



# Culture for Regional Cohesion and Global Engagement: The Case of ASEAN

## ASEAN's Cultural Strategy

The recent hosting of the 11th ASEAN Ministers Responsible for Culture and Arts (AMCA) meeting in October 2024 reiterated the region's proactive stance in utilising culture as a unifying force and as a means to reinvigorate its global engagements.<sup>1</sup> ASEAN, as a pivotal regional grouping of Southeast Asian nations, has always upheld a profound awareness of its cultural identity and has actively integrated cultural elements into its broader socio-economic and global strategies. This commitment is not merely symbolic; it is a calculated approach that recognises culture as a crucial driver of inclusivity, sustainability and innovation. The establishment of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) and frameworks like the ASEAN Strategic Plan on Culture and Arts (2016–2025) are not just initiatives; they intent to leverage culture for regional cohesion and to enhance ASEAN's stature on the global stage.

The journey of ASCC to promote culture as a strategic tool was introduced in 2003 alongside the ASEAN Political Security Community and the ASEAN Economic Community. The ASCC was a cornerstone in the vision for an integrated ASEAN Community that officially came into existence in 2015.<sup>2</sup> This development has opened up new avenues for ASEAN ministers to explore and fortify the cultural dimensions of the organisation, striving to foster deeper intercultural dialogue among member states.

Another milestone in this journey was the ASEAN Strategic Plan for Culture and Arts (2016-2025) which plays an essential role for promoting regional cultural engagement.<sup>3</sup> It serves as a guideline for member states to connect the unifying power of culture and also encourage collaborative innovation. These, along with other initiatives led by the ASEAN are reminders that in an increasingly interconnected world, the significance

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- 1 ASEAN. 2024. AMCA Joint Statement.
- 2 ASEAN. 2015. Kuala Lumpur Declaration on the Establishment of ASEAN Community.
- 3 ASEAN. 2016. ASEAN Strategic Plan for Culture and Arts (2016-2025).
- 4 ASEAN. 2000. ASEAN Declaration on Cultural Heritage.
- 5 ASEAN. Culture and Arts.

of cultural diplomacy cannot be neglected. Culture is a formidable tool for enhancing ASEAN's global presence while simultaneously achieving its regional goals. The objective of this brief is to understand ASEAN's cultural strategies and cultural diplomacy as navigated through its official instruments. Efforts are also made to explore India's potential to strengthen its Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with ASEAN through cultural connect.

India's participation in ASEAN-led initiatives to preserve cultural heritage signals a growing recognition of the intertwined fates of these neighboring regions. This collaboration extends beyond mere cultural preservation; it is a component of the comprehensive strategic partnership that emphasises the importance of cultural heritage in strengthening ASEAN-India relations. Initiatives ranging from youth engagement to programmes aimed at digital heritage preservation exemplify a holistic approach to advance a sustainable and resilient Indo-Pacific region.

## Frameworks for Preserving ASEAN's Unique Cultural Identity through Institutionalisation

One of the early documents on cultural strategy by ASEAN was released in the year 2000. ASEAN Declaration on Cultural Heritage (ADCH) 2000 was aiming at specific policies and programmes as a framework for ASEAN

cooperation on cultural heritage.<sup>4</sup> It included adopting policies and programmes by the member countries to protect, preserve and promote their cultural heritage; design both formal and nonformal learning programs for living traditions; continuing cultural exchanges and programs of cultural awareness and sensitivity as a basic component of ASEAN cooperation, advancement of legislations to protect the cultural heritage; integration of culture and development among many other aspects. ADCH also defined the terms "culture" and "cultural heritage". (See Box. 1)

Other important documents and declarations on culture include the following:<sup>5</sup>

- Declaration on ASEAN Unity in Cultural Diversity: Towards Strengthening ASEAN Community, 2011, adopted at the 19th ASEAN Summit in Bali, Indonesia on 17 November 2011.
- Hue Declaration on Culture for ASEAN Community's Sustainable Development, adopted at the 6<sup>th</sup> AMCA, 6 April 2014.
- Bandar Seri Begawan Declaration on Culture and the Arts to Promote ASEAN's Identity towards a Dynamic and Harmonious ASEAN Community, adopted at the 7<sup>th</sup> AMCA, 24 August 2016.
- Vientiane Declaration on Reinforcing Cultural Heritage Cooperation in ASEAN, adopted at the 28th ASEAN Summit in Vientiane, Lao PDR on 6 September 2016.
- Yogyakarta Declaration on

Embracing the Culture of Prevention to Enrich ASEAN Identity, adopted by the 8th AMCA, 24 October 2018.

- The Narrative of ASEAN Identity, adopted by the 37th ASEAN Summit, 12 November 2020.
- Siem Reap Declaration on Promoting a Creative and Adaptive ASEAN Community to Support the Cultural and Creative Economy, adopted by AMCA, 7 July 2022.

The ASEAN Strategic Plan on Culture and Arts for 2016-2025 represents another significant framework for fostering a cohesive, vibrant, and resilient ASEAN community. It upholds that art and

culture serve as powerful tools for nurturing intercultural understanding while celebrating the richness of cultural diversity within the region.

Central to this Strategic Plan are six priority areas that are contemporary and directly relevant to the aspirations of the ASEAN community. It speaks about increasing appreciation for the histories and cultures of the region, promotes cultural diversity, underscores the importance of inclusive and sustainable development, harnesses the use of culture for creativity, innovation and livelihood creation, promotes regional cooperation in heritage management and encourages the role of culture in making ASEAN a proactive member in the global community.

### Box 1: ASEAN Declaration on Cultural Heritage (ADCH) 2000

**"Culture"** means "the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, intellectual, emotional and material features that characterize a society or social group. It includes the arts and letters as well as human modes of life, value systems, creativity, knowledge systems, traditions and beliefs".

**"Cultural heritage"** means: "(a) significant cultural values and concepts; (b) structures and artifacts: dwellings, buildings for worship, utility structures, works of visual arts, tools and implements, that are of a historical, aesthetic, or scientific significance; (c) sites and human habitats: human creations or combined human creations and nature, archaeological sites and sites of living human communities that are of outstanding value from a historical, aesthetic, anthropological or ecological viewpoint, or, because of its natural features, of considerable importance as habitat for the cultural survival and identity of particular living traditions; (d) oral or folk heritage: folkways, folklore, languages and literature, traditional arts and crafts, architecture, and the performing arts, games, indigenous knowledge systems and practices, myths, customs and beliefs, rituals and other living traditions; (e) the written heritage; (f) popular cultural heritage: popular creativity in mass cultures (i.e. industrial or commercial cultures), popular forms of expression of outstanding aesthetic, anthropological and sociological values, including the music, dance, graphic arts, fashion, games and sports, industrial design, cinema, television, music video, video arts and cyber art in technologically-oriented urbanized communities".

*Source:* Excerpted from ASEAN Declaration on Cultural Heritage (ADCH) 2000.

Moreover, the emphasis on inclusive and sustainable development within the Strategic Plan should be noted. By bringing together cultures for creativity, innovation, and economic growth, ASEAN is positioning itself as a forward-thinking collective that not only preserves its cultural heritage but also leverages it for modernisation and global competitiveness. The promotion of regional cooperation in heritage management will ensure that these cultural assets are preserved for future generations, thereby creating a sustainable framework for cultural exchange and appreciation.

The establishment of the Working Group on the Culture of Prevention (CoP) further solidified ASEAN's commitment to a harmonious society. Adopted at the 31st ASEAN Summit in Manila in 2017, the Declaration on the Culture of Prevention outlined six essential thrust areas that are indicative of a comprehensive roadmap towards peace and understanding. A culture of peace and intercultural dialogue is not a mere ideal; it is a necessity in today's complex world, which is often marred by conflict

and misunderstanding. By fostering respect for all cultures, promoting good governance, and advocating for environmental sustainability, ASEAN is not only addressing current challenges but is also paving the way for a resilient future.

The focus on a healthy lifestyle and moderation underscores the necessity of holistic societal well-being in achieving ASEAN's goals. It is imperative that member states embrace these values as foundational principles, ensuring that culture plays an integral role in national policies and community initiatives.

The ASEAN Strategic Plan on Culture and Arts, alongside the Declaration on the Culture of Prevention, put in a nutshell a visionary approach to building a united and resilient ASEAN community. It is a testament to the region's potential to play a proactive role on the global stage while preserving its unique cultural identities. It is incumbent upon all ASEAN member states to recognise this vision and to actively engage with these frameworks, thereby fostering an inclusive, peaceful, and sustainable community for generations to come.

### Box 2: Declaration on the Narrative of ASEAN Identity

“Constructed values are defined as values that of a group of people or nations who associate themselves with, as a product of active and deliberate intentions in order to develop an allegiance with certain mindsets to achieve a specific objective of a community.”

“Inherited Values are defined as values that the people of Southeast Asia region ascribe to, which have been passed on for generations, through the natural process of human interaction that develops into various type of communities with much similarities.”

*Source:* Excerpted from Declaration on the Narrative of ASEAN Identity, ASEAN.

The 2020 Declaration on the Narrative of ASEAN Identity focused on “constructed values” and inherited values” for the social construct of the ASEAN identity. The Narrative of ASEAN Identity emphasised on the centuries of pluralistic history of Southeast Asia, diversity, and the process of acculturation which form new forms of cultures and civilisations.<sup>6</sup>

## Culture and Arts Ministers' Meetings

To implement the grand plans taken by ASCC in art and culture, ASEAN has institutionalised the ASEAN Ministers Responsible for Culture and Arts (AMCA) Meetings and AMCA with ASEAN Plus Three Meetings. The 11th round of the AMCA Meeting was held in Malaysia on 24 October 2024 with the theme "Bridging Cultures, Building Futures: Unity in Diversity".

It is imperative to recognise that AMCA, as an ASEAN sectoral body, plays an indispensable role in fostering mutual understanding and solidarity among the diverse populations of ASEAN member states. It is foundational to the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community, aiming to forge strategic solutions that enhance cooperation in culture and the arts. The recent outcomes from the AMCA meetings are not just noteworthy; they are a clarion call for action regarding regional identity and cohesion.

The joint statement released from this meeting takes a decisive stance on various pressing issues, particularly the empowerment of youth and Creative

Economy. The statement emphasises the crucial engagement of young individuals in cross-cultural activities, positioning them as vital contributors to the cultural dialogue. It recognises that the future of ASEAN lies in the hands of its youth.

The convening of the ASEAN Youth and Heritage Forum, alongside the adoption of the Vang Vieng Declaration on Promoting Small and Medium-sized Cultural Enterprises, signals a forward-thinking approach to integrating cultural entrepreneurship with sustainable development goals. Its alignment with the Green Growth for Sustainable Development, 2024, needs to be remembered. This reflects a pragmatic understanding that culture and creativity can significantly drive economic growth, job creation, and overall societal cohesion. Thus, the contributions of the Creative Economy to GDP and employment must be viewed as critical facets of this regional development narrative. Creative Economy gained much traction in the joint statement as ASEAN plans to hold a symposium, which will be supported by the UK and ASEAN Secretariat. ASEAN is also planning to establish the ASEAN Creative Economy Sustainability Framework based on the Siem Reap Declaration on Promoting a Creative and Adaptive ASEAN Community to Support the Cultural and Creative Economy, adopted on 7 July 2022.

Furthermore, the AMCA joint statement boldly pivots towards the role of digitalisation in safeguarding cultural

**Table 1: ASEAN Cities of Culture, 2010-2024**

City	Year
Cebu City, Philippines	2010-2011
Singapore	2012-2013
Hue, Vietnam	2014-2015
Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei	2016-2017
Yogyakarta, Indonesia	2018-2020
Siem Riep, Cambodia	2021-2022
Vientiane, Lao PDR	2022-2023
Melaka, Malaysia	2024-2025

*Source:* SEASIA.<sup>7</sup>

heritage. In an era where technology is revolutionising how cultures are consumed and preserved, adopting digital tools for cultural innovation becomes essential. By partnering with ASEAN's international counterparts, this initiative aims to connect global cultural exchanges as a strategic asset.

The holistic framework proposed in the joint statement offers a comprehensive strategy that encapsulates the intersection of social, cultural, economic, and environmental dimensions. Hence, it is clear that the AMCA offers a detailed roadmap encouraging collaboration, creativity, and resilience in the face of an ever-changing global landscape.

Overall, AMCA's 11th meeting served as a pivotal moment for ASEAN. It emphasises the interconnectedness of culture and economic development, underscoring the importance of youth engagement and digital innovation. The strategic initiatives outlined within

the joint statement not only reflect a compelling vision for ASEAN's cultural landscape but also assert that culture is a powerful tool in the region's broader strategies for global engagement and sustainable development. Another remarkable outcome of the 11<sup>th</sup> AMCA meeting was the selection of Melaka, Malaysia, as the 8th ASEAN City of Culture. This will complement Malaysia's role as the ASEAN Chair for 2025, including hosting the International Cultural and Arts Festival (ICAF), among many other events and programmes.

### **ASEAN's Cultural Partnerships with External Partners including India**

The necessity of fostering close collaboration between ASEAN and its dialogue partners should be focused, particularly when it comes to the effective implementation of various strategic initiatives and action plans.

Recent developments underscore the importance of this cooperation. Take, for instance, the ASEAN-China Work Plan on Cooperation in Culture and the Arts for the years 2022-2025, along with the ASEAN-Japan partnership focusing on the ASEAN Cultural Heritage Digital Archive (ACHDA). Moreover, the ASEAN-Japan Work Plan on Cooperation in Culture and the Arts demonstrates a continued commitment to cultural collaboration, as does the ASEAN-ROK Working Committee on Cultural Heritage Cooperation.

It is crucial to highlight the ASEAN Cultural Heritage (ACHL), a significant initiative conceptualised during the Senior Officials' Meeting on Culture and Arts (SOMCA) in 2019. India's proactive interest in aligning with the ACHL illustrates the potential for broader participation and synergy among ASEAN nations and partners. This collaboration was further established during the 21st ASEAN-India Summit in October 2024, where India's involvement in important policy discussions regarding the feasibility study of ACHL was recognised and appreciated.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, several commendable initiatives aimed at strengthening ties between ASEAN and India were noted in the Chair's Statement. These initiatives include the Leadership Programme for Young Leaders from ASEAN countries and India, the ASEAN-India Youth Summit, and the ASEAN-India Youth Awards. The ASEAN-India Media Exchange Programme

and the ASEAN-India Artist's Camp and Exhibition further underline the commitment to cultural exchange and understanding. Additionally, the ASEAN-India Network of Universities (AINU) Faculty Exchange Programme exemplifies academic collaboration, an essential pillar of deepening bilateral relations.<sup>9</sup> Particularly noteworthy is India's decision to expand the number of Master's degree slots for students from ASEAN nations at Nalanda University. This initiative not only facilitates educational opportunities but also fosters a sense of community and shared purpose among future leaders in the region. (See table 2 for further details on recent ASEAN-India people-to-people and cultural partnership.)<sup>10</sup>

The ongoing and planned collaborations between ASEAN and its dialogue partners highlight the vital role of culture and education in building comprehensive, strategic alliances. The time is now for ASEAN to further cement these partnerships, ensuring that their collective efforts lead to enhanced cultural preservation and mutual understanding, thereby benefitting all involved parties.

## Conclusion

In this brief, ASEAN's official position on cultural strategy has been discussed with a focus on the instruments and mechanisms that are currently available to ASEAN member states to advance their cultural synergy and cooperation. ASEAN's cultural collaborations are

8 ASEAN. 2024. ASEAN. cultural officials and experts gathered for the Interface Meeting on the Feasibility in the Development of ASEAN Cultural Heritage List

9 ASEAN. 2024. Chairman's Statement. ASEAN-India Summit.

10 ASEAN. 2024. Chairman's Statement of the 21st ASEAN-India Summit.

**Table 2: Recent Events and Programmes Related to ASEAN-India Cultural and People-to-People Ties**

Event/Programme	Dates	Place
3rd ASEAN-India Music Festival	29 November to 01 December 2024	Delhi
<b>1st Capacity Building Programme on Public Policy and Administration for civil servants from Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean Region</b>	18th to 29th November 2024	Mussoorie and New Delhi
Bali Jatra Cuttack Utsav 2024	15 - 22 November 2024	Cuttack, Odisha.
8th Roundtable of ASEAN-India Network of Think Tanks (AINTT)	07-08 November 2024	Singapore
Launch of ASEAN-India Fellowship' for Higher Education in Agriculture and Allied Sciences	14 August 2024	New Delhi
Launch of ASEAN-India Artists' Camp Exhibition	1- 14 July 2024	Jakarta

Source: Indian Mission to Jakarta, 2024.<sup>11</sup>

strategic tools that reinforce ASEAN's identity, global outreach, and internal cohesion. As far as India is concerned, ASEAN and India demonstrate a shared vision for a peaceful, resilient, and prosperous Indo-Pacific by integrating

culture, heritage, education, and technology. This synergy supports their roles as champions of multilateralism, and regional leaders who are globally relevant.

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