



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



EAST ASIA EXPLORER MARCH 2024

Authors

Pradeep Taneja
Jayantika Rao T. V.
Anshita Shukla
Biren Nanda

Volume II, Issue 3



Delhi Policy Group

Core 5A, 1st Floor, India Habitat Centre, Lodhi Road, New Delhi- 110003

www.delhipolicygroup.org



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power

East Asia Explorer

Vol. II, Issue 3

March 2024

ABOUT US

Founded in 1994, the Delhi Policy Group (DPG) is among India's oldest think tanks with its primary focus on strategic and international issues of critical national interest. DPG is a non-partisan institution and is independently funded by a non-profit Trust. Over past decades, DPG has established itself in both domestic and international circles and is widely recognised today among the top security think tanks of India and of Asia's major powers.

Since 2016, in keeping with India's increasing global profile, DPG has expanded its focus areas to include India's regional and global role and its policies in the Indo-Pacific. In a realist environment, DPG remains mindful of the need to align India's ambitions with matching strategies and capabilities, from diplomatic initiatives to security policy and military modernisation.

At a time of disruptive change in the global order, DPG aims to deliver research based, relevant, reliable and realist policy perspectives to an actively engaged public, both at home and abroad. DPG is deeply committed to the growth of India's national power and purpose, the security and prosperity of the people of India and India's contributions to the global public good. We remain firmly anchored within these foundational principles which have defined DPG since its inception.

Authors

Pradeep Taneja, Non-Resident International Fellow, Delhi Policy Group

Jayantika Rao T. V., Research Associate, Delhi Policy Group

Anshita Arvind Shukla, Research Associate, Delhi Policy Group

Ambassador Biren Nanda, Senior Fellow for Act East Diplomacy, Delhi Policy Group

The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Delhi Policy Group as an Institution.

Cover Image:

ASEAN country leaders with Premier Li Qiang of China for the 26th ASEAN-China Summit in Jakarta, Indonesia on September 6, 2023. (Source: [Prime Minister's Office Singapore](#))

Australian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence, Richard Marles, meeting Indonesian Minister of Defence and President elect, Prabowo Subianto for high-level defence and security discussions in Jakarta, on February 23, 2024. (Source: [X/@RichardMarlesMP](#))

President Joe Biden of the United States along with Prime Minister Anthony Albanese of Australia and Prime Minister Rishi Sunak of the United Kingdom during the AUKUS summit at Naval Base Point Loma in San Diego, California, on March 13, 2023. (Source: [The White House/Official X Account](#))

© 2024 by the Delhi Policy Group

Delhi Policy Group

Core 5A, 1st Floor,

India Habitat Centre,

Lodhi Road, New Delhi- 110003.

www.delhipolicygroup.org

East Asia Explorer

Vol. II, Issue 3

March 2024

Contents

No End in Sight to Conflict in Myanmar

Pradeep Taneja1

Indonesia-Australia Defence Agreement – A Pathway for Cooperation?

Jayantika Rao T.V..... 4

China- ASEAN Relations: Beyond the tensions in the South China Sea

Anshita Shukla..... 8

How do we evaluate ASEAN's Centrality in the Regional Security Architecture in East Asia?

Biren Nanda..... 13

No End in Sight to Conflict in Myanmar

by

Pradeep Taneja

Ever since the February 2021 coup d'état that prevented a re-elected National League for Democracy (NLD) government led by Aung San Suu Kyi from taking power in February 2021, Myanmar has scarcely been out of the headlines. The latest [headline](#) related to the rescue of 69 Rohingya refugees by an Indonesian search and rescue ship on 21 March off West Aceh.

These refugees had apparently left the Kutupalong refugee camp in Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh, where around one million Rohingya have been living in squalor for years. The dangerous journeys aboard rickety boats that thousands of Rohingya refugees have embarked on in recent years are emblematic of the hopelessness felt by them about the prospects of ever returning to their homes in Rakhine state in Myanmar.

The humanitarian disaster created by the brutal expulsion campaign launched by the Myanmar military in August 2017 has continued to widen the gulf between Myanmar's military regime led by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing and the other fellow members of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), especially the Muslim-majority Indonesia and Malaysia.

Min Aung Hlaing, the 67-year-old Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services, and Chairman of the State Administration Council (SAC), has become so unpopular that the March 2024 issue of The Diplomat magazine headlined its [cover story](#) "Myanmar: the many foes of Min Aung Hlaing." When a Buddhist monk known for his nationalist pro-military leanings calls for the Commander-in-Chief to step down in favour of his deputy, you know the strongman is in trouble.

This is just what happened in January when the ultranationalist monk, Pauk Ko Taw, led a protest by a few hundred pro-regime demonstrators in the former colonial hill station Pyin Oo Lwin, calling for Min Aung Hlaing to resign and hand over the reins of the military and the country to his deputy General Soe Win. The monk said Min Aung Hlaing should move to a civilian role because he was "not coping", while describing Soe Win as a "real soldier".

The calls for the junta leader to resign have been prompted by the recent defeats suffered by the Myanmar military – the Tatmadaw – at the hands of resistance forces. In one of the biggest setbacks for the military in decades, in January this

year hundreds of soldiers surrendered their weapons and handed over control over the strategic town of Laukkai in Shan State to a coalition of rebel forces known as the Three Brotherhood Alliance. According to some [reports](#), the number of soldiers who surrendered was close to 2,400, including 200 officers.

The Alliance is made up of the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), the Arakan Army and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army. It has put up a tough resistance to the Myanmar military since last October, capturing swathes of territory in northern Myanmar including several towns and important trade hubs near the border with China.

The capture of these towns in the Kokang region has been not only humiliating for the Tatmadaw but it has also cut off vital revenue for the militia that the military had installed there in 2009 after expelling the MNDAA from Laukkai. In fact, Min Aung Hlaing first rose to prominence after leading that military operation. According to the [The Straits Times](#), the militia subsequently "enriched itself by producing drugs and selling gambling and sex to visitors from across the Chinese border."

Following the humiliating military defeat in the Kokang region, the junta has sentenced three brigadier-generals to death for "shamefully abandoning" their posts. In February, it also activated the 1959 conscription laws to draft 60,000 young people into the military to boost the numbers. Given the unpopularity of the current regime, it remains to be seen how many young people it would be able to conscript. There were long queues outside the passport offices and foreign embassies in Yangon following the conscription announcement as the youth whom the military wants to recruit tried to flee the country. Two people were [killed and several injured](#) in a stampede outside the passport office in Mandalay as young men and women tried to escape being compelled into joining military service.

There is no end in sight to the ongoing civil war in Myanmar, let alone the restoration of democracy in the country. The opposition National Unity Government (NUG) – a government-in-exile formed by lawmakers who were ousted by the 2021 coup – backs the rebel groups that have forced the Tatmadaw to resort to conscription. It [claims](#) that almost 60 per cent of Myanmar's territory is under the control of ethnic armed groups and the NUG. While the NUG predicts the rebel forces will put more and more pressure on the capital within a few months, Yangon has already [witnessed](#) a number of bomb blasts in the last few weeks, targeting sites belonging to one of the military-owned companies. Also, on 1 March, a ship transporting fuel for the military was blown up on a river near central Yangon.

The ongoing instability in Myanmar has already created one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world by forcing more than 1.2 million Rohingya refugees to flee Myanmar. It has also revealed the failure of the ASEAN to deal effectively with a major crisis in one of its own member states that has serious implications for the region and for its own future. Beset by their own rivalry and distracted by other global conflicts, Myanmar's largest neighbours – India and China – have adopted a cautious wait and watch approach. While being cautious, China is also supporting the Myanmar military materially as its second biggest supplier of arms. As the biggest foreign investor in Myanmar, China is also mindful of protecting its economic interests.

Indonesia-Australia Defence Agreement – A Pathway for Cooperation?

by

Jayantika Rao T.V.

Australian Defence Minister Richard Marles and his Indonesian counterpart, Prabowo Subianto, officially announced on February 23, 2024, that their countries would enter into 'a very significant' defence cooperation agreement within the next few months. Although the specifics of the agreement are yet to be disclosed, the Ministers stated that negotiations were under way and could take a couple of more months to finalise. The agreement is poised to coincide with a critical juncture for Indonesia, when Prabowo, presently serving as Indonesia's Defence Minister, will be gearing up to assume the presidency in October 2024 from incumbent President Joko Widodo 'Jokowi'.

During the discussions between Prabowo and Marles on February 23, both ministers explored possible avenues for preserving and augmenting the positive relations between the two countries. Prabowo, who was officially confirmed as Indonesia's President elect on March 20, 2024, expressed support for the opportunity to fortify the bonds of friendship between Indonesia and Australia through this agreement.¹

Richard Marles indicated that the new agreement would increase 'dialogue' and 'enhance practical cooperation', with both nations negotiating on reciprocal access to training ranges and streamlined entry and exit processes for joint military activities.² Australian PM Anthony Albanese said that the agreement will build on the joint security framework established in 2006 through the Lombok Treaty, as well as the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement (2018). This new agreement will "be binding under international law" and will elevate the defence partnership between the two nations, enabling new ways for them to work together³. While the agreement will not be an alliance or

¹ Jatmiko, Andi and Karmini Niniek "Indonesia and Australia Move Toward 'Significant' Security Agreement". The Diplomat. (2024, February 26). Accessed from, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/>

² "Joint ministerial statement of intent on upgrading our Defence Cooperation Arrangement". Australian Government of Defence. (2023, February 10). Accessed from, <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/>

³ Tan, Su-Lin. Australia, Indonesia make 'remarkable' progress towards binding defence pact amid calls for 'collective responsibility'. South China Morning Post. (2023, December 19). Accessed from, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/>

mutual defence treaty, it will provide a platform for the two defence forces to streamline their interactions.

Past defence agreements between the two nations have primarily focused on non-traditional security cooperation, including disaster relief, law enforcement cooperation against people smuggling, drugs and arms, intelligence sharing and counter-terrorism. However, Marles has claimed that the agreement will be significant “in terms of what it provides as a platform for our two Defence Forces - for Indonesians to exercise in Australia and vice versa – it is a very significant statement about the strategic direction of both Indonesia and Australia”⁴.

A complex history of ups and downs has characterised diplomatic relations between Australia and Indonesia. Prabowo acknowledged the significance of Australia’s proximity and said, “we are destined to be close neighbours, and we are determined to be good neighbours”⁵, further affirming Indonesia’s commitment to fostering good relations with Australia. He noted that despite the complex historical challenge, Australia has stood by Indonesia in critical moments, thus, cementing Australia’s significance as a strategic friend.

However, past strains in the two nations’ diplomatic ties can hardly be ignored. For instance, in 2013, Australia was accused of wiretapping Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono’s (and his wife) private phone calls, which led to Yudhoyono’s cutting off cooperation with Australia. Additionally, Indonesia’s use of capital punishment on Australian drug traffickers remains a contentious issue between the two countries. In 2021, AUKUS also sparked reservations from Indonesia with concerns that Australia’s acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines could trigger a regional arms race and heighten Indo-Pacific tensions.

Despite these underlying issues between the two countries, the agreement will come at a time when Prabowo is preparing to take over the reins of government as the President of Indonesia. This will be a critical juncture when it is by no means certain which direction Indonesia’s foreign policy might pivot towards as it navigates an increasingly complex and fraught geopolitical landscape. As Prabowo appears to be more accommodating, especially regarding Australia’s submarine plans and AUKUS, there is good a possibility that he will also be

⁴ Hope, Zach. “‘Not too many surprises’: Prabowo, Indonesia’s fiery next president, vows good neighbourly relations”. The Sydney Morning Herald. (2024, February 24). Accessed from, <https://www.smh.com.au/world/asia/>

⁵ Jatmiko, Andi and Karmini Niniek “Indonesia and Australia Move Toward ‘Significant’ Security Agreement”. The Diplomat. (2024, February 26). Accessed from, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/>

more cooperative in undertaking security initiatives with Australia. Even in 2021, while Indonesia's official position regarding AUKUS was "Southeast Asia should remain nuclear free", Prabowo had stated that he understood why the countries had entered into a trilateral deal to protect their national interests against threats.⁶ Moreover, he has also expressed his understanding of the logic behind minilaterals in the Indo-Pacific. Nonetheless, it is important to bear in mind that as Prabowo pursues Indonesia's security interests, he will also ensure that its foreign policy will remain based on the 'principles of non-membership to any geopolitical bloc'.

Efficacy of the Proposed Agreement

While Australia and Indonesia's plan to enhance their security cooperation might make perfect sense on paper, it is not as simple in reality. The bilateral relationship is much more complex than the picture the two defence ministers sought to convey. The biggest challenge to the agreement is that for any security cooperation to be effective, the two countries need to be convergent on values, principles and, more specifically, on regional threats. As a treaty alliance partner of the United States, Australia has been vocal about the threat from China, with many Australian analysts stating that 'China poses the greatest danger to Australia and the stability of the region'.⁷ Furthermore, Australia's procurement of nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs) through the AUKUS pact is seen primarily as a step to align more closely with the US to deter China. However, Indonesia does not view China in the same way. Like many Southeast Asian nations, while Indonesia may be wary of China's assertions in the South China Sea, and especially the North Natuna Sea, Indonesia, even under Prabowo, will likely remain relatively restrained in dealing with China, primarily due to the imperatives of safeguarding the economic relationship between the two countries. Therefore, both countries not only have different ways of dealing with disputes, but also have differing views on regional security. Any agreement between the two countries would likely be based more on the necessity of collaborating on non-traditional security threats like irregular migration, people smuggling and drug trafficking, which are of greater interest to Australia.

Another challenge to the agreement will be the actual working of the agreement. Historically, even in the past, while the two countries reached an agreement to broaden their cooperation through the Indonesia-Australia

⁶ Lamb, Kate. "Prabowo says 'understands, respects AUKUS Pact". Jakarta Post. (2021, November 24). Accessed from, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/>

⁷ Bristow, Alex. "Australia Can't Talk Defence By Not Mentioning China". Australian Financial Review. (2024, February 13). Accessed from, <https://www.afr.com/policy/foreign-affairs>

Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (IA-CEPA) in 2020, it did not quite yield the desired results, despite their geographical proximity to each other. China and the United States are Indonesia's top trading partners. ASEAN accounts for only 12 percent of the exports from Australia, and countries like Singapore, Malaysia and Vietnam are more significant trading partners of Australia than Indonesia.⁸

Another challenge to the agreement concerns Prabowo himself. While he has shown a favourable stance towards the United States and Australia in the past, it is unwise to assume that a pro-Western orientation will be a baseline policy for Indonesia's future engagement, due to his unpredictability. Additionally, Prabowo will face the issue of lacking support within the House of Representatives - as his political party (Gerindra) - did not win a majority, forcing him to form a coalition with his rivals, potentially leading to frictions within the government. Even if Prabowo continues to lean towards the West, his policies might be challenged by the rivals in the House.

Conclusion

The defence agreement between Indonesia and Australia has the potential to bring the two countries closer together, despite their turbulent relationship in the past. However, several issues have the potential to derail the agreement's implementation. The details of the deal are yet to be revealed, and only upon its signing will it be possible to determine whether there is a genuine commitment to broader defence cooperation, or whether the agreement merely comprises elements that centre around non-traditional security and training in HADR. It thus remains to be seen if the proposed Indonesia-Australia defence agreement will be as pathbreaking in practice as the current political signalling indicates, and domestic politics as well as regional developments will remain factors to watch.

⁸ "Australia's Trade In Goods And Services (A)(B) By Top 15 Partners". Australian Government - DFAT. Accessed from, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/australias-goods-and-services-by-top-15-partners-2022.pdf>

China- ASEAN Relations: Beyond the tensions in the South China Sea

by
Anshita Shukla

As the ongoing US-China great power competition flares up, unilateral assertions by a rising China are most acutely being felt in Southeast Asia. The engagement between the regional grouping of Southeast Asian countries, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and China will play a critical role in determining the future of security architecture in the Indo-Pacific. The contemporary discourse on China-ASEAN relations over-emphasizes the strained equation between these neighbours due to escalating tensions in the South China Sea, and overlooks the comprehensive economic and security partnership they share. Beyond the disputes at sea, China and ASEAN have a long history of diplomatic relations driven by geographical proximity, historical and cultural affinity, and economic engagement.

Looking back at China's imperialist past during the classical era, the country's engagement with the region has historically been driven by a sense of dominance by China and the subservience of the Southeast Asian kingdoms under the tributary system⁹. Post the creation of ASEAN in 1967, the relationship between China and the bloc remained turbulent. Beijing viewed the establishment of the regional grouping as a means to encircle the country and contain the spread of communism¹⁰. The newly independent Southeast Asian countries, in the midst of the Cold War, were plagued with communist insurgencies that were supported by the PRC as a part of its larger ideological war against liberalism¹¹. The negative perception of China was exacerbated as appeals were raised by Beijing for ethnic Chinese in the region to support China's aims in the region.

The China-ASEAN relationship began to transform under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, who made his first official visit to three ASEAN countries—Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore, in 1978¹². As Beijing began to open up in the 1990s and China made public commitments to pursue a 'peaceful rise' and to be a 'good neighbour' to the region, China and ASEAN established a full

⁹ Hegemon and Instability: Pre-Colonial Southeast Asia under the Tribute System, [Shu Min](#), 2012.

¹⁰ Recent Developments In China-ASEAN Relations, [ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute](#), 1979.

¹¹ Chinese Support for Communist Insurgencies in Southeast Asia during the Cold War, [International Journal of China Studies](#), December 2015.

¹² Looking Back on Deng Xiaoping's Landmark Visit to Singapore, [The Diplomat](#), December 22, 2023.

dialogue partnership in 1996. In 2003, China acceded to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia and upgraded their relations to a 'strategic partnership'¹³. The two sides instituted the annual China-ASEAN Summit, and China became a member of ASEAN-led institutions including the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN plus One (China), ASEAN plus Three (China, Japan, South Korea), and the East Asia Summit. Bilateral relations were further upgraded to a 'comprehensive strategic partnership' in 2021.

A critical feature of these bilateral relations emerged as China and ASEAN signed a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in 2001. China today is ASEAN's top trading partner and a leading foreign investor. Beijing has invested approximately US\$163.55 billion in Southeast Asia, while the United States has invested about US\$105.80 billion over a ten-year period, according to the Asia Power Index by Lowy Institute¹⁴. Trade between China and ASEAN has doubled, reaching \$722 billion in 2022 and accounting for nearly one-fifth of ASEAN's global trade¹⁵. While the share of ASEAN's exports to China is 19.8% - lower than the 34.3% share of Japan, the U.S., and Europe combined, the share of imports is 27.2% - higher than the 18.8% share of Japan, the U.S., and Europe combined¹⁶. This reflects a trade imbalance in relations between China and ASEAN where the US and others are important final destinations for finished products while China remains critical in supplying basic and intermediate goods for assembly and processing. ASEAN's leading imports from China today are electronics, machinery, plastics, and chemicals¹⁷. Trade relations between the two are likely to grow, with increasing economic integration and supply chain connectivity under the Regional Comprehensive Economic Engagement (RCEP).

Beyond the economic realm, China and ASEAN share a comprehensive relationship in traditional and non-traditional security areas. In 2018, the two conducted their first joint maritime exercise in Zhangjiang, China which involved all ten countries of ASEAN¹⁸. The PLA Navy joined the Multilateral Naval Exercise Komodo (MNEK) hosted by Indonesia in the Makassar Sea in the

¹³ China and ASEAN mark 20-year partnership in Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, [China Daily](#), June 22, 2023

¹⁴ Asia Power Snapshot: China and the United States in Southeast Asia, [Lowy Institute](#), April 20, 2023.

¹⁵ ASEANStatsDataPortal,

¹⁶ ASEAN is reluctant to join the U.S.-led decoupling/de-risking strategy for China, [JRI Research Journal](#), April 11, 2023.

¹⁷ Balancing Act: Assessing China's Growing Economic Influence in ASEAN, [Asia Society](#), November 8, 2023.

¹⁸ ASEAN and China Successfully Conclude ASEAN-China Maritime Exercise, [MINDEF Singapore](#), October 27, 2018.

South Sulawesi province on June 5, 2023¹⁹. Beijing also conducted a 10-day land and sea exercise, Aman Youyi-2023, with five Southeast Asian countries – Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam in November 2023²⁰. The year 2023 marked the “highest number” of military exercises by China in Southeast Asia, with 14 joint defence cooperation engagements which were more than with any other part of the world²¹.

Beijing’s non-traditional security engagement with the region has further helped in improving bilateral relations between China and ASEAN. The earliest example of this came in the wake of the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997, when China decided not to devalue its international currency, the Renminbi (RMB), and delivered aid to Indonesia and Thailand, two of the worst crisis-stricken countries in the region²². In the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami, China provided US\$80 million in assistance to the affected Southeast Asian countries, organised a China-ASEAN tsunami seminar in 2006, and conducted workshops in 2007 and 2008 under the ‘ASEAN plus Three’ dialogue on the role of the armed forces in disaster relief²³. During the COVID-19 pandemic, China was one of the first countries to deliver more than 7 million doses of vaccines across Southeast Asia before July 2021, when the first batch of vaccines was delivered by the United States²⁴.

A predominant facet of this relationship over the past decade has been the simmering tensions in the South China Sea. Beijing’s expanding maritime and territorial claims through the nine-dash line and subsequently the construction of artificial islands, and the use of Chinese maritime militia to inhibit access of regional countries to contested waters, have heightened security concerns over sovereignty amongst Southeast Asian neighbours. To resolve tensions in the South China Sea, a non-binding Declaration of the Code of Conduct was signed between ASEAN and China in 2002²⁵. The declaration was intended to serve as the basis for a future ‘Code of Conduct’ in the South China Sea, the negotiations for which are still ongoing. Under Indonesia’s chairmanship in

¹⁹ Indonesia kicks off multilateral naval exercise amid Asia-Pacific tension, [Reuters](#), June 5, 2023.

²⁰ Will China’s [Aman](#) Youyi military drills with Southeast Asian nations reduce trust deficit? South China Morning Post, December 2, 2023.

²¹ China held a record number of military exercises with ASEAN states in 2023. What’s fuelling the spike? [CNA](#), February 5, 2024.

²² China-Southeast Asia Relations: Trends, Issues, and Implications for the United States, [CRS Report for Congress](#), April 4, 2006

²³ Non-traditional security cooperation between China and south-east Asia: implications for Indo-Pacific geopolitics, [International Affairs, Volume 96, Issue 1](#), January 2020

²⁴ China Won Over Southeast Asia During the Pandemic, [The Diplomat](#), July 20, 2022.

²⁵ Country Profile from the Maritime Awareness Project- ASEAN, [The National Bureau of Asian Research](#), March 25, 2024.

2023, ASEAN and China agreed on Guidelines to accelerate negotiations for the Code of Conduct (COC) in the South China Sea (SCS)²⁶.

The South China Sea dispute is a divisive issue for countries in Southeast Asia, with little scope for collective action. The main reason is that only four (Brunei, Malaysia, Philippines, and Vietnam) of the ten ASEAN countries are claimant states in the South China Sea. Thus, the threat perception amongst Southeast Asian countries on China's aggressive actions varies greatly. The non-claimant states do not have similar stakes in the dispute and are unwilling to antagonize China. This inhibits ASEAN's ability to unite against China's expansionist maritime ambitions, as decision-making requires complete consensus. ASEAN's actions are further restricted by China's foreign policy approach of dealing with the issue bilaterally rather than multilaterally. In addition, recent measures by Vietnam and the Philippines to diversify their relations and build domestic capabilities reflect their decision to deal with the threat posed by China in South China Sea through non-ASEAN mechanisms.

ASEAN's need to maintain stable relations with China is sustained by a waning US economic outreach in the region. The US decision to withdraw from the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), under the Trump administration and later continued by the Biden administration, has enabled deeper economic entrenchment by China, leaving ASEAN devoid of an American alternative²⁷. The shifting of US priorities is further reflected by President Biden's decision to skip the ASEAN Summit and the East Asia Summit of 2023 held in Indonesia²⁸. The US emphasis on democratic norms in governance also drives a wedge in its relations with ASEAN countries, that have their own distinct and diverse political systems. As Washington remains preoccupied with the wars in Europe and the Middle East, a key question for ASEAN is the intent and ability of the USA to project power and balance China's actions in the region. Furthermore, US engagement in Southeast Asia seems to be driven by bilateral and minilateral arrangements, which is seen to be diminishing ASEAN centrality.

Over the years, ASEAN-China relations have been strained due to escalating frictions in the South China Sea. The inability of the two to successfully conclude negotiations on the 'Code of Conduct' reflects the conflicting maritime interests of ASEAN and China. Despite these differences, the bilateral

²⁶ ASEAN-China Agree on Guidelines to Accelerate Negotiations for the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea, [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia](#), July 13, 2023.

²⁷ The United States Officially Withdraws from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, [Office of the United States Trade Representative](#), March 27, 2024.

²⁸ Biden's Absence at ASEAN Summit Seen as Snub to Southeast Asia, [Foreign Policy](#), September 5, 2023.

relationship between the two remains comprehensive and multi-faceted. The extensive economic engagement of China with Southeast Asia, coupled with traditional and non-traditional security relations, does not allow the South China Sea dispute to overshadow their partnership. In the face of waning US engagement in the region, ASEAN does not have the intent nor the capability to decouple from Beijing. Thus, as tensions persist in the maritime domain, ASEAN and China are likely to maintain engagement on all other fronts.

How do we evaluate ASEAN's Centrality in the Regional Security Architecture in East Asia?

by
Biren Nanda

The defining nature of strategic developments since the GFC of 2007-08 is a rising China making territorial assertions in the South and East China Seas and along the India-China border, as well as coercive maneuvering by the PLA Navy off the coast of Taiwan, all part of a broader effort to supplant the United States as the preeminent power in Asia. The trend has escalated after the COVID-19 crisis broke out in November 2019.

Regional efforts at ASEAN institution building have attempted to advance the security and prosperity of Southeast Asian states. The regional security architecture in East Asia has been characterized by regional frameworks centered around the ASEAN, the American bilateral alliance system, the United States' strategic cooperation with non-allied countries, the growing bilateral defense relations between middle powers, and the special relationships that continue to exist between former communist bloc countries.

The new Asian geopolitics is markedly different from that which existed during the Cold War. Then, during the fight against communism, the US extended its security umbrella and allowed ASEAN members to focus on economic growth and domestic stability. Now, China has displaced Japan as Asia's largest economy and China's GDP is 5 times that of the ASEAN. ASEAN's capacity to offer a combined response to this new geopolitics is under challenge. Membership expansion from the original five states has made reconciling national positions even more difficult

ASEAN-centric security institutions have largely failed to address the hard security issues that have come to the fore with China's assertive rise²⁹. Economic interdependence between the ASEAN and China, and China's soft coercion, and offers of investment funds have induced many ASEAN countries to fall in line. As a consequence, ASEAN unity on Chinese claims on the Spratlys and Paracels in the South China Sea has broken down since 2012. Though the ASEAN has embraced the "Indo-Pacific", there is a state of confusion where the accommodation of China is writ large and questions are raised against the

²⁹ Joshua Kurlantzick (2012. November) ASEAN's Future and Asian Integration. Council on Foreign Relations Working Paper.

https://www.cfr.org/sites/default/files/pdf/2012/10/IIGG_WorkingPaper10_Kurlantzick.pdf

Quad. Expectations from the EAS are fading. As such, ringing endorsements of ASEAN centrality to the broader Indo-Pacific would appear to be misplaced. Recent efforts at advancing regional economic integration through the RCEP will only serve to strengthen China's growing influence in the region.

The ARF has achieved some success in confidence-building measures, anti-terrorist collaboration, and HADR but made little progress in preventive diplomacy and conflict resolution.

The ADMM and its Indo-Pacific extension the ADMM Plus were created to include defense officials in the dialogue and to move from a discussion of CBMs to tangible defense and security cooperation focusing on NTS issues. The ADMM and ADMM Plus have made some headway in practical security cooperation in HADR, military medicine, counterterrorism, and maritime security through cooperative security exercises. The reported decision by ADMM Plus in Malaysia in 2015 to scrap a planned joint statement reference to the South China Sea issue fostered the impression that ADMM Plus could go the way of the ARF.

In the Joint Declaration issued³⁰ at the end of the seventeenth ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting (ADMM) meeting held in Jakarta on 15 November, 2023 there was once again, no direct reference to the territorial disputes in the South China Sea. The participants, did, however, stress the importance of maintaining and promoting the freedom of navigation and over-flight and pursuing a peaceful resolution of disputes, without coercion, in accordance with international law, including the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

In assessing the future of the ADMM Plus, the most critical challenge is that while it has religiously kept to the NTS remit, it continues to face centrifugal forces pushing for an expansion to hard security issues.

Perhaps, the biggest threat to ASEAN centrality comes from ASEAN itself, particularly ASEAN's tendency to capitulate under Chinese pressure and bandwagon with China as Cambodia and Laos have done, and to join Chinese efforts at legitimizing aggression in the South China Sea through the discussions on the 'Code of Conduct' which is essentially a derogation from

³⁰ November 23, 2022. Joint Declaration by the ADMM-Plus Defense Minister's meeting on Defense Cooperation to Strengthen Solidarity for a Harmonized Security. ASEAN.org <https://asean.org/joint-declaration-by-the-admm-plus-defence-ministers-on-defence-cooperation-to-strengthen-solidarity-for-a-harmonized-security/>

international law. It is difficult to see how a 'Code of Conduct' can be effective if it merely ratifies the status quo.

On June 23, 2019, ASEAN finally – albeit reluctantly – embraced the Indo-Pacific concept³¹. The ASEAN's reluctance to embrace the Indo-Pacific concept as a framework to conduct regional policy-making stemmed from a number of reasons. **First** and foremost, there were fears that the adoption of the framework would invite an adverse Chinese reaction. The Chinese interpretation of the Quad as a budding alliance and its association with the United States' Indo-Pacific Strategy also added to ASEAN's fears and reluctance. **Second**, in the ASEAN view, there was a lack of clarity on what the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" exactly stood for. This was because the Indo-Pacific geopolitical construct was a work in progress and there continued to be nuanced differences in the articulation of the concept between Quad members themselves. **Third**, there were growing ASEAN fears – so clearly articulated by the Singapore Prime Minister in his address at the Shangri la Dialogue in 2019 – that prolonged US-China tensions and the pushback against globalization would undermine the economic prosperity of the region.

China's rise and assertive behavior have been a source of concern to the US, India, and many countries in the Indo-Pacific – particularly in East Asia. While India prioritizes its territorial disputes with China and China's growing naval presence in the Indian Ocean, Southeast Asian countries are more concerned about China's territorial assertions in the South China Sea, growing tensions in Sino-US relations, and the undesirable prospect of having to choose between their leading security provider and their main trading partner.

The Quad embodies a long-term effort to shape the global order³². This struggle co-exists with a vast amount of still mutually beneficial trade and other economic activity. But the world the Quad represents is also one of partial decoupling and fragmentation, of national economic sovereignty, "trusted" supply lines and export controls. The net result is a complex new duality of simultaneous competition and interdependence, with higher degrees of risk.

Assessing the prospects for the Quad starts with the common interests that have drawn the four countries together. These can be grouped into geostrategic interests and those concerning the nature of the international

³¹ Parameshwaran Prashant (24 June. 2019) Assessing ASEAN's New Indo-Pacific Outlook. The Diplomat. <https://thediplomat.com/2019/06/assessing-aseans-new-indo-pacific-outlook/>

³² Maude, Richard (February 9, 2022) How to understand the Quad- a short guide for Australian business. Asia Society <https://asiasociety.org/australia/how-understand-quad-short-guide-australian-business>

order.

First, all four nations share an abiding interest in maintaining a stable balance of power in the Indo-Pacific and preventing a regional state from becoming dominant. **Second**, all four states share an interest in deterring the use of forceful or coercive practices to resolve political and territorial disputes in the region. **Third**, as trading nations all Quad members share a deep interest in maintaining a maritime order based on the free movement of goods and services across the world's oceans. **Fourth**, since China seeks to lead in key technology areas as part of its desire to become the Asian hegemon by 2050, Quad members share a common interest in limiting the flow of sensitive technologies to China. Restructuring semi-conductor supply chains to exclude China has become a key priority for the Quad. Building resilient, diverse, and secure technology supply chains for semi-conductors, cyber-security, and emerging technologies, and services and the harmonization of standards and benchmarks is a key objective in line with Quad members' national interests. **Fifth**, the Quad has adopted a wide array of global initiatives related to the pandemic and climate change. **Sixth**, the Quad has adopted an infrastructure partnership that focuses on sustainable development and transparency that could provide a viable alternative to the BRI.

The key question is does the Quad undermine ASEAN Centrality? So far the Quad has eschewed the temptation and pitfalls of evolving into a security alliance. As long as this does not occur ASEAN centrality could continue to share the strategic space in Southeast Asia.

When the news of the AUKUS agreement broke on September 16, 2021, ASEAN was taken by surprise. ASEAN failed to reach a consensus on AUKUS. ASEAN sees AUKUS as increasing geopolitical risks in the region. The pact also bypassed all notions of ASEAN centrality. AUKUS is a technology-sharing mechanism between three partners in the US alliance system which will deliver a quantum leap in technology and nuclear capabilities to a non-nuclear weapon state. It will inevitably bring Australia into the cross-hairs of the Chinese nuclear deterrent.

What is currently occurring has echoes from the past. In 2011, the United States under President Obama announced the "pivot to Asia" but very soon found itself entangled with the fight against global terrorist groups. The United States finds its strategic gaze once again diverted away from the Indo-Pacific. It will inevitably have to divert its resources away from the Indo-Pacific region and will have to lean heavily on its regional allies and partners in Asia to continue countering China amidst ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East.

This might give a new lease of life to ASEAN centrality and give another opportunity for ASEAN to demonstrate its resolve to address hard security issues in the region. If ASEAN fails to up its game the US will likely begin to ignore or bypass ASEAN and focus on the Quad instead.



Delhi Policy Group
Core 5A, 1st Floor,
India Habitat Centre, Lodhi Road
New Delhi - 110003
India

www.delhipolicygroup.org