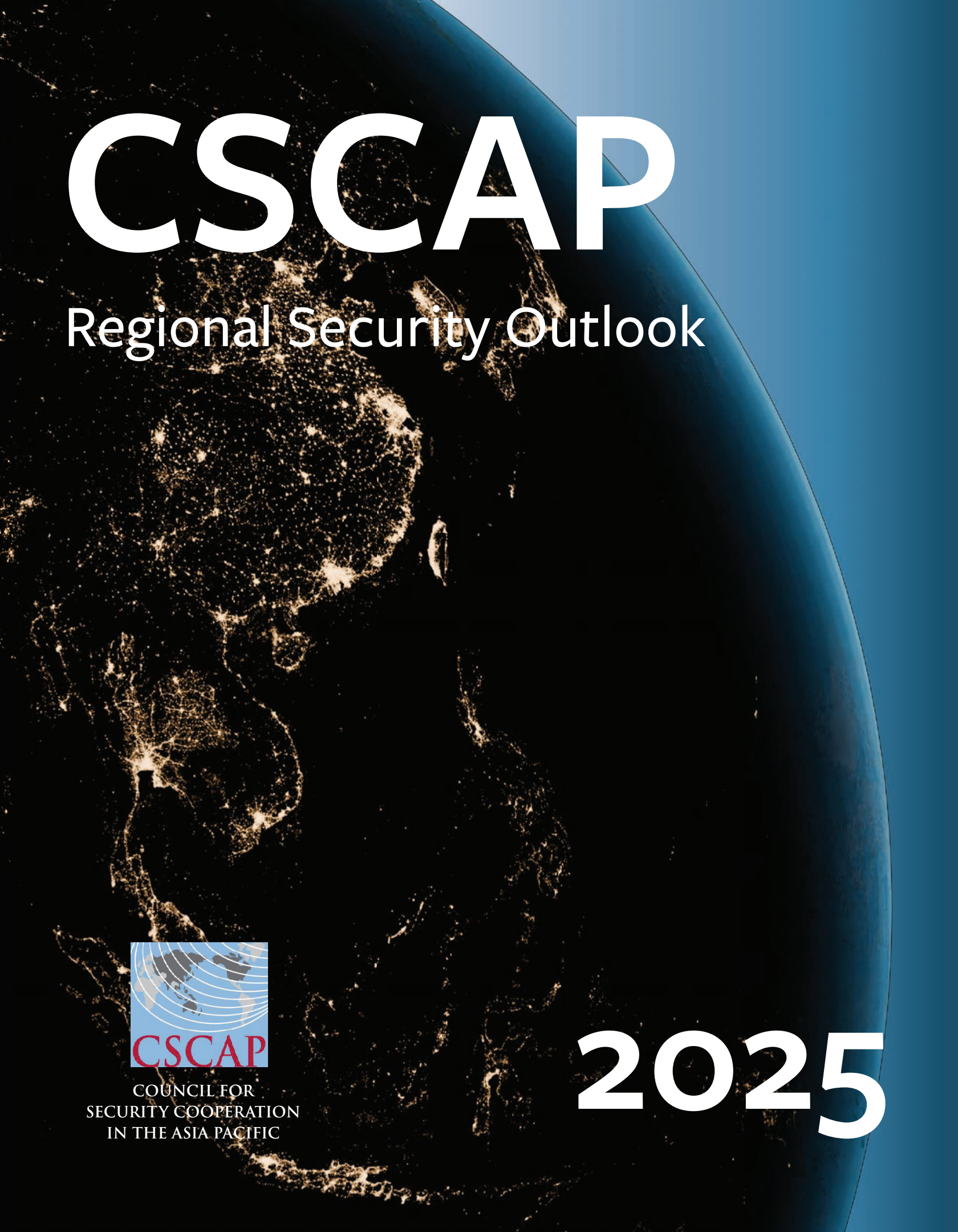

CSCAP

Regional Security Outlook

CSCAP

COUNCIL FOR
SECURITY COOPERATION
IN THE ASIA PACIFIC

2025

COUNCIL FOR SECURITY COOPERATION IN THE ASIA PACIFIC

Established in 1993, the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) is the premier Track Two organisation in the Asia Pacific region and counterpart to the Track One processes dealing with security issues, namely, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the ASEAN Defence Ministers Plus Forum. It provides an informal mechanism for scholars, officials and others in their private capacities to discuss political and security issues and challenges facing the region. It provides policy recommendations to various intergovernmental bodies, convenes regional and international meetings and establishes linkages with institutions and organisations in other parts of the world to exchange information, insights and experiences in the area of regional political-security cooperation. *www.cscap.org*

LETTER FROM THE CO-EDITORS

On behalf of CSCAP, we are pleased to present the CSCAP Regional Security Outlook (CRSO) 2025. Inaugurated in 2007, the CRSO volume is now in its nineteentth 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 2025 do not represent those of any Member committee or other institutions and are the reseponsibility of the individual authors and the Editors. Charts and images in the CRSO 2025 do not necessarily reflect the views of the chapter authors.

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INTRODUCTION

REGIONAL SECURITY IN AMBIGUOUS TIMES

Charles Labrecque

Director of Research, Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada

The Indo-Pacific is at a pivotal and transformative moment. Intensifying geopolitical rivalries, accelerating military modernization, and growing technological competition have placed the region at the heart of a shifting international order. Uncertainty surrounding the new US administration's stance on alliances, international institutions, and global trade—coupled with the escalating strategic rivalry between the two superpowers—is leaving countries in the region navigating a complex and volatile landscape. This comes on top of a host of other long-standing challenges, including economic disparities, climate-related risks, and unresolved territorial disputes, that are further complicating relations in the region. The central question now is how the Indo-Pacific can manage these different pressures without slipping into conflict or instability.

The US–China relationship remains central to regional security dynamics in Asia, continuing to shape the strategic environment in profound ways. Over the past year, there have been efforts to recalibrate diplomatic ties and restore high-level communication between Washington and Beijing, despite persistent frictions. However, these engagement efforts have been largely eclipsed by a prevailing consensus in Washington favouring strategic competition with China.

Restrictions on semiconductor exports and investment in sensitive technology sectors, along with additional tariffs, have in recent years strained an already delicate relationship. The trade war launched by the new administration of Donald Trump has significantly—and potentially permanently—damaged bilateral ties. A resulting decoupling between the world's two largest economies—although not likely—would have profoundly negative consequences and be extremely risky, as it would eliminate some communication channels for de-escalation and increase the likelihood of miscalculation (Gordon 2025, Shen 2025).

While the two superpowers managed to avoid direct confrontation during Trump's first term, a second Trump administration that sees China as its primary adversary would not bode well for the future (Shambaugh 2025). Both countries have incentives to pursue an agreement to at least de-escalate the trade war—as the May 2025 US–China decision to significantly reduce tariffs while negotiations are pursued underscored—but the structural drivers of their rivalry are likely to persist. These enduring tensions suggest that even temporary compromises are unlikely to bring long-term stability to the relationship. This trade war between the US and China is fuelling significant uncertainty and posing a growing threat to regional security, increasingly forcing countries in the region to make difficult choices (Bland 2025).

Beyond US–China strategic competition, other regional conflicts in the Indo-Pacific are simmering—and even boiling over, as was seen in the conflict between India and Pakistan in May 2025. Regional players are also watching closely the situation in Ukraine. Countries from the region, whether aligned with major powers or pursuing more independent strategies, are observing the war with great interest and drawing lessons about deterrence, the limits of international law, the role of alliances, and the consequences of military aggression. The Ukraine conflict has become a lens through which Indo-Pacific players assess their own weaknesses and the credibility of external security guarantees (Crabtree and Graham 2023).

With the goal of preserving peace and stability in the region, several actors in the Indo-Pacific have increasingly asserted their influence in shaping the evolution of the region. In recent years, Japan and South Korea have deepened their security cooperation, forging stronger trilateral ties with the US through the Camp David Principles established in 2023. Japan has also emerged as a more assertive actor, taking greater responsibility for its own security and more actively contributing to regional stability. India, driven by its own strategic imperatives, has expanded its regional role—particularly in the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf through strengthened anti-piracy operations and an increased naval presence—moving from a coastal defence posture to a more proactive approach in upholding the maritime order (Singh and Sen 2024).

Meanwhile, Southeast Asia remains a crucial arena where strategic balancing plays out, with ASEAN seeking to maintain its centrality despite growing pressures to take sides between the US and China. The situation in Myanmar, however, compromises ASEAN centrality and unity—as its members remain divided on the crisis—and hinders its ability to play a central role in defusing the civil war, including implementing its own Five-Point Consensus, which had been negotiated to address the crisis following the military coup on February 1, 2021 (Jones 2025).

ASEAN continues to play a crucial convening role through regional platforms like the East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Regional Forum, offering spaces for dialogue and confidence-building even amid intensifying great-power competition. While these institutions remain relevant, they have been criticized for their inability to address major regional challenges (Heydarian 2024). As a result, in the last few years, several minilateral groupings and issue-specific coalitions have popped up. Notably, middle powers in Asia have seen their influence grow through their increasing participation in these new minilateral groupings.

These developments underscore the region's strategic importance and its rapidly evolving security landscape, particularly in an increasingly contested and multipolar world marked by turmoil and strategic ambiguity. With this in mind, the 2025 edition of the CSCAP Regional Security Outlook examines a range of issues and recent developments that are shaping the region's security environment and offers ideas to increase the ability of countries in the region to manages these issues.

With ASEAN at such a critical juncture, Datuk Prof. Dr. Faiz Abdullah (Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS), Malaysia), in the first article, explores Malaysia's priorities

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as chair of the association in 2025. The author identifies several factors making Malaysia's leadership potentially consequential, depending on how it navigates competing pressures and opportunities.

As the global race for artificial intelligence (AI) is entering a more competitive and less co-operative phase, Yang Gyu Kim (Graduate School of National Security, Korea National Defense University) examines, in the second paper, its implications for regional security. He explores the strategic choices countries face in this quickly evolving landscape and highlights the role regional actors can play in advancing transparent and inclusive AI governance to shape a future for AI that upholds both innovation and security.

The third article, by Ngô Di Lân (Institute for Foreign Policy and Strategic Studies, Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam), explores the contested strategic narratives in the Indo-Pacific and offers a forward-looking perspective on how regional actors—particularly ASEAN—can manage strategic ambiguity through narrative stewardship. It argues that to fully understand the security architecture, one must consider the narratives that shape state behaviour.

The fourth paper, by Zhang Gaosheng (Department for World Peace and Security Studies, China Institute of International Studies), reviews from a Chinese perspective the evolution of the regional security architecture and the challenges it faces amid increasing complexity and uncertainty. The author also proposes a set of priorities the region should pursue to promote peace, stability, and prosperity.

Frédéric Lasserre (Department of Geography, Université Laval, Canada) investigates in the fifth article the impact of the war in Ukraine on geopolitical dynamics in the Arctic. It considers the war's effects on Asian Arctic strategies and the prospects for future cooperation in the polar region.

The sixth and final paper, by Maryam N. Ismail (Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS), Malaysia), examines the repercussions of the war in Gaza on Southeast Asia, exploring the countries' responses and the implications for the region's relations with the US, particularly as it navigates a range of competing priorities.

"These developments underscore the region's strategic importance and its rapidly evolving security landscape, particularly in an increasingly contested and multipolar world marked by turmoil and strategic ambiguity."

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The logo for Malaysia's 2025 ASEAN Chairmanship is pictured in front of Malaysia's Petronas Twin Towers in Kuala Lumpur on May 15, 2025. (Photo by MOHD RASFAN/AFP via Getty Images).

MALAYSIA'S ASEAN CHAIRMANSHIP

REIMAGINING REGIONAL LEADERSHIP IN A SHIFTING INDO-PACIFIC

Datuk Prof. Dr. Mohd Faiz Abdullah

Chairman, Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia

Malaysia assumes the ASEAN Chair in 2025 at a time of considerable flux in the regional and global order. Intensifying strategic rivalries, shifting economic currents and rising internal pressures within ASEAN are all testing the bloc's cohesion and credibility. Far from taking on a mere symbolic role, Malaysia's chairmanship will be a defining moment to demonstrate that ASEAN can adapt, respond and lead.

As a founding member with a reputation for moderation and constructive diplomacy, Malaysia is well-positioned to steer ASEAN towards a more responsive, cohesive and forward-looking trajectory while navigating the competing narratives that define the Indo-Pacific.

A key deliverable under Malaysia's watch will be the adoption of the ASEAN Community Vision 2045, hitherto much vaunted in the rhetoric but less understood in its purport. This document must go beyond aspirational declarations to chart an actionable course for the next two decades, that addresses structural limitations of the current pillar-based approach and offers a more integrated framework for cross-cutting challenges such as climate change, digitalisation, artificial intelligence (AI), supply chain resilience, and geopolitical uncertainty.

Crucially, Malaysia must ensure that the Vision 2045 process is grounded in both ambition and realism. Learning from the implementation gaps of the Vision 2025 agenda, the new blueprint should embed clear metrics, performance indicators and accountability frameworks. Broader and deeper engagements with youth, civil society and the private sector will be essential in crafting a vision that is both state-driven and people-centred; an ASEAN that is more attuned to the hopes and dreams of its over 650 million citizens.

Malaysia is going for pragmatic and inclusive leadership, and for putting our money where our mouth is. As the region grapples with increasingly mangled trade dynamics, compounded by the aftershocks of the COVID-19 pandemic and the reconfiguration of global supply chains, there is an urgent need to ensure ASEAN's trade architecture remains relevant, efficient and competitive.

On the political-security front, Malaysia will have to walk a tightrope. The Myanmar crisis remains the most visible and consequential test of ASEAN's credibility. While the Five-Point Consensus continues to serve as the official framework of engagement, progress has stalled. There is a pressing need for more calibrated and principled approaches, exploring meaningful engagement with stakeholders beyond the military junta, including civil society groups and ethnic resistance organisations. In this regard, the recent formation of the Informal Advisory Group for Malaysia's ASEAN chairmanship 2025 as spearheaded by Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim demonstrates the imperative to move the needle towards resolution. Malaysia can further reinforce ASEAN's convening power by revitalising platforms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and pressing for more substantive dialogue within the East Asia Summit (EAS).

Recent events have also underscored Malaysia's value as a reliable regional partner. Apart from the pledge of financial aid of ten million ringgit (US$2.3 million), the deployment of a Malaysian search-and-rescue team following the devastating earthquake that struck Myanmar and Thailand exemplifies Malaysia's commitment to regional solidarity in times of crisis. As ASEAN Chair, Malaysia can capitalise on this momentum by strengthening regional mechanisms for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), particularly under the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) framework. Enhancing interoperability, building rapid response capabilities and even institutionalising an ASEAN Disaster Response Fund would reinforce ASEAN's credibility in addressing non-traditional security threats, especially those exacerbated by climate change.

"As the region grapples with increasingly mangled trade dynamics, compounded by the aftershocks of the COVID-19 pandemic and the reconfiguration of global supply chains, there is an urgent need to ensure ASEAN's trade architecture remains relevant, efficient and competitive."

This broader view of security should also include a revival of foundational ASEAN instruments such as the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) and the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ). These frameworks, though conceived during the Cold War, can be reframed to address contemporary challenges in a multipolar world. Strategic dialogues on non-alignment, transparency and confidence-building among major powers in Southeast Asia will be increasingly critical as external powers jostle for influence.

Maritime cooperation is another area where Malaysia can lead. With tensions escalating in the South China Sea and the Code of Conduct (COC) negotiations with China showing little progress, Malaysia can advocate for clearer timelines, transparency in the negotiation process, and practical confidence-building measures. As a littoral state, Malaysia carries credibility and strategic interest in promoting rules-based conduct in disputed waters. It could also drive initiatives to improve maritime domain awareness, strengthen coast guard collaboration and enhance the blue economy through sustainable fisheries, marine conservation and technological innovation.

At the institutional level, Malaysia can seize the moment to push for much needed reform. Strengthening ASEAN's internal machinery, especially the capacity of the ASEAN Secretariat, improving funding mechanisms, and encouraging better coordination across sectoral bodies, will be essential to delivering on ASEAN's ambitions.

Malaysia's chairmanship also coincides with the rise of non-ASEAN-led regional initiatives such as the Quad and AUKUS. While the jury is still out on the geopolitical impact of these minilateral groupings, with some member states viewing them as threats to ASEAN centrality and some welcoming them with open arms, nevertheless, Malaysia can underscore ASEAN's continued relevance by leading on key regional issues such as green transition, digital economy governance and inclusive development. The forthcoming ASEAN Blue Economy Framework and ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement present timely opportunities for Malaysia to take the lead in shaping forward-looking regional rules that respond to real-world challenges.

Photo by Orbital 01 Studio via Unsplash.

Malaysia's Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim (R) is given the ceremonial gavel by Laos' Prime Minister Sonexay Siphandone during the closing ceremony of the 44th and 45th Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Summits, with Malaysia set to take over the ASEAN Chairmanship in 2025, in Vientiane on October 11, 2024. (Photo by Tang Chhin Sothy / AFP) (Photo by TANG CHHIN SOTHY/AFP via Getty Images)

To make these frameworks more effective and widely embraced, Malaysia should promote a whole-of-community approach, engaging not only governments but also the private sector, academia, and civil society. Broad-based participation will help embed these initiatives within ASEAN's economic and social fabric, strengthening resilience and collective ownership.

Malaysia's chairmanship of ASEAN in 2025 will not be without other challenges. And that is none other than the repercussions of the trade and foreign policies of America under the Trump 2.0 administration. Granted that Trump has declared to the world at large that tariffs will be imposed "on all countries," this is therefore not a problem germane only to ASEAN. But the chairmanship arrives at a critical juncture — when ASEAN must prove that it is not only relevant but capable of leading amid uncertainty. With a legacy of moderation, a track record of constructive diplomacy and a clear-eyed view of regional dynamics, Malaysia has the wherewithal to shape a compelling narrative of renewal, one that reaffirms ASEAN's centrality and cohesiveness while reimagining its role in a fast-evolving Indo-Pacific landscape.

As the region looks ahead to 2045, the year of ASEAN's centenary, Malaysia's leadership in 2025 could mark a turning point—from a reactive bloc to a more proactive and purpose-driven community.

Former South Korean President Yoon at the 2024 AI Seoul Summit on May 21, 2024. | Photo: Handout, Office of the President. Official Photographer: Kang Min Seok.

STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT OR SOVEREIGN AI?

THE GLOBAL AI RACE, THE NEW CULT OF THE OFFENSIVE, AND THE TWO STRATEGIC PATHS FOR MIDDLE POWERS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

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We are at an inflection point, and the geopolitics of artificial intelligence (AI) development is shifting rapidly. In February 2025, France hosted the AI Action Summit, a high-level gathering of global stakeholders in AI governance, in Paris. The summit followed the AI Safety Summit in the UK in 2023 and the AI Seoul Summit in 2024, yet ended without any meaningful deliverables. The United States and the United Kingdom declined to sign the final document, *Statement on Inclusive and Sustainable Artificial Intelligence for People and the Planet*, while China did. Most notably, the formal disappearance of the term "AI safety" from official summit documents signalled a fundamental shift: from efforts to establish governance for the responsible use of AI to an open race for global AI dominance. This change in tone and ambition comes at a critical moment. Just three weeks before the AI Summit convened in Paris, DeepSeek-R1 was released—a Chinese-developed large language model (LLM) with

performance rivalling GPT-4, yet reportedly trained with only a fraction of the computational resources and financial investment.

The rise of DeepSeek has redefined eligibility for AI competition. It revealed that the ability to develop cutting-edge generative AI is no longer exclusive to countries with access to the most advanced high-performance graphics processing units (GPUs), massive investment, and top-tier talent. By making its methods open source, DeepSeek effectively invited any state with a baseline of AI capacity to consider entering the global AI race. In response, the Trump administration issued an executive order on January 23, 2025, entitled Removing Barriers to American Leadership in Artificial Intelligence, directing federal agencies to submit action plans by July this year for securing US global dominance in AI (White House 2025). This development makes clear that competition over AI leadership has become central to strategic rivalry among great powers.

This article proceeds in three parts. First, it explains why DeepSeek matters and how the United States has responded, assessing whether this marks a Sputnik moment for AI competition. Second, to correctly gauge the significance of this competition, it explores how the military use of AI may transform the offense-defence balance in international security, drawing on recent scholarship and evolving national-security doctrines. Third, it considers the fundamental choice facing states in the region—between joining US-led efforts to restrict China's AI access and advancing sovereign AI development—and argues that middle powers in the Indo-Pacific must position themselves to balance innovation, autonomy, and strategic stability.

DeepSeek and the New Phase in the Global AI Race

The release of DeepSeek-R1 represents a profound disruption in the AI development landscape. Produced by a Chinese firm established in 2023, DeepSeek's model achieved performance on par with GPT-4 without access to NVIDIA chips or elite engineering teams in the US. This event, which many have described as an "AI Sputnik moment," shook the assumption that frontier AI models demand enormous computational capability, capital, and talent.

DeepSeek's innovation lies in its unique training approach. It employed large-scale reinforcement learning (RL) rather than traditional supervised fine-tuning. The initial model, DeepSeek-R1-Zero, was trained using rule-based reward functions and demonstrated emergent reasoning capabilities, such as self-verification and reflection. The firm later incorporated a small "cold start" dataset and adopted a three-stage training process—RL for reasoning, supervised fine-tuning for alignment, and a final RL pass to integrate safety and usability. Finally, it distilled its large model into compact versions with as few as 1.5 billion parameters (Guo et al. 2025).

The implications of its success are far-reaching. First, the DeepSeek case reveals the limits of US export controls. As analysts have noted, "export controls cannot kill innovation," and cutting off access to computer chips cannot fully block AI development due to black markets, cloud-based compute leasing, and the incentive structures created by scarcity (Villasenor 2025). Second,

it underscores the risks of over-relying on large technology firms for national AI leadership (Wheeler 2025). Third, it increases pressure on the United States to coordinate more closely with its allies to maintain technological superiority and prevent China from closing the gap (Shivakumar et al. 2024; Allen and Goldston 2025).

Despite the shock, DeepSeek has not fundamentally upset the US–China balance in AI. US firms still generally lead in six core areas: capital, talent, intellectual property, data, energy, and compute infrastructure (Lang et al. 2024). Yet the performance gap is narrowing. According to Stanford University's 2025 AI Index, China significantly reduced the benchmark performance gap between 2023 and 2024—on metrics such as multitask language understanding (MMLU) and math, the gap narrowed from double-digit margins to near parity.

Beyond demonstrating the limitations of export controls, DeepSeek also signals opportunity for non-US players. Its success could lower the barriers to entry for countries or organizations previously excluded from the frontier of AI due to resource constraints. French AI champion Mistral AI, for instance, welcomed the development and framed DeepSeek as "China's Mistral," highlighting the parallels between the two. But this apparent invitation to new competitors also raises risks. The race to develop smaller, faster models may incentivize companies to bypass essential safety protocols in pursuit of market advantage. Without international guardrails, the innovation race could devolve into a "race to the bottom" (Caroli 2025). The exclusion of the term "safety" from the official lexicon of the Paris AI Summit suggests that this race may have already begun.

The AI Race and Its Security Implications: The Rise of a New Cult of the Offensive

As the AI race intensifies, its most consequential impacts are likely to manifest in the realm of national security—where decisions concern not only strategic advantage, but the fundamental conditions of peace, war, and state survival.

In security studies, the offense-defence balance is a core structural variable that shapes the probability of war, alliance formation, and arms races. When offense dominates, crises escalate more easily; when defence prevails, stability is more likely (Jervis 1978). AI influences this balance not through a single mechanism, but through multiple, intersecting pathways. Its nature as a general-purpose, dual-use technology and "force multiplier" blurs the boundaries between civilian and military use. Militarily, AI is expected to accelerate the tempo of operations, enhance target identification, and increase the precision of strikes—amplifying overall combat effectiveness (Horowitz 2018; Johnson 2019; Bode et al. 2024).

Both Washington and Beijing are embedding AI into their national defence strategies—through "integrated deterrence" and "intelligentized warfare," respectively. In the US case, these frameworks envision a "seamless integration of capabilities" across domains, regions, and levels of conflict—and even among allied partners—with AI playing a central role in addressing joint capability gaps from the operational to the strategic level. Chinese strategic documents

"As the AI race intensifies, its most consequential impacts are likely to manifest in the realm of national security—where decisions concern not only strategic advantage, but the fundamental conditions of peace, war, and state survival."

articulate a similar concept, positioning AI as a foundational enabler of multidomain operations by facilitating cross-platform coordination (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2022; White House 2022; US Department of Defense 2023).

Three military domains exemplify how AI may transform future warfare: cyber operations, autonomous systems, and nuclear weapons.

In cyber operations, AI enhances both offensive and defensive capabilities. It enables stealthier and more adaptive cyber attacks, such as DeepLocker, while also improving intrusion detection and anomaly monitoring. However, efforts to strengthen systems by integrating cyber defenses across domains can inadvertently expand the "attack surface," introducing new vulnerabilities. As a result, the net effect of AI on the offense-defence balance in the cyber realm remains ambiguous (Jacobsen and Liebetrau 2023).

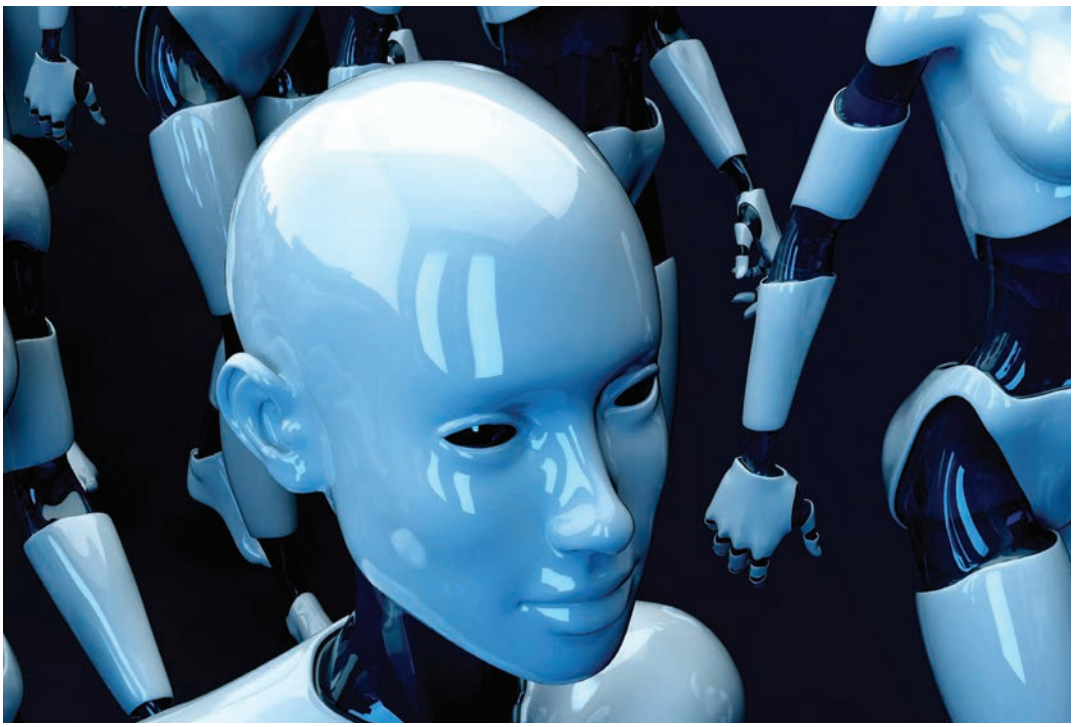
In autonomous weapons systems, AI lowers the cost of conflict and reduces reliance on human personnel. Systems like drone swarms and robotic combat platforms can be scaled rapidly, enabling one operator to control multiple assets. These capabilities may incentivize first-mover strategies and reduce the domestic political costs associated with human casualties. However, defenders may still hold an advantage in localized environments due to their familiarity with the terrain and superior contextual data—especially as large language models rely on dense, high-quality training datasets (King 2024; Schneider and Macdonald 2024).

In the upcoming era of the AI–nuclear nexus, technology enhances both first-strike and second-strike capabilities. AI improves intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, enabling the detection of hidden nuclear forces and supporting precision counterforce targeting. AI-enabled electronic warfare may also paralyze command-and-control systems, producing non-kinetic effects with strategic equivalence. At the same time, AI strengthens early-warning systems, cyber defenses, and automated retaliatory protocols—such as Russia's "Dead Hand." This simultaneous enhancement of both first- and second-strike capabilities introduces strategic ambiguity, and it remains premature to conclude whether the introduction of AI will fundamentally disrupt the stability traditionally sustained by the logic of mutual assured destruction (Johnson 2023).

Thus, AI does not decisively tip the balance toward offense or defence. Instead, its effects are context-dependent and will evolve through action-reaction cycles of innovation. Yet a distorted perception is emerging among policymakers—a new "cult of the offensive." Enticed by AI's promise of speed, precision, and automation, decision-makers may prioritize efficiency over control, heightening the risk of inadvertent escalation. The resulting effectiveness-safety dilemma reflects a troubling trade-off: as military operations grow more effective, they may simultaneously become harder to regulate or halt.

Recent research highlights that this perception gap is driven by a self-reinforcing cycle of beliefs: ambiguous technological progress, coupled with rising expectations of conflict, reinforces elite assumptions about offensive dominance (Selden 2024). Drawing on US and Chinese leadership statements, strategy documents, military publications, and media discourse between 2014 and

2022, this study finds that both countries' elites increasingly view great-power war as inevitable. If this trend continues—while the objective effects of AI remain unclear—then policy-makers on both sides may behave as though AI creates an offense-dominant world. This recalls the pre-World War I security dilemma, where exaggerated confidence in offensive advantage led to catastrophic miscalculation (Van Evera 1984). The spectre of such strategic misjudgment suggests that the AI arms race may not just reshape warfare, but also tilt the world closer to great-power conflict.



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Two Futures for AI: Between Strategic Alignment and Sovereign Autonomy

As the global race for AI development accelerates, the world is approaching a strategic crossroads. One path aligns with the vision of the United States: restricting China's access to advanced AI components through strengthened export controls and developing a tighter, US-led technological ecosystem. The other path warns of the long-term risks associated with such restrictions—including the erosion of international collaboration, fragmentation of global innovation, deterioration of strategic trust, and, above all, diminished national autonomy in AI strategies and action plans. Both perspectives offer compelling arguments and raise urgent questions about the future of AI governance in the Indo-Pacific and beyond.

Advocates of the first pathway argue that limiting access to critical technologies is essential for preserving military advantage, preventing misuse, and maintaining a rules-based order—particularly given concerns about China's challenge to the current international system. From this perspective, alignment with the United States offers access to cutting-edge innovation,

enhanced security partnerships with the world's most capable military power, and safeguards against the authoritarian use of AI. Closer coordination among like-minded countries—through list-based controls, end-use monitoring, and services restrictions—could reinforce US-led efforts to constrain China's access to critical components (Shivakumar et al. 2024; Allen and Goldston 2025). In return, participating countries could expect greater support from Washington in developing their own AI ecosystems, particularly in terms of semiconductor access, computing infrastructure, and the cultivation of elite talent.

Critics, however, caution that these restrictions risk entrenching technological hegemony and deepening global divides. The rise of "sovereign AI" reflects not only a desire for strategic autonomy but also growing unease with exclusion and overdependence on US platforms. Open-source breakthroughs like DeepSeek-R1 show that states can circumvent traditional chokepoints long dominated by American firms. Over-reliance on coercive measures could accelerate the fragmentation of AI development into rival blocs—undermining cooperative frameworks for safety, interoperability, and inclusive innovation across both state and non-state stakeholders (Ray 2025; Wheeler 2025).

Rather than choosing between alignment and autonomy, many countries are pursuing a hybrid strategy—partially engaging in US-led initiatives while hedging by investing in homegrown AI capacity. Even the Indo-Pacific region's three pivotal US allies—South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan—are navigating this middle path. South Korea has committed to acquiring 10,000 GPUs to bolster national computing infrastructure. Japan is investing in projects like ABCI 3.0 and SB OpenAI Japan, as well as instituting regulatory frameworks tailored to specific sectors. Taiwan continues to support domestic models like FoxBrain, rooted in its advanced semiconductor base. For these and other regional actors, the core challenge is not only how to remain competitive, but how to prevent strategic competition from spiralling into technological decoupling and mistrust. Without a credible framework for transparency and restraint, the Indo-Pacific risks becoming a proving ground for digital blocs, exclusionary governance, and misperception-driven military escalation.

"Rather than choosing between alignment and autonomy, many countries are pursuing a hybrid strategy—partially engaging in US-led initiatives while hedging by investing in homegrown AI capacity."

At this juncture, regional actors—whether they are US allies or not—share a broader responsibility: to shape a future for AI that upholds both innovation and security. This means reinforcing global norms of transparency, resisting the erosion of cooperative guardrails, and ensuring that short-term advantage does not come at the cost of long-term peace. Framing the AI race purely as a zero-sum contest between the great powers risks overlooking the vital role middle powers can play as stabilizers, bridge-builders, and norm entrepreneurs in this emerging domain.

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ONE REGION, DIFFERENT NARRATIVES, AND THE WAY FORWARD

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The Indo-Pacific[1] has emerged as the focal point of global strategic competition. It is widely portrayed as a contested space—shaped by great-power rivalries, shifting alignments, and overlapping security architectures. Yet this framing overlooks a crucial dimension. The region is not only a battleground of material power but also of meaning—a site of contestation over the narratives states and actors tell about order, identity, and the future. These strategic narratives are not mere "cheap talk"; they shape how threats are perceived, alliances justified, and legitimacy constructed.

1 Even the terminology used by major powers reflects competing strategic visions. The United States and some partners deliberately promote the term "Indo-Pacific" to signal maritime connectivity and a multipolar regional vision inclusive of India. China, by contrast, consistently uses "Asia" or "Asia-Pacific," reinforcing a Sino-centric framework anchored in continental logic.

This region has become the battleground for competing visions—from the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" to China's "Community of Shared Future for Mankind" to ASEAN's more understated inclusive regionalism. Understanding the region's security landscape, therefore, requires more than tracking naval exercises or trade flows—it demands attention to the narrative architectures that shape state behaviour and the evolving regional order.

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Strategic Narratives and the Indo-Pacific's Fragmented Narrative Landscape

Strategic narratives are structured storylines through which actors make sense of their role in the world and project their vision of international order. They link a nation's past experiences, present policies, and future aspirations into a coherent framework that explains and justifies behaviour (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle 2013). Unlike propaganda or ad hoc rhetoric, strategic narratives are enduring, institutionalized, and performative: they shape not only how a state sees itself, but how it wants to be seen by others. As such, they serve both as tools of persuasion and as mechanisms for structuring alignment, legitimacy, and action in international affairs.

These narratives typically operate on three levels: the systemic, which articulates a vision of the international order; the national, which defines a state's identity and strategic purpose; and the issue-specific, which targets discrete domains such as maritime security, infrastructure, or climate cooperation. In the Indo-Pacific, these levels often blur: visions of regional order are inseparable from questions of national identity and domain-specific interests. For example, the promotion of a "rules-based order" is simultaneously a systemic ideal, a national value for many liberal democracies, and a basis for maritime claims.

At the systemic level, this region is shaped most visibly by the tension between two broad strategic narratives—each advanced by a major power bloc with global ambitions. The first is the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP), initially proposed by then–Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan in 2007 and revived in 2016 as a response to China's growing assertiveness in the East and South China Seas (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2007). FOIP has since been embraced and adapted by the United States, Australia, and India, becoming the conceptual backbone of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and, more recently, AUKUS. Its core tenets—freedom of navigation, rule of law, respect for sovereignty, and the promotion of liberal-democratic values—are designed to uphold a "rules-based order" in the face of what its proponents see as coercive state behaviour and the erosion of international norms.

However, FOIP is not a monolith. While Japan and the United States converge on many of its principles, they diverge subtly in emphasis. Japan foregrounds connectivity, development, and maritime capacity-building—often extending these initiatives to ASEAN and Africa. The US, particularly under the Biden administration, leaned more explicitly into the security dimension, embedding FOIP within the broader strategy of strategic competition with China (US Department of State 2019). Despite these differences, both the US and Japan aim to construct a

Former UN Secretary General and Chairman of the Boao Forum for Asia Ban Ki-moon speaks during the opening ceremony of the Boao Forum for Asia (BFA) Annual Conference 2025 in Boao, in southern China's Hainan province on March 27, 2025. (Photo by AFP) / China OUT (Photo by STR/AFP via Getty Images).

regional order that is open, pluralistic, and favourable to the preservation of liberal international norms. Yet some critics argue that FOIP, particularly in its American articulation, risks becoming a thinly veiled containment strategy—limiting its appeal to actors wary of choosing sides in a binary geopolitical framework.

To counter FOIP, China has advanced its narrative of a "Community of Shared Future for Mankind," which has evolved since 2013 into the overarching discursive framework of Chinese foreign policy (Xinhua 2017). Introduced by Xi Jinping in the context of China's rise as a global power, the narrative seeks to present China as a benevolent force advancing mutual development, civilizational respect, and stability—especially for countries in the Global South. Its core themes include non-interference, respect for the diversity of political systems, and the rejection of zero-sum thinking. While ostensibly universal, the narrative is most visible in the Indo-Pacific through mechanisms like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Global Development Initiative, and forums such as the Boao Forum for Asia.

Rather than a direct ideological counterpoint to FOIP, the "Shared Future" narrative presents itself as an alternative architecture—one in which the regional order is based not on universal liberal norms, but on a more flexible, sovereignty-respecting form of interdependence. Yet this posture is not merely defensive. It implicitly critiques the selective application of rules by Western powers, positions China as a civilization equal or superior to the West, and offers material incentives to reinforce normative alignment.

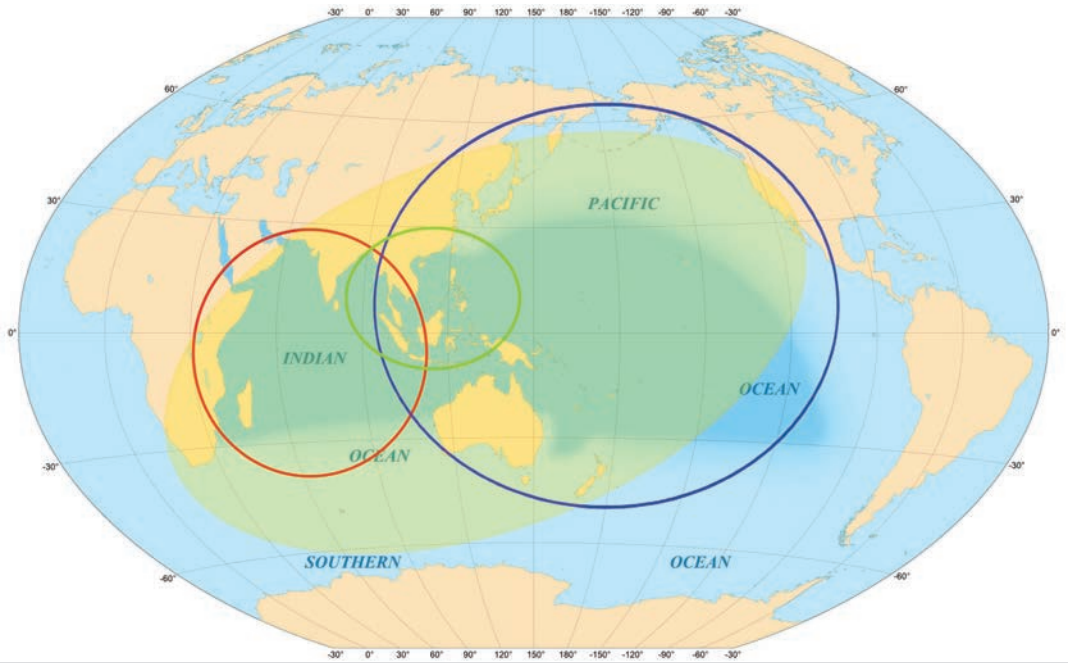

Photo by Eric Gaba via Wikimedia Commons (*https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Indo-Pacific_map_outlines_with_ASEAN_overlay.jpg*).

The result is a dynamic interplay between the two narratives: FOIP positions itself as a bulwark against coercion, while China's narrative recasts such bulwarks as exclusionary blocs designed to preserve Western primacy. This contest manifests not only in rhetorical clashes—such as duelling statements at regional summits—but also in competing institution-building and connectivity strategies. The US and its partners promote initiatives like the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) and the Blue Dot Network as alternatives to Chinese-led infrastructure development under the BRI. Meanwhile, China leverages financial inducements and diplomatic forums such as the Boao Forum to draw regional actors into its orbit, often rejecting FOIP-affiliated efforts as attempts to impose "Cold War thinking." The result is a narrative environment where actors are pressured to align not just materially but ideationally—choosing between two visions that increasingly define the boundaries of strategic legitimacy.

A third, more understated narrative framework comes from ASEAN through its "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific" (AOIP), adopted in 2019 (ASEAN Secretariat 2019). The AOIP neither opposes nor endorses FOIP or China's narrative explicitly; instead, it attempts to carve out conceptual space for ASEAN's role as a convener and stabilizing force. The Outlook is rooted in ASEAN's long-standing principles: openness, inclusivity, respect for sovereignty, and the centrality of ASEAN-led mechanisms such as the East Asia Summit (EAS) and ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). It identifies four key areas for practical cooperation—maritime cooperation, connectivity, sustainable development, and economic collaboration—positioning ASEAN not as a geopolitical bloc, but as a facilitator of functional partnerships across strategic divides.

The AOIP is not a grand narrative of order in the same way FOIP or "the Community of Shared Future" are. It lacks overt ideological ambition and a strong normative claim about how the international system should be organized. However, by downplaying ideological confrontation and emphasizing cooperation on shared challenges, the AOIP seeks to soften the edges of great-power rivalry while reinforcing ASEAN's role as an agenda-setter in regional diplomacy. In doing so, it embodies what might be called a "process-based narrative"—one that privileges rules of interaction over the substance of alignment.

Beyond ASEAN, middle powers such as India, Australia, and South Korea have advanced strategic narratives that assert autonomy while navigating great-power rivalry. India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative emphasizes practical cooperation (e.g., in maritime security, connectivity, and disaster resilience), projecting a vision of inclusive regional leadership rooted in strategic independence. While Australia subscribes to FOIP and AUKUS, it also supports multilateral initiatives like IPEF and the EAS to maintain regional inclusivity. South Korea's 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy marked a shift toward values-based engagement, though with continued hedging on China. These narratives act as strategic improvisations: flexible, issue-driven, and designed to widen maneuvering space in a polarized environment. While none are hegemonic, they dilute the dominant narratives and incrementally reshape the regional discourse.

The Indo-Pacific today is best understood as a dynamic narrative ecosystem—one marked not by a single storyline, but by the interaction of competing and overlapping visions. This narrative competition materializes in ways that are both subtle and consequential. For example, the lack of shared framing of maritime norms and legal interpretations has hindered progress on the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea, as involved parties dispute not just interests but the conceptual foundations of regional order. Similarly, regional digital governance remains fragmented, as divergent narratives shape the adoption of technical standards, data-sovereignty regimes, and cyber-cooperation agreements. These are not merely policy gaps—they are downstream effects of clashing storylines about what the region is, who gets to lead, and how cooperation should be structured.

"The Indo-Pacific today is best understood as a dynamic narrative ecosystem—one marked not by a single storyline, but by the interaction of competing and overlapping visions."

Risks of Narrative Fragmentation and the Way Forward

The growing diversity of strategic narratives heightens the risk that the same actions are interpreted through incompatible frames. A naval exercise described as deterrence in one narrative becomes evidence of encirclement in another. This narrative asymmetry erodes mutual trust, muddles signalling, and heightens the risk of misperception—particularly in flashpoints like the South China Sea or the Taiwan Strait. While the dominant tension lies between FOIP and China's "Community of Shared Future," the ecosystem is more complex than a binary rivalry. Middle-power narratives—such as India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative or ASEAN's AOIP—may lack coercive weight but still challenge hegemonic frames by offering alternative focal points (like connectivity, sustainability, or multipolar dialogue). The result is not just bilateral competition, but an overlapping, multidirectional contest over how the region

is described, which norms should guide behaviour, and whose vision of legitimacy carries weight. In this sense, narrative diversity expands agency—but also complicates the search for shared understanding.

Narrative fragmentation also carries the risk of exclusion and institutional erosion. Hegemonic narratives such as FOIP or the "Community of Shared Future" encode normative preferences that may alienate states unwilling to fully endorse them. Smaller actors—especially in Southeast Asia and the Pacific—can find themselves marginalized in a discourse that increasingly revolves around major-power binaries. Even ASEAN's AOIP, which explicitly rejects bloc politics, has struggled to gain discursive traction outside ASEAN-led forums (Hoang 2022). Meanwhile, the rise of minilateralism and ad hoc groupings has sidelined inclusive regional institutions, threatening long-term coherence and undermining confidence in multilateral diplomacy.

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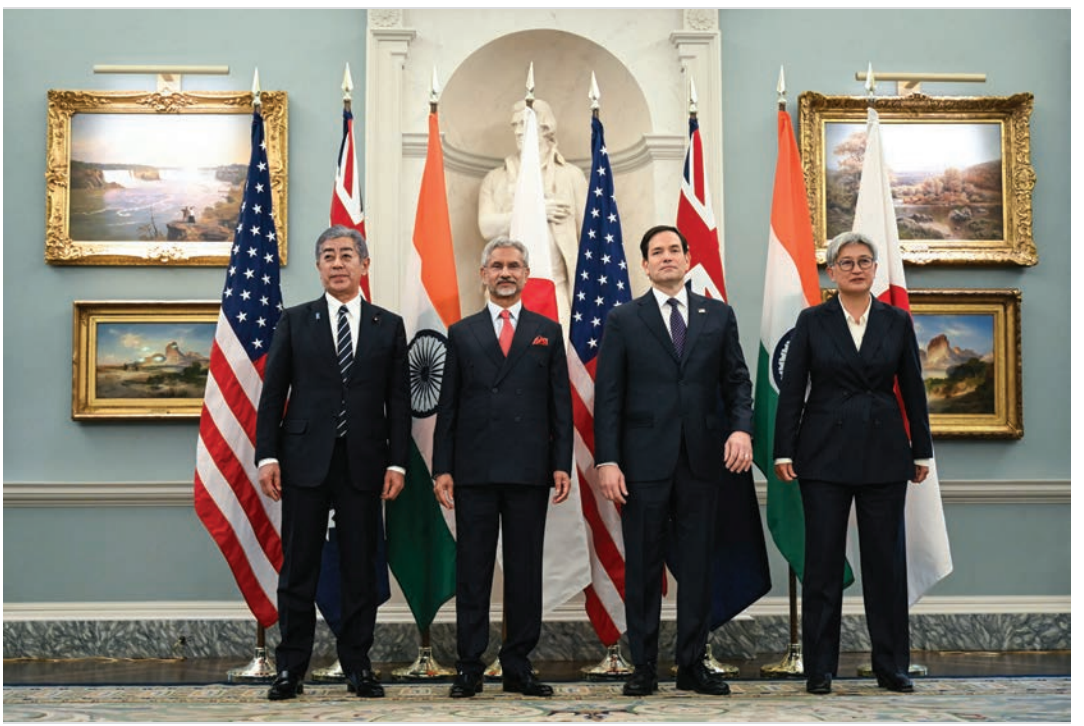
This pluralism need not lead to paralysis (i.e., total diplomatic gridlock), but could create a scenario where normative fragmentation undermines institutional coherence and weakens trust among regional actors. For example, when states attach fundamentally different meanings to concepts like "freedom of navigation" or "inclusivity," it becomes more difficult to achieve consensus on rules or joint action—especially in times of crisis. This risk is not hypothetical. The absence of coordinated narrative framing has already slowed cooperation on cross-domain challenges like pandemic response, critical-minerals governance, and AI ethics. However, this is a risk that can be mitigated—provided the region invests in platforms and habits of dialogue that acknowledge and manage, rather than suppress, narrative diversity.

Moving forward does not demand a single shared narrative, but it does require skillful management of narrative diversity. This requires creating platforms for bridging strategic narratives—spaces where competing visions can overlap or converge on shared challenges. Maritime cooperation, climate governance, AI norms, and pandemic resilience offer concrete issue areas where even ideologically distant actors can find common ground. ASEAN-led institutions and platforms such as the EAS, ARF, and other Track 1.5 forums, including the ASEAN Future Forum and the Asia-Pacific Roundtable, can play a pivotal role not only in coordinating policy, but in coordinating meaning—shared understandings of legitimacy, order, and cooperation.

To move forward, the region needs more than shared interests—it needs strategic narrative stewardship: the intentional curation of discursive space where multiple visions can coexist without collapsing into zero-sum competition. This means investing in institutions that do not just coordinate policy, but mediate meaning—clarifying how terms like "order," "freedom," or "development" are differently understood across actors. ASEAN is well-suited to this task, not as a hegemon or enforcer, but as a discursive convener. Platforms like the EAS and ASEAN Future Forum can serve as venues where narrative tensions are broached, translated, and managed. Stewardship here does not mean convergence—it means ensuring that the region's diversity of perspectives becomes a source of stability rather than confusion.

ASEAN is perhaps uniquely positioned to play the role of regional narrative-bridger—not despite its cautious, consensus-driven style, but because of it. Rather than shy away from the Indo-Pacific framing, ASEAN should continue to assert ownership over it. By articulating a version of the Indo-Pacific that emphasizes inclusivity, openness, and developmental cooperation—while moderating its more adversarial undertones—ASEAN can defuse narrative confrontation while enhancing its strategic relevance. This would not weaken ASEAN centrality, but reinforce it: not as a driver of power politics, but as a steward of meaning and mediator of visions. In a region defined by strategic flux, discursive agility may be ASEAN's most important asset—and its most credible contribution to regional order.



US Secretary of State Marco Rubio (2R) stands alongside Indo-Pacific Quad ministers, L-R, Japanese Foreign Minister Iwaya Takeshi, Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar and Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong, during a photo opportunity before meetings at the State Department in Washington, DC, on January 21, 2025. (Photo by ANDREW CABALLERO-REYNOLDS / AFP) (Photo by ANDREW CABALLERO-REYNOLDS/AFP via Getty Images).

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Diplomats take part in the 31st ASEAN Regional Forum at the 57th Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Vientiane on July 27, 2024. (Photo by Sai Aung MAIN / AFP) (Photo by SAI AUNG MAIN/AFP via Getty Images)

THE HISTORICAL EVOLUTION AND FUTURE PROSPECTS OF THE ASIA-PACIFIC SECURITY ARCHITECTURE

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In the landscape of global geopolitics, the Asia-Pacific region has consistently held a pivotal position. The evolution of its security architecture profoundly influences the fate of regional countries and reflects global political and economic transformations. From the starkly defined ideological confrontations of the Cold War era to the emergence of post–Cold War multilateral mechanisms to the current dynamics of increasing complexity, the Asia-Pacific security architecture has undergone profound changes. In this process, multilateral security cooperation has become the common aspiration of regional countries.

Historical Evolution of the Asia-Pacific Security Architecture

During the Cold War, the security architecture of the Asia-Pacific region was shaped by the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union, prominently seen in the pattern of bloc confrontation. To counter the Soviet Union's influence in the Asia-Pacific, the United States actively established a series of bilateral and multilateral military alliances. Among them, the treaties signed between the United States and Japan and the US and South Korea, and the establishment of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization allowed the US to make key strategic deployments in Asia. The Soviet Union, in turn, supported its allied countries, such as North Korea and Vietnam, providing military aid, as well as political and economic support.

During this period, countries in the Asia-Pacific region were often drawn into disputes between the two major camps, with highly tense security situations and military confrontations becoming the norm. The most intense security conflicts were seen in the Korean Peninsula, with its division and the long-term standoff between North and South Korea, as well as in Vietnam, during its civil war. The sovereignty and economic development of countries in the Asia-Pacific region were affected to varying degrees, with many forced to get involved in the conflicts. The security order in the Asia-Pacific region lacked stability and autonomy.

Following the end of the Cold War, the disintegration of the bipolar world order precipitated a profound realignment within the Asia-Pacific security architecture. The United States emerged as the sole superpower, leading to a significant shift in its strategic objectives and security policies in the region (Baker 1991). In response to this new geopolitical landscape, the interactions between the United States and Japan and between the US and South Korea changed. The US–Japan alliance has undergone multiple rounds of redefinition since the end of the Cold War. In 1996, the two countries signed the US–Japan Joint Declaration on Security, expanding the strategic goal of the alliance from merely defending Japan's homeland to responding to "situations that may emerge in the areas surrounding Japan" (US Department of State 1996). Subsequently, cooperation in areas such as the research and development of military equipment, joint military exercises, and intelligence sharing has continued to deepen. The alliance between the United States and South Korea has also undergone profound changes. In the early post–Cold War period, the US–South Korea alliance briefly underwent a period of adjustment, but with the dynamic developments on the Korean Peninsula, the alliance quickly warmed up and once again became a key part of the United States' alliance system in Northeast Asia. In addition to consolidating relationships with traditional allies, the United States has actively expanded its strategic partnerships with countries such as Australia, building a broader system of allies and partners. The US–Australia alliance was established in 1951 with the signing of the ANZUS Treaty, and has continued to intensify since the end of the Cold War.

In the post-Cold War era, the security architecture of the Asia-Pacific became more complex, with the formation of a preliminary regional security-cooperation framework centred around ASEAN. Regional countries began to proactively explore multilateral security-cooperation

mechanisms to help them manage complex and diverse security challenges—both traditional threats, such as territorial disputes, and non-traditional threats, such as terrorism and transnational crimes, which are difficult for individual countries to handle alone. Moreover, a stable security environment is a prerequisite for economic development and can facilitate regional economic cooperation. Thus, Asia-Pacific states sought to establish multilateral security mechanisms to help promote regional economic development. Additionally, small and medium-sized countries hoped to balance the power of major countries through joint efforts and enhance their say in regional security affairs.

Finally, in the context of globalization—in which the demand for international cooperation is constantly increasing—countries in the Asia-Pacific region also needed to better integrate into the international system by establishing multilateral security mechanisms and promoting the improvement of global governance. The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), established in 1994, marked the first official multilateral dialogue and cooperation mechanism for security in the Asia-Pacific, initiating a new chapter in the resolution of security issues through multilateral mechanisms. Subsequently, additional multilateral security-cooperation mechanisms emerged, such as the East Asia Summit (EAS) in 2003 and the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) in 2010, each playing a significant role at various levels and in diverse fields to contribute positively to the security and stability of the Asia-Pacific.

Dong Jun, China's defense minister, gives an address during the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, on Sunday, June 2, 2024. Photographer: Ore Huiying/Bloomberg via Getty Images.

In recent years, the Asia-Pacific security architecture has undergone complex transformations, particularly since the United States made the strategic pivot to the Asia-Pacific region, which led to a competition between the US-led system of bilateral and multilateral alliances and the emerging multilateral security-cooperation frameworks in the region (Tan 2020). The two systems have fundamentally different security concepts. First, the former centres on traditional security views, emphasizing forward-deployed military and deterrence, while the latter adheres to a comprehensive security perspective, focusing on inclusiveness, cooperation, and dialogue. Second, the United States, relying on its strength, aims to lead regional security affairs, whereas ASEAN strives to enhance its position within the regional security framework through multilateral mechanisms. Third, the US alliance system is concentrated in the military domain, and is therefore tight and exclusive, while the mechanisms promoted by ASEAN cover multiple fields, exhibiting flexibility and emphasizing trust-building. Fourth, the United States attempts to establish a hegemonic order centred around itself, while ASEAN is committed to creating a new regional order based on equality, mutual benefit, and joint decision-making. The bilateral alliance framework, spearheaded by the United States, has been undergoing an upgrade and a deepening process, continuously evolving toward a networked minilateral structure. The US has actively promoted initiatives such as the "Pivot to Asia" and the "Indo-Pacific Strategy" (White House 2022), establishing mechanisms such as the Quad (comprising the US, Japan, India, and Australia) and the AUKUS (Australia–United Kingdom–United States) pact, thereby constructing an "Indo-Pacific" security-alliance framework centred around the United States (Abbas, Qazi, and Ali 2023).

Current Challenges Facing the Asia-Pacific Security Architecture

The Asia-Pacific region stands as one of the most intricate and sensitive geopolitical arenas globally, characterized by the lingering legacies of the Cold War and the emergence of new security dilemmas. To date, a comprehensive regional architecture that encompasses all countries and facilitates shared security among all regional actors has yet to materialize. The principal challenges facing the current construction of the Asia-Pacific security architecture include the following:

First, there is a normative contradiction between the military-alliance system and the regional multilateral security-cooperation mechanisms. The military-alliance framework refers to a network of cooperative military relations formed by two or more countries to promote their common security interests and military-strategic goals through formal treaties, agreements, or other legally binding documents. It is inherently exclusive, emphasizing military buildup and deterrence. Regional multilateral security cooperation, by contrast, underscores inclusivity, balance, and sharing, with a focus on resolving security issues through dialogue, consultation, and collaboration. The dominance of alliance politics and bloc antagonism, especially the military-alliance system in the Asia-Pacific region, has undermined the principles of collective

security that are foundational to regional security governance, resulting in a normative contradiction that exacerbates institutional balancing and competition, and ultimately jeopardizes the long-term peace and stability of the Asia-Pacific (Li 2022, Koga 2023).

Second, persistent regional hotpots continue to threaten regional security. The security landscape of the Asia-Pacific remains one of the most scarred from the Cold War (Mearsheimer 1990; Slater and Wilson 2004). For instance, in recent years, the situation on the Korean Peninsula has spiralled into a cycle of confrontation with its future trajectory fraught with instability and uncertainty—provoking widespread concern within the international community. Similarly, the South China Sea has seen intermittent tensions between regional states, and negotiations on a "South China Sea Code of Conduct" have progressed with considerable difficulty. Additionally, some countries within the Asia-Pacific are grappling with varying degrees of political, security, and social governance challenges, while domestic political transitions and factional struggles also impact regional stability.

Moreover, non-traditional security threats, such as cyber security, terrorism, and climate change, are becoming increasingly prominent, interlinking with traditional security challenges and complicating the landscape of security governance. Cyber-security threats not only jeopardize national information and economic security but may also precipitate international conflicts. With the enhancement of artificial general intelligence capabilities, emerging risks are becoming increasingly apparent. Terrorist activities pose grave threats to social stability, to the personal safety of citizens, and to property within regional countries. Furthermore, issues related to climate change, such as rising sea levels and more frequent extreme-weather events, have profound impacts on regional security. Collectively, these factors pose significant challenges to the security-governance framework in the Asia-Pacific. The existing multilateral security institutions in the Asia-Pacific have their own focuses in addressing non-traditional security challenges and have achieved certain results. However, due to the complexity and dynamics of non-traditional security threats, as well as the diversity of national interests, these multilateral security institutions need to constantly adjust and improve their cooperation mechanisms, strengthen the integration of their resources and build capacity, so as to more effectively deal with these challenges and maintain security and stability in the Asia-Pacific region.

"Moreover, non-traditional security threats, such as cyber security, terrorism, and climate change, are becoming increasingly prominent, interlinking with traditional security challenges and complicating the landscape of security governance."

The Future Trajectory of the Asia-Pacific Security Architecture

Building on the current trajectory, Asia-Pacific countries need to adopt a perspective characterized by common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security. They should enhance communication and coordination to collectively confront diverse security challenges, in an effort to carve out a new path toward security that features dialogue, partnerships, and win-win scenarios over confrontation, alliances, and zero-sum games.

The first priority is to build a balanced, effective, and sustainable security architecture. The future security framework in the Asia-Pacific should embrace inclusivity and eschew Cold War

mentalities—that is, a confrontational mindset that divides states into camps based on binary oppositions, prioritizes ideology, emphasizes military buildup, upholds zero-sum thinking and dismisses the possibility of win-win cooperation, and simplistically and crudely interprets international relations through the lens of friends and foes. Regional countries should be encouraged to collaboratively participate in the development of this security architecture. This can be achieved through the implementation of multilayered and multifaceted confidence-building measures that foster economic cooperation and cultural exchanges among regional countries, thereby enhancing mutual understanding and trust.

The second priority is to continuously strengthen multilateral security cooperation. As the interdependence among Asia-Pacific countries intensifies, multilateral security cooperation will emerge as the predominant approach to developing the region's security architecture. Countries should actively support and refine ASEAN-centred regional security-cooperation frameworks, thereby enhancing security dialogue and collaboration among regional countries in the "ASEAN way"—that is, characterized by consensus, inclusivity, and comfort. Existing multilateral security mechanisms like the ARF and EAS can be further strengthened to improve their capacity and efficacy in addressing regional security issues. Additionally, the region could explore new multilateral security mechanisms, rearrange overall regional security systems, or address specific security issues to respond to the continuously evolving security challenges.

The third priority is to jointly address non-traditional security threats. Given the increasing prominence of these threats, the future security architecture in the Asia-Pacific should place greater emphasis on confronting non-traditional security challenges. Regional countries ought to strengthen collaboration in combatting terrorism, addressing transnational crimes, managing climate change, mitigating public health emergencies, enhancing cyber security, and promoting the governance of AI, collectively developing strategies and measures for response. These countries should establish specialized and functional transnational-cooperation mechanisms to enhance intelligence sharing and coordinated actions, implement monitoring and early-warning systems, and conduct emergency-preparedness drills.

The Asia-Pacific region constitutes a shared homeland for China and its neighbours, and the maintenance of regional peace and stability is a collective responsibility. China is dedicated to the goal of constructing an Asia-Pacific community with a shared future and remains committed to contributing to regional peace and security.

Multilateral security cooperation represents an inevitable choice for the future development of the Asia-Pacific security architecture. China is committed to working collaboratively with regional countries to enhance multilateral cooperation mechanisms, establishing a security architecture that meets the needs of regional countries, and jointly promoting peace, stability, and prosperous development in the Asia-Pacific.

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Photo by Mathieu Durocher, Nunavut Eastern Arctic Shipping Inc.

GEOPOLITICAL DYNAMICS IN THE ARCTIC

WHAT IMPACT FOR ASIA?

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The war in Ukraine has had major consequences for geopolitical dynamics in the Arctic. To a certain extent, the severe tension that has unfolded between Western states and Russia since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine has spilled into the region. However, the bulk of the tension is centred in the European Arctic, along the border between Norway, Finland, and Russia. Some dynamics that prevailed in the Arctic before the outbreak of the war are ongoing despite the conflict. What, therefore, are the geopolitical dynamics in the Arctic in 2025, and what consequences do they have for Asian Arctic strategies?

Geo-economics: the geopolitics of economic activities in the Arctic

Several Asian states have displayed a keen interest in economic activities in the Arctic, especially extracting natural resources, shipping across Arctic waters, and fishing.

Natural resources extraction

The presence of natural resources has been documented for several decades in the Arctic. For instance, the huge Mary River iron ore deposit on Baffin Island in Nunavut was discovered in 1962 but exploited only in 2015, given the high costs of extraction and the low world prices for iron that had prevailed for decades. Several non-Arctic states, and Asian countries in particular, have displayed an interest in the Arctic's extractive resources. Chinese projects in the Arctic have attracted attention because of the debate surrounding the assertion of China's power and its goals in the Arctic, but Chinese companies are not alone in seeking access to resources. There are Chinese mining ventures in Canada, such as the Nunavik Nickel Mine in northern Quebec, owned by Jilin Jien. In Greenland, General Nice owned the large Isua iron ore deposit, but inaction led the Greenlandic government to revoke the license in 2021.

> **"Several Asian states have displayed a keen interest in economic activities in the Arctic, especially extracting natural resources, shipping across Arctic waters, and fishing."**

Chinese involvement has gained a much higher profile in Russia, where Moscow has sought the involvement of Chinese capital to make up for Western sanctions, which began to unfold in 2014 after Russia's takeover of Crimea. Chinese firms are active in the development of LNG in Siberia, especially in the Yamal LNG project, where China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) owns 20 percent and China's Silk Road Fund, 9.9 percent. Russia actively courts Chinese and Indian companies to invest in other extractive projects, notably in coal mining and the Vostok Oil project in the Taymyr Peninsula and other LNG projects in the Gydan Peninsula.

China allowed several Chinese extractive and industrial companies to get involved in Russian Arctic extractive industries. Russia is willing to deepen its integration into the Chinese energy market and pushing for the construction of new pipelines to transport oil and gas to China, as the only two existing pipelines, the Eastern Siberia–Pacific Ocean oil pipeline and the Power of Siberia 1 gas pipeline, have limited capacities below the volumes Russia would like to deliver. However, the project to develop the Power of Siberia 2, a major gas pipeline that could help transport massive gas volumes from Russia's Siberia, is confronted with the high cost of construction—a hurdle made more challenging by China's refusal to pay for it. This refusal underlines the fact that China is indeed inclined to take advantage of Russia's search for new markets and willingness to sell at lower prices, but it does not want to absorb all of Russia's production if it does not need such volumes (Alexeeva et al. 2024).

Shipping

As early as 1993, Japan financed research with its International Northern Sea Route Programme (INSROP) to investigate the commercial feasibility of developing transit shipping along the Northern Sea Route (NSR). Since then, Asian expectations regarding transit can be described as nurtured by high hopes but dashed by the realities of logistical constraints. Transit shipping remains limited and is dominated by Russian companies navigating between Chinese and Russian ports. Few Asian shipping companies have expressed interest in developing commercial transit (Beveridge et al. 2016; Baudu and Lasserre 2024). Some tried but were disappointed, like South Korea's Hyundai Glovis. COSCO SHIPPING Lines backed off during the war in

Ukraine in 2022 for fear of Western sanctions and was replaced by New New Shipping Line. Asian shipping companies have been more successful in developing destinational shipping for natural resources extraction, in particular, LNG transportation from Russian projects in the Yamal Peninsula (China Merchants and Japan's Mitsui OSK Lines) and iron ore shipping from the Mary River iron mine in Nunavut (Singapore's Golden Ocean and Japan and India's Tata NYK Shipping).

The development of Arctic shipping implies the construction of several ice-class vessels, and South Korea and India have developed a keen interest in shipbuilding. India is competing in the market for lower ice-class vessels, while South Korea's Daewoo Shipbuilding & Marine Engineering/Hanwha is developing the more technologically advanced market segment of higher ice-class vessels. Several orders were, however, cancelled after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine.

All Asian states have kept a low profile in the debate on the status of Arctic passages. It may be interpreted, from academic and policy publications, that China, Japan, and South Korea favour the idea of deeming the NSR and the Northwest Passage (NWP) international straits (Lasserre et al. 2025); however, they chose (like the European Union) not to press for this legal interpretation. Chinese and Japanese vessels that venture along the NSR all require permission from the Northern Sea Route Administration, thus tacitly recognizing the de facto control of the seaway by Russia. Attesting to deepening bilateral cooperation, including in maritime affairs, China and Russia signed a Memorandum of Understanding in 2023 to expand cooperation between their coast guards in the Arctic, with the first joint patrol in the Arctic Ocean taking place in October 2024. Though some observers estimated that China might be willing to escort convoys using its icebreakers (Mitko 2018), Russia flatly rejected the possibility (Office of the Secretary of Defense 2020, 114). While that assessment was made before the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, it does underline that there are limits to cooperation between Russia and China.

Photo by Mathieu Durocher, Nunavut Eastern Arctic Shipping Inc.

Fishing

Fishing is a major industry in China, Japan, and South Korea. With the sea ice melting in the Arctic Ocean, opening up vast marine areas in the summer, the question of whether industrial fishing fleets could begin exploiting these new

fishing grounds—and Arctic species, whose biology is not very well known—was raised. Concerns about the possibility that fish stocks could be rapidly depleted were expressed. The Arctic littoral states thus initiated a discussion process that led to formal negotiations. The result was the International Agreement to Prevent Unregulated Fishing in the High Seas of the Central Arctic Ocean, signed in October 2018 by Canada, Iceland, Denmark, Norway, the United States, and Russia, as well as China, Japan, South Korea, and the European Union. The agreement commits the parties to not authorize any vessel flying its flag to engage in commercial fishing in the high seas portion of the central Arctic Ocean, beyond the limits of their Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ).

Potential Causes of Conflict

Increased tension over the definition and claims of maritime zones?

Access to natural resources on the seafloor and subsoil leads to the question of maritime zones, as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) regulates and enables coastal states to define extended maritime areas where they do not have sovereignty but sovereign rights over the fisheries and the resources on the seabed. Beyond the idea of controlling vast maritime expanses is the hope, through EEZs and extended continental shelves, of securing access to fisheries and potentially exploiting extractive resources on the seabed.

Most EEZ claims either have not created international tensions or were settled through negotiations when they overlapped. Famous examples include the maritime border agreements between the Soviet Union and the United States in 1990 and between Russia and Norway in 2010. A notable exception is the Beaufort Sea dispute between Canada and the US, but it has remained very low key since beginning in 1977. Since 2001, when Russia published its extended-continental-shelf claim, several Arctic states have made public their own claims to extended continental shelves in Arctic waters (Lasserre et al. 2023). Many claims overlap in the central Arctic Ocean but—contrary to alarmist analyses—this has not led to severe tensions: no states have objected to the submissions of claims by other Arctic states, even after the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. It rather seems that the movement toward the extension of claims since 2019 could be explained by the desire to maximize potential gains when negotiations begin in more peaceable times in the future.

One exception to this general pattern of tolerance of other Arctic states' claims has been Chinese and Russian criticism of the United States publishing its extended-continental-shelf claim in December 2023. Both China and Russia argued that the US, not having ratified UNCLOS, cannot claim a maritime zone that is codified specifically in this convention, and thus they rejected this move from Washington. It was the first time China officially commented—negatively—on a maritime claim by an Arctic state.

"Since then, Asian expectations regarding transit can be described as nurtured by high hopes but dashed by the realities of logistical constraints."

"All Asian states have kept a low profile in the debate on the status of Arctic passages."

Future for institutional cooperation following the war in Ukraine?

The 2022 invasion crippled the damaged but ongoing institutional cooperation in the Arctic. The Western members of the Arctic Council (AC) suspended council activity. Despite a smooth transition from the Russian chairmanship to Norway in 2023 and the resumption of some activities not involving Russia, the work of the institution remains limited without the participation of the largest Arctic state.

Moscow threatened to withdraw from the AC but so far has not done so, although it left the Barents Euro-Arctic Council in September 2023 (Jonassen and Hansen 2024). Several packages of sanctions decided by the European Union, the United States, and Canada were published with a view to cripple the Russian economy and the development of natural-resources extraction projects in the Russian Arctic. For its part, Russia shut down gas exports through pipelines to Europe in 2022.

The Arctic Council has been formally maintained and working groups have resumed project-level work but without Russian participation. In the long term, this situation is problematic, as a third of the Arctic region is Russian. It may be difficult to contemplate strengthening present cooperation without active Russian participation. This major drawback is a direct consequence of the war in Ukraine. It also means that for several Asian observers, one of the most important opportunities for engagement in the development of Arctic governance is no longer available (Hilde et al. 2024). This setback is particularly acute for China, Japan, and South Korea, and affects their Arctic strategies. Consequently, the relative importance of international Arctic

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conferences as platforms for diplomatic dialogue and policy promotion—often termed track 2 diplomacy—has increased (Lanteigne 2025). At times considered as competing diplomatic structures by Arctic states, despite being designed as complements (Steinveg et al. 2024), Arctic conferences could be increasingly perceived as competition should Russia step up its support for these track 2 events. It remains to be seen, however, what impact these meetings and discussions could have on formal governance of the Arctic region.

Increased military tensions?

The degraded relations between Russia and its Western counterparts in the Arctic fuelled analyses about the militarization of the Arctic. The idea that Russia is increasingly a threat, along with its ongoing cooperation with China, is not new. However, both NATO allies and Russia appear to have sought to avoid escalating the war beyond Ukraine (Troianovski and Barnes 2022). In the Arctic, there are no signs of an increased threat or unusual Russian military activity; what is taking place is an attempt by Russia to strengthen its defence capacities. Indeed, overall military activity is lower than normal, as several Russian military units have been deployed to fight in Ukraine (Fornusek 2024; Hilde et al. 2024). Despite these relatively moderate tensions, the relationship has very much degraded between Russia, on the one hand, and several states on its border—Poland, the three Baltic states, Norway, Finland, and Sweden—on the other. The last two of these states decided to break their decades-long neutrality and join NATO in 2023 and 2024, respectively. These decisions increased political, if not military, tensions in the European Arctic and will likely encourage Russia to keep beefing up its reinforcement strategy. Indeed, the so-called militarization initiated by Russia involves the re-opening of former Soviet bases closed during the 1990s, the development of coastal defenses, the construction of several frigates and destroyers, as well as continued reliance on nuclear deterrence. There are no signs, as of today, of the expansion of long-range military capabilities, whether for the navy or the air force. The re-equipping of the Russian navy and air bases appear aimed at putting an end to two decades of downgrading capacities following the demise of the Soviet Union, as well as developing defensive capacities to protect the Russian Arctic, given its increasing importance to the Russian economy—it produces about 20 percent of Russia's GDP. Other states have also developed capabilities in the Arctic, moves that stem from the need to gain capacities to patrol and control sea spaces that are opening up as sea ice rapidly recedes in the context of climate change. This military buildup (a term more appropriate than "arms race") and the increased political tensions that partly fuel it, do not help foster cooperation and keep the door closed for the participation of non-Arctic states in Arctic governance.

"This military buildup (a term more appropriate than 'arms race') and the increased political tensions that partly fuel it, do not help foster cooperation and keep the door closed for the participation of non-Arctic states in Arctic governance."

Conclusion

The war in Ukraine definitely impacted the geopolitical dynamics of the Arctic region, but maybe not in the way several commentators have highlighted. True, the Arctic Council is severely crippled by the tensions, and it remains to be seen if its legitimacy will remain intact. Russia might try to set up competing institutions and/or embolden existing conferences like the Arctic

Circle with a higher political profile. A tense Arctic is not a good scenario for the development of economic, scientific, and political cooperation that all Asian observers call for.

However, the tension should not be understood as acute. Indeed, Russia is trying to redevelop its military capacities, but they appear directed at beefing up the defenses of the Russian Arctic rather than giving Russia a long-range attack capacity. Besides, no Arctic state has objected to the extended-continental-shelf claims of the other littoral states—except for Russia challenging the US claim, on the basis of non-ratification of UNCLOS by Washington.

Russia has intensified cooperation with China on economic projects and even engaged in developing ties between their respective coast guards—a move that made American military officials nervous as they considered the prospect of armed Chinese vessels entering the Arctic Ocean. Russia and China appear willing to foster cooperation, but there are limits—to the dismay of Russia, which would like to speed up this cooperation. Transit shipping along the NSR remains low, and though China—and to a lesser extent, India—have bought large volumes of Russian oil and gas, China is not willing to foot the bill for all resource development projects in Siberia.

It is thus very difficult to predict the direction that cooperation in the Arctic will take, all the more so since US President Trump took office in January 2025. Asian states are watching, while keeping an eye on their objectives.

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Protest in solidarity in the wake of the conflict between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip after Friday prayers in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on October 13, 2023. (Photo by Annice Lyn/Getty Images)

A REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE WAR IN GAZA AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR RELATIONS IN ASIA

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On October 7, 2023, the political party and armed resistance movement that governs Gaza, the Palestinian Islamic Resistance Movement—better known by its Arabic acronym Hamas—breached Israel's southern borders. At least five other Palestinian armed factions participated in this operation (Ragad et al. 2023), which now bears the distinction of being the deadliest attack on Israel in its history. Israel retaliated by launching an intensive military campaign in Gaza that was punctuated by a week-long truce in November 2023 and a ceasefire from January to March 2025.

Both truces allowed Israel, Hamas, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) to exchange Palestinian prisoners for Israeli hostages on more than eight occasions. As of April 2025, 59 Israeli hostages are still held captive in Gaza while 9,900 Palestinian political prisoners remain in Israeli prisons, 3,498 of whom are detained without charges (administrative detainees) and 400 of whom are children (Addameer 2025).

The Gaza war is without question one of the most pressing security and humanitarian issues of the past two years, both regionally and globally. Following its total blockade of aid into the Gaza Strip from March 2025 (*Al Jazeera* 2025a, 2025b), Israel admitted in May that Gaza only has several weeks before it plunges into a humanitarian crisis and proposed a radical aid distribution system in which representatives of each family collect food boxes at military-controlled hubs (Fabian and Magid 2025). The United Nations Humanitarian Country Team swiftly opposed this plan (United Nations 2025), which would effectively allow the Israeli army to take over aid distribution from international organizations and expose civilians to greater risk of being targeted, disappeared, and detained.

Having already claimed a third of the Gaza Strip as a military buffer zone, Israel recently approved of their military's plan to seize even more Gaza territory (Gritten 2025). As war fatigue creeps in among Israeli army reservists (Reuters and *Times of Israel* 2025), the effects of a persistent and genocidal war (Amnesty International 2024; University Network for Human Rights et al. 2024) on international relations bear examining. This article explores the repercussions of the war in Gaza on relations within Southeast Asia.

Southeast Asian Responses to the Gaza War

The Gaza war not only highlighted the varying stances of the ten ASEAN member states toward Israel and Palestine but also revealed the political utility of the Palestinian cause as a rallying issue for countries with significant Muslim populations (Rubenstein and Shannon 2024).

In Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei—none of which have diplomatic ties with Israel—the dominance of Muslim pro-Palestinian sentiment means that politicians have been compelled to clearly express their condemnation of Israel and support for Palestine. Even Indonesia has intensified its censure of Israel, despite its more ambiguous position on Israel. Indonesia has managed to forge commercial, defence, and intelligence ties with Israel over the decades (Wilson 1979; Conboy 2004; Shamah 2016; Mack 2019)—leading to speculations in the wake of the 2020 Abraham Accords that it could become another Muslim country to normalise relations with Tel Aviv (Singh and Yaari 2020). The lack of diplomatic relations also did not deter Indonesian state agencies from buying and deploying cyber surveillance tools from Israeli tech firms between 2017 and 2020 (Benjakob 2024).

Meanwhile, Singapore has stayed true to its "friend to all, enemy to none" foreign policy; it has condemned Hamas for the attack, recognised Israel's right to defend itself, but also called out unilateral moves by Israel that drive Palestinians toward violent resistance. In 2022, Singapore

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opened its Representative Office in Ramallah months after announcing its decision to open an embassy in Tel Aviv (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore 2022; *Times of Israel* 2022). Singapore's first ambassador to Israel then presented his credentials to the Israeli president in December 2023 amid the departure of several other diplomatic missions, some of them recalled by their governments in protest of the war (Schneider 2023).

Responding to public sentiment, Singapore's Ministry of Education implemented Character and Citizenship Education (CCE) lessons on the war to help students "understand the situation from Singapore's perspective, including the need to preserve cohesion and harmony" (Teng and Qing 2024). Parents' dissatisfaction over the "oversimplified" lessons was raised in parliament and again during the May 2025 general elections, with politicians and candidates debating the relevance of the Israel/Palestine issue to Singaporean politics and society (Abdullah 2025; Lay 2025; *Online Citizen* 2025). The city state's religious institutions also reinforced the state's tight control over public discourse on Israel/Palestine so that it would not tilt one way or the other, with the Mufti and Chief Rabbi expressing empathy and solidarity with one another upon hearing about October 7 (Wong 2023).

Thailand, on the other hand, has projected a more neutral stance by emphasising support for the two-state solution (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Thailand 2024). Multiple Thai and Filipino workers in Israel were killed or captured by Hamas, making these two nations the only ASEAN members to be directly impacted by the October 7 attack. Since then, cross-border attacks between Israel and Hezbollah in the evacuated towns of northern Israel killed five more Thai workers. Israeli officials issued permits for foreign labourers to work in these high-risk zones despite pleas from Thai leaders to stop sending civilian workers to the front lines in the north and south (Tan and Levine 2024).

A Palestinian flag flies amidst destroyed buildings during the Israel-Hamas ceasefire in the Al Remal district of Gaza City, northern Gaza, on Friday, Feb. 7, 2025. Photographer: Ahmad Salem/Bloomberg via Getty Images

The Philippines and Israel share flourishing trade and defence relations, which have arguably deepened since the Gaza war began (Greppi 2024; Saballa 2024). Manila's purchase of Rafael's SPYDER surface-to-air missiles (SAM) and Elbit Systems' Hermes 900 unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) are instrumental in modernising the capabilities of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) (Global Defense Corp 2020; Mandal 2024). This need for Israeli arms underlies Manila's staunch support for Israel and condemnation of Hamas.

With far less skin in the game, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam have expressed concern about the humanitarian situation in Gaza without assigning blame to any party. The military junta in Myanmar, meanwhile, has been occupied with regime survival (Yaacob 2023).

The Impact of the Gaza War on Relations in Southeast Asia

The *State of Southeast Asia Survey*, which captures Southeast Asians' outlooks on regional and global affairs, saw the war in Gaza becoming the region's top geopolitical concern in 2024. Tellingly, in the 2025 edition of the survey, the Israel–Hamas war dropped to fourth place, having been taken over by concern over aggressive behaviour in the South China Sea, global scam operations, and the new leadership in the United States (ISEAS 2025, 18). Indonesia and Malaysia are the only states in which Israel's wars against Hamas (and Hezbollah in Lebanon) remain the top geopolitical concern for its citizens in 2025.

"Tellingly, in the 2025 edition of the survey, the Israel–Hamas war dropped to fourth place, having been taken over by concern over aggressive behaviour in the South China Sea, global scam operations, and the new leadership in the United States."

Recognizing Malaysia's communication channels with actors in Gaza, Thailand requested its assistance in securing the release of Thai hostages during the first truce period in November 2023 (*Malay Mail* 2023). Twenty hostages were released, for which the Thai Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin thanked his Malaysian counterpart.

The economic impact of the war on Southeast Asia is primarily caused by maritime trade-route disruptions; Israel's unabating assault on Gaza and the West Bank has prompted the Houthi in Yemen to launch missiles toward Israel as well as attacks on Israel-linked ships passing through the Red Sea via Bab El-Mandeb. This strait is a major chokepoint connecting Southeast Asia and Europe, which is ASEAN's third-largest trading partner. As a result, 80 percent of US- and Europe-bound ships from Southeast Asian ports have been re-routed via the Cape of Good Hope around the southern tip of Africa, doubling shipping time and freight costs, which in turn hikes the price of goods (Loheswar 2025). The diversion of trade routes has additionally swelled congestion at ports in Indonesia, Singapore, and Port Klang (Kang 2024).

Luckily, ASEAN states' larger trade activity among themselves and with China has somewhat insulated the region from even bigger losses from the Houthi–Israel exchange of fire, to which US and UK missile attacks against the Houthi in Yemen has been added.

Aside from the economic impact of compromised maritime security, two facts of Asian political sociology have tempered the repercussions of Israeli military campaigns in Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon, and Syria in Southeast Asia: first, ASEAN countries are not the preferred destination of Middle Eastern refugees; and second, Asian countries do not have politically significant Arab,

Jewish, and Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) diasporas. These facts limit the impact of MENA armed conflict and mass displacement on the domestic politics of Indo-Pacific states that are not Western democracies.

Southeast Asia hosts some 2.1 million forced migrants. However, the majority of these displaced individuals are not from the MENA region, so the legal status and welfare of MENA refugees tend to be overlooked and more tenuous, and the consequences of their presence is perceived to be more limited in these countries. Refugee policy discussions in ASEAN are dominated by the Rohingya problem.

Despite Malaysia's vocal support for Palestine, the presence of Palestinian refugees in the country has, at times, prompted public unease. In one instance, critical reactions to refugees who expressed dissatisfaction with their circumstances highlighted the occasionally conditional nature of popular solidarity (Zulkifli 2024). As in Indonesia, Malaysia's geographic distance from the Middle East has enabled it to voice strong support for the Palestinian cause without being directly exposed to the security, political, or humanitarian pressures faced by countries in closer proximity to the conflict.

The Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement—which aims to "withdraw... support from Israel's apartheid regime, complicit Israeli sporting, cultural, and academic institutions, and all Israeli and international companies engaged in violations of Palestinian human rights" (BDS 2025)—gained traction in Indonesia and Malaysia following the Israeli ground operations in Gaza. The Malaysian government responded to pressure from the national BDS movement by banning Israeli-based ZIM ships from docking at Malaysian ports and its containers from entering Malaysian territory (Shukry 2023; Li 2024). Still, beyond offering solidarity and symbolic support for the Palestinian people, Malaysia is under no illusion that it is in any position to mediate Israel–Palestine relations.

Coincidentally, the two loudest critics of Israel in Southeast Asia, Indonesia and Malaysia, have been the consecutive chairs of ASEAN throughout the Gaza war. However, it is unlikely that either of them will be able to influence or steer ASEAN into collectively adopting a united position regarding Israel or Hamas. Under Malaysia's chairmanship, ASEAN foreign ministers issued a collective statement supporting the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people to self-determination and to their homeland (ASEAN 2025), but the regional association's safest bet is to keep to their consensus on calling for a lasting ceasefire and the two-state solution, while working on delivering humanitarian assistance to Palestinians.

ASEAN's non-interference principle has been key to keeping the peace among member states. Even when its members occupy polarized stances on Israel and Palestine, no government believes that relations with fellow ASEAN brethren are worth ruining over a distant war that is essentially a political (as opposed to a strategic or security) concern for a few of its members.

The Impact of the War on Southeast Asia–US Relations

Photo by Faldi00 via Wikimedia Commons (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Action_to_Defend_Palestine_in_Jakarta.jpg).

How has the Gaza war affected Southeast Asian nations' relations with Washington, which is Israel's principal ally and has diplomatic and trade relations with all ASEAN countries?

The 2025 *State of Southeast Asia Survey* notes that ASEAN-10 respondents view the US as the second most influential political and strategic power as well as economic power in Southeast Asia, lagging only behind China on both counts. Meanwhile, Southeast Asians' wariness of Washington decreased compared to last year, with 51% welcoming US influence in the region. The Philippines topped the group that welcomes US influence (at 66 percent), while apprehension of US influence is strongest in Indonesia (75.4 percent), Thailand (65.7 percent) and Malaysia (63.8 percent) (ISEAS 2025, 34–35).

Indeed, in Malaysia, the US embassy has had to lay low with their events and engagements, especially during the first year of the Gaza war, when it became evident that President Joe Biden's administration stood faithfully behind Israel's ever-escalating operations not only in Gaza, but also in the West Bank. Pragmatism prevails on the government level, however. Notwithstanding Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's open and direct criticism of Washington's role in enabling Israel, to flourish as a trading nation, Malaysia needs to protect its business with the US, its second-largest trading partner.

On the other hand, the Philippines, faced with repeated aggression by China in the South China Sea, has increased incentive to maintain a secure relationship with the US, whose naval strength is sorely needed to support Manila's maritime operations in its waters.

Underpinning these developments is the security architecture and stability provided by US dominance—which is unlikely to be replaced by China or any other country in the foreseeable

future—which has enabled Southeast Asian economies to conduct business as usual despite maritime route disruptions. More significantly, the war in Gaza did not transform the region's perception of the United States—not even close; no one is surprised by Washington's resolute backing of Israel. Ultimately, Gaza war or not, ASEAN states need US business to further grow their economies.

Conclusion

Relations between ASEAN countries and the US and Middle Eastern states are driven primarily by bilateral diplomacy, which is supported by multilateral engagements to varying degrees of effectiveness. Waning attention to the war in Gaza after eighteen months betrays the nature of Southeast Asian concern over the Israel–Palestine issue: it is political, not strategic.

Owing to the comparatively limited migration of Middle Eastern refugees to and settlement in Southeast Asian countries, the populace is typically not connected to Middle Eastern issues, including the Gaza war, on a sentimental or interpersonal level; they certainly are not invested enough to propel Middle Eastern matters to the top of their nation's foreign policy agendas. Developments closer to home like incidents in the South China Sea are more urgent problems to address.

A more immediate strategic concern is the United States, which under President Donald Trump's administration has imposed trade tariffs on all and sundry, friend or foe. None of the ASEAN states can afford to degrade diplomatic, defence, and trade relations with Washington. Consequently, countries that have been vocally criticizing Israel and the US role in the war will have to tone down their invective, at least until they can ascertain the security of their trade and investment deals with the US.

Finally, strategic alliances and cooperation with Israel, Palestinian political factions, and the principal mediating states between them—the United States, Egypt, and Qatar—continue to be explored and shaped by ASEAN member states in light of the war in Gaza. Yet, Israel's occupation of Palestine, Hamas's October 7 attack, and the ensuing war have shown that while violent conflict and mass displacement in one region can indeed be compartmentalized to a certain extent, they will remain a thorn in the side of bilateral and multilateral engagement in the long run.

“More significantly, the war in Gaza did not transform the region's perception of the United States—not even close; no one is surprised by Washington's resolute backing of Israel.”

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