Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific

# Regional Security Outlook

2026


## Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific

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## Letter from the Co-editors

On behalf of CSCAP, we are pleased to present the CSCAP Regional Security Outlook (CRSO) 2026. Inaugurated in 2007, the CRSO volume is now in its twentieth year. The CRSO brings expert analysis to bear on critical security issues facing the region and points to policy-relevant alternatives for Track One (official) and Track Two (non-official) to advance multilateral regional security cooperation. The views in the CRSO 2026 do not represent those of any Member committee or other institutions and are the responsibility of the individual authors and the Editors. Charts and images included in the CRSO 2026 have been selected by the Editors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the chapter authors.


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Introduction

# Regional Security in an Era of Strategic Reordering

**Charles Labrecque,** Director of Research, Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada

The Indo-Pacific is changing rapidly, and with it, the opportunities and challenges facing countries across the region. Geopolitical rivalries are deepening, technology competition is accelerating, economic nationalism is on the rise, and supply chains are becoming increasingly politicized. The return of Donald Trump to the White House has created new uncertainties, and while the recent Trump-Xi summit has produced a degree of tactical stabilization, underlying U.S.-China rivalry continues to deepen across trade, technology, and military posture—reshaping a regional landscape already complicated by territorial disputes, uneven development, and climate risks. For many countries in the region, the central question is no longer simply which side to align with, but how to navigate a more competitive world while preserving their independence and agency. This shifting landscape presents real challenges, but also genuine opportunities to build new partnerships, diversify trade, and play a more active role in shaping the rules that will define the region's future.

The US–China relationship remains the central axis shaping the region's security environment and will continue as such for years to come. While both Washington and Beijing continue to pursue selective engagement, their structural rivalry has deepened across trade, technology, military posture, and critical infrastructure (Council on Foreign Relations 2026). A full economic decoupling remains unlikely, as both countries remain significantly interconnected, but growing derisking measures and strategic competition are increasingly forcing regional countries to navigate competing political, technological, and economic ecosystems. What holds this uneasy relationship together is less mutual trust than a shared awareness of the economic devastation either side could inflict on the other (Kelly and Hirson 2026).

At the same time, emerging technologies are transforming the Indo-Pacific security landscape in ways that blur the boundaries between economic security, national security, and technological governance. AI, cyber capabilities, space infrastructure, digital platforms, and critical undersea infrastructure are creating new vulnerabilities alongside new opportunities for growth and innovation. From AI-enabled disinformation and cyber threats to concerns over submarine cables, critical minerals, and the resilience of digital infrastructure, security risks in the region are cross-domain, transnational, and deeply interconnected (Chilukuri et al. 2025).

"While both Washington and Beijing continue to pursue selective engagement, their structural rivalry has deepened across trade, technology, military posture, and critical infrastructure."

President Donald J. Trump participates in a welcome ceremony with President Xi Jinping of the People's Republic of China, at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, China, Thursday, May 14, 2026. Official White House Photo by Daniel Torok via Flickr

Against this backdrop, regional actors are strengthening both traditional and non-traditional security co-operation. Japan and South Korea have deepened ties with the United States and with one another (Kanodia 2025), while India has expanded its role across the Indian Ocean and beyond (Shukla 2025). ASEAN remains central to the region's diplomatic architecture, though growing geopolitical pressures and internal divisions continue to test its cohesion (Thit Htoo 2025). Meanwhile, minilateral frameworks and issue-specific coalitions have proliferated, reflecting both the limitations of existing institutions and the growing influence of middle powers in shaping the regional order (Biba 2026).

These developments underscore the Indo-Pacific's continued strategic importance in an increasingly contested and multipolar world. In this context, the 2026 edition of the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) Regional Security Outlook examines emerging security challenges reshaping the region, from intensifying technological competition and cyber-enabled threats to the increasingly apparent vulnerabilities of digital infrastructure, fraying climate governance, and evolving regional dynamics. Together, the contributions to this volume explore how countries in the Indo-Pacific can strengthen resilience, manage strategic competition, and build more effective mechanisms for regional co-operation in this period of accelerating change.

The first article, by Umi Ariga, argues that the growing integration of AI, cyber, space, and emerging quantum technologies into military systems across Northeast Asia is compressing decision-making timelines, increasing uncertainty, and creating new cross-domain escalation risks that existing regional-governance mechanisms are ill-equipped to manage.

The second paper, by Mark Bryan Manantan, asserts that generative AI is rapidly transforming online scam operations in Southeast Asia by enabling more scalable, sophisticated, and deceptive forms of cyber fraud, while also offering governments and industry new AI-driven tools for detection and prevention. This is an emerging "AI paradox" in which the same technology both empower and combat transnational cybercrime.

Datuk Prof. Dr. Faiz Abdullah argues in the third article that the Indo-Pacific's economic and security orders are becoming increasingly inseparable. What was once a region built on economic interdependence is now one where trade, technology, and supply chains are increasingly weaponized as instruments of geopolitical competition. The central challenge for countries in the region is to address legitimate security concerns without allowing economic coercion to define the regional order.

In the fourth paper, Do Manh Hoang contends that submarine cables in the South China Sea have become strategically vital yet highly vulnerable infrastructure for Vietnam and other Southeast Asian states. Great-power competition, legal gaps, maritime disputes, grey-zone tactics, and limited domestic technical capacity increasingly threaten regional digital connectivity and security, thereby requiring stronger domestic resilience and greater international co-operation.

Akekelak Chaipumee analyzes the evolving crisis in Myanmar in the fifth paper, tracing its structural roots to unresolved questions of state formation and the military's deeply embedded role in political life, before turning to its broader implications for regional security and ASEAN cohesion. Chaipumee then assesses how neighbouring states and regional mechanisms have responded to a crisis that has long spilled over Myanmar's borders, fuelling displacement, transnational crime, and instability across the region.

The sixth and final paper, by Yuan Sha, argues that Asia's fragmented climate governance and growing climate vulnerabilities create an urgent need for stronger regional co-operation. It proposes that China, through its green-transition strategy, clean-tech capacity, climate financing, and multilateral engagement, has the potential to act as a major "green engine" driving Asia's low-carbon transformation, despite significant geopolitical and governance constraints.

"Together, the contributions to this volume explore how countries in the Indo-Pacific can strengthen resilience, manage strategic competition, and build more effective mechanisms for regional co-operation in this period of accelerating change."

# Integrated Technologies, Fragmented Governance:

## Emerging Escalation Risks in Northeast Asia

**Umi Ariga,** Research Fellow, Japan Institute of International Affairs

If a missile launch were detected over the Korean Peninsula today, the warning would likely move from ground- and space-based sensors through automated processing and multi-sensor fusion, across data links and networked command-and-control systems, before reaching a human decision-maker—each layer speeding detection and dissemination while also expanding the vulnerable attack surface (Saltini et al. 2025). Across Northeast Asia's flashpoints, AI, cyber capabilities, space-based systems, and prospective quantum advances are becoming embedded within shared data networks and decision-support architectures.

This article argues that the strategic significance of these developments lies less in their individual capabilities than in their interaction effects: the way these technologies connect to create new, compounded risks. As military systems become more digitally integrated, they compress decision timelines, heighten uncertainty about data integrity, and multiply pathways for cross-domain escalation. This means that a localized incident in one area, such as a cyber intrusion or interference with a satellite, can now much more easily spill over and trigger a wider military response across the air, sea, or land domains. These dynamics do not undermine deterrence in Northeast Asia's overlapping nuclear and conventional deterrence relationships, but they intensify structural stressors in a region already marked by frequent missile testing, contested air and maritime operations, and persistent high readiness.

While bilateral and trilateral defence- and security-co-operation mechanisms have expanded in recent years, governance of these mechanisms remains largely siloed by domain and unevenly distributed across the region. Managing the risks of emerging technologies therefore requires governance mechanisms that are as integrated as the technologies themselves.

Soyuz TMA-16 launches from the Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan, 2009. Photo by NASA via Unsplash

> "Emerging defence technologies in Northeast Asia are not advancing along parallel tracks. The region's most consequential capabilities increasingly depend on shared data, networks, and space-enabled connectivity, creating interlocking chains in which disruption in one domain could cascade into others."

## Cross-Domain Integration of Emerging Technologies in Northeast Asia

Emerging defence technologies in Northeast Asia are not advancing along parallel tracks. The region's most consequential capabilities increasingly depend on shared data, networks, and space-enabled connectivity, creating interlocking chains where disruption in one domain could cascade into others. Northeast Asia is uniquely sensitive to these dynamics because of its geography and the high density of advanced military assets in close proximity. In geographically compressed theatres such as the Taiwan Strait and the Korean Peninsula, missile flight times are measured in minutes, significantly reducing warning and decision timelines. In such environments, advances in hypersonic weapons and AI-enabled targeting further accelerate the pace of operations, such that even marginal increases in speed can disproportionately affect the tactical balance by reinforcing first-mover advantages. Furthermore, the region is characterized by persistent high readiness and frequent missile testing, creating an environment where automated alerts or data disruptions are more likely to be interpreted as precursors to an actual strike.

The most mature illustration of AI-enabled, multi-sensor fusion remains the United States' Project Maven, established explicitly to "turn the enormous volume of data" from Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) into actionable intelligence by integrating big data and machine learning into processing, exploitation, and dissemination workflows (Deputy Secretary of Defense 2017). Maven's model (algorithmic assistance applied to imagery and sensor flows) has become the reference point for how AI can accelerate target recognition and analysis at scale (Kuzuoka 2024; Pfaff and Hickey 2025).

In Northeast Asia, publicly documented integration often points to networked kill-chain connectivity (data links enabling target identification and strike execution) and warning-chain connectivity (links transmitting early-warning data to defenders), especially via satellite communications. Japan's upgraded Type 12 surface-to-ship missile program, for instance, highlights how long-range strikes increasingly rely on space-enabled data links: its "Up to Date Command" function is designed to receive target updates via satellite communications mid-flight, enabling strikes against moving targets at extended distances (Inaba 2022). Japan's investment in dedicated defence communications satellites (e.g., Kirameki) similarly reflects how command connectivity and data sharing are being expanded through space infrastructure (Kim 2025).

This connectivity also expands vulnerabilities. Sensors, satellites, data links, and command networks have all become potential points of disruption. Cyber operations aimed at networks or space-based infrastructure can corrupt or delay the information that targeting and early warning depend upon, often in ambiguous ways. The strategic problem is therefore not simply the existence of offensive cyber tools, but their ability to exploit the interdependence of data-dependent command structures. When decision-making relies on a continuous information flow, interference with that flow can generate uncertainty across the entire system.

> "The strategic problem is therefore not simply the existence of offensive cyber tools, but their ability to exploit the interdependence of data-dependent command structures."

China's evolving concept of "intelligentized warfare" reflects this same tension between integration and vulnerability. It is described as coordinated operations across land, sea, air, space, electromagnetic, cyber, and cognitive domains, underpinned by networked information systems and data fusion (Takagi 2022; Yamaguchi et al. 2023, 46). While such integration promises greater coordination and speed, it also deepens reliance on uninterrupted data flows and digital connectivity. As in the US and Japanese cases, Chinese operational effectiveness is also increasingly tied to system-wide interdependence. Taken together, Northeast Asia's technological acceleration has generated cross-domain dependence on data integrity and connectivity, acting as a multiplier for military effectiveness but also as a source of systemic fragility.

Finally, quantum computing represents a longer-term but potentially structural disruptor of this networked system. Modern military integration depends on encryption securing satellite communications, missile data links, command networks, and early-warning transmissions. Advances in quantum computing could, in principle, undermine widely used public-key cryptographic systems that protect these channels (Chochrek 2025; Riaz and Waseem 2026). While large-scale, relevant quantum computers do not yet exist, states must assume that encrypted communications intercepted today could be decrypted in the future. In a region where strategic stability relies heavily on secure command-and-control and early-warning systems, even the simple prospect of quantum-enabled decryption introduces long-term uncertainty, in particular into Nuclear Command, Control, and Communication (NC3) integrity (Ajaykumar 2025).

## Implications for Regional Stability in Northeast Asia

Technological acceleration does not automatically translate into operational transformation. Despite experimentation with AI-enabled systems, a gap remains between demonstrated capability and battlefield reality. That said, crisis stability (the degree to which states can manage escalating tensions without triggering pre-emptive action) depends as much on perceived trajectories

“Technological acceleration does not automatically translate into operational transformation. Despite experimentation with AI-enabled systems, a gap remains between demonstrated capability and battlefield reality.”

as on fully realized systems. In Northeast Asia—a region marked by frequent missile testing, near-miss air and maritime encounters, and persistent high readiness—incremental shifts in speed and connectivity can have disproportionate effects.

First, digitally networked systems compress decision timelines (Boulanin et al. 2020, 113–14). As the US defence planning around the “sense, make sense, act” concept underscores, modern command-and-control increasingly hinges on accelerating the flow from sensing to decision across domains (US Department of Defense 2022). AI-assisted processing can accelerate this cycle, flagging anomalies and elevating alerts in seconds. In flashpoints such as the Korean Peninsula or the Taiwan Strait, this temporal compression reduces deliberation space (Saalman 2019, 104; Johnson 2024). When ambiguous signals are framed as urgent threats, decision-makers may feel pressure to act before verification is complete. Precautionary moves taken under time pressure may escalate a crisis, even if no actor initially intended to do so.

Second, the growing dependence on interconnected data flows heightens concerns about both integrity and attribution (Levite et al. 2021). Cyber interference, whether through GPS spoofing, satellite-uplink disruption, or network intrusion, does not need to destroy systems to destabilize them; it need only introduce doubt. In tightly networked architectures, anomalous signals may stem from a technical malfunction, an environmental interference, or deliberate manipulation. The difficulty lies not only in detecting corrupted data, but in determining the intent behind the disruption. If commanders cannot distinguish a system error from a hostile intrusion, confidence in early-warning and command networks erodes. In nuclear-armed environments, where rapid assessment underpins deterrence credibility, even temporary uncertainty can distort risk perceptions and incentivize precautionary responses (Raju and Wan 2024).

Finally, the growing interconnection between domains increases the risk that a problem in one area quickly spreads to others. This dynamic is not entirely new (Acton 2018). However, as more military functions depend on shared data networks, satellite connectivity, and AI-assisted processing, the number of potential spillover points expands (Arie 2024). A cyber intrusion into a satellite ground station can disrupt missile-warning data. Interference with space-based navigation can affect conventional air or naval operations. A limited conventional clash, in turn, may prompt cyber retaliation against command networks or electronic interference with space assets. As military systems become more tightly linked through shared data and communications, it becomes harder to contain incidents within a single domain.

A UN staff member at work in the General Assembly Hall on the first day of the debate of the General Assembly's seventy-ninth session, September 24, 2024. Photo by Loey Felipe via UN Photo

Taken together, emerging technologies in Northeast Asia do not fundamentally overturn deterrence, but they intensify three enduring stressors of crisis stability: speed, uncertainty, and cross-domain entanglement. The strategic problem is therefore less about the existence of new tools than about how their interaction compresses time, complicates judgment, and widens escalation pathways. Managing these interaction effects is the central stability challenge facing the region.

## Existing Frameworks and Co-operation Mechanisms in Northeast Asia

Over the past several years, a dense set of bilateral and minilateral initiatives have been developed regarding emerging technologies, particularly within the US–Japan–South Korea trilateral framework. At the global level, normative discussions on military AI and cybersecurity continue at the United Nations, including the UN General Assembly’s resolution on AI in the military domain (United Nations General Assembly 2024). While these efforts provide important principles, they remain largely declaratory and do not offer regionally tailored operational mechanisms for managing escalation or coordinating restraint in a crisis.

Regionally, the most significant development has been the institutionalization of US–Japan–South Korea co-operation. In December 2023, the three governments fully activated a real-time North Korean missile-warning data-sharing mechanism and adopted a multi-year trilateral

exercise plan (US Department of Defense 2023). Their annual trilateral exercise, Freedom Edge, further aims to deepen interoperability across maritime-, air-, and missile-defence domains (US Indo-Pacific Command Public Affairs 2025). In parallel, director-level US–Japan–South Korea dialogues on space security now address threats, national strategies, and responsible behaviour in orbit (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2023).

Bilateral co-operation within Northeast Asia has also expanded. In 2025, South Korea and Japan agreed to pursue co-operation in emerging defence technologies, including AI, unmanned systems, and space—a commitment that was again reinforced in 2026 under the new Japanese leadership (Lee 2025; Indo-Pacific Defense Forum 2026). Seoul has deepened defence-industrial collaboration with the United States, including joint work between Hanwha Aerospace and General Atomics Aeronautical Systems on unmanned aircraft systems (Hanwha 2025). Both Japan and South Korea are also diversifying partnerships beyond the United States: Japan's participation in the Global Combat Air Programme with the United Kingdom and Italy institutionalizes advanced defence-technology collaboration, while both South Korea and Japan are key players in NATO's Indo-Pacific Four (IP4) flagship projects on cyber defence, emerging technologies, and supply-chain security.

China's approach to emerging technologies has emphasized self-sufficiency and civil–military integration, with comparatively limited transparency regarding how cross-domain escalation risks would be managed in crisis (Gokireddy and Jash 2024). Taiwan, facing acute threat, has prioritized asymmetric resilience and rapid technological adaptation. However, because it is not part of US alliance frameworks in the region, it lacks formalized multilateral mechanisms through which emerging-technology risks can be jointly addressed (Panella 2025). The result is a fragmented regional landscape in which technological integration advances more rapidly than shared crisis-management frameworks.

Taken together, these developments demonstrate a growing capacity for co-operation that nevertheless lacks alignment with the evolving risks facing the region. Existing initiatives remain largely organized by domain—missile defence, space security, cyber coordination, or industrial development—while the escalation dynamics described earlier cut across them. Northeast Asia therefore exhibits a governance gap: technological integration is advancing at the cross-domain level, but institutional responses remain compartmentalized.

## Toward Cross-Domain Guardrails in Northeast Asia

As emerging technologies simultaneously impact decision-making speed, heighten uncertainty, and increase the chances of cross-domain spillover, the challenge of managing the region's stability becomes institutional rather than purely technological. In this context, Northeast Asia needs practical guardrails designed to prevent ambiguous disruptions from escalating.

The first priority is continuity, considering that the political momentum behind US–Japan–South Korea co-operation is vulnerable to leadership turnover and shifting strategic priorities (Kanodia 2025). As a result, the most durable guardrails should be built below the level of summit diplomacy. Regular technical and operational dialogue among mid-level defence and intelligence officials can sustain co-operation even when political relations fluctuate. The recent institutionalization of recurring director-level meetings, working groups, and trilateral-secretariat support provides an administrative foundation that could be leveraged for emerging-technology risk reduction.

Second, Northeast Asian actors should complement existing domain-specific co-operation with cross-domain risk framing. Existing mechanisms already cover missile warning, cyber coordination, and space dialogue, but they largely treat these issues separately. A modest but meaningful step would be to introduce a shared agenda focused on interaction risks: data integrity in warning systems, ambiguous cyber/space interference, and decision-time compression. The objective would not necessarily be to standardize capabilities or disclose sensitive operational details, but to develop shared understandings of how uncertain events are interpreted and managed in crisis.

Third, the region should prioritize risk-reduction routines rather than ambitious new treaties. This can include agreed practices for consultation during disruptive cyber/space incidents affecting strategic systems, and regular scenario-based discussions among relevant stakeholders. Exercises already underway can also be used as governance laboratories: their value is not only interoperability but rehearsing how actors communicate and deconflict under stress.

Finally, partnership diversification can reinforce risk-reduction guardrails by broadening exposure to trusted practices and benchmarks for responsible emerging-technology use. Both South Korea and Japan are widening their defence partnerships beyond the core alliance framework, helping to socialize shared expectations about responsible behaviour in contested domains.

Taken together, these steps treat cross-domain guardrails as a *governance layer* that can be incrementally strengthened through institutional continuity, shared risk framing, and routine co-operation, even in cases of imperfect political alignment.

"As emerging technologies simultaneously impact decision-making speed, heighten uncertainty, and increase the chances of cross-domain spillover, the challenge of managing the region's stability becomes institutional rather than purely technological."

The AI Paradox:

# Generative AI and Scams in Southeast Asia

**Mark Bryan Manantan,** Research Fellow, Centre for Global Security, La Trobe University

With the anticipated launch of the ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement during the Philippines' chairmanship in 2026—alongside the implementation of Regional Payment Connectivity to promote effective cross-border digital payments—combatting online scams has become an urgent regional priority for Southeast Asia. The same forces accelerating digital integration and economic opportunity are also generating new and expanding vulnerabilities.

Transnational crime syndicates are adapting quickly to Southeast Asia's technological drive. The advent of generative artificial intelligence (AI) has further accelerated the cyber-scams industry, equipping malicious actors with increasingly novel ways to refine their tactics and scale deception across borders, both offline and online. In response, regional and global discussions have converged on the Global Public-Private Partnership Framework against Fraud as a key mechanism to disrupt and counter the evolving service models of cyber scammers. The central challenge, however, lies in whether these coalitions can respond rapidly and coherently enough before transnational crime syndicates adapt once again.

This article examines the dual role of AI—particularly generative AI—in amplifying and mitigating the rise of cyber scams in Southeast Asia. It outlines key implications and policy recommendations for countering cyber-scam operations, with a focus on strengthening regional information sharing and extracting tangible and measurable contributions from AI companies to prevent the misuse of their models.

## Online Scams in Southeast Asia

With rapid digitalization and rising internet penetration, Southeast Asia now sits in the front row of the global online scams industry—both as a primary target and a major operational hub (Sari 2014). Across the region, ASEAN member states have articulated ambitious strategies to attract investments for AI-enabled systems and solutions, semiconductors, data centres, cloud services, and undersea cables. At the same time, Southeast Asia's rapid transition toward mobile-first economies has spurred the widespread adoption of mobile-banking applications and e-commerce platforms (Manantan 2023; Raman et al. 2024). Cyber scammers have exploited such trends.

> "Since the pandemic, Southeast Asia has recorded an annual increase of roughly 50 percent in scam incidents, with total losses approaching US$5 billion"


President Marcos pushes for stronger coordination, implementation of ASEAN plans to mitigate impact of future global shocks, May 9, 2026. Presidential Communications Office, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Since the pandemic, Southeast Asia has recorded an annual increase of roughly 50 percent in scam incidents, with total losses approaching US$5 billion (Raman et al. 2024). According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), organized crime groups operating from Southeast Asia accounted for an estimated US$37 billion in online-scam losses across East and Southeast Asia in 2023 alone (UNODC 2025b). The exponential growth of these losses underscore the adaptability of transnational crime syndicates. Evidence suggests that many Asian criminal networks have pivoted seamlessly from illegal online-casino operations to cyber-enabled fraud, including investment scams, romance scams, phishing, and crypto-based money laundering (UNODC 2025b).

The Mekong subregion—comprising Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam—emerged as a central hub of scam activity in terms of scale, pace, and sophistication between 2023 and 2025. Despite intensified crackdowns led by UNODC and INTERPOL, criminal networks continue to thrive by exploiting the region's porous borders and uneven law-enforcement capabilities. Scam operations remain highly mobile, relocating operations quickly across jurisdictions—a trend reflected in confirmed spikes in the cross-border movement of labour and illicit activity (UNODC 2025b).

These adaptations extend beyond national borders. Scam syndicates have diversified their digital infrastructure, increasingly leveraging satellite-internet services, such as Starlink, to sustain operations in remote and weakly governed areas (UNODC 2025a). Law-enforcement agencies have also observed the emergence of self-contained digital ecosystems for laundering illicit proceeds, built around online-payment applications, encrypted-messaging platforms, and cryptocurrencies that bypass mainstream financial systems (UNODC 2025a).

Raided gang-run internet 'scam farm' in Bamban, north of Manila, the Philippines, May 31, 2024. Photo by United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime via Wikimedia Commons

Exacerbating these developments is the widespread trafficking of individuals for forced criminality. Scam compounds increasingly rely on trafficked workers of diverse nationalities, moving beyond their earlier dependence on mainland Chinese nationals. Investigative reporting has documented thousands of individuals across Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Africa lured by fraudulent job offers and subsequently trapped in scam-operation compounds (UNODC 2025b).

The economic and social consequences of scams are significant. Online scams have eroded confidence across Southeast Asia, imposing heavy financial and emotional costs on victims. According to the *ASEAN Consumer Scam Report 2025,* more than 67 percent of consumers are "very worried" about online scams while 84 percent fear that the threats are intensifying (GSMA 2025). These developments are already reshaping consumer behaviour, with over 90 percent of respondents adopting more cautious approaches to e-commerce—raising concerns for a region where digital trade remains a key growth engine (GSMA 2025).

## Is AI a Friend or Foe?

Despite progress in regional co-operation led by UNODC and INTERPOL, countering online scams has become more daunting with the rapid integration of frontier AI models (like ChatGPT, Gemini, and Claude) into scam-enabling tools that enhance deception and circumvent platform restrictions (Girolamo 2026). UNODC has characterized large language models (LLMs) as a force-multiplier for existing criminal activities, lowering barriers to entry, while amplifying scale, speed, and reach (UNODC 2024b).





Low-cost access to generative AI, coupled with expanding connectivity and fragmented regulatory environments, has enabled scam operators to automate and refine fraudulent practices at unprecedented speed. At the 2026 UN Global Fraud Summit in Vienna, UNODC Acting Executive Director John Brandolino (2026) cautioned that "with today's technology, everyone is a potential target, and no target is out of reach. Digital tools have reshaped the fraud landscape in critical ways, and we need to rapidly step up our efforts and take action to fight back." The discussions below offer brief insights into the growing application of LLMs in the scams ecosystem and how governments are deploying them too, as countermeasures.

## Sharpening the Saw: AI-Driven Scam Tactics

Criminal groups increasingly deploy AI to generate fake identities, produce phishing content, and craft highly personalized scripts that exploit victims' emotional and behavioural vulnerabilities (UNODC 2024a). The rapid rise of AI-generated deception is reflected in the surge of deepfake incidents documented across Australia, Japan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam from 2022 to 2024 (UNODC 2024a). Deepfakes have become integral to cyber-enabled fraud schemes, particularly sextortion and extortion-based blackmail (UNODC 2024a).

In Cambodia, UNODC has documented cases where trafficked individuals are coerced into participating in video-based scam operations that use AI overlays to simulate nudity during calls, enabling the capture of compromising material to blackmail targets (UNODC 2024a). Voice-cloning technologies have similarly enabled emotionally manipulative scams, including staged kidnappings that combine synthetic voices with publicly available videos to impersonate family members and extort ransom payments (UNODC 2024a).

Analysis of underground marketplaces on the messaging app Telegram reveals a growing commercialization of AI tools marketed explicitly for fraud. Vendors advertise services for large-scale social engineering in fraud schemes, deceptive recruitment, disinformation campaigns, and money laundering (UNODC 2024a). AI has also facilitated biometric forgery, allowing deepfake identity documents to bypass Know Your Customer verification systems (UNODC 2024a). More concerning, criminal groups increasingly jailbreak closed LLMs or manipulate AI input prompts, as well as rely on open-source alternatives, to automate the generation of malicious software capable of evading conventional security controls (UNODC 2024a).

These developments have dramatically reduced the technical threshold for cybercrime. Polymorphic malware—a type of malicious software which is generated and iteratively refined using AI—can alter its code autonomously to evade signature-based detections, placing defenders at a growing disadvantage (UNODC 2025a). As a result, cyber-defence capabilities face mounting pressure from the convergence of scale, speed, and stealth in AI-enabled attacks (UNODC 2025a).

## Raising Defences Against AI-Enabled Scams

Paradoxically, AI also underpins many of the most promising countermeasures against cyber fraud. Machine learning, natural language processing, generative AI, and emerging agentic-AI systems enhance real-time fraud detection, compliance monitoring, and cross-institutional intelligence sharing (Rodríguez Valencia et al. 2025). Across Southeast Asia, governments increasingly collaborate with financial institutions, telecommunications providers, and technology platforms to deploy AI-driven systems that move beyond traditional rule-based algorithms.

> “Paradoxically, AI also underpins many of the most promising countermeasures against cyber fraud. Machine learning, natural language processing, generative AI, and emerging agentic AI systems enhance real-time fraud detection, compliance monitoring and cross-institutional intelligence-sharing”

Singapore’s Scam Analytics and Tactical Intervention System illustrates this approach, deploying machine-learning models to detect and block phishing and job-scam websites at scale (GovTech Singapore 2026). As of September 2024, SATIS had detected and blocked 50,000 scam-related websites (GovTech Singapore 2026). Complementing SATIS is the Collaborative Sharing of Money Laundering/Terrorism Financing Information & Cases, a voluntary information-sharing platform developed by the Monetary Authority of Singapore in partnership with leading domestic and international banks to dismantle data silos in anti–money laundering and counterterrorism-financing efforts (Fenergo 2024).

Elsewhere, the Royal Thai Police’s intelligence-sharing partnership with True Corporation reflects growing recognition of the need for public-private coordination in countering cross-border cybercrime. In January 2026, the two entered into a partnership to develop a road map to enhance coordinated operations to disrupt cross-border online crime *(Nation Thailand 2026)*. The partnership is very timely and critical, building on True Corporation’s True CyberSafe, an AI-powered, automated cybersecurity-protection system, and its ongoing crackdown on internet and mobile signals spanning Thailand’s border areas with Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar (Nation Thailand 2026).

Despite being identified as a key operational hub of scams in Southeast Asia, the Philippines is transforming into an AI-integration hub that leverages human and AI solutions to counter fraudulent activities (Samu 2026). The Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) industry has emerged as an AI-integration hub, combining large-scale human oversight of almost 250,000 personnel with AI-driven solutions for global financial institutions, like JPMorganChase, Deutsche Bank, HSBC, Citi, and PayPal. As an AI-integration hub, the Philippines BPO industry is also pilot testing agentic AI for fraud detection, risk management, and anti–money-laundering compliance (Samu 2026).

A notable regional trend is the deployment of “AI kill switch” mechanisms. Malaysia (Lai 2023), Singapore (Tham 2024), and the Philippines (Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas 2025) have implemented account-freezing mechanisms that allow suspicious transactions to be halted before funds exit the financial system, signalling a shift from reactive recovery toward preventative intervention.

## Implications of AI-Enabled Scams for Regional Co-operation

Despite advances in defensive AI technologies, Southeast Asia remains largely reactive in the face of rapidly adapting transnational crime syndicates. While most ASEAN member states have strengthened domestic frameworks, the region continues to lack a coherent, interoperable mechanism for real-time information sharing and joint enforcement.

Legal disparities, uneven technical capacity, and divergent political will complicate cross-border coordination (Southeast Asia Public Policy Institute 2024). Even where intelligence sharing occurs, criminal networks continue to relocate, retool, and exploit cryptocurrencies beyond jurisdictional reach. ASEAN acknowledged these shortcomings in its 2025 declaration on combatting cybercrime and online scams, highlighting the urgency of faster asset recovery and coordinated enforcement responses (ASEAN 2025).

Anti-scam measures also introduce economic trade-offs. Stricter verification processes can erode user experience and dampen digital demand. Across the Asia-Pacific, 75 percent of organizations indicate that enhanced fraud controls have reduced customer sales conversion rates (LexisNexis 2023). Implementing novel AI solutions is also becoming an operational burden, imposing additional compliance costs (LexisNexis 2023).

An equally critical piece to addressing cyber scams is the tangible contributions of the tech industry, especially global AI companies. While the Global Fraud Summit in Vienna in March 2026 introduced the Call to Action on Combating Fraud and the Global Public-Private Partnership Framework against Fraud, it is worth asking how much rhetoric turns into action (INTERPOL 2026). A few days before the two-day summit, the Industry Accord Against Online Scams and Fraud was signed by global companies, including Amazon, Google, Meta, Microsoft, and Open AI (Sabin 2026). However, with the adoption of generative AI and the increasing deployment of agentic AI in cyber-scam operations, an important question remains: to what degree should AI companies be held to account to uphold their commitments to such partnerships in measurable and impactful ways?

Demonstrating commitment is an imperative because transparency in the AI industry is rapidly declining. According to the 2025 Foundation Model Transparency Index, the average transparency score out of 100 dropped from 58 in 2024 to 40 in 2025 (Wan et al. 2025). The overall findings show that training data spanning copyright, licences, and Personal Identifiable Information continues to be opaque (Wan et al. 2025). Most companies surveyed withheld basic information about the models they are developing. Amazon, Google, Midjourney, Mistral, OpenAI, and xAI did not provide basic model information indicators encompassing input modality, output modality, model size, model components, and model architecture (Wan et al. 2025).

The current data suggests that while AI developers fear reputational harms from low scores, compelling incentives to uphold transparency is lacking, due to rapid competition with new Chinese AI models like DeepSeek and Alibaba (Wan et al. 2025). With declining transparency, it becomes challenging for tech companies to fully contribute to combatting cyber scams; for example, OpenAI’s ChatGPT was found to be widely used in romance scams in fraud compounds (Reuters 2025).

To address the accelerating convergence of AI and cyber scams, Southeast Asia must adopt a more coordinated and forward-leaning approach. First, ASEAN member states should operationalize the 2026 *ASEAN Guide on Anti-Scam Policies and Best Practices* through concrete benchmarks for data sharing, enforcement co-operation, and institutional capacity building.

Governments must demand stronger safeguards from AI-platform developers, including stringent identity verification for Application Programming Interface (API) access—a set of rules that that allow pieces of software to interact with one another—as a standardized mechanism for reporting and mitigating platform abuse.

Finally, increasing transparency within the AI industry is essential. Developers should be required to disclose aggregated information on detected scam-related activities linked to their platforms and co-operate proactively with law-enforcement investigations. Without enforceable transparency, public-private partnerships risk remaining rhetorical as criminal innovation continues to outpace regulation.

Competing Visions, Shared Prosperity:

# The Future of Economic Architecture in the Indo-Pacific

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People walk on a footbridge with a screen displaying the treasury bond futures index at the financial district, Lujiazui, Shanghai, China, June 1, 2026. Photo by Hector Retamal/AFP via Getty Images

“The evolution of the Indo-Pacific’s economic architecture will influence patterns of regional co-operation and the ability of states to preserve policy autonomy amid intensifying competition among major powers.”

The Indo-Pacific has emerged as the principal arena in which trade, technology, infrastructure, supply chains, and finance increasingly intersect with questions of power, security, and regional order. For much of the post-Cold War era, regional prosperity was underpinned by the assumption that expanding economic interdependence would promote growth, moderate strategic rivalry, and strengthen support for a stable rules-based order. That assumption remains influential, but it now operates within a far more contested geopolitical environment.

Across the region, economic policy is increasingly viewed through a strategic lens. Governments are reassessing supply-chain dependencies, introducing industrial policies to strengthen domestic capabilities, tightening controls over sensitive technologies, and placing a special emphasis on the security implications of digital networks, energy systems, and critical minerals. Economic considerations remain central, but they are no longer insulated from broader geopolitical calculations.

These developments elevate the discussion beyond traditional questions of trade and investment. The evolution of the Indo-Pacific’s economic architecture will influence patterns of regional co-operation and the ability of states to preserve policy autonomy amid intensifying competition among major powers. For regional security practitioners, the future of economic order has become inseparable from the future of strategic order.

## The Securitization of Economic Architecture

The post-Cold War economic order rested on the understanding that markets would allocate resources efficiently, global value chains would deepen cross-border integration, and multilateral institutions would provide the predictability necessary for trade, investment, and long-term growth. In the Indo-Pacific, this logic found expression in successive waves of regional institution-building, from APEC and intra-ASEAN economic integration initiatives to ASEAN’s network of external free trade agreements and, more recently, mega-regional arrangements such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).

These agreements remain central pillars of the regional economic landscape. RCEP has brought together ASEAN, China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand within a common framework that reinforces production networks across East Asia. CPTPP advances a more ambitious rule-making agenda, addressing issues such as digital trade, state-owned enterprises, labour standards, and environmental commitments.

The U.S.-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) reflects a markedly different philosophy. Unlike traditional trade agreements, IPEF offers no meaningful market-access commitments and instead concentrates on supply chains, clean-economy initiatives, anti-corruption measures, and emerging regulatory standards. While IPEF may contribute to co-ordination in selected sectors, its long-term influence will ultimately depend on whether participating economies perceive tangible economic benefits from engagement. In the absence of market access obligations, there are legitimate questions about its durability and attractiveness relative to more traditional economic arrangements.

These frameworks demonstrate that the Indo-Pacific does not suffer from a shortage of economic architecture. Rather, it is witnessing a growing contest over the purpose of that architecture. Economic arrangements will no longer be assessed solely on their contribution to trade liberalization or economic efficiency. They will be increasingly evaluated according to their capacity to strengthen resilience, reduce strategic vulnerabilities, shape technological standards, secure critical supply chains, and advance geopolitical influence.

This shift reflects a broader transformation in the relationship between economics and security. The Indo-Pacific remains deeply interconnected through flows of trade, investment, capital, technology, data, and people. Yet the political meaning of interdependence has changed. Relationships once viewed primarily as sources of mutual benefit are increasingly examined through the lens of risk, vulnerability, and strategic exposure.

## Fragmentation and the New Logic of Interdependence

Economic fragmentation is one of the defining risks facing the Indo-Pacific. Rather than signalling a collapse of trade, fragmentation refers to the gradual re-organization of economic activity into increasingly distinct regulatory spheres, technological ecosystems, production networks and strategic partnerships shaped by geopolitical considerations. The process is often incremental rather than abrupt, but its cumulative effects can be profound.

This trend is reflected in the growing prominence of concepts such as de-risking, friend-shoring, near-shoring, and strategic autonomy. Although these approaches differ in emphasis, they share a common objective: reducing exposure to economic relationships perceived as strategically risky or politically uncertain.

Recent events have reinforced these concerns. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed vulnerabilities in concentrated supply chains for medical equipment, pharmaceuticals, and semiconductors. Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine disrupted global energy, food, and commodity markets. Continuing instability across West Asia has demonstrated how conflict can rapidly affect energy prices, maritime transportation, and insurance costs. Meanwhile, tensions in the Taiwan Strait have sharpened concerns regarding semiconductor supply chains, while competition over critical minerals has elevated the strategic significance of resources essential to advanced manufacturing, defence industries, and the green transition.

> "Relationships once viewed primarily as sources of mutual benefit are increasingly examined through the lens of risk, vulnerability, and strategic exposure."






U.S. President Biden launches the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework in Tokyo, Japan, May 23, 2022. Photo by the Office of the President of the United States, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

Yet fragmentation carries significant costs. Efforts to duplicate production networks, restrict technology flows, and narrow economic partnerships may reduce certain vulnerabilities, but they can also generate inefficiencies, increase costs, and weaken growth prospects. While larger economies may possess the fiscal capacity and market size to absorb some of these burdens, smaller and trade-dependent economies are likely to face far greater challenges.

Much of the Indo-Pacific's economic success has been built upon participation in deeply integrated regional and global value chains. As those networks become increasingly shaped by geopolitical considerations, the foundations of the export-oriented growth model that supported decades of development may come under pressure.

For ASEAN, these risks are particularly acute. The region's prosperity has long depended upon openness, connectivity, and the ability to engage all

major economic partners simultaneously. ASEAN member states have benefited from avoiding exclusive alignments and maintaining broad economic relationships across competing geopolitical blocs. A more fragmented Indo-Pacific would constrain this flexibility, complicate investment decisions, and diminish ASEAN's attractiveness as a hub within regional production networks.

The concept of weaponized interdependence offers a useful framework for understanding these developments. In highly networked economic systems, influence often derives from control over critical nodes rather than sheer economic size. Financial systems, digital platforms, technological standards, logistics hubs, energy corridors, and supply-chain chokepoints can all become sources of strategic leverage. Networks that facilitate prosperity under normal circumstances may also provide opportunities for coercion during periods of tension.

Reducing strategic vulnerabilities has become a legitimate policy objective for governments across the Indo-Pacific. The more difficult task lies in achieving this objective without undermining the openness, connectivity, and predictability that have long served as the foundations of regional prosperity.

## Resilience Without Protectionism

For much of the previous era, firms sought to minimize costs and maximize efficiency by dispersing production across multiple jurisdictions according to comparative advantage. The resulting just-in-time production systems reduced inventories and improved profitability, but they also heightened exposure to disruptions when critical links in supply chains were interrupted.

The lessons of recent years have prompted governments and businesses alike to place greater emphasis on resilience. Yet resilience should not be confused with self-sufficiency. No country, regardless of its size or capabilities, can realistically produce everything it requires at competitive cost and technological sophistication. Nor should resilience become a justification for economic closure. Properly understood, resilience refers to the capacity to anticipate shocks, absorb disruption, adapt rapidly, and recover without systemic breakdown.

Achieving resilience depends upon a broader portfolio of partnerships, diversified sourcing arrangements, and sustained investment in enabling infrastructure. Energy systems, logistics networks, digital connectivity, food security mechanisms, and human capital development all contribute to a state's capacity to absorb shocks. Equally important are institutional arrangements that facilitate information sharing, policy co-ordination, and collective responses during periods of disruption.

Several regional frameworks can contribute to this objective, albeit in different ways. RCEP supports the continuity of regional production networks through common rules and broader participation. CPTPP promotes greater regulatory predictability and higher-standard governance disciplines. Elements of IPEF may strengthen co-operation in areas such as supply-chain resilience and clean economy initiatives, while APEC continues to provide an important platform for the incubation of ideas, voluntary co-operation, and policy dialogue. Taken together, these arrangements illustrate that resilience can be strengthened through deeper co-operation rather than economic isolation.

ASEAN remains particularly important in this regard. Its value lies in providing an inclusive platform through which economies with differing strategic orientations can continue to engage with one another. ASEAN-led processes may not always move at the speed preferred by major powers, but they provide diplomatic space for dialogue, confidence-building, and practical co-operation in an increasingly polarized environment.





At its core, the emerging policy challenge is to develop forms of interdependence that are sufficiently diversified to reduce strategic risk while remaining open enough to preserve economic dynamism. Such an approach avoids the extremes of both unfettered market orthodoxy and inward-looking economic nationalism. It is also more consistent with the realities of a region that is dependent upon cross-border connectivity for its prosperity.

"At its core, the emerging policy challenge is to develop forms of interdependence that are sufficiently diversified to reduce strategic risk while remaining open enough to preserve economic dynamism."

## Economic Warfare and the New Strategic Battleground

The growing use of economic instruments for strategic purposes represents one of the most consequential developments in contemporary geopolitics. States have employed sanctions, embargoes, blockades, and trade restrictions for centuries. What distinguishes the current environment is the unprecedented integration of economic tools into broader strategies of geopolitical competition.

The U.S.–China rivalry illustrates this transformation. The contest extends far beyond tariffs or trade balances. It encompasses artificial intelligence, quantum computing, data governance, critical minerals, and the standards that will shape future industries. Economic competition has become inseparable from strategic competition.

Developments elsewhere reinforce the same trend. Western sanctions on Russia have demonstrated the reach of financial restrictions, export controls, and energy measures. Longstanding sanctions on Iran, investment-screening mechanisms, and controls on sensitive technologies all reflect the growing convergence of economic and security policy.

The effects of these measures often extend far beyond their immediate targets. Export controls on strategically important technologies can reverberate throughout entire industrial ecosystems. Financial sanctions may affect firms, banks, and consumers across multiple jurisdictions. The interconnected nature of the global economy amplifies both the reach and the consequences of economic coercion.

Economic warfare also produces highly uneven effects. While target states are intended to bear the primary costs, third parties frequently experience collateral consequences. Trade-dependent economies may face reduced demand, supply disruptions, and heightened uncertainty. Energy-importing countries may confront inflationary pressures. Firms operating across multiple jurisdictions may encounter growing compliance burdens and legal risks. Smaller economies often possess limited influence over the decisions that generate these disruptions, even though they must absorb many of the resulting costs.

This does not imply that all economic security measures are inappropriate or illegitimate. States have the right to protect critical infrastructure, prevent the transfer of strategically sensitive technologies, and respond to serious violations of international law. Nevertheless, the increasing normalization of economic coercion risks blurring the distinction between legitimate security measures and instruments of strategic intimidation.

There is also the danger of escalation. Economic warfare is frequently portrayed as a substitute for military conflict, offering states a means of applying pressure without resorting to force. Yet when economic measures fail to achieve their intended objectives, pressures for further escalation may emerge. Economic coercion can therefore become part of a broader cycle of confrontation rather than a mechanism for resolving disputes.

For policymakers across the Indo-Pacific, the challenge lies in preventing the growing convergence between economics and security from eroding the foundations of co-operation that have supported decades of prosperity. Excessive securitization risks generating a climate in which economic relationships are viewed primarily through the lens of vulnerability and coercion. Such an environment would diminish trust, increase uncertainty, and weaken the incentives for collaborative problem-solving that remain essential to regional stability.

## ASEAN, Middle Powers, and Regional Agency

Despite the recent developments, it would be a mistake to view the Indo-Pacific merely as an arena in which major powers impose competing visions upon the rest of the region. Regional states retain considerable agency in shaping rules, institutions, and norms. ASEAN, Japan, Australia, South Korea, India, New Zealand, and others continue to influence the evolution of regional economic architecture through both national policies and collective initiatives.

ASEAN centrality, however, cannot rest solely on institutional habit or declaratory support. It must be demonstrated through practical leadership and tangible outcomes. ASEAN should focus on areas where consensus remains achievable, including supply-chain transparency, digital economy governance, and crisis response mechanisms. It must also ensure that emerging external initiatives complement rather than displace ASEAN-led processes.

Middle powers have an equally important role to play. Japan's contributions to quality infrastructure, Australia's work on critical minerals and supply-chain resilience, South Korea's technological strengths, and India's economic scale and strategic geography all contribute to a more balanced and diversified regional environment.

The objective is not to eliminate competition. Competition among states is a normal feature of international relations and will remain so. The more important task is ensuring that competition remains bounded by rules, institutions, and shared interests that prevent it from becoming destructive.

## Conclusion

The future economic architecture of the Indo-Pacific will be shaped by the interaction of four powerful forces: competing economic visions, fragmentation pressures, resilience imperatives, and the growing use of economic instruments in strategic competition. None of these dynamics operate in isolation. Measures intended to strengthen resilience may contribute to fragmentation, which, in turn, could generate new vulnerabilities. Efforts to address those vulnerabilities may then accelerate the securitization of economic relations.

Managing these tensions will require a careful balancing of objectives that are often presented as competing but are, in reality, deeply interconnected. Regional economies will need to strengthen resilience without retreating into protectionism, diversify partnerships without institutionalizing decoupling, and address legitimate security concerns without allowing coercive practices to become a defining feature of regional order.

The Indo-Pacific is unlikely to return to the assumptions that characterized the early post-Cold War period. Strategic competition will remain a central feature of the regional landscape. The more consequential question is whether that competition can be channelled through institutions, rules, and co-operative mechanisms that preserve openness, encourage innovation and sustain broadly shared prosperity.

The answer will determine not only the region's economic future but the character of its strategic order in the decades ahead.

"The future economic architecture of the Indo-Pacific will be shaped by the interaction of four powerful forces: competing economic visions, fragmentation pressures, resilience imperatives, and the growing use of economic instruments in strategic competition."

# Submarine Cables in the South China Sea:

## Across-Domain and Across-Level Vulnerabilities

**Do Manh Hoang,** South China Sea Institute, Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam; School of Political Science & International Studies, The University of Queensland[1]

Vietnam is currently connected to five active international submarine cables, all crossing the South China Sea. This system is a part of Vietnam's maritime connectivity network, which is utterly important to Vietnam's national interests, specifically in terms of preserving security, developing economically, and enhancing its international standing. However, it is highly vulnerable to multiple risks, spanning across strategic, legal, and technical domains. Some of them, including ones that fall within the "grey-zone" realm, are also faced by other Southeast Asian countries.

Using the multiple-level-of-analysis framework in international relations, this paper provides an overview of these multidomain risks—incorporating recent developments in the cable landscape and the South China Sea—and then explores Vietnam's lines of efforts to mitigate them, with international co-operation being a key component.

### The Relevance of Submarine Cables to Vietnam

Vietnam's long-lasting national interests (Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam 2026), as recently restated in the 14th National Party Congress, can be summarized in three points (Lê 2021), all of which could be applied to Vietnam's submarine-cable system in the South China Sea.

First, Vietnam wants to preserve its independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. Vietnam's geography requires taking the security of regional submarine cables into consideration, as Vietnam is situated along a major east-west sea line of communication in the South China Sea, linking Northeast Asia to the Indian Ocean via the Malacca Strait (Guoxing 2000). Current South China Sea disputes and competition between the big powers—leading to the growing trends of "decoupling" in technology and infrastructure, unilateralist action (especially in legal and paramilitary domains, such as increasing live-fire military drills, new domestic laws applied to disputed maritime zones and features [South China Sea Institute 2025]), and grey-zone tactics—reinforce Vietnam's need to protect its submarine cables.

Second, Vietnam aims to maintain a peaceful environment conducive for national economic development. In the long term, Vietnam, with a coastline of over 3,000 km, aims to become a maritime economy and develop a more integrated approach to maritime governance, as expressed in Resolution 36-NQ/TW (October 22, 2018) on the Strategy for the Sustainable Development of Vietnam's Marine Economy (Communist Party of Viet Nam 2018) and Resolution 139/2024/QH15 on the National Marine Spatial Plan (Kim Ahn 2025). Submarine cables are indispensable in this regard as they run through Vietnam's waters and land on its coastlines, forming part

Workers pull an undersea fiber-optic cable from a ship, as KDDI Corp. began an operation to lay a cable connecting Japan and Singapore. Photo by The Asahi Shimbun via Getty Images

1 The views expressed here are those of the author, based on publicly available sources, and do not necessarily represent the views of any institution or government. The author would like to thank his colleagues at the Institute, especially Ms. Hien Thao, as well as Dr. Charles Labrecque and Dr. Liat Ross, for their assistance and helpful comments.

“Vietnam also aims to become a digital nation by 2030, with the digital economy contributing 30 percent of GDP (reaching 50 percent of GDP by 2045), with digitalization being the main driver of its modernization and industrialization.”

of its marine infrastructure and the allocation of marine resources and activities under marine spatial planning. Vietnam recorded 8 percent GDP growth in 2025, with industries related to the Blue Economy (sustainable maritime economic activities) (Vietnam Briefing n.d.) or the sea (including marine infrastructure, energy, and seabed mining) reportedly accounting for over 47–50 percent of total GDP (Vietnam News Agency 2025). Vietnam also aims to become a digital nation by 2030, with the digital economy contributing 30 percent of GDP (reaching 50 percent of GDP by 2045), with digitalization being the main driver of its modernization and industrialization (Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam 2026). Because the vast majority of intercontinental data traffic—which could reach more than 90 percent—is transmitted through submarine cables (Mauldin 2023), secure regional submarine cables are foundational for Vietnam to achieve these economic targets.

Third, Vietnam seeks to enhance its international standing, reinforcing its image as a responsible and active stakeholder in international affairs, and promoting the rule of law, multilateralism, and peaceful dispute resolution. These priorities are clearly evident in the principles guiding its dispute management in the South China Sea (Nhan Dan Online 2025) and the Vietnam Law of the Sea (National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam 2012). Such principles are based on the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which in turn contributes to the international legal framework that helps govern submarine cables. Additionally, Vietnam can use international forums dedicated to submarine cables, such as the International Cable Protection Committee (ICPC) or ASEAN’s working groups on cables (ASEAN ADGMIN 2026), to show its contributions to foreign affairs. Vietnam being a co-chair in the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP)’s Study Group on the Safety and Security of Digital Infrastructure is also in line with this direction in Track 1.5 diplomacy.

## Vulnerabilities on Multiple Fronts

This paper employs a multiple-levels-of-analysis framework, focusing on the above-state (or system), state, and below-state levels (Singer 1961), to describe the risks—both existing and potential—to Vietnam’s submarine cables in the South China Sea. Many of these risks are also shared by other countries in the region, including other Southeast Asian claimants in the South China Sea disputes.

First, at the system level, great-power competition, especially economic decoupling or “derisking,” has brought about strategic and technical risks to cables. For smaller countries like Vietnam, this competition makes it more difficult to navigate competing technological and infrastructure ecosystems, including in the governance and development of submarine cables. For instance, the US executive branch, including the second Trump administration, has been making efforts to “disconnect” its cable network from China’s by promoting its own “Clean Network” initiative (Pompeo 2020); intervening to help US companies outbid China’s operators in cable projects like SeaMeWe-6; connecting Southeast Asia and Western Europe (Brock 2023); and introducing a new Federal Communications Commission (2025) rule to prevent cables connected to “adversaries” from landing in the US and to disqualify any cable projects related to “adversaries.” The US legislative branch is also active in this regard, with the House of Representatives introducing multiple acts related to submarine cables from 2023 to 2025, aiming to separate US cables and services from those of “foreign adversaries” (US Congress 2023; US Congress 2025). For its part, China has been allegedly tightening licensing for international cable projects to gain leverage over competitors in the maritime domain (Gross et al. 2023). Such a widening separation of US and Chinese submarine cables can generate more pressure for smaller countries, especially those whose cables are connected to both, to choose one side over another and thus risk cable/technological “isolation” (if choosing one side and being separate from the other) and dependence (Nguyen et al. 2023).

The existing international law also creates systemic risks as the current legal framework on submarine cables is not complete. UNCLOS, often cited as the “constitution” of the oceans, does cover submarine cables and installations, with some articles granting parties the freedom/right to lay and repair cables.[2] However, in practice, cables are usually laid and repaired by private companies instead of states, which are the subject of UNCLOS (Davenport 2018). In addition, Vietnam’s submarine cables are transnational, running across the maritime zones of different coastal states (Bueger and Liebetrau 2023), which UNCLOS does not address. Transnational cables might require extra international coordination, possibly affecting cable protection on the ground, as Vietnamese businesses cannot perform the duty by themselves. For example, when Vietnam’s Asia Pacific Gateway cable was disrupted in 2023 (on branch S6 going to Hong Kong), the original repair plan was postponed partly due to the fact that the cable route and repair ships belonged to different operators in a variety of countries and territories (Vân Anh 2023).

2 UNCLOS contains several provisions relevant to submarine cables. Within territorial seas, coastal states may enact regulations to protect cables and regulate innocent passage. Archipelagic states are also required under Article 51(2) to permit the maintenance of cables laid by other states that pass through their waters. Within the exclusive economic zone (EEZ), coastal states are not explicitly obligated to protect cables, but states laying cables must comply with applicable coastal-state laws and regulations. Article 58 further affirms the freedom of all states to lay, operate, and maintain submarine cables in the EEZ. On the continental shelf, coastal states may not impede the maintenance of existing cables while conducting resource exploration. On the high seas, states must exercise “due regard” for cables already in place and avoid actions that would hinder their repair. Finally, Article 113 requires states to adopt laws and regulations criminalizing the intentional or negligent breaking of, or injury to, submarine cables.

In terms of legal compliance, Vietnam, other South China Sea claimants, and even extra-regional countries have many challenges. Submarine-cable offences are difficult to prosecute. Coastal states have only limited jurisdiction in areas beyond their territorial sovereignty (as explained in footnote 2), where breakages can happen (54 percent of global cases in 2023 were in Exclusive Economic Zones [EEZs] [ICPC 2024]). The flag states (normally countries where the ships are registered) can exercise that authority but are usually reluctant to do so if their own ships caused the offence (Halog et al. 2024). Some have pointed to the ICPC as an organization that can help enforce UNCLOS and protect cables, but the ICPC only provides guidance, best practices, and suggestions (ICPC 2014), and thereby cannot ensure compliance. Others have pointed to the 1884 International Convention for the Protection of Submarine Telegraph Cables, also known as the Paris Convention, as it applies to all maritime areas beyond territorial waters,[3] but there are only 36 parties to the convention, excluding Vietnam, and the convention itself is outdated.

Second, at the state level, on the strategic side, the South China Sea disputes can exacerbate risks to cables. As the disputes have become increasingly complex, naval activities have increased on the surface of the sea, raising the chances of accidents or miscalculation (Walker 2020), including scenarios in which communication channels are cut off. Under the surface, destroying critical infrastructure, such as submarine cables, has been labelled one of the grey-zone or mixed-warfare tactics (Rolander 2025). In the past few years, cable disruptions near Yemen during the Red Sea crisis (Patil and Gupta 2024), in the Baltic Sea during the Russia–Ukraine conflict (Reuters 2024), and around Taiwan (Rickards 2025) constitute examples of probable cable sabotage for political purposes, a tactic that can be replicated in the South China Sea.

> “In the past few years, cable disruptions near Yemen during the Red Sea crisis, in the Baltic Sea during the Russia–Ukraine conflict, or around Taiwan, constitute examples of probable cable sabotage for political purposes, a tactic that can be replicated in the South China Sea.”

3 The 1884 Paris Convention, in Article 2, defines what can be considered an “offence” to cables outside the territorial waters of states. To prevent such offences, the convention puts forward multiple solutions, such as suggesting parties use proper safety measures when granting a concession for landing cables (Article 3); proposing the cable’s owner bear the cost of damage (Article 4); and advising vessels to avoid collisions or keep fishing nets at safe distances from cable-repairing ships (Article 5).





A Vietnamese coast guard officer looking towards a Vietnamese Coast Guard ship sailing near the area of China’s oil drilling rig in disputed waters in the South China Sea, May 14, 2014. Photo by Hoang Dinh Nam/AFP via Getting Images

Additionally, grey-zone tactics can also be conducted in a less confrontational method. Reportedly, China has been tightening licensing for international cables as a way to reinforce its authority within the “nine-dash line” (Gross et al. 2023)—potentially a cause of the years-long delays of some Vietnam-linked projects, such as the Southeast Asia–Japan 2 and the Asia Direct Cable routes.

On the legal side, the different domestic regulations of coastal states can hinder cable connectivity. International law does not have a universal definition of “critical infrastructure,” leading to a lack of universal protection. A survey concluded that among 194 actors (193 UN members and Taiwan), 94 had not defined this concept (Weber et al. 2023). Vietnam has not officially defined which infrastructure it considers critical, but the Ministry of Construction has introduced Circular No. 06/2021/TT-BXD, which classifies the construction of multinational telecommunications lines as the highest level of importance (Vietnam Ministry of Construction 2021). Of the countries that have defined critical infrastructure, there are still roughly 5 percent that do not consider information and communications technology, including submarine cables, as critical (VietnamNews 2022).

Third, at the below-state level, from a technical perspective, Vietnamese businesses lack the needed capacity to secure cables. Capacity obstacles to Vietnam’s cables include coordination issues with the foreign partners of cable operators (especially given all Vietnam’s cables are international and many of them are getting old) and the related lack of domestic repair services and repair dependence on foreign consortiums. These limitations were visible in the repair delay during the Asia-Africa-Europe 1 shunt case in 2022 (VietnamNews 2022) and the Intra-Asia route disruption case in 2023 (*Báo Nhân Dân điện tử* 2023). Moreover, Vietnam has also faced oversight issues, notably in the Thailand-Vietnam-Hong Kong route theft case in 2007 (when around 100 km of cable went missing) (Báo

Người Lao động 2007). Vietnam's lack of surveys in the cable-designing stage was also indicated as a problem in the Asia-America Gateway route disruption case in 2014 (Tuấn Anh 2014).

Moreover, rising geopolitical tensions can make it harder for foreign businesses to co-operate with Vietnamese counterparts on cable connectivity. Several big tech companies, such as Google and Meta, have allegedly diverted their cable routes from the South China Sea due to the maritime disputes, notably with the Apricot and Bifrost cable projects (Weissberger 2023). This trend might have political implications as well, if it leads to reduced strategic interest in or attention to the South China Sea or to an implicit acknowledgement of a certain party's maritime claims.

It is important to note that the above-mentioned threats do not exist independently but overlap. For instance, the decoupling of submarine cables might increase if big powers increasingly politicize critical infrastructure and exploit the above-mentioned gap in the legal framework. Indirectly, scenarios of a China–US "grand bargain" in the Pacific,[4] or a China–Philippines conflict, escalating from clashes on the ground—regardless of their likelihood—can be damaging to regional stability, in general, and cable security, in particular. Additionally, many such threats are felt not only by Vietnam, but also other Southeast Asian countries that want to upgrade their submarine cables, including Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore.

## The Way Forward

The overall picture is not all gloomy, as there are several mitigating factors to the above-mentioned risks posed to Vietnam's cable system. First, in the short term, the impact of China–US competition on Vietnam's cable infrastructure may be limited, as some decoupling legislation remains largely symbolic and, in several cases, has yet to be fully implemented. Other ASEAN countries, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore—and even some US treaty allies—are pursuing co-operation projects with both big powers. For example, KT, the largest submarine-cable company in South Korea, a US ally, still maintains cable routes with China (Jeong 2022). Second, as cables become more securitized, connectivity initiatives led by "third options" (not China or the US) have emerged. For example, Australia has announced its own Cable Connectivity & Resilience Centre, and the European Union has transformed its Enhancing Security Cooperation in and with Asia (ESIWA) program into the ESIWA+ to include submarine-cable co-operation, all aiming at promoting Indo-Pacific cable connectivity rather than decoupling. Third, there have been more efforts to commonize cable governance within ASEAN, including Malaysia's 2024 relaxation of its cabotage law[5] and the ASEAN Digital Masterplan 2025 (which refers to the 2019 Guidelines on Submarine Cables). At the 2025 Shangri-La Dialogue, officials from France, Japan, New Zealand, and others all spoke on the importance of undersea cables, indicating growing awareness on this front.

> "On the political-strategic side, Vietnam promotes diversification of cable partnerships in all stages of cable operation, including planning/routing and maintenance/repairing."

Regardless, Vietnam has been pursuing multiple lines of efforts in the submarine-cables domain that might help mitigate the above-mentioned risks. As discussed in the previous two meetings of the CSCAP's Study Group on the Safety and Security of Digital Infrastructure, many efforts are similar to what other regional countries have been doing. They are not silver bullets and do not always bring immediate results, but they reflect a long-term commitment to addressing challenges to submarine cables.

On the political-strategic side, Vietnam promotes diversification of cable partnerships in all stages of cable operation, including planning/routing and maintenance/repairing. For example, Vietnam launched a plan for its sixth international cable route in 2024 (with Singapore as both a partner and landing point), aiming for ten international cables in total by 2030 (Tạp chí Nhà nước và Lao động 2024; Lưu Quý 2025). This in-development Vietnam–Singapore project is also the first bilateral project for Vietnam that does not cut through the South China Sea, indicating Vietnam's desire for greater domestic capacity, direct ownership, and more strategic derisking.

On the legal-governance side, Vietnam relies on international law/the rule of law to preserve its maritime interests in the South China Sea, thus indirectly warding off cable instability. For example, bilaterally, Vietnam has creatively sought delimitation, settlement, and co-operation where possible with disputing parties, which has yielded concrete results, such as the Gulf of Tonkin delimitation and shared fishing zone with China (Tréglodé 2016); the Joint Oceanographic and Marine Scientific Research Expedition in the South China Sea with the Philippines (Mangosing 2021); the delimitation of the Gulf of Thailand (Manh Dong 2009); the EEZ agreement with Indonesia (Strangio 2025); and the joint continental-shelf submission with Malaysia (Division for Ocean Affairs and the Law of the Sea, Office of Legal Affairs, United Nations 2024). Within ASEAN, Vietnam actively

4 This concern is related to the Trump administration's reference to the "Donroe Doctrine" in its 2026 National Defense Strategy and the drawing of some Indo-Pacific resources to other geopolitical hotspots, such as the Middle East.

5 The "cabotage" law refers to a coastal state's regulation to restrict foreign vessels in its waters generally. In 2024, Malaysia's Transport Ministry announced an exemption of its cabotage policy for all foreign ships engaged in the installation, maintenance and repair of submarine cables.

supports subforums like the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting and ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus, promoting maritime confidence building, joint drills, and defence dialogues in line with international law. Vietnam also supports the full and effective implementation of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea and the negotiation of a substantive Code of Conduct that does not affect the interests of third parties (Báo Lào Cai 2023).

More directly, Vietnam promotes common cable governance and best practices. With partners, Vietnam proposed mechanisms such as the ASEAN Guidelines for Strengthening Resilience and Repair of Submarine Cables in 2019 (ASEAN TELMIN n.d.). Through CSCAP, more ideas on how to commonize ASEAN approaches to legal governance could be promoted to governmental channels. Additionally, Vietnam's state-owned cable companies have joined the ICPC (although membership is still limited with only two Vietnamese companies), and the International Telecommunication Union recommendations regarding cables are carefully monitored and practiced by Vietnamese agencies.

Domestically, Vietnam pursues a more streamlined cable-licensing and -protection process, helping the country strengthen its own capacity, in line with its independent foreign-policy tradition. As mentioned, Vietnam has not designated submarine cables as critical infrastructure, but the construction of multinational telecommunications lines, including cables, have been classified in domestic regulations as the highest level of importance. Vietnamese Telecommunications Laws No. 41/2009/QH12 and No. 24/2023/QH15 also encourage or give "priority" to enterprises to install and operate telecom projects on the seabed (Nguyen and Do 2026). Moreover, Vietnam adopts a whole-of-government approach by involving multiple agencies in the processes of issuing permits, and laying, maintaining, and protecting submarine cables. Primary stakeholders include the Ministry of Information and Communications, Ministry of National Defence, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Public Security, and Ministry of Natural Resources (Nguyen and Do 2026). In response to potential undersea-cable disruptions, Vietnam has been introducing new domestic laws, including: (i) simplifying landing procedures to make connection and repair easier (Thủy Diệu 2024); (ii) encouraging digital innovation to improve data transmission (Le My 2025); (iii) expanding the number of cable routes, partners, and landing stations; and (iv) introducing tighter legal frameworks to criminalize offences to cables and put cables among the top infrastructure priorities (Nguyen and Do 2026).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, submarine cables are important to Vietnam's national interests, including protecting territorial integrity, increasing economic development, and enhancing its international reputation. However, Vietnam's cable system in the South China Sea is susceptible to threats across the system, state, and below-state levels, stemming from strategic competition, the limits of current legal frameworks, increasingly complex maritime disputes and grey-zone tactics, as well as restrained technical capability. Many of these threats may also be perceived by other countries in the region, especially Southeast Asian claimants in the South China Sea. To help address this problem, Vietnam's current efforts include cable diversification (not just of routes and landing points but also partners and geographical directions); and governance promotion in line with the rule of law—especially with new domestic regulations and international co-operation, including with ASEAN. As many challenges faced by Vietnam are shared, the room for regional co-operation is spacious.

"Vietnam's cable system in the South China Sea is susceptible to threats across the system, state, and below-state levels, stemming from strategic competition, the limits of current legal frameworks, increasingly complex maritime disputes and grey-zone tactics, as well as restrained technical capability."

# Myanmar's Evolving Crisis and Its Regional Implications:

## Insights from the CSCAP Study Group

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People pass a sign promoting voter participation in downtown in Yangon, Burma, December 26, 2025. Photo by Lauren DeCicca via Getty Images

### The Evolving Crisis in Myanmar

Since the military coup of February 2021, Myanmar has experienced a profound political and humanitarian crisis marked by mass protests, violent repression, the emergence of the Civil Disobedience Movement, the formation of the National Unity Government, and the expansion of armed resistance involving both the People's Defence Forces and long-established ethnic armed organizations. The post-coup period has accelerated state fragmentation, weakened central governance, and intensified humanitarian displacement across multiple border regions.

Against this backdrop, developments surrounding the electoral process announced by the Myanmar authorities between December 2025 and January 2026 have further complicated an already fragile political and security landscape. While presented as a potential step toward political normalization, the electoral process unfolded under severe structural and security constraints. Of an estimated 35 million eligible voters, only approximately 13.1 million, or 38 percent, cast ballots—about half of the 25.9 million in the 2020 general election. At the same time, around 10.5 million voters, representing 30 percent of the electorate, were excluded from the process, and a further 11 million abstained, indicating both restricted access and widespread disengagement. The election was conducted in only 39.86 percent of the country's territory, with more than 67 townships excluded and over 4 million voters unable to participate (ALTSEAN Burma 2026, 1–4). Even within areas where voting occurred, turnout remained uneven, including record-low participation in Yangon and less than 5 percent turnout in parts of Chin State. The number of polling stations declined from 39,963 in 2020 to approximately 21,517, further limiting voter access (ACLED 2026; UNHRC 2024).

"Of an estimated 35 million eligible voters, only approximately 13.1 million, or 38 percent, cast ballots – about half of the 25.9 million in the 2020 general election."


Myanmar, October 28, 2021. Photo by Pyae Sone Htun via Unsplash

Concerns regarding the conditions of the electoral process surpass its limitations. Reports documented coercive practices, administrative pressure, and procedural irregularities, alongside restrictions on political competition, following the exclusion or dissolution of major parties that had previously secured over 90 percent of the seats in parliament in the 2020 election. These developments unfolded in parallel with continued armed conflict, including more than 1,288 recorded attacks and 308 airstrikes during the electoral period. Taken together, these empirical indicators suggest that the electoral process remained embedded within the broader conflict and had limited impact in addressing the underlying crisis (IFES 2026).

Prior to this recent electoral process, the first meeting of the CSCAP Study Group on the Situation in Myanmar, was held September 25–26, 2025, in Bangkok, marking the formal initiation of a Track II effort to address the crisis within a broader regional and geopolitical context. The establishment of the Study Group reflects a recognition that the situation in Myanmar extends beyond a domestic political impasse, and carries wider implications for regional stability that require sustained and structured dialogue. Rather than seeking to alter Myanmar's internal political order, the initiative is oriented toward pragmatic engagement aimed at mitigating political, economic, and social spillovers across the region.

Discussions within the Study Group highlighted three interrelated dimensions of Myanmar's evolving crisis: (1) its structural roots in unresolved questions of state formation and civil-military tensions; (2) its growing implications for regional security and ASEAN cohesion; and (3) the varied responses of neighbouring states and regional mechanisms seeking to mitigate its cross-border consequences.





## The Structural Roots of Myanmar's Crisis

Discussions within the CSCAP Study Group highlighted that Myanmar's crisis is fundamentally rooted in the so-called politics of state formation: shaped by the enduring role of the Tatmadaw and unresolved tensions over the structure of the state (Preecharush 2023, 19–30). Participants noted that the military's institutional identity predates the modern state and is grounded in a persistent self-perception as the guardian of national unity, which has been reinforced through repeated interventions during periods of crisis. This identity makes its withdrawal from politics unlikely (Callahan 2003, 172–73).

At present, Myanmar's political landscape reflects a fragmented and multilayered distribution of authority. The Tatmadaw maintains control primarily in Naypyidaw and parts of Yangon, while large areas are contested or administered by ethnic armed organizations and forces aligned with the National Unity Government. In regions such as Chin and Karenni, local consultative councils function as parallel governance structures, illustrating the emergence of alternative administrative orders (ALTSEAN Burma 2026, 2). This territorial fragmentation is closely tied to competing models of federalism. The Tatmadaw advances a top-down model of federalism within a centralized hybrid system, while the National Unity Government promotes a bottom-up federal democratic approach. In contrast, several ethnic organizations advocate forms of confederalism that prioritize extensive autonomy. This tension between federalism and confederalism reflects fundamentally divergent visions of sovereignty and political order.

"At present, Myanmar's political landscape reflects a fragmented and multi layered distribution of authority."

For that reason, Myanmar's peace processes have historically produced only partial outcomes. From amnesties in the 1950s to bilateral ceasefire arrangements between 1989 and 2010, and subsequent initiatives since 2011, multiple efforts have failed to generate a comprehensive settlement. As highlighted in the CSCAP Study Group, the current situation reflects the continued armed conflict, shaped by governance deficits, protracted negotiation processes, and deep mistrust arising from repeatedly unmet commitments.

“One of the key conclusions of the Study Group is that Myanmar’s crisis has evolved into a multidimensional challenge for regional security and ASEAN cohesion, reflecting both the scale of internal conflict in Myanmar and its expanding cross-border implications.”

## Implications for Regional Security and ASEAN Cohesion

One of the key conclusions of the Study Group is that Myanmar’s crisis has evolved into a multidimensional challenge for regional security and ASEAN cohesion, reflecting both the scale of internal conflict in Myanmar and its expanding cross-border implications. The intensity of violence has increased to the extent that Myanmar is now ranked as the second-most conflict-affected country globally after Palestine, underscoring the severity of instability within the region. This escalation has been accompanied by a visible erosion of state institutions, including the weakening of financial systems, which has facilitated the growth of illicit economies and strengthened the operational capacity of armed actors across multiple territories.

ASEAN’s response, primarily articulated through the Five Point Consensus or 5PC (ASEAN 2021), has remained limited in its effectiveness. Although mechanisms such as the rotating special envoy and the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance provide a degree of operational engagement (ASEAN n.d.), these efforts have not matched the scale and complexity of the crisis (Siahaan 2024, 1–3). The absence of clear enforcement mechanisms and measurable compliance frameworks has further contributed to growing doubt regarding the viability of the 5PC, particularly in the context of continued non-compliance.

At the structural level, the crisis has also exposed underlying fault lines in ASEAN’s structure. Divergent national interests and continued reliance on consensus-based decision-making have limited the organization’s capacity to articulate a unified and decisive response. At the same time, Myanmar’s increasing role as a hub for transnational crime has introduced additional security risks, reinforcing the need for more coordinated regional approaches that extend beyond conventional diplomatic engagement. Taken together, these developments indicate that Myanmar’s crisis now constitutes not only a domestic conflict but a broader test of ASEAN’s institutional capacity, requiring a recalibration of engagement that balances dialogue, accountability, and regional stability (International Crisis Group 2022).

Moreover, external stakeholder dynamics play a decisive role in shaping Myanmar’s trajectory, as regional and major powers pursue pragmatic and interest-driven engagement that both stabilizes and complicates the crisis. China remains the most influential external actor, with deeply intertwined economic, strategic, and security interests in the country (International Crisis Group 2020). Myanmar serves as a critical corridor for China to bypass the Malacca Strait and access natural resources, including rare-earth minerals, and thus Beijing continues to shield Naypyidaw from substantive action at the United Nations Security Council (Strangio 2022). Russia provides sustained military, economic, and diplomatic support, driven by arms sales, resource access, and its ambition to expand influence in Southeast Asia (Storey 2023, 1–8).

India’s engagement is shaped by its geographic proximity to Myanmar, as they share a land border of approximately 1,600 kilometers. This contiguity has generated direct security challenges, including displacement and transnational crime. Nearly 90,000 civilians have crossed into India during periods of intensified conflict, while illicit trafficking remains significant—as illustrated by a series of major crystalline-methamphetamine trafficking cases through the Andaman Sea between 2018 and 2019, including seizures ranging from more than 1–2 tons per incident, reflecting the growing scale and sophistication of maritime drug-trafficking networks in the region (UNODC 2019). Bangladesh faces similar pressures, particularly in managing border security and the unresolved issue of Rohingya repatriation.

Other external actors have adopted varied but largely pragmatic approaches. The European Union remains the largest humanitarian donor, while Australia has sustained support despite donor fatigue (DFAT n.d.; European Commission 2026). The United Kingdom retains influence through its permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council, and Japan continues engagement as both a development partner and interlocutor (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2026). Overall, external involvement remains cautious and interest-driven, with limited capacity to produce transformative change.

## Responses of Neighbouring States and Regional Mechanisms

Regional responses to Myanmar’s crisis reflect a combination of sustained engagement and pragmatic adjustment, circumscribed by the structural limitations of ASEAN-led mechanisms. A consistent approach has been the maintenance of calibrated pressure alongside continued humanitarian assistance. Since 2001, ASEAN has repeatedly encouraged political reform in Myanmar. While these efforts have produced only limited compliance, sustained pressure remains necessary to prevent further regional destabilization, maintain diplomatic leverage over the junta, preserve ASEAN’s credibility and centrality, and keep open the possibility of gradual political engagement and humanitarian access. The modest effectiveness of past measures therefore reflects not the irrelevance of pressure, but the structural complexity of the Myanmar crisis and the absence of viable alternatives. At the same time, humanitarian engagement remains a critical entry point. Since Cyclone Nargis in 2008, Myanmar has accepted international assistance, particularly from United Nations agencies, thus providing a continued basis for regional involvement (UNOCHA 2008).

The 5PC remains the central framework guiding ASEAN's response, but its implementation has been uneven. The absence of enforcement mechanisms and measurable benchmarks has limited its effectiveness and contributed to growing doubts about its long-term viability. In response, proposals have emerged to strengthen the framework through more precise compliance measures and monitoring tools. At the operational level, humanitarian access and conflict de-escalation have been identified as immediate priorities, particularly following major military operations such as Operation 1027, which enabled ethnic armed organizations to expand territorial control in several areas (International Crisis Group 2024, 4–6).

Neighbouring states have responded according to proximity. Thailand, in particular, has taken a more proactive humanitarian role than it had in previous phases of the crisis, including attempting to establish humanitarian corridors in border areas, particularly in Tak Province, in coordination with local networks and non-state actors. India has combined humanitarian assistance with border-stabilization efforts, while Malaysia has pursued diplomatic coordination with regional partners, particularly Thailand, reflecting efforts to maintain cohesion within ASEAN. At the same time, ASEAN faces increasing pressure to sustain its relevance and centrality amid competing global crises, including Ukraine and Palestine, which risk diverting international diplomatic attention, humanitarian resources, and great-power engagement away from Southeast Asia. This, in turn, may weaken ASEAN's capacity to maintain international focus and coordinated pressure on the Myanmar crisis (UNOCHA 2023; AHA Centre n.d.).

## Conclusion: Human Security in ASEAN's Approach to Myanmar

Reflections from the Study Group suggest that Myanmar's crisis presents a profound test for ASEAN's approach to human rights, particularly in navigating the tension between non- interference and the growing urgency of human-security concerns. The persistence of conflict within Myanmar since 1988, marked by recurring cycles of resistance and repression, reflects deep structural grievances that continue to elude resolution. Following the 2021 military coup, these long-standing tensions once again escalated into a renewed crisis that prompted ASEAN to adopt the 5PC as its principal regional framework. Yet continued non-compliance and the framework's limited enforcement capacity have exposed the constraints of ASEAN's existing approach to accountability, particularly its inability to impose meaningful punitive measures, ensure compliance with agreed commitments, or hold key actors responsible for violations linked to the crisis.

A humanitarian response and conflict de-escalation therefore emerge not simply as policy priorities, but as essential conditions for safeguarding human rights. Expanding access to assistance requires pragmatic engagement with all relevant actors, including both the Tatmadaw and ethnic armed organizations, while ensuring protection for displaced populations and vulnerable communities. The failure to implement earlier initiatives, most notably the 88 recommendations of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, illustrates the consequences of delayed action and reinforces the cumulative mistrust that continues to hinder progress.

At the institutional level, these challenges reveal the limitations of ASEAN's consensus-based approach when confronted with a protracted crisis. Mechanisms such as the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights remain underutilized, despite their potential to support dialogue and confidence building (ASEAN 2009; Wahyuningrum 2021, 170-72). Greater coordination between Track II, Track 1.5, and formal ASEAN processes could enable more flexible and sustained engagement, while preserving ASEAN's normative framework. Maintaining communication with both *de facto* and *de jure* actors, alongside making gradual efforts to strengthen accountability, reflects a pragmatic pathway consistent with regional practice. Ultimately, ASEAN's credibility will depend on its ability to embed human rights within a broader strategy of engagement, where humanitarian action, political dialogue, and regional stability are pursued as mutually reinforcing objectives.

"A humanitarian response and conflict de-escalation therefore emerge not simply as policy priorities, but as essential conditions for safeguarding human rights."

# Asia's Climate Governance and China's Potential Role as a "Green Engine"

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Weihai, Shandong, China, June 24, 2023. Photo by Marko Sun via Unsplash

Climate change stands as one of the most pressing challenges of our time, transcending national borders, endangering human well-being, and demanding individual and collective action. Asia—a region endowed with the world's largest population and fastest-growing economies, as well as a diverse geography—is exceptionally vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and thus recognizes the shared climate risks and the imperative for joint climate action. However, the region also has divergent priorities in socio-economic development and a lack of effective regional multilateral arrangements. There has also been a setback in global climate governance[1], represented by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and its Paris Agreement. Asia's efforts at climate governance are facing practical difficulties.

As a country significantly affected by climate change, China has set ambitious national goals for reaching peak carbon emissions and carbon neutrality, and developed a comprehensive national climate strategy that prioritizes the green transition to achieve the dual objectives of addressing climate change and driving economic growth. Over the years, China's national climate strategy has produced concrete results, turning the country into an important and influential player in climate governance and green industry. From this position, China could contribute to the region's green transition and unleash its great potential.

With heightened climate risks, disruptions in energy supply chains, and uncertain economic growth, Asia is at a pivotal moment to decide its future development path. By analyzing Asia's evolving landscape of climate challenges coupled with the practical difficulties of climate governance, and dissecting China's national climate strategy centred on the green transition, this essay explores how China could serve as a "green engine" for Asia and what this means for the region's broader climate collaboration.

## The Imperative of Climate Governance in Asia

Climate governance in Asia has reached a critical juncture, necessitating immediate and collective action.

### SHARED CLIMATE RISKS

Asia, home to over 60 percent of the world's population and a key growth engine of the global economy, faces disproportionate risks from climate change. According to the State of the Climate in Asia 2024 report released by the World Meteorological Organization (2025), Asia experienced its warmest or second-warmest year on record in 2024 and is warming nearly twice as fast as the global average. Extreme weather events—

1 In this context, global climate governance can be defined as a system of international institutional frameworks, normative agreements, and operational rules designed to coordinate collective actions among sovereign states, non-state actors, and global stakeholders for the overarching goal of mitigating and adapting to climate change.

including heat waves, floods, droughts, tsunamis, and typhoons—frequently strike Asia. The rapid melting of Himalayan glaciers threatens the water resources and agricultural systems that sustain communities along the Yangtze and Ganges rivers. Low-lying coastal towns and Pacific Islands, such as Tuvalu and Kiribati, face an existential crisis due to rising sea levels. Ecological degradation affects rainforests and coral reefs, further compounding environmental challenges.

Climate challenges are not confined within national borders and entail multifaceted and intertwined risks, threatening food, water, and energy security, and endangering the lives and livelihoods of people across the region. As many Asian countries are trade-oriented and deeply interconnected in regional and international supply chains, the economic stakes of climate change are particularly high. Research by the Asian Development Bank (2024) found the impacts of climate change in a high greenhouse-gas-emissions scenario could reduce gross domestic product (GDP) in developing Asia and the Pacific by 17 percent by 2070, rising to 41 percent by 2100. Furthermore, climate change exacerbates resource scarcity, which might cause geopolitical tensions and even conflicts in the region. To avoid this outcome, collective action is required.

### PRACTICAL OBSTACLES TO COLLECTIVE CLIMATE ACTION

Asian countries have made climate commitments by submitting Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and National Adaptation Plans under the Paris Agreement framework. They have also initiated efforts to collaborate to mitigate climate risks and build regional resilience. However, Asia's collective climate action confronts practical obstacles.

First of all, Asia's vast disparities in levels of development and national divergences regarding development priorities create significant challenges for climate co-operation. Asia's economic development heavily relies on energy and natural resources. Many Asian nations see economic development—and thus energy security—as a higher priority than climate-change mitigation. Particularly for less-developed countries or countries reliant on fossil fuels, energy security often rests on high carbon-emitting energy sources. The region's rapid urbanization and industrialization are exacerbating this problem as more people living in the cities and more industrial operations increase energy use. This gives rise to a classic collective-action dilemma, as the increase in carbon emissions generated by one country imposes tangible, cross-border negative externalities on other nations, amplifying the pace of global warming and thereby creating significant barriers to coordinating climate-mitigation efforts and nurturing mutual trust among international stakeholders.

"Asia's economic development heavily relies on energy and natural resources. Many Asian nations see economic development—and thus energy security—as a higher priority than climate-change mitigation."

Second, the lack of effective multilateral arrangements hampers regional climate co-operation. Despite an increasing number of climate initiatives in Asia, the region still lags behind the European Union in building a unified and effective platform (for example, the European Green Deal) to align countries' emission-reduction targets and pool resources like green technologies, climate financing, and carbon-credit mechanisms. The primary reason lies in Asia's diversity of climate vulnerability and adaptability, which leads to disagreements regarding the foundational principle of international climate negotiations, "common but differentiated responsibilities." Debates about how to balance historical emissions and current development needs impede regional coordinated action on climate change.

Last but not least, Asia's climate action is affected by the setback in global climate governance. Despite COP30's approval of the Belém Package, including a commitment to triple adaptation finance by 2035, the Paris Agreement is challenged by the insufficient implementation of NDCs, funding shortfalls, and delays in technological solutions and capacity building. A United Nations report cautioned that "progress in national climate policy efforts remains insufficient to achieve 2030 Targets" (United Nations Public Administration Network 2024). As Asia relies heavily on international collaboration for climate funding, technology transfer, and capacity-building support, this setback in global climate governance undermines the region's climate momentum. Since systemic challenges persist, it is imperative to explore more unified, innovative, and effective approaches to climate co-operation in the region.

## China's National Climate Strategy Centring on the Green Transition

As the world's largest developing country, with a population of over 1.4 billion, China has placed increasing emphasis on environmentally sustainable development and has fostered a national climate strategy that centres on the green transition, encompassing a domestic "dual carbon" policy as well as support for the global climate agenda.

### CHINA'S DOMESTIC DUAL-CARBON POLICY

With the notion of "humans and nature as a community with a shared future," China has developed a multidimensional, multifaceted, and systematic national climate strategy centring on a green and low-carbon transition, which requires that China strike a balance between socio-economic development and emissions reduction. At the core is China's "1+N" policy framework, where the "1" stands for the guiding principle of dual-carbon goals—reaching peak carbon emissions before 2030 and achieving carbon neutrality by 2060—and the "N" encompasses action plans for green transitions in key sectors, industries, and administrative districts (Xinhua 2025a). This framework provides overarching guidelines for the country's climate strategy and sets clear benchmarks and a road map for coordinated climate action across the entire economy.

China's President Xi Jinping speaks remotely during the "Climate Summit 2025" on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly at the UN headquarters in New York City on September 24, 2025. Photo by Charly Triballeau/ AFP via Getty Images

Over the years, China's dual-carbon policy has produced tangible outcomes on climate mitigation and adaptation. China has contributed about one-fourth of the reforested areas worldwide (Chen et al. 2019) and ranks among the countries with the fastest decline in energy-consumption intensity (i.e., the amount of energy consumed per unit of GDP) (Huang et al. 2025). China has also made notable achievements in the green transition of its economy and society, by building the largest and fastest-growing renewable-energy industry, effectively making China a key driver in lowering global clean-tech costs.

China also incorporates climate measures and green development in its domestic socio-economic policies. The new 15th Five-Year Plan (2026–2030) for National Economic and Social Development specifies measures on "working actively and prudently toward peaking carbon emissions" and "accelerating the shift to eco-friendly production practices and lifestyles" (Xinhua 2025b). This integration not only bolsters China's capacity to implement targeted sustainability measures but also generates positive spillovers that can accelerate the green transition across the broader region, signalling China's entry into a new phase of resilient, low-carbon development.

## CHINA'S GLOBAL CLIMATE COMMITMENT

As a major developing country, China has positioned its climate strategy as both a domestic priority and an element of international engagement. China upholds the multilateral mechanisms established by the UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement, recognizing these frameworks as the cornerstone of global climate governance. While upholding these international commitments, China emphasizes the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and the pursuit of a just transition, acknowledging that developed and developing nations have distinct historical contributions to global warming and different capabilities in addressing climate change.





At the United Nations Climate Summit on September 24, 2025, China announced its new NDCs, which aim to reduce economy-wide net greenhouse-gas emissions from peak levels by 7–10 percent by 2035, and intends to do better. The new NDCs also state that China will increase the share of non-fossil fuels in total energy consumption to over 30 percent; expand the installed capacity of wind and solar power to over six times the 2020 levels, striving to bring the total to 3,600 gigawatts; scale up the total forest stock volume[2] to over 24 billion cubic metres; make new energy vehicles[3] mainstream; expand the National Carbon Emissions Trading Market to cover major high-emission sectors; and establish a climate-adaptive society (Xi 2025).

China has taken a range of actions to contribute expertise and resources to global efforts to combat climate change. China pledged to stop building new coal-fired power plants abroad, while at the same time increasing its support for developing countries to pursue green and low-carbon development. This latter move is particularly important as developing countries (excluding China) need to invest an estimated US$2.4 trillion per year by 2030 in climate action, of which around US$1 trillion per year needs to be sourced internationally (Songwe et al. 2022).

The Green Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is also a case in point. The Green BRI marked an important update to the earlier version of the BRI, reorienting infrastructure investment from carbon-intensive projects toward climate-friendly solutions, such as green infrastructure, clean-power projects, and low-carbon industrial supply chains. During the third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation held in October 2023, China, together with thirty-five countries, jointly launched the Initiative on International Trade and Economic Cooperation Framework for Digital Economy and Green Development, making the digital and green transformations twin objectives in international trade and economic co-operation.

China's domestic dual-carbon policy and global climate commitment represent the essence of China's national climate strategy. Nevertheless, achieving the green transition requires not only top-level strategy but also concrete actions, where critical gaps and obstacles in implementation remain. Several areas present opportunities for further action, including further strengthening the legal and regulatory system; aligning national goals and local realities across provinces, especially in areas that are less developed and rely more on energy-intensive industries; as well as deepening co-operation with regional and international partners, in order to further solidify the green transition in China and beyond.

### China's Potential Role as a "Green Engine" of Asia

China's ongoing efforts toward the green transition hold great potential to foster deeper green co-operation with its neighbours. A critical question now emerges: how can China fully leverage its role as a "green engine" of Asia's climate governance to inject fresh impetus to the green transition in Asia and the broader world?

2 The forest stock volume, defined as the total volume of the stems of all living trees per unit area, is often used for forest resource management and planning and as a predictor of carbon-related variables and carbon stocks.

3 New energy vehicles (NEV) refer to vehicles that differ from traditional internal combustion engine vehicles and primarily include hybrid electric vehicles, battery electric vehicles (BEV), and fuel cell electric vehicles (FCEV).

## ENHANCING REGIONAL GREEN SUPPLY CHAINS

As Asia's demand for energy continues to rise and international oil and gas supplies have been frequently disrupted in recent years, China's green technological and industrial foundations make it a natural partner for regional green supply-chain collaboration. China's sustained investment in green technologies provides increasingly accessible and affordable clean energy for Asian countries. Chinese solar panels and wind turbines have been widely adopted across Asia. China's clean-energy exports in 2024 are estimated to have cut the carbon emissions of importing countries by 1 percent (Myllyvirta 2025). With its massive investments in the supply chains of the "new trio" of electric vehicles, lithium-ion batteries, and photovoltaic products, China could provide scalable solutions to reduce carbon emissions in Asia.

China's overseas green investment could provide much-needed green capital and expertise to the region. According to research by the Net Zero Industrial Policy Lab, since 2022, Chinese overseas green investments have surged past US$220 billion, spanning sectors such as batteries, solar, wind, new energy vehicles, and green hydrogen (Xue and Larsen 2025). Asia, especially ASEAN countries, remains the primary destination for Chinese green investment, where China leads public investment in ASEAN countries with over US$2.7 billion in clean energy (Zero Carbon Analytics 2025). The China–Ethiopia–Sri Lanka Renewable Energy Technology Transfer Project is a also successful case in point, achieving notable progress in enhancing local access to clean and renewable energy through knowledge and technology transfer (UNDP 2024).

China, together with neighbouring countries, could leverage their comparative advantages in green technologies, abundant natural resources, well-educated human resources, and vibrant markets to stimulate green innovations, scale up green production, and promote clean-tech trade, in a joint effort to build a robust regional green supply chain, reduce the region's reliance on fossil fuels, and transition to a low-carbon economy.

## BOOSTING REGIONAL CLIMATE FINANCING

Given Asian countries' soaring demand for climate financing, China could work with partner countries in the region on climate financing. China has already made progress in this regard. The South-South Cooperation Fund, established by China in 2015, has provided project funding and development aid exceeding 177 billion yuan (approximately US$25 billion) to assist other developing countries in strengthening climate resiliency (Xinhua 2025a).

China and other leading green economies in the region—including Singapore, a global hub for green finance, and South Korea, a pioneer in hydrogen-energy technology—could build stronger co-operative frameworks, such as a regional climate-finance pool and a green tech-transfer network dedicated to climate funding and capacity building in less-developed countries.

They could also encourage regional financial institutions to play a bigger role in climate financing, as well as issuing green bonds, building carbon-pricing mechanisms, and expanding carbon markets. For example, the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank, with China as a key player, launched its Climate Action Plan in 2023 and released an update of its corporate strategy in 2025, which targets over 50 percent of its annual financing to climate-related investments, with total climate finance exceeding US$50 billion over the strategy period of 2021–2030 (Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank 2025). The World Bank and Asian Development Bank could also play a bigger part in climate financing in the region.

The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) could also serve as a critical platform for climate financing, yet its diverse membership poses notable challenges. With economies ranging from developed nations, like Japan and Australia, to least-developed countries, such as Laos and Myanmar, the region displays a wide gap in financial capacity, technological advancement, and development priorities. However, this diversity, while a challenge, also presents an opportunity to design frameworks that balance development needs with climate goals. For example, RCEP can establish a tiered and layered climate-financing mechanism, with developed member economies contributing climate funds and sharing green technologies, while emerging markets offer affordable manufacturing supply chains for renewable-energy products and help less-developed countries transition to green development, thereby unleashing the potential of economic integration and the green transition across the region.

## PROMOTING MULTILATERAL CLIMATE INITIATIVES

China's long-standing commitment to multilateralism and open regionalism is also evident in multilateral climate platforms. As a key member of various regional multilateral institutions, China has the opportunity to collaborate with fellow countries to promote multilateral climate initiatives.

In its relationship with ASEAN China has been a key participant in the ASEAN Plus Three Environment Ministers' Meeting and has contributed to setting up the ASEAN–China Environmental Cooperation Forum, as well as the China–ASEAN Clean Energy Cooperation Center. China supports capacity-building activities through such initiatives as the ASEAN–China Initiative on Climate-Resilient Friendship Cities, as well as the "Plan of Training for 10,000" to help ASEAN countries train 10,000 people in governance, anti-corruption, and green energy in the next three years (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People's Republic of China 2023). China has also supported clean-energy projects under the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation framework, such as hydropower dams along the Mekong River Basin and solar farms in Southeast Asia.

Within the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), China has integrated green co-operation as a new priority, and has set up the SCO Green and Sustainable Development Forum. At the China–Central Asia mechanism, launched by China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, green mining, green industries, and green development have been listed as priorities for co-operation among member countries.

China, Japan, and the Republic of Korea have also utilized their respective advantages—for example, China's expertise in large-scale renewable-energy supply chains, Japan's cutting-edge carbon-capture and -storage technology, and the Republic of Korea's advanced green-hydrogen system—to implement the Tripartite Joint Action Plan on Environmental Cooperation, creating more opportunities for green development and capacity building across the region.

However, due to the fragmented nature of regional platforms, geopolitical tensions, and competing national interests, multilateral climate co-operation is facing real challenges, and climate commitments are often non-binding, reducing accountability and motivation for compliance. Yet, these challenges are not insurmountable. Common interests on protecting shared ecosystems, mitigating transboundary climate impacts, and pursuing the green transition to a more sustainable economy, can serve as a unifying force. By leveraging these shared concerns, China and other countries in the region should share expertise, synergize efforts, align national climate strategies, and create a broader foundation to build a more unified and inclusive regional agenda for climate governance and green development.

## Conclusion

Confronted with the shared risks posed by climate change, Asia's co-operation on climate governance represents a crucial test of the region's ability to address common challenges through collective action and to seize the new-found opportunity of the green transition. China, through its rapid advancement in green development and its enthusiasm for regional co-operation on green initiatives, has great potential to serve as a "green engine" of Asia. Nevertheless, China faces significant constraints to playing this role, especially in implementing in green technologies across its overseas projects, as well as managing the divergent governance capabilities and misalignment of green standards among partner countries. Compounding this are escalating geopolitical tensions and supply-chain uncertainties. Western nations have framed China's green supply chains as national-security concerns and erected "green barriers" to Chinese clean tech—from solar panels and battery production to electrical vehicles. Such a protectionist tendency has fuelled suspicions in the region about its growing reliance on Chinese clean tech, which not only create barriers for China's green initiatives overseas but also disrupt the momentum of the global green transition.

Overcoming these constraints requires China to make sustained investment in technological breakthroughs to unlock the immense economic potential of the green transition, to develop more localized manufacturing for renewable-energy components—thus creating jobs, fostering technological transfer, and creating a mutually beneficial cycle—as well as to engage in deeper, more inclusive, and mutually beneficial regional collaboration. By focusing on the common goal of addressing shared climate challenges and seizing green opportunities, China and other Asian countries can find common ground and foster a culture of shared responsibility for inclusive and environmentally sustainable growth across Asia.

"Confronted with the shared risks posed by climate change, Asia's cooperation on climate governance represents a crucial test of the region's ability to address common challenges through collective action and to seize the new-found opportunity of the green transition."



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