

CHAPTER 1

Is ASEAN Still Fit for Purpose?: Adjustment and Maladjustment in a Contentious World

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The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has the reputation of being Southeast Asia's premier regional organization. In the decades since its creation, not only has ASEAN grown in membership, the number of initiatives and platforms it facilitates, from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) to the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus), have increased significantly.¹ Yet the grouping is perhaps facing a moment of unprecedented challenge brought about by rising uncertainties surrounding intensifying U.S.-China rivalry, particularly as it plays out in Asia.² Going into ASEAN's sixth decade, it is now perhaps an opportune time to consider the roles that the grouping currently plays in Southeast Asia and beyond, its performance, as well as the directions it may take as global and regional politics evolve. Such perspectives may inform how ASEAN members and partners work with and relate to the organization going forward.

Like any other inter-governmental institution, ASEAN's primary responsibility is to its member states and here the grouping's recent record is, at best, mixed. ASEAN continues to function as a conduit facilitating economic cooperation and integration for its members, both within and without Southeast Asia. It also provides a useful platform for dialogue and confidence building through mechanisms such as the East Asian Summit, ASEAN Plus Three cooperation, and various dialogue partnerships.³ ASEAN seems far less effective at agenda setting or even to helping find common ground when it comes to issues where interests diverge both within ASEAN and with key partners, managing—not resolving—disputes over the South China Sea being a case in point. However, ASEAN can appear paralyzed at times, seen in the inaction and apparent confusion following the February 1 coup in Myanmar as well as the subsequent breakdown in order.

Given intensifying U.S.-China competition and ASEAN's current limitations in addressing more contentious issues, ASEAN members and partners face questions over how to position the grouping as well as their relationship with it in a world where contestation may be the norm. U.S.-China rivalry is likely to play out in Asia and across different issue domains, making neat distinctions

¹ ASEAN Secretariat, "About the ASEAN Defence Ministers," February 6, 2017, <https://admm.asean.org/index.php/about-admm/about-admm-plus.html>.

² Amitav Acharya, "ASEAN and the New Geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific," *East Asia Forum*, December 29, 2021, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/12/29/asean-and-the-new-geopolitics-of-the-indo-pacific/>.

³ ASEAN Secretariat, "About the East Asia Summit," <https://eastiasummit.asean.org/about-east-asia-summit> (accessed February 12, 2022); ASEAN Secretariat, "Economic Community," (accessed February 12, 2022). <https://asean.org/our-communities/economic-community/>; ASEAN Secretariat, "Overview of ASEAN Plus Three Cooperation," November 30, 2021, https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Overview-of-APT-Cooperation-30-November-2021_Rev.pdf.

among economic, non-traditional security, and traditional security issues difficult to maintain. Such contestation is already evident in discussions about “decoupling” in the United States and “dual circulation” in China, as well as efforts by both Beijing and Washington to limit exposure of critical systems to each other’s technologies.⁴ As ASEAN members and their partners try to navigate the vagaries and challenges of greater U.S.-China friction, they need to figure out whether ASEAN remains the most suitable forum for addressing most of the region’s more pressing issues. Such discussion should involve considering whether to reform and revamp the grouping or leave the grouping in its current form, while searching for alternative arrangements to address the functions that regional actors need but ASEAN does not intend to cover.

The point of this essay is not to lay out a prescription of what ASEAN, its members, and partners should or should not do. Despite the growing urgency of meeting evolving conditions in Asia, states involved in ASEAN are perhaps not at a stage of thinking and discussion where they—or anyone, for that matter—can chart a definitive way forward at present. Any proposal requires clearer notions of preferences which currently remain unclear. Instead, I seek the more modest goal of discussing some of the considerations and variables that may be worth exploring to clarify preferences and positions. To do so, I first turn to some of the conditions undergirding ASEAN’s successes and limitations.

Coordination and Dialogue

ASEAN’s strengths as a regional organization stand out in two areas. Initially established to reduce tensions and friction among members, ASEAN’s ability to provide a platform for engaging different actors in conversation and emphasis on consensus can be a means to avoid unintended escalation and even promote de-escalation.⁵ ASEAN’s ability to decrease tensions comes from a general desire among members to avoid armed conflict with each other that has so far held, as well as an interest in maintaining dialogue. ASEAN can also help address coordination problems when members and partners have an interest in cooperation but are unsure about the exact arrangement and terms of cooperation, as seen in the brokering of trade liberalization deals.⁶ Where ASEAN faces more difficulty is over issues where the members and interlocutors diverge substantively on an issue or are distrustful of each other’s intentions, conditions apparent over the South China Sea disputes and the handling of the 2021 Myanmar coup.

⁴ Yan Xuetong, “Becoming Strong: The New Chinese Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs* (July/August 2021), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-06-22/becoming-strong>.

⁵ Kamarulzaman Askandar, Jacob Bercovitch, and Mikio Oishi, “The ASEAN Way of Conflict Management: Old Patterns and New Trends,” *Asian Journal of Political Science* 10, no. 2 (2008): 21-42.

⁶ He Kai, “A Strategic Functional Theory of Institutions and Rethinking Asian Regionalism: When Do Institutions Matter?,” *Asian Survey* 54, no. 6 (2014): 1184-1208.

Despite unresolved territorial disputes and some history of animosity that cross both the pre- and post-colonial eras, member states have avoided war with each other since they joined ASEAN either at its inception or during its expansion in the 1990s.⁷ Tensions and differences which sometimes manifest in noisy arguments exist, but actual fighting is extremely rare and are all at most small-scale, localized skirmishes. The Thai-Cambodian skirmish over Preah Vihear is probably the only instance of actual, intentional armed engagements among ASEAN militaries in ASEAN's history.⁸ Such conditions lend support to the claim that the experiences of interaction and cooperation have largely made war among ASEAN members unimaginable today, especially if ASEAN member states do not experience upheaval in their domestic political systems. ASEAN members are remarkably ready to negotiate and even take disputes to third-party arbitration, as seen in the cases of the Malaysia-Singapore and Indonesia-Malaysia maritime disputes.

Success is also evident in ASEAN efforts to promote trade liberalization. Bilateral trade deals aside, the grouping managed to advance both the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) and the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area (ACFTA). As seen in the figures below, a result is that ASEAN is collectively each member's largest trading partner, and China has been the region's largest single trade partner in merchandise over the past decade, edging out the United States by a few percentage points. ASEAN is continuing with further trade liberalization through a push for the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC)⁹ and the start of implementation for RCEP.¹⁰ Progress on trade comes from a shared preference for greater trade liberalization, matching desires for closer integration into the global supply chain and aspirations for having significant export components to their economies.¹¹ The ASEAN role in these instances is to identify a common focal point around which efforts can coalesce, since the main concern is to establish collaboration rather than the detailed distribution of relative costs and benefits associated with a deal.

Another area where ASEAN has demonstrable accomplishments is in promoting dialogue and exchange, including over security issues. Most obvious of these is the continuation and expansion of the regular ADMM and ADMM Plus processes, which now include not just ASEAN defense ministers but also counterparts from Northeast Asia, Oceania, and North America. The ADMM and ADMM Plus have also come to include regular joint military exercises covering such areas as humanitarian

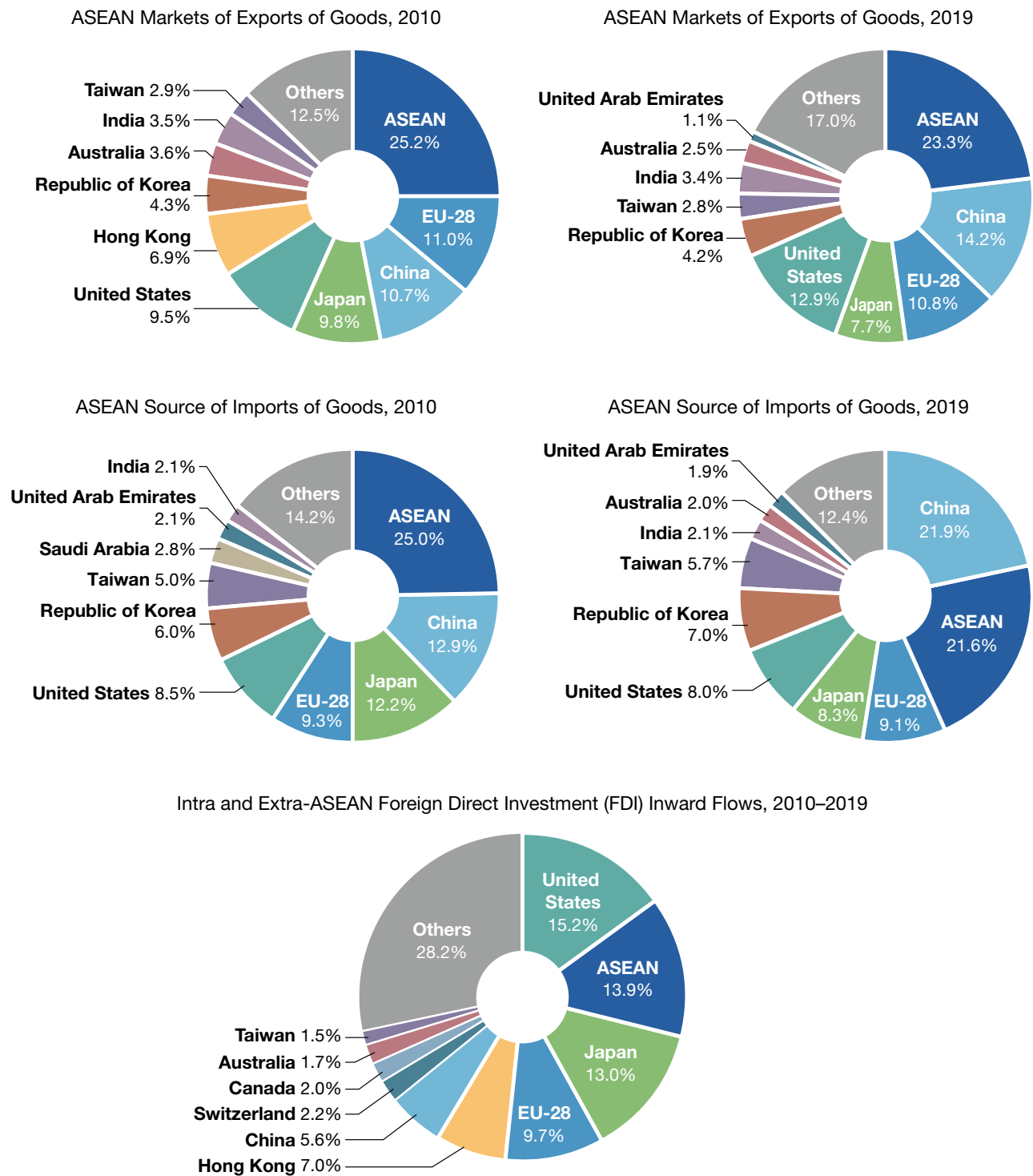
⁷ Stéphanie Martel, "The Polysemy of Security Community-Building: Toward a 'People-Centered' Association of Southeast Asian Nations?," *International Studies Quarterly* 64, no. 3 (2020): 588-599.

⁸ Martin Wagener, "Lessons from Preah Vihear: Thailand, Cambodia, and the Nature of Low-Intensity Border Conflicts," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 30, no. 3 (2011): 27-59.

⁹ *ASEAN Statistical Yearbook 2020* (Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat, 2020), 101-102, 129.

¹⁰ ASEAN Secretariat, "RCEP Agreement Enters into Force," January 1, 2022, <https://rcepsec.org/2022/01/14/rcep-agreement-enters-into-force/>.

¹¹ ASEAN Secretariat, "Economic Community," <https://asean.org/our-communities/economic-community/> (accessed February 12, 2022); M. Prayoga Permana, Herman Hoen, and Ronald L. Holzhaecker, "Framing Trade Policy Preferences and Dialogues in ASEAN Economic Integration," in *Challenges of Governance: Development and Regional Integration in Southeast Asia and ASEAN*, ed. Ronald L. Holzhaecker and Wendy Guan Zhen Tan, (London: Springer, 2020), 89-114.



Source: ASEAN Secretariat, *ASEAN Statistical Yearbook 2020*.

Figure 2-1. ASEAN Merchandise Trade and FDI, 2010-2019

assistance and disaster relief, counterterrorism, peacekeeping, cybersecurity, and military medicine.¹² ASEAN also drives the East Asian Summit process that brings ASEAN members plus Australia,

¹² ASEAN Secretariat, "About the ASEAN Defence Ministers."

China, India, Japan, New Zealand, Russia, and the United States together to discuss cooperation in areas ranging from education to the environment.¹³ Like trade liberalization, ASEAN can leverage on an overall interest in dialogue to bring various parties together to discuss matters of common interest.

On the other hand, ASEAN faces greater challenges in prompting cooperation where perspectives among member states and key partners diverge. ASEAN risks stasis, even paralysis, on such issues. Differences over the management of disputes over the South China Sea are perhaps where such dynamics are most evident. Decades of dialogue and commitment to documents such as the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, pronouncements about their implementation, and continued discussion about a Code of Conduct provide little in the way of encouraging restraint.¹⁴ Notably, China has occupied and militarized maritime features at far greater scale than all other claimants, while regularly patrolling contested waters and airspace even as it ignores the Arbitral Tribunal ruling restricting the possible scope of claims.¹⁵ ASEAN appears to have limited ability to work collectively on promoting restraint, but instead seemed unable to act when Beijing allegedly used certain members to block joint statements and punished members for not supporting its position on the South China Sea.¹⁶

Aside from areas of substantive divergence, ASEAN also faces difficulties in responding to political crises. A case in point is the 2022 Myanmar coup and its aftermath, where ASEAN took almost three months to come up with a response in the form of the “Five Point Consensus” with the Myanmar junta.¹⁷ However, ASEAN was unable to arrange for its special envoy to visit the country and meet with imprisoned leader Aung San Suu Kyi or have the junta limit its use of violence against civilians.¹⁸ Instead, with the start of Cambodia’s rotation as ASEAN Chair, its longtime strongman leader, Hun Sen, took the prerogative to meet with the junta’s leaders without consultation with other ASEAN capitals, as would usually be the case.¹⁹ Amid this confusion and inaction, Myanmar has slipped into a civil war that threatens cross-border refugee flows during a pandemic and spillovers in fighting, along with an increase in transnational drug and people smuggling due to the breakdown in order.²⁰

¹³ ASEAN Secretariat, “About the East Asia Summit.”

¹⁴ Hoang Thi Ha, *Pitfalls for ASEAN in Negotiating a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea* (Singapore: ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019).

¹⁵ Nehginpao Kipgen, “ASEAN and China in the South China Sea Disputes,” *Asian Affairs* 49, no. 3 (2018): 433-448.

¹⁶ Le Hu, “Examining ASEAN’s Effectiveness in Managing the South China Sea Disputes,” *The Pacific Review*, published online on June 29, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2021.1934519>; Christopher B. Roberts, “ASEAN, the ‘South China Sea’ Arbitral Award, and the Code of Conduct: New Challenges, New Approaches,” *Asian Politics and Policy* 10, no. 2 (2018): 190-218.

¹⁷ ASEAN Secretariat, “Overview of ASEAN Plus Three Cooperation”; ASEAN Secretariat, “Chairman’s Statement on the ASEAN Leaders’ Meeting,” April 24, 2021, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/Chairmans-Statement-on-ALM-Five-Point-Consensus-24-April-2021-FINAL-a-1.pdf>.

¹⁸ Sebastian Strangio, “ASEAN Envoy Cancels Planned Myanmar Trip Due to Junta Stonewalling,” *The Diplomat*, October 15, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/10/asean-envoy-cancels-planned-myanmar-trip-due-to-junta-stonewalling/>.

¹⁹ Toru Takahashi, “Cambodian PM’s Embrace of Myanmar Military Rulers Splits ASEAN,” *Asia Nikkei Review*, January 31, 2022, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Myanmar-Crisis/Cambodian-PM-s-embrace-of-Myanmar-military-rulers-splits-ASEAN>.

²⁰ Lindsay Maizland, “Myanmar’s Troubled History: Coups, Military Rule, and Ethnic Conflict,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, January 31, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/background/myanmar-history-coup-military-rule-ethnic-conflict-rohingya>.

ASEAN inaction too, contributed to the scale of the humanitarian disaster experienced by Myanmar's Rohingya in 2015, as the military launched an ethnic cleansing campaign against them with the support of the civilian leadership at the time.²¹

Despite ASEAN's many successes and achievements, its limitations may perhaps be especially salient in a world where major power contestation is becoming more acute. ASEAN's ability to broker deals and encourage different parties to enter dialogue was predicated on a convergence in interests among members and partners. It is no longer safe to assume this will continue to be the case when Beijing and Washington, the two most influential actors in the region, view each other with suspicion and are ready to discourage ASEAN members and others from engaging more deeply with their rival. Efforts to peel off ASEAN members to prevent the grouping from issuing inconvenient statements or engaging in action that complicates major power plans, such as having Cambodia block South China Sea statements in 2012 and 2015, is likely to become more common.²² This means that ASEAN member states and ASEAN partners must find some way of navigating this environment, which raises salient and unanswered questions about ASEAN's future role as a regional grouping and, indeed, its claims of "centrality."

Amity, Cooperation, and Their Limits

ASEAN's relative strengths in facilitating coordination and promoting dialogue among willing parties is a feature and not a bug, so too with its constraints in addressing political crises and issues where substantive divergence in interests exist. Undergirding ASEAN-related interactions are principles enshrined in the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) in Southeast Asia, which include:

- a. Mutual respect for the independence, sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity and national identity for all nations;
- b. The right of every State to lead its national existence free from external interference, subversion or coercion;
- c. Non-interference in the internal affairs of one another;
- d. Settlement of differences or disputes by peaceful means;
- e. Renunciation of the threat or use of force;
- f. Effective cooperation among themselves.²³

²¹ Mayesha Alam, "Mass Violence against the Rohingya: Strategic and ideological drivers of ethnic cleansing," in *Political Violence in Southeast Asia since 1945*, eds. Eve Monique Zucker and Ben Kiernan (London: Routledge, 2021).

²² David, Hutt, "Time to Boot Cambodia Out of ASEAN," *Asia Times*, October 28, 2020, <https://asiatimes.com/2020/10/time-to-boot-cambodia-out-of-asean/>.

²³ Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, February 24, 1976, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/20131230235433.pdf>.

Subsequent foundational ASEAN documents and agreements involving member states as well as partners repeatedly reaffirm these ideas, together with a commitment to consensus decision-making.²⁴

These basic ASEAN principles work best when states are seeking to sort out problems relating to coordination over issues where the consequences of relative gain and loss are minimal. This largely covers trade-related issues so long as there is a common view that more liberalization is better than less, and any differential distribution of gains are of lesser concern.²⁵ ASEAN principles are likewise more effective when different partners have an overriding interest in maintaining and expanding dialogue, such that specific differences in approach themselves matter less. Under these conditions, differences in capability and even uncertainty are less likely to become stumbling blocks for cooperation and at most present themselves as more minor issues for the different parties to jointly navigate. Areas of successful ASEAN-driven collaboration are over lower hanging fruit where various actors are predisposed to cooperation in the first place.

Another condition that fosters cooperation under ASEAN terms is that the different interlocutors do not have overwhelming capability advantages that significantly amplify the temptation to use force or even intervene. Despite substantial differences in size and population, no single ASEAN member state has historically had the ability to use force against another at low expected cost. Correspondingly, ASEAN members also have little to gain from the use of force. Such circumstances discourage ASEAN members from using force and instead encourage them to search for alternative, non-forceful channels, such as arbitration or negotiation, to resolve differences.²⁶ These inclinations may become habitual among ASEAN member states over time as part of the way they deal with each other and help explain the relative absence of force to address intra-ASEAN differences, including over such sensitive issues as territorial disputes.²⁷

Further bolstering cooperation under ASEAN terms is the general unpalatability of cross-border intervention among members. That all initial members except Thailand had newly emerged from colonial rule and were seeking to establish themselves as sovereign states at ASEAN's creation meant they placed a premium on non-intervention and territorial integrity. Experience from Indonesia's Konfrontasi campaign against Malaysia reinforced perceptions about the difficulty of trying to foment domestic unrest across borders.²⁸ The Communist Party of Malaya's destabilizing presence

²⁴ Samuel Sharpe, "An ASEAN Way to Security Cooperation in Southeast Asia," *The Pacific Review* 16, no. 2 (2003): 231-250.

²⁵ ASEAN Secretariat, "Economic Community."

²⁶ Martel, "The Polysemy of Security Community-Building," 588-599.

²⁷ Kilian Spandler, "Primary Institutional Dynamics and the Emergence of Regional Governance in Southeast Asia: Constructing Post-Colonial International Societies," in *International Organization in the Anarchical Society: The Institutional Structure of World Order*, eds. Tonny Brems Knudsen and Cornelia Navari (London: Springer, 2019), 321-355.

²⁸ Jürgen Haacke, *ASEAN's Diplomatic and Security Culture: Origins, Developments, and Prospects* (London: Routledge, 2002), Chapters 1-2, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203037539>.

in the border area between Peninsular Malaysia and southern Thailand highlighted the importance of actively addressing any spillover of conflict across borders.²⁹ Concord over the avoidance of intervention removed a set of potentially contentious behaviors in intra-ASEAN interactions, but this depended, of course, on the existence of relatively strong state capacity, which most ASEAN members generally enjoyed.

When ASEAN has fallen short, it has been cases where these conditions do not or did not any longer hold, making consensus challenging to achieve. On the South China Sea, for instance, ASEAN faced an actor in the form of China for which the costs of using force were rapidly declining as its economy and military capabilities grew. Beijing had little reason to limit itself to negotiation, arbitration, and seeking compromise. As a result, even respecting ASEAN unity did not have to be a major consideration, hence it was more likely to use Cambodia as a proxy to prompt ASEAN paralysis.³⁰ Occupying and reclaiming maritime features and then arming them, while sending paramilitary vessels and military aircraft into and over contested waters was easy and low-cost for a major power like China. There was simply very little—if anything—that ASEAN or disputant member states could do in response, except to continue talking to Beijing. Active efforts to involve outside actors such as the United States could prove escalatory, even if the U.S. presence might be helpful to ASEAN, its members, and claimants other than China, which led to a more tentative public welcoming of the U.S. role in the South China Sea.³¹

Political crises that involve state breakdown violate the key ASEAN assumption that there is a strong state interlocutor that can and will generally act in good faith, which can undermine any shared understanding about the need for substantive engagement. The absence of a strong state means that it is unclear who might be able to represent the state in question, something which has become increasingly apparent in Myanmar following its February 2022 coup. State breakdown may also mean that any interlocutors may not be interested in interacting in good faith and living up to ostensible commitments if that means potentially weakening their domestic positions. There is also the conundrum whereby interacting with various competing authorities in a weak state may confer a degree of legitimacy that may be tantamount to a level of domestic intervention on the one hand, while not doing so could complicate difficult cross-border issues on the other. Some of these cross-border issues include refugee flows, human smuggling, and drug smuggling. ASEAN member states may also find themselves implicated in human rights abuses by various local actors,

²⁹ M. Ladd Thomas, “The Malayan Communist Insurgents and Thai-Malaysian Relations,” *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 4, no. 6 (1977): 371-384.

³⁰ Daniel C. O’Neill, “Who Wins in China’s ‘Win-Win’ Relations with Cambodia?: a Skewed Illusion,” in *The Deer and the Dragon: Southeast Asia and China in the 21st Century*, ed. Donald K. Emmerson (Stanford: Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Center, 2020), 247-271.

³¹ Kipgen, “ASEAN and China in the South China Sea Disputes,” 433-448.

such as through financial transactions and technological transfers, and may consequently eschew fuller participation in any process.³²

Notably, joint ASEAN efforts to address the climate crisis and even global health remain underdeveloped, despite the pressing nature of climate change across the region, especially regarding sea level rise, disruption to riparian ecological systems, deforestation, and transboundary haze.³³ Even with the COVID-19 pandemic raging, there are limited large-scale coordinated, region-wide ASEAN responses. These issues are simply too contentious, and ASEAN members diverge significantly on them, given differing interests in finance, investment, and development, which makes more practical action more challenging.

The challenge for ASEAN, in a world of intensifying U.S.-China competition and increasing prevalence of state breakdown, is that it may find itself in a set of circumstances that it was not designed to adequately address. With two major powers contesting one another over a wider range of issues, the asymmetry in capabilities may well mean that ASEAN and ASEAN member states may be less able to count on major power restraint, claims about respecting ASEAN centrality notwithstanding. Washington and Beijing may be readier to deploy their much greater capabilities to entice, coerce, and pressure ASEAN members and their partners, limiting the grouping's ability to exercise agency and promote the cooperation that its members desire. The risk of a prolonged civil war in Myanmar likewise threatens such issues as cross-border violence, refugee flows, human smuggling, and a resurgent drug problem that could affect several ASEAN members and other neighboring states. Without a clear interlocutor that can manage the situation in Myanmar and deliver on commitments, ASEAN and its state-centered approach to managing challenges may be hard-pressed to find a sustainable and effective response.

The Risks Ahead

The origin of these principles lay in the fundamental similarity of the five founding ASEAN members and Brunei at the point of their accession to the organization. All were essentially anti-communist, conservative, developmentalist states with at least some authoritarian leanings and a history of colonialism. There was a lot they could agree on as a result, especially over unfettered autonomy, territorial integrity, and non-intervention. Such convergence proved convenient to member states as their regimes sought to dispatch domestic rivals under the label of anti-communism, even as they looked toward the United States, Japan, and other non-communist states for investment and trade

³² Jonathan Liljeblad, "We Know How to Cut Off the Financial Valve to Myanmar's Military. The World Just Needs the Resolve to Act," *The Conversation*, April 1, 2021, <https://theconversation.com/we-know-how-to-cut-off-the-financial-valve-to-myanmars-military-the-world-just-needs-the-resolve-to-act-158220>.

³³ *ASEAN State of Climate Change Report*, (Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat, 2021), <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/ASCCR-e-publication-Final-12-Oct-2021.pdf>.

opportunities. This formulation was, as well, useful to ASEAN members in gaining their footing and voice internationally as states that recently gained independence, with the notable exception of Thailand.

Of course, conditions have changed with the end of the Cold War. ASEAN has undergone expansion and a degree of regime change, which have introduced much greater diversity within the grouping. Expansion in the 1990s meant the incorporation of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam with their recent Leninist and Communist past, as well as previously isolationist and military-ruled Myanmar. The new members have lower incomes and different development needs compared to older ASEAN members. Indonesia, ASEAN's largest and most populous member, democratized at the end of the 1990s in the wake of the Asian Financial Crisis and continues to engage in a process of democratic consolidation. The Philippines, Malaysia, and Thailand continue to vacillate between democratization and democratic backsliding, while Myanmar only recently underwent a coup attempt following a decade of democratization.

Growing diversity, alongside greater extra-regional engagement, make maintaining a common position on basic ASEAN principles more complex. A larger set of members with a wider range of interests and perspectives makes coordination more complicated and common ground more difficult to find. Such conditions mean that within ASEAN, the all-important consensus becomes tough to achieve unless there is acceptance of a very low common denominator on issues.³⁴ ASEAN's important efforts to make itself more relevant and central to broader regional affairs through broader formal engagement with various partners active in Asia also came with the cost of introducing more variables into ASEAN considerations. Such a development meant that on-boarding of wider concerns and rivalries that ASEAN had to manage, with the top concern now being the increasingly acrimonious U.S.-China rivalry over a wide spectrum of issue domains.

More heated U.S.-China rivalry playing out in Asia could mean that ASEAN and its members could become an arena for major power competition. Beijing apparently leaning on Cambodia to prevent ASEAN statements about management of the South China Sea dispute that it disliked could be a precursor of future developments. A Chinese proposal to include language in the Code of Conduct (COC) for the South China that gives it a veto over military activity there by non-littoral states, including engagement with littoral states, appears designed to restrict U.S. military presence in those waters.³⁵ For its part, Washington sought to restrict security cooperation with states that use China-designed and China-built digital infrastructure, while advancing its competitive position, as

³⁴ Vinod K. Aggarwal and Jonathan T. Chow, "The Perils of Consensus: How ASEAN's Meta-Regime Undermines Economic and Environmental Cooperation." *Review of International Political Economy* 17, no. 2 (2010): 262-290. Shaun Narine, "ASEAN and the ARF: The Limits of the 'ASEAN Way'" *Asian Survey* 37, no. 10 (Oct., 1997): 961-978.

³⁵ Carl Thayer, "A Closer Look at the ASEAN-China Single Draft South China Sea Code of Conduct," *The Diplomat*, August 3, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/08/a-closer-look-at-the-asean-china-single-draft-south-china-sea-code-of-conduct/>.

exemplified in the White House's recently launched 2022 Indo-Pacific strategy.³⁶ These efforts by the United States and China to check each other's activities could expand as contestation between the two major powers expand, potentially putting ASEAN and ASEAN members in a bind since they affect the entire region.

Exacerbating matters is the increasing prevalence of influence operations and disinformation among the societies of ASEAN member states resulting from greater U.S.-China rivalry. Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, official Chinese sources and social media began spreading conspiracy theories about the disease originating from U.S. military laboratories and the ineffectiveness of vaccines not developed by China.³⁷ For its part, then-President Donald Trump insisted on the possibility that COVID-19 was linked to a Chinese biological weapons program.³⁸ Then, there were social media efforts to promote Chinese claims over Taiwan and the South China Sea allegedly linked to Beijing.³⁹ There were also alleged efforts by China to interfere in the domestic political processes in ASEAN member states such as the Philippines, Malaysia, and Singapore to sway elite and public opinion in favor of Beijing's preferred positions.⁴⁰ Such activity may point to the potential weaponization of information and otherwise innocuous exchanges that could sow confusion within ASEAN member states and complicate cooperation through the organization.

ASEAN's difficulty in addressing domestic political turmoil among its members, especially on crises with cross-border implications, is also of concern going forward. The present problems in Myanmar may point to a trend of autocrats and populists trying to seize power in Southeast Asia and beyond.⁴¹ There have been recent seizures of power by the military in Thailand and the populist presidency of Roderigo Duterte in the Philippines. The Thai case was met for a time with mass protests, while the Philippines saw a campaign of state-sanctioned violence associated with an effort to combat illegal drugs.⁴² Even though both the Thai and Philippine experiences generally did not see much cross-border spillover of unrest, this could be the case with future attempts to seize power and responses

³⁶ White House, *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*, February 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>.

³⁷ Erika Kinetz, "Anatomy of a Conspiracy: With COVID, China Took Leading Role," *Associated Press* February 15, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/pandemics-beijing-only-on-ap-epidemics-media-122b73e134b780919cc1808f3f6f16e8>.

³⁸ BBC, "Coronavirus: Trump Stands by China Lab Origin Theory for Virus," *BBC News*, May 1, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52496098>.

³⁹ Dexter Roberts, *China's Disinformation Strategy: Its Dimensions and Future* (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council of the United States, 2020), <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/CHINA-ASI-Report-FINAL-1.pdf>.

⁴⁰ Timothy Heath, "Beijing's Influence Operations Target Chinese Diaspora," *War on the Rocks*, March 1, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/03/beijings-influence-operations-target-chinese-diaspora/>; Jonathan Stromseth, "The Testing Ground: China's Rising Regional Influence in Southeast Asia and Regional Responses," Brookings Global China project, November 2019, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/FP_20191119_china_se_asia_stromseth.pdf.

⁴¹ Aurel Croissant, "The Struggle for Democracy in Asia – Regression, Resilience, Revival," *Bertelsmann Stiftung Asia Policy Brief* (April 2020), https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/user_upload/ST-DA-asia-policy-brief-the-struggle-for-democracy-in-asia_.pdf.

⁴² Joshua Kurlantzick, "The Pandemic and Southeast Asia's Democratic Struggles," *Current History* 119, no. 818 (2020): 228-233; Mark R. Thompson, "Duterte's Violent Populism: Mass Murder, Political Legitimacy, and the 'Death of Development' in the Philippines," *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, April 16, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2021.1910859>.

to such efforts. ASEAN's adherence to non-intervention and consensus could increasingly come up short in finding appropriate responses to manage and contain such challenges.

Of concern, as well, are related questions over regime stability and leadership transition among ASEAN members. Following the election defeat of the long-ruling Barisan Nasional in Malaysia, the country witnessed two changeovers in administration that did not go through an electoral process.⁴³ Thailand's military-backed government came to power amid widespread protests, and the stability of its government—and perhaps even the monarchy—remains in question.⁴⁴ Cambodia faces the question of who might succeed strongman Hun Sen, while usually stable Singapore, too, is facing a prolonged leadership transition.⁴⁵ The Philippines may also have to deal with the long-term issue of populism in its electoral process.⁴⁶ Even though these seem like domestic issues that ASEAN was never designed to address, the fact that ASEAN is a state-led organization means that questions over leadership among several member states can translate into stasis for the grouping.

The net effect that follows from the above issues is that ASEAN may see even its ability to coordinate and foster dialogue diminish along with a decline in any agenda-setting ability. ASEAN may end up having to accept the increasingly restricted set of options Washington and Beijing permit, rather than being able to advance positions that are more aligned with the interests of the grouping and its members. Even when left to its own devices, members may find increasing difficulty in putting forward anything but the most rudimentary of agendas or find obstacles to consensus insurmountable. The "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific" document laying out ASEAN's strategic role and direction, for instance, notably seeks to reinforce ASEAN centrality and promote cooperation but provides discussion as the primary mechanism for achieving such goals.⁴⁷ Given a lack of effective leadership, ASEAN may also find it difficult to propose and pursue new ideas that could bolster the standing of the grouping and its members. Coupled with an inability to address increasingly frequent political crises, ASEAN may find its credibility further handicapped.

⁴³ Tricia Yeoh, "Malaysian Politics: What Just Happened and the Political Outlook," Heinrich Böll Stiftung Southeast Asia, October 20, 2021, <https://th.boell.org/en/2021/10/20/malaysian-politics-what-just-happened-and-political-outlook>.

⁴⁴ Pavin Chachavalpongpun, *Coup, King, Crisis: A Critical Interregnum in Thailand* (New Haven: Southeast Asia Studies Monograph, 2020).

⁴⁵ Michael Barr, "Succession Vacuum Looms over Singapore Politics," *East Asia Forum*, December 19, 2021, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/12/19/succession-vacuum-looms-over-singapore-politics/>; Astrid Noren-Nilsson, "Hun Sen Future-Proofs Cambodia's Politics," *East Asia Forum*, January 21, 2022, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2022/01/21/hun-sen-future-proofs-cambodias-politics/>.

⁴⁶ Ian Clark R. Parcon, "Understanding Duterteism: Populism and Democratic Politics in the Philippines," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 49, no. 3 (2021): 131-137.

⁴⁷ ASEAN Secretariat, "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific," June 23, 2019, https://asean.org/asean2020/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific_FINAL_22062019.pdf.

Uncertainty and Changing Needs

ASEAN's enduring value for both members and partners rests on its ability to meet their demands, many of which are dependent on changing conditions. Given that coordinating on trade and fostering dialogue will remain important functions, ASEAN is likely to retain some of its usefulness. Intensifying U.S.-China competition, however, may mean that these roles may no longer be enough to maintain ASEAN's status as the primary vehicle for handling regional matters. However, members and partners alike may find the grouping's increasingly limited initiative and agenda-setting capacity frustrating, since this means that ASEAN will be more subject to the proclivities and pressures of major powers and their proxies. Such conditions create incentives to search for ways to address gaps in capability, which could well result in a further diminishment of ASEAN's prominence and standing.

Preserving autonomy in the wake of growing major power competition and heightened pressure on ASEAN may foster greater interest in collective bargaining among middle and smaller powers to supplement ASEAN's coordination and dialogue functions. A clearer collective voice and stronger bargaining position seeks to provide more initiative and possibly more effective responses to a grouping encumbered by dogmatic approaches to consensus and non-intervention at moments of crisis. Indeed, ASEAN helped provide a platform to amplify the collective voices of its members when they sought to coordinate with the United States and China to push back against Vietnam's 1979-1989 invasion and occupation of Cambodia.⁴⁸ Since not all ASEAN members today may be similarly committed to autonomy and collective bargaining, there may be some desire for some sort of sub-grouping within ASEAN. Indonesia's initiative to work on maritime issues with Brunei, the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam may represent such a coalescence of ASEAN members with greater similarity in interest.

However, other ASEAN members may be eager to work more closely with either Beijing or Washington. Motivation may stem from expectations of advantage or fear of punishment and losing that can often accompany interactions with major powers and supersede the anticipated gains of ASEAN-led coordination and dialogue. Both the United States and China can offer such benefits as investment, access to markets, and security guarantees that actors may desire or at least not wish to lose out on. ASEAN members that tack closer to one major power or another can still pay lip service to the mantra of "not choosing sides" between Washington and Beijing. Developments in this vein may already be taking place through Cambodia's welcoming of Chinese investment, civil service training, and military cooperation, as well as heavy Chinese investment in infrastructure and extraction in Laos.

⁴⁸ Lee Jones, "ASEAN Intervention in Cambodia: From Cold War to Conditionality," *The Pacific Review* 20, no. 4 (2007): 523-550.

ASEAN partners, including Beijing and Washington, that seek to have roles in Southeast Asia that go beyond what ASEAN can traditionally offer can as well make alternative arrangements. The United States, for instance, seems to be trying to preserve its version of a rules-based order through the establishment of mechanisms such as the Quad and AUKUS while bolstering ties with established allies.⁴⁹ Actors involved with U.S. initiatives—Australia, India, Japan, South Korea, and the United Kingdom—are all ASEAN partners that are active in Southeast Asia. Despite their refrain of respecting ASEAN centrality, these arrangements and their intended effect of bolstering rules that advantage their participants may effectively leave ASEAN members with a *fait accompli* that the latter can only accept or reject, but not actively shape. Chinese efforts to reinterpret international legal norms over the South China Sea, from its treatment of the Arbitral Tribunal to the COC, too, seem to be pushing toward a set of rules that advantage Beijing but where ASEAN and ASEAN members have limited say.⁵⁰

A net effect from attempts to go beyond ASEAN's current limitations could well result in a further dilution of the organization's role. Efforts by some members to find a more cohesive arrangement on specific issues while others work to deepen ties with one of the competing major powers is likely to result in ASEAN positions becoming even less coherent. Less intra-ASEAN cohesiveness can reduce the grouping's ability to provide coordination and a venue for discussion, which could reduce its importance to the members, partners, the region, and the world. Of course, ASEAN and its members have the option of continuing to maintain an ambivalent "not choosing sides" position, but to do so while Beijing and Washington are trying to peel off members or establish alternative groupings may diminish ASEAN's relevance. Should the United States and China work either alone or with other ASEAN partners to establish and entrench rules, norms, and mechanisms they prefer with minimal ASEAN input, the organization and its members may find their roles further hemmed in.

An alternative is the unlikely scenario of ASEAN reform. For ASEAN to be able to go beyond dialogue and coordination to take more initiative and even an agenda-setting role, the grouping has to find more effective means of creating consensus. It could also try to move past its dependence on consensus decision-making at least on some matters, particularly those that are of some urgency. On matters that have cross-border effects, ranging from crime to climate change, ASEAN may have to modify its stance on non-intervention to better reflect a world where borders are far more porous. Given the diverse range of views within ASEAN, and the fact that Myanmar is in effect mired in the dysfunction of civil war, reform is extremely unlikely.

⁴⁹ White House, *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*.

⁵⁰ Isaac B. Kardon, "China Can Say 'No': Analyzing China's Rejection of the South China Sea Arbitration," *University of Pennsylvania Asian Law Review* 13, no. 1 (2018), <https://scholarship.law.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1037&context=alr>.

Conclusion

ASEAN had a very good run as a regional organization through the Cold War and two decades after the Cold War, but earlier circumstances that enabled its previous success may no longer be taken for granted. Even though it was technically non-aligned during the Cold War, the anti-communist orientation of its members made the grouping an acceptable partner to the United States and, after the Sino-Soviet Split, China as well.⁵¹ An overarching emphasis on economic liberalization leading to cooperation toward the end of the Cold War and its immediate aftermath created substantial demand for coordination and dialogue over other concerns. Sharpening major power competition, increasing divergence among ASEAN members and partners, as well as a series of crises, mean that solving coordination problems and promoting dialogue may no longer carry the premium they once did. ASEAN now faces a need to adjust or accept greater prominence by other mechanisms for advancing cooperation and managing differences given the new challenges with which its members and partners now need to live.

How ASEAN members and partners adjust to a more contested and potentially crisis-prone world is a major question that looms over the organization and its future. This essay provided some considerations and key variables to consider, but how competition between Washington and Beijing, as well as interactions among ASEAN members and partners in response, play out and affect ASEAN remain a key dynamic to watch. ASEAN's reluctance to change and the changing needs of its members and partners may spur institutional experimentation, the success of which is likely to result in a diminishment of ASEAN's traditional role as the partner of choice in Southeast Asia. If alternatives and supplements to ASEAN prove unsuccessful, the limitations of the grouping could mean that it still has a lesser role to play in regional governance that creates conditions for more ad hoc arrangements and more contestation. Southeast Asian regional politics could become more tumultuous as a result, which is something that current ASEAN members and partners may do well to prepare for.

⁵¹ Daljit Singh and Lye Liang Fook, "30 Years On: A Reflection on Southeast Asia's Fight against Communism during the Cold War Years," *Trends in Southeast Asia* 14 (2021), https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/TRS14_21.pdf.