Tensions and alliances: ASEAN's path in a multipolar Indo-Pacific

Tensões e alianças: o caminho da ASEAN em um Indo-Pacífico multipolar

Tensiones y alianzas: el camino de la ASEAN en un Indo-Pacífico multipolar

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ABSTRACT

The Indo-Pacific region has emerged as a central focus in global geopolitics, characterized by heightened competition among major powers and shifting regional alliances. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) serves a vital role as a mediator between the U.S. and China while addressing internal challenges among its member states and partners like Australia, Japan, and Russia. This article explores ASEAN's strategic positioning amid the competing frameworks of the "Asia-Pacific," favored by China, and the "Indo-Pacific," promoted by the U.S. and allies. The study presents two main contributions: first, it highlights ASEAN's pragmatic yet ambiguous approach in navigating these regional visions, aiming to sustain economic growth while avoiding entanglement in great power rivalries. Second, it examines ASEAN's efforts to alleviate regional tensions. The analysis reveals that ASEAN's long-standing principle of neutrality is increasingly challenged by external pressures and internal divisions. By evaluating ASEAN's historical evolution, economic dependencies, and security issues, the paper argues that the shifting power dynamics in the Indo-Pacific necessitate a recalibration of ASEAN's governance approach, making its role as a "tightrope walker" in this complex geopolitical landscape both crucial and precarious.

Keywords: Indo-Pacific; Asia-Pacific; ASEAN; China; United States.

RESUMO

A região do Indo-Pacífico tornou-se um dos principais focos da geopolítica global, marcada pela intensificação da competição entre grandes potências e por transformações nas alianças regionais. A ASEAN exerce um papel estratégico como mediadora entre Estados Unidos e China, enfrentando ao mesmo tempo desafios internos e pressões externas, além da influência crescente de atores como Austrália, Japão, Rússia e Índia. Este artigo analisa o posicionamento da ASEAN diante das visões concorrentes de "Ásia-Pacífico", promovida pela Chi-

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na, e "Indo-Pacífico", defendida pelos Estados Unidos e seus aliados. Destacam-se dois aspectos principais: a postura pragmática, porém ambígua, adotada pela ASEAN para preservar o crescimento econômico sem se envolver diretamente em disputas de poder; e os esforços do bloco para mitigar tensões regionais e preservar sua centralidade. A análise demonstra que o tradicional princípio de neutralidade da ASEAN está cada vez mais sob pressão, tanto por fatores externos quanto por divisões internas. Diante das novas dinâmicas de poder no Indo-Pacífico, o artigo argumenta que a ASEAN precisa recalibrar sua estratégia de governança. Seu papel como "equilibrista" permanece fundamental, mas se torna progressivamente mais delicado no cenário atual.

Palavras chave: Indo-Pacífico; Ásia-Pacífico; ASEAN; China; Estados Unidos.

RESUMEN

La región del Indo-Pacífico se ha consolidado como un eje central de la geopolítica global, marcada por la creciente competencia entre grandes potencias y la reconfiguración de alianzas regionales. La ASEAN cumple un rol estratégico como mediadora entre Estados Unidos y China, mientras enfrenta tensiones internas y la creciente influencia de actores como Australia, Japón, Rusia e India. Este artículo analiza el posicionamiento de la ASEAN frente a las visiones geopolíticas en disputa: el "Asia-Pacífico", promovido por China, y el "Indo-Pacífico", impulsado por Estados Unidos y sus aliados. Se destacan dos aspectos clave: el enfoque pragmático, aunque ambiguo, que adopta la ASEAN para mantener el crecimiento económico sin involucrarse directamente en rivalidades de poder; y sus esfuerzos por reducir las tensiones regionales y preservar su centralidad. El análisis evidencia que el principio de neutralidad, históricamente central para la ASEAN, está siendo desafiado por presiones externas y divisiones internas. A partir de su evolución institucional, sus vínculos económicos y los dilemas de seguridad actuales, se concluye que la ASEAN debe recalibrar su estrategia de gobernanza. Su rol como "equilibrista" regional sigue siendo fundamental, aunque cada vez más complejo y vulnerable frente al nuevo orden geopolítico del Indo-Pacífico.

Palabras clave: Indo-Pacífico; Asia-Pacífico; ASEAN; China; Estados Unidos.

1 INTRODUCTION

The Indo-Pacific region has emerged as a pivotal arena in global geopolitics, characterized by its vast population, economic potential, and strategic significance. This article seeks to address a critical question: How does ASEAN navigate its role and influence within the competing frameworks of the Indo-Pacific and Asia-Pacific in the context of rising tensions between China and the U.S.? As the Indo-Pacific concept gains traction, understanding ASEAN's positioning becomes essential for comprehending the broader dynamics of regional stability and security. While official documents provide insight into stated strategies, this article critically contrasts them with academic interpretations and empirical dynamics.

This study contributes to existing literature by examining the evolving role of ASEAN in the Indo-Pacific through a qualitative research approach that combines document analysis and comparative case studies. It draws from a wide range of primary and secondary sources, including official government statements, policy papers, white papers from ASEAN

member states, reports from international organizations (e.g., North Atlantic Treaty Organization, ASEAN Secretariat, U.S. State Department, and China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs), as well as academic articles and media reports. Furthermore, key geopolitical tensions -such as the South China Sea disputes, China's Belt and Road Initiative, and the Quad's strategic realignment- are examined through a comparative approach, assessing their implications for ASEAN's regional diplomacy.

By focusing on ASEAN's strategic behavior amidst geopolitical tensions, this research highlights patterns of alignment, neutrality, or divergence in its approach to major powers. Furthermore, it assesses the implications of key regional conflicts, such as the South China Sea disputes and the Belt and Road Initiative, for ASEAN's diplomatic strategies. This article provides insights into how ASEAN seeks to maintain its centrality in an increasingly contested environment. Ultimately, this research underscores the importance of ASEAN's role as a stabilizing force in the Indo-Pacific, while also acknowledging the challenges it faces in balancing relationships with both China and the U.S.

This article advances the literature by arguing that ASEAN's centrality is not merely under pressure but structurally constrained by the interaction between economic dependence on China and security reliance on the U.S. Unlike existing studies that treat ASEAN's centrality as either resilient or declining, this article conceptualizes it as conditionally viable, depending on the evolving asymmetry between economic and security dependencies.

The structure of the article is as follows. The next section explains the geopolitical dynamics of the Indo-Pacific, section three discusses the main conflicts and power struggles in the region. Section four develops ASEAN's role in maintaining regional peace and security and section five studies ASEAN's positioning in the conflicts. Section six analyzes the weight of China and the U.S. in ASEAN trade and security and section seven develops the conclusions.

2 NAVIGATING THE INDO-PACIFIC: GEOPOLITICAL DYNAMICS AND STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE

The Indo-Pacific region has been evolving for decades, driven initially by its vast population (more than 60% of the world´s population resides in this region), followed by its economic growth and by its military and geopolitical ambitions (Costa Lima, 2018). The concept of the Indo-Pacific, which emerged in the early 2000s, highlights the shared interests and challenges faced by the nations bordering the Indian and Pacific Oceans (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2022; Khurana, 2023). This region is geo-strategically located; it has key natural resources (such as natural gas and oil or marine biodiversity, among others), the main east-west maritime trade route traverses it and more than 60% of world maritime trade transits this region and this fact has multiplied conflicts among countries of the region and among those from abroad.

Beyond its relevance, the Indo-Pacific area as a concept is not free of controversy. As happened in the case of the Asia-Pacific area, there is no

consensus on the countries that belong to this region. For example, India could be the big winner when focusing on Indo-Pacific instead of Asia-Pacific because it would have a central position, the world axis would be at the Indian Ocean, beyond the obvious importance of both oceans, which are integrated and interconnected and are part of a whole (De Miguel Calabia, 2018).

Although China tries to emphasize the concept of Asia-Pacific, there is no doubt that the Indian Ocean has a crucial meaning for this country. It becomes clear when assessing its great geopolitical project, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) promoted by President Xi Jinping when considering not only the sea route but also the infrastructure projects (land routes or development of ports). However, India is out of this great project, this country has several disputes with China, and as a counterpart, Pakistan is included.

Through the BRI, China aims at connecting countries through the infrastructure, but also that these countries open their markets to China to promote trade and to deepen financial market linkages as well as aligning their economic development policies with those of China (Mercator Institute for China Studies, 2018). This initiative will give China more influence in many of the participating countries.

The benefits for China go beyond the economic, commercial or political areas, security issues are also a key element. In 2017, China published a new document titled "Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative", through which it harmonizes development plans and promotes joint actions between countries along the Maritime Silk Road. The document repeatedly mentions the importance of guaranteeing security. It includes a section on the subject in which it is mentioned that "China will shoulder its due international obligations, participate in bilateral and multilateral maritime navigation security and crisis-control mechanisms, and work with all parties to combat non-traditional security issues such as crimes on the sea" (The State Council of China, 2017).

Other countries that have gained relevance with the Indo-Pacific concept are Australia and Indonesia, both are strategically located in this region at both oceans and in the passage of the main maritime routes. Both economies established in their respective white papers the relevance that they attach to the Indo-Pacific area. In the case of Australia, the Defense White Paper (2016), refers to the Indo-Pacific 68 times, this region is the center of its strategy. Moreover, the document highlights that during the last 70 years' peace and stability has been supported by a strong presence of the U.S., this country is defined as a strategic partner (Austrália, 2016).

Indonesian former President Joko Widodo took office in 2014 with the vision of establishing Indonesia as the 'Global Maritime Fulcrum' (GMF), a strategic bridge between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Combining domestic and foreign policy dimensions, the GMF was envisioned to become Indonesia's first concrete grand strategy in decades (AUFIYA, 2017). Its Defense White Paper (2015) refers to the concept of Asia Pacific and it mentions that the region is a strategic area in political and military terms, which includes countries with large populations such as China and India which implies a definition of the area. It was also

mentioned that the conflicts in the China Sea, the disputes on the Korean peninsula and the tension around certain borders must be approached wisely. On the other hand, it describes both China and the U.S. as strategic partners (Defense Ministry of the Republic of Indonesia, 2015).

In October 2024, Prabowo Subianto took office and continuity in Indonesia´s foreign policy was expected. In November, Subianto visited China on his first overseas trip where some infrastructure projects were presented, and the delegation signed relevant contracts. After China, he visited Washington where the contribution of the U.S. to the Indo-Pacific was positive evaluated, and in January 2025, Indonesia joined the BRICS (Real Instituto Elcano, 2025).

These evolving geopolitical dynamics in the Indo-Pacific have direct and significant implications for ASEAN's regional role. The intensification of strategic competition, alongside persistent security tensions, places increasing pressure on ASEAN's longstanding commitment to neutrality and consensus-based decision-making (Acharya, 2009; Goh, 2007). While the growing strategic relevance of the region has reinforced ASEAN's position as a convening platform within the Indo-Pacific architecture, it has also exposed the organization to external pressures that risk exacerbating internal divergences among its member states (Jones; Smith, 2006; Severino, 2006). In this context, ASEAN's centrality is better understood not as a fixed or guaranteed outcome, but as a contingent condition shaped by both external geopolitical forces and internal cohesion (Acharya, 2017; Hamanaka, 2024). As great power competition intensifies, the key challenge for ASEAN lies in maintaining its relevance while reconciling its normative principles with the structural constraints imposed by an increasingly polarized regional order.

3 KEY REGIONAL CONFLICTS AND POWER STRUGGLES

Beyond China's central role in the BRI, its actions on various fronts have intensified regional conflicts. The U.S.-China confrontation is unfolding in the Indo-Pacific, particularly in the South China Sea, where China's military expansion into disputed areas with Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Taiwan has escalated tensions.

In 2012, China established Sansha City under Hainan Province, granting it jurisdiction over more than 280 islands and marine areas, including the Paracel, Spratly, and Zhongsha Islands (Haver, 2020). In April 2020, during the pandemic, the Chinese State Council announced its decision to establish two new districts in the city of Sansha, one of them based on Woody Island, which governs a large portion of China's territorial claims in the South China Sea. This situation has been frowned upon by other countries, who believe that such a decision will expand China's administrative control over the disputed marine areas. Between 2013 and 2015, China recovered 17 times more territory than the rest of the Spratly Islands claimants combined over the past 40 years (Neil; Nouwens; Taylor, 2018).

Even when the U.S. has not claimed territory in the South China Sea, it had been an active participant in the disputes. In 2019, during

President Trump administration, the U.S. Department of State published the document "A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision". It advocated for the stability of the region, and it pointed out against China. It was held that it implemented repressive measures on both within its borders and abroad and that Beijing was intolerant of dissents and that it controlled the media and civil society. It was also asserted that China "has exported" these practices to other countries through its political and economic influence, which undermines the stability and prosperity at the Indo-Pacific region (U.S. Department of State, 2019). Regarding China's claims, it was highlighted that the "Nine-Dash Line" was an absurd, without arguments, illegal and unreasonable claim that also implied costs for another countries, such as ASEAN members that were unable to access to more than US$ 2.5 billion in energy reserves (U.S. Department of State, 2019).

The U.S. has launched several initiatives and strategic movements in the Indo-Pacific region. In November 2025, the Malabar military exercises, organized by the United States, were held in Guam (Ministry of Defense of India, 2024). The participating countries were Australia, India, Japan and the U.S. The maneuvers, which began in 1992 between India and the U.S., have been described by China as an "anti-China coalition". To make matters worse, in 2018 the U.S. transformed the Pacific Command into the Indo-Pacific Command (Serbin, 2021).

Philippines and Vietnam have been also affected by the preponderance of China, but their economic dependence on the Asian giant limits their ability to act. Under President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., the Philippines has shifted from appeasement to active resistance against China, replacing quiet diplomacy with direct confrontation in international forums like ASEAN (Bautista, 2024). Manila has strengthened military ties with the U.S., Australia, and Japan, increased patrols, and bolstered its defense capabilities to counter Chinese pressure through deterrence.

Recent drills such as "Kamandag" and "Sama Sama" highlight this strategic shift, backed by U.S. support in naval and surveillance upgrades. However, Manila faces a delicate balancing act strengthening security ties with the U.S. risks straining economic relations with China, its top trading partner.

The U.S. has lost its predominant role in the area. It promoted the creation of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD). It is a forum in which Australia, India, Japan and the U.S. could cooperate to achieve regional stability and contain Chinese influence in Asia. Leveraging its established network of alliances and security partnerships, the United States maintains a relative advantage over China in the Indo-Pacific great power competition and uses this edge -through initiatives like the QUAD and other minilateral arrangements -to keep Beijing on the defensive in the region (Cruz de Castro, 2026).

By 2026, tensions in the South China Sea have intensified, turning this crucial maritime corridor into a hotspot of geopolitical rivalry. Confrontations between China, the Philippines, and other claimants escalate, challenging regional stability, international norms, and global strategic alliances (Bautista, 2024). A key development occurred on November

8, 2023, when Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. signed two maritime laws that reaffirmed the country's territorial claims to protect resources and sovereignty. China quickly condemned the laws as "illegal". Amid growing regional frictions, Vietnam and the Philippines have deepened their defense cooperation and are preparing to sign a maritime security pact by the end of the year, reaffirming their commitment to peaceful dispute resolution under international law (Walker; Rahn, 2024).

In January 2026, tensions in the South China Sea escalated through reciprocal accusations between China and the Philippines, accompanied by military signaling —including joint U.S.-Philippine exercises near Scarborough Shoal and subsequent Chinese patrols— alongside indications of further Chinese militarization in contested areas (Parulekar, 2026). Concurrently, China intensified pressure on Taiwan through military drills, airspace incursions, and sustained coercive activities, reinforcing regional security concerns and prompting defensive responses from both Taiwan and its partners.

China and India led another relevant dispute in the Indo-Pacific area. In particular, the dispute on the Himalayan border that started several decades ago. The Kashmir region have led to the direct confrontation among China, India and Pakistan and it caused a large list of incidents and direct confrontations among their armies.

The confrontation between India and China is mainly linked to the opposite strategic objectives of each one. Tensions have long been a feature of the region, but the two nuclear-armed rivals have been in a tense standoff since a deadly clash in 2020 (Gan, 2024). Nowadays, there are troops on both sides of the border and the two countries have developed infrastructure. In 2020, India decided to redraw the map of the region, which was denounced by China. India created the new administrative region Ladakh that includes Aksai Chin, an area that India has claimed but it has been under the control of China where the confrontation took place. On the other hand, the Chinese military forces had moved tents and heavy equipment within the territory that India considered its own in the Galwan Valley (Argumosa Pila, 2020).

On October 21, 2024, China and India reached an agreement in their post-Galwan relations that enabled the resumption of pre-2020 border patrols. The deal led to troop withdrawals from Depsang and Demchok by the end of the month, effectively ending a four-year standoff and reflecting a mix of strategic, diplomatic, and economic factors shaping both countries' efforts to ease border tensions (Balzás, 2024). In 2026, amid a gradual easing of border tensions, India moved to restore commercial ties with China by lifting restrictions that had largely excluded Chinese firms from major government contracts since 2020, a shift symbolically reinforced when Xi Jinping described both countries as "good neighbors, friends and partners," signaling a renewed willingness to deepen cooperation (Parulekar, 2026).

In 1949, the dispute between China and Taiwan started. It has caused the island has limited international recognition. Only 12 countries recognize it as a sovereign State, and it could not access international organizations (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Australia,

2025). China recognizes it as part of its territory. In 2005, the Chinese Communist Party passed an anti-secession law claiming its right to resort to "non-peaceful measures" against Taiwan if it tries to secede from mainland China. However, when considering taking military action against Taiwan, China should also consider a possible intervention of the U.S. In 1979, the U.S. unilaterally established diplomatic relations with Beijing, and it cut official ties with Taiwan but at the same time, the Congress passed the Taiwan Relations Act, which authorizes the sale of defensive weapons to the island. These facts are proofs that the U.S. has been ambiguous in its policy towards Taiwan.

Moreover, Taiwan is the world's leading producer of advanced semiconductor chips, a product that is difficult to reproduce in the short term (Tung, 2024). The U.S. is the main customer followed by China and given this fact; it is likely that the U.S. would assist Taiwan in case that China attacks it. Additionally, when the trade war between those countries started, Taiwan supported the U.S. This small good has been called the "silicon shield" by Craig Addison because it has allowed Taiwan to maintain its survival in such a disparate confrontation with China.

Conflicts in the Indo-Pacific do not escape the Southeast Asian region, the military coup in Myanmar has once again confronted the international community. Western countries have condemned these events, while China and the ASEAN have classified it as an internal affair. As was mentioned above, several documents published by the ASEAN have declared that the members would not interfere in the internal affairs that took place within the borders of another member.

However, ASEAN has delivered a different message. At the bloc leaders' summit (October 2021), representatives of the Burmese military junta were not invited due to non-compliance with the agreements reached in April to find a solution to the crisis triggered in Myanmar after the February 2021 coup. The agreement included the following commitments: 1) cessation of violence against civilians, 2) dialogue to reach a peaceful solution, and 3) an ASEAN mediator would visit the country. Later, the junta stated it would not comply until it had "pacified" the country, while attacks and arrests of regime opponents continued. The Burmese issue also exposed divisions among ASEAN members given the principle of non-interference.

Western countries, led by the U.S., can impose sanctions on Myanmar, but the influence that these countries have is low (Poling; Tran Hudes, 2021). China is the main trading partner of Myanmar, 25% of the foreign investments come from China, it also has invested in infrastructure and one of the corridors of the BRI passes through its territory. Therefore, Chinese influence in the country is very clear. Moreover, the Chinese government was quick to establish relations with the Burmese military junta. In April 2024, the ASEAN Foreign Ministers issued a statement regarding the escalating conflicts in Myanmar, recognizing the gravity of the situation for the bloc and calling for an immediate cessation of violence (Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 2024a).

All these conflicts and changes in the balance of power only increase tensions and wear down relations in the Indo-Pacific region where the

main world economies are confronting. By leveraging the normative justifications of a "rules-based order," the U.S. aims to safeguard its interests in the Indo-Pacific while simultaneously countering China's efforts to achieve regional supremacy or hegemonic dominance (Josukutty; Sabina Lobo, 2024).

Taken together, these regional conflicts and power struggles have differentiated yet converging implications for ASEAN's cohesion and strategic role. In the South China Sea, overlapping maritime claims involving several ASEAN member states continue to test the organization's capacity to maintain unity and articulate a common position, often exposing internal divergences between claimant and non-claimant countries (BUSZYNSKI, 2012; THAYER, 2011). The China–India rivalry, while largely external to Southeast Asia, contributes to a broader environment of strategic competition that reinforces ASEAN's inclination toward hedging, but also complicates its efforts to sustain a stable regional balance (Goh, 2007). Tensions in the Taiwan Strait, in turn, heighten the risks of major power confrontation with significant economic and security spillovers for ASEAN economies deeply embedded in regional supply chains (Woo, 2011; Ikenberry, 2018). Meanwhile, the crisis in Myanmar represents a direct and internal challenge to ASEAN's credibility, highlighting the limitations of its principles of non-interference and consensus-based diplomacy in addressing intra-regional instability (Acharya, 2009; Jones, 2012). Collectively, these dynamics suggest that ASEAN's centrality is not only shaped by external geopolitical pressures but also constrained by its ability to respond coherently to diverse and simultaneous crises, reinforcing the view that its regional role remains structurally conditioned rather than fully autonomous (Acharya, 2017; Hamanaka, 2024).

4 ASEAN'S PATH TO REGIONAL STABILITY: HISTORICAL MILESTONES AND STRATEGIC ADAPTATION

Before the establishment of the ASEAN, there were various attempts to integrate the region. For example, in 1961 the Association of Southeast Asia (ASA) was signed by Indonesia, Malaysia and Philippines. It was the first regional cooperation process in Southeast Asia. Due to territorial disputes in Sabah (Malaysian state), Malaysia requested British intervention, but it caused tension among ASA members and the shutdown of the bloc. In 1966, Australia, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, the Philippines, South Korea, South Vietnam, Taiwan, and Thailand founded the Asian and Pacific Council, but internal divisions and shifting international political dynamics led to its collapse in 1975 (Khoman, 1992).

ASEAN began in 1967 when Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand signed the Bangkok Declaration, setting goals of economic growth, social progress, and regional peace, while its evolution reflects a continuous balance between neutrality, non-interference, and regional centrality.

At the beginning, the bloc was unable to achieve significant progress due not only to the conflicts in the region, but also to the internal problems that the members had. The ASEAN's early approach to stability

was less about deep integration and more about constructing a framework of coexistence grounded in political restraint. In 1971, the ASEAN's members signed a new declaration in which countries pursuit of a Zone of Peace, Freedom And Neutrality (ZOPFAN). Moreover, countries assumed the commitment to expand cooperation and solidarity among themselves (Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 1971). By expressing the interest in keeping the interference of external countries outside the bloc, the ASEAN begun to work on the concept of what is external to the bloc and member countries started to build up the capacity for collective action against external powers (Koga, 2014). However, ZOPFAN did not establish how to achieve this commitment or a timetable for its application, for these reasons the declaration remained without effect during subsequent years (Narine, 2008).

Later, in 1976, two other documents emerged those deepened commitments in favor of political stability and regional security: The Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) and the Declaration of ASEAN Concord. Both were approved at the Bali Conference and represented a critical institutionalization of the norm of non-interference, which has since become a defining feature of ASEAN's diplomatic practice. The TAC served as a code of conduct for the members, its purpose was to promote peace, amity and cooperation among the citizenship, which would lead to their strength (Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 1976a). This Treatment was opened to the accession of other countries, and it was signed by 55 countries, including China, European Union members, India, the U.S., Brazil, Argentina and Chile (Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 2025).

The Declaration of ASEAN Concord establishes objectives, principles and an action plan to be implemented to maintain political and regional balance. It was declared that the stability (of each member and of the region as a whole) was a key element that would contribute to reaching international peace and international security. It was also established that the members must take active measures to establish the commitment assumed in 1971 to establish the ZOPFAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 1976b). At the same time, they sought strengthening cooperation in the economic and social spheres to improve the living conditions of the inhabitants. On the other hand, key elements such as the importance of the peaceful settlement of disputes, the promotion of peaceful cooperation and the development of a regional identity were emphasized. Regarding the action plan, commitments are established in the political, economic, social, cultural, information, security and operational spheres of the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 1976b).

In December 1978, the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia took place. Regarding this conflict, the ASEAN members took different positions which weakened the bloc. Finally, peace was reached in October 1991 through the Paris Peace Treaty. At that moment, third parties contributed to the end of the war and Vietnam had improved its relationships with countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand (Narine, 2008).

With the end of the Cold War and with a clear vision of the political advantages of staying together as a bloc, in the 1990s, it was decided to

give a new turn to the process. In particular, the commercial ties were highlighted. In that decade, it was also decided to reform the institutional structure of the bloc (the summits were formalized, and the role of the General Secretariat was strengthened).

A critical milestone in ASEAN's economic integration, often overshadowed by more recent initiatives, is the establishment of the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) in 1992. Conceived as a mechanism to enhance regional competitiveness and attract foreign investment, AFTA marked a decisive shift from the primarily political and security-oriented cooperation of earlier decades toward a more structured economic integration agenda. Through the Common Effective Preferential Tariff (CEPT) scheme, member states committed to progressively reducing intra-regional tariffs, thereby fostering trade liberalization within Southeast Asia and strengthening production networks across the region.

The significance of AFTA lies not only in its immediate economic impact but also in its role as the institutional foundation for ASEAN's subsequent external economic engagements. By promoting intra-regional trade and facilitating the development of regional value chains, AFTA enhanced ASEAN's collective bargaining power in negotiations with external partners. In this sense, later frameworks such as the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area (ACFTA) and broader mega-regional agreements can be understood as extensions of a process that was initially consolidated through AFTA.

From a geopolitical perspective, AFTA also contributed to reinforcing ASEAN's aspiration to maintain centrality in a rapidly evolving regional order. By deepening economic interdependence among its members, the agreement provided a degree of internal cohesion that underpins ASEAN's external diplomacy. However, this cohesion remains uneven, as differences in economic development and national interests continue to shape the extent to which member states benefit from and commit to regional integration. These structural asymmetries help explain why ASEAN's economic centrality, while significant, does not always translate into unified strategic action in the face of intensifying great power competition.

The concern for regional security and peacekeeping, a preponderant topic for members throughout the process, continued to give rise to new commitments. In 1995, the Treaty that declared Southeast Asia as a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ Treaty) was signed, it granted this status to the signatory countries. It should be highlighted that this group of countries were the actual members of the ASEAN. However, at that time, some of them were not members[4]. Countries accepted not to develop, manufacture or buy nuclear weapons, as well as install or transport them and even test them, both within their territory and in others. It was also clarified that other countries would not be allowed to do so in their territories (Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 1995).

At the 30th anniversary of the bloc, the members decided to deepen commitments and the integration process, the economic sphere emerged

4. Brunei joined the bloc in 1984, Vietnam did it in 1995, Laos and Myanmar were accepted in 1997 and Cambodia is a member since 1999.

as a more relevant issue. To do this, they signed ASEAN Vision 2020, through which they express their intention to create an economically stable, prosperous and competitive region. Following the commitment made at the 9th Summit (held in 2003) through the Declaration of ASEAN Concord II, it was decided to create the ASEAN Community, which will be made up of three pillars: 1) the political and security pillar, 2) the economic pillar and 3) the socio-cultural pillar. Each of them is related to a community: the ASEAN Political Security Community (APSC), the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC). They are mutually reinforcing.

With the entry into force of the ASEAN Community in 2015, new challenges emerged from the new commitments and from the step towards a stronger and deeper integration. It marked a more explicit attempt to consolidate ASEAN's role across political-security, economic, and socio-cultural dimensions. These developments signal a gradual shift toward a more institutionalized form of regionalism, yet one that continues to operate within the constraints of consensus-based decision-making and respect for sovereignty (Acharya, 2017).

Among other commitments on security issues, it is worth highlighting the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, which represents a joint declaration, through which they commit to a pacific coexistence in those territories and a pacific resolution of disputes, as well as to reinforce cooperation in other areas such as navigation, research, search and rescue operations, among others.

Taken together, these historical milestones suggest that ASEAN's approach to regional stability is best understood as a dynamic equilibrium between neutrality, non-interference, and centrality. While these principles have enabled the organization to maintain cohesion and avoid open conflict, they have also imposed structural limitations on its capacity to act decisively in the face of evolving regional challenges. In this sense, ASEAN's historical evolution does not point to a linear strengthening of its role, but rather to a form of strategic adaptation in which stability is achieved through flexibility, restraint, and the continuous negotiation of internal and external pressures.

5 ASEAN'S GEOPOLITICAL ROLE IN THE INDO-PACIFIC: BETWEEN CENTRALITY AND CONTESTATION

The ASEAN project has allowed the integration of ten diverse countries in terms of their economy, political characteristics and cultural attributes among other aspects. At the same time, this process has allowed them to position themselves with a preponderant role within the Asia-Pacific region and the ASEAN became a key representative of the region.

The Indo-Pacific has emerged as a relevant concept, and the ASEAN seeks to occupy a key position in this new geostrategic scenario and to be a central reference. Indonesia has been one of the key supporters of this strategy and at the national level, it has tried to show itself as a maritime power in the region given that its strategic position in the region allows

Indonesia to control strategic routes that connect the Pacific and the Indic Oceans (De Miguel Calabia, 2019).

Regarding the South China Sea, in 2002, the ASEAN members and China signed a joint declaration that would guide their actions in this region. The document reaffirms the need to promote an environment of peace, friendship and harmony in the South China Sea that would contribute to the growth and prosperity of the region. Moreover, the declaration also focused on the respect and commitment to freedom of navigation and overflight and the committing to the non-use of force (ASEAN-China, 2002). China and ASEAN hold regular senior officials' meetings to implement the Declaration; at the 19th meeting (June 7, 2021), despite South China Sea tensions, they deemed the situation stable and reaffirmed commitment to full implementation and to advancing the Code of Conduct, reaching consensus to expedite negotiations begun in 2017 (Ministry of Foreing Affairs of China, 2021a).

Although these negotiations, the ASEAN members have different positions. However, most of them are strongly tied to China given the trade flows. Given this scenario, the U.S. has tried to be close to the region and that the ASEAN becomes an ally. It has stated that it is able to ensure peace and stability, as well as free navigation and the use of the resources of the South China Sea. In September 2020, the U.S. Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, in a videoconference with the ASEAN´s Foreign Ministers, urged that they should not be "overwhelmed" by China, and he also requested that they "reconsider business dealings with the state-owned companies that bully ASEAN coastal states in the South China Sea" (EFE Agency, 2020).

In January 2019 the ASEAN´s Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) was approved by the foreign ministers. This document integrates their vision and the main challenges for the Indo-Pacific region. It becomes the first official document that presents opinions in this regard. However, the concept had already been mentioned. The ASEAN aims at playing a key role in the region, but it would depend on the distribution of power among all countries. Regarding the economic and security spheres, the ASEAN expressed its interest in contributing to shape them as well as guaranteeing peace, security, stability and prosperity for not only the Southeast Asia region but also the Indo-Pacific region. Both geographic definitions were included in the document (Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 2019).

The document highlights that the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions were seen as closely integrated and an interconnected space where the ASEAN plays a central and strategic role. In addition, it repeatedly emphasizes the purpose of contributing to the maintenance of regional peace, freedom and prosperity, the main objectives of the bloc since its creation. To ensure its key role, the East Asia Summit[5] was suggested as the natural mechanism for dialogue in the Indo-Pacific. At the same time, other regional corridors of dialogue were mentioned such as the

5. It groups ASEAN countries and Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, Russia and U.S.

ASEAN Regional Forum, the ASEAN Plus Defense Ministers Meeting, the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum and other mechanisms such as ASEAN Plus One.

Given the differences among ASEAN's members, Singaporean Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan acknowledged the modest impact that the AOIP had, and she stated that ASEAN unity, as a prerequisite for its long-awaited key role in the region, would be tested when each member defines its individual strategy and its proximity to the U.S. or to China (Thi Ha, 2021).

Regarding the Indo-Pacific concept, the ASEAN Studies Center at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute carried out a survey, from November 2020 to January 2021, that deals with this issue and the sample size was 1,032 citizens from the ten member countries. The questionnaire includes the following question: "Many countries have put forward their versions of an Indo-Pacific strategy such as the U.S., Australia, Japan, India, France, United Kingdom, Germany and Indonesia. Which statement below do you most agree with? The possible responses were:

a) ASEAN needs to articulate its AOIP more clearly to stay relevant;
b) The Indo-Pacific strategy is just a tool for different countries to shape geo-politics;
c) The Indo-Pacific strategy is unclear and requires further elaboration;
d) The Indo-Pacific strategy promotes stable, multipolar order and effective multilateralism;
e) The Indo-Pacific strategy should not be defined by one country, nor should it be used to contain a particular country.

As the following figure shows, while 40.3% of ASEAN citizens indicated the first option and 20.2% pointed out the second alternative, 16.7% chose the last statement.

Table 1 - "Many countries have put forward their versions of an Indo-Pacific strategy …Which statement below do you most agree with? Answers by country

	ASEAN needs to articulate its AOIP more clearly in order to stay relevant.	The Indo-Pacific strategy is just a tool for different countries to shape geo-politics	The Indo-Pacific strategy is unclear and requires further elaboration.	The Indo-Pacific strategy promotes a stable, multipolar order and effective multilateralism.	The Indo-Pacific strategy should not be defined by one country, nor should it be used to contain a particular country.
Philippines	55.2%	11.9%	11.9%	11.9%	9.0%
Brunei	51.5%	18.2%	3.0%	9.1%	18.2%
Myanmar	44.2%	20.5%	14.1%	9.6%	11.5%
Indonesia	41.9%	16.3%	11.6%	12.4%	17.8%
Vietnam	41.1%	17.7%	7.4%	21.1%	12.6%
ASEAN	**40.3%**	**20.2%**	**11.8%**	**11.0%**	**16.7%**
Malaysia	37.6%	21.4%	12.0%	10.3%	18.8%
Singapore	35.4%	24.7%	9.5%	7.6%	22.8%
Lao PDR	35.0%	12.5%	30.0%	5.0%	17.5%
Cambodia	34.6%	34.6%	15.4%	0.0%	15.4%
Thailand	33.6%	24.4%	13.7%	6.9%	21.4%

Source: ASEAN Studies Centre; ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute (2021).

At the 11th EAS Foreign Ministers' Meeting (August 2021), China called for strengthening ASEAN centrality, equity, and existing regional dialogues—implicitly criticizing the QUAD and the U.S. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, 2021b); meanwhile, the U.S. also backed the AOIP, recognizing ASEAN as a strategic partner and supporting its central role and principles in shaping regional architecture (U.S. Department of State, 2021).

The ARF Security Outlook 2020 is an additional proof of the disagreement among ASEAN's members regarding the Indo-Pacific concept. China and Russia opted for Asia-Pacific while members of the QUAD went for Indo Pacific while other countries have not decided. This lack of consensus among members made more difficult to approve a Joint Declaration when the 10th anniversary of the ADMM-Plus took place in December 2020 (Thia Ha, 2021).

In May 2022, the U.S. launched the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity in which 14 countries participate, including seven ASEAN members (Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam) and Australia, Fiji, India, Japan, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea and U.S. The target is to promote resilience, sustainability, inclusion, economic growth, equity and competitiveness of partner economies. The agreement has four pillars covering trade (including digital trade), supply chains, clean economy and fair economy.

In parallel, China proposed the Global Security Initiative (GSI) to address the challenges of the current changing international system, advocating cooperation, improving global security governance, fostering international efforts toward achieving stability, as well as promote lasting peace and promote development.

The Chairman's Statement of the 44th and 45th ASEAN Summits Vientiane, held in LAO PDR on October 9, 2024, includes a section on AOIP. In this section, members express their concern over the escalating geopolitical tensions in the region and stress the importance of AOIP to the peace, security, stability, and prosperity of ASEAN (ASEAN, 2024b). Furthermore, the ASEAN Leaders' Declaration on the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific for the Future-Ready ASEAN was adopted, reaffirming the strengthening of the centrality of ASEAN and reinforcing the commitment and implementation of the AOIP (Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 2024c).

The centrality positioned by ASEAN and established in its documents points to its central role in shaping the political and economic institutional architecture of the wider region. However, according to Hamanaka (2025), the concept poses two problems: it is vague and there is no method to measure such centrality.

Southeast Asian countries have not simply aligned themselves with one side, even though uncertainties (stemming from China's expanding economic and military power as well as doubts about the U.S.'s long-term commitment to the region) play a significant role in regional stability (Huang; Ho, 2024). Rather than choosing between the U.S. and China, they have adopted strategies aimed at reducing their vulnerability. This approach is commonly known as "hedging." According to Goh (2005), it

refers to a set of strategies designed to avoid, or prepare for potential scenarios, in situations where states are unable to choose clearer alternatives such as balancing, bandwagoning, or neutrality. Instead, they maintain an intermediate position that allows them to avoid siding with one power at the clear expense of the other. This balanced approach is also reflected in the AOIP, where both China and the U.S. are explicitly acknowledged as key actors in the regional framework.

6 CHINA, THE U.S. AND THE ASEAN, THE WEIGHTS OF THEIR ECONOMIC, COMMERCIAL AND SECURITY RELATIONSHIPS

The relationships between ASEAN, China, and the U.S. have evolved into one of the defining features of the contemporary Indo-Pacific order. ASEAN has sought to maintain balanced ties with both powers, benefiting from economic engagement while avoiding explicit alignment. However, the growing intensity of great power competition has increasingly exposed the structural constraints underlying this balancing strategy.

Over the past decades, China has consolidated its position as ASEAN's largest trading partner, with trade flows expanding significantly in both volume and scope. This growing interdependence reflects the deep integration of Southeast Asian economies into China-centered regional value chains, particularly in manufacturing and intermediate goods. As a result, China has become a central hub in ASEAN's external economic relations, shaping trade patterns and production structures across the region. The expansion of agreements such as the ACFTA has further institutionalized these linkages, reinforcing China's role in regional economic dynamics.

Beyond these descriptive trends, the relationship between ASEAN, China, and the U.S. reveals a deeper structural pattern. While China has consolidated its position as ASEAN's primary trading partner, embedding the region deeply within its production networks and supply chains, the U.S. retains a distinct form of influence through investment flows and security linkages. This dual configuration does not simply reflect diversification, but rather a structural condition in which ASEAN's economic and strategic dependencies are anchored in different external powers.

ASEAN's economic dependence on China is most visible in trade dynamics, where the scale and intensity of exchanges have grown steadily over time. China's centrality in regional value chains has reinforced patterns of interdependence that are not easily substitutable in the short term, particularly for export-oriented Southeast Asian economies. This deep commercial integration constrains ASEAN's room for maneuver, as any disruption in economic ties with China would entail substantial costs for domestic growth, employment, and industrial stability. In this sense, trade dependence operates as a structural anchor shaping ASEAN's external economic positioning.

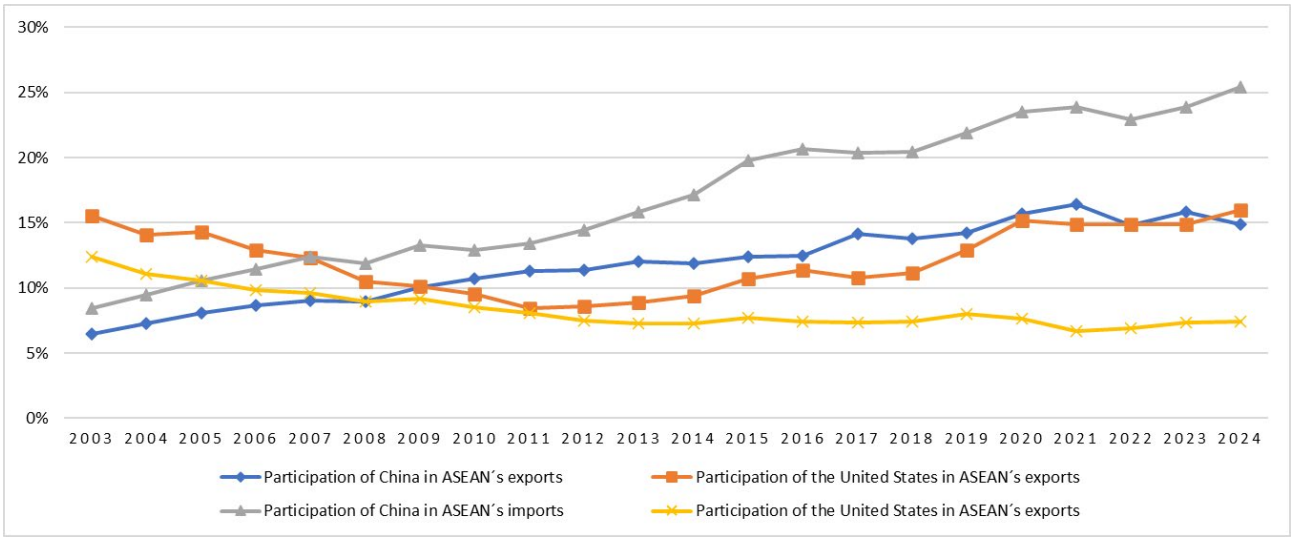
In contrast, the U.S. exerts its influence less through trade dominance and more through foreign direct investment (FDI), technological linkages, and its enduring strategic presence in the region. U.S. investments

have played a critical role in shaping key sectors of ASEAN economies, including finance, high-value manufacturing, and digital industries, thereby generating long-term structural ties that extend beyond immediate trade flows. Moreover, security cooperation, strategic partnerships, and defense arrangements reinforce the U.S.'s role as a key provider of regional stability, embedding ASEAN within a broader U.S.-centered security architecture.

This asymmetric configuration (economic dependence on China and strategic reliance on the U.S.) constitutes a central structural constraint on ASEAN's regional role. Rather than enabling full strategic autonomy, this dual dependency produces a condition of "conditional centrality," in which ASEAN's capacity to act cohesively and independently is continuously mediated by the evolving balance between these external ties. In this context, ASEAN's well-known strategy of hedging should not be interpreted solely as a voluntary diplomatic choice, but also as a structural necessity derived from the interaction of these economic and security dependencies.

Consequently, ASEAN's position in the Indo-Pacific cannot be adequately understood through binary interpretations that portray the organization as either resilient or declining. Instead, its role is better conceptualized as contingent upon shifts in the relative weight of China's economic influence and the U.S.' strategic and investment presence. This perspective helps explain both ASEAN's persistence as a regional platform and its recurrent limitations in articulating unified responses to major geopolitical challenges.

Chart 1 – Participation of China and the U.S. in ASEAN goods trade



Source: own elaboration based on ASEAN Statistics Division., 2025

China's strong trade linkages with the ASEAN are observed at the individual level, in the case of all members of the bloc. Table 2 shows that when considering the three main trading partners of each member, China is part of the list and in several cases it ranked first. This is proof of the existing dependence. The U.S. The United States is an important

trading partner for most ASEAN countries as a destination for their exports, although it is not as a source of their imports.

Table 2 – ASEAN: most relevant trade partners by member

	Main destinies of exports in 2025	Main originis of imports in 2025
Brunei*	Australia, China, Japan	Malaysia, Rusia, Australia
Cambodia	U.S., Vietnam, China	China, Vietnam, Thailand
Philippines*	U.S., Japan, Hong Kong	China, Indonesia, Japan
Indonesia	China, U.S., India	China, Singapure, Japan
Lao PDR*+	China, Vietnam, Thailand	Thailand, China, Vietnam
Malaysia	Singapure, U.S., China	China, Singapure, Taiwán
Myanmar*	China, Thailand, India	China, Singapure, Malaysia
Singapore	Hong Kong, China, Malaysia	Taiwan, China, Malaysia
Thailand	U.S., China, Japan	China, Japan, Taiwan
Vietnam*	U.S., China, Rep. of Korea	China, Rep. of Korea, Taiwan

* 2024 last available data

**2023 last available data

Source: own elaboration based on Trade Map, 2025.

China's foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows to the ASEAN reached to US$ 17.3 billion in 2024, which represented 7.5% of the total FDI received by the bloc. In 2024, the U.S. emerged as ASEAN's largest external source of FDI, contributing a total inflow of US$ 74.4 billion, representing 32.4% of ASEAN's total FDI, according to data from ASEAN Statistics Division.

In addition to trade, ASEAN has strong political and security ties. Both countries have the status of ASEAN Dialogue Partners and share different instances of political relations and cooperation. They also hold bilateral summits where major economic, trade, political, security and cooperation issues are discussed. Both the U.S. and China share with ASEAN numerous regional spaces and strategies. Connectivity and transport are key cooperation areas, alongside annual initiatives like the ASEAN investment summit and the ASEAN-China Expo, which engage the private sector, as well as ASEAN's role in China's BRI.

Table 3 - ASEAN's relations with China and the U.S.

	United States	China
Trade and investment links	ASEAN Economic Ministers-U.S. Trade Representative (AEM-USTR), 2023-2024 ASEAN-U.S. Trade and Investment Framework Arrangement (TIFA) and the Expanded Economic Engagement (E3) Work Plan, Consultations and ASEAN Senior Economic Officials-Assistant USTR (SEOMAUSTR) Consultations	FTA ASEAN - China, RCEP, China-ASEAN Expo (CAEXPO), Joint Statement on Synergising the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) 2025 and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), conclusion of the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area (ACFTA) 3.0 Upgrade Negotiations in 2024.
Status of cooperation	Dialogue Partner	Dialogue Partner
Adherence to regional strategies	Active participation in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus), the East Asia Summit (EAS), and the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF)	ASEAN+3, ASEAN+6, ASEAN Regional Forum,East Asia Summit (EAS) and ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus), ASEAN-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)+China Summit
Political and Security Cooperation (Source: ASEAN)	First ASEAN-U.S. Maritime Exercise (2019), Table-top Exercise on Response Capabilities to CBRN (chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear) Incidents (2022), Cyber Policy Dialogue. ASEAN-U.S. Defence Ministers' Informal Meeting was held on 2023. The U.S. acceded to TAC in July 2009.	China was the first Dialogue Partner of ASEAN to accede to the TAC in October 2003, first Nuclear Weapon State (NWS). ASEAN and China signed the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) in November 2002.In combatting illicit drug trafficking, ASEAN and China cooperate under the ASEAN Senior Officials on Drug Matters (ASOD)+China Consultation since 2012.
Summits	The 13th ASEAN-U.S. Summit was held on 26 October 2025.	The 28th ASEAN-China Summit was held on 28 October 2025.

Source: own elaboration based on Trade Map, ASEAN Statistics Division and ASEAN Secretariat, 2025.

Each ASEAN member has a different relationship with China and the U.S, in economic, trade and security terms. Regional conflicts are another issue that brings ASEAN member countries closer to U.S. and Chinese security initiatives, for example with respect to the South China Sea disputes. However, all ASEAN countries are members of the BRI.

In addition to the ACFTA, Cambodia and Singapore have further deepened their economic ties with China through separate bilateral agreements. On the U.S. side, Singapore is the only ASEAN country with a formal Free Trade Agreement in force, while Vietnam has signed the U.S.-Vietnam Bilateral Trade Agreement, a comprehensive and WTO-consistent framework that covers trade in goods, intellectual property rights, services, investment protection, business facilitation, and transparency (U.S. Mission Vietnam, 2024).

The U.S. remains Southeast Asia's primary partner for joint military exercises, followed by India and China. From 2021 to 2023, data from the Lowy Institute shows that the U.S. participated in approximately 33% of the 525 recorded military exercises involving Southeast Asian states, either bilaterally or multilaterally (Yaacob; Sato, 2024). When including allies like Australia and Japan, this figure rises to over 60%. However, regional variations exist, with a notable divide between mainland and maritime Southeast Asia.

Mainland Southeast Asian states (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam) tend to engage more in exercises with China, except for Thailand, which has been a U.S. treaty ally since 1952 (Yaacob; Sato, 2024). Meanwhile, maritime states such as Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines and Singapore conduct more drills with the U.S., reflecting their strategic concerns in the South China Sea. Countries like Brunei, Malaysia, and the Philippines have territorial disputes with China, while Indonesia faces overlapping claims in the Natuna Sea. Singapore, though not directly involved in these disputes, has maintained strong defense ties with the U.S. since the Cold War.

Table 4 – ASEAN member countries relations with China and the U.S.

	Goverment type	Territorial Disputes in the South China Sea	BRI member since	Signatory to the Agreement on the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity	United States bases	Rim of the Pacific Exercise (RIMPAC) participants
Brunei	Absolute monarchy or sultanate	☑	2018	☑	--	☑
Cambodia	Parliamentary constitutional monarchy	--	2013	--	--	--
Indonesia	Presidential republic	☑	2015	☑		☑
Lao PDR*	Communist party-led state	--	2018	--	--	--
Malaysia	Federal parliamentary constitutional monarchy	☑	2017	☑	--	☑
Myanmar	Military regime	--	2016	--	--	--
Philippines	Presidential republic	☑	2017	☑	☑	☑
Singapore	Parliamentary republic	--	2018	☑	☑	☑
Thailand	Constitutional monarchy	--	2014	☑	--	☑
Vietnam	Communist party-led state	☑	2017	--	--	--

Source: own elaboration based on The World Factbook, U.S. Department of State, World Trade Organization, 2025.

7 CONCLUSIONS

This article set out to examine how ASEAN navigates its role within the evolving geopolitical landscape of the Indo-Pacific, particularly in the context of intensifying competition between China and the U.S. By analyzing regional dynamics, key conflicts, institutional developments, and economic and security relationships, the study has shown that ASEAN's regional role cannot be adequately understood through static or binary interpretations. Rather, ASEAN operates within a complex and shifting environment that both enables and constrains its strategic behavior.

A central finding is that ASEAN's long-standing principles (neutrality, non-interference, and consensus-based decision-making) have been instrumental in maintaining regional stability and cohesion, but they also impose important limitations. The historical analysis showed that these norms have allowed ASEAN to accommodate diverse political systems and avoid direct conflict among its members, contributing to its durability as a regional organization. However, in the face of increasingly complex and transnational challenges, these same principles can hinder timely and coordinated responses, particularly in situations such as the Myanmar crisis or the South China Sea disputes.

The analysis of regional conflicts further demonstrates that ASEAN is simultaneously affected by internal and external pressures. Disputes in the South China Sea expose divisions among member states, while broader geopolitical tensions (such as U.S.-China rivalry and cross-strait tensions) generate spillover effects that directly impact ASEAN's economic and security environment. These dynamics reinforce ASEAN's preference for hedging strategies but also reveal the structural constraints that limit its capacity to act as a unified strategic actor.

Building on these findings, the article advances the argument that ASEAN's centrality is not merely under pressure but structurally constrained by the interaction between economic dependence on China and security reliance on the U.S. As shown in the analysis of trade and investment patterns, China has become deeply embedded in ASEAN's economic structure through trade and regional value chains, while the U.S. maintains a predominant role through foreign direct investment, technological linkages, and security cooperation. This asymmetric configuration generates a condition of dual dependency that shapes ASEAN's strategic options.

In this context, ASEAN's centrality is best understood as conditionally viable rather than inherently resilient or inevitably declining. Its ability to function as a convening platform and regional intermediary depends on the evolving balance between these external relationships, as well as on its internal cohesion. Consequently, ASEAN's strategy of hedging should not be interpreted solely as a deliberate diplomatic choice, but also as a structural necessity derived from its position within the regional order.

Looking ahead, ASEAN faces a set of diverging but plausible trajectories. It may strengthen its centrality by enhancing internal coordination

and deepening regional integration, thereby reinforcing its role as a mediator in Indo-Pacific affairs. Alternatively, increasing external pressures could lead to greater alignment with one of the major powers, undermining its neutrality and fragmenting its unity. A third possibility is a gradual erosion of cohesion, resulting in a more fragmented regional landscape where individual member states pursue divergent strategies. These scenarios highlight that ASEAN's future role will depend not only on external geopolitical developments but also on its capacity to adapt institutionally while preserving its core principles.

In conclusion, ASEAN remains a relevant and influential actor in the Indo-Pacific, but its role is neither fixed nor guaranteed. Its position as a "tightrope walker" captures the delicate balance it must maintain between competing powers, internal diversity, and evolving regional dynamics. Understanding ASEAN's centrality as structurally conditioned rather than inherently stable provides a more nuanced framework for analyzing its past performance and prospects in an increasingly contested regional order.

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