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# **When Non-Violence Fails:** **The Challenges of Resolving Conflicts** **in Southeast Asia**

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# **When Non-Violence Fails: The Challenges of Resolving Conflicts in Southeast Asia**

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## Introduction

Southeast Asia has been widely considered a peaceful region by both decision-makers<sup>1</sup> and academics.<sup>2</sup> Although the three Indochina wars had a detrimental impact on human and state security throughout the Cold War, Southeast Asian states have not engaged in protracted warfare since the expansion of ASEAN from five members to ten in the 1990s. To be sure, there were three military skirmishes—between Thailand and Myanmar in 2001, and between Thailand and Cambodia in 2011. However, these incidents were limited in scale and duration and were quickly resolved through diplomatic channels. The absence of war, argues prominent academic and long-time observer of Southeast Asia, Amitav Acharya, is because “ASEAN was able to achieve the state of a limited (‘nascent’) but important ‘security community,’ a grouping which despite inter-state disputes, political tensions, and armed preparedness by some members against others, has developed a habit of peaceful conduct, or a state whereby its members do not wish their conflicts to be resolved by going to outright war.”<sup>3</sup>

However, recent events have brought this claim into question. Renewed tensions between Thailand and Cambodia proliferated into a small-scale military clash between Thai and Cambodian troops on 28 May 2025, but erupted again in late July, claiming many lives and displacing up to 300,000 people. Meanwhile, inter-state disputes remain, as evidenced by the ongoing South China Sea dispute. Conflicts, including those in the Mekong sub-region and existing territorial disputes, still require constant management. Although many argue that many inter-state conflicts have been contained, a number of intra-state conflicts have persisted, including in Myanmar following the 2021 coup, as well as in Southern Thailand and Mindanao. Prolonged intra-state conflicts in these areas have led to a lack of human security, displacement, and widespread human rights abuses, despite ASEAN’s pledge to build a people-centered community.

This paper examines the strengths and limitations of ASEAN’s role in addressing inter- and intra-state conflicts in Southeast Asia. More specifically, the paper asks: To what extent has non-violence been used to resolve or manage these inter- and intra-state conflicts within the context of Southeast Asia? By non-violence, this

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- 1 Riyaz ul Khaliq, “Vietnam tells UN: Southeast Asia ‘emerged as a region of solidarity and cooperation’ Premier Pham Minh Chinh says Hanoi will work with nations ‘withing and outside’ Southeast Asia to safeguard peace”, *Anadolu Ajansi*, 23 September 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/vietnam-tells-un-southeast-asia-emerged-as-a-region-of-solidarity-and-cooperation-/2999121> (accessed 28 August 2024).
  - 2 Emmers, Ralf, and Mely Caballero-Anthony, “Peaceful Change in Southeast Asia: The Historical and Institutional Bases”, in T. V. Paul, Deborah Welch Larson, Harold A. Trinkunas, Anders Wivel, and Ralf Emmers (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Peaceful Change in International Relations* (2021; online edn, Oxford Academic, 8 Oct.2020), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190097356.013.39>, (accessed 5 July 2024).
  - 3 Amitav Acharya, *ASEAN and Regional Order Revisiting Security Community in Southeast Asia* (London: Routledge, 2021), p. 3-4.

paper engages with the definition outlined in the Global Greens Charter<sup>4</sup>, adopted in 2001 and recently updated in 2023, which “strive[s] for a culture of peace and cooperation between states, inside societies and between individuals, as the basis of global security.” Global security goes beyond a narrow definition of state security and the enhancement of military might. Instead, it places importance on “pursuing general and complete disarmament, including international agreements to ensure a complete and definitive ban of nuclear weapons, biological and chemical arms, anti-personnel mines and depleted uranium weapons” and “a rigorous code of conduct on arms exports to countries where human rights are being violated.” Regarding the protection of individual security, it considers the “social, economic, ecological, psychological and cultural aspects of conflict.”

This involves “respecting other cultures, eradicating racism, promoting freedom and democracy” while strengthening multilateral frameworks, including the United Nations (UN), and more specifically, ASEAN in the context of Southeast Asia. All in all, non-violence seeks to secure both state and human security through the use of peaceful and democratic means, such as respect for equality, the peaceful settlement of conflicts, and cooperation. The promotion of non-violence is often codified in international agreements and institutions, but over time, the continued practice of these peaceful and democratic methods can evolve into a lasting culture.

The analysis in this paper explores the use of non-violent means, including ASEAN norms, multilateral cooperation, joint development, and negotiations, to diffuse both inter- and intra-state conflicts and tensions in Southeast Asia. The findings show that while ASEAN institutions and norms as well as the expansion of economic interdependency have fostered a “culture of peace and cooperation” that has generally helped prevent the outbreak of inter-state war and tensions, these elements have not necessarily ensured the use of democratic practices (i.e., negotiations and respect for equality) in diffusing intra-state tensions. This limitation arises because the principle of non-interference, which upholds the authority of individual states to determine their own responses to internal issues. In the context of an authoritarian shift in Southeast Asia, this has allowed governments to infringe upon human rights, consequently violating the spirit of creating a people-centered ASEAN Community and diverging from the principle outlined in the Global Greens Charter.

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4 Charter of the Global Greens (2023). From [https://globalgreens.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/GlobalGreens\\_Charter\\_2023.pdf](https://globalgreens.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/GlobalGreens_Charter_2023.pdf) (accessed 9 September 2025)

The following discussion is divided into two parts. First, it examines the use of non-violence in diffusing inter-state conflicts and tensions in Southeast Asia, focusing on the South China Sea dispute and tensions in the Mekong sub-region. These conflicts deserve special attention as they involve a considerable number of Southeast Asian states and China. Although tensions between Thailand and Cambodia have reignited in recent weeks, this bilateral dispute is not included due to the timing of the clashes, which occurred as this analysis went to press. Second, it explores how Southeast Asian states have responded to intra-state conflicts, employing a range of approaches from adherence to democratic principles to outright suppression.

## **Managing Inter-state Conflicts and Tensions in Southeast Asia**

Contemporary peace, defined as the absence of war, within the region can be attributed to a number of changes in the 1990s. As the Cold War came to a close, the region experienced the expansion of economic interdependency,<sup>5</sup> which in turn brought about regional prosperity over the decades.<sup>6</sup> Most importantly, ASEAN has played a key role in the promotion of non-violence via its institutional expansion and the entrenchment of its norms. As an illustration, the proliferation of East Asian multilateralism based on the ASEAN framework has created opportunities for secondary states in Southeast Asia to communicate, engage, and initiate cooperation with larger extra-regional powers. For example, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) became an important platform for economic dialogue while the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) advanced discussions on security. On a smaller scale, ASEAN initiated forums to facilitate engagement and cooperation with its larger Northeast Asian neighbors, namely China, Japan, and the Republic of Korea via ASEAN Plus Three, as well as individually with various extra-regional actors through the ASEAN Plus One platforms. In the 1990s, ASEAN membership expanded from five to ten countries. In 2022, Timor Leste was in principle accepted as ASEAN's 11<sup>th</sup> member, but will potentially become a full member at the October summit in 2025.

Regarding ASEAN norms, the principle of non-interference is a security and diplomatic practice highly valued by ASEAN member states and embraced by other East Asian security forums, such as the ARF. As a result, ASEAN members refrain from actions such as criticizing a fellow member state or engaging in military intervention. The ASEAN Way also emphasizes consensus-based decision-making through discussions and consultations. Reinforcing these norms is ASEAN's commitment to the non-compliance approach, which governs the degree to which ASEAN agreements are institutionalized—or, in many cases, not.

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5 Natasha Hamilton-Hart, "The costs of coercion: modern Southeast Asia in comparative perspective", *The Pacific Review* 26, no. 1 (2013), p. 69.

6 Richard Stubbs and Sorin Mitrea, "ASEAN At 50: the global political economy's contribution to durability", *Contemporary Politics* 23, no. 4 (2017), p. 392.

In practice, these norms have helped regulate state behaviour<sup>7</sup> and establish “a habit of peaceful conduct.”<sup>8</sup> However, “peaceful conduct” and non-violence have been achieved largely through conflict avoidance rather than problem-solving.<sup>9</sup>

Consequently, many inter-state disputes have persisted while a handful of regional problems have been simply swept under the rug. Despite ASEAN’s approach to non-violence having been instrumental in maintaining relative peace over the decades, the question remains: have these measures been sufficient in terms of containing or resolving contemporary challenges such as the South China Sea dispute or tensions in the Mekong sub-region? These two problems share some similarities but diverge in significant ways. On one hand, both are issues complicated by a rising China and affect a considerable number of Southeast Asian states.

Due to China’s involvement, both have attracted a proliferation of minilateral initiatives, some conceived by major and middle powers seeking to counterbalance China’s expansion. On the other hand, there are also considerable differences in how the South China Sea dispute and the tensions in the Mekong sub-region are managed, particularly with respect to conflict mitigation. ASEAN has maintained a consistent role in managing tensions in the South China Sea dispute, whereas minilateral mechanisms outside the ASEAN framework have provided space for communication and cooperation in the Mekong sub-region. But while Southeast Asian countries have pursued diplomatic, non-violent approaches to promote peace and stability in both cases, the South China Sea dispute has fueled militarization, whereas tensions in the Mekong sub-region have created opportunities for joint development.

## The South China Sea Dispute

Virtually uninhabited, the islets in the South China Sea consist of the Paracels in the north, the Spratly islands in the south, and the Scarborough Shoal located in the east. Hosting nearly one-third of global trade, the South China Sea is marked by overlapping sovereignty claims from China, Taiwan, Malaysia, Brunei, Vietnam, and the Philippines, alongside an intense struggle for influence between major powers—most notably the United States and China.

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7 Kusuma Snitwongse, “Thirty years of ASEAN: achievements through political cooperation”, *The Pacific Review*, 11, no. 2 (1998), p. 185; Mely Caballero-Anthony, “Mechanisms of Dispute Settlement: The ASEAN Experience”, *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 20, no. 1 (1998), pp. 38-66; Kai He, “Does ASEAN Matter? International Relations Theories, Institutional Realism, and ASEAN”, *Asian Security*, 2, no. 3, (2006), p. 190.

8 Acharya, *ASEAN and Regional Order Revisiting Security Community in Southeast Asia*, p. 2.

9 David Martin Jones and Michael L.R. Smith, “Making Process, Not Progress: ASEAN and the Evolving East Asian Regional Order”, *International Security* 32, no. 1 (2007), pp. 148-184.

On one hand, the United States' position on the South China Sea dispute is closely tied to its Indo-Pacific Strategy, which emphasizes adherence to international law and the protection of freedom of navigation. This is at odds with China's actions in pursuing its expansive claims in the South China Sea, which the United States has described as "bullying of neighbors."<sup>10</sup> From time to time, the US has expressed vocal support for its partners and allies, such as the Philippines. For instance, in response to rising tensions in 2024, the US reaffirmed its commitment to the 1951 US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, the US has maintained neutrality regarding the specific sovereignty claims of the disputing states.

On the other hand, President Xi has placed the "highest priority on building an impregnable wall for border and ocean defense" and has reiterated "the need to firmly uphold China's territorial sovereignty, maritime rights and interests, and national unity, and properly handle territorial and island disputes."<sup>12</sup> China's contemporary actions are rooted in a historical narrative known as the "Century of Humiliation" (1839-1949), when China lost elements of its sovereignty to Western powers. Although overlapping claims by all parties are driven in part by national prestige, these are also motivated by the desire to tap into resource-rich grounds consisting of an estimated 11 billion barrels of oil, 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, and 12 percent of global fisheries.<sup>13</sup>

While outright war is arguably undesirable for all parties, confrontations and skirmishes have occurred periodically, often between China and some ASEAN member states. In 1988, the Chinese navy sank three Vietnamese vessels near Johnson Reef. In 1996, Chinese and Philippine naval forces clashed in the Spratly Islands. Tensions flared again in 2011, when skirmishes broke out between China and the Philippines following a series of incidents, with both sides accusing each other of violating the 2002 ASEAN-China Declaration. In June 2024, China Coast Guard units blocked Philippine Navy supply boats from resupplying an outpost at the Second Thomas Shoal, leading to a tense standoff. A Philippine government task force described China's actions as "dangerous maneuvers, including ramming and towing."<sup>14</sup> The incident left eight Philippine service members injured, with one losing a finger.

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10 The White House, "Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States," February 2022, <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf> (accessed 30 August 2024).

11 U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Support for the Philippines in the South China Sea," Press Statement by Matthew Miller, Department Spokesperson, 31 August 2024, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-support-for-the-philippines-in-the-south-china-sea-12/> (accessed 30 August 2024).

12 F. Andrew Wolf, Jr., "The West Is Misreading China in the South China Sea", *Geopolitical Monitor*, 11 July 2024, <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/the-west-is-misreading-china-in-the-south-china-sea/> (accessed 30 August 2024).

13 Sajjad Ashraf, "What happens now in the South China Sea? *East Asia Forum*, 23 July 2016, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2016/07/23/what-happens-now-in-the-south-china-sea/> (accessed 30 August 2024).

14 Jim Gomez, "Philippine officials say Chinese forces seized 2 navy boats in disputed shoal, injuring sailors", *AP News*, 18 June 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/south-china-sea-philippines-second-thomas-shoal-75c2ecc0804d1160e691f6e066c88f10> (accessed 22 October 2024).

Given these elements, it is unsurprising that the South China Sea continues to draw significant global attention and the involvement of extra-regional actors in various forms—some of which have contributed to confrontation rather than conflict resolution. Aside from the United States, its allies, such as Japan, have also expressed concern over threats to freedom of navigation, as protected under international law. In line with these objectives, the European Union (EU) also announced its commitment to upholding the rules-based international order, among other priorities outlined in the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific in 2021.<sup>15</sup> While the level of involvement varies among individual European states in addressing the Indo-Pacific challenges, the EU and the US have been strengthening their cooperation, as demonstrated by high-level discussions and a first-ever joint naval exercise in 2023.<sup>16</sup>

Other state actors have also conducted military exercises and patrols to assert their position on China's actions. The promotion of a rules-based maritime order has further encouraged the rise of minilateral initiatives, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad)—a partnership between Japan, the United States, Australia and India—and AUKUS, which includes Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Both are seen as acting as a counterbalance to China's increasing influence. The United States, Australia, Japan, and India are also deepening defense ties with countries like the Philippines and Vietnam, contributing to regional militarization. A notable example is the "Reciprocal Access Agreement" signed in July 2024 between Japan and the Philippines, which facilitates the exchange of military personnel for training, joint military exercises, and the sharing of defense equipment and technology. While not considered a mutual defense pact, the agreement simplifies the entry of foreign military personnel into each other's territory.

Individually, claimant states have also taken additional measures. For example, Malaysia has increased military deployments around the industrial port town of Bintulu in the state of Sarawak, where most of its energy sources are concentrated.<sup>17</sup> While the present security landscape and the involvement of extra-regional powers offer Southeast Asian countries more opportunities for hedging and cooperation, they also exert pressure on individual states to take sides, which creates divisions and adds another layer of strategic mistrust.

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15 European Commission, "Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council The EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific", 16 September 2021, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication\\_2021\\_24\\_1\\_en.pdf](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication_2021_24_1_en.pdf) (accessed 22 October 2024).

16 Christina Keßler, "Indo-Pacific Calling: Where is the US heading and what does it mean for Europe?" *Heinrich Böll Stiftung*, 24 January 2024, <https://www.boell.de/en/2024/01/24/indo-pacific-calling-where-us-heading-and-what-does-it-mean-europe#:~:text=Europeans%20therefore%20primarily%20look%20at,on%20the%20Indo-Pacific%20region>. (accessed 22 October 2024).

17 Rebecca Tan, "Malaysia's appetite for oil and gas puts it on collision course with China", *The Washington Post*, 11 May 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/05/11/china-malaysia-south-china-sea/> (accessed 15 September 2024).

As members of the aforementioned minilateral frameworks and China increasingly engage in divisive rhetoric, it is imperative that individual ASEAN states avoid becoming too closely aligned with the US or acting as proxies for China. Equally concerning is the involvement of extra-regional actors, which increases the risk of escalation and raises the likelihood of accidental confrontation.

As former Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi once observed, “One wrong step in the South China Sea will turn a small fire into a terrible firestorm.”<sup>18</sup> To be clear, while militarization is accelerating at a pace over which ASEAN has very little control, the risk of nuclear weapons build-up remains low. ASEAN members are parties to The Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ), or the Bangkok Treaty, which was signed on 15 December 1995 and came into effect in 1997. While the treaty permits the peaceful use of nuclear energy, it prohibits signatories from developing or acquiring nuclear weapons, or using nuclear weapons against parties to the treaty. Since 1999, China has been the only state with nuclear weapons that has expressed a willingness to sign the SEANWFZ.

To promote the peaceful management of the South China Sea dispute, ASEAN has played a central role in keeping the issue on its agenda while providing a forum for ongoing communication and dialogue. While these initiatives can help limit misunderstandings and miscalculations between the actors involved, they do not necessarily resolve the conflict. In 2002, ASEAN and China signed the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC), a non-binding document that lacks a dispute resolution mechanism. The DOC stipulates that signatories “reaffirm their commitment to the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations, the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, and other universally recognized principles of international law which shall serve as the basic norms governing state-to-state relations.”<sup>19</sup>

The document also states that signatories will exercise “self-restraint” and “resolve their territorial and jurisdictional disputes by peaceful means, without resorting to the threat or use of force,”<sup>20</sup> all of which have been violated at one point or another. According to the ASEAN website, the purpose of the DOC is

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18 Jintamas Saksornchai, “Southeast Asian diplomats meet with China as friction mounts over Beijing’s sweeping maritime claims”, *AP News*, 26 July 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/asean-laos-china-america-south-china-sea-9f51f4e931ca34c859113a4d7da79267> (accessed 15 September 2024).

19 ASEAN, Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, *May 14, 2012* <https://asean.org/declaration-on-the-conduct-of-parties-in-the-south-china-sea-2/> (accessed 15 September 2024).

20 Ibid.

to help build “trust, confidence-building, and cooperation.”<sup>21</sup> To be clear, this means the DOC is not a conflict resolution mechanism, and the guidelines for its implementation were only finalized in 2011. Although ASEAN floated the idea of having a Code of Conduct (COC) in the 1990s, negotiations did not get underway until 2002. Similar to the DOC, the COC is expected to adhere to international norms and laws, especially UNCLOS. To date, the first and second readings of the Single Draft COC Negotiating Text were completed in 2019 and 2023, respectively, with the third reading launched in October 2023.

Despite these milestones, finalizing the COC will be a significant challenge. More than two decades of negotiations have passed amid repeated violations of the UNCLOS and principles of “peaceful coexistence,” and many issues remain unresolved, namely the geographic scope of the COC, also referred to as the Zone of Applicability. Furthermore, China has proposed provisions that would prevent extra-regional actors from playing a role. One provision specifies: “The parties shall not hold joint military exercises with countries from outside the region, unless the parties concerned are notified beforehand and express no objection.”<sup>22</sup> This provision would provide Beijing the authority to veto any joint military exercises between extra-regional actors, such as Japan and the US, as well as ASEAN countries, some of which are US treaty allies. More importantly, critics have raised concerns over the feasibility of enforcing the COC.<sup>23</sup> Given that China has rejected the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration’s ruling in favor of the Philippines, it is doubtful whether it would be willing to sign a legally binding document, let alone be bound by one.

As China continues to assert its sovereignty claims within the nine-dash line, it is imperative that ASEAN stands in support of its member states facing such challenges, such as the 2024 standoff at the Second Thomas Shoal. Doing so would not only uphold the commitments outlined in the DOC but also strengthen ASEAN’s credibility as a unified regional body. Unfortunately, divisions continue to undermine ASEAN’s unity. In the wake of the Second Thomas Shoal incident, ASEAN remained silent. At the conclusion of the ASEAN Foreign Minister’s Meeting held in Lao PDR from 24-27 July 2024, the joint communique acknowledged that some ministers had raised concerns over “land reclamations, activities, serious incidents in the area, including actions that put the safety of all persons at risk, damage to the marine environment, which have eroded trust and confidence, increased tensions, and may undermine peace, security, and stability in

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21 ASEAN, “Priority Areas of Cooperation,” <https://asean.org/our-communities/asean-political-security-community/peaceful-secure-and-stable-region/situation-in-the-south-china-sea/priority-areas-of-cooperation/>

22 RFA Staff, “China, ASEAN unlikely to achieve Code of Conduct in 2024: experts”, *Radio Free Asia*, 2 July 2024, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/southchinasea/code-of-conduct-02072024014051.html> (accessed 1 August 2024).

23 Rahman Yaacob, “A code of conduct won’t solve the South China Sea crisis”, *The Interpreter*, 15 May 2024, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/code-conduct-won-t-solve-south-china-sea-crisis> (accessed 1 August 2024).

the region.”<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, according to one media report, the Philippines sought to include a specific reference to the military clashes, which “led to serious injury to persons and vessel damage.”<sup>25</sup> Reports suggest that Cambodia and Laos, both close to China, insisted the wording be dropped from the communique. The fact remains that not all ASEAN countries are directly affected by China’s actions in the South China Sea, resulting in different responses to China’s conduct.

The non-claimant countries of mainland Southeast Asia, including Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand, do not have a stake in the South China Sea but are more concerned about China’s control over the flow of the Mekong River, which affects livelihoods, food security, and local communities. Vietnam is in a unique position as both a claimant in the South China Sea dispute and a part of the Mekong sub-region. However, Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand—due to their strong relations with China—are unwilling to take a critical stance against China’s actions in the South China Sea. At the same time, each of these countries has taken a different approach to the issue, influenced by a range of factors, including domestic politics and levels of economic development.

For example, Myanmar has been preoccupied with internal strife and has not pursued an active role in regional affairs. Furthermore, owing to increased isolation from the West since the 2021 coup, Myanmar remains largely dependent on China and Russia. Cambodia has sustained close relations with China since the Khmer Rouge era, with its economy remaining significantly reliant on Chinese investment and aid. Consequently, Cambodia has consistently aligned its foreign policy with Beijing’s strategic interests. This was evident at the 2012 ASEAN Summit in Phnom Penh, when Cambodia blocked any reference to the South China Sea dispute in the Summit’s joint statement, despite the insistence of the Philippines and Vietnam on including a reference to their territorial disputes with China. As a result of these divisions, ASEAN failed to issue a joint communique for the first time since its inception. In contrast, Thailand largely remains a bystander on the matter. However, it arguably took a greater interest in the issue when it assumed the role of ASEAN Country Coordinator for China, during which it facilitated the first formal consultation on the COC in September 2013.

Despite these challenges and ASEAN’s disunity, it remains the most viable mechanism for managing and containing the South China Sea dispute in accordance with the principles of non-violence due to several factors: 1) almost half of its members are claimants; 2) ASEAN adopts an inclusive diplomatic approach, in

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24 ASEAN, “Joint Communique of the 57th ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ Meeting Vientiane, 25 July 2024”, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Final-Joint-Communique-of-the-57th-AMM.pdf> (accessed 1 August 2024).

25 Ramon Royandoyan, “ASEAN ministers at loggerheads over Israel-Hamas conflict”, *Nikkei Asia*, 27 July 2024, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/ASEAN-ministers-at-loggerheads-over-Israel-Hamas-conflict> (accessed 1 August 2024).

contrast to other multilateral frameworks such as the Quad and AUKUS, which exclude China and explicitly identify it as the primary violator of international norms and law; and 3) China has not entirely rejected ASEAN's role (although it prefers quiet bilateral talks over public multilateral ones).

However, given ASEAN's complexity—stemming from its large membership and the diverse strategic interests of its ten member states—minilateral frameworks such as the Quad and AUKUS can serve as complementary mechanisms. Similarly, the EU Indo-Pacific Ministerial Forum could promote regular communication among participants and help identify key areas of cooperation among stakeholders. Considering the circumstances, continuous negotiations and communication through ASEAN's multilateral framework are crucial. Equally important are talks between the relevant actors, including the Quad, AUKUS, and China, which should replace inflammatory rhetoric disseminated through the media. While many believe that a COC may not fully resolve the issue, it serves as a mechanism aimed at diffusing tensions through constructive communication, thereby reducing the risk of military incidents among the involved parties.

## Tensions in the Mekong Sub-region

While ASEAN plays a key role in chairing negotiations to contain the South China Sea dispute, it has assumed practically no role in managing tensions over shared resources in the Mekong sub-region. Instead, a host of minilateral frameworks advancing economic cooperation and joint development agendas have played a more active role in mitigating these tensions. To appreciate what is at stake, one must understand that the Mekong River is a vital source of fishery and income for more than 60 million people. Its flow is a key component in agricultural production, and the riverbank is home to over 95 indigenous groups,<sup>26</sup> as well as a crucial source of hydropower. According to the Stimson Center, a total of 745 dams have been completed or are under construction.<sup>27</sup> The strategic placement and sheer number of dams effectively provide artificial control over the natural flow of the waterways in the Mekong sub-region.<sup>28</sup>

It is for this reason that the Riparian States in the lower Mekong basin, including Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam, are in dispute with China, located upstream, over the control of the river's flow and water quality. More importantly, dam construction, which began three decades ago, has proceeded without much consultation or coordination with the parties involved. Arguably,

26 World Wildlife Fund, "People of the Greater Mekong", [https://origin-mekong.wwf-sites.org/discovering\\_the\\_greater\\_mekong/people\\_of\\_the\\_greater\\_mekong/#:~:text=In%20the%20lower%20basin%2C%20Khmer,integral%20part%20of%20local%20culture](https://origin-mekong.wwf-sites.org/discovering_the_greater_mekong/people_of_the_greater_mekong/#:~:text=In%20the%20lower%20basin%2C%20Khmer,integral%20part%20of%20local%20culture) (accessed 15 September 2024).

27 Brian Elyer and Regan Kwan, "All Dams Map of the Mekong Basin Mainstream and Tributaries", *Stimson*, 7 May 2024, <https://www.stimson.org/2024/all-dams-map-of-the-mekong-basin/> (accessed 2 August 2024).

28 Ibid.

while all the Riparian States of the Mekong have dams, the critical distinction lies in the extent to which China's dams are capable of regulating the river's natural flow. According to Brian Eyler, "China's dams can reduce natural flow by up to 70% in the wet season and cause downstream river levels to be four times more than what is normal for the Mekong environment."<sup>29</sup>

The South China Sea dispute and tensions in the Mekong sub-region both pose significant challenges for Southeast Asian states as they navigate the shifting geopolitical hierarchies in the region, driven by a rising China. These issues have also drawn considerable attention from extra-regional actors, not only from Western powers, such as the United States, but also from Northeast Asian states such as Japan and the Republic of Korea. While stakeholders have endorsed various non-violent measures to diffuse tensions, including communication, negotiations, cooperation and multilateralism, there are also considerable differences in how the South China Sea dispute and the issues in the Mekong sub-region are approached, particularly in terms of managing tensions.

First, while ASEAN has assumed the lead role in advancing negotiations for the COC, its role in the Mekong has remained limited, as previously mentioned. In this vacuum, minilateral frameworks led by various extra-regional powers have emerged as alternative mechanisms to address specific concerns that ASEAN has either overlooked or insufficiently prioritized. One report by the Asia Foundation suggests that there are 13 separate frameworks in total dedicated to the Mekong sub-region.<sup>30</sup> These include the Mekong-Ganga established by India in 2000, the Mekong Japan Cooperation founded by Japan in 2007, and the Mekong-ROK framework initiated by South Korea in 2011, to name a few. The US and China have also established their own minilateral frameworks aligned with their broader national strategies in the region. Building on its earlier initiative, the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI), the US launched the Mekong-U.S. Partnership (MUSP) in 2020 to promote the US Indo-Pacific Strategy. Meanwhile, China has been utilizing the Lancang Mekong Cooperation (LMC) since 2016 to advance its Belt and Road Initiative in mainland Southeast Asia. Lastly, secondary states such as Thailand and Vietnam have also jumped on the minilateral bandwagon by introducing the Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS)—a partnership among Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam—and the Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam Development Triangle Area (CLV-DTA).

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29 Johanna Son, "The Mekong Region: 'China's Dams Can Be Operated In A More Sensible Manner'", *Heinrich Boell Stiftung*, 29 June 2024, <https://th.boell.org/en/2023/06/29/mekong-region-chinas-dams-can-be-operated-more-sensible-manner#:~:text=Its%20two%20largest%20Mekong%20dams,most%20of%20which%20are%20tiny> (accessed 15 September 2024).

30 Benjamin Zawacki, *Implications of a Crowded Field: Sub-regional Architecture in ACMECS Countries – Policy Brief*, The Asia Foundation, August 2019, [https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Implications-of-a-Crowded-Field\\_whitePaper.pdf](https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Implications-of-a-Crowded-Field_whitePaper.pdf) (accessed 7 January 2024).

Second, while the South China Sea dispute has intensified militarization, the Mekong sub-region represents a geographical space where cooperation and joint development in various areas are still feasible. Although overlapping agendas and competing interests have transformed the region into a “theater of competition,” this dynamic has not yet escalated into direct confrontation. For centuries, both Thailand and Vietnam have perceived themselves as dominant players in mainland Southeast Asia. For this reason, Thailand formed the ACMECS in 2003 to enhance its role as an economic hub for transport, logistics, trade, and investment in mainland Southeast Asia, while also improving policy coordination and aligning the interests of its member states. While not entirely focused on managing challenges in the Mekong sub-region, the CLV-DTA emphasizes trans-border economic cooperation between three riparian Mekong countries under Vietnam’s de facto leadership.

In 2018, Japan announced the Tokyo Strategy, a three-year action plan aimed at improving connectivity and the quality of infrastructure projects in the region. Some analysts believe the strategy seeks to challenge Chinese dominance while positioning Japan’s infrastructure projects as an alternative.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, the Republic of Korea has expressed support for “regional and sub-regional connectivity through various development projects in harmony with the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025” in its Plan of Action (POA) 2021-2025 on Mekong-Republic of Korea Cooperation. The POA also outlines six other priority areas, including culture and tourism, human resource development, agriculture and rural development, information communication technology (ICT), the environment, and non-traditional security challenges.<sup>32</sup>

Despite this element of competition, the likelihood of tensions escalating into military confrontation remains minimal, as witnessed in the South China Sea. Most importantly, the Mekong sub-region is fast becoming an arena where multinational corporations can find new investment opportunities, while states actively negotiate transboundary trade agreements, large-scale infrastructure initiatives, and investment projects across diverse sectors such as technology, energy, and automotive manufacturing. In fact, the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) Program, established at the end of the Cold War between the war-torn Indochina states and anti-communist Thailand, was initiated to do just that.

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31 Nan Lwin, “Suu Kyi Commits to Japan’s ‘Tokyo Strategy 2018’ Development Plan”, *The Irrawaddy*, 12 October 2018, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/suu-kyi-commits-japans-tokyo-strategy-2018-development-plan.html> (accessed 15 September 2024); Tobias Harris, “‘Quality Infrastructure’: Japan’s Robust Challenge to China’s Belt and Road”, *War on the Rocks*, 9 April 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/04/quality-infrastructure-japans-robust-challenge-to-chinas-belt-and-road/> (accessed 15 September 2024).

32 The Mekong Institute, “Plan of Action (POA) 2021-2025 on the Mekong-Republic of Korea Cooperation for the implementation of Mekong-Han River Declaration”, [https://mekonginstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Mekong-ROK\\_Plan\\_of\\_Action\\_2021-2025.pdf](https://mekonginstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Mekong-ROK_Plan_of_Action_2021-2025.pdf) (accessed 15 September 2024).

Considering that some countries downstream, notably Vietnam and Cambodia, are among the fastest-growing economies in the Asia-Pacific, while lower-income countries like Laos and Myanmar are experiencing stagnating or negative growth, it is important to ensure that no one is left behind. In this context, the region's economic diversity and the availability of varied development opportunities serve as important mechanisms for reducing tensions over shared resources through peaceful, cooperative means.

## Intra-State Conflicts

As much as ASEAN norms, including the principle of non-interference, have contributed to regional stability and the mitigation of inter-state conflicts, they have also afforded member states considerable latitude to pursue what they perceive as appropriate responses to domestic conflicts; in some cases, this has led to the use of military or violent means to suppress internal dissent. The consequences of ASEAN's firm commitment to the principle of non-interference are two-fold.

First, by reinforcing the primacy of state sovereignty, the principle of non-interference precludes the establishment of formal mechanisms through which ASEAN might assume a third-party role in domestic conflict resolution, such as mediation or peace monitoring. Instead, third-party roles in peace processes are based on ad hoc bilateral agreements with the host government, which may or may not enlist the help of fellow ASEAN member states, let alone ASEAN as an institution. In other words, unlike ASEAN's approach to managing inter-state conflict, it has failed to create "culture of peace and cooperation" to address domestic-level challenges.

Interestingly, this diverges from African practices where regional and sub-regional organizations such as the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have deployed peace missions to monitor post-conflict situations on the continent.<sup>33</sup> Within the AU framework, the Peace and Security Council (PSC) is the main organ tasked with the prevention, management, and resolution of conflicts in Africa. As stipulated on the AU's website, the PSC responsibilities include, but are not limited to, "anticipat[ing] and prevent[ing] disputes and conflicts, as well as policies, which may lead to genocide and crimes against humanity;" "undertak[ing] peace-making and peacebuilding functions to resolve conflicts where they have occurred;" and "authoris[ing] the mounting and deployment of peace support missions."<sup>34</sup>

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33 Claire Klobucista and Mariel Ferragamo "The Role of Peacekeeping in Africa", *Council of Foreign Relations*, 12 December 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/background/role-peacekeeping-africa> (accessed 15 September 2024).

34 African Union, "The Peace & Security Council", <https://au.int/en/psc#:~:text=Undertake%20peace-making%20and%20peacebuilding,such%20missions%20including%20the%20mandate> (accessed 1 September 2024).

While both the United Nations and regional organizations in Africa have reduced the adverse impacts of wars, the established procedures for addressing internal wars have their flaws. Furthermore, in some cases, peacekeepers themselves have been involved in cases such as sexual abuse and forced prostitution.<sup>35</sup> Thus, while institutional procedures for dealing with conflict ensure that minimal standards towards human rights are upheld, they are not necessarily a panacea for peacebuilding.

Second, unlike approaches to inter-state challenges in Southeast Asia, Southeast Asian governments have *not* consistently applied measures to address domestic conflicts in line with democratic values, such as negotiations or peace talks.

While some governments do, others have adopted diverse approaches that potentially violate the Geneva Conventions. Considering democratic backsliding in Southeast Asia, ASEAN member states that have demonstrated a commitment to “respecting other cultures, eradicating racism, promoting freedom and democracy,” still remain in the minority. As a result, mass violations against human rights are still a common occurrence in many countries. These violations occur in spite of ASEAN’s pledge to promote “equitable access to opportunities for ASEAN peoples, and the promotion and protection of human rights of women, children, youths, the elderly/older persons, persons with disabilities, migrant workers, ethnic minority groups, and vulnerable and marginalised groups.”<sup>36</sup>

Also noted in “ASEAN 2025: Forging Ahead Together” is the importance of ASEAN members contributing to a “community that embraces tolerance and moderation, fully respects the different religions, cultures and languages of our peoples, upholds common values in the spirit of unity in diversity, as well as addresses the threat of violent extremism in all its forms and manifestations”,<sup>37</sup> and endorsed by the UN. While the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) has provided ASEAN members with the space to discuss human rights in the region, ASEAN has yet to create institutions that are empowered with investigative and monitoring authority or enforceable mechanisms to ensure that the rights of vulnerable groups are protected.

To exemplify, ASEAN never formulated a coordinated approach to the Rohingya crisis out of respect for the principle of non-interference. The crisis has displaced over one million people as a result of systematic violence, including “clearance operations” in which the military junta raided and burned down entire villages. Instead, extra-regional actors have taken steps to respond to the crisis, including

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35 Women’s Congressional Policy Institute, “Panel Examines Human Rights Abuses by UN Peacekeepers”, <https://www.wcpinst.org/source/panel-examines-human-rights-abuses-by-un-peacekeepers/> (accessed 1 September 2024).

36 ASEAN, “ASEAN 2025: Forging Ahead Together”, <https://www.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/ASEAN-2025-Forging-Ahead-Together-final.pdf> (accessed June 21, 2021), p. 106.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

a legal case submitted to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) by The Gambia in 2019, accusing Myanmar of committing genocide against the Rohingya. In 2023, Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Great Britain filed a joint declaration of intervention in support of this case. Other parties, such as the Maldives, have lodged separate cases accusing Myanmar of violating the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide.

Similarly, ASEAN as an institution has played no role in resolving separatism in Southeast Asia. Instead, individual ASEAN member states have undertaken various peacebuilding tasks based on bilateral agreements outlined by the host government. However, these approaches are limited to a few states that are open to measures in line with democratic values. For example, peace negotiations between the Indonesian government and the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) led to a peace agreement in 2005. Subsequently, the Aceh Monitoring Mission, composed of officials from the EU and individual ASEAN member states—Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, and Thailand—was tasked with monitoring the agreement and the demobilization of weapons. Meanwhile, due to ethnic affinities and Malaysia's status as a fellow ASEAN member, both the Philippine and Thai governments have sought Malaysia's support in mediating and facilitating the peace talks aimed at resolving the conflicts in Mindanao and Thailand's southern border provinces, respectively.

## Deviating from the Norm?

In comparison to past practices, ASEAN has played a greater role in addressing the civil war in Myanmar since the military seized power in February 2021. However, this involvement has been widely criticized as ineffective. According to a report by the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), 6,337 civilians were killed in the first 20 months following the coup, with 3,000 of those deaths attributed to the military junta. The report also acknowledges that the total number of deaths is likely higher, as many incidents have gone unreported.<sup>38</sup> The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) ranks the situation in Myanmar as the third deadliest in the world, with 22.8 million, or 43 percent of the entire population, exposed to political violence by the state.<sup>39</sup> Much of this violence includes arbitrary arrests, torture, sexual violence,<sup>40</sup> massacres, and clearance operations.<sup>41</sup> Yet, ASEAN has been powerless to end these actions.

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38 Min Zaw Oo and Stein Tønnesson, "Counting Myanmar's Dead: Reported Civilian Casualties since the 2021 Military Coup", *PRIO Paper* (Oslo: PRIO, 2023), p. 6-7.

39 Christina De Paris and Ciro Murillo, "Myanmar Mid-Year Metrics 2024", The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), 6 August 2024, <https://acleddata.com/2024/08/06/myanmar-mid-year-metrics-2024/> (accessed 2 September 2024).

40 Human Rights Watch, "Myanmar Events of 2022", <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/myanmar#:~:text=Since%20staging%20a%20coup%20on,amount%20to%20crimes%20against%20humanity> (accessed 15 September 2024).

41 The Irrawaddy, "Over 2,000 Killed in 210 Massacres by Myanmar Junta Forces Since Coup: Report", 11 March 2024, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/over-2000-killed-in-210-massacres-by-myanmar-junta-forces-since-coup-report.html> (accessed 15 September 2024).

To date, ASEAN's primary response to the civil war has been the Five-Point Consensus (5PC), which Senior General Min Aung Hlaing agreed to at an emergency summit in Jakarta held on 24 April 2021. The consensus calls for an immediate end to violence in the country, dialogue among all parties, the appointment of a special envoy, provisions to allow humanitarian assistance by ASEAN, and a visit by the special envoy to Myanmar to meet with all parties. In October 2021, ASEAN also decided to permit only a "non-political" representative from Myanmar at its meetings. This marked the first time such conditions had been imposed on an ASEAN member. In addition, at the summit held in Jakarta in 2023, it was announced that Myanmar would not assume the rotating leadership of ASEAN as scheduled in 2026. While these measures are considered a blow to Senior General Min Aung Hlaing's efforts to gain external legitimacy, they do nothing to alleviate the suffering of the people.

ASEAN's response to the coup is a departure from past standards, which typically involved refraining from criticizing a member state. But it still falls short of the more assertive approach taken by the AU, which includes the option of suspending member states. The recent suspension of Sudan's membership drives home this point. However, many ASEAN members are unwilling to contemplate such drastic action. Compounding the problem are internal divisions and the lack of a coordinated approach to pressure the military junta to address them.

On the one hand, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos generally endorsed the principle of non-interference. Some have initiated additional measures through bilateral channels, many of which have benefited the military junta. For instance, former Prime Minister Hun Sen led a delegation, including Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn, to Naypyidaw in 2022, which drew widespread criticism for gaining little while undermining ASEAN.<sup>42</sup>

Similarly, Thailand has kept bilateral channels with Naypyidaw open, largely due to long-standing military relations while also citing the joint economic and security interests along the 2,400-kilometer border it shares with Myanmar. For these reasons, Thailand has periodically deviated from what was agreed upon in ASEAN. For example, former Thai Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai controversially hosted an informal ministerial meeting in 2023 to "re-engage" with the Myanmar junta.

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42 Sharon Seah, "Hun Sen's Cowboy Diplomacy: Quick Draw or Firing Blanks?", *Fulcrum*, 10 January 2022, <https://fulcrum.sg/hun-sens-cowboy-diplomacy-quick-draw-or-firing-blanks/> (accessed 15 September 2024).

The meeting was shunned by Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore. Although Thailand established a humanitarian corridor in early 2024, critics argue that the initiative benefits areas controlled by the military junta.<sup>43</sup> Meanwhile, as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council (UNSC), Vietnam—along with China, India, and Russia—played a key role in softening a draft statement in March 2021 that initially condemned the coup and threatened to “consider possible further measures,” likely referring to sanctions.<sup>44</sup> To add, Vietnam, Thailand, Laos, China, Russia, India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan sent representatives to attend the Armed Forces Day parade in Naypyidaw on 27 March 2021, which coincided with a bloody crackdown on unarmed civilians.

On the other hand, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore have taken a tougher approach to the situation, denouncing the widespread use of force against unarmed civilians on several occasions. Although other attempts have been made, including Indonesia’s “non-megaphone” diplomacy, which entailed more than 180 separate engagements with a range of different stakeholders in Myanmar, individual ASEAN members lack either the bargaining power or the will to press Myanmar’s junta to comply with the 5PC. Considering the circumstances, it is not entirely surprising that the military junta would only consider “suggestions made by ASEAN leaders when the situation returns to stability.”<sup>45</sup> The junta’s announcement came just two days after it agreed to 5PC.

A significant factor complicating multilateral and bilateral diplomatic efforts is the intricate web of business interests among companies in ASEAN countries and those owned by Myanmar’s top generals, covering a range of sectors, including telecommunications and energy. Some ASEAN countries have also supplied to the regime—actions that clearly contradict the principle of non-violence. This is not to mention the support the military junta also receives from China and Russia. While these business relations provide a lifeline for the military junta, which reportedly controls less than half of the country, no party is seriously considering using these business relations as a bargaining chip to pressure Senior General Min Aung Hlaing to conform to what has already been agreed upon in the 5PC.

Contrary to ASEAN’s pledge to create a people-centered community, these examples underscore its shortcomings in promoting a culture of non-violence and cooperation—particularly in safeguarding civilians affected by conflict. The biggest obstacle to a change would involve reassessing ASEAN’s long-held

43 Jintamas Saksornchai, “Thailand sends aid to war-torn Myanmar, but critics say it will only help junta”, *AP News*, 25 March 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/thailand-myanmar-karen-state-aid-displaced-people-9836e1303203c0a9e6b23052bd14289d> (accessed 15 September 2024).

44 Reuters and Michelle Nichols, “U.N. Security Council agrees to condemn Myanmar violence, urge military restraint”, *Reuters*, 11 March 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/un-security-council-agrees-condemn-myanmar-violence-urge-military-restraint-2021-03-10/> (accessed 15 September 2024).

45 Human Rights Watch, “Myanmar: ASEAN’s Failed ‘5-Point Consensus’ a Year On”, 22 April 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/22/myanmar-aseans-failed-5-point-consensus-year> (accessed 15 September 2024).

commitment to the principle of non-interference, which most member states are unwilling to consider. Thus, the main challenge for proponents of conflict resolution consistent with democratic values is finding ways to demonstrate how peace and enhanced regional cooperation can be beneficial for all.

## **Concluding Remarks**

The preceding sections illustrate that Southeast Asia's track record in promoting non-violence as a means to achieve state and human security has been inconsistent. To ensure state security and regional stability, Southeast Asia has employed a range of non-violent means to contain and diffuse conflicts, including ASEAN norms, economic cooperation, and multilateralism. Although imperfect, these efforts have arguably contributed to a culture of peace and cooperation in the region. As a result, Southeast Asia has not experienced protracted warfare since the fall of the Iron Curtain—though on some rare occasions, small-scale military clashes have occurred between ASEAN member states—suggesting that Southeast Asia is not necessarily a “risk free” region. The recent clashes between Thailand and Cambodia illustrate the point. Most notably, the South China Sea dispute holds the greatest potential to destabilize regional security if not managed properly, due to rapid militarization and the involvement of extra-regional actors. For these reasons, ASEAN prioritizes facilitating continued communication between stakeholders and finalizing a COC. That said, numerous obstacles remain, including divisions within ASEAN. In comparison, the risk of escalation in the Mekong sub-region remains limited thanks to the nature of the issue, which does not involve contested territory. Furthermore, the Riparian States and extra-regional actors have been able to enhance cooperation through a host of minilateral frameworks in several key areas. Unfortunately, that level of cooperation and joint development in the Mekong sub-region is still lacking in the South China Sea dispute.

While there has been a widespread use of non-violent means to diffuse inter-state conflicts, the region's approach to intra-state conflicts has been markedly different. ASEAN's commitment to the principle of non-interference has largely constrained the organization from taking a role in resolving internal conflicts. Instead, this principle strengthens the authority of individual states to decide whether to use force or democratic measures in response to domestic conflicts, as they see fit. ASEAN member states have accordingly applied a range of approaches to resolve or manage ethnic conflicts in Southeast Asia. As the examples in the discussion above show, there have been instances where a fellow ASEAN member state has supported various stages of peacebuilding, such as mediation and peacekeeping. Nonetheless, these roles are based on bilateral and ad hoc agreements conducted outside the ASEAN framework and are defined

by what the host state is comfortable with. Regardless of how these agreements came about, More worrying is the continued use of force against civilians in Myanmar. Yet, as of July 2025, ASEAN members still remain divided in how to pressure Senior General Min Aung Hlaing to conform to the 5PC.

The failure to promote peaceful resolutions to internal conflicts in accordance with non-violent and democratic principles stands in direct contradiction to the commitments outlined in the ASEAN Charter. When ASEAN was established, its members understandably adhered strictly to the principle of non-interference owing to a long history of foreign intervention that stretched back centuries. With Southeast Asian states no longer confronting the kinds of external threats that once justified strict adherence to non-interference, perhaps the time has come to reconsider this principle and ask what more can be done to advance the use of non-violence in addressing domestic conflicts.

Proposing a more flexible version of the principle of non-interference will undoubtedly be an uphill battle, considering that most of the Southeast Asian states are semi-democracies or autocracies that benefit from the protection the principle provides against unwanted criticisms of their internal affairs. Nevertheless, it is crucial that ASEAN fosters and supports these conversations to catalyze change. A culture of non-violence to resolve intra-state conflicts could also be further promoted, not necessarily by introducing new agreements or institutions, but by ensuring that ASEAN member states abide by their commitment to human rights, equality, and freedoms as outlined in ASEAN documents such as the ASEAN Charter and the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration.

To achieve this, it is essential that ASEAN member states recognize the importance of empowering existing institutions, such as the AICHR, with investigative and monitoring powers, as well as enforceable mechanisms to ensure that vulnerable groups are protected. As people in Myanmar continue to live in fear and insecurity while ASEAN remains ineffective in addressing the crisis, the organization faces a stark choice: to persist in supporting regimes that show little regard for human life, or to uphold its own commitment to building a people-centered community. Choosing the former would gradually render ASEAN inconsequential, whereas pursuing the latter would undeniably strengthen ASEAN's leadership, centrality, resilience, and credibility.

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