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ASEAN Centrality in the Era of Great Power Competition: Hedging for Survival and Prosperity

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Abstract

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was formed in 1967 with the Bangkok Conference as a bulwark against the spread of Communism in Southeast Asia. In its 57 years of existence, ASEAN has proven to be a durable organization capable of organizational change. Furthermore, as the oldest and only standing regional organization with full membership of its region, or sub-region, ASEAN has a large degree of credibility in international affairs. With the end of the Unipolar moment where the 'West' led by the United States exercised hegemony and the beginning of a multipolar world, ASEAN and its member states are entering into a new and dangerous period of great power competition. This holds both opportunities and perils similar in scope to the Cold War. This article will demonstrate, using a historical and strategic institutional hedging approach to argue that ASEAN will continue to play a pivotal and central role in East Asian international relations. It will be argued that as small states with a historically constructed networked institutional architecture which incorporates all great powers can exercise strategic institutional hedging, between security and economic interests against being forced to choose sides in the era of increased security competition between the world's great powers.

Keywords: *ASEAN, ASEAN Centrality, Multipolarity, Great Power Competition, Small States*

Introduction

With the establishment of ASEAN in 1967, the five original member states of Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and the Philippines marked a united beginning for international affairs in the sub-region of Southeast Asia (ASEAN 1967). This brought an end to the period of violence of Sukarno's foreign policy of *konfrontasi* between the newly independent states of Indonesia and Malaysia (Sutter 1966). With the end of *Konfrontasi,* the five ASEAN member states could now engage in a united policy to put aside territorial disputes and push back against the spread of communism in the region (Poon-Kim 1977; Wey 2021). This allowed a period of relative peace to spread within the five ASEAN states. The regional peace was disrupted in December 1978 with the Vietnamese invasion of Democratic Kampuchea to oust the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime. This came on the heels of American withdrawal from the region after losing the Vietnam (or American) War (Mohan, 1981; Morris, 1999).

With the fall of Phnom Penh to communist Vietnam, fear spread throughout the region of a communist push into ASEAN frontline states (Mount 1979; Simon 1987; Southgate, 2015; Stirling 1980). ASEAN played a crucial role in the United Nations in supporting the ousted Khmer Rouge government in exile on Thailand's eastern border. This support was military, political, financial, and diplomatic in nature. ASEAN support for the Khmer Rouge government lasted throughout the 1980s and culminated in the Paris Peace Accords, which brought to an end the 3rd Indochinese War (UNGA 1991). It is well known that ASEAN states played a central role in keeping the Cambodian issue on the world stage throughout the 1980s, thus denying the occupation government of the People's Republic of Kampuchea international legitimacy (Alagappa 1993; Jones 2007; Sanglee 2022).

The ability of small and medium-sized ASEAN states, all of which were developing countries still in early stages of nation-building, to exercise this degree of influence gave ASEAN a high degree of credibility to deal with threats to regional security (Acharya 2002; Jones and Jenne 2015). The historical legacy of the Cold War and ASEAN's ability to deal with security issues and organize regional

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security and governance will be the focus of this paper. In particular, the central contention of the author is to advance the notion that while international relations are moving from an American unipolar world to a multipolar world, the legacy of East Asian international relations will dictate that ASEAN continue to play an important role in wider East Asian affairs. The author will argue that increasing great power competition between China, Russia, and the United States will not detract from ASEAN centrality. In fact, given the constellation of relations between East Asian states, *de facto* ASEAN will be the primary game in town for the great powers to exercise diplomacy and international politics.

ASEAN Centrality: Southeast Asian Security and Network Institutionalism

The notion of ASEAN centrality centers on three primary factors. First is the historical legacy of ASEAN being the 2nd oldest regional organization, surviving the Cold War and reinventing itself in the post-Cold War period. Second is the fact that ASEAN is the only regional organization in East Asia that has a pan-East-to-South Asian institutional architecture. Last is the de facto position of the previous two factors that lead to ASEAN being the primary node for interaction between states of East Asia and the wider world on a multilateral basis. Amador has argued that ASEAN's position as a central node in East Asian affairs was de facto in the absence of any other viable alternative and has led to a hodgepodge of issues and general-based institutionalization (Amador III 2010). Ba provides nuance to this by arguing that institutions such as APEC, which were led by Australia and Japan, coupled with pressure by external powers for institutionalization, led ASEAN to take the lead in creating the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) after a half dozen other proposals from external powers did not materialize (Ba 2009, 385).

Cabellero-Anthony understands centrality as the ability to lead. This is founded on three intersecting processes of multilateral institutionalism and leading in terms of normative operating principles and structural institution building (Caballero-Anthony 2014). The previous studies take the view that ASEAN centrality is a facet of external environmental forces. Beeson argues that East Asian regionalism, namely ASEAN, can be seen through the lens of indigenous

mobilization. Beeson takes a historical view to argue that the lack of regionalism in East Asia is largely due to the manner in which America dealt with the region via its foreign policy. During the Cold War, the United States engaged on a bilateral basis through a hub-and-spokes model rather than a uniform integrative approach in Europe with NATO and the European Coal and Steel Community (Beeson 2005). The crux of this approach lay in the hegemon's method of engaging with ASEAN states, which was on a bilateral rather than multilateral basis. Implicit in Beeson's analysis is that ASEAN regionalism took place indigenously but also against America's policy, seen in the undermining of Malaysia's attempt to establish the East Asian Economic Caucus of the early 1990s (Ibid, 979).

Both of these factors point to internal and external motivations for ASEAN's centrality. ASEAN centrality can also be understood from the perspective of a regional lattice of uneven networks of institutional frameworks. ASEAN's external institutionalization began in 1994 with the creation of the ASEAN Regional Forum to establish security dialogue in the greater Asia-Pacific region. In the aftermath of the Asian Economic Crisis of 1997-1998, regionalism took on a tone of urgency and one of a twin characteristics by broadening security-based issues to include traditional and non-traditional issues and also deeper economic integration. This was seen first in the ASEAN Plus Three formula, with ASEAN reaching out to Northeast Asia. Then it broadened its engagement with the East Asia Summit, which brought together all of ASEAN's strategic partners. This was continually paralleled by the ASEAN Plus economic frameworks beginning with ASEAN-China in 2002 and encompassing Hong Kong by 2018.

Ba points to the ARF, ADMM, and ADMM Plus initiatives as being emblematic of ASEAN's ability to 'socialize' parties and be a viable platform for strategic dialogue on issues such as transnational crime, terrorism, and the South China Sea. The ability of ASEAN, through its normative framework of equality and informality, is credited with the success of being a platform for great powers such as China and the USA (Ba 2017). This, of course, can be countered by the argument that socialization is 'skin deep' on some issues, such as the SCS, where the Code

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of Conduct has not been agreed upon in over two decades of dialogue (Parameswaran 2023). ASEAN Plus Three was built on the success of the ARF to broaden the agenda from strictly security-based issues to include economic agendas with ASEAN's three primary trade partners in Northeast Asia: China, Japan, and Korea. This stemmed from the internal integrative process of ASEAN itself, seen in the push towards the ASEAN Free Trade Area and economic liberalism to capitalize on the global free trade movement and place ASEAN as a critical global supply chain link (Beeson 2002; Beeson 2003; Nesadurai 2009; Simon 2008). The Western correlate to the APT is the Asia-Europe Meeting between ASEAN and the European Union in 1996, which has expanded to include 53 countries (ASEM 2023). The strategic dialogue between the two regional organizations is credited with expanding cooperation and two-way socialization as 'liberal' norms of human rights and democracy are essentials of EU dialogue (Allison 2015; Gaens 2008; Murray 2008; Robles 2007).

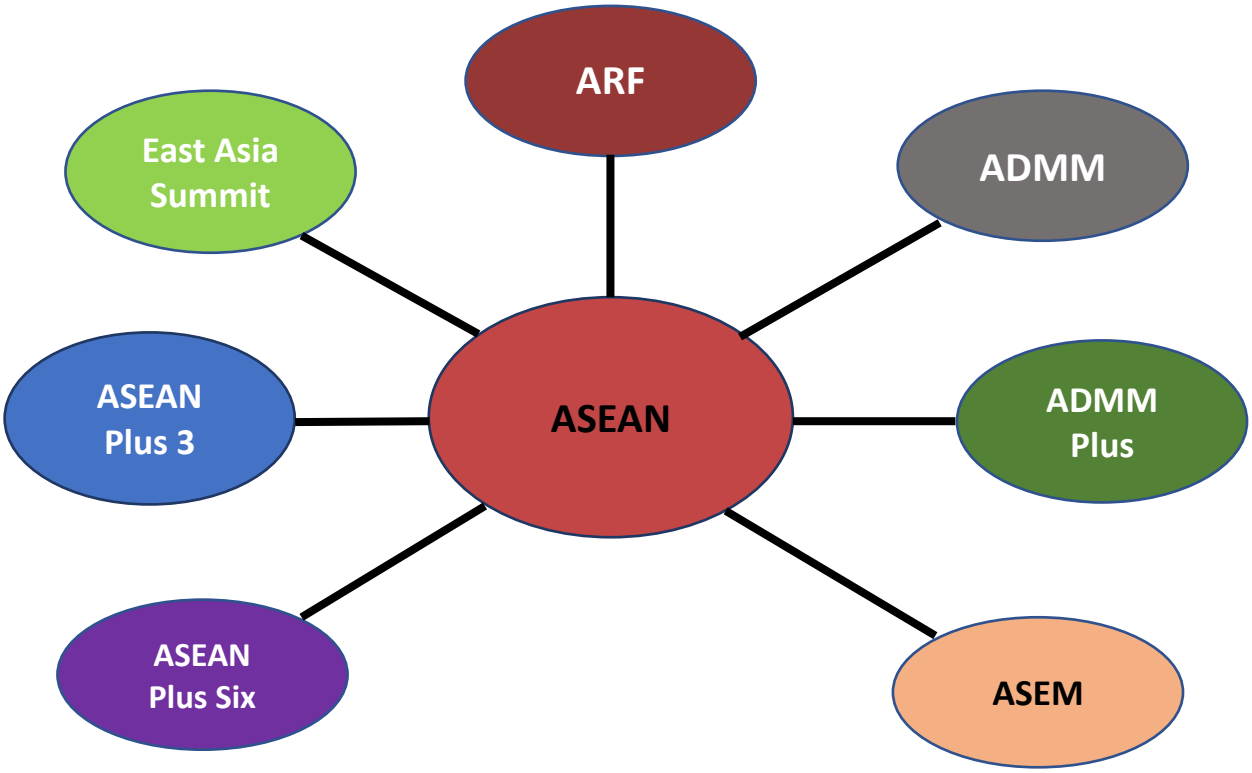

Figure 1 ASEAN Institutional Frameworks for Dialogue

Table 1 ASEAN Mechanisms and Membership

ASEAN Regional Integrative Mechanisms

Mechanism	Established	Members
ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF)	1994	**ASEAN**, Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, **China**, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, European Union, **India**, Japan, Mongolia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Republic of Korea, **Russia**, Sri Lanka, Timor-Leste, **United States**
Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM)	1996	**ASEAN**, European Union, Australia, Bangladesh, **China**, **India**, Japan, Kazakhstan, Republic of Korea, Mongolia, New Zealand, Pakistan, **Russia**, Switzerland, United Kingdom
ASEAN Plus Three (APT)	1999	**ASEAN**, **China**, Japan, Republic of Korea
East Asia Summit (EAS)	2005	**ASEAN**, **China**, **India**, Japan, New Zealand, Republic of Korea, Russia, **United States**
ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting (ADMM)	2006	ASEAN
ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus)	2010	**ASEAN**, Australia, **China**, **India**, Japan, New Zealand, Republic of Korea, **Russia**, **United States**
ASEAN Plus Six (APS)	2002-2018	**ASEAN**, Australia/New Zealand, Republic of Korea, **China**, Hong Kong, **India**, Japan

Source: ASEAN Secretariat https://asean.org/our-communities/asean-political-security-community/outward-looking-community/external-relations/

Table 2 ASEAN Mechanisms and Major Power Membership

ASEAN Mechanisms and the Great Powers

ASEAN Mechanism	China	India	Russia	USA
ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF)	✓	✓	✓	✓
Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM)	✓	✓	✓	
ASEAN Plus Three (APT)	✓			
East Asia Summit (EAS)	✓	✓	✓	✓
ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting (ADMM)				
ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus)	✓	✓	✓	✓
ASEAN Plus Six (APS)	✓	✓		

Source: ASEAN Secretariat https://asean.org/our-communities/asean-political-security-community/outward-looking-community/external-relations/

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The diagram and tables illustrate a type of networked institutionalism established by ASEAN in the post-Cold War era. This framework emphasizes collaboration among member states, promoting economic integration, political stability, and cultural exchange. ASEAN has successfully cultivated a sense of community and shared identity among its member nations, which in turn has strengthened regional resilience in an increasingly interconnected world. While not all great powers participate in every ASEAN external relations framework, every strategic power is involved in one or more of ASEAN's various institutions. Each institution has its agenda, which ranges from narrow, ADMM Plus, to mid, ARF, to broad, East Asia Summit. At the center of all this network is the node of ASEAN member states.

The ASEAN Way: Norms, Socialization, and International Affairs

ASEAN's principles mirror principles articulated in the UN Charter (United Nations Charter 1945; Articles 2.1, 2.3, 2.4, 2.6) and UNGA Resolution 1514 of 1960 (Besu-Mellish 2023). These principles are sovereignty, non-intervention, and peaceful settlement of disputes. Combined with the way ASEAN does business of consultation and consensus, it constituted the 'ASEAN Way,' which informs all aspects of interaction, decision-making, and regional integration within ASEAN (Acharya 1997; Acharya 2001; Acharya 2005; Ba 2009; Jones 2011a; Jones 2011b; Nischalke 2002; Stubbs 2008). These principles are embodied in ASEAN's constitutive institutional documents of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and are echoed in the ASEAN Charter (ASEAN 1976, Articles 2, 10, 11, 13; ASEAN 2007, Article 2). Consultation and consensus as procedural norms dictate that ASEAN diplomacy always seeks to find a common denominator among its member states, which at times and in the case of AICHR 'a best that we could [was possible] result' (Narine 1997, 365; Narine 1999, 360; Sebastian and Lanti 2010, 155).

The ASEAN Way has at its core a few important characteristics that impact the manner in which ASEAN interacts with external partners. On a normative level, the ASEAN Way denotes informality in relations between members and partners.

Informality dictates a non-confrontational approach to relations without formal voting procedures and produces a lack of standing institutional structures within ASEAN structures. This takes decision-making to policymakers on an interpersonal level. Acharya argues from a sociocultural perspective that this leads to 'stickiness' whereby states and leaders that lack trust or familiarity can slowly build relations in a functional and non-threatening manner, leading to further cooperation (Acharya 2001). Haacke takes this further by arguing that the ASEAN Way has produced a diplomatic community that mediates disputes and bridges relations through a process of socialization within the context of ASEAN norms (Haacke 2003). ASEAN's external institutions are guided by the ASEAN Way framework, anchored in ASEAN's principles and norms of institutional cooperation and conduct.

Important to understanding the notion of credibility lies in ASEAN being the convenor of all these integrative measures. As such, the ASEAN Chair (which rotates annually) convenes and chairs all the meetings of the different mechanisms. This allows ASEAN to bring together disparate perspectives and interests and find a common agenda, which can set ASEAN in the driver's seat. Second, there are the ground rules, which are emblematic of ASEAN writ large: non-antagonistic, non-accusatory, informal, and consensus-based (Acharya 1997; Beeson, 2008; Jones 2010; Jones 2011; Roberts 2012). Lastly, while some ASEAN states are security treaty partners with the United States, ASEAN is seen as a credible vector for constructive dialogue, as all states are non-threatening, small, and medium-sized states. They also carry on peaceful relations with all dialogue partners on a non-partisan basis; hence, ASEAN legitimacy.

Great Power Competition: From Unipolarity to Multipolarity

With the end of the Cold War, geopolitical power shifted from a bipolar world to a unipolar world with America and the West in charge of global rule-making. This is important as ASEAN states' economic, hence political, orientation is one of dependence on larger and more powerful external actors, historically North

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America, Europe, and Japan, and now China. With this in mind, it is fundamental to understand the context of the period of time. With the end of the Cold War in 1991 and the entrance into the "unipolar" moment, the West, led by the United States and its allies in Western Europe, exercised heretofore unseen power and influence in all spectrums of interstate relations (Krauthammer 1990). This conjuncture point of history was immensely profound for ASEAN states for two primary reasons: it ushered in the unipolar moment, whereby American and European interests became primary global interests. Western countries, in particular, and their political elites, for the first time, engaged in an ideological foreign policy with the thought that "liberals want to spread liberal democracy not just to protect the rights of individuals but also because they believe it is an excellent strategy for causing peace" (Mearsheimer 2018, 132). It is taken for granted and argued by Ikenberry and Mastanduno, who see American hegemony as a given in the post-Cold War world and hegemony as being central in terms of organizing world and regional order. They argue that American hegemony provides a reference point for organizing economic and political activity along liberal lines that will create stability and hierarchy (Ikenberry and Mastanduno 2003, 8).

The beginning of the end of unipolarity, or the era of unbridled American dominance of international affairs, is argued to have begun with the American military response to the September 11 attacks (Smith 2002). The costs associated with America's "Global War on Terror" are estimated at over $8,000,000,000,000 and led to the deaths of millions (Kimball 2021). Other scholars point to the Russian military intervention in the Syrian civil war to halt American-backed jihadi militants as the moment when American hegemony ceased to be omnipotent (Phillips 2022; Weissman 2022). Importantly, the GWT led the United States to focus on small wars and interventions to the detriment of its broader regional interests in East Asia.

Beginning in the Clinton Administration, American economic policy shifted to a global neoliberal approach. This entailed opening American markets to foreign competition, outsourcing industrial manufacturing, and freeing capital flows to

Mexico and, most importantly, China (Goldman 1995). The massive offshoring of American and European manufacturing jobs helped fuel China's economic growth in the two decades following Clinton's departure from office. The Chinese economy grew from a GDP of $1,211.33 trillion in 2000 to $17,963.17 trillion in 2020 (World Bank 2021a), displacing America as the number 1 trade partner to over 120 countries (Green 2023). China is the number 1 trade partner and largest export market for every ASEAN member state except the Philippines, which still counts the USA as the main export market, topping China by only $300,000 (World Bank 2021b). The rise of China is having a massive impact on ASEAN member states, and many member states have seen foreign policy shifts due to China's influence (Liu 2023). China's influence has led Brunei to give up its territorial claims in the South China Sea (Putra 2024), Cambodia to back China's claim (Florick 2021), and go so far as to have Chinese-owned casinos in Sihanoukville closed in response to a request by President Xi (Turton 2020).

China's rise, coupled with the American foreign policy missteps in the Middle East and Ukraine (Collins and Sobchak 2023; Mearsheimer 2014; Ostergard 2006), has now led to the emergence of a multipolar world (Diesen 2019; Hadano 2020; Acharya et al. 2024). The two competing blocs can roughly be divided into two large blocs. The 'Western' bloc consists of a US-led NATO with Australia, Japan, and New Zealand, and the Eastern bloc is led by China and Russia, which is best exemplified in the BRICS countries, which recently expanded membership (Kurecic 2017; Paikin 2023). The two blocs have been engaging in a seesaw of escalation beginning with the Trump tariffs on Chinese imports, which began shortly after he took office (Pettis 2021). This trend towards China of economic coercion has continued under the Biden administration, with its attempts to stop Chinese high tech by reshoring high-tech firms to America and a ban on semiconductor and lithograph machine sales to Chinese firms (Sheehan 2022). The economic war, coupled with American bellicosity surrounding Taiwan, all point towards conflict at some point or at least a continued trajectory of tense relations (Maizland 2023). Given that Biden and Trump are the presumptive

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nominees of their parties in the upcoming election, as both sounded resounding victories on Super Tuesday primaries, no matter which wins, the policy will have continuity (Epstein and McCausland 2024).

ASEAN's Security Relationships with the Great Powers

Within the global split, East Asia is not uniform in terms of foreign policy leanings towards either bloc. The United States has a number of security arrangements. There are five primary treaty alliances in East Asia, which include Australia/New Zealand (1951), the Philippines (1951), Japan (1960), and the Republic of Korea (1953) (US Department of State 2017). The Philippines under President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. has reversed the foreign policy of President Duterte and reconnected with its traditional ally, and is now hosting the American Navy again (Arugay and Storey 2023). These five treaty alliance members are the core of American strategic security in the Western Pacific. The US has extensive military bases and full-spectrum cooperation in intelligence, military procurement, and operations, with Australia and New Zealand also being Five Eyes members.

The United States also has lower-level strategic security agreements with Singapore (Strategic Framework Agreement 2005) and Thailand since 1954 with the Manila Pact of SEATO, which is also a major non-NATO ally since 2003 (US Department of State 2022), and the Congressional Taiwan Relations Act of 1979 (Taiwan Relations Act 1979). These consist of non-permanent basing of American military assets, training, military procurement, intelligence cooperation, and non-traditional security cooperation such as counterterrorism. The security relationship between the United States, Thailand, and Singapore deserves deeper analysis, as there is more to the relationships of late. While Thailand and America share a historical and treaty-based security relationship, it must be noted that since the coup of 2014, the once historic security relationship was downgraded significantly as America shunned Thailand under the Obama administration (Kittisilpa and Lefevre 2016). The cooperation got to such a low level as to bring into question America's relationship in general as Thailand continued to lean heavily towards China (Abuza 2020; Saballa 2023; Rahman et al. 2024). The lack

of trust is evidenced by the US refusing to sell F-35s to Thailand, as it feels that Thailand has ingratiated itself too much with China by purchasing submarines and other military weapons (Detsch 2022) (Strangio 2023). This can be juxtaposed with Singapore, which openly offered and sold F-35s, America's 5th generation and most advanced fighter aircraft (Zachariah 2024). Implicit in this comparison is the look forward, as Thailand is a shaky security partner to America and could go further to the side of China. Singapore, alternatively, will remain firmly in the American sphere of security influence.

America also has increasingly dense security cooperation with Vietnam (Dung and Vu 2024; Shoji 2018). The United States also has lower-level defense cooperation with Brunei, largely in the realm of joint training and military procurement (US Department of State 2021). Vietnam has upgraded its relationship to a strategic one with the United States, but this is largely a facet of rhetoric more than reality (The White House 2023a). The nature of Vietnam-USA strategic relations is primarily in economics, trade, investment, and technology cooperation. This does belie a less formal but nonetheless important and informal area of cooperation, which is non-permanent basing. American Navy vessels have been making visits to Vietnamese ports since 2016 in Cam Ranh Bay, with the rise in tensions in the South China Sea between China and Vietnam (Hammond 2020). It has to be stated that this is balanced with cooperation with China as well. In 2023, President Xi and President Thuong signed a strategic partnership for cooperation in a wide spectrum of relations, including trade, technical, education, and defense (Vu 2023). This can be seen through the spectrum of Vietnam's hedging policy options between its northern neighbor and historical enemy through its policy of the Four No's. Vietnam's Four No's foreign policy was formalized by the Vietnam Ministry of Defense in 2019 with the release of its White Paper, which stated that Vietnam would not allow "no military alliance, no affiliation with one country to counteract the other, no foreign military base in the Vietnamese territory to act against other countries, and no force or threatening to use force in international relations" (Phan 2019). It has been argued

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that this is being tested with American Navy vessels visiting Vietnamese ports and American attempts during the Trump administration to base missiles in Vietnam (Sang 2022). Nonetheless, to date, Vietnam has refused American missile bases, and military cooperation is largely informal (Grossman 2017).

Indonesia is a traditional American military partner in Southeast Asia and had the security relationship formalized in a strategic partnership in 2023 (O'Brien 2005; US Embassy 2023). The relationship in the post-9/11 period dealt principally with counterterrorism and training and is now moving towards military procurement and joint training operations. There is pushback and limits to the cooperation under President Widodo to try and balance the relationship with the burgeoning economic relationship with China (Rachman 2023). On the China side of the ledger, Indonesia is the second-largest recipient of investment, with some $8.2 billion worth of investment entering Indonesia through the Maritime Silk Road (Song 2023). It must also be noted that a great degree of goodwill was built between China and Indonesia during the Covid pandemic when China donated millions of doses of Sinovac and built factories to manufacture the vaccine indigenously (Wanyi and Mingjiang 2023).

Within this network is also the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, consisting of the United States, Australia, Japan, and India (Tzinieris et al. 2023). The Quad, since its formalization during the Trump administration in 2017, has increasingly become more active and coherent in terms of policy direction. This is currently in the stage of maritime security cooperation for active engagement from the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea (Szalwinski 2023; Townshend et al. 2023). This can be further bolstered by the AUKUS coalition when Australia finally receives its nuclear submarines from the United States in a decade or more (The White House 2023b).

The Quad is a cross-cutting formation as it bridges South Asia, Northeast Asia, and two members of the Five Eyes. India, while a member of the Quad, carries on historical and close relations with Russia in defense procurement and now the sale of oil, with India importing over 1 million barrels per day since the American

and EU sanctions at the start of the Russia-Ukraine War (Ministry of External Affairs 2017; Rajghatta 2023). India and China share a shaky relationship with border conflicts dating back to their border war in 1962, which flared again and resulted in military deaths in the Himalayas in 2020 (Bonner 2023; Kewalramani 2024). The Quad can be understood as a mechanism for the United States to expand its influence into South Asia with India, a country with which it historically has loose security relations. For India, the Quad allows for strategic knowledge sharing and expansion of influence outside of its traditional area of influence into Southeast and East Asia.

Table 3 List of United States Security Partners in Asia

United States of America Asian Security Partners

Partner	Year	Nature of Relationship
Australia	1951	Treaty partner (Deep full spectrum cooperation)
New Zealand	1951	Treaty partner (Deep full spectrum cooperation)
Philippines	1951	Treaty partner (Deep full spectrum cooperation)
South Korea	1953	Treaty partner (Deep full spectrum cooperation)
Japan	1960	Treaty partner (Deep full spectrum cooperation)
Thailand	1954	Strategic partner (Training, military procurement, counter terrorism, possible basing)
Taiwan	1979	Strategic partner (Training, military procurement, counter terrorism, possible basing)
Singapore	2005	Strategic partner (Training, military procurement, counter terrorism, possible basing)
Brunei Darussalam	1994	Low level partner (Training, military procurement)
India	2017	Formative stage partner (QUAD maritime strategic)
Indonesia	2023	Initial stage partner (Defense cooperation, technical and economic)
Vietnam	2023	Initial stage partner (Economic strategic, technical)

Source: US Department of State https://2009-2017.state.gov/s/l/treaty/collectivedefense/

This network lattice of security arrangements makes it clear that certain countries in East Asia will continue to be lodged firmly in the American sphere of influence (Australia, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, New Zealand, and

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Singapore). Coupled with the dense dependency that ASEAN countries have on the Chinese economy, ASEAN as an organization is well placed to navigate and hedge its relations between the two blocs and leading countries seeking to garner influence in the region. (Beeson 2013; Beeson 2016; Chen and Yang 2013; Stubbs 2014; Yoshimatsu 2012). Non-strategic security partnerships of Thailand, Singapore, Brunei, and Vietnam, while being at varying levels of depth, allow America a strong security hold in Southeast Asia. The only ASEAN countries that are firmly

Alternative Asian Regionalism

There is only one East Asian regional organization that includes East Asia's important states, which could in the future be a node of connectivity between the major powers and possibly rival ASEAN as a point of contact: the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization was established in 2001 by Kazakhstan, China, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan (Shanghai Cooperation Organization 2017). The primary focus of the SCO is security dialogue and cooperation. The SCO was formed in response to the spread of terrorist organizations in Central Asia, Southern Russia, and Eastern China and deals with border disputes between its members to lessen the opportunity for conflict. While the SCO has expanded its scope of activities to include economic dialogue, security affairs continue to dominate its agenda (Blank 2013). The membership has expanded to nine members, fourteen dialogue partners, and three observers (Ibid.). Current membership now includes India, Iran, and Pakistan. In 2005 ASEAN became an observer. Pertinent to this discussion is the block coverage. China, Russia, Iran, and India are now members of the BRICS grouping and are also members of the SCO. The absence of any Western bloc countries signals an absence of normative or interest-based inclusivity in the SCO, and its agenda mirrors its membership.

There are initiatives to expand cooperation with the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union and existing ASEAN connectivity; the lack of an interregional

scope of membership inherently is a limiting factor for the SCO to be a substantive mediator in great power competition (Alimov 2018). It is also highly unlikely that Japan or South Korea would join the SCO, as it is a vestige of security cooperation between the United States' competitors and adversaries in the region, China and Russia. As such, the SCO, which includes India, a Quad member, is not a viable node of diplomatic, political, or security connectivity between the Western bloc and its counterpart, the China/Russia-led bloc.

ASEAN Between Great Powers: Hedging for Survival

It has been argued that international relations have entered into a new Cold War (Abrams 2022; Breuer 2022; Schindler et al. Online First). This puts ASEAN states into a dangerous position similar to the first Cold War, with added complexity. During the first Cold War, there was a lack of economic interaction between rival blocs. This is the opposite in this iteration, as countries can have their security arrangements with the leading country in a bloc and trade relations with the leading country from the opposing bloc. This is best seen with Japan and South Korea, who are treaty allies with the United States but whose largest trade partner is China (World Bank 2021a). The same is true to varying degrees with ASEAN member states, which puts ASEAN states into a difficult predicament of survival (Acharya 2018). Put simply, national security can be linked to a strategic rival of the source of your national wealth and economic well-being. To this end, many ASEAN states have engaged in the policy strategy of hedging (Gede and Karim 2023; Gerstl 2022).

A common analytical framework or strategic positioning perspective taken in the scholarly literature is one of hedging, deferred alignment, or deferred bandwagoning. These are conceptually different but imply similar outcomes based on different reasoning. This author takes the conceptual view that strategic hedging is a rational state behavior for small states who do not want to choose sides in a competition when their security and economic relationships are towards opposite nodes or great powers (Kuik 2021). Furthermore, the contested

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economic relationships where both great powers, China and the USA, or within the top 3 overall trade and export markets, provide strong incentives for ASEAN states to not choose.

The difference between the current state of relations and the Cold War is the blurred distinctions in economic relations. In the Cold War, economic intercourse between capitalist American allies or inclined states was minimal with the Socialist bloc. This is not the case today when China and America are the top 3 trading partners with all ASEAN states, except the Lao PDR. This relationship nexus of export-oriented ASEAN economies forces ASEAN elites to seek peaceful coexistence with the great powers for economic survival while maintaining historical and burgeoning security relationships with the USA and increasingly China. This does not imply balancing but a simple rational stance for economic survival while maintaining flexibility in security affairs by exploiting competition for influence.

Many scholars have argued that ASEAN states have engaged in hedging, which is a foreign policy strategy of not choosing alignment with a great power; instead, a policy of engagement with both or all powers is engaged (Wang 2021). Kuik (2008) has argued that Malaysia and Singapore do this out of perceived economic benefit. Kuik (2021) has further articulated from a broader ASEAN perspective that this is more in line with a wait-and-see approach, with ASEAN states fearful of making enemies. Goh (2008) and Marston (2024) take the same approach of deferred alignment, with ASEAN states not wanting to choose due to fears of choosing the wrong partner. Alignment denotes when a state firmly chooses another state's positions in economic and security affairs, the classic example being formal and economic organizations such as the European Union and NATO. ASEAN states have so far deferred making a strategic choice, instead choosing to engage to the greatest degree possible where it serves national interests without sacrificing core interests.

The reasons for hedging, of course, depend on the state and its leadership. It has been previously argued that ASEAN states have engaged in hedging or

deferred alignment due to the above-mentioned conundrum of not wanting to choose a side, which undermines national security or undermines economic well-being (Yuzhu 2021). Hedging in this sense can be understood as simply a reflection of reality. ASEAN states are small, and one of the two competitors, America, has an unstable foreign policy (Narine 2024). With American foreign policy shifting with regard to China and multilateral forums such as the WTO and in areas of previous stability, such as free trade, it is no wonder ASEAN leaders have adopted a wait-and-see approach (Thompson 2024). To do otherwise would be irrational. This is particularly evident with the Trump 2.0 administration and its 'liberation day' tariffs, which hit ASEAN states particularly hard (Harithas et al. 2025). It is evident that President Trump is trying to force ASEAN states to choose an economic partner preference, but so far, ASEAN states (Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam), while offering concessions to balance trade, have not sacrificed the China side of their relationship.

Table 4 ASEAN Countries Top 3 Trade Partners

ASEAN Countries Largest Export Markets (Ranked by Top 3)

	China	USA	Japan	Singapore	Thailand	Vietnam	Malaysia
Brunei	3		3	1			
Cambodia	2	1	3				
Indonesia	1	2	3				
Lao PDR	2				1	3	
Malaysia	1	3		2			
Myanmar	1		3		2		
Singapore	1	3					2
Thailand	2	1	3				
Philippines	2	1	3				
Vietnam	2	1	3				

Source: World Bank, 2021 (World Integrated Trade Solution Database)

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Table 5 ASEAN Top Trade Partner Imports and Exports by Percentage of Overall Trade

Imports		Exports	
China	23.9%	China	15.9%
USA	7.4%	USA	14.9%
Republic of Korea	7.0%	European Union	8.6%
Japan	6.9%	Japan	6.7%

Source: ASEAN Statistical Highlights 2024

The rub with ASEAN lies at crosscutting points of national foreign policy preferences of ASEAN states in the two realms of security and economy, and issues of contention between the great powers. A case in point is the South China Sea issue, where China's rise has only emboldened its claims to the SCS and, at times, belligerence toward an ASEAN member, the Philippines. This was seen in China's disregard for the ICJ ruling regarding territorial claims vis-à-vis the Philippines and the Philippines' recent invitation to the US Navy to open once-shuttered bases (Phillips et al. 2017; Rasheed 2023). Furthermore, China has been able to leverage bilateral relations with ASEAN members to undermine ASEAN cohesion to where the notion of even reaching consensus over particular issues, such as the SCS, has been abandoned (Goh 2021).

Additionally, no ASEAN state is large enough to exert influence over the great powers. ASEAN itself, due to its informality and lack of substantive engagement, has led to a reexamination and orientation by Western powers away from ASEAN institutions. This is evidenced by the formation of the Quadrilateral Dialogue (Quad), which includes the United States, Australia, India, and Japan. This parallels the AUKUS alliance between the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom. These mini-lateralisms are highly indicative of the United States taking it upon itself to shore up its security interests by bypassing established regional institutions such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) (Beeson 2022). The mini-lateralism of the Quad while bypassing the ARF has had an interesting twist of late in that the Quad requested to formalize relations with ASEAN at the 2023 ASEAN Summit, where it was later agreed at the ASEAN Foreign Minister's Retreat

in February 2024 to indeed formalize relations with the Quad within ASEAN mechanisms of ASEAN Plus One, EAS, and ARF in order to try and demonstrate ASEAN centrality (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2024).[1]

The above has its correlate in China's Belt and Road Initiative, where, in the Chinese view, its engagement creates the conditions for 'win-win' outcomes as China's vision overlaps with Southeast Asian needs for infrastructure (Jinping 2013). The BRI dovetails with ASEAN's historical plans for connectivity, which it was unable to realize on its own until China put forth its ambitious proposals (ASEAN 2010). The reliance on Chinese funding was laid by Mueller's analysis, which states

> "in the absence of functioning mechanisms to mobilize internal resources for the achievement of its objectives, ASEAN has to rely on external resources to fund the formulation of plans, the convention of meetings, and, most significantly, the implementation of projects related to its connectivity agenda. This is a pattern that is familiar to observers of ASEAN in the realms of security and trade. In connectivity, this pattern of ASEAN's external resource dependence is being replicated." (Mueller 2021).

Furthermore, with regard to China's economic leverage, it has shown a willingness to use coercive economic measures on developed countries when policy disputes arise. This was seen in China putting hefty tariffs on Australian wine, barley, beef, cotton, lobsters, and timber after Australia called for inquiries

[1] It should be noted that Australia and New Zealand while nominally are geographically positioned in Asia-Pacific, they are considered to be part of Oceania as a separate region. However, given that both countries are geographically adjacent to Indonesia and part of the 2nd Island Chain of America's security position in Asia they are grouped within the East Asian sphere.

ANZUS is an original post-World War II security treaty alliance between Australia, New Zealand, and the United States established in 1951. The QUAD is more recent having been formed in 2007 while AUKUS was only formed in 2021. It should be further noted that many practitioners and scholars consider AUKUS to not be a security alliance but simply a weapons deal, namely Virginia Class nuclear submarines by Australia from the United States.

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into the coronavirus origins from a laboratory in Wuhan (Choudhury 2020). Given many ASEAN members' dependency in politically sensitive areas of their economies, it is difficult to see many ASEAN members openly engaging in any policy stance that may be considered hostile or threatening to Beijing's interests (Jones and Rhein 2023).

In addition to China's willingness to use leverage there is a lack of American or European response to China's BRI. In 2022, the United States, through the G7, announced some $600 billion in infrastructure funding to counter the BRI (Shalal 2022). The European Union also announced infrastructure plans of up to €300 billion as part of its Global Gateway policy (Sacks 2021). These plans, while impressive on the surface, have been heavily criticized and have not yet yielded any policy implementation. The plans rely heavily on both public and private financing and are stacked with traditional conditionality as seen in Asia Development Bank and World Bank loans (Barbero 2023). It is argued that still-dominant neoliberal thinking in the United States and Western Europe accounts for both the underwhelming implementation and lack of policy take-up seen in the rollout of PGII (Yu 2024). This is reflected in the approach taken by the public/private partnership philosophy, where anywhere from 55% to 95%, with an average of 82%, of infrastructure loans from the G7 plan originate from private funding sources (Hameiri and Jones 2024). Given the pace and implementation of the BRI over the previous decade and the lack of imagination brought by Western countries to counter the BRI, there is little hope that any viable alternative to China's BRI will emerge.

In parallel to the EU's initiative, the Biden administration unveiled its Indo-Pacific Strategy. The Biden Administration's IDPS outlined a broad and ambitious proposal to engage Southeast Asian states in democracy promotion, security network building, economic integration, and sustainability initiatives (United States Embassy of Thailand 2022). Towards the end of the Biden era, it became clear that a lack of deliverables was the primary facet of engagement. It is noted that only green sustainability projects were both funded and to a degree engaged (EAF

editors 2024; Li 2025). There were no new economic or trade initiatives, and American engagement in ASEAN institutions, forums, and Summits was a noticeable no-show, thereby ceding the economic ground to China while maintaining a unidirectional policy heavily skewed towards security.

The BRI infrastructure expansion to connect the region has been met with mixed but largely positive embrace. The high-speed rail, WHOOSH, connecting Jakarta to Bandung has been widely hailed as a local success (Berger 2023). In Malaysia, the East Coast Rail Link is expected to boost trade and connectivity when completed in 2027 (Mahmud 2025). Laos' high-speed rail is more controversial in that it has saddled the government with a large debt load. However, the benefits are clear in terms of connectivity and will become more so when Thailand completes its high-speed rail connection in 2030, which is not part of the BRI as the previous three are (Forgan 2022; Strangio 2025).

The implication of this Western policy failure is that ASEAN countries will continue to economically gravitate towards China, and the physical linkages of the BRI, as they expand, will drain even more economic activity to the Middle Kingdom rather than to the transatlantic zone.

Direction for ASEAN among the Great Powers

ASEAN, as a collective of 10 independent member states that have different security relationships with China and the United States, will have a very difficult time finding common ground on strategic foreign policy. ASEAN members such as Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar are fully within the sphere of influence of China, whereas all other members are walking the foreign policy tightrope of hedging. In realist terms, hedging is perhaps the only viable option for the remaining ASEAN members not within China's sphere. Looking towards China for national economic and investment vitality is now a regional reality that cannot be ignored with the decline of the West and American economic initiatives. The counterbalance to this is looking towards America for strategic national security to balance against Chinese belligerence in the South China Sea and possibly other areas of

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contention.

Cabellero-Anthony has argued that ASEAN's place between the two great powers is one of 'strategic neutral convenor' (Cabellero-Anthony, Online First). Cabellero-Anthony understands the notion of neutrality in a narrow sense. In ASEAN institutional forums, ASEAN as a grouping and its members exercise a regional perspective which is distanced from national perspectives. This can be seen in Cambodia's refusal to endorse a Joint Communiqué at the 2012 ASEAN Summit over the contentious South China Sea issue where the Philippines wanted to condemn China's encroachment (Sarith 2013). Some analysts condemned Cambodia's action, seeing the 'hidden hand' of China (Bower 2012; Cook 2014). However, a more nuanced perspective would argue that ASEAN has had the Code of Conduct framework to address the SCS issue to which it still attempts to include China. This non-confrontational approach is indicative of being a neutral convenor to produce engagement rather than polarity and estrangement. This is based on the regional realities of ASEAN being composed of small, weak states and of ASEAN's de facto position in the East Asian space.

The ability of ASEAN to have multiple institutional forums for interaction and integrative agenda formulation holds significant advantages for hedging relations. However, the more engaging question is what can ASEAN do or contribute when a great power's core interest is a point of contention? The most recent example of this is President Trumps' 'liberation day' tariffs. It is clear that a central target of the tariffs are many ASEAN states, reflected in the high tariff rates. This of course was a stopgap measure for China tariffs. In Trumps' first term, tariffs on China were raised significantly along with sanction measures on technology and tech companies. Many ASEAN states were the willing and open recipient of Chinese manufacturers skirting tariffs by moving manufacturing to Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand and a lesser degree Cambodia. When tariffs were announced ASEAN states were some of the first to offer concessions individually rather than act collectively. How these tariffs play out will be seen.

Table 6 Trump Tariffs on ASEAN States

Country	New Tariff Rate
Cambodia	49%
Vietnam	46%
Thailand	36%
Indonesia	32%
Malaysia	24%
Philippines	17%

Source: https://whitehouse.gov

ASEAN's limitations are apparent with the South China Sea dispute and its inability due to fracturing of members towards China. Concurrently, ASEAN is also suffering from a lack of credibility in dealing with the crisis in Myanmar, with member states such as Thailand undermining the ASEAN 5-point consensus under the government of Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha.

There are also points of concern and possible friction between ASEAN states with regard to increasing security ties to China. This is seen in Thailand's concern over China's financing of the Funan Techno Canal to connect the Mekong River to the Gulf of Thailand (Cheang 2025). This is of concern to Thailand due to the continuing maritime dispute with Cambodia in the Gulf. There are also concerns in Thailand over the possible impact of China's donation of naval vessels to Cambodia, naval docking and basing of Chinese naval assets at Ream Naval base (Morris and Nguyen 2023).

Tensions have become sharper in the China-Philippines relationship after the election of President Marcos Jr. President Marcos Jr. shifted Philippine foreign policy from the previous administration of President Duterte, inviting the US Navy back to the Philippines and offering basing rights. So far, President Marcos Jr. has granted the establishment of nine naval bases to the United States (Lariosa 2025). At present, this has evolved to the basing of American Typhoon missile systems in the Northern Philippines with a range of 1,500 km in an obvious action to balance against China's actions in the SCS (Doyle and Lema 2025). This is to say

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there is a complex web of national relationships vis-à-vis China in the security sphere and no easy choices to make as geographically ASEAN states feel the 'pull' of China to differing degrees.

Clearly, there are no easy options for ASEAN to engage other than the status quo of being an institutional nexus point for dialogue. Hedging will be a successful strategy insofar as the great powers do not consider an issue or issue area to be of core national interest. In which case they will bypass ASEAN or use divide-and-stagnate tactics. This does not bode well for ASEAN, as it will not necessarily play a key role in East Asian affairs but rather a second-order convening power for dialogue and discussion.

Conclusion

There are no easy options for the Global South's oldest regional organization in the new era of great power competition. ASEAN has a developed institutional framework for engagement with all major powers that no other organization has. ASEAN as a collective of small and medium-sized states is essentially a neutral actor, in that there are no possible threats that can emanate from any ASEAN member towards a great power. That being said, ASEAN has critical weaknesses of an inability to deal with substantive issues in an 'open diplomacy' manner, which relegates it to a dialogue-based forum for discussion, socialization, and talk shop. This has its benefits, of course, but it would be an overstatement to say that ASEAN has any ability to influence the great powers on core national interests.

It has been demonstrated that there exist complex relations in the economic and security spheres between ASEAN states and the primary great powers, China and the USA. There is an existing lattice of ASEAN mechanisms to deal with specific general agendas, which include all the great powers. Given the fact there are no other institutional frameworks that include such a wide range of issue areas and are inclusive of all great powers, ASEAN de facto has a central role to play. This role involves acting as a convening power to unite various actors in a non-confrontational manner. This has clear limits, as ASEAN external relations forums

are informal and do not produce binding resolutions in these frameworks. However, there is clear utility in being the only organization where near-constant diplomacy can take place at the highest levels. The assumption is that, with greater, not less, security competition in international relations with Asia being the epicenter, no new institutions will be established that are as inclusive and expansive as ASEAN has already produced. Scholars and practitioners question how effective ASEAN can be in forging consensus and if ASEAN can lead in external relations frameworks. The open question is, when a great power gets tired of ASEAN's hedging strategy and forces the hands of its members, will ASEAN be able to manage security affairs? This is difficult to imagine at the moment, as ASEAN cannot take care of crises in its own backyard, namely the crisis in Myanmar.

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