

Unpacking ASEAN Neutrality: The Quest for Autonomy and Impartiality in Southeast Asia

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The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has preferred to avoid entanglement in Great Power competition since its inception in 1967. The 1971 Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) Declaration captured ASEAN's aspiration to keep Southeast Asia neutral and free of external interference. ZOPFAN accommodated divergent strategic outlooks within ASEAN while avoiding the legalities associated with the concept of neutrality. While no consensus was ever reached on ZOPFAN's specific application, neutrality is continually mentioned as a critical factor in ASEAN's success. The article argues that ASEAN neutrality is defined by impartiality and autonomy, and that this concept has evolved over time as its specific meaning has changed due to shifting geopolitical circumstances. At the organization's inception, and during the bipolarity of the Cold War, ASEAN's focus was on autonomy. However, since the early 2000s, the emphasis has evolved to impartiality due to increasing multipolarity in the Asia-Pacific region. The concept of neutrality has been tested in recent years with the intensification of the South China Sea dispute.

Keywords: Neutrality, ASEAN, ZOPFAN, non-interference, autonomy, impartiality, Southeast Asia.

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As a consequence of European and Japanese colonialism, most Southeast Asian states have historically been suspicious of external interference and domination by the Great Powers. A regional preference for autonomy from Great Power politics was endorsed in the early years of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) through the formulation of a declaratory principle for regional order. In November 1971, the five founding member states signed the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) Declaration in Kuala Lumpur.¹ The ZOPFAN Declaration is a political document that captured contrasting views within ASEAN on the role of external powers in Southeast Asia at that time. While Indonesia has traditionally favoured a regional order determined primarily by the Southeast Asian states themselves, other members have been more willing to rely on the United States and other actors to enhance their security. Although no consensus has been reached on its specific application, ZOPFAN has continually been referred to by ASEAN and its members as an ambition to keep Southeast Asia neutral and free of external interference. Significantly, the concept of neutrality has been repeatedly mentioned — together with unity and solidarity — as one of the main pillars supporting ASEAN's success story over the last 50 years.²

Neutrality and ZOPFAN have been referred to in the academic literature on ASEAN. Both have been discussed in a political context, separate from a legalistic reading of the concept of neutralization. This article associates neutrality and ZOPFAN to the ASEAN practice of steering clear of Great Power competition. There are variations on how neutrality has come to be defined. Its definition and application have been adapted due to changes in the geopolitical landscape and evolving ideas of what constitutes security. ZOPFAN is a political declaration calling for Southeast Asian autonomy, while ASEAN neutrality traditionally refers to the diplomatic practice of not taking sides with competing Great Powers.³ In 1971, ZOPFAN was an attempt by ASEAN to insulate the region from being embroiled in the geopolitics of the Cold War.⁴ It therefore reflects ASEAN's historic approach to the Great Powers that engages them at a distance while striving to enhance solidarity among its members to increase the organization's overall influence in regional affairs.

While referred to, the concept of neutrality has not been examined in a careful and detailed manner in the literature on ASEAN.⁵ This article seeks to fill this gap by offering a history of neutrality and its shifting meaning in the context of the regional grouping. It demonstrates that the notion of ASEAN neutrality does

not have a fixed content but is instead an evolving concept that changes over time. This article argues that ASEAN initially sought and operationalized neutrality to keep the Great Powers at bay during the Cold War before its meaning evolved to lock in the Great Powers in an increasingly multipolar world. However, the concept of neutrality has been greatly tested in recent years with the intensification of the South China Sea dispute. This article therefore makes a contribution to the ASEAN literature by providing an analysis of the historical evolution of neutrality and of the existing ways in which the concept has been framed by ASEAN.

This article traces the origins, nature and role of neutrality in the development of ASEAN. It demonstrates that ASEAN neutrality is defined by two key elements: impartiality, to be understood as not taking sides in Great Power dynamics; and autonomy, which refers to an attempt to limit external interference in Southeast Asia's affairs. ASEAN has sought and projected its neutrality under the bipolar structure of the Cold War by emphasizing its autonomy and the need to limit external interference by the Great Powers. Since the early 2000s, the regional body has responded to an increasingly multipolar system by stressing its impartiality when attempting to build an institutional architecture that includes all the major and middle powers in the Asia Pacific. Rather than a static concept, this article therefore demonstrates a change by which ASEAN has tried to operationalize and make use of its perceived neutrality.

To better understand how ASEAN neutrality has evolved, this article is structured around three themes. The first examines what neutrality means in International Relations (IR). This section reviews definitions of the concept, and how these definitions have evolved from a narrow legalistic understanding to a wider political reading of the term as expressed through the affiliated notions of neutralism and non-alignment. The second section discusses what neutrality meant to ASEAN at its inception and during the Cold War. Here the article examines how ASEAN localized the notion of neutrality in a bipolar structure by adopting a political declaration that called for regional autonomy without imposing constraints on its individual members and steering away from the legal obligations associated with the concept of neutralization. The third section examines how the concept of ASEAN neutrality has evolved since the advent of multipolarity in Asia in the early twenty-first century. This section highlights how the regional security environment has been transformed before examining how ASEAN neutrality remains

important to the regional grouping in its emphasis on impartiality while at the same time being tested by the South China Sea dispute.

What Does Neutrality Mean in International Relations?

The concept of neutrality was first developed at the end of the Middle Ages when the notion of state sovereignty emerged.⁶ Weak military states welcomed the principle of neutrality to preserve their sovereignty and balance relations among the Great Powers. The Hague Convention of 1907 on sea and land war legally codified the concept of neutrality. According to the Convention, neutral states are:

required not to participate in wars either directly or indirectly. They should not support or favour war parties with military forces. Nor should they make their territory available to them, supply them with weapons or credits, or restrict private weapon exports in a one-sided way. Neutrals are also required to defend themselves against violations of their neutrality.⁷

Neutrality laws have evolved over the past 70 years to cover peacekeeping operations undertaken under the auspices of the United Nations (UN) and other international institutions as well as humanitarian operations conducted by non-governmental organizations. In the case of such operations, “non-interference in the form of impartiality remains at the core”.⁸ Humanitarian organizations prefer the term “non-partisan” to describe their refusal to take sides in a political or military conflict.⁹

The IR literature on neutrality refers to two types of neutrality: occasional and permanent. The former means that “a state is neutral in a particular war between other states, and only for the duration of that war” while the latter means that “a state will remain neutral in all future wars”.¹⁰ States that declare themselves as permanently neutral must conduct a security and foreign policy that allows them to remain neutral in peacetime and in times of conflict. This implies that a permanently neutral state relies on its military capabilities for deterrence and is prohibited from using force except in self-defence, entering alliances and from establishing foreign military bases on its territory. Although not formally codified into international law, these four obligations define “the core content of permanent neutrality”.¹¹

Affiliated concepts of neutrality have been developed. Recognized under international law in the nineteenth century, neutralization is

an “endeavour to remove small but strategically important territories outside the active sphere of international rivalries” and it calls for the Great Powers to respect “the independence of the neutralised state”.¹² Neutralization can thus be defined as “a process of international law whereby a state assumes the status of permanent or perpetual neutrality, both in times of peace and of war; a status which is recognised as such and guaranteed by certain other states”.¹³ Austria in 1955 and Laos in 1962 are two historical examples of states which opted for neutralization. Neutrality, and by extension neutralization, has had a mixed record in practice. While Switzerland and Sweden are generally seen as being successful cases of neutrality (both avoided being entangled in the First and Second World Wars), other states (Belgium, Norway, Denmark and Thailand in the Second World War) still faced aggression and domination by the Axis Powers.¹⁴

After the Second World War, the legal view of neutrality was taken over by a more political concept of neutrality which emphasized non-participation and impartiality in international disputes.¹⁵ With the advent of the Cold War, the term “neutralism” referred to “all those who were opposed, whatever the reasons ..., to being associated with the military alliances of either the Soviet Union or the United States”.¹⁶ The period of decolonization in the 1950s and 1960s saw the emergence of newly independent states which faced an important decision: whether to join the Western bloc, the Communist bloc or adopt some form of neutrality. In Asia, neutralism was first used to describe the foreign policies of newly independent countries and this idea quickly gained ground in the 1950s.¹⁷ At the same time, the associated concept of non-alignment spread rapidly, most notably at the April 1955 Bandung Conference. For a state to be non-aligned, it should not be “a member of one or more of the military alliances of the superpowers”.¹⁸ In 1961, the non-aligned countries established “an independent path in world politics, one which would not result in their becoming pawns in the struggles between the major powers”.¹⁹ Within 20 years, the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) counted 99 countries as members.²⁰ Although the two concepts seem similar, non-alignment differs from neutrality in several ways. Non-alignment is “defined exclusively in political terms and has no standing in international law”.²¹ Moreover, whereas neutrality means abstention from wars, non-alignment does not exclude participation in military conflicts.²²

As discussed thus far, a policy of neutrality has traditionally been adopted by individual states rather than by a collective of

states in a specific geographical area. The complexity of achieving a regional zone of neutrality results from the number of states involved and the divergence of strategic outlooks. Regional neutrality is “a form of collective neutrality covering a group of states, [and] its dimensions and its concepts are of a different order from neutrality of individual states”.²³ In addition, the neutrality of a region is likely to depend on its ability to resolve or manage its own potential and actual conflicts. If a region is prone to conflict, one would then expect the Great Powers to intervene in regional affairs. This brings us to the next section of the article which discusses how ASEAN has approached and applied the concept of neutrality since its formation in 1967. ASEAN neutrality is described as functioning both as a means and an end, as the regional body has attempted to both operationalize and achieve some form of neutrality in Southeast Asia. Moreover, the search for regional neutrality is arguably unique to ASEAN, as no other regional organization has conceptualized it in a similar way.

ASEAN Neutrality during the Cold War: Autonomy in a Bipolar Structure

A bipolar system is often more stable and predictable when compared to a multipolar structure, as the two rival powers seek to avoid direct conflict.²⁴ Yet, while preventing a devastating war, the two Great Powers can engage in proxy wars conducted on foreign soil to compete for primacy. This section argues that ASEAN responded to the bipolar structure of the Cold War by projecting its neutrality and by emphasizing its autonomy and the need to limit external interference by the major powers in Southeast Asia. During this period, ASEAN repeatedly referred to the norms of non-interference and non-use of force in international affairs to proclaim regional autonomy and maintain some form of regional order within the wider bipolar system.

Southeast Asia became entangled in the political and ideological challenges associated with the global distribution of power.²⁵ The Cold War exacerbated intra-state conflicts and led to three proxy wars in Indochina between 1946 and 1991. The bipolarity of the Cold War also influenced Southeast Asian perspectives towards regionalism. With Great Power rivalry leading to the polarization of Southeast Asia, some regional leaders recognized the importance of greater self-reliance through regional cooperation.²⁶

In the 1950s, the United Kingdom (UK), as a colonial power, was attracted to the idea of having a neutral belt in Southeast Asia in an attempt to manage its relations with the United States.²⁷ The Vietnam War and the UK's decision in 1967 to withdraw militarily from "East of Suez" put this notion to rest. Yet the idea of regional neutrality was not abandoned but was instead pursued by ASEAN's founding members (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand) after the regional body was established in August 1967. Indeed, one of the key motivations in creating ASEAN was to help small and medium-sized Southeast Asian countries to remain neutral in Great Power competition.²⁸ Neutrality from the international politics of the Cold War was therefore seen as a "regional priority".²⁹ By establishing some form of regional autonomy, ASEAN aimed to engage the two superpowers in a peaceful and orderly fashion while preventing outside interference in Southeast Asian affairs. Significantly, the regional body was created without the immediate intervention of any of the major powers.

From the ASEAN perspective, the concepts of regional neutrality and peace went hand in hand. The desire for a peaceful and stable region can be traced back to the organization's beginnings. ASEAN was set up through the Bangkok Declaration and its original members emphasized intra-mural stability and peace. Among its declared purposes, ASEAN would aim to "promote regional peace and stability through abiding respect for justice and the rule of law in the relationship among countries of the region and adherence to the principles of the United Nations Charter".³⁰ The member states shared a common emphasis on domestic sources of insecurity. Most of the founding members were challenged by domestic insurgencies, including communist, irredentist and separatist movements. The ASEAN members hoped for regional political stability in order to attain individual economic growth. By participating in a regional organization, the members expected to gain from increased subregional stability, enabling them to pay closer attention to their domestic affairs.

Regional neutrality was perceived as a means by which stability could be achieved. The Bangkok Declaration announced the member states' determination "to ensure their stability and security from external interference in any form or manifestation in order to preserve their national identities in accordance with the ideals and aspirations of their people".³¹ The explicit mention of "external interference" illustrated ASEAN's focus on state sovereignty and

the prevention of external intervention in Southeast Asia. Yet military cooperation was rejected at the outset, as only limited military arrangements existed, for example, bilateral military exercises between Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore.³² The ASEAN members hoped to avoid hostile Vietnamese and Chinese reactions by officially eschewing an anti-communist stance.

Nevertheless, intra-ASEAN differences existed in regard to the People's Republic of China and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) and to the role of external powers in Southeast Asia. With the exception of Indonesia, the member states relied on external guarantees to ensure their individual security. In 1967, Thailand and the Philippines were members of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and the United States had military bases in both countries. Malaysia and Singapore were part of the Anglo-Malaysian Defence Agreement which also included the UK, Australia and New Zealand and which was replaced in 1971 by the consultative Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA). All, with the exception of Indonesia, rejected the notion of a regional order based exclusively on the managerial role of regional states and perceived the United States as the primary countervailing power to contain external aggression.

Unlike most other ASEAN member states, Indonesia openly proclaimed a non-aligned policy and favoured an autonomous order in which regional players would be responsible for their own defence. Indonesia emphasized that regional security could only be obtained through full independence and the avoidance of external domination. After protracted negotiations, a paragraph was added in the Bangkok Declaration to register Jakarta's preference for a regional order based on the exclusive managerial role of Southeast Asian states. It read:

Affirming that all foreign bases are temporary and remain only with the expressed concurrence of the countries concerned and are not intended to be used directly or indirectly to subvert the national independence and freedom of States in the area or prejudice the orderly processes of their national development.³³

Hence, ASEAN neutrality was tied to the notion of limiting external interference in Southeast Asia but not prohibiting its individual members from relying on external defence ties for their national security. The struggle for security at the time of the Bangkok Declaration therefore influenced ASEAN's conceptualization of neutrality.

ASEAN sought to enshrine its conceptualization of regional neutrality when it adopted ZOPFAN in November 1971 as a call for regional autonomy. It stated that the participants were “determined to exert initially necessary efforts to secure the recognition of, and respect for, Southeast Asia as a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality, free from any form or manner of interference by outside powers”.³⁴ It repeated the determination, previously articulated in the Bangkok Declaration, to avoid external intervention. The process of defining the components of ZOPFAN was thus driven by the principle of non-interference, which was viewed by the ASEAN states as a means to address their immediate security challenges.³⁵

ZOPFAN originated from the need to react to strategic transformations that occurred in 1971, namely, the rapprochement in Sino-US relations and Beijing replacing Taipei as the representative of China in the UN and thus at the United Nations Security Council. The concern was that an alignment between America and China would lead to a divided Southeast Asia.³⁶ Malaysia had previously put forward, without prior consultation with its ASEAN partners, a plan for neutralizing Southeast Asia at the Lusaka Non-Alignment Conference in September 1970. This was the first formal proposal for the neutralization of Southeast Asia but the idea of regional neutrality had previously been brought up by Singapore’s then prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, in April 1966 when he commented at a Socialist International meeting in Sweden that “the best way to maintain peace and security would be to leave Southeast Asia as a neutral area in which no major powers will use any of the smaller countries as an extension of its own might, and at the same time guarantee the integrity of each of these smaller nations against encroachments by others”.³⁷

Malaysia proposed neutralizing Southeast Asia by using external powers as guarantors for a regional application of this legal condition. The plan “required the major powers to accept and respect Southeast Asia as an area of neutrality”.³⁸ In July 1971, then Malaysian Prime Minister Abdul Razak Hussein remarked that “the involvement of major powers was the essential reason Southeast Asia had not been at peace for twenty years” and that the neutralization of the region was the only way to ensure it would “no longer be a theatre of conflict for the competing interests of the major powers”.³⁹ The proposed neutralization would yield several benefits. First, it would free the region from interference from the major powers. Second, it would enable Southeast Asian countries to reduce military expenditure

and channel funds towards economic development instead. Third, it would free them from having to align with any bloc.⁴⁰ Despite Malaysian diplomatic efforts to promote the proposal, it received only a lukewarm response from the other ASEAN states and was mostly rejected by the Great Powers.⁴¹

The initial neutralization proposal met with opposition in Southeast Asia due to contrasting strategic outlooks. Malaysia's "public argument in favour of neutralisation was very straightforward: the lesson of Vietnam ... made neutralisation necessary".⁴² The other ASEAN members viewed the situation differently and found neutralization unrealistic and potentially detrimental to regional stability. Thailand reasoned that the situation in Vietnam was the result of a "predatory regime in Hanoi and the Vietcong" and that "neutralisation would not address the threat posed by these actors".⁴³ Thailand, the Philippines and Singapore viewed balance of power politics as a crucial element in their foreign policies. Manila was dependent on its links with Washington to ensure its security, while Bangkok had traditionally relied on external powers and was keen to preserve a policy of independence of manoeuvre with the Great Powers. Thailand was also mindful of the geographical proximity of the conflicts in Indochina and consequently perceived neutrality as an impractical foreign policy stance.⁴⁴ Singapore perceived US involvement in the region as vital to its security. Consequently, the three states opposed the neutralization plan and argued for the involvement of external powers, primarily the United States, to maintain regional stability. The proposed neutralization plan was also unacceptable to Indonesia as it challenged Jakarta's preference for regional autonomy and opened the door to increased external interference. Jakarta was particularly concerned about conceding the role of guarantor to external powers, because it suggested that regional security could only be achieved with the involvement of non-regional players.

Nevertheless, the geopolitical circumstances in 1971 persuaded the foreign ministers of the ASEAN states to re-consider Malaysia's neutralization plan during an unofficial meeting held in Kuala Lumpur in November. Despite the differences in perspectives, the ASEAN member states still sought to assert a neutral position: "ASEAN's policy of trying to ensure that it was seen as a neutral region was an attempt to dissuade the major powers from involving non-communist Southeast Asia as proxies in the Cold War."⁴⁵ Given the tussle between the member states on whether to support more

or less external involvement, ZOPFAN sought to accommodate the member states' divergent security outlooks.

ZOPFAN was a political declaration that avoided the legal rights and obligations associated with the concept of neutralization by simply stating that "the neutralisation of South-East Asia is a desirable objective and that we should explore ways and means of bringing about its realisation".⁴⁶ Although neutralization was mentioned in the Declaration, the concept was mostly understood as referring to a form of "political neutrality".⁴⁷ Nicholas Tarling explains that what "ASEAN itself and its declarations amounted to was not neutralisation, but they had what Faraday's chemistry would have termed a 'neutralising' effect."⁴⁸ As a declaratory principle, ZOPFAN represented continuity with the Bangkok Declaration and did not impose any duties or limitations on the member states. The ASEAN foreign ministers recognized "the right of every state, large or small, to lead its national existence free from outside interference in its internal affairs as this interference will adversely affect its freedom, independence and integrity".⁴⁹

Hence, the ZOPFAN Declaration called for regional autonomy and excluded a specific role for external powers in Southeast Asia while avoiding the legal obligations associated with the concept of neutralization. Jurgen Haacke points out that "none of the members believed that the chosen formulations would impact negatively on their foreign policy or security interests".⁵⁰ For example, the ZOPFAN blueprint that was agreed upon after the Kuala Lumpur meeting had no practical effect nor did it impose any obligations on the member states.⁵¹

In practice, ASEAN's quest for neutrality was repeatedly frustrated during the Cold War. The establishment of communist regimes in South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos in 1975 was an immediate challenge to ASEAN neutrality. In 1976, the now reunified Vietnam called for the development of "genuine neutrality" in Southeast Asia and rejected ZOPFAN at a Non-Aligned Movement meeting in August that year. In May 1978, Vietnam formally presented its own regional vision at the UN and called for the establishment of a Zone of Peace, Independence and Genuine Neutrality (ZOPIGN) as an obvious alternative to ZOPFAN. Arguably, Cold War politics made it difficult for any coherent form of neutrality to develop in Southeast Asia. The ASEAN countries could not muster "sufficient clout, if not to neutralise, then at least to minimise, great power intervention in the region".⁵²

ASEAN's difficulties with neutrality were best illustrated by the Cambodian conflict (1978–91).⁵³ Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia in December 1978 represented a significant challenge to ASEAN and its institutional principles of national sovereignty, non-use of force, and non-interference in the affairs of other states. ASEAN's response to the crisis assumed two major forms, which were primarily determined by Thailand as the "frontline state" to the conflict. The members followed a common diplomatic position that consisted of condemning Vietnam and calling for the national sovereignty of Cambodia to be restored. In addition, ASEAN developed a close partnership with China to exert additional pressure on Vietnam. Indonesia was distressed by the fact that the situation in Cambodia had led to additional external intervention in Southeast Asia, chiefly from China, which opposed Vietnam's occupation, and the Soviet Union which supported it. The reliance on China and a deeper involvement in Cold War antagonism frustrated Indonesia's call for regional autonomy. In response, Indonesia tried to serve as an "interlocutor" between ASEAN and Vietnam during most of the Cambodian conflict. Jakarta hoped to "bring the Cambodian conflict to an early end through regional cooperation and to deny the outside powers any scope for fishing in the troubled waters".⁵⁴ Indonesia eventually co-chaired the International Conference on Cambodia held in Paris in October 1991 which led to the resolution of the conflict.

Nevertheless, ASEAN's emphasis on neutrality was not without achievements. Ultimately, while the Great Powers continued to interfere in Cambodia after the end of the Vietnam War, they did not intervene directly nor conduct proxy wars in any of the original ASEAN states.⁵⁵ For example, in the Sabah dispute between Malaysia and the Philippines, the other ASEAN members maintained their principle of non-interference and ring-fenced the issue from external actors in order not to further complicate the process of conflict avoidance. In short, the ASEAN stance to emphasize regional autonomy, and not to interfere in its members' domestic and bilateral issues, helped to maintain peace and stability in the region.⁵⁶

ASEAN Neutrality in Contemporary Asia: Impartiality in a Multipolar Structure

The multipolar structure that has defined Asian security since the early 2000s has been complex, as new actors have emerged and

international crises have been more diffused with blurred sets of responsibilities and national interests. This section argues that ASEAN has responded to the complexity of the emerging multipolar structure by shifting its attention to being a convening power and emphasizing its impartiality rather than its autonomy. The notion of ASEAN neutrality has therefore evolved over the years in light of changing geopolitical circumstances.

The collective attempt to register a call for regional neutrality has been repeated since the 1990s. For instance, the 2003 Declaration of ASEAN Concord II — which first announced the establishment of an ASEAN Security Community — reaffirmed the member states' commitment to ZOPFAN and indicated that it would, as a political instrument, “continue to play a pivotal role in the area of confidence building measures, preventive diplomacy and the approaches to conflict resolution”.⁵⁷ The 2007 ASEAN Charter also called “for the right of every Member State to lead its national existence free from external interference, subversion and coercion”.⁵⁸ These examples, among others, illustrate how ASEAN has continued to refer to ZOPFAN in its official statements not as a tangible and immediate objective, but rather as a collective aspiration and part of its institutional approach to peace and security.

Indonesia is still the strongest supporter of ZOPFAN. Jakarta has over the years repeatedly called for the regional management of differences free from outside interference. Indonesia has also supported the 1995 Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone Treaty (SEANWFZ) as a building block of ZOPFAN. In contrast, Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines have at no time interpreted ZOPFAN as leading to a policy of non-alignment or to the termination of their defence links with the United States. Hence, as John Ciorciari notes in his assessment of alignments in Southeast Asia, individual ASEAN states have pursued their own alignment policies with external parties “to bring about a desired balance of influence among the great powers”.⁵⁹

While ZOPFAN's realization is unlikely to materialize, it remains an expression of an ambition to maintain some form of neutrality in ASEAN's relations with the Great Powers. ZOPFAN serves as an articulation of an often-expressed belief in not having to choose between the Great Powers, be it the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, or China, the United States, Japan and India today. Moreover, this section demonstrates that ASEAN's projection of its neutrality has evolved in that its emphasis has shifted in light of changing circumstances. While ASEAN stressed

the need to limit external interference in Southeast Asia's affairs during the Cold War, the regional body has emphasized its impartiality in recent years in response to growing multipolarity in Asian security.

The regional security environment has been transformed by the economic development and military modernization of China. This raises questions on the role of China, either as a benign and responsible power or one that might attempt to assert coercive influence on its neighbours, and highlights ASEAN's limited ability to manage regional tensions.⁶⁰ Washington has become increasingly concerned about China's growing military capabilities, while Beijing has been critical of the US alliance system and of the "pivot/rebalance to Asia" strategy of the Obama administration.⁶¹ The competition for influence between China and Japan is another source of regional instability. Tokyo has deepened its military alliance with Washington and stepped up maritime security and defence cooperation with several Southeast Asian states in an attempt to balance China's growing power and influence in the region. India is viewed as another rising power in light of its large population, economic growth and nuclear capabilities. Its foreign and security policy has seen a shift in recent years characterized by its "Look East" and later "Act East" policy. All these geopolitical transformations have intensified a number of security flashpoints. The North Korea and the Taiwan issues are inextricably linked with Sino-US relations, while tensions in both the East and South China Seas have been escalating since the early 2010s. Finally, New Delhi is concerned over China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean, which it views as posing a threat to India's maritime interests.

Great Power competition is not, *per se*, a negative development for ASEAN, as it can provide its member states with more room for manoeuvre and flexibility. For example, most Southeast Asian countries have relied on a hedging strategy by leveraging on Sino-US competition.⁶² Yet, while relations between the Great Powers have become more competitive, ASEAN has found it close to impossible to restrict their involvement and interference in Southeast Asian affairs. In response, ASEAN's search for neutrality has evolved in view of a growing multipolarity in Asia. More specifically, the change in circumstances has led to a shift in emphasis from autonomy and non-external interference to impartiality.

In the last two decades, ASEAN has attempted to build an institutional architecture that includes all the major and middle powers in the Asia Pacific. The architecture consists of overlapping

multilateral bodies — such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Plus Three, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) — that provide venues for participants to exchange strategic perspectives and work towards mutual understanding on security issues. Based on the notion of inclusiveness, these platforms have focused on dialogue and confidence building measures to improve the climate of relations.⁶³ Significantly, the ASEAN-led architecture suggests a change in the meaning and applicability of ASEAN neutrality. It constitutes a shift in strategy from keeping the major powers at bay to a new imperative centred at locking them in. ASEAN has therefore evolved from being dedicated to keeping Southeast Asia free from Great Power conflict to accepting the involvement of external powers.⁶⁴

ASEAN's role in the emerging architecture is dependent on the impartiality element of its neutrality. The regional body engages the major and middle powers and seeks to institutionalize regional relations by promoting diplomatic rules of engagement acceptable to all. This has entailed locking in the United States, China, India and Japan, as well as middle powers such as Australia and South Korea, into the multilateral security architecture. By bringing all the key players to the table, ASEAN seeks to guarantee the sovereign rights of its members and prevent the emergence of a concert system that would exclude them. Significantly, in addition to its impartiality, ASEAN aims to preserve its centrality in the regional security architecture, which derives from the lack of an alternative leader acceptable to all participants. The United States, China and Japan have so far not questioned ASEAN's managerial role in the cooperative process.⁶⁵

In this multipolar context, neutrality can be equated with impartiality. For example, Heng Sarith comments that it is precisely ASEAN's neutrality that has enabled the regional body to play an important role in Asian regionalism as "China and Japan might not trust each other, but ASEAN is believed to be impartial".⁶⁶ Richard Stubbs concurs with this assessment, noting that "in many ways ASEAN is seen as neutral territory on which China and Japan — and when appropriate India and the US as well — can meet and negotiate".⁶⁷ For example, since its inception in 1994, the ARF's diplomatic practice and mechanisms was meant to establish a more constructive pattern of regional relationships.⁶⁸

However, it is questionable whether the aspiration for neutrality/impartiality from Great Power rivalry, and the preservation of centrality

in the security architecture, are reconcilable strategic imperatives. Rather than successfully combining neutrality and centrality, ASEAN may increasingly be unable, as the main driver of the architecture, to either stay clear from or manage Great Power competition. A worst-case scenario for ASEAN would involve losing this sense of neutrality/impartiality and being forced to choose between the Great Powers. This could result from a significant deterioration in the climate of regional relations or may derive from domestic developments linked to the administration of US President Donald Trump and Chinese party politics. ASEAN's role as a neutral platform that brings together the major powers to discuss regional affairs is therefore jeopardized by the evolving dynamics between the United States and China.⁶⁹

An imperative for ASEAN remains not to take a position when it comes to Great Power rivalry in order to preserve its impartiality between China and the United States. Not being forced to choose between them has become a Southeast Asian mantra in recent years. For example, Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong declared at the Central Party School in Beijing in September 2012 that "We hope that China-US relations flourish, because we are friends of both countries. We do not wish to see their relations deteriorate, or be forced to choose one or the other."⁷⁰ In practice, ASEAN, as a regional grouping, has been careful to maintain equidistance between Beijing and Washington.

This is most challenging in the context of the South China Sea dispute. ASEAN has sought to preserve its neutrality/impartiality on the sovereignty dispute and establish a conflict management mechanism that includes all ten ASEAN members and China, first through the implementation of the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DoC) and ultimately through the negotiation of a binding Code of Conduct (CoC) for the South China Sea. In that sense, ASEAN has tried to be impartial on the sovereignty question. Yet the negotiation of a CoC for the South China Sea with Beijing has, in part, been complicated by increasing Sino-US competition.⁷¹ Beijing is concerned that the United States is utilizing ASEAN to interfere in the South China Sea dispute and threaten China's national interests in the region. Moreover, while China has traditionally preferred to address the dispute bilaterally with the respective claimant states, there is a perception in Beijing that ASEAN has used its "related forums to constrain China, and tried to drag in external powers into the dispute".⁷² This Chinese perception worsened after Vietnam and the Philippines

openly welcomed the US pivot/rebalance to Asia due to their concerns over Beijing's renewed assertiveness in the South China Sea.

Furthermore, ASEAN members have themselves been split over the South China Sea due to China's deepening economic and diplomatic ties with individual member states — especially Cambodia and Laos — which have become more inclined to endorse Beijing's preferences. China's increasing influence over some members was illustrated by ASEAN's failure to issue a joint communiqué, a first in the organization's history, at the end of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting in July 2012. The Philippines had insisted on a reference to the incident between Manila and Beijing at Scarborough Shoal earlier in 2012 but Cambodia, the ASEAN chair at the time, refused on the grounds that the territorial disputes with China are bilateral. Cambodia also justified its stance on the premise that ASEAN "ought to remain neutral".⁷³ A major recipient of economic aid from China, Cambodia sought to appease Beijing by not mentioning the South China Sea at the expense of ASEAN unity and its role as an impartial party as described above. More recently, statements made by Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte on China have further undermined the foundations of ASEAN's neutrality/impartiality. In an attempt to placate China, Duterte has often repeated that the South China Sea dispute should not be addressed multilaterally but bilaterally with Beijing, irrespective of the preferences of other ASEAN members.

In short, while events are unfolding, it is clear that the notion of ASEAN neutrality is currently being tested. The Great Powers still endorse ASEAN's managerial role in the multilateral security architecture thanks mostly to its impartiality. Yet ASEAN neutrality is increasingly undermined by a conflict that embroils several of its members in a dispute with China while others seek to appease Beijing for economic benefits. Moreover, the contested neutrality as it is put in practice in the South China Sea dispute is yet another manifestation of a long-drawn issue: the lack of consensus on the operationalization of the concept of neutrality since ZOPFAN was first proposed in 1971.

Conclusion

ASEAN has preferred to try and insulate itself from Great Power rivalry since its establishment more than five decades ago. The ZOPFAN Declaration captured ASEAN's aspiration to keep Southeast

Asia free from Great Power interference. ZOPFAN should be studied as a political statement and in the political context of the early 1970s as well as separate from a more legalistic reading of neutrality and its associated concepts. The Declaration accommodated the divergent strategic outlooks that co-existed within ASEAN by avoiding a specific definition or immediate application of neutrality. National positions of alignment have remained unaffected by the regional commitment to neutrality since the 1970s. Part of the story has been the failure of ASEAN to generate any substantive agreement on neutrality beyond ZOPFAN and other statements. The regional grouping of middle and small states has stuck to a loose and evolving interpretation of neutrality in the absence of a common strategic outlook.

This article contributes to the existing literature by shedding light on the otherwise ill-defined concept of ASEAN neutrality. It has argued that ASEAN neutrality can be defined as the quest for autonomy and impartiality based on how the regional body has approached the concept from the Cold War until today. The article has demonstrated that ASEAN has displayed a change in emphasis from one element to the other due to the shift from bipolarity to multipolarity. Rather than having a fixed content, the notion of neutrality in ASEAN has therefore evolved over time. In the 1970s and 1980s, Southeast Asia's strategic context was driven by the bipolar structure of the Cold War and ASEAN's emphasis was on asserting regional autonomy by seeking to limit Great Power interference in regional affairs. In more recent times, growing multipolarity has shifted ASEAN's focus to impartiality. The Association has sought, amid evolving Great Power dynamics, to assert a more centralized managerial and impartial role within a regional institutional architecture.

The notion of ASEAN neutrality will continue to evolve and be tested in the years to come in view of the ongoing South China Sea dispute and wider strategic transformations occurring in the region. Increased economic dependence on China will also give Beijing additional diplomatic leverage over most Southeast Asian countries. It remains to be seen, therefore, whether the commitment to ASEAN neutrality will be maintained in the changing strategic and economic environment. This is particularly true when individual member states have already violated it in practice and at the expense of ASEAN's ability to operate as a regional grouping.

NOTES

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