



ASEAN'S BALANCING ACT: NAVIGATING RELATIONS WITH US-CHINA IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Abstract: This article looks at how the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) manages its relationships with the USA and China in the changing geopolitical landscape of Southeast Asia. As global powers focus on the region, ASEAN must carefully balance its partnerships. The USA has recently increased its engagement with ASEAN, while China has strengthened its ties with the organization. ASEAN's role in preserving stability and prosperity in the region is more important than ever. The article offers a deep dive into these intricate dynamics.

Key Words: China, ASEAN, USA

INTRODUCTION

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a vital regional group with ten members that plays a key role in the development of Asia. Its strategic location and economic and political significance make it a central hub for regional activities. The growing influence of the USA and China in Southeast Asia in recent years has added a new dimension to the region's geopolitical landscape. As part of its Indo-Pacific strategy, the United States recognises the importance of collaborating with ASEAN and underscores its value and advantages. Meanwhile, China has increased its economic and trade presence in the region through the Belt and Road Initiative, taking on a prominent role in regional affairs.

In this complex geopolitical situation, ASEAN has adopted a strategic approach, communicating with both major players while upholding its leadership in regional matters.

ASEAN'S ENGAGEMENT WITH THE USA AND CHINA

In the intricate world of global politics, Southeast Asia holds a unique position where the power dynamics of major players such as China and the United States intersect. ASEAN has been mindful of the importance of balancing security, diplomacy, and economic ties to foster peace and prosperity in the region, hence, maintaining strategic relationships with both superpowers.

ASEAN began its diplomatic relationship with the United States in 1977 and has since seen significant growth in their partnership. The United States has become ASEAN's second-largest trading partner and a key provider of financial aid. Since 2002, the United States has contributed over \$12.1 billion in assistance for development, economic growth, healthcare, and security in Southeast Asia, highlighting the strong cooperation between the two parties.

On the other hand, China and ASEAN too have developed a strong relationship since the establishment of the latter in 1991. China is now ASEAN's leading trading partner, showcasing the positive impact of their partnership. In 2003, China reaffirmed its dedication to amicable relations with ASEAN countries by joining the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia. The depth of ASEAN and China's cooperation is highlighted in the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, which includes collaboration on disaster relief, defence, maritime security, and efforts to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons. In 2021, a breakthrough occurred in their partnership when they celebrated the 30th anniversary of the China-ASEAN dialogue relations.

The economic ties between ASEAN, the United States, and China drive regional growth and prosperity. China's investments in ASEAN support infrastructure projects and economic development, while the USA remains a key source of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) for the region. This mutually beneficial relationship underscores ASEAN's importance as a key player in global commerce and investment. Initiatives such as the Trade and Investment Framework Arrangement (TIFA) facilitate trade and investment between the United States and ASEAN member nations.

Besides focusing on the economy, ASEAN relies greatly on security cooperation with the United States and China to maintain regional peace and stability. These two countries have formed Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships that address various security issues like cyber security, disaster response, defence partnerships, and counterterrorism efforts. Collaborative initiatives enhance regional security

and help ASEAN combat emerging threats effectively. Highlighting the importance of maritime security in the region, the U.S. Coast Guard stated in 2024 its plan to deploy a training team in Southeast Asia.

To enhance communication and collaboration on regional and global issues, ASEAN actively engages with the United States and China through various platforms and means. Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships provide a structure for increased involvement in multiple areas, such as public health, environmental protection, women's empowerment, and political cooperation. Common interests are discussed through platforms like ministerial meetings, joint committees, and bilateral dialogues. Diplomatic interactions are facilitated by platforms like the ASEAN Post Ministerial Conference (PMC)+1 Session, the ASEAN-China Senior Officials' Consultation (ACSOC), and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) acknowledges the importance of maintaining a delicate equilibrium between competing interests, and, as of 2024, is still in the process of navigating its strategic relationships with the United States and China with diplomacy and practicality. With these partnerships constantly evolving, it is crucial to emphasize ASEAN's adaptability and agility in response to shifting geopolitical dynamics. Going forward, upholding peace in the region and fostering economic development in Southeast Asia will require ASEAN's commitment to constructive interactions with both the US and China, especially in the face of recent challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

USA-CHINA COMPETITION AND ASEAN

The intense competition between the US and China is having significant impacts on ASEAN and its member states, touching on geopolitical, economic, security, and diplomatic aspects.

The increasing competition between the United States and China is causing tension within ASEAN, putting pressure on the organization's unity and unique characteristics. ASEAN's primary goals in this situation are to preserve its regional autonomy and unity while balancing its relationships with both countries. The member countries of ASEAN are facing ongoing challenges to enhance their self-reliance and autonomy in the face of mounting competition from the major powers.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has shown impressive independence and leadership in dealing with the increasing competition between the United States and China. ASEAN has set regional priorities and enhanced its collaboration efforts to uphold the organization's goals. Nevertheless, ASEAN's efforts to maintain its independence face obstacles, as the tensions between China and the USA worsen. This situation has sparked concerns about potential divisions within the region and the risk of being pressured to pick sides.

When it comes to the economy, the strategic competition has allowed ASEAN to expand its market share and position itself as an attractive choice for diversifying supply chains and investments. To safeguard its independence, ASEAN interacts with both China and the United States while enlisting the support of other countries in return for resources and security assurances. Research has revealed that the diversification of ASEAN economies' exports influences how responsively China imports goods from these countries to changes in the RMB. Over the next decade, ASEAN's overall trade is anticipated to grow by \$1.2 trillion as a result of closer trade ties with China and the implementation of a "China + 1" diversification strategy.

ASEAN is focused on enhancing connectivity and economic integration in the region through various infrastructure endeavours such as the Hengyi refinery and petrochemical project in Brunei, the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed rail, the China-Laos railway, and the Malaysian East Coast Rail Link. In 2019, ASEAN reiterated its dedication to infrastructure development by unveiling the "Initial Rolling Priority Pipeline of ASEAN Infrastructure Projects" under MPAC 2025. Moreover, external partnerships play a crucial role in enhancing ASEAN's infrastructure development capacity. Initiatives such as the U.S.-ASEAN Platform for Infrastructure and Connectivity, along with support from institutions like the U.S. Trade and Development Agency, underscore the importance of collaboration in this area.

In addition, ASEAN's strategic diplomacy plays a crucial role in navigating the complex geopolitical landscape shaped by the competition between the United States and China. Through the use of collaborative efforts and the ASEAN Way, which focuses on building consensus and non-interference, ASEAN strives to preserve its autonomy and promote stability in the region while engaging with both superpowers. As part of its diplomatic strategy, ASEAN has reaffirmed its stance against external meddling by engaging in joint opinion pieces and countering false information. Leveraging its extensive institutional connections, ASEAN has played a key role in coordinating regional reactions through various multilateral diplomatic efforts. In ASEAN, reaching consensus involves protracted discussions, careful consideration of common issues, and mutual compromise. ASEAN diplomacy differs from Western diplomacy in its approach to making decisions based on consensus. Ongoing diplomatic efforts have been made to counter rumours of US interference in Thai politics and to publish a collaborative article in Malaysia outlining the goals of AUKUS. In some cases, having senior US officials involved could be helpful. For example, the first ASEAN-US Special Summit, held in May 2022 in Washington, D.C.

The ASEAN region continues to experience significant security issues due to China's extensive territorial claims in the South China Sea, leading to tensions with other claimant states such as Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam. Competing interests for resources and control have led to maritime disputes, such as the incident near Second Thomas Shoal. ASEAN aims to maintain regional peace while asserting its independence through collaboration with both China and the United States. To maintain peace in the South China Sea, it is important to use diplomatic efforts and work together with other countries in the region. Looking ahead, ASEAN needs to remain united, independent, and flexible to successfully navigate the challenging dynamics of the rivalry between the United States and China. As competition escalates, ASEAN must uphold its principles and independence in the face of external pressures by leveraging its diplomatic ties, trade relationships, and strategic partnerships to foster peace and economic growth across the region.

ASEAN'S RESPONSE AND STRATEGIES

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) plays a crucial role in the intricate political landscape of Southeast Asia, balancing competing interests among powerful countries. By prioritizing the needs of its member nations and safeguarding its independence, ASEAN uses a variety of approaches to uphold its significance in regional matters.

In 2022, ASEAN made significant progress in enhancing its role and influence in the region. Through careful planning and effective communication, ASEAN solidified its position as a key player in shaping regional policies. The organization showed impressive autonomy and assertiveness by taking on leadership roles and influencing the agenda of major countries to align with ASEAN's goals. This marked a turning point for ASEAN in restoring order and stability in the region.

The Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) aims to promote collaboration among ASEAN member states and reduce developmental disparities within the region. By harnessing the strengths of more advanced economies, ASEAN seeks to bridge the development gap and enhance the competitiveness of the region as a whole.

In addition, ASEAN has worked together to promote a culture of shared leadership in its organizations, emphasizing collaboration and cooperation as key principles. This spirit of teamwork was evident at the ASEAN-Australia Special Summit in 2024, where ASEAN and Australia established connections in various areas such as defence, security, economy, technology, environment, and culture exchange.

ASEAN's policy is guided by principles when interacting with other nations, like the United States and China. It values non-alignment, inclusiveness, and respect, aiming to steer clear of being caught in a competitive game or losing autonomy. The positive responses from the United States and China show ASEAN's role as a mediator that fosters cooperation among competing interests in the region.

In the ever-evolving geopolitical landscape, ASEAN remains steadfast in its commitment to upholding its principles. ASEAN firmly believes that staying neutral and independent is vital for ensuring stability in the region and rejects any efforts to force alignment. It would be beneficial for both the US and China to acknowledge ASEAN's autonomy and actively endorse the group's stance on international platforms such as the UN.

ASEAN has not only focused on diplomacy but has also initiated a clear strategy to enhance the region's resilience and tackle common issues. Showing its dedication to fostering harmony and collaboration among its members, ASEAN has introduced projects that emphasize a united regional identity, joint leadership, and cooperative problem-solving. Through proactive measures, ASEAN is working towards securing the region's future prosperity and stability by addressing challenges such as supply chain disruptions, food and energy security, digital transformation, and sustainable development.

To sum up, ASEAN has taken a refined and multi-faceted strategy to address competition among major powers, focusing on centrality, principled engagement, and strengthening resilience. ASEAN remains a significant player in shaping the future of Southeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific region through steadfastly upholding its fundamental principles and forming partnerships grounded in respect and cooperation.

CONCLUSION

To truly grasp the intricate dynamics shaping Southeast Asia's geopolitical landscape, we must analyze how ASEAN interacts with the United States and China. ASEAN plays a crucial role in maintaining a delicate equilibrium that ensures security and progress in the region.

Strengthening ASEAN's ability to withstand outside pressures has been successful due to its strategies rooted in building unified leadership and a common regional identity. These approaches not only bolster ASEAN's position but also serve as drivers for cooperation among countries in addressing mutual problems, solidifying the organization's role as a key player in the region.

Despite the ongoing competition between the United States and China in 2024, ASEAN has managed to maintain a balanced relationship with both countries. Despite the challenges it faces, ASEAN has successfully maintained peace and cooperation by employing a strategic and balanced approach to address any potential issues.

China and the United States have both demonstrated a commitment to managing their competition peacefully, resulting in a stable yet delicate relationship. Amid navigating these complex dynamics, ASEAN's role becomes increasingly vital, steering its initiatives with impartiality and a steadfast dedication to regional harmony.

As we look to the future, the opportunities for collaboration are promising, thanks to ASEAN's strong dedication to collective action and mutual aid. Both China and the United States have recognized ASEAN's crucial position in the region and have expressed a readiness to work together on a range of issues, including climate change and economic unity.

In conclusion, ASEAN has shown great ability in managing its relationships with the United States and China, despite their complexity. By staying true to its fundamental beliefs, ASEAN remains a key player in maintaining stability in the region and promoting a peaceful and cooperative environment.

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