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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 660 million and a combined annual gross domestic product (GDP) of around \$3.2 trillion in 2022. 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 in the Straits of Malacca and the South China Sea. Taken collectively, ASEAN ranks 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. (Timor-Leste, the region's newest nation, has observer status.) Members rotate as chair: Laos is ASEAN's chair for 2024 and Malaysia is to assume the chair in 2025. 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 it opened a U.S. mission to ASEAN in Jakarta with a resident ambassador.

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 as ASEAN seeks to address the crisis that has followed the Burmese military's 2021 coup d'état, which has led to a political and humanitarian crisis in one of the group's members.

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)**, first convened 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+)**, established in 2010, regularly brings senior defense officials from EAS members together and hosts multilateral military exchanges.

In recent years, as cooperation through non-ASEAN regional groupings such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, the Australia-U.K.-U.S. (AUKUS) security grouping, and other “mini-lateral” groupings involving regional nations—including some ASEAN members—has deepened, some Southeast Asian observers have expressed concern about ASEAN's place in U.S. strategy.



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 elevated the relationship in November 2015 to a U.S.-ASEAN Strategic Partnership and in November 2022 to a U.S.-ASEAN Comprehensive 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; combatting human trafficking and trafficking in narcotics and wildlife; and addressing public health risks. The Biden Administration faces a range of challenges in engaging with ASEAN, including ASEAN's limited ability 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 problematic Chinese actions, but many are also concerned that efforts to "contain" China could be counter-productive.

The United States has pursued a series of initiatives with ASEAN. It created **U.S.-ASEAN Connect** 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 economic integration and trade. The United States and ASEAN launched a **Smart Cities Partnership** in 2018 to promote U.S. investment in the region's digital infrastructure.

Historically, the United States has provided a range of assistance to ASEAN and its members. According to a 2023 State Department fact sheet, between 2002 and 2021, the United States provided over \$12.1 billion in economic, health, and security assistance and over \$1.5 billion in humanitarian assistance to Southeast Asian nations. The Biden Administration has announced a range of new assistance packages to the region, including a \$102 million package of new funding for public health, climate, and economic initiatives announced in 2021 and \$150 million in other new initiatives unveiled in 2022, including investments in infrastructure, health security, education and \$60 million to expand maritime cooperation programs. U.S. trade and economic arrangements with ASEAN, however, are limited by the vast diversity of the group's economies.

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 among 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. The United States has generally supported ASEAN members' efforts to push back against Chinese assertions.

ASEAN's Economic Integration

ASEAN members play a major role in regional supply chains, and U.S. companies are significant investors in several 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 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 concluded a trade agreement known as the **Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)** (India withdrew). Four ASEAN nations—Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam—are members of the **Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP)**. ASEAN members seek to promote infrastructure development, 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).

Human Rights and the Burma Crisis

The United States—and some of ASEAN's own members—have long voiced concerns about human rights conditions in several ASEAN member states. 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 2021, ASEAN issued a five-point plan for resolving the crisis, but successive ASEAN Envoys to Burma have had little success in defusing the crisis, and Burmese junta leader Min Aung Hlaing was not invited to any of ASEAN's Leaders Meetings since 2021. Other human rights issues in ASEAN include the Cambodian government's banning of the political opposition and continued moves by Thailand to protect military authority through restrictions on civil rights. The U.S. mission to ASEAN has sought to foster networks among the region's civil society groups to build capacity among nongovernmental actors.

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