



Updated February 10, 2020

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)

Overview

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

ASEAN's members are Brunei, Burma (Myanmar), Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. Members rotate as chair: Vietnam is ASEAN's chair for 2020 and Brunei is to assume the chair in 2021. ASEAN engages in a wide range of diplomatic, economic and security discussions through hundreds of annual meetings and through a secretariat based in Jakarta, Indonesia. In 2008, the United States became the first non-ASEAN nation to appoint a representative to ASEAN, and in 2011 opened a U.S. mission to ASEAN in Jakarta with a resident Ambassador. Several other nations have followed suit.

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

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. ASEAN convenes and administratively supports a number of regional forums that include other regional governments (known as “dialogue partners”), including the United States. Member governments deeply value what they call “ASEAN Centrality” in the evolving regional architecture.

The **ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF)**, established in 1994 with 26 Asian and Pacific states plus the EU, was formed to facilitate dialogue on political and security matters. The **East Asia Summit (EAS)**, created in 2005, is an evolving institution with a varied agenda, in which the United States gained membership in 2010. The EAS includes ASEAN members, Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand,

Russia, South Korea, and the United States. The **ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting-Plus (ADMM+)** was established in 2010, bringing senior defense officials from EAS members together regularly and hosting multilateral military exchanges.



Source: Graphic created by CRS.

U.S.-ASEAN Relations

The United States has long had strong bilateral relations with individual Southeast Asian nations, including treaty alliances with the Philippines and Thailand and a close security partnership with Singapore. Some U.S. officials have spoken of a need to strengthen ties with the region's multilateral institutions as well. The United States initially supported ASEAN as a means to promote regional dialogue and as a bulwark against Communism in Asia, becoming an ASEAN Dialogue Partner in 1977. In 2009, the United States acceded to the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and committed to an annual U.S.-ASEAN Meeting. In 2012, it raised the level of the U.S.-ASEAN meeting to a Leaders Meeting, and in November 2015, it announced the creation of a U.S.-ASEAN Strategic Partnership.

Successive U.S. Administrations have identified deep U.S. interests in Southeast Asia, including fostering democracy and human rights, encouraging liberal trade and investment regimes, addressing maritime security and tensions in the South China Sea, promoting environmental protection, countering terrorism, and combatting human trafficking and trafficking in narcotics and wildlife. Increasingly, observers see the region as an area of strategic and economic competition between the United States and China.

The Trump Administration has cast its regional strategy as the promotion of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific, a formulation that raises some concern for some ASEAN members, who see the group itself as a central hub for regional diplomacy. Administration officials have sought to reassure ASEAN of its importance. “ASEAN is literally at the center of the Indo-Pacific,” Secretary of State Mike

Pompeo said in July 2018, “and it plays a central role in the Indo-Pacific vision that America is presenting.” The Administration intends to hold a summit meeting with ASEAN leaders in Las Vegas, NV, in March 2020, the second such meeting on U.S. soil, following a 2016 U.S.-ASEAN Special Leaders’ Summit in Sunnylands, California. However, in a region where “showing up” is considered important, many Southeast Asians are concerned that President Trump has not attended the past two regular U.S.-ASEAN summits in Asia.

The United States has launched a series of initiatives with ASEAN and other regional institutions. **U.S.-ASEAN Connect** was created in 2016 to coordinate U.S. public- and private-sector economic initiatives through the U.S. Mission to ASEAN and the U.S. Embassies in Bangkok and Singapore. Other U.S. initiatives include an expanded **Fulbright Exchange of ASEAN-U.S. Scholars**, aid for ASEAN’s formation of a **Single Customs Window** to facilitate easier trade of goods and services, and the **Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI)**, which offers scholarships and opportunities for young leaders. In November, 2018, Vice President Pence announced a **U.S.-ASEAN Smart Cities Partnership**, to promote U.S. investment in the region’s digital infrastructure. U.S. trade and economic arrangements with ASEAN have been limited by the vast diversity of the group’s economic development. According to the World Bank, in 2018 per capita GDP among ASEAN members, based on purchasing power parity, ranged from \$101,532 in Singapore to \$4,361 in Cambodia.

ASEAN, China, and the South China Sea

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

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

particularly Cambodia and Laos, have been hesitant to join a unified ASEAN response to Chinese assertions.

ASEAN’s Economic Integration

ASEAN members play a major role in regional supply chains, and U.S. companies are significant investors in several of the 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)** to promote 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 members seek to promote infrastructure development in the region, particularly in building greater regional “connectivity” through investment in transport and IT. This has led to substantial demand for foreign investment, including in some cases through China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). ASEAN’s individual members have differing approaches to the BRI. Cambodia and Laos, for example, have embraced the BRI as a means of developing much needed infrastructure. Malaysia and Vietnam, by contrast, have been highly vocal about concerns surrounding the terms of BRI investments.

ASEAN has trade agreements with several Asian partners, including Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea. In 2019, ASEAN and five of those nations (excepting India), concluded a regional trade agreement known as the **Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)**. Four ASEAN nations—Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam—are members of the **Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP)**.

ASEAN and Human Rights

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

ASEAN’s 2007 Charter attempts to bring some amount of pressure to bear upon member states on human rights, but progress has been limited. The charter created a formal Inter-Governmental Commission on Human Rights, but the body has been criticized by some human rights organizations as largely symbolic. The U.S. mission to ASEAN has sought to foster networks among the region’s civil society groups so as to build capacity among non-governmental actors in Southeast Asia.

Ben Dolven, Specialist in Asian Affairs

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.