

International cooperation in south-east Asia

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has long been one of the developing world's most active and well-established regional organisations. There are however several other organisations active in the ten ASEAN countries, some established by ASEAN, others independent of it. The following is an overview of the main players in the region, comparing them by membership, remit, and impact.

Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)

ASEAN is the region's closest equivalent to the EU, with potential to develop as a regional community.

Members: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam.

Established: 1967 by Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand

Remit: to promote peace and prosperity in the region

Impact: like the EU, ASEAN has helped to bring stability to a formerly turbulent part of the world, and through enlargement it has integrated former Cold War adversaries (Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam) into the region's structures. Its member states have committed themselves to peace in a [Treaty of Amity and Cooperation](#) and declared the region a [nuclear-free zone](#). Other integration measures include an ASEAN [free trade area](#) and an agreement on visa exemption for intra-ASEAN travel, which has considerably boosted tourism in the region. In terms of external relations, ASEAN has set up several regional fora together with non-ASEAN countries (see below); although not all of these are equally effective, they have helped member states to play a stronger role on the world stage than they could have individually.

After criticism of its weak response to the 1997 Asian financial crisis, ASEAN adopted a [Charter](#) in 2007 envisaging closer cooperation based on three pillars: economic, political-security and socio-cultural. Useful initiatives have been taken in all three areas – for example, remaining tariff barriers have been removed and customs procedures harmonised, joint military and disaster management exercises have been carried out, an Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights ([AICHR](#)) has been established, as well as an ASEAN [Youth Volunteer Corps](#). An ASEAN flag and anthem together with an annual ASEAN Day and [Southeast Asian Games](#) are helping to build regional identity.

However, compared to the EU, progress towards regional integration remains limited. Despite impressive economic performance (average annual GDP growth from 1980 to 2009 was 5.3%), south-east Asian markets are still fragmented, with little intra-regional infrastructure. Treaty commitments to democratic values have not translated into political reforms, and human rights abuses continue (such as in [Myanmar](#)).

Barriers to closer integration include ASEAN's informal approach (the '[ASEAN Way](#)'), based on consensus and non-interference in internal affairs. This can make it hard to reach agreement when member state interests differ – for example, cross-border haze pollution caused by Indonesian forest fires and migrant worker rights are areas where ASEAN has failed to adopt effective measures. Implementation and enforcement are also difficult given ASEAN's lack of supranational powers and limited resources – in 2009, its tiny permanent secretariat had a budget of just [US\\$9 million and 240 staff](#). Finally, huge economic and political differences between member states (e.g. per capita income is 61 times higher in Singapore than in Myanmar) make it harder to find common ground.

An [EP Resolution](#) on the future of EU-ASEAN relations (adopted on 15 January 2014) acknowledges the importance of ASEAN in promoting regional integration, advocates a common EU approach and closer cooperation with ASEAN, and calls for greater parliamentary involvement.

ASEAN Plus...

With the possible goal of creating a future 'East Asian Community', ASEAN has initiated two concentric platforms to enable cooperation with its regional partners:

ASEAN Plus Three ([APT](#))/ASEAN Plus Six

Members: ASEAN countries + China, South Korea, Japan

Established: 1997, in response to the Asian financial crisis

Remit: To facilitate cooperation between south-east Asia and its main Asian trading partners on a wide range of issues, but with a focus on economic matters.

Impact: APT's main achievement to date is the multilateral [Chiang Mai Initiative](#), a common fund which in conjunction with the IMF supports regional currencies to prevent a repeat of the 1997/98 crisis.

With a further three partners (India, Australia, New Zealand - 'ASEAN Plus Six'), the aim is to build an East Asia/Australasia free trade area, the [Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership](#).

East Asia Summit ([EAS](#)), since 2005

Members: ASEAN Plus Six countries + Russia, US

Remit: facilitating dialogue between East Asian leaders on 'broad strategic, political and economic issues'.

Impact: EAS plays only a secondary role, with APT the main driver of closer cooperation between ASEAN and its regional partners, and APEC as the most important forum for Asia-Pacific cooperation. Its only real activity remains its annual summit (scheduled to follow ASEAN summits).

Wider fora

Asia-Europe Meeting ([ASEM](#)), since 1996

Members: ASEAN countries + 41 Asian, European and Australasian countries

Remit: promoting dialogue between Asia and Europe on a wide range of subjects, including poverty, education and climate change.

Impact: ASEM's informal structure allows a wide range of subjects to be tabled at [annual summits](#), but its reputation as a mere '[talking shop](#)' is reflected in high absenteeism rates at summits and a lack of media interest.

ASEAN Regional Forum ([ARF](#)), since 1994, initiated by ASEAN

Members: ASEAN countries + 17 Asian, European, Australasian and N. American countries

Remit: dialogue on security issues including defence, disarmament, peacekeeping, nuclear non-proliferation. Cooperation on conflict resolution is a long-term goal.

Impact: little real impact; for example, it has been bypassed in talks on North-South Korean relations, though both countries are member states.

Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), since 1989

Members: ASEAN countries (except Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar) + 14 Pacific Rim countries

Remit: economic cooperation, in particular liberalising trade/investment and facilitating business

Impact: APEC has enabled participating countries to bypass the WTO's stalled Doha Round and progress towards trade liberalisation – over the 1989-2010 period average trade tariffs in the region were cut from 16.9% to 5.8%. Business transaction costs have also fallen significantly, for example thanks to the [APEC Business Travel Card](#) exempting business travellers from visas. In the longer term, a [Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific](#) region is envisaged.