

Can ASEAN Still Keep Its Neutrality in a Fractured World?

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Introduction

Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim concluded Malaysia's ASEAN chairmanship with a visionary outcome under the banner of "ASEAN 2045: Our Shared Future." ASEAN is committed to achieving a resilient, dynamic, and people-centred regional community by 2045 through the ASEAN Community Vision 2045.

At the Shangri-La Dialogue 2025 in Singapore, he cautioned that smaller states risk being left behind amid tensions generated by major powers. This observation suggests that Southeast Asia could become a proxy arena in the context of escalating global competition. While ASEAN's commitment to non-alignment has long underpinned regional stability, it has also, at times, marginalised the organisation from the core of strategic decision-making.

In the current phase of geopolitical rivalry, ASEAN may not yet face direct repercussions. However, as major power competition in the Indo-Pacific intensifies, ASEAN's neutrality is increasingly under strain. This raises a critical question: will deepening regional rivalry compel ASEAN member states to abandon neutrality and begin choosing sides?

The Rise of Indo-Pacific Contestation and Proliferation

The Indo-Pacific is witnessing an increasing trend of missile development, threatening to outpace existing arms control frameworks. Signs of fragmentation and competitiveness characterize the regional security environment, with traditional mechanisms slowly losing their deterrent forces against escalation (Qiao-Franco, 2024). Selective implementation of the non-proliferation regime, such as the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) and the Hague Code of Conduct (HCoC), leaves open gaps for collective security (Héau & Maitre, 2021). These multilateral agreements aim to limit the spread of missiles capable of delivering weapons of mass destruction (WMD), but many countries either remain outside or selectively commit to their principles.

At the same time, increasing U.S. arms sales to Taiwan and FONOPs in the South China Sea challenge China's maritime claims, increasing the risk of miscalculation. Adding to the complexity is Russia's military technology trade in exchange for Pyongyang's wartime support that undermines UN sanctions and emboldens North Korea to pursue more aggressive nuclear programs. The potential for escalating provocative action increases, particularly after the successful testing of Hwasong-19 on October 31, 2024. For Japan and South Korea, this proliferation creates an

unpredictable situation that triggers concerns about direct nuclear threats. Taken together, these dynamics risk creating a dangerous cycle in which one side's efforts at deterrence are viewed as provocation by the other. Gradually, it narrows the room for diplomatic solutions (Yuan, 2023).

Risks to ASEAN Unity and Autonomy

In this context, ASEAN needs to balance autonomy with dependency. Growing economic dependency on China has complicated some states, as they directed their dependency and were unwilling to confront China's proactive actions directly. Surprisingly, other states, including the Philippines, have outrightly stated that they turned to the U.S. to provide some reassurance against any Chinese incursions in the maritime space (Naval, 2024). This asymmetry also opens the door to considering the South China Sea dispute as illustrative of a broader division among states, which persisted despite negotiating a Code of Conduct. Some members appeared indifferent as they are geographically distant, while others feared that speaking out too firmly might jeopardize trade and investment ties with China.

On the other hand, relying heavily on external powers to police its waters will erode ASEAN's credibility as a regional security actor. Outsourcing deterrence to the U.S. through FONOPs will remove its autonomy to shape regional norms and increase vulnerability to outstanding power disputes. Similarly, the current Iran-Israel war, as mentioned above, adds insult to injury. Most ASEAN member states have formal diplomatic relations with Israel through the presence of Israeli ambassadors in Bangkok, Hanoi, Manila, Singapore, and Yangon. Simultaneously, Muslim-majority countries like Malaysia and Indonesia face increased domestic pressure to maintain anti-Israel positions (Byrnes, 2025). Their actions may be perceived as leaning towards Iran due to shared Islamic identity. This cautious stance, masked as "neutrality," threatens ASEAN's collective voice to handle conflicts near and far.

Conclusion

The posture of not siding with any major powers creates a vision to become an active actor in international affairs. Nonetheless, the leaders from each member state should take progressive measures to react to the geopolitical tension. While neutrality should never be mistaken for silence, ASEAN must realise that staying quiet in the face of growing pressure from major powers does more harm than good. The reluctance given by ASEAN to respond. When member states are coerced, economically or politically, ASEAN's reluctance to react only emboldens external actors and raises serious questions about the bloc's relevance. If this pattern continues, ASEAN risks being seen as weak, fragmented, and incapable of safeguarding its interests. The world and the very citizens ASEAN claims to represent are watching. Inaction erodes the international community's trust and weakens ASEAN's long-term ability to shape the region's future. The question we must ask now is simple. Where is ASEAN headed? A passive bystander or a united voice for regional integrity? The choice will determine whether ASEAN remains credible or slips into irrelevance.

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