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US National Security Strategy and 20th CCP Congress: What They Mean for ASEAN Regional Security

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SYNOPSIS

*The release of the new US National Security Strategy and conclusion of the 20th national congress of the Chinese Communist Party are two recent developments that raise the spectre of great power conflict in the Asia-Pacific. Amid fluctuating tensions in the region, **Muhammad Faizal** argues ASEAN needs to take urgent steps to bolster its resilience and diplomacy so that that it does not slip into irrelevance.*

COMMENTARY

On 12 October, the United States published its [National Security Strategy](#) (NSS), outlining how it would use all instruments of national power to advance its vital interests and prioritising China as its “most consequential geopolitical challenge”. Ten days later, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) concluded its [20th national congress](#), cementing President Xi Jinping's power, unveiling a new leadership filled with people known to be close to Xi, and envisioning how China would advance its vital interests.

The juxtaposition of these two developments augurs the widening gap between both powers' competing visions for the world, as the United States seeks to secure its role as a leading Pacific power and China promotes itself as the dominant alternative. In the context of the upcoming ASEAN Summit and related meetings hosted by Cambodia, it is crucial that ASEAN is fully cognisant of the implications of great power rivalry and boost its efforts to maintain its relevance in the Asia-Pacific.



PLA(N) Jiangkai-class frigate Linyi (foreground) and PLA(N) Luh-class destroyer Qingdao (background) in a search and rescue exercise with U.S. Navy Ticonderoga-class guided-missile cruiser USS Lake Erie. Can such exercises mitigate growing Sino-U.S. tensions? *The appearance of U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) visual information does not imply or constitute DoD endorsement.*

The Clash of Titans Intensifies

The US NSS opens with the message that the “world is at an inflection point” and in the “midst of a strategic competition to shape the future of the international order”. It states that China “is using its technological capacity and increasing influence over international institutions to create more permissive conditions for its own authoritarian model” and is seeking to “layer authoritarian governance with a revisionist foreign policy.”

To navigate this competition and other shared challenges, the NSS provides a roadmap for “a free, open, prosperous, and secure international order”. Three lines of effort would undergird this goal: (i) investing in sources and tools of US power and influence, (ii) building a strong coalition of allies and partners, and (iii) strengthening the military.

In contrast, President Xi Jinping’s [report](#) to the CPC congress warned about “external attempts to blackmail, blockade and exert maximum pressure on China”. It lauds the ability of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) to “provide strategic support for the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” and make “greater contributions to world peace and development.”

The congress [resolution](#), which approves the report, states that “China plays an active part in the reform and development of the global governance system and works to make global governance fairer and more equitable”. Promoting economic

development and self-sufficiency, increasing China's influence and role in global governance, and strengthening the military are among the lines of effort that the CCP would undertake in the next five years.

ASEAN Security amid Diminishing Trust

Both powers are still talking past each other. The room for conciliation between their competing interests and visions of international order remains small, or perhaps has even grown smaller. Military relations will be more strained as the United States perceives that China's new top [military leadership](#) is preparing for armed conflict and less inclined to have constructive dialogue. Furthermore, one of China's newly promoted members has been slapped with US sanctions ([Li Shangfu](#), under the Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act or CAATSA). Diplomatic relations could worsen as China remains self-assured, with its principle of "[major-country diplomacy](#)", a stance that some observers regard as corresponding to a more [assertive](#) and [adversarial](#) foreign policy.

While the CCP congress did not mention ASEAN, it raised China's [intention](#) to promote the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and safeguard its maritime interests. These are areas where China is countervailing US influence and could flex more muscle. The United States is likely to urge ASEAN to take a stronger stance against China in these areas given that the NSS mentioned ASEAN's role in the context of promoting the US notion of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific. Senior officials from [China](#) and the [United States](#) have previously reiterated that countries should not be compelled to choose sides. But ASEAN is increasingly feeling the [pressure](#) to do so.

This milieu heightens the security dilemma in which each power perceives the other as pushing for a "new normal" in the region. It heightens the inconvenient fact for ASEAN that the post-Cold War international order that helped it successfully achieve cooperative peace in the past is unravelling. It could further constrain ASEAN-led multilateral processes.

While this milieu does not make conflict inevitable, it does make conflict more probable. Conflict could break out by design or unintentionally: for example, if China decides that it should take Taiwan [sooner](#) rather than later, or if another crisis in the South China Sea, similar in scale to the force posturing by both China and the United States during and after US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's Taiwan visit, spins out of control and spills over to Southeast Asia.

Enhance ASEAN Diplomacy and Resilience

The geopolitical timeline in the Asia-Pacific from now to 2027 is critical. The [PLA](#) aims to accomplish certain goals ahead of the CCP's 21st congress that year. The United States, for its part, will increase [defence spending](#) and exert added [pressure](#) in the economic and technological sectors to thwart China's goals. The window for trust-building between two distrusting powers is closing fast.

ASEAN's ability to navigate US-China relations will be increasingly tested. As an inclusive and non-adversarial grouping in the region, ASEAN is still the best bet in diplomacy to minimise the spectre of great power conflict. In that regard, member

states need to ask themselves what they could do collectively to ensure ASEAN's effectiveness as an institution amid current circumstances.

First, ASEAN would need to be bolder and more proactive in trying to manage great power politics. It could project itself as one avenue for conflict mitigation while making clear that its platforms are not instruments for great powers to push a zero-sum agenda. But this is a tall order unless ASEAN takes tangible steps to resolve regional issues that have been undermining its unity and credibility. On the Myanmar crisis, for example, ASEAN may need to take a hard look at the value and effectiveness of the Five-Point Consensus, as well as reassess the [role and tenure](#) of the Special Envoy.

Second, ASEAN may do well to heed the age-old adage “*Sī vīs pācem, parā bellum*”, which translates as “If you want peace, prepare for war”. This does not suggest engaging in an unfettered arms build-up in Southeast Asia. Instead, it suggests that ASEAN needs new approaches to function in an era of [unpeace](#) and imbalance of powers. ASEAN should maintain the cooperative momentum on the common and less-sensitive areas where (most if not all) member states and their defence forces may support each other's resilience in the face of spillover effects from a great power conflict.

Likely spillover effects could include humanitarian and supply chain issues, and cyber and information disruptions. To that end, member states should urgently contribute resources and thinking to new regional security initiatives such as the [ASEAN Cyber Defence Network](#) and the [ADMM Cybersecurity and Information Centre of Excellence](#) in ensuring that their operationalisation produces valuable outcomes.

Unless ASEAN takes tangible steps to enhance its diplomacy and resilience, regional players would continue paying lip service to its centrality. If ASEAN slips into rigidity and irrelevance, any efforts at diplomacy could fail. And if diplomacy fails, ASEAN would be unprepared to prevent a spillover of great power conflict to Southeast Asia and mitigate its impact when it happens.

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