

Third Pole Realism Diplomacy: A Unique Presence in Relations with the US, China and Russia—ASEAN as a Proactive Player and a Gray World



While ASEAN countries are mixed in their pros and cons for Quad and AUKUS which have China in mind, ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) has set out to build cooperative relationships that include not only the United States, Japan, India, and Australia, but also China, Russia and others.

Photo: Cabinet Public Affairs Office

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Inclusive Diplomacy

The “Global South” is a term often used to refer to developing and emerging countries primarily in Asia and Africa, and the expanding influence of this Global South in the international community is attracting attention. The ten countries that make up ASEAN are a part of the Global South. According to World Bank statistics, today the combined GDP of these ten countries is nearing 70% of Japan’s GDP (US\$3,343.3 billion) and their combined population was five times that of Japan (673.33 million) as of 2021. Moreover with Indonesia holding the G20 Presidency and Thailand presiding over APEC in 2022, the presence of Southeast Asia in major international and regional meetings has been impressive.



Prof. Oba Mie

With strategic competition between the US and China heating up, prominent discourse suggests that Southeast Asia is becoming a tactical hotbed. Indeed, it is true that both countries are locked in keen competition over ASEAN countries. But theories that discount the independence of ASEAN countries fail to see what is really happening.

ASEAN countries actually hold the key to determining the regional order. A form of inclusive diplomacy has developed that deepens coordination and cooperation with various non-regional countries but avoids bias towards any specific country, and does not adopt an inclusionary stance towards any country.

And even as the US-China conflict has become more serious, ASEAN countries have maintained their stance at the national level and as an organization. For both the US and China to ensure the advantages of their respective countries and establish a regional order they see as favorable, it will be important how far ASEAN countries are willing to align. In that sense, these countries are important players who will determine the role of regional order.

An organization that is not monolithic

As is often noted, there is great diversity among ASEAN countries. There are regional powers such as Indonesia and countries like Singapore that have reached economic levels on par with advanced nations, while others like Laos fall into the category of least developed country, and have to rely on external assistance for infrastructure development.

Similarly, the political systems vary greatly, ranging from countries like Indonesia and the Philippines that have established electoral systems to some degree, to Vietnam and Laos that have maintained the one-party ruling system of the communist party. In addition, geographical factors such as islands or continents also have an impact, and the diplomatic stances of these countries are not always in sync. Then there is Myanmar, which saw the restoration of a military regime during a coup in February 2021. Myanmar is isolated even within ASEAN and there are serious concerns that imperil its unity.

Reflecting the diverse range of issues they face, ASEAN countries are not always diplomatically aligned. Even so, there is a certain weight to the fact that ASEAN, an organization that was established in 1967 and observed its 55th anniversary in 2022 has continued to engage in dialogue, worked to stabilize mutual relations, and has pursued cooperation in various areas, such as security and politics, economics, society and culture.

ASEAN has also functioned as an important mechanism for these diverse countries to constantly exchange opinions and information, consolidate their stances even if only in terms of the greatest common divisor, and communicate where they stand both domestically and internationally.

More specifically, ASEAN countries have strengthened their ties with major non-regional countries such as the US, China, Japan, India and Australia at the individual country level in parallel, institutionalizing structures of dialogue, discussion and cooperation with each of these countries as an “ASEAN plus one” framework. In addition, ASEAN countries have formed ASEAN-centric regional systems such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN plus three, East Asia Summit (EAS), and ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM+) at multiple levels, playing a principal role in stabilizing regional order.

Professor Evelyn Goh of the Australian National University has described the multiple hedging strategy towards external partners adopted by ASEAN countries as an “omni-directional strategy.” Besides, for them to preserve what they have achieved into the future and stabilize regional order, it will be necessary to emphasize “ASEAN Centrality” when asserting that the role of ASEAN is essential.

The foreign strategy of ASEAN countries to avoid favoring any one power and instead maintain a balance is born out of a risk hedging perspective. Professor Kuik Cheng-Chwee of the National University of Malaysia has posited four risks that ASEAN countries face: the risk of being taken under the wing of only one great power, the risk of relying on a specific great power but having the ladder removed and being abandoned, the risk of being divided by conflict between great powers, and the risk of marginalization where the importance of ASEAN is diminished. To avoid these risks, the multiple hedging strategy is even more important to ASEAN countries.

Economic Dependence on China

Let's take a look at this based on recent developments in the ASEAN region. According to estimates made by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) in 2017, for developing countries in Asia including ASEAN to maintain their growth momentum, they will need to make infrastructure investments worth more than US\$1.7 trillion a year up to 2030. As mentioned earlier, the development level of ASEAN countries varies from country to country. There are some countries willing to select partners on the condition that they can secure funding for infrastructure development in their own country to some extent, while there are other countries that have to rely completely on external funding.

But in either case, the financial resources of China, which has made clear its intention to invest in and support infrastructure development as part of its Belt and Road initiative and other efforts, are attractive to each country. And even beyond the scope of infrastructure development, investment in ASEAN by China is increasing. Thus, the relationships between China and ASEAN countries are clearly growing closer, although there are grey areas in each country.

For these countries, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) that went into effect in January 2022 is important as a framework that further deepens economic integration based on close economic ties with China. Then in November 2021, ASEAN upgraded its existing strategic partnership with China to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP), touting even stronger coordination.

However, all ASEAN countries have a strong sense of caution about making their economies overly reliant on China. Moreover, China's hegemonic behavior typified by efforts to engage in large-scale land reclamation and military base construction in the South China Sea has been a factor undermining relations with countries disputing the South China Sea issue, particularly Vietnam and the Philippines. These actions have also generated a backlash from countries that are not part of the dispute but value the stability of sea lanes and maritime order in general, such as Singapore and Indonesia, causing them to see China as a security threat.

Security Provided by the US

Taking these perspectives into account, maintaining and strengthening ties with the United States, a hegemonic power that has long contributed to the stability of the security environment in this region, is also important to these countries. The fact that in May 2022 seven ASEAN countries, excluding Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar indicated they would take part in the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, which does not incorporate market access elements, may also influence their intentions. At the US-ASEAN Summit held in November 2022 the decision was also made to upgrade the relationship between the US and ASEAN to CSP.

The way that ASEAN countries look at minilateral strategic alliances such as the Quad (a framework of four countries of Japan, US, Australia, and India) and Aukus (a military alliance between US, UK and Australia) is also complicated. The emergence and strengthening of these frameworks which do not include ASEAN countries and are clearly formed with China in mind elevates tensions in Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific region that surrounds it, and attracts criticism for triggering military expansion among other things. However, from the perspective of relativizing China's growing influence, there is a surprisingly strong tendency to evaluate these moves favorably.

According to the results of an annual survey of experts in ASEAN countries conducted by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS)-Yusof Ishak Institute, a Singapore-based think tank, while 58.5% welcome the strengthening of the Quad and greater cooperation, 28.5% were neutral and 13% disagreed. And with regard to Aukus, 36.4% saw it as a way to balance China's military power, but 22.5% think it will escalate the regional arms race, 18% say it will weaken ASEAN centrality, and 12.3% are concerned it will undermine the nuclear weapons nonproliferation regime. While the reactions have been wide ranging, these results suggest a hope that these endeavors will work as frameworks to relativize China's growing power.

Commanding a Unique Presence in the International Community

The multiple hedging strategy being pursued by ASEAN countries is also linked to a stance that emphasizes inclusivity. While the US and Japan have each advocated for a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)" and the Quad has also clearly pushed FOIP, ASEAN countries announced "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP)" in June 2019. AOIP is distinctive in that it emphasizes inclusivity, and seeks to build cooperative relationships with countries other than Quad nations US, Japan, India and Australia, such as China and Russia. This inclusive approach being put forward by ASEAN countries was also seen in 2022, when the Russian invasion of Ukraine cast shadows over various aspects of the international community. ASEAN chair Cambodia in 2022 refused to exclude Russia from the East Asia summit and advocated its participation from the outset. Similarly in 2022, Indonesia, which was the G20's chair country, and Thailand, which was the APEC's chair country, adopted stances of not excluding Russia as a member nation from summit-level gatherings and other meetings. According to some reports, Western nations applied pressure to ASEAN countries to rescind invitations to Russia but were rejected. Then in May 2022, the foreign ministries of these three countries issued a joint press release affirming their stances as chair countries of each meeting to cooperate "with all partners and all stakeholders" and to strengthen "ASEAN Centrality" through such efforts. This is a clear indication of their intent to establish a unique presence in the international community by adopting an inclusive approach while aligning with ASEAN countries.

Something noteworthy from the latest G20 Summit was the issuance of a Leaders Declaration that was expected to be difficult to pass. The declaration condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine while making reference to UN resolutions. This was important in the sense that the G20 successfully demonstrated its stance on the Russo-Ukrainian War, an issue that is extremely sensitive in the current international community, while also including objections to it. In addition to China's willingness to compromise and India's encouraging members to reach consensus, Indonesia's strong willingness to see adoption of the leaders' declaration contributed greatly to its passage. This G20

summit was an opportunity to show the importance of the Global South in the international community, particularly Indonesia, which is seen as the leader of ASEAN countries, along with China and India.

Relationship with Russia

Seen in terms of the risk hedging and multiple hedging strategy exhibited by ASEAN countries, Russia is actually an important partner. For example, Vietnam had close ties to Russia during the Cold War era but has maintained and even strengthened its partnership in the post-Cold War era. In recent years, Russia has been regarded as an even more important partner from the perspective of relativizing the influence of China in particular.

To Laos, which does not expect large-scale investments from countries other than China, Russia is a key partner in relativizing its dependence on China, as Laos can gain support from Russia by deepening political ties. According to reports, Laos is currently struggling with serious gasoline shortages due to its weakening currency and sharply rising resource prices, and hopes to gain access to crude oil imports by maintaining friendly ties with Russia.

Indonesia is also believed to be considering the purchase of petroleum from Russia, but investments from Russia, particularly in the energy industry, have been notable for some time.

Then to Thailand, tourists from Russia were crucial in rebuilding its tourism industry without having to rely on inbound tourism from China alone. It is still fresh in my memory that after the Russian invasion of Ukraine began, some 7,000 Russian tourists were stranded in Phuket and other tourist spots around Thailand. At the end of October, 2022, direct flights from Russia to Phuket operated by Aeroflot were resumed. Thailand hopes to revitalize its tourism industry by once again welcoming tourists from Russia.

Which is to say, even if there are differences from country to country, Russia has become increasingly important as a partner to ASEAN countries, and even under current conditions, we can see moves in pursuit of pragmatic ties with Russia. For ASEAN countries, where maintaining economic development is a top priority, the more sources of investment, energy, food and other goods, the better. In October 2021, the 4th ASEAN-Russia Summit was held in an online format, marking the 30th anniversary of the start of dialogue between Russia and ASEAN. A joint statement was issued, suggesting a further deepening of cooperative ties.

Seen in this context, Indonesia, Cambodia and Thailand encouraging Russia to participate in meetings they hosted will ultimately be viewed by some as nothing more than pandering to Russia. But we cannot infer that ASEAN countries are on the side of Russia regarding the Russo-Ukrainian War just because they invited Russia to these meetings.

ASEAN does not approve of the Russian invasion of Ukraine

First of all, the G20 Leaders Declaration mentioned earlier was tough on Russia. In addition, Indonesia also invited Ukrainian President Zelensky to the G20 summit. Zelensky ended up not going to Bali, but sent a video speech instead. President Joko's wish that the leaders of Russia and Ukraine meet face to face at the G20 summit was not fulfilled, but the result was no different from the stance of taking an inclusive approach to all stakeholders.

Moreover, as the Ukrainian foreign minister did meet with the Secretary-General of ASEAN on the sidelines of the ASEAN summit and even held a press conference in front of press from various countries, the participation of Ukraine was realized in some form, although modest.

The vote on the resolution condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine brought up during an Emergency Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly in early March soon after Russia invaded Ukraine is also telling. Only two of the ten ASEAN countries, Vietnam and Laos, abstained from voting, with the other eight countries all casting votes in favor. Among them was Myanmar, whose vote was cast not by a representative of the military regime established in a coup in 2021, but by the UN representative appointed by the previous democratic administration. While it may be necessary to discount Myanmar's vote for this reason, it is still important to note that the seven other countries all expressed support for the resolution condemning Russia.

Considering, as noted earlier, that Vietnam and Laos have established closer ties with Russia, abstaining rather than casting votes in opposition to the resolution can be seen as these countries not criticizing Russia directly, but not aligning with them either.

Note that in voting on a UN resolution criticizing Russia for declaring the annexation of four provinces of Ukraine including Donbass on October 12, 2022, Thailand, Vietnam and Laos each abstained, while the remaining seven ASEAN countries voted in favor. Thailand's voting behavior may have been due to dealings with Russia on its participation in the APEC Summit.

Indeed many ASEAN countries have been avoiding criticizing Russia head-on. The only ASEAN country that has taken a clearly critical stance of the Russian invasion as a violation of international law and an affront to international order, and also taken part in economic sanctions, is Singapore.

However, I still believe it is important that no ASEAN countries have cast votes opposing resolutions that criticize Russia. To these countries, like other Global South countries with histories of once being exposed to the pressure of imperialist great powers, international norms such as respect for national sovereignty and territorial integrity carry deep significance. From that perspective they cannot approve of Russia's actions. On that point, developed countries and most countries of the Global South including ASEAN are likely in accord with one another. Yet there is a wide gap between the two on how specifically to approach Russia and this issue.

A Gray World

The actions of the ASEAN countries described above illustrate how simplistic it is to see the world in terms of binary opposition, as "democracy vs. despotism." In other words, they embrace an unbiased policy according to their own logic. And it is those actions that make not just the Indo-Pacific but the entire world gray, not something that can be divided into black and white.

Nor is this world supported by and driven solely by developed countries like the US as it once was. Parts of the Global South including ASEAN countries have developed economically and expanded their political voice. And in light of globalization that also involves the Global South, developed countries are forced to work together to address various common issues such as food, energy, and the environment.

However, the Global South has a deeply rooted antipathy and distrust towards the West that has built up over time. On the other hand, developed countries including Europe, the US and Japan still look down on them.

It is important to understand that firstly, ASEAN and other members of the Global South are not arenas where power competition of the great powers unfolds, but are themselves active players, and secondly that while they may respond to or quietly reject approaches from great powers, they are looking after their own interests in doing so.

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