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INSTITUTE OF STRATEGIC & INTERNATIONAL STUDIES (ISIS) MALAYSIA



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Crisis in an interregnum

What the changing global order means for Malaysia

How Gaza war could shift Middle East geopolitics

Wishlist for Malaysia's ASEAN chairmanship 2025



ISIS Malaysia

The Institute of Strategic & International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia is the country's premier think-tank with a mandate to advance Malaysia's strategic interests. As an autonomous research organisation, we focus on foreign policy and security; economics and trade; social policy and nation-building; technology and cyber; and climate and energy.

We actively conduct Track-Two diplomacy, promoting the exchange of views and opinions at the national and international level. We also play a role in fostering closer regional integration and international cooperation through forums, such as Asia-Pacific Roundtable, and networks like ASEAN Institutes of Strategic & International Studies network, Pacific Economic Cooperation Council and Network of East Asian Think-Tanks.

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Editors' Note

This issue of *focus* expounds on the key issues covered during the 37th Asia-Pacific Roundtable (37APR), one of the Institute of Strategic & International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia's flagship conferences.

The 37APR was convened from 4-6 June 2024 with the theme "Crisis in an interregnum", reflecting the current state of global affairs where norms and mechanisms that have shaped the international order are breaking down, and no longer able to respond to the adverse challenges of the day.

The roundtable sought answers to distinct questions, such as how established and emerging middle and major powers would operate in this interregnum and if they would seek common ground and cooperation. Role-players also tried to discern what emerging structures and rules are being shaped in this complex environment. Malaysian Prime Minister Dato' Seri Anwar Ibrahim who delivered the keynote address shared his perspectives on the failure of existing international cooperative mechanisms and the rise of strategic configurations of consequence, as a product of this interregnum.

A key topic covered in this issue is what the changing global order and strategic competition means for states, with perspectives from Malaysia, India, China and the European Union (EU). It also covers the dire situation in Gaza with two perspectives on Middle East geopolitics.

This *focus* has an entire section dedicated to Malaysia's upcoming ASEAN chairmanship with views from Southeast Asian experts, including the Secretary-General. There are also articles on the state of global geoeconomics with a focus on Malaysia's competitive advantages, cooperation opportunities for ASEAN with Australia, India and the EU respectively, the impact of Artificial Intelligence on military capabilities and the North-South divide in addressing the climate crisis.

These articles are written by ISIS Malaysia researchers, 37APR role-players and collaborators and members of the ASEAN-ISIS network. The editors of ISIS *focus* remain ever grateful to all contributors and readers for your unwavering support. We wish you a productive reading.

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The Asia-Pacific Roundtable

The Asia-Pacific Roundtable (APR) is the signature international conference of the Institute of Strategic & International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia convened on behalf of the ASEAN Institutes of Strategic & International Studies (ASEAN-ISIS) network.

The APR is one of the region's premier Track-Two gatherings and ranked among the world's top 20 think-tank security conferences. From its modest beginnings at ISIS Malaysia's conference room in the late 1980s, the APR has grown significantly in scope, depth and size, attracting the participation of policymakers, thought leaders, intellectuals, scholars, officials and journalists to address strategic issues concerning the Asia-Pacific and the world at large.

The APR has been held annually since its inception in 1987 and its long-standing success is a result of the strong support from successive Malaysian prime ministers and regional leaders. The roundtable brings together the best minds in the region and from around the world to stimulate frank discussions and serious policy debate on a wide range of topics. Over the years, the APR has hosted participants from Southeast Asia and the wider Asia-Pacific, North America, Europe, South Asia and the Middle East.



What the changing global order means for Malaysia

**ASEAN chairmanship in 2025 an opportunity to
mitigate worst aspects of geopolitical rivalry**

Datuk Prof Dr Mohd Faiz Abdullah

As the world's economic order unravels in tandem with the gradual disintegration of the international rules-based order, we are entering the phase of interregnum – a shift from an order defined by American primacy to one that is yet undefined. A glimpse of what may come was explored at the recent 37th Asia-Pacific Roundtable, one of the region's top security conferences.

In the words of Prime Minister Dato' Seri Anwar Ibrahim, "the geostrategic horizon ahead is overcast with ominous signs of foreboding, foreshadowing the critical risks, hazards and potential catastrophes in our path that we ignore only at our peril". The prime minister emphasised that navigating these treacherous geopolitical waters, Malaysia will continue to uphold its own principles when dealing with major powers in the face of multiple interlocking crises.

Common security interests

In the Asia-Pacific region, rivalry among the majors has necessitated middle and smaller powers to reassess and adjust their national security interests to address threats, whether perceived or real. This process has revealed that the Asia-Pacific shares more security interests and strategies than previously thought. While that may lend some degree of mutual reassurance, the reality bites hard. That's because the commonality of security interests and strategies brings cold comfort in the face of ongoing strategic competition, economic rivalry and differing visions for the preferred regional order.

The trepidation felt by middle and smaller powers in the Asia-Pacific is further accentuated by attempts to bring security related discussions into trade and economic platforms that have traditionally avoided such controversial topics, for example, APEC.

Closer to home, the strategic geography of Southeast Asian nations between the sea links of the Indian and Pacific Oceans means that the major powers have a lingering

presence in the region, bringing their rivalries with them and piling on the pressure for the other powers, littoral or otherwise, to pick sides.

China's re-emergence as a significant player and its attempts to redefine the regional architecture, contrasted with the United States' containment-driven approach, have escalated both powers towards greater confrontation, particularly in the South China Sea.

With the prospects for consensus, cooperation and coordination via multilateral governance mechanisms getting dimmer by the day – thanks largely to institutional inertia and the lack of willingness to find common grounds – small and middle countries can neither let the grass grow under their feet nor afford to be "at the space in between" of the superpower rivalries for too long.

ASEAN's central role

In this regard, ASEAN and its inclusive regional strategy might be just what the doctor ordered to balance the interests of the outside powers. ASEAN's firm foundation of centrality, unity and non-alignment, together with its enhanced collective economic weightage, confers on this regional bloc a position of significance. ASEAN is also proof that carefully crafted cooperation can benefit its members that are extremely diverse in size, geography, culture, income level and resource endowment.

Malaysia is preparing for its ASEAN chair in 2025 as we move forward with the ASEAN Community Vision 2045. It is imperative that ASEAN punches above its weight and exceeds expectations in promoting trust through diplomacy and sustained dialogues. ASEAN needs to be free from interstate conflict and able to maintain its balance at the intersection of great power interests in the region. This, in turn, will ensure that ASEAN remains in the central role in the evolving regional architecture.

ASEAN plays a crucial role in the global economy. The region's combined GDP makes it one of the largest economies in the world, fostering significant trade and investment opportunities. The economic integration within ASEAN enhances the competitiveness of its member states, allowing them to attract more foreign direct investment and benefit from economies of scale. Moreover, its strategic location at the crossroads of global trade routes further amplifies its importance as a hub for commerce and industry.

Given ASEAN's prominence in the regional political economy, Malaysia aims to rejuvenate convening and norm-building mechanisms, namely, the East Asian Summit and ASEAN Regional Forum, by focusing on more contemporary issues. This is essential in clinching more tangible and impactful policy outcomes and revitalising these processes as an effective entity within the overall ASEAN ecosystem.

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Malaysia is preparing for its ASEAN chair in 2025 as we move forward with the ASEAN Community Vision 2045. It is imperative that ASEAN punches above its weight and exceeds expectations in promoting trust through diplomacy and sustained dialogues.

ASEAN will remain unpretentious in its endeavour to get on the front foot and welcome productive yet meaningful relations with our strategic and comprehensive partners as well as friends in the Global South. Yet we should remain committed to maintaining and deepening our relations with the Global North and ASEAN's long-standing dialogue partners, the US as well as the European Union. At the same time, ASEAN should also look forward to enhancing relations with the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States, Gulf Cooperation Council and MERCOSUR, the South American trade bloc.

Yet difficult issues confront ASEAN, with the crisis in Myanmar and the South China Sea dispute being among the most intractable, bearing longstanding ramifications for the region and beyond.

Myanmar, South China Sea issues

Malaysia will be under tremendous pressure to move the needle forward on the crisis in Myanmar. No matter how daunting, it will be essential for Malaysia to work with ASEAN member states and dialogue partners that have influence with the various stakeholders. Anwar has clearly stated his commitment to address the issue, as doing nothing is not an option. Yet we must remain cognisant of the various changes taking place in Myanmar, including discussions by numerous stakeholders on its future as a federation, or if the fighting continues indefinitely, the possibility of Balkanisation.

James Baldwin opines that “people are trapped in history and history is trapped in them.” Too sweeping perhaps and TS Eliot should provide some relief: “History may be servitude, History may be freedom.” Either way, we forget history at our own peril.

It is in times of momentous geopolitical convulsions that we need to cast off our pessimism in favour of the possible and initiate discourse. With the crises and

conjunctures happening right now, whether it is the genocide of Palestinians in the Middle East, war between Ukraine and Russia and closer to the region, the conflict in Myanmar and rising South China Sea tensions, it is certain that multiple configurations of alliances underscored by the mushrooming of mini-lateral alignments will be unable to serve the cause of peace. There is a need to return to a rules-based approach and value-based leadership, instilled in every type of bilateral or multilateral relationship.

It is more important than ever for all countries to “cling to the law” more firmly or risk more chaotic collapse if the ruptures we are witnessing are not sealed. Whether or not the battle between the major powers will lead to zero-sum game, we, collectively, cannot afford to weather another turbulence in the realm of international order. Averting such a debacle warrants a return towards respecting and observing the rule of law and upholding the values of integrity and accountability.

Indeed, the onus is on the major powers to aspire to be responsible participants in the international system and avoid being the “spoilers” of global peace. In our region, it is vital for ASEAN through its mechanisms, to lead the major powers in mitigating the worst aspects of their geopolitical rivalry. Malaysia will use its capacity to shape these new contours as we remain steadfast to our non-aligned, open and peaceful foreign policy, as we have done over the last 67 years of independence.



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Datuk Prof Dr Mohd Faiz Abdullah
Chairman
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Asia's growing agency in new Cold War

Regional actors need internal cohesion, strong leadership, judgment and political will to engage with great-power rivalry

Prof C Raja Mohan

Conventional wisdom suggests that great-power conflict severely constrains the political agency of others, including regional powers and small states. As the United States-China rivalry envelops Asia, it has become commonplace in the region to argue that Asian states don't want to choose.

In Asia's real world though, it is not question of picking a side but of navigating the reality of great-power rivalry that the region can't control. Recent history of international relations suggests that great-power rivalry increases the agency of states that are capable and willing to seize the possibilities that emerge. Like the Cold War in the second half of the 20th century, the current great-power conflict creates considerable room for manoeuvre for regional actors, big and small.

Recall that in the earlier Cold War, many Asian states refused to abide by the presumed rules of the conflict between the US and the Soviet Union. They were willing to challenge the ideological framing of the Cold War and the claim, from both Washington and Moscow, that their battle was between "good and evil". While some chose non-alignment, other Asian states bargained with either or both superpowers for their support.

As the Cold War unfolded and the competition between the US and the Soviet Union intensified, they sought to win friends and influence the vast number of states that were uncommitted to one side or the other. Development assistance, arms supplies and capacity building were offered by both sides to key countries of interest.

Tracing geopolitical rivalry

Jawaharlal Nehru's India, for example, not only received aid from both sides but was the biggest recipient of external assistance from Washington and Moscow. Mao Zedong's China switched from an alliance with the Soviet Union in the 1950s to the forging of a productive political and economic partnership with the US and the West in the



In the earlier Cold War, many Asian states refused to abide by the presumed rules of the conflict between the US and the Soviet Union. They were willing to challenge the ideological framing of the Cold War and claim that their battle was between 'good and evil'.

1970s. Egypt moved from a non-aligned orientation to a strategic partnership with Moscow and then broke with Russia for a security partnership with the US. Several smaller states, too, followed this pattern of bargaining with the great powers.

In the post-Cold War era that followed the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the great powers were in harmony with each other. Each of them sought greater economic cooperation with the others. The creation of the World Trading Organisation in 2000 and China's membership in 2001 saw the emergence of a single framework to govern global commerce. This peaceful, cooperative and "rules-based order" was indeed beneficial to most but it left little agency for many that had to perform subordinate policy sovereignty in many domains to the WTO rules. Some multilateral institutions at the global level, too, began to assume the power to intervene in the internal affairs of the states.

Renewed tensions between the West and Russia, on the one hand, and between the US and China, on the other, as well as the

“partnership without limits” between Beijing and Moscow have set in motion an intense geopolitical rivalry. Given the salience of the economic and technological dimensions of the new Cold War, the old rules on cross-border trade, investment and technology are breaking down.

Leveraging on ‘advantages’

While this complicates the predictable global environment of the last several decades, it also has enhanced the leverage of countries that have something of value to the great powers. It could be a strategic location, for example. Consider, for example, the growing strategic focus of the great powers on the island states of the Indo-Pacific. As potential sites for bases and facilities, islands on or around the sea lines of communication acquire considerable significance in the maritime competition between the major powers.

The presence of critical minerals that have become so central to the pursuit of green and digital technologies has given countries great leverage in negotiating with the major powers. Niche capabilities, such as semiconductor production, have propelled countries like Taiwan to the centre-stage of international affairs. Countries seeking to develop their domestic industrial and other infrastructure today can benefit from the rivalry between China’s Belt and Road Initiative and the infrastructure development initiatives of the G7 countries.

The war in Ukraine has seen the intense competition between Russia and the West to win support for their respective narratives on the war. More importantly, Europe has turned to Asia for weapons supplies amid the pressure on the defence industrial production in the West that was not geared up for the prolonged war of attrition between Russia and the Ukraine.

North Korea has become a major supplier of ammunition for Russia. In return for its



Renewed tensions between the West and Russia... and between the US and China, as well as ‘partnership without limits’ between Beijing and Moscow have set in motion an intense geopolitical rivalry.

valuable support to Moscow, Pyongyang has gotten renewed Russian strategic boost in the form of a security treaty and commitments to bolster its broader national military capabilities. This has allowed North Korea to gain more room for manoeuvre between South Korea, Japan, China and the US. Meanwhile, South Korea has become a sought-after supplier of advanced weapons for Europe.

Having a valuable location, natural resources or a niche industrial capability, however, does not automatically translate into strategic gains. Regional actors need internal cohesion, strong leadership, prudent judgment and the political will to engage with great-power rivalry. Miscalculations, however, could turn out to be costly and turn the regional actors into theatres of great power conflict.



Prof C Raja Mohan

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Inevitable peace between China-US

Major nuclear powers should act as deterrent
to war

Victor Gao



Since 2017, the United States' bellicose clamours for action against China have increased in tandem with accusations that China is the root cause of all its problems. The US has threatened all-out measures against China, including military showdown and war.

Such warmongering is sometimes backed up by renowned American scholars through books like *Destined for War* and other pamphlets like *One Hundred Years Marathon*. On the other hand, there are scholars and experts with admirable intentions, who talked about *Avoidable War* and *Accidental Conflict* between China and the United States.

After the assassination attempt against former President Donald Trump and the addition of Senator JD Vance to the Republican presidential ticket, there is more alarm, lest the US government, especially under a second Trump administration, resorts to extreme measures to pull the rug from under China-US relations.

I believe the destined-to-war analysis is fundamentally flawed. Without disputing the academic excellence or its scholarship, no mention was made that all the cases of war analysed in great detail over the centuries were all conventional wars, whereas China and the US are major nuclear powers armed to the teeth, rather than conventional weapon powers.

Nuke weapon fears

One simply cannot apply conclusions scientifically derived at from analysing conventional wars to nuclear powers. Other things being equal, having nuclear weapons at their disposal should have completely changed their respective ways of sizing up each other, both in peace as well as in war, potential or actual.

While the US has one of the largest and most lethal nuclear arsenals in the world, China has never disclosed the exact number of its



One simply cannot apply conclusions scientifically derived at from analysing conventional wars to nuclear powers... While the US has one of the largest and most lethal nuclear arsenals in the world, China has never disclosed the exact number of its nuclear warheads.

nuclear warheads. For many years, China has refused to enter nuclear-weapon-reduction negotiations with either the US or Russia.

Beijing has always insisted that its policy of no-first use of nuclear weapons against any country and no use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear-weapon countries and nuclear-weapon free zones should effectively remove any country's concern about China's nuclear weapon programme.

As to the numbers of nuclear warheads in its possession, China philosophically refuses to disclose and assures every country that it will have enough nuclear warheads to launch an annihilating retaliation against any country which dares to launch a nuclear attack.

Any country wishing to dismiss China's assurances do so at its own peril, especially now that it has dazzled the world by being the first and the only country to land a lunar probe on the far side of the moon and to have flown back safely to the earth with lunar soil. Further, it is reasonably expected that

in this round of lunar exploration, China is well positioned to be the first country to land Chinese taikonauts, both man and woman, on the moon and get them back safely to Earth.

Third inevitability

The conclusion should be clear: between China and the US, war is not and should not be an option, because neither country can achieve anything meaningful through war against the other country without suffering mortal destruction. Such a war will be mutually destructive, triggering Armageddon not only for the two of them, but for mankind.

This should lead to the inevitable peace between China and the US. There is saying that nothing is certain except death and taxes. Now a third inevitability should be added, the inevitable peace between China and the US.

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Any country wishing to dismiss such China's assurances will do so at its own peril, especially now that it has dazzled the world by being the first and the only country to land a lunar probe on the far side of the moon and to have flown back safely to Earth with lunar soil.

Such inevitability does not need to be based on love for each other or achieving identical values. How could anyone in the right mind expect both to have the same values? China has 5,000 years of uninterrupted civilisation and unique values accumulated over the millennium while the US has only about 400 years' history since the Europeans landed.

Their differences should not drive them to decouple from each other or launch wars against each other but should enrich the two countries and mankind. “Your God for you and my God for me” should be the megatrend for China and the US.

And don't do unto the other what I don't want the other do onto me should be the motto for both. China and the US need to get along with each other, not in war, but in inevitable peace.

The sooner the US extricates itself of the Tonya Harding syndrome (an act of sabotage where Harding, scheming to retain the US national figure skating championship, whacked her closest competitor Nancy Kerrigan's kneecap), the better.

Whether Kamala Harris or Donald Trump or anyone after them in the White House, they need to accept this inevitability of peace between China and the US.



Victor Gao
Vice-President
Centre for China & Globalisation

How EU approaches major-power rivalry in Southeast Asia

Blocs have more in common than differences, spirit of consensus could lead to regional prosperity

HE Sujiro Seam



The European Union (EU) approaches the major-power rivalry in Southeast Asia based on the combination of its principles, interests and institutions, and favours cooperation over confrontation, integration over disintegration but, above all, engagement and partnership.

First, the EU defends and promotes the principles of the rules-based multilateral order. Those principles are enshrined in the United Nations Charter: sovereignty, territorial integrity, peaceful resolution of conflicts, prohibition on the use of threat of use of force and primacy of the rule of law. These principles are shared by ASEAN because they are indeed universal principles.

Second, these principles are aligned with the EU's interests. The core interest of the EU, its aspiration really since the creation of its precursor, the European Community of Coal and Steel in 1951, has remained to achieve peace and prosperity through democratic institutions and market integration. This aspiration, as well as the awareness that regional interests are more than the sum of national interests, is shared by ASEAN.

Third, the EU can count on solid institutions: the European Council and Council of the European Union representing the member states respectively at leaders' and ministerial levels; European Commission, with the power to propose and implement policies; European Parliament as co-legislator with the Council of the European Union; European Court of Justice as the judicial branch of the EU. ASEAN institutions might appear less sophisticated but are anchored in regular summits, bringing the legitimacy of leader-led processes.

Many commonalities

The EU favours cooperation over confrontation. Its strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific is not meant to confront any country but to cooperate in seven priority areas – prosperity; green transition; oceans; digital; connectivity; defence and security;

human development – with all the countries in the Indo-Pacific and like-minded partners. ASEAN is animated by the same spirit and its Outlook on the Indo-Pacific offers a comparable platform for cooperation over confrontation.

The EU favours integration over disintegration. The illegal war of aggression of Russia against Ukraine and the situation in Myanmar are forces of disintegration in Europe and Southeast Asia. However, the EU remains an attractive model and nine countries have candidate status for accession (Albania, Bosnia Herzegovina, Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Türkiye and Ukraine). And so is ASEAN, with Timor-Leste applying to join.



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Above all, the EU favours engagement and partnership. The EU has been an ASEAN dialogue partner for 47 years. It became a Strategic Partner on 1 December 2020 and the leaders of the EU and ASEAN met for the summit commemorating 45 years of dialogue relationship on 14 December 2022.

The EU-ASEAN engagement is reflected in the joint leaders' statement and plan of action for 2023-2027 endorsed during that summit. It covers all three ASEAN pillars: political and security, economic and sociocultural communities.

The EU has manifested its desire for more engagement with ASEAN, in particular through regular summits every five years and the celebration of 50 years of dialogue relationship in 2027 and a special summit to allow the new EU leaders, following the elections of 6-9 June 2024, to meet with ASEAN leaders in 2025. The EU also signalled its interest in attending the East Asia Summit as guest of the chair, like in 2022, recognising the centrality of ASEAN in the regional architecture.

Display of soft enabler

In the major-power rivalry, the European Union is not a hard power, but a “smart enabler”, to use the formula proposed by the EU high representative and vice-president for the Common Foreign and Security Policy. For example, the EU has the capacity to plan, coordinate and manage operations on maritime security, off the Horn of Africa (Operation Atalanta) or in the Red Sea (Operation Aspides). With ASEAN member states, the EU offers engagement and partnership through its projects on Enhancing Security In and With Asia (ESIWA) and Critical Maritime Routes (CRIMARIO).

For ASEAN, the EU is also a soft enabler. It is its third largest trading partner and foreign direct investor. In that regard, a region-to-region free trade agreement remains the long-term objective, with bilateral FTAs with



For ASEAN, the EU is also a soft enabler. It is its third largest trading partner and foreign direct investor (and) a region-to-region free trade agreement remains the objective.

ASEAN member states serving as building blocks towards this objective. The EU is also a major development partner, with €250 million (RM1.26 billion) of regional projects and €4.2 billion in investment in infrastructure, in the framework of its Global Gateway Initiative.

In its engagement with ASEAN, the EU values its approach based on a non-confrontational diplomacy, mutual respect and spirit of consensus. The EU and ASEAN cannot agree on everything, but their desire to work together is stronger than their differences. The ASEAN-EU ministerial meeting joint statement of 2 February, including on sensitive issues like Ukraine and Myanmar, South China Sea, Korean Peninsula or Middle East, is the best example of this spirit of consensus.



HE Sujiro Seam
Ambassador of the European Union to ASEAN



India's G20 presidency offers Global South a 'reset'

New Delhi attempts to bring highly diverse stakeholders together to act on global challenges

Prof Harsh V Pant

When New Delhi unveiled the logo, theme and website for India's presidency of the G20 in November 2022, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said: "(It) is a representation of hope in these times. No matter how adverse the circumstances, the lotus still blooms." Indeed, India took the helm of the G20 at an inflection point in contemporary history, when the word "adverse" seemed only apt in describing the state of the world order. "India's G20 presidency is coming at a time of crisis and chaos in the world," Modi had said. "The world is going through the after-effects of disruptive once-in-a-century pandemic, conflicts and lot of economic uncertainty."

India has been keen to play the role of a "leading power" – one that sets rules and shapes outcomes – and this presidency could not have come at a more opportune time to showcase India's capabilities.

The world is churning and the challenges are aplenty: the Covid-19 pandemic, Russia-Ukraine conflict, US-China contestations and withering away of the multilateral order are fracturing the world in unprecedented ways.

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At a time of this global fragmentation – and when the very existence of Earth is being threatened by a massive climate crisis – the G20 is perhaps the only platform of its kind that could claim a degree of legitimacy.

Many of the assumptions that have guided our engagements in the past three decades have fallen by the wayside. The post-Cold War world – nay, "History" itself, as we knew it – can truly be said to be over. The world is grappling with the fundamental transformations brought in by shifting power balance, technological overreach and institutional decay.

These underlying shifts have been exacerbated by the pandemic and Ukraine conflict, resulting in global inflationary pressures, food and energy crises, and widespread economic downturn. Nations are frantically scraping their coffers to provide for their citizens' basic needs and we are standing farther from achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

At a time of this global fragmentation – and when the very existence of Earth is being threatened by a massive climate crisis – the G20 is perhaps the only platform of its kind that could claim a degree of legitimacy. Although it might be too much to expect the G20 to deliver the world from its contemporary challenges, its member states are home to 67% of the global population and they account for nothing less than 85% of global GDP and more than 75% of global trade.

Therefore, it has the potential to revive our faith in effective multilateralism. And this tall task needs a kind of leadership that India today is in a singular position to provide.

Focused on G20

The G20 is unique in so far as it brings together the developed and the developing nations to discuss and create solutions to global governance challenges. India tried to bridge this divide by forging consensus on key global issues.

New Delhi has been vociferous in giving voice to the aspirations of the Global South at a time when few global powers have neither

the time nor resources to cater to the most vulnerable – occupied as they are with their own domestic woes.

The pressures of global disruption are being absorbed most by the poorer economies and few powers are willing to consider their challenges with the seriousness they deserve. In recent years, India has taken up their concerns more forcefully at multiple global fora, be it the United Nations Security Council, World Trade Organisation or World Health Organisation.

For its G20 presidency, India focused attention on the following areas: women's empowerment, digital public infrastructure, health, agriculture, education, culture, tourism, climate financing, circular economy, global food security, energy security, green hydrogen, disaster-risk reduction and resilience, fight against economic crime and multilateral reforms.

While the G20 was initially formed to manage global economic and financial challenges, its remit has grown and with the current conflation of geopolitics and geoeconomics, the group's centrality to the global governance discourse is only likely to grow. New Delhi has long insisted that the world needs to "redefine" its conversations on globalisation to include social and humanitarian issues, such as terrorism, climate change, and pandemics, as well as the financial and economic impediments to genuine progress and sustainable development.

India's G20 presidency tried to move the world away from polarisation towards a greater sense of solidarity. Its own reality of being a multicultural democracy should guide it well in bringing together highly diverse stakeholders to cogitate and act on global challenges.

The theme of G20 India 2023 – Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam: One Earth, One Family, One Future – encapsulated India's conceptualisation of the global order and its

own role in it. And New Delhi has shown that it does not dwell merely on rhetoric.

In 2020, as Covid-19 first surged, it insisted on the need for the international community to work together and help those struggling with the least resources, even as developed nations focused inwards, some of them hoarding enough vaccines to inoculate each adult five times over.

Bearing global burden

To be sure, the road ahead remains a tough one. The G20 is not a panacea for the global governance deficit and the constraints are significant. But with effective leadership from India, New Delhi has viewed this as an opportunity to reinvigorate the multilateral order from the stupor it has sunk into in the past few years.

India's push for "reformed multilateralism" has gained greater credibility with its effective stewardship of the G20. India today is willing to shoulder its share of the global burden. How effective it will be in shaping the global agenda at the G20 will also depend on how willing others are reflecting seriously on the present-day disorder. New Delhi, for its part, is pulling out all the stops and aiming high.

For India, the G20 process has been one of rediscovering its potential as a responsible global stakeholder. New Delhi is today seemingly keen to provide resolutions to global challenges, announcing plans for a Global Biofuel Alliance and India-Middle East-Europe connectivity partnership and its willingness to share its own success in digital public infrastructure.

For the world at large, this process has been about coming to terms with the shifting centre of gravity toward the developing world. The G20 summit and the consensus on a joint New Delhi declaration reminded the major powers of the world beyond geopolitical conflicts that is also seeking a role in global decision-making.



The challenges of sustainable development, inclusive growth, climate change, food security, digital divide, emerging tech regulation and multilateral development bank reform cannot be undertaken without the developing world at the table.

The challenges of sustainable development, inclusive growth, climate change, food security, digital divide, emerging tech regulation and multilateral development bank reform cannot be undertaken without the developing world at the table. The inclusion of the African Union in the G20 has fundamentally altered the character of the platform, making it more inclusive and representative of the emerging global order.

The global governance architecture has been in disarray for a long time, a reality few disagree with today. If New Delhi's G20 succeeds in reviving even a little bit of that lost faith in existing governance structures, it would have served its purpose.



Prof Harsh V Pant

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Gaza gridlock to Mideast peace

War forces Global North and South to revive
commitment to two-state solution following
Israeli rejection

Maryam Ismail



Israel's military campaign in Gaza following the 7 October 2023 Hamas attack on Israeli territory has brought several realities to the fore. It is the lengthiest and deadliest war in Gaza since the Six-Day War in 1967, at more than double the casualty rate. The longer the belligerents persist, the harder other states and international organisations will have to reassess their own stances and policy direction vis-à-vis Israel and Palestine.

After nearly five decades of the Arab League's general rule of tethering their recognition of Israel to Palestinian independence and statehood, in 2020, the UAE and Bahrain dared to test a new paradigm when they signed the Abraham Accords with Israel. This treaty included Israel's agreement to suspend settlement expansion in the West Bank. Israel has since approved thousands of new settlement housing units there.

In May 2021, following the Israeli security forces' storming of Al-Aqsa Mosque, UAE crown prince Mohammed bin Zayed offered to mediate between Israel and Hamas in an attempt to trial any new leverage the Gulf monarchy had acquired over Israel. Eventually, it was the usual suspects – Egypt, Qatar and the United Nations – which brokered a ceasefire.

Eleven months into Israel's military campaign in Gaza, peaceful instruments of persuasion have been rendered impotent before Israel's single-minded aim to eliminate Hamas, which has been widely agreed to be an impossible goal.

If anyone entertained any illusion about gaining leverage over Israel's political and military decisions through the warmth of relations, Washington's limited influence over Tel Aviv throughout this Gaza war should snap them back to reality.

Israeli consensus on war

The truth is that in Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's calculations, the prospect of the

religious far-right abandoning his coalition is a far more pressing factor than any external pressure. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to paint Israel's genocidal resolve on Gaza solely as Netanyahu's doing. This decision has majority support and is unlikely to be reversed with a change of leadership.



Eleven months into Israel's military campaign in Gaza, peaceful instruments of persuasion have been rendered impotent before Israel's single-minded aim to eliminate Hamas.

Even if we juxtapose Israeli victims of the Holocaust with the ongoing displacement and killing of Palestinians – with the conclusion that one genocide does not warrant another – those who acknowledge the Israeli genocide of Palestinians would be wise to recognise seriously the existential threat that weighs heavily on the Jewish Israeli electorate's psyche.

It is essential to understand how, in the functional democracy that is Israel, this mentality, combined with the decades-long dehumanisation of Palestinians, has effectively sanctioned the systematic decimation and oppression of its occupied territories. This is not a force that can be overturned by external persuasion.

Israelis collectively make this choice and Israel must eventually deal with this damning aspect of its society and history. The repeated

pleadings of self-defence lost any legitimacy weeks into the disproportionate Israeli offensive and with the well-documented and obscene disregard for human life in Gaza.

Rejection of two-state solution

The two-state solution was largely seen as dormant prior to 7 October and Hamas arguably succeeded in bringing Palestinian statehood back into the spotlight.

However, in June, four developments drove home Israel's staggering impunity and intransigence that continue to scupper the prospect of two states: first, the Knesset voted to oppose Palestinian sovereignty and the two-state solution, marking the official mainstreaming of decades of annexation.

A few days later, the International Court of Justice issued an advisory opinion, which confirmed Israel's status as an occupying power whose security concerns do not justify the forcible displacement of Palestinians.



Even if the Palestinian leadership is ready to recognise Israel as a state, reparations can only be made when all parties have moved past warring and accepted that both sides equally need a sovereign government that will uphold everyone's rights.

On the other side, 14 Palestinian political factions, including Hamas and Fatah, signed a national unity agreement with Beijing's mediation. Following that, in a mockery of global opposition to the Israeli military campaign in Gaza, the US Congress hosted Netanyahu's address in which he demanded the expedition of further military aid so that Israel could "finish the job faster".

Even if the Palestinian leadership is ready to recognise Israel as a state, reparations can only be made when all parties have moved past warring and accepted that both sides equally need a sovereign government – be it a single state or two states – that will uphold everyone's rights.

More importantly, any negotiation towards Palestinian statehood must define and guarantee Palestinian and Israeli security in equal measure.

Middle East beyond Gaza

Genocide derails life and, in Gaza's case, the ongoing material, physical and psychological rehabilitation following previous wars. But as we continue to press for a lasting ceasefire, we cannot lose sight of consolidating peace and security in the wider region to enable and support sustained development.

In reality, Abu Dhabi's compartmentalisation of the Palestinian issue from its relations with Israel is not that unusual in how pro-Palestine states conduct their bilateral affairs. Nonetheless, we must be careful to distinguish between accepting a strategic loss – e.g. Palestinians giving up land – and rewarding a coloniser state for its perseverance in apartheid.

Regional security and political alliances in the Persian Gulf have become more fluid over the past few years. Saudi Arabia's rapprochement with Iran in March 2023, followed by the UAE's warming relationship with Iran show how each state has prioritised national security and economic interests above all else.

Ideology, it seems, can be hedged. This trend is further empowered by the new mindset of sourcing security domestically and regionally in lieu of depending on external powers and technology.

Closer to home, the emerging relationship between ASEAN and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) can be expected to highlight

the commonalities and compatibility between the two regions, which so far have been untested to a wider and deeper extent. Finally, we can look forward to increased ASEAN-GCC cooperation because it could pave the way for a higher support for multilateralism.



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How Gaza war could shift Middle East geopolitics

Region's stability depends on ability to address
multitude crises, notably Palestine question,
Iranian issue

Dr Ebtesam Al-Kethbi

The debate continues among experts, researchers and diplomats regarding the global order amid a transitional period characterised by division, reluctance and the inability of great powers to utilise fully their potential to address the many conflicts, crises and challenges worldwide. These powers even fail to reach consensus on establishing new rules for this order.

The Middle East both influences and is influenced by this international environment. In recent months, Middle Eastern geopolitics has been at its clearest and most powerful form of impact. The war in Gaza since 7 October 2023 represents a complex crisis that extends beyond its local dimension to encompass regional and international ramifications.



The discourse surrounding great-power competition in the Middle East has undergone a shift since 7 October. The polarisation between the US and Western allies, and China and Russia, has intensified in the wake of Gaza war.

It transcends the security and military dimensions to encompass humanitarian, legal and political aspects, among others. We are witnessing a unilateral polarity in a new age where middle powers and non-state actors wield significant influence in shaping realities and events.

The impact of the war in Gaza is no less significant than that of the war in Ukraine in the order of importance of questions raised by observers examining the recalibration of facts pertaining to the evolving world order, fluctuations in the regional strategic environment, mapping of actors and their priorities, and the challenges facing the value system, global concepts and human rights. Moreover, it prompts inquiries into the standards of response to open-ended and unforeseen crises and the risks that face de-escalation efforts.

Middle powers' growing influence

In the broader picture, there are more challenges and crises while there are fewer solutions. There exists a sense of randomness and selectivity in the manner and extent of the great powers' engagement with their responsibilities in the international arena and their commitment to preserving peace and security.

While the imperative to restore respect for politics, diplomacy, international conventions and co-existence remains paramount, questions persist regarding the growing influence of middle powers in shaping the global landscape and facilitating de-escalation efforts.

Additionally, attention is directed towards the increasing role of minilateralism in reshaping blocs and partnerships, first and foremost on the basis of geoeconomic considerations, alongside the transformative impact of technology and artificial intelligence on redefining states' power and status in this new age.

The discourse surrounding great-power competition in the Middle East has undergone a shift since 7 October. The polarisation between the United States and its Western allies, on the one hand, and China and Russia, on the other, has intensified in the wake of the Gaza war. This is reflected in the divergent positions and calculations among

these international actors regarding the war and its broader ramifications.

The situation in the Middle East and its trajectory in the near- to medium-term future hinges on the region's ability to address its multitude of crises, notably the Palestine question and the Iranian issue.

Nevertheless, the war in Gaza transcends mere domestic or regional boundaries: it is an international one in which Washington has asserted unilateral dominance in managing the conflict based on its perspective and confronting its rivals and competitors. We should keep in mind that wars open the doors to exploit the "window of opportunity".

Strategic shifts

The US – Israel's closest ally – might have interpreted the event as a terrorist attack against Tel Aviv, while also perceiving it as an attempt by Moscow to divert Washington's attention from the war in Ukraine, as well as an effort to embroil the US in a raging crisis to distract it from the growing influence of China and Russia.

Iran strategically aligned itself with anti-American objectives by leveraging on Hamas' action on 7 October, anticipating that it would deal a blow to Saudi Arabia's efforts to normalise relations with Israel. This strategic move bolstered Iran's position and enhanced its leverage against Israeli and American pressures.

The conflict in Gaza has indeed created a significant strategic shift by re-engaging the US in the region in a different manner. We have witnessed a surge in militarisation across the Middle East, a development particularly noted by Beijing, especially in light of the heightened US military presence in the eastern Mediterranean.

The conflict in Gaza and its aftermath necessitates a re-evaluation of approaches to de-escalation, coexistence, economic



There is a pressing need post-7 October to review and reassess various concepts concerning collective regional security, de-escalation and reconciliation approaches, great-power competition, multipolarity, regional integration projects and trans-regional infrastructure.

diplomacy, supply chain challenges and security of international corridors. Furthermore, ongoing interactions following the war prompt a reconsideration of strategies.

Regional actors in the Middle East and North Africa are increasingly pursuing independent foreign policies and greater self-organisation amid great-power competition and the trend towards multipolarity in the international system. It is evident that the conflict challenges the notion that geoeconomics outweighs geopolitics in the new Middle East, a trend that had been shaping up in the years leading to 7 October.

Addressing root causes

Middle Eastern parties that are losing out because of initiatives, such as the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor or the Abraham Accords, among others, might disrupt or complicate the de-escalation process, highlighting its fragility in the absence of

a realistic and sustainable solution to the region's underlying issues. From the Palestinian problem to other crises in the Middle East, addressing the root causes is imperative.

Furthermore, the Gaza war necessitates a re-evaluation of European engagement in the Middle East and with Gulf states, and potentially even prompting Japanese involvement in the region. The significance of oil and gas alone in shaping relationships is no longer sufficient. In the Gulf, there is anticipation regarding how the Gaza war will influence the region's hedging approach to major-power competition, prompting a reassessment of the "less America, more China" strategy.

Therefore, there is a pressing need post-7 October to review and reassess various concepts concerning collective regional security, de-escalation and reconciliation approaches, great-power competition, multipolarity, regional integration projects and trans-regional infrastructure and railway plans.

This underscores the enduring influence of geopolitics on geoeconomics and emphasises the necessity of strengthening collective action across multiple fronts and rehabilitating international laws to achieve higher levels of sustainable stability, comprehensive security, developmental justice and human dignity.



Dr Ebtessam Al-Ketbi

President

Emirates Policy Centre, United Arab Emirates



Preparing Malaysia for the ASEAN chairmanship

With pressure to build on existing track record, Malaysia should leverage on interests to deliver on economic and development front

Izzah Ibrahim

ASEAN remains in the limelight because of developments within and beyond Southeast Asia. Of great interest to many is the discourse surrounding the current state of institutional cohesion and its ability to assert centrality while managing regional affairs.

This focus on assessing ASEAN's overall leadership in relation to its mechanisms, while important, does not sufficiently incorporate discussions about the capacity and role given to the rotational chairmanship. With Malaysia assuming this role in 2025 and in consideration of past chairs, there needs to be greater preparation and understanding of what the role entails and whether they can meet them.

For the most part, there are generally positive sentiments towards the chairmanship role. For example, Indonesia's term, entitled "ASEAN Matters: Epicentrum of Growth", was an effort to empower the institution through bolder initiatives. These include the issues of Myanmar, the promotion of the maritime agenda and the implementation of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific.

Similarly, Laos' "ASEAN: Enhancing Connectivity and Resilience" complemented its efforts to strengthen its position for regional connectivity while reaffirming its commitment to a better connected and resilient regional bloc. It also serves as an opportunity for a member state to guide regional agendas into aligning with its own national interests.

Dealing with reality checks

Despite expressions of interest, the last two chairmanships highlighted the dilemma of the interplay of national priorities, institutional constraints and external variables. It remains clear that domestic interests are the most influential driver guiding international relations in Southeast Asia. Both the Indonesian and Laotian examples demonstrated the extent to which individual state capacity limited their contributions to ASEAN.



Critics have long pointed out the limitations of ASEAN's leadership and lack of enforcement measures. These pose further obstacles to move the institution collectively at a feasible pace while allowing ASEAN to maintain its relevance by contributing substance in such unpredictable times.

The former's initial gusto slowed with time, especially over the management of sensitive matters, such as Myanmar and the competing attention demanded from its G20 chairmanship. The latter, already facing apprehensions about their capacity and overall diplomatic capital, were focused on achieving the desired results for their own economic development. There were discussions about whether they managed to deliver on such promises and the continued comparisons will provide a means to evaluate a state's goals and the means used to achieve them.

Thus, the varying ways member states carried out their chair duties do raise questions about the expectations and qualifiers for successful leadership in ASEAN. In principle, the chair is entrusted with three main duties: to act as a spokesperson; to be both chair and facilitator of ASEAN Summits and similar official meetings; and promote the institution's interests and wellbeing.

Alongside the general norms and conduct characterising the ASEAN way, there is the tacit expectation that the initiatives are contingent upon the member state. Ideally, this would contribute towards the goal of consolidating regional interdependence, creating benefits out of the cooperative engagement that could not be achieved from bilateral partnerships alone.

Expectations of Malaysia's chairmanship

While much of ASEAN's shortcomings were framed through its ability to navigate the regional environment, there remains concerns over the ability of the acting chair to support internal cohesion.

Critics have long pointed out the limitations of ASEAN's leadership and lack of enforcement measures. These pose further obstacles to move the institution collectively at a feasible pace while allowing ASEAN to maintain its relevance by contributing substance in such unpredictable times. This also raises questions whether internal reforms could be implemented, especially when evaluating which principles and practices to retain, reform or retire.

This shows the considerable list of challenges that a member state must confront upon assuming the chairmanship. In the case of Malaysia, its status as one of the founding members of ASEAN and general track record establishes some degree of expectation of a more assertive chairmanship that is able to push for the implementation of challenging decisions.

Malaysia's track record includes the implementation of the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality, admission of Myanmar as a member and establishment of the ASEAN Economic Community. These were follow throughs from ASEAN's ambitions and the culmination of past groundwork. There is expectation that similar achievements will be replicated.

Prime Minister Dato' Seri Anwar Ibrahim is aware of this enthusiasm, saying that he will chair the periodic meetings leading up to 2025. While no concrete details have been shared, there is considerable speculation on the general themes of the agenda. It is likely the chairmanship will gear towards a more economic- and development-oriented agenda.

This is supported by then finance minister Senator Tengku Datuk Seri Utama Zafrul Tengku Abdul Aziz's statements that Malaysia would pursue initiatives that enhance intraregional economic cooperation and to coordinate and complement Southeast Asian economies to benefit from increased foreign direct investments into the region.

However, this will not mean that other major concerns, such as the South China Sea and Myanmar, would be overlooked. As Malaysia remains committed to continuously improving its, and ASEAN's by extension, image on the global space,



The outcome of ASEAN chairmanships has produced mixed results, underscoring the ongoing dilemma of balancing the institution's goals with its own limitations, member states' national priorities and the dynamic international environment.

they would still retain these priorities in the chairmanship's agenda. While the outcome from these admittedly sensitive issues are not guaranteed, it is still a key opportunity to reassert the strengths of multilateral institutions at a globally challenging time.

Amplifying ASEAN's relevance

However, there is a pattern to Malaysian foreign policy that could be detrimental to efforts aimed at sustaining more assertive action. While the principles of non-alignment and upholding amicable relations are unlikely to change, the execution remains inconsistent at best. Inward-focused policies and concerns of appeasing domestic constituents continue to sap political leaders' attention, as are concerns over actions that might disrupt the stability of its external environment. Furthermore, foreign policy endeavours have long remained under the purview of the prime minister, whose interests towards certain subjects do play a role in the political will and allocation of resources.

Therefore, in preparation of the chairmanship, there needs to be a clear focus in determining deliverables that could be realistically met. This does present an opportunity to incorporate the Malaysia Madani framework into the chairmanship, as the themes of connectivity, togetherness and community building could pave a way to revitalise the way ASEAN's regionalism is pursued. Furthermore, by leveraging on the existing internal focus, this civil-oriented and inclusive brand of leadership could lend greater domestic buy-in that is often lacking in ASEAN's pursuits.

This approach must also include proactive engagements beyond policymakers and political leaders. They need to include the youth, civil society and other relevant stakeholders to create opportunities for tangible exposure to ASEAN's relevance in the wider developments in Southeast Asia.

A greater awareness of the roles and responsibilities can encourage initiative and self-confidence in how member states could add value to ASEAN and the institution's way to meet growing challenges.

The outcome of ASEAN chairmanships has produced mixed results, underscoring the ongoing dilemma of balancing the institution's goals with its own limitations, member states' national priorities and the dynamic international environment.

Given the expectation and roles the framework exists in, there needs to be a recalibration in the way ASEAN's successes are measured. It should be approached as a work in progress, an evolving body that thrives from its members mutually agreeing to goals. While the chairmanship is limited to a year, it could still contribute towards long-term outcomes and continuation of the broader regional vision rather than just adding more empty promises.



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Wishlist for Malaysia's ASEAN chairmanship 2025



HE Dr Kao Kim Hourn
ASEAN Secretary-General

In 2025, Malaysia will assume the ASEAN chairmanship and will oversee the completion of the current ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and its accompanying blueprints, marking a decade of deepened regional integration and community-building. ASEAN's commitment to its norms and values of diplomacy, dialogue, cooperation and adherence to the rule of law has enabled Southeast Asia to remain a peaceful and stable region where economic prosperity thrives. ASEAN is poised to become the 4th largest economy by 2030.

However, ASEAN cannot afford to be complacent. The world has undergone significant changes since Malaysia last chaired ASEAN in 2015. Today, we are in an era of profound uncertainties and divergence driven by great power competition, technological disruptions and climate change, among others. Moreover, we cannot take our usual path to economic prosperity for granted. Malaysia's Chairmanship also marks the launch of the ASEAN Community Vision 2045 and its strategic plans, which will guide ASEAN in enhancing its adaptability, resilience and responsiveness to the multitude of challenges. ASEAN has a proven track record of progress, resilience and problem-solving. As I always emphasize, ASEAN has been and will continue to be a part of the solution.

ASEAN is poised to strengthen its institutional capacity. Under Malaysia's chairmanship, ASEAN-led mechanisms will be reinforced to preserve our convening power, provide regional solutions to our common challenges, and strengthen ASEAN's role as the centripetal force in the region. ASEAN, with its tech-savvy population, stands at the threshold of another transformative milestone: the conclusion of the Digital Economy Framework Agreement, the world's single largest digital economy agreement, in 2025, which would unlock the regional digital economy up to US\$2 trillion by 2030.

Meanwhile, green transition will be a new driver of regional growth and dynamism. ASEAN is expected to further accelerate its clean energy transition, including through effective implementation of the ASEAN Strategy for Carbon Neutrality and the ASEAN Power Grid. ASEAN is also cognisant of the immense potential of the blue economy as a new engine of the region's future growth. I am confident that Malaysia will effectively steer the region's interests and priorities, and advance ASEAN community building, given its extensive experience, leadership and unwavering commitment to ASEAN.



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Malaysia will be taking over the ASEAN chairmanship in 2025 at a most crucial time, following Laos' low-key leadership of the organisation and ahead of the Philippines' rotational turn. Given internal divisions over the past decade from the United States-China geostrategic conflict to Myanmar's military coup and civil strife, Russian invasion of Ukraine and the Hamas-Israel war, ASEAN must regroup and close ranks to regain a semblance of cohesion and credibility. ASEAN centrality in the regional architecture-building for peace and security and its ability to convene summit meetings among the major powers, such as the East Asia Summit, have lost lustre and momentum, challenged and bypassed by mini-lateral strategic cooperation between ASEAN member states and outside powers as well as among the external players themselves.

Malaysia should be clear and credible on ASEAN's revitalisation imperative and the government's own agenda. Although what ASEAN needs and what's good for Malaysia as chair overlap, they should not be conflated. For example, Malaysia should be assertive on Myanmar beyond the Five-Point Consensus, aiming to broker dialogue and engage civilian and ethnic stakeholders towards a common future beyond the military junta. The incoming chair should also maintain ASEAN's balancing act between the US and China, sticking to ongoing patterns and trends of relying on Beijing's economic partnership for growth and Washington's strategic counterbalancing for regional security. Doing so will require a measured approach towards the Hamas-Israel war, whose injustices are felt by ASEAN member states broadly but to varying degrees. Malaysia should retake the driver's seat and get momentum going for the chairs in 2026-28 to reinvigorate the ASEAN spirit for a progressive and consequential region that could make a difference in a turbulent world, working among the five founding members as the core, if necessary, to get things done.



Institute of Foreign Affairs

Lao PDR

In a rapidly changing and complex world, ASEAN faces challenges that need to be addressed collectively. These include economic and financial difficulties, climate change, and traditional and non-traditional security threats. Against this backdrop, enhancing connectivity and resilience is of utmost importance to ensure ASEAN collective efforts in strengthening the ASEAN Community and addressing present and emerging challenges effectively. As a result, the Lao PDR as the 2024 ASEAN chair has set the theme “ASEAN: Enhancing Connectivity and Resilience.”

The Lao PDR has put in collective efforts and worked closely with Malaysia as the 2025 chair in drafting the ASEAN Community Vision 2045, including ASEAN Political Security Community, ASEAN Economic Community, ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community, and Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025. Hence, the expectations for Malaysia’s chairmanship in 2025 would be not only to adopt but put such a vision into impactful implementation and build on the progress made over the past decades.

We also hope that Malaysia will further drive our vision and build upon the achievements made under the Lao PDR’s ASEAN chairmanship 2024. We believe that Malaysia will lead efforts for ASEAN to enhance connectivity and resilience under the three community pillars, such as promoting infrastructure connectivity, narrowing the development gap, promoting greater economic integration and people-to-people exchanges. Coping with current and future challenges, in the context of uncertain global geopolitics and geo-economics, ASEAN’s fundamental principles, particularly ASEAN centrality and ASEAN-led mechanisms remain relevant. However, ASEAN’s leadership in regional cooperation and external relations should be further strengthened.

We hope that Malaysia will continue to uphold ASEAN’s commitment to assist Myanmar in finding a peaceful, durable, and a Myanmar-owned and led comprehensive political resolution to the ongoing crisis through the implementation of the Five-Point Consensus. We fully support and strongly believe that Malaysia’s ASEAN chairmanship in 2025 will mark another seminal moment for ASEAN to foster cooperation among regional countries with common interests. We are eager to see the way forward to guide ASEAN’s future within the next decades and beyond in a sustainable way.



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Malaysia's ASEAN chairmanship next year will mark a significant milestone for advancing regional integration. The final review of the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 will take place, alongside the adoption of the ASEAN Community Vision 2045. However, the road ahead will not be easy for Malaysia. Globally, multiple crises from geopolitical tensions and wars have persisted. And our ASEAN region is not immune to the effects. A fragmented global order has made regional integration more challenging.

The consequent lingering economic disruptions and uncertainties have worsened socioeconomic inequalities in the region. While some ASEAN economies like Vietnam were able to benefit from US-China supply chain diversions, the effect has not been evenly distributed across the region. Overall price increases have hit lower-income economies the hardest. The humanitarian crisis in Myanmar and climate-related disasters have exacerbated the situation. But for successful community building, more equitable economic growth is necessary. Malaysia is well positioned to lead ASEAN towards achieving a more equitable growth and integrated community. This is if the Malaysia Madani framework, which champions sustainability and social justice alongside growth, also forms a strong basis for its chairmanship of ASEAN. Integrating economic goals with human capital development will be a crucial task for Malaysia as ASEAN chair.

Better synergy across ASEAN's political, economic and socio-cultural community pillars is needed to develop human capital that is future-ready, skilled, safe and healthy across ASEAN economies. In view of the evolving global landscape, this is even more important. It is hoped that Malaysia, under PM Dato' Seri Anwar Ibrahim, who has championed reform agenda for the welfare of the people of Malaysia, could pave the way for ASEAN to successfully realise its community vision.



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Malaysia's ASEAN chairmanship comes at a crucial time when ASEAN officially launches its post-2025 ASEAN Community Vision. This will inform the organisation's future direction at a time where many are questioning ASEAN's relevance and credibility.

ASEAN is nowhere from seeing any progress in facilitating a solution to the Myanmar crisis. ASEAN's unity is also at stake, as there has been no coherent understanding and approach to the crisis which prohibits any substantive result of the Five-Point Consensus.

Therefore, ASEAN must have a fixed, credible and agile decision-making process mechanism to deal with urgent situations that threaten regional security. In this case, the recommendation from the High-Level Task Force on this matter must be rigorously followed up. The discussion on reviewing the ASEAN Charter, to allow such specific crisis-management mechanism to be fixated within ASEAN, should be taken up by Malaysia as next chair. It is no doubt that ASEAN is losing its gravitas externally and its so-called its centrality. ASEAN-led platforms, such as ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN Plus Three and East Asia Summit (EAS), have lost their spark as mini-lateralism or trilateral cooperation trends are on the rise.

One way to reinforcing ASEAN centrality is to rejuvenate the EAS as it incorporates the key major powers in Asia-Pacific. During its chairmanship, Malaysia can consider these three concrete steps for the EAS.

First, extending the duration of the EAS meeting to at least a day long to allow for substantive discussion among the leaders. Second, institutionalising the EAS mechanism by building a secretariat and creating a Sherpa system where specific member states can work on the leaders' recommendations thoroughly. Finally, proposing for a joint chairmanship of EAS where ASEAN co-chairs with other non-ASEAN members to allow for bigger ownership of the mechanism.



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In 2025, Malaysia will assume its ASEAN chairmanship amid persistent regional and global challenges, such as climate change, major-power rivalry and unresolved territorial disputes. While major powers remain key to global stability, emerging middle actors are gaining prominence on the international stage, presenting ASEAN with both opportunities for enhanced cooperation and competition for leadership on regional issues. As external pressures test ASEAN’s unity and centrality, Malaysia’s chairmanship could focus on strengthening ASEAN’s internal foundation, while addressing external challenges and upholding the region’s credibility.

During its chairmanship, Malaysia could lead by example and advocate for future chairs to champion their respective “flagship” initiatives in the medium to long term. This means taking ownership, driving progress and creating a sustainable framework to ensure that these initiatives can continue to thrive and deliver value even after their respective chairmanships end. This approach also allows various new initiatives to be introduced and championed by the rotating chairs, while existing ones remain anchored to their original proponents, ensuring continuity and maximising their effectiveness.

Notwithstanding ASEAN’s ongoing efforts to streamline its work processes, more needs to be done to ensure continuity and coherence between its past and new initiatives. Therefore, Malaysia’s chairmanship could prioritise streamlining ASEAN’s initiatives by integrating similar activities to optimise resources, leading to cost savings, improved efficiency and enhanced collaboration. This could apply to various marine and maritime initiatives with potential overlaps, e.g., Blue Economy, Combating Marine Debris, Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia, ASEAN Maritime Outlook, ASEAN Maritime Forum and Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum.

As chair, Malaysia has the prerogative to promote new deliverables in 2025. However, its chairmanship could, at the same time, offer ASEAN a chance to take a strategic pause amid the constant push for innovation and change, allowing for a reassessment of its overall approach. A balanced strategy that fosters both alignment and innovation can help ASEAN maintain stability and focus, especially in times of continued uncertainty.



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ASEAN has yet to find its bearing in the changing geopolitical and economic architecture. On the one hand, its apparent disorientation comes from the credible challenge that its rising and increasingly aggressive neighbour, China, presents to the US' global dominance. On the other hand, there is the ASEAN's commitment to respect each member state's national sovereignty as well as its historic propensity to work with both sides of the aisle towards advancing their national interests. These push-and-pull factors have led to efforts towards regional integration to lose steam and put into question the viability of a core guiding principle, that is, ASEAN centrality.

In this light, Malaysia as ASEAN chair in 2025 will have to do a lot of heavy lifting for the regional body to regain its pivotal role as a regional and global player. The transition from the unipolar world that began with the end of the Cold War and peaked in the 2000s has risks but also creates spaces for it to contribute to shaping the emerging regional and global order. Given the tug and pull that small and middle states experience in geopolitical issues that strike at the core principle of national sovereignty, there is wisdom in Malaysia's call for ASEAN to lean into areas that strengthen regional cooperation: economy and trade, sociocultural community-building, cross-border environmental issues, and digital connectivity.

Towards this end, there are five areas that deserve focused attention (1) gear economic integration towards building the production base of low-income and low-middle-income countries. Raising these countries' productivity and real economy would, in the long run, contribute to their autonomy, freeing them from the exigencies of great power competition; (2) explore concrete ways to realise the concept of the regional commons towards peacefully resolving competing territorial and maritime claims among ASEAN member states; (3) study different decision-making processes that would allow for quick action, especially in response to grave humanitarian crises and emergency situations, such as those in Gaza and the Rakhine state in Myanmar; (4) promote and deepen Southeast Asian consciousness by increasing cultural and study exchange programmes among the youth and; (5) as suggested by Malaysian Prime Minister Dato' Seri Anwar Ibrahim at the 37th Asia-Pacific Roundtable, use ASEAN as a platform to advocate seats for regional alliances, such as ASEAN in the United Nations Security Council.



How Malaysia should seize geostrategic advantages

Focus must be redirected at revitalising
manufacturing and diversifying trade for nation to
benefit from global geoeconomic developments

Jaideep Singh

Time and again, experts have argued that the US-China rivalry is advantageous for Malaysia. The country's strategic location and economic non-alignment are allegedly favourable in today's age of supply chain diversification.

Proponents cite Malaysia's record-high approved foreign direct investment (FDI) figures of RM188 billion in 2023 as proof of its attractiveness to investors from East and West alike. Another perceivably potent tool in the nation's arsenal is its participation in an extensive ecosystem of regional free trade agreements (FTAs) and comprehensive partnerships, signalling Putrajaya's unwavering openness as a bulwark against protectionism elsewhere. In March, the International Monetary Fund affirmed Malaysia's economic potential, thanks to its "strong fundamentals" and "sound policymaking".

But we should not rest on our laurels. Though export performance has recovered since the pandemic, annual exports declined by 8% in 2023 because of the cyclical downturn in semiconductors and commodities. Further, Malaysian companies continue to underutilise mega-FTAs like Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). Meanwhile, uncertainties are growing amid escalating geopolitical conflict in Eastern Europe and the Middle East alongside interferences to shipping routes.

Maximising opportunities, minimising complacency

The country must not take it for granted that its geostrategic advantages will accrue automatically. To be sure, the government has rolled out domestic initiatives, such as the New Industrial Master Plan (NIMP) 2030 and National Energy Transition Roadmap, targeting improvements in competitiveness, value-add and sustainability. However,

Malaysia must also redouble its efforts to build broader geoeconomic resilience, given risk factors, such as a possible second Donald Trump administration, more severe supply chain disruptions and mounting use of non-tariff measures.

To achieve this, Malaysia needs to focus on diversifying its mix of trading partners and products. Structurally, trade is a lifeline for the open Malaysian economy, constituting 147% of GDP. The country is, therefore, not immune to fluctuations in global investment and trade. Nevertheless, there is scope to reduce exposure to the economic ebbs and flows emerging out of any single source country or commodity.

In the last decade, Malaysian trade has become more concentrated. UNCTAD data show that two such measures – the Herfindahl-Hirschman Index and the share of trade among Malaysia's top 10 partners – increased by 1% between 2012 and 2022. Additionally, China, Malaysia's biggest trading



Trade is a lifeline for the open Malaysian economy but it is not immune to fluctuations in global investment and trade. Nevertheless, there is scope to reduce exposure to the economic ebbs and flows emerging out of any single source country or commodity.

partner, now accounts for 17% of its trade flows. Though reports of “overdependence” are exaggerated – China’s contribution to Malaysian trade has declined since the pandemic, not to mention its smaller share of inward FDI than the US, Singapore and Japan – weaker Chinese demand does have knock-on effects on Malaysian export performance.

So far, Malaysia has relied mostly on traditional instruments of economic diplomacy, including FTAs, to broaden trading opportunities. For instance, through CPTPP, Malaysian exporters now enjoy lower tariffs in three new markets – Canada, Mexico and Peru. But a more specialised approach is needed.

As Malaysia sets its sights on strengthening South-South cooperation, market access alone will not matter as much as developing a holistic policy toolbox consisting of capacity building, technical cooperation and information sharing, targeting both government-to-government and business-to-business ties.

Rather than resigning to the notion that Malaysia is “too rich” to receive support from the Global North and “too poor” to assist the Global South, the narrative should focus on carving out a niche as a bridge between the two. As early as the late 1990s, the country received technical assistance from high-income economies while contributing more than RM200 million to multilateral institutions like the Asian Development Bank.

Today, Malaysia should work on expanding existing initiatives, including the Third Country Training Programme run with Japan, through greater interministerial cooperation. Singapore’s framework, through which a centralised cooperation programme coordinates targeted partnership packages for Africa and climate action, among others, could serve as a guide.

Done well, this would unlock markets in fast-growing countries across the Global South

in areas like infrastructure, agriculture and renewable energy, thereby diversifying trade and investment prospects. At the same time, Malaysia could solidify its soft power as a reliable global partner, establishing itself as a resilient middle power.

Making manufacturing matter

Malaysia has reduced its dependence on the production and export of commodities, which are prone to business cycle fluctuations and shocks. The share of commodities like palm oil and crude oil in total exports has declined from 23% in 2010 to 15% in 2022 while the collective contribution of mining, construction and agriculture to GDP dropped from 32% in 2000 to 22% in 2016. This is an encouraging development but more can be done.

The priority in the coming years should be to reinvigorate manufacturing as set out in NIMP 2030. This is because global patterns of industrialisation demonstrate that manufacturing is a major source of overall innovation, R&D and productivity growth.

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Rather than resigning to the notion that Malaysia is ‘too rich’ to receive support from the Global North and ‘too poor’ to assist the Global South, the narrative should focus on carving out a niche as a bridge between the two.

Accordingly, the government announced a National Semiconductor Strategy in May 2024, earmarking RM25 billion to move Malaysia up the semiconductor value chain. But the devil is in the details – the strategy’s success will be contingent on firms’ access to targeted incentives, initiatives to develop domestic human capital and the integration between academia, industry and government.

Properly executed, this could upstream Malaysia’s electronics sector, making it increasingly indispensable in the global semiconductor trade. A strong electronics sector should also be more closely linked with adjacent downstream activities like electric vehicles, energy efficient solutions

and smart furniture, creating an end-to-end ecosystem of interlinked supply chains with considerable export-linked value addition.

Malaysia is in a prime position to benefit from the renewed economic interest in Southeast Asia precipitated by geopolitical tensions. But geography and foreign policy alone will only take us so far. Ultimately, the country must be proactive in addressing vulnerabilities by diversifying its economic activities and trading partners. That way, Malaysia could strengthen its economic positioning and navigate the complexities of global trade more effectively.



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Australia with ASEAN every step of the way

Canberra views ASEAN as primary norm-setting
body in region with unmatched convening power

HE Tiffany McDonald

This year, Australia and ASEAN commemorate 50 years since Australia became the bloc's first Dialogue Partner. Shortly after the establishment of ASEAN, with Malaysia as a founding member, Australia recognised the value of engagement with ASEAN.

In 1974, Australia's then Prime Minister Gough Whitlam said: "that of all the arrangements in our region, ASEAN is unquestionably the most important, the most relevant".

Since then, Australia and ASEAN have steadily built habits of cooperation, understanding and trust to expand our partnership. This culminated in the establishment of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) with ASEAN in 2021. We work together to address our shared challenges, respecting ASEAN centrality through ASEAN-led regional architecture and mechanisms.

As this year's Asia-Pacific Roundtable theme Crisis in an Interregnum alludes to, the existing system of rules and norms is under strain. The theme asks us to reflect on the norms, which have shaped our world today and how we will maintain common ground.

ASEAN Centrality

In this time of heightened tensions, it is crucial we protect and uphold international law to prevent conflict and safeguard sovereignty in our region. Each country – large or small – must operate by the same rules: rules that we have all had a say in shaping and international law that we have all agreed and committed to upholding. And when disputes inevitably arise, they must be managed in accordance with international law, and through respectful dialogue, not the threat or use of force.

Australia sees ASEAN at the forefront of these efforts. It is the primary norm-setting body in our region and has unmatched convening power in the Indo-Pacific region. It sets expectations of responsible state behaviour in our shared region. As Australia's Foreign

Minister Penny Wong has said, the strength of ASEAN's collective voice "resonates throughout the region when it speaks on its view of the importance of sovereignty and rules".

Last year's ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Statement on Maintaining and Promoting Stability in the Maritime Sphere in Southeast Asia – which Australia welcomed – was an example of ASEAN using its voice to express concerns about developments that threaten regional peace and security in the maritime domain.

Australia has always attached great importance to ASEAN processes that have brought ASEAN and external partners together to discuss the strategic issues facing the region. We recognised the value of this, supporting ASEAN as a founding member



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of the ASEAN Regional Forum and East Asia Summit (EAS), and ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM+).

The EAS – an initiative established during Malaysia’s 2005 ASEAN chair year – is the region’s premier leader-level forum for strategic dialogue. Meetings held under EAS framework are pivotal platforms for frank discussions on political, regional security and economic issues, and its joint statements are key articulations of ASEAN-led responses to the strategic issues affecting the region.



Australia is invested, engaged and committed to working with Malaysia and ASEAN to realise our shared vision for a peaceful, stable and prosperous future. We will continue to champion the effectiveness and resilience of ASEAN centrality...

As Prime Minister Dato’ Seri Anwar Ibrahim said during his visit to Australia in March: “working on our respective strengths and unique relationships with the major countries of this region, we can achieve something of profound consequence”. This speaks to the role we all play in maintaining regional peace and stability, and creating the kind of region in which we want to live.

This role was recognised at the ASEAN-Australia Special Summit, with the Joint

Leaders’ Vision Statement committing us to work together to promote strategic trust and a rules-based regional architecture, which upholds international law. The Joint Vision Statement also outlined our shared objective of a region where sovereignty and territorial integrity is respected.

ASEAN saw respect for sovereignty and settlement of disputes by peaceful means as a driving principle as early as 1976, establishing the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) in Southeast Asia. By becoming a signatory in 2005, Australia reiterated its commitment to TAC’s principles.

TAC continues to gain signatories from across the international community, with 54 parties and counting, demonstrating its ongoing relevance, as reflected at the recent Conference of High Contracting Parties to the TAC held in June.

Show of support

At this year’s Asia-Pacific Roundtable, Anwar described ASEAN as a “force multiplier, and a valuable asset to exercise our agency”. In this regard, we are approaching a pivotal time for ASEAN as Malaysia takes on the chair in 2025 and ASEAN crafts its strategic direction for the future through its ASEAN Community Vision 2045.

Malaysia has always been a strong driver of ASEAN’s efforts, such as the establishment of the EAS in 2005 and the 2015 Kuala Lumpur Declaration on the Establishment of the ASEAN Community during previous chair years. I am confident Malaysia will continue to advance ASEAN’s ambition of fostering stability and promoting prosperity – and Australia stands ready to support.

We build on a strong history of collaboration, such as the January Track 2 workshop on Conflict Prevention and the ASEAN-led Regional Architecture, co-hosted by Australia and Malaysia, alongside Indonesia. Australia was also proud to support Malaysia hosting

the first ASEAN Green Jobs Forum in Kuala Lumpur and ASEAN Maritime Connectivity Forum in Penang earlier this year.

Australia and Malaysia are also strong supporters of Timor-Leste's full ASEAN membership, working trilaterally with Timor-Leste on capacity building assistance to support the accession process. We look forward to continuing this close cooperation, building habits of cooperation to address the challenges and opportunities the current times present, including around energy transition, digital transformation and equipping our workforces with skills for the future.

Australia is invested, engaged and committed to working with Malaysia and ASEAN to realise our shared vision for a peaceful, stable and prosperous future. We will continue to champion the effectiveness and resilience of ASEAN centrality, not only in our words but in our actions, including by implementing more than A\$500 million (RM1.6 billion) in new and expanded initiatives, announced at the ASEAN-Australia Special Summit in March. Australia continues to be with ASEAN – every step of the way.



HE Tiffany McDonald

Australian Ambassador to ASEAN



India's foreign policy approach to the Global South and Indo-Pacific

Championing the cause of holistic human-centric
development and promoting self-reliance among
Global South countries

HE BN Reddy & Beno Zephine NL

India's foreign policy has undergone significant transformation over the past few decades, adapting to the changing geopolitical and geoeconomic landscape. A constant all along has been India's steadfast support for countries of the Global South.

For India, the term "Global South" is not just a diplomatic term but part of its shared history from the days of its united opposition to colonialism and apartheid. India has been a key player within Non-Aligned Movement, UNCTAD and G77 since their establishment, working actively for the economic development of the Global South.

India has been constructively championing the cause of holistic human-centric development in the Global South. Several steps were taken to promote self-reliance among countries of the Global South by enhancing connectivity and economic inter-linkage projects, ranging from large-scale infrastructure development to community related projects, including health, housing, environment and education.



India's vision of Indo-Pacific is an extension of its ancient philosophy of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (the world as one family). Modi described India's vision of Indo-Pacific as SAGAR in 2015 – Security and Growth for All in the Region.

India has also extended financial, budgetary and humanitarian assistance to mitigate economic challenges. Other support include capacity building and skill development via scholarships and training programmes offered to students and professionals.

Since 1964, under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation programme, more than 200,000 officials from 160 countries have benefited from capacity building training at premier institutions. Development assistance through LOCs worth US\$31 billion was extended to 65 countries covering diverse economic sectors. During the Covid-19 pandemic, India supplied made-in-India vaccines to more than 100 nations under the "Vaccine Maitri" (Vaccine Friendship) initiative, apart from supplying medicines to 150 nations.

G20 and Global South

Standing beside US President Joe Biden at a 22 June White House press conference, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced that "under India's G20 presidency, we are lending a voice to the priorities of the Global South". This, in a way, defines India's approach to addressing core challenges confronting the Global South in a plurilateral format.

India has been advocating reforms in the multilateral system to represent the concerns of the Global South more effectively. PM Modi, while addressing the G20 foreign ministers in March 2023 stated that "multilateralism is in crisis today", referring to the inability of existing multilateral institutions to effectively serve their mandate for fostering international cooperation on issues of interest to the Global South.

In line with PM Modi's vision, India hosted two editions of the Voice of Global South Summits in January and November 2023. India worked to ensure that the Global South's concerns and priorities received due cognizance in several G20 verticals, duly

factoring in solutions to the most pressing contemporary global challenges. The induction of the African Union into the G20 as a permanent member during India's G20 presidency in September 2023 is a reflection of this commitment.

India, during its G20 presidency, announced five major initiatives to advance its development partnership with the Global South:

1. Establishment of a "Global-South Centre of Excellence"
2. Launch of a "Global-South Science & Technology Initiative"
3. Launch of a new "Aarogya Maitri (Health Friendship) Project"
4. Creation of a "Global-South Young Diplomats Forum"
5. Instituting "Global South Scholarships" for students to pursue higher education in India.

Malaysia's Minister of International Trade and Industry, Senator Tengku Datuk Seri Utama Zafrul Tengku Abdul Aziz, while speaking at the Voice of the Global South Summit in January 2023, noted that "as the world's fifth largest economy, soon to be the most populous country and one of the fastest-growing economies in the world, I believe India truly represents the voice of the Global South advocating a more balanced future-oriented development agenda".

India-led initiatives, including International Solar Alliance (ISA), Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure and LiFE or Lifestyle for the Environment movement, serve as platforms for stakeholders to find innovative solutions to energy, humanitarian and climate-change-related problems. These initiatives have provided avenues for investments, capacity building of personnel and assist in R&D efforts. ISA has acquired universal acceptance, with 118 and 98 countries signing and ratifying the agreement, respectively.

India and the Indo-Pacific

India's vision of Indo-Pacific is an extension of its ancient philosophy of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (the world as one family). PM Modi described India's vision of Indo-Pacific as SAGAR in 2015, which stands for Security and Growth for All in the Region. While presenting India's vision of Indo-Pacific at the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2018, he described the Indo-Pacific region as "a natural region from the shores of Africa to that of the Americas".

India's Indo-Pacific vision rests on five pillars – a free, open and inclusive region; ASEAN centrality; upholding the notions of sovereignty and territorial integrity irrespective of the size or strength of any nation; equal and unimpeded access through freedom of navigation; and peaceful settlement of disputes following international law.



India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) does not envisage a new institutional framework but will rely on the leader-led East Asia Summit process, framework and activities.

India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), launched by PM Modi at the East Asia Summit in 2019, does not envisage a new institutional framework but will rely on the leader-led East Asia Summit process, framework and activities.

IPOI looks at establishing a safe, secure and stable maritime domain. This broadly supports the direction, vision and objectives of the Quad. All four countries of the Quad partners and other countries have joined in co-leading the eight pillars of this initiative.

Both India and ASEAN are also working towards finding greater convergence between IPOI and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific.

QUAD in Indo-Pacific construct

Like any new mechanism or platform, the Quad, too, is a product of its times. Quad is propelled by a change in the global order for global good and for the global commons. External Affairs Minister Dr S Jaishankar said “Quad reflects the growth of a multipolar order and it is a post-alliance and post-cold war thinking. It is against spheres of influence, and it expresses the democratising of the global space and a collaborative, not unilateral, approach”.

Quad is now focussing on maritime security, infrastructure and connectivity, HADR, critical technologies, communications, space cooperation, cybersecurity, counterterrorism, fellowships and climate action.

Quad countries also offered 1,800 infrastructure fellowships for policymakers and technical experts, deploying digital public infrastructure to deliver public goods in the Indo-Pacific, and STEM fellowship programme. Quad has extended STEM fellowships to ASEAN member states as well. Another collaboration announced under Quad serves the same objectives of global good – the Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness Initiative.

Both India and Malaysia are part of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), along with 12 other countries. IPEF is now in advanced stages of reaching agreements on four pillars – trade, supply chain resilience, clean economy and fair economy.

In conclusion, India’s foreign policy approach to the Global South and the Indo-Pacific would contribute to a more stable, rules-based and inclusive multipolar world order, particularly one that reflects and accommodates the interests, concerns and aspirations of the Global South.



HE BN Reddy
High Commissioner of India to Malaysia



Beno Zephine NL
First Secretary, High Commission of India in Malaysia

How the EU could reshape Indo-Pacific's future

Bloc could pursue strategy to build trust, address mutual concerns as it seeks to expand regional influence

Dr Rahul Mishra



The European Union (EU) launched its Indo-Pacific strategy in September 2021. Even though some first thought it was “too little, too late”, the EU has already established itself as a major actor in the Indo-Pacific region. Notwithstanding several obstacles, the EU’s strategic involvement has contributed significant weight to the swiftly evolving Indo-Pacific order, consistent with its overarching objective of maintaining a rules-based international order founded on universally acceptable norms.

The growing EU presence in the Indo-Pacific region corresponds with risks that the rules-based order faces. The rise of revisionist states has weaponised trade, deepened strategic polarisations, and disregarded international norms, laws and principles. In this context, the EU’s steadfast commitment to a rules-based international order is vital, particularly as it strives to address key regional security challenges, including maritime security, cybersecurity and terrorism.

As a multilateral regional organisation, the EU naturally emphasises collaboration with other regional and multilateral institutions. Strengthening ties with regional organisations, such as ASEAN, is central to its strategy, particularly in addressing global challenges like climate change and pandemics.

Proactive engagement moves

The Russian invasion of Ukraine came as a shock for the EU, rendering its systematic plans to engage Russia on trade, commerce and the diplomatic front futile. As the conflict spilt over to the diplomatic domain, the EU quickly realised the importance of “doing more” in diplomacy.

Strengthening ties with regional partners, including ASEAN member states, India, Japan, Australia and South Korea, promoting trade, investment, and sustainable development in line with the EU’s Green Deal and digital transformation agendas are important steps



The EU has made significant strides in its trade relations with ASEAN. The launch of the Comprehensive Air Transport Agreement in December 2021, the first of its kind between the two regions, has significantly improved connectivity and economic cooperation.

in this regard. EU’s Global Gateway strategy is another multi-pronged tool to enhance its presence in the Indo-Pacific region.

Bolstering economic diplomacy and promoting trade ties with the aim to diversify its engagements has been one of the EU’s Indo-Pacific strategy’s major goals. Interestingly, before EU came up with its Indo-Pacific strategy, it worked on some key enablers to systematically foster its engagement. The 2019 connectivity strategy and launching of several trade and investment agreements worked as two important foundational pillars of the strategy. The launching of trade negotiations/agreements with Singapore, Vietnam, Australia, New Zealand, India, Thailand and South Korea is notable in this regard.

The EU’s proactive engagement in signing FTAs with ASEAN partners – Singapore and Vietnam – resulted in an effective and coordinated plan to enhance economic ties. The EU has made significant strides in its trade relations with ASEAN. The launch of the

Comprehensive Air Transport Agreement in December 2021, the first of its kind between the two regions, has significantly improved connectivity and economic cooperation.

The EU's focus on maritime security, cybersecurity and counterterrorism has been demonstrated through joint naval exercises with regional partners to secure vital sea lanes. In 2021, the EU launched the CRIMARIO II (Critical Maritime Routes Indo-Pacific) project to improve maritime domain awareness and foster cooperation among regional navies.

Cybersecurity has also been its focal point. Recognising the growing cyber threats in the region, the EU has bolstered its cybersecurity partnerships. In 2022, the EU and Japan intensified their cooperation in this area through joint exercises and information-sharing mechanisms, reflecting the EU's commitment to regional stability and security.

In line with the 2020 EU Green Deal, the EU's Indo-Pacific approach gives considerable attention to climate action and sustainability. To advance sustainable infrastructure, circular economy principles and renewable energy, green alliances have been established with Indo-Pacific nations. The establishment of the EU-India Clean Energy and Climate Partnership in 2022, which intends to improve collaboration in renewable energy and energy efficiency, was a noteworthy effort in this area.

Furthermore, the EU has promoted the sustainable management of marine resources in the Indo-Pacific region via several initiatives. Its commitment to environmental sustainability was highlighted during the EU-ASEAN High-Level Dialogue on Environment and Climate Change in 2021, which focused on reducing marine pollution and advancing the blue economy.

Challenges galore

The EU has been playing an active role in providing humanitarian aid and disaster relief in the Indo-Pacific region. Notable efforts include significant contributions to the Covax initiative, providing vaccines to Indo-Pacific countries during the Covid-19 pandemic. Its Team Europe initiative mobilised resources to support health systems and economic recovery in the region.

Notwithstanding these successes, there are still many challenges to the Indo-Pacific strategy. The safety and security of the sea lanes of communication, particularly South China Sea and Strait of Malacca, and complications in dealing with China are among them. Above all, the escalating rivalry between the United States and China poses a significant challenge for the EU. Aligning too closely with either side could alienate the other, while a neutral stance may limit the EU's influence in the region. Countries, such as India, Japan, and Australia, have their strategic interests and partnerships, which may not always align with the EU's objectives. Balancing these relationships is crucial but challenging.

Economic competition, especially China's dominant presence through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative, presents another formidable challenge to the EU's efforts to establish its economic footprints and connectivity initiatives in the region. Additionally, security concerns, such as the use of AI and swarms in the South China Sea waters, cybersecurity threats and terrorism, demand substantial resources and coordination with regional partners.

Keeping these challenges in view, the EU should work towards deepening its bilateral relations with key Indo-Pacific countries through high-level dialogues, strategic partnerships, and cooperation agreements. Regular Track 1, 1.5 and 2 exchanges could help build trust and address mutual concerns. Pursuing comprehensive trade

and investment agreements with Indo-Pacific countries will enhance market access and economic ties. Reducing trade barriers and fostering a conducive business environment are essential for mutual benefit.

The EU should actively participate in regional multilateral forums, such as ASEAN, the East Asia Summit, and the Pacific Islands Forum, to enhance its influence and support regional stability and development. Furthermore, the EU should continue to strengthen maritime security cooperation through joint exercises, capacity building and information-sharing mechanisms. Enhancing cybersecurity partnerships is equally critical to addressing common threats.

The EU should forge climate action partnerships to address climate change and promote sustainable practices. Collaborative efforts in renewable energy, climate resilience and environmental conservation are vital for long-term sustainability. The EU should improve disaster preparedness and response mechanisms, ensuring timely and effective humanitarian aid in the region. Strengthening health security cooperation through joint

research and capacity building is essential for resilience to future health emergencies.

Over the past three years, the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy has significantly increased its participation and influence in the area. Through strengthened economic ties, security cooperation, sustainability initiatives and humanitarian aid, the EU has positioned itself as a key player in the Indo-Pacific. As the region continues to evolve, its proactive and multifaceted approach will be crucial in promoting stability, prosperity, and sustainability. By addressing the challenges and seizing opportunities, the EU can continue to play a pivotal role in shaping the Indo-Pacific's future.



Economic competition, especially China's dominant presence through initiatives like BRI, presents another formidable challenge to the EU's efforts to establish its economic footprints and connectivity initiatives in the region.



Dr Rahul Mishra

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AI in defence and military innovation: advances and challenges

Gap between 'haves', 'have-nots' in military
capabilities likely to widen further

Dr Michael Raska

The rise of artificial intelligence (AI)-enabled systems and technologies presents a multifaceted transformation opportunities and challenges for ASEAN militaries.

On the one hand, AI offers significant potential for enhancing regional security. AI-powered systems can bolster maritime domain awareness through real-time data analyses from sensors and drones, enabling earlier detection of incursions and grey-zone tactics in the South China Sea. Additionally, AI can streamline logistics and optimise resource allocation, leading to more efficient deployments and improved decision-making during crises.

Indeed, for the first time in history, the character of human involvement in warfare is being fundamentally challenged by the rise of AI-driven decision-making and autonomous systems, and the blurring lines between human and machine on the battlefield.

Algorithms may soon play a critical role shaping human judgment on the battlefield. Advanced AI systems can analyse vast amounts of data in real time, influencing targeting decisions, troop movements and even tactical strategies. Imagine soldiers equipped with AI-powered tactical assistants that analyse battlefield data, suggest optimal courses of action, or even control autonomous drones for reconnaissance or combat.

However, the integration of AI also introduces substantial challenges. Concerns regarding an AI arms race in the region could exacerbate tensions and hinder peaceful resolutions to territorial disputes.

Moreover, ethical considerations surrounding autonomous weapons and the potential for algorithmic bias within AI systems necessitate careful development and deployment strategies to ensure human oversight and prevent unintended escalation or violations of international law. Overall, the impact of AI on ASEAN militaries is a

double-edged sword, demanding a nuanced approach that balances the pursuit of technological advancement with responsible development and regional cooperation.

AI-enabled RMA wave

While major powers, including the United States, China and, to a lesser degree, Russia, are now increasingly experimenting with AI technologies that enable unprecedented data analytics and automation in warfare – these technologies are increasingly permeating future warfare experimentation and capability development programmes, including in select militaries in East Asia.

Indeed, with the rapid development and convergence of emerging technologies such as AI and autonomous systems, whether in the People’s Liberation Army, Republic of Korea Army, Japan Self-Defence Forces, Singapore Armed Forces, and the forward-deployed US armed forces in the region, one could argue that a new AI-revolution in military affairs (AI-RMA) is emerging.

The new “AI-enabled” RMA wave, however, differs from the past information-technology (IT)-led RMA waves in several ways, which shaped military modernisation trajectories over the past four decades: first, the diffusion of AI-enabled data innovation proceeds at a much faster pace and through more diverse



Concerns regarding an AI arms race in the region could exacerbate tensions and hinder peaceful resolutions to territorial disputes.

pathways, notably through the accelerating geostrategic competition for emerging technologies between great powers – the US, China and, to a lesser degree, advanced middle powers and small states, such as South Korea, Japan, Israel and Singapore.

For the first time in decades, the US faces a strategic peer competitor, China, capable of pursuing and implementing its own AI-RMA in areas, such as robotics, cyber, additive manufacturing, advanced materials, synthetic biology, quantum computing, directed energy, space technologies and many others.



The ability to innovate and integrate AI technologies is synonymous with international influence and national power.

In this context, the ability to innovate and integrate AI technologies is synonymous with international influence and national power – generating economic competitiveness, political legitimacy, military power, and internal security. Therefore, the AI-RMA wave is arguably diffusing much faster across geopolitical lines in East Asia than in other geographical regions.

Second, contrary to previous decades, which, admittedly, utilised some dual-use technologies to develop major weapons platforms and systems, the current AI-enabled wave differs in the magnitude and impact of the commercial-technological innovation and use of data as the primary source of military innovation.

Large military industrial primes are no longer the only key drivers of military technological innovation, instead, advanced technologies with a dual-use potential are being developed in the commercial sectors and then being “spun on” to military applications. Imagine self-driving car technology being adapted for autonomous military vehicles or commercially available drones being repurposed for military reconnaissance.

The implications of this shift are far-reaching. The convergence between militaries and commercial tech companies allows militaries to keep pace with technological advancements at a more cost-effective rate, while commercial tech companies are becoming primary drivers of military strategic advantage – through their ability to harness the power of data.

Third, the diffusion of autonomous and AI-enabled autonomous weapon systems, coupled with novel operational constructs and force structures, challenges the direction and character of human involvement in future warfare – in which algorithms may shape human decision-making in warfare, and future combat will be conducted by unmanned Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems.

Algorithm to the fore

These technologies are increasingly permeating future warfare experimentation and capability development programmes and select militaries in the region are actively exploring how AI and automation can be utilised to enhance battlefield awareness, improve decision-making speed and accuracy, and potentially reduce human casualties in specific scenarios.

This focus on experimentation signifies that we are at the forefront the AI-driven revolution in warfare. Its rapid diffusion trajectory inherently also poses new challenges and questions concerning strategic stability, alliance relationships, arms control, ethics

and governance and, ultimately, the direction and character in the use of force.

Indeed, militaries – including ASEAN – must grapple with the contending legal and ethical implications of new weapon technologies and problems in encoding diverse values of safety, ethics and governance into these systems. Integrating data streams and AI systems across different military platforms will require trustworthy algorithms that can adapt to changes in their environment and learn from unanticipated events. It would also call for designing ethical codes and safeguards for these systems.

Hence, building a viable road map for traditional militaries to incorporate disruptive technologies will be a difficult task. While many advanced militaries may strive to design and implement varying digitisation paths, only some will have the vision, resources and will to succeed.

The principal challenge for implementing the AI-RMA is a wholesale re-engineering of Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (C4ISR) strategies and doctrines. An entirely new operational environment and novel technologies will require new mindsets at every echelon of military organisation.

The gap between the “haves” and “have-nots” in the military capabilities between countries will likely widen further. This gap will impact on future interoperability within military alliances and security partnerships, depending on how new technologies interact with current and emerging operational interfaces and force structures. ASEAN member states must resolve these challenges of the AI wave to manage new types of conflicts in the 2030s and beyond.



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Climate crisis at North-South impasse

Paris Agreement at risk until historical inequalities,
Global North-South divide addressed

Kieran Li Nair

Addressing the modern polycrisis is a momentous task, more so its all-encompassing component of climate change. Despite acknowledging this, the current state of global climate discourse is a contentious one.

Progress remains inadequate to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels, as underlined within the Paris Agreement. The UAE Consensus produced at the 28th Conference of Parties (COP28) has been heralded as the “beginning of the end of the fossil fuel era”, yet it was heavily criticised for watering down the commitment to transitioning away from fossil fuels through the inclusion of “transitional fuels” and carbon capture technologies.

Some argue that the movement has lost sight of the “common but differentiated responsibilities” principle meant to underlie international cooperation. To examine this argument, it is necessary to delve into how inequalities have been exacerbated across various stakeholders in the mutual pursuit of international climate commitments.

Unequal playing fields

Climate action has increasingly taken on an angle of profitability. COP28 marked the most attendance of “fossil fuel lobbyists” – a whopping 2,456 compared with COP27’s 636, raising concerns about the co-opting of climate narratives on the ground.

Consulting firms have also gained prominence within climate spaces, from the rising numbers of government contracting for national policymaking to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) bringing on consultancies as official strategic partners, creating a conflict of interest because of their expanse of fossil-fuel clientele and exposing these spaces to further risk of greenwashing and inadequate market-based solutions.

Civil society plays a crucial role



Civil society plays a crucial role in communicating the needs of underrepresented groups and serving as a check-and-balance for state actors, yet inclusivity remains a long-standing issue.

in communicating the needs of underrepresented groups and serving as a check-and-balance for state actors, yet inclusivity remains a long-standing issue – marred by tokenisation, inequitable access and, in extreme cases, state-sanctioned oppression.

Many have consistently advocated for equitable solutions at the national level that have either seen slow progress or fail to reflect within parties’ actions throughout the years. These circumstances perpetuate the exclusion of grassroots perspectives and are further amplified for marginalised communities in the Global South, where disproportionate climate impacts and urgent perspectives fail to be recognised at the international stage.

The UNFCCC and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), both serving as the authoritative drivers on climate knowledge and global cooperation, are not exempt from circumstances which perpetuate global dynamics of inequality. For example, the IPCC’s assessment reports are a crucial component of understanding climate science, however, authorship from Global South and socially diverse scientists remains insufficiently represented, wherein

the latest report comprised of 38% Global South authors and 33% female authors, missing out on crucial perspectives.

Equitable access to spaces, such as COP, has also been a long-standing issue, wherein Global North players not only bear disproportionate soft-power influence, but also do not face the same barriers as Global South and civil society actors, including negotiators, when it comes to capacity, funding and travel arrangements.

In view of these issues, shifting the tide of global climate discourse to mobilise proper action is a Herculean task. But keeping three things at the forefront is vital to provoke the paradigm shift needed to achieve equitable outcomes.

Key bases to equitable outcomes

First, reaffirming that these existing modern inequalities bear historical context. Namely, historical emissions and colonialism – circumstances explicitly acknowledged in the IPCC’s sixth assessment report – have formed the basis of resource extraction and ecological degradation which created the climate crisis, as well as set up the uneven dynamics of the Global North and Global South when it comes to parties’ respective development and mutual pursuit of emissions reductions.

The US\$1 billion (RM4.5 billion) global climate finance goal, for instance, has largely been delivered in the form of loans, which hinders accessibility and thereby crucial adaptation progress for the Global South. What’s more, superpowers, such as the US, alone comprise one-fourth of the world’s carbon dioxide emissions after accounting for historical emissions, a far cry from the developing world’s cumulative.

These showcase the existing dynamics where developing nations are pressured to weigh national development against adapting to climate impacts while facing



Given that the climate crisis does not exist in a vacuum, this is also tied to broader development reform movements, which aim not only to decouple imperial patterns of profiteering and overexploitation from development, but also decentralise decision-making processes from the ruling class to empower equal participation of ordinary citizens.

exacerbated inequalities, as compared with developed nations which do not face these struggles largely on account of perpetuating exploitative practices from their colonial histories.

Second, global climate governance requires a level of systemic change. This not only calls for the ambition required to fulfil the fossil fuel phase-out and wider just energy transition in achieving meaningful emission reductions but also to halt the overexploitation that our current institutional structures enforce, damaging ecosystem services, biodiversity, indigenous livelihoods and more.

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of profiteering and overexploitation from development, but also decentralise decision-making processes from the ruling class to empower equal participation of ordinary citizens, including grassroots and marginalised communities.

This is tied to the third point, in which a critical climate justice lens must be the north star in driving policy action. Such a lens integrates frameworks of intersectionality and decolonisation, as well as the right to self-determination for indigenous populations, to ensure a holistic approach to our climate responses.

For Global North players to build solidarity through these principles, true allyship must be built by empowering the inclusion of Global South and civil society movements, through amplifying awareness, capacity building, consultations and partnerships, ensuring meaningful participation and implementation of viewpoints in spaces where these actors are underrepresented or excluded.

Where gaps of inclusion have been identified, institutions such as the IPCC must continuously implement and review measures to ensure Global South and grassroots perspectives are adequately represented within the negotiating process and outcomes.

Developed nations should also continue to fulfil their financial and technological transfer obligations as agreed upon to bridge the Global North-South divide.

We return to “common but differentiated responsibilities” as the central and guiding principle of global climate discourse. The climate crisis is a global fight, but the battleground was not made equally. While all stakeholders must commit to their parts, the world must acknowledge the inequalities at hand and the collective action needed to address them, ensuring the Paris Agreement does not become a futile aspiration.



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