

The road to peace: Bilateral cooperation or regional cooperation?

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ByHindustan Times

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As the world keeps witnessing newer and worse forms of human catastrophe as compared to what has been seen in history, the questions around what can lead to a peaceful and stable international order become more pertinent. The United Nations (UN) was formed to prevent another conflict on the lines of the two World Wars, but as clearly seen in the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict, or in Hamas' brutal and dehumanising acts of terror, the answer to questions around peace are yet to be found. Most of the current conflicts in the world are still around questions of sovereignty and boundaries.



ASEAN Flags

While international organisations like the UN continued to play key roles in providing platforms for dialogue and discussions among parties to various conflicts, they also have been rendered useless owing to a lack of reform since the 1940s onwards. Regional organisations became a more efficient and acceptable mechanism for pushing towards attaining the unattainable peace, through their emphasis not just on dialogue and diplomacy,

but also on leveraging common arenas of interest like trade and foreign investment. The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) is frequently cited as one of the most successful examples of regional cooperation. While countries of the ASEAN have several territorial disputes among themselves, in addition to their respective territorial disputes with China; conflict has largely been kept at bay.

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The question that arises in this context is what exactly is it that has made a regional organisation like the ASEAN effective in keeping military conflicts largely at bay. A closer look at the ASEAN States reveals multiple lines of not just boundary conflict but also multiple channels of bilateral communications between the member states. Examples of such bilaterals from the year 2023 alone include an October meeting between Vietnamese ambassador to Cambodia- Nguyen Huy Tang and the Cambodian deputy prime minister and the minister of foreign affairs, Sok Chenda Sophea; a September meeting between Indonesian president Jokowi and Vietnam's prime minister Pham Minh Chinh, and a February meeting between Cambodian prime minister Hun Sen and his Lao counterpart Sonexay Siphandone to enhance relations between the two countries. Also, in June this year, Malaysia and Singapore agreed on having a regular platform--the Annual Ministerial Dialogue to boost bilateral trade and investments between the two countries, particularly in the realms of digital and green economies. In August, the secretary general of ASEAN, Kao Kim Hourn met with Lao PDR's minister of industry and commerce, Lalaithong Kommasith in Indonesia and discussed key initiatives and deliverables to advance the work of the ASEAN Economic Community.

While bilaterals between these sets of mentioned countries have taken place, the ugly head of conflict over sovereignty has also reared. In 2018, a dispute between Malaysia and Singapore got reignited when Malaysia extended the territorial boundary at Johor Bahru Port, encroaching into Singaporean claimed waters. The claim extended beyond the maritime border Malaysia had declared and reinstated in 1979 and 1999 respectively; marking the first time in about 20 years that either side attempted to shift the boundary.

The Cambodia-Laos border has also not been an easy one. The international boundary between the two was delimited in vague terms while the two countries were under French control at the turn of the 20th century. Since independence there have been many small-scale disputes along the roughly 580-kilometre frontier, none of which have thankfully escalated into major conflicts. The most recent instance of border dispute between the two was in 2019 over the course of the Tonle Sap River, along the western stretches of the boundary. The two countries have an active bilateral boundary commission which is working towards the resolution of all the remaining arenas of dispute.

Even in the case of Vietnam-Cambodia relations, the unfinished demarcation of the land border between the two causes persistent dispute. In 1954, both Vietnam and Cambodia gained full independence. However, Vietnam was split into a Communist North and a

capitalist South, with Cambodia bordering South Vietnam. The border remained undemarcated and in numerous areas including the Gulf Islands, the dispute remained alive.

While several of these lines of conflict over sovereignty issues in Southeast Asia are remnants of colonialism and unfinished demarcation of boundaries, ASEAN States have leveraged modern tools, such as those of economic exchanges to further mutual reliance in good faith to reduce possibilities of politics marring opportunities created by economics. ASEAN countries actively use not just the regional group as a whole to push towards greater stability in the region, but also through bilateral meetings between individual members of the states. The efforts clearly at the regional and at the bilateral levels are to bring about tangible benefits to the peoples inhabiting the ASEAN countries, in newer emerging arenas of cooperation - be it in the context of post pandemic recovery, green technologies or cyber cooperation.

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