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The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)

Overview

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is Southeast Asia's primary multilateral organization, a 10-member grouping of nations with a combined population of 650 million and a combined annual gross domestic product (GDP) of around \$2.8 trillion in 2019. Established in 1967, it has grown into one of the world's largest regional fora, representing a strategically important region straddling some of the world's busiest sea lanes, including the Straits of Malacca and the South China Sea. Taken collectively, ASEAN would rank as the world's fifth-largest economy and the United States' fourth-largest export market.

ASEAN's members are Brunei, Burma (Myanmar), Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. Members rotate as chair: Brunei is ASEAN's chair for 2021 and Cambodia is to assume the chair in 2022. ASEAN engages in a wide range of diplomatic, economic and security discussions through hundreds of annual meetings and through a secretariat based in Jakarta, Indonesia. In 2008, the United States became the first non-ASEAN nation to appoint a representative to ASEAN, and in 2011 opened a U.S. mission to ASEAN in Jakarta with a resident Ambassador. Several other nations have followed suit.

ASEAN is a diverse and informal organization. Two of its core operating principles are consensual decisionmaking and noninterference in the internal affairs of its members. Some observers argue that this style constrains ASEAN from acting strongly and cohesively on important issues. Others argue that these principles—dubbed the “ASEAN Way”—promote regional stability and ensure that the group's members continue to discuss issues where their interests sometimes diverge. The principle has been tested in 2021, as ASEAN seeks to address the crisis that has followed the Burmese military's February 1 coup d'état.

ASEAN and Asian Regional Architecture

Asia has no dominant EU-style multilateral body, and many observers see the region's economic and security institutions as underdeveloped. ASEAN convenes and administratively supports a number of regional fora that include other governments (known as “dialogue partners”), including the United States. ASEAN Member governments deeply value what they call “ASEAN Centrality” in the evolving regional architecture.

The **ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF)**, established in 1994 with 26 Asian and Pacific states plus the EU, was formed to facilitate dialogue on political and security matters. The **East Asia Summit (EAS)**, created in 2005, is an evolving leaders-level forum with a varied agenda, in which the United States gained membership in 2010. The EAS includes all 10 ASEAN members, plus Australia, China,

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



Source: Graphic created by CRS.

U.S.-ASEAN Relations

The United States has long had strong bilateral relations with individual Southeast Asian nations, including treaty alliances with the Philippines and Thailand and a close security partnership with Singapore. Many U.S. policymakers see engagement with ASEAN as complementing bilateral relationships and strengthening the region's collective diplomatic weight as other regional players gain in economic and military power. The United States initially supported ASEAN as a means to promote regional dialogue and as a bulwark against Communism, becoming an ASEAN Dialogue Partner in 1977. In 2009, the United States acceded to the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and committed to an annual U.S.-ASEAN Meeting. In 2012, the United States and ASEAN agreed to raise the level of the U.S.-ASEAN meeting to a Leaders Meeting, and in November 2015 announced a U.S.-ASEAN Strategic Partnership.

Successive U.S. Administrations have identified deep U.S. interests in Southeast Asia, including fostering democracy and human rights, encouraging liberal trade and investment regimes, addressing maritime security and tensions in the South China Sea, promoting environmental protection, countering piracy and terrorism, and combatting human trafficking and trafficking in narcotics and wildlife. Some of ASEAN's members were among the first countries outside China to identify Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) cases in early 2020. The region has experienced previous trans-national public health crises, including avian influenza and the 2003 Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) pandemic, and this experience helped some ASEAN members in their initial

response to the COVID-19 outbreak. However, the pandemic continues to hit the region hard.

The Biden Administration faces a range of challenges in its engagement with ASEAN and Southeast Asia, including ASEAN's efforts to address the coup in Burma, and regional concerns about the impact of growing Sino-U.S. tensions. Many Southeast Asian officials have welcomed U.S. efforts to push back against Chinese actions, but many in the region are also concerned that any effort to "contain" China could be counter-productive. The Administration's Interim National Security Guidance said the United States will "deepen our partnership with ... Singapore, Vietnam, and other Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states, to advance shared objectives."

The United States has pursued a series of initiatives with ASEAN. **U.S.-ASEAN Connect** was created in 2016 to coordinate U.S. public- and private-sector economic initiatives through the U.S. Mission to ASEAN and the U.S. Embassies in Bangkok and Singapore. Other initiatives include an expanded **Fulbright Exchange of ASEAN-U.S. Scholars** and the **Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI)**, which offers scholarships and opportunities for young leaders. The United States provides aid for ASEAN's formation of a **Single Customs Window** to facilitate trade. A **U.S.-ASEAN Smart Cities Partnership** was launched in 2018 to promote U.S. investment in the region's digital infrastructure. The United States has also joined Australia and Japan to form the "Blue Dot Network" to promote sustainable and non-exploitive infrastructure projects in Southeast Asia.

U.S. trade and economic arrangements with ASEAN are limited by the vast diversity of the group's economies. According to the World Bank, per capita GDP among ASEAN members, based on purchasing power parity, ranges from \$101,532 in Singapore to \$4,361 in Cambodia.

ASEAN, China, and the South China Sea

China is the largest trade partner and a major source of investment for many Southeast Asian nations. However, concerns about China's growing power in the region, including worries that China may use its economic leverage to achieve political goals and anger over China's efforts to exert control over much of the South China Sea, have strained relations with some ASEAN members. Most ASEAN members rely on the U.S. security presence and strong trade and investment ties with the United States to ensure stability and enhance their economic development.

Four members—Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam—have maritime territorial disputes with China (as well as with each other), and others have interests in the South China Sea's natural resources and shipping lanes. In 2002, ASEAN and China agreed to a nonbinding **Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea**, in which they agreed to "resolve their territorial and jurisdictional disputes by peaceful means, without resorting to the threat or use of force," to "exercise self-restraint in the conduct of activities that would complicate or escalate disputes," and to work toward the creation of a formal Code of Conduct to govern activities in the region.

However, the group's members have deep disagreements over how to approach the negotiations with China. Some ASEAN members, particularly Cambodia and Laos, have been hesitant to join a unified ASEAN response. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, in his first call with the Philippine Foreign Secretary, "pledged to stand with Southeast Asian claimants in the face of PRC pressure."

ASEAN's Economic Integration

ASEAN members play a major role in regional supply chains, and U.S. companies are significant investors in several ASEAN economies. ASEAN has an internal free trade agreement (the **ASEAN FTA**, or **AFTA**.) In 2015, the group launched an **ASEAN Economic Community (AEC)** to promote trade liberalization and regulatory harmonization among members, with the goal of creating a single ASEAN market and integrated manufacturing base.

ASEAN members seek to promote infrastructure development in the region, particularly in building greater regional "connectivity" through investment in transport and Information Technology. This has led to substantial demand for foreign investment, including in some cases through China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). ASEAN members have differing approaches to the BRI. Cambodia and Laos, for example, have embraced the BRI as a means of developing much needed infrastructure. Vietnam, by contrast, has been highly vocal about concerns surrounding the terms of BRI investments.

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

Human Rights and the Burma Crisis

Human rights conditions in several ASEAN member states have long been a concern for the United States, and sometimes for the group's own members. Some ASEAN members are effectively one-party states, and coups in Burma (2021) and Thailand (2006 and 2014) deposed democratically elected governments. ASEAN's approach to human rights violations among its members has become a touchstone issue with the crisis in Burma, in which over 750 people were killed between February 1 and May 14. ASEAN Leaders and Burmese Gen. Min Aung Hlaing met on April 24, 2021, and issued a five-point plan that included the naming of an ASEAN envoy to address the crisis.

Other human rights issues in ASEAN include the Cambodian government's banning of the political opposition, thousands of extra-judicial killings under the Philippines' anti-drug program, and continued moves by Thailand to protect military authority. The U.S. mission to ASEAN has sought to foster networks among the region's civil society groups so as to build capacity among non-governmental actors in Southeast Asia.

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