Opinion | AbdulWahed Jalal Nori

As the US and China compete over AI, Asean must secure strategic autonomy

Asean's choice is not between technological dominance and isolation but between dependence and agency

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International relations has long measured power through familiar instruments: military capability, territory, energy, capital and control of trade. The digital revolution added information to that equation. Artificial intelligence (AI) is taking the transformation further by turning information into a strategic capability that can shape economies, governments and societies.

For the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean), the central question is no longer whether Southeast Asia will participate in the AI revolution. The more consequential question is whether Asean will possess enough control over the infrastructure, knowledge and systems behind AI to shape its own future or whether it will have to rent intelligence from others.

Southeast Asia is rapidly becoming an important physical centre of the AI economy. Data centres are expanding and investment is flowing into digital infrastructure. The International Energy Agency expects electricity demand from data centres in Southeast Asia to more than double by 2030.

Malaysia and Singapore are emerging as major regional hubs, while Indonesia and Thailand seek to capture a larger share of the digital infrastructure boom. However, beneath this expansion lies a strategic paradox: Asean might provide the land, electricity, connectivity, markets and physical infrastructure for the AI economy while depending on external powers for advanced chips, foundational models, cloud platforms and technological standards.

This marks a subtler dependency: states retain sovereignty while increasingly relying on foreign AI systems to run critical functions. This matters because Asean's traditional concept of strategic autonomy was developed in a world where states could diversify their economic and diplomatic relationships without necessarily having to choose their technological architecture.

That assumption is becoming less secure. The United States and China are developing competing technology ecosystems. Reuters reported earlier this month that Washington was preparing to encourage countries taking part in its Pax Silica initiative to choose between competing US and Chinese AI frameworks. Meanwhile, China is expanding AI engagement with Southeast Asia through training, infrastructure, research and industrial applications.

Participants pose for a photo at the inaugural Pax Silica summit in Washington on December 12, 2025. Photo: Getty Images

For Asean, technological pluralism is essential. It must cooperate with multiple powers while avoiding dependence on any single AI ecosystem or strategic alignment.

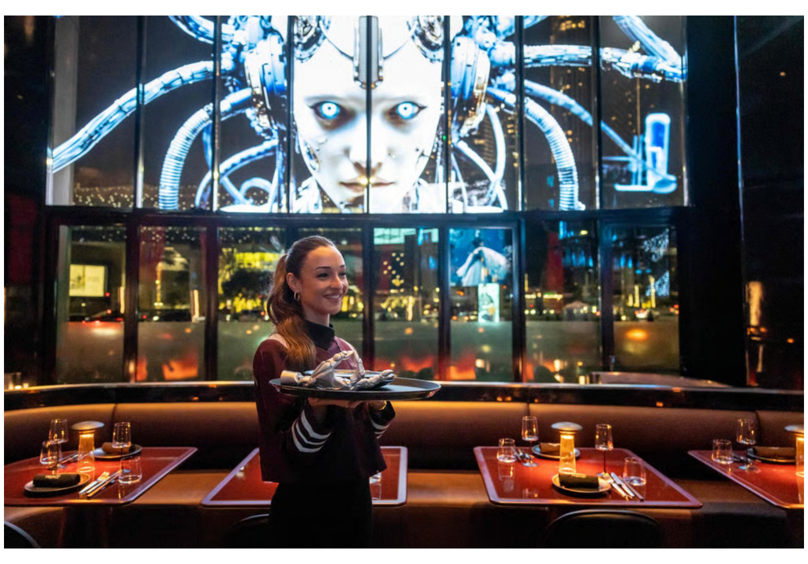
This is where the idea of intelligence dependency becomes important. Technological dependency means relying on another country for technology, but intelligence dependency goes further. It means relying on external systems to process information, predict outcomes and assist in decisions that increasingly affect how societies function. Whoever controls those systems possesses a form of structural power that is less visible than military coercion but is more deeply embedded in everyday governance.

Therefore, Asean needs to move from AI adoption to intelligence resilience. This does not mean trying to manufacture every chip or build a frontier model in every member state. That is unrealistic. Instead, strategic autonomy means maintaining alternatives: regional computing capacity, trusted data systems, multilingual AI models, cybersecurity capabilities, local technical expertise and interoperable standards.

China-Asean cooperation could become particularly important. The inauguration of the China-Asean Artificial Intelligence Industry Innovation Centre in Beijing in May marked a further institutionalisation of cooperation in AI development and applications. China's strengths in manufacturing, digital infrastructure and large-scale AI deployment offer Asean valuable opportunities, but the objective should not be to replace dependence on American technology with dependence on Chinese technology.

China could support Asean's AI capacity through research, training, infrastructure and technology transfer, fostering mutual interdependence rather than technological patronage.

The same logic applies to the wider Islamic world, particularly the Gulf. The US, China, the Gulf and Asean possess complementary strengths and could become centres of strategic agency rather than consumers of competing technological ecosystems.



A waitress holds a serving tray while standing inside Woohoo, an AI-powered restaurant in Dubai, on November 12, 2025. Photo: AFP

However, there is a physical constraint that policymakers cannot ignore. AI requires enormous quantities of electricity, cooling and infrastructure. Southeast Asia's data centre boom is already raising concerns over water and energy consumption.

For Gulf countries, AI development depends on balancing technological capacity with sustainable energy and water resources to avoid new vulnerabilities.

Asean should respond through an AI strategic resilience framework built around four pillars: computing capacity, data capacity, human capacity and institutional capacity. It should support regional research centres, trusted data-sharing mechanisms, independent testing of high-impact AI systems and common standards for AI infrastructure.

Major foreign data centre investments should also be assessed against energy, water, cybersecurity and local skills-development requirements. The strategic objective should be simple: open to all, dependent on none.

The emerging contest is not simply a race between American and Chinese AI. It is a contest over who controls the infrastructure through which societies think, calculate and make decisions. Asean and the Islamic world should not become passive arenas in that competition. They possess too much capital, energy, human talent and market power to remain mere consumers.

The coming decade will determine whether Asean remains an AI consumer or gains the technological agency to shape the emerging global order. The choice is not between technological dominance and isolation but between strategic dependence and strategic agency.

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