



CENTRE FOR INTERNATIONAL LAW  
National University of Singapore

---

***ASEAN Ideas in Progress Series***

**6/2021**

**June 2021**

***“A More Coordinated Foreign Policy to Boost  
Regional Competitiveness for ASEAN”***

**Peng Bo**

**Nanyang Technological University, Singapore**

## **A More Coordinated Foreign Policy to Boost Regional Competitiveness for ASEAN**

Peng Bo

### **ASEAN Politics amid the Covid-19 Pandemics**

It has been one year since the outbreak began, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' (ASEAN) member states, which are highly dependent on international tourism, have stumbled into a serious economic crisis. In the first half of 2020, ASEAN became China's largest trading partner. The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), signed in the second half of the year, will advance economic cooperation between China and ASEAN. ASEAN is becoming a hot spot of concern.

In the past year, Foreign Minister Wang Yi has visited most of the ASEAN countries, which indicates that China's relations with ASEAN are entering a new stage. In the past year, Singapore and Myanmar completed general elections and introduced new governments. Vietnam also completed its 13<sup>th</sup> National Congress this week, which will decide on the new leadership of the Communist Party of Vietnam.

The economic recession induced by the pandemic and the change of political environment caused by the change of government all have a direct impact on the foreign policy implementation of ASEAN countries. As the largest international organization in the region, ASEAN's performance in managing the pandemic and international relations is unimpressive. The lack of coordination within ASEAN reduces the overall competitiveness of the region.

### **The Influence of Sino-US Competition on ASEAN Foreign Policy**

The ongoing competition and friction between China and the United States (US) in recent years has led to a dilemma for ASEAN, which has tried to avoid taking sides between the two nations. Indonesia has denied refueling stops to US patrol aircrafts four times in 2020. Myanmar is buying Indian submarines to counterbalance China's influence in its domestic politics. Vietnam, which is at the forefront of the conflict in the South China Sea, also wants to get the US to increase its leverage in the South China Sea dispute. This series of diplomatic moves by ASEAN countries demonstrates the region's desire to find the best balance between China and the US. The more active diplomatic postures of China and the US in recent years has rendered ASEAN's traditional 'balance beam' strategy ineffective. Different countries in ASEAN are choosing endorsement from China or the US on different issues for their own internal considerations. Taking Vietnam as an example, on the one hand, Vietnam wants to use the US to compete with China for the South China Sea issue. On the other hand, Vietnamese authorities are also afraid of the destabilizing effect of the US's influence on their internal regime, and need China, another socialist country, as an ally for political stability.

### **ASEAN's Foreign Policies Lack Coordination**

Although ASEAN regularly engages in meetings with and adopts numerous mechanisms, as an international organization that actively strives for greater regional integration, ASEAN is rarely able to coordinate in its foreign policies as a united front. The main reason for this lies in the significant differences in geography, nationality, language, culture and polity among ASEAN countries. Each country has its own political line and foreign policy considerations. As an international organization, ASEAN can hardly achieve unity in foreign policy. ASEAN countries hope that the organisation can improve their own level of development, but they are unwilling to make the requisite compromises on key issues such as security and foreign policy.

Within ASEAN, Singapore, Indonesia and Vietnam have long jostled for the top spot. Each of these three countries has its own unique strengths: Vietnam will be ASEAN's fastest growing country; Indonesia is ASEAN's largest country and an important maritime crossroad; and Singapore is ASEAN's service center, especially for finance and technology. All three nations want to play a leading role in foreign policy in the region, but none have an overwhelming advantage over its competitors. This is different from Germany's dominant leadership role in the European Union. The lack of leadership has exacerbated the differences in each ASEAN country's foreign policies. The relationship between China, the US and ASEAN countries is also dominated by bilateral diplomacy between countries.

### **Enhanced ASEAN Diplomatic Coordination to Enhance Competitiveness**

ASEAN will inevitably become a hot area of competition between China and the US, but also the main engine for Asia. With the exception of Singapore and Brunei, the ASEAN region is still in the development stage. ASEAN countries need to face up to the reality of their own economic development and national size by acknowledging the challenges ahead for a single country to be able to make a difference in the global diplomatic stage. ASEAN countries should make more active use of the platform role of international organizations, coordinate foreign policies among its member states, and promote stability and development in ASEAN. Only a more integrated and unified ASEAN, as a new stakeholder in international politics, can play a more important role in regional stability and economic recovery in Asia. At the same time, a more united ASEAN can take advantage of its size and have greater say in international competitions, and be less passive in the competition between China and the US.

### **Policy Recommendations for ASEAN**

ASEAN could follow the example of the European Union and set up a more institutionalized and specific foreign affairs committee. On important diplomatic issues, ASEAN can adopt a holistic diplomatic strategy after multilateral consultations. This would prevent a single ASEAN country from taking a stand against China or the US by itself, which could embarrass the region as a whole. The post-epidemic world will be uncertain and moving toward multipolarity. Through a more systematic and integrated foreign policy, ASEAN could become an important module in international politics,

like the European Union. International relations in the post-epidemic era also provide an opportunity to reshuffle the deck. In the face of competition from bigger countries, smaller countries can get together and consider the size advantage of international organizations, make use of regional alliances and equal relations with big countries, and leave more room for maneuver in their own diplomatic relations.

ASEAN is also a region with a relatively young population structure. ASEAN countries also need to promote youth exchanges among themselves. The contradictions within ASEAN are often caused by the large differences in social culture. A long-term strategy to improve ASEAN's regional integration is to enhance understanding and mutual trust among the next generation. Taking Singapore as an example, the majority of its youth population would choose Europe, the US, China, Japan and South Korea over other ASEAN countries for exchange programmes. Very few are willing to choose to learn other about ASEAN countries, let alone learn other ASEAN languages. Stereotypes of each other's countries are not conducive to stability and unity within ASEAN. ASEAN should take advantage of the changes in education and any new educational technology platforms brought about by the epidemic to actively promote the dissemination of knowledge and information within its member states.