

Committee: United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)

Agenda: Mitigating the disruption in supply chains and trade flows attributed to the US-China trade tensions and reciprocal tariffs on trans-shipment dependent ASEAN economies.

List of Countries: Australia, Brunei, Cambodia, Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Japan, Laos, Malaysia, Mexico, Myanmar, Netherlands, New Zealand, Philippines, Russia, Singapore, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Thailand, United Kingdom, United States of America, Vietnam

I. General Overview



Figure 1. The United Nations Economic and Social Council Emblem

1. Committee Introduction

In 1945, the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) was established to promote and coordinate international cooperation in the economic, social, and environmental spheres. The ECOSOC is the center of the global debate where the 54 member states who are elected by the General Assembly (UNGA) collectively discuss innovative approaches to tackle global issues like poverty and sustainability.

The ECOSOC links different sub-bodies of the UN relevant to the SDGs it aims to achieve. Through functional and regional commissions, the ECOSOC not only identifies emerging challenges but also assists countries in developing the capacity to respond to their

needs and policy recommendations. The ECOSOC can also promote partnerships with international development and financial organizations like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank to cooperate with its agendas. Additionally, there are more than 5,000 accredited NGOs across the globe that engage in supporting the committee's effort when necessary.

While the ECOSOC does not possess a coercive power to enforce certain actions, its resolutions hold remarkable authority to influence global actions. Therefore, as one of the six principal organs of the United Nations, they play an important role in shaping international agendas before they move into higher-authority bodies. Moreover, the ECOSOC regularly provides policy guidance and evaluates global progress via different sessions like the Youth Forum, Partnership Forum, High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF), and Financing for Development Forum (FFD). This way, the ECOSOC ensures that the collaborative efforts reach beyond the governmental sectors and benefit all groups in the society, even the ones who are most vulnerable. Ultimately, the ECOSOC continues to seek advancement in global commitment and inclusive development for long-term stability and prosperity across all nations.

2. Significance of the Agenda

The political tension between the two strongest nations in the 21st century, the United States and China, has intensified over time. The recent trade war between these two superpowers starkly illustrates the magnitude of tension within this so-called "Second Cold War". Their reciprocal tariffs and technology restrictions have created a significant disruption in global trade flows. Its impact is especially concerning in the ASEAN economies, where the majority of them are heavily dependent on trans-shipment and export-manufacturing networks. Many developing nations that relied on trades are currently facing economic slowdowns due to shifting supply chains, delays in cross-border exchanges, and increased compliance costs.

Because industrializations in these economies remain closely tied to foreign demand and external investments, declining export revenue and reduced factory operations threaten job security, especially among low-skilled manufacturing labor forces. Singapore, for example, accounts for 20% of its GDP in manufacturing. Ever since the US-China trade war began, Singapore's exports fell by 15.9% percent in May 2019 compared to the same month in the

previous year. Prolonged trade uncertainties contributed to the general increase in operational cost and higher volatility across those sectors, negatively affecting every stakeholder, from local workers to small and medium enterprises to multinational investors and even the consumers across the globe.

While relatively larger economies like Vietnam and Malaysia are putting increased efforts into attracting businesses and securing their positions as major assembly hubs, smaller economies like Laos and Cambodia struggle to find their ways to this challenge due to their limited economic capacity. More so, if investor and business confidences further decline, the ASEAN countries will be pressured into unfavorable trade positions or forced to neglect environment or ethical burdens to stay in competition. This poses a significant long-term threat in ASEAN's development, not just economically but also socially as it will further amplify the gap between resilient economies and susceptible economies. Given this urgency, it is ECOSOC's duty to find a novel yet feasible solution that can mitigate the impact of such a trade tension ultimately to ensure regional socio-economic security and ASEAN economy's competence and stability.

3. Key Terms

Trans-shipment

Trans-shipment refers to the process where the cargo is transported to an intermediate hub and moved from a transport unit to another before reaching its final destination such as transferring a cargo from one ship to another at the port. Usually done to reduce logistical costs or target favorable laws.

Multinational Corporation (MNC)

Multinational Corporation refers to the type of business that owns and controls the operation, production, and services across more than one nation. MNCs—e.g., Nike, Amazon, Meta—have their headquarters located in one state while having its subsidiaries and factories in multiple countries. This allows them to diversify their products, and access and influence global supply chains. Still, they raise concerns in regards to their labor conditions, monopoly, environmental ethics, and regulatory oversight in different countries.

“China+1”

“China+1” strategy is when the companies maintain their manufacturing in China but also expand part of their production to another country. While they do not entirely leave China, using this way, they can reduce the risk in regards to the over-reliance of China as a single production hub. This also minimizes risks associated with geopolitical tensions, supply chain disruptions, increasing labor costs, and trade barriers such as tariffs or quotas.

Reciprocal Tariffs

When two countries impose mutual tax measures on each other’s imported goods. This raises the product cost and reduces trade competitiveness—a primary tool for economic retaliation in trade disputes. China, for example, imposed retaliatory tariffs on US goods like soybeans and energy sources in response to US tariffs on Chinese manufactured goods.

Rule of Origin (ROO)

Trade regulations that officially determine the origin of the goods. This is often used for tariff-avoidance purposes. For example, goods assembled from Chinese intermediate goods in ASEAN countries can still qualify as ASEAN-origin goods and thereby enjoy corresponding trade advantages.

ASEAN

Established in 1967, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) geopolitical, economic organization of member countries in Southeast Asia. The member states include Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste, and Vietnam. Their ultimate aim is to establish an economic cooperation framework and promote socio-political progress within the region.

Export Processing Zones (EPZs)

Between 2005 and 2017, ASEAN nations created more than 1,500 export processing zones, many of which promised 10-year corporate tax exemptions, duty-free imports, fast track

land leases, foreign ownership of land, and full repatriation of profits. In addition to the benefit of cheap labour, these policies incentivized Chinese companies to relocate to ASEAN soil.

ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement (ACFTA)

ACFTA reduced tariffs on the majority of products traded between member countries—however, to qualify for tax exemptions, the goods in question must have at least 40% of their value content come from a member country. Moreover, as of October of 2025, the signing of the ACFTA 3.0 Upgrade Protocol is expected to further deepen ties.

Single Production Base Policies

From 2015 and onwards, ASEAN passed coordinated policies that would allow the entire region to behave as a single national market in terms of tariffs, customs, and logistics, allowing MNCs to easily set up production bases across multiple ASEAN countries. The ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (AFTA) granted that almost all goods transported between ASEAN would be exempted from tariffs; one of the terms of the 2015 AEC agreement was to establish the ASEAN Single Window policy, which would unify customs documentation and origin certificates; the Mutual Recognition of Standards Arrangement (MRA) further harmonized product safety and production standards.

II. Historical Background

By the late 20th century, ASEAN countries saw globalization as an opportunity to seek economic growth through an export based economy. They positioned themselves as key manufacturing and trans-shipment hubs. Their cheap labor cost attracted many multinational corporations to East and Southeast Asia and this allowed many ASEAN states to become a crucial supplier of intermediate goods for finishing touch in China, while also gaining competitiveness in the US market.

However, the long standing tension between the United States of America and China began to intensify during the 2010s. Strategic competition over advanced technology—namely semiconductors and telecommunications—and tariff wars to economically stay dominant further amplified the conflict. In 2018, this tension escalated into an official trade war, where both superpowers exercised excessive influence over the global trade through imposing waves of

tariff and technology restrictions. Starting in late 2017, the US began conducting investigations against China's trade practices as according to Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974. By early 2018, the Office of the US Trade Representative accused China of unfair trade practices, and throughout the following year, imposed five additional tariffs, with China retaliating at each stage. By the end of 2019, the two countries had imposed approximately \$350 billion USD and \$100 billion USD on each other's goods respectively. By late 2024 the U.S. announced tariffs of up to 100 % on Chinese-made electric vehicles (EVs), along with large increases on solar cells, EV battery parts, critical minerals and advanced chips. China, in response, tightened export controls on rare-earth metals and magnets used in semiconductors, EVs and aerospace. Both sides are moving past mere trade tariffs to supply chain weaponization, strategically controlling economic and technological flow.

Founded in 1967 to promote regional economic growth and stability, ASEAN, with its export-led economic model, had been benefiting strongly from globalization and deep integration into supply chains. However, the escalated tension between US and China and the resulting disruption in the established supply chain had notable consequences in the ASEAN region. As the trade war progressed, two phenomena accelerated the development of ASEAN economies: trade deflection, or the increase in Chinese exports to ASEAN countries as China became unable to export to the US, and trade diversion, or the subsequent increase in exports from ASEAN countries to the US. Due to the increase in cost of producing goods and moving between the US and China, Multi-National Corporations (MNCs) began to seek alternative supply chain routes, and inward-directed foreign direct investment (FDI) to ASEAN countries soared, bolstering rapid economic development. In addition to offering cheap labour as a replacement for Chinese manufacturing, many ASEAN nations began adopting what is now referred to as "China+1 strategies", serving as an intermediary for US-China trade. Numerous ASEAN states are currently facing troubles both from primary and secondary impacts of such trade dynamics, and these difficulties risk widening structural inequalities within the region.

In recent years, the effects of this trade dynamics have become more complex and are continuing to escalate: supply chain fragmentation, trans-shipment issues, and decline in investor confidence posed challenges to the socio-economic progress of the region. This is not only hindering the economic growth of ASEAN, but also has the potential to threaten the Sustainable Development Goals ECOSOC aims to protect.

III. Interested Parties

Asia Monitor Resource Centre (AMRC)

AMRC serves as an NGO standing for labour rights and working conditions in Asian industrial zones. It is a research and educational source that monitors, analyzes, and reports on the state of worker's rights across Asia, and has thus far published multiple research reports and issue briefs detailing the impact of trade-war originated shutdowns on workers rights, wages, and employment statuses. Since the start of the war, AMRC has worked to elicit concerns in forums such as the Asia Floor Wage Alliance, regional CSR meetings, and ASEAN labour groups.

ASEAN Corporate Social Responsibility Network (ACN)

ACN was founded in 2008 as a forum for businesses and governments to convene, report, and discuss responsible business conduct, established under the consensus that a unified economic effort would be the most fruitful in the region. While not explicitly an active player in the trade war, the organization holds valuable data on the impacts of manufacturing relocations, labour conditions, and cross-border supply-chain restructuring, and allows ASEAN businesses and governments to form a unified and collaborative response to the crisis.

United States

While reciprocal tariffs were meant to prevent "China+1" from remaining a profitable option for many companies in order to shift manufacturing back to the US, the reality is that at least as of current, American systems remain unprepared to completely handle the manufacturing burden without significant short term economic consequences. As ASEAN nations become unable to absorb China's manufacturing overflow, production will shift not to America, but rather back to China or to other third party nations not yet facing tariffs, or will simply proceed with higher production costs. All options contribute to inflation in America, which ultimately erodes US purchasing power and increases US dependence on China in the long term.

Moreover, the loss of American economic relevance in the ASEAN region costs the US geopolitical influence in the Indo-Pacific region. As a result of decreased export to the US, ASEAN countries have inevitably become more reliant on alternative trading partners, namely

Japan, Korea, Australia, and China. This increases China's geopolitical influence in the region in two ways, the first of which being that China simply becomes the last remaining major source of FDI in the region. Moreover, while ASEAN countries are initially less incentivized to purchase large quantities of pre-processed Chinese goods, China will attempt to compensate accordingly by dumping goods at ever lower prices into the region. This is further detrimental to local industries producing goods for local consumption as they find themselves unable to compete, and ultimately deepens ASEAN's economic dependence on China.

China

China is the largest supplier of intermediate goods to the ASEAN countries. There are numerous Chinese firms that either manufacture in or invest in the ASEAN region. Chinese firms have increasingly invested in Southeast Asia to mitigate tariffs imposed by the US. This strengthened the Chinese economic influence within the region as their partnership benefits ASEAN through infrastructure, capital, and job creation. However, it simultaneously increases ASEAN's dependency on Chinese supply chains and creates susceptibility to geopolitical dynamics. China continues to seek industrial growth via efforts to advance semiconductors, electric vehicles, and electronics, which push lower-value production into ASEAN. Essentially, China's decisions on trade and investment hold a significant power and influence in ASEAN's economic stability and global flow of supply chain.

Nike

Over the past decade, Nike had shifted a major part of its production out of China and into ASEAN nations, until, by 2025, over 50% of its footwear was made in Vietnam, and 27% of apparel in Indonesia. As reciprocal tariffs of 46% and 32% respectively were applied to the two countries in April of 2025, Nike's shares plunged, and a third of its market value evaporated in the proceeding months. Nike has thus far responded by raising prices in the US and abroad—however, projections yet expect another \$1 billion in losses from the tariff war.

Apple

From the late 2010s, Apple had shifted most of its final production stages to ASEAN countries, namely Vietnam, in order to avoid US-China trade tensions. When reciprocal tariffs hit

the country in April, Apple's market cap dropped immediately by over \$300 billion USD, with its CEO predicting another \$900 million lost over the ensuing quarter as the company struggled to rearrange its supply chains. A leaked statement revealed that Apple aimed to revise its production plans from China+1 to China+n, relying, in particular, on India, which faced only 26% in tariffs, for most of its final stage manufacturing before shipping to the US.

Vietnam

One of the most significant beneficiaries of China+1 proliferation was Vietnam, with a trade-to-GDP ratio of 170% as of 2024. When tariffs were first announced in April, the UN Development Program (UNDP) warned that under current conditions, shrinking exports to the US could lead to \$25 billion+ annual losses for Vietnam— a significant blow to its \$400 billion GDP. Factory slowdowns and reduced hiring in the garment and electronics industries further contributed to this loss. In the months since, Vietnam has deployed aggressive tax breaks to encourage MNCs such as Nike and Adidas to remain operational within their borders— however, the question of their efficacy in the face of rising tariffs remains to be answered.

Thailand

In the years leading up to the tariff war, Thailand had positioned itself as a relocation base for the automotive and electronics industries, attracting MNCs such as Toyota, Honda, and Asus until, by 2024, its trade to nominal GDP reached a ratio of 137%. Because most of the parts needed to manufacture Thailand's exports, such as personal electronics and home appliances, were imports from China, they were subject to their own tariffs from the US. which, in addition to the tariffs levied on exports to the US, culminated in a total loss of profit for many of Thailand's most critical MNCs. As part of the resuscitation effort, the Thai government pursued incentivization strategies for MNCs, inducing tax breaks and plans to encourage Thailand+1 approaches, to ensure Thailand remained relevant in at least the final stages of production.

Low-skilled Labor Force Population

Reports from both ILO and OECD reveal that a significant portion of the ASEAN workforce remain in low-skilled, labor intensive jobs. They are often the first ones to suffer when MNCs shift production hubs. Unemployment, reduced wages, and declining working conditions

to sustain profit can threaten millions of livelihoods, especially in developing ASEAN countries. Ensuring the mitigation of detrimental effects on these people aligns with ECOSOC's one of the most crucial concerns as it directly links to SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth.

Consumers in the Global Market

Global consumers are also one of the most important stakeholders because they have to bear consequences of this disruption in supply chains. ASEAN manufacturing is heavily tied to numerous daily live goods we encounter such as electronics, apparels, refined petroleum, and integrated circuits. Because the tariffs increase the production and transport costs, there will be a reduction in the amount of those products available in the market. As a result, the consumers may have to experience increased prices. Also, because the trade logistics will become more complex, the delivery times of the goods will increase significantly. Their purchase behaviors can affect the global demand and trade volume. Therefore, global consumers, who both significantly affect and are affected by these dynamics, are one of the most crucial stakeholders of the issue.

IV. Status Quo

1. Current Situation

While the 2020 Phase One deal paused tariff escalations between the US and China, the 2019 tariffs were mostly kept in place through the Biden era, further cementing "China+1" strategies as a key feature of ASEAN economies. Countries such as Vietnam and Thailand became major centers of industrial relocation and achieved massive MNC-dependent growth as corporations such as Samsung, Xiaowei, Toyota, and Honda set up off-shore factories to bypass US tariffs. Moreover, with the rapid increase of Chinese-originated FDIs into ASEAN nations, ASEAN rose to become China's largest trading partner, and, inadvertently, heavily reliant on Chinese imports for their trade industry, receiving 31% of their global imports from China alone.

These market incentives allowed for ASEAN economic growth on the condition of stable relations between the US and China. Therefore, when the Trump administration began imposing additional "reciprocal tariffs" on ASEAN countries whose growth models now depended heavily on China+1 strategies, ASEAN economies came under direct threat.

Reciprocal tariffs directly stymied ASEAN-to-US exports, which, due to China+1 restructuring, had risen to comprise a significant portion of ASEAN nations' economies. Vietnam and Thailand, both of whose exports to the US comprised approximately 30% of their respective GDPs, faced between 5 and 19% decreases in total exports; Malaysia and Indonesia, in addition to >10% decreases in exports, found their high-tech China+1 infrastructure investments suddenly failing to meet projected exports.

Moreover, the tariffs have decimated the economic incentive for formerly Chinese-based MNCs to relocate to ASEAN nations. As MNCs such as Cargill, Intel, Samsung, and Nike disperse production to still other nations that do not yet face tariffs, FDI flow into the ASEAN region has been drying up, threatening countries such as Vietnam, 70% of whose GDP comes from such FDIs. Unemployment has also seen a sharp uptick, as former offshore MNCs lay off their ASEAN workers due to the lack of incentives to continue production.

The unravelling of China+1 strategies has culminated in tangible economic losses for ASEAN nations. Vietnam alone is projected to lose more than \$25 billion USD in US exports (around 5% of its GDP), and Southeast Asia as a whole expects a 9.7% fall in US exports.

2. Past Actions

RECP (Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership)

The RCEP (Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership) was formed in 2020 as the world's largest free trade agreement, between all 10 ASEAN member states as well as China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand. The treaty pledged to reduce 90% of tariffs amongst member countries, and unite Rules of Origin procedures, ultimately incentivizing trade between member states. As US-ASEAN trade relations toppled due to reciprocal tariffs, the RCEP agreement has made possible the replacement of US-originated FDI flow into the region by facilitating the expansion of Japanese and Korean manufacturing infrastructure in ASEAN.

CPTPP (Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership)

The CPTPP (Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership) is a similar free trade agreement between Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Japan, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Mexico, Peru, and Chile. Signed in 2018, the agreement has protected

ASEAN nations through the trade war escalations in much the same way the RCEP has, helping to diversify trade practices with Western nations, many of them also affected by the trade war.

V. Future Outlook

Negotiation of Reciprocal Tariffs

As of November 2025, ASEAN nations have not responded to the reciprocal tariffs imposed by the US with retaliatory tariffs, instead officially declaring their desire for negotiation. During the ASEAN Finance Ministers Retreat in April, ASEAN ministers voiced their intentions to collaborate with each other and enter discussions with the US presenting a unified ASEAN front with the shared goal of settling tariffs threats. Thus far, ASEAN nations have displayed their willingness to comply with US demands for tighter production origin verification, adding additional checks to ensure genuine value was added in ASEAN nations during the production process, in order to avoid being tariffed by the FTA.

Trade Diversification

Current discussions are underway to strengthen inter-ASEAN trade, including attempts to upgrade ASEAN's Trade in Goods Agreement, and remove intra-regional non-tariff trade barriers. Discussions with China as a potentially more reliable trading partner are also underway, as seen by the October 28th upgrade to the China-ASEAN FTA.

Internal Industry Restructuring

ASEAN nations have also amended domestic policies to reduce vulnerability to tariff fluctuations by shifting from simple assembly and trans-shipment to more advanced value-added manufacturing. Countries such as Vietnam and Malaysia have invested more than \$40 billion USD since 2022 in enhancing advanced testing and packaging capacities in the hopes that these efforts will make their production chains less replaceable by other countries. In addition, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam have all announced measures to protect workers displaced as a result of tariffs, offering re-training support and multi-billion dollar economic stimulus packages.

Questions to Consider:

1. Given the volatility of recent international relations, is it sustainable for ASEAN countries to attempt growth as a trade intermediary, or should they pursue more independent, isolationist forms of economic integration?
2. Within ASEAN nations, who are the people that will be impacted the most by the trade wars? How could the government offer targeted support to these demographics?
3. Is it possible for ASEAN nations to remain as reliable bases of production without de-escalating tensions between the US and China directly?
4. How can the international community help to restructure ASEAN economies from highly-export dependent, China+1 models, to more stable forms of conduct?
5. Is it possible to facilitate negotiations such that the China+n model becomes a feasible, long term solution for ASEAN export-dependent economies?

VI. Resources

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