



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

BEYOND CENTRALITY:

ASEAN'S PATH TO REGIONAL LEADERSHIP

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Anyone who fights for the future, lives in it today.

– Ayn Rand, *The Romantic Manifesto*, 1969

Abstract

In the face of escalating great power competition, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) can solidify its regional leadership by leveraging its established centrality and the unfulfilled promises of the U.S. Free and Open Indo-Pacific framework. This chapter argues that ASEAN can proactively shape the Indo-Pacific security landscape through concrete actions and by fostering a network of cooperative initiatives known as Communities of Common Interest (CCI). By initiating these CCIs, ASEAN can incentivize great power engagement on its own terms, reinforcing shared norms and values. This approach will solidify ASEAN's centrality and elevate it to an actual leadership position in the region.

Introduction

The dissolution of the Cold War's bipolar order ushered in a new era for Southeast Asia, presenting both challenges and opportunities. Amidst the shifting landscape, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), composed of relatively small powers, emerged as a key player in regional peace and security. Leveraging its convening power, ASEAN established itself as a vital forum for regional dialogue, attracting major powers and solidifying its role in managing the economic and security developments in its own region.¹ Through initiatives like the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus, ASEAN brought

regional and global powers into forums, highlighting its central role in the region.

Building on this success, ASEAN pursued deeper integration, expanding its membership and ratifying the ASEAN Charter in 2008. This new foundational document established a framework for greater regional integration across political, security, economic, and socio-cultural dimensions.² During the early 2000s, ASEAN leveraged relative regional stability, backstopped by a dominant United States (U.S.), to build a soft normative order.³ However, its consensus-based decision-making model and recent internal divisions suggest it may have trouble leading the region.⁴

The concept of ASEAN centrality gained prominence with the introduction of the U.S. Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) framework in 2017. However, the escalating great power competition between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC) has raised questions about ASEAN's continued relevance and autonomy in shaping its destiny. To secure its future and that of Southeast Asia, ASEAN must transition from a position of centrality to embrace proactive leadership.

This chapter begins by examining the regional environment, focusing on the intersection of ASEAN, U.S., and PRC aspirations for the region. The following section will explore the need for and challenges to ASEAN regional leadership. Subsequently, the chapter will examine the concept of Communities of Common Interest (CCI) as a tool for operationalizing and securing ASEAN leadership in the region. This section will leverage the concept of cross-cutting cleavages to explore how focused minilateralism can be leveraged by ASEAN to manage competing interests while establishing itself as the leader of regional cooperation and security.

ASEAN in a Dynamic Indo-Pacific

As highlighted in the “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific,” the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions are among the most dynamic

globally, experiencing constant geopolitical and geostrategic shifts.⁵ Faced with a distracted United States and an increasingly aggressive China, ASEAN's relative regional influence has waned.

The past decade and a half have brought ASEAN a more complex strategic environment. The Obama administration's "Pivot to the Pacific" signaled a U.S. intent to challenge China's pursuit of regional dominance, leading to heightened competition and leaving ASEAN member states caught in the middle. The escalating rivalry has disrupted ASEAN's role as the primary platform for addressing regional issues.

However, ASEAN can find some solace in the growing recognition among scholars and practitioners that the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions form a single, interconnected region.⁶ The challenge for ASEAN is to leverage this interconnectedness to maintain its central and strategic role in shaping and managing this evolving landscape.

*United States:
Engaged yet Aloof*

ASEAN has long valued the presence of the United States in the region, especially for security purposes. Evelyn Goh argues that, following the end of the Cold War, "many Southeast Asian states proved to be more concerned about potential United States withdrawal than anything else."⁷ However, maintaining U.S. engagement within ASEAN-led structures has proven challenging. While ASEAN's inclusive approach has encouraged U.S. participation, global commitments and domestic priorities have often diverted American attention. ASEAN has repeatedly felt slighted by cancellations of U.S. participation in ASEAN forums due to external distractions or domestic concerns. Furthermore, perceived U.S. hesitancy in supporting regional allies, as seen in the Second Thomas Shoal incident, has raised doubts about the U.S.

commitment to regional security and its ability to counterbalance a rising China.⁸

The 2017 introduction of the FOIP framework initially held promise, seemingly aligning with ASEAN's values and emphasizing cooperation. For a time, FOIP seemed to be a move toward cooperative order building that agreed with ASEAN values and represented a U.S. commitment to an ASEAN-led security order rather than security competition. However, FOIP failed to materialize into a comprehensive strategy, as the United States quickly shifted focus toward security competition with China. This shift is evident in the U.S. embrace of minilateral initiatives like the Quad and AUKUS. The Quad, an informal strategic forum that includes the United States, Japan, India, and Australia, has seen a growing emphasis on security and prominence in the regional approach of the United States, raising concerns in ASEAN about exclusion from critical discussions. The 2021 establishment of AUKUS, a trilateral security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States focused on enhancing military capabilities to counter China, has further sidelined ASEAN.⁹

While not explicitly directed against ASEAN, the Quad and AUKUS have fostered a perception that the United States prioritizes alternative frameworks over ASEAN-led mechanisms. This risks undermining ASEAN's centrality and influence in shaping the regional security landscape.¹⁰

*People's Republic of China:
Asserting Dominance*

Under Xi Jinping's leadership, China has become increasingly assertive in global governance, seeking to "reform the international system and global governance, and increase the representation and say of China and other developing countries."¹¹ In December 2014, he noted that China could no longer be "spectators and followers,

but should participate and lead, make China's voice heard, and inject more Chinese elements into the international rules.¹² It has established alternative frameworks, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, posing a challenge to the U.S.-led regional order.¹³

China strategically promotes a new regional and global order with Beijing at its core, as exemplified by the "One Belt, One Road" initiative. While framed as cooperative, this initiative primarily emphasizes bilateral agreements between Beijing and individual partners.

In the South China Sea, China's assertiveness has laid bare its ambition to reshape the regional order to its advantage, often conflicting with ASEAN's interests. Its actions prioritize Sino-centrism, even within seemingly cooperative frameworks like the proposed "Community of Common Destiny."¹⁴ Elizabeth Buensuceso recounts how China even attempted to get the phrase "community of common destiny" included in several East Asia Summit Leadership statements in 2017, leveraging an ASEAN-centered forum to further its vision of a Beijing-led region.¹⁵

In fact, China has skillfully manipulated ASEAN dialogues to its benefit. For example, it prevents discussions on the South China Sea Code of Conduct (COC) from hindering its strategic and economic agendas by relegating the issue to lower-level fora.¹⁶ While China keeps COC negotiations alive to prevent the internationalization of the disputes,¹⁷ its goal is not to complete the COC; rather, China aims to ensure the regional order aligns with its strategic objectives. The COC is little more than a game to keep other states distracted.¹⁸

Another tactic China employs is to divide ASEAN and prevent unified opposition. By leveraging its influence over individual member states, China creates "an effective veto over ASEAN policy, undermining the organization's centrality and unity."¹⁹

The broader threat to ASEAN centrality lies in China's attempt to create a hierarchical order centered on Beijing, where individual ASEAN member states function as mere components of that system. Xi Jinping's promotion of the "community of common destiny" as the region's guiding philosophy reflects this ambition to establish a Sino-centric rather than ASEAN-centric order.²⁰

The Unfulfilled Promise of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific

Initially, FOIP strengthened ASEAN's central role in the region, garnering endorsements from the United States and its allies. However, despite initial enthusiasm, FOIP never fully materialized into a robust U.S. policy with concrete implementation in the region.

Following President Trump's 2017 speech in Da Nang, which introduced the FOIP vision,²¹ it became evident that there was no detailed strategy to support the rhetoric. FOIP initially resembled a catchy slogan rather than a well-defined policy. However, the U.S. policy community sought input from regional leaders to align FOIP with their countries' values, following an ASEAN-style consultative approach.²² Only after establishing a platform with regional support were the tenets of FOIP formally articulated.

Despite the effort to ensure the policy aligned with regional sentiment, FOIP lacked a clear implementation plan. Subsequent remarks by U.S. officials primarily focused on countering China's economic influence in the region through dollar diplomacy, neglecting to articulate how U.S. policy would foster an open, values-based environment and promote cooperation with partners.²³ Instead of centering ASEAN in the Indo-Pacific, the focus remained on great power competition.

Although the U.S. Department of Defense introduced "Partnerships for a Purpose" in June 2019, suggesting collaboration with regional states on shared interests,²⁴ this concept seems to have faded. The Biden Administration, though continuing to embrace

FOIP as a framework, has not elevated it to a central policy priority, leaving its potential unrealized.

**ASEAN Leadership:
Embracing Proactivity Amidst Internal Complexities**

ASEAN faces a geopolitical environment where great powers act unilaterally, pursuing their own security interests, and can no longer rely on the goodwill of external actors to maintain its regional role. The United States, while not seeking to displace ASEAN, will shape the region according to its interests if a security architecture is not established. Meanwhile, China increasingly disregards regional states' sovereignty, actively pushing for a hierarchical, Sino-centric order.

To remain relevant and influential, ASEAN must evolve beyond its traditional role of centrality and embrace proactive leadership. The "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific" states that "it is in the interest of ASEAN to lead the shaping of their economic and security architecture and ensure that such dynamics will continue to bring about peace, security, stability, and prosperity for the peoples in Southeast Asia as well as in the wider Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions or the Indo-Pacific."²⁵ However, ASEAN's mechanisms remain broadly consultative, relying heavily on forums like the East Asia Summit (EAS).²⁶ Whereas the United States forms multilateral organizations, such as the Quad and AUKUS, without ASEAN, and China actively builds a Sino-centric order, ASEAN must transcend mere discourse and take concrete steps to lead.

Challenges to Leadership

As ASEAN has become a more recognized and important regional actor, its internal divisions and requirement for consensus have been barriers to leadership. The organization was founded in part to protect the independence of the member states. Consequently, ASEAN states take pride in their sovereignty and are loath to cede

power to organizations. This principle also constrains joint action when questions of political systems and state responsibilities come into play. For example, ASEAN has been unwilling to comment on Myanmar's actions toward its Rohingya minority as it would violate their principle of non-intervention. Moreover, the member states vary significantly in economic development, political systems, and strategic priorities. This diversity can lead to divergent interests on specific issues. For instance, economically advanced members like Singapore and Malaysia may prioritize trade liberalization, while developing nations like Cambodia and Laos may focus on infrastructure development and poverty reduction. Divisions such as these have made common economic policies problematic.

Beyond internal differences, ASEAN may be most hamstrung by its organic processes, particularly the commitment that all organizational matters be decided by consensus. Pongsudhirak, for example, suggests that this insistence on unanimity has undermined the prospects for an ASEAN economic community and is also preventing ASEAN from effectively leading the region it calls home.²⁷

This tradition is, in part, an attempt to protect members from outside actors by projecting the appearance of unity.²⁸ However, leadership requires being decisive when time does not exist to build a consensus.²⁹ Moreover, given the nature of the member states, not all will have the same interest or capacity in all areas. ASEAN must find a way to mitigate these facts and design a role for the organization that enables it to remain central and steer regional policy while understanding that its current paradigm does not allow it to move at the pace of crises.

A Path to Leadership

ASEAN's established convening power provides a strong foundation for shifting the organization to leadership. The ARF remains the only regional institution with a comprehensive security

mandate encompassing all the major powers with an interest in the region's security.³⁰ By operationalizing its leadership potential, ASEAN can regain the initiative in shaping regional security and attract external actors who seek engagement based on mutual respect.

Although ASEAN's consensus-based decision-making is often considered a constraint, it can be reframed as a standard that enables action rather than a method that prevents it. By establishing a norm of enabling action within the framework of its foundational principles, as outlined in the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC),³¹ ASEAN can make decisions that benefit the organization, its members, and its people without requiring absolute unanimity. Unity will be maintained by upholding the TAC principles, not from every state agreeing with every action of the organization.

While recognizing that ASEAN as an organization may only move when all members are ready, ASEAN needs to realize that it still benefits by casting itself in the role of regional enabler for the interests of its members, even when consensus is elusive. The organization can serve as a regional enabler, fostering cooperation and leadership among its members, as long as the principles of non-interference and sovereignty are upheld.

ASEAN must recognize that action is required to realize its vision. That action can be by ASEAN when consensus can be reached, but it will, at times, be carried out by individual states in areas where they have comparative advantages. At that point, all members must maintain the centrality and leadership of ASEAN as an institution by ensuring those actions are discussed and taken within ASEAN's framework, reinforcing the organization's centrality and leadership. Recognizing that not all states have the same interests or capacities, ASEAN should adopt a flexible approach to integration, focusing on areas where initiatives can be tailored to serve specific interests.

Building trust and reducing miscalculations are crucial for maintaining regional peace, and ASEAN's forums play a vital role.³² However, concrete action is equally necessary. ASEAN must become a catalyst for regional action, designing initiatives that individual states can lead and integrating external powers into the ASEAN framework on its terms. This approach will solidify ASEAN's leadership and shape a regional order that reflects its values and interests.

**Communities of Common Interest:
ASEAN Takes the Lead**

The United States is falling short of ASEAN's leadership expectations, while China's leadership vision threatens ASEAN's independence. Consequently, it is time for ASEAN to implement several initiatives to shape the region according to its interests. To do so, it should revive the concept of small, issue-based minilateral initiatives within its existing fora by establishing Communities of Common Interest (CCI) around specific issues that align with the needs of the organization and its member states. By doing so, ASEAN can enmesh external powers in a web of mutually beneficial cooperative endeavors, incentivizing them to align with ASEAN's regional leadership. This approach positions ASEAN as a regional leader and fosters a broader cooperative community reinforcing regional peace and security.

*Cross-Cutting Cleavages:
Security in Differences*

Establishing numerous small CCIs allows ASEAN to avoid the need for universal support for each initiative. Instead, it can leverage the political science concept of cross-cutting cleavages, which suggests that when differences between subgroups do not align but are cross-cutting, security and cooperation are enhanced.

Cleavages are differences between groups of individuals that have the potential to divide and lead to conflict.³³ However, Edward Alsworth Ross argues that when these cleavages do not coincide but run in multiple directions, each new cleavage serves to narrow the cross clefts and, rather than tear the society apart, sews it together.³⁴ Relatedly, in his study of the early United States, Alexis de Tocqueville noted the average citizen had many interests, manifested in a number of associations with other citizens.³⁵ Moreover, as they become enmeshed in these associations and find benefits in them, individuals establish an interest in maintaining the system.³⁶ When these associations are cross-cutting, and an individual's interactions touch many other individuals who also have different associations, it reduces the potential cleavages on which a community can be divided into distinct groups.

While individuals A and B might disagree with C on issue X, A and C agree on issue Y. In other words, the cleavages between these individuals are cross-cutting across issues. Buensuceso echoed this situation in relaying an inside joke of the ASEAN community, “so-and-so is my friend in Agenda Item 3 but my worst enemy in Agenda Item 5, which may not be a joke after all when you examine the debates and negotiations we carried out in our daily lives here.”³⁷ In other words, no two cleavages—or few—are between the same groups. Since there is never a completely clear line between two blocks, disagreements tend to be mitigated, conflict limited, and stability obtained.

Research supports the hypothesis that cross-cutting cleavages moderate social conflict.³⁸ Given the existing diversity of interests and actors in the Indo-Pacific, leveraging cross-cutting cleavages could be an effective method for ensuring regional security while building a more cooperative and prosperous environment.

Establishing a Regime of Cooperation

ASEAN can combine its status as a convening authority for the region and the stability offered by cross-cutting cleavages to create a foundation for a series of CCIs. These initiatives will showcase ASEAN's leadership and external actors in a web of relations and focus the future of the region on working through ASEAN institutions. In doing so, ASEAN can establish the values-based order promised by FOIP and establish itself as a leader at the center of the Indo-Pacific.

This approach builds on existing concepts such as middle-power coalitions and the "Partnership for a Purpose" under FOIP but with the added advantage of ASEAN's legitimacy and convening power.³⁹ To ensure CCIs are structured to promote ASEAN's regional leadership, they should be built on the following four principles:

- *ASEAN LEADERSHIP*: Each CCI should be led by an ASEAN member state.
- *INSTITUTIONAL LINKAGE*: Each CCI should be tied to an existing ASEAN forum for discussions, coordination, and implementation.
- *ACTION-ORIENTED*: Each CCI should focus on concrete actions, not just discussions.
- *EXTERNAL ENGAGEMENT*: While not mandatory, each CCI should strive to include at least one external partner to tie extra-regional interests into the ASEAN system.

Practical Applications: CCIs in Action

To truly operationalize its leadership, ASEAN needs to move beyond theoretical frameworks and embrace concrete action. The following examples highlight how CCIs can be applied to address specific regional challenges, demonstrating ASEAN's ability to lead

and foster collaboration. When implemented, these CCIs can be tangible proof of ASEAN's commitment to proactive leadership, creating a network of cooperative initiatives that benefit the entire region.

Trafficking in Persons (CCI-TIP)

Combatting trafficking in persons is already a priority for ASEAN and a perfect issue for establishing the framework for organizing CCIs. A CCI-TIP could be organized around joint maritime and coastal patrols, including officer exchanges and ship-riders, to integrate efforts to eradicate this illicit trade. Justification can be found in the ASEAN Convention on the Trafficking in Persons (ACTIP) and cooperation and training enhanced through the Jakarta Centre of Law Enforcement Cooperation. The CCI could be managed and coordinated by the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime (AMMTC) to formally tie the CCI to ASEAN. This CCI would also benefit from the expertise and resources of extra-regional partners with a vested interest in curbing human trafficking. For example, Australia is already linked with ASEAN partners through funding, joint management, and participation in the Jakarta Centre.⁴⁰

Maritime Security (CCI-MarSec)

The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific specifically identifies maritime cooperation as an area it seeks to promote.⁴¹ A CCI-MarSec could build on existing initiatives like the "Eyes in the Sky" program. This could involve including joint maritime patrols, allowing for ship-riders from littoral states, and ensuring they are structured to include appropriate arrest authorities. Although legal and bureaucratic challenges exist, a commitment to cooperation can pave the way for innovative solutions that enable multinational participation.

Disaster Response (CCI-DR)

Despite establishing the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre), ASEAN's response to disasters has been hampered by consensus requirements. A CCI-DR could focus on establishing a more agile coordination mechanism to identify and deploy resources from public, private, and civil society capabilities during emergencies. AHA Centre could serve as a central hub to communicate, coordinate, and deconflict with providers from all sectors of society to rapidly coordinate the delivery of required capabilities to a disaster site. Private and civil groups are not bound by government bureaucracies and procedures or tied to expensive taxpayer funding. By bringing in disaster response experts regionally and extra-regionally, ASEAN can prove a leader in coordination and turn the AHA Centre into the Indo-Pacific's disaster response hub. This model was being experimented with by regional partners during a 2018 workshop in Taiwan, but further development was interrupted by the pandemic.⁴² With a CCI-DR, ASEAN can pick up this initiative and turn it into an example for the region to follow.

CCI-Economics

Despite some success in cutting trade tariffs, ASEAN faces challenges in economic liberalization due to lingering tariffs, non-tariff barriers, and dissimilar member state priorities.⁴³ Rather than rely on expansive regional trade pacts, which are the product of prolonged bureaucratic deal-making rather than strong leadership, ASEAN should initiate a series of targeted economic CCIs focused on specific goods. For instance, member states could unilaterally offer zero tariffs on certain goods to any state willing to reciprocate. This would accelerate liberalization, avoid lengthy negotiations, and demonstrate leadership. These CCIs would be open to all, including extra-regional states, and could be discussed in ASEAN forums like the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) meetings.

By unilaterally instituting broad, single-issue liberalization measures, ASEAN breaks out of complex negotiations with individual partners and makes itself the torch bearer of the future. External states that want the best deal with ASEAN must now accede to ASEAN's terms or risk falling behind other states that do. This allows ASEAN to build momentum with one initiative after the other and become the *de facto* norm setter for liberalized trade.

Expanding the Network of CCIs

The key is establishing a network of cross-cutting interest groups represented by ASEAN-led CCIs. This approach fosters familiarity, builds trust, spreads norms, and encourages external powers to act cooperatively within an ASEAN-led framework. As Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff argue, it is of central importance that the benefits of cooperation outweigh the incentives to act unilaterally. This is achieved through frequent repetition of interaction, the development of greater communication and transparency between states, and the construction of institutions, which enable cooperative patterns.⁴⁴

If ASEAN acts first and creates the conditions through which its members and external actors agree to act in concert, they encourage integration and cooperation on their terms. Basing each initiative in an ASEAN-led fora ensures that when external states want to engage with a CCI, they do so through ASEAN, even if not every member of ASEAN is willing to participate in the initiative. The more CCIs ASEAN states can create, the more linkages they build, each strengthening its role as the hub for regional engagement and knitting a quilt of cross-cutting cleavages that reduces the potential for conflict and promotes the participants' shared interests. This, in turn, empowers ASEAN to lead in shaping its and the region's future.

Conclusion

Since the end of the Cold War, ASEAN has struggled to become more than a platform for discussions about the region. However, it has long been constrained by external actors seeking to use the region for their own ends. While it has attempted to engage these powers, ASEAN has lacked the necessary influence to shape its regional interactions. The United States, despite its welcome presence, has been inconsistent in its focus, often prioritizing its own initiatives. Meanwhile, China envisions a Sino-centric order that diverges from ASEAN's values-based approach.

Positioned between these competing visions and at the convergence of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, ASEAN has a unique opportunity to lead. By leveraging the Communities of Common Interest concept, ASEAN can transform its fora into essential mechanisms for shaping the region while engaging external actors on its own terms. This is not simply a matter of revitalizing ASEAN's fora; rather, it requires linking them to concrete actions that enhance regional cooperation by addressing critical security and economic challenges. In doing so, ASEAN can evolve from a facilitator of collaboration to a leader, transforming the region into a peaceful and prosperous zone of interaction and trade and contributing to the broader prosperity of the Indo-Pacific.

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