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The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)

Overview

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is Southeast Asia's primary multilateral organization, a 10-member grouping of nations with a combined population of 630 million and a combined annual gross domestic product (GDP) of around \$2.4 trillion. Established in 1967, it has grown into one of the world's largest regional fora, representing a strategically important region with some of the world's busiest sea lanes, including the Straits of Malacca and the South China Sea. Taken collectively, ASEAN would rank as the world's fifth-largest economy and the United States' fourth-largest export market.

ASEAN's members are Brunei, Burma (Myanmar), Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. Members rotate as chairs: Thailand is ASEAN's chair for 2019 and Vietnam is to assume the chair in 2020. ASEAN engages in a wide range of diplomatic, economic and security discussions through hundreds of annual meetings and through a secretariat based in Jakarta, Indonesia. In 2008, the United States became the first non-ASEAN nation to appoint a representative to ASEAN, and in 2011 opened a U.S. mission to ASEAN in Jakarta with a resident Ambassador. Other ASEAN dialogue partners have followed suit.

ASEAN is a diverse and informal organization, operating on principles including consensus and noninterference in the internal affairs of its members. Some observers argue that this style constrains ASEAN from acting strongly and cohesively on important issues. Others argue that these principles—dubbed the “ASEAN Way”—ensure that the group's diverse members continue to discuss issues where their interests sometimes diverge. ASEAN includes nations across the economic development spectrum, and its political systems include democracies, semi-authoritarian states, and repressive military regimes.

U.S.-ASEAN Relations

ASEAN has played a key role in U.S. policy towards Southeast Asia. While much U.S. diplomacy is conducted bilaterally with the organization's individual members, engagement with ASEAN offers opportunities to encourage multilateral cooperation and promote U.S. goals across the region. The United States initially supported ASEAN as a means to promote regional dialogue and as a bulwark against Communism in Asia, becoming an ASEAN “Dialogue Partner” in 1977. In 2009, the United States acceded to the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and committed to an annual U.S.-ASEAN Meeting. In 2012, it raised the level of the annual U.S.-ASEAN meeting to a Leaders Meeting, and in November 2015, it announced the creation of a U.S.-ASEAN Strategic Partnership.

Successive U.S. Administrations have stated that the United States has deep interests in Southeast Asia, including fostering democracy and human rights, encouraging liberal trade and investment regimes, addressing maritime security and rising tensions in the South China Sea, promoting environmental protection, countering terrorist threats, and combatting human trafficking and illegal trafficking in narcotics and wildlife. Observers in the region have largely welcomed U.S. initiatives that work through ASEAN. Some Southeast Asian observers have expressed concern about proposed U.S. funding cuts for ASEAN-centered programs in FY2018 and FY2019. In a region where “showing up” for diplomatic gatherings is considered important, President Trump did not attend a series of summits, including the U.S.-ASEAN Leaders Meeting, in Singapore in 2018.

The Trump Administration has cast its regional strategy as the promotion of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific, a formulation that raises some concern for some ASEAN members, who see the group as a central hub for regional diplomacy. Administration officials have sought to reassure ASEAN of its importance. “ASEAN is literally at the center of the Indo-Pacific,” Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in July 2018, “and it plays a central role in the Indo-Pacific vision that America is presenting.” ASEAN's current chair, Thailand, says it intends to issue a joint ASEAN statement on the Free and Open Indo-Pacific this year.

The United States has launched a series of initiatives with ASEAN and with other Southeast Asian regional institutions. **U.S.-ASEAN Connect** was created in 2016 as an effort to coordinate U.S. public- and private-sector economic initiatives in the region through the U.S. Mission to ASEAN and the U.S. Embassies in Bangkok and Singapore. Other U.S. initiatives targeted at ASEAN include an expanded **Fulbright Exchange of ASEAN-U.S. Scholars**, aid for ASEAN's formation of a **Single Customs Window** to facilitate easier trade of goods and services, and the **Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI)** which offers scholarships and opportunities for young leaders in the region. In November, 2018, Vice President Pence announced a **U.S.-ASEAN Smart Cities Partnership**, to promote U.S. investment in the region's digital infrastructure.

ASEAN and Asian Regional Architecture

Asia has no dominant EU-style multilateral body, and many see the region's economic and security “architectures” as underdeveloped. The United States has long had strong bilateral alliances and security partnerships with individual Southeast Asian nations, including treaty alliances with the Philippines and Thailand, as well as a close security partnership with Singapore. In recent years, some U.S. officials have spoken of a need to strengthen the region's multilateral institutions as well, including ASEAN.

ASEAN also convenes and administratively supports a number of regional forums that include other regional governments, including the United States, and the group's member governments deeply value what they call "ASEAN Centrality" in the evolving regional architecture. The **ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF)**, established in 1994 with 26 Asian and Pacific states plus the EU, was formed to facilitate dialogue on political and security matters. The **East Asia Summit (EAS)**, created in 2005, is an evolving institution with a varied agenda, in which the United States gained membership in 2010. The EAS includes ASEAN members, Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, Russia, South Korea, and the United States. The **ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting-Plus (ADMM+)** was established in 2010, bringing senior defense officials together regularly and hosting multilateral military exchanges in a range of areas including humanitarian relief, disaster management, cybersecurity and maritime security.

ASEAN, China, and the South China Sea

With U.S.-China tensions and uncertainty about U.S. commitment to the region growing sharply under the Trump Administration, many Southeast Asian nations are re-examining their relations with both China and the United States. China is the largest trade partner and a major source of investment for many Southeast Asian nations. However, concerns that China may use its economic leverage to achieve political goals, combined with anger over China's territorial assertions in the South China Sea, have constrained closer ties. Meanwhile, most rely on the U.S. security presence and strong trade and investment ties with the United States to ensure stability and enhance their economic development.

ASEAN nations are seeking to lower regional tensions by concluding a Code of Conduct for parties in the South China Sea. In 2002, ASEAN and China agreed to a nonbinding **Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea**, in which they agreed to "resolve their territorial and jurisdictional disputes by peaceful means, without resorting to the threat or use of force," to "exercise self-restraint in the conduct of activities that would complicate or escalate disputes," and to work toward the creation of a formal Code of Conduct that would govern activities in the region. However, the group's 10 members have deep disagreements over how to approach the negotiations with China. Four members—Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam—have territorial disputes with China (as well as with each other) in the South China Sea. Observers say some other members, particularly Cambodia and Laos, have been hesitant to join a unified ASEAN response to Chinese assertions.

ASEAN's Economic Integration

ASEAN members play a major role in regional supply chains, and U.S. companies are major investors in several of the 10 ASEAN economies. ASEAN has an internal free trade agreement (**the ASEAN FTA, or AFTA**). In December 2015, the group launched an **ASEAN Economic Community (AEC)** that promotes further trade liberalization measures and regulatory harmonization among ASEAN's members, with the goal of creating a single ASEAN market and integrated manufacturing base.

Observers note that the AEC goes only partway toward this goal, and that ASEAN nations may pursue further reforms in the years ahead.

U.S. trade and economic arrangements centered on ASEAN have been limited by the vast diversity of the group's economic development. According to the World Bank, per capita GDP among ASEAN members in 2017 ranged from \$57,714 in Singapore to \$1,257 in Burma. The United States engages in dialogue on economic initiatives through a Trade and Investment Framework agreement (TIFA) signed in 2006. ASEAN has trade agreements with several Asian partners, including Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea. ASEAN and those six nations are also pursuing a regional trade agreement known as the **Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)**, which does not include the United States. Four ASEAN nations—Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam—were members of the proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement, from which the United States withdrew in January 2017. In 2018, the remaining members concluded a renamed **Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP)** without U.S. participation.

ASEAN members seek to promote infrastructure development in the region, particularly in building greater regional "connectivity" through investment in transport and IT. This has led to substantial demand for foreign investment, including in many cases through China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). ASEAN's individual members have differing approaches to the BRI. Cambodia and Laos, for example, have embraced the BRI as a means of obtaining much needed infrastructure. Malaysia and Vietnam, by contrast, have been highly vocal about concerns surrounding the terms of BRI investments.

ASEAN and Human Rights

Human rights conditions in several ASEAN members have long been a concern for the United States and international NGOs, and sometimes among the group's own members. While some ASEAN members, such as Indonesia and the Philippines, have thriving democracies, others, including Laos and Vietnam, are effectively one-party states. Human rights advocates are deeply concerned about Burma's treatment of its Rohingya and other ethnic minorities, the Cambodian government's intimidation of its political opposition, thousands of extra-judicial killings under the Philippines' anti-drug program, and continued moves by Thailand to muzzle criticism and protect military authority.

ASEAN's 2007 Charter attempts to bring some amount of pressure to bear upon member states on human rights, but progress has been limited. The charter created a formal Inter-Governmental Commission on Human Rights, but the body has been criticized by some human rights organizations as largely symbolic. One of the initiatives undertaken by the U.S. mission to ASEAN is to foster networks of civil society groups within ASEAN nations so as to build capacity among nongovernmental actors.

Ben Dolven, Specialist in Asian Affairs

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