



INSAP- ASEAN DISCUSSION PAPERS

#2024 - 1102

Leadership Matters in ASEAN

Mohd Khairul Ramli

In the intricate geopolitical arena of Southeast Asia, ASEAN has long been positioned as a key player. ASEAN's leadership often invoked in international summits and diplomatic gatherings represents not only symbolism but also the real, albeit subtle, influence this diverse coalition of member countries wields within the global diplomatic architecture. Particularly in the context of the South China Sea disputes and with Malaysia now officially ASEAN chair, ASEAN's role as a mediator and stabilizing force will be rigorously tested.

To understand why ASEAN's leadership matters in geopolitics, one must examine the institutional framework it provides for regional diplomacy. ASEAN is not a military bloc nor an economic superpower. Its strength lies in its ability to convene and facilitate dialogue among great powers and steering conversations in ways that protect the interests of its members. This influential role is particularly evident in forums such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM-Plus), where major powers like the United States, China, and Russia interact under the ASEAN-led umbrella. Here, ASEAN members, despite their varying sizes and occasionally divergent interests will set the agenda influencing how global powers engage with Southeast Asia.

This quiet yet significant diplomatic strength will be especially relevant as Malaysia assumes ASEAN's leadership role. In recent months, the South China Sea has emerged as a hotspot of strategic competition between China and the United States, with several ASEAN members, including the Philippines, Vietnam, including Malaysia, contesting China's maritime claims. ASEAN's importance in managing these disputes cannot be overstated; its collective voice, even when hesitant, is more impactful than any single member state's voice in engaging great powers. ASEAN's leadership in this situation will be vital for moderating the influence of external powers and maintaining regional balance.

Yet, ASEAN's internal cohesion is fragile. Each member state has its own national interests and political dynamics. Domestic instabilities such as political transitions in Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines, have occasionally diluted ASEAN's ability to present a united front on contentious issues. ASEAN needs to adopt a more strategic mindset and going beyond the traditional "ASEAN Way" of non-interference and consensus. Although this



approach has kept the peace for decades, the evolving geopolitical landscape calls for a more proactive stance. With rising tensions between China and the U.S., ASEAN cannot afford to be reactive or passive; it must take active steps in shaping the regional order, particularly regarding the South China Sea.

Malaysia's position as ASEAN chair places it in a delicate balancing act. It must, on the one hand, uphold its sovereign rights, particularly in its contested claims with China in the South China Sea. On the other hand, Malaysia holds the responsibility of ensuring ASEAN's leadership remains central to regional diplomacy, preventing any domination by external powers. This challenge is intensified by the fact that other ASEAN members, like the Philippines, adopt a more assertive stance toward China's maritime claims, while countries like Cambodia and Laos are more aligned with Beijing's interests. Malaysia's ability to navigate these internal divisions will be a true test of its diplomatic acumen.

ASEAN must adapt to changing geopolitical realities. In a world marked by a "geopolitical recession" where global governance structures are weakening, ASEAN's role as a diplomatic platform becomes increasingly crucial. The geopolitical rivalry between the U.S. and China presents both risks and opportunities for ASEAN. The region could either become a battleground for influence as both superpowers attempt to draw ASEAN member states into their spheres, or it could position itself as a neutral arbiter, a role Malaysia is especially suited for given its history of non-alignment and strategic neutrality.

ASEAN's leadership is not without its limitations. The bloc's consensus-based decision-making has been both a strength and a weakness. While this model prevents any single member state from dominating, it also impedes swift or decisive actions in urgent matters. This limitation has been evident in ASEAN's handling of the Myanmar crisis, where the principle of non-interference has restrained ASEAN's ability to address violence and instability. Nevertheless, ASEAN has demonstrated flexibility when its leadership is under threat. The decision to exclude Myanmar's junta leader from the 2021 ASEAN Summit was a bold statement that demonstrated ASEAN's readiness to adapt under exceptional circumstances.

Malaysia's chairmanship presents an opportunity for ASEAN to reaffirm its leadership role in the region. This task requires not only diplomatic finesse but also a renewed commitment to unity among its members. The South China Sea disputes will remain a critical flashpoint, and ASEAN's capacity to manage these tensions while maintaining positive relations with both China and the U.S. will be essential. ASEAN's strength lies in its inclusivity, ensuring that all



major powers have a stake in the regional order. This inclusiveness has allowed ASEAN to stay relevant despite shifting alliances and intensifying rivalries.

The concept of "bamboo diplomacy," exemplified by Vietnam's balancing of relations with both China and the U.S., offers a model for ASEAN members to navigate the current geopolitical landscape. Malaysia, too, has cultivated strategic partnerships with multiple countries, safeguarding its economic and security interests without fully aligning with any single power. This approach of strategic neutrality grows increasingly valuable in a multipolar world.

Conclusion

In conclusion, as Malaysia assumes the role of ASEAN chair, it faces the dual challenge of balancing its national interests with its responsibility to uphold ASEAN's leadership in regional geopolitics. The South China Sea will undoubtedly serve as a focal point, testing ASEAN's conflict resolution mechanisms and diplomatic coherence. If ASEAN can adapt to new geopolitical realities, balance internal and external pressures, and maintain its inclusiveness, it will remain a formidable force in shaping the future of Southeast Asia and beyond.

13th November 2024

Kuala Lumpur

//END

ABOUT AUTHOR

***Mohd Khairul Ramli** is a Senior Research Officer and Economist at the Institute of Strategic Analysis and Policy Research (INSAP), bringing over a decade of expertise in macroeconomics, microeconomics, econometrics, international trade, and regional geopolitics. With a diverse background in both government and private sectors, his insights have been highlighted in newspapers and published in peer-reviewed journals, including *The Engineering Economics*, *International Journal of Economics and Management*, and the *Korea Institute for International Economic Policy (KIEP)*.*

For information on INSAP, please contact:

INSTITUTE OF STRATEGIC ANALYSIS AND POLICY RESEARCH (INSAP)

Suite 5.01, Level 5, Wisma MCA

163 Jalan Ampang, Kuala Lumpur

MALAYSIA

Website: www.insap.org.my

Email: insapmalaysia@insap.org.my