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ASEAN Centrality in the Era of Great Power Competition

William J Jones

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 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 an historical and geopolitical approach that ASEAN will continue to play a pivotal and central role in East Asian international relations.

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 Philippines marked a united beginning for international affairs of the sub-region of Southeast Asia (ASEAN, 1967). This brought an end to the period 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 withdraw 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 1980's in 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 1980's, 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 sizes 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 & Jenne, 2015). The historical legacy of the Cold War and ASEAN's ability to deal with security issues and organize regional security and governance will be the focus of this paper. In particular the central contention of author is to advance the notion that whilst the international relations is moving from an American Unipolar 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 leads 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 absence of any other viable alternative and has led to a hodgepodge of issue 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, p. 385).

Caballero-Anthony understands centrality as the ability to lead. This is founding 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 environment forces. Beeson argues that East Asian regionalism, namely ASEAN can be seen through the lens of indigenous mobilization. Beeson takes an 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 the hegemon's method of engaging with ASEAN states which was on

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 1990's (Beeson, 2005, p. 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 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 tone of urgency and one of a twin characteristic 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 broadening 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 to 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 of Conduct has not been agreed 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 agenda's with ASEAN 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 European Union in 1996 which

has expanding 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)

Diagram 1: ASEAN Institutional Frameworks for Dialogue

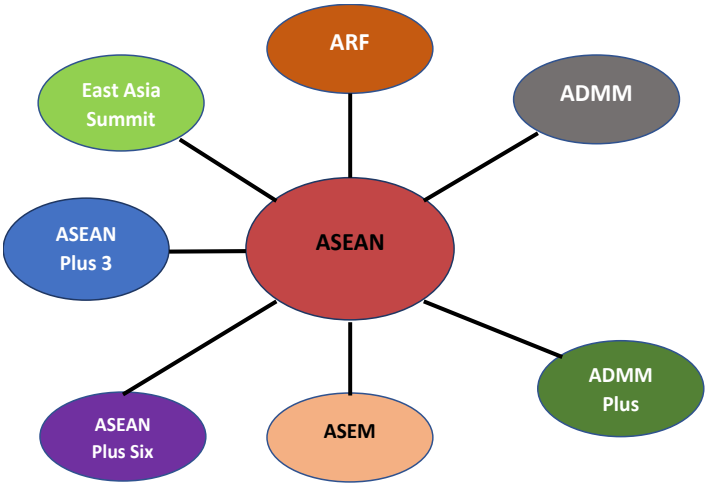

Table 1: ASEAN Mechanisms and Membership

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/

The diagram and tables articulate a form of networked institutionalism which has been created by ASEAN in the post-Cold War era. Whilst, all great powers are not members of all ASEAN external relations frameworks, all strategic powers are members in one or more of ASEAN's constellation of institutions. Each institution has its agenda which ranges from narrow of the 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; Article 2.1, 2.3, 2.4, 2.6) and find their origins of the state system with the Treaty of Westphalia (Asbach and Schröder (2014). These principles are sovereignty, non-intervention and peaceful settlement of disputes. Combined with the way ASEAN does business of consultation and consensus 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 Article 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 p. 365; Narine, 1999 p. 360; Sebastian and Lanti, 2010 p. 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 that 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 policy makers on an interpersonal level. Acharya argues from a sociocultural perspective that this leads '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 which mediates disputes and bridges relations through a process of socialization within the context of ASEAN norms (Haacke,

2003). All of ASEAN's external institutions are guided by the ASEAN Way framework.

Important to understanding the notion of credibility lay 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, thus putting ASEAN in the driver's seat. Second, 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, Whilst, 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 size states. They also carry on peaceful relations with all dialogue partners on a non-partisan basis hence, ASEAN legitimacy.

Great Power Competition: From Uni 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 America, Europe, 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 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 p. 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 p. 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" is estimated at over $8,000,000,000,000 and leading to the deaths of millions (Kimball, 2021). Other scholars pinpoint 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 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 states except the Philippines who still count 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 back China's claim (Florick, 2021) and go so far as to have Chinese owned casino's in Sihanoukville closed in response to 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) have now led to the emergence of a multipolar world (Diesen, 2019; Hadano, 2020; Acharya et al., 2023). The two competing blocs can roughly be divided into two large blocs. The 'Western' bloc consisting of a US led NATO with Australia,

Japan and New Zealand and an Eastern bloc 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 semiconductors and lithograph machines 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 Biden and Trump are the presumptive 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 & 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 join Australia/New Zealand 1951, Philippines 1951, Japan 1960, Republic of Korea 1953 (US Department of State, 2017). The Philippines under President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. has reversed its foreign policy of President Duterte and reconnected with its traditional ally and is now hosting the American Navy again (Arugay & 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, 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 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 counter terrorism. The security relationship between the United States, Thailand and Singapore deserves deeper analysis as there is

more to the relationships of late. Whilst Thailand and America share an 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 & 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 F35's to Thailand as it feels that Thailand has ingrained itself too much with China buy purchasing submarines and other military weapons (Detsch, 2022) (Strangio, 2023). This can be juxtaposed with Singapore who was openly offered and sold F35s, 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 Whitehouse, 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 hedging is 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" (Pham, 2019). It has been argued 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 counter terrorism and training and is now moving towards military procurement and joint training operations. There is push back 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 good will 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 & 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 is 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 India Ocean to 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 whilst 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 Af-

fairs, 2017; Rajghatta, 2023). India and China share a shaky relationship with border conflicts dating back 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 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

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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 is clear that certain countries in East Asia will continue to be lodged firmly in the American sphere of influence (Australia, Japan, Philippines, South Korea, New Zealand and Singapore). Coupled with the dense dependency that ASEAN countries have to 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 & Yang, 2013; Stubbs, 2014; Yoshimatsu, 2012). Non-strategic security partnerships of Thailand, Singapore, Brunei and Vietnam whilst being at varying levels of depth allow America a strong security hold in

Southeast Asia. The only ASEAN countries which are firmly.

Alternative Asian Regionalism

There is only one East Asian regional organization which 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 are 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 deal with border dispute between its members to lessen the opportunity for conflict. Whilst, 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 3 observers (Ibid). Current membership now includes India, Iran and Pakistan. In 2005 ASEAN became an observer. Pertinent to this discussion is the bloc coverage. China, Russia, Iran, India are now members of the BRICS grouping and are also members in the SCO. The absence of any Western bloc countries signals an absence 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 a vestige of security cooperation between the United States competitors and adversaries in the region, China and Russia. As such the SCO whilst including India a Quad member is not a viable node of diplomatic, political or security connectivity between the Western bloc and its opposite the China/Russia led bloc.

ASEAN Between Great Powers: Hedging for Survival

It has been argued that that international relations has entered into a new Cold War (Abrams, 2022; Breuer, 2022; Schindler et al., 2023). 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 with 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 wellbeing. To this end many ASEAN states have engaged in the policy strategy of hedging (Gede & 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 reasonings.

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.

The reasons for hedging of course depend on the state and its leadership has argued that ASEAN states have engaged in hedging or deferred 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 two competitors, America has an unstable foreign policy (Narine, 2024). With American foreign policy shifting with regards to China, 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.

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)

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 to 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 have 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 formation of the Quadrilateral Dialogue (Quad), which includes the United States, Australia, India, Japan. This parallels the AUKUS alliance, between the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom. These minilateralisms 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 minilateralism of the Quad

whilst 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 an demonstrate ASEAN centrality (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024).

The above has its correlate in the 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 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 & Rhein, 2023).

In addition to China's willingness to use leverage is the lack of American or European response to the 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 as of 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 account 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 originating from private funding sources (Hameiri & Jones, 2023). 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 leaves little hope that any viable alternative to China's BRI will emerge. 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 which 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 counter balance 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 contention. Caballero-Anthony has argued that ASEAN's place between the two great powers is one of 'strategic neutral convenor' (Caballero-Anthony, 2022). This is based on 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 powers core interest is a point of contention? ASEAN's limitations have already been laid bare 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 Prayut government. Implicit in the Thailand's undermining the lack of consensus in the 5-point consensus.

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 interests. In which case they will bypass ASEAN or use divide and stagnate tactics. This does not bode well for ASEAN as 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 institution framework for engagement with all major powers that no other organization has. ASEAN as a collective of small and medium size 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 overstating to say that ASEAN has any ability to influence the great powers on core national interests. 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 image at the moment as ASEAN cannot take care of crisis in its own backyard, namely the crisis in Myanmar. If left to its own and hedging continues ASEAN can play an important role

as interlocutor between the major powers as a venue for injecting ASEAN interests into the great power competition agenda through its institutional formats.

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