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Revitalising ASEAN Diplomacy: The Role and Limits of Track-2 Regional Security Cooperation

By Gordon Kang and Kwa Chong Guan

SYNOPSIS

ASEAN faces heightened institutional constraints amidst emergent external pressures and regional crises. The key question is not whether Track-2 diplomacy should be pursued, but how it can be structured to yield tangible outcomes in an increasingly complex geopolitical landscape.

COMMENTARY

As ASEAN transitions into Malaysia's 2025 Chairmanship, the regional grouping finds itself at a critical juncture. Longstanding flashpoints, such as the Myanmar civil strife and the competing territorial claims in the South China Sea, continue to persist, and broad geopolitical momentum in opposition to a Western-centric rules-based order has put increased scrutiny on ASEAN's institutional frameworks.

Unlike previous Chairmanships under Laos and Indonesia, Malaysia's leadership comes at a time when ASEAN's structural limitations are distinctly pronounced. Most ASEAN member states (AMS) have recognised the need for proactive, substantive, and balanced reform for ASEAN to reaffirm its centrality and strategic relevance. However, the ends and contours of such a path remain unclear.

[Concerns](#) over ASEAN's systemic weaknesses have been an enduring theme in regional security discussions over the past decade. While principles of non-interference, consensus-based decision-making, and regional stability have been key aspects of the "ASEAN Way" of diplomacy, outcomes have tended toward the lowest common denominator.

The large and increasingly unwieldy membership numbers of its mechanisms, such

as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the East Asia Summit (EAS), have likewise caused a progressive dilution of institutional focus.

Compounding these issues are the rise in external unilateral initiatives, such as the Quad and AUKUS, and the increased scrutiny over a Western-centric rules-based order. Worryingly, these developments have indirectly put into question ASEAN's continued role and effectiveness as a platform for regional security cooperation.

In less than two months since taking office, the second Trump administration in the US has introduced [significant](#) changes with concerning implications for ASEAN and the region, including shifting priorities in USAID funding and a broader realignment of US global engagement. At the same time, certain crises have continued to escalate. The Myanmar crisis remains a primary test of ASEAN's credibility, with the Five-Point Consensus proving ineffective in shifting the Tatmadaw's behaviour.

An emergent concern is North Korea's direct military support for Russia's war in Ukraine and the risk of regional spillover and broader instability. The combined effect of such challenges underscores the need for ASEAN to recalibrate its diplomatic approaches and consider avenues to develop more responsive and innovative mechanisms for these emerging security risks.

Track-2 diplomacy has long served as an essential space for dialogue in ASEAN's security architecture. Unlike Track-1 diplomacy – formal, state-to-state interactions conducted through official channels – Track-2 provides a more informal space for discussions, enabling alternative pathways to build confidence and trust, innovate on policy, and facilitate engagements where formal diplomacy is often constrained. Leveraging past [successes](#) in this domain is thus crucial to developing a more adroit and revitalised diplomacy that can substantively address the region's contemporary challenges.

Firstly, greater effort is necessary to reinforce ASEAN's existing Track-2 policy networks, such as the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific (CSCAP), the Network for ASEAN Defence Institutes (NADI), and the ASEAN-ISIS network, building on pre-existing activities to deepen intra-regional stakeholder engagements and inter-regional trust.

Secondly, discussions should identify and focus on pursuing depoliticised areas of cooperation, such as non-traditional security sectors, including climate resilience, humanitarian assistance, and natural disaster response.

Thirdly, initiatives should plan for the medium to long term, ensuring a commitment to institutionalising mechanisms, and integrating findings into Track-1 processes. Conversely, and lastly, ASEAN should nevertheless ensure that Track-2 dialogues remain adaptable, accepting a continuous de- and re-institutionalisation of practices to evolve with changing geopolitical conditions.

Tailoring Track-2 processes to the Myanmar crisis and North Korean regional engagements would necessarily account for different structural and political realities.

In Myanmar, Track-2 efforts could offer practical alternatives, particularly in mapping

stakeholder positions, engaging non-state actors, and establishing trust-building avenues where Track-1 would face political complications. Institutions like CSCAP could provide platforms for informal discussions and sustained activities on de-escalation, humanitarian access, and governance models for shared concerns, such as public health. Engaging opposition actors who lack direct representation in ASEAN-led processes could expand diplomatic channels.

However, Track-2 cannot replace decisive political action, nor are all Track-2 initiatives comparatively successful. Only having the presence of Myanmar military rulers (Tatmadaw) in Track-1 diplomacy limits ASEAN's flexibility, making broader engagement difficult. Similarly, humanitarian access remains highly politicised, with both the Tatmadaw and resistance forces leveraging aid for political gain. For Track-2 to be meaningful, it must be structured to inclusively feed into Track-1 channels, providing an incremental, rather than immediate, shift toward a broader process for constructive change.

North Korea presents a different challenge. Pyongyang has historically prioritised bilateral over multilateral diplomacy in Southeast Asia, limiting its relative participation in ASEAN-led initiatives. However, with its growing ties to Russia and China, there is scope for regional cooperation to be initiated alongside these countries – particularly in CSCAP, where North Korea remains a member.

Non-traditional security issues are neutral entry points in which North Korea has previously demonstrated interest, such as climate change, disaster relief, and public health. Nonetheless, such initiatives are dependent on Pyongyang's broader strategic calculations, particularly as almost all regional Track-2 engagements with the state have remained stagnant since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Unlike Myanmar, where multiple actors seek international recognition, North Korea also offers fewer stakeholders for engagement. Any Track-2 initiative must be carefully framed to avoid being drawn into broader geopolitical tensions. It should focus on continuity, prioritising sectoral cooperation that does not challenge Pyongyang's core security concerns to outlive shifts in geopolitical dynamics.

Ultimately, confronting these challenges will necessitate fulfilling several shared objectives for ASEAN: protecting its strategic autonomy, its ability to engage with major stakeholders, and the integrity of ASEAN's institutional mechanisms. As Malaysia assumes the ASEAN Chairmanship, the key question is not whether Track-2 diplomacy should be pursued but how it can be leveraged for tangible outcomes. Its effectiveness will depend on whether it is treated as a structured process with clear objectives rather than a symbolic exercise in engagement.

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