

### **Discussion Report Talking ASEAN**

on

Navigating a Fragmented Multipolar World: Can ASEAN Continue to Deliver a Balancing Act?

#### Introduction

On Wednesday, 25 June 2025, The Habibie Center convened the Talking ASEAN seminar titled "Navigating a Fragmented Multipolar World: Can ASEAN Continue to Deliver a Balancing Act?". The seminar featured Rene Pattiradjawane (Chairperson, Center of China Studies and Senior Associate Fellow, The Habibie Center), Joanne Lin Weiling (Cocoordinator of the ASEAN Studies Centre, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute), and Anak Agung Banyu Perwita (Professor of International Relations, The Republic of Indonesia Defense University)—and was moderated by Naufal Bagus Pratama (Researcher of ASEAN Studies Program, The Habibie Center).

The objectives of the seminar were to: (a) examine the conceptual and practical implications of multipolarity for the global order, (b) discuss China's strategy in promoting a multipolar world, particularly through its deepening engagement with ASEAN, including recent state visits to Vietnam, Malaysia, and Cambodia, (c) analyze ASEAN's position and its capacity to maintain a balancing act amid recalibrations of a multipolar world order, and (d) explore Indonesia's foreign policy approach in navigating multipolarity through its de facto leadership role and normative power within ASEAN.

This discussion report summarizes each speaker's key points and the following questionsand-answers session.



Rene Pattriradjawane began his remarks by highlighting the emergence of a new, unprecedented era of competition among major powers in international relations. He noted that there is no widely agreedupon definition of what constitutes multipolarity, affirming that it remains a complex and continuously evolving concept. The interconnection of economic, social, and political factors will continue to shape the development of multipolarity. Recent developments, including the conflicts in the Middle East and between Ukraine and Russia, as well as ongoing trade wars, will also influence how multipolarity is understood within the global political landscape.

Pattiradjawane also pointed out a significant shift of the Western leading power, marked by the US retreat from its traditional role as a benevolent hegemonic power. The US withdrawal from various international cooperation, along with actions that have disrupted the global economy, has contributed to the erosion of the very world order it created itself. This shift, combined with recent developments which include Russia's invasion of Ukraine and China's system-challenging policies, has triggered a transition from a rules-based order to a power-based order. Reflecting on these trends, Pattiradjawane remarked that the rule breaker is "the winner" in the current international system.

Pattiradjawane continued by reiterating that the multilateral system and international cooperation are currently under threat and facing declining effectiveness, paving the way for alternative frameworks such as minilateralism and a more assertive voice from the Global South. These emerging alternatives, along with the rise of new powers, such as China and India, have raised questions about the capacity and relevance of traditional multilateral institutions. Recent geopolitical dynamics, such as the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and the failure of international organizations to respond decisively, further challenge the credibility of these multilateral arrangements. Furthermore, Pattiradjawane observed that multipolarity could erode the perceived universality of norms embedded in these multilateral institutions, including the United Nations, International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and the World Trade Organization. As the perspectives and views on global issues become increasingly diverse, achieving collective action will become even more challenging.

The fragmentation of global power and the emergence of smaller, purpose-driven alliances have increasingly challenged the more established forms of multilateralism. Alliances have become more fluid, often focusing on technical or issue-specific cooperation. This reflects a trend toward multi-alignment and smart balancing, where states form partnerships with different countries depending on their national interests and issues at hand. While this allows countries to diversify their partnerships, it may also contribute to a more unpredictable and



complex diplomatic landscape. Additionally, the economic impact of recent developments in the global political economy–such as derisking of the global supply chain, a push for localization, nearshoring, and fearshoring–might signal the emergence of what Pattiradjawane coined as "re-globalization." This refers to rerouting and recalibrating trade and investment flows along geopolitical lines rather than based on efficiency. While this might lead to a more fragmented global economy, it could also potentially present new opportunities for various regions.

Conceptually, multipolarity denotes international system characterized by the presence of three or more great powers. These refer to states that possess significant economic, political, and diplomatic capabilities to influence global affairs. This implies a diffusion of power, with no single state able to dictate the terms of the international system. As new poles emerge, they often bring distinct political systems, economic philosophies, and cultural diversity, bringing more diverse values and norms to the international discourse. As such, the rise of new emerging powers, such as China, India, Brazil, and the resurgence of Russia, has now challenged the traditional norms and values embedded in the Westerncentric order that has dominated since the end of the Cold War.

Pattiradjawane then proceeded to discuss China's strategy in the context of the current multipolar world. He raised the question of whether the growing estrangement between major powers is being driven by China or the US. He argued that this is a multifaceted phenomenon, shaped by the actions and perceptions from both sides rather than by one country alone. It is an escalating dynamic fueled by divergent national interests, ideological differences, economic competition, and strategic ambitions.



With regard to Southeast Asia, Pattiradjawane inferred that the region has become the epicenter of escalating great power rivalry due to its strategic location and significant potential. This makes the region crucial for both major powers, thereby increasing the pressure on Southeast Asian countries to align with either China or the US. However, the region might opt for what Pattiradjawane referred to as the "a la carte" option, engaging with initiatives from both major powers based on their national interests while maintaining balanced relations without formally taking sides. Southeast Asia is likely to pursue a strategic path focused on advancing economic development by expanding its economic connections and minimizing geopolitical tensions. Nevertheless, this could shift if China continues to deepen its engagement and support for the region's development, while the US further retreats from its regional commitments during the second term of Trump's presidency.





In her session, Joanne Lin Weiling focused on assessing ASEAN's position and capacity to maintain a balancing act amidst a recalibration of a multipolar world, as well as the options that ASEAN can adopt to ensure regional stability and leverage emerging opportunities. She began by emphasizing that the global political landscape has shifted and is now marred with growing uncertainties. For ASEAN, the current challenges extend beyond the US and China rivalry to include regional issues, such as the crisis in Myanmar and the South China Sea dispute, as well as issues beyond the region, such as rising protectionism, trade tensions, and ongoing conflict in Ukraine and the Middle East. These recent developments have disrupted global stability and raised critical questions about ASEAN's ability to maintain stability and navigate an increasingly fragmented and multipolar environment. Additionally, Weiling noted that ASEAN has been relatively successful over the past decade in its regional integration effort and engaging with external partners through various mechanisms. These efforts have been vital in fostering dialogue and managing tensions. However, recent shifts in the global political landscape have drawn attention to whether these mechanisms remain sufficient to address the mounting external pressures driven by the increasing multipolarity.

Weiling continued by delving into the latest The State of Southeast Asia 2025 Survey Report published by ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute. The survey revealed that the top concern regarding ASEAN is that regionalism is slow and ineffective, raising fears that the organization may become increasingly irrelevant amidst rapid political and economic developments. This was followed by concerns that ASEAN is becoming an arena for major power competition, potentially turning its member states into proxies. Closely related is the third-highest concern that ASEAN is becoming disunited. In line with these concerns, geopolitical issues have become the largest challenge for ASEAN, with respondents identifying tensions in the South China Sea as the most pressing concern. The differing standings and approaches among ASEAN Member States (AMS) on such issues, both within the region and beyond the region, could pose a challenge to its internal cohesion and unity.

Another key takeaway from the survey is that most respondents believe ASEAN must first address its internal challenges, including divergences among member states and the still-limited levels of intra-regional trade and investment. Many also see accelerating regional integration and deepening cooperation with like-minded partners as essential strategies for responding to rising protectionism and nationalism. ASEAN continues to engage in the global trade agenda, as evident through its various frameworks such as the Regional Economic Comprehensive Partnership (RCEP), upgraded ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement (ATIGA), and Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA). However, ASEAN also faces limitations in swiftly responding to emerging challenges, prompting the establishment of new issue-specific informal groupings and cooperation mechanisms as alternative approaches.

Weiling went on to discuss ASEAN's recent achievements that could serve as a foundation navigating the current geopolitical landscape and responding to future dynamics. The recently published ASEAN Community Vision 2045, for instance, serves as a strategic framework tailored to today's environment, emphasizing resilience, transformation, and strategic autonomy. lt highlights various issues, including digital innovation, sustainable growth, and crisis responsiveness. Under Malaysia's Chairmanship, ASEAN has also recently established the Geoeconomics Task Force to better address economic security challenges, including trade coercion, tariffs, and economic shocks. However, while these initiatives are steps in the right direction, the key challenge remains in their implementation. ASEAN has often succeeded in producing strategic plans, but as Weiling pointed out, oftentimes their implementation remains questionable and elusive.

Weiling offered several recommendations for how ASEAN can better navigate the rising geopolitical uncertainty and economic shocks. She began by emphasizing the importance of strengthening ASEAN's internal cohesion and resilience. This can be achieved by enhancing institutional capacity and deepening economic integration, particularly through boosting intra-ASEAN trade, addressing longstanding barriers and inconsistent regulatory standards, as well as investing in infrastructure connectivity and logistic networks. Moreover, ASEAN needs to improve its coordinated crisis response capabilities by strengthening cross-sector cooperation. ASEAN could also diversify its external partnerships to mitigate the risks associated with major power rivalries. This includes exploring partnerships with the middle powers in order to reduce dependence on a particular partner and enhance ASEAN's strategic flexibility.

Weiling also saw the urgent need for ASEAN to adopt a more pragmatic and flexible approach when it comes to managing its regional flashpoints. She argued that ASEAN must move beyond rigid and legally binding mechanisms, such as the Code of Conduct,



which have been proven ineffective. Instead, she proposed focusing on incremental, issue-specific approaches that are actually achievable and practical, such as through confidence-building measures, clear protocols for crisis communication, and mechanisms for de-escalation. Finally, ASEAN could invest more in innovation and human capital to increase its competitiveness and resilience. ASEAN could leverage support from its dialogue and external partners to help advance these efforts.

Weiling wrapped up her session by acknowledging that ASEAN undoubtedly faces significant challenges in maintaining its balancing act in an increasingly fragmented and multipolar world. Yet, ASEAN possesses

substantial agency through its established mechanisms and institutional instruments. She emphasized the importance of enhancing the operational flexibility, improving decision making process, and strengthening the capacity of ASEAN's various mechanisms, such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Infrastructure Fund (AIF), and ASEAN Defence Minister's Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus), to ensure that ASEAN will be able to respond swiftly and effectively to new and emerging challenges. Weiling concluded by reaffirming that ASEAN's continued relevance and effectiveness will largely depend on its internal cohesion and ability to proactively adapt to a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape.





Professor Perwita opened his session by posing the question of whether we are truly entering an era of multipolarity. He referred to Joseph Nye's concept of the international system as a threedimensional chessboard, comprising political security and military power, economic power, and the transnational system. Professor Perwita proceeded to dissect each of these dimensions. In the realm of political security and military power, he argued that the US remains the dominant actor, followed by China. In the economic domain, however, more than two actors are beginning to gain influence. While the US and China remain at the forefront, other players, such as the EU and BRICS, are becoming increasingly significant in shaping the global economy. The third dimension, the transnational system, highlights the role of non-state actors, including large multinational corporations that hold substantial economic power, such as Google and Microsoft.

Professor Perwita went on to define a multipolar system as an international system in which power is more diffused among several major states. What matters most is the balance of power that emerges within the international system. While multipolarity sometimes result in imbalances of power, it does not necessarily lead to such outcomes. Quoting the UN Secretary General, António Guterres, he noted that the emergence of a multipolar system could encourage better multilateral cooperation and foster a new balance in international relations, highlighting the need to think beyond the traditional definition of multipolarity. On the other hand, some scholars also argued that although some countries have grown quite strong, only two countries possess the military and economic capability to form distinct poles: the US and China. Multipolarity truly exists only when several major states form competing blocs that actively compete for power and seek hegemony.

Professor Perwita then discussed the recent 2+2 ministerial meeting between Indonesia and China, which brought together the defense and foreign ministers of both countries. This meeting marked the 75th anniversary of Indonesia-China bilateral relations. Among the key takeaways was a renewed commitment to strengthen their Comprehensive Strategic Dialogue (CSD), which structured around 5 pillars, including economic cooperation, people-to-people relations, and maritime security. The pillar on maritime security was particularly noteworthy, as it was closely related to a joint statement released in November 2024. which included provisions outlining mechanisms to explore joint development agendas in the South China Sea-an initiative that drew mixed responses. This has been framed as a way to reduce the risk of open conflict in the South China Sea, facilitating technology transfer, and building on the resumption of the Heping Garuda military exercises. Initially suspended in 2016, the joint exercise was resumed in 2024, focusing on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. Professor Perwita viewed these developments positively, emphasizing the need for more space to conduct similar exercises. The significance of the 2+2 ministerial meeting lies in strengthening economic and infrastructure linkages as well as ensuring regional centrality and stability.

for Indonesia's foreign policy As outlook, Professor Perwita referenced Henry Kissinger's notion that foreign policy begins at home. He argued that Indonesia must first address its domestic challenges, followed by regional issues within ASEAN and broader concerns beyond the region, such as developments on the Korean Peninsula and in the Taiwan Strait. Indonesia continues to hold a critical role in ASEAN, owing to its growing economy, large population, and strong military power. However, it remains to be seen what direction Indonesia's foreign policy will take under the new administration, as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has yet to release its 2025-2029 strategic planning document. This document will be key in guiding Indonesia's behaviour in the international arena, anticipating future challenges and navigating an increasingly complex geopolitical landscape.



Furthermore, Professor Perwita maintained that Indonesia continues, and will continue, to serve as an anchor for ASEAN. Indonesia's foreign policy conduct will largely depend on its ability to maintain a balanced posture between the US and China. To sum up, Professor Perwita borrowed Hidetaka Yoshimatsu's concept of "impartial enmeshment", which refers to the behaviour and strategy of positioning oneself in the middle without aligning with or choosing sides among major powers. If Indonesia could successfully adopt this approach, it would be better equipped to manage its geopolitical positioning amidst an evolving global landscape, while continuing to serve as a central player in ASEAN and other multilateral or minilateral platforms. This will allow Indonesia to amplify both its own voices and those of ASEAN on the regional and global stages.



#### Questions

#### Azhari (Taipei Economic and Trade Office Jakarta):

Considering the increasing global trends of protectionism as mentioned by Ms. Weiling, along with the tariff trade wars and the fragmentation of the international system driven by the rising tensions between the US and China, the geopolitical challenges in ASEAN and the need for regional cohesion, how do you see ASEAN navigate its relations with Taiwan amidst the US-China tariff wars and ongoing South China Sea dispute? Additionally, the survey that Ms. Weiling brought up mentioned aggressive behaviour in the South China Sea as one of the top geopolitical concerns. I am intrigued to hear more about Ms. Weiling's recently published paper about the elusive code of conduct related to this.

### Responses

## Rene Pattiradjawane (Chairperson, Center of China Studies and Senior Associate Fellow, The Habibie Center):

Regarding ASEAN's relations with Taiwan, Pattiradjawane noted that no AMS formally recognizes Taiwan. The issue has never been addressed in any ASEAN meetings. He further reiterated that in Indonesia's case, there has been no official engagement with Taiwanese counterparts, even on non-political matters. From his perspective, navigating the Taiwan issues will depend on whether the status quo across the strait and the level of threat posed by mainland China. The main concern, should an open conflict arise, would be evacuating the 350,000 Indonesians from Taiwan. He emphasized that this is a key issue that needs to be addressed and anticipated.

## Joanne Lin Weiling (Co-coordinator of the ASEAN Studies Centre, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute):

Weiling pointed out that Taiwan is not the highest on ASEAN's agenda, noting that the last related statement was released in 2022. She highlighted that all AMS support the One China Policy, therefore, Taiwan and the Cross-Strait relations are regarded as internal affairs of China. ASEAN is more concerned with the impact of the tensions on regional stability. Weiling also seconded Pattiradjawane's concerns on the many ASEAN nationals currently residing in Taiwan, emphasizing that their evacuation will become the top priority should a conflict arise. Additionally, she noted that the economic impact, caused by the concern of whether the South China Sea would still be open for trade, will be another area of attention for ASEAN.

Weiling also highlighted that reunification is not for ASEAN to say. She further emphasized that the region's concern is on the use of force. Among all of the member states, the Philippines would face the most strategic pressure. As the country has a lot of Enhanced Defense Cooperation

Agreements (EDCAs) with the US, the Philippines would have to make the decision on whether to allow the attacks launched from the bases in their country. Apart from that, Singapore could be another country that would need to make a critical decision on the possibility of being used as a base for the US, given its strong strategic ties with the country.

In regard to her recent paper related to the South China Sea, Weiling argued that ASEAN should move beyond an "all or nothing" mindset, such as insisting on either having a legally binding agreement or nothing at all. She further suggested that ASEAN needs to pursue more pragmatic solutions and find ways beyond binary thinking that equates success with legally binding clauses. Weiling noted the importance of having revitalized diplomatic frameworks that include stronger intra-ASEAN coordination to overcome internal fragmentation, especially among the claimant states. Allowing all claimant states to first establish a common position would enhance ASEAN's collective leverage in its negotiations with China. Additionally, it is essential to understand the different positions that each AMS has in order to build internal cohesion and prevent potential exploitation by China. A divided ASEAN would make it easier for China to engage and conquer the member states individually.

# **Questions** Tifanny:

A question to Rene Pattiradjawane: Considering China's deepening economic and defense footprints in Southeast Asia, and given your expertise in Chinese studies, is ASEAN already leaning towards dependency rather than balancing? Is this so-called balancing act merely a strategic indecision? And how sustainable is it in the long run, especially when China increasingly sets the terms of regional engagement?

A question to Joanne Lin Weiling: You previously mentioned that ASEAN needs to be more resilient and proactive, especially in the South China Sea and digital development, without being dependent on any single power. However, given the current asymmetries in capabilities within ASEAN and the deepening economic and defense ties that many AMS have with China, how realistic is this vision? Can ASEAN truly lead a "new game" if it continues to avoid addressing its internal fragmentation and growing reliance on external powers?

A question to Professor Anak Agung Banyu Perwita: In regard to Indonesia's attempt to deliver a balancing act, as you mentioned in your speech, it seems that Indonesia may be forcing this balance rather than genuinely achieving it. There are some signs indicating that Indonesia is leaning towards an imbalance. So, is Indonesia trying to deliver the balancing act, or is it more of forcing the balance in order to benefit from both global powers in today's multipolar world?

### Responses

Rene Pattiradjawane (Chairperson, Center of China Studies and Senior Associate Fellow, The Habibie Center):

Pattiradjawane echoed his earlier point that most AMS primarily act based on their respective national interests, adopting an "a la carte" approach. For example, Indonesia chooses to depend on China for economic and trade cooperation, but engages with Western countries, such as the US, France, Germany, and the UK, on security issues. This reflects a new form of international relations, where the old principle of "if you are not with us, you are against us" is collapsing.

Pattiradjawane further noted that China's important role in Southeast Asia is undeniable. In assessing threats, he raised a question of whether Iran, with its nuclear capability and ambition, poses a greater danger than North Korea for ASEAN. North Korea does not have proxy terrorist groups, as opposed to Iran, which is linked to Hamas and Hezbollah. The intersection of the Middle East issues and China's role became evident during the recent summit meeting in Malaysia between ASEAN, China, and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). However, it remains to be seen what kind of nuances or framework would be established through this trilateral platform that would help de-escalate the tensions and prevent further regional spillover.

Regarding the South China Sea, Pattiradjawane noticed that the region is being balkanized by China. For instance, when President Prabowo visited China in November 2024, during which a confidential document called the Consensus on Joint Development on the Overlapping Claims in the South China Sea was reportedly issued. The nature of the document is unusual as it has no timeframe and remains undisclosed to the public.

Pattiradjawane also mentioned that when Chinese Premier, Li Qiang, visited Jakarta to follow up on this document, President Prabowo was seen nervous, suggesting the uncertainty and confusion on how the document should be implemented. Additionally, this document reportedly led to the cancellation of a delimitation agreement between Indonesia and Vietnam that had been working for 13 to 15 years.

Although the region has strong relations with China, especially in economic development and trade exchange, it is nonetheless experiencing a form of balkanization due to the South China Sea issue. As not every AMS is a claimant of the South China Sea, it hinders ASEAN's unity and centrality, evident in the difficulty ASEAN faces in issuing joint statements on matters related to the South China Sea issues.

In response to Professor Perwita's remark on the balancing act, Pattiradjawane expressed skepticism on its feasibility, particularly in the context of relations with China. He emphasized

the need for ASEAN and Indonesia to be firm in articulating their national interests while also upholding their principles in a rules-based order. Indonesia's claim in the North Natuna Sea, for example, is a claim grounded in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). However, when long-standing practices, such as Indonesia's efforts to have maritime delimitation with Vietnam, were obstructed by China, it raises a fundamental question on how ASEAN or its member states can be expected to have a balancing act with the major powers when its interests are being compromised.

## Joanne Lin Weiling (Co-coordinator of the ASEAN Studies Centre, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute):

Weiling noted that the unilateral tariffs imposed by the US were quite a big issue for ASEAN, as they range from 10% to 49%. Some countries, such as Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, and Myanmar, were hit especially hard. The magnitude of the issue not only impacts the supply chain but also future investments, which can lead to shifts in regional trade patterns and impact regional economic stability. Although the countries were subjected to varying tariff rates, unlike the EU, ASEAN does not negotiate as a single bloc. Nevertheless, ASEAN tried to respond by emphasizing collective diplomacy rather than retaliation, opting for measured, principle-based responses as none of the AMS has the economic weight to engage in the retaliatory measures. The ASEAN Economic Ministers, along with the ASEAN leaders, have also issued two different joint statements responding to this issue, reaffirming ASEAN principles and commitment to multilateralism, adherence to WTO rules, and the integration process.

Malaysia's Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim, has also written to President Trump, to convene an ASEAN-US Summit to reinforce diplomatic engagement. However, whether the US agrees to such an initiative will likely depend on whether there are compelling US interests at stake, which Weiling noted may not be the case. President Trump has not shown much interest in Southeast Asia on its own, without the China equation. Additionally, President Trump is not known for favoring multilateralism. This underlines the importance of a two-track approach: ASEAN as a group and individual negotiations from each AMS based on their respective economic and country characteristics, including export profiles and comparative advantages. Given the diversity and sensitivity within ASEAN, a "one-size-fits-all" approach will not be suitable or effective. Unlike the EU, ASEAN is unique as it tries to seek common ground where possible, while also acknowledging that each AMS has distinct strategic priorities and offers different values that they can offer to the US.

## Professor Anak Agung Banyu Perwita (Professor of International Relations, The Republic of Indonesia Defense University):

Professor Perwita noted that the practice of balancing act is not new for Indonesia, referring to the country's central role in the Non-Aligned Movement, and described the current practice as "pouring old wine into a new bottle." He further recalled a time when he was invited by the Chinese Communist Party, along with other experts from around the world, to discuss the importance of the Global South. On the occasion, he emphasized that the balancing act should not be seen as an attempt to compete with the West, but rather as a way to create as much space as possible to fulfill the Global South's national interests. He reaffirmed his point by taking BRICS as an example, noting that its principle of non-alignment echoes the Asian-African Conference's Dasasila Bandung Declaration, illustrating that the concept is not new. He emphasized that what matters is to rejuvenate or revitalize old values in order to meet the agendas and challenges of the current geopolitical landscape.

Professor Perwita continued by pointing out that scholars have many different definitions and understandings of the balancing act. Nevertheless, he argued that as long as countries can provide as many rooms as they can to manoeuvre to fulfil their goals and interests, it can already be deemed as the country's balancing act. He also took Indonesia as an example through its foreign policy principle of "bebas dan aktif" (free and active). He referred to the action as playing the "pendulum", not remaining strictly in the "middle", but occasionally swinging to the "left" or "right", so long as it serves the pursuit of its national interests.

Professor Perwita also mentioned that the term Global South has been rising in the last couple of years. This is not only a response to Western dominance, but also a means to provide alternatives. The rise of the Global South, including China and BRICS, is seen as an alternative, not only for the nations themselves, but also for other developing countries in order to help these nations catch up to the developed countries and elevate their position in the global world.

### **Questions**

#### **Seon Young Yang (Korean Mission to ASEAN):**

ASEAN's cooperation with the middle power countries, including South Korea, is quite interesting. When it comes to the implementation and middle power engagement, ASEAN often provides the initiatives and platforms, but much of the resources still rely on its dialogue partners. How does ASEAN balance this, and how can it accommodate its interests while still keeping its position?

The second question relates to Timor-Leste. As the country is anticipated to be the 11th AMS by the end of the year, how will this impact ASEAN's unity and centrality?

The last question is related to Professor Perwita's thought-provoking presentation on whether multipolarity is truly happening in reality. For instance, ASEAN centrality was initially considered a mythical concept by Amitav Acharya, yet it has now become a norm in ASEAN's engagement with dialogue partners. I believe ASEAN is a great norm-setter. In this context, what kind of narrative or discourse can ASEAN make regarding multipolarity while positioning itself to take a leading role?

### Responses

Joanne Lin Weiling (Co-coordinator of the ASEAN Studies Centre, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute):

Weiling noted that ASEAN has a lot of dialogue partners who view such cooperation as very useful. More importantly, these partners have the funding available that ASEAN can utilize to strengthen its integration, whether in the economic or socio-cultural pillars. ASEAN does not have to replicate the EU, which has its own financial resources to fund its own agenda, preventing it from being driven by external partners. At the same time, ASEAN has yet to reach a stage where it can fully fund all of its own cooperations and initiatives.

Referring to the ASEAN Community Vision 2045, Weiling highlighted ASEAN's many different goals, which will not be achieved without sufficient resources. She suggested that ASEAN should do more to find its own source of funding. While there is an ASEAN Development Fund already established, the amount is insufficient to carry out the extensive plans that ASEAN has. She encouraged the more capable AMS to contribute to the funding more significantly, enabling ASEAN to be more independent and drive its own initiatives. Nevertheless, any cooperation with the dialogue partners, including South Korea, remains very important at this stage. The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) provides a valuable framework that enables ASEAN to cooperate and engage with all partners equally, or as the Singaporean Prime Minister put it, "omnidirectional initiative", while allowing the region to focus and remain anchored to its own strategic priorities.

As for Timor-Leste, Weiling noted that most people welcome the decision for the country to join ASEAN by the next ASEAN Summit in October 2025. However, she also acknowledged that there are concerns whether Timor-Leste's membership will entrench differences within the bloc, slow down the realization of AEC, or even dilute ASEAN's organizational effectiveness and complicate the decision-making process. She pointed out that even with only ten countries, it is already difficult for ASEAN to make decisions, often reaching a consensus only at the lowest common denominator; therefore, adding one more country might present more complexity for the grouping. Nonetheless, it is time to overcome such thinking, affirming that Timor-Leste is a part of ASEAN's regional geography.

The ISEAN-Yusof Institute's survey shows that most regional respondents welcome Timor-Leste into ASEAN, as it can further boost regional integration and create more economic opportunities. Weiling argued that the critical issue lies in TimorLeste's ability to establish the appropriate institutional structures to effectively cooperate with ASEAN and strengthen its human resource capacity. While its current capabilities may still be lacking, Weiling noted that progress is being made. She also drew parallels with the past accession of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam, which initially faced similar challenges, but have now brought a lot of benefits for ASEAN.

## Professor Anak Agung Banyu Perwita (Professor of International Relations, The Republic of Indonesia Defense University):

Professor Perwita brought up the question of whether it is better to have many poles or simply just one or two poles in international relations. He followed this by asking whether peace and stability would be created through prosperity or security. From his perspective, the optimal scenario is one in which countries are able to pursue and secure their national interests, regardless of where the benefits originate. ASEAN has been quite successful in endorsing the rules-based order, highlighting the absence of serious open conflict in the region.

He went on to emphasize the need to revisit the AOIP, noting that the framework is now six years old and would need to be reviewed to ensure its continued relevance and effectiveness in advancing ASEAN's interests. AOIP has three pillars: 1) maritime cooperation, 2) connectivity, and 3) sustainable development. In regard to maritime cooperation, Professor Perwita noted that ASEAN still has a lot of problems in the waterways. Meanwhile, on connectivity, he highlighted the need to review existing initiatives to ensure more concrete actions are taken to improve connectivity among the AMS, particularly in light of the varying development level across the region. As for sustainable development, it has the potential to enable ASEAN to address non-traditional security issues, such as climate change and disaster resilience. He argued that should ASEAN takes a more active role and a concrete agenda on these issues, it can enhance ASEAN's relevance, not only in high politics, but also in low politics, which are increasingly shaping the global political landscape. Professor Perwita continued to stress the importance of reconciling and integrating traditional and non-traditional security concerns to allow ASEAN to play a more significant role. This will require a lot of collaboration, in which ASEAN will need to leverage its relationships with dialogue and external partners.

### **Respons from Participant**

Wela (Journalist):

In response to Professor Perwita's earlier remark that "foreign policy begins at home", I would like to echo the importance of this perspective. However, among all the AMS, I recalled that only one leader, the Malaysian Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim, has taken a strong and vocal position on the Middle East conflict.

Additionally, I also agreed with Weiling's use of the term "collective approach and diplomacy". This approach taken by ASEAN can also be seen through the ASEAN Governors of Central Bank Meeting held in May, in Kuala Lumpur, along with the ASEAN Finance Ministers, in order to respond to the unilateral tariffs from the US, as well as the US-China tariff war. As a result, a collective statement has been released, since the imposed tariff and trade war have caused a big impact on the region. Moreover, instability in the global political landscape also affected Indonesia. Indonesia's Minister of Finance, Sri Mulyani, noted this during a press conference where she stated that the Russia-Ukraine and the Middle East conflict have had a significant impact on the state budget, requiring it to be revised.

Lastly, I would like to urge ASEAN to articulate a clear foreign policy stance on global conflicts, aside from its internal problems within ASEAN.



#### **ABOUT ASEAN STUDIES PROGRAM**

The ASEAN Studies Program was established on February 24, 2010, to become a center of excellence on ASEAN related issues, which can assist in the development of the ASEAN Community by 2015. The Habibie Center through its ASEAN Studies Program, alongside other institutions working towards the same goal, hopes to contribute to the realization of a more people-oriented ASEAN that puts a high value on democracy and human rights.

The objective of the ASEAN Studies Program is not merely only to conduct research and discussion within academic and government circles, but also to strengthen public awareness by forming a strong network of civil society in the region that will be able to help spread the ASEAN message. With the establishment of ASEAN Studies Program, The Habibie Center aims to play its part within our capabilities to the ASEAN regional development.

#### **ABOUT TALKING ASEAN**

Talking ASEAN is a monthly public dialogue held at The Habibie Center in Jakarta. Covering a wide array of issues related to ASEAN, Talking ASEAN addresses topics of: Economic Integration, Socio-cultural, & Democracy, human rights and regional peace, among others. Featuring local and visiting experts, Talking ASEAN is one of a series of twelve dialogues regularly held each month and open to a target audience consisting of ASEAN officials, foreign ambassadors & diplomats, academics, university students, businesses, and the media.

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