For example, ASEAN governments shall convene beyond the formal summits to brainstorm on the current critical issues faced by the countries in the region, and subsequently formulate several tangible solutions to be implemented. This unconventional problem-solving framework invites ASEAN member states (AMS) to acknowledge regional issues as ‘collectively regional’ instead of ‘sole domestic’. Adopting this method will help them create a robust organisation that is resilient amidst adversities. The combination of inward and outward strategies will expand ASEAN’s global contributions in the ensuing years, especially with respect to overcoming future challenges.

### **Striking a Balance between Regionalism and Non-Intervention: A Daunting Task**

The challenge of regionalism may come from the very core principle of ASEAN, that is non-intervention towards its member states. ASEAN believes that this principle is the price of keeping the organisation intact. It is therefore understood why ASEAN does not maximise its full capacity in mitigating the conflict in Myanmar. In addition, Thailand’s coup d’états that happened twice in the past were successfully resolved by itself, and hence part of the reason for ASEAN's non-intervention towards Myanmar this time is to avoid an accusation of double-standards measures (Leong Kok Wey, 2021).

Within its political and security blueprint, ASEAN aims to create a resilient community in a peaceful, secure and stable region in accordance with the principle of comprehensive security (*ASEAN Political-Security Community Blueprint 2025*, 2016). The greatest dilemma lies in between these key characteristics and non-intervention basis, as the latter deter the operationalisation of the former. Similarly, ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) Blueprint 2025 that upholds the five pillars of integrated, cohesive, competitive, innovative and dynamic economy (Shimizu, 2021) may not fully materialise in an unstable political climate, assuming legitimate interstate political security intervention is continuously discouraged by AMS themselves.

For regionalism to reach its maximum potential, ASEAN shall activate its intergovernmental resources while still providing space for the non-state actors to participate. Even though the emergence of grassroots social movements has been encouraged by ASEAN since the 1990s, they have not really earned an official forum in ASEAN. Furthermore, the privilege is thus far granted to business interest groups and elite think-tanks (Madu & Kuncoro, 2022). Such organisational favouritism may limit the effectiveness of ASEAN in fulfilling regional interests as diversification of non-state actors will certainly enrich the regional perspective required to solve focal problems in Southeast Asia.

### **Preparing for the Unforeseen Tomorrow: Optimising Interregional Cooperation**

Boosting regional vitality is crucial as ASEAN moves toward the world with uncertain types of polarity. The governments in Southeast Asia possess a set of liabilities pertaining to the betterment of political, economic and social mechanisms in the region. On the other hand, the non-state actors parallelly play a significant role in guarding the matters often overlooked by the states, such as social justice, human rights, freedom of expression and community welfare. Activating and empowering the state and non-state actors are of paramount importance for ASEAN to cope with the unpredictable outcome of future polarity.

Southeast Asian nations should also focus on developing a sustainable blueprint to withstand the impact of any upcoming crisis. They need to brace themselves for the impending global recession that is likely to affect the political and social balance, pushing the threshold down to the level where ASEAN is implored to endure. In this case, ASEAN indeed serves as a good institutional platform to discuss diverse issues pertinent to Southeast Asia, as well as to exchange different strategies applicable to restoring regional stability. At the end of the day, it is incumbent on the entire AMS to exercise collective leadership in creating a more resilient Southeast Asia capable of making outstanding contributions to global development.

Once ASEAN has accomplished an adequate amount of regional resilience, it will inevitably be regarded as an equal partner in various interregional cooperation, such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The current partnership landscape of ASEAN suggests that there are divided voices among its member states. To exemplify this point, currently only six out of ten ASEAN countries signed the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with China for BRI (*Countries of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)*, n.d.), and only seven out of ten for IPEF (*Fact Sheet: In Asia, President Biden and a Dozen Indo-Pacific Partners Launch the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity*, 2022). AMS also hold an ambivalent view on FOIP due to internal incoherence and external sensitivities. Among ASEAN countries, Indonesia and Vietnam are seen as the most forward-leaning towards the Indo-Pacific concept. The rest of AMS are apprehensive about the overpowering of the US, India, Japan and Australia on their Indo-Pacific strategies through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) (Ha, 2021).

AMS's uneven standpoints illustrate regional insecurity in engaging with great powers. Based on this ground, ASEAN needs to enhance regional resilience to ensure coherence in intraregional policy formulation. The unity in the decision-making process represents ASEAN's confidence in undertaking regional responsibilities to embrace interregional cooperation that are potentially beneficial for AMS. Interregional cooperation, when optimised, act as convenient alliances in terms of partnering ASEAN in walking towards economic and geopolitical uncertainties. Espousing interregional cooperation is also advantageous to ameliorating multidimensional stability essential for the region. Unless sustainable regional stability is achieved, ASEAN will not be valued as a strong regional ally by the great powers, thus countervailing the effectiveness of international cooperation.

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