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Sunsets and strategy

In a region of rising rivalries, ASEAN's global soft power strategy rides on passports, planes and palm-fringed resorts

More than just holidays, tourism is a strategic tool for shaping global influence. Fully aware of this, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) members are actively using the travel industry not only to promote themselves, but also to elevate ASEAN as a regional organisation in the international arena.

Unlike the European Union, which largely develops tourism through individual member states, ASEAN aims to present itself as a single, cohesive travel destination. This approach dates back to 1981, when ASEAN organised its first large-scale tourism forum, gathering ministers, private-sector representatives and industry stakeholders to coordinate regional tourism efforts. Ever since, the organisation has leveraged tourism as a subtle tool of regional diplomacy. And over the years, tourism seems to have become a workaround for ASEAN's lack of hard power.

Geopolitical balancing

This year's ASEAN Tourism Forum in Cebu, the Philippines, is taking place against the backdrop of the US-China trade war and rising tensions around Taiwan, illustrating how ASEAN uses seemingly non-political platforms to navigate complex geopolitical currents, engaging major powers without taking an overt political stance. The ongoing developments did not prevent the foreign ministers of ASEAN member states – the Philippines, Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste and Vietnam – from holding a separate event, also in Cebu, to discuss a wide range of issues, from artificial intelligence and the Thailand-Cambodia border dispute, to the situation in the South China Sea.

It is not a secret that several ASEAN members have active territorial and maritime disputes with China in the South China Sea. That could be the reason why ASEAN Spokesperson Dominic Xavier Imperial stressed that maritime cooperation remains one of the organisation's top priorities.

That, however, does not stop the group from actively courting Chinese tourists.

Several ASEAN nations have abolished or eased visa requirements for Chinese tourists, hoping that such a move will boost tourism. With talks with China's leadership planned shortly after the Cebu events, improving ties with Beijing appears to be a top priority for ASEAN in the coming months and years. Reports suggest that ASEAN leaders aim to 'set rules that will prevent the intensifying disputes in the South China Sea from spinning out of control.'

Stability is precisely what the region needs the most, as it allows ASEAN members not only to develop closer relations with each other, but also to increase the organisation's global impact. According to Eddy Krismeidi Soemawilaga, President of the ASEAN Tourism Association, 'ASEAN members actively work with one another to promote the region globally. At the same time, we want to bring our members closer together — not only in terms of tourism, but also politically.'

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One reason why ASEAN is building a parallel diplomacy track through tourism could be the fact that formal political integration within the organisation remains weak. Moreover, its influence beyond Asia appears limited. It is, therefore, unsurprising that, for the time being, regional actors seem more interested in strengthening their footprint on the continent, while Europe and the United States remain on the periphery of their focus. This is especially apparent in tourism, with Russia, China and India emerging as key target markets.

The group, however, remains interested in expanding partnership – not necessarily only in the sphere of tourism – with other entities and countries. That includes Ukraine, which formally applied to become an ASEAN Sectoral Dialogue Partner by the end of 2026, aiming to increase its presence in Southeast Asia. However, as Imperial stressed during a press conference in Cebu on 27 January, 'there is still no decision on whether Kyiv will be allowed to obtain that status.'

Given that, back in 2018, Russia and ASEAN established a Strategic Partnership, and the fact that a number of Russian delegates and journalists participated in the ASEAN Tourism Forum, the group is likely to carefully balance its relations with Moscow against any potential decision to expand cooperation with Ukraine.

At the same time, ASEAN is expected to continue building stronger ties with Russia. There is, for instance, a growing number of charter flights between the Philippines and Russia — hardly surprising, given that the country, along with other ASEAN members, seeks to benefit from Western sanctions imposed on Moscow following its invasion of Ukraine. Vietnam, for instance, managed to attract 700 000 Russian tourists last year, while the very presence of Russian businesspeople at the ASEAN Tourism Forum clearly shows that Moscow does not consider itself isolated in this part of the world.

Thus, despite the war in Ukraine and the problems Russia's economy is suffering as a result of the Kremlin's actions, Russian tourists continue to be regarded as an important source of income for ASEAN countries. If the success of soft-power initiatives can be measured by tourist arrivals, then ASEAN's efforts to strengthen ties with Russia appear to be paying off.

Soft power by design

Indeed, tourism seems to be the tool that both ASEAN as an organisation and its individual members are using to expand their soft power in the global arena. Indonesia is the prime example, given that it has a history of using tourism awards and international tourism diplomacy initiatives as instruments of soft power to improve the country's global image and strengthen diplomatic relations across Southeast Asia and beyond. That comes as no surprise, as ASEAN is known for holding forums on soft power, which perfectly illustrates that the group has serious geopolitical ambitions.

In addition to tourism, ASEAN leverages culture as a vehicle to project soft power across the region, reinforcing the appeal of its destinations. As Southeast Asian cultures remain underrepresented in Western media and education, the organisation's priority is strengthening its influence within Asia and building the internal cohesion of the organisation, often compared to that of the European Union.

In reality, however, institutional integration among ASEAN members is much weaker than that among EU members, as the Southeast Asian group has neither a common foreign policy nor a common security policy. Still, if the number of joint tourism and other forums – including 89 ASEAN meetings alone scheduled to take place in the Philippines this year – is any indication, the organisation is clearly committed to the long-term ambition of eventually becoming more like the EU.

In the meantime, ASEAN – with a total population of 678 million,

making it the world's third-most populous region, and a combined gross domestic product (GDP) of $3.9 trillion – is expected to continue increasing its soft power, primarily in Asia. This will be anything but an easy task, given the strong competition from China and India.

While ASEAN currently lacks the capacity to extend its influence in the West, Europe can still draw lessons from the region's use of tourism, culture and cooperation to project a collective role and strengthen its global standing. And that is something the EU will almost certainly need in the event of a potential divorce from the United States.



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