

# ASEAN Must Get Its House in Order

## By Piper Campbell

Amid growing doubts about Washington's commitment to Asia under the Trump administration, it's high time for Southeast Asian nations to pull together more convincingly and burnish ASEAN's reputation as an economic power at a time when China and the US are engaged in intense rivalry, writes former US diplomat Piper Campbell.

SINCE US PRESIDENT Donald Trump returned to office, it has not been a question of whether confidence in US commitments to the Indo-Pacific has diminished, but rather what shreds of a security guarantee remain. As headlines in 2025 detailed, jitters over the reliability of US security commitments turned into alarm as East Asian countries were slammed by Trump's "Liberation Day" tariffs. In the first five months of 2026, US actions such as the raid on Venezuela, discussions about annexing Greenland and war with Iran have further unsettled the region, while policies put forth in documents such as the 2025 US National Security Strategy (NSS) last November and the 2026 National Defense Strategy (NDS) in January have deepened anxiety.

Statements and actions by Trump and his administration have cast doubt on foundational assumptions about how the region's security architecture works. At the strategic level, Trump's NSS and NDS reframe America's core interests and explicitly question both the reasons for and level of US commitments overseas.<sup>1</sup> This has exacerbated "longstanding questions about the Trump administration's intentions and expectations" toward friends and allies in the Indo-Pacific, as one Japanese analyst wrote.<sup>2</sup> The Lowy Institute's *2025 Asia Power Index* documents diminished Asian confidence in the US and a reduction in US power, as does the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak *2026 State of Southeast Asia* survey.<sup>3</sup>

At the organizational level, the 2025 restructuring of the US Department of State eliminated the office focused on institutional interaction with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)

<sup>1</sup> "National Security Strategy of the United States of America," White House, November 2025, [www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf](https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf); "2026 National Defense Strategy," US Department of Defense, Jan. 23, 2026, [media.defense.gov/2026/Jan/23/2003864773/-1-1/0/2026-national-defense-strategy.pdf](https://media.defense.gov/2026/Jan/23/2003864773/-1-1/0/2026-national-defense-strategy.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Ryo Hinata-Yamaguchi, "What the Indo-Pacific Thinks of the New US National Defense Strategy," Atlantic Council, Jan. 29,

2026, [www.atlanticcouncil.org/dispatches/what-the-indo-pacific-thinks-of-the-new-us-national-defense-strategy/](https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/dispatches/what-the-indo-pacific-thinks-of-the-new-us-national-defense-strategy/)

<sup>3</sup> Asia Power, "Lowy Institute Asia Power Index: 2025," Lowy Institute, 2025, [power.lowyinstitute.org/](https://power.lowyinstitute.org/); J. Lin et al., "The State of Southeast Asia: 2026 Survey Report," Singapore, ISEAS — Yusof Ishak Institute, 2026, [www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/The-State-of-Southeast-Asia-2026-Survey-Final-Single.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/The-State-of-Southeast-Asia-2026-Survey-Final-Single.pdf)

and consolidated the two regional offices focused on Southeast Asia into one. In private conversations, State Department officials insist that the responsibilities of the multilateral affairs office also have been transferred to the new office and note the capabilities of the Jakarta-based US Mission to ASEAN. However, the Congressional Notification explaining the restructuring re-assigns only limited responsibilities related to South China Sea co-ordination and "managing bilateral relations with ASEAN member states."<sup>4</sup> The clear implication is that the US is moving away from institutional interaction and multilateral approaches in Southeast Asia. Southeast Asians have noticed. Singapore Defense Minister Ng Eng Hen made one of the earliest and most-noted comments in February 2025, as he characterized the US as shifting from a country once perceived as a force of "moral legitimacy" to something akin to "a landlord seeking rent."<sup>5</sup>

Other dynamics beyond the Trump administration further contribute to this sense of a seismic shift. A 2024 report prepared by this author for the Asia Pacific Leadership Network (APLN) described "destabilizing trends," including increasingly skeptical public opinion in America on the value of global engagement and benefits of trade; China's view of itself as "rising" and its desire to create a global community of common destiny around a Sinocentric vision; and concern in Southeast Asia about being squeezed, or forced to choose, between the US and China.<sup>6</sup> Further, as many scholars and analysts have noted, support for international and regional institutions and respect for international law have diminished. Writing in *Foreign Affairs* in January 2026, Oona Hathaway and Scott Shapiro describe an emerging "world without rules."<sup>7</sup> That piece built on an earlier 2025 article in which the two worried that the core principles of international law, including norms against the use of force and

respect for sovereign equality, were eroding.<sup>8</sup> My distinguished colleague at American University, Amitav Acharya, meanwhile, addressed these dynamics in his 2025 book, *The Once and Future World*, as well as in a January 2026 essay in *Foreign Policy*, "The World-Minus-One Moment," in which he discusses current challenges to maintaining global co-operation.<sup>9</sup>

### NEW ARCHITECTURE OR MORE FRAGMENTATION?

It is unclear what the countries of East Asia — and especially the members of ASEAN — will do about these changing dynamics. Within what timeframe will signs of a new (or renewed) architecture emerge? Will their actions signal convergence toward a new regional strategy? Or does the every-country-for-itself approach seen during the 2025 tariff negotiations portend a weaker and more fractured region?

Contemplating the future, the state of US-China relations will both drive and constrain the choices of Southeast Asian countries. Much has been written about how Southeast Asia serves as a primary site for the contestation between the US and China. At times, such great-power competition has provided diplomatic or economic benefits and facilitated Southeast Asian hedging behavior. Yet the potential for heightened conflict raises regional fears. At the other end of an imagined spectrum, if the US and China were to develop a great-power bargain — as some believe was suggested by Trump's October 2025 social media post announcing "the G2 will be convening shortly" — the agency of Southeast Asian states could be impacted profoundly. In a new APLN report published this June, I used forecasting techniques to explore varying behavior by Southeast Asian nations in contexts featuring either concert or contestation between the US and China.<sup>10</sup>

I agree with analysts who see the most desira-

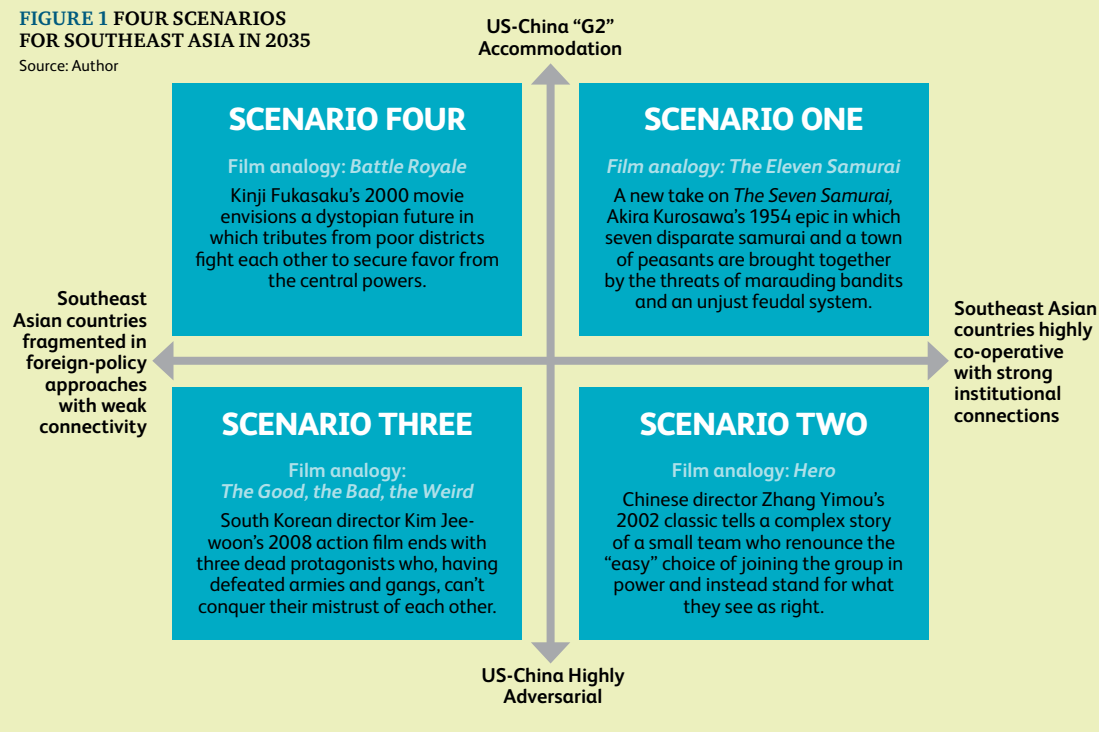
4 "State Department Restructuring Memo: Congressional Note 25-032," US Department of State, 2025, [archive.org/details/state-department-restructuring-memo](https://archive.org/details/state-department-restructuring-memo)  
 5 Philip J. Heijmans, "Singapore Says Asia Now Views U.S. As a 'Landlord Seeking Rent,'" *The Japan Times*, Feb. 17, 2025, [www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2025/02/17/asia-pacific/politics/singapore-asia-us-landlord/](https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2025/02/17/asia-pacific/politics/singapore-asia-us-landlord/)

6 Piper Campbell, "The United States: An Increasingly Incidental Provider of Regional Stability in the Asia-Pacific? US and Southeast Asian Responses," Asia-Pacific Leadership Network, June 2024, [cms.apln.network/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Piper-Anne-Wind-Campbell\\_17th-June-1.pdf](https://cms.apln.network/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Piper-Anne-Wind-Campbell_17th-June-1.pdf)  
 7 Oona A. Hathaway and Scott J. Shapiro, "A World without Rules," *Foreign Affairs*, Jan. 13, 2026, [www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/world-without-rules](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/world-without-rules)

8 Oona A. Hathaway and Scott J. Shapiro, "Might Unmakes Right," *Foreign Affairs*, June 24, 2025, [www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/might-unmakes-right-hathaway-shapiro](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/might-unmakes-right-hathaway-shapiro)  
 9 Amitav Acharya, "The World-Minus-One Moment," *Foreign Policy*, Jan. 5, 2026, [foreignpolicy.com/2026/01/05/world-minus-one-united-states-isolationism-multilateralism-global-power/](https://foreignpolicy.com/2026/01/05/world-minus-one-united-states-isolationism-multilateralism-global-power/)  
 10 Piper Campbell, "US Policy towards Southeast Asia under the Trump Administration," Asia-Pacific Leadership Network, June 2026, [www.apln.network/projects/asia-dialogue-on-china-us-relations/us-policy-towards-southeast-asia-under-the-trump-administration](https://www.apln.network/projects/asia-dialogue-on-china-us-relations/us-policy-towards-southeast-asia-under-the-trump-administration)

11 See Cheng-chwee Kuik, "Assessing Hedging in Trump 2.0: The Case of Malaysian Neutrality," *Trends in Southeast Asia*, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, Issue 5, February 2026; Cheng-chwee Kuik, "Actively Choosing Not to Choose," KMAS Working Paper Series, February 2026, [www.ukm.my/ikmas/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/IKMAS-WP-20261\\_Kuik\\_Actively-Choosing-Not-to-Choose.pdf](https://www.ukm.my/ikmas/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/IKMAS-WP-20261_Kuik_Actively-Choosing-Not-to-Choose.pdf)

**FIGURE 1 FOUR SCENARIOS FOR SOUTHEAST ASIA IN 2035**  
 Source: Author



ble conditions for Washington and Beijing as some sort of "managed" competition, but through scenarios and case studies I wanted to focus on the question of the most desirable conditions for the countries of Southeast Asia over the next decade (see Figure 1). To aid in imagining what dynamics might be in play in 2035, I developed four scenarios based on high or low bloc cohesion within Southeast Asia coupled with concert or contestation between the US and China. These variables align with conditions envisioned by serious scholars, although the scenarios themselves are intentionally designed to describe the extremes of possible outcomes. To emphasize the fact that these scenarios are abstract "ideal types" built to aid understanding of complex dynamics, each framework is associated with a classic East Asian

film. Through the modeling, one sees a consistent dynamic of Southeast Asian nations retaining more agency and having greater impact on outcomes when a visible convergence of interests facilitates co-ordinated efforts. As the bound shafts in the ASEAN flag depict, they are stronger together, and that beats falling apart.

**WORKING TOGETHER AND APART**

At the same time, looking at the current foreign-policy approaches of the Philippines, Vietnam, Cambodia and Indonesia, one sees significant divergences in strategy. The case studies included in the APLN report raise questions about whether countries in Southeast Asia share a diagnosis of the challenge and have the capabilities and political will to work together.

According to academics and officials with whom I spoke during the preparation of the APLN report as well as survey data on perceptions, for the countries of Southeast Asia, conditions are optimized when they maintain space for individual and collective maneuver in the political, security and economic space; they're able to hedge to insulate themselves from vulnerabilities; and the norms of a rules-based order, including around sovereignty and free trade, are preserved. Even though countries of Southeast Asia differ substantially, including in governance structures, economic conditions and sense of priorities and vulnerabilities, through the report I demonstrate that these conditions are best attained when countries of Southeast Asia converge, including through regional mechanisms. Achieving this will not be easy. As the former foreign minister of a Southeast Asian nation told me, the need to work more closely together is clear, but the sometimes petty animosities common to neighbors get in the way.

Notwithstanding that challenge, leaders of Southeast Asian states should work to strengthen ASEAN by actively prioritizing actions and programs that align with the region's most important economic goals. ASEAN member states need to continue to build their region into one of the fastest-growing and most dynamic economic areas in the world. For the countries of Southeast Asia, building individual economies provides less resilience and is less impactful than building an ASEAN economy. ASEAN member states should lean into actions that further strengthen connectivity across the region, support energy needs, facilitate trade and the movement of people, and continue to grow and unite an ASEAN economy.

**BUILDING AN ASEAN ECONOMY**

Where they can, Southeast Asian nations should resist pressures to negotiate bilateral trade deals and look to address structural impediments to co-

ordinating trade positions. As a focused and forward-looking ASEAN agenda is shaped, Southeast Asian leaders should highlight how these activities produce gains for, and investments in, the people of Southeast Asian nations. They can frame co-ordinated efforts as helpful in tackling geopolitical and geoeconomic challenges emerging from outside the region, as for example, the energy shock rippling through the region caused by the Iran war. To effectively advance economically, ASEAN states need to get their houses in order individually and collectively. This includes resolving longstanding disputes over competing borders like the Thai-Cambodia conflict and navigating a best-possible outcome on Myanmar. In the diplomatic sphere, the countries of Southeast Asia need both to support and ask more of each other.

Leaders should also strengthen ASEAN externally by continuing to diversify economic partnerships, including with Canada, the European Union and the Global South. Diplomatically, the countries of ASEAN should seek to make themselves an indispensable player in regional and global discussions, including about how middle powers can support the trade and legal regimes that have underpinned Southeast Asia's growth.

Simultaneously, Southeast Asian states should continue actively engaging both China and the US. As they do this, leaders should recognize that while the US and China may feel threatened by Southeast Asian co-operation, leaders can make the case that "choosing ASEAN" is (still) choosing the less bad option.<sup>11</sup>

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