



# Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power

## EAST ASIA EXPLORER DECEMBER 2025

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**Delhi Policy Group**

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## East Asia Explorer

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*The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Delhi Policy Group as an Institution.*

### Cover Images:

*Myanmar's Interim President and Chairman of the National Security, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing were among the first to cast his vote during the first phase of elections, on December 28, 2025. Source: [Myanmar National Portal](#)*

*Philippines and Vietnam signed Letters of Intent (LOIs) on the Enhancement of Cooperation in the Field of HADR at Sea and Military Medicine on during Viet Nam Minister of National Defence General Phan Van Giang visit to Philippines, on August 30, 2024. Source: [Department of National Defense- Philippines](#)*

*The leaders of ASEAN and the United States convened for the 13<sup>th</sup> ASEAN-United States Summit met in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on October 26, 2025. Source: [X/@ASEAN](#)*

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## Contents

### **Manufacturing Legitimacy: Myanmar's Junta-Staged Elections**

*Jayantika Rao T.V.*.....1

### **Vietnam and the Philippines' Growing Convergence on Defence-Related Issues in the South China Sea**

*Divya Rai*.....5

### **Global Economic Shocks and their Consequences for Southeast Asian Prosperity**

*Biren Nanda*.....9

## Manufacturing Legitimacy: Myanmar's Junta-Staged Elections

by

Jayantika Rao T.V.

After five years of plunging Myanmar into a devastating civil war, Myanmar's military government held its first phase of long-promised 'democratic' elections on December 28, 2025. However, calling it democratic is a questionable word to describe the elections that took place in the country. The remaining second and third phase of elections will be held on January 11 and 25, 2026 respectively. In a notice published on April 9, 2025 while the country was dealing with the powerful earthquake that hit the country in March, the state-run Global New Light of Myanmar newspaper announced that the Union Election Commission (UEC) reaffirmed its previously announced plan to hold the poll in December and said that "individuals or groups intending to apply for permission to establish a political party must submit their applications no later than May 9, 2025."<sup>1</sup> International observers have expressed deep scepticism regarding the legitimacy of this process. The United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of Human Rights in Myanmar, Tom Andrews, has explicitly dismissed the three-stage polls as "sham elections," underscoring the broader concerns about the credibility of the military regime's attempt to frame the exercise as democratic governance.

After the announcement, as preparations for the elections advanced, it became increasingly evident that the junta has no intention of allowing an unfettered electoral process. The ballot has been dominated by parties perceived to be close to the military with many opposition parties and leaders have been arrested under a new law criminalising 'obstruction, disruption and criticism of the poll'. Although 71 parties initially registered or re-registered under the Political Parties Registration Law, only 57 political parties were ultimately permitted to contest the December 28 elections. Of these, merely 6 qualified as a national party, with the remainder confined to regional constituencies. The military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) was the primary contender, fielding 1,018 candidates—roughly one-fifth of the total 4,963 registered candidates.<sup>2</sup> Major opposition groups, most notably the National

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<sup>1</sup> "Republic of the Union of Myanmar Union Election Commission Press Release". Global New Light of Myanmar, April 9, 2025. [https://cdn.digitalagencybangkok.com/file/client-cdn/gnlm/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/9\\_April\\_25\\_gnlm.pdf](https://cdn.digitalagencybangkok.com/file/client-cdn/gnlm/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/9_April_25_gnlm.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> "Myanmar's election in numbers". Reuters, December 25, 2025. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/myanmars-election-numbers-2025-12-24/>

League for Democracy (NLD), were excluded completely for failing to comply with the Junta's restrictive electoral framework.

Independent assessments further underscore the lack of credibility. The Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL) which has served as an accredited international observer during the 2015 and 2020 polls concluded that the polls will unfold amid widespread violence, mass displacement, and the systematic denial of basic freedoms, and therefore could not meet international standards for genuine, democratic elections. The Union Election Commission's (UEC) framework reinforced these deficiencies: it imposed no minimum voter turnout, no requirement for nationwide territorial coverage, and no obligation for simultaneous voting.<sup>3</sup> The first round of polling was conducted in 102 of Myanmar's 330 townships, with subsequent rounds planned for 100 and 72 townships respectively. Meanwhile, polling was cancelled in 56 townships outside regime's control, with further cancellations anticipated as security conditions deteriorates.

In practice, whole swaths of the country have been excluded from these elections reflecting the junta's ongoing conflict with ethnic armed organisations and pro-democracy resistance groups. On December 5, the UEC said no voting would be held in 2,931 wards and village tracts – around 17% of all basic administrative units, in addition to the 56 townships previously excluded.<sup>4</sup> Many of these areas are those most severely affected by armed conflict and displacement, underscoring the fundamentally compromised nature of the electoral exercise. As such, despite these exclusions, the regime continues to present their elections as a “national” election.

That said, even with the outcome effectively predetermined in favour of the USDP, the junta has taken further measures to eliminate any residual uncertainty. The UEC announced that it will use a complex combination of two very different electoral systems: the previous single-member, first-past-the-post constituencies – where the winning candidate is the one with the largest number of votes and multi-member, proportional representation constituencies, in which several seats are allocated to parties using a quota-and-remainder

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<sup>3</sup> “Myanmar: A Junta-Staged Election in the Midst of a War | Data Dive Issue No. 25”. The Asian Network for Free Elections, December 19, 2025. <https://anfrel.org/myanmar-a-junta-staged-election-in-the-midst-of-a-war-data-dive-issue-no-25/>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

formula based on their share of the vote in the constituency.<sup>5</sup> While designed to broaden representation, the complexity of this mixed system obscures transparency and creates opportunities for manipulation. Beyond this, the military benefits from a constitutionally entrenched quota of 25 percent of seats in all legislatures, directly appointed by the commander-in-chief.<sup>6</sup> In practice, this guaranteed share is amplified by widespread electoral cancellations in conflict-affected townships, which reduce the number of contested seats and thereby inflate the military's proportional influence. Taken together, these institutional arrangements reveal an electoral design not intended to foster pluralism, but rather to consolidate military dominance under the veneer of procedural legitimacy.

The question, then, is why has the Junta chosen to stage elections now. The principal rationale lies in the pursuit of political legitimacy. By holding elections, even if partial and deeply flawed – it still signals political strength and could serve as the impetus for many countries, especially in Southeast Asia, to normalise diplomatic ties with Naypyitaw. At the same time, the need to bolster legitimacy has become acute for Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, whose personal authority as commander-in-chief has been increasingly contested since the military's return to power in 2021. Myanmar's pariah status has deepened, with engagement even within ASEAN diminishing, while Western sanctions have compounded economic isolation and accelerated economic decline. Against this backdrop, a manufactured electoral victory for the USDP is expected to be endorsed by allied authoritarian states such as China and Russia, both of which have provided military assistance to counter insurgent advances. Through this exercise, the junta aims to reconstitute itself as a nominal civilian government, thereby facilitating renewed business ties and external recognition. Min Aung Hlaing's self-designation as "acting president" underscores the regime's attempt to cloak military rule in civilian legitimacy.

Yet the pursuit of legitimacy has been accompanied by the systematic weaponisation of laws to suppress dissent and control the political environment. The counter-terrorism law, amended in 2021 and 2023, and the cybersecurity law, enacted in January 2025, have granted sweeping powers to state agencies to monitor, target, and seize the assets of civil society organizations, independent media, and political opponents. These measures have been

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<sup>5</sup> Horsey, Richard. "Myanmar's Military Seeks Vote of Approval in One-sided Polls". International Crisis Group, December 9, 2025. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia-pacific/myanmar/myanmars-military-seeks-vote-approval-one-sided-polls>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.



reinforced by the enactment of the “Law on the Protection of Elections from Interference and Disruption” on July 29, 2025, which criminalises any perceived sabotage or disruption of the electoral process.<sup>7</sup> The law prescribes penalties ranging from a minimum of three years’ imprisonment to capital punishment in cases where disruption results in loss of life. Taken together, these legal instruments reveal how the junta has institutionalized coercion under the guise of electoral protection, ensuring that the electoral process functions not as a vehicle of democratic participation but as a tightly controlled mechanism to consolidate military power while silencing opposition.

The trajectory for Myanmar’s future is already evident. Following the first phase of elections, the USDP swiftly declared an overwhelming lead on December 29<sup>8</sup>, with official results on January 3 confirming its capture of 90 percent of the lower house (Pyithu Hluttaw) seats, winning 38 of 40 contests<sup>9</sup>. The subsequent phases are almost certain to consolidate this dominance, producing a resounding USDP victory and entrenching military authority behind a civilian façade. Such outcomes will not resolve Myanmar’s deep-seated political turmoil nor diminish the determination of armed resistance movements. On the contrary, they are poised to intensify polarization, deepen societal fractures, and perpetuate the conditions of state failure that have defined Myanmar’s recent trajectory.

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<sup>7</sup> “SAC Law No. 48/2025: Protection of Multiparty Democratic General Elections”. Mitv, July 30, 2025. <https://www.myanmaritv.com/news/sac-law-no-482025-protection-multiparty-democratic-general-elections>

<sup>8</sup> Magee, Caolán. “Myanmar pro-military party claims huge lead in contentious elections”. Aljazeera, December 29, 2025. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/12/29/myanmar-pro-military-party-claims-huge-lead-in-contentious-elections>

<sup>9</sup> “Military-backed party in Myanmar takes lead in contentious first election since coup”. The Guardian, January 3, 2026. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/jan/03/myanmar-election-first-phase-election-result>

## **Vietnam and the Philippines' Growing Convergence on Defence-Related Issues in the South China Sea**

by

Divya Rai

In the contested waters of the South China Sea (SCS), where China's assertive manoeuvres challenge international norms, Vietnam and the Philippines – two key ASEAN countries – have pursued a pragmatic thaw in their historically strained ties. At the recent 7th Vietnam-Philippines Defence Policy Dialogue held on November 26, 2025, in Hanoi, both agreed to advance defence and military relations and deepen collaboration on maritime security.<sup>10</sup> As maritime nations sharing not just a common boundary but a mutual desire to build a maritime space of peace in line with international law and the UNCLOS, the Philippines puts primary importance on maintaining robust and intensive maritime relations with Vietnam. Diplomatic relations, established in 1976, evolved sluggishly, but the two countries elevated relations to that of a 'Strategic Partnership' in November 2015, paving the way for Vietnam to become the Philippines' only strategic partner in ASEAN. The two countries had achieved substantive results across various fields, such as economy, trade, education and training, and people-to-people exchanges, especially defence and maritime security. With continuing collisions and aggressive manoeuvres, Chinese vessels near a disputed shoal in the SCS and intensifying Chinese pressure have prompted a growing strategic convergence between Manila and Hanoi, something that had been inhibited for a long time by the outstanding disputes that these countries have with each other in the SCS.

President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s January 2024 state visit to Hanoi marked a watershed moment in the bilateral defence ties, yielding two MOUs: one on SCS incident prevention to de-escalate encounters, and another on coast guard collaboration for trust-building exercises. The two memorandums of understanding (MOUs) are basically to improve cooperation of their coast guards and build trust by preventing untoward incidents in the South China Sea. Following this, in August 2024, at a meeting between Vietnamese Defense Minister Gen. Phan Van Giang and his Philippine counterpart, Gilberto Teodoro, they signed Letters of Intent (LOIs) on the Enhancement of

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<sup>10</sup> Vietnam Vn. "Vietnam, Philippines Boost Defence Cooperation". November 26, 2025. <https://www.vietnam.vn/en/doi-thoai-chinh-sach-quoc-phong-viet-nam-philippines-lan-thu-7>



Cooperation in the Field of HADR at Sea and Military Medicine to strengthen the work to mitigate the impact of natural disasters and other increasingly complex security challenges at sea. Furthermore, they issued a statement confirming their intent to finalise a memorandum of understanding on defence cooperation by the end of 2024.<sup>11</sup>

Maritime ties between the Philippines and Vietnam are slowly moving beyond symbolism towards more functional cooperation, evidenced by regular port calls and joint Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) missions. Adding new steps, Philippines and Vietnam held their first joint maritime exercises on August 9, 2024 – involving coast guard vessels simulating search-and-rescue (SAR) and anti-piracy drills in the SCS. The drills were historic: for the first time, two Southeast Asian claimants held joint maritime exercises to deepen cooperation and address shared concerns in the region<sup>12</sup>. Naval cooperation has also expanded to more frequent goodwill exchanges on disputed islands like the Northeast and Southwest Cays within the Spratly Islands<sup>13</sup>.

Vietnam and the Philippines have shown a willingness to hold talks to settle their overlapping claims to the undersea continental shelf in the South China Sea. Unlike China, Southeast Asian countries, such as Indonesia, Philippines and Malaysia, have shown more receptivity towards managing and resolving maritime boundary disputes due to a common desire to maintain the region's status quo. After the Philippine government, on June 14, 2024, submitted information to the U.N. Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf to register the country's entitlement to an extended continental shelf (ECS) in the West Palawan Region in the West Philippine Sea/South China Sea. Vietnam stated it "asserts its full rights and interests under international law, particularly the 1982 UNCLOS, and stays ready to discuss with the Philippines to seek and

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<sup>11</sup> Department of National Defense, Republic of the Philippines. "Outcome of the Bilateral Meeting between Philippine Secretary of National Defense Gilberto C. Teodoro, Jr. and Viet Nam Minister of National Defence General Phan Van Giang". August 30, 2024. <https://www.dnd.gov.ph/Release/2024-08-30/2232/Outcome-of-the-Bilateral-Meeting-between-Philippine-Secretary-of-National-Defense-Gilberto-C-Teodoro-Jr-and-Viet-Nam-Minister-of-National-Defence-General-Phan-Van-Giang/>.

<sup>12</sup> The Straits Times. "Philippines, Vietnam to Hold First Joint Maritime Drills amid Tensions in South China Sea". August 5, 2024. <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/philippines-vietnam-to-hold-first-joint-naval-drills-amid-tensions-in-south-china-sea>.

<sup>13</sup> South China Morning Post. "Will Growing Philippines-Vietnam Naval Ties Reshape South China Sea Diplomacy?" September 28, 2025. <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3327174/will-growing-philippines-vietnam-naval-ties-reshape-south-china-sea-diplomacy>.

achieve a solution that is mutually beneficial for both countries”.<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, this announcement came four days after the Chinese Coast Guard engaged in a violent confrontation with Philippine vessels within the Philippine EEZ, resulting in a Filipino soldier losing his finger.<sup>15</sup>

What makes the cooperation between the Philippines and Vietnam important are the implications of the same. As the Philippines takes over the chairmanship of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations next year, a stronger partnership with Vietnam may help inject momentum into closer cooperation on maritime matters among the bloc, including the possible finalisation of a code of conduct (COC) in the SCS. Given the fact that, for more than a couple of decades now, efforts to negotiate a Code of Conduct (CoC) on the SCS have been frozen as the parties to this dispute have been unable to work out their differences. Thus far only the “Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the SCS” of 2002 has been the basis of all other engagements. Despite repeated assertions, progress on a CoC has been slow, and the stumbling block is not so much within the Southeast Asian countries but China, which has been reluctant to revisit its claims or position on any of the disputes.

The limitations persist, since cooperation remains episodic. Nikkei Asia reported that Gilberto said that the two countries will also sign an MoU to “undertake to sign a memorandum on defence cooperation within this year.” The MoU was expected to be signed last year (2024) in December. After a year, it remains to be seen when both countries will sign a defence agreement<sup>16</sup>. While the agreements are developing trust between the Philippines and Vietnam, it is still too early to conclude just how united the partnership would be against Beijing. So far, the bilateral engagement between the two countries has steered clear of contentious issues and focused on humanitarian assistance and disaster response (HADR), sidestepping zero-sum territorial frictions. Thus, without any significant breakthrough in defence cooperation between Vietnam and the Philippines, their defence relations are largely symbolic for now.

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<sup>14</sup> Associated Press. “Vietnam Says It's Ready to Talk with Philippines on Overlapping South China Sea Claims”. June 18, 2024. <https://apnews.com/article/vietnam-philippines-south-china-sea-continental-shelf-6656b8bcd3fbc336ccdde98c0f6d70fb>.

<sup>15</sup> ABS-CBN News. “Navy Seaman Who Lost Finger from China Ramming Details June 17 Ordeal”. June 25, 2024. <https://www.abs-cbn.com/news/2024/6/25/navy-seaman-who-lost-finger-from-china-ramming-details-june-17-ordeal-1345>.

<sup>16</sup> Nikkei Asia. “Philippines and Vietnam Plan to Seal Defense MOU This Year”. August 30, 2024. <https://asia.nikkei.com/politics/international-relations/south-china-sea/philippines-and-vietnam-plan-to-seal-defense-mou-this-year>.

Digging deeper, the two countries have taken distinct approaches in countering the Chinese coercion in the maritime area. While Vietnam has dramatically accelerated its effort to expand islands and reclaim land in the contested SCS to challenge rising Chinese assertiveness. Additionally, Vietnam has been enlarging its presence across a remote collection of rocks, reefs and islets called the Spratlys since 2021; the country is on pace this year to create more than 1,000 acres of new land there, more than in any year prior.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, Manila has chosen to defy China's pressure campaign and to strengthen its relations with its security partners, the United States, Australia and Japan. Consequently, China has benefitted from the fragmented and varying approaches of Southeast Asian claimant countries for the longest time.

The past two years witnessed a series of robust bilateral, trilateral, and multilateral maritime security activities under the administration of Ferdinand Marcos Jr. The Philippines has pursued a multi-aligned approach to forge robust defence networks with like-minded partners in the Indo-Pacific. The Philippines has been supported by the West to push back against China's belligerence within the Philippines' lawful exclusive economic zone (EEZ). Thus, a more robust level of maritime security cooperation between the Philippines and Vietnam will be a defining moment in Southeast Asian security. If the Philippines and Vietnam can continue to enhance their confidence-building and interoperability collaborations in the SCS – although a robust partnership won't expel China from the contested areas, it will be more difficult for Beijing to have a free run with its provocative manoeuvres in the SCS. At the same time, this also has the potential to have a positive impact on ASEAN unity in managing the SCS dispute. If both countries become successful in forging a strong defence partnership, this may serve as an important stepping stone for other claimants to follow suit. Thus, it will be crucial for Manila and Hanoi to maintain and even strengthen both countries' contemporary momentum in creating a conducive bilateral environment that could nonetheless reshape SCS dynamics.

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<sup>17</sup> Washington Post. "Vietnam's Rapid Island-Building in the South China Sea" August, 9, 2024. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/interactive/2024/vietnam-south-china-sea-islands-growth/>.

## **Global Economic Shocks and their Consequences for Southeast Asian Prosperity**

by

Biren Nanda

### **Introduction**

For over three decades East Asia has led global growth and become the center of gravity of the world economy. In assuming this position East Asia has overcome many challenges in the past. These challenges included the rise of China and its aggressive assertions in the South and East China Seas, the growing tensions between the United States- Southeast Asia's major security partner and China - Southeast Asia's major economic partner- that threaten to derail Asian prosperity; the move away from globalization and towards protectionism as wealthy nations became alarmed by their trade deficits and the rising inequalities in their societies, as a consequence of globalization; and the economic security concerns that came to the fore during and after the COVID 19 pandemic.

### **Southeast Asian Economies Suffered from a Series of Shocks in 2025**

In 2025 Southeast Asia was dealt with a series of shocks including US-China trade tensions, tariffs and shifts in global demand patterns. These shocks have the potential to adversely affect trade and financial stability in Southeast Asian countries in many different ways.

First, the global economy has moved further away globalization after the imposition of tariffs by the US. States.' The Tariff war has imparted shock waves to supply chains across the world. Economic Security concerns that were the driving force behind the realignment of global supply chains after COVID 19, and have once again come to the fore.

Second, US tariffs on China and Southeast Asian nations affect Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar, Indonesia and Malaysia by disrupting supply chains, adversely affecting their exports and encouraging some companies to move out of China. Factories in ASEAN countries are running at below capacity amid growing uncertainty on tariffs.

Third, weak Chinese manufacturing and demand shifts for Chinese exports to Southeast Asian countries have led to the hollowing out of local industries.

Southeast Asian countries with labor-intensive industries have been hit hard by cheap Chinese imports.

Fourth, high octane tariff announcements and the disruption caused to the flow of goods and services has added volatility to stock markets and impacted international capital flows. The burden of US tariffs has primarily been shared foreign exporters and US importers. The US has used its economic leverage to influence outcomes over tariffs and to redirect foreign investment to the United States.

Fifth, trade diversion- a direct consequence US tariffs – is redirecting China's exports to markets in the global south crowding out products from Southeast Asian and third countries.

Sixth, Southeast Asian countries are also reeling under the China shock 2.0 which has taken the form of a surge in exports from high tech industries like EVs, solar panels, and automotive industries and industrial robots – all high-tech products that are disrupting global markets. The first China Shock came in the early 2000s, in the form of low value consumer goods like textiles and toys.

### **Will major Southeast Asian economies be able to manage and contain the Economic shocks dealt in 2025?**

The US has used its dominance of the monetary system to coerce friend and foe alike, bringing them to heel to accept tariffs as a fait accompli and also to force developed countries to commit themselves to bringing manufacturing investment to the United States. One consequence of the tariff war would be the potential de-globalization of sectors of the economy that the United States and major powers bring to their respective domestic tariff areas. To mitigate the impact of these developments Southeast Asian countries will have to focus on enhancing consumption in their economies.

The tariff shock dealt by the US has shaken the confidence of ASEAN countries in the reliability of the US as a trade partner, who adheres to long-standing trade principles. As Singapore Prime Minister Lawrence Wong put it “the era of rules-based globalization and free trade is over”.

Will Southeast Asian countries be able to manage and contain the tariff shock? Major Southeast Asian economies – Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia - have a sufficient buffer comprising of forex reserves and relatively low fiscal deficits - to manage the impact of a future crises.

However, the areas of concern also include the dependence of ASEAN countries on energy imports – and their vulnerability to oil price shocks. The region is also very vulnerable to climate change and highly prone to natural disasters, rising sea levels, droughts and Tsunamis. These structural vulnerabilities will continue to derail progress and growth in Southeast countries in the future.

In a recent article published in the Interpreter by the Lowy Institute the authors Roland Rajah et al.<sup>18</sup> have argued – on a more sanguine note – that Southeast Asia's economies have proved very resilient to global trade shocks in the past. The region is benefitting from shifting global supply chains and capital inflows. The trade of the ASEAN is well diversified and geopolitically aligned with the US. Despite these challenges, Southeast Asia's trade in October 2025 was 15% higher than at the same time in the previous year.

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<sup>18</sup> (December 10,2025) Roland Rajah, Ahmed Albayrak and Rober Walker. Navigating the Storm: Southeast Asia and the Global Trade Shocks. Interpreter Lowy Institute





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