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# The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)

## Overview

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

ASEAN engages in a wide range of diplomatic, economic and security discussions through hundreds of annual meetings and through a Secretariat based in Jakarta, Indonesia. The group's members rotate as chairs: Singapore is ASEAN's chair for 2018 and Thailand will assume the chair in 2019.

Many observers see ASEAN as an evolving hub of multilateral diplomacy in East Asia. In recent years, ASEAN has been a center of discussions on numerous regional issues, including South China Sea tensions, cross-border environmental problems, and regional economic development and trade liberalization. As China has deepened its economic and cultural ties in Southeast Asia, some analysts believe the region also has become an area of great power rivalry. Other powers also have shown renewed or greater interest in the region, including the United States, Japan, India, Russia, and the European Union (EU).

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

## U.S.-ASEAN Relations

U.S. engagement with ASEAN has expanded steadily since the organization's creation, particularly during the Obama Administration. The United States initially supported ASEAN as a means to promote regional dialogue and as a bulwark against Communism in Asia. The United States became an ASEAN "Dialogue Partner" in 1977. In 2008 the United States became the first non-ASEAN nation to

appoint a representative to the ASEAN Secretariat. In 2009, the United States acceded to the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and committed to an annual U.S.-ASEAN Leaders' Meeting. In 2012, it raised the level of the annual meeting to a U.S.-ASEAN Summit, and in November 2015 it announced the creation of a U.S.-ASEAN Strategic Partnership.

The United States has long stated that it has deep interests in Southeast Asia, including fostering democracy and human rights, encouraging liberal trade and investment regimes, addressing maritime security and rising tensions in the South China Sea, promoting environmental protection, countering terrorist threats, and combatting human trafficking and illegal trafficking in narcotics and wildlife. Observers in the region have largely welcomed U.S. initiatives that work through ASEAN. Some Southeast Asian observers have expressed concern about proposed U.S. funding cuts for ASEAN-centered programs in FY2018, and what they see as the Trump Administration's lack of new initiatives towards their own region. Although President Trump attended the U.S.-ASEAN Summit in Manila in November 2017, he did not attend the subsequent East Asia Summit (EAS).

U.S. trade and economic arrangements centered on ASEAN have been limited by the vast diversity of the group's economic development. Per capita incomes among ASEAN members range from \$56,084 in Singapore to \$1,144 in Cambodia. The United States does not have a Free Trade Agreement with ASEAN itself, though it does engage in dialogue on economic initiatives through a Trade and Investment Framework agreement (TIFA) signed in 2006.

The United States has launched a series of initiatives with ASEAN and with other Southeast Asian regional institutions. **U.S.-ASEAN Connect** was created in 2016 as an effort to coordinate U.S. public- and private-sector economic initiatives in the region through the U.S. Mission to ASEAN and the U.S. Embassies in Bangkok and Singapore. U.S.-ASEAN Connect is intended to coordinate projects managed by the Departments of State and Commerce, the U.S. Agency for International Development, the U.S. Trade and Development Agency, and the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative.

Among other U.S. initiatives targeted at ASEAN are an expanded **Fulbright Exchange of ASEAN-U.S. Scholars**, aid for ASEAN's formation of a **Single Customs Window** to facilitate easier trade of goods and services, the **Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI)** which offers scholarships and opportunities for young leaders in the region, and assistance to the **ASEAN Volunteers Program**, an ASEAN-based program modeled after the Peace Corps.

## ASEAN and Asian Regional Architecture

Asia has no dominant EU-style multilateral body, and many see the region's economic and security "architectures" as underdeveloped. The United States has long had strong bilateral alliances and security partnerships with individual Asian nations—a "hub and spoke" approach that includes treaty allies the Philippines and Thailand, as well as a close security partnership with Singapore. In recent years, some U.S. officials have spoken of a need to strengthen the region's multilateral institutions as well, including ASEAN. The Trump Administration, however, appears less focused on multilateral institutions than was its predecessor.

There has been a proliferation of ASEAN-centered regional groupings over the past two decades, and the group's member governments regularly state their intention to maintain what they call "ASEAN Centrality" in the evolving regional architecture. The **ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF)**, established in 1994 with 26 Asian and Pacific states plus the EU, was formed to facilitate dialogue on political and security matters. The **ASEAN+3** (China, Japan, and South Korea) was created in 1997, partly as a response to the Asian financial crisis, and partly as a way to balance and involve northeast Asian powers in the security dialogue process. The **East Asia Summit**, created in 2005, is an evolving institution with a varied agenda, in which the United States gained membership in October 2010. In addition to the ASEAN+3 members, the EAS includes Australia, New Zealand, India, Russia, and the United States. The **ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting-Plus (ADMM+)** was established in 2010 and has emerged as an active multilateral security forum that brings senior defense officials together regularly and hosts multilateral military exercises in a range of areas including humanitarian relief, disaster management, cybersecurity and maritime security. The **Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF)**, created in 2012, is an effort to address maritime security issues at working levels.

## ASEAN and the South China Sea

Tensions surrounding longstanding territorial disputes over waters and land features in the South China Sea have been the most contentious issues addressed by ASEAN in recent years. These tensions illustrate the difficulty of marshaling ASEAN's diverse membership to act in concert. Four members—Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam—have territorial disputes with China (as well as with each other) in the South China Sea. However, observers say some other members, particularly Cambodia and Laos, but also Thailand and possibly disputants such as the Philippines and Malaysia, may see their economic links to China as obstacles to pursuing a more unified ASEAN response to Chinese assertions.

In 2002, ASEAN and China agreed to a non-binding **Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea**, in which they agreed to "resolve their territorial and jurisdictional disputes by peaceful means, without resorting to the threat or use of force," to "exercise self-restraint in the conduct of activities that would complicate or escalate disputes," and to work toward the creation of a formal Code of Conduct that would govern activities in the region. ASEAN and China resumed discussion of such a

Code in 2013 and agreed to a "framework" for an agreement in 2017, although observers argue that conflicting interests among China and ASEAN's members continues to constrain progress on a formal code.

## ASEAN's Economic Integration

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

ASEAN has trade agreements with several Asian partners, including Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea. ASEAN and those six nations are also pursuing a regional trade agreement known as the **Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)**, which does not include the United States. Four ASEAN nations—Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam—were members of the proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement, from which the United States withdrew in January 2017. The remaining members continue to pursue a renamed **Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP)** without U.S. participation.

## ASEAN and Human Rights

Human rights conditions in several ASEAN members have long been a concern for the United States and international NGOs, and sometimes among the group's own members. While some ASEAN members, such as Indonesia and the Philippines, have thriving democracies, others, including Laos and Vietnam, are effectively one-party states with dubious human rights records. Human rights advocates are deeply concerned about Burma's treatment of its Rohingya and other ethnic minorities, the Cambodian government's intimidation of its political opposition, thousands of extra-judicial killings under the Philippines' anti-drug program, and moves by Thailand's military government, in power since a 2014 coup, to muzzle criticism.

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

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**Ben Dolven**, Specialist in Asian Affairs

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