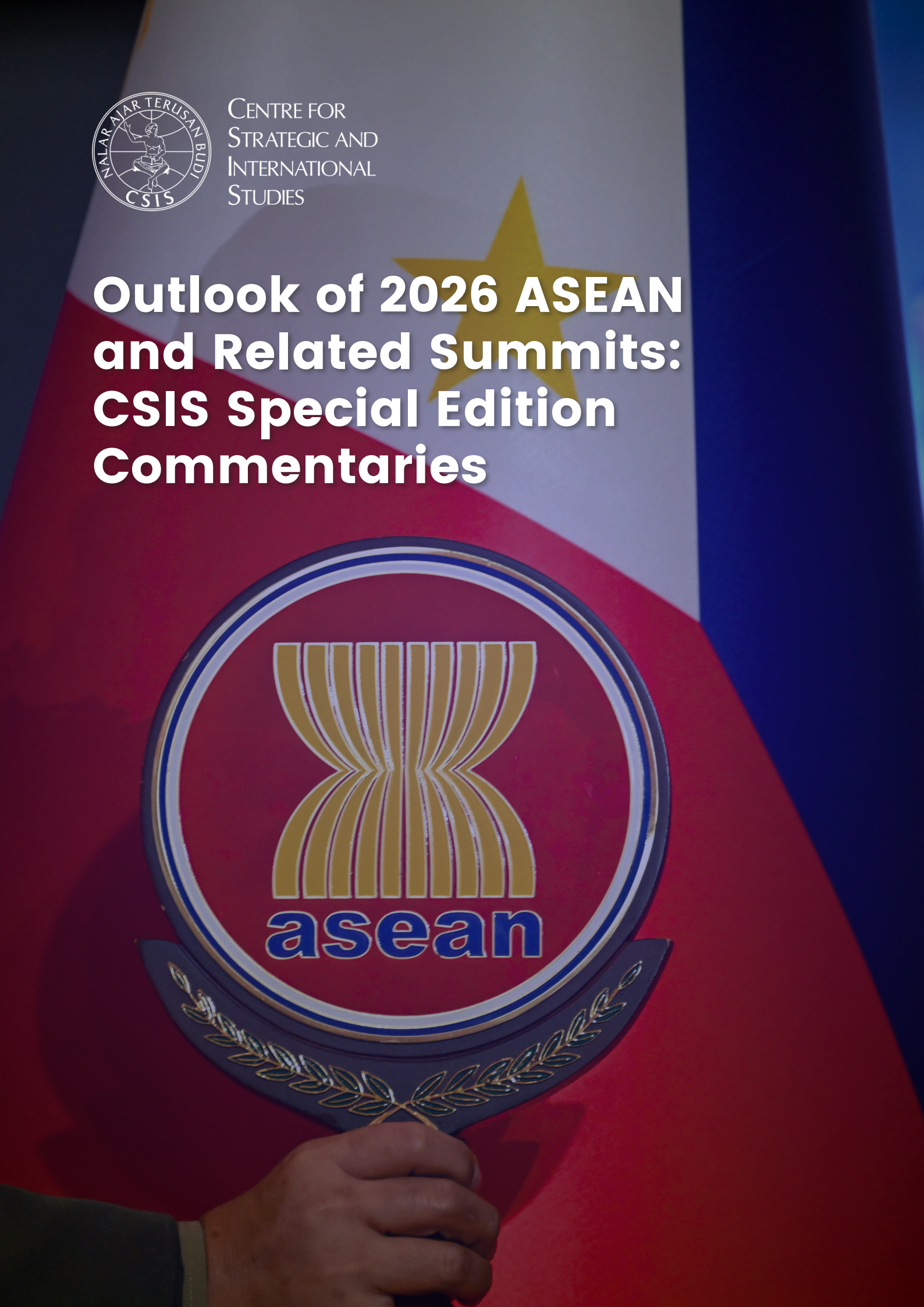

CENTRE FOR
STRATEGIC AND
INTERNATIONAL
STUDIES
Outlook of 2026 ASEAN and Related Summits: CSIS Special Edition Commentaries
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NALAR AJAR TERU
CSIS



Photo: The Philippines Displays its ASEAN Chairship 2026 Logo on 20 January 2026 at the ASEAN Headquarters/ASEAN Secretariat.

Outlook of 2026 ASEAN and Related Summits: CSIS Special Edition Commentaries

CENTRE FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

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About the Publication

CSIS Special Edition Commentaries

CSIS Special Edition Commentaries publication series serve as a platform to provide insightful articles and op-eds from regional experts and diplomats from ASEAN and Dialogue Partners. This initiative aims to cater to diverse stakeholders to ASEAN cooperation, including diplomats, scholars, international relations students, and the wider public, fostering a deeper, practical, and timely understanding of ASEAN's regional affairs.

CSIS Indonesia

The Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Jakarta is an independent, non-profit organisation focusing on policy-oriented studies on domestic and international issues. It was established in 1971. CSIS undertakes research in economics, politics and social change, and international relations, with topics selected on the basis of their relevance to public policy. Interdisciplinary studies are encouraged. In the area of foreign policy, CSIS research is complemented and strengthened by its relations with an extensive network of research, academic, and other organizations worldwide.

Foreword

Navigating Under Pressure: ASEAN in 2026

This special edition of the CSIS Commentaries arrives at a moment that is, in equal measure, consequential and uncertain. As the Philippines assumes the ASEAN Chairmanship in 2026, the region confronts a confluence of pressures that test not only ASEAN's institutional reflexes but the underlying assumptions on which regional cooperation has long rested. A fragmenting global order, an energy crisis with roots in the Middle East, and the persistent gap between ASEAN's declaratory ambitions and its operational capacity, all of which form the backdrop against which this volume is written.

Titled *Outlook of 2026 ASEAN and Related Summits*, this edition brings together eight contributions from diplomats, scholars, and policy practitioners across the region and beyond. Like its predecessor, it does not seek to render a single verdict on ASEAN. It seeks instead to surface the hard questions the region must confront, and to do so with the analytical honesty that this moment demands. Contributors approach these questions from different vantage points, from the security of maritime domains to the governance of emerging technologies, from the architecture of trade to the softer registers of cultural diplomacy. What unites them is a shared seriousness about ASEAN's trajectory.

The Philippines' Chairmanship theme, *Navigating Our Future, Together*, is well-suited to this environment. Its priorities across digital transformation, energy resilience, maritime cooperation, and inclusive development reflect both ambition and pragmatism. Yet as several contributors in this volume note, the challenge for ASEAN in 2026 is not a shortage of vision. It is the persistent difficulty of translating vision into delivery and ensuring that the institutional machinery keeps pace with the urgency of the problems it is asked to address.



We are grateful to the Mission of the Republic of Korea to ASEAN for their sustained support and partnership, which have made this publication possible. We also extend our sincere thanks to all contributors, including H.E. Evangeline T. Ong Jimenez-Ducrocq, H.E. Helen Fazey, H.E. Dr. Kao Kim Hourn, Dr. Yose Rizal Damuri, Ms. Farlina Said, Mr. Julius Cesar Trajano, Dr. Vu Hai Dang, and Mr. Hwang Kukchan, for bringing depth, candor, and regional perspective to this edition.

We hope this volume will serve as a useful resource for those seeking to understand where ASEAN stands at this pivotal juncture, and what it will take for the region to navigate the years ahead with both coherence and purpose.

Jakarta, June 2026

Lina A. Alexandra
Head of Department of International Relations
CSIS Indonesia

Table of Contents

Introduction:
ASEAN Under Pressure: Possibilities and Limits in a Shifting Global Order 2
Andrew W. Mantong, Senior Researcher, Department of International Relations, CSIS &
M. Waffaa Kharisma, Researcher, Department of International Relations, CSIS

Navigating Our Future, Together:
A Mid-Term Assessment of the Philippines' ASEAN Chairship 8
H.E. Evangeline T. Ong Jimenez-Ducrocq, Permanent Representative of the Republic of the Philippines to ASEAN

Five Years on, Real Partnership is Delivering:
the UK and ASEAN Must Keep Advancing Together 14
H.E. Helen Fazey, Ambassador of the United Kingdom to ASEAN

ASEAN's Timeless Compass – The Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia 18
H.E. Dr. Kao Kim Hourn, Secretary-General of ASEAN

ASEAN Plus One FTAs: From Openness to Resilient Integration 22
Dr. Yose Rizal Damuri, Executive Director, CSIS

Scams in the Digital Age:
ASEAN's Fragmented Governance and the Way Forward 26
Farlina Said, Director of Cyber and Technology Policy,Institute of Strategic & International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia

Operationalizing Maritime Security Cooperation under ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) 32
Dr. Vu Hai Dang, Acting Director, Centre for Maritime Diplomacy, South China Sea (East Sea) Institute, Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam

From Energy Shock to Nuclear Momentum:
Prospects for Nuclear Energy in Southeast Asia 38
Julius Cesar Trajano, Research Fellow, Centre for Non-Traditional Security Studies, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

A New Horizon for Creative Industry Diplomacy and
People-to-People Connectivity 46
Hwang Kukchan, Chief Producer, ASEAN-Korea Music Festival <ROUND>, KBS WORLD TV



Photo: A symbolic handshake marks the official transfer of the ASEAN Chairship to the Philippines as the ASEAN Summit comes to a close on 28 October 2025.

Introduction

ASEAN Under Pressure: Possibilities and Limits in a Shifting Global Order

Andrew W. Mantong
Senior Researcher, Department of International Relations, CSIS

M. Waffaa Kharisma
Researcher, Department of International Relations, CSIS

For ASEAN this year, some pressures have eased. Tensions between Thailand and Cambodia have receded following the Kuala Lumpur Peace Accord brokered under Malaysia's chairmanship. The immediate threat of sweeping U.S. tariffs has entered a temporary legal limbo after the U.S. Supreme Court weighed in. These are not small reliefs. But the broader environment has not become more forgiving. The world is being shaped more assertively by major powers, compressing the space for multilateral dialogue and rule-based cooperation that ASEAN has long depended on. And the latest escalation in the Middle East, following U.S. strikes on Iran and tit-for-tat retaliatory moves that put the Strait of Hormuz in jeopardy, has raised an energy crisis with direct fiscal and supply-chain consequences for every ASEAN economy.

As the Philippines assumes the ASEAN Chairmanship in 2026, the usual diplomatic optimism hangs in the air. Vision documents circulate, summits reaffirm commitment, and partnership communiqués abound. But a closer reading of both ASEAN's institutional performance and the critical reflections in this volume suggests that we are entering a phase where the gap between what ASEAN claims and what it can actually deliver is becoming more prominent.

The world ASEAN was built to engage, a world that was once open, rules-based, and economically integrated, is not necessarily the world it now inhabits. The liberal order is in retreat, excessive and unilateral economic protectionism is gaining ground, and regional cooperation increasingly demands more than declarations and soft law. Under these conditions, the challenge is not simply for ASEAN to do more, but to prove that it still matters as a forum for functional cooperation and credible coordination.

This Special Edition brings together eight contributions that grapple with this challenge, each from a different vantage point: security, economics, digital diplomacy, energy, public safety, and strategic identity. Some contributions are cautiously hopeful, others pointedly

critical. What unites them is the sense that ASEAN's institutional framework, built for a different era, is now under pressure to evolve or risk irrelevance.

Several essays identify potential avenues for meaningful cooperation, often through technical mechanisms or sectoral initiatives. But these same proposals, whether in cybercrime enforcement, regional energy security, or trade architecture, have been circulating for years. The striking continuity of ideas across successive ASEAN summits and scholarly commentaries suggests a deeper problem: the persistence of good proposals that rarely translate into sustained implementation. ASEAN does not lack vision. It lacks traction.

Recognizing existing challenges, as Philippine Permanent Representative H.E. Evangeline Ong Jimenez-Ducrocq rightly notes in her contribution, is necessary but not sufficient. The Philippines' Chairmanship theme, Navigating Our Future, Together, is well-calibrated to this moment. Its priorities reflect a clear reading of the environment; through strengthening trade and investment linkages, accelerating digital transformation, promoting sustainable economies, advancing maritime cooperation, improving disaster response, supporting MSMEs, and pursuing institutional reform within ASEAN itself.

The Philippines' initiatives have included the early ratification push for the ASEAN Petroleum Security Agreement, convening Special Ministerial Meetings on the Middle East crisis across trade, energy, and foreign affairs portfolios, and the trilateral meeting among Cambodia, Thailand, and the Philippines on the sidelines of the 48th ASEAN Summit in Cebu. Equally important, the ASEAN Leaders' Declaration on Maritime Cooperation, with its reaffirmation of UNCLOS as the governing legal framework, represents a constructive anchoring. Cambodia's ratification of UNCLOS on 6 February 2026 is a meaningful milestone.

However, the Philippines' chairmanship is taking place amid a landscape shaped by converging pressures. Great-power competition is no longer an external variable but a structuring condition of regional diplomacy. Supply chain fragmentation and dual-use technologies complicate both trade and security agendas. New challenges, from online scams to energy transition, have outpaced ASEAN's institutional tempo. These problems demand regional coordination, yet most responses remain national, ad hoc, or donor-driven. At the same time, each member state is exposed differently to the current crises, shaped by its own leadership dynamics, strategic preferences, and calibration between pragmatism and principle.

One of the volume's strengths is that it surfaces these tensions without overstating ASEAN's weaknesses or romanticizing its past. Essays like those by Farlina Said and Julius Trajano make concrete policy recommendations in domains that are politically sensitive but technically viable. Farlina's work on regional cooperation against online scams shows

that cross-border digital threats expose gaps in ASEAN's security architecture. Trajano, on the other hand, argues that the energy crisis should accelerate the region's pursuit of nuclear energy, but cautions that governance credibility and regulatory capacity must precede infrastructure commitments. These are not new ideas, but they remain under-implemented not due to conceptual flaws, but political hesitation and institutional inertia.

Others, like Secretary-General Kao Kim Hourn and Vu Hai Dang, revisit ASEAN's normative foundations: the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), and the 2045 vision. Secretary-General Kao Kim Hourn's contribution on the 50th anniversary of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation articulates what this milestone should mean beyond commemorative events: a return to "first principles" at a moment when might is increasingly equated with what's right. The Cambodia-Thailand border conflict was a reminder that ASEAN is not insulated from actual conflict among its own members.

Vu Hai Dang's essay presents the AOIP as a strategic identity that ASEAN can still project to navigate major-power rivalry. Yet in a fractured order, the AOIP risks becoming a normative relic unless ASEAN can demonstrate it has the capacity, and will, to operationalize its principles. They both remind us that ASEAN still holds significant diplomatic capital. But their writings also implicitly underscore the gap between principle and performance. If ASEAN's normative assets are to retain meaning, they must inform real decisions, not just aspirational texts.

Yose Rizal Damuri's contribution on ASEAN Plus One FTAs is more direct in his critique. For him, ASEAN's trade strategy is broad but shallow, reactive rather than strategic. As economic resilience becomes a more pressing regional goal, ASEAN's fragmented architecture, built during years of global liberalism, may no longer serve.



Photo: Chairship Handover Ceremony from Malaysia to the Philippines on 9 December 2025 at the ASEAN Headquarters/ASEAN Secretariat.

This critique complements the diplomatic essays from UK Ambassador Helen Fazey, and to an extent the guest contribution from KBS World, which emphasize which diplomatic engagements and public diplomacy initiatives have endured in such a time. In her contribution, Amb. Fazey emphasized how the UK, the fourth-largest investor in ASEAN in 2024, has deliberately positioned its cooperation to work through ASEAN institutions rather than around them. Rather than focusing on eye-catching flagship announcements, the ASEAN-UK programmes serve as essential, enduring architecture upon which sustainable, future-proof economic resilience is built. The ASEAN-UK Economic Integration Programme focuses on MSMEs, digital trade, and women-led businesses, while the ASEAN-UK Green Transition Fund mobilizes private capital for clean infrastructure.

Another underappreciated aspect of ASEAN's enduring appeal is soft power collaboration. In the KBS World essay, Chief Producer Hwang Kukchan, with support of the ASEAN-Korea Cooperation Fund, argued in such a line, promoting an initiative in the realm of cultural diplomacy and public broadcasting between ASEAN and Korea, using media collaboration, regional storytelling, and people-to-people dialogue to build awareness and affinity across diverse audiences.

Indeed, these partner contributions offer a valuable perspective on what ASEAN's continued relevance looks like from the outside, as well as what is worth preserving.

What emerges across the volume as a whole is not necessarily pessimism, but a shared analytical sobriety towards familiar patterns. ASEAN's ambitions still tend to outpace follow-through, and declarations are seldom matched by the deadlines needed to make them credible. Much emphasis remains on regionalism as ritual. While that dimension is not without value (it sustains the habits of dialogue and the foundations of regional unity), ASEAN member states will also find that unity will increasingly be about responding collectively to emerging shared challenges and sparing more resources for the regional good. For that mission, the institutional structures exist, yet they are too rarely empowered with the mandates and resources to act decisively. The problem for ASEAN, in other words, is not design but delivery.

That sobriety is especially warranted now. For much of its life, ASEAN operated under favorable conditions where economic globalization, external patience from partners, and a liberal order rewarded its institutional incrementalism. If ASEAN struggled to act in times of relative global stability, when international norms supported openness and when geopolitical competition was less overt, why should we believe it can suddenly succeed in this more fragmented and contested environment? The assumptions that underpinned ASEAN's earlier decades, the effectiveness of consensus, the inevitability of integration, the patience of partners, are no longer safe bets.

This is not a call to abandon ASEAN. It is a call to reframe the stakes. Cooperation must now be judged not by the volume of statements produced, but by the problems solved and capacities built. The Philippines, in its 2026 chairmanship, has an opportunity, perhaps not to reinvent ASEAN, but to clarify what it can still do. That will require political courage, sharper prioritization, and perhaps most of all, a willingness to challenge procedural habit.

The essays in this Special Edition do not all agree on the path forward, but they share a commitment to interrogating ASEAN's current trajectory. They reflect a region still rich in expertise, ambition, and diplomatic skill, but one increasingly at risk of drifting from function to form. If ASEAN is to remain central, it must first become effective. And that means making cooperation real, not just institutional, but operational.

This volume does not resolve the question of ASEAN's future. But it does sharpen the terms on which that future should be debated. It asks whether the institution can still adapt, or whether it has come to rely too heavily on the very narratives that once made it strong. If ASEAN is to matter in the coming years, it must move beyond those narratives, toward a practice of cooperation that delivers under pressure, not just promises in principle.

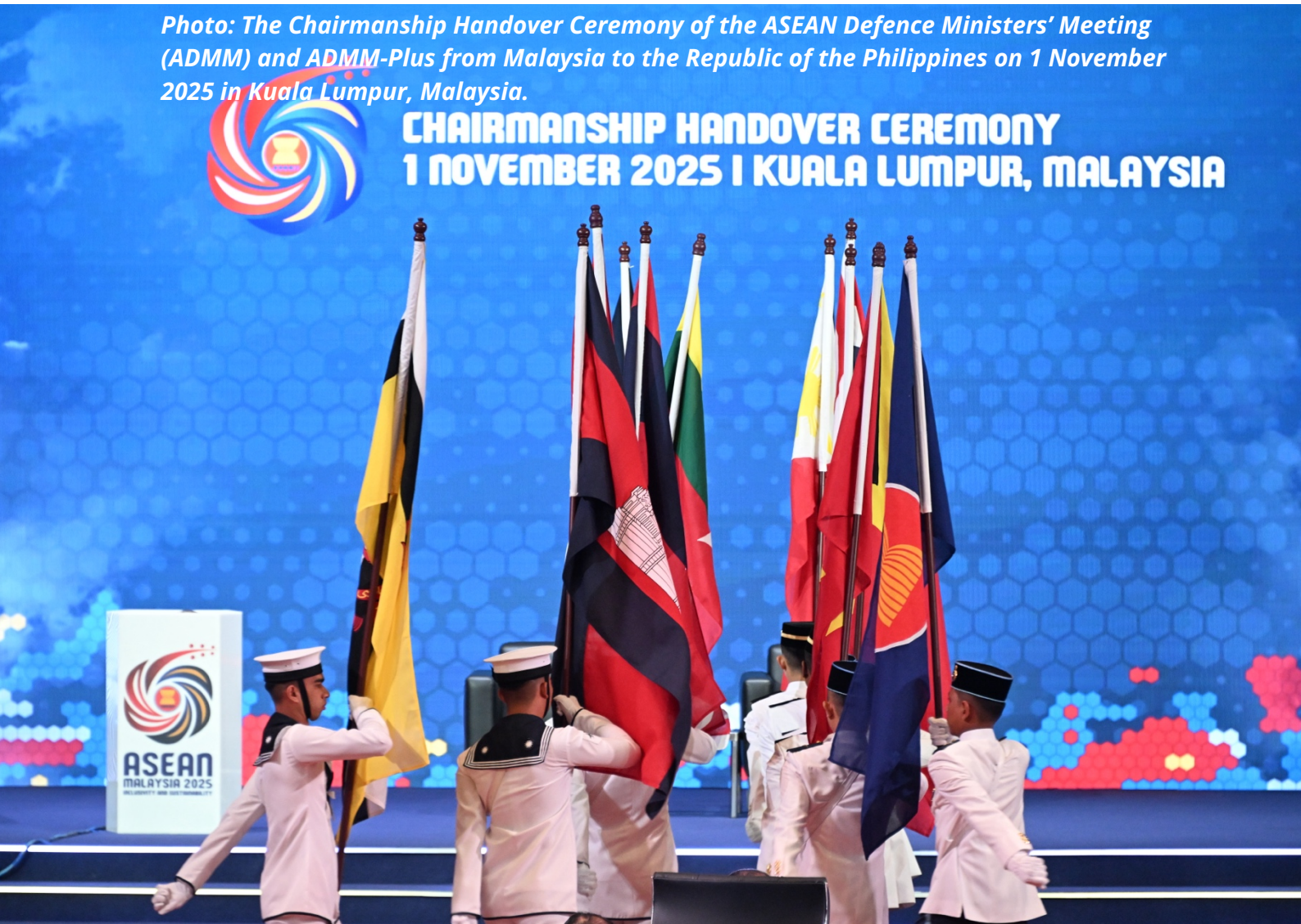


Photo: The Chairmanship Handover Ceremony of the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) and ADMM-Plus from Malaysia to the Republic of the Philippines on 1 November 2025 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.



Photo: President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. briefs the media at the 48th ASEAN Summit on 8 May 2026 in Cebu, the Philippines.

Navigating Our Future, Together: A Mid-Term Assessment of the Philippines' ASEAN Chairship

H.E. Evangeline T. Ong Jimenez-Ducrocq
Permanent Representative of the Republic of the Philippines to ASEAN

The Philippines' ASEAN 2026 Chairship theme "Navigating Our Future, Together" sought to capture the determination of ASEAN to act in unity in the face of a more difficult external environment. Looking at 2026, the theme presciently resonates across the region as the year may now be remembered as one of the most consequential and turbulent periods the region has faced in recent memory.

The Philippine Chairship has emphasized that ASEAN's greatest strength and appeal lie in its unity, in the strengths of its individual economies and the growing confidence of its expanding middle class, in the increasing recognition of ASEAN as a region of robust processes and rules, in its convening power, and in its deep pragmatism that has created a complex network of cooperative relationships and programs, among others. If ASEAN is to continue to leverage these strengths, it will indeed need to navigate the fierce headwinds challenging the foundations of the international order, where rapid technological advances define the influence of nations, creating both unprecedented opportunities and complex new risks, and where the compounding pressures of climate change and natural disasters strain humanitarian and economic resilience – all with direct impact on a growing and more educated population that is able to advance solutions but expect progress towards a more resilient operating environment.

These challenges will require ASEAN to identify its own pathway to avoid choices that restrict opportunities, stunt growth, and conceal risks further down the road. As ASEAN nears six decades of existence, it has grown into a strong and experienced organization. Amidst what has so far been achieved, much remains to be done, and a look at the world forces us to say with all honesty that what we do today will reverberate far beyond 2026, hence the importance of fidelity to the vision of our founding fathers, commitment to our shared horizon as captured in the ASEAN Community Vision 2045, and cooperation that helps achieve the aspiration of each ASEAN Member State.

The Philippines' ASEAN Chairship Priorities and Strategic Vision

The Philippines' Chairship is anchored on three mutually reinforcing pillars: Peace and Security Anchors, Prosperity Corridors, and People Empowerment, framed under the Chair's priorities of reinforcing peace through dialogue, promoting maritime cooperation, deepening economic integration and digital transformation, and advancing inclusive and sustainable development.

At the 48th ASEAN Summit in Cebu on 8 May 2026, ASEAN Leaders reaffirmed these priorities, and welcomed the 19 Priority Economic Deliverables (PEDs) designed to strengthen trade and investment linkages, accelerate digital transformation, integrate the MSME agenda, and advance sustainable economies. The Summit yielded landmark outcomes: the ASEAN Leaders' Declaration on Maritime Cooperation, the ASEAN Leaders' Statement on the Response to the Middle East Crisis, the adoption of the ASEAN Leaders' Statement on the ASEAN Convergence on Disaster Response: The ASEAN Strategic Protocol for Emergency and Comprehensive Transformation (ASPECT) Framework, the adoption of the ASEAN Declaration on the Empowerment of Youth in Climate Action and Disaster Resilience, and the Cebu Protocol to Amend the ASEAN Charter to reflect Timor-Leste's full membership — the first such amendment since 2007.

The conversations in the 48th Summit reflected serious concern over the shared impact of the crisis in the Gulf region and its likely long effect on our economies. Hence, regional energy security and resilience, food security, and the safety of ASEAN nationals were key matters of discussion. Prior to the Summit, and in recognition of the urgency of the impact on our region of developments in the Gulf region, two Special ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meetings and one Special ASEAN Trade Ministers' Meeting on the Situation in the Middle East were convened, and one Special ASEAN Energy Ministers' Meeting.

Leaders agreed on the need for the early ratification of the ASEAN Petroleum Sharing Agreement, the operationalization of the ASEAN Power Grid, stronger intra-ASEAN trade that the upgraded ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement can help usher in, safeguarding agricultural supply chains, strengthening financial resilience and macroeconomic stability, and developing crisis coordination mechanisms, among others.

The BIMP-EAGA Summit was organized to enhance growth in the sub-region covering Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines, with the launch of the BIMP-EAGA Vision 2035, aligning with the ASEAN Community Vision 2045 in areas of connectivity, energy resilience, food security, digital transformation, sustainable tourism, and infrastructure development.

A trilateral meeting among Cambodia, Thailand, and the Philippines on the sidelines of the 48th ASEAN Summit provided the opportunity to advance confidence-building

measures and promote dialogue among parties. With a reinforced commitment to the Five-Point Consensus, ASEAN will continue to play a positive and constructive role in facilitating a peaceful solution in the interest of the people of Myanmar.

These are not small achievements. But the Chairship story is not told by summits alone, but also by the cumulative weight of over 650 meetings this year, each one a steady pull of the oar on a vessel that is learning, sometimes against the current, to hold its course together. Akin to the science of navigation, these meetings examine, plot and elaborate the painstaking steps needed for us to get to our destination.

The TAC at 50: Relevance in a Fragmented Global Order

Perhaps no milestone of this Chairship carries more symbolic and substantive weight than the 50th anniversary of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC). Signed in 1976, the TAC remains one of ASEAN's foundational instruments and continues to embody principles that are as relevant in today's fragmented global environment as when they were first articulated at a different time: peaceful settlement of disputes, mutual respect for sovereignty, non-interference, and renunciation of the threat or use of force.

The TAC serves as an enduring reminder that dialogue and cooperation remain possible even amid differences. Its relevance is reflected in the steadily expanding number of High Contracting Parties, demonstrating continued international confidence in ASEAN-led norms and mechanisms.

Efforts to organize events to commemorate the TAC's golden anniversary are in full swing – the formal accession of new states, a Conference of High Contracting Parties at the Foreign Ministers' level, a gala dinner hosted by President Marcos, our hope to adopt an ASEAN-sponsored resolution commemorating the TAC's 50th anniversary at the 80th Session of the United Nations General Assembly. The Philippines employs these efforts not with nostalgia but to remind the world of first principles which have been the premise of our strength and growth, a reaffirmation of ASEAN's long-standing commitment to peaceful coexistence and regional stability.

ASEAN+1 FTAs: Progress, Current Status and Future Prospects

ASEAN continues to advance its economic integration agenda, strengthen measures to leverage the economic potential of emerging sectors and evolving supply chains, and diversify its economic partnerships through ongoing negotiations and upgrade initiatives under its ASEAN+1 Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) with Canada, India and the Republic of Korea. Parallel to these efforts, ASEAN hopes to conclude and sign the ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA) in 2026, an instrument envisioned to support

greater regional digital integration, facilitate cross-border digital trade, and strengthen ASEAN's digital economy ecosystem. Collectively, these initiatives demonstrate ASEAN's continued commitment to maintaining an open, inclusive, and forward-looking regional economic architecture anchored on deeper integration and resilience.

Operationalizing Maritime Cooperation under ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP)

The South China Sea remains the most consequential waters through which ASEAN must navigate its complex geopolitical realities without drifting apart. As ASEAN Chair and a claimant state, the Philippines occupies an especially delicate position at the helm. We have been clear-eyed about this from the outset of the Chairship.

In Cebu, ASEAN Leaders adopted the ASEAN Leaders' Declaration on Maritime Cooperation, reaffirming the multi-dimensional nature of maritime issues and the importance of UNCLOS as the governing legal framework. The Summit noted the planned establishment of an ASEAN Maritime Centre in the Philippines, which will support cross-sectoral cooperation on maritime security, environmental protection, and the blue economy while avoiding duplication of efforts across existing ASEAN mechanisms. Importantly, Cambodia's ratification of UNCLOS on 6 February 2026 brings the entire ASEAN membership under this critical legal framework.



Photo: Leaders of ASEAN Member States during the group photo session at the 48th ASEAN Summit in Cebu, the Philippines.



Photo: President of the Republic of the Philippines and ASEAN Chair for 2026, H.E. Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr., at the Opening Ceremony of the 48th ASEAN Summit and Related Meetings on 8 May 2026 in Cebu, the Philippines.





Photo: Secretary-General of ASEAN meets the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs of the United Kingdom (Photo credit: UK Mission to ASEAN).

Five Years on, Real Partnership is Delivering: the UK and ASEAN Must Keep Advancing Together

H.E. Helen Fazey
Ambassador of the United Kingdom to ASEAN

Five years after the UK became ASEAN's newest Dialogue Partner, our partnership is proving its worth. Two-way trade now exceeds £60 billion and our first ASEAN–UK Plan of Action has been delivered. Now, as we look ahead, we need this to be a partnership fit for a new era of geoeconomics, where economic choices increasingly carry strategic weight. As the UK Foreign Secretary Yvette Cooper set out in *The Economist*[1], prosperity and security can no longer be treated separately. Supply chains are being rewired for resilience as well as efficiency. Reciprocal tariff pressures are testing the bargaining power of every open economy. The cost of climate adaptation is rising faster than the finance available to meet it.

In this environment, partnership is not a slogan – it is a capability. There is great potential to make more of the collective weight among like-minded partners. The choices that we make in how we shift our cooperation from presence to performance will set the measures by which the next phase of ASEAN-UK cooperation will be judged: on strengthening economic resilience, supporting SMEs, agreeing the rules for a digital economy and mobilising green finance.

[1] Yvette Cooper, "How to Think about Foreign Policy in the New Geoeconomic Era," *The Economist*, April 24, 2026, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/how-to-think-about-foreign-policy-in-the-new-geoeconomic-era.



Photo: Meeting between the UK Minister for Indo-Pacific, Seema Malhotra, and ASEAN Permanent Representatives to Launch the Celebrations for the Fifth Anniversary of the ASEAN-UK Dialogue Partnership (Photo credit: UK Mission to ASEAN).

ASEAN and the UK are both open economies, deeply embedded in global trade, and long-standing proponents of a rules-based international trading system. As a region central to global supply chains, the choices made today – by ASEAN and its external partners – will shape ASEAN's strategic agency for the next decade.

In this context, the UK's response is deliberately practical. In a more contested global economy, we aim to be useful – and to be useful through ASEAN, not around it.

The figures point to a strong foundation. The UK was the fourth largest investor in ASEAN in 2024, reflecting sustained confidence in the region's growth and stability. The UK's accession to the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership connects UK businesses to four ASEAN economies through a single, rules based framework, with further ASEAN Member States likely to become members in the future.

But numbers only matter for what they enable. Behind every percentage point of trade growth sits a concrete story: a small business in Surabaya digitising its first cross-border shipment; a fintech founder in Manila accessing UK capital; a woman-led agricultural cooperative in the Mekong meeting international standards because the right partnership emerged at the right moment. This is where resilient prosperity is built. This is where programmes have to keep delivering – so that these people can point to something the UK helped build and say, with confidence – that worked for us.

That philosophy underpins the ASEAN–UK Economic Integration Programme. Delivered with the ASEAN Secretariat and ASEAN Member States, the programme focuses on micro, small and medium-sized enterprises – the backbone of ASEAN's economy – helping them trade across borders, integrate into regional value chains, and adopt digital tools and finance. Women-led businesses are a deliberate priority. Economic systems that exclude half the workforce do not compound. Inclusive ones do.

This approach is not imposed; it is aligned with ASEAN's own direction. The Philippines' 2026 Chairmanship theme – *Navigating Our Future, Together* – sets the benchmark for our delivery. The ASEAN Community Vision 2045 and the Strategic Plan 2026–2030 provide the architecture. The next ASEAN–UK Plan of Action, for 2027–2031, is being built to serve those frameworks. ASEAN centrality is not a slogan. It is a discipline.

Economic partnership today also extends well beyond traditional trade. The ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement – projected to add up to US$2 trillion to the regional digital economy by 2030 – is among the most consequential integration projects under way anywhere in the world. Through the Economic Integration Programme's digital trade workstream and initiatives such as the ASEAN–UK TradeTech Lookbook, British

strengths in artificial intelligence, cybersecurity and cloud services are being matched to ASEAN's implementation priorities.

Alongside this, the ASEAN–UK Green Transition Fund is mobilising private capital for clean infrastructure and climate resilient growth. Together with ASEAN, we are mobilising green finance, accelerating the clean energy transition and protecting nature. The prize is clear: lower emissions, stronger energy security and new jobs in sunrise industries. A resilient region is an inclusive region.

How does the UK distinguish itself among other partners engaged in Southeast Asia – some who trade in larger volumes, some with bigger programme budgets? What the UK offers is distinct: consistency and a steadfast commitment to the rules-based international system that underpins sustainable economic growth. We show up. We deliver on what we commit to. We work through ASEAN institutions rather than around them. In an era of volatility, predictability itself is a strategic asset for trade, investment and long-term confidence.

The diplomatic calendar in 2027 brings a rare alignment: the UK chairs the G20, Vietnam hosts APEC, and Singapore takes the ASEAN Chair. The next Plan of Action is being shaped now. There are no shortcuts. The work must continue.

Five years in, the ASEAN–UK partnership is no longer about establishing presence. It is about compounding it. It is about earning trust through delivery – layer by layer, outcome by outcome. It is about recognising that only ASEAN-led work produces ASEAN-shaped outcomes. It is about advancing together.

That is the partnership we are five years into. And it is the partnership we must keep building for the five ahead, and the five after that.



Photo: Senior Officials from ASEAN Member States and the United Kingdom during the 5th ASEAN-UK Senior Officials' Meeting (AUKSOM) on 31 March 2026 at Wilton Park, United Kingdom.



Photo: ASEAN Heads of Government during the First ASEAN Summit and the signing of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) on 23–24 February 1976 in Bali, Indonesia (Photo credit: ASEAN Secretariat).

ASEAN's Timeless Compass – The Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia

H.E. Dr. Kao Kim Hourn
Secretary-General of ASEAN

The year 2026 marks a major milestone for ASEAN. It is the year ASEAN begins implementing ASEAN 2045: Our Shared Future and its Strategic Plans for the ASEAN Political-Security Community, ASEAN Economic Community, ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community, and ASEAN Connectivity. With this new 20-year vision – the first in ASEAN Community-building – ASEAN embarks on a bold new chapter.

ASEAN enters this era with renewed dynamism following the formal accession of Timor-Leste as the 11th ASEAN Member State. Timor-Leste's membership not only fulfils the longstanding aspiration of having all Southeast Asian states under the fold of ASEAN but also reinforces ASEAN's collective capacity to realize the new Vision while navigating an increasingly turbulent and uncertain strategic environment.

As ASEAN advances into the next chapter of its Community-building, it will continue to draw strength and dynamism from the principles that have long guided ASEAN: respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-interference in the internal affairs of states, non-use of force, and the peaceful settlement of disputes. These principles are enshrined in the ASEAN Charter and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC), whose 50th anniversary is being commemorated in 2026.

While ASEAN has played a central role in promoting regional peace, stability and progress, it has also faced significant challenges that test its spirit of unity and resilience. These include internal challenges within ASEAN Member States, the political crisis in Myanmar, disputes between ASEAN Member States, recently the Cambodia-Thailand border conflict – and tensions involving ASEAN and external partners, particularly in the South China Sea.

ASEAN has taken cognisance of developments following the elections in Myanmar, including the release of political prisoners. The Five-Point Consensus remains the framework as ASEAN continues to engage Myanmar, in full consideration that it is a member of the ASEAN family. The ASEAN Member States continue to affirm their support for a Myanmar-owned and Myanmar-led process in addressing the situation.

The Cambodia-Thailand border conflict, in particular, tested ASEAN unity. Under Malaysia's leadership as ASEAN Chair, a ceasefire was agreed upon and the Kuala Lumpur Peace Accord signed. The conflict between two ASEAN neighbours served as a sobering reminder that the region is not insulated from actual conflict and that complacency must be avoided. Peace can never be taken for granted, even in our own region.

The conflict also underscores the urgent need for ASEAN to further strengthen its culture of peace, institutions and mechanisms to ensure full adherence to the principles of peaceful dispute settlement and the renunciation of the threat or use of force, as enshrined in both the ASEAN Charter and the TAC.

At the same time, the global landscape has become increasingly polarized, divided and fragmented. A rules-based and law-based international order is no longer a fait accompli. Instead, power is becoming increasingly equated with right. The ongoing conflicts across the world illustrate the growing tendency of some states to use force in pursuit of what they perceive as their legitimate national interests. Regrettably, the impact does not only affect those directly involved. Neither are the consequences confined to a single geographic region. In an increasingly interconnected world, conflicts rapidly affect energy markets, trade and investment flows, financial systems, global supply chains, food security, and defence spending, among others.

For ASEAN, dependence on energy supplies from the Middle East remains structurally significant. Between 2021 and 2025, more than half of ASEAN's crude oil imports originated from the region. With limited alternative export routes available, disruptions to shipping through the Strait of Hormuz have constrained global energy supplies and contributed significantly to volatility in international energy markets.

These developments demand stronger ASEAN leadership — leadership that can only be effective if ASEAN remains united. As often emphasized, ASEAN Member States "must hang together, otherwise we hang separately." The challenges confronting ASEAN require collective action undertaken in the spirit of ASEAN solidarity and unity.



Photo: The inaugural Conference of the High Contracting Parties to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) convened at the ASEAN Secretariat on 26 June 2024.

Equally important is the need for ASEAN to adopt a resilient rather than a victim mindset. This is especially critical given the evolving nature of the challenges facing the region. In 2025, ASEAN's primary concern centred on tariffs imposed on ASEAN Member States. Today, attention has shifted toward energy security as a consequence of developments in the Middle East.

ASEAN's history, however, demonstrates its resilience in the face of major social, political, and economic shocks — from the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997, to the SARS outbreak in 2003, and the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. ASEAN is, therefore expected to demonstrate similar resilience in responding to the current energy crisis affecting the region and its peoples.

In times of uncertainty, unpredictability, and volatility, ASEAN must rely on what may be described as its "compass of navigation": a return to the organization's foundational principles as embodied in the TAC, the ASEAN Charter, and other ASEAN key documents.

Notwithstanding that ASEAN has effectively dealt with the challenges that came its way in the past, it nevertheless cannot afford to rest on past achievements. Yesterday's successes belong to the past; today presents new challenges and realities, while the future remains uncertain.

As ASEAN commemorates the 50th anniversary of the TAC, the Philippine Chairship theme, Navigating Our Future, Together, is of utmost significance. It reflects ASEAN's shared destiny, underscores the importance of collective wisdom, and calls on ASEAN Member States not merely to survive together, but to thrive collectively as one. It also emphasizes the need to move forward with clarity, unity, purpose and decisiveness.

The principles enshrined in the TAC have enabled ASEAN to exercise agency within the regional architecture. By establishing the normative foundations of regional cooperation, ASEAN's enduring legacy has been its consistent advocacy of dialogue and diplomacy, collaboration and cooperation, consultation and consensus-building rather than confrontation and conflict.

Beyond the commemorative activities marking this milestone year, adherence to the principles embodied in the TAC remains essential. Only through continued commitment to these principles can ASEAN maintain its credibility as a trusted partner and preserve its standing as the driving force for peace, prosperity and progress in the rapidly evolving regional architecture.

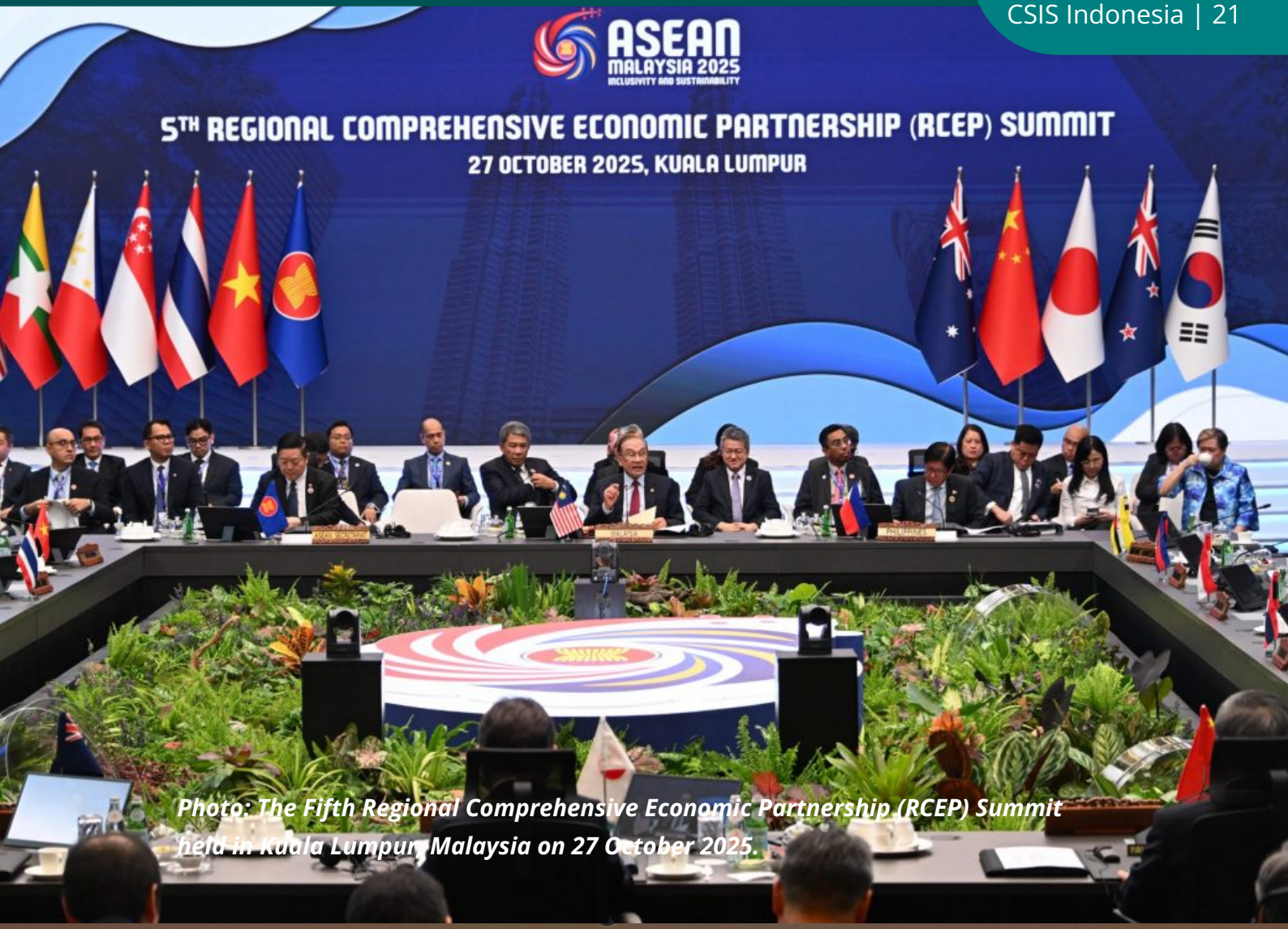


Photo: The Fifth Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) Summit held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia on 27 October 2025.

Photo: The Second ASEAN-Korea FTA (AKFTA) Upgrade Joint Committee (The First Negotiation Round) Meeting held in Seoul, the Republic of Korea in June 2026.



ASEAN Plus One FTAs: From Openness to Resilient Integration

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Since initiating the process in 2004, ASEAN has significantly expanded its network of Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) with major external trading partners. Currently, the bloc maintains six active plurilateral trade arrangements, specifically with China, the Republic of Korea, Japan, India, Hong Kong, and a joint agreement with Australia and New Zealand. Furthermore, several agreements remain under negotiation, notably with Canada and the European Union. This extensive framework underscores ASEAN's strategic ambition to drive regional economic integration, promote sustainable development, and institutionalize its economic ties beyond Southeast Asia.

Initially, the primary objective of the "ASEAN Plus One" FTAs centered predominantly on trade in goods. For example, the landmark ASEAN-China Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation was signed in 2002, whereas its respective components regarding trade in goods, services, and investment were subsequently concluded in 2004, 2007, and 2009. This sequential timeline reflects the characteristic evolution of ASEAN's trade architecture, which typically commences with tariff elimination and market access for goods before gradually expanding to encompass services, investment, and deeper forms of regulatory and economic cooperation.

This strategy has brought some fruitful results to the group. Trade with these partners has increased by almost 9% annually in the last two decades. ASEAN countries have also become important hubs for their partners' production networks. However, the agenda under this arrangement must now be expanded from market opening to deeper economic integration, rules-making and improving resilience in order to respond to the current global shifts.

Several next-generation FTAs have already adjusted their trajectories to reflect this paradigm shift. For instance, the upgraded ASEAN–Australia–New Zealand Free Trade Agreement (AANZFTA) – the Second Protocol of which officially entered into force in April 2025 – modernized core chapters governing rules of origin, customs procedures, trade facilitation, competition policy, and digital commerce. Similarly, the recently signed ASEAN–China FTA upgrade (ACFTA 3.0) underscores this institutional pivot by embedding regulatory frameworks for the digital transition, green economy, and supply chain resilience.

Yet economic integration is now taking place in a world shaped by protectionism, industrial policy, supply-chain rivalry, and the securitisation of trade. The ASEAN Geoeconomics Report 2025 argues that the global economic and trading system is experiencing its most serious disruption since the creation of the WTO in 1995, and that ASEAN may face serious challenges from these dynamics due to its reliance on global value chains. That does not mean ASEAN should abandon its integration and liberalization initiatives. Openness remains necessary, but it should be complemented with resilience to shield ASEAN from external shocks.

Crucially, ASEAN can no longer rely solely on external demand and foreign-led production networks. The prevailing economic model and institutional goals of ASEAN integration – largely driven by the "ASEAN Plus" frameworks – tend to position the bloc primarily as a production hub, while its primary consumption markets remain outside the region. As highlighted in the ASEAN Geoeconomics Report, the bloc must harness the latent potential of its domestic markets and unlock new engines of regional demand. Effectively operationalizing the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and optimizing the utilization of existing "ASEAN Plus" FTAs are vital to achieving this objective; however, this shift requires significant structural adjustments.

First is to simplify the FTA system. ASEAN's network of Plus One FTAs has created opportunities, but it has also created complexity with different rules of origin, tariff schedules, and documentation procedures. Even early study on RCEP warned the coexistence of five ASEAN+1 FTAs with different rules of origin created a potential "noodle-bowl" problem.[2] If FTAs are too complicated to use, they may benefit only large firms with good capacity, while smaller firms remain outside the system.

Second is to improve utilisation. ASEAN Barometer Survey 2026 shows that while more than 70% of businesses in ASEAN are aware of FTAs in the region, only 48% have ever used them. Firm-level research on Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines found that use of ASEAN+1 FTAs is associated with knowledge, technological capabilities, and membership in industrial clusters, while non-use is linked to lack of information and the absence of FTAs with major trading partners.[3] This suggests that ASEAN needs more activities beyond outreach, to better provide practical firm-level assistance and guidance on FTAs, especially for MSMEs.

Third is to deepen services and behind-the-border integration. Services are crucial inputs into production networks and industrial upgrading, and ASEAN countries can benefit

[2] Yoshifumi Fukunaga and Ikumo Isono, "Taking ASEAN+1 FTAs towards the RCEP: A Mapping Study," ERIA Discussion Paper No. 2013-02, January 2013, https://www.eria.org/ERIA-DP-2013-02.pdf.

[3] Christopher Findlay and Hein Roelfsema, "The Determinants of FTA Use in Southeast Asia: A Firm-Level Analysis," *Journal of Asian Economics* 35 (December 2014): 32–42, https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1049007814000748.

from greater services integration.[4] This is highly relevant to ASEAN Plus One FTAs. If ASEAN wants to move beyond being a low-cost production base, it must improve logistics, finance, telecommunications, digital services, and other producer-services sectors. FTAs should therefore be used not only to reduce tariffs but also to improve the competitiveness of the regional economy.

Fourth is to use FTAs to support resilience. FTAs can help strengthen internal market integration by streamlining non-tariff measures, facilitating trade and investment through e-procedures and single windows, and establishing more reliable rules. This prevents countries from over-securitizing their economies and "weaponizing" economic policies. In this regard, fully implementing RCEP and boosting its utilization is a key step that connects trade openness with regional strength.

RCEP should not become just another layer of complexity added on top of ASEAN Plus One FTAs; rather, it can serve as a bridge across all FTAs. That is the initial objective of the agreement: to synchronize the existing Plus One FTAs. RCEP's value comes from unifying rules of origin, expanding cumulation, and establishing more coherent trade disciplines. This is important because RCEP can help ASEAN move from fragmented FTA management toward a more coherent regional trade system. If used properly, RCEP can become a platform for improving customs procedures, standards, and services in the region, in order to improve supply chain cooperation and strengthen the internal market.[5]

In conclusion, while "ASEAN Plus One" FTAs remain foundational to the bloc's economic strategy, their institutional objectives must evolve beyond mere market liberalization and the facilitation of regional production networks. These traditional frameworks should be systematically complemented by targeted initiatives that enhance macroeconomic resilience through the consolidation of the internal market. To achieve this, ASEAN must streamline rules of origin (ROO), deepen regulatory alignment in services and digital commerce, mitigate non-tariff barriers (NTBs), and strategically utilize the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) as a mechanism to foster more coherent and harmonized regional trade governance.

[4] Yose Rizal Damuri, "Services Sector Development and Improving Production Network in ASEAN," CSIS Indonesia, 2015, https://www.csis.or.id/publication/services-sector-development-and-improving-production-network-in-asean/.

[5] Yose Rizal Damuri, "RCEP Prospect and Challenges: Political Economy of East Asian Integration," in *Trade Regionalism in the Asia-Pacific: Developments and Future Challenges*, ed. Sanchita Basu Das and Masahiro Kawai (Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2016), 105–128, https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/trade-regionalism-in-the-asiapacific/rcep-prospect-and-challenges-political-economy-of-east-asian-integration/13AB33E0617AA5CFF6007D6AFFE0AE10.



Photo: Senior officials and representatives at the 25th ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting on Transnational Crime (SOMTC) and Its Related Meetings on 24–26 June 2025 in Putrajaya, Malaysia.



Photo: Ministers at the 19th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime (AMMTC) on 10 September 2025, Melaka, Malaysia.

Scams in the Digital Age: ASEAN's Fragmented Governance and the Way Forward

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Among the oldest forms of cybersecurity concerns to plague the ASEAN region are scams. A traditional cybersecurity concern, love scams and cyberfraud have exploited digital infrastructure and its characteristics for illicit gains. Among the earliest was the 'ILOVEYOU' virus which typically sends a replicating worm from one user to the next, overwriting files and stealing passwords which the original inventor claims is intended for access to the internet.[6] The file was deliberately named 'LOVE-LETTER-FOR-YOU-TXT' to raise curiosity[7] and exploit social engineering methods.[8]

Cyberspace was traditionally designed with features considered the anti-thesis to security. Proxy identification given by IP addresses link users to the world wide web. However, IP addresses can be dynamic while devices can be shared across users which makes anonymity a feature of cyber connectivity. Secondly, cyberspace is highly interconnected with ITU estimating 74 percent of individuals use the Internet globally today.[9] Meanwhile, internet speeds have increased dramatically: in 1992, Malaysia's dial-up connectivity operated at 64kbps[10] while in 2024, ASEAN mobile download internet speeds range from 22.84Mbps in Myanmar to 129.13Mbps in Singapore,[11] with Timor-Leste registering around 4.85Mbps for mobile internet speeds.[12] Larger internet penetration with a digital architecture functioning on zero-trust assumptions mean vulnerabilities for a large population can be exploited. A General System Mobile

[6] Geoff White, "Love Bug: How It All Started," *BBC News*, 4 May 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-52458765.
[7] Ibid.
[8] "A Brief History of Computer Viruses and What the Future Holds," *Kaspersky,* accessed June 2026, https://www.kaspersky.co.uk/resource-center/threats/a-brief-history-of-computer-viruses-and-what-the-future-holds.
[9] International Telecommunication Union (ITU), *Global Connectivity Report 2025* (Geneva: ITU, 2025), https://www.itu.int/dms_pub/itu-d/opb/ind/D-IND-ICT_MDD.GCR-2025-4-PDF-E.pdf.
[10] Sureswaran Ramadass and Azlan Osman, "Malaysia Snapshot," *Internet History Asia*, 27 October 2012, https://sites.google.com/site/internethistoryasia/book1/Malaysia-snapshot.
[11] Department of Information and Communications Technology (DICT) of the Republic of the Philippines, *Internet Speed of the Philippines as of March 2025*, May 2025, https://ictstatistics.dict.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Internet-Speed-of-the-Philippines-ao-March-2025.pdf.
[12] Tim Mann and Juvita Pereira Faria, "Timor-Leste on the Cusp of Digital Transformation Despite Challenges," *DevPolicy Blog*, 21 July 2025, https://devpolicy.org/timor-leste-on-the-cusp-of-digital-transformation-despite-challenges-20250721/.

Association-commissioned report found that nearly one in ten consumers were digitally scammed across Southeast Asia in 2024, exemplifying the severity, prominence and exploitation of digitally-enabled scams in this day and age.[13]

A Social or Cyber Issue?

Due to a scam's cross-cutting exploitative nature, categorising activities for further action can be challenging. Bearing in mind that the 'ILOVEYOU' worm was purposefully digitally distributed for digital goals such as stealing passwords, other forms of scams and fraud can exploit social connections for financial gains. Romance scams, for instance, use social connection to exploit emotional vulnerabilities while financial fraud could promise lucrative returns with fake investment schemes to lure victims. In ASEAN, investment scams emerge as the most common, followed by unexpected money offers and impersonation scams.[14]

Additionally, the analytical distinction between cyber-dependent and cyber-enabled crimes frequently blurs. Impersonation scams often occupy an intermediate position, wherein the deception of victims serves either as a mechanism for immediate financial gain or as a precursor to identity theft for broader fraudulent exploitation. Similarly, romance scams leverage social media platforms and telecommunication networks for initial solicitation and engagement, yet fundamentally depend on psychological manipulation, empathy, and perceived human connection. Conversely, other digital threats operate entirely within a virtual lifecycle; for instance, phishing campaigns utilize deceptive emails or malicious hyperlinks to harvest personal credentials or trick victims into deploying malware. Such compromises can facilitate the subsequent exploitation of personally identifiable information (PII) or expose corporate architectures to catastrophic ransomware attacks.

Distinctions of emphasis between social or cyber methods would seem unimportant, especially if victims have monetary or reputational losses. However, enforcement typically flows along the lines of jurisdiction and regulatory powers. A computer emergency response team, for instance, may be the primary stop for issues regarding malware or cyber concerns. However, should a case be filed, the case's social dimension or social impact may be out of a cybersecurity team's jurisdiction. ASEAN's cybersecurity

[13] "Consumer Trust in Southeast Asia Falters as Cyber Scam Concerns Grow," *GSMA*, 2025, https://www.gsma.com/newsroom/press-release/consumer-trust-in-southeast-asia-falters-as-cyber-scam-concerns-grow-new-gsma-commissioned-report-warns/.

[14] "Singapore Scam Victims Top Southeast Asia Losses at US$2,132 per Person, Malaysia Second," *Vietnam News*, 15 September 2025, https://vietnamnews.vn/world/1725271/singapore-scam-victims-top-southeast-asia-losses-at-us-2-132-per-person-malaysia-second.html.

cooperation strategy has also deliberately carved out responsibilities, where the 2017 strategy explicitly states that the strategy would not cover domains such as cybercrime.[15]

This can be challenging in the midst of two trends plaguing scam and fraud ring developments. The first is that cybersecurity threat actors can also serve as resources for future scam or financial fraud activities. MITRE's FIN6 - a cyber crime group that has stolen payment card data and sold it for profit on underground marketplaces, for instance, targets enterprise point-of-sale systems for credit card information or utilises fake resumes to draw information.[16] The entry point for an attack can be cybersecurity vulnerabilities or cyber hygiene challenges. However, the information stolen and sold can be used for cybercrime purposes. Additionally, cybersecurity vulnerabilities can be sold as a service package for clients. LockBit, for instance, is an example of ransomware-as-a-service which could be sold and directed by attackers to their targets, most commonly via social engineering methods like trusted personnel.[17]

Structurally, the ASEAN institutional mechanism functions across three distinct community pillars: the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC). Regulatory authorities and law enforcement agencies handling the digital fraud lifecycle are highly fragmented across these pillars. Specifically, counter-transnational crime agencies and police forces operate within the APSC framework; network security, telecommunications, and digital transformation bodies are housed under the AEC; and regulatory bodies governing information policy, public awareness, and digital literacy fall within the purview of the ASCC. This cross-pillar dispersion poses significant challenges for coordinated regional enforcement.

The pertinence of an issue such as scams has galvanised activities across all three communities. ASEAN's Declaration to Prevent and Combat Cybercrime was signed in 2017[18] and the ASEAN Declaration on Combatting Cybercrime and Online Scams was released in 2025,[19] illustrating cybercrime cooperation efforts for information exchange, law enforcement and capacity building in the political-security community. Meanwhile, the ASEAN Guide on Anti-Scam Policies and Best Practices, published under the economic

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[15] ASEAN, *ASEAN Cybersecurity Cooperation Strategy 2017–2020*, 2017, https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/ASEAN-Cybersecurity-Cooperation-Strategy.pdf.

[16] "FIN6," *MITRE ATT&CK*, accessed June 2026, https://attack.mitre.org/groups/G0037/.

[17] "LockBit Ransomware," *Kaspersky*, accessed June 2026, https://www.kaspersky.com/resource-center/threats/lockbit-ransomware.

[18] ASEAN, *ASEAN Declaration to Prevent and Combat Cybercrime*, November 2017, https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/ASEAN-Declaration-to-Combat-Cybercrime.pdf.

[19] ASEAN, *ASEAN Declaration on Combatting Cybercrime and Online Scams*, 2025, https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/03.-ASEAN-Declaration-on-Combatting-Cybercrime-and-Online-Scams.pdf.

community pillar, addresses vulnerabilities from the perspective of network security operators, with interventions emphasising the role of telecommunications operators and SIM card distributors.[20] The socio-cultural community's interest in digital literacy has produced a Framework for Developing Digital Readiness among ASEAN Citizens in 2021, which also highlights the role of digital literacy to build resilience of the ASEAN population in the midst of online scams and cyberattacks.[21]

Fragmented forms of governance can mean that domestically, the cycle of justice can be incomplete due to difficulty in escalating cases to criminal law enforcers or unidentified and unaddressed areas of concern. Regionally, silos and absence of cooperation mechanisms could mean that information is not flowing for effective further action, or governance oversight could be exploited.

[20] ASEAN, *ASEAN Guide on Anti-Scam Policies and Best Practices*, January 2026, https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/ASEAN-Guide-on-Anti-Scam-Policies-and-Best-Practices-090126.pdf.

[21] ASEAN, *Framework for Developing Digital Readiness among ASEAN Citizens*, September 2021, https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/FRAMEWORK-FOR-DEVELOPING-DIGITAL-READINESS-AMONG-ASEAN-CITIZEN.pdf.



Photo: At the 26th ASEAN – Republic of Korea Summit held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia on 27 October 2025, leaders reaffirmed their commitment to further strengthening cooperation in addressing transnational crime, including online scams.

Way Forward

One way forward perhaps stems from the typology and taxonomy of the problem itself. In current assessments, scams are viewed in accordance with methodology and jurisdiction. Piecing together a holistic point of view for scams can unveil areas missed in current approaches. For instance, F-Secure, a cybersecurity company from Finland, develop a taxonomy of scams along multiple dimensions, not only by its methodology, but also by its intended target, the platforms exploited, and the degree to which they are enabled by artificial intelligence.[22] In Southeast Asia, a cross-cutting paradigm could also include human trafficking, policies on labour migration which fuel scam rings and cooperation efforts with international as well as local actors. Diversifying categories beyond methodologies could be helpful to identify potential programmes that encourage information exchanges and build resilience.

Furthermore, establishing a dedicated institutional platform to enhance intra-ASEAN coordination is critical in the digital era, particularly as emerging technologies like artificial intelligence (AI) exacerbate the threat landscape and complicate cross-border jurisdictional enforcement. Such a mechanism could serve as a centralized forum to galvanize efforts aimed at consolidating ASEAN's unified posture across multiple sectors. This includes harmonizing regional frameworks for the norms of responsible state behaviour in cyberspace, as well as formulating strategic, collective approaches to enforce regulatory compliance from transnational social media platforms to mitigate algorithmic misuse and user safety risks.

Although ASEAN was established during an era when digital transformation was virtually non-existent, the rapid proliferation of contemporary technology has profoundly reshaped the region's socio-cultural, economic, and security landscapes. Romance scams and other forms of cyber fraud in the US, for instance, could be traced to Southeast Asia's scam rings.[23] The region could experience great reputational damage not only as a hub which incubates illicit activities,[24] but also be deemed an unsafe region for visitors. As a region whose tourism sector contributes more than 9% of the region's GDP, addressing scams is a regional imperative and a cross-sectoral challenge as the region digitalises further.[25]

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[22] "Scam Taxonomy," *F-Secure*, accessed June 2026, https://www.f-secure.com/en/partners/scam-protection/scam-taxonomy.

[23] Emil Bachev, "Romance Scam Centers in Southeast Asia," *Panda Security,* 29 April 2026, https://www.pandasecurity.com/en/mediacenter/romance-scam-centers-in-southeast-asia/.

[24] "Malaysia Love Scam: Kelantan–Singapore Men Syndicate," *Channel NewsAsia*, 24 April 2026, https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/malaysia-love-scam-kelantan-singapore-men-syndicate-6078281.

[25] ASEAN, *ASEAN Tourism Outlook Report*, February 2026, https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/Dummy_ASEAN-Tourism-Outlook-Report_Final-Draft_rev-26-Feb-2026_CRD.pdf.

Photo: The 19th ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) on 31 October 2025 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.



Operationalizing Maritime Security Cooperation under ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP)

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Introduction

The Indo-Pacific has become one of the world's most important geopolitical and geoeconomic centers. Yet its maritime environment is becoming increasingly unstable. Tensions continue to simmer in the South China Sea, great-power rivalry is intensifying across the region, and environmental degradation is accelerating throughout its waters. Maritime crimes such as piracy, smuggling, and trafficking further complicate the region's security landscape. Against this backdrop, the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific has served as ASEAN's strategic framework for navigating an increasingly contested maritime environment while preserving regional stability and ASEAN centrality.

Nearly seven years post-adoption, a critical inquiry persists as to whether ASEAN has successfully translated the AOIP's strategic vision into tangible, practical maritime security cooperation.[26] Since 2019, the bloc has undoubtedly taken substantive measures to operationalize these mandates. Nonetheless, these institutional efforts remain severely constrained by systemic geopolitical and structural challenges.

AOIP: A Strategy Grounded in Principles and International Law

Adopted in 2019, the AOIP represents ASEAN's attempt to preserve regional peace, stability, and prosperity amid growing great power competition. The Outlook emphasizes principles such as openness, transparency, good governance, inclusivity, dialogue, and ASEAN centrality. It also stresses the importance of international law, especially the UN Charter and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, 1982.

Maritime cooperation occupies a pivotal position within the architecture of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). Specifically, ASEAN has designated maritime security as a primary theater for practical cooperation, placing explicit emphasis on confidence-building measures (CBMs), preventive diplomacy, and institutionalized functional

[26] ASEAN, "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific," adopted at the 34th ASEAN Summit, Bangkok, June 22–23, 2019.

collaboration. Areas of cooperation include the peaceful settlement of disputes, maritime safety and security, freedom of navigation and overflight, and combating transnational crimes such as piracy, trafficking, smuggling, and armed robbery at sea.

Operationalizing Maritime Security Cooperation: ASEAN in Action

Since 2019, ASEAN has expanded maritime security cooperation across several fronts. First, naval exercises under the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus have become increasingly frequent, complex, and operationally oriented. These exercises have brought together ASEAN Member States and dialogue partners, including the United States, China, India, Japan, and Australia, in coordinated maritime drills aimed at improving interoperability and operational coordination.[27] Recent exercises have included tactical maneuvering, maritime interdiction operations, communication drills, and coordinated responses to piracy and other maritime threats. These activities are highly consequential, serving not merely as symbolic gestures of multilateral alignment, but as functional mechanisms for cultivating mutual trust, elevating naval professionalism, and institutionalizing "habits of cooperation" among regional maritime forces operating within an increasingly contested domain. Furthermore, the simultaneous participation of both the United States and China in ASEAN-led exercises underscores a critical dimension of defense diplomacy; it reinforces ASEAN's strategic institutional centrality as a neutral, inclusive platform for conflict mitigation and confidence-building amid intensifying great power rivalry.

Second, ASEAN has made notable progress in strengthening maritime law enforcement cooperation through the gradual formalization of the ASEAN Coast Guard Forum. Initially driven by informal consultations among regional maritime agencies, the Forum has increasingly evolved into a more structured platform for coast guard cooperation. This paradigm shift underscores ASEAN's institutional recognition that civilian coast guards and maritime law enforcement agencies — rather than conventional gray-hull navies — frequently occupy the front lines of mitigating "gray zone" challenges. These threats encompass illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, transnational smuggling, piracy, and jurisdictional skirmishes that intentionally remain below the threshold of conventional armed conflict. Consequently, mechanisms like the ASEAN Coast Guard Forum have expanded their institutional remits, prioritizing deep tactical discussions on operational coordination, maritime domain awareness (MDA), targeted capacity-building, and real-time information-sharing networks among regional white-hull fleets. It has also facilitated greater engagement with external partners such as Japan and India in areas including training, technical assistance, and coast guard professionalization.

[27] "Multinational Navies Work Together to Counter Maritime Security Threats in ADMM-Plus Exercise," Ministry of Defence Singapore, May 12, 2019, https://www.mindef.gov.sg/news-and-events/latest-releases/12may19_nr/.

Finally, progress in maritime domain awareness (MDA) has strengthened the region's ability to monitor and respond to developments at sea. Institutions such as Singapore's Information Fusion Centre (IFC) have become important hubs for sharing maritime information, including the tracking of piracy, smuggling, armed robbery, and suspicious vessel activities across regional waters.[28] During spikes in piracy and armed robbery incidents in the Strait of Malacca and Singapore, coordinated information-sharing through the Information Fusion Centre has helped regional authorities improve situational awareness and facilitate faster operational responses to maritime security incidents. Another mechanism is the Our Eyes Initiative, launched by Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Brunei, Thailand, and Singapore to improve strategic information-sharing and early warning coordination on transnational security threats, including maritime terrorism and cross-border criminal activities.[29] Together, these initiatives demonstrate ASEAN's increasing recognition that effective maritime security cooperation depends not only on naval presence, but also on the ability to generate, share, and act upon timely maritime information.

Persistent Challenges: Fragmentation, Caution, and Capability Gaps

Despite these advances, ASEAN's maritime security cooperation still faces major limitations. The first challenge is institutional fragmentation. Maritime initiatives are spread across multiple ASEAN-led mechanisms involving foreign affairs, defense, transport, and law enforcement, often with limited coordination among them. Exercises, forums, and information-sharing platforms exist, but they do not yet add up to a coherent, region-wide system capable of sustained operational coordination.

Second, ASEAN cooperation remains largely confined to exercises and dialogue rather than actual joint operations. Maritime exercises are useful for confidence-building and interoperability, but they are not substitutes for coordinated operational responses. ASEAN has yet to institutionalize regular joint patrols or coordinated enforcement actions under its own framework. When maritime incidents occur, responses remain largely national or ad hoc.

Third, sovereignty concerns continue to constrain deeper cooperation. Many ASEAN Member States remain reluctant to share sensitive intelligence or allow foreign assets to operate within their maritime zones. These sensitivities are most acute within contested waters, where operational maritime security issues directly intersect with complex questions of territorial sovereignty and conflicting maritime entitlements under international law.

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[28] Information Fusion Centre, accessed May 7, 2026, https://www.ifc.org.sg/.

[29] Tom Abke, "ASEAN Intelligence Alliance Broadens to Counter Extremism," *Indo-Pacific Defense Forum*, February 23, 2019, https://ipdefenseforum.com/2019/02/asean-intelligence-alliance-broadens-to-counter-extremism/.

Fourth, capability gaps remain a major obstacle. ASEAN Member States vary significantly in their naval and coast guard capacities, surveillance technologies, and maritime enforcement capabilities. While countries such as Singapore possess advanced MDA systems and relatively modern maritime forces, others still struggle with basic maritime monitoring and enforcement. This asymmetry complicates collective action by creating uneven operational burdens and limiting ASEAN's ability to coordinate responses at a common level of capability and readiness.

What Should ASEAN Do Next?

A number of next steps should be undertaken by ASEAN to operationalize maritime security cooperation more effectively under the AOIP. First, ASEAN should gradually transition from exercises to low-sensitivity operational activities. Coordinated anti-piracy patrols, search-and-rescue missions, humanitarian assistance, and marine environmental protection provide practical areas for cooperation with relatively low political sensitivities. These activities address common regional interests while helping ASEAN Member States build trust and operational experience.



Photo: Coast guard leaders from ASEAN Member States at the 5th ASEAN Coast Guard Forum High-Level Meeting on 4 June 2026 in the Philippines.

Second, the ASEAN Coast Guard Forum should evolve into a more functional operational mechanism. ASEAN should establish real-time communication channels, standard operating procedures, and coordinated response frameworks for maritime incidents. Such measures would significantly improve regional maritime law enforcement coordination.

Third, ASEAN should invest more substantially in maritime domain awareness. Expanding data-sharing mechanisms and integrating surveillance systems could help create a more comprehensive regional maritime operating picture. This does not necessarily require full intelligence-sharing, but it does require greater trust, interoperability, and technical coordination among ASEAN Member States.

Finally, ASEAN must manage external partnerships carefully and strategically. External assistance from dialogue partners remains essential for capacity-building and technical support. However, this assistance should reinforce rather than dilute ASEAN centrality. ASEAN must ensure that external initiatives align with ASEAN priorities and support ASEAN-led mechanisms under the AOIP framework.

Conclusion

ASEAN has long claimed to occupy the center of the Indo-Pacific's evolving regional architecture. However, ASEAN centrality cannot simply be declared; it must be demonstrated through concrete outcomes and sustained regional leadership. Maritime security represents one of the most important tests of ASEAN's relevance in the Indo-Pacific era.

Since the adoption of the AOIP in 2019, ASEAN has made meaningful progress in operationalizing maritime security cooperation through naval exercises, coast guard coordination, and maritime domain awareness initiatives. Environmental and geopolitical structural limitations persist. Institutional fragmentation, heightened sovereignty sensitivities, restricted operational synchronization, and asymmetric capability gaps continue to constrain the bloc's capacity to institutionalize deeper, more robust maritime security cooperation. To transcend these systemic bottlenecks, ASEAN must adopt a more assertive posture by systematically transforming ad hoc dialogue into institutionalized coordination, coordination into joint operational maneuvers, and localized operations into a sustained, cohesive regional capability.





Photo: Workshop on ASEAN Nuclear Pathway: Technology and Sustainable Energy Transition held in Hanoi, Vietnam on 27 April 2026, organized by the ASEAN Centre for Energy (ACE), in collaboration with the Korea Nuclear Association for International Cooperation (KNA) (Photo credit: ASEAN Centre for Energy).

From Energy Shock to Nuclear Momentum: Prospects for Nuclear Energy in Southeast Asia

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The recent energy disruptions linked to tensions in the Middle East have underscored a persistent vulnerability in Asia's energy systems. The short-term return to coal across parts of Asia reflects immediate energy security concerns rather than a structural shift away from decarbonisation.[30] Within Southeast Asia, this geopolitical and economic juncture should be conceptualized not as a retrograde reversal of climate commitments, but as a structural catalyst. It is rapidly accelerating the regional pursuit of secure, low-carbon baseload power, with nuclear energy increasingly positioned as the long-term strategic endgame for the region's energy architecture.

Across Southeast Asia, interest in nuclear power is no longer hypothetical. Countries such as the Philippines and Vietnam are advancing their nuclear energy plans and policy frameworks, while others, including Indonesia,[31] Thailand, Singapore and Malaysia,[32] are evaluating emerging technologies such as small modular reactors (SMRs). Vietnam, in particular, has concluded an agreement with Russia on building the country's first nuclear power plant in March 2026.[33] The Philippines is actively reviving its nuclear energy program, targeting 1.2 GW of capacity by 2032 and 4.8 GW by 2050 to boost energy security and meet decarbonisation goals.[34]

[30] Julius Cesar Trajano, "Asia Is Turning to Coal in the Iran Crisis, but Nuclear Power Will Be the Real Endgame," *Fortune*, 24 April 2026, https://fortune.com/2026/04/24/asia-is-turning-to-coal-in-the-iran-crisis-but-nuclear-power-will-be-the-real-endgame/.

[31] Alif Ilham Farjadi, "BRIN Eyes US SMR Tech for Indonesia's First Nuclear Plant," *Tempo*, 5 May 2026, https://en.tempo.co/read/2101918/brin-eyes-us-smr-tech-for-indonesias-first-nuclear-plant.

[32] "Malaysia's Nuclear Energy Plan under Review," *The Straits Times*, 28 March 2026, https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/malaysias-nuclear-energy-plan-under-review.

[33] "Russia and Vietnam Signed Intergovernmental Agreement on Construction of Ninh Thuan 1 NPP," *Rosatom*, March 2026, https://rosatom.ru/en/press-centre/news/russia-and-vietnam-signed-intergovernmental-agreement-on-construction-of-ninh-thuan-1-npp/.

[34] "Philippines to Accept Nuclear Plant Licence Applications from 2026," *Asian Power*, accessed June 2026, https://asian-power.com/project/news/ph-accept-nuclear-plant-licence-applications-2026.

Singapore, while maintaining a cautious baseline stance, has significantly expanded technical research and international cooperation to evaluate the feasibility of nuclear energy deployment.[35] This focus centres explicitly on advanced reactor technologies and civilian nuclear safety frameworks, particularly regarding Small Modular Reactors (SMRs). This accelerating momentum reflects a critical convergence of systemic pressures: rapidly escalating industrial electricity demand, the baseline limitations of intermittent renewables, and heightened geopolitical concerns over fossil fuel dependency. Within this shifting paradigm, nuclear energy is being aggressively reconsidered — not merely as a decarbonization mechanism, but as a vital strategic hedge against volatile external energy shocks.

However, the region's nuclear future will depend less on technological readiness and more on governance credibility. Public trust and investor confidence are not automatic outcomes of deployment; they are preconditions that must be deliberately cultivated. This is particularly important in Southeast Asia, where institutional capacities vary and public familiarity with nuclear energy remains limited.

[35] "Singapore, IAEA Sign Five-Year Framework to Strengthen Nuclear Capabilities," *Channel News Asia*, 24 April 2026, https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/singapore-nea-iaea-five-year-framework-strengthen-nuclear-capablities-6078436.



Photo: MoU Signing Ceremony on Small Modular Reactor Collaboration between Korea Hydro Nuclear Power Co., LTD and Singapore Energy Market Authority held in Singapore on 1 March 2026 (Photo credit: Korea Hydro Nuclear Power Co., LTD).

Nuclear Energy Governance

ASEAN Member States must prioritize "governance before infrastructure" by establishing robust legal frameworks, independent regulatory bodies, and comprehensive safety and security systems prior to committing to nuclear construction. This includes developing clear licensing processes, emergency preparedness mechanisms, and long-term waste management strategies. Without these foundations, nuclear programmes risk facing delays, public resistance, and investor uncertainty.

In this regard, institutionalized regional cooperation plays a pivotal role. The ASEAN Network of Regulatory Bodies on Atomic Energy (ASEANTOM) has emerged as the primary multilateral mechanism for advancing nuclear safety, security, and safeguards (the "3Ss") across Southeast Asia. Through comprehensive capacity-building initiatives, technical exchanges, joint crisis-response exercises, and strategic coordination with external dialogue partners — including the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the European Union, the United States, China, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and Canada — ASEANTOM bridges persistent regulatory and technical capacity asymmetries while codifying a common baseline for regional nuclear governance. As various ASEAN Member States edge closer toward commercial nuclear energy deployment, ASEANTOM's mandate in fostering regulatory coherence, institutionalized peer learning, and cross-border emergency preparedness becomes fundamentally indispensable.

The primary impediments to robust nuclear governance in Southeast Asia are anchored in systemic institutional fragmentation, highly uneven regulatory and legal preparedness, severe capital financing constraints, and acute specialized human resource deficits. These structural vulnerabilities vary widely across the region, creating sharp asymmetries between states with relatively mature nuclear administrative frameworks and those facing significant legislative and engineering bottlenecks. A major challenge is the limited ability of regional mechanisms such as ASEANTOM to influence national legislative and regulatory frameworks. While ASEANTOM has contributed significantly to regional capacity-building, emergency preparedness, and the promotion of nuclear safety and security norms, nuclear governance in Southeast Asia remains fundamentally state-led. Critical decisions such as the enactment of national nuclear legislation, ratification of international conventions, management of nuclear waste, and regulation of new reactor technologies, including SMRs, remain under the sovereign authority of individual states. ASEAN's principle of non-interference further constrains ASEANTOM's ability to push member states toward harmonized legal or regulatory reforms.

Concurrently, the rapid evolution of next-generation nuclear technologies is fundamentally reshaping traditional regulatory and governance requirements. The anticipated commercial deployment of Small Modular Reactors (SMRs) — uniquely

designed for co-location in close proximity to major urban populations and industrial hubs — introduces unprecedented safety, security, and safeguards considerations. These dense operational environments necessitate a paradigm shift from conventional large-scale containment zoning toward highly localized emergency planning zones (EPZs) and robust physical protection architectures. Unlike traditional large reactors, SMRs may be integrated into more distributed energy systems, including powering data centres and industrial hubs. This requires regulators to adopt more risk-informed and site-specific approaches, rethinking conventional assumptions about siting, emergency planning, and security perimeters. It also underscores the need to integrate cybersecurity and physical protection into the design and regulatory process from the outset.

In Southeast Asia, where nuclear governance systems are still evolving, it is essential that state authorities retain clear control over safety and security functions, even as private and foreign SMR companies' participation expands.

Capacity Building Challenges

Even across the region more broadly, shortages of trained regulatory personnel, limited domestic nuclear education programmes, and weak knowledge retention systems continue to constrain long-term preparedness. Compounding these institutional hurdles is a palpable decline in interest among students and young professionals toward nuclear-related STEM fields and specialized education. This systemic recruitment deficit is primarily driven by an acute lack of long-term national policy visibility, fluctuating state-level nuclear energy roadmaps, and historically constrained domestic employment prospects within the regional civil nuclear sector.

Developing a skilled nuclear workforce and strengthening education in nuclear safety and security are increasingly important for countries evaluating the future deployment of nuclear power. Across Southeast Asia, national nuclear institutions are adjusting their capacity-building strategies to enlarge the domestic pool of nuclear professionals and improve their ability to evaluate advanced reactor technologies, particularly SMRs.

Singapore announced partnerships with two United States-based nuclear energy organisations to strengthen local expertise and technical knowledge in nuclear energy. In March 2026, Singapore's Energy Market Authority (EMA) and Korea Hydro & Nuclear Power Co Ltd (KHNP) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on civil nuclear energy capacity building, especially on SMR technology.[36]

[36] "Korea Hydro and Nuclear Power and Energy Market Authority of Singapore to Cooperate on Civil Nuclear Energy Cooperation," *Energy Market Authority of Singapore*, 2 March 2026, https://www.ema.gov.sg/news-events/news/media-releases/2026/Korea-Hydro-and-Nuclear-Power-and-Energy-Market-Authority-of-Singapore-to-Cooperate-on-Civil-Nuclear-Energy-Cooperation.

In Indonesia, the National Research and Innovation Agency is intensifying efforts to build national human resource capacity in nuclear technology, including plans to train approximately 4,900 nuclear specialists by 2040 to support the operation of future nuclear power plants.[37]

In the Philippines, the Nuclear Energy Programme Inter-Agency Committee has implemented Nuclear Energy Awareness Training programmes for scientists, engineers, and energy professionals to improve technical understanding and help develop a qualified workforce to support the country's nuclear energy ambitions. The committee has also expanded cooperation with universities and educational institutions to establish academic courses, scholarships, and specialized training initiatives aimed at strengthening national capabilities for the safe and secure use of nuclear energy.

In March 2026, the Philippines and South Korea signed an MOU on joint discussions regarding the adoption of nuclear power technology, strengthening human resource capacity through education and training, cooperation in the early phases of nuclear power development including site selection and public acceptance, and the exploration of financing and investment support mechanisms for nuclear energy projects.[38]

Despite these efforts, a major challenge remains in encouraging students and young professionals to pursue nuclear-related education and training amid uncertainty surrounding the future of domestic nuclear power programmes. Ultimately, reversing this demographic trend and sustaining long-term institutional interest will depend fundamentally on the articulation of unambiguous state policy directions, the institutionalization of credible, decadal nuclear energy planning, and the deliberate cultivation of robust, high-value professional career trajectories within the domestic and regional civil nuclear industry.

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[37] "Realizing Future Energy: BRIN Prepares a Research and Innovation Ecosystem for Nuclear Energy," *National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN)*, 6 December 2024, https://www.brin.go.id/en/news/121771/realizing-future-energy-brin-prepares-a-research-and-innovation-ecosystem-for-nuclear-energy.

[38] "South Korea to Cooperate with the Philippines on Nuclear Power Projects," *World Nuclear News*, 4 March 2026, https://www.world-nuclear-news.org/articles/south-korea-to-cooperate-with-the-philippines-on-nuclear-power-projects.



Photo: The 10th ASEAN Network of Regulatory Bodies on Atomic Energy (ASEANTOM) Annual Meeting on 22-24 August 2023 in Yogyakarta, Indonesia.

Public Acceptance Is Crucial

The success of these developments will partly hinge on public trust. The experience of past nuclear accidents, most especially the Fukushima accident, continues to shape perceptions across the region, making transparency and engagement indispensable. Governments must move beyond one-off consultations and instead adopt sustained, long-term approaches to stakeholder engagement. Trust is built through consistent institutional performance, regulatory independence, and demonstrated safety over time. It cannot be achieved through technical assurances alone.

A long-term nuclear energy programme depends heavily on sustained public acceptance, which may shift over time in response to political, social, and environmental developments. Governments therefore need to engage a broad range of stakeholders to strengthen public support, build trust, and respond effectively to societal concerns surrounding nuclear energy.

Establishing public confidence requires early and continuous investment in education, awareness-raising initiatives, and transparent communication, alongside meaningful mechanisms for public participation in policy and decision-making processes. Equally important is the need to address public concerns in a systematic and credible manner, particularly regarding safety, security, and potential risks associated with nuclear power development.

Southeast Asia's Nuclear Future

The current energy crisis presents both a warning and an opportunity. While the short-term turn to coal may appear to contradict climate goals, it reinforces the urgency of developing more resilient and diversified energy systems. Nuclear energy offers one pathway to achieving this balance, but only if it is underpinned by credible governance and regional cooperation.

For ASEAN, the path forward is clear. Strengthening platforms such as ASEANTOM, investing in regulatory capacity, and embedding governance at the core of nuclear planning will be essential to ensuring that nuclear energy contributes not only to energy security, but also to long-term regional stability. Consequently, the long-term viability of Southeast Asia's nuclear energy architecture depends far less on technological advancements or reactor engineering than on the structural resilience and regulatory integrity of the institutions tasked with governing them.



Photo: The 12th ASEAN Network of Regulatory Bodies on Atomic Energy (ASEANTOM) Annual Meeting on 11-15 August 2025 in Johor Bahru, Malaysia.



Photo: The ASEAN-Korea Music Festival, 2026 ROUND in Philippines on 18-19 April 2026 at Araneta Coliseum.

A New Horizon for Creative Industry Diplomacy and People-to-People Connectivity

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ASEAN-Korea Music Festival <ROUND> is supported by the ASEAN-Korea Cooperation Fund and implemented by KBS World.

On the evening of April 18, 2026, the Araneta Coliseum in Manila was pulsating like a giant, living heart. As the lights dimmed and the countdown flashed across the massive screens to signal the start of the performance, the roar from the 7,000-strong crowd instantly transformed the air inside the arena into pure electricity. With nearly 100,000 ticket applications flooding in, this fervent heat was far more than a mere gathering of fandoms. Seeing musicians of diverse languages and nationalities united and passionately intertwined with the Filipino audience under the single melody of music was a breathtaking scene. It was living, breathing proof that the relationship between ASEAN and Korea, which had long been characterized primarily by economic solidarity, is now evolving into a solid and vibrant "Community."



Photo: Performers at the ASEAN-Korea Music Festival, 2026 ROUND in Philippines on 18-19 April 2026 at Araneta Coliseum.

From Economic Solidarity to a Living Cultural Community

This journey toward a cultural community began in the midst of the 2020 pandemic through an innovative online format to reconnect ASEAN and Korea. Since then, ROUND has been on a relentless journey, from the 2023 stadium show in Jakarta, Indonesia, to the 2024 festivals in Busan, Korea, and Vientiane, Laos, and finally to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in 2025. This path is a chronicle of a massive cultural network being built across borders, centered on the "ASEAN-Korea Music Committee (AKMC)." The AKMC has evolved beyond its initial role of recommending artists to become a permanent cultural diplomacy channel and a "Cultural Policy Think-Tank" discussing pressing issues in the music-centered cultural industry. The annual "ROUND Music Forum" held in Korea is expanding its function as a knowledge-sharing platform, where professionals share practical policy tasks such as the post-pandemic recovery of the performance industry and online marketing strategies, providing vital inspiration for cultural policy-making across ASEAN nations.

The 2026 festival in the Philippines carried profound symbolic weight, occurring during the nation's ASEAN Chairmanship. In step with this diplomatic milestone, a close partnership with the Philippine National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) ensured the festival resonated authentically with local sensibilities, encompassing multi-layered exchanges such as the Welcome Ceremony at the PICC and the 'ROUND Village' as a side event. The emotional distance between the youth of Korea and ASEAN was bridged most visibly by the co-hosting of Korea's 10CM and Philippine star Gabbi Garcia, whose remarkable chemistry shattered language barriers and created a buzz that rippled across digital platforms. Furthermore, the collaboration between the Philippines' beloved band Ben&Ben and Thailand's Tilly Birds was a defining moment, visually manifesting the values of "ASEAN Centrality" and cultural coexistence. This represented the pinnacle of "two-way exchange," moving away from the old model of one-way cultural export to a space where talents blend and a new creative consensus is born on equal footing.

The Power of Technical Collaboration and Data-Driven Solidarity

Behind this powerful resonance lies the unparalleled production expertise of Korea's public broadcaster, KBS. Beyond providing a stage, KBS has shared world-class live production know-how — including sophisticated camera work and advanced sound and lighting systems — with local staff, also performing a pivotal role as a form of "Technical Public Development Assistance (Technical ODA)" by disseminating the standards of the 'K-Content Production System' through ROUND. In Manila, the KBS production team and Filipino staff transcended differences in language and culture, working as one team day and night. Their collaboration, from the first rehearsal to the final encore, was a victory

for true “human exchange,” where mutual respect for professional expertise resulted in a superlative performance that met the highest global standards.

This resonance is firmly supported by figures. In a post-event survey, an astonishing 99.3% of attendees expressed overall satisfaction, with over 90% belonging to the 20-30 age demographic — the future leaders of the region. Most notably, the Filipino audience discovered artists from other ASEAN nations, such as Malaysia and Cambodia, naming them as their “New Favorites.” This sentiment is vividly echoed in digital spaces, where fans from different nations leave heartfelt comments like “Respect from the Philippines to the talented artists of Cambodia” or “I discovered the charm of Thai indie music today thanks to ROUND.” The cumulative view count for <ROUND in Philippines> related content now exceeds 20 million, demonstrating that ROUND is solidifying cultural unity within ASEAN itself, culturally realizing the vision of “One Vision, One Identity” through organic people-to-people connectivity.

Now, ROUND is preparing for its next leap forward. A pivotal shift will occur next year: the forum, which has been hosted in Korea until now, will travel directly to ASEAN countries. This move will allow ROUND to share its operational know-how more broadly with local stakeholders, realizing the value of true mutual reciprocity. These future-oriented efforts will serve as a milestone showing how deeply Korea and ASEAN can bond culturally. Winning the hearts of the youth through the most intuitive language — music — and building an infrastructure of trust on that foundation will sustain the next 30 years of ASEAN-Korea relations. In the spirit of the ROUND’s slogan, “COME AROUND, HERE TO SHINE,” we hope the energy of resonance created here will become the eternal engine illuminating the future of ASEAN and Korea.



Photo: Crews at the ASEAN-Korea Music Festival, 2026 ROUND in Philippines on 18-19 April 2026 at Araneta Coliseum.



Photo: Crowds at the ASEAN-Korea Music Festival, 2026 ROUND in Philippines on 18-19 April 2026 at Araneta Coliseum.


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