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Recessionary Pressures and Geopolitical Concerns Dominate the State of Southeast Asia 2024 Survey Report

Singapore, 2 April 2024 - *Findings from the latest State of Southeast Asia Survey conducted by the ASEAN Studies Centre at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute reveal that Southeast Asia’s top preoccupations are with recessionary pressures, intensifying economic tensions between major powers, as well as geopolitical concerns over the ongoing Israel-Hamas conflict and aggressive behaviour in the South China Sea. ASEAN’s inability to cope with fluid political and economic developments continues to worry the region.*

China remains the most influential economic and political-strategic power in the region while the US has experienced a decline in its popularity in the event of a forced choice. China also tops the charts in terms of strategic relevance to ASEAN, outpacing the US by a narrow margin, while Japan remains as the most trusted major power in the region.

The survey was conducted from 3 January to 23 February 2024 in English, Bahasa Indonesia, Burmese, Khmer, Thai, and Vietnamese, gathering views from 1,994 respondents from academia, business, government, civil society and the media. The survey was conducted online using a mixed sampling method involving both panel and non-panel respondents.

The sixth edition of this region-wide survey covers a broader and more diverse set of questions including the Israel-Hamas conflict; the Russia-Ukraine War; Taiwan Strait tensions; the ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA); the strategic relevance of ASEAN’s dialogue partners; regional leadership, especially the US-China rivalry and its impact on Southeast Asia, as well as levels of trust in the major powers; and measures of soft power.

In the context of the rapidly changing global geopolitical and economic environment, unemployment and economic recession is placed as the top challenge facing the region, followed by the severe impacts of climate change, and the intensifying economic tensions between major powers. Almost half of the regional respondents expressed concern over the Israel-Hamas conflict, followed by concern over aggressive behaviour in the South China Sea, while the Russia-Ukraine war and global scam operations were tied at third place.

China remains undisputed as the most influential economic power in the region and also continues to be seen as the most influential political and strategic power, outpacing the US significantly in both domains. However, more than two-thirds of the respondents express worries about China’s economic and political influence while more than half welcome the US’ economic influence in the region. Regional respondents also recognise China as the most strategically relevant partner of ASEAN.

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Touted as the world's first regional digital economy agreement, more than a third of the respondents feel that the ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA) will contribute to raising digital capabilities. Close to half feel uncertain about the effectiveness of the US-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) in the region.

The survey also found that respondents are concerned that ASEAN remained ineffective in coping with political and economic developments, and that ASEAN may become an arena for major power competition.

In a question on ASEAN's long-term development and progress, two-thirds of regional respondents acknowledge Singapore's leading role in contributing to the regional grouping, followed by over 40% who voted for Indonesia.

More than a third of the respondents believe that Timor-Leste's admission to ASEAN will enhance ASEAN's unity and centrality. On the matter of moving the Myanmar situation forward, independent dialogue with all key stakeholders, including with the National Unity Government and other entities, continue to be the region's most favoured approach with support from almost two fifths of the respondents.

Japan continues to be regarded the most trusted major power in terms of "doing the right thing" to provide global public goods, while the trust levels in the US and the EU recorded a significant fall despite maintaining their rankings at second and third place respectively. Japan also shines in the soft power domain in terms of tourism, and comes in second as the preferred country to live or work in.

Commenting on the results, Mr Choi Shing Kwok, Director and CEO of ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute and Head of the ASEAN Studies Centre said: *"This year's survey results clearly reflect heightened regional concerns over economic issues and the risk that unrestrained geopolitical rivalry that can adversely affect the region's interests in the short to medium term. At the same time, the results also tell us that the region remains hopeful that major powers can cooperate on issues of mutual benefit and welcomes other major powers in the region to engage more closely with ASEAN. Within ASEAN itself, there is recognition among the members that Singapore and Indonesia are playing leading roles in contributing to ASEAN's development and progress."*

The full survey findings were released at a webinar this morning. A distinguished panel comprising Professor Danny Quah, Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy; Ms Bonnie Glaser, Managing Director of GMF's Indo-Pacific Program; Professor Wu Xinbo, Dean of the Institute of International Studies, Fudan University; and Mr Shin Nakayama, Editor-in-Chief for Nikkei Asia, discussed the findings and shared their insights at the launch. Mr Choi Shing Kwok moderated the discussion.

The 2024 report and those from the previous years can be downloaded from ISEAS website - <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/category/articles-commentaries/state-of-southeast-asia-survey/>

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About ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute (ISEAS) and ASEAN Studies Centre (ASC)

ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute (formerly Institute of Southeast Asian Studies) was established as an autonomous organization in 1968. It is a regional centre dedicated to the study of socio-political, security, and economic trends and developments in Southeast Asia and its wider geostrategic and economic environment. The Institute's research programmes are the Regional Economic Studies (RES), Regional Strategic and Political Studies (RSPS), and Regional Social and Cultural Studies (RSCS). The Institute is also home to the ASEAN Studies Centre (ASC), the Temasek History Research Centre and the Singapore APEC Centre.

The **ASEAN Studies Centre (ASC)** was established in 2008 to research on issues pertaining to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as an institution and a process. Through research, publications, conferences, media engagement and outreach activities, ASC seeks to promote greater understanding of ASEAN and to contribute toward regional cooperation and integration. The Centre conducts studies and provides inputs to stakeholders on issues and matters that call for collective ASEAN actions and responses, especially those pertinent to the ASEAN Community building process. The ASC is the first institutional Recipient of the ASEAN Prize in 2020, a prestigious award to honour outstanding achievements of individuals or organisations who have made meaningful contributions to ASEAN.