

## Inaugural GCC-ASEAN Summit: Comparative Insights into GCC-ASEAN Cooperation Dynamics

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### Abstract

**Objectives:** This research evaluates and analyzes how the GCC and ASEAN will cooperate following the October 2023 summit, determining the most likely paths in the political-security, economic, and sociocultural aspects. It reevaluates how the two regional blocs position themselves with the great powers, mainly the United States (US) and the People's Republic of China (PRC), and assesses the optimism surrounding this cooperation despite the tensions faced by both the GCC and ASEAN. Additionally, this research elaborates on insights that both the GCC and ASEAN can share with one another. **Methods:** This research employs descriptive analytics and comparative research to analyze the GCC and ASEAN. Both organizations have different visions, missions, challenges, and worldviews, which contribute to the earnestness of the agreed framework of cooperation.

**Results:** The results indicate that the role of a regional driver is central to realizing the existing framework of cooperation. For ASEAN, cooperation must be guided by its members who are at the forefront of engaging with the Arab Sunni-Muslim monarchies. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia acts as a driver for the Arabian Peninsula on multiple fronts, making the regionalization process challenging in this developed sub-region.

**Conclusion:** Despite their distinct regional and international geopolitical challenges, there are many lessons that both the GCC and ASEAN can learn from each other, with a particular emphasis on ASEAN's experiences benefiting the GCC.

**Keywords:** Gulf Cooperation Council; Association of Southeast Asian Nations; Regionalism; Framework of Cooperation; Major Powers

### القمة الافتتاحية لمجلس التعاون الخليجي وآسيان: رؤى مقارنة حول ديناميكيات التعاون بين مجلس التعاون الخليجي وآسيان

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#### ملخص

الأهداف: ستقيم هذه المقالة كيفية تعاون مجلس التعاون لدول الخليج العربية، ورابطة دول جنوب شرق آسيا في المستقبل، عقب قمة أكتوبر 2023، وذلك لتحديد المسارات الأكثر احتمالاً التي سيتم اتباعها في الجوانب السياسية-الأمنية والاقتصادية والاجتماعية-الثقافية. ستعيد تقييم كيفية تبني الكتلتين الإقليميتين مواقفهما تجاه القوى الكبرى، وخاصة الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية وجمهورية الصين الشعبية، ومدى تفاؤل هذا التعاون رغم التوترات التي تواجهها كل من دول مجلس التعاون ودول الآسيان على التوالي. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، ستستعرض المقالة الرؤى التي يمكن لكل من مجلس التعاون ودول الآسيان تقديمها لبعضهما البعض.

المنهجية: استخدمت هذه المقالة البحثية التحليل الوصفي والبحث المقارن لتحليل كل من مجلس التعاون ودول الآسيان على التوالي. تتمتع كلتا المنظمتين برؤى ورسائل وتحديات مختلفة، وكذلك وجهات نظر مختلفة حول العالم، مما سيسهم أيضاً في جدية إطار التعاون المتفق عليه.

النتائج: تظهر النتائج أن دور المحرك أو القوة الإقليمية هو أمر حيوي لتحقيق إطار التعاون الحالي. في حالة الآسيان، يجب أن يكون التعاون موجّهًا من قبل أعضائها الذين يتصدرون التعامل مع الملوك العرب السنة المسلمين. بينما تلعب المملكة العربية السعودية دور المحرك في شبه الجزيرة العربية على جهات متعددة، وهي منطقة فرعية تتكون من دول متقدمة، مما يجعل عملية الإقليمية تحديًا.

الخلاصة: مع التحديات الجيوسياسية الإقليمية والدولية الخاصة بهما، هناك العديد من الدروس التي يمكن لكل من مجلس التعاون ودول الآسيان تعلمها من بعضهما البعض، مع تركيز أكبر من الآسيان نحو مجلس التعاون.

الكلمات الدالة: مجلس التعاون لدول الخليج العربية، رابطة دول جنوب شرق آسيا، الإقليمية، إطار التعاون، القوى الكبرى

## 1.0. Introduction

With the holding of the first-ever summit between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) on October 20<sup>th</sup>, 2023, it is anticipated that the two regions will turn a new page of cooperation, with the focus on securing their mutually essential interests. As a sub-regional organization of the Middle East that unites the Gulf Arab monarchs, and as a regional organization that unites ten Southeast Asian states, both regions are pondered to reach greater cooperation following the summit. However, varying degrees of interest in determining what lies ahead following the summit and considering individual states' foreign policies rather than collective movements as regional blocs, it is necessary to reevaluate this optimism. It is also necessary to reconsider the benefits that the member states and the respective organizations can acquire following the summit which is only 'the tip of the iceberg' from the international relations point of view. Challenges lie ahead to establish meaningful cooperation from both regional blocs which generally depend on one another.

This research will evaluate and analyze how the GCC and ASEAN will cooperate going forward following the October 2023 summit and to determine the most likely paths to be taken at the political-security, economics, and sociocultural aspects. It will reevaluate how the two regional blocs take up positions with the great powers mainly the United States (US) and the People's Republic of China (PRC), and how optimistic can this cooperation be, despite the tensions both the GCC and ASEAN respectively faced. Additionally, the research will elaborate on insights that both the GCC and ASEAN can pass on to one another. Both organizations have similarities and differences that needs to be taken into account in order to translate them into concrete research that offers valuable recommendation, despite the fact that they have distinct levels of collaboration, geographical challenges and dynamics.

### 1.1. Overview on the GCC-ASEAN Summit

The GCC-ASEAN Summit aims to strengthen and to diversify the economic relations among the GCC and ASEAN states. Efforts to finally gather all parties together to the same table was finally made. The 2011 Arab Spring puts the process of 'confidence building' between both regional blocs on hold since the ministerial-level meeting in Manama which witnessed the signing of the memorandum of understanding (MoU) and the formulation of the two-year action plan between the GCC and ASEAN in 2009. The two-year action plan was then officially adopted during the second ministerial-level meeting held in Singapore in 2010 (*Masarat*, 2024), but was put on a hold with little to no progress following the Arab Spring. Since then, discussions to enhance cooperations further continued between the secretary general of the GCC and ASEAN, as well as on the ministerial level. Both bilateral and multilateral dimensions are utilized, representing as both the respective organizations and as individual states on the sideline of international assembly, such as the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). What distinguishes this summit from others intraregional summit is the level of commitment that both regional blocs signified, by having it to the level of head of states and governments.

This research will not put forward the introduction of what the GCC and ASEAN are or what both respective organizations stood for in details, but instead, this research will cover both organizations together leading up to the Summit as researches which covers the introduction of the GCC and ASEAN (separately) are broadly available, however, research paper which emphasize both organization together and seek to find a concrete result and recommendations are still underdeveloped as the summit happened recently at the end of 2023. The authors believe that research into South-South relations must be put forward in different angle. The cooperation that is expected to develop between the GCC and ASEAN is also among efforts to strengthen South-South relations.

Additionally, weak security systems of both regional blocs pose a significant challenge. As GCC and ASEAN primarily focused on economic cooperation, both organizations cannot overlook the fundamental issue of regional security. Therefore, this research will highlight how security issues concerning major powers (Iran for the GCC and the PRC for ASEAN) are addressed and will offer alternative ways to address it. This research will explore how both organizations have managed or could transform the security dilemma into a more inclusive approach and what challenges lie ahead. The authors consider it crucial to address this issue given the importance of national and regional security for both organizations, which currently lack an adequate security strategy (Salameh, 2017).

## **2.0. Methodology**

This research used descriptive analytics and comparative research to analyze both the GCC and ASEAN respectively. Both organizations have different visions, missions, and challenges, as well as different worldviews when it comes to regionalism. The authors believe that it is necessary for both the GCC and ASEAN to be analyzed and compare to come out with a fruitful venture.

### **3.0. Addressing the Palestinian Question: A Joint Statement from the GCC and ASEAN**

The summit in Riyadh was conducted amid the Israel-Hamas war, when international community's focus shifted entirely towards the war. Undoubtedly, the summit cannot afford to be silent to what's at stake, despite both the GCC and ASEAN being primarily economically driven. Days before the GCC-ASEAN Summit in Riyadh, the Organization of Islamic Cooperations (OIC) gathered in Riyadh for an emergency summit with the hope to realize collective measures and issued a joint declaration on the war in Gaza. The OIC covers the entire Arab League members (including the GCC), as well as three states from ASEAN namely Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam.

Given the Israel-Palestine conflict's importance to the international community and its status as the global event of the previous year (2023) and this year (2024), the authors perceive that the war in Gaza should also be addressed in this research paper. The war did overshadow the GCC-ASEAN Summit, but the effectiveness of the summit and what both regions are looking to accomplish remained intact. Joint statement on the development in Gaza from the GCC and ASEAN referred to as 'ASEAN-GCC statement on developments in Gaza' (2023) was finalized with 'general diplomatic language' that calls for both Israel and Hamas to end the war, condemning all acts of violence including civilian casualties committed by both sides ('ASEAN-GCC Statement', 2023). The drafting of the joint statement from both organizations showed how central is the Israel-Palestine conflict which cannot be placed aside.

### **3.2. Putting forward issues of concern on the developments in Gaza and the importance of holding this Summit when the world's focus shifts to the war in Gaza.**

Thus, the Israel-Hamas war, the genocide in Gaza, as well as the centrality of the Palestinian question are subjects that could not be left hanging as it is in the interest of the international community and the majority of the GCC-ASEAN member states. States from the GCC and ASEAN also calls for solution to the Palestinian question, pushing for the establishment the realization of a two-state solution. Both Thailand and the Philippines raised the issue regarding the safety and the evacuation of their nationals, namely their migrant workers from Israel and sought support from the GCC, especially Saudi Arabia to exert its influence in the process.

On the one hand, the need to conduct this summit and not to delay it any longer and the urgency to hold it in the midst of escalating global contestation, as it has gone through periods of uncertainty which result to the delay of conducting a head of state level summit which shows the level of priority from both regional blocs. The Arab Spring in 2011 (Abdullah, 2012), the destabilization of the OIC in 2016 following the severed diplomatic ties between Saudi Arabia and Iran (Ilishev, 2016), which was followed by PM Tun Mahathir of Malaysia holding of the Kuala Lumpur Summit in 2019, making Saudi Arabia as the major authority of the OIC to maintain distance from Malaysia which initiated a summit that seemed to create an awakening by challenging the status-quo. A year later the Covid-19 pandemic affects every sector and individual on the global scale.

On the other hand, the centrality of the Palestinian question for both regional blocs cannot be put on the sideline. However, the joint statement has taken into account the recent development of the Palestinian question and the Israel-Palestine conflict, and the road towards normalization with Israel. Diplomatic relations have been established between the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain with Israel which were the result of the Abraham Accords in 2020. Secret talks about the road towards normalization among Arab states with Israel, namely Saudi Arabia, is also a development to be considered. In addition, the long-established ties between ASEAN states, namely Singapore, the Philippines, and Thailand with Israel also played a role to the general diplomatic language used for the joint statement, namely Israel's diplomatic strategies in the Southeast Asian region to countries that choose to establish relations with them both openly and secretly, or to those that remain hostile to Israel, as part of Israel's diplomatic strategies and regional (Muddle East) strategies for

wider recognition (Salameh and Ishakat, 2022). The GCC which comprise of Arab Sunni-Muslim monarchs and the region of Southeast Asia which covered approximately 25 percent of the total Muslim population worldwide, this translates into Islamic solidarity for the Palestinians and the third holiest Islamic site, Al-Masjid Al-Aqsa, as cases that cannot be sidelined when the summit was conducted.

#### **4.0. Elevating Global South relations in post-GCC-ASEAN Summit**

The GCC-ASEAN Summit marks the advancement of South-South relations, setting a compelling example of South-South cooperation. The conclusion of the GCC-ASEAN Summit is culminated in the joint statement on the 'ASEAN-GCC Framework of Cooperation 2024-2028' ("Joint Statement", 2023), a shared commitment to deepen collaboration and forge stronger ties between the regional blocs. The Framework of Cooperation covers diverse landscapes such as the political and security dialogue, trade and investment, people-to-people exchanges, education, culture, tourism, media, and sports ("ASEAN-Gulf Cooperation", 2023). However, it is essential to acknowledge that while this framework provides a solid foundation to enhance cooperation, challenges remain to ensure that the cooperations are consistent to the set framework. Overcoming these challenges will require sustained efforts, continuous dialogues, and further mutual understanding between both regional blocs.

##### **4.1. The rising Global South and the US hegemonic decline: How true is this view?**

This summit is one of the efforts to increase cooperation among the Global South in recent years which has been a trending phenomenon. The summit is also perceived as among further efforts that are related to opposing the domination of Western influence or specifically the US centric approach, mainly in economic affairs, for the development of the Global South. Özekin and Sune (2023) states that the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region offers a useful laboratory for evaluating the Western hegemonic decline and refuting it, as demonstrated by the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) as a counter-hegemonic alternative to the US-led world order. By evaluating the situation in the Middle East and the Arab world considering the US's declining influence and relative disengagement from the region, one can argue that the interest to enhance cooperations between the GCC and ASEAN are one of the steps to elevate Global South relations further.

Since the end of World War II, institutions that are designed to support many Global South states have been the same international institutions directed and regulated by Western states, particularly the US, namely the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). These institutions were ostensibly established to assist in the economic development and general welfare of the newly independent countries of the Global South. However, the World Bank and IMF, which have faced significant criticism from Global South leaders, seem primarily aimed at integrating South states into the capitalist economic system favored by the Western bloc. This integration was particularly intended to counter the Eastern bloc led by the Soviet Union during the Cold War period.

Historical and contemporary analyses, such as those by Salameh (2017), have shown that the stated goals of promoting economic development and welfare through these US-led institutions have primarily served to foster development for a select few in the Global South while maintaining the hegemony of the West, specifically US-led world order. The emergence of BRICS is a response to the seven decades of failure by these US-led institutions to reform themselves, to achieve equitable development and welfare in Asia, Africa, and South America.

In consideration of the larger scenery of regional politics in the MENA region, how true are the statements above? How important is BRICS to MENA in light of its expansion and implication? Is improving the GCC-ASEAN relations a crucial endeavor in the process? Of course, this summit is a positive endeavor for the sustainability of south-south relations. Thus, when it comes to the MENA region, regardless of the established and pre-established economic efforts and re-equipment in its foreign policy approach to the economy, the authors suppose that the MENA's dependence on the Western powers for security matters has an influential impact on the policy making. Given the alliance and close security ties that existed between the US and states of the GCC, such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE, Bahrain, and Kuwait, in addition to Jordan, Egypt, and Morocco, which are "labeled" as major non-NATO allies. Though steps to reevaluate the US-led world (or regional) order continue, the dependency in security that Arab states have with the US demonstrates that there are issues

more crucial than the US hegemony, namely Iran as a regional power that is considered mainly by the GCC as a 'revisionist actor' of the MENA region.

As argued by Özekin and Sune, the assumed American hegemonic decline cannot simply be viewed as something that is beneficial for the region or by simplifying the situation. Instead, it necessitates that each MENA state, particularly those vulnerable to external threats, to advance new vision. Bani Salameh (2017) suggests that small state in the MENA region, particularly as Bahrain, must develop a new strategy for their national security. Broadly, the US pullback from its crucial role in the MENA region will elicit varied responses from MENA governments and open the door for regional actors like Iran and international actors such as Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China (PRC) to become more actively involved. This shift will significantly impact small states like Bahrain. Therefore, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) particular (and ASEAN generally) must formulate a vision that reflects three spheres: (1) internal, (2) Gulf, and (3) international (Salameh, 2023). As stated by Salameh, Bahrain's national security is based on a comprehensive security concept that integrates military, economic, and social dimensions (Salameh, 2017).

#### **4.2. The regional history of East Asia as a lesson for ASEAN to not to fall into proxy conflicts.**

East Asian states has learned from the experience of seeing the region turned to arenas for proxies since the Cold War period, the war in Vietnam, as well as the continuous conflict still of concern to this day, namely the intensity between the two Koreas and also between the PRC and the Republic of China (Taiwan). Given how ASEAN addresses hegemonic struggles, the organization has pledged to prevent conflicts between its member, especially conflict which can transform the Southeast Asian region into proxy for external actors (powers). This stance is continuously demonstrated and voiced by Indonesia as the regional power. Holding the position as Chair of ASEAN in 2023, the stance to ensure the stability of ASEAN and to prevent the region from proxy conflicts was continuously expressed by President Joko Widodo of Indonesia (Cabinet Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia, 2023).

However, the reality and the 'need to respond to external threat' for ASEAN member states often translate into unilateral moves. Known for standing on the principles of consensus, cooperation, and consultation, and the basis of non-interference in the domestic affairs of its members (Acharya, 2017), ASEAN didn't impose tight pressure when it enters the realm where a state decides to pursue matter unilaterally, for example, the Philippines-US military pact which will be discussed in the following section. All ASEAN members are dedicated to preventing proxy conflicts that could destabilize the region and major conflict among its members, however, as a region that is highly considered because of its strategic position, it is a region contested by major powers which sometimes forces states (of Southeast Asia) to act unilaterally for the sake of its survival. ASEAN has to deal with the major power struggles, mainly between the PRC and the US, and this situation has brought member states into a dilemma.

#### **4.3. Following up on the SCS confrontation: between realism and liberalism approaches.**

The Philippines acted unilaterally in response to perceived threats to its national security and sovereignty, which was assessed as disregarding the position of ASEAN which should stay out of hegemonic conflicts. The Philippines and the US military cooperation that authorized the US to use the Philippines' military base in the South China Sea (SCS) is a major event that has shown the softer side of ASEAN as a regional bloc in anticipating or providing a joint response for this matter. The Philippines perceived threat towards the PRC's activities and claims over the highly contested South China Sea (SCS) (Severino, 2010), based on the disputed nine-dash line claim from the PRC, threatening the territorial sovereignty of the Philippines, in addition to Malaysia, Vietnam, Brunei, and Indonesia, and forced the Philippines to change course from the ASEAN principle which does not guarantee the sovereignty of its territory from the claims of powerful external actor.

Although ASEAN is less likely to anticipate its member states to move unilaterally, with the example of the Philippines being highlighted, and despite ASEAN and the PRC's territorial claims in the SCS, ASEAN has demonstrated a notable diplomatic stance to realize a high-level economic cooperation and preserve firm bilateral relations with the PRC. When it comes to minimizing any significant disruption to economic ties, ASEAN has placed a greater emphasis on dialogue and consensus-building, greater than what the GCC does when it comes to resolving issues with regional powers like Iran or the crisis involving Qatar in 2017. The continuing dialogue, negotiations, and debates between the PRC and ASEAN about

the Code of Conduct (COC) for activities in the SCS serve as an example of this strategy. While contentious conflicts and disputes persist mainly on the territorial claim of the SCS, the commitment to establishing such a framework underscores ASEAN's dedication to managing tensions and fostering regional stability through diplomatic channels (Ciorciari, 2017). This is reflected in the annual growth of trade between the PRC and ASEAN, which in 2023 reached 886 billion USD ('State Council Information', 2024), ASEAN has been PRC's largest trading partner for four years in a row. What can be learned in this case for the GCC will be foregrounded in the following sections.

In contrast to ASEAN, the GCC states have all had high levels of military cooperation both bilaterally and multilaterally involving the US (major power). This certainly manifests itself in the same way as the dilemma faced by the Philippines in 2014 over the rising concern towards the PRC's claim of its territory, with namely between the GCC states and their security in this sub-region to their closest neighbor Iran, which is also the enemy of the US. The US military bases are located in all GCC member states. One might assume that this means the GCC is acting like a proxy for the US, but one thing that must also be considered is that with this high level of military cooperation between the GCC and the US, it is not only strengthening the GCC from a military perspective with military training and access to top-level military technology, but its existence also ensures that the GCC will not fall into conflict between them (as ASEAN fears) because of the existence of a common ally.

However, being in this position doesn't mean that the GCC members are absent from responding to regional power confrontations. The GCC members, notably the geographically small states that directly border Iran, deal with Iran with strategic hedging, namely, to maintain their security position in case their relationship with the regional powers (Saudi and Iran) deteriorates in order to be ready for confrontation, uncertainty, and risk (Bani Salameh, 2024). For states who are unable to decide on other strategies like bandwagoning or balancing, a combined 'balancing and engagement' carried out by small states of the GCC towards Iran became essential, although member states didn't implement it in the GCC platform due to the differing perceptions (of threat) when it comes to dealing with Iran, like what ASEAN did in their balancing and engagement with the PRC with the Code of Conduct. The authors believes that the 'balancing and engagement' carried out by small but developed GCC states is not an appropriate comparison when it come to small ASEAN states such as Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar which are highly dependent to the PRC, in addition to East Timor (Official Observer Status in ASEAN), this emphasizes ASEAN to move as one unit, regardless of strength and size when dealing with the PRC, and preventing the spread of proxy conflict in the Southeast Asian region between the PRC and the US.

#### **4.4. Returning the focus of integration to economic factors for both regions.**

The crisis at the SCS and the dependence on the PRC are two very influential factors for ASEAN and affect both regional security and the ASEAN economic interdependence. Additionally for ASEAN, as a combined fifth (5<sup>th</sup>) largest economy in the world (2023), ASEAN is often seen as being under the shadow of its Asian neighbors, namely the PRC and India, who both shows great economic development larger compared to the combined ASEAN. In terms of economic growth of ASEAN, Indonesia's progressive annual economic growth above 4% each year and the government's target for economic growth above 5% annually, is an achievement that can be translate for the region itself. Indonesia is part of the prestigious G20 membership, and in major platforms such as the G20 Summit, where Indonesia hosted in 2022. ASEAN members considered Indonesia as the 'big brother' of the organization, and as regional power in Southeast Asia, thus, Indonesia never forget to put the interest of ASEAN first by representing the voices and aspirations of ASEAN in major platforms.

The GCC-ASEAN Summit does show improved relations among the Global South, which serves as catalyst for deeper cooperation and solidarity among states and blocs in the Global South. However, there is still 'a mountain to climb' as what has been achieved is a 'Framework of Cooperation' which according to the authors requires drivers to realize the framework of cooperation within the specified time (2024-2028), which will be covered in the following section. Nevertheless, positioning oneself with hegemonic powers such as the US and the PRC is something that must be paid attention to or reconsidered if we look at it in the context of the 'Global South'. However, considering the recent trend of extending cooperation between the Global South, it has shown a level of vibrant to improving GCC-ASEAN cooperations.

### **5.0. The role of drivers to ensure the realization of the framework of cooperation.**

To ensure that the interregional cooperation does not become a ceremonial summit is one of the main challenges that has to be considered. Therefore, efforts to further improve confidence building between the two regional blocs mainly in political-security, economics, and sociocultural aspects are what needs to be put to the table before the second GCC-ASEAN Summit in Malaysia in 2025. Institutionalized coordination, coherence, as well as a pragmatic approach is what needs to be looked upon, thus, having an institutionalized coordination, coherence, and a pragmatic approach are what needs to be accomplished before the holding of the second GCC-ASEAN Summit. Additionally, Both the GCC and ASEAN require drivers to make sure that the parties involved remain "firmly dedicated and represented" (Masarat, 2024).

For the GCC, Saudi Arabia as a regional power of the Middle East has acted as the driver in different fronts, which in many cases, the role of the kingdom is accepted without any altercation, at least within the scope of the GCC. Of course, this didn't always come without altercation or dispute. The crisis between Saudi Arabia and Qatar happened in 2017 and then ended in 2021, additionally, Iran as a regional power rival to Saudi Arabia in the Middle East is also a challenge. Thus, the GCC remains firmly united, even though each member perceives threats differently. Nonetheless, states with the capacity to be the drivers for the GCC-ASEAN moving forward have a major role to realize the set framework of cooperation.

As for the driver of ASEAN, complexity can be seen, because on one hand there is a regional power (Indonesia), but on the other hand, there are states who are more reliable to play a crucial role in the context of cooperation between GCC-ASEAN. Although Indonesia acts as the regional power, Indonesia needs to collaborate or diverge with its more influential and experienced neighbors when it comes to relationships with the GCC states such as Singapore and Malaysia. Singapore is the only state from ASEAN with a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the GCC (2008). Thus, Singapore can play a crucial role in paving the way to further enhancement in trade with the GCC. Meanwhile, Malaysia was chosen to be the host for the next GCC-ASEAN Summit in 2025 for a reason which shows how much Malaysia is taken into account. In general, it is Malaysia that has the firmness and potential to realize FTA with the GCC next. Malaysia's excellence in outreach with the GCC states and Malaysia's raising market cannot be separated from the basic principles of foreign policy. The diplomatic position of Malaysia has is something that is considered unique, as it is a mixture of 'Third world egalitarianism, pacifist, multilateralism, selective globalism, "Asiatism" and Islamic particularism' (David, 2012), Former Prime Minister Tun Mahathir has provided this direction for Malaysia, and it is continued to be implemented.

The pursuit of a free trade agreement between the GCC and ASEAN necessitates consideration of the economic gap among ASEAN member states. Additionally, utilizing the influence of major players such as Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia can greatly enhance the negotiation process and guarantor for mutual benefits for all stakeholders.

### **6.0. Increasing the GCC-ASEAN multisector cooperations**

On one side, each GCC state sees the potential in improving mutual relations with ASEAN which continue to show economic development. On the other side, ASEAN members such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore which already have close relations with the GCC members are looking to increase these the cooperation in multiple sectors, namely in trade and investment, energy, infrastructure development, tourism, and Islamic finance. While ASEAN members which do not yet have close relations, such as Cambodia and Laos, have voiced their interest, commitment and hopes in efforts to increase cooperative relations between these two regional blocs on several occasions at the summit.

In improving GCC-ASEAN multisectoral relations, it is also necessary to note that the challenges are mostly on the ASEAN members itself which consists of states which huge diversity, in this context, from an economic perspective. The economic gap between one ASEAN state and another has quite significant differences. ASEAN states that are taken into account in terms of consistent economic growth are states such as Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. Meanwhile, among ASEAN members there are also states where economic growth is still a challenge such as Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar. Unlike the GCC, ASEAN also consists of different regimes or governments, and at the same time, ASEAN also stands with an approach where the regional bloc must move together in phases that can be followed by all its members, and this phase will of course consider those from the bottom first, not those from the top.

As we examine it in context of the GCC, such an issue didn't exist. The Gulf monarchs are overall pliable to move individually towards economic development in the same way as an organization. Thus, decision to make a collective effort or movement by utilizing the GCC is something that is not as centralized as ASEAN in carrying out a collective movement (Acharya, 2017). With that said, ASEAN continues to strive for collaborative and cooperative movements among its members amidst the complexity that has been mentioned, which has become recognized as 'the ASEAN Way'.

Forging deeper relationships through trade and investment is essential, and there are plenty of possibilities for businesses to collaborate together in industries like energy, tourism, technology, infrastructure, and energy. The growing energy needs of ASEAN might be addressed by the GCC's expertise in energy production and distribution, and cooperative efforts in infrastructure development could promote economic expansion and job creation.

In recent years Indonesia and Malaysia have emerged as major hubs for halal tourism with enormous potential of attracting Muslim tourists from all over the world. This is also something Saudi Arabia, UAE and Qatar, will pay attention to. GCC as a hub of Islamic finance and tourism, can provide valuable expertise, investment, and partnerships to bolster the development of halal tourism infrastructure in ASEAN countries. Something that has occurred in the last few years and shows a massive development. Apart from halal tourism, the issue of Hajj quotas is something that is very central, especially for Indonesia and Saudi Arabia. From year to year, Saudi Arabia always increases its Hajj quota from Indonesia, as the state with the largest Muslims in the world. The matter of services for the pilgrims from Indonesia is also something that Saudi Arabia has given attention towards, and a subject which Indonesia also address which shows closeness of relations.

#### **7.0. What the GCC and ASEAN can learn from each other**

So far, this research paper has provided an overview of what these two organizations can learn from each other, considering the dynamics that these two organizations or regions have faced, especially in dealing with major powers both economically and security wise and also in dealing with regional rivals. Before providing aspects that can the two regional blocs can learn from each other further in this section, the authors will review the rationale as to why the two blocks were formed in the first place.

ASEAN (1967) and the GCC (1980) were founded based on shared understanding between its members for the need to unite both voices and strengths in the midst of the regional and global tensions of the Cold War period. ASEAN was founded by five states, namely Thailand, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines. It's only made possible after Indonesia went through a regime change from the dictatorship of President Sukarno (1950-1967) to pro-Western bloc military regime of President Suharto (1967-1998), which opens the doors to create a regional bloc in Southeast Asia. World geopolitical blocs namely pro-West and pro-East of the Cold War period divided the world including Southeast Asia. In this period as well, new major power of the region emerged, namely the PRC in the beginning of 1970s, which scholars of international relations argued that it has shifted the Cold War in East Asia to tripolar structure (Yazid, 2020).

As the for GCC, it is founded as a response and awareness of the importance to unite amidst the regional tensions and external threats that the Sunni Arab monarchs of the Gulf which should be overcome. Facing actors of the region such as Israel, Saddam Hussein's Iraq (then a regional power) and the popular Islamist ideals based on the Islamic Revolution in Iran (1979), which the GCC members considers having created a force that could threaten the survival and idealism of the Arab Gulf states, with the launching of proxies driven by Iran who aspire to to assume a leadership role in the region, exercise control over the security of the Arab/Persian Gulf (Al Gharaybeh & Bani Salameh, 2022).

One significant difference is that ASEAN emphasized the need to unite despite the cultural diversity of the Southeast Asian region which should be integrated in terms of its political security, economic, and socio-cultural relations. The GCC also have this in common but are united based on similar identity, presenting a more specific context, united due to shared similarities of the Arab Gulf heritage, namely Arab, monarchy, and Sunni Islam. Although the two regional blocs could not avoid the tensions of the Cold War that divided the world in determining their foreign policy such as alliance and partnership, yet, the formation of ASEAN in 1967 showed that it is possible for states with different regimes (absolute monarchy, democracy, military, etc.) to come together to face global contestation. Thus, the formation of both the GCC and ASEAN also teaches us that a single driver or leader is needed to ensure that all states (members) are motivated. This



actuality is left behind by ASEAN in order to truly realize the vision for ASEAN Economic Community by 2025, to enhance connectivity, inclusivity, and people-oriented in a diverse region. Meanwhile, in the case of the GCC, Saudi Arabia's central role to ensure the stability of the region by exercising its power, is still seen significantly in the running of the GCC.

### **7.1. Differences in regional challenges present differences in the regionalization process for the GCC and ASEAN**

The increase of the number of member states in ASEAN with the entry of Brunei Darussalam (1984), Vietnam (1995), Laos (1997), Myanmar (1997), and Cambodia (1999), shows the success story of ASEAN to unite regardless of the immense diversity of the nations in Southeast Asia and to realize top-down 'regionalism' and bottom-up 'regionalization' (Legrenzi & Calculli, 2013). Whereas the GCC has maintained its original membership of six states namely Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, the UAE, and Oman. This shows the complexities and challenges in the MENA region in integrating new members into the [sub]regional bloc. However, other Arab monarchs that have similarities with the GCC members such as Morocco and Jordan have been a topic of discussion regarding their inclusion in the GCC (Ryan, 2014). This shows the differences between these two regional blocs in viewing the benefits or trump card of organization expansion. Thus, for the GCC, a broader regional organization that embraces all Arab states, namely the Arab League, is also an aspect that is included in the examination.

Within fellow ASEAN members, disputes occur, most of which are territorial disputes, for example between Indonesia and Malaysia over the Sebatik Island resolved by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in 2002, the Pedra Branca dispute between Malaysia and Singapore resolve by the ICJ in 2008, and the ongoing border dispute Vietnam and Cambodia, to name a few disputes in the Southeast Asian region. However, ASEAN's region-based activities and principles encourage its members to always emphasize dialogue by all means necessary. With that said, major conflicts among fellow ASEAN members are avoided. As ASEAN is going through a rapid process to optimism to increase regionalization and regional economic development, it moves with the pace that all its member states are comfortable so that none are left behind (Ciorciari, 2017; Chia, 2013).

Additionally, ASEAN members consist of states with different ideologies, cultures, religions, languages, state systems, and economic status which are all are taken to the interest of ASEAN. The economic gap between one state and another, for example, low economic development of Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia, with a more progressive economics like Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, and Malaysia, and with developed economic like Singapore, also made ASEAN a unique organization at how they pursue collective regional development. All these unique ways of regionalization which left positive impression to other regional bloc is known as the ASEAN Way.

### **7.2. Endeavors for strategic cooperations among the GCC and ASEAN**

One aspect that shows the level of a regional economic organization is in the aspect of improving trade relations internally and externally which takes place after the organization is established. Though ASEAN is much more diverse in terms of its members, and also has a significant economic gap between one member and another as has been mentioned, in terms of expanding international trade relations, ASEAN showed a fantastic phase that proves itself as a partner to consider. This is different from the GCC, in addition, it also shows the different dynamics between the two regional blocs, the GCC consists of oil and gas producing states with bombastic economic growth and extraordinary investment throughout the world, unlike ASEAN. Therefore, GCC members do not always see the need to move collective vibrantly in external affairs the same way ASEAN sees it, because of the confidence to move individually, which is what several ASEAN countries (Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar) lacked the ability to do.

As mentioned, ASEAN showed a fantastic phase that proves itself as a partner to consider due to the economic initiatives such as forums and dialogues with external actors which have been proven to produce significant results for improving mutual relations that would eventually benefit the region. Fostering constructive dialogue, consultation, as well as confidence building which ASEAN has implemented internally, and has since 1994 ASEAN implemented together with its 10 partners known as ASEAN Dialogue Partners in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), namely, Australia, Canada, the PRC, European Union (EU), India, Japan, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea (South Korea), Russia and the US. The ARF has contributed to maintaining regional peace, security and cooperation (Janardhan, 2014), and apart from that, it has

also made ASEAN a dialogue partner that plays a significant role.

The ASEAN Economic Community in 2015 is also an achievement that has been put into practice and has become a success story for ASEAN regionalism (Janardhan, 2014; Onyusheva et al., 2018; Legrenzi et al., 2013), has similarities with the ideal of the European Economic Community (EEC) back in 1957, namely, to create line for the region between collaborators and competitors. As mentioned in the previous section, there is competition or even disputes between ASEAN members economically (the gap), politically (different systems), and territorial problems (for example Indonesia and Malaysia), however, these disputes, especially in territorial problems which are a competition, will not make ASEAN countries forget that they are also collaborators who complement each other. The same applies to the territorial dispute with the PRC over SCS, where a line has been distinguished between competitors and collaborators which will be explained carefully in the last part of this section.

### 7.3. ASEAN-PRC & GCC-Iran ties

ASEAN's experience dealing with the PRC could be a valuable consideration to the GCC-Iran contention. When it comes to the competition over the South China Sea (SCS), ASEAN has joined together to send the PRC a clear position, but it has also never allowed its political and ideological disagreements to sour relations with the PRC in trade and believe that enhancing trade relations can in the future find a solution or a common ground to this SCS conflict which is filled with complexity. As with the COC previously mentioned which acts to shift the issue so not to focus solely on the conflicts that occur over the SCS. This is also what makes ASEAN underscores that its members should not establish some kind of high-level military cooperation with major powers that allows a platform for a collection of 'proxies' in the region, as is the case of the Philippines and the US. Thus, a different reality exists within the GCC, and so do the existing regional challenges.

Looking at the economic relations between ASEAN and the PRC, it is reflected in its annual development, which in 2023 reached 886 billion USD ('State Council Information', 2024). ASEAN is also a very attractive market for the PRC, being one of the PRC's main partners. It is also necessary to consider the ambitious project that the PRC has that puts the Southeast Asian region as a strategic agenda, namely the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which in sort is an ambition to revive the historical silk road. Trade between ASEAN and the PRC was hampered due to the Covid pandemic; however, the recent trend shows that the figure up to 1 trillion USD in trade is expected for the year 2024.

In comparison to the GCC-Iran trade, it is only about one-tenth of the ASEAN-PRC trade bill (Janardhan, 2014), which shows that a 'line' to separate the competitor and collaborator areas between the GCC and Iran is a challenge to be truly realized. The authors also considered the intensity that applies in the Middle East region which is more complex and 'incomparable' or equated with what applies in East Asia; however, one need to put into account that East Asia (and Southeast Asia) is a region that has went through series of wars and conflicts that is no less extraordinary. Thus, such issues have been contained by various initiatives from ASEAN, notably the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), which shifts the fundamental power centric issues of concern to joint economic development as a guiding direction to avoid prolonged conflict. The GCC has to give thoughtful consideration to what East Asia has learned. The PRC is the same factor for ASEAN member as Iran is for the GCC members (Janardhan, 2014).

ASEAN and China both recognize the strategic importance of the Strait of Malacca, which serves as a critical trade route connecting Europe, the Middle East, and India with the Asia-Pacific region, including China, Japan, and South Korea. This strait, controlled by Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore, handles 80 percent of the world's maritime trade activity. Thus, the significance of trade issues becomes a key component in delineating the boundaries between competitors and collaborators. One component for the GCC and Iran which can possibly delineating the boundaries between competitors and collaborators are environmental challenges that impact the GCC states and Iran, like water management and dust storms, present additional opportunity for cooperation (Bani Salameh, 2021). Collaborative environmental projects could act as a neutral platform to promote cooperation and trust, which could open the door to more meaningful discussions on divisive political and security problems. Environmental challenges, which transcend national borders, have been recognized by the international community. The year 2023, marking the hottest year in recorded history, underscores the urgency of addressing these issues collectively.

In summary, the GCC could adopt a strategy of compartmentalizing issues, prioritizing economic and environmental cooperation while managing political disputes, much like ASEAN's approach with the PRC. This strategy could help in gradually building a framework of trust and potentially diminishing the impacts of Iran's expansionist policies which affects the regional stability (Harahsheh & Bani Salameh, 2023). Regional environmental challenges could serve as a platform for cooperative discussions between the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Iran. Furthermore, trade remains a significant aspect that can closely link these regions, though it presents challenges within the realm of international politics. However, environmental issues represent a trend that should not be overshadowed by political agendas and should be addressed through unified efforts.

### **8.0. Recommendation and Conclusion**

The Framework of Cooperation (2024-2028) will be an assessment of the extent of the potential that can be developed between the GCC and ASEAN. A confidence building process that involves series of dialogue between the two regional blocs in various potential sectors is something that must be prioritized regularly, because in order to realize this framework of cooperation, first and foremost is the good office of the two regional blocs. The GCC and ASEAN understand that this comprehensive step will be something that is seen as the spirit of Asian development and more broadly as the spirit of South-South relations. However, in this case, drivers are desperately needed to ensure that each member states stay committed to the set framework of cooperation. The role of Saudi Arabia and Indonesia as regional powers in ensuring that this commitment continues is very clear, but at the same time, in the case of ASEAN, other states must also play an active role for positive activism if the ambition of realizing an FTA between the GCC and ASEAN is to be achieved, namely from ASEAN states which already have closer diplomacy, including trade and sociocultural, namely Singapore and Malaysia.

In addition, considering the efforts that ASEAN has made in the regionalism and regionalization process and also in developing external relations is something that is useful for the GCC to study. Learning from the 'ASEAN Way' can support the GCC in the process of modernizing its organizational principles and in the process also help the region which has been blessed with abundant wealth. At the same time, it could act as part of the confidence building that could give benefits for both regional blocs.

The authors consider the influence of hard power and regional geopolitics, especially between the US and PRC in Southeast Asia and also the US and Iran in the Middle and how ASEAN and the GCC act on it. In this case, the authors cannot arbitrarily conclude that ASEAN's measures, which in international relations theory are measured as defensive realism, while the GCC's measures to be offensive realism are more superior than the other. The complexity of the real situation in each region makes ASEAN and the GCC act in this way. However, in terms of the importance of realizing peace and a confidence building process, ASEAN's way with its leading initiatives is recommended for the GCC to draw the line between the existing disputes with its neighbor and the importance of maintaining and expanding bilateral trade relations.

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