

ASEAN at a Crossroads: Navigating Disunity Amid Global Power Struggles

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Cover Image Attribute: The file photo of a woman who poses with the logo of Indonesia's 2023 chairmanship of ASEAN at the Hotel Indonesia traffic circle in Jakarta on January 29, 2023. | Source: AFP/Goh Chai Hin

Southeast Asia currently finds itself at a critical juncture fraught with uncertainty. While it was once hailed as a stronghold of stability and economic prosperity, the region now grapples with a slew of pressing challenges. These include the escalating tensions in the geopolitical arena between the United States and China, a rising tide of internal political conflicts, and the splintering of Myanmar, which underscores the intricate difficulties surrounding democratic reforms and the inherent dangers of populist movements.

The significance of these challenges cannot be understated, as they are poised to come into sharp focus at the forthcoming **annual leaders' summit** of the Association of

Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) scheduled to convene in Jakarta in the coming week. Moreover, there's a palpable concern that these issues could further intensify as Indonesia, a relatively more democratic and stable member of ASEAN, relinquishes the chairmanship to Laos, which stands as the smallest and least affluent member within the bloc.

Over the years, ASEAN has been regarded by both civil society and the global community as a steadfast guardian of regional harmony and stability. However, this regional bloc's very fabric is fraying due to profound divisions that have surfaced. The issue of Myanmar serves as a poignant example, where mainland ASEAN states place a premium on preserving state integrity and security, often at the expense of political transformation and reform. In stark contrast, the more democratically inclined maritime states, spearheaded by Indonesia, vehemently reject any form of military rule.

Recent events have exacerbated these regional divisions, with Thailand's direct engagement with Myanmar's military junta taking center stage, all without prior notification to Indonesia. This move underscores a disconcerting regional discord, which, in turn, provides an opening for the junta to elude complete diplomatic isolation.

Moreover, the region is characterized by a notable divergence in how it perceives China's role and the degree to which the United States and its allies should engage in containment measures. Within Southeast Asia, nations such as Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia have cultivated robust ties with Beijing, reflecting their geographical proximity or long-standing political alignment with China. Conversely, harboring deep-seated historical tensions with its northern neighbor, Vietnam has actively cultivated closer relationships with the United States.

The Philippines, experiencing a profound sense of disillusionment due to what it views as ASEAN's ineffectiveness in safeguarding its maritime claims against encroachments by China, has taken steps to distance itself from the regional bloc. This growing schism concerning external matters is further compounded by a notable political schism. The emergence of democratic reform movements in select ASEAN member states over the past three decades has ushered in an era marked by more frequent changes in national leadership.

This political transformation has introduced a fundamental shift in the personal relationships that once united ASEAN nations, particularly during periods characterized by more authoritarian regimes. Consequently, some democratic leaders are now questioning the value of dedicating significant time to mundane ASEAN meetings, as their domestic constituencies increasingly prioritize concerns related to social equity and food security over the strengthening of regional identity.

Collectively, these dynamics have rendered Southeast Asia more fragile and isolated than initially apparent. Prominent global leaders who once routinely participated in regional summits now frequently opt to bypass such gatherings in favor of bilateral interactions,

enabling them to exert greater influence and alignment pressure. This shift is notably evident in the approach of the United States and China, both of which favor one-on-one engagements over multilateral forums.

As the decline of multilateralism becomes a global trend, ASEAN confronts the disconcerting reality of losing its once-celebrated status as a central and autonomous platform for multilateral cooperation. In light of these transformative developments, it becomes crucial to contemplate how effective multilateral collaboration can be revitalized and how the region can be rescued from fragmentation resulting from the competition between major global powers and the internal political rifts within the bloc.

An effective approach to address these complex issues could involve launching a comprehensive recovery process to reestablish connections among the 10 ASEAN member states. This revitalization effort would focus on identifying shared challenges and steering away from antiquated institutionalized procedures or fragile conflict management mechanisms that have proven inadequate in the current context.

The imperativeness of fostering increased communication and mutual comprehension within a region facing substantially greater challenges than it did merely half a decade ago cannot be overstated. These challenges have been notably exacerbated by the fierce rivalry between the United States and China, which perceive Southeast Asia as a pivotal arena in their global competition.

In this context, the responsibility of bolstering regional unity may increasingly fall upon mid-sized powers and established partners such as Australia, the European Union (EU), and the United Kingdom (U.K.). These nations have the potential to make significant contributions to fostering cohesion in Southeast Asia by recalibrating their approach. Instead of predominantly advocating for Western values and inadvertently nurturing animosities toward China, these partners can play a pivotal role in encouraging regional unity. Such a shift could involve engaging constructively with ASEAN states, leveraging their resources to support regional cooperation, and promoting solutions that mitigate the impact of external power dynamics.

It is imperative that governments across Southeast Asia assume an active role in this process by presenting a cohesive stance on pivotal matters and upholding conventional strategies for managing competition among major powers. Failure to do so could exacerbate tensions between the Philippines and China, particularly concerning the Second Thomas Shoal. Such a scenario could push the United States and China to the brink of a perilous conflict.

At this critical juncture, the capacity of ASEAN leaders to effectively collaborate and avert such a crisis remains uncertain. The pivotal question looms is whether these leaders can surmount their differences, unite in the face of mounting challenges, and craft cooperative strategies that safeguard the region's stability. In essence, it is a "*moment of truth*" for

Southeast Asia that demands deft diplomacy, resilience, and regional unity to navigate the complex dynamics of great power competition and potential regional conflicts.

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