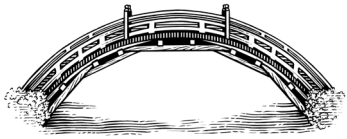
ASIA POLICY, VOLUME 20, NUMBER 3 (JULY 2025), 1–72
HTTP://ASIAPOLICY.ORG

ROUNDTABLE

Nontraditional Security in a Changing Global Order



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Introduction

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In today's rapidly changing security landscape, attention is increasingly shifting beyond traditional military threats to encompass a wider range of nontraditional risks. The international community now recognizes that some of the most pressing dangers for the survival and stability of states and societies originate from nonmilitary sources. Situated within the broader framework of "comprehensive security,"[1] nontraditional security (NTS) issues—such as climate change, resource scarcity, pandemics, natural disasters, irregular migration, food insecurity, and transnational crime—are understood to be equally capable of undermining national resilience and posing existential threats. Responding effectively to these challenges requires a fundamental reconceptualization of security, one that accounts for the complex, interconnected, and transboundary nature of contemporary risks.

Climate change, in particular, exemplifies the destabilizing impact of NTS threats. Widely characterized as a "threat multiplier," climate change has generated profound humanitarian and security consequences: it has displaced populations, damaged critical infrastructure through increasingly frequent and severe weather events, jeopardized food and water security, and contributed to the spread of infectious diseases through disruption of ecological systems. The world's recent experience with the Covid-19 pandemic illustrates how cascading impacts from transborder threats compound vulnerabilities across political, economic, and social systems,

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[1] Mely Caballero-Anthony, "Reclaiming ASEAN's Comprehensive and Cooperative Security Southeast Asia," East Asia Forum, June 13, 2023.

reinforcing the imperative for urgent, coordinated, and multisectoral responses to safeguard human security and promote global stability.[2]

At the same time, the 2020s have so far witnessed a resurgence of traditional security threats. Armed conflicts—such as the Russia-Ukraine war, the Hamas-Israel conflict, instability in the Red Sea, tensions in the South China Sea, and the ongoing crisis in Myanmar—are eroding the foundations of the post–Cold War rules-based international order and threatening to dismantle the fragile "long peace." This deterioration is compounded by intensifying U.S.-China rivalry, which has exacerbated economic fragmentation and heightened vulnerabilities in regions prone to external shocks. In response, emerging powers are advancing initiatives such as the expansion of the BRICS, reflecting broader efforts by the global South to recalibrate the international system and challenge the dominance of the Western-led global order.

These global changes have profound impacts on the nature of security challenges and on the well-being and security of peoples and states. To be sure, traditional geopolitical risks are intersecting with transnational NTS risks and raising serious concerns about how security should be governed at the national, regional, and global levels.

While states are traditionally responsible for protecting their people from existential threats, NTS issues are more challenging as they are transboundary in nature and thus might require collaborative solutions across countries. Given the disparate capacities, interests, and priorities of states, there has been an expansion of the role of nonstate actors in providing security. These include nonprofit organizations, think tanks, epistemic communities, and even private and multinational companies. The need to coordinate among a diverse array of state and nonstate actors further compounds the complexity of governing NTS issues, while raising critical questions about the effectiveness of existing policies and institutional frameworks designed to address them.

Among the key institutions in Asia is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), whose unity as a regional body and continued centrality are increasingly challenged by the complex shifts in the global security environment. How states and regions respond to NTS matters and whether such efforts can effect meaningful change in the global order remain questions that scholars are likely to debate for decades to come. The pressing

[2] Mely Caballero-Anthony, ed., *An Introduction to Non-Traditional Security Studies: A Transnational Approach* (London: Sage Publications, 2016).

issue before us here, and the central focus of this *Asia Policy* roundtable, is whether the evolving global order is transforming the landscape for NTS issues. Specifically, this roundtable seeks to examine whether, and in what ways, changes in the global order are shaping the governance of NTS issues globally, as well as how these dynamics are translating into regional responses in Southeast Asia.

International Order and Global Public Goods

It is essential to clarify how the term "global order" is operationalized in this roundtable, and, further, how it relates to NTS issues. Hedley Bull presented the classical problem: a system of sovereign states is anarchical by default since all states are equal, yet this causes unease among states owing to a lack of order and predictability. This roundtable posits that earlier state-led approaches in attaining a functional international order were insufficient in addressing NTS threats amid a changing global environment, thus calling for broader engagement with actors at multiple levels of governance.

Much thinking on attaining international order in the post–World War II era has been largely state-focused, considering frameworks such as a Hobbesian world order where some states rise to hegemony and primacy while others are subordinated; a Kantian social contract that ensures the freedom of each state following an agreed set of moral principles; and an international "society of sovereign states," which Bull explored, wherein states are interdependent and therefore "consciously united together for certain purposes." This in turn, according to Bull, would shape their conduct in relation to one another.[3]

Bull's "international society" initially envisioned order as guided by a combination of the rule of law and a balance of powers so as to "enjoin respect for the legal and moral rules upon which the working of the international society depends."[4] States would then be assigned duties and rights as members of this society, ensuring a constitutional order in which the interests of the society are ideally reflected in the rules and norms.[5] These would be further supported by mechanisms for maintaining a balance of

3 Hedley Bull, "Society and Anarchy in International Relations (1966)," in *International Theory: Critical Investigations*, ed. James Der Derian (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995): 79.

4 Ibid.

5 G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 22–37. See also Jamie M. Johnson, Victoria M. Basham, and Owen D. Thomas, "Ordering Disorder: The Making of World Politics," *Review of International Studies* 48, no. 4 (2022): 607–25.

power and regulating the influence of the hegemon. Ikenberry summarizes the international order as the "governing arrangements among a group of states, including its fundamental rules, principles, and institutions."[6]

As the rules and norms were meant to reflect the international society's common values and interests, the effectiveness of the global order is best assessed through the extent to which international institutions function coherently to advance these collective interests. These interests are represented in this roundtable in the form of global public goods, defined as goods that offer benefits that are shared or experienced by all countries and that are not zero-sum (i.e., goods where one country's consumption does not reduce that of another).[7] For instance, in the post–World War II era, the international order promoted "open markets, international institutions, cooperative security, democratic community, progressive change, collective problem solving, shared sovereignty, and rule of law."[8]

However, the shortcomings of state-focused approaches in achieving global public goods are readily seen in the historical challenges to attain them. For example, maintenance of international peace and security is considered a key global public good, prompting the establishment of UN Security Council after World War II. But as seen in the last two decades, the Security Council has increasingly shown itself to be unfit for this purpose, repeatedly failing to mobilize coherent responses to egregious violations of territorial integrity, ranging from the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, to Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2022, to the escalating Israel-Palestine conflict in 2023. These instances underscore the council's growing paralysis in the face of major-power interests and geopolitical deadlock.

There have also been repeated deviations from the established multilateral system for achieving global economic development through free and open trade, despite rules such as the World Trade Organization agreements. This has given rise to perceptions that free trade has led to uneven progress, whether across countries or industries, including within those deemed "sensitive" that are critical for domestic food and economic security (e.g., agriculture, energy). In 2025, this can be observed, for instance, in the United States' unprecedented level of tariffs imposed on China in

6 G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint and the Rebuilding of Order after Major War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 23.

7 Moya Chin, "What Are Global Public Goods?" International Monetary Fund (IMF), December 2021 ~ https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/fandd/issues/2021/12/Global-Public-Goods-Chin-basics.

8 Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan*, 2.

an effort to reduce the U.S. trade deficit. These examples of challenges in maintaining global public goods show that the state-focused view of global order was not perfect to begin with. Global discord—driven by entrenched economic inequality, underdevelopment, and internal conflicts—has not only revealed the limitations of multilateral governance and institutional capacity but also underscored the failure of global leadership, particularly among the major powers traditionally responsible for the provision of such public goods. This leadership vacuum has contributed to the fragmentation and ineffectiveness of efforts to address transnational challenges. Recurring failures in the provision of global public goods thus call for a strategic reconsideration of whether the older, primarily state-based notions of order are a sufficient foundation for them.

Re-envisioning the Western-Led International Order

While post–World War II notions of international order were foregrounded on the primacy of rules and values to guide the behaviors of states, much of the current discussion on international order revolves around great-power relations and the dominance and decline of a U.S.-led liberal order. These state-centric perspectives are found wanting in a changed global environment. In his book *Constructing Global Order*, Amitav Acharya argues that the prevailing conception of the (Western-led) rules-based international order can no longer ignore the role of non-Western states in shaping a new global order. He further notes that the changing global order is not unipolar or bipolar but rather multipolar, characterized by a proliferation of actors ranging from small to big states, international and regional bodies, private corporations, and nonstate actors. As Acharya argues, "In a world of multiple modernities, where modern liberal modernity is only part of what is on offer…a multiplex world is marked by a proliferation of consequential actors—including not just global great powers but also regional bodies, corporations, people and social movements."[9]

This brings to the fore the importance of reforming global multilateral institutions and engaging emerging nonstate actors in ensuring the comprehensive security of states and societies from existential threats.

[9] Amitav Acharya, "After Liberal Hegemony: The Advent of a Multiplex World Order," *Ethics and International Affairs*, no. 3 (2017): 272, 277; and Amitav Acharya, *The End of American World Order* (Cambridge: Polity Books, 2018). See also Mely Caballero-Anthony, *Negotiating Governance on Non-Traditional Security in Southeast Asia and Beyond* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

In the past decade, there has been a growing understanding that the tasks involved in addressing NTS issues are themselves public goods.[10] Given the transboundary nature of NTS threats, however, these are not just localized public goods but also international, that is to say, global, public goods. For example, both climate change mitigation and pandemic prevention bring about global benefits. Yet these global public goods tend to be underprovided since the benefits are viewed as much smaller than the costs for any individual state.

While international peace and security is typically a traditional security concern, the past decades have shown an increasing impact on NTS threats. Further related to conflict are the issues of gender security and disaster resilience. Similarly, although economic development and trade are not in themselves NTS issues, they are linked to NTS issues of human, food, and energy security, following the Ricardian logic that international trade competition allows access to the greatest quantity of consumer goods at the most affordable prices for all countries. These critical issues impact the economic security of individuals with knock-on effects on issues such as food and health security, among others.

Beyond the need to work together to ensure that global public goods are provided, it is just as critical to achieve equality and inclusion so that that the benefits of cooperation, in the form of sustained development across economic, social, and political facets, are attained by countries equally, especially giving attention to those with weakest state capacities to do so alone.[11] This sets the stage for the need for global governance mechanisms, as in the multilateral framework supporting the UN programs in development, the environment, health, disaster mitigation, gender, and food security, among others. Such institutions empower communities to deal with NTS threats at their own level to ensure that they retain agency in shaping long-term development and security outcomes.

We apply this to the regional level. For Southeast Asia, addressing global public goods entails that the member states of ASEAN embrace the broader agenda of "regional resilience." This concept ranges from inward-looking comprehensive security to a more outward-looking and regional view with a high degree of interdependence among geographically

[10] Raj Verma, "Instability in Afghanistan and Non-traditional Security Threats: A Public Good Problem?" *Global Policy* 13, no. 1 (2022): 152–59.

[11] Mely Caballero-Anthony, "Combating Infectious Diseases in East Asia: Securitisation and Global Public Goods Approach for Health and Human Security," *Journal of International Affairs* 59, no. 2 (2006): 105–27.

linked or proximate states.[12] Thus, the analysis in this roundtable focuses on explaining the changing dynamics of NTS issues amid the evolving global order, with the view that, for ASEAN, building resilience at the regional level and raising cooperation to a higher plane are key to promoting and maintaining comprehensive security. As argued by Inge Kaul, former head of the UN Development Programme and member of the International Task Force on Global Public Goods, "as the fate[s] of many nations become increasingly intertwined, transforming what were once national policy issues into regional issues…so too should they [be brought] together as partners in appropriately reformed public policy making."[13]

Overview of the Roundtable Essays: Order, Global Public Goods, and NTS Issues in Southeast Asia

This roundtable seeks to elucidate further on the impacts of an increasingly unstable global order on NTS issues with a focus on Southeast Asia. This section briefly introduces the essays, which address food security, energy security, health security, gender security, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

Impacts on regional food security. The first essay by Jose Ma. Luis Montesclaros examines food security, defined by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization as a situation "when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life."[14] Within the region, over 300 million people are unable to afford a healthy diet. Of this population, more than half miss regular meals and the remainder are in more severe states of food insecurity. Among the geopolitical changes affecting food security, most prominent are those which disrupt global food trade. Trade is critical given the limitations of land, the diversity of consumer preferences, and the negative impacts of

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12 Mely Caballero-Anthony, "From Comprehensive Security to Regional Resilience: Coping with Nontraditional Security Challenges," in *Building ASEAN Community: Political Security and Socio-Cultural Reflections*, ed. Aileen Baviera and Larry Maramis (Jakarta: Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia, 2017): 123–45.

13 The taskforce was established in 2003 under the leadership of France and Sweden with a mandate to assess and prioritize international public goods, both global and regional, and make recommendations to policymakers and other stakeholders on how to improve and expand their provision. Inge Kaul, *Providing Public Goods: Managing Globalization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

14 UN Food and Agriculture Organization, International Fund for Agricultural Development, and World Food Programme, *The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2015* (Rome: FAO, 2021), 53 ⇝ https://www.fao.org/publications/sofi/2015/en.

climate change on farming, for instance; thus, an unstable global food trade system poses a critical threat to regional food security.

Montesclaros's essay traces the impacts of geopolitically related changes such as Covid-19, the Russia-Ukraine war, and the recent tariff wars on Southeast Asian food security. It argues that this issue has been improving for the region as can be seen in declining food export bans relative to the global food price crisis of 2007–8. But more can still be done, especially when the threats to the region emerge from great-power competition. To minimize collateral effects on the food sector, a change in outlook will be necessary for ASEAN governments toward greater integration of and collaboration among governments, cooperatives, and private actors across the supply chain as well as enhanced regional coordination of commodity production where they are still vulnerable to disruption.

Impacts on regional low-carbon transition. The second essay, by Margareth Sembiring and Danielle Lynn Goh, focuses on the low-carbon energy transition in Southeast Asia toward greater adoption of renewable energy sources. This relates to the NTS issue of energy security, or ensuring a "reliable and adequate supply of energy at reasonable prices" for all.[15] In the 1960s and 1970s, energy security fears arose from the declining availability of nonrenewable energy sources (e.g., oil) to keep up with demand, but later discourses have sought to transition away from dependence on nonrenewable sources, given the carbon gases emitted that feed into climate change.

Renewable energy sources are needed to effect a low-carbon transition, but the pace of the transition is impacted by geopolitical disruptions, such as the United States' second withdrawal from the Paris Agreement. Sembiring and Goh discuss alternative partner countries available to Southeast Asia in sustaining the low-carbon transition amid geopolitical disruption, including Japan, South Korea, and the developed Middle Eastern countries. Beyond country partners, they also recognize the roles of nonstate entities, such as private companies and banks, state-owned companies, and multilateral banks. They emphasize that "ultimately, the region must maintain its diversification strategy and ensure that no single actor…has excessive leverage over its low-carbon energy transition efforts in technology, financing, or infrastructure development, among others."

[15] Janusz Bielecki, "Energy Security: Is the Wolf at the Door?" *The Quarterly Review of Economics and Finance* 42, no. 2 (2002): 237.

Impacts on regional biosecurity. Global health security is defined by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control as "the existence of strong and resilient public health systems that can prevent, detect, and respond to infectious disease threats, wherever they occur in the world."[16] One aspect of health security, apart from public health systems, focuses on biosecurity. In the third essay Julius Cesar Trajano and Jeselyn identify biosecurity as referring to regulating and preventing biological threats, including infectious disease outbreaks, bioterrorism, and laboratory accidents, from harming humans, animals, and the environment.

In the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, attention to biosecurity has increased, as seen in the development of new vaccines and expanded capacities and investments in biotechnology. However, Trajano and Jeselyn note that international governance and regulation are not keeping pace with such developments, leading to risks and uncertainties regarding the storage and handling of hazardous biological materials that could also potentially be weaponized. These are further complicated by the United States' retreat in its leadership and funding support for such endeavors and its escalating biotechnology competition with China, thus raising the importance for ASEAN of science diplomacy with other partners such as Japan, China, Canada, and the European Union. Science diplomacy will also involve the scientific communities and associations, which they argue "play a critical role in strengthening technical expertise, fostering cross-border collaboration, and standardizing best practices for biosecurity."

Impacts on regional gender security. Gender security "can pose existential threats to segments of society that may be disadvantaged as a result of institutions which discriminate and fail to provide equal opportunity to individuals regardless of gender."[17] In the fourth essay, Nanthini S. and Junli Lim use the Women, Peace, and Security agenda as a policy framework for tracking the gender security theme, looking also into "ensuring the 'equal and meaningful' participation of women as key actors in processes of peace and security."

The effect of geopolitical changes has been to further deepen gender-related discrepancies. Amid the government reorganization in the United States, for instance, Nanthini and Lim note that the closure of

16 "Global Health Security," U.S. Centers for Disease Control, December 12, 2024 ~ https://www.cdc.gov/global-health/topics-programs/global-health-security.html.

17 Jose Ma. Luis Montesclaros and Mely Caballero-Anthony, "Non-Traditional Security Perspectives on the New Normal: An Introduction," *Non-Traditional Security Concerns in the New Normal*, RSIS Monograph, no. 36. (Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 2022), 3–12.

"offices that previously served the interests of women in conflict-affected areas is bound to have a profound impact on women's rights and inclusion." At the same time, they highlight the evolving actors beyond the U.S. Agency for International Development, such as Australia and New Zealand, as ASEAN's dialogue partners. They also recognize the need for nonstate actors to advance gender security, noting the historic Grand Bargain agreement in 2016, which comprised 68 signatories, with pledges made by states, NGOs, international NGOs, and UN agencies to "get more means into the hands of people in need and to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the humanitarian action."[18]

Impacts on regional disaster resilience. Finally, vulnerability to disasters poses an existential threat to Southeast Asia, with 323.4 million people in the broader Asia-Pacific requiring humanitarian assistance in 2024, as Alistair Cook and Keith Paolo Landicho note in the fifth essay. Disasters can be naturally caused or human-made (including geopolitical threats), but the security situation significantly worsens when both types simultaneously emerge or when societies are battered by successive disruptions. In such cases of simultaneous or successive disruptions, there is less capacity to cope with disasters, as could be seen in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Cook and Landicho highlight the key problem in the present context of "an increasingly fraught international system dominated by major-power competition" and in turn "more interest-based humanitarian assistance." They argue this comes alongside the "need to diversify funding sources and humanitarian actors to reach affected populations and meet their needs." In light of the 2016 Grand Bargain, one trend has been the growing diversity of actors with humanitarian efforts occurring "locally, bilaterally, and regionally, particularly for those countries outside the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee." Amid the changing geopolitical dynamics, an emerging serious threat is that the very systems for providing humanitarian aid are evolving and becoming more fragmented. Access constraints, changing priorities, further policy shifts, and funding and operational hurdles are causing delays to effective action. As such, the authors call for "a new system for humanitarian action that is rooted in and reflective of global, regional, and local realities and safeguards humanitarian principles."

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18 "The Grand Bargain," Inter-Agency Standing Committee ~ https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/grand-bargain.

This roundtable, therefore, offers concrete case studies showing how the evolving global order is impacting NTS issues, whether through the intensification of existing challenges or a change in their nature due to increasing interdependence among issue areas. It underscores the pressing need for a transformation in the governance of these issues at the national, regional, and international levels. Notably, the essays emphasize the growing importance of nonstate actors in complementing and supporting states in responding to complex NTS issues. The failure to adapt governance frameworks in a timely manner to the realities of a multiplex world endangers human security. Yet, states often do not have the capacities to adequately initiate reforms on their own. These disparities highlight the importance of regional resilience frameworks, exemplified by the ASEAN-led institutions working together with the wider regional community in fostering peace and stability amid a fluid global environment. ◈

Food Security and Crises in Southeast Asia: Is This Time Different?

Jose Ma. Luis Montesclaros

Food security is concerned with ensuring that sufficient food is produced, traded, and physically available at affordable prices to meet the consumption requirements of populations. It is a complex issue since, beyond governments, it relies ultimately on decisions by a broad array of stakeholders across supply chains, including farmers and their input providers (who decide on how much food to produce); food processers, traders, local wholesalers, and retailers (who decide on how much to procure and sell, and at what price); and consumers themselves. Food security is further complicated by the negative impacts of climate change on food production alongside declining arable land and labor, which make it difficult to increase production relative to population demand. A stable global food trade system is thus critical in meeting the growing diversity of consumer preferences amid the limited land and resources possessed by countries.

In 1972–74 a global food crisis, which coincided with the oil crisis, was among the driving factors for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to conceive the 1976 Bali Concord, which set the goal of building a united community that could concertedly address food security challenges and other shared existential threats.[1] Subsequently, a global food crisis in 2007–8, during which the price of staple food commodities such as rice, maize, wheat, sorghum, and soybeans soared, prompted ASEAN to begin developing integrated frameworks and strategic plans of action for food security from 2009 onward.[2] In part, these food crises emerged from the transformations and changing dynamics in the landscape of relevant actors; countries and traders alike played key roles in precipitating speculative price

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1 ASEAN, "The Declaration of ASEAN Concord, Bali, Indonesia, 24 February 1976," May 14, 2012 ~ https://asean.org/the-declaration-of-asean-concord-bali-indonesia-24-february-1976.

2 For the first of these, see ASEAN, "ASEAN Integrated Food Security (AIFS) Framework and Strategic Plan of Action on Food Security in the ASEAN Region (SPA-FS), 2009–2013," March 9, 2009 ~ https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/42-AIFS-Framework-SPAFS-Final-13-July-2020.pdf.

bubbles, destabilizing food security. ASEAN's main regional mechanisms for food security resilience today, in the form of food reserves, information systems, and intraregional trade integration, were thus a response to prevent future food price bubbles.

In recent years, however, several major geopolitical and geoeconomic events inside and outside the region have negatively impacted Southeast Asia's food sector. The first was the Covid-19 pandemic, which began in 2020 and generated a hybrid health-economic-food crisis that highlighted the vulnerability of supply chains in an increasingly integrated world.[3] The second was Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, followed by the outbreak of another conflict between Israel and Palestine in October 2023. These crises have upset trade and supply chains. Further disruption has been caused in 2025 by U.S. president Donald Trump's renewed tariff wars and the economic uncertainty they generate. This essay examines how geopolitical crises have affected the complex nature of regional food security and food supply chains in Southeast Asia as well as policies that could help address these challenges.

The Evolving Dynamics of Crises on Staples

Food security in ASEAN has been perennially beset by crisis-induced instability in both supplies and prices. These disruptions, however, have broadly served to push institutional evolution and further regional integration.

Prior to the 2020s, ASEAN was suffering from a slow-onset, supply-side food issue through the negative impacts of climate change on farmers, including extreme weather events. Rice is a staple in regional households, but from 1990 until the late 2010s, the growth in productivity of rice farmers (measured in tonnes of output per hectare) slowed to the point that it was overtaken by the growth rate of the population.[4] The same trend applied to other commodities, such as potatoes, soybeans, and some fruits and vegetables. Amid constraints on expanding land for agriculture, some countries have had to import more food to meet growing

[3] Jose Ma. Luis Montesclaros, "Has Southeast Asia Reached a New Normal in Food Security? Dissecting the Impacts of Covid-19 as a Hybrid Health-Economic Crisis," in *Non-Traditional Security Issues in the New Normal,* RSIS Monograph, no. 36, ed. Jose Ma. Luis Montesclaros and Mely Caballero-Anthony (Singapore: RSIS, 2022), 13–24.

[4] Jose Ma. Luis Montesclaros and Paul S. Teng, "Agri-Food Supply Chains and Food Security in Asia," in *Frontiers in Agri-Food Supply Chains: Frameworks and Case Studies*, ed. Sander de Leeuw, Renzo Akkerman, and Rodrigo Romero Silva (Cambridge: Burleigh Dodds Science Publishing, 2024).

consumption needs. Yet, given the diversity in levels of GDP per capita among consumers in the region, some countries have needed to compete with higher-income countries for food imports, the latter being able to afford higher prices. These supply, demand, and cost dynamics have led to plateauing progress in reducing undernourishment, causing a marked U-turn in undernourishment. The number of undernourished increased by 3 million people for the first time from 2014 to 2016, even though it had trended down since reaching over 101 million in 2005.

By 2022 approximately 36.7% of the ASEAN population was unable to afford a healthy diet—making up over 250 million people.[5] The pathway to that situation lies in international food trade dynamics of the 2020s. Over the past five years, Southeast Asian countries have been both recovering from the Covid-19 pandemic and fighting inflation amid the recovery of domestic demand alongside a slower resumption in supply-side economic activity. The pandemic left governments with smaller budgets to subsidize basic commodities for domestic consumers, and they could not simply expand these budgets without risking economic instability. As a result, there have been fewer protections for ASEAN households' falling real incomes during a period of food price inflation. This section examines the influence of geopolitical events on the emergence of this situation, showing how distant events can impact the multifaceted nature of food security.

Russia and Ukraine: Disruptions from the world's "breadbaskets." As warring states, Russia and Ukraine have risen in significance to Southeast Asia's food security. Of interest is the parallel between the war that began in 2022 and the 1972–74 global food crisis: both events involved a significant shortfall in production and international supplies. The earlier crisis was driven by a drought-induced reduction in harvests amid a sudden upsurge in Soviet grain purchases, leading to a grain shortage worldwide of 70 million tonnes.[6] The key difference, however, is that the grain shortage brought about by the Russia-Ukraine war has owed to the damage of storage facilities and blockage of transport routes in the Black Sea. Additionally, unlike the 1972–74 crisis that arose from a natural cause common to many countries (drought), the production and trade impacts of the war in 2022 were concentrated in a region that served hitherto as

5 "Cost and Affordability of a Healthy Diet (CoAHD)," UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), FAOSTAT ~ https://www.fao.org/faostat/en/#data/CAHD.

6 C. Peter Timmer, "Reflections on Food Crises Past," *Food Policy* 35, no. 1 (2010): 1–11.

the world's "breadbasket," making up the largest share of global wheat exports (24%) prior to the war.[7]

Although the war does not involve any key producers of rice, the most basic food staple in Southeast Asia, it nonetheless affects ASEAN food security. The key dynamic that explains this is the phenomenon of cross-product inflation among grains, which also occurred in the 2007–8 global food crisis. In 2007–8, the grain production shortfall was less significant, yet food prices still rose significantly. Owing to a shortage in wheat, India banned rice exports, since both grains made up the country's total grain reserves, and this in turn triggered a price spiral. This was thus an "artificial" crisis, wherein food prices soared owing to price speculation outside the subregion affecting Southeast Asian food security: in this case, it especially affected the traders and governments of major exporters (Thailand, Vietnam, and India) and a key importer (the Philippines).[8] Amid the Russia-Ukraine war, a similar dynamic was observed in the early months after the war broke out—international rice prices rose from an index rate of 101.2 points at the end of January 2022 to 110 points by the end of June 2022.

India: Balancing domestic and international roles. India was already important to Southeast Asia's food security in the previous 2007–8 global food crisis, but it rose further in importance with the 2022 war. As the second-largest wheat producer in the world, India provided stability to global grain supplies and prices by significantly increasing its monthly wheat exports to five times their normal level. On the one hand, this prevented a sudden food crisis owing to a dearth in supplies from Russia and Ukraine to international markets, providing an improvement over the 1972–74 crisis. On the other, it came at the cost of India significantly reducing its wheat reserves. Later in 2022, India suffered a major drought that reduced its wheat harvests to below target levels.[9] In combination, these factors drove domestic wheat price inflation and the country's eventual ban on wheat exports to meet its own food security needs. At the same time, India's rice prices started to increase since people were consuming more rice as a cheaper alternative to wheat. Unsurprisingly, India prioritized its national food security requirements by again restricting its rice exports in July 2023.

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7 Jose M.L. Montesclaros and Mely Caballero-Anthony, "Ukraine War and Food Security: How Should ASEAN Respond?" RSIS, RSIS Commentary, no. 53, May 25, 2022. For further info, see "Trade Map," International Trade Centre, 2025 ~ https://www.trademap.org/Index.aspx.

8 Timmer, "Reflections on Food Crises Past."

9 Denise Chow, "2022 Was the Year of Drought," NBC News, December 31, 2022.

China: Disruptions from an emerging power. China's importance in the global food market can be seen in its buildups of food stocks over the past decade for the three key grains (rice, maize, and wheat) as well as soybeans. These buildups came amid the rising tensions in the South China sea in 2011–13, the first Trump administration's trade war in 2016, and the lead-up to the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war. Available data shows China's food reserves for rice increased fourfold from 42 million tonnes in 2010 to 168 million tonnes in 2022 and for wheat more than threefold from 59 million tonnes in 2010 to 184 million tonnes in 2022. China had an eightfold increase in stocks of maize, which is used for both domestic consumption and animal feed, from 84 million tonnes in 2010 to 763 million tonnes in 2022. It also saw a threefold increase in soybeans (mostly for livestock feed) from 3 million tonnes in 2010 to 9 million tonnes in 2022.[10]

Had it been any other country, the reserve buildup may not have been as relevant. But over the past decade China has comprised 17%–19% of the world's population. Its ability to develop its stocks can be attributed in part to greater negotiating power gained from its ability to purchase in bulk. In fact, state support and guidance likely allowed for a near tripling in food imports from $49 billion in 2013 to $139 billion in 2022.[11] China was estimated to have held 69% of global maize reserves, 60% of rice reserves, and 51% of wheat reserves by early 2022.[12]

Actions such as these effectively force other countries to compete for the remaining grains available, leading to increases in international prices. By the time the Russia-Ukraine war erupted in 2022, countries that relied on imports for meeting their consumption requirements were already in a less stable position regarding national stocks, leading to an increase in monthly year-on-year food prices of 23%–25% for commodities as a whole.

The tariff wars. Amid the tariff rate increases imposed by the United States in early 2025 on China's exports, one of China's responses was to place additional tariffs on $21 billion worth of U.S. agricultural products. These retaliatory tariffs imply an additional 10% in tariffs for soybeans, beef, sorghum, aquatic products, pork, fruits, dairy, and vegetables and 15% on

10 Estimates based on an analysis of the FAOSTAT database for stock buildups and U.S. Department of Agriculture data for beginning stock levels.

11 Liang Jun and Hongyu, "China Becomes World's Largest Food Importer," *People's Daily*, December 4, 2023.

12 Shin Watanabe and Aiko Munakata, "China Hoards over Half the World's Grain, Pushing Up Global Prices," *Nikkei Asia*, December 23, 2021.

wheat, corn/maize, and chicken from the United States. China is unlikely to lift these soon, given the unfruitful trade talks with the United States as of this writing in May 2025.[13]

Given these tariffs, U.S. traders will undoubtedly export less to China. In turn, China, will seek alternative, non-U.S. sources to meet its food security requirements. An analysis using a tariff simulator reveals that to replace these imports China will need to source 752,000 tonnes of wheat exports, 628,000 tonnes of maize, and 1.13 million tonnes of soybeans from non-U.S. providers.[14]

The impacts on Southeast Asian countries are likely to be increased import competition that will raise import prices, lower supplies, or both. For these staples, China is projected to turn to Canada and Australia to make up 82% of the wheat import gap, Ukraine and Myanmar for 81% of the maize gap, and Brazil for 80% of the soybean gap. Yet, these sources are also shared by Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. Thus, the tariff war can be expected to heighten the risks to the food security of these impacted ASEAN states.

Further Up the Supply Chain: Fertilizer Supplies and Prices

Fertilizer supply and price fluctuations show the impact of disruptions higher up on the regional food security supply chain. The availability of fertilizers in international markets plays a critical role in the ability of smallholder farmers to boost their agricultural productivity. Disruptions to these markets reduce supply relative to demand, leading to localized increases in fertilizer prices. However, farmers cannot simply raise prices to transfer the increased production costs to consumers since they could lose market share as a result. The net effect is a reduction in fertilizer use intensity in affected countries and, in turn, a smaller quantity of crops produced.

The Russia-Ukraine war: The Black Sea. An indirect impact of the war in Ukraine has been disruptions in the supplies and prices of fertilizers, which are key inputs to agricultural production. Russia is the top exporter of nitrogen fertilizers, accounting for 15% of global exports, and is the

13 Jose Ma. Luis Montesclaros and Kayven Tan, "Collateral Effects of the Tariff War on Southeast Asia's Food Security," RSIS, RSIS Commentary, no. 075, April 10, 2025.

14 Analysis was conducted using the Observatory of Economic Complexity's tariff simulator. See Viktor Stojkoski et al., OEC Tariff Simulator ~ https://oec.world/en/tariff-simulator.

third-largest exporter of phosphate. Russia and its ally Belarus are the second- and third-largest exporters of potash fertilizer nutrients, respectively.[15]

Before the war started, Southeast Asia depended on imports for nearly 60% of its total fertilizer supplies. In particular, the region was 38% import-dependent for nitrogen (which is the most intensively used by farmers), 60% for phosphate, and 96% for potash.[16] With the war, regional fertilizer imports fell significantly: by 24% for nitrogen, 15% for phosphate, and 26% for potash. While there was a ramp-up in regional fertilizer production, it was not sufficient to compensate for the reduced exports, leading to a fall in total supplies by 5% for nitrogen fertilizers, 2% for phosphate, and 23% for potash.[17] By July 2023, Russia had pulled out of the Black Sea grain deal that had guaranteed safe passage to ships delivering food and other products during the war.

The Hamas-Israel conflict and the Red Sea. Further disruptions to fertilizer supply in 2023 were caused by pirate attacks by Houthi rebels in Yemen in the Red Sea in response to the war between the Hamas militant group and Israel. These attacks disrupted supplies of the two fertilizers on which ASEAN was most import-dependent (potash and phosphate), although only 7% and 5% of global trade in these fertilizers, respectively, pass through the sea.[18]

The timing of these disruptions was especially challenging. In November 2023, one month after the Hamas missile strikes on Israel, El Niño began, causing droughts. Together with increased piracy events, this caused a 42% reduction in ship transit along the Suez Canal and a 67% drop in container ship transits via the Panama Canal.[19] By early December, spot freight rates (i.e., shipping costs) had increased by 122% (for those from Shanghai), 256% (for those going to Europe), and 162% (for those going to the United States). Ships reportedly needed to travel faster to avoid piracy, raising shipping costs even more.

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15 "Fertilizers by Nutrients," FAO, FAOSTAT ~ https://www.fao.org/faostat/en/#data/RFN.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 "Red Sea Disruptions and the Geopolitical Premium," *Bangkok Post*, February 7, 2024.

19 "Disruptions in Key Global Shipping Route—Suez Canal, Panama Canal, and Black Sea—Signal Unprecedented Challenges for Global Trade Affecting Millions of People in Every Region," UN Trade and Development, Press Release, no. 2024/003, February 22, 2024.

Imperatives Moving Forward

ASEAN's approaches to food security have evolved in the face of disruptions. After the 2007–8 global food price crisis, ASEAN launched its Integrated Food Security Framework in 2009. This includes the promotion of unfettered trade through the ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement. In partnership with China, Japan, and South Korea, ASEAN also formalized the ASEAN Plus Three Emergency Rice Reserve mechanism in 2013 and the ASEAN Food Security Information System, which became a permanent mechanism in 2012.

Despite ASEAN's existing policies, its member countries remain vulnerable to food supply chain disruptions beyond the region, as observed during recent geopolitical events. At the top of the agenda to improving regional resilience should be a re-examination of the notion of security within food supply chains. To improve the security and stability of prices and supplies, ASEAN's food and agricultural sector could take a page from practices in other economic sectors, such as friendshoring (diverting trade toward geopolitical allies), diversification (increasing the spread of import sources), and nearshoring (increasing reliance on neighboring countries).[20]

Regional supply chain collaboration is a variant of all three strategies: friendshoring, since the ASEAN member states are part of a closely knit community of countries; nearshoring, owing to their geographic proximity to one another; and diversification toward intraregional sources. Essentially, ASEAN should explore ways of enhancing intraregional trade in critical food commodities as well as in related input industries, such as fertilizers.

A further way forward is to revisit the notion of "collective self-reliance" enshrined in the ASEAN Food Security Reserve Agreement, which recognized that each member country is accountable both in solidarity to committing to regional goals and in subsidiarity to improving food security within its borders. A worrying trend to arrest is, for instance, the declining rate of agricultural productivity growth in recent decades to roughly half of rates in the 1960s through 1990s, owing to capital deficiencies in investing in climate-smart agricultural technologies.[21] This problem is intensified by the declining and rapidly aging agricultural workforce of each country and the growing contributions of agriculture to greenhouse gas emissions.

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[20] Jose Ma. Luis P. Montesclaros, "Food Security as Supply Security: Geopolitical Implications for ASEAN," RSIS, Annual Review, January 2025.

[21] Montesclaros and Teng, "Agri-Food Supply Chains and Food Security in Asia."

Economic support will be needed from states to empower agriculture to better serve national and regional food, employment, and sustainability needs. This support should go beyond simply meeting the needs of the market, given that some individuals in a society are typically excluded from market mechanisms owing to their smaller purchasing power and that there are gaps in social protection in financially constrained states. Additionally, market mechanisms today are not yet sufficiently geared for including the value of sustainability in pricing. Likewise, not all consumers are willing or able to contribute to such goals, as shown by the modest growth rates in the consumption of more environmentally friendly meat substitutes.

Providing agricultural support is politically contentious if viewed through a purely market lens, since such forms of assistance can be considered deviations from free trade. However, even the UN Food and Agriculture Organization has already made a shift from the Washington Consensus of outwardly rejecting agricultural support policies to proposing that such support be purposed toward shaping healthier and more sustainable farmer and consumer behaviors.[22]

To avoid the pitfall of a protectionist approach, a compromise could be to follow Singapore's model of technology-based support, which does not subsidize the actual production targets by farmers but only farmers' adoption of productivity-enhancing technologies. Greater support through investment thus enables larger production levels. Such an approach, if applied to ASEAN as whole, would be a strategic reorientation that could allow for an equalization of the playing field that would boost regional producers' productivity levels and, in the longer-term, their cost competitiveness in international trade. In this manner, the objective of food security would be fulfilled alongside the objective of free and open intraregional trade across food commodities.

Digital technologies present a strategic area for technology deepening and cooperation across the ASEAN member states, given that these are generally more portable and encourage smart farming practices without massive infrastructure investments.[23] These can also complement the existing ASEAN Food Security Information System program, which is currently limited both in that it mostly applies to only rice, maize, sugar, soybeans, and cassava and

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22 FAO, UN Development Programme, and the UN Environment Programme, *A Multi-Billion-Dollar Opportunity: Repurposing Agricultural Support to Transform Food Systems* (Rome: FAO, 2023).

23 Jose Ma. Luis Montesclaros, Paul Teng, and Mely Caballero-Anthony, "Digital Technology Utilization in the Agriculture Sector for Enhancing Food Supply Chain Resilience in ASEAN: Current Status and Potential Solutions," RSIS and the Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia, 2023.

in that the most frequent reporting is just monthly. Such technologies, by contrast, allow for continuous monitoring of field production that can alert farmers of pestilence and provide recommendations on maximizing farm productivity in a sustainable manner.

Nonetheless, the question of whether states can play a stronger role in influencing production targets—within their country or for the region as a whole—remains important. This is in light of the pattern of structural transformation that accompanies the economic development of countries, whereby economic incentives (in terms of higher and more regular wages) skew away from agriculture toward other industries. States can potentially provide economic support so that mechanisms can be developed to better align food production targets with the actual needs of the region, rather than just being guided by prices alone, and incentivize developing more reliable physical grain reserves for supply stabilization purposes.

These strategies can complement the existing regional mechanism of maintaining food reserves, which is limited in that it only focuses on rice stocks and does not feed into the rice procurement targets for farmers. Government-provided incentives and investment could further be applied to strengthening supply chains for agricultural inputs, especially fertilizers. However, these policies will only be effective if developed and implemented through collaboration with actors across the supply chain and with associations and cooperatives as well, so that the technologies developed by scientific communities can be taken up by farmers on the ground. Beyond these, it is still conceivable to develop and upgrade ASEAN fertilizer production capacities and reserves as a buffer against future geopolitical disruptions amid a changing global order. ◈

The Changing Global Order and Southeast Asia's Low-Carbon Energy Transition

Margareth Sembiring and Danielle Lynn Goh

Geopolitical tensions and great-power competition have intensified in the past decade, impacting the transition to a low-carbon energy future and related investment, technology transfer, and supply chain security in the wider international community and specifically in Southeast Asia. With Donald Trump back in the White House for a second term as president, the United States has not only withdrawn from the Paris Agreement on climate change for a second time but also announced a spate of reciprocal tariffs on China and other countries. The ensuing geoeconomic uncertainty, in which tariffs are utilized as a political and bargaining tool, has sparked concerns of a global trade war. Protectionist measures such as these are not just confined to the United States and China; globally, protectionist measures have given rise to a declining trend in FDI.[1] In addition, the escalation of war between Russia and Ukraine, as well as the war in Gaza, have contributed to rising fossil fuel prices and a shift away from Russian gas in Europe. Considering that the energy transition hinges on the ability of states to collectively work toward reducing carbon emissions and developing renewable energy infrastructure, ongoing developments in bloc politics and protectionist economic approaches present worrying risks that could reverse progress made on addressing climate change.

This essay aims to examine broadly the implications of these developments for the transition to low-carbon energy sources in Southeast Asia and argues that a diversity of emerging actors can serve as a counterpoint to the United States and China, which have both traditionally played leading investment

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[1] Weilin Lu and Xin Yi, "How Has Rising Global Trade Protectionism Impacted FDI in China?" Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore, Asia Competitiveness Institute, Research Paper, no. 14, 2024.

and development roles in the region. Additionally, more can be done toward intraregional cooperation within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in terms of energy security integration, infrastructure development, and capacity building in renewable energy. Countries in ASEAN must further develop in these areas to move up the supply chain from mining and extraction toward refining critical minerals and manufacturing renewable energy technologies.

Great-Power Competition

China has steadily expanded its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that is focused on building infrastructure and directing efforts to improve connectivity and economic integration in the developing world. Southeast Asia is a region of particular strategic interest for China, which is promoting connectivity through "corridors" of trade and efforts to enhance its influence in the region. According to a 2024 report from the Lowy Institute, from 2015 to 2022 China cumulatively contributed significantly more than the United States to energy investments in the region, with investments totaling $23.8 billion compared with the United States at $231 million.[2] Green energy investments under the BRI banner in 2023 reached $9.5 billion,[3] including investments in critical minerals and mining, electric vehicles and batteries, and the production and distribution of solar cells. Notable BRI projects in the region include Power Construction Corporation's gas-fired power plants in Myanmar and Zhejiang Huayou's nickel and cobalt processing facilities in Indonesia.[4]

While China's contributions have been notable, the United States' role as a leader in tackling climate change and U.S. engagement in the energy transition in Southeast Asia are arguably inconsistent, being contingent on the priorities of the administration that has been elected. There is an observable trend across the different administrations over the past decade: amid the intensification of geopolitical competition, the U.S. stance on China is hardening, and successive administrations under

2 Alexandre Dayant et al., "Southeast Asia Aid Map: 2024 Key Findings Report," Lowy Institute, June 17, 2024.

3 Sin Lu Tan, "China's Evolving Belt and Road Initiative in Southeast Asia," International Institute for Strategic Studies, July 31, 2024 ~ https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2024/07/chinas-evolving-belt-and-road-initiative-in-southeast-asia.

4 Kaho Yu, "The Belt and Road Initiative in Southeast Asia after Covid-19: China's Energy and Infrastructure Investments in Myanmar," *ISEAS Perspective*, April 6, 2021 ~ https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2021-39-the-belt-and-road-initiative-in-southeast-asia-after-covid-19-chinas-energy-and-infrastructure-investments-in-myanmar-by-kaho-yu.

Trump and Biden have pursued protectionist measures. In the name of national interest, the United States under Trump has rolled back its multilateral commitments in various sectors, including climate change. These actions have included the administration announcing the U.S. withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accord in 2017 and again in 2025, which the international community has largely interpreted as the United States ceding its leadership in addressing climate change. Similarly, in a bid to secure supply chains and adopt a de-risking strategy,[5] in 2024 the Biden administration established that electric vehicles with batteries or critical minerals sourced from China would not qualify for the Inflation Reduction Act's clean vehicle tax credit.[6]

In his second term, Trump has said that the administration aims to cut about 65% of spending at the U.S. Environment Protection Agency.[7] The United States has also stepped away from its role as co-leader with Japan in the Just Energy Transition Partnership in Indonesia, a program aimed at providing climate financing to support developing countries in transitioning to low-carbon economies. Its role in the partnership was passed on to Germany.[8]

In contrast to China, the United States under the Trump administration is seeking to recast energy dependence on the United States by promoting fossil fuel exports to Asia and Southeast Asia. The implications of great-power competition and tit-for-tat exchanges between the United States and China will likely have a mixed effect on Southeast Asian countries—with both powers looking to reshore their supply chains, they may look to the ASEAN region as an alternative. Analysis of investment and FDI data found that U.S. companies, when faced with U.S.-China trade disputes, tend to diversify their investments in Southeast Asian markets.[9] However, escalating trade tensions could trigger higher prices and targeted measures to pressure countries to accede to the demands of the great powers.

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5 Emily Benson and Gloria Sicilia, "A Closer Look at De-risking," Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 20, 2023 ~ https://www.csis.org/analysis/closer-look-de-risking.

6 "Biden's China Tariffs Miss the Mark on Onshoring Clean-Tech," Bloomberg, May 21, 2024 ~ https://www.bloomberg.com/professional/insights/data/bidens-china-tariffs-miss-the-mark-on-onshoring-clean-tech.

7 Alex Guillén, "White House Says Trump Meant EPA Will Cut 65 Percent of Spending, Not Staff," *Politico*, February 26, 2025 ~ https://www.msn.com/en-us/politics/government/white-house-says-trump-meant-epa-will-cut-65-percent-of-spending-not-staff/ar-AA1zRo8p.

8 Divya Karyza, "U.S. Backs Out from JETP Leadership Role," *Jakarta Post*, February 1, 2025 ~ https://www.thejakartapost.com/business/2025/02/01/us-backs-out-from-jetp-leadership-role.html.

9 Yoo Sun Jung and Yohan Park, "Winners and Losers in U.S.-China Trade Disputes: A Dynamic Compositional Analysis of Foreign Direct Investment," *Social Science Quarterly* 105, no. 4 (2024): 980–95.

ASEAN Energy Security Challenges

The intensification of geopolitical competition will largely have an adverse impact on the energy transition in Southeast Asia. With the global economy facing a period of uncertainty, the competition could dissuade countries in the region from expanding their renewable energy development if prices rise for clean energy production. About 82% of Southeast Asia's new capacity in 2020 was renewable energy.[10] This level is in line with the objectives of the ASEAN Power Grid initiative, which seeks not only to establish an integrated regional energy market but also to promote the expansion of renewable energy across the region, as reflected in the ASEAN Interconnection Masterplan Study III published in 2021.[11] Nine of the eighteen power interconnection projects under the ASEAN Power Grid initiative have been completed, and new interconnections across borders are being planned.[12] Some renewable energy projects that support cross-border power trade in Southeast Asia include Laos's two mainstream dams, the Xayaburi Dam and the Don Sahong Dam, which were constructed in 2020. The hydroelectricity these dams have generated powers cities in Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Singapore, with countries looking to meet their targets of net-zero emissions.[13] Vietnam is also growing as a solar energy powerhouse. Solar energy has become its leading power source in the renewable sector, contributing more than a third of its total renewable energy capacity at 18,854 gigawatts in 2023.[14]

In addition to the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, an impetus for ASEAN member states to move away from fossil fuels is that reliance on fossil fuel imports exposes the region to greater supply chain disruptions and price volatility. The war between Russia and Ukraine has shocked global

10 Mirza Sadaqat Huda, "The Geopolitics of Energy Transition in ASEAN," Fulcrum, February 28, 2025 ~ https://fulcrum.sg/aseanfocus/the-geopolitics-of-energy-transition-in-asean.

11 Heads of ASEAN Power Utilities/Authorities Council and the ASEAN Centre for Energy, "ASEAN Interconnection Masterplan Study (AIMS) III Report," September 15, 2021 ~ https://aseanenergy.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/01_AIMS-III-Phase-1-and-2_Summary-Report-_Endorsed-AMEM39.pdf.

12 Mirza Sadaqat Huda, "New ASEAN Power Grid Agreement Must Reflect New Needs," Fulcrum, February 24, 2025 ~ https://fulcrum.sg/new-asean-power-grid-agreement-must-reflect-new-needs.

13 Hui Yee Tan and Lim Min Zhang, "Saving the Mekong: The Arduous Battle to Sustain Life along South-East Asia's Longest River," *Straits Times*, May 18, 2024 ~ https://www.straitstimes.com/multimedia/graphics/2024/05/mekong-river/index.html.

14 Nguyen Thi Phuong Thanh, "Vietnam's Solar Energy Market: A Comprehensive Outlook for Investors," Vietnam Briefing, December 16, 2024 ~ https://www.vietnam-briefing.com/news/vietnams-solar-energy-market-a-comprehensive-outlook-for-investors.html.

energy stability, leading to rising oil prices worldwide that have impacted Southeast Asia indirectly.[15]

While renewable energy expansion is gaining stronger momentum in the region, the key challenges Southeast Asia faces that have impeded faster growth of renewable energy include poor energy infrastructure, the need for increased energy investments, and the different levels of economic development across the region.[16] For example, Cambodia's and Myanmar's renewable energy strategies for rural areas have been hampered by lack of funding and technical competence. Regional integration efforts through the ASEAN Power Grid and cross-border energy cooperation face challenges due to national and domestic priorities and protectionism regarding renewable energy. The trends toward greater geopolitical competition and protectionism will only exacerbate these challenges and may result in Southeast Asian countries being more cautious and reluctant in expanding their renewable energy sources.

Emerging Actors and Their Influences

Amid shifting geopolitics, some emerging actors are taking on increasingly prominent roles through various regional cooperation schemes that support renewable energy development. These actors can provide an alternative or a counterweight to dominant Chinese investments and declining U.S. presence in Southeast Asia's energy sector, thereby reducing risks relating to U.S.-China tensions.

Japan plays a growing role in allocating financial and technological aid in Southeast Asia. Through the Japan Bank for International Cooperation and the Japan International Cooperation Agency, the country has funded several renewable energy projects in Vietnam. It has also committed $1.7 billion of concessional and nonconcessional loans to Indonesia's Just Energy Transition Partnership,[17] which was launched in 2022 by Indonesia and the International Partners Group (comprising Canada, Denmark, the

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15 Tri Bagus Prabowo and Rezya Agnesica Helena Sihaloho, "Impact of the Ukraine-Russia Conflict on the Stability of Energy Geopolitics in Southeast Asia," *Journal of International Studies on Energy Affairs* 5, no. 1 (2024): 35–56.

16 See Sharon Seah, "Obstacles to Decarbonisation in Southeast Asia," Fulcrum, April 5, 2023 ~ https://fulcrum.sg/aseanfocus/obstacles-to-decarbonisation-in-southeast-asia; and Ryan Wong and Lee Poh Onn, "The Intractable Challenges Facing Energy Trade in Southeast Asia," *ISEAS Perspective*, February 25, 2022 ~ https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2022-19-the-intractable-challenges-facing-energy-trade-in-southeast-asia-by-ryan-wong-and-lee-poh-onn.

17 James Guild, "Breaking Down the $20 Billion in Indonesia's Just Energy Transition Partnership," *Diplomat*, December 12, 2023 ~ https://thediplomat.com/2023/12/breaking-down-the-20-billion-in-indonesias-just-energy-transition-partnership.

European Union, Germany, France, Italy, Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United States, which quit the group in 2025).

The Republic of Korea (ROK) has also emerged as an active partner. ROK investments in critical minerals are growing, particularly in Indonesia, where they surpass those of the United States and Japan. Notable projects include the Petchem Methanol Complex Project located in Bintulu, Malaysia, as well as the Brunei-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA) cooperation fund with the ROK.[18] In 2023 the Partnership for ASEAN-ROK Methane Action was launched, in which the ROK is set to share clean energy technologies with ASEAN and cooperate on reducing methane emissions.[19]

Middle Eastern countries, particularly those in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), are likewise noteworthy. In line with their efforts to expand partnerships beyond traditional allies, the GCC and ASEAN renewed their engagement with the ASEAN-GCC Summit in Riyadh in 2023, the first to be held since both sides established relations in 1990.[20] The ASEAN-GCC Framework of Cooperation (2024–2028), adopted at the summit, features energy and low-carbon solutions as key areas of collaboration, and investment from GCC countries into Southeast Asia is projected to rise significantly. This new emphasis on collaboration marks a departure from the previous twenty years when GCC investments in the ASEAN countries only amounted to $75 billion, or about 4% of its total foreign investment, and ASEAN's investments in the GCC only made up $24.8 billion, or 3.4% of its total FDI.[21] The stronger engagement is also expected to increase bilateral trade between the two regional blocs, which only grew incrementally from $77.9 billion in 2010 to $85.2 billion in 2021.[22]

A prominent example of Middle Eastern investment in Southeast Asia comes from the United Arab Emirates' renewable energy giant Masdar, which made inroads into the region's renewable energy landscape even before

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18 Chow Bing Ngeow, "China and South Korea's Growing Southeast Asia Footprint in BIMP-EAGA," ThinkChina, December 3, 2024 ~ https://www.thinkchina.sg/economy/china-and-south-koreas-growing-southeast-asia-footprint-bimp-eaga.

19 Wendy Teo, "'Key Partners': Next Lap of ASEAN-South Korea Ties to Focus on Tech, Clean Energy, Says President Yoo," *Straits Times*, October 8, 2024 ~ https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/key-partners-next-lap-of-asean-south-korea-ties-to-focus-on-tech-clean-energy-says-president-yoon.

20 Jenna Zar, "ASEAN-GCC Summit Deepens Trade and Climate Co-operation," Economist Intelligence Unit, October 25, 2023 ~ https://www.eiu.com/n/asean-gcc-summit-deepens-trade-and-climate-co-operation.

21 Layla Ali, "Developing Cooperation between the GCC and ASEAN," Gulf Research Center, December 2023.

22 Ibid.

the summit. In 2020, Masdar entered into an agreement with Indonesia's state utility company PT PLN Nusantara to build the country's first floating solar plant at Cirata Reservoir in West Java Province.[23] The 145-megawatt project is the largest of its kind in Southeast Asia at the time of writing and also involved Standard Chartered Bank, Sumitomo Mitsui Banking Corporation, and Societe Generale to finance its $145 million billion cost.[24]

From Indonesia's perspective, Masdar's involvement provided a counterbalance to earlier investments made in renewable energy by the then U.S.-based company UPC Renewables. Together with Philippines-based AC Energy Holdings,[25] UPC Renewables constructed Indonesia's first utility-scale 75-megawatt wind farm in Sidrap, South Sulawesi Province, in 2018, which was also the largest of its kind in Southeast Asia at the time.[26]

Another emerging actor in Southeast Asia's renewable energy activities is Australia. At the ASEAN-Australia Special Summit in 2024, Australia pledged a range of new and expanded initiatives, including a A$2 billion Southeast Asia investment financing facility, which especially targets low-carbon transition infrastructure development.[27] Under this scheme, Australia has approved its first equity investment worth A$75 million to the Singapore-led Financing Asia's Transition Partnership initiative in December 2024.[28] Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the ASEAN Centre for Energy inked the ASEAN-Australia Energy Cooperation Program in December 2024 in support of the low-carbon energy transition.[29]

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23 "Cirata Floating Solar Photovoltaic (FPV) Plant," Masdar ~ https://masdar.ae/en/renewables/our-projects/cirata-floating-photovoltaic-fpv-plant.

24 Vann Villegas, "Masdar, PT PLN NR Conquer Cirata Reservoir's Depth for Largest Floating Solar Farm in SE Asia," Asian Power, June 14, 2024 ~ https://asian-power.com/project/exclusive/masdar-pt-pln-nr-conquer-cirata-reservoirs-depth-largest-floating-solar-farm-in-se-asia.

25 "Baker McKenzie Advises on Development and Financing of Indonesia's First Wind Project," Conventus Law, April 10, 2017 ~ https://conventuslaw.com/report/baker-mckenzie-advises-on-development-and.

26 Andi Hajramurni, "Jokowi Inaugurates First Indonesian Wind Farm in Sulawesi," *Jakarta Post*, July 2, 2018 ~ https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2018/07/02/jokowi-inaugurates-first-indonesian-wind-farm-in-sulawesi.html.

27 "$2 Billion Investment Facility to Support Business Engagement with Southeast Asia," Prime Minister of Australia, Press Release, March 5, 2024 ~ https://www.pm.gov.au/media/2-billion-investment-facility-support-business-engagement-southeast-asia.

28 "Investing in Southeast Asia's Clean Energy Transition," Minister for Foreign Affairs (Australia), December 3, 2024 ~ https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/penny-wong/media-release/investing-southeast-asias-clean-energy-transition.

29 "Accelerating Sustainable and Inclusive Green Energy Transition in ASEAN: ASEAN Centre for Energy and Australia Signed Cooperation Arrangement," ASEAN Centre for Energy, December 12, 2024 ~ https://aseanenergy.org/post/accelerating-sustainable-and-inclusive-green-energy-transition-in-asean-asean-centre-for-energy-and-australia-signed-cooperation-arrangement.

Beyond state-backed initiatives, Australian firms, like those in the United Arab Emirates, have secured a presence in the region's renewable energy landscape through the Australia-Asia Power Link project. The project saw Australian company Sun Cable enter into an agreement with Singapore to transmit solar-generated electricity from Australia's Northern Territory to Singapore via 4,000 kilometers of undersea cables in support of Singapore's low-carbon energy transition efforts.[30]

India is also taking a more prominent role in Southeast Asia's energy transition. The country was involved in the construction of Myanmar's Sedawygi and Yeywa hydropower facilities, and the installation of biomass gasifiers in Myanmar, Cambodia, and Thailand.[31] India's investment in the region is set to expand following the signing of a memorandum of understanding for cooperation on smart grids, electric vehicles, and renewable energy development between the India Smart Grid Forum and the ASEAN Centre for Energy in 2021 and the ASEAN-India High-Level Conference on Renewable Energy in 2022.[32] These initiatives build on an earlier ASEAN-India Green Fund set up in 2010, which saw India contribute $5 million to finance technology-driven climate adaptation and mitigation projects in Southeast Asia.[33]

Another important group of actors in Southeast Asia's low-carbon energy transition landscape are multilateral banks. Through its ASEAN Catalytic Green Finance Facility, the Asian Development Bank set aside over $1 billion in loans to fund green infrastructure projects in Southeast Asia.[34] The World Bank's International Finance Corporation has likewise disbursed a loan package of $212.5 million to Vietnam.[35]

The involvements of these emerging actors are a positive development as they serve as a strategic hedge against the changing U.S.-China dynamics

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30 "Australia Approves Renewable Energy Link to Singapore," ASEAN Briefing, August 23, 2024 ~ https://www.aseanbriefing.com/news/australia-singapore-renewable-energy-link-approved.

31 Prabir De and Durairaj Kumarasamy, "ASEAN-India Energy Cooperation: Current Status and Future Scope of Cooperation," Research and Information System for Developing Countries, March 2020 ~ https://aseanindiacentre.org.in/sites/default/files/Publication/AIC%20Working%20Paper%20No.2%20March_2020-min.pdf; and "ASEAN and India Explore Further Cooperation on Renewable Energy," ASEAN Centre for Energy, February 8, 2022 ~ https://aseanenergy.org/post/asean-and-india-explore-further-cooperation-on-renewable-energy.

32 Beni Suryadi, "ASEAN-India Cooperation on Energy Transition," *ASEAN Magazine*, May 9, 2022 ~ https://theaseanmagazine.asean.org/article/asean-india-cooperation-on-energy-transition.

33 "Overview: ASEAN-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership," ASEAN, June 2023 ~ https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Overview-ASEAN-India-CSP-as-of-June-2023.pdf.

34 "ASEAN Catalytic Green Finance Facility (ACGF)," Asian Development Bank ~ https://www.adb.org/what-we-do/funds/asean-catalytic-green-finance-facility/main.

35 "World Bank Issues Its First 'Green Loan' to Vietnam," VOA News, January 28, 2020 ~ https://www.voanews.com/a/east-asia-pacific_world-bank-issues-its-first-green-loan-vietnam/6183280.html.

in the geopolitical landscape. The rise of other actors in Southeast Asia's renewable energy sector increases the ASEAN states' resilience by reducing their dependency on either great power, thereby mitigating risks associated with escalating trade tensions, supply chain disruptions, and any ensuing economic or political coercion.

Plugging the Policy Gaps

While diversifying collaborations is an important policy tool to safeguard Southeast Asia's energy transition efforts, gaps in industrial policies remain, particularly in securing the supply chains for the critical minerals necessary for producing renewable energy technologies.

The region is home to significant critical mineral reserves. Indonesia and the Philippines constitute the two largest nickel producers in the world, accounting for about 70% nickel outputs by 2025.[36] Vietnam and Indonesia possess around 12% of global bauxite reserves,[37] while Indonesia, Myanmar, and the Philippines contribute to around 4% of global copper production.[38] Vietnam, Myanmar, and Malaysia possess considerable reserves of rare earth elements (REE): Vietnam is home to approximately 19% of the world's REE deposits, Myanmar accounts for about 13% of global REE production, and Malaysia's REE reserves are valued at around $160 billion.[39] Although the global push toward renewable energy development has positioned Southeast Asia as a key player in critical mineral supply chains, the region's role has remained largely confined to raw material extraction, as most Southeast Asian countries lack refining and specialized production capabilities. Consequently, these countries need to rely on other states for material processing, particularly China, which dominates 80% of the global rare earth refining market.[40] Without localized refining and manufacturing capabilities, the current configuration creates a major dependency on China and renders Southeast Asia vulnerable to geopolitical changes involving China and the United States.

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36 "The Role of Critical Minerals in Clean Energy Transitions," International Energy Agency, May 2021.

37 "Bauxite," Geoscience Australia, December 19, 2023 ~ https://www.ga.gov.au/scientific-topics/minerals/mineral-resources-and-advice/australian-resource-reviews/bauxite.

38 International Energy Agency, "Southeast Asia Energy Outlook 2022," May 2022, 130.

39 Sharon Seah and Mirza Sadaqat Huda, *Enhancing ASEAN's Role in Critical Mineral Supply Chains* (Singapore; ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2024).

40 Han Phoumin, "ASEAN's Strategic Role in Securing Critical Minerals for Clean Energy and High-Tech Futures," Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia, December 16, 2024 ~ https://www.eria.org/news-and-views/asean-s-strategic-role-in-securing-critical-minerals-for-clean-energy-and-high-tech-futures.

Similarly, the region's reserves make it well-placed to become a major player in the global battery value chain. However, only Indonesia has so far taken definite steps toward developing its battery industry, as evidenced by the establishment of the Indonesia Battery Corporation in 2021, whereas other countries such as Thailand and Malaysia are still in the early stages of development in this field.[41]

To mitigate geopolitical risks and enhance their resilience during the energy transition, Southeast Asian countries must reduce their dependency on foreign supply chains. This requires strengthening industrial policies to move beyond raw material extraction to higher-value production, focusing on building domestic industrial capacity for mineral processing and product manufacturing. Similarly, to support self-sufficiency, the region must maximize the value of biofuel production in countries with well-established palm oil industries, such as Indonesia and Malaysia, as a substitute for imported oil.

To lessen reliance on external actors, states must adjust their trade policies to look beyond their traditional focus on extraregional exports and place greater emphasis on fostering intraregional trade. This could start with solar panel trade, given that Cambodia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam already have the capacity to manufacture these products and could gradually expand to include batteries, charge controllers, and other related items once the region's capability to produce them in scale takes off. Strengthening intraregional trade and facilitating cross-border supply chain integration not only advances the region's low-carbon energy transition efforts but also reduces the risk of market volatility by enabling Southeast Asia to absorb surplus products arising from the U.S.-China trade war.

Similarly, the region must safeguard itself against supply chain volatility in critical minerals and any possible geopolitical fallout by creating an ASEAN-wide critical mineral reserve mechanism to secure key resources for their energy transitions. This is especially crucial given the scarcity of these resources and the intense competition among major powers to secure access to them to support their own renewable energy development.

Ultimately, the region must maintain its diversification strategy and ensure that no single actor—either state or nonstate—has excessive leverage over ASEAN countries' low-carbon energy transition efforts, whether in supply chains, technology, financing, infrastructure development, or

41 Yeojin Yoo and Yoonhee Ha, "Market Attractiveness Analysis of Battery Energy Storage Systems in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam," *Renewable and Sustainable Energy Reviews* 191 (2024) ~ https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rser.2023.114095.

any other component. The region could consider establishing a regional financing pool to establish autonomy in green energy investments. Likewise, it is important for ASEAN countries to anticipate future risks and prioritize preparedness in policy formulations. By adopting stronger policy measures, Southeast Asia can build a resilient low-carbon energy transition framework and ensure its long-term stability amid changing geopolitical dynamics. ◈

Biosecurity in the Changing Global Order: The Case of Southeast Asia

Julius Cesar Trajano and Jeselyn

In recent years, biosecurity has emerged as a central issue in global security, increasingly linked to national security, economic stability, and international relations. Traditionally, biosecurity referred to measures taken to regulate and prevent biological threats, including infectious disease outbreaks, bioterrorism, and laboratory accidents, from harming humans, animals, and the environment.[1] However, the past few years have demonstrated that biosecurity is no longer just a scientific or public health issue—it is now a key geopolitical concern. The combination of the Covid-19 pandemic, advancements in biotechnology, and rising geopolitical tensions has further intensified the urgency of strengthening biosecurity frameworks at national and regional levels. Countries now recognize that biosecurity is essential, not only for protecting public health but also for preventing the weaponization of life sciences.

Much is happening in this changing world and the international security landscape, and rapid advances in life sciences and technology offer both benefits and risks. Such geopolitical and technological disruptions pose challenges to the implementation of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC). Since 1975, the convention has represented a collective international commitment to prevent the misuse of biological sciences, reinforced the global norm against biological warfare, and served as a foundation for multilateral cooperation on biosecurity issues.

Meanwhile, the intensifying geostrategic competition and tensions among major powers are placing significant pressure on multilateral disarmament and straining multilateralism more broadly. Long-standing international cooperation and norms against biological weapons now confront challenges unlike any seen before. The failure to exercise global

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[1] World Health Organization, *Laboratory Biosecurity Guidance* (Geneva: WHO, 2024).

leadership in upholding the BWC and the lack of formal verification mechanisms place biosecurity at risk.

This essay examines the policy responses of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states to the implications of rapidly evolving geopolitical changes on the BWC and the biosecurity regime. We argue that the global biosecurity regime is increasingly being undermined by four converging factors: (1) the intensification of geostrategic competition among major powers, (2) the erosion of global leadership amid rising geopolitical tensions, (3) the rapid and largely unregulated pace of technological innovation, which is lowering the barriers to developing biological weapons, and (4) mounting challenges to international norms under the BWC. In this context, Southeast Asia faces a growing imperative to strengthen regional biosecurity governance to address these emerging risks and reinforce global security frameworks. By strengthening regional and national biosecurity frameworks, promoting dual-use risk awareness, and fostering cooperation across science, policy, health, and security communities, ASEAN can play a vital role in reinforcing global biosecurity norms and mitigating emerging biological threats in Southeast Asia.

The growing role of the scientific community as an important stakeholder can also help enhance biosecurity in a rapidly evolving and changing world. We highlight the critical role of both state and nonstate actors in Southeast Asia in enhancing biosecurity at the regional and national levels amid geopolitical challenges and the difficulties of regulating emerging dual-use technologies in the life sciences.

Geopolitical and Technological Challenges to Biosecurity

Geopolitical tensions among major powers. The ongoing Russia-Ukraine war has posed challenges to the effectiveness of the BWC. Russia accused the United States and Ukraine of collaborating to develop biological weapons in violation of the convention, claiming to have uncovered evidence of U.S.-funded biological laboratories in Ukraine engaged in military-biological activities.[2] These allegations led to a formal consultative meeting under Article V of the BWC, marking a rare invocation of the

[2] "Outstanding Risks Related to the Military Biological Activities of the United States and Ukraine in Ukrainian Territory in Violation of the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on Their Destruction," submitted by the Russian Federation, Meeting of the States Parties to the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on Their Destruction, BWC/MSP/2024/WP.2, December 2, 2024 ~ https://docs.un.org/en/BWC/MSP/2024/WP.2.

treaty's dispute resolution mechanism.[3] The United States and Ukraine vehemently denied these accusations, dismissing them as baseless and politically motivated. Both countries assert that their biological research activities in Ukraine are solely for civilian scientific purposes and fully comply with the BWC.[4] These accusations brought renewed attention to the treaty's dispute-resolution mechanisms, highlighting both their utility and limitations as well as the absence of measures for verification.

In recent years, U.S.-funded capacity-building initiatives for laboratory biosecurity in Southeast Asia have faced disinformation campaigns alleging that these laboratories are part of a U.S. strategy to deploy biological and chemical facilities globally for warfare purposes. These laboratories are supported through the Biological Threat Reduction Program under the U.S. Defense Threat Reduction Agency, with the aim of enhancing Southeast Asian countries' ability to detect and respond to animal and human diseases. Disinformation campaigns have exacerbated distrust among the major powers, potentially undermining the positive perception of laboratory biosecurity projects in Southeast Asia and their contributions to regional health and biosecurity.

Meanwhile, the U.S.-China rivalry in biosecurity and biotechnology is intensifying, reflecting broader geopolitical and economic tensions. Both nations are leveraging science and vaccine diplomacy as tools to expand their geopolitical presence. Science diplomacy (the use of scientific collaboration to build diplomatic relationships) and vaccine diplomacy (the strategic distribution of vaccines to build political goodwill) have become influential instruments of soft power in the region.[5] This competition is reshaping global biotech industries and raising concerns about national security, data privacy, and scientific collaboration. The United States has imposed export controls on biotechnology equipment and related technology, most recently in January 2025, because of national security concerns. Such measures essentially aim to prevent China from acquiring

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3 Brendan Cole, "Russia Pushes U.S. Bio Weapons Claims," *Newsweek*, August 27, 2024 ~ https://www.newsweek.com/russia-us-bioweapons-1944761.

4 "Statement to the Meeting of States Parties, U.S. Special Representative Kenneth D. Ward," submitted by the United States, Meeting of the States Parties to the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on Their Destruction, WC/MSP/2024/WP.8, December 17, 2024 ~ https://docs.un.org/en/BWC/MSP/2024/WP.8.

5 "What Is Science Diplomacy?" European Union External Action, March 16, 2022 ~ https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/what-science-diplomacy_en; and Remco Johan Leonard van Dijk and Catherine Yuk-ping Lo, "The Effect of Chinese Vaccine Diplomacy during Covid-19 in the Philippines and Vietnam: A Multiple Case Study from a Soft Power Perspective," *Humanities and Social Science Communications* 10, no. 687 (2023): 1–12.

commercial biotechnologies that could boost its military power.[6] China has since retaliated with similar measures. In March 2025, China announced that it would ban Illumina, a U.S.-based company and the world's top manufacturer of gene-sequencing machines, from importing its gene sequencers into the country.[7] Such technological and geopolitical rivalry impedes much-needed scientific cooperation, particularly in the areas of pandemic research and vaccine development.

The U.S.-China trade war has profound implications for biosecurity in Southeast Asia, affecting pharmaceutical supply chains, vaccine production, and access to essential medical equipment. Many Southeast Asian countries rely on China for active pharmaceutical ingredients and medical supplies,[8] while U.S. technological sanctions on Chinese biotech firms have further complicated research collaborations.[9] As manufacturers relocate to Southeast Asia to avoid tariffs, the lack of stringent biosecurity regulations raises concerns about biocontainment and the safe handling of hazardous biological materials. Countries such as Indonesia and Thailand have responded by investing in domestic pharmaceutical production to reduce dependency on external suppliers, yet gaps in quality control and biosecurity enforcement remain challenges.[10]

The United States' retreat and the lack of biosecurity leadership. Biosecurity in Southeast Asia will face challenges due to the shifting global health priorities of the current Trump administration and the potential reallocation of U.S. foreign aid supporting biosecurity.[11] While some initiatives such as the Global Health Security Agenda have received renewed support, funding for disease surveillance and pandemic preparedness in the

6 Jack Burnham and Johanna Yang, "New U.S. Export Controls Seek to Prevent China from Weaponizing Biotech," Foundation for Defense of Democracies, Policy Brief, January 21, 2025.

7 Ankit Kankar, "Beijing Bans U.S. Gene-Sequencing Giant from Selling in China, Fueling Local Biotech Expansion and Intensifying Geopolitical Tensions," BioSpectrum, March 5, 2025 ~ https://www.biospectrumasia.com/analysis/89/25682/china-bans-illumina-deepening-u-s-china-trade-rift-and-reshaping-global-biotech.html.

8 Xue Gong, "Biopharmaceuticals Rising: China's Strategic Pivot to Southeast Asia amid Great Power Tech Competition," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 23, 2025.

9 *Biosecure Act*, House Oversight and Accountability, H.R. 8333, 118th Cong. (May 10, 2024).

10 "Menkes resmikan produksi vaksin Biotis pacu kemandirian dalam negri" [Minister of Health Officially Launches Biotis Vaccine Production to Spur Domestic Independence], Antara News, September 11, 2024; and Antonio Postigo, "The Vaccine R&D System and Production Network in Thailand: Possibilities for Strengthening Domestic and International Partnership," *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 23/12, February 23, 2023.

11 "Indonesia Health Programmes with USAID on Hold, Minister Says," Channel News Asia, February 6, 2025.

region remains inconsistent.[12] Many of the biosecurity capacity-building projects have been funded primarily by U.S. agencies, and the withdrawal of U.S. funding assistance by the Trump administration poses significant challenges to their sustainability. Southeast Asia's biosecurity efforts are bolstered by support from multiple international partners, including the European Union, Japan, and Canada, but this might be inadequate to match U.S. assistance, and it remains to be seen whether China will be able to use this opportunity to broaden its influence on biosecurity in the region.

The biosecurity implications of emerging technologies. The World Economic Forum's *Global Risks Report 2025* warns that advances in artificial intelligence–driven biotech will make biological weapons easier and cheaper to develop over the next decade.[13] There is also heightened risk that nonstate actors could develop such weapons, increasing the severity of future terrorist attacks. Strict protocols and monitoring of materials, technological tools, and equipment are currently lacking to mitigate the risk of weaponizing biotechnology.

Meetings of the UN Working Group on the Strengthening of the BWC accentuate the growing relevance of modern biotechnologies (for example, gene editing, synthetic biology, and DNA synthesis) and the interaction with other emerging technologies (e.g., artificial intelligence) to the convention. Such scientific and technological advancements in the life science sectors, with potential dual-use applications that can be misused or misapplied either accidentally or deliberately, should be considered in a BWC review process.[14]

Countries such as Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam are boosting their biotechnology research and development with state-led initiatives spearheaded by national science and technology research agencies, often in collaboration with industry partners. The fear is that some rapid innovations may create loopholes that could be exploited by dangerous people or organizations, damaging the environment and public health. A key challenge is that governance and regulatory frameworks in most ASEAN member states have yet to catch up with the rapid developments occurring in the life sciences.

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12 "Global Health Security," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ~ https://www.cdc.gov/global-health/topics-programs/global-health-security.html.

13 Mark Elsner, Grace Atkinson, and Saadia Zahidi, *Global Risks Report 2025, World Economic Forum*, 20th Edition (Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2025).

14 "Examples of Advancements in Science and Technology Relevant to the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention and Worthy of Review," submitted by the United Kingdom, Working Group on the Strengthening of the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on Their Destruction, Fourth Session, BWC/WG/4/WP.6, August 19, 2024.

Southeast Asia's Efforts to Enhance Biosecurity Cooperation

These geopolitical shifts alongside advances in biotechnology have underscored the urgent need for a coordinated and well-funded biosecurity strategy in Southeast Asia. ASEAN has taken steps to bolster its collective response to biological threats, including the establishment of the ASEAN Centre for Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases in 2022 and the adoption of the ASEAN Leaders' Declaration on Strengthening Regional Biosafety and Biosecurity in 2024.[15]

At the same time, Southeast Asia faces growing biological threats from climate change, such as the emergence or re-emergence of vector-borne diseases, shifting pathogen virulence, and zoonotic spillovers driven by environmental degradation. Rising temperatures, deforestation, and changing rainfall patterns are altering disease ecologies, placing further strain on already fragile public health and biosecurity systems in the region.

Southeast Asian countries have repeatedly expressed their concerns over the implications of deteriorating geopolitical stability and the unchecked dual use of scientific advancements for the implementation of the BWC and global biosecurity frameworks. Several ASEAN members actively participate in the Working Group on the Strengthening of the BWC, which was launched in 2022. It is essential to adopt a comprehensive approach to bridge political divides and collectively focus on the shared objectives of the convention. They collectively argue that amid contemporary geopolitical and security challenges, a comprehensive approach toward establishing verification and compliance measures is essential in enhancing the BWC and biosecurity. They emphasize that strengthening the BWC is now more critical than ever.

In response to rapidly evolving geopolitical and technological disruptions, Southeast Asian countries have been improving biosecurity and responding to global biosecurity challenges through regional cooperation and capacity building. In the 2024 ASEAN Leaders' Declaration on Strengthening Regional Biosafety and Biosecurity, states made a collective call for the need to "ensure the provision of necessary human resources for biosafety and biosecurity in a sustainable manner through training, education and certification for all relevant personnel."[16] It recognized

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15 "Stronger Health Systems: Our Lifeline in a Pandemic," *The ASEAN*, special edition, December 2020 ~ https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/The-ASEAN-Special-Edition-Nov-Dev-2020.pdf.

16 "ASEAN Leaders' Declaration on Regional Biosafety and Biosecurity," ASEAN, October 9, 2024 ~ https://asean.org/asean-leaders-declaration-on-strengthening-regional-biosafety-and-biosecurity.

that "potential weaknesses in biosafety and biosecurity can give rise to accidental or deliberate pathogen release and misuse in securing, handling, and manipulating high-risk pathogens and associated data, especially in our region where member states have varying levels of capacities and legal instruments."[17] This declaration represents recognition among the ASEAN members of the rising importance of biosecurity and biosafety and provides a strong foundation for robust collaboration among the members themselves, ASEAN dialogue partners, and international organizations.

Southeast Asian countries have been enhancing their information sharing regarding their national implementation of the BWC through regional workshops in collaboration with ASEAN partners and UN bodies. In particular, to support the implementation and effectiveness of the convention, ASEAN states, in collaboration with the ASEAN Regional Forum and other partner countries, regularly organize workshops addressing biological threat reduction, disease surveillance and detection, and pandemic preparedness, management, and response.[18] Such workshops allow the states to strengthen their biosecurity cooperation.

A key feature of ASEAN's capacity-building programs with external partners is the conduct of tabletop exercises aimed at identifying emerging biological risks, testing national and regional preparedness and response measures, and sharing best practices and lessons in managing bio-risks. However, challenges remain in securing sustainable funding, standardizing biosecurity regulations across member states, and improving data-sharing mechanisms. Investments in biotechnology and synthetic biology research are becoming increasingly crucial as nations recognize the need for early-warning systems to detect and contain diseases and bio-threat outbreaks before they escalate into a global pandemic.

Measures Needed to Further Strengthen Regional Biosecurity

Integrate biosecurity into national security strategies. National governments currently serve as the primary actors responsible for implementing policies, securing critical infrastructure, and ensuring regulatory enforcement. Biosecurity is a state responsibility. However, disparities in governance capacity, public health investment, and political will

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17 "ASEAN Leaders' Declaration on Regional Biosafety and Biosecurity."

18 "Working Paper," submitted by the member states of ASEAN, Meeting of the States Parties to the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on Their Destruction, BWC/MSP/2024/WP.25, December 16, 2024 ~ https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g24/233/76/pdf/g2423376.pdf.

create an uneven landscape for biosecurity preparedness across the region. Some countries, such as Singapore and Thailand, have advanced biosecurity frameworks with strong regulatory oversight and research capabilities, while others face challenges in surveillance infrastructure, laboratory capacity, and interagency coordination.[19] Hence, Southeast Asian states must proactively integrate biosecurity into their national security strategies. This requires developing stronger legal frameworks for pathogen control, enhancing coordination between the security sector and public health agencies, and making greater investments in laboratory biosecurity. Aligning domestic policies with regional and international commitments will ensure that biosecurity measures are preventive, not just reactive. Adherence to the BWC is crucial to strengthening global cooperation and enforcement.

To support these efforts, organizations and state bodies must strengthen interagency collaboration. Biosecurity threats often require coordinated responses across multiple sectors, including health, agriculture, and national security. Improving engagement among relevant ministries and supporting this with joint training exercises can further enhance national and regional preparedness.[20]

Strengthen and implement BWC norms. ASEAN member states recognize the importance of confidence-building measures (CBM) in supporting the BWC and its reporting mechanism. These CBMs are essential to preventing ambiguities and building trust and transparency among convention parties. In recent years, most ASEAN states have improved their submission of annual CBM reports to the UN Implementation Support Unit as they have gained the needed national capacity to collect, analyze, and report data on biological materials and activities.

However, low biosecurity awareness and inadequate understanding of state obligations to the BWC among national stakeholders and relevant government agencies need to be addressed to effectively develop and enhance CBMs beyond the submission of annual reports. Several Southeast Asian officials that the authors consulted emphasized the importance of regular interagency meetings for coordinating and validating the data and activities of relevant agencies pertaining to their implementation of the BWC. In this regard, countries in the region have been organizing national workshops and interagency meetings to address this challenge.

19 Mely Caballero-Anthony et al., "Emerging Biosecurity Landscape in Southeast Asia: Summary of Key Findings," S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), June 21, 2024.

20 Author interviews, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, May 20, 2024.

Furthermore, South-South cooperation among Southeast Asian countries is also fostering capacity-building and information sharing on CBMs.

Promote dual-use risk awareness. Countries in Southeast Asia must also address at the national level the dual-use security implications of modern biotechnologies. A significant hurdle in the region is the uneven and fragmented nature of national policies regarding the implementation of the BWC and broader biosecurity measures. This inconsistency creates vulnerabilities in the regional biosecurity landscape, as countries adhere to varying standards and protocols. Furthermore, technical guidelines covering dual-use research of concern are also needed.

A key step toward promoting awareness regarding dual-use research of concern is the development of a tailored list of biological agents specific to Southeast Asia. There are efforts underway by the ASEAN health sector under the Mitigation of Biological Threats Programme to develop an inventory of high-risk pathogens. A feasibility study on establishing a biobank of high-risk pathogens in the ASEAN region is also being conducted. At the national level, the biobanking landscape in each of the member states is highly fragmented. This problem should be addressed, given that fragmentation fosters the preconditions for risks in biosecurity.[21]

Leverage the critical role of the life science community. Another essential component in addressing the impact of the shifting global order on biosecurity and the dual-use implications of modern biotechnologies is the role of science diplomacy conducted by the life science community.[22] In Southeast Asia, bio-risk and life science associations play a critical role in strengthening technical expertise, fostering cross-border collaboration, and standardizing best practices for biosecurity. These associations, which bring together biosafety/biosecurity officers, laboratory professionals, and life science researchers through national and regional capacity-building conferences and workshops, serve as vital knowledge hubs that complement government efforts. Organizations such as the Asia-Pacific Biosafety Association, BioRisk Association of the Philippines, Biorisk Association of Singapore, Indonesian Biorisk Association, and the Malaysian Biosafety and Biosecurity Association help develop training programs, risk assessment frameworks, and laboratory standards essential for preventing accidental and deliberate biological threats.

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21 Ma. Patricia M. Lansang, "PH, SG leads ASEAN Biobank Feasibility Study 2nd Regional Meeting," Research Institute for Tropical Medicine, Department of Health (Philippines), September 19, 2023 ⁓ https://ritm.gov.ph/ph-sg-leads-abfs-regional-meeting.

22 "Goals and Objectives," Biorisk Association of Singapore ⁓ https://biorisk.sg/about/goals-objectives.

However, despite their contributions, many of these associations operate with limited resources and rely heavily on donor funding, such as from the U.S. Defense Threat Reduction Agency. This raises concerns about sustainability, especially given the Trump administration's efforts to cut foreign assistance.[23] To maximize their impact, ASEAN states must formally integrate bio-risk associations into national and regional policymaking processes, ensuring that their expertise and capacity-building initiatives inform decision-making and contribute to the development of biosecurity norms in the region.

Conclusion: Institutionalizing a Sustainable Biosecurity Network

In 2024, ASEAN leaders declared their commitment to establishing the ASEAN Biosafety and Biosecurity Network to "facilitate knowledge sharing, coordination, and cooperation among ASEAN Member States, partners and relevant stakeholders."[24] In the absence of global leadership on biosecurity, ASEAN and its members should utilize this network to conduct a range of activities to strengthen, for example, regional capabilities and support the universalization and effective implementation of the BWC, particularly in the ASEAN states that have yet to establish biosecurity governance mechanisms and frameworks. The ASEAN Biosafety and Biosecurity Network could be built on existing regional networks and projects that separately address various biosecurity issues. Effective information sharing is crucial for enhancing regional preparedness. Establishing a robust mechanism for the timely exchange of data on communicable diseases, laboratory incidents, and emerging threats can significantly improve early-detection and response efforts.

Given the complex and evolving nature of biological threats, addressing biosecurity concerns in a rapidly changing global and geopolitical environment requires comprehensive efforts that bring together scientific expertise, policy coordination, and cross-sectoral collaboration at both the national and regional levels. ◈

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23 Many regional biosecurity experts depend on programs, partnerships, and funding from the U.S. Defense Threat Reduction Agency. Author interview, Bogor, Indonesia, March 14, 2024.

24 "ASEAN Leaders' Declaration on Strengthening Regional Biosafety and Biosecurity."

Rising to the Challenge: Advancing the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda in Southeast Asia

Nanthini S. and Junli Lim

The year 2025 marks the 25th anniversary of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda. The agenda is a policy framework that recognizes not only the disproportionate impact of conflict on women but also the importance of ensuring the "equal and meaningful" participation of women as key actors in processes of peace and security.[1] Since its creation, the WPS agenda has become a cornerstone of gender equality. It has been integrated into institutions, mechanisms, and policies around the world, including in the United Nations system through mechanisms such as reviews, annual reports of the secretary-general on WPS, and resolutions in the General Assembly.[2] Beyond inclusion in international security mechanisms, the WPS agenda has also been localized in various regional and state national action plans.[3] Not all progress, however, is linear. Current events—most significantly a swift and drastic change in U.S. domestic and foreign policy—are slowing the momentum of global gender equality, particularly in the political sphere.

Gender has always been political, after all, with its narratives galvanized during times of war and peace to enable both the protection and violation of women's rights.[4] Most recently and quite prominently, under the new U.S. administration and in one of President Donald Trump's many executive orders, issues of gender have been framed by the term "gender ideology" to

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1 "Women, Peace and Security," United States Institute of Peace, February 20, 2025.

2 "Joint Press Stakeout on Shared Commitments for the Principles of Women, Peace and Security," Permanent Mission of Switzerland to the United Nations, October 25, 2023 ~ https://www.aplusforpeace.ch/joint-press-stakeout-shared-commitments-principles-women-peace-and-security.

3 "Women, Peace and Security," United Nations Peacekeeping ~ https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/women-peace-and-security-0.

4 Jacqui True and Farkhondeh Akbari, "Geopolitical Narratives of Withdrawal and the Counter-Narrative of Women's Rights Activism in Afghanistan," *Global Studies Quarterly* 4, no. 3 (2004) ~ https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksae051.

produce a definition around "the biological reality of sex."[5] This definition of gender is both narrow and exclusionary, given that it restricts the inclusion of transgender women and other gender-nonconforming communities.[6] Coupled with other executive orders, an increasingly polarized international community, and an ostensible global backlash against women's rights—even among traditional "allies"—the future of the WPS agenda appears bleak.[7]

Among the member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the WPS agenda has only recently gained a foothold, as reflected by the 2022 adoption of the "ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on WPS." As the world comes to terms with a new U.S. administration and its implications for leadership of the liberal international order, fast and drastic change in both foreign and domestic policies has meant less stability for the WPS agenda to take root. Not only does the Trump administration's restrictive sex-based definition of gender set a precedent for other governments, but other matters, such as the administration's tariffs and trade war with China, increasingly occupy the minds and agendas of policymakers and policy implementers, impacting development models.[8] Southeast Asia is no exception.

This essay seeks to assess the impact of these global trends on the implementation of the WPS agenda in Southeast Asia and suggests that a possible measure to withstand and counter instability in implementing the agenda may lie in prioritizing localization. To be "as local as possible and as international as necessary," as highlighted by the Grand Bargain agreement in which states and humanitarian organizations pledged to reform the humanitarian system,[9] also means leaning toward neighboring, like-minded, and partner countries whose strategic priorities more closely

5 "Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government," White House, January 20, 2025 ~ https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/defending-women-from-gender-ideology-extremism-and-restoring-biological-truth-to-the-federal-government.

6 Ibid.; and Danielle Kurtzleben, "Trump's Executive Actions Curbing Transgender Rights Focus on 'Gender Ideology,'" NPR, February 7, 2025 ~ https://www.npr.org/2025/02/07/g-s1-46893/trump-anti-trans-rights-executive-action-gender-ideology-confusion.

7 Susanné Seong-eun Bergsten and Song Ah Lee, "The Global Backlash against Women's Rights," Human Rights Watch, March 7, 2023 ~ https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/03/07/global-backlash-against-womens-rights.

8 Nguyen Xuan Quynh and John Boudreau, "Vietnam's Factory-Based Growth Model at Risk in Global Trade War," Bloomberg, April 17, 2025 ~ https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2025-04-16/vietnam-s-factory-based-growth-model-at-risk-in-global-trade-war.

9 Veronique Barbelet, "As Local as Possible, as International as Necessary," Humanitarian Policy Group and Overseas Development Institute, HPG Working Paper, November 2018 ~ http://cdn-odi-production.s3-website-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/media/documents/As_local_as_possible_as_international_as_necessary_understanding_capacity_and_comp.pdf.

align for allyship. First, the essay examines the impact of geopolitics on gender equality. Subsequently, it analyzes the impact of these shifts on the WPS landscape in Southeast Asia and suggests that developing strong partnerships with neighboring Australia and New Zealand may prove a stable path forward for the future of the WPS agenda in the region.

The Impact of Geopolitics on Gender Equality

In his first term as U.S. president, Trump signed into law the Women, Peace, and Security Act of 2017. The act directed that relevant staff at the Department of State, Department of Defense, and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) be trained in a gender responsive manner, with a focus on women and their meaningful participation in recipient jurisdictions.[10] The law formed a critical part of the global move toward gender equality and reaffirmed the WPS agenda to recognize the role and protection of women in ensuring sustainable peace and security. Other developments around this time included Sweden being the first country to adopt a self-described feminist foreign policy (in 2014), followed by Canada (in 2017), France (in 2019), and Mexico, Spain, Germany, and Chile more recently, among several other states. In Southeast Asia, the WPS agenda gained official recognition in 2017 with the "Joint Statement on Promoting Women, Peace and Security in ASEAN."[11] This then led ASEAN to create related initiatives and mechanisms, such as the ASEAN Women for Peace Registry under the ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation in 2018 and the "ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on WPS" in 2022, which has since become the region's framework for the institutionalization of the WPS agenda.[12]

On resuming office for a second presidential term in January 2025, however, Trump quickly issued a series of executive orders that have already profoundly impacted the global landscape of gender equality and the WPS agenda. While the order "Defending Women from Gender Ideology

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10 *Women, Peace, and Security Act of 2017*, Pub. L. No. 115–68. S. 1141. 131 Stat. 1202 (2017) ~ https://www.congress.gov/115/plaws/publ68/PLAW-115publ68.pdf.

11 ASEAN, "Joint Statement on Promoting Women, Peace and Security in ASEAN," November 16, 2017 ~ https://asean.org/joint-statement-on-promoting-women-peace-and-security-in-asean.

12 "ASEAN Member States and Partners Reaffirm Commitments to Implement the Regional Plan of Action on Women, Peace and Security at High-Level Dialogue Hosted by Indonesia," ASEAN, June 7, 2023 ~ https://wps.asean.org/news/asean-member-states-and-partners-reaffirm-commitments-to-implement-the-regional-plan-of-action-on-women-peace-and-security-at-high-level-dialogue--hosted-by-indonesia; and ASEAN, *ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on Women, Peace and Security* (Jakarta, 2022) ~ https://wps.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/FINAL_ASEAN-Regional-Plan-of-Action-on-Women-Peace-and-Security_reduced-1.pdf.

Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government" may on the surface appear congruent with both the Women, Peace, and Security Act and the WPS agenda, its effect is to exclude already deeply marginalized and vulnerable groups within the community. The order contradicts the act's directive to protect and ensure women's rights and their meaningful participation in accordance with international human rights law—a body of law that defends the dignity of and equality for every individual.[13] The administration's politicization of gender did not end here, however. In concert with other orders such as the "Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing" and "Reevaluating and Realigning United States Foreign Aid," the Trump administration's directives have served to undermine the protection and position of women both in the United States and globally, where USAID-funded programs oriented at WPS were brought to an abrupt halt.[14]

The order to halt humanitarian aid has had severe impacts around the world, particularly in Southeast Asia, where USAID operated missions in at least half of the ASEAN member states. Although an immediate waiver for emergency food aid was granted the same day as the order, the waiver for "life-saving humanitarian assistance…with limited exceptions as needed" was only granted on January 28 with broad wording that confused program staff and implementors.[15] Some of the most devastating effects in the region are seen along the Thai-Myanmar border, which is home to thousands of displaced persons from conflict-affected Myanmar. For instance, the hospital at Umpiem Mai refugee camp that provided essential health services, including basic healthcare and chronic illness treatment, was ordered to shut down immediately. Despite the waiver, medical facilities

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13 *Women, Peace and Security Act of 2017*, section 6; "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," United Nations, December 10, 1948, "International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights," United Nations, December 16, 1966; "Convention on the Rights of the Child," United Nations, November 20, 1989, art. 2; and Saskia Brechenmacher, "Trump's 'Gender Ideology' Attacks Are Following a Global Movement," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Emissary, February 14, 2025 ~ https://carnegieendowment.org/emissary/2025/02/trump-gender-ideology-global-trend-women-lgbtq-rights?lang=en.

14 "Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing," White House, January 20, 2025 ~ https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/ending-radical-and-wasteful-government-dei-programs-and-preferencing; "Reevaluating and Realigning United States Foreign Aid," White House, January 20, 2025 ~ https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/reevaluating-and-realigning-united-states-foreign-aid; and "The Faces of U.S. Pronatalism and the War on Women's Rights—Part One," Population Matters, January 22, 2025 ~ https://populationmatters.org/news/2025/01/the-faces-of-u-s-pronatalism-and-the-war-on-womens-rights-part-one.

15 "Lives on the Line: The Human Impact of U.S. Foreign Aid Shifts," International Council of Voluntary Agencies, March 2025, 8 ~ https://www.icvanetwork.org/uploads/2025/03/Lives-on-the-Line-Final-Report.pdf.

remain inaccessible. Pregnant women and those requiring ongoing health services are at high risk of harm and other complications.[16] Given that women are already disproportionately burdened by armed and violent conflict, the sudden withdrawal of programs and offices that previously served their interests in conflict-affected areas is bound to profoundly impact women's rights and inclusion.

Furthermore, policies toward climate change prevention and mitigation have been set back under the present U.S. administration.[17] Like armed conflict, climate change disproportionately affects women. The climate crisis "fuels increases in conflict and migration, as well as exclusionary, anti-rights political rhetoric targeting women, refugees, and other vulnerable groups."[18] In a region highly prone to natural hazards arising from both environmental and human-induced factors, and with communities dependent on agricultural production, the protection and inclusion of women in meaningful participation of work toward peace and security are severely jeopardized.[19] In Myanmar, for instance, weak environmental safeguards and poor natural resource management, combined with persistent environmental exploitation, have already led to the disempowerment and direct harm of women and girls, such as through sexual exploitation and trafficking.[20] The United States' withdrawal of both humanitarian aid and participation in key environmental frameworks such as the Paris Agreement lends legitimacy to the disempowerment of women globally.

While the impact of U.S. foreign policy on the WPS agenda reverberates worldwide, it is also occurring alongside a growing "anti-rights" and

16 Bill Birtles, Stephen Dziedzic, and Shakeel, "As Donald Trump Signed an Executive Order, Everything Changed for This Clinic 13,000 Kilometres Away," ABC News (Australia), February 8, 2025 ~ https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-02-08/donald-trump-usaid-freeze-hit-thai-myanmar-migrant-camps/104908708.

17 "Putting America First in International Environmental Agreements," White House, January 20, 2025 ~ https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/putting-america-first-in-international-environmental-agreements.

18 "New Report Shows How Feminism Can Be a Powerful Tool to Fight Climate Change," UN Women, December 2, 2023 ~ https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/feature-story/2023/12/new-report-shows-how-feminism-can-be-a-powerful-tool-to-fight-climate-change.

19 Su Mon Thazin Aung, "Trump's Aid Cuts Could Devastate Myanmar More Than Anyone Expects," Fulcrum, February 11, 2025 ~ https://fulcrum.sg/trumps-aid-cuts-could-devastate-myanmar-more-than-anyone-expects.

20 Debby Sze Wan Chan and Ngai Pun, "Renegotiating Belt and Road Cooperation: Social Resistance in a Sino–Myanmar Copper Mine," *Third World Quarterly* 41, no. 12 (2020): 2109–29.

"anti-gender" movement.[21] Additionally, declining political and social support for democracy and democratic institutions has led to more exclusionary practices and behaviors that undermine commitments to the WPS agenda.[22] It was recognized at the 69th session of the Commission on the Status of Women in March in March 2025 that, despite decades of work toward equal rights for women and girls, progress has been slow and uneven.[23]

Looking to the Future: Prioritizing Localization

As new developments on the global stage rapidly unfold and take effect, imminent questions around how developing regions rise to the challenge need to be addressed urgently.[24] ASEAN will feel the effects of the U.S. withdrawal from global leadership, particularly in its gender mainstreaming projects. The ASEAN-USAID project Partnership for Regional Optimization in the Political-Security and Socio-cultural Communities, for example—whose future is still up in the air—has been a substantial funder of ASEAN WPS initiatives, including the first ASEAN regional symposium on WPS in 2019, a regional study in 2021, the regional action plan in 2022, and a high-level summit dialogue in 2023.[25]

Prioritizing localization. Answers as to how to rise to the challenge of a reduced U.S. humanitarian presence and to sustain Southeast Asian WPS efforts may come from strengthening the commitments made in the Grand Bargain agreement in 2016 alongside the will to implement the undertakings already laid out. The Grand Bargain, comprising 68 signatories, is a pledge

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21 Rebecca Holmes, "Feminist Responses to the Growing Anti-Rights Movement at the UN," Global Observatory, October 23, 2024 ~ https://theglobalobservatory.org/2024/10/feminist-responses-to-the-growing-anti-rights-movement-at-the-un; "Gender Equality Goals at Risk as Global Leaders Fail to Stop Rollback on Women's Rights," Walk Free, February 7, 2025 ~ https://www.walkfree.org/news/2025/gender-equality-goals-at-risk-as-global-leaders-fail-to-stop-rollback-on-womens-rightscommission-on-the-status-of-women-csw69; and Phoebe Ryan, Keely Moloney, and Lady Nancy Lisondra, "The Rights Roll-Back Is Gaining Momentum," Devpolicy Blog, July 18, 2024 ~ https://devpolicy.org/the-roll-back-on-rights-is-gaining-momentum-20240718.

22 Joshua Kurlantzick, "Trump's Cuts to Democracy Promotion Like the NED Already Hit Asian Organizations Hard," Council on Foreign Relations, March 3, 2025 ~ https://www.cfr.org/blog/trumps-cuts-democracy-promotion-ned-already-hit-asian-organizations-hard; and "Democracy Index 2023," Economist Intelligence Unit, 2024 ~ https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2023.

23 "Political Declaration on the Occasion of the Thirtieth Anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women," Commission on the Status of Women, United Nations, E/CN.6/2025/L.1, March 6, 2025, item 3 of the provisional agenda ~ https://docs.un.org/en/E/CN.6/2025/L.1.

24 "The Impacts of the U.S. Funding Suspension: ICVA Survey Findings," International Council of Voluntary Agencies, PowerPoint presentation, February 18, 2025 ~ https://www.icvanetwork.org/uploads/2025/02/Impact-of-US-Funding-Suspension-Survey-Results-ICVA.pdf.

25 "Half the Sky: Advancing Women's Roles in Security and Sustainable Peacebuilding," U.S. Mission to ASEAN, February 2, 2024 ~ https://asean.usmission.gov/advancing-womens-roles-insecurity-and-sustainable-peacebuilding.

made between states, NGOs, international NGOs, and UN agencies to "to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the humanitarian action, in order to get more means into the hands of people in need."[26] In short, the Grand Bargain recognized the importance of diversifying funding sources while strengthening localization so that both needs shrink and the delivery of humanitarian services is made more efficient. By 2020, however, among signatories who had pledged to give at least 25% of their humanitarian funding to local and national stakeholders, only 3.4% was so directed.[27]

Grand Bargain 2.0 was then introduced in 2021 to refocus priorities and streamline processes and structures over a two-year period. An independent review in 2022, however, revealed that there was no increase of direct funding to local actors—in fact, direct funding had dropped to 1.8%.[28] This demonstrates a continued lack of connection between international humanitarian actors and country-level needs, on the one hand, and an inequitable distribution of funding among crises, on the other.[29] Furthermore, the review found that while gender equality and women's empowerment remained priorities at an institutional level and across the humanitarian aid system, they featured less prominently overall in Grand Bargain 2.0 processes and dialogues.[30] Significantly, the review stressed the need for greater political coordination, with focus on high-level political solutions.[31] This, alongside the drive toward localization, is particularly important, given the current geopolitical landscape and the renewed politicization of gender toward invoking rights-restricting and protection-reducing policies.

Evidence of the impact localization can have on advancing the WPS agenda can be seen in the growing localization movement. For example, the first regional action plan explicitly based on the WPS agenda was the "2004 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Action Plan for the Promotion of Gender Equality." It was released just after the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 that reaffirms the role of women

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26 "The Grand Bargain," Inter-Agency Standing Committee, February 20, 2025 ~ https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/grand-bargain.

27 Andrew Green, "Why the 'Grand Bargain' Failed to Deliver Its Promise of Local Funding," Devex, July 14, 2023 ~ https://www.devex.com/news/why-the-grand-bargain-failed-to-deliver-its-promise-of-local-funding-105848.

28 Ibid.

29 Victoria Metcalfe-Hough, Wendy Fenton, and Farah Manji, "The Grand Bargain in 2022: An Independent Review," Humanitarian Policy Group and ODI, HPG Commissioned Report, 2023, 13–27 ~ https://odi.org/en/publications/the-grand-bargain-in-2022-an-independent-review.

30 Ibid., 98.

31 Ibid., 24.

in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, stresses their importance in promoting peace and security, and calls for the protection of women and girls from gender-based violence.[32] Other regional plans followed, including the "Pacific Islands Forum Regional Action Plan (2012–2015)," the League of Arab States' "Protection of Arab Women: Peace and Security, Executive Action Plan 2015–2030," and the African Union's "Continental Results Framework Monitoring and Reporting on the Implementation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in Africa (2018–2028)."[33]

In Southeast Asia, the localization of the WPS agenda is reflected in the "ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on Women, Peace and Security" published in 2022. As the culmination of decades-long work, this plan emerged from several regional commitments over the years such as the 2004 "Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women in the ASEAN Region" and the 2017 "ASEAN Declaration on the Gender-Responsive Implementation of the ASEAN Community 2025 and Sustainable Development Goals." Part of the plan's objective is to deliver clear guidance for the implementation of the WPS regionally and at the national and local levels.[34] In large part, therefore, actions to implement the WPS agenda rely on their applicability to the Southeast Asian context.

As such, ASEAN's regional action plan was developed to be "understandable, [be] realistic, fit the local context, and [be] doable by all stakeholders."[35] It explicitly expands the scope and understanding of "security" beyond conflict into the realm of human security.[36] This in turn highlights the plan's application to other challenges such as climate change and disaster-mitigation and response. Not only are natural hazards a significant concern in disaster-prone Southeast Asia, but disaster-mitigation is also an area in which the WPS agenda is particularly applicable, considering the disproportionate impacts of disasters on women and girls. The plan also demonstrates interoperability with other ASEAN mechanisms such as the AADMER (ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response) Work Programme 2021–2025, which stipulates

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32 "Decision No. 14/04, 2004 OSCE Action Plan for the Promotion of Gender Equality," Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Ministerial Council, Sofia, 2004 ~ https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/7/d/23295.pdf.

33 "Regional Action Plans and Strategies," Women, Peace and Security Focal Points Network, February 20, 2025 ~ https://wpsfocalpointsnetwork.org/regional-action-plans.

34 ASEAN, *ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on Women, Peace and Security.*

35 Ibid.

36 S. Nanthini and Tamara Nair, "Covid-19 and the Impacts on Women," S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), NTS Insight, July 29, 2020 ~ https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/nts/covid-19-and-the-impacts-on-women.

strengthening cooperation among local, national, and international actors in disaster response.[37] Therefore, even facing the ill headwinds of the global backlash against gender equality, Southeast Asian countries—through ASEAN—should continue on this localization trajectory, taking up the call to mainstream gender in its ongoing and future activities.

Strengthening regional partnerships. While there have not been explicit indications regarding the long-term future of USAID and, in turn, the future of potential funding for projects similar to the ones it supported, this may also prove to be an opportunity for ASEAN states to look elsewhere and diversify their partnerships. This could be done through strengthening collaborations with other like-minded actors closer to home.

Neighboring countries, notably Australia and New Zealand—both of which are dialogue partners with ASEAN—have been increasing their focus on gender. For example, in 2024, Australia released its domestic policy framework on gender, "Working for Women: A Strategy for Gender Equality," which is guided by its 2021–31 national action plan on WPS. The framework focuses on goals such as ending gender-based violence, advancing women's economic security, and closing representation gaps.[38] Similarly, in 2025 the Australian government launched its International Gender Equality Strategy, which focuses on the country's international obligations to promote gender-responsive peace and security efforts through "advocacy, diplomacy and leadership in multilateral, regional and bilateral settings." This strategy could present an opportunity for ASEAN and its member states to further strengthen and expand their partnerships with Australia, filling in gaps that have been left by the departure of USAID. For instance, Australia could assist in terms of states' protecting and advancing women's sexual and reproductive health or in working with ASEAN to further develop applications of the WPS agenda to emerging challenges such as climate change, natural hazards, and cybersecurity—all of which are areas of interest in ASEAN's WPS regional action plan.[39] Australia has previously supported ASEAN initiatives related to women, such as its flagship Southeast Asia Gender-Based Violence Prevention Platform, which runs from 2024 to 2029 and brings together actors from all levels of society

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37 ASEAN Secretariat, "Localisation Trends and Disaster Risk Management in ASEAN: Strengthening the Local Actors," ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Trend Report 3 (2024) ~ https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/ASCC-RD_Flagship-Report_DM3-2024.pdf.

38 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Australia), *Australia's International Gender Equality Strategy* (Canberra, 2025) ~ https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/australias-international-gender-equality-strategy.pdf.

39 ASEAN, *ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on Women, Peace and Security*.

to develop policies in line with the "ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on the Elimination of Violence Against Women."[40]

Similarly, New Zealand is leaning toward Southeast Asia, and cooperation and collaboration on the WPS agenda could be a potential pillar to increase and strengthen its engagement with the region.[41] The New Zealand military is already incorporating a "gender perspective lens" into its operations, including local and international humanitarian deployments.[42] This is done by training personnel as "gender focal points" to be attached to units, branches, and headquarters to ensure an inclusive perspective during decision-making.[43] Such a strategy could also be adapted by Southeast Asian states in line with the "ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on WPS." Assistance for this could be provided through engagement via the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting–Plus (ADMM-Plus) Experts' Working Group on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief—currently co-chaired by New Zealand and Singapore—which has a core focus for the ongoing term that includes WPS. ADMM-Plus is meant to be a platform for member militaries to work on initiatives that increase defense cooperation and strengthen peace and stability in the broader region, including in gender policies. By supporting ASEAN states in developing and implementing gender mainstreaming strategies in their militaries as part of their WPS initiatives, this would also fill a gap in regional disaster operations.

Conclusion

In a time of increasing geopolitical volatility, gender has once again become controversial, marked by intensifying polarization and politicization. There has been a stalling of progress on, and even pushback against, gender equality and the rights and empowerment of women and girls in many countries. The question remains: How can ASEAN continue to evolve and progress in terms of addressing gender-related issues while facing a changing world order?

This retreat from action on gender issues by international actors and traditional allies such as the United States has forced the world, including

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40 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Australia), *Australia's International Gender Equality Strategy*.

41 David Capie, "New Zealand's Tilt towards Southeast Asia: More Than Rhetoric?" Fulcrum, June 21, 2024 ~ https://fulcrum.sg/new-zealands-tilt-towards-southeast-asia-more-than-rhetoric.

42 "New Zealand Defence Force Incorporates Gender Perspectives on Military Operations," New Zealand Defence Force, Media Centre, August 28, 2024 ~ https://www.nzdf.mil.nz/media-centre/news/new-zealand-defence-force-incorporates-gender-perspectives-on-military-operations.

43 Ibid.

Southeast Asian states, to reassess their WPS trajectories and move away from long-set dependencies; it has reinforced the need to diversify partners and avenues of support. This in turn has breathed new life into the concept of localization and its application to the WPS agenda. By identifying like-minded states and close neighbors as partners in working on WPS issues, states can raise awareness, seek to fill gaps, and collaborate on maintaining the overall momentum of gender equality.

It is, therefore, a priority for ASEAN to uphold practical, tangible actions to implement its aims. Leaders owe it to their communities to respect states' commitments to the WPS agenda, not just by taking concrete actions to implement the existing frameworks to which they have already agreed but by developing the agenda further with local resonance. ASEAN member countries should, therefore, not simply rest on their laurels after the development of the regional action plan on WPS; there is a need to convert these action items into tangible outcomes. After all, women are half of the world's population, and as the world heads into an increasingly uncertain future, ensuring the role of women in peace and security processes will be ever more necessary. ◈

Humanitarian Action in a Changing Global Order

Alistair D.B. Cook and Keith Paolo C. Landicho

The changing global order is redefining both how humanitarian crises unfold and how the world responds to them. The Covid-19 pandemic, followed by crises in Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Haiti, Myanmar, Palestine, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, and Syria, created significant humanitarian emergencies and exposed the limitations of the current humanitarian system. Beginning in the early 2000s, and notably with the 2008 financial crisis, geopolitical shifts began reshaping international relations, development priorities, and the security landscape with particularly profound impacts on humanitarian work, as donor countries began to alter their government departments and agencies to implement aid policies with a more explicit link to their national security concerns.[1] Furthermore, the UN Security Council members now often compensate for failing to agree on political solutions to conflict by focusing on their humanitarian dynamics to negotiate compromises.[2] There is clearly a need to rethink the roles and responsibilities of state and nonstate actors in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) amid increasing global fragmentation and the renewed politicization and securitization of aid.

The Asia-Pacific is prone to disasters and complex, multidimensional conflicts with significant implications for those in need. Declining respect for international humanitarian law has led to the increasing inaccessibility of affected populations and the targeting of humanitarian workers at the

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1 Alistair D.B. Cook, "Global Humanitarian Action at the Crossroads," S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), IDSS Paper, no. 047/2025, March 31, 2025 ~ https://rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/idss/ip25047-global-humanitarian-action-at-the-crossroads.

2 Richard Gowan, "Gaza and the Rise of the 'Humanitarian Council,'" *Journal of International Peacekeeping* 27, no. 3 (2024): 264–73 ~ https://doi.org/10.1163/18754112-27030003.

same time as decreasing financial support from traditional donors. The dominant model of humanitarian aid centered on Western donors and international NGOs is inadequate for crises today, and the UN-led system has proved itself only able to implement incremental changes rather than address the fundamental challenges the world faces. With an increasingly fraught international system dominated by major-power competition, the future of international humanitarian work confronts a rise in interest-based humanitarian assistance alongside the need to diversify funding sources and actors to reach affected populations and meet their needs.

This essay examines the crossroads at which humanitarian action currently stands as a result of the changing global order. It discusses the geopolitical shifts reshaping humanitarian priorities, the delivery of aid, and the emergence of new actors. By integrating these geopolitical and operational realities, this analysis seeks to chart potential pathways in the face of policy shifts, funding constraints, and operational hurdles. The global community must navigate international fragmentation to create a new system for humanitarian action that is rooted in and reflective of global, regional, and local realities and that safeguards humanitarian principles. The experience in the Asia-Pacific offers an important case study of these emerging dynamics that can inform wider global changes to the governance of humanitarian action.

Humanitarian Dynamics in the Asia-Pacific

The Asia-Pacific is frequently subjected to natural hazards from hydrometeorological events, such as tropical cyclones and recurring floods, that are likely to increase in frequency and intensity due to climate change and geophysical threats such as earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. These hazards are further compounded by political instability and conflict in parts of the region. According to a UN report, conflict and natural hazards are the primary drivers of humanitarian need. In 2024, for instance, 323.4 million people around the world required humanitarian assistance.[3] This figure includes both political conflicts, such as the Russia-Ukraine war, the Israel-Palestine conflict, and the military coup and civil war escalation in Myanmar, and disasters, such as Typhoon Yagi, which was the strongest

3 "Global Humanitarian Overview 2025," UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, December 4, 2024, 17 ⇝ https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/world/global-humanitarian-overview-2025-enarfres.

storm to strike mainland Southeast Asia that year, and six consecutive tropical cyclones that struck the Philippines within two months.

Another critical factor in the provision of humanitarian assistance is the evolving risk to involved personnel. Increased threats not only endanger lives but also disrupt established channels of aid delivery. This challenge is evidenced by a troubling rise in humanitarian personnel deaths—281 in 2024, making it the deadliest year on record—after 280 in 2023 and 118 in 2022.[4] Operating in precarious environments, humanitarian workers also now face increasingly restrictive access. In Myanmar, for example, bureaucratic hurdles and a repressive operational climate continue to impede aid efforts to communities affected by the political-military conflict and the earthquake in March 2025.[5] Similarly, in Gaza a survey of 35 aid agencies revealed that humanitarian access has deteriorated, despite an International Court of Justice ruling in January 2024 aimed at preventing genocide and irreparable harm.[6]

Simultaneously, global funding patterns for humanitarian aid are undergoing significant realignment. In 2024, of the $33.89 billion in tracked total funding, the top five donor countries to global humanitarian efforts were the United States, which funded over 40%; Germany, the European Commission, and the United Kingdom, which funded between 6% and 8% each; and Sweden, which contributed approximately 4%, to the UN-led humanitarian system. The Asia-Pacific accounted for approximately $3.48 billion, or 10%, of the total tracked humanitarian expenditure worldwide in 2024.[7] Almost all the countries in the Asia-Pacific received some level of aid, and almost half of this funding went to World Food Programme activities, with recipients ranging from Afghanistan to the Philippines.[8] However, the trend of the last few years illustrates that the donor dynamics of the global humanitarian system are now in a period

4 "2024 Deadliest Year Ever for Aid Workers, UN Humanitarian Office Reports," UN News, November 22, 2024 ~ https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/11/1157371; and "World Humanitarian Day 2024: With Number of Aid Workers Killed Reaching Record High, UN and Partners Demand Those in Power #ActforHumanity," UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), August 19, 2024 ~ https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/world/world-humanitarian-day-2024-number-aid-workers-k`illed-reaching-record-high-un-and-partners-demand-those-power-actforhumanity-19-august-2024.

5 "Myanmar/Burma," European Commission, European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations ~ https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/where/asia-and-pacific/myanmarburma_en.

6 "New Survey Reveals Extent of Israel's Failure to Improve Humanitarian Access in Gaza in the Year Since ICJ Ruling," Oxfam International, Press Release, January 27, 2025 ~ https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/new-survey-reveals-extent-israels-failure-improve-humanitarian-access-gaza-year-icj.

7 "Humanitarian Aid Contributions 2024," OCHA, Financial Tracking Service ~ https://fts.unocha.org.

8 Ibid.

of flux. Although this period has witnessed a significant increase in populations in need, international financial support to them has shrunk to the extent that only 49% of these efforts were funded in 2024. This number is down from the pre-pandemic level of 61% in 2018. Aid cuts from among the largest donors—the United States (under its "America first" policy), the UK, Germany, and Sweden—are indicative of a broader trend of less money being made available from traditional donors.[9]

Evolving Humanitarian Approaches

The changing global order is reshaping humanitarian action from being a system organized and led through the UN toward greater diversity in function and form. It has been suggested that this is a re-emerging "solidarism," a "more universalist, interventionist, and justice-oriented type of international society," that offers new modes of international cooperation and a transboundary responsibility to both provide and receive aid.[10] This re-emergence of solidarism coincides with a demand by practitioners and academics to transition from a supply-driven to a demand-driven model of humanitarian assistance.[11] Today, there is a growing consensus that humanitarian assistance must align with the self-identified needs and domestic development agendas of the affected communities.

However, there is concern that a shift toward a demand-driven model risks commodifying humanitarian assistance or creating market-based dynamics that push affected communities to make choices based on

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9 "America First Policy Directive to the Secretary of State," White House, Presidential Actions, January 20, 2025 ~ https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/america-first-policy-directive-to-the-secretary-of-state; Grace Stanhope and Riley Duke, "UK Aid Cut: Implications for an Increasingly Lonely Australia," Lowy Institute, Interpreter, February 25, 2025 ~ https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/uk-aid-cut-implications-increasingly-lonely-australia; Andrew Green, "Germany Plans Billions in Cuts to Development, Humanitarian Aid," Devex, September 10, 2024 ~ https://www.devex.com/news/germany-plans-billions-in-cuts-to-development-humanitarian-aid-108259; and Christiane Kliemann, "Swedish Aid Cuts Dent 'Decades of Work' in Global South," EADI Blog, May 28, 2024 ~ https://www.developmentresearch.eu/?p=1863.

10 Ipek Zeynep Ruacan, "Natural Disasters, Principled Humanitarianism, and the Prospects for a New Solidarism in International Solidarity," *Alternatives* 50, no. 2 (2025): 443 ~ https://doi.org/10.1177/03043754251319943.

11 Jeremy Konyndyk and Rose Warden, "People-Driven Response: Power and Participation in Humanitarian Action," Center for Global Development, CGD Policy Paper, no. 155, September 2019, 1–30 ~ https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/people-driven-response.pdf; and Catherine Bragg, "International Humanitarian Assistance: What Must Change," RSIS, RSIS Commentary, March 11, 2019 ~ https://rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/international-humanitarian-assistance-what-must-change.

what is available rather than what is needed.[12] There also appears to be a re-emergence of more explicit conditionality in aid commitments among donor governments that risks undermining humanitarian principles and signifies a shift toward interest-based or transactional aid. Historically, the priorities of international donors shaped aid, leading to a one-way transfer of resources that often fostered a "beneficiary mentality."

Traditionally, a few Western countries have dominated humanitarian financing and policy debates. However, the reality of humanitarian action in the present day reflects the growing diversity of actors in the wider international community, with humanitarian efforts occurring locally, bilaterally, and regionally, particularly for countries outside the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.[13] This was evident at the UN World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, where there was a focus on diverse participation from across the world and recognizing the work of those taking different "positions of responsibility."[14]

The main outcome of the 2016 summit was a commitment to the Grand Bargain, an agreement that committed countries to increase the direct humanitarian funding of local organizations from 3.5% in 2015 to 25% by 2020. Yet that goal was not met, and in 2021 the amount regressed to around 2.1%. The commitment was relaunched in 2021 as the Grand Bargain 2.0 to revitalize efforts and extend the timeframe to 2030. The inability of the humanitarian system to reform itself at the speed and scale needed has made the effects of the current policy shifts on humanitarian and development aid in Western donor countries, particularly the United States, much more pronounced.

There is, however, a growing recognition that humanitarian actors play different functions and take different forms across the world, often outside the formal UN-led system. The Asia-Pacific is a notable example of how middle powers like Australia, Indonesia, Japan, and South Korea operate through a latticework of bilateral and multilateral agreements that both dilute major-power influences and carve out functionally

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12 Jane Midgley, "Engaging the Humanitarian Marketplace: Values, Valuations and the Making of Humanitarian Geographies," *Environment and Planning F* 3, no. 4 (2024): 305–22 ~ https://doi.org/10.1177/26349825231163142.

13 "Leaving No One Behind: Humanitarian Effectiveness in the Age of the Sustainable Development Goals," OCHA, 2016.

14 Alistair D.B. Cook, "Positions of Responsibility: People-Centered Approaches to Humanitarian Action," in *Non-traditional Security in the Asia-Pacific: A Decade of Perspectives*, ed. Alistair D.B. Cook and T. Nair (Singapore: World Scientific, 2021), 199–203.

differentiated spaces for themselves.[15] Recognizing similar patterns within the global humanitarian system, the roles of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the European Union in responding to the devastation of Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar in 2008 emerged as "positions of responsibility," in which ASEAN crafted a crucial diplomatic role for negotiating access to the affected communities, and the EU and wider international humanitarian community provided funding and support to disaster relief.[16] The most prominent example of regional humanitarian action was the establishment in 2011 of the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre), which coordinates member states' emergency responses primarily to disasters caused by natural hazards at the request of affected states. Alongside formal state-based activities, there is also a humanitarian community of different traditions that supports such efforts in the region through its own networks. This includes the International Council of Voluntary Organizations and its hub in Bangkok, which supports local NGOs in the region on national-level platforms (for example, the Humanitarian Forum Indonesia, Indonesian Development Humanitarian Alliance, and Jejaring Mitra Kemanusiaan).

Amid changing geopolitics, humanitarian action will be forced to move away from traditional donors and operational models to adapt to the new aid provision environment. Efforts to address these fundamental shifts are seen by some to signal a move toward transitional polycentrism in the Asia-Pacific that provides a more distributed system of global governance characterized by multiple centers of authority and influence.[17] This could provide an opportunity for more inclusive and needs-driven approaches that reflect the mantra of "locally led, regionally supported, and international as necessary." However, concern remains that this shift away from the traditional system will ultimately mean that there are fewer resources available to meet humanitarian needs.

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15 Sarah Teo, *Middle Powers in Asia Pacific Multilateralism: A Differential Framework* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2022).

16 Alistair D.B. Cook, "Positions of Responsibility: A Comparison of ASEAN and EU Approaches towards Myanmar," *International Politics* 47 (2010): 433–49 ∼ https://doi.org/10.1057/ip.2010.7.

17 Alan Chong, "International Security in the Asia-Pacific: Transcending ASEAN towards Transitional Polycentrism—an Introduction," in *International Security in the Asia-Pacific*, ed. Alan Chong (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 1–41 ∼ https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-60762-7_1.

Emerging Actors amid Shifting Power Dynamics

These fundamental shifts in the changing global order are causing Western donors and UN agencies that were once dominant to be complemented—and at times challenged—by local actors, emerging powers, and regional coalitions. This transformation, fueled by Western donor retreat, is reshaping humanitarian priorities, response mechanisms, and geopolitical strategies, particularly in the Asia-Pacific. China, India, and Japan are often cited as non-Western states with a growing role in humanitarian action inside and outside the Asia-Pacific. These countries, along with regional and multilateral coalitions and the private sector, signal the rise of new actors, which will also be accompanied by new challenges.

China has undertaken significant institutional reforms to strengthen its HADR capabilities, notably through establishing the Ministry of Emergency Management and the China International Development Cooperation Agency in 2018.[18] These efforts aim to streamline domestic disaster management while supporting China's role in global humanitarian initiatives. However, its overseas efforts remain largely channeled through multiple government agencies and the private sector, highlighting a significant challenge to the function and form of the formal humanitarian aid system. While China's approach remains largely bilateral, Beijing has nonetheless expanded its engagement with the formal humanitarian system, contributing $8.0 million in humanitarian aid in 2024.[19] This growing, albeit relatively minor, involvement in funding multilateral humanitarian aid aligns with China's broader strategy of using humanitarian diplomacy to enhance its international image.[20] Its commitments are not in line to replace the traditional Western donors; such a policy shift would be a significant departure from its current trajectory where China's overseas partnerships are firmly bound to its political agenda and worldview. Perhaps more likely with China is the identification of niche contributions that provide particular support in specific areas.

India's humanitarian efforts have been largely directed toward its own neighborhood, especially following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and the 2015 Nepal earthquake. Its assistance remains primarily bilateral, given the

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18 Lina Gong, "China's Emerging Disaster Diplomacy: What It Means for Southeast Asia," RSIS, February 6, 2020 ~ https://rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/nts/chinas-emerging-disaster-diplomacy-what-it-means-for-southeast-asia.

19 "Humanitarian Aid Contributions."

20 Lina Gong, "Humanitarian Diplomacy as an Instrument for China's Image-Building," *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 6, no. 3 (2021): 238–52 ~ https://doi.org/10.1177/20578911211019257.

limitations of regional organizations such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation in coordinating disaster response.[21] India's ambition to be the Asia-Pacific's "first responder" in humanitarian crises was recently illustrated at the BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) Summit in Bangkok in April 2025, where leaders from member states agreed to enhance HADR efforts in light of the devastating earthquake in Myanmar a week earlier. As India emerges as an important global player, there are opportunities for it to identify niche areas for contributing to global humanitarian efforts. For example, as one observer noted, India could replace USAID as the single-largest "in kind" donor to the World Food Programme under the same arrangement that the United States had, and it could do so using national food supplies that would otherwise spoil, offering Indian logistics firms an opportunity to expand.[22]

Japan's humanitarian work in Southeast Asia is shaped by its support for the AHA Centre through the Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund. The nature of support ranges from financial assistance to capacity development in terms of infrastructure, systems, knowledge, and skills.[23] Japan's recent commitment in its 2022 National Security Strategy to doubling defense spending to 2% of GDP also has significant implications for its military engagement in HADR. Investing in dual-use capabilities such as transportation and logistics infrastructure, increasing regional engagement, and supporting the development of new technologies are all important components of disaster relief.

Beyond individual states, regional and multilateral coalitions play an increasingly prominent role in humanitarian action, particularly HADR. The core BRICS nations—Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa—pledged to strengthen cooperation on disaster management, recognizing the escalating risks posed by climate change, pandemics, and disasters.[24] In the Beijing declaration from the Third Meeting of BRICS Ministers for Disaster Management in 2022, the BRICS nations made an aim to promote strategic cooperation in disaster-risk prevention and mitigation.

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21 Saneet Chakradeo, "Neighbourhood First Responder: India's Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief," Brookings Institution, Policy Brief, August 2020 ~ https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/HADR-Policy-Brief.pdf.

22 Arjun Katoch, "The Dismantling of USAID Presents India with an Opportunity," unpublished op-ed, 2025.

23 Will Shea, "JAPAN-ASEAN Integration Fund," AHA Centre, Column ~ https://thecolumn.ahacentre.org/posts/partnership/vol-39-japan-asean-integration-fund.

24 The BRICS expanded to include Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates in 2024 and Indonesia in 2025.

Meanwhile, the Quad—a grouping involving Australia, India, Japan, and the United States—institutionalized its humanitarian efforts in 2022 through the Quad Partnership on HADR in the Indo-Pacific and a set of related guidelines. This initiative underscores the Quad's strategic intent to establish greater coordination in humanitarian action between its member states, albeit seemingly among themselves as suppliers rather than following the lead of affected communities. With multiple actors operating alongside the UN-led humanitarian system, the risk of overlapping mandates, competition for resources, and political tensions is growing. Fragmentation also impairs aid effectiveness and could intensify vulnerabilities.[25]

Humanitarian operations are deeply entangled in geopolitics and shifting global power structures. Emerging actors have not filled the gap left by the reshaping of major donors' priorities and cuts in Western aid budgets. The rise of new actors and coalitions offers the potential for a more diverse, resilient, and context-sensitive humanitarian landscape, but this will come with its own challenges in a system where geopolitical competition and fragmentation already complicate humanitarian efforts.

Critical Reassessment and Future Directions

The changing global order is in the process of reshaping the landscape of humanitarian action. The traditional and dominant Western donor–centric models are inadequate to address today's complex crises amid geopolitical shifts and evolving security risks; yet at present there is no comparable alternative that has emerged to replace them.

However, there is a gradual shift away from dependency on Western donors toward emerging donors. In the Asia-Pacific, new financial flows and institutional capacities challenge long-standing assumptions about local actors, reinforcing the need for regionally resourced, regionally led, and regionally focused solutions. Reconsideration of the UN's key role, from direct responder to facilitator of systemic change, could support this. This shift is not mainly financial but also reflects a broader move toward a more diverse system that emphasizes the priorities of regional and local actors. Revisiting Chapter 8 of the UN Charter could offer an opportunity to enhance these efforts by building connections among the United Nations, regional organizations, and new multilateral arrangements. At the same time, there is an urgent need to center humanitarian action on

[25] Randolph C. Kent, *Humanitarian Futures: Challenges and Opportunities* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2025).

the needs of crisis-affected populations and find alignment with donor or national government priorities. Truly creating a people-centered approach demands a fundamental restructuring of priorities, funding mechanisms, and operational practices. Yet the initial signs are that the overall aid commitment by the international community is shrinking compared with previous decades.

The need for change in the governance of humanitarian action is catalyzed by the changing global order and interests of traditional donors. Current debates focus on two paths: remaking the system[26] or pursuing pragmatic reform.[27] Acknowledging hard truths is essential with the erosion of the moral foundation of aid as it increasingly serves geopolitical interests. However, remaking the humanitarian system requires leadership to dismantle existing structures. What is emerging is a shift toward a more fragmented system of bilaterally and regionally led humanitarian solutions with multiple centers of authority and influence.

Conclusion

The dominant humanitarian models of aid focused on Western donor leadership are inadequate for today's multilayered humanitarian crises, where geopolitics, climate risks, protracted conflicts, and donor fatigue converge. Such changes present both opportunities and challenges for the global humanitarian system. In the increasingly fragmented international landscape, the governance of humanitarian action needs to move beyond incremental reform to more transformative change. This includes empowering a diversity of humanitarian actors and decentralizing decision-making if we are to meet humanitarian needs with available resources.

The Asia-Pacific is a prime example of the new formulations of humanitarian action, given the region's diversity of actors, rising middle powers, and experience in alternative governance models. The emergence of regional mechanisms, such as ASEAN's Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response, and new coalitions, such as BIMSTEC, the Quad, and BRICS, illustrates the diversifying state-led humanitarian landscape.

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26 Tammam Aloudat, "Why Reform Is Not Enough: From Rethinking to Remaking Humanitarianism," New Humanitarian, February 18, 2025 ~ https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2025/02/18/why-reform-isnt-enough-rethinking-remaking-humanitarianism.

27 Jemilah Mahmood and Oliver Lacey-Hall, "Defending Humanitarianism: Today's Aid Turmoil Calls for Reform, Not Abandonment," New Humanitarian, February 25, 2025 ~ https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2025/02/25/defending-humanitarianism-todays-aid-turmoil-calls-reform-not-abandonment.

However, the challenge lies in coordinating this emerging polycentric system to avoid duplication, uphold humanitarian principles, and safeguard space for nonstate humanitarian actors, particularly in considering conflict contexts. Efforts to address this challenge will need to be guided by the mantra of "locally led, regionally supported and international as necessary." If it is to remain relevant, the United Nations will need to be directed by its member states to facilitate this change to offer a more sustainable and context-sensitive approach to humanitarian action that is better suited to today's realities. ◈

Achieving Resilience amid a Changing Global Order

Jose Ma. Luis Montesclaros and Mely Caballero-Anthony

Amid today's changing global order, the experiences of Southeast Asian countries and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in governing nontraditional security (NTS) issues offer lessons for other countries and regions. In this concluding essay, we integrate findings from the roundtable essays on food insecurity, energy insecurity, biosecurity threats, gender insecurity, and challenges to humanitarian assistance and disaster relief and draw forward-looking insights and policy implications.

At the outset of the roundtable, we framed the need to address NTS issues as public goods in local and international settings. Global public goods offer benefits that are shared or experienced by all countries, but they tend to be underprovided since for any individual provider the benefits are viewed as smaller than the costs.[1] This problem of underprovision requires cooperation and coordination, following Hedley Bull's notion of an international society bound by common interests, norms, and values.[2]

Traditional state-focused views of such an order in the post–World War II setting idealized an international society of nations working to address common problems. State members would assume duties and rights in accordance with this law- and norms-based order to address the interests of the entire society.[3] The functionality of such an order would

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1 Moya Chin, "What Are Global Public Goods?" International Monetary Fund (IMF), December 2021 ~ https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/fandd/issues/2021/12/Global-Public-Goods-Chin-basics.

2 Hedley Bull, "Society and Anarchy in International Relations (1966)," in *International Theory: Critical Investigations*, ed. James Der Derian (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995), 79.

3 G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 22–37; and Jamie M. Johnson, Victoria M. Basham, and Owen D. Thomas, "Ordering Disorder: The Making of World Politics," *Review of International Studies* 48, no. 4 (2022): 607–25.

then be assessed based on how it achieved effective provision of global public goods, especially the tasks of addressing NTS issues that are shared across states.

Yet even amid the post–World War II setting that aimed to establish this rules-based order, there have consistently been spoilers and deviations, especially by states that have a greater power to do so. In the current environment, we can see this in many examples, such as the United States threatening tariffs on all countries with which it maintains a trade deficit, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Israel-Palestine conflict, the Israel-Iran conflict, and activities by spoilers' allies, such as Belarus, North Korea, and the Houthi pirates.[4] These conflicts contradict the interests of international society at large to work toward a peaceful and mutually beneficial society.

The international order has thus proved to be subpar at ensuring full compliance with the global institutions that were established to provide global public goods. In this complex and multipolar world, it is increasingly difficult to implement a rule of law or system that does not discriminate in favor of who is advocating for it but rather judges according to how it aligns with the interests of the international society.

Uncertainty over the future of the global order—and this apparent shifting from one that is rules-based to one that is driven discriminately by the unilateral actions of those who wield the most power—is therefore the basis of a need for agency among the other relevant actors in the system. Specifically for Southeast Asia, it is essential that the ASEAN member states build a framework for regional resilience.

Build Regional Communities for Resilience Beyond a State Focus

A regional approach to security provides an improvement, even from a traditional state-focused perspective, by coming closer to the "society" concept that Bull envisioned. Within a region, there can be a group of tight-knit countries—we argue that their cooperation on public goods

[4] Others have even pushed for a Hobbesian global order as an alternative to the society of sovereign states through arrangements that would subordinate states to a hegemon to govern their coordination in a world government. This alternative is contentious and has been critiqued for diminishing the notion of state sovereignty for those subordinated. An example of a downside to such an order is seen in the responses to the unilateral tariff push by the United States in April 2025. Owing to the overwhelming de facto economic power of the United States, and the dominance of the U.S. dollar as the world's reserve and trade currency, most of the affected countries (except China) had no choice but to seek to negotiate with the United States rather than retaliate with their own tariffs when the hegemon acted against the common interest. See Barry Eichengreen, *Exorbitant Privilege: The Rise and Fall of the Dollar and the Future of the International Monetary System* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

presents a more viable (and also complementary) approach while preserving the key elements of rules-based order and a balance of power. This applies especially to institutionalized regional groupings, such as the ASEAN Community, which go beyond state-focused approaches and involves nonstate actors as well.

A rules-based order is within closer reach when the common interests are shaped partly by member states that share geographic proximity. What makes ASEAN unique is its manner of preserving the balance of power in which equality for all members is maintained by its consociational, consensus-based approach to decision-making, with any member state essentially holding a veto. Another unique aspect of ASEAN is the group's approach of noninterference in the domestic political affairs of its member states, which fits well with the goal of preserving state sovereignty.

In addition, a regional approach is timely amid what Amitav Acharya describes as a "multiplex world"—one characterized by a proliferation of actors, including states, international and regional bodies, private corporations, and nonstate actors.[5] This concept is relevant since a limitation of ASEAN is that, no matter how sound the group's order within, its fortunes are still closely tied with that of the broader global order. In fact, ASEAN is envisioned by its leaders to be "a peaceful, stable and resilient region *within* a global community of nations while still maintaining ASEAN centrality" (emphasis added).[6] The challenge, therefore, is to address the specific channels of ASEAN's vulnerability to changes in the global order by developing regional resilience. In this regard, it is notable that all of the roundtable essays identified the need to go beyond a state-focused approach and recognize the growing role of nonstate actors, including multilateral institutions, NGOs, and interest groups such as scientific communities, in ensuring comprehensive regional security. These actors provide another element to the "communities" envisioned beyond states.

Sustain Regional Capacity Development amid the United States' Retreat

A common gap in the provision of global public goods that has resulted from the evolving international order lies in the declining investment in capacity development, and this applies to all sectors. In 2025, this decline

5 Amitav Acharya, "After Liberal Hegemony: The Advent of a Multiplex World Order," *Ethics and International Affairs*, no. 3 (2017): 271–85.

6 "Our Communities," ASEAN, 2025 ~ https://asean.org/our-communities.

in investment is in large part a result of the United States' rationalization of government expenditures and rejection of projects that are not putting "America first" according to the Trump administration.

Yet, given the disparate capacities across states in ASEAN, there is increasing need for such capacity-building support. Climate change, for example, presents a common extant threat that simultaneously impacts multiple NTS issues. It contributes to natural disasters, disease spread,[7] and food insecurity, the consequences of which are worse for women, especially in conflict settings. In the case of food security, climate change is slowing the land productivity growth rates, which have been overtaken by the faster rates of demand and population growth. All these considerations interact closely with objectives in the energy sector, most directly that of achieving a low-carbon transition to slow the pace of anthropogenic climate change.

A common narrative charted by the essays is that as a result of the United States' withdrawal from a role in providing leadership and global public goods, the region must seek to bolster its own resources and at the same time partner with both like-minded and even not-so-like-minded countries to bridge the gap. Foremost among these countries could be the ASEAN +3 partners: China, Japan, and South Korea.

Japan historically has been the largest provider of official development assistance to the region and continues to be a reliable partner, as the authors have noted, especially in the renewable energy transition, in the development of biosecurity and biosafety capacities, and in humanitarian work. Notably, Japan has supported the ASEAN Coordination Centre for Humanitarian Assistance and resource mobilization efforts within the Quad (with Australia, India, and the United States), as well as the ASEAN Centre for Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases. China is also an alternative to help bridge the gap, given its significant investments in the construction of energy infrastructure in the region through the Belt and Road Initiative, such as in Myanmar and Indonesia. It likewise contributes pharmaceutical ingredients and medical supplies from a health security and biosecurity point of view. It has also shown growing interest in global humanitarian initiatives, mostly through bilateral approaches toward individual ASEAN states. South Korea is known for its investments in renewable energy and critical minerals, which recently exceeded those of Japan and the United States. In food security, all three partners are part

[7] Jose Ma. Luis P. Montesclaros and Mely Caballero-Anthony, "Facing Up to Climate Change-Induced Biosecurity Threats," S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, RSIS Commentary, no. 007, January 9, 2024.

of the ASEAN Plus Three Emergency Rice Reserve mechanism, which stockpiles rice as a critical commodity for emergency purposes, and the ASEAN Food Security Information System, which communicates food security disruptions to the ASEAN member states.

ASEAN's other three "plus six" partners—India, Australia, and New Zealand—are also recognized by the authors as alternative partners. India and Australia are both part of the Quad and likewise join Japan in mobilizing resources for humanitarian action. India is notable for BIMSTEC (the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) and its ambition to be the "first responder" in the region. Australia has pledged funding to the region on renewable energy development. New Zealand is co-chair with Singapore in the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus's expert working group on humanitarian and disaster relief, which has included the Women, Peace, and Security agenda among its priorities. Both Australia and New Zealand are supporting programs for gender equality and eliminating violence against women. Beyond these six states, the authors have recognized the roles of emerging partners, such as countries in the Middle East and multilateral development banks.

Strengthen Regional Supply Chain Integration for Critical Commodities

A further channel for regional resilience that relates to most of the NTS issues examined here is trade and development. The roundtable essays have shown how trade and supply chain disruptions impact food security, energy security, disaster resilience, and biosecurity.

ASEAN has already taken some measures to improve resilience in this area. For example, the group launched the ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement (ATIGA) in 2009 to prioritize removing trade barriers within the region and promote intraregional trade. The agreement has boosted regional food resilience, in part since it has reduced instances of trade bans by member states during periods of disruption. Whereas 24.5% of ASEAN's total food trade in caloric terms was affected by the 2007–8 global food price crisis, only 13.7% was affected in 2020 amid the Covid-19 pandemic and 9.8% since the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022.[8]

8 David Laborde and Abdullah Mamun, "When Policy Responses Make Things Worse: The Case of Export Restrictions on Agricultural Products," Asian Development Bank Institute, ADBI Working Paper, no. 1386, May 2023.

Despite this progress in reducing instances where ASEAN member states react to global disruptions by imposing trade restrictions, however, the region remains reliant on extraregional sources for commodities that it does not have sufficient capacity to produce by itself. For food security, this supply chain challenge applies to fertilizers, which are key inputs to the production of the crops and cereals that make up the majority of food consumption by poorer households in the region. The way forward in this regard would be to explore how the region can better develop the industries supporting commodities for which it remains dependent on extraregional sources.

In the case of energy security and the low-carbon transition, the region can focus on supply chains related to critical minerals and rare earth metals used in solar power technologies. Given the Russia-Ukraine war and previous disruptions to energy prices, it is contentious that some ASEAN member states are imposing bans on the exports of these metals despite the ATIGA (for example, Indonesia's successive export bans on bauxite, copper, and nickel since the early 2020s and the Philippines' plans to ban nickel exports as well).[9] Supply chain development and trade will thus need to be improved in removing barriers and expanding trade in these metals and also in their derivative products, such as solar panels, batteries, and charge controllers.

Conclusion

The geopolitical and geoeconomic reconfigurations that have occurred in recent years, and seem to have accelerated in the first half of 2025, have impacted multiple NTS issues in Southeast Asia. One commonality among them is that they reveal the interdependency of the global community of nations in addressing crosscutting NTS issues and the value of a stable global order. They also show the interdependencies of the disruptions themselves.

The system of international trade contributes to furthering the greater availability and affordability of essentials like food and energy as well as products up and down the value chain such as critical minerals. Similarly, international governance and funding cooperation are critical for ensuring

9 "Indonesia to Ban Bauxite Exports in Latest Protectionist Move," *Straits Times*, November 25, 2024 ~ https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/indonesia-bans-bauxite-exports-in-latest-protectionist-move; and Cliff Venzon, Neil Jerome Morales, and Bloomberg. "Philippine Lawmakers Plan to Approve Bill to Ban Ore Exports," *Fortune*, February 6, 2025 ~ https://fortune.com/asia/2025/02/06/philippine-lawmakers-approve-plan-ban-ore-exports-nickel.

that public goods, such as protection from biosecurity threats or disasters, are sufficiently provided. The method of provision matters as well and can advance gender security by addressing historical gender-based biases and their impacts on societal vulnerability.

Given that ASEAN is a community of relatively small states, the disruptions brought about by geopolitical changes to the web of interdependency surrounding NTS issues are especially relevant and challenging. The call for greater regional resilience expressed here is a move beyond addressing merely traditional military threats to working toward a truly comprehensive security. It is grounded in the notion that the plight of each ASEAN member state is strongly tied to the region's ability to develop integrated and resilient supply chains and maneuver toward alternative sources of capacity-building assistance. Thus, a dual push will be needed among ASEAN states that builds both on solidarity to meet regional goals and on subsidiarity to recognize what functions the governments can do best at the state level, as well as what they could improve on, if members are to function as stable pillars for furthering regional progress on the NTS issues.

A further recurring recommendation has focused on addressing the challenges brought by reliance or dependence on extraregional actors. Likewise, deepening work with partners, especially beyond the United States, is critical to maintaining ASEAN's centrality, agency, and capacity on the governance of NTS issues. While leveraging these partnerships, ASEAN will need to continue its efforts in strengthening regionalism by managing perturbations in the global order.

Finally and increasingly, nonstate actors are not only providing global public goods but also helping bridge the limited capacities of states. It is therefore critical to counter the trend of disempowerment of global institutions, especially given the retreat of the United States from the World Health Organization and the Paris Agreement and its withdrawal of aid to programs supporting food security, gender security, and disaster resilience. Moreover, barriers to delivering humanitarian aid to affected and vulnerable communities, particularly in conflict and disaster settings, must be removed. To carry out these endeavors, actors at all levels must strengthen their collaborations in the global community to be able to better build capacity and resilience amid a rapidly changing international environment. ◈