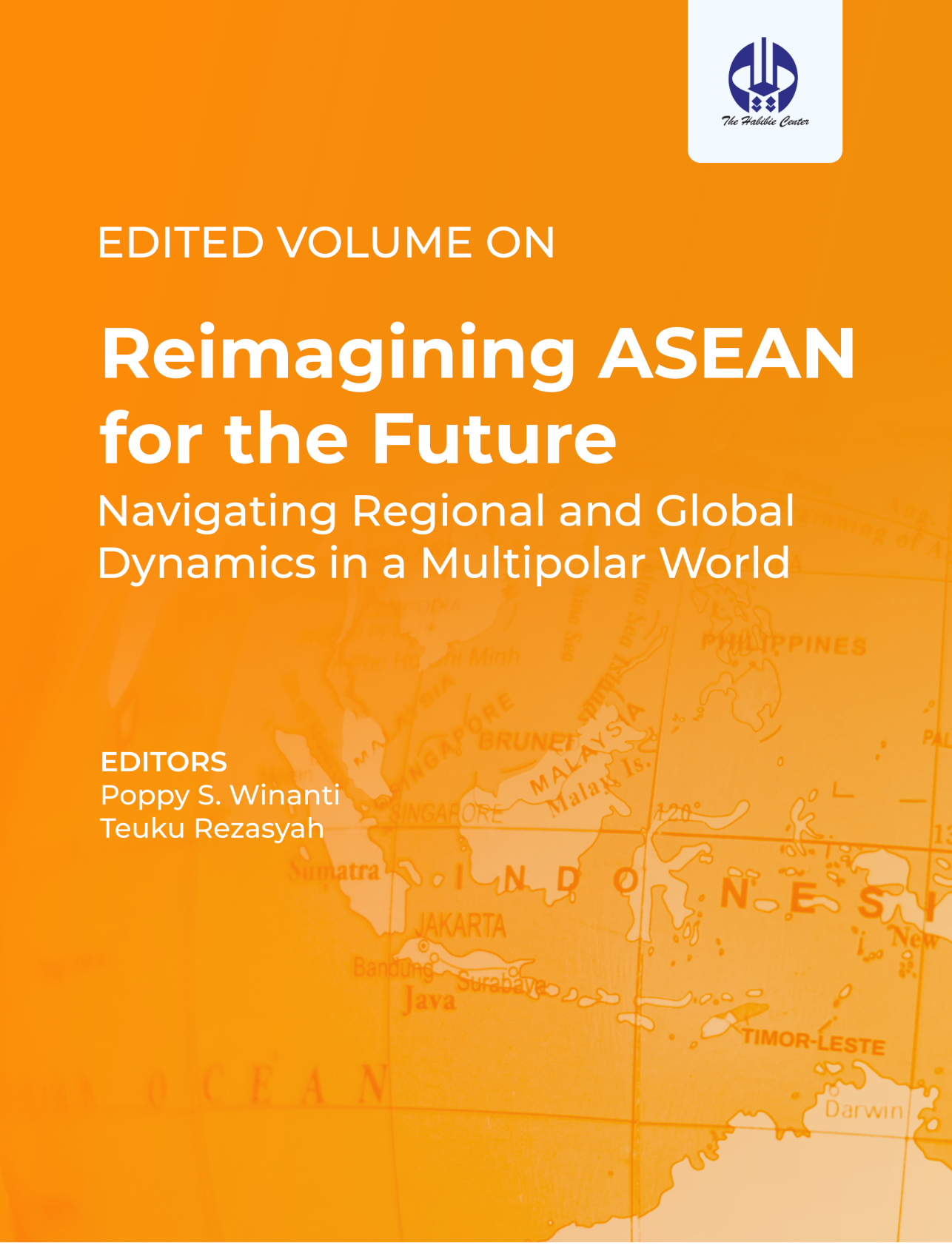
The Habibie Center

EDITED VOLUME ON

Reimagining ASEAN for the Future

Navigating Regional and Global Dynamics in a Multipolar World



EDITORS
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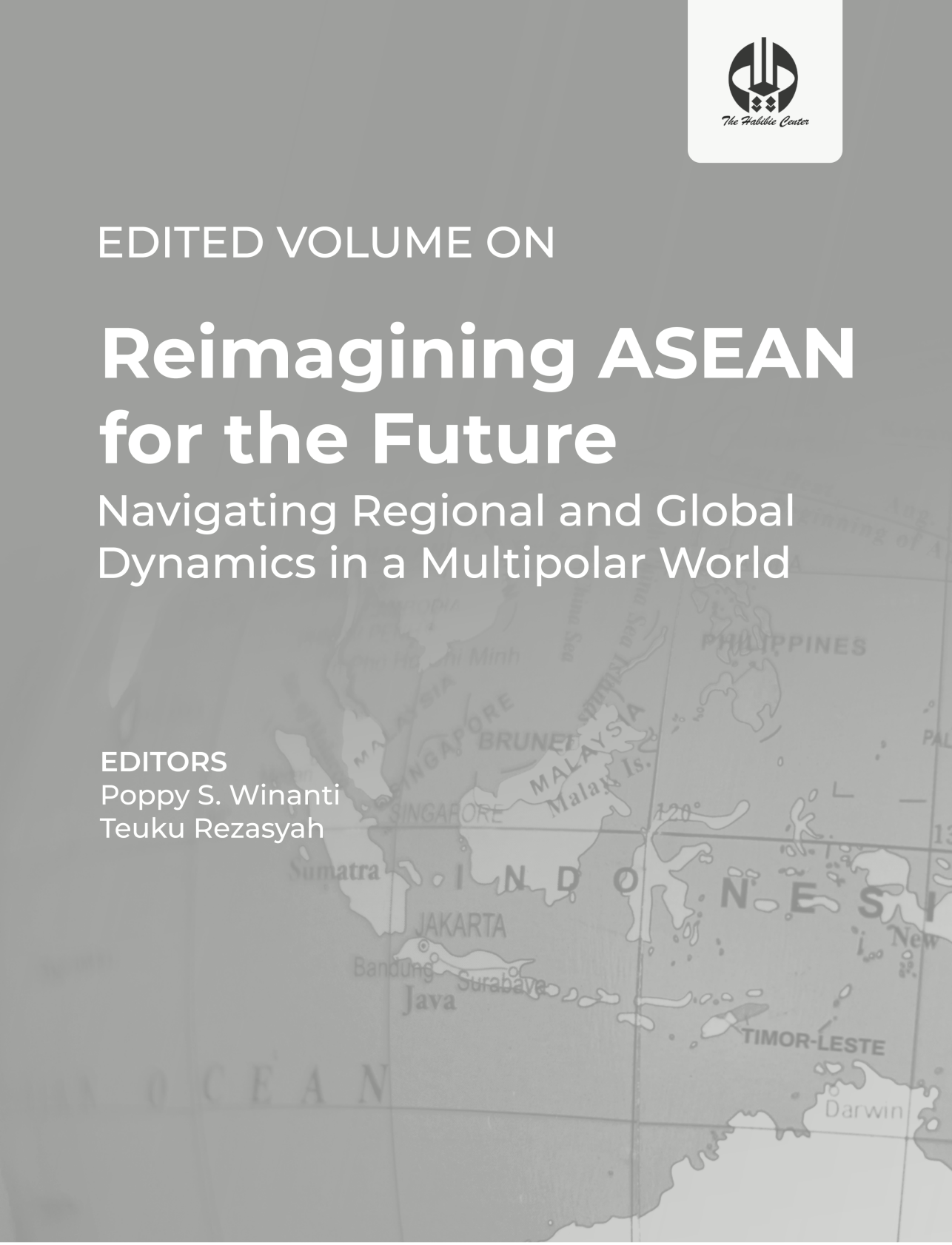

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Navigating Regional and Global Dynamics in a Multipolar World

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Acknowledgments

This book marks the second edited volume published by The Habibie Center, which features selected chapters from scholars around the region. It should be seen as a vital endeavor of providing an evidence-based reference and enriching our understanding of ASEAN's position and its relevance in navigating regional and global dynamics in a multipolar world. This year's edited volume coincides with some of the key developments and breakthroughs during the 2025 Malaysia's ASEAN Chairmanship, including the adoption of the ASEAN Community Vision (ACV) 2045: Our Shared Future which envisions a "resilient, innovative, dynamic and people centred ASEAN". Through its new ACV 2045, ASEAN not only recognizes the urgency to strategically navigate current regional security and economic dynamics, but also anticipates future and emerging megatrends in order to seize the opportunities, tackle challenges, and strengthen its global competitiveness.

In response to the global shifts which continue to be more apparent and volatile within an increasingly multipolar world, ASEAN's future relevance hinges on its ability to maintain ASEAN Centrality anchored in its established mechanisms, mainly Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), and the ASEAN community documents as I previously mentioned. In addition, ASEAN's ability to maintain its strategic positioning within the international theater is necessary to safeguard its future relevance by defining coherent regional interests without being dictated by external hegemonic power(s).

Aligned with the ACV 2045, the second edited volume produced by The Habibie Center, also highlights some important points, addressing diverse and rich topics by the authors. A broad spectrum of perspectives and expertise, ranging from the evolution of ASEAN Community Vision, ASEAN institutionalism, dynamics of great-power rivalries and minilateralism, ASEAN strategic relations with its partners, labor mobility and trafficking, cyber-scam, supply chain weaponization, to cross-strait relations. Together, these chapters offer valuable insights into how ASEAN can adapt, innovate, and assert its strategic position within the evolving regional architecture.

Finally, as time has been dedicated to completing this edited volume, there were invaluable opportunities to get to know the many people who have helped make this research work with their invaluable ideas, time, and support within the process.

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to all parties for their support thus this edited volume can be produced, especially to all authors of the volume, editors, colleagues, and network for your articles and constructive feedback. My heartfelt appreciation goes to the ASEAN Studies Program's research team, Marina Ika Sari, Roihanatul Maziyah, Naufal Bagus Pratama, and Indira Utomo.

May this edited volume serve as a useful contribution for policymakers, scholars, and practitioners seeking to understand and shape ASEAN's evolving role in a complex multipolar world.

Sincerely Yours,

Mohammad Hasan Ansori, Ph.D.
Executive Director

List Of Abbreviations

ACAFTA	ASEAN-Canada Free Trade Agreement
ACFTA	ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement
ACTIP	ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children
ACV	ASEAN Community Vision
ADB	Asian Development Bank
ADBI	Asian Development Bank Institute
ADIP	ASEAN Digital Innovation Programme
ADM 2025	ASEAN Digital Masterplan 2025
ADMM	ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting
ADMM–Plus	ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus
AEC	ASEAN Economic Community
AEP	Act East Policy
AHKFTA	ASEAN-Hong Kong Free Trade Agreement
AHN	ASEAN Highway Network
AHRD	ASEAN Human Rights Declaration
AIF	ASEAN Infrastructure Fund
AIIB	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
AIME	ASEAN-India Maritime Exercise
AIMS	ASEAN International Mobility for Students
AIPF	ASEAN Indo-Pacific Forum
AITGA	ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement
AMMTC	ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime
AMS	ASEAN Member States
ANA	Active non-alignment
AOIP	ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific
APA-TIP	ASEAN Plan of Action to Combat Trafficking in Persons
APEC	Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation
APG	Asia/Pacific Group on Money Laundering
APG	ASEAN Power Grid
APHR	ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights
APSC	ASEAN Political-Security Community
ARF	ASEAN Regional Forum
ASCC	ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ASEAN-ACT	ASEAN–Australia Counter Trafficking
ASEANAPOL	ASEAN Chiefs of National Police
ASEC	ASEAN Secretariat
ATIGA	ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement
ATISA	ASEAN Trade in Services Agreement
AUKUS	Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States

AYDA	ASEAN Youth for Digital Action
AYVP	ASEAN Youth Volunteer Programme
BAKIN	*Badan Koordinasi Intelijen* (State Intelligence Coordination Agency)
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa
BRICS+	Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa Plus
CCTV	Closed-Circuit Television
CNN	Cable News Network
CoC	Code of Conduct
COE	Certificate of Eligibility
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease of 2019
CPTPP	Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership
DEFA	Digital Economy Framework Agreement
DKBA	Democratic Karen Benevolent Army
EAS	East Asia Summit
ECTEG	European Cybercrime Training and Education Group
EIR	Emancipatory International Relations
ENISA	European Union Agency for Cybersecurity
EU	European Union
EUROPOL / EC3	European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation/ European Cybercrime Centre
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FOIP	Free and Open Indo-Pacific
FPDA	Five Power Defense Agreement
FTA	Free Trade Agreement
FYP	Five-Year Plan *(if relevant; appears contextually in planning references)*
G20	Group of Twenty
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
IDR	Indonesian Rupiah
IETO	Indonesian Economic and Trade Office
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMTTH	India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IPE	International Political Economy
IPEF	Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity
IPOI	India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative
IPS	International Political Sociology
IR	International Relations

ISA	Immigration Services Agency (of Japan)
IT	Information Technology
JPY	Japanese Yen
KAP	Knowledge-Attitude-Practice
KBGF	Karen Border Guard Force
KDEI	*Kantor Dagang dan Ekonomi Indonesia* (Indonesian Economic and Trade Office)
LPI	Logistic Performance Index
MECO	Manila Economic and Cultural Office
MEXT	Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (Japan)
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MFTC	Malaysian Friendship and Trade Centre
MIT	Malaysia-Indonesia-Thailand
MLA	Mutual Legal Assistance
MLHW	Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (Japan)
MNDAA	Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army
MOC / MOCs	Memorandum(s) of Cooperation
MOFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MPAC	Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity
MSMEs	Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises
NAM	Non-Aligned Movement
NAPs	National Action Plans
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OCAC	Overseas Community Affairs Council
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
OIC	Organization of Islamic Cooperation
OTIT	Organization for Technical Intern Training
P2P	People-to-people
PDR	People's Democratic Republic (as in Lao PDR)
PQI	Partnership for Quality Infrastructure
PRC	People's Republic of China
QIP	Quick Impact Projects
QIR	Quantum International Relations
QUAD	Quadrilateral Security Dialogue
RCEP	Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership
REEs	Rare Earth Elements
RER	Rare Element Resources
RIHED	Regional Centre for Higher Education and Development
ROC	Republic of China
ROK	Republic of Korea

RPA	Regional Plan of Action
SCS	South China Sea
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal(s)
SEANWFZ	Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon Free Zone
SEAMEO	Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization
SEATO	South East Asia Treaty Organization
SEZ	Special Economic Zone
SIMBEX	Singapore-India Maritime Bilateral Exercise
SKRL	Singapore-Kunming Rail Link
SMEs	Small and Medium Enterprises
SSW	Specified Skilled Worker
TAC	Treaty of Amity and Cooperation
TAGP	Trans-ASEAN Gas Pipeline
TECO	Taiwan Economic and Cultural Office
TITP	Technical Intern Training Program
TTCO	Thailand Trade and Economic Office
UN	United Nations
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution
US	United States
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USD	United States Dollar
VND	Vietnamese Dong
VNR	Voluntary National Reviews
VOA	Voice of America
WPS	Women, Peace, and Security
ZOPFAN	Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1

The 2025 Malaysia's ASEAN Chairmanship yielded the adoption of the ASEAN Community Vision (ACV) 2045: Our Shared Future, which brings the overarching theme of "Resilient, Innovative, Dynamic, and People-Centred ASEAN". The ACV 2045 marks the third iteration in the evolution of the ASEAN Community and serves as a long-term strategic blueprint to guide the regional grouping's trajectory in navigating an increasingly multipolar world over the next two decades. The chapter explores how the newly adopted ACV 2045 could assist ASEAN in navigating multipolarity by firstly examining the achievements and shortcomings of the preceding ACV 2025, through its three pillars: political-security, economic, and socio-cultural communities, along with the ASEAN connectivity agenda. While the growing multipolarity presents ASEAN with opportunities, the chapter also argues that ASEAN still needs to overcome inherent challenges by strengthening its institutional design, internal cohesion, and promoting inclusivity to safeguard its centrality and relevance.

Chapter 2

This chapter examines ASEAN's evolving role in reaffirming its centrality amid intensifying great power rivalries and proliferating minilateral frameworks in the Indo-Pacific. Drawing on semi-structured elite interviews, it argues that ASEAN's convening power, its ability to organize dialogue and shape regional narratives, constitutes a deliberate and performative form of quiet authority. Through an International Political Sociology (IPS) lens, the chapter interprets ASEAN's diplomatic practices, institutional rituals, and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) as symbolic strategies that sustain an inclusive, rules-based order. Rather than a sign of weakness, ASEAN's proceduralism and narrative control reflect a distinct mode of agency grounded in continuity, consensus, and non-alignment. The analysis concludes that ASEAN's future relevance lies not in mimicking great power logic but in reinforcing its convening identity as a normative and stabilizing force within an increasingly fragmented Indo-Pacific architecture.

Chapter 3

Amid escalating geopolitical tensions in the Indo-Pacific, marked by the weaponization of trade and supply chains, ASEAN is caught in the US-China rivalry. This chapter critically analyses ASEAN's evolving role in regional economic security, arguing it must shift from a reactive stance to proactive normative and strategic leadership. The core argument defines ASEAN's dual mandate there are acting as a normative architect to build internal economic coherence, and as a strategic mediator to mitigate external economic coercion. Desk-based research and institutional analysis show that while ASEAN has latent capacities and diplomatic leverage, these are weakened by internal divisions and a lack of cohesive strategic coordination. Without addressing these structural weaknesses, ASEAN risks marginalization. To counter this, the chapter proposes three key steps: establishing a coordinated ASEAN Supply Chain Strategic Management Framework; adopting formal strategic neutrality declarations; institutionalizing regional mechanisms for trade and supply chain dispute mediation. These steps aim to

reinforce ASEAN centrality, enhance resilience, and mitigate systemic risks from economic securitization and great power contestation.

Chapter 4

In the context of Southeast Asia's digital transformation, cyber scams and labor trafficking have become increasingly interconnected. Drawing on qualitative policy analysis, this chapter examines how transnational scam operations exploit existing national and regional governance in facilitating online scams and cross-border trafficking in the Mekong sub-region. The study argues that ASEAN's digital governance has prioritized economic growth over human rights and security, leaving thousands vulnerable to exploitation and violence. The chapter proposes a framework focused on human-rights-based digital governance with lessons from the European Union, highlighting how binding legal instruments and institutional integrity at the regional level can strengthen collective regional responses. Most importantly, an inclusive and people-centered approach that engages all stakeholders is essential to build a safer digital future for ASEAN.

Chapter 5

Amid Japan's intensified recruitment of foreign labor to counter demographic decline, ASEAN's evolving labor mobility—particularly from Indonesia, the Philippines, and Myanmar—demands critical scholarly attention. This study analyzes the dynamics and structural challenges of these migration flows through the lenses of migrant infrastructure theory, dependency theory, and circular migration. Integrating policy analysis, multi-sited fieldwork, and interviews with migrants and stakeholders, the study elucidates how institutional actors, social networks, and commercial intermediaries simultaneously facilitate mobility and reproduce asymmetrical dependencies between sending countries and Japan. Recruitment agencies and training centers emerge as key yet ambivalent actors that expand access while exacerbating financial vulnerability, especially among Myanmar migrants. In contrast, Filipino and Indonesian workers navigate more stable, institutionalized channels but continue to face precarity and limited upward mobility under Japan's Specified Skilled Worker program. The findings underscore ASEAN's intra-regional heterogeneity and advance the potential of circular migration and regional policy harmonization for equitable, sustainable labor mobility.

Chapter 6

This chapter discusses how ASEAN's future integration after 2025 depends increasingly on the participation and mobility of its youth. It highlights that young people, through student exchanges, volunteer projects, and digital collaborations, are becoming key drivers of regional identity and belonging. Drawing from a constructivist perspective, the discussion shows how initiatives such as ASEAN International Mobility for Students (AIMS), ASEAN Youth Volunteer Programme (AYVP), and ASEAN Youth for Digital Action (AYDA) help young people cultivate empathy, mutual understanding, and a shared sense of "ASEAN-ness" beyond state-led cooperation. At the same time, the chapter draws attention to persistent gaps in access, representation, and program continuity that limit youth inclusion, especially for those in rural

or marginalized contexts. It ultimately calls for ASEAN to move beyond symbolic engagement by embedding youth voices into policymaking and ensuring that regional programs remain inclusive, sustainable, and reflective of the diverse realities of its young citizens.

Chapter 7

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) serves as a gateway to India for the larger East Asian economic and security frameworks. Maritime tensions in the South China Sea and the increasing role of external players in regional security have put severe pressure on ASEAN centrality. In this context, this chapter explores evolving dynamics in India's strategic relations with ASEAN. As ASEAN aims to balance its strategic ties between increasingly assertive China and reengaging the US, New Delhi offers some alternative strategic options. To contribute to building the rules-based order in the region, India has been carefully nurturing its defense and maritime security cooperation with ASEAN member countries. While New Delhi aspires to be a meaningful strategic partner to ASEAN, its current capabilities, domestic and South Asian pressures, economic positioning, and slow-paced implementation of connectivity projects to link with ASEAN place certain limits. Nonetheless, amid the increasing trend of converging interests in maritime security, digital resilience, and economic diversification, India-ASEAN relations are expected to further rise in the coming years.

Chapter 8

This chapter examines ASEAN member states' positions on the Taiwan Strait through the framework of Quantum International Relations (QIR). While ASEAN officially supports the One China Policy, its member states maintain active yet informal relations with Taiwan, an increasingly significant economic and social partner. Traditional IR theories—realism, liberalism, and constructivism—struggle to explain this duality because they rely on fixed and binary assumptions. Applying QIR, particularly the concept of superposition, this study interprets ASEAN's simultaneous engagement with Beijing and Taipei as a form of quasi-superposition: politically, member states have "collapsed" toward Beijing through adherence to the One China Policy, yet economically and socially, they continue robust interactions with Taipei. Focusing on the ASEAN-5 (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand), the chapter argues that this dual stance reflects their skillful balancing act but remains vulnerable to future "measurements" that could collapse this delicate equilibrium into a more deterministic foreign policy posture.

Chapter 9

ASEAN aspires for continued relevance through its centrality, established mechanisms (Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, the ASEAN Community, and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific), as well as by adhering to principles (non-interference, non-alignment, and consensus-building). However, it seems to be sitting on the fence amid regional challenges, including the proliferation of minilateralism, tariff wars, tensions in the South China Sea, and the Myanmar

Crisis. The organization's mechanisms are constrained by the necessity of accommodating great powers, adhering to the lowest common denominator as well as hesitance in taking firms' stances. This chapter aims to re-imagine ASEAN's future relevance, by leveraging an emancipatory approach in international relations and utilize "Active Non Alignment" concept that argue ASEAN must transform itself to actively identify and participate in shaping regional dynamics, defining its interests without succumbing to hegemonic pressures, thereby asserting its relevance and centrality for the future.

Chapter 1

Looking Back to Look Ahead: Analyzing ASEAN Community Vision and Strategic Adaptation in a Multipolar World

Indira Utomo, Marina Ika Sari, Naufal Bagus Pratama, and Roihanatul Maziyah

Introduction

Since its establishment on August 8, 1967, ASEAN has undergone institutional development aimed at fostering a safe, peaceful, and prosperous region. At the 46th ASEAN Summit held in Kuala Lumpur on May 26, 2025, ASEAN leaders launched the "ASEAN Community Vision 2045: Our Shared Future", marking a significant new milestone in the bloc's regional integration efforts (ASEC, 2025a). The ASEAN Community Vision (ACV) 2045 is the third iteration in the evolution of the ASEAN Community, succeeding the ASEAN Vision 2020 and the ACV 2025, and serves as a long-term strategic blueprint to guide the bloc's trajectory over the next two decades (ASEC, 2025b).

The ACV 2045 comprises six core documents: (1) Kuala Lumpur Declaration on ASEAN 2045: Our Shared Future; (2) ACV 2045 "Resilient, Innovative, Dynamic, and People-Centred ASEAN"; (3) ASEAN Political-Security Community Strategic Plan; (4) ASEAN Economic Community Strategic Plan 2026-2030; (5) ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Strategic Plan; and (6) ASEAN Connectivity Strategic Plan (ASEC, 2025a). Each Strategic Plan outlines specific goals, targets, measures, and activities designed to achieve the stated objectives. As a 20-year roadmap, the Vision aims to strengthen the regional community-building agenda while providing strategic direction for planning and decision-making (ASEC, 2025b).

Under the theme "Resilient, Innovative, Dynamic, and People-Centred ASEAN," the Vision acknowledges 17 emerging global megatrends—ranging from peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific, great-power competition, digitalization, cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, supply chain resilience, climate change, pandemics, to aging populations (ASEC, 2025a). Compared to Vision 2025, the new document adopts a more expansive and outward-looking approach, incorporating evolving cross-pillar and cross-sectoral trends not previously addressed. In line with the "people-oriented" principle enshrined in the ASEAN Charter, the emphasis on the "people-centered" approach signals ASEAN's commitment to empowering the citizenry. It fosters bottom-up initiatives in the community-building process, moving beyond solely top-down methods.

In response to the global shift toward a multipolar world, characterized by multiple centers of power and influence, the ACV 2045 seeks to enhance the region's resilience and foster collective, efficient, effective, and innovative responses to emerging challenges. Given these developments, this chapter examines the ACV 2045, analyzing its key components to assess how ASEAN can adapt to a multipolar world. The chapter begins by evaluating the implementation of the preceding ACV 2025 through its three pillars: the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), and ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC), along with the ASEAN Connectivity agenda. Subsequently, it analyses the prospects and

challenges facing ASEAN in this era of multipolarity. Finally, the chapter concludes by offering strategic recommendations for ASEAN to position itself within this shifting global landscape while advancing regional interests.

From the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 toward 2045: A Lesson Learned

ASEAN Political-Security Community

The existence of the APSC pillar has contributed to maintaining regional peace and stability, preventing open conflicts among ASEAN Member States (AMS). ASEAN-led mechanisms facilitate defense and security cooperation among member states and dialogue partners through strategic forums such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM), and ADMM-Plus, as well as practical collaborations like the ASEAN Solidarity Exercise held from 19 to 23 September 2023 with and the 3rd ASEAN Multilateral Naval Exercise held from August 15 to 22, 2025. It is important to acknowledge the commendable progress made by the bloc, as the implementation of the APSC Blueprint 2025 has achieved 99.6 percent of its outlined action plans (Antara News, 2025). Nevertheless, this impressive statistic does not necessarily mean that ASEAN is free from shortcomings that still need to be addressed (Tempo, 2025).

Several key issues highlight both the achievements and gaps in the APSC Blueprint 2025's implementation, including the South China Sea (SCS) disputes, the Myanmar crisis, the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), and the ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on Women, Peace, and Security (RPA WPS). Regarding the SCS, Code of Conduct (CoC) negotiations have progressed slowly, though the third reading phase of the text has been completed (Jiangtao, 2025). On-the-ground tensions have escalated in recent years, with clashes between China and the Philippines in contested waters, including the entry of 200 Chinese vessels at Whitsun Reef in March 2021, and multiple ramming and water cannon attacks at Second Thomas and Scarborough Shoals from October to December 2023, as well as collisions in March 2024 (The Habibie Center, 2024; Al Jazeera, 2024). With the growing risks of violent flare-ups and personnel injuries, ASEAN priorities lie not only in expediting the CoC's finalization but also in ensuring compliance by all disputing parties.

Meanwhile, the Myanmar crisis remains a "thorn" for ASEAN, testing the bloc's credibility in the eyes of the international community in handling internal problems (Yuniarti, 2024). The 2021 coup in Myanmar has led to severe setbacks in democracy and human rights. ASEAN has undertaken various efforts to address the crisis, including the Five-Point Consensus, the appointment of a Special Envoy to Myanmar, and the establishment of a Troika mechanism. However, there has been no significant progress on the ground due to the lack of commitment from the military junta to implement these regional initiatives and inconsistent approaches from various ASEAN Chairmanships (Tene, 2024). Hence, divergent stances among AMS on the Myanmar issue have caused internal divisions, weakening organizational cohesion. Given the APSC's objectives—promoting political development based on democracy, the rule of law, good governance, and human rights—the Myanmar crisis has instead undermined democratization in Southeast Asia and tarnished the APSC's foundational goals (Yuniarti, 2024).

In the security sector, ASEAN has made a significant milestone and achievement in acknowledging the intersection of peace, security, and gender at the regional level by adopting the ASEAN RPA WPS in 2022. Aligned with the United Nations Security Council Resolution

(UNSCR) 1325, this document underscores the importance of women's active involvement in peace processes, protection in conflict situations, and gender-responsive recovery measures (ASEC, 2022). Despite its progressive framework, implementation at the national level remains sluggish. To date, only the Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Timor-Leste have adopted National Action Plans (NAPs) on WPS (UN Women, 2024), while others have yet to formalize such plans, though some have integrated WPS principles into national policies. The adoption of NAPs on WPS remains a challenge for the remaining AMS, as each has different policy priorities and domestic concerns.

Beyond ASEAN, the Indo-Pacific has emerged as a new regional architecture, prompting major (the US and China) and middle powers (India, Japan, Australia, South Korea) to incorporate Indo-Pacific strategies into their foreign policies. Amidst this evolving Indo-Pacific construct, ASEAN adopted the AOIP in 2019 to reaffirm its strategic role in shaping regional dynamics. The AOIP reflects ASEAN's collective stance on the Indo-Pacific discourse (Ramiz & Sari, 2024). In its development, ASEAN convened the ASEAN Indo-Pacific Forum (AIPF) and issued the Concept Paper on the Implementation of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific from a Defence Perspective to translate the Outlook into concrete cooperation. However, efforts to advance the AOIP have stagnated since its inception, with limited tangible actions to operationalize its provisions, resulting in minimal impact on the Indo-Pacific's strategic environment (Ramsi et al., 2023).

Among all the community pillars, the APSC stands out as the most challenging one, often slowing down the progress of the community-building agenda. This is because the pillar inherently covers high politics and sensitive issues, requiring AMS to engage in protracted and arduous negotiations to reach a consensus.

Regarding political-security matters in the ACV 2045, the APSC Strategic Plan outlines nine strategic goals accompanied by 178 strategic measures (ASEC, 2025b). Compared to the APSC Blueprint 2025, the Strategic Plan adopts a stronger and more comprehensive tone in responding to the evolving multipolar world. While the Strategic Plan reiterates several goals from the APSC Blueprint 2025, it introduces three key departures. First, concerning ASEAN's position on regional and global issues, the document emphasizes the need for a timely and coordinated response to global dynamics to maintain ASEAN's relevance and credibility on the international stage while steadfastly upholding its principles, values, and norms. Second, ASEAN not only supports the multilateral system but also reaffirms its role as the primary driving force in shaping the regional architecture and contributing to a rules-based international order. Finally, ASEAN also includes its efforts to implement the AOIP through concrete, practical projects and activities.

ASEAN Economic Community

Following the conclusion of the AEC Blueprint 2015-2025, ASEAN has made notable progress in expanding and deepening economic integration. While some have questioned its overall impact, arguing that AEC offers little substance beyond political rhetoric, others view AEC as a perpetual work in progress, acknowledging its achievements and relevance in the global economy (Maria et al., 2017; Tijaja et al., 2024).

Although often criticized for its low intra-regional trade, ASEAN has shown considerable improvement over the years. In 2022, intra-ASEAN trade reached 856.6 billion USD, more than

double the 353 billion USD in 2007 (Tijaja et al., 2024). Collectively, the region is also recognized as the world's fifth-largest economy, contributing 3.6 percent to global GDP in 2023, with a total output of 3.8 trillion USD (ASEC, 2024). Data from ASEC also shows that Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) inflows have seen a significant rise, growing from 129.9 billion USD in 2014 to 234 billion USD in 2023. Following the pandemic, the region demonstrated strong resilience, with FDI inflows surging by 71.8 percent in 2021. In 2023, ASEAN's FDI inflows increased by 1.8 percent, in contrast to the decline in global FDI of 1.8 percent (ASEC, 2024), highlighting the region's resilience and continued attractiveness as an investment destination.

The AEC has made further progress in its continued effort to deepen regional economic integration. This is exemplified by the full operationalization of the ASEAN Single Window in 2019, facilitating the electronic exchange of trade-related documents to streamline and expedite trade across the region. In addition, ASEAN has liberalized and deepened integration in the services sector through the entry into force of the ASEAN Trade in Services Agreement (ATISA) in 2021, offering a more transparent and rules-based environment for trade in services. ASEAN has also agreed to upgrade the ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement (ATIGA) to establish a more comprehensive and modernized framework, introducing stronger commitments to enhance the region's competitiveness. Another important breakthrough is the launch of negotiations for the Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA) in 2023. The framework aims to harmonize, collaborate, and establish a rules-based digital ecosystem for ASEAN, enabling the region to tap into the vast economic potential of the growing digital economy. This demonstrates AEC's continued commitment and long-term vision to position ASEAN as the epicenter of growth, building a more integrated single market, enhancing global competitiveness, strengthening economic and financial resilience, and establishing itself as an integral part of the global supply chain.

ASEAN has also made significant progress in expanding external relations. Most notably, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) signed in 2020. It covers approximately 30 percent of global GDP and population, making it the largest free trade agreement (FTA) in the world. By 2030, RCEP is projected to increase the member economies' income by 0.6 percent and generate an additional 2.8 million jobs across the region, further reinforcing ASEAN centrality and strengthening the region's position as a key production hub (Tijaja et al., 2024). ASEAN has also worked to upgrade and explore other economic partnerships, including the upgrade of the ASEAN-China FTA (ACFTA), the signing of the ASEAN-Hong Kong FTA (AHKFTA), and the ongoing negotiations for the ASEAN-Canada FTA (ACAFTA). This highlights ASEAN's appeal and influence in the global economy, driven by its market size and economic potential. However, the effectiveness of these FTAs remains uncertain despite the success and development ASEAN has achieved thus far.

ASEAN still has gaps and shortcomings that need to be addressed in its post-2025 strategic plan. A commonly highlighted criticism is ASEAN's persistent low level of intra-regional trade. In 2023, intra-ASEAN trade accounted for only 21.5 percent of the region's total trade (ASEC, 2024). While this still constitutes the region's largest share of trade, it pales in comparison to other intra-regional trade, such as the European Union (EU), which hovers around 60 percent (Tijaja et al., 2024). ASEAN's low intra-regional trade can be attributed to prevailing non-tariff barriers, similarities in commodities and factor endowments, and inadequate logistics and institutional support (Cuyvers, 2025; Saptowalyono & Anwar, 2023). Although

this may appear to be a significant shortcoming for ASEAN, it actually reflects ASEAN's outward-looking approach rather than the EU's more inward-looking one, which emphasizes ASEAN's prioritization of multilateralism and global economic integration through extensive engagements and trade agreements with its external partners (Hill & Menon, 2014).

Amidst rising global uncertainties and waning trust in multilateralism, ASEAN continues to champion open regionalism while also recognizing the need to strengthen internal cohesion by deepening its regional integration, which includes enhancing market and investment interconnectedness among AMS, strengthening its role as a production hub by fostering complementarity and addressing overlaps in production and commodities, and narrowing the development gap. This has been a central focus of the AEC Strategic Plan 2026-2030 under the new ACV 2045, along with other key priorities, such as broadened strategic partnerships, adoption of emerging technologies, sustainability-driven initiatives, and inclusive economic participation. In total, the document contains six strategic goals and 192 strategic measures designed to better navigate the upcoming challenges and megatrends. The new strategic plan is expected to be agile and responsive, enabling it as a guiding document to help ASEAN balance its ambition and pragmatism.

ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community

The ASCC blueprint 2025 serves as an instrument to foster dialogues and promote regional cooperation between AMS and across its five strategic characteristics: engaging and benefiting the people, inclusivity, sustainability, resilience, and dynamism (ASEC, 2016c). Within the last decade, the ASCC has made significant progress with around 103 Declarations adopted in advancing human development, social welfare, and regional identity, although there is still much that remains to be achieved (Phantavong, 2024). AMS showed an increase in the Human Development Index for the past decades. Yet, the number still varies across AMS, with Singapore (0,946) and Brunei Darussalam (0,837) as the highest, whereas Myanmar (0,609) and Cambodia (0,606) are the lowest (Putri, 2024).

Many successful initiatives continue to play a key role in enabling the smooth mobility of skilled workers across ASEAN and the development of human capital (Roger, 2024). ASCC also shared political commitment amongst AMS to uphold the rights of migrant workers, and to promote their fair treatment, protection, and welfare. These efforts also focus on promoting accessible infrastructure, inclusive education, employment opportunities, and participation in political and public life that encourages the participation of persons with disabilities in policy planning and decision-making processes through several initiatives. However, challenges brought by rapid digitalization have created a digital divide that exacerbates disparities in educational quality (Das, 2022).

AMS also still lacks a comprehensive and universal social protection system, particularly in the informal sector, which makes up a large portion of the workforce. In the health sector, a significant gap in the Universal Health Coverage Index still prevails, ranging from scores of 52 to 89 among AMS in 2021, while a shortage in workforce and healthcare infrastructure also remains an issue (ASEC, 2024). ASEAN demonstrated resilience in its efforts to mitigate the COVID-19 outbreak. ASEAN acted swiftly and quickly mobilized through established channels to assess the situation with The ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework and the COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund served as the most influential initiatives. However, the

pandemic also revealed the serious weakness in ASEAN's readiness and response to shocks, as many AMS lacked emergency unemployment support, food assistance, and healthcare access (ASEC, 2020).

ASEAN reaffirmed its commitment through several initiatives to the efforts on gender mainstreaming and social inclusion that sets the normative foundation for political commitment to gender equality ensuring that gender equality is embedded across policy and program cycles, and provides implementation tools and sector-specific activities to advance women's empowerment, to ensure that women and girls are not left behind. Most of the AMS have achieved gender parity in primary and secondary school enrolment. The data shows that women's labor force participation is 56 percent, with 21 percent of women serving in the national parliament, 22 percent in the local government, 32 percent of women in managerial positions, and 48 percent of researchers are women across AMS (ASEC, 2023). Given the numbers above, women are still considered underrepresented in political decision-making, peacebuilding, and executive leadership roles. Despite the efforts, many AMS still struggle to integrate these agendas into their national policies effectively, largely due to competing national priorities, weak institutions, limited funding, deep-rooted cultural norms, and governance issues. (ASEC, 2022).

With the introduction of the ACV 2045, it addresses the gaps within the previous Blueprint through the 12 new comprehensive strategic directions. The new Strategic Plan aims to make ASEAN more responsive and meaningful to the lives of Southeast Asians by bridging digital access gaps–caused by national governments uneven investment and prioritization–improving job opportunities, enhancing healthcare services, and advancing the empowerment of women and youth (Enriquez, 2025). A greater commitment to gender-responsive policies, more space for civil society, and youth engagement are further taken into consideration. Moving forward, ACV 2045 not only complements but also strengthens ASCC's role in shaping a cohesive and people-centered ASEAN Community.

ASEAN Connectivity

ASEAN envisions that a massive and integrated infrastructure development could harmoniously tie the geographically fragmented region, which would help realize the ASEAN Community. In pursuit of this vision, jumpstarted by an ASEAN leaders meeting in 2009, the bloc adopted the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) 2010. It listed 125 initiatives for the implementation period of 2011-2015, including ambitious cross-border mega-infrastructure projects, such as the completion of the ASEAN Highway Network (AHN), the Singapore-Kunming Rail Link (SKRL), and the development of regional energy infrastructures—the ASEAN Power Grid (APG) and Trans-ASEAN Gas Pipeline (TAGP). Initiatives from existing sub-regional arrangements were pursued in parallel with the ASEAN Connectivity agenda (ADB, 2023), such as the Greater Mekong Subregion and the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle. The MPAC 2010 was later renewed through the adoption of the MPAC 2025 covering the period of 2016-2025. Both MPACs have served as strategic blueprints for enabling the seamless movement of people, goods, services, and capital across AMS and beyond.

The ASEAN Connectivity agenda serves dual purposes—guiding development efforts among AMS and providing a framework for external partners to mobilize resources (Mueller, 2019a). In connection to ASEAN's three pillars, rather than functioning as a standalone structure, it

acts as a backbone supporting the three pillars of the ASEAN Community and the regional integration process. To this end, the document drafters adopt a broader definition of connectivity, encompassing three core elements: physical connectivity, institutional linkages, and people-to-people (P2P) mobility. This chapter focuses on physical connectivity, as it plays a direct role in facilitating trade, investment, and mobility. Additionally, as the MPAC 2025 is still ongoing at the time of writing, this study will first evaluate the implementation of the MPAC 2010.

The MPAC 2010 proved underwhelming. Only 31.2 percent (39 projects out of 125) of the planned initiatives were completed, 34 were removed, and 52 remained uncompleted. A few flagship projects achieved notable progress—the AHN expanded to 2,559 km, and nine APG power interconnection projects alongside 13 TAGP cross-border gas pipelines were completed (ASEC, 2016a; 2016b). However, other initiatives lagged considerably; for instance, the SKRL project advanced by only 6 km out of a planned 1,285 km (ASEC, 2016b). These shortfalls underscore the limitation of the MPAC 2010 and the need for a recalibrated strategy. Hence, the MPAC 2025 was designed with more attainable objectives as contended by its drafters.

The MPAC 2025 features five priorities—infrastructure, digitalization, logistics, regulatory excellence, and people mobility—underpinned by 14 strategic objectives and 15 initiatives. The reduction in the number of initiatives from 125 to 15 was rationalized due to resource constraints and the common assumption that successful strategies typically have fewer than six priority areas. However, the inclusion of 52 uncompleted initiatives like the SKRL to the MPAC 2025 has led to criticism that the ASEAN Connectivity agenda reflects a "wish-list character" (Mueller, 2020, p. 16). While it may be too soon to fully assess the overall performance of the MPAC 2025, as many projects are still ongoing at the time of writing, the pace of adoption and implementation has been uneven among the AMS (Abeysinghe et al., 2019).

Table 1.1 Comparison of the World Bank's 2023 and 2018 Logistic Performance Index and Infrastructure Scores for AMS

LPI 2023 Global Ranking	Country	LPI Score		Infrastructure	
		2023	2018	2023	2018
1	Singapore	4,3	4,0	4,6	4,06
26	Malaysia	3,6	3,22	3,6	3,15
34	Thailand	3,5	3,41	3,7	3,14
43	Vietnam	3,3	3,27	3,2	3,01
43	Philippines	3,3	2,90	3,2	2,73
61	Indonesia	3,0	3,15	2,9	2,90
115	Cambodia	2,4	2,58	2,1	2,14
115	Lao PDR	2,4	2,70	2,3	2,14
N/A	Myanmar*		2,30		1,99
N/A	Brunei Darussalam*		2,71		2,46
ASEAN Average		3,2	3,35	3,2	2,8
Global Average		3,1	3,08	3,2	3,09

Source: World Bank (2023, 2018)

The table shows that the logistic performance index (LPI) index (LPI) and its infrastructure development scores in the region are unevenly distributed, with Singapore ranking first globally, while Cambodia and Lao PDR rank 115th. Furthermore, the average LPI for AMS declined from 3.35 in 2018 to 3.1 in 2023, signalling regressions rather than improvements.

Both MPAC documents identified three barriers: financing, decision-making, and implementation. Among these, financing remains the most pressing. The MPAC 2025 estimated, ASEAN requires 3.3 trillion USD in infrastructure investment to fulfill its connectivity agenda, amounting to over 110 billion USD annually (ASEC, 2021). To address this, ASEAN established the ASEAN Infrastructure Fund (AIF), which has disbursed more than 460 million USD (MoF Malaysia, 2025). However, this contribution has been deemed marginal. In comparison, the ADB has contributed 15.4 billion USD for regional and sub-regional initiatives in 2006-2015 (Lynch et al., 2017), emphasising ASEAN's reliance on external partners for resource mobilization.

This dependence raises questions about ASEAN's centrality in the regional development narrative. The ASEAN Connectivity agenda has been complicated by external major power interests in the Indo-Pacific. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its capital resources, managed by the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), have been aggressively directed toward infrastructure development in the region. Although the MPAC projects were not officially branded as BRI projects, several AMS benefited indirectly through bilateral cooperation with China when their governments aligned national connectivity plans with the BRI. The SKRL project, linking mainland Southeast Asia with Kunming in Yunnan, exemplifies how China projects Southeast Asia into "a hub-and-spoke network" centered on Beijing (Mueller, 2019b, p. 192; Li & Lye, 2012). In response, other key powers have advanced their own Indo-Pacific connectivity agendas, seeking to counterbalance the BRI. Japan and the United States have promoted the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) initiative, which emphasizes joint efforts to enhance economic prosperity through improved connectivity. Japan has further linked this initiative to its Partnership for Quality Infrastructure (PQI), its central connectivity policy instrument (Gaens & Sinkkonen, 2023).

ASEAN has sought to avoid taking sides between major powers by issuing its own Indo-Pacific Outlook known as the AOIP. One of the cooperation areas under the AOIP is regional connectivity, which requires coherent visions and strategies for integrating development across the region. The Indo-Pacific Infrastructure and Connectivity Forum was then launched to launch cooperation in this regard. Thepchatree (cited in Yoshimatsu, 2023) argued that expanding and integrating the MPAC into a Master Plan on Indo-Pacific Connectivity is essential. Japan's success with the PQI in inspiring the G20 to adopt this principle offers a lesson for ASEAN in charting pathways to advance its connectivity agenda in the Indo-Pacific, thereby reinforcing its centrality (Yoshimatsu, 2023).

Most recently, ASEAN launched the ASEAN Connectivity Strategic Plan 2026–2035, embedded within the broader ACV 2045. This roadmap updates ASEAN's three-dimensional connectivity framework—physical, institutional, and P2P—and identifies six priority areas, including a new focus on smart and sustainable urban development. The plan also aligns ASEAN's agenda with seven global megatrends, notably urbanization, sustainability, and digital transformation. To remain resilient, adaptable, and future-oriented, ASEAN must integrate these megatrends into its connectivity agenda. This consideration is especially critical as several AMS comprise low-lying islands where climate change threatens agriculture, coastal communities, and, ultimately, survival.

Despite these well-crafted plan on paper, infrastructure investment in AMS remains low—averaging under 3 percent of GDP annually—which falls short of regional targets (Lynch et al., 2017). Under the ACV 2045, ASEAN will need at least 210 billion USD annually for 2023-2030, almost double the amount projected under the MPAC 2025. Bridging this gap demands not only external funding but also innovating financing mechanisms to attract private and institutional investors. Existing instruments such as the AIF must evolve in parallel with enhanced institutional capacity, governance, and effectiveness in project delivery.

ASEAN in a Multipolar World: Prospects and Challenges

The notion of multipolarity has regained its traction among academics and foreign policy analysts since the 2008 global financial crisis (Peters, 2022). Regardless of the consensus on whether we already have multiple poles or not, the world has already witnessed the recalibration of alliances and world architecture, as seen in the formation of AUKUS to strengthen Indo-Pacific security, the expansion of BRICS to include emerging powers like Saudi Arabia and Iran, and the revitalization of the QUAD, due to intensifying major power competitions to an unprecedented level, the trend of emerging smaller power groupings, and the rising geopolitical tension where the world no longer seems to be rule-based, but power-based order. Amidst this unpredictability, prospects and challenges arise for ASEAN in navigating the complexities of the circumstances.

ASEAN, as a regional organization, upholds its neutrality, centrality, and inclusivity. This allows the region to engage with more caution and flexibility, providing more room to engage with potential partners. Aforementioned, for the past decades, ASEAN has been successful in its integration efforts by leveraging its ASEAN-led mechanisms such as EAS, ADMM-Plus, and ARF. In light of this, ASEAN can reinforce its strategic relevance and role as a convening power in the Indo-Pacific by maintaining its centrality and autonomy. By acting as a bridge builder for dialogue between major and middle powers, ASEAN can mediate tensions and foster cooperation. The ongoing negotiation of DEFA can also be an opportunity for ASEAN to be the leading entity and shape emerging global norms, especially in digital governance. DEFA distinguishes itself as the first binding, region-wide agreement in the world dedicated solely to digital economy governance and is foreseen to mark a significant leap forward for ASEAN. It positions ASEAN as a strong, united voice in the global digital conversation, and therefore could solidify ASEAN as a norm setter by taking the lead (Hourn, 2025).

The current multipolar world also serves as the momentum for partnership diversification. The ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute's (2025) survey indicates ASEAN's potential in championing the global free trade agenda, ranking ahead of China in second place, and the US in third. Successful initiatives, such as the RCEP, serve as an important tool in an increasingly uncertain global environment as the world's largest free trade agreement that brings together AMS, China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand (Vlados, 2022). Additionally, ASEAN can capitalize on the increasing interest from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states in strengthening ties with it, considering that the GCC is ASEAN's seventh-largest trade partner, and both blocs have expressed interest in cooperating on transnational crime, cybercrime, and counterterrorism issues (ASEAN Secretariat, 2025). Leaders from both regions adopted a Joint Statement and a cooperation framework that sets the groundwork for enhancing and expanding their partnership to further deepen and elevate their collaboration. Furthermore, during the ASEAN-GCC-China Summit, the three parties aim to strengthen cooperation, which was conveyed in the joint statement.

ASEAN could also take this opportunity to increase its intra-regional trade and investment to accelerate regional integration. With the finalization of the ATIGA upgrade, which is scheduled to be signed on the sidelines of the upcoming 47th ASEAN Leaders' Summit, which is set to take place in October in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The ATIGA upgrade is an effort to expand beyond tariff reduction and includes digital trade and sustainability, making it more modern and inclusive. It simplifies rules of origin, enhances trade facilitation through digital systems, and strengthens measures for smoother trade. The upgrade positions ASEAN for more efficient, sustainable, and equitable regional trade. This will play a crucial role in driving ASEAN's long-term growth and enhancing its global competitiveness. Through ATIGA, member states have significantly reduced or eliminated import tariffs on intra-ASEAN trade (Bernama, 2025). These diversification efforts and stronger intra-ASEAN trade could strengthen ASEAN economic resilience by lowering dependency on a single economy and broadening its trade partnerships, and help cushion the region against the impacts of geopolitical tensions and disruptions in global trade.

The challenge for ASEAN's post-2025 trajectory essentially lies in three interrelated factors: cohesion, (in)flexibility, and implementation. Left unaddressed, these issues may significantly impede the realization of the objectives outlined in the strategic plans and ACV 2045. As the region navigates an increasingly multipolar and fragmented global landscape, effectively managing these challenges will be essential to safeguard ASEAN's relevance and centrality as it seeks to deepen regional integration.

On many occasions, ASEAN often struggles to maintain cohesion on certain issues within and beyond the region. For instance, the Myanmar crisis and the SCS dispute illustrate how AMS continues to lack a unified voice. This highlights ASEAN's persistent incoherence, especially on politically sensitive issues, where it repeatedly falls short of delivering concrete and impactful measures beyond formalities, such as joint statements, which tend to be normative rather than practical. While ASEAN has established the Troika to address regional security issues, including the Myanmar conflict, its adherence to consensus and non-interference, refraining from engaging in the domestic affairs of AMS, has limited its effectiveness. Divergent AMS positions and views towards the junta, as well as differing priorities and approaches under successive ASEAN chairs, have further complicated a unified response. The absence of influential leaders in recent years, who are capable and willing to assume a greater regional role to pursue actionable solutions, has also contributed to ASEAN's challenge in maintaining its unity and cohesion (Agussalim & Wicaksono, 2024). As the region increasingly faces the megatrends, these internal divisions may continue to hamper ASEAN's effectiveness. In a rapidly shifting global political landscape, disunity in ASEAN will not only risk diminishing ASEAN's relevance, but the growing multipolarity might complicate the task of achieving cohesion itself.

Another challenge for ASEAN lies in its (in)flexibility as a regional grouping. The flexibility embedded in ASEAN's consensus-based decision-making process allows all of AMS's interests to be considered, ensuring equality and preventing any member from being left behind. However, this institutional characteristic—often referred to as the "ASEAN way", which prioritizes a non-confrontational and cooperative approach—has also been the subject of many criticisms. It is frequently cited as a key factor behind the region's slow response to pressing issues and sluggish substantive progress. The ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute's (2025) survey echoes this view, with respondents identifying ASEAN's slow response and ineffectiveness as their top concern.

The ACV 2045 has introduced the new 'Rules of Procedure to Support Decision-Making Process at the ASEAN Summit' to address this issue. Yet, the new procedure still requires consensus to determine how decisions should be made in the absence of consensus, effectively rendering it futile (Mantong, 2025). In an increasingly complex and fast-changing global dynamics, along with declining trust in multilateralism, its inability to make timely and effective decisions may risk ASEAN falling behind and becoming irrelevant. Still, it raises a question: is the "ASEAN way", perhaps, the only thing that has allowed ASEAN to remain relatively integrated and resilient compared to other regionalisms?

The final and arguably most pressing challenge in ensuring that ASEAN remains forward-looking and agile lies in the implementation. Many scholars have long noted ASEAN's tendency to produce various official meetings and documents, yet the actual implementation of these commitments often falls short (Mantong, 2025; Tijaja et al., 2024). One contributing factor is the normative nature of the documents, which often lack concrete, actionable steps. Additionally, the monitoring and reporting mechanisms remain weak and insufficient. This criticism has also been acknowledged and voiced by AMS themselves. For instance, the foreign ministers of Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia have openly noted the slow progress and limited impact of the implementation of the Five-Point Consensus (Arshad, 2023; Tostevin, 2021). Beyond the adoption of regional initiatives, the monitoring and reporting mechanisms need to ensure that the regional commitments are translated and well-implemented at the national level (Hew & Tijaja, 2024). Moreover, as ASEAN expands its engagement across an increasingly wide range of issues, the depth and breadth of its agenda will continue to grow. However, this expansion is not matched by institutional support that remains limited, including the political will, funding, human resources, and institutional support in the ASEC. This necessitates ASEAN to identify its priorities, determining which agendas should be advanced and implemented first, posing yet another challenge for ASEAN.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The grand theme of 2025 Malaysia's Chairmanship, "inclusivity and sustainability," reflects a deeper commitment to regional unity amidst growing multipolarity (Lin et al., 2025), as demonstrated by two observed aspects. First, the formulation of the ACV 2025 followed a whole-community approach, emphasizing on a people-centered focus. The drafters also consulted with marginalized groups, including youth and women (Buensuceso, 2025). This bottom-up approach dodged long-standing accusations that ASEAN and its accompanying documents are elitist and exclusive—instead, it recognizes the importance of Southeast Asians as the heart of the ASEAN community-building process. Second, the acknowledgement and inclusion of 17 emerging megatrends affecting the region far into the next two decades underscores ASEAN's farsighted, outward-looking approach. It marked a shift in tone from the ACV 2025, as ASEAN is now operating in a more contested global order with mounting new challenges (Lin et al., 2025). However, the inclusion of the megatrends, which call for innovative responses, requires more than just a business-as-usual approach.

ASEAN has long been criticized for its institutional design—anchored in the consensus and non-interference principle. Yet, if ASEAN wants to meet its aspirations of becoming a nimble and resilient grouping, then its traditional approach to decision-making may need to be adaptive as well (Lin et al., 2025). The ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute's (2025) survey also revealed that if ASEAN wants to remain relevant and resilient, it cannot afford to be held hostage by

its institutional design, as evidenced by its incapability to manage long-standing issues in Myanmar and the SCS. It would be too naïve to assume that relying on the same method would yield different results. Previously, the Philippines had proposed a revision to the ASEAN Charter, which might affect Article 20 on ASEAN's decision-making process. Nonetheless, most AMS objected to the proposal, citing that the changes would be too radical (Buensuceso, 2025).

The Philippines' Chairmanship next year will serve as the first testing ground for manifesting the ACV 2045, including all the strategic plans. Sustained commitments, strong coordination, and inclusive engagement are key to solidifying ASEAN's relevance and resilience in achieving all the stipulated initiatives. To ensure that these initiatives are coherent with future aspirations, the ACV 2045 and its Strategic Plans will undergo a mid-term review, including the possibility for AMS to propose updates and changes as necessary. However, despite assurances from the document drafters, the region's capacity to chart pathways for addressing existing and future challenges remains subject to further scrutiny. ASEAN centrality may come under threat due to a confluence of internal and external factors. Internally, aforementioned challenges include cohesion, (in)flexibility, and implementation. Externally, powerful entities may attempt to influence or dictate the region's direction through their financial and political leverage.

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Chapter 2

ASEAN's Quiet Authority: A Strong Convening Power in the Indo-Pacific

Marie Kwon

Introduction: Competing Multilateralisms in the Indo-Pacific

Over the past two decades, the Indo-Pacific has taken the center stage in geopolitical analyses of Asia (López Nadal, 2025). What has come to be known as the Indo-Pacific era has ushered in an increasingly fragmented and competitive landscape of multilateralism across the Pacific and Indian Oceans, marked by intensifying great power rivalries and the proliferation of overlapping institutional architectures. For ASEAN, this evolving context presents not just a challenge of adaptation but a deeper risk: the potential erosion of its role as the cornerstone of Asian regionalism. Building from a distinction between multilateralism, often externally driven and strategic, and regionalism, as a normatively grounded internal project, this chapter contends that ASEAN's continued legitimacy in the Indo-Pacific hinges on its ability to reaffirm its centrality through convening power. Far from being a passive or default position, ASEAN's convening power constitutes a deliberate and performative form of quiet authority.

Theoretically, this chapter draws from the field of International Political Sociology, examining power as expressed through norms, narratives, and diplomatic rituals performed by the region's political elites. In doing so, it explores convening power not as material influence but as the capacity to shape discursive space, modulate diplomatic tempo, and maintain inclusive regional order. Empirically, the chapter draws from multi-sited interviews conducted in South Korea, Indonesia, and Singapore in 2024, offering insights into the continuities of ASEAN's evolving diplomatic identity.

The analysis unfolds in four parts: it begins by outlining the current strategic challenges ASEAN faces in the Indo-Pacific; it then reflects on how ASEAN Centrality has long constituted the institutional DNA of Southeast Asian regionalism and served as a blueprint for broader Asian regionalism; it proceeds with an assessment of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) and its implications for ASEAN's positioning in relation to its principle of centrality; and finally, it introduces an IPS-informed reading of ASEAN's underappreciated symbolic power. The chapter concludes by making the case that ASEAN's future relevance rests not in emulating great power logic but in embracing its role as a strategic convener within a competitive regional order.

ASEAN's Challenges in the Indo-Pacific

The emergence of the Indo-Pacific is notable because it has "allowed for an appreciation of the strong economic expansion of the region as well as a recognition of significant changes to Asia's security architecture" (Kwon, 2023). Nonetheless, the Indo-Pacific era, presents significant challenges to ASEAN's cohesion and strategic agency, as commentators have framed it (Mclain Gill, 2024). Central among these is the perception that ASEAN's institutional architecture lacks the coherence, coordination, and bureaucratic capacity required to sustain a genuinely multilateral Indo-Pacific order (Ha, 2022). The rise of minilateral groupings such

as the QUADrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), and AUKUS further compounds this challenge by sidelining ASEAN-centric frameworks and diluting the centrality it once commanded in the Asia-Pacific. Moreover, internal divisions within ASEAN, exemplified by contrasting positions between member states, underscore the difficulty of articulating a unified regional response to shifting geopolitical dynamics. The organization's struggles over the implementation of the Five-Point consensus in light of the Myanmar crisis is one of the latest examples of international rifts among ASEAN members (Jones, 2025; Tobing, 2018).

To fully grasp these contemporary pressures, it is crucial to situate ASEAN's role within its longer institutional and diplomatic trajectory. ASEAN's institutional capacity has long been debated and contested (Acharya, 2009a; Jetschke & Theiner, 2020; Stubbs, 2019; Sukma, 2015), however, its strong emphasis on *ASEAN* centrality has historically functioned as both a strategic tool and unifying normative belief that the "international order should not be guided by the raw struggle for power" (Al Banna Choiruzzad, 2025), and it continues to do so. In the Indo-Pacific context, the challenge for ASEAN is not simply external alignment, but the delicate act of resisting incorporation into US-led narratives while maintaining long-standing economic and political ties with China (Trần et al., 2025). Navigating this polarized context requires of the organization to reaffirm its centrality, not as rhetorical inertia, but as a principled strategic stance amid systemic flux. Since its creation, ASEAN has been "living with giants" in the words of Beeson (2013), and has always been shaped by the activities of more powerful actors (Emmerson, 2017; Yates, 2017). Therefore, the challenges tied to the Indo-Pacific are far from new to the region's political and strategic leaders.

In what follows, the chapter turns to unpack how this principle of centrality has been translated into the Indo-Pacific discourse, particularly through the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), and how it continues to shape ASEAN's diplomatic posture in the region.

Reframing ASEAN Centrality as Strategic Continuity in the Indo-Pacific

The publication of the AOIP in 2019 marked a pivotal moment in regional diplomacy, symbolically reaffirming ASEAN's relevance in a geopolitical context increasingly dominated by great power rivalry. ASEAN's Indo-Pacific positioning has consistently centered on reaffirming its principle of centrality as the normative anchor of regional diplomacy. One of the most common misconceptions is that ASEAN centrality is either a recent innovation or merely about ASEAN itself. As Amitav Acharya (2009a) reminds us, centrality is deeply rooted in earlier conceptualizations of ASEAN as the "leader," "driver," "institutional hub," or "nucleus" of regionalism. It is not only about ASEAN per se but about enabling and organizing regional processes in a manner that reflects Southeast Asian priorities. Moreover, centrality has always been co-constructed: ASEAN's very existence and function have evolved in dialogue with, and in response to, great power rivalry. Scholars such as Davies (Davies, 2018) have further emphasized how Southeast Asian states leverage institutional design and diplomatic narrative to exert quiet influence in a contested regional order. As one official interviewed for this study remarked, "great power rivalry has always been a part of the regional order," a view echoed across multiple conversations. In this light, ASEAN's adoption of the AOIP is not belated; rather, it is a continuation of ASEAN's longstanding strategy of cautious but deliberate engagement, reaffirming its role as a stabilizing regional convener.

The notion of *hedging* has experienced a resurgence in recent Indo-Pacific scholarship, often invoked to describe the strategic ambiguity and simultaneous engagement with competing great powers that characterizes the behavior of smaller and middle powers in the region. This strategic balancing act has frequently been interpreted through the lens of "hedging", a term typically used to describe the simultaneous pursuit of contradictory alignment behaviors to offset risks (Goh, 2005), and more formally defined by Haacke (2019) as an effort to manage strategic uncertainty without committing fully to any one bloc.

Yet this framing flattens the complexity of ASEAN's approach. Rather than a reactive or indecisive stance, ASEAN's strategy is better understood as grounded in a coherent diplomatic culture, defined by principles of non-alignment, consensus, and narrative control. This gradually emerged from what Amitav Acharya coined 'Asia's cognitive prior,' taking shape through the 1947 Asian Relations Conference and the 1955 Bandung Conference, which collectively contributed to the region-wide acceptance of 'non-intervention' as a core diplomatic principle (Acharya, 2009b). This is not a pitfall but rather a modality of agency, grounded in non-alignment and calibrated to preserve unity across political and developmental asymmetries through the ASEAN Way[1]. As highlighted in interviews with regional diplomats, ASEAN's diplomatic culture privileges continuity and predictability, qualities that serve as strategic assets amid the volatility of great power competition. Today this translates into a doctrine of practical multi-alignment in order to mitigate the risks (Fitriani, 2025).

In this light, ASEAN centrality is not an aspirational claim but a mode of practice—one that reaffirms ASEAN's role as the core of Asian regionalism. This commitment is evident in the AOIP, which "has been criticized for being yet another ineffectual ASEAN document. These criticisms, however, misunderstand the basis on which ASEAN operates" (Tsjeng & Bhubhindar, 2020). The next section explores how AOIP operates not as a grand strategy, but as an expression of ASEAN's convening identity within the broader Indo-Pacific imaginary.

Hedging and Theories of Southeast Asian Regionalism

The evolution of regional cooperation in Asia has long been shaped by a persistent duality: the quest for a shared regional identity, and the pragmatic imperative of managing asymmetrical inter-state relations. Within this enduring tension, two prominent strands of scholarship offer valuable insight into ASEAN's institutional resilience: Amitav Acharya's notion of constitutive regionalism and Jürgen Rüland's conceptualization of hedging utility.

Acharya's framework of constitutive regionalism advances a view of ASEAN not merely as a functional response to systemic pressures, but as an active constructor of regional order. For Acharya, ASEAN's endurance lies in its capacity to generate and diffuse norms, practices, and shared diplomatic culture—what has become known as the "ASEAN Way" "a code of conduct for inter-state behaviour as well as a decision-making process based on consultation and consensus. Rather than emulating Western institutional models, Southeast Asian regionalism, as Acharya argues, is embedded in the region's own post-colonial experiences and socio-political heterogeneity (Acharya, 2009b). ASEAN's centrality, in this light, derives from its normative agency: the ability to shape regional interaction not through enforcement, but through the socialization of expectations and the performative reproduction of diplomatic order.

[1] For more on the ASEAN Way, see, amongst others, Amitav Acharya (2014). Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order (3rd ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315796673

Rüland, by contrast, approached ASEAN's institutional architecture through the lens of hedging utility—a framework that foregrounds the strategic calculus behind regional cooperation. From this perspective, multilateral mechanisms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) or the East Asia Summit (EAS) function less as expressions of normative convergence and more as pragmatic tools for policy coordination, soft balancing, and collective bargaining *vis-à-vis* external powers. While Rüland acknowledges ASEAN's value in setting agendas and convening actors, he remains cautious about its depth of institutionalization, pointing to its limited coherence and uneven performance in crisis response (Rüland, 2010).

Taken together, these two perspectives offer complementary insights into ASEAN's political durability. ASEAN may be understood both as a constitutive force, shaping regional norms and identity, and as a strategic platform, providing member states with an instrument to navigate shifting power dynamics. Its capacity to oscillate between these roles, to adapt symbolically while operating instrumentally, has underpinned its relevance over time.

This institutional hybridity is especially salient in the context of the Indo-Pacific, where the emergence of competitive minilateral frameworks and renewed great power rivalry threatens to sideline inclusive regionalism. Yet ASEAN's persistence, as much of the scholarship suggests, is far from coincidental. It is a product of both historical embeddedness in the region's diplomatic culture (Ba, 2009) that enables it to remain central to, even if not dominant in, evolving regional architectures. Whether assessed through the lens of normative production or utilitarian flexibility, ASEAN's role in the Indo-Pacific continues to be defined not by its limitations, but by its capacity to endure and convene amid systemic flux.

International Political Sociology and the Study of ASEAN

International Political Sociology (IPS) emerged as a critical response to the limitations of mainstream International Relations, offering a lens attuned to the complexities of how the "international," the "political," and the "social" are co-constituted and continuously reshaped (Basaran et al., 2016; Guillaume & Bilgin, 2020). In contrast to International Relations (IR) theory, thanks to its sociological foundations, IPS emphasizes the relational and socially constructed nature of power: a shift from material capabilities to the shaping of norms, identities, and meaning.

In this context, convening power can be understood as a modality of agency that lies in the ability to organize discursive arenas, set the diplomatic tempo, and legitimate narratives over others. It foregrounds processes through which actors are positioned within broader regional frameworks, often not through coercion or hierarchy, but through the ritualization of roles and the diffusion of norms. This framework is especially generative for ASEAN studies, as it moves beyond classical geopolitical readings of the Indo-Pacific as a monolithic strategic space. Instead, it draws attention to the performative dimensions of regional diplomacy, where regional actors like ASEAN enact influence through symbolic practices and normative framing (Guzzini, 2016)

Through an IPS lens, ASEAN appears not as a reactive institutional actor but as a producer of regional diplomatic grammar, operating through a distinct mode of power that is quiet, performative, and ritualized. This approach sheds light on how ASEAN continuously constructs its centrality, not through directives, but through iterative acts of convening that produce a sense of regional rhythm and order. The following section develops this perspective by

turning to the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), interpreting it not as a conventional strategic blueprint, but as a symbolic articulation of ASEAN's performative centrality within a competitive regional architecture.

The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific as Symbolic Strategy

A key milestone for ASEAN in 2019 was the introduction of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), a non-binding document articulating the region's strategic vision. Initiated by Indonesia (Anwar, 2020), this outlook was officially presented by all ten ASEAN member states during the 34th ASEAN Summit held in Bangkok on June 23, 2019. "The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific envisages ASEAN Centrality as the underlying principle for promoting cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region, with ASEAN-led mechanisms, such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), as platforms for dialogue and implementation of the Indo–Pacific cooperation, while preserving their formats."(ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, 2019)

The adoption of the AOIP was widely perceived as a delayed and diluted response to the region's shifting geopolitical environment or "old wine in a new bottle" (Ha, 2019) and significantly lacking "actionable policy" (Jaknanihan, 2022). Yet such assessments often overlook the symbolic weight the document. As interviewees noted "the AOIP is in fact] not a strategy" and should be understood as such. The AOIP serves not as a blueprint for grand strategy, but as a discursive recentring of ASEAN within Indo-Pacific imaginaries through the principle of centrality. By advancing an alternative to more militarized, security-driven regional frameworks, such as those promoted, amongst others, by the United States, the QUAD countries, and AUKUS, the AOIP reasserts ASEAN's normative voice. It offers a counter-narrative to the assumption that ASEAN is merely a passive bystander or an institutional relic. The organization remains *de facto* central not simply because it has survived as an organization, but because it continues to provide an inclusive platform where regional order is debated, reframed, and cautiously steered.

Historically, the AOIP was crafted as a deliberate counterbalance to great power-driven visions of the Indo-Pacific. Rather than endorsing binary strategic alignments, it reflects ASEAN's long-standing commitment to multilateral dialogue, non-alignment, and sovereignty. In this sense, centrality must not be reduced to diplomatic fence-sitting or to the hedging posture often attributed to ASEAN. It is, instead, a strategic act of continuity, a commitment to maintaining an open, rules-based architecture in the face of growing polarization. While the AOIP may lack binding mechanisms or enforcement tools, its significance lies in its symbolic and normative function: it asserts ASEAN's authorship in shaping regional discourse.

Looking ahead, the Indo-Pacific era presents both substantial risks of having to face its sempiternal challenge and affirm its centrality (Kwon, 2024), and meaningful opportunities for ASEAN. The AOIP agenda offers a chance to not only reaffirm ASEAN's principles, but also to actively shape the future contours of Indo-Pacific cooperation. To this end, three key policy avenues should be prioritized. First, ASEAN members must work toward greater institutional coherence by ensuring deeper alignment among member states around the principles articulated in the AOIP and developing mechanisms for implementation and follow-through. Second, the organization should deepen and diversify its strategic partnerships with middle powers such as South Korea, Australia, and the European Union—actors whose visions of the Indo-Pacific often align with ASEAN's inclusive and rules-based approach. Third, ASEAN

should further institutionalize its convening role, using its position as a diplomatic hub to mediate tensions and promote confidence-building among rival powers. In embracing these paths, ASEAN can continue to exercise its quiet authority, not by replicating the logic of great powers, but by doubling down on its role as a regional steward and convener.

ASEAN's Convening Power: Quiet Authority in Practice

This approach is particularly fruitful for ASEAN studies, where power is often expressed not through material dominance but through symbolic authority, procedural norms, and narrative control. By foregrounding ASEAN's symbolic power, not as a tool of enforcement but as a mechanism for shaping regional diplomatic grammar, an IPS lens enables a deeper understanding of how ASEAN exerts agency in the Indo-Pacific. As Evelyn Goh (2011) has argued, ASEAN helps establish a "normative bargain" grounded in sovereignty, non-intervention, consensus, and informality—principles that collectively legitimize the voice of smaller states in regional security management (p. 373). It helps illuminate how ASEAN's identity and influence are constructed through ritualized summitry, the ASEAN Way or its consensus-driven processes, and its capacity to frame the terms of multilateral engagement in a way that is acceptable to great powers (Yates, 2017). As such, IPS offers a valuable methodological toolkit for analyzing ASEAN not only as an institutional actor but as a producer of the region's diplomatic language and norms amid the imperatives of geopolitical competition.

Building on the symbolic assertion of centrality in the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), it is essential to foreground the deeper logic that sustains ASEAN's regional role: its capacity for convening. In an era marked by the growing polarization of Asia's geopolitical landscape, fueled by China's expanding military and economic ambitions and the United States' increasingly adversarial rhetoric, ASEAN's convening power with normative leadership constitutes one of its most enduring power assets (Acharya, 2018). In this context of heightened rivalry and fractured trust, ASEAN provides a rare platform capable of hosting inclusive dialogue.

ASEAN operationalizes this symbolic power through key diplomatic mechanisms such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN Plus groupings, and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+) (Ba, 2017). These forums, while often overlooked for their lack of binding enforcement, enable ASEAN to embed major powers, many of them strategic competitors, into processes of dialogue and norm articulation. ASEAN rarely acts as a directive force; instead, it assumes the roles of venue provider, process owner, and agenda-shaper. This facilitative posture is not a sign of weakness but a strategic asset: it anchors competing actors within a normative framework and sustains a diplomatic rhythm distinct from that of great power posturing.

The regularity of summits and diplomatic gatherings provides what Davies describes as "the rituals and symbols which serve as a representation of a region at peace to citizens, other member-states and the wider international community" (2018). Far from being mere ceremonial formalities, these diplomatic performances operate as constitutive practices that actively reproduce ASEAN's symbolic power and normative authority. As Davies further observes, the rituals of ASEAN diplomacy are "endowed with performative value precisely because of their regularity and formalism". They enact, rather than simply reflect, regional order by staging consensus, continuity, and institutional coherence. Through this lens,

ASEAN's calendar of summits and ministerial meetings functions as a visual and procedural grammar of regionalism—where the act of convening itself becomes a strategic expression of unity, irrespective of tangible outcomes. These practices do not only project an image of regional cohesion outward; they also internalize shared norms by socializing member states into a distinct diplomatic culture. Central to this process is what Davies terms a "collective sense of temporality", wherein ASEAN-led events punctuate regional time and position the organization as the central rhythm-setter of Asian diplomacy. Thus, rather than symbolic in a superficial sense, ASEAN's diplomatic rituals are deeply strategic. They render centrality visible and legitimate through repetition, format, and affect—constituting a mode of quiet authority that is performatively sustained within the evolving architecture of Indo-Pacific multilateralism.

Within the Indo-Pacific discourse, this form of symbolic power remains central to ASEAN's relevance. Unlike coercive strategies that seek compliance, ASEAN's strength lies in its ability to mediate meaning, to shape how regional narratives are framed, how priorities are set, and how diplomacy is performed. This power to convene and frame, while subtle, is vital in a regional order increasingly defined by fragmentation and contestation. ASEAN offers a space in which states can interact without the pressure of alignment, preserving room for ambiguity, flexibility, and negotiation. In other words, it provides the normative architecture of the region (Acharya, 2014).

Rather than being marginal or secondary, ASEAN's centrality derives precisely from this underappreciated diplomatic capacity. Its relevance in the Indo-Pacific era does not depend on adopting the logics of containment or alliance-building, but on embracing its identity as a symbolic convener, an actor that mediates between competing visions and institutionalizes dialogue as a strategic tool. In this light, ASEAN's quiet authority becomes not only a defensive stance but a generative form of regional leadership.

While soft power, as articulated by Nye (2023), denotes a state's capacity to shape the preferences of others through the attractiveness of its values, norms, or culture, convening power operates according to a distinct logic. It is less concerned with attraction per se than with the orchestration of collective processes, namely, the ability to initiate and sustain platforms for dialogue, regulate diplomatic tempo, and enable inclusive decision-making absent coercive instruments. In this regard, convening power can be understood as an extension of Barnett and Duvall's conception of productive power, insofar as it configures the normative structures and institutional modalities through which actors comprehend and participate in regional order (2005). Within the ASEAN context, convening power should thus be seen not as a secondary or procedural asset, but as a core strategic modality of quiet authority, a form of agency that derives legitimacy from symbolic centrality rather than directive capacity.

Policy Recommendations for Strategic Continuity

ASEAN must reinforce its role as a regional bridge-builder (Lin, 2024), and reassert its capacity to shape the Indo-Pacific discourse on its own normative terms. The present context—marked by escalating trade tensions, exemplified by the ongoing US-led tariff war—demonstrates the strategic wisdom behind ASEAN's refusal to be drawn into the polarizing logics of major power competition. This non-alignment is not an act of evasion, but a deliberate affirmation of the organization's longstanding commitment to multilateral dialogue, sovereignty, and regional autonomy.

To preserve and enhance its centrality, ASEAN must work to strengthen institutional coherence within the framework of the AOIP. While the AOIP has been criticized for its lack of operational clarity, its core value lies in articulating a vision that centers ASEAN-led mechanisms as the backbone of regional cooperation. As the AOIP itself states, "This Outlook is not aimed at creating new mechanisms or replacing existing ones; rather, it is an Outlook intended to enhance ASEAN's Community building process and to strengthen and give new momentum for existing ASEAN-led mechanisms to better face challenges and seize opportunities arising from the current and future regional and global environments" (ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, 2019). In this light, ASEAN's primary objective moving forward should not be the construction of new institutional frameworks, but rather the revitalization of existing ASEAN-led mechanisms (Laksmana, 2020).

Finally, ASEAN must continue to cultivate strategic partnerships with middle powers whose Indo-Pacific visions reflect a shared commitment to multilateralism and regional stability. South Korea and ASEAN, for instance, have already demonstrated this by advancing practical cooperation in the four priority areas of the AOIP, as outlined in the Joint Statement on Cooperation on the AOIP adopted at the 24th ASEAN–ROK Summit in 2023. Beyond South Korea, countries such as Australia, the European Union, and Canada also offer valuable opportunities for institutional collaboration and norm-building without the pressure of binary alignments. Strengthening these relationships would not only amplify ASEAN's collective diplomatic voice but also anchor it more firmly within the Indo-Pacific's evolving architecture.

In sum, ASEAN's policy posture should move beyond a reactive defense of centrality and toward a proactive affirmation of its convening identity. It is quiet authority, far from being a sign of decline, offers a model of regional stewardship that privileges inclusion, dialogue, and normative continuity. In a fragmented Indo-Pacific, such a model is not merely desirable, it is indispensable.

Conclusion: ASEAN Centrality as Quiet Authority in the Indo-Pacific

Interviews with regional policymakers and analysts consistently underscore a key insight: ASEAN is not losing relevance in the Indo-Pacific, rather it is transforming the meaning of relevance itself. Far from becoming obsolete, ASEAN remains a vital site for consensus-building, agenda-setting, and normative framing. In an increasingly polarized regional environment, its quiet authority continues to serve as a stabilizing force. Rather than retreat from its leadership role, ASEAN must double down on its strengths: its symbolic convening capacity, agenda-setting capabilities and its ability to shape regional narratives. These are not passive attributes but active forms of agency—expressed through diplomacy, institutional continuity, and the production of strategic ambiguity. By reasserting this unique role, ASEAN can resist being instrumentalized as a conduit for the Indo-Pacific strategies of external powers. Instead, it can reaffirm its identity as a normative convener—one that crafts inclusive frameworks, frames multilateral discourse, and anchors the region to a logic of dialogue rather than division. In doing so, ASEAN demonstrates that power in the Indo-Pacific need not be measured in force projection or bloc-building, but in the ability to convene, mediate, and narrate the region's future. Overall, the Indo-Pacific era does not render ASEAN obsolete; rather, it demands a renewed focus on ASEAN Centrality—not as an outdated doctrine, but as a renewed practice of regional order-making.

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Chapter 3

ASEAN as Normative Architect and Strategic Mediator in Tackling Supply Chain Weaponization in the Indo-Pacific

Irine Hiraswari Gayatri and Pandu Prayoga

Introduction

In an era of intensified great-power rivalry and economic interdependence, supply chains have become arenas of strategic competition. The US and China increasingly leverage trade controls, export restrictions, and investment policies as instruments of state power, a trend often described as the weaponization of supply chains, a concept developed by Farrell and Newman (2019). This approach reflects a broader shift toward geoeconomic statecraft (Blackwill & Harris, 2016), where states utilize global economic interdependencies to project power and coerce rivals without direct military confrontation. For example, recent US controls on advanced semiconductors (Gupta et al., 2024) and Chinese sanctions on foreign firms (Briefing, 2025) have highlighted how critical goods can be politicized. Such measures disrupt trade flows and create vulnerabilities for countries integrated into regional supply chains. The Indo-Pacific, as home to many of the world's manufacturing hubs and regional trade routes is particularly exposed. In this context, Southeast Asia's ASEAN faces a dual challenge: navigating economic shocks while maintaining strategic autonomy.

ASEAN has responded by developing a normative agenda in economic governance, emphasizing open markets, connectivity, and resilience. It also aspires to a strategic mediator role, seeking to bridge the US-China divide through dialogue and ASEAN-led institutions. This chapter examines these twin roles. Employing constructivist and International Political Economy (IPE) frameworks, we analyze how ASEAN's identity, norms, and institutional capacity shape regional supply chain governance. Constructivism highlights ASEAN's shared norms (consensus, non-interference, centrality) and identity as a "neutral" community, while IPE focuses on material interdependencies and power.

Drawing on official ASEAN documents, scholarly analysis, and case studies, we assess ASEAN's track record in supply chain resilience and great power diplomacy. We argue that ASEAN has crafted a robust normative vision (e.g., commitments to open, rules-based trade and diversified supply chains (Centre for International Law, 2023) but faces structural limits such as consensus-based decision-making and uneven member interests, that dilute its impact (Luo, 2021). While "norm entrepreneur" typically refers to actors advocating for new international norms, ASEAN's role as a "normative architect" emphasizes designing institutional frameworks that embed such norms through consensus-building. This distinction helps position ASEAN's gradualist, inclusive approach within broader constructivist debates on norm diffusion and regional institutionalism.

This chapter examines ASEAN's dual role in addressing supply chain weaponization in the Indo-Pacific, focusing on its function as a normative architect, designing and embedding inclusive, rules-based economic frameworks—and as a strategic mediator in bridging US–China rivalry

through neutrality and convening power. It begins with an introduction outlining geopolitical context and theoretical framing through constructivist and IPE lenses, followed by a literature review on ASEAN centrality, normative power, and economic integration, highlighting gaps in existing scholarship. The analytical framework clarifies the distinction between a "norm entrepreneur" and a "normative architect," and explains the interpretive, document-based methodology combining discourse analysis with empirical trade and supply chain data. Subsequent sections explore ASEAN's normative initiatives, such as the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC), and Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), alongside its mediator role through inclusive forums like the East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+). Two case studies—RCEP and critical minerals or clean energy supply chains—illustrate how ASEAN sets norms while managing power rivalries. The chapter then addresses structural challenges, including consensus-based decision-making, asymmetric economic dependence on China, divergent member priorities, and limited technical capacity, before concluding with a synthesis of findings and policy recommendations aimed at strengthening ASEAN's unity, adaptability, and centrality in a contested regional order.

Literature Review

A fundamental concept on ASEAN's regional role is ASEAN centrality, the idea that ASEAN should be the "primary driving force" in shaping the Indo-Pacific order (Valockova, 2025). In practice, centrality means leading regional institutions like the ARF and EAS. Scholars note that centrality is both a narrative and a norm: it guides how ASEAN members and external powers frame engagement (Valockova, 2025). Constructivist studies highlight ASEAN's identity and norms ("ASEAN Way" of consensus and non-interference) and how these social factors influence integration (Valockova, 2025). Acharya (2001; 2014; Khoo, 2004) and others have emphasized ASEAN's normative power, such as its role in promoting the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) as a regional code of conduct. Critics, however, point out a rhetoric-reality gap: ASEAN frequently reaffirms centrality and norms, but has sometimes failed to act decisively (e.g., on the South China Sea disputes).

On economic integration, IPE studies highlight material interdependence and vulnerability. Globalization created complex supply chains, but also new dependencies. For ASEAN, studies note opportunities (industrial diversification foreign investment) and risks (exposure to external demand and shocks) (Di Floristella & Chen, 2022). Several studies explicitly address economic coercion or "weaponized interdependence"—how major powers exploit these links for political ends. For example, European analysis has mapped trade data to identify countries most vulnerable to Chinese market power (Šebeňa et al., n.d.), while Indo-Pacific scholars highlight China's export controls (critical minerals, tech) and US tariff policies as signs of coercion (Ho et al., 2025). In this light, ASEAN-focused research examines how member states respond: by pursuing "China + 1" supply chain strategies and joining new trade agreements (e.g., RCEP, the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), and Indo-Pacific Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) to buffer disruptions (Kim, 2022).

Notably, constructivists and IPE analysts offer complementary insights. Constructivism shows why ASEAN promotes certain economic norms (for instance, open trade as part of ASEAN's identity and a commitment to multilateralism) (Valockova, 2025). It also illuminates ASEAN's self-image as a neutral platform for dialogue, what some call an "omni-enmeshment" hedging

strategy (Luo, 2021; Goh, 2005; Müller, 2016; Jones & Jenne, 2021). IPE, by contrast, draws attention to asymmetric dependencies, for instance, ASEAN is a resource-rich in areas like nickel and rare earths elements but relies heavily on Chinese processing of those resources (Phoumin, 2024). This casts ASEAN's normative stance in pragmatic terms, where its norms (e.g., by advocating regional trade rules or supply chain diversification) serve not only to express collective values but also to reduce vulnerability. Scholars such as Pennisi di Floristella and Chen (2022) note ASEAN frames resilience as a blend of inward and outward orientation to bolster competitiveness and autonomy.

In sum, the literature suggests ASEAN is both a norm entrepreneur by actively building rules and institutions, and a key stakeholder navigating US-China economic contestations. However, gaps remain. Few studies focus specifically on "supply chain weaponization" specifically, or ASEAN's dual role in that context. Most literature addresses either traditional security or general economic cooperation, rather than the intersection of supply-chain shocks and great power rivalry. This chapter fills that gap by synthesizing evidence on ASEAN's normative commitments and strategic agency in the supply-chain domain.

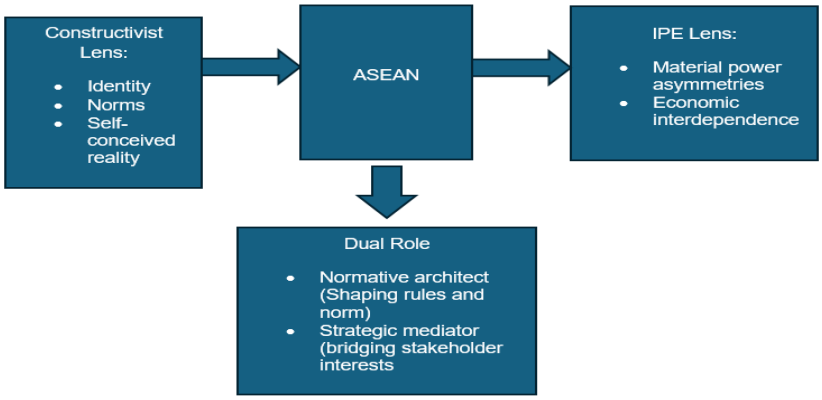
Analysis of ASEAN's Dual Role as Normative Architect and Strategic Mediator

In International Relations theory, a "norm entrepreneur" refers to an actor that promotes new norms or normative changes in the system (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). Such actors draw attention to issues and advocate new standards of appropriate behavior (Doan, 2013). ASEAN has been described as a norm entrepreneur in this sense, actively championing principles of regional cooperation, multilateral dialogue, and mutual restraint as part of its diplomatic identity (Doan, 2013). In this chapter, however, we use the term "normative architect" to convey a broader and more deliberate role. As a normative architect, ASEAN not only proposes or diffuses norms, but also designs and institutionalizes a regional normative framework. This includes building structures and agreements that embed norms into regional practice, from foundational documents like the ASEAN Charter and TAC, to frameworks like the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and ASEAN-led trade agreements. This distinction situates ASEAN's role within constructivist debates on normative power in regionalism. Whereas a norm entrepreneur might introduce or lobby for a norm, a normative architect actively constructs the architecture for norms to reside in. In ASEAN's case, this means creating consensus-based institutions and legal frameworks that reflect principles of openness, inclusive regionalism, and cooperative security (Acharya, 2014; Valockova, 2020). ASEAN seeks to shape the regional order through institution building and the internalization of norms, rather than through coercive power through its role as a normative architect. We examine how this normative architectural role complements ASEAN's parallel efforts as a strategic mediator in the Indo-Pacific.

Employing a qualitative desk-based research design, we analyze official ASEAN documents (such as leader's declarations and joint communiqués) and secondary sources (peer-reviewed academic articles, policy literature, expert commentaries) on ASEAN's economic and security roles. The approach is interpretive, combining a constructivist lens to assess how ASEAN's norms are constructed and an IPE lens to evaluate trade dynamics. No new fieldwork or primary data collection is undertaken; instead, we synthesize existing materials to explore ASEAN's capacities and behavior.

In practice, our interpretive analysis examines both ideational content and material context. We conduct a qualitative content analysis of ASEAN's own statements and policy documents to identify key normative themes, for example, references to "open and inclusive" regionalism, or commitments to "resilience" and "centrality." These are interpreted through a constructivist lens by asking how shared norms, identities, and historical experiences shape ASEAN's rhetoric and initiatives. At the same time, we analyze empirical indicators of economic interdependence and vulnerability in ASEAN, such as trade patterns, investment flows, or supply chain dependencies through an IPE perspective. This entails examining evidence of power asymmetries, for instance reliance on extra-regional powers for critical technologies or resources, and instances of economic coercion affecting ASEAN. We operationalize the constructivist and IPE frameworks in tandem by triangulating discourse and policy analysis with an understanding of material conditions.

Figure 3.1 Theoretical Framework



Source: Authors

For example, we review how ASEAN's leaders frame issues in recent joint statements, such as the emphasis on economic resilience and connectivity in the Joint Communique of the 57th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting and relate this to the realities of ASEAN's external economic pressures (Vietnam News, 2024). When ASEAN collectively highlights principles of a rules-based order and neutrality, we interpret this as part of its identity construction and normative narrative. We then assess whether such principles are borne out in practice, given external challenges like US tariff threats or Chinese export restrictions. In essence, the constructivist lens guides us to interpret meaning and intent in ASEAN's language and institutional design, while the IPE lens allows us to assess outcomes and constraints in the realms of economics and power. The combination provides a richer understanding of how ASEAN's ideational aspirations aligns or clash with material realities.

To ground the analysis, we include two case studies. First, the negotiation and implementation of RCEP as an example of ASEAN-led economic architecture, and second, ASEAN's role in critical minerals supply chains. Each case is examined for how ASEAN acted as normative architect (shaping rules and norms) and as a strategic mediator (bridging stakeholders' interests and navigating power rivalries). These cases are selected because they illustrate ASEAN's dual roles in different contexts, one in the realm of formal trade institution building, the other in

a strategic sector marked by a geopolitical competition. RCEP highlights ASEAN's ability to set regional trade norms and mediate between major economies during negotiations, whereas the critical minerals case illuminates ASEAN's efforts to develop resilience-oriented norms amid dependence on external powers (Phoumin, 2024) and to mediate tensions between great-power interests and its own member's development goals. We derive evidence-based conclusions by triangulating insights from theory with these empirical cases.

In examining the cases, we analyze textual records (agreement texts, official statements, meeting reports) and relevant data (trade volumes, supply chain maps) using our dual lenses. For RCEP, we assess how ASEAN's normative principles like open regionalism and inclusive participation were embedded in the agreement's design, and how ASEAN's convening diplomacy balanced the interests of larger powers like China and Japan. We draw on studies of RCEP's negotiation process (e.g. Kim, 2022) to evaluate ASEAN's agency. For the critical minerals supply chain, we review ASEAN's frameworks like the AEC Blueprint 2025, which calls for a "Resilient, Inclusive, people-oriented and People-Centered ASEAN Economy," (ASEAN Secretariat, 2015) and the recent agreements such as the ASEAN Declaration on Supply Chain Connectivity endorsed in 2024. We interpret these as normative efforts to codify resilience and cooperation in supply chains (Huaxia, 2024) and then analyze the strategic reality that ASEAN countries remain significantly dependent on China for mineral processing. Throughout, we consider ASEAN's neutral diplomacy (e.g. engaging all partners without exclusion) and its internal divisions, to gauge its effectiveness as a mediator. The case study approach thus operationalizes our interpretive framework, where each case provides a narrative that dissected for normative content and material constraints, allowing us to illustrate and evaluate ASEAN's dual roles in practice.

ASEAN as Normative Architect

ASEAN has long been committed to encouraging an open, inclusive, and rules-based regional order. This core belief is clearly articulated in high-level ASEAN documents. For example, the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) envisages ASEAN's centrality and an inclusive, rules-based framework as guiding principles for regional cooperation (ASEAN, 2021) . Likewise, the 2023 ASEAN Leader's Declaration on ASEAN as an "Epicentrum of Growth" emphasizes the need to strengthen ASEAN's resilience against future shocks and uphold an open, rules-based multilateral trading system (ASEAN, 2023).[1] ASEAN's normative vision seeks not only to strengthen its internal cohesion but also to build collective resilience against external pressures or coercive economic practices by focusing on regional connectivity and inclusive development. These shared commitments provide the foundation for ASEAN's evolving role in shaping the Indo-Pacific's economic architecture.

ASEAN puts its ideals into practice through initiatives like the MPAC and related frameworks. This MPAC aims to better connect member states through improved infrastructure, digital connectivity, and regulatory harmonization, thereby promoting equitable economic growth. Efforts under MPAC include projects to streamline logistics and reduce supply chain bottlenecks, as seen in the development of a Framework on ASEAN Supply Chain Efficiency and Resilience.[2] These initiatives are designed not only to cut supply chain costs within the region bit also to boost speed and reliability, thereby enhancing ASEAN's competitiveness. Progress

[1] https://cil.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/2023-ALD-on-Epicentrum-of-Growth.pdf
[2] https://asean.org/book/framework-on-asean-supply-chain-efficiency-and-resilience/

has been made in expanding transportation networks and digital integration, although gaps remain in truly seamless logistics. Still, MPAC and associated plans signal ASEAN's recognition that internal connectivity and efficiency are keys to a resilient regional economy.

Table 3.1 2023 The Logistics Performance

Economy	LPI Score	Customs Score	Infrastructure Score	International shipments score	Logistics competence and quality score	Timeliness score	Tracking and tracing score
Singapore	4.3	4.2	4.6	4.0	4.4	4.3	4.4
Malaysia	3.6	3.3	3.6	3.7	3.7	3.7	3.7
Thailand	3.5	3.3	3.7	3.5	3.5	3.5	3.6
Philippines	3.3	3.2	3.3	3.0	3.4	3.5	3.3
Vietnam	3.3	3.1	3.2	3.3	3.2	3.3	3.4
Indonesia	3.0	2.8	2.9	3.0	2.9	3.3	3.0
Cambodia	2.4	2.2	2.1	2.3	2.4	2.7	2.8
Lao PDR	2.4	2.3	2.3	2.3	2.4	2.8	2.4

Source: The World Bank, 2023

Building on these internal commitments, ASEAN has actively sought to diffuse its normative vision across the wider Indo-Pacific using institutional mechanisms and diplomatic platforms. A key example is the RCEP. The RCEP agreement reflects ASEAN's leadership in integrating principles like regulatory consistency, transparency, and inclusive participation into regional trade governance. This "norm diffusion" process extends ASEAN's influence beyond its borders, promoting rules-based economic interaction even amid intensifying geopolitical competition. In recent years, regional principles on supply chain resilience and diversification have emerged as critical regional imperatives in response to economic weaponization. It can be reviewed in Trump's economic weaponization which went beyond the typical traditional competitors and instead targeted allies and neighbors like Canada (Stevis-Gridneff, 2025). The organization not only reinforces its internal coherence but also enhances its strategic relevance as a regional rule-setter and stabilizing force by integrating these principles into ASEAN-led platforms.

One of ASEAN's defining characteristics as a regional institution is its normative flexibility. This allows it to accommodate the diverse political systems, economic capacities, and development levels of its member states. Instead of imposing strict rules, ASEAN adopts a pragmatic, consensus-based approach that allows countries to participate at their own pace. This flexibility, often encapsulated in the "ASEAN Way" has been instrumental in preserving unity and inclusivity; it allows less-developed members to participate at their own pace, and it tempers obligations with considerations of sovereignty. Normative flexibility has helped prevent the marginalization of any members and enabled broad buy-in for initiatives like the AEC and RCEP. members However, the same flexibility can weaken commitments. Because ASEAN norms are usually implemented through soft law and voluntary compliance, it can be challenging to implement consistent standards or timelines in areas such as supply chain governance and regulatory alignment. What ASEAN gains in inclusivity, it sometimes loses in effectiveness, as will be discussed in the section on structural challenges.

From a constructivist perspective, ASEAN's approach to regional governance is driven less by coercive power than by the gradual internalization of shared norms and identities (Rother, 2012:51). Foundational norms such as non-interference, consensus-based decision-making, and peaceful dispute resolution have become deeply ingrained in ASEAN's political culture, guiding its behavior and institutional design (Rother, 2012; Natalegawa, 2018). This internalization of norms helps sustain cooperation even in the absence of strong legal enforcement (Archarya, 2014: 259). In the economic realm, ASEAN's emphasis on inclusive growth and rules-based engagement is similarly cultivated through norm socialization rather than top-down imposition. There is a shared understanding among members that open trade, connectivity, and integration are common goods that contribute to regional stability and prosperity, which encourage them to adhere these principles, to some extent.

Despite these strengths, ASEAN's normative architecture faces significant limitations, particularly in enforcing economic agreements and harmonizing policies. ASEAN has developed ambitious blueprints for integration, such as the AEC, but there remains a persistent rhetoric-reality gap. Progress in regulatory harmonization and deeper economic integration often falls short of official commitments. The lack of any supranational authority or binding enforcement mechanisms may mean that implementation of ASEAN agreements relies on national will, which varies. This can undermine the credibility and effectiveness of ASEAN's norms when responding to external economic threats or in advancing supply-chain resilience. For example, while the AEC 2025 calls for a "resilient, inclusive, people-oriented and people-centered" ASEAN economy (ASEAN Secretariat, 2015), actual policy coordination during crises (like the COVID-19 pandemic's supply disruptions or the US–China tariff exchange) has been ad-hoc and uneven. These institutional constraints highlight a core tension in ASEAN's normative project, where the organization strives to maintain consensus and national sovereignty; however, this approach may challenge substantive regional reforms that require collective actions.

Nevertheless, ASEAN continues to play a vital role in the creation of regional norms and institutions that promote inclusive, rules-based economic governance. Initiatives such as the AOIP and the RCEP illustrate ASEAN's capacity to convene diverse actors and embed its normative preferences, such as openness, transparency, and multilateralism, into broader regional frameworks. These instruments reflect ASEAN's determination to shape the regional order not through power projection but through institutional leadership and normative diffusion. ASEAN bolsters its relevance as both a stabilizing force and a normative architect in the Indo-Pacific by anchoring economic cooperation in inclusive and stable institutional frameworks. The next section examines how ASEAN pairs this norm-setting role with a strategic diplomatic role amid major power rivalries.

ASEAN as Strategic Mediator

Beyond crafting norms, ASEAN strives to act as a strategic mediator amid US-China competition and other great power rivalries. ASEAN offers a diplomatic bridge through the preservation of neutrality and hosting inclusive forums. Historically, ASEAN member states have pursued a hedging strategy often termed "omni-enmeshment", engaging with all major powers to avoid choosing sides outright. According to Luo (2021), this approach has earned ASEAN a reputation as a regional "buffer," it provides a platform where rival powers have a stake in dialogue and stability, thus moderating tensions. Zhang (2023) describes ASEAN's recent posture as an effort to revive centrality and strategic autonomy, even hinting at a "new non-aligned movement"

approach for a multipolar order. This means ASEAN attempts to pull major powers into ASEAN-led multilateral forums that it leads, rather than letting regional order be set by external blocs.

ASEAN's convening power is central to its mediator role. The organization has created a dense institutional architecture of dialogue platforms in which both the US and China (along with other powers like Japan, South Korea, India, etc.,) participate regularly. These include the EAS, ARF, "ASEAN +3", the ADMM+, and more. Valockova (2025) notes that ASEAN's proliferation of forums provides venues for dialogue on sensitive security and economic issues, helping to diffuse bilateral tensions in a multilateral setting. Importantly, ASEAN (or the ASEAN chair) often choreographs interactions between the major powers. For instance, ASEAN ensures that its summits include separate ASEAN- China and ASEAN-US meetings, allowing the leaders of those rivals to convene under ASEAN's auspices in the same overall event (Minister for Defence to Attend 18th ADMM and 11th ADMM-Plus in Laos, 2024). Such arrangements let Washington and Beijing communicate and negotiate indirectly, building understanding and without forcing ASEAN countries to formally choose one side over the other. This "convening without committing" is a hallmark of ASEAN's mediating style.

ASEAN's well-known neutrality underpins its credibility in this mediator stance. ASEAN as a bloc has no formal security alliance with any major powers and explicitly refuses to pick allies in the ASEAN charter. This non-alignment, echoing principles of the 1971 Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN), gives ASEAN a certain legitimacy as an "honest broker" (Valockova, 2025). This characterizes ASEAN's "impartial forum" advantage, its neutrality can help mitigate mistrust between rival powers. For example, at ADMM's meetings, both China and the US attend as partners, and ASEAN's neutral chairing facilitates dialogue that might not manifest in a forum perceived as aligned with one side. In economic terms, ASEAN has similarly positioned itself as an unbiased hub. It engages with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) while also partaking in US-led initiatives like the IPEF. Both Washington and Beijing have frequently expressed support for "ASEAN centrality" in regional architectures, an acknowledgement that they prefer to work with ASEAN's inclusive processes rather than see the region dominated by the other's exclusive bloc. Such external validation reinforces ASEAN's mediator role (at least in principle), as both major powers signal that they see ASEAN-led mechanisms as useful channels (Lao, 2021).

As a strategic mediator, ASEAN also seeks to promote economic deconfliction and confidence-building measures to reduce the risk of great power economic wars impacting the region. For instance, ASEAN has discussed guidelines on economic security, such as not weaponizing interdependence, and continually advocates for open markets. The TAC, while originally a politico-security treaty, embodies norms of peaceful engagement that ASEAN explicitly extends to economic conduct as well. At summits ASEAN often secures statements from external partners affirming support for ASEAN's norms and initiatives. In 2022 both China and the US publicly endorsed support ASEAN centrality (Qiao-Franco et al., 2024) and ASEAN-led frameworks in joint statements (*Joint Vision Statement*, 2022), reflecting ASEAN's behind the scenes mediation to engage the major powers on record in support of multilateralism. Additionally, ASEAN engages major partners in practical projects, from supply chain resilience initiatives with Japan and South Korea, to infrastructure financing with Australia and the Asian Development Bank (ADB). Through such efforts, ASEAN seeks to shape the economic dimension of major power relations so that competition does not spiral into regionally harmful outcomes.

Nonetheless, ASEAN's mediatory function has limitations. The consensus decision-making process may result in inaction during crises. Luo (2021) emphasizes that ASEAN frequently "remains silent" on contentious issues when members cannot agree. The South China Sea are a case in point. ASEAN has struggled to issue strong statements or to act in the face of what is perceived as Chinese assertiveness, because several member states benefit from China's investments. This inability to present a unified front can undermine ASEAN's normative influence and its leverage as a mediator. In the economic realm, similarly, when confronted with trade coercion or supply-chain disruptions caused by great power moves, ASEAN has often defaulted to silence or express very general statements. During the US-China tariff war (2018-2019) and subsequent supply chain shocks, ASEAN collectively did little beyond reaffirming support for multilateral trade; it did not, for instance, issue a concerted response to specific tariffs or coordinate a regional strategy, partly to avoid exposing internal division. Such reticence shows the flip side of neutrality, where ASEAN avoids taking sides, but in doing so, it often does not adopt a firm stance, which limits its ability to mediate or alleviate the conflict at hand.

Another challenge is minilateralism and extra-ASEAN groupings that exclude or bypass ASEAN. The emergence of QUADrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), AUKUS, and other Indo-Pacific coalitions driven by major powers have created parallel venues for addressing regional issues (including supply chain security) that do not centre on ASEAN. These initiatives can marginalize ASEAN or render its forums less critical. If key decisions on regional economic security, (for instance, technology supply chain arrangements or critical mineral alliances) start being made in small-group setting like the QUAD or between the US and its allies, ASEAN's mediator role is diminished. As Luo (2021) and others warn, if ASEAN is perceived as ineffective or irrelevant, great powers will "seek security (or economic solutions) elsewhere," bypassing ASEAN mechanisms. ASEAN leaders are acutely aware of this risk. In 2025, Singapore's Prime Minister Lawrence Wong cautioned that in a new era of rising protectionism, small states (including those in ASEAN) risk being side-lined unless they band together and assert their collective interests (Prime Minister's Office of Singapore, 2025). Such statements underscore that ASEAN must continually demonstrate its value as a convenor; otherwise, the great powers will set up their own arrangements that could undermine ASEAN centrality.

Moreover, ASEAN's internal diversity sometimes hampers its mediator role. The grouping is not monolithic; member states have divergent strategic orientations and economic dependencies. These differences may paralyze ASEAN or lead to watered-down positions when trying to mediate big-power issues. For example, during the Trump administration's tariff threats in 2025, ASEAN did not issue a collective response strategy, and members responded individually. Vietnam quietly negotiated concessions to reduce US tariffs on its exports, while Indonesia and several others "monitored" the situation and explored bilateral fixes (Lam, 2025; Kumala, 2025). Such uncoordinated responses weakened ASEAN's bargaining power as a group. The episode highlighted a core dilemma: how can ASEAN uphold a neutral, mediator role and preserve regional cohesion when external powers apply pressure that affects members unevenly? If each state breaks ranks to secure its own deal, ASEAN's unity and credibility suffer.

Nevertheless, there have been occasions where ASEAN's collective action had an impact, suggesting unrealized potential in its mediator role. An oft-cited example is the 2012 Scarborough Shoal incident, where ASEAN foreign ministers issued a six-point declaration (ASEAN Foreign

Ministers, 2012) on South China Sea conduct (calling for respect for international law) after China seized the shoal. Although non-binding, this "concerted resistance" signaled united ASEAN disapproval, raising reputational costs for China and possibly deterring further aggressive moves. In economic terms, a similar united ASEAN response to economic coercion (if it were to occur) could likewise impose social and diplomatic pressure. However, organizing such unity on economic issues is more difficult due to ASEAN's members' varied interests. Nonetheless, the potential remains, when ASEAN faces open resistance from a unified organization-based initiative, Beijing is more inclined to adjust its conduct. ASEAN may leverage its normative power; even subtle kinds of admonition could mitigate supply-chain coercion.

In hindsight, ASEAN's strategic mediator role rests on three pillars: neutrality, convening power, and normative influence. Its neutrality and inclusive posture enable it to keep all sides engaged through ASEAN-led venues, avoiding polarization of the region into hostile camps. Its convening power provides channels for dialogue and confidence building that reduce misunderstanding. Also, its normative standing, embodying principles of regional order, gives it moral suasion to encourage cooperative behavior. This aligns with the constructivist view that ASEAN's identity encourages a balanced, multipolar order. Economically, ASEAN tries to insulate its markets by urging cooperative approaches and maintaining an open business environment. However, structural challenges like consensus paralysis and external workaround limit how far ASEAN can shape great-power behavior. Overall, ASEAN's mediating has helped prevent outright conflict and kept the Indo-Pacific from splitting into rigid blocs, but its success in the economic security realm depends on its ability to reinforce unity and demonstrate concrete value-add, such as coordinating responses to supply-chain shocks. The next section delves into case studies that illustrate these dynamics, followed by an analysis of structural changes that constrain ASEAN's effectiveness.

Case Studies

The RCEP: ASEAN as Convener, Rule-Setter, and Broker

One illustrative case of ASEAN's dual role is the RCEP, the world's largest free trade agreement involving the ten ASEAN member states and five of its dialogue partners: China, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand (Chen et al., 2023). Finalized in November 2020 and entering into force in 2022, RCEP covers around 30 per cent of global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and population. ASEN's central role in initiating and steering RCEP negotiations underscores both its convening power and norm-setting influence. Originally proposed by ASEAN in 2011 to consolidate multiple ASEAN + 1 agreements, RCEP reflects ASEAN's pragmatic diplomacy, anchored in consensus, inclusivity and neutrality, designed to harmonize divergent political and economic systems across the region.

ASEAN's leadership helped bypass Sino-Japanese rivalry over competing trade frameworks (ASEAN +3 vs ASEAN +6) by championing a unified, ASEAN-centric negotiation track. ASEAN facilitated consensus through persistent chairing and by embedding the norms of gradualism, multilateralism, and equal partnership. Observers credit ASEAN as the "lynchpin" of RCEP's success; even with India's eventual withdrawal in 2019 (Wang & Sharma, 2021), ASEAN framed the agreement as a reaffirmation of regional cooperation and a rejection of zero-sum decoupling amid US-China tensions. Even though India chose not to join RCEP this decision has not diminished the overarching spirit of multilateralism (Drysdale & Armstrong, 2021) and the pursuit of gains from free trade that ASEAN champions within the region (Shimizu, 2021).

The agreement itself mirrors ASEAN's consensus ethos, allowing for flexible implementation timelines and development-sensitive clauses to support less-developed members.

As a normative architect, ASEAN's influence is seen in several features of RCEP. The agreement streamlines rules of origin and reduces paperwork barriers, which is crucial for business to build multi-country supply chains (RCEP, n.d., pp. 10–20). These provisions align with ASEAN's long-standing goals of trade facilitation and connectivity. RCEP also has captures on small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and economic cooperation, indicating an inclusive approach that goes beyond liberalization for benefiting large corporations, again reflecting ASEAN's norms of equitable development. According to Tan (2025), RCEP's emphasis on supply chain diversification and easier customs procedures is important especially in times of global uncertainty and rising geopolitical tension. These were priorities ASEAN quietly championed during negotiations to ensure the pact would bolster resilience against trade disruptions. In essence, RCEP institutionalizes ASEAN's normative by creating rules-based economic architecture in line with its principles and extends those principles across the wider region.

Simultaneously, ASEAN played a strategic mediator in RCEP's formation. It had to balance and accommodate the interests of major power, notably China and Japan, but also India (initially) and others. ASEAN gave each of the big economies the reassurances that no rival would dominate the agenda by maintaining an "ASEAN-centric" process. It kept door open for India's potential return, showing inclusivity beyond immediate participants. During sensitive moments such as disputes over tariff concessions or e-commerce rules, ASEAN officials worked in the background to forge compromises, often by proposing creative, face-saving solutions or phased commitments (Nair, 2019; Raj et al., 2025; Baharudin, 2025). This ability to bridge differences without alienating any party showed ASEAN's mediator skill. RCEP's conclusion in 2020, amid US-China trade tensions, was evidence that ASEAN-led diplomacy could deliver a collective good (a trade pact). In doing so, ASEAN shielded the region from great power polarization and demonstrated its capacity to shape economic governance through multilateral frameworks. RCEP brought China, Japan, Australia etc. into a single cooperative agreement, reducing the risk of competing trade blocs in Asia.

In essence, RCEP stands as a powerful testament to ASEAN's dual role. It institutionalizes ASEAN's normative leadership in regional trade architecture (forging a landmark regional trade book in line with its principles), while also validating its ability as a strategic mediator (balancing the interests of China, Japan, other among major powers to achieve a mutually beneficial outcome). RCEP not only strengthens ASEAN's centrality in Indo-Pacific economic affairs but also provides a durable mechanism for establishing regional stability and supply-chain resilience. The agreement's provisions for economic cooperation and capacity building give ASEAN a platform to continue shaping norms (such as e-commerce rules or intellectual property standards) going forward. Meanwhile, the modes of cooperation established through RCEP could, in theory, help deescalate future trade conflicts by keeping major powers engaged within a common framework. In the next case study, we turn to the issue of critical minerals, a very different domain, to see how ASEAN's roles play out in a strategic sector vital for clean energy transition.

Critical Minerals and Clean Energy Supply Chains: Asean in a Resilience Dilemma

The global shift towards clean energy has surged global demand for critical minerals like

lithium, cobalt, nickel and rare earth elements (REEs). These materials are important for electric vehicles, semiconductors and renewable technologies (IEA, 2023). ASEAN member states, especially Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam and Thailand, are emerging key suppliers, holding rich reserves of nickel, tin, and rare earth (Phoumin, 2024). This positions ASEAN as an important player in these new supply chains. However, the region remains deeply dependent on by China, which refines is equal to 80 percent of global REEs (Šebeňa et al., 2023). This asymmetry creates strategic vulnerability. Disruptions like China's 2010 embargo on rare earths to Japan demonstrate how supply chains can be weaponized in geopolitical tensions (Di Floristella & Chen, 2022). ASEAN thus finds itself both strategically positioned (with valuable resources) and strategically exposed (lacking control over value chains), seeking to capitalize on its resources while avoiding entrapment in great-power rivalries over these resources.

ASEAN has begun to build cooperative frameworks to address supply chain resilience in critical minerals, though progress is incremental. As a normative architect, the organization has taken steps to codify norms of cooperation and resilience in this domain. The *ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint 2025* and the 2024 proposed Declaration on Supply Chain Connectivity are examples of regional attempts to formalize commitments to supply chain security and collaboration (ASEAN, 2024). The AEC Blueprint explicitly calls for a resilient ASEAN that can adjust to global economic shocks (Jaknanihan, 2024), acknowledging the need for mechanisms to handle disruptions. Meanwhile, the 2024 Supply Chain Connectivity Declaration endorsed by the ASEAN Economic Ministers reaffirms ASEAN's commitment to enhancing the innovation, competitiveness, and resiliency of regional supply chains (Huaxia, 2024). Such documents signal that ASEAN attempts to set expectations among its members to diversify sources, share information and support each other in times of supply stress.

Practically, ASEAN utilizes forums like ASEAN+3 and the East Asia Summit to promote regulatory harmonization and resource-sharing. Trade agreements like RCEP are also leveraged as platforms for technical cooperation and keeping mineral trade open (Kim, 2022). Additionally, ASEAN has sector-specific initiatives such as ASEAN Minerals Cooperation Action Plan (ASEAN Secretariat, 2021, pp. 1–36), which fosters information exchange and coordination on mining policies among members. ASEAN signals a commitment by embedding environmental, social, and governmental standards in these initiatives. To promote sustainable resource governance, aligning resilience with broader development goals (Di Floristella & Chen, 2022). This normative emphasis aims to ensure that as ASEAN countries exploit critical minerals, they do so responsibly and in a way that contributes to long-term resilience, for instance, by preventing export bans or trade restrictions that could invite retaliatory actions.

At the same time, ASEAN also acts as diplomatic intermediary in the critical minerals arena, engaging with multiple external partners, such as China, the US, Japan, the EU, and Australia without aligning exclusively. It faces a tricky task of mediating divergent interests, such as Indonesia's raw nickel (ore) export bans to develop its domestic processing industry; and other members' emphasis on open trade (Ho et al., 2025). This move, while aligning with ASEAN's developmental goals, caused friction with China (a major buyer) and affected other ASEAN countries differently, where some member states benefit from Indonesia's downstream investments, while others worry about resource nationalism. ASEAN must balance such internal policy differences, where one member's pursuit of resource sovereignty (Huang, 2021) can conflict with another's reference for open trade. Platforms like the ASEAN Minerals

Cooperation Action Plan and ASEAN+ frameworks help manage intra-regional disputes and promote joint investment corridors. For instance, ASEAN Ministries have discussed common approaches to mineral export policies to avoid undercutting each other or triggering trade disputes.

Externally, ASEAN engages partners through polycentric cooperation models. It welcomes support from QUAD countries, the EU, and the US for diversification and capacity building (Valockova, 2025), while also cooperating with China through dialogues and investments in local mineral-value addition. ASEAN's neutrality here is an asset: it allows the region to receive assistance, such as technology or financing for mineral processing facilities from all sides without being seen as taking stands in the larger great power competition. We see instances of this in action, such as US and Japanese agencies investing in rare earth processing projects in ASEAN states to reduce reliance on China, alongside Chinese companies investing in Indonesian nickel smelters like in the Morowali Industrial Park in Central Sulawesi Province. ASEAN, through its meetings, has encouraged such investments from any willing partner, aiming to create a more diversified network of cooperation that dilutes any single actor's dominance (ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Minerals, 2023). This balancing act diffuses strategic pressure by ensuring ASEAN countries are not exclusively tied to one great power's supply chain.

Despite these initiatives, significant challenges remain for ASEAN in this arena. Limited institutional enforcement, internal policy fragmentation, and mounting pressure to "choose sides" in US-China decoupling (Zhang, 2023). To preserve its mediating position, ASEAN must reinforce collective principles, expand infrastructure for processing, and support the formulation of inclusive frameworks that reflect both strategic resilience and sustainable development.

In conclusion, ASEAN's role in critical minerals and clean energy supply chains showcases its dual identity. As a normative architect, ASEAN is gradually framing the rules and collaborative norms for managing these new strategic resources, emphasizing resilience, openness, and sustainability. As a strategic mediator, ASEAN navigates the power rivalries (particularly US – China) that loom over critical supply chains, striving to maintain a diversified network of cooperation that insulates the region from coercion. Successfully balancing these roles will be key for ASEAN to harness its mineral wealth for economic development without becoming a pawn in great-power games. The next section will discuss the challenges faced by ASEAN regarding the dual role.

Structural Challenges to ASEAN's Effectiveness

ASEAN's effectiveness in tackling supply chain weaponization in the Indo-Pacific, particularly through its dual role as a Normative Architect and Strategic Mediator, is undermined by several deep structural challenges. This is evident in the contexts of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership and critical mineral governance

The first challenge is consensus-based decision-making and institutional limitations. ASEAN's decision-making structure, founded on consensus and non-interference, poses a fundamental barrier to timely and robust responses. As a normative architect, ASEAN has attempted to set standards on economic integration and security through soft-law instruments and frameworks like the AEC. However, its weak supranational authority makes enforcement minimal. In RCEP negotiations, ASEAN played a convening role, but its ability to steer economic outcomes was

limited by larger powers (China, Japan), setting the agenda. The lack of binding commitments on supply-chains security and strategic trade reflects ASEAN's inability to impose or even promote enforceable norms beyond economic liberalization.

The second challenge is an asymmetrical economic dependence on China. ASEAN's strategic autonomy is constrained by its deep and uneven economic interdependence with China. While RCEP reflects ASEAN's attempt to serve as a balancing platform amid US-China rivalry, it paradoxically institutionalizes Chinese regional trade centrality. This creates strategic dilemmas when confronting supply-chain weaponization, especially in sensitive sectors like critical minerals. For example, Indonesia's efforts to restrict nickel exports to develop domestic industries align with ASEAN's developmental goals, however, this creates frictions with Chinese firms and weakens ASEAN coherence, given that other members remain reliant on Chinese demand and capital. ASEAN thus struggles to mediate supply-chain conflicts without alienating either major power or fragmenting internally.

The third challenge is the divergent national priorities and strategic cultures. ASEAN is not a unitary actor (Gayatri, 2025). Member states diverge significantly in their strategic outlooks and economic priorities, complicating coordinated responses. For instance, Vietnam and Indonesia have taken more assertive steps in managing strategic resources, while Cambodia and Laos are more aligned with China's preferences. As strategic mediator, ASEAN's convening of platforms like the EAS or ARF offers dialogic space but less actionable solutions since internal fragmentation prevents unified messaging initiative-pushing. These gaps were evident in ASEAN's limited coordination on critical mineral supply-chains (Pushp & Ahmed, 2023) amid US-led IPEF discussions, where individual members like the Philippines and Indonesia negotiated bilaterally with Washington, bypassing ASEAN mechanisms.

The last challenge faced by ASEAN is lack of technical and regulatory capacity (Mahmood, 2018; Tech in Asia, n.d.). ASEAN's ability to act as a normative architect in technical areas such as digital traceability, environmental standards for RER mining, or resilience audits is constrained by capacity gaps. Many ASEAN member states lack the regulatory frameworks, digital infrastructure, or technical know-how to enforce supply-chain transparency or sustainability, making them vulnerable to coercion or manipulation by stronger partners. The RCEP agreement lacks comprehensive discipline on these fronts, indicating a normative gap ASEAN has not yet filled.

While ASEAN aspires to shape Indo-Pacific normative order and mediate great power rivalries, several structural constraints, such as consensus politics, asymmetrical dependencies, internal fragmentation, and institutional weaknesses, impedes its effectiveness in addressing supply-chain weaponization. RCEP showcases ASEAN's convening strength but also its strategic limitations, while the critical minerals case exposes its normative and capacity insufficiencies. For ASEAN to be more than a forum, it must enhance institutional coherence, invest regulatory capabilities, and develop mechanisms to reconcile member interests in the face of geopolitical-economic coercion.

Conclusion

In conclusion, ASEAN has demonstrated the potential to be both a norm-setter and a regional mediator, however, its continued relevance will significantly depend upon bold internal reforms and adaptive leadership. ASEAN plays two pivotal roles in the Indo-Pacific evolving

economic security landscape, as normative architect that shapes the region's rules and norms of engagement, and a strategic mediator that balances and bridges between great powers. As a normative architect, ASEAN has successfully built a framework of principles, from the TAC to the ASEAN Charter and ASEAN-centric trade agreements, that promote open, inclusive, and rules-based cooperation. The RCEP case illustrates ASEAN's ability to institutionalize cooperative economic order even amidst major power ambivalence. As a mediator, ASEAN has utilized its convening power to maintain dialogue between rivals and reduce conflict, such as through ARF and ADMM+. In the critical minerals' context, ASEAN worked to engage multiple partners to reduce vulnerabilities to unilateral supply-chain disruptions. In addition, the mid-2025 tariffs showdown has reinforced the need for agility: ASEAN's collective ability to swiftly adjust and unite under external economic pressure will determine whether it remains central or is side-lined.

The recommendations herein, on economic coordination, neutrality, institutional reform, external engagement, and issue leadership, offer a pathway to maintain ASEAN centrality in the global and multifaceted challenges. ASEAN's collective will and moral authority grant it unique leverage particularly if unity and strategic clarity can be forged. Lastly, ASEAN can remain an important regional actor in shaping a peaceful, inclusive Indo-Pacific order.

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Chapter 4

Scams that Scorch: Cybercrime, Labor Trafficking, and the Future of ASEAN Digital Governance

Saittawut Yutthaworakool and Ika Kurnia Riswandari

Introduction

The digital transformation has generated profound economic opportunities for the people in the Southeast Asian region. Digitalization not only strengthens infrastructure connectivity but also enables access to digital services, such as banking and e-commerce platforms. However, this rapid development of digital technology has also exposed the Southeast Asian population to increasing non-traditional security threats, particularly cybercrime and its associated illegal actions, like labor trafficking (UNODC, 2025). In recent years, scam operations–known as call center scams–have escalated their presence across the region, particularly the Mekong Sub region, including Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar, while Thailand, a neighboring country, has emerged as a key supporter of these syndicates, providing both infrastructure and human resources (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, 2022). The issue of call center scams should not be overlooked because they are transnational and technology-facilitated.

Today, it is found that more than hundreds of thousands of individuals from within and beyond Southeast Asia have been trafficked into scam compounds (Jesperson et al., 2023). Many victims reported that they had been promised a high salary; however, they ended up in coercive working conditions to carry out cyber fraud under surveillance, threats, and violence, which is considered modern slavery (IOM, 2023). According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2023), it is estimated that cyber scams in the Southeast Asian region are lucrative, having generated between 7.5 billion USD and 12.5 billion USD, which contributes to the growing Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in those countries. Despite the rise of cybercrime, led by scam syndicates, the institutional response from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has remained limited. Instead, ASEAN's principle of non-interference has positioned this issue under domestic boundaries, lacking coordinated actions among its member states and an integrated framework for cybercrime prevention and labor rights protection (APHR, 2025).

This chapter critically examines the current situations where cybercrime, with a particular emphasis on cyber scams, labor trafficking, and digital governance, intersect within ASEAN's evolving digital landscape. The research relies heavily on qualitative methods, following an analytical framework established by Creswell (2018). It draws upon a qualitative policy analysis approach, the chapter identifies the existing regional gaps and advocates for a reformed and informed framework that addresses and eradicates cybercrime issues in Southeast Asia. The chapter argues that the rise of cyber scams and associated labor trafficking in Southeast Asia exposes the shortcomings of current ASEAN's digital governance framework. While digital transformation has contributed to economic opportunities within the region, it has widened regional and national loopholes for transnational scam syndicates through weak and uncoordinated enforcement across jurisdictions. Moreover, the chapter views that ASEAN's principles of non-binding instruments and non-interference have hindered the effective

responses against this timely event.

The chapter is organized in seven sections, including this introduction. It begins with an overview of cyber scams in Southeast Asia, detailing how their operations have emerged across the Mekong Sub region. It then explores the intersection between cyber scams and labor trafficking by analyzing how individuals are exploited under the modern slavery conditions. The third section critically examines ASEAN's existing legal frameworks and institutional responses, highlighting the limitations of non-binding instruments, the barrier of the non-interference principle, and the fragmentation of cross-border enforcement. This is followed by a section on cybersecurity and digital governance gaps, which analyzes the region's failure to regulate digital ecosystems. Finally, the chapter proposes a reimagined digital governance framework for ASEAN to effectively address the growing crisis of cyber scams and labor exploitation in the digital era.

The Rise of Cyber Scams in ASEAN

Today, cyber scams have expanded significantly in scope and impact. Unlike phishing emails or romance scams, cyber scams were no longer manipulated behind the screens but instead established compounds. In reality, they have been formally established and operate like legitimate businesses at an industrial scale, with physical office setups, capital funds, and human resources (Nelson, 2025). Moreover, cyber scams have formed networks across borders as complex transnational crime groups where other associated crimes, namely labor trafficking, money laundering, drug smuggling, and terrorism (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2025). In the post-COVID-19 era, where cross-border investments are crucial for driving economic growth, cyber scams have capitalized on and facilitated these criminal activities. Cyber scams have targeted these developing economies, where foreign direct investment is a priority. Through this legal loophole and economic incentive, Special Economic Zones (SEZs) have played a crucial role in easing regulations, including those related to land use and labor tax laws (UNODC, 2025). SEZs, primarily located in border towns distant from authorities, are characterized by newly constructed high-rise buildings that house luxurious entertainment complexes, including casinos and hotels (Kennedy & Southern, 2022). This established infrastructure is a pulling factor for cyber scams to establish their call center syndicates and labor movements across the region and beyond.

As mentioned in the previous section, cyber scam operations are prominently found in the Mekong Sub region countries—Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), and Myanmar. According to Transparency International (2024), these countries have consistently faced weak governance and corruption, resulting in limited oversight. In some SEZs, legal enforcement is autonomously controlled by these foreign investors through private security firms, creating grey areas that can be exploited to conceal their illicit activities (Kennedy & Southern, 2022). Besides relaxed regulatory frameworks of the SEZs, it is undeniable that the geographical locations of these countries are another pulling factor that sustains the scam compounds. Amidst the geopolitical and geo-economics tension, Cambodia and the Lao PDR have received large investment volumes from China (Feng & Zhang, 2025). Particularly in the SEZs, Chinese investments have transformed border towns into entirely new urban spaces, creating numerous jobs for locals, especially young people (Kuaycharoen et al., 2020). Likewise, these SEZs are located across the borders with Thailand, which has been positioned as a supplier of technology and a transit point of labor trafficking by exploiting

Thailand's infrastructure and resource readiness, as well as weak immigration and border control regulations (Sattaburuth, 2025).

Scam cities in Cambodia include Poipet, Bavet, and Sihanoukville (Bangkok Post, 2025; Kiripostb, 2025). Initially, these border towns were recognized as casino cities. However, the situation has shifted during the COVID-19 pandemic toward cybercrime operations (Nikkei Asia, 2022). These compounds are usually self-contained with tight security surveilling dormitories and offices (Nazer, 2024). Although the Golden Triangle has long been recognized for its role in drug smuggling across three countries – Myanmar, Lao PDR, and Thailand – the rise of Chinese investment in SEZs in Lao PDR has facilitated scam operations through the 99-year land lease scheme offered by the Lao government (Jumlongrach, 2022). This long-term concession through a public-private partnership arrangement allowed Kings Romans group to build extensive infrastructure, including roads, airport, hospitals and casinos, while aligning the zone's development with China's Belt and Road agenda (The Nation Thailand, 2025). Such extended leases give Chinese firms near-total control of the city's security and contribution to the long-term profits, illustrating how China's influence in the region. However, local law enforcement has a limited capacity to combat cyber scams due to a lack of willingness and corruption. (Hutt, 2024).

Similar to Cambodia and Myanmar, scams in Lao PDR have originated from casinos, and call center scams have subsequently developed. In Myanmar, the situation is more complicated and distinct from that of other countries. This is due to its complex political regime, particularly following the 2021 coup d'état. At the federal level, Myanmar is controlled by the armed forces, while at the state or territory level, ethnic armed groups play a significant role in shaping local security landscapes. The epicenter of scam syndicates in Myanmar is primarily located within cities where ethnic militias are present, such as Shwe Kokko, KK Park, and Myawaddy (controlled by the Karen Border Guard Force: KBGF), Payathonzu (controlled by the Democratic Karen Benevolent Army: DKBA), and Laukkai (controlled by the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army: MNDAA). As a hybrid zone of governance, these scam compounds in Myanmar are in ambiguous zones with little federal authority interference and are fully guarded by ethnic armed groups (Bangkok Post, 2024).

Although Thailand is not a country that hosts cyber scam operations, it serves as a critical supplier of operational and infrastructural support for scam syndicates operating in its neighboring countries—Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar (South China Morning Post, 2025). In terms of operational support, Thailand facilitates the recruitment of laborers for call center scams. Laborers are often trafficked through Thailand as a transit point, using immigration checkpoints, informal border crossings, and natural boundaries (OHCHR, 2023a). The reasons why Thailand has been used as a transit location are not only that it shares borders with these nations, particularly in cities such as Sa Kaeo (bordered by Cambodia), Chiang Rai (bordered by Laos and Myanmar), and Chiang Rai (bordered by Myanmar). However, Thailand hosts direct flights and more relaxed immigration policies as a result of its tourism-supportive scheme. Besides operational support, Thailand acts as an infrastructural facilitator for cyber scam operations, as Thai SIM cards and internet access are readily available and affordable along the Thai border. Being located in border towns, these scam syndicates benefit from this infrastructural readiness. According to the recent crackdown, it was also reported that Starlink satellite equipment had been smuggled into these scam cities from Thailand (Asian Wireless

Communications, 2025). Additionally, Thai bank accounts—known as horse accounts, despite being owned by Thai nationals in Thailand—have been exploited as a tool for these cyber scams to receive transactions (Khaosod English, 2025).

According to the statistics, Southeast Asia is one of the leading regions with the highest rate of cyber scams. Singapore is a leading country in terms of scam victims in the region, with an economic loss of more than 4,031 USD per scam (Fintech Global, 2025). Vietnam contributes to the highest number of victims of scam calls and messages, with 56 percent of them having experienced contact with scammers (Anh, 2023). Meanwhile, the entire region has lost 37 billion USD in 2023 to cyber scams (UNODC, 2024). In Cambodia, the total revenues of cyber scams reached 12.5 billion USD. Similarly, in Lao PDR and Myanmar, cyber scams contributed 10.9 billion USD and 15.3 billion USD, respectively, accounting for nearly 40 percent of their combined GDP (Amarthalingam, 2024).

Labor Trafficking in Cyber Scam Operations in ASEAN

This section highlights the current situation of labor trafficking as a result of the cyber scam operations in ASEAN. Regarding the profiles of the trafficked, their origins are relatively diverse across continents. There are different ways they were trafficked to the scam cities. First, many of them had been deceived by job advertisements that often offer positions like data entry officer, customer service agent, digital marketer, or sales executive for e-commerce, cryptocurrency, or gaming platforms (The Mekong Club, 2023). Many of them were promised high salaries, free accommodations, visa support, and attractive bonuses, making young job seekers—usually in their 20s and 30s—victims of these schemes (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, 2022). Those from Southeast Asia, including Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Malaysia, as well as those from the host countries, are leading victims of employment as call center operators (OHCHR, 2023b). As ASEAN passports are permitted to travel to Thailand without a visa, it has become a pathway for scam operators to traffic them. Another group being trafficked to work in the scam syndicates are South Asians, primarily from India and Bangladesh, and Africans, including those from Ethiopia, Ghana, Nigeria, and Uganda, which appear to be the leading nationalities in the recruitment networks (Al Jazeera, 2025; Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, 2024). Last but not least are citizens from China, Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan who were trafficked due to their restrictions at home, such as poverty (The Guardian, 2022).

Once inside the compounds, where their phones and passports were confiscated, trafficked laborers are subject to complete surveillance under guards and CCTV monitoring (CamboJA News, 2025). Victims are forced to undergo training to learn scam scripts and manipulation techniques (Legal Support for Children and Women, 2024). They are often asked to fulfill the daily quotas, and those who fail to meet this financial goal will face different forms of threats of physical violence, such as beatings or sales to another compound (ABS-CBN News, 2025). Trafficked laborers who request a return are coercively asked to repay their debt, ranging from transport fees, accommodations, or training. Debt bondage varies from approximately thousands of USD (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2023a). In case they attempt to escape, further threats to families back home or death are introduced (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2023a). Being forced to work in cyber scam syndicates affects their lives physically, mentally, or both. Many of them have experienced malnutrition, extreme trauma, and isolation (The Telegraph, 2025). In some

cases, they may be sold to other scam gangs if they cannot perform effectively (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, 2022). In Poipet, Cambodia, it was reported that individuals fell to their deaths from high-rise buildings suspected of hosting scam compounds (Thai PBS World, 2025). Additionally, many were reported missing by their family members who lost contact with them after crossing borders from Thailand to another country, as was seen in the case of the Chinese actor (CNN, 2025). Despite urging investigations, it is reported that local law enforcement, including repatriations, has likely been delayed (Voice of America, 2025).

In recent months, crackdowns on cyber scam operations in the Mekong Sub region countries were conducted in collaboration with China and Thailand (South China Morning Post, 2025b). The joint efforts across countries contributed to the rescue of over 7,000 victims from various countries who had been trafficked and coerced to engage in cyber scams (The Diplomat, 2025). Along with the crackdowns, Thailand initiated strategies against these operations by implementing measures, such as financial sanctions against suspected horse accounts and cutting off electricity, fuel, and internet connectivity (Radio Free Asia, 2025). The result of these disruptions causes the release of trafficked victims and the temporary operation of scam syndicates. In Cambodia, scam syndicates in Poipet were exposed by the media and raided afterward (Wright & Leng, 2024). In Myanmar's Shwe Kokko and Myawaddy, coordination and negotiation with ethnic armed groups were introduced in specific locations under their control (France24, 2025). China played an important role in this operation, and thousands of Chinese nationals running the cyber scams were deported to China to face further legal prosecution (Kiripost, 2025a). In Lao PDR, the government ordered the closure of scam compounds within the Golden Triangle SEZ and deported many hundreds of individuals, both perpetrators and trafficked victims (Strangio, 2024).

Current ASEAN's Responses

The growing cyber scam crisis in Southeast Asia, which leads to human trafficking and digital slavery, has exposed a significant gap between existing ASEAN regional instruments and the reality of cross-border cyber threats. While ASEAN has various legal instruments aimed at addressing transnational crimes and promoting digital cooperation, ASEAN's response to the rapidly growing cyber scams crisis in the region continues to demonstrate limitations in both institutional capacity and coordination among ASEAN Member States (AMS). The cyber scams crisis has demonstrated that ASEAN's normative and non-binding approach is inadequate to address the complexity of this problem. This section will critically examine ASEAN's response, highlighting relevant ASEAN instruments, the principle of non-interference, and its institutional limitations, as well as analyzing the fragmented enforcement and lack of cross-border coordination.

Recognizing these gaps, ASEAN leaders have begun to elevate the issue at the highest political level. In May 2023, the 42nd ASEAN Summit in Labuan Bajo adopted the first-ever ASEAN Leaders' Declaration on Trafficking in Persons Caused by the Abuse of Technology (ASEAN, 2023a). In that declaration, ASEAN heads of state explicitly "share[d] concerns about the increasing abuse of technology in facilitating trafficking in persons" and committed to a "cohesive and immediate ASEAN response" to cyber-enabled scams (ASEAN, 2023). Crucially, the declaration instructs member governments to strengthen cooperation and coordination by enhancing each law-enforcement agency's capacity to investigate, share data, and conduct joint operations against technology-facilitated trafficking-in-person (ASEAN, 2023); it also calls

for improved victim identification and protection mechanisms, including technology-based methods to prevent victims' criminalization. In other words, the ASEAN Summit has begun to translate abstract commitments into concrete commitments: one operative section even urges promoting effective implementation of existing ASEAN instruments, such as the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (ACTIP) (ASEAN, 2023). However, the summit documents still require follow-up: national implementation, dedicated budgets, and measurable targets to ensure its anti-trafficking and digital plans become enforceable actions, not just words (Lamb, 2023).

ASEAN has developed a series of legal instruments that could theoretically be used to combat online fraud and human trafficking. The ACTIP is a cornerstone of regional efforts to combat human trafficking. ACTIP, adopted in 2015 and entering into force in 2017, is supplemented by a Plan of Action to Combat Trafficking in Persons (APA-TIP), which serves as a guide for its implementation. ACTIP aims to prevent human trafficking, protect victims, and punish perpetrators through a comprehensive regional cooperation framework (ASEAN, 2015). However, its implementation remains weak because its enforcement mechanisms depend on the political willingness of each member state (Rapid Asia, 2022). Furthermore, ACTIP does not explicitly address the emerging phenomenon of human trafficking in the context of cyber scams and digital-based forced labor. Victims from numerous countries are trafficked through transnational networks to work in forced labor centers in online scam operations, such as the Poipet or Shwe Kokko scam complexes (Jesperson et al., 2023; IOM, 2023). The lack of a timely and binding collective response mechanism exposes ACTIP's structural weakness in dealing with new forms of exploitation.

Furthermore, although the ASEAN Declaration on Human Rights (AHRD) is not legally binding, it affirms human rights, including the right not to be enslaved (ASEAN, 2012). These principles should serve as a guide in responding to cases of digital slavery arising from online scam operations. However, the AHRD often serves only as an inspirational statement due to limited enforcement mechanisms. To date, many argue that implementing the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration to address cases such as digital slavery requires concrete steps beyond mere symbolic commitments (Bon Tai Soon & Vathanaganthan, 2022).

In the digital domain, the ASEAN ICT Masterplan 2020 and the ASEAN Digital Masterplan 2025 (ADM, 2025) underscore the regional commitment to promoting digital transformation and cybersecurity. However, the primary focus of these plans is more on the development of digital infrastructure, the digital economy, and technology inclusiveness, with limited attention to emerging social risks and digital security , even though it is intended to be a proactive framework for cross-border law enforcement against digital threats to cybersecurity (ASEAN, 2025). Despite ADM 2025's recognition of the importance of cybersecurity, details on cross-border law enforcement coordination against online fraud remain vague. ADM 2025 does not directly address the need for digital safeguards against the misuse of technology by criminal syndicates, including oversight of the misuse of SEZs as sites for cyber scam operations. In this context, ASEAN digital governance remains developmentalist and less responsive to human rights and social vulnerabilities (Kuaycharoen et al., 2020; APHR, 2025).

One of the most significant obstacles to ASEAN's response to the online scam crisis is the long-standing principle of 'non-interference', a cornerstone of the 'ASEAN Way'. This principle, which underlines the sovereignty of member states, effectively limits ASEAN's ability to

intervene in domestic affairs, including the enforcement of laws against transnational crimes. Many have argued that the principle of 'non-interference' is often viewed as a barrier to swift and coordinated collective action in addressing transnational crimes such as cyber fraud (Tan & Ang, 2023). The principle significantly hinders effective regional intervention. It has led to the reluctance of ASEAN countries to conduct joint investigations, cross-border law enforcement operations, or even exchange intelligence on online scam syndicates. In the context of the scam compound in Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar, this principle makes the issue of human trafficking an internal issue, even though the pattern of operations is transnational and involves various actors directly from several member states. Studies indicate that, despite the ACTIP's legally binding nature, challenges persist in its enforceability and the monitoring of compliance by states (ASEAN-Australia Counter Trafficking, 2022; Rapid Asia, 2022).

ASEAN's institutional limitations also contribute to its challenges. ASEAN lacks a supranational authority, unlike the European Union, whose decision-making process is based on consensus that can slow down or even halt collective action. ASEAN's existing coordination mechanisms, such as the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime (AMMTC) and the ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting on Transnational Crime (SOMTC), are often perceived as overly bureaucratic and slow to respond to the rapidly evolving nature of cybercrime. As noted by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), ASEAN's consensus-based decision-making structure is like a double-edged sword when addressing cybercrimes that need swift and coordinated responses (UNODC, 2019). While consensus helps maintain regional harmony and respect for national sovereignty, it can also hinder timely action. As a result, critical measures may be delayed, reducing the effectiveness of ASEAN's collective response to cross-border cybercrimes. By contrast, the EU has formal institutions coordinating training across member states. Europol's European Cybercrime Centre explicitly supports training and capacity-building, in particular for the relevant authorities in Member States (Europol, n.d.) The EU also funds the European Cybercrime Training and Education Group (ECTEG), which develops standard curricula and courses for cybercrime investigators. ECTEG provides training and education material and reference trainers to international partners, aiming to harmonize cybercrime training EU-wide and beyond (European Cybercrime Training and Education Group, 2023).

The enforcement of laws against online scams remains highly fragmented across Southeast Asia. Each AMS operates within its jurisdiction, with its cybercrime legislation and law enforcement capacities. This legal and institutional disparity creates a "safe haven" for organized criminal actors to operate across borders with minimal obstruction. Perpetrators frequently exploit these differences, establishing scam operations in countries with weak enforcement frameworks (UNODC, 2023). When cybercrime cases involve multiple jurisdictions, the investigation process has been described as highly complex, often hindered by diverse legal protocols, the absence of effective extradition agreements, and language barriers (UNODC, 2021; Strangio, 2023). Limitations in regional cooperation mechanisms exacerbate these challenges. Existing Mutual Legal Assistance (MLA) arrangements within ASEAN are characterized by lengthy procedures and bureaucratic inefficiencies that hinder the timely conduct of cross-border investigations (UNODC, 2023). The reality of fragmented cross-border enforcement is evident in the inconsistent application of law across AMS, varying investigative capacities, and significant bureaucratic hurdles in intelligence and evidence sharing (UNODC, 2021; Wirawan & Novikrisna, 2024). The inadequacy of information-sharing frameworks and

the lack of harmonized cybercrime definitions among AMS further delay enforcement efforts (Asia/Pacific Group on Money Laundering, 2022). As a result, many cases remain unresolved with perpetrators able to evade arrest and prosecution, undermining deterrence and justice in the region.

Cybersecurity and Digital Governance Gaps

The crisis of online scams and digital slavery in the Mekong Sub region underlines significant vulnerabilities within ASEAN's digital regulatory framework. Analysts argue that many of ASEAN's digital governance gaps stem from its internal decision-making model. The region's "ASEAN Way" grounded in unanimous consensus and non-interference rarely yields binding commitments. Critics note that requiring all ten member states to agree often results in the weakest-common-denominator outcome, with policy texts intentionally watered down to avoid controversy (Aggarwal & Chow, 2010; Nagy, 2016). Consequently, ASEAN's cyber and digital strategies are often framed as broad aspirations rather than enforceable provisions. ASEAN forums were described as "talk shops" that issue declarations devoid of sanctions for non-compliance (Aggarwal & Chow, 2010; Nagy, 2016). The non-intervention norm further limits collective action: member states often avoid criticizing neighbors or overriding domestic prerogatives, even in cross-border digital contexts.

Despite notable progress in promoting the digital economy, ASEAN continues to lag in adopting comprehensive and enforceable policies on data privacy, cybersecurity, platform accountability, and the rights of digital workers (Suvannaphakdy, 2022; Ing et al., 2023; Anggono et al., 2025; Kodri, 202). Number of policy frameworks in the cybercrime and digital domain adopted by ASEAN, including the ASEAN Declaration to Prevent and Combat Cybercrime (2017), the ASEAN Cybersecurity Cooperation Strategy 2021-2025, the ASEAN Digital Masterplan 2025 (ADM 2025), and the Digital Data Governance Frameworks, emphasize the region's commitment to improving digital infrastructure and cybersecurity. However, these instruments are only advisory and not legally enforceable. The ASEAN Digital Masterplan 2025, for example, emphasizes connectivity and economic growth but lacks explicit provisions on protecting users from digital exploitation and ensuring cross-border enforcement (Nasution, 2021). This is largely rooted from ASEAN's principle of non-interference and mutual respect, which often prioritize national sovereignty over legally binding regional commitments, thus hindering the establishment of unified regulatory standards (Tan & Ang, 2023).

This reliance on non-binding instruments creates a fertile ground for exploitation. The policy gap has resulted in regulatory loopholes that cybercriminal syndicates can exploit. Furthermore, enforcement mechanisms remain weak and fragmented, partly due to institutional corruption and the lack of technical capacity within national law enforcement agencies (Ngich & Cho, 2020; United States Institute of Peace, 2024). The diversity of national interests within ASEAN also complicates efforts to establish regionally binding norms. States vary in their political will, legal traditions, and priorities in addressing digital harms (Gunther, 2024). Consequently, digital governance in ASEAN remains reactive rather than preventive, leaving both consumers and vulnerable workers exposed to increasing online threats.

On the other hand, the ASEAN Declaration to Prevent and Combat Cybercrime (2017) and the ASEAN Cybersecurity Cooperation Strategy aim to strengthen technical cooperation and information sharing among member states. However, the declaration is not legally

binding and does not provide joint investigative mechanisms or regional courts (ASEAN, 2017). However, the crimes committed by online scam syndicates span across jurisdictions. Recruitment occurs in one country, while training takes place in another, and the victims come from diverse nationalities, making these illegal practices difficult to manage. The lack of an effective mutual legal assistance mechanism in the digital arena hinders the prosecution and repatriation of victims (OHCHR, 2023a; Radio Free Asia, 2025). These enforcement limitations are complicated further by the disparate legal environments across member states. The ASEAN digital landscape is a patchwork of national laws and regulations, lacking comprehensive regional harmonization. Regarding data privacy, some countries, such as Singapore and Malaysia, have enacted laws to protect personal data, while others operate within unclear frameworks (Choudhury, 2025; Crown Information Management Philippines, 2025). This disparity makes cross-border data protection inconsistent and weakens responses to scam-related data breaches. The lack of unified standards enables criminals to exploit legal loopholes by relocating their operations to countries with weaker regulations (Benincasa, 2021; UNODC, 2024; Aurelia & Lewiandy, 2025). This undermines both investigations and efforts to provide restitution to victims.

Cybersecurity capacity across ASEAN member states also varies widely. Countries like Singapore have strong laws and institutions, while others struggle with limited technical expertise, insufficient funding, and outdated laws. This development gap creates vulnerable entry points for cybercriminals seeking to launch large-scale scam operations. Studies show that the weakest link in the regional cybersecurity chain often determines overall resilience against sophisticated cyber threats (Tay, 2023; Tech For Good Institute, 2025). Without a common response mechanism or a shared framework for protecting critical systems, attacks on one state can affect the entire region, yet, effective collective action continues to fall short.

Platform accountability for content moderation and the prevention of illicit activities remains largely underdeveloped. Online platforms used by scam syndicates for recruitment and communication rely on self-regulations or weak national laws. These regulations differ widely and are often poorly enforced. There is a perceptible lack of clear legal obligations for platforms to identify and remove scam-related content or to share user data with law enforcement across borders. A recent study shows that responsibility for policing online crimes often falls into a regulatory void, as platforms deny liability while governments face jurisdictional limits (Benincasa, 2021). This regulatory gap enables scams to spread easily through global digital systems with relative impunity.

The monitoring of digital labor, particularly in contexts where individuals are coerced into performing scam-related tasks, represents another critical area of regulatory neglect. The increasing number of "scam factories" masquerading as legitimate IT or gaming companies underscores the urgent need for clearer regulatory frameworks to protect workers from forced labor and exploitation in the digital economy. Existing labor laws in many ASEAN countries were not designed to address the complexities of digital exploitation, and enforcement mechanisms are often inadequate. It has been argued that the line between legitimate digital work and exploitation is increasingly blurred, calling for a regulatory approach that prioritizes human rights within the digital sphere (OECD, 2024).

The effectiveness of any regulatory efforts depends on the integrity of its governance and enforcement. Corruption within government and law enforcement has been identified as a

significant barrier to addressing online scams and related trafficking in Southeast Asia. Reports have documented cases where officials ignore or even support scam operations. Corruption enables traffickers (scam operators) to operate with impunity, evade law enforcement, or even receive protection from local authorities, rendering efforts to prevent, suppress, and punish trafficking ineffective (UNODC, 2021; ASEAN-Australia Counter Trafficking, 2025). This internal compromise severely undermines the institutional capacity to address the crisis. When law enforcement agencies are compromised, policies designed to protect citizens or strengthen cybersecurity become mere formalities, losing their deterrent effect. The failure of governance, exacerbated by corruption, creates a fertile ground for criminal syndicates to operate with a low risk of apprehension and prosecution, thereby perpetuating the cycle of exploitation.

In conclusion, the current state of ASEAN's digital regulatory framework is severely hindered by legal inconsistencies, enforcement gaps, and the profound impact of governance failures stemming from corruption. These internal weaknesses leave the region vulnerable to the growing threats of online scams and digital exploitation. Addressing these fundamental problems will require not only the development of more comprehensive and harmonized legal instruments but also a determined effort to strengthen institutional integrity, improve cross-border coordination, and a shared political will to uphold digital security and human rights across the region.

Reimagining ASEAN Digital Governance

The rise of cyber scam operations and associated labor trafficking across Southeast Asia necessitates an immediate response and a redefinition of ASEAN's digital governance. While regional blueprints, such as the ASEAN Digital Masterplan 2025 (ADM, 2025), the ASEAN Framework on Digital Data Governance (2018), and the ASEAN Framework on Personal Data Protection (2016), have served as foundations for digital governance in the region, these documents remain largely non-binding and ineffective. Moreover, digital environments, including those affected by cybercrime, have developed at a rapid pace, making it challenging for regional integration to keep up. Given this complexity, existing frameworks of cooperation have proved insufficient in responding to current transnational crimes. ASEAN is urgently required to design and implement a comprehensive digital governance framework that moves beyond fragmented national strategies and non-interference principles towards integrated and deepened regional cooperation. The current cybersecurity mechanisms have created loopholes in regulations and enable transnational crime networks to continuously exploit the Southeast Asian population. This section proposes a reimagined framework to be institutionalized for robust mechanisms.

The EU Cybersecurity Act (Regulation 2019/881) can serve as an example for ASEAN in implementing the binding regulation for the regional cybersecurity. This legal document gives the EU Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA) a permanent mandate and establishes a European-wide certification framework (EUR-Lex, 2019). Similarly, the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) is a binding law imposing mandatory data privacy rules with strict penalties for non-compliance. Furthermore, the EU has dedicated bodies and penalties to back up its laws. ENISA now has a permanent mandate to coordinate cybersecurity policy across Europe (EUR-Lex, 2019), and national data-protection authorities can levy fines (up to 4 percent of global turnover under GDPR). In terms of victim protections, Directive 2011/36/EU requires each country to strengthen penalties and victim support in a coordinated way. The

EU has also adopted an explicit 2021–2025 strategy that provides a comprehensive response to trafficking from prevention and victim protection to bringing traffickers to justice (European Commission, 2021).

Transnational digital governance networks must be implemented collectively at the regional level. A regional cybercrime enforcement task force should be established, utilizing shared resources among ASEAN member states, including intelligence, joint investigations, and data sharing. This would strengthen existing initiatives by bringing strategies into operational capabilities. Moreover, a unified victim protection and repatriation protocol is needed in order to ensure that trafficked individuals are treated as victims and are granted immediate access to legal aid, physical and mental health consultation and rehabilitation, consular access, and safe return mechanisms. In addition, ASEAN should consider establishing a regional cybersecurity commission to serve as an oversight body responsible for implementation, monitoring, and advising member states and relevant stakeholders on protecting people and the region from cybercrime threats. With all these efforts, ASEAN should learn from other regional bodies that can become example models of regional cooperation, like the European Union's Cyber Security Act (2019); General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR); Directive 2011/36/EU; the EU Strategy on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings (2021-2025); and the Charter of Fundamental Rights.

To fast-track implementation within five years, ASEAN should anchor its reforms in a two-track approach: immediate institutional set-up and phased legal harmonization. In year 1-2, ASEAN leaders should adopt a high-level declaration establishing a regional Cybercrime Task Force and a Cybersecurity Commission with interim secretariats under the ASEAN Secretariat. These bodies would begin joint intelligence sharing, pilot investigations, and draft a unified victim protection and repatriation protocol, drawing technical assistance from partners such as the EU, UNODC, and Interpol. In parallel, ASEAN ICT and justice ministers should align national laws on data protection and cybercrime, referencing the EU's GDPR and Cybersecurity Act as benchmarks (EUR-Lex, 2019; European Commission, 2021). By Year 3-5, the Commission would oversee binding standards on cross-border data sharing, run regional cyber drills, and publish compliance reviews, while the Task Force conducts coordinated operations against scam syndicates. The Victim Protocol should be operational across all member states, guaranteeing trafficked persons access to legal aid, health and rehabilitation, and safe return.

The current ASEAN digital governance framework is fragmented, not only by country but also by scope. It is recommended that ASEAN integrate cybersecurity with a human rights lens in order to ensure that the rights of the population in the region, including those who fall as victims of cyber scams' labor trafficking as well as those who are deceived by the cyber scams, are protected through the victim-centered approach that prioritizes needs, rights, and dignity of individuals by ensuring access to justice and legal assistance, physical and psychological safety and wellbeing regardless of their identities. Besides, ASEAN should be more proactive in counter-cybercrime and human trafficking measures that are not only dysfunctional cyber scam operations but also prevent the future establishment of cyber scam compounds. To operationalize this, relevant stakeholders, including government agencies, civil society organizations, academics, and tech firms in ASEAN, should collaborate to monitor, track down, and remove content labeled as threats and risks to digital spaces, including cyber scams that harm and exploit ASEAN's populations. Likewise, cutting supplies, such as electricity or fuel,

that foster scams, as well as developing advanced technological equipment, should continually be supported throughout the regional task force.

In addition, ASEAN should strengthen protections by law enforcement coordination through the ASEANAPOL. These ten police chiefs can spearhead cross-border operations and build on international efforts. In parallel, ASEANAPOL should be mobilized to establish a joint cybercrime unit that enables real-time sharing of alerts, evidence, and best practices among police in all member states. Complementing these measures, member states need to work toward legal harmonization, developing consistent definitions of cybercrime and extradition rules, so that perpetrators cannot exploit jurisdictional gaps. Additionally, investing in region-wide training and joint exercises on digital investigations will help ensure that even countries with weaker capacity, such as Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar, can build robust and resilient cyber-policing capabilities.

Furthermore, ASEAN's digital governance framework should be grounded in a bottom-up approach, centering its design and implementation on the needs of people, especially the youth, who make up more than half the population of the region. Additionally, they are among the most digitally active individuals, making significant contributions to the workforce. Across the region, young people are disproportionately affected by their digital presence in both personal and professional life. The new governance framework must embed youth participation by institutionalizing consultation mechanisms that enable young people to be represented at the national and regional levels. Moreover, national and regional digital frameworks should integrate the voices of young individuals and organizations. To protect youth from becoming victims of cyber scams and labor trafficking, it is essential to strengthen digital literacy beyond the fundamental skills that address critical thinking, cybersecurity, and data privacy. Young people should also be empowered to become resilient as digital citizens.

Involving young people is not only practical but a moral imperative as UNESCO ensures that engaging youth in decision-making is necessary (UNESCO, 2021). Similarly, the UN has affirmed that internet access as a basic human right underscores that equitable governance is fundamentally about justice and inclusion (United Nations, 2023). From this perspective, ASEAN should treat youth as co-creators of policy, embedding their voices through consultation mechanisms and ensuring digital literacy programs that foster critical thinking, security awareness, and responsibility. Such a bottom-up approach echoes the social contract tradition and extends human rights into the digital realm by guaranteeing all youth, especially marginalized groups, safe, meaningful participation in the region's digital society. A successful framework must also resonate with youth culture, meeting young people in the spaces they inhabit online. ASEAN governments could adapt these methods by collaborating with influencers, eSports figures, and local creators to embed digital security into youth culture. Over time, empowering young people not only as audiences but as content creators ensures authenticity and builds resilience.

ASEAN is standing at a critical juncture in rethinking and redefining digital governance amidst the rise of transnational cybercrime, namely cyber scams and labor trafficking, which have exposed populations in the region to vulnerabilities and risks. As a result, ASEAN's digital governance framework must be re-strategized and forward-thinking, turning paper into action that places human rights principles at the center. Regional law enforcement and victim protection mechanisms should be coordinated and cooperated among the ASEAN member

states at a higher intensity level to ensure that the region is safe for all communities. Advanced technologies should be readily equipped to quickly take down cyber scam operations. Relevant stakeholders must join hand-in-hand to tackle cyber scams. The voices of victims must be heard in order to design and implement effective mechanisms for further prevention and protection. Most importantly, the roles of youth must not be overlooked. As the next generation, young people in ASEAN must be empowered with digital literacy and become resilient in terms of digital safety and security.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that the rise of cyber scams and associated labor trafficking in Southeast Asia represents a complex and evolving threat facilitated by weak digital governance, institutional fragmentation, and regulatory loopholes. Although ASEAN has established multiple frameworks to address cybercrime, digital transformation, and human trafficking such as ACTIP, ADM 2025, and the ASEAN Cybersecurity Cooperation Strategy. These instruments remain largely non-binding and lack the enforcement power necessary to respond to rapidly evolving transnational threats (UNODC, 2019).

Key findings point to the persistent gap between ASEAN's formal commitments and operational realities. The region's legal landscape is fragmented, with member states adopting inconsistent laws related to cybersecurity, data protection, and labor. Corruption, limited cross-border enforcement, and the principle of non-interference further weaken coordinated responses (Ngich & Cho, 2020; United States Institute of Peace, 2024) As a result, scam syndicates exploit jurisdictional loopholes and weak oversight to conduct large-scale operations with impunity, often through special economic zones and digital platforms. The lack of mutual legal assistance and the absence of shared investigative protocols continue to impede victim protection and prosecution efforts (UNODC, 2023; OHCHR, 2023).

The urgency of reform is apparent. The crisis highlights the limitations of traditional security approaches in a digital landscape where exploitation can transcend borders and governance structures. Addressing this requires more than technical capacity or isolated enforcement efforts. ASEAN must adopt a whole-of-society approach, one that strengthens institutional integrity, empowers civil society, and mobilizes cross-sector partnerships to protect digital rights and safety.

A coordinated and binding digital governance framework must be developed, grounded in accountability, victim-centered justice, and human rights protection (Tan & Ang, 2023; OECD, 2024). The creation of a regional cybersecurity task force, unified victim repatriation protocols, and a dedicated ASEAN digital oversight body should be prioritized. Moreover, ASEAN must embrace youth inclusion and digital literacy as cornerstones of long-term resilience, given the disproportionate vulnerability of young people in the digital space.

A people-centered ASEAN digital future requires bold leadership and genuine political will. Cyber scams and digital slavery cannot be seen as isolated crimes but as systemic failures demanding collective action. The time has come to move beyond declarations and commit to governance that protects the dignity, safety, and digital freedoms of all people in the region.

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Chapter 5

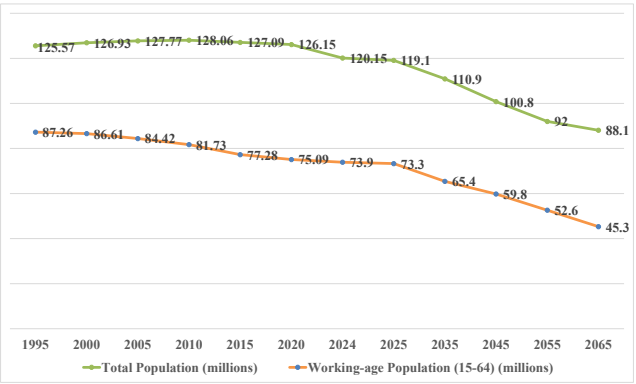
Reimagining ASEAN Labor Migration: Infrastructures of Mobility and Dependency in the Japan-ASEAN Corridor

Andi Holik Ramdani

Introduction

The labor corridor from ASEAN to Japan is in the midst of profound changes, shaped by diverse economic and demographic considerations driving labor flow. Japan is faced with a population crisis of historic proportions defined by the extremely rapid population aging, leading to the correspondingly small population of the young that might be used productively in the labor market (Figure 5.1). The 2024 Statistics Bureau's Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications of Japan's "Population Estimates" for April 2024 points out the population in the 15 to 64-year-old group has been continuously falling since 1995. The group representing this age range is estimated to number around 73.9 million in 2024. Future estimations show Japan's population is projected to shrink to 88.08 million in 2065, resulting in the shrinking of the labor force to around 45.29 million. The elderly population ratio was measured at 29.1 percent in 2022 and is projected to grow to 38.4 percent by 2065.

Figure 5.1 Japan's total and working-age population (15–64) are declining as of April 2024



Source: Statistics Bureau's Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications of Japan.

Thus, Japan has to depend more on foreign workforce by fulfilling its needed labor requirement. ASEAN nations have a high percentage of youth populations who can contribute significantly to the recruitment pool — particularly in intensive sectors like healthcare, construction, agriculture and manufacturing. This chapter focuses on the processes of sending, receiving, and returning migration within the Japan-ASEAN corridor by taking into account the institutional, economic, and governmental framework.

Understanding the nuanced movements underpinning and constraining these migrations requires attention to mobility infrastructures — regulations, supply chains, mode of entry, recruitment landscape, as well as also language acquisition and valorizing credentials (Xiang & Lindquist 2018). These are organizational frameworks and they have an impact not only

on migrant outcomes, but create systemic dependency in maintaining these mechanisms of mobility. They have major implications for the rights, health, and protection of migrants. In this, recruitment agencies and language schools as the key intermediaries, intersect with migration policies and processes and therefore have a hand in shaping not only the migrant pathways but also their subjective experiences. The study posits that these infrastructures not only enable labor migrants from ASEAN to Japan to come and go, but also significantly generate long-term dependencies, fundamentally shaping both opportunities and risks throughout the entire migration process.

Further, examining the whole migration process—from how people are recruited in their countries of origin for working overseas to job, social integration and exit strategy at the destination (return or re-migrate)—reveals numerous dependencies at every level across the corridor. Bilateral agreements, commercial agency networks, and local training institutions in origin countries create pathways often channeling migrants to specific companies or sectors. In the case of Japan, this occurs to varying degrees depending on factors such as the strict Japanese labor market and social rules, the difficulty in obtaining permanent residency status or work visas in certain countries, and hierarchical stratification based on occupation. This is compounded by the lack of holistic reintegration mechanisms in several ASEAN countries, which hinders the benefits of overseas employment and results in a number of migrants caught in repeated migration episodes. Understanding this intricate process is key to overhauling a migration system that serves Japan's labor needs in combination with delivering developmental outcomes for regions of origin.

Objectives, Problem Description, Significance, and Approach

This chapter explores labor migration to and from Japan among select ASEAN countries, where recruitment of foreign workers is the highest, with a focus on Technical Intern Training Programme (TITP) participants. Statistics from Japan Immigration Services show many individuals from the ASEAN states to be found in various sectors of employment. This highlights the high labor force both in the ASEAN region and in Japan (see Table 5.1).

Table 5.1 Number of Technical Intern Trainees by Country of Origin as of June 2024

Nationality	Technical Intem	Nationality	Technical Intem
Vietnam	203,977	Bangladesh	1,410
Indonesia	87,090	India	884
Philipinnes	37,914	Pakistan	123
Myanmar	31,069	Peru	52
China	26,780	Taiwan	8
Cambodia	14,913	Brazil	4
Thailand	12,025	DPRK	0
Nepal	2,704	South Korea	0
Mongolia	2,671	United Kingdom	0
Sri Lanka	2,088	USA	0
		Others	2,002

Source: Immigration Services Agency of Japan.

Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines constitute a special subgroup of ASEAN nations that largely rely on Japan's TITP as the primary framework for labor migration, for intermediary opportunities of employment abroad, and for supporting remittances to their home countries. Resolving the basic deficiency in the migration system has become increasingly urgent. TITP has shown significant benefits to laborers from Myanmar and other areas where socioeconomic and political conditions limit access to occupational opportunities. Despite the irregularities in the enforcement of the rules (ILO, 2021), the rationale still holds. The present study goes beyond the simplistic belief in foreign labor influx to Japan; it underscores serious needs for ASEAN countries to seek employment-based schemes that encourage overseas labor, combined with vital reforms in governance systems to make labor migration routes viable.

This chapter explores the barriers faced by technical interns in three key stages: pre-departure, arrival, and post-return. At the pre-departure stage, prospective interns face excessively high costs to find employment, lack enough information to understand these costs, and suffer from unequal access to information even in the presence of national policy steps to ensure the protection of the rights of interns (OECD, 2018). Many trainees find difficulty in finding appropriate employment, face overwork, and lack appropriate legal means once they arrive. Such contexts reflect the role of power in the relationship between the migrant and the employer (Liu-Farrer, 2022). Shortcomings in reintegration programs, in addition to the lack of dedicated financial means for business purposes, lead to the neglect of the needs of the larger society (Bachtiar & Prasetyo, 2017; IOM, 2022).

To overcome these inadequacies, it is vital for the ASEAN states to cooperate with Japan in the creation of well-managed circular migration arrangements. Such movement has the potential to create benefits for recipient and source communities, but only if proper institutional measures are established in place, including systems for the recognition of skills, transferability in respect to social security benefits, and reintegration support (Wickramasekara, 2011; Vertovec, 2007). Without extensive reforms, circular migration will only provide an alternative route for labor searchers, hence exposing them to being exploited. Therefore, it is indispensable for ASEAN states to cooperate in the creation of balanced migration arrangements by aligning the necessary skills and improving labor relations with Japan (ADBI, OECD, ILO, 2023).

The shift from the TITP to *Ikusei-Shūrō* is a critical component in the rethinking of the current migration scheme in terms of equity and sustainability.

This chapter contends that labor migration between Japan and ASEAN countries, specifically the TITP, is not one-sided as of worker flow. However, this perspective ignores the intricate networks that influence migration in the sending, hosting and circular stages. By going beyond the notion of 'drivers' to a more holistic understanding of politics and political-economic forces behind migration and immobility, this study offers an alternative knowledge production by focusing on infrastructures that not only facilitate mobility but are also constitutive of infrastructure-oriented systemic vulnerabilities.

This is done by capitalizing on Migrant Infrastructure Theory, which underscores the matrix of institutions, intermediaries and material infrastructures that facilitates or articulates mobility processes (Xiang & Lindquist 2014) together with Dependency Theory (Frank 1969), which denotes the systemically asymmetric relations inherent in a globalized economy based on structural disparities among countries. By combining these approaches, the analysis can get

closer to recognizing not only real mechanisms of migration for work between ASEAN countries and Japan but also the power relations that make possible and maintain this dependence on the regimes of migration. This theoretical lens are proper to examine how sending, receiving and returning infrastructures teeter between flexibility of labor needs while constraining mobility and entrenching dependence within the context of Japan–ASEAN labor corridor.

For ASEAN and Japan to create an equitable and beneficial system for the movement of laborers, it is crucial for all stakeholders to take on collective responsibilities for the necessary preparations before workers' departure and their eventual reintegration upon return.

Pre-Departure Challenges: Financial and Non-Financial Issues

TITP is a government-administered initiative established through Memorandums of Cooperation (MOCs) between Japan and designated partner nations. As of 2020, Japan had entered into Memoranda of Cooperation with 14 Asian countries, including prominent ASEAN members like Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines (MLHW, 2020). These agreements provide transnational recruitment through sanctioned sending organizations—occasionally collaborating with intermediaries—to identify and prepare trainees in accordance with the requirements of Japanese companies. Upon arrival, supervision organizations assign trainees to specified host companies. This configuration illustrates the deeply structured framework of Japan–ASEAN labor migration.

The program provides mobility options; but, participation entails considerable pre-departure expenses. Applicants generally incur expenses for language training, formal documentation, medical examinations, and agency fees. Despite the existence of formal fee caps—35 million IDR (2,150 USD) in Indonesia, 10.8 million VND (450 USD) in Vietnam, 1,500 USD in Cambodia, and a "no placement fee" policy in the Philippines—these regulations are enforced inconsistently. Training and paperwork fees continue to be applicable, and concealed expenses persist. A 2022 survey by the Immigration Services Agency indicated that the average overall pre-departure expenditure amounted to 688,143 JPY (5,294 USD), with Vietnamese trainees incurring the highest costs and Filipinos the lowest.

Expenditures on education and recruitment predominate among these costs. Vietnamese trainees incurred an average expenditure of 320,272 JPY (2,464 USD) on training, Cambodians 429,788 JPY (3,306 USD), and Indonesians 100,767 JPY (775 USD) on supplies. Filipinos continually had the lowest levels of expenditure. These gaps indicate structural variances in national recruitment systems, which directly influence access to international employment.

Elevated expenses frequently result in migration funded by debt. More than fifty percent of the trainees had incurred loans prior to departure, with Vietnamese workers indicating the greatest average debt (674,480 JPY / 5,188 USD). Loan payback responsibilities often eclipse the TITP's declared objective of skill development upon trainees' arrival in Japan.

The TITP, albeit officially characterized as a developmental program, has predominantly provided labor to industries experiencing domestic shortages. Each year, over 210,000 trainees are employed in 74 specified areas, many of which are deemed "unskilled" (Liu-Farrer, 2020), such as construction and seafood processing. Some also engage in unofficial or excessive working hours to fulfill financial responsibilities (Le Phuong Anh & Torao, 2022).

These vulnerabilities are exacerbated by Japan's immigration and labor systems. As of January 2025, 65,270 foreign residents have exceeded their visa durations, with Vietnamese nationals constituting the predominant demographic (ISA, 2025). Field research in Miyagi Prefecture associates economic distress among trainees with theft and other criminal activities.

Extra pressure arises from processing delays in Japan's Certificate of Eligibility (COE). Such delays may result in the retraction of job offers, the accumulation of interest on debts, and leading to some applicants resorting to informal employment prior to departure. Similar trends have been recorded in Thailand (Kalapong, 2022). The OECD cautions that these procedural inefficiencies erode confidence in the TITP, while Yoshida (2021) emphasizes that improvements must tackle the fundamental conditions facilitating abuse, rather than only modifying superficial procedures.

The existing framework of the TITP perpetuates financial instability, indebtedness, and dependency—issues that necessitate more than mere administrative reforms. Significant modifications are required to guarantee transparency, safeguard workers, and realign the program with its initial developmental objectives.

Post-Arrival Issues: Employer-Related Challenges and Social Integration Obstacles

Many technical intern trainees (TITs) from ASEAN can say that the conditions of their jobs in Japan are very different from what they were promised when they were hired. Written contracts spell out the rules for employment, pay, and other general working circumstances, but that doesn't stop people from being taken advantage of. According to the Immigration Services Agency of Japan (2022), most interns do things that are not linked to or just slightly relevant to the work they were given to do. The type of diversion is often caused by companies not using formal, skill-based training programs and instead focusing on general labor needs. This kind of behavior goes against the goals that the TITP set for itself.

The trainees are quite worried about the prevalent problem of extended working hours and the necessity for proper regulation of overtime. A 2021 assessment by the Japan Investigative Council for Occupational Health and Toxicology found that more than 30 percent of technical interns worked excessive hours for too long. The practice is especially frequent in fields like construction, manufacturing, and farming, where rules are not as strict. In this case, the law has not been followed, which puts both physical and mental health at risk and causes chronic fatigue and high levels of stress (Yoshida, 2021).

Interns have to deal with power dynamics at work, which makes it hard for them to report harassment. Many interns don't report violations of their contracts or mistreatment because they depend on sponsorship, resources, or job placements that are linked to their visa sponsorship. The main reason for these worries is the fear of being deported or losing their job. Liu-Farrer (2020) notes that these dynamics make things unstable, and the fact that people don't know enough about their rights at work and don't speak the language well enough, makes it easier for exploitative behaviors to continue with little opposition and responsibility.

Getting language skills is a big barrier to empowerment and integration. The first element of the pre-departure orientation training is Japanese language education. However, this kind of training often doesn't give interns the abilities they need to do their jobs well or to participate in society as a whole. When interns go to Japan, they have trouble getting healthcare, getting

to the courts, or using ordinary services because of communication problems. Tsujimoto (2020) says that those who don't speak Japanese well are more likely to be alone, which makes technical interns feel even more alone in Japanese culture.

When the corporation provides housing, which is usually in cities or locations that are not on site, it makes people feel more lonely and isolated. The conditions make it harder for people to make friends and get help from others. According to Sato's 2021 model on isolation, this behavior makes it harder for trainees in crisis management to adjust since it limits their ability to engage with coworkers and get resources outside of the typical job settings.

Local governments have started programs to meet these needs. These programs aim to promote multicultural integration and provide services to non-native residents, especially in areas like learning a new language, getting legal help, and fitting in with the community. Most of these programs aim to help long-term residents or settled immigrants, therefore they do not meet the demands of short-term technical trainees (Chiavacci, 2020). Because of this, these programs lead to outreach initiatives that don't do enough, and the trainees don't know about the support services they are entitled to and can't get to them.

In locations like Kawasaki and Hamamatsu, where *tabunka kyōsei*, or inclusive living initiatives, are more widely used, migrant workers benefit from having many places to meet up at foreign community centers and service centers that offer services in multiple languages. But the quality and variety of the services differ greatly from one region to another. Many small towns and localities in the country that take many technical interns lack the organizational skills and political will to implement inclusive policies into action. Different levels of service access lead to different experiences and make the system obstacles that foreign workers have encountered for a long time even stronger.

These issues illustrate that there is a wide gap between what the TITP desires and what trainees actually do. Sometimes, the program is promoted as a way for people to share their abilities and work together across borders. In reality, though, it often functions like a disposable labor model, where foreign workers are left out, overworked, and not given real chances to learn new skills. In order to close this gap, changes must be made to address problems that arise at every stage of the migration process, from hiring to returning home. This entails making *tabunka kyōsei* programs easier for everyone to use, giving workers greater rights, and making sure that technical interns are treated with dignity, respect, and recognition of their human rights by establishing better methods for overseeing work between Japan and ASEAN countries**.**

Return Migration: Reintegration Dynamics and Opportunities for Professional Development

Return migration is a significant yet inadequately examined facet of the experiences of TITs. The 2023 second follow-up study by Organization for Technical Imtern Training (OTIT) indicates that reintegration outcomes significantly differ by country of origin—especially Indonesia, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Myanmar—due to varying economic, institutional, and socio-political circumstances.

Returnees from Vietnam and Indonesia typically attained more favorable labor market results. A significant number participated in entrepreneurial or self-employment endeavors, with Vietnamese workers frequently utilizing alumni networks for employment opportunities, whilst Indonesians typically initiated small-scale enterprises in agricultural or retail.

Conversely, Myanmar returnees encountered significant reintegration challenges stemming from persistent political instability and economic deterioration, which limited employment prospects. Filipino returnees saw varied outcomes, with some securing employment in caregiving or migrating into Japan's Specified Skilled Worker (SSW) program.

The transferability of skills has become a significant issue. Filipino and Vietnamese returnees in caregiving and manufacturing indicated that their technical capabilities were more relevant in the domestic labor market. Indonesian studies indicated that although returnees appreciated the soft qualities gained in Japan—such as punctuality and diligence—these talents did not significantly improve domestic employment opportunities. Myanmar returnees characterized their technical talents as predominantly impractical due to insufficient market recognition and restricted work prospects.

Financial resilience exhibited variability. Returnees from Indonesia and Myanmar frequently exhausted their funds within a year, whereas individuals from Vietnam and the Philippines were more inclined to preserve some financial resources, typically allocating them for familial responsibilities, home enhancements, or entrepreneurial endeavors. OTIT discovered that merely 22.6 percent of returnees maintained financial stability after one year, underscoring risks that may prompt recurrent migration, particularly in Indonesia.

Institutional support varied among countries. Vietnamese returnees experienced enhanced access to formal reintegration initiatives and community-oriented programs. The Philippines has implemented reintegration procedures via the Department of Migrant Workers; however, these have not guaranteed complete integration into the labor market. Returnees from Indonesia and Myanmar reported limited interaction with support agencies, frequently attributed to insufficient understanding of available services, including job placement, skills recognition, and counseling. These deficiencies highlight shortcomings in bilateral policy execution and the necessity for synchronized Japan–ASEAN reintegration measures. Fieldwork in Java (2023–2024) substantiated these findings through more than 50 interviews with current and former migrants, recruitment agents, trainers, and officials. Case narratives exemplify varied reintegration experiences.

A 27-year-old individual from Brebes utilized his income from food processing employment in Kesennuma to establish a small enterprise and refurbish his residence, enhancing familial well-being despite persistent financial challenges. A 33-year-old individual from Subang returned from Ishinomaki to establish a food booth and workshop while contributing to the construction of a training institution, serving as a local resource for prospective migrants despite experiencing emotional fatigue.

A woman from Ponorogo, who returned early due to a family sickness, emphasized the gender-specific obstacles of reintegration, observing that while soft skills remained intact, technical abilities rapidly became obsolete. A construction worker from Cilacap faced challenges in obtaining permanent job after returning and sought re-entry through the SSW program, illustrating the difficulty that over 30 percent of returnees encounter in finding work commensurate with their qualifications.

The data indicate that although some TIT returnees thrive as community entrepreneurs or skilled workers, many face financial instability, underutilization of skills, and inadequate

institutional support—issues that sustain cycles of migration.

Discussions

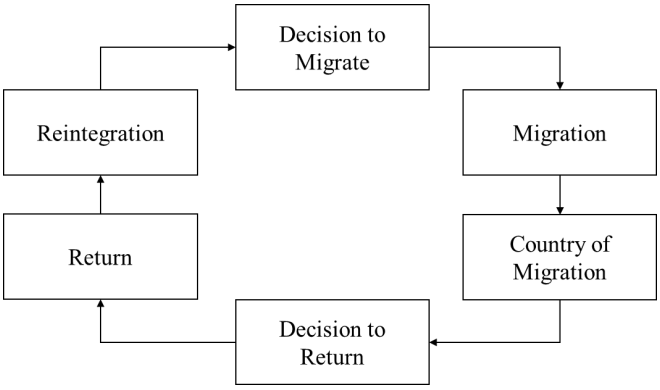
This chapter utilizes Migrant Infrastructure Theory and Dependency Theory to analyze the ASEAN–Japan labor migration framework under the TITP, concentrating on the stages of sending, receiving, and returning. Utilizing fieldwork conducted in Indonesia, secondary sources, and ideas from Kuschminder's (2013) research on return migration, the analysis synthesizes converging findings to elucidate the dynamics and structural challenges inherent in the program.

During the sending phase, migration is influenced by the collaborative networks of governmental bodies, authorized recruitment agencies, and language training organizations. These entities standardize training, certification, and employment placement, therefore facilitating migration and centralizing authority over the timing, individuals, and sectors of movement. This approach tightly associates workers with the infrastructures enabling their departure. Dependency Theory contextualizes this process within overarching structural disparities. Japan's demographic decline and labor shortages generate persistent demand for low-wage foreign labor, while remittance-dependent ASEAN nations modify their domestic labor frameworks to satisfy offshore market requirements, occasionally to the detriment of local job prospects. Significant pre-departure costs for language training, documentation, and job placement remain a significant obstacle, even under bilateral Memoranda of Cooperation (MOCs). The OTIT (2023) study indicates that these expenses often drive migrants into debt, diminish their negotiating strength, and heighten their susceptibility to exploitation, especially when pre-departure orientations do not deliver precise information regarding working conditions.

In Japan, the employment and daily life of migrants are strictly governed by employers, regulatory agencies, and legal structures. Under the TITP, oversight predominantly emphasizes employer contentment and regulatory adherence rather than employee well-being. Field interviews and reports (JITCO 2021; Liu-Farrer 2020) indicate prevalent difficulties include high workloads, contract violations, restricted mobility, and constrained possibilities for skill development. Dependency Theory elucidates the continuation of certain circumstances: Japan gains from a consistent influx of temporary, interchangeable laborers in industries including healthcare, construction, agriculture, and food processing—sectors largely shunned by the native workforce—while circumventing the expenses linked to long-term assimilation. Language problems further impede access to help, and multicultural coexistence (tabunka kyōsei) initiatives are inconsistently administered, with restricted availability in remote regions (Chiavacci 2020; Tsujimoto 2020).

The return phase exposes the most vulnerable aspect of the migration cycle. Institutional support available during the sending and receiving phases—such as recruitment agencies, training centers, and monitoring organizations—largely dissipates upon migrants' return home. Numerous individuals encounter underemployment, challenges in obtaining acknowledgment for skills obtained internationally, and little support for job placement. This corresponds with Dependency Theory's perspective of a self-sustaining cycle where dependency on labor export inhibits reinvestment in reintegration, resulting in recurrent migration and an intensified reliance on remittances.

Figure 5.2 Kuschminder's Migration Life Cycle



Source: Kuschminder, 2013, p. 84

Kuschminder (2013) asserts that return migration must be perceived as a process rather than a conclusion, necessitating policies and initiatives that empower migrants to leverage the skills, financial resources, and networks they obtain overseas (Figure 5.2). However, OTIT's 2023 follow-up survey revealed that numerous returnees depleted their money within a year and faced difficulties in obtaining appropriate jobs. In Indonesia, reintegration programs are disjointed and excessively centered on business, without thorough career counseling and emotional support (Bachtiar & Prasetyo 2017). The obstacles are particularly evident in Myanmar, where political instability, economic decline, and weak institutions severely hinder reintegration. A multitude of returnees faces persecution or ostracism. Japan and ASEAN partners ought to implement adaptable re-entry provisions under the Specified Skilled Worker (SSW) system or a revised TITP, with diaspora networks, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and independent monitors safeguarding rights.

While the TITP was intended to facilitate skills transfer, it has frequently served as a source of inexpensive labor for Japanese industry. Japan's initiative to substitute it with the *Ikusei–Shūrō* program by 2027 presents an opportunity to rectify systemic deficiencies. Reforms like transparent recruiting procedures, sectoral mobility, and improved alignment between training outcomes and established skill standards could facilitate a transition from a dependency-based economy to a more equitable and mutually advantageous framework. Accomplishing this necessitates the integration of reintegration assistance within the migration framework, encompassing pre-departure planning, bilateral accords on skill recognition, and access to employment post-return. According to Wickramasekara (2011), Vertovec (2007), and Kuschminder (2013), effectively managed circular migration can yield advantages for both sending and receiving nations, contingent upon integrated governance and fair rights safeguards.

Reconceptualizing the ASEAN–Japan labor corridor in this manner would establish returnees as significant assets to national and regional development instead of as disposable labor. The implementation of Migrant Infrastructure Theory and Dependency Theory illustrates that although the corridor promotes mobility, it simultaneously reinforces structural reliance. Should the transition to *Ikusei–Shūrō* be executed with authentic bilateral commitment, equitable labor standards, and robust reintegration mechanisms, the corridor may emerge as

a paradigm of rights-based collaboration that advantages Japan, sending communities, and migrants, thereby transforming cycles of dependency into reciprocal development and shared accountability.

Conclusions

Reimagining ASEAN labor migration entails transitioning from a transactional, dependency-focused model to a rights-based, development-oriented paradigm that advantages migrants, sending countries, and Japan equally. This chapter's examination of the TITP reveals that, although the program promotes cross-border labor mobility, it simultaneously confines migrants within institutional frameworks that sustain unequal economic and political relationships. Migrant Infrastructure Theory elucidates the mechanisms by which recruitment agencies, language institutions, and intermediary organizations govern migration conditions, whereas Dependency Theory illustrates how these frameworks perpetuate Japan's reliance on foreign labor and reinforce ASEAN nations' dependence on remittances and overseas employment.

The findings highlight that enduring discrepancies between policy formulation and execution—particularly in recruitment regulation, workplace protection, and reintegration assistance—facilitate exploitative practices that disproportionately impact migrants from rural and politically vulnerable backgrounds. Transforming this system necessitates a transition to collective accountability: Japan must ensure that migrants return home with dignity, equitable compensation, and avenues to utilize their acquired skills, while ASEAN nations must incorporate reintegration initiatives, including skill certification, counseling, and public awareness, into their national policy frameworks.

The existing TITP paradigm, by standardizing migration channels, also institutionalizes reliance on intermediaries for access to foreign employment. This solidifies the systemic inequities that reimagining aims to eradicate. Reforming the TITP and the SSW program is crucial for guaranteeing transparent recruitment, enforced labor rights, and significant career advancement. The establishment of reintegration procedures that disrupt cycles of re-migration is equally crucial, connecting labor mobility with overarching development goals.

The anticipated shift to the *Ikusei–Shūrō* system, among SSW reforms, presents a unique opportunity to actualize this idea. If undertaken with authentic bilateral dedication, these modifications might convert the Japan–ASEAN labor corridor from a necessity-driven paradigm into one characterized by mutual advantage, social inclusion, and economic resilience—establishing a standard for equitable and sustainable migration governance in the area.

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Chapter 6

Youth, Mobility, and Regionalism: ASEAN's Socio-Cultural Capital Post-2025

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Youth, Identity, and ASEAN's Post-2025 Agenda: A Constructivist Entry Point

As the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) advances toward its post-2025 vision, the imperative for deeper socio-cultural integration becomes increasingly urgent. Central to this transformation is the youth demographic, whose mobility, digital fluency, and civic engagement position them as vital actors in shaping a shared regional identity. While ASEAN's earlier regionalism was predominantly state-driven, recent discourse highlights the significance of grassroots interactions and "regionalism from below" as alternative sources of integration.

This chapter argues that youth mobility and engagement programs, such as the ASEAN International Mobility for Students (AIMS), ASEAN Youth Volunteer Program (AYVP), and emerging digital initiatives like ASEAN Youth for Digital Action (AYDA) and ASEAN Digital Innovation Programme (ADIP), are instrumental in cultivating socio-cultural capital and fostering a sense of "ASEAN-ness." These cases have been selected because they exemplify three distinct yet complementary modes of youth engagement: academic exchange, volunteerism, and digital collaboration. Each mode provides a unique lens through which youth actively participate in bottom-up regional integration, making them especially relevant for illustrating how "ASEAN-ness" is constructed through everyday experiences, relationships, and shared practices.

Youth-led initiatives have gained increasing scholarly attention as critical avenues for constructing regional solidarity, especially through educational and volunteer exchanges. These programs provide more than academic benefits; they foster mutual understanding, intercultural competence, and the emotional bonds necessary for long-term integration. As Zhang et al. (2025) note, social and cultural capital now serve as key dimensions in ASEAN's post-2025 socio-economic strategy, reinforcing the idea that young people are not passive recipients of policies but dynamic agents of regional transformation. Stubbs et al. (2021) similarly assert that mobility programs serve as engines of identity construction, providing everyday experiences that support ASEAN's vision of a people-oriented and people-centered community.

This study builds on a constructivist approach within international relations theory, which emphasizes that identities and interests are not fixed but socially constructed through interaction, discourse, and shared experiences (Wendt, 1999). In the ASEAN context, this lens enables an analysis of how regional identity, often termed "ASEAN-ness", is co-created through everyday exchanges among citizens, particularly youth, rather than solely by intergovernmental mechanisms.

Constructivist scholars argue that regional integration is shaped by meaning-making processes, including how actors interpret norms, values, and symbols (Fardhiyanti & Wee, 2022). Youth, as social agents, shape ASEAN identity not merely by joining official programs, but by generating narratives and practices that transcend national boundaries. Through educational exchanges, volunteer initiatives, and digital collaboration, youth construct shared understandings that reinforce a collective regional consciousness. These shared narratives materialize in both formal platforms and informal social spaces, such as friendships, daily routines, or digital networks.

A complementary concept to this perspective is "regionalism from below", which refers to bottom-up processes driven by civil society and communities (Acharya, 2014). This framework positions youth as active builders of regional integration, especially through programs such as AIMS and AYVP. These initiatives cultivate "social spaces" where youth engage with diversity, challenge stereotypes, and build emotional ties that support regional solidarity (Siraprapasiri & na Thalang, 2016). These experiences foster hybrid identities, combining national and regional consciousness that become key to ASEAN's sustainability.

Through such processes, youth generate what can be called affective regionalism, integration that is driven by empathy, shared emotion, and interpersonal relationships (Alamsyah, 2021; Yoshimatsu, 2023). These dimensions are essential yet often overlooked in top-down policy-making. Youth act as producers of meaning, culture, and connectivity, roles that enable a more human-centered form of integration. The daily interactions between youth, whether in classrooms, communities, or online spaces, serve to "humanize" ASEAN.

Digital connectivity further amplifies this regional identity construction. Platforms like AYDA and ADIP facilitate youth collaboration across borders in real time, offering opportunities to co-create solutions and cultivate transnational solidarity (ASEAN Foundation, 2024). These digital experiences become just as meaningful as physical exchanges, particularly for youth with limited access to mobility due to economic or geographic constraints. The virtual realm thus expands the potential for youth-led regionalism.

By applying this theoretical lens, the chapter argues that ASEAN regionalism is shaped not only by leaders in summit rooms but also by youth who exchange stories in campus cafeterias, share water in rural villages, or collaborate on digital platforms. Identity formation and regional cohesion happen in these micro-level encounters that construct social trust and belonging. This combined theoretical and empirical approach highlights how youth are not simply beneficiaries of ASEAN's programs but are co-creators of its future. Their active engagement is foundational for a more cohesive, inclusive, and people-centered ASEAN beyond 2025. Furthermore, the chapter proceeds by outlining the constructivist lens, analyzing flagship youth mobility programs, identifying structural barriers, and concluding with reflections on youth's centrality to ASEAN's post-2025 integration.

Mapping Youth Mobility Initiatives in ASEAN

Imagine two students, one from Yogyakarta, one from Kuala Lumpur, sitting side by side in the library of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, studying the social structures of Southeast Asia. They come from different countries, speak different languages, and have grown up in national contexts that have not always been harmonious. But in the academic and everyday spaces they share during the AIMS program, those boundaries begin to dissolve. They understand each

other not just as "foreigners," but as fellow ASEAN citizens. These are small but meaningful stories that, taken together, form the foundation of something much bigger: a sense of regional togetherness.

The AIMS Program was launched in 2010 by Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization Regional Centre for Higher Education and Development (SEAMEO RIHED) as the Malaysia-Indonesia-Thailand (M-I-T) pilot mobility scheme, which in its initial phase involved 23 universities and approximately 270 student exchanges (RCRC Resilience Library, 2016). By 2012, the initiative had expanded, Vietnam joined, the program was renamed AIMS, and membership grew to include 59 universities across multiple countries, facilitating around 700 student mobilities. Over the years, AIMS continued to expand both in reach and impact: by 2019, it had engaged 78 universities and served nearly 4,900 students, and as of 2023, over 7,000 students across 87 member universities had benefitted from the program (SEAMEO RIHED, 2020). But AIMS is not just about earning academic credits, it's about immersing oneself in a new cultural environment, approaching differences with curiosity, and forging friendships that transcend formal academic metrics (Nguyen, 2023).

Something similar is reflected in the experiences of Indonesian students studying in Malaysia, who in their narratives stated that "ASEAN becomes real when you exchange stories in food stalls, not just in seminar rooms" (Soejatminah, 2021). They began to see how cognate languages could be bridges, not just phonetic differences. They saw how history that was once taught as conflict could be reframed as a shared heritage. For them, regionalism is not just an institutional structure, but a lived experience.

While AIMS targets the academic realm, the ASEAN Youth Volunteer Programme (AYVP), endorsed by ASEAN Youth Ministers in 2013, puts young people directly into community settings to drive real change. Coordinated by Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia with support from the ASEAN Secretariat and USAID (US Agency for International Development), AYVP mobilizes approximately 50 youth volunteers annually, representing all ten ASEAN member states, to collaborate on community development projects that build empathy and regional consciousness (Dhanakoses, 2023). One memorable example occurred in the floating village of Krakor, Cambodia, where ASEAN volunteers joined hands with local residents to address sanitation and clean-water challenges. They didn't just bring data and theories, they learned to work for change through trust, conversations in the village hall, and an immersion into life practices they might never have imagined. Using a multidisciplinary Knowledge-Attitude-Practice (KAP) approach, the outcome was not merely an evaluation report, but a tangible sense of shared ownership of the future. A volunteer from Laos poignantly captured this transformation: *"we came as different citizens, but returned as one team that cannot be separated by a flag."* This is not an empty slogan, but rather a lived experience.

In the digital age, connected spaces no longer have to be physical. Two separate programs, the AYDA and the ADIP, have opened new avenues for young people to connect and contribute through cyberspace. AYDA, for example, involves participants from 11 countries in designing digital solutions based on community needs, from applications for MSMEs (Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises) to regional language digital literacy campaigns (AYDA, 2023). On the other hand, ADIP, a collaboration between the ASEAN Foundation and Microsoft that has trained tens of thousands of young people across the region in essential digital skills, including coding, data analytics, and digital entrepreneurship (ASEAN Foundation, 2024).

However, like long-distance relationships, digital connectivity is not without its challenges. Many youth in border areas or indigenous communities have yet to have access to a stable internet connection, let alone adequate training. This disparity in access shows that regional integration is not yet fully equitable. According to Tan and Lean (2023), there is still a gap between the symbolic participation celebrated in ASEAN youth forums, and the real impact on policy that can be felt directly by young people in remote villages. That is why it is important to shift our perspective: that youth engagement is not just a one-off event or initiative, but an integrated process. They are not just participants in activities, but producers of meaning. They do not have to wait for space to be given, they create space. In this case, regionalism does not come from secretariat offices in the capital, but from the activity of exchanging stories on WhatsApp between cross-border volunteers, from vlogs of Filipino students telling stories about their farming experiences in Thailand, or from a local application developed by young Bruneians to help Vietnamese fishermen access weather information.

These programs, AIMS, AYVP, AYDA, ADIP, may sound like acronyms in a policy document. But when you look closely, they are real stories. Stories of young people who travel not to travel, but to learn to live together. Stories of volunteers rinsing mud in remote villages while listening to ASEAN pop music on their phones. Stories of digital natives who want to build social apps not just because it's trendy, but because they believe that ASEAN's future depends on us connecting today. In the context of the post-2025 vision, the question is no longer whether youth matter in the integration project, but how we can more seriously make them central to the ASEAN story itself.

Youth and the Construction of "ASEAN-ness"

To promote good neighbor relations, ASEAN has consistently evolved to become an integrated and stable community with shared prosperity through the ASEAN Community pillars, one of which them is the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community. It centers on people and encourages the narrative of forming ASEAN identity even though it is challenging and take process. ASEAN identity is formed by diversity of member states, such as race and ethnic, political systems, historical backgrounds, religions, levels of economic development, as well as strategic outlooks. This commitment also envisions the development of a common vision, common values, and a common identity as many challenges and threats push ASEAN to be on the rise. Diversity in ASEAN is marked by the regional traits of inclusiveness, openness, pluralism, and tolerance (ASEAN Secretariat, 2023).

The phenomenon of youth mobility plays a pivotal role in cementing a collective ASEAN identity, often referred to as "ASEAN-ness" as well as contributing to significant processes of regional identity-building. From an international relations perspective, youth act as catalysts for regional collaboration and understanding, fostering a sense of shared identity transcending national boundaries. As they engage in various mobility programs, such as academic exchanges, volunteer initiatives, and digital engagement, these young individuals cultivate essential skills and relationships that enhance their sense of connection to the broader ASEAN community, and contribute profoundly to the socio-cultural capital of ASEAN by embodying the principles of mutual respect, cultural understanding, and collaborative problem-solving. Youth mobility within the ASEAN framework encapsulates several forms of engagement, notably academic exchanges, internships, and other collaborative initiatives that bring young people together. These programs enable participants to interact with peers from diverse cultural backgrounds, facilitating the development of intercultural competencies.

Based on the ASEAN Work Plan on Youth 2021-2025, participation in these types of mobility programs facilitates professional networks and develops interpersonal and intercultural competencies critical to fostering a collective ASEAN identity. To prepare youth with skills, ASEAN has fostered some priority areas to engage youth in any institution and regional's policy discourse. Those priority areas are as following: (1) Education; (2) Health and well-being; (3) Employment and opportunity; (4) Participation and engagement; (5) ASEAN awareness, values, and identity. These priorities are divided into various programs and activities which contribute to the implementation of ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint 2025 framework (ASEAN Secretariat, 2025). Such exchanges have been fundamental in fostering deeper ties among ASEAN youth, contributing to political and socio-economic cooperation among member states (Cahya et al., 2023). With approximately 30 percent of the ASEAN population comprising young people aged between 15 to 30, leveraging this demographic through mobility initiatives is pivotal to realizing the ambitious goals of regional integration (ASEAN Secretariat, 2017).

Table 6.1 Priority Areas and Outcome Statements

(1) EDUCATION	(2) HEALTH AND WELL-BEING	(3) EMPLOYMENT AND OPPORTUNITY	(4) PARTICIPATION AND ENGAGEMENT	(5) ASEAN AWARENESS, VALUES AND IDENTITY
Strengthened youth participation in human resource development	ASEAN youth are health literate, enabled to access health programmes/ services and to identify solutions for issues affecting their health and well-being	ASEAN youth are provided with inclusive access to information and opportunities for employment and entrepreneurship	ASEAN youth are enabled to develop 21st century skills and contribute to community development	ASEAN youth are enabled to promote ASEAN identity, develop deeper awareness of ASEAN and greater understanding of ASEAN's shared values

Source: ASEAN Secretariat, 2022

Therefore, the youth's role as agents in regional mobility can be further substantiated through programs like the AIMS and AYVP which frequently heightened empathy and commitment of youth to regional causes such as sustainability and inclusive development (Velasco, 2023). Friendships formed during these exchanges enhance emotional investments in regional initiatives, reinforcing bonds between individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. These kinds of interactions cultivate a sense of belonging among participants, leading to durable connections with shared objectives within the region.

According to Chen et al. (2023), youth engaged in social activities, including volunteer work and academic exchanges, report improved academic and social integration, which are key components in building a regional cultural identity (Chen et al., 2023). Similarly, youth is considered an asset and key to the success of ASEAN Community-building since the people-to-people connectivity could raise awareness and explore common values among member states (ASEAN Secretariat, 2022). Moreover, it could also foster ASEAN identity that encompasses the sense of belonging to the ASEAN Community. This statement underscores a broader implication, especially when youth from different ASEAN member countries collaborate. They develop their own "ASEAN-ness," reflecting shared values and experiences that transcend national boundaries.

It is also argued that community service initiatives significantly contribute to realizing the vision of an integrated ASEAN community, promoting solidarity and cooperation (Azizah et al., 2023). There are different programs designed by ASEAN in order to empower youth, namely the ASEAN Youth Empowerment for Peacebuilding and Tolerance (initiated by ASEAN Foundation), the Intra-ASEAN Scholarship Programme, the ASEAN Mobility for Students, the EU-ASEAN Young Leaders Forum, the Empowering Youths Across ASEAN, and the ASEAN Youth Volunteer Program. Nevertheless, those programs also emphasize experiential learning, which participants report as crucial for developing empathy, mutual understanding, and problem-solving skills pertinent to ASEAN's collaborative identity. This nexus between personal experiences through mobility programs and the formation of a shared ASEAN identity illustrates how young individuals actively partake in regional dynamics.

Given these findings, youth mobility in ASEAN transcends mere physical movement across borders; it represents a transformative journey that shapes young people into proactive members of their communities. The informal yet impactful processes of regional identity-building are amplified by shared experiences that encourage empathy, understanding, and a commitment to collective regional initiatives. The impact of youth mobility extends beyond personal development; it exists within the context of broader international relations. As youth engage in various capacity-building workshops and leadership programs, they emerge as informed citizens who conceptualize ASEAN integration not merely as a political agenda but as a lived experience. Such involvement fosters political will that transcends governmental frameworks, reinforcing ASEAN's appeal as a significant player in the global arena.

In addition, the ability of youth to navigate and connect through digital platforms enhances their role in shaping ASEAN-ness. The intersection of technology and mobility allows for broader engagement, as youth collaborate on issues ranging from environmental sustainability to economic initiatives through social media and online forums. As reported in Velasco's analysis, these digital engagements alongside traditional mobility mechanisms significantly contribute to the fabric of regional identity, facilitating collective action and enabling the establishment of solidarity networks across borders (Velasco, 2023).

Furthermore, as ASEAN continues to evolve towards its Post-2025 Vision, recognizing the significance of youth programs as essential components for achieving the socio-cultural objectives of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) is crucial. The regional integration fostered through these mobility initiatives is anticipated to enhance collaboration among member states and engage youth in addressing common challenges, creating resilience against contemporary issues such as climate change and socio-economic disparities (Anggo & Laja, 2018).

Moreover, the ASEAN Way, characterized by an emphasis on consensus, non-intervention, and respect for sovereignty, which plays an instrumental role in mediating cultural differences amongst member states. This established practice allows youth to engage actively, respecting varying cultural backgrounds while unifying them under a shared ASEAN identity. As elucidated by Darwis and Wambrauw, this normative framework is conducive to fostering mutual understanding, which is essential for achieving ASEAN's political and economic goals in an increasingly complex geopolitical environment (Darwis & Wambrauw, 2023). Youth engagement serves to reinforce this framework, ensuring that cultural sensitivities are respected while still promoting a cohesive regional physical and psychological space.

Finally, youth mobility serves as a foundational pillar in the formation of ASEAN-ness, enabling young people to act as vital agents of regional integration. Through academic exchanges, collaborative projects, and digital engagement, ASEAN youth embody a collective identity that transcends national borders, fostering intercultural understanding and reinforcing political and economic cooperation. Their active participation ensures that the ASEAN narrative evolves in line with contemporary global dynamics, positioning the region toward a more integrated and resilient future. As such, it is imperative for ASEAN policymakers to continue investing in youth mobility programs, recognizing them as critical avenues for building shared regional identity and achieving a sustainable, inclusive, and equitable societal framework across the ASEAN community.

Barriers to Inclusive Youth Regionalism

While ASEAN's youth engagement initiatives reflect an inspiring vision of young people as agents of regional identity and cohesion, a closer examination reveals several structural and practical limitations that continue to hinder meaningful and equitable participation. Despite the expanding digital landscape and the proliferation of ASEAN youth programs, persistent challenges such as unequal access, limited representation in policymaking processes, and the fragility of program sustainability continue to constrain the potential impact of youth-led regionalism, particularly for youth in marginalized, rural, or less-connected communities.

A major limitation in ASEAN youth engagement lies in the unequal access to regional programs across and within member states. While initiatives like the AIMS and the AYVP are commendable, their reach remains skewed toward youth from urban, well-resourced, and institutionally connected backgrounds. In contrast, youth from agrarian provinces, border districts, and remote islands face multiple structural barriers, including limited digital infrastructure, financial hardship, and linguistic exclusion.

For instance, a webinar may stream effortlessly in Jakarta but often fails to load in Pulau Babar. In many such areas, stable internet, affordable data, or even basic computer access remains out of reach (Santika, 2023). Over 80 million children across East Asia and the Pacific were unable to access remote learning in 2020 due to infrastructural deficits, including limited internet connectivity and lack of digital devices. This gap is mirrored in other rural contexts, where spatial inequalities, socio-cultural norms, and inadequate infrastructure systematically hinder youth inclusion and economic empowerment (Lahrech et al., 2025). Even among educated urban youth, access to civic platforms varies by country and socioeconomic background, the disparity is even more pronounced in rural and under-connected regions (Saat et al., 2025).

ASEAN countries have indeed made efforts to engage youth, but these often remain urban-centric. Evidence from youth-focused SDG programs in Indonesia, for instance, reveals that although youth were involved in consultations, access was largely digital and therefore excluded many rural youth (Yusof et al., 2021). This disparity limits the diversity of voices and risks reinforcing elite-centric regionalism. Even where digital access exists, participation is constrained by economic and linguistic gatekeeping. Applicants must navigate high passport fees, health checks, and proof of English proficiency.

These intersecting barriers have created a silent majority of ASEAN youth who observe integration from the margins. Participation often focuses on the "usual suspects," systematically excluding marginalized youth such as those in rural or conflict-affected areas (Yague & Berents,

2025). Genuine inclusion requires multilingual, community-based engagement models with offline training and locally adapted entry points that move beyond elite participation.

Another core issue is the lack of institutionalized youth representation in ASEAN policymaking. Despite declarations positioning youth as "partners" in development, their participation remains largely symbolic. While consultation sessions and youth summits are routine, these platforms rarely connect meaningfully to ASEAN's core decision-making structures. Many initiatives are ad hoc or civil society-led without systematic integration into ASEAN institutions (Yague & Berents, 2025). There is no formal mechanism for integrating youth perspectives into key bodies such as the ASEAN Summit, Coordinating Council, or sectoral ministerial meetings. This symbolic engagement without decision-making power risks reinforcing youth marginalization, a pattern observed across Southeast Asia where young people are often included only in tokenistic or performative ways (Haque et al., 2019). As a result, young voices remain peripheral to the policymaking process.

ASEAN Voluntary National Reviews (VNR) processes across ASEAN have noted the participation of youth, but often only in preliminary or symbolic consultations rather than in continuous policy cycles (Yusof et al., 2021). It can also discourage long-term civic engagement, as youth perceive ASEAN as elite-driven and unresponsive. When participation lacks influence, engagement becomes performative like a checkbox rather than a meaningful dialogue. This weakens the concept of "regionalism from below," which envisions grassroots actors as central to shaping regional governance. Yet youth is not passive. They create their own spaces of engagement through initiatives, networks, and expressions of identity. When institutional pathways exclude them, they innovate outside the system. Recent studies emphasize how young people in Southeast Asia have carved alternative engagement strategies through digital activism and familial solidarity to cope with structural exclusion (Schwittek & de los Reyes, 2023). Recognizing this agency is key to building more inclusive regionalism.

A third limitation lies in the fragility of youth engagement programs due to short-term funding and inconsistent political commitment. Many initiatives like AYVP, AIMS, AYDA rely on donor support or shifting national priorities. When funding is delayed or withdrawn, programs are paused or scaled down. This disrupts long-term alumni networks, weakens institutional memory, and undermines impact assessment. The situation mirrors global patterns where youth-focused programs lack long-term strategies, and often collapse when political priorities shift or donor support declines (Lahrech et al., 2025).

The AYVP and similar youth-led SDG initiatives in ASEAN often struggle with continuity due to temporary donor schemes and lack of institutional ownership, weakening alumni follow-up and impact tracking (Yusof et al., 2021). Many programs lack robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks. Policymakers are left without data to assess outcomes or improve design. What happens after a volunteer leaves a farming village or when a digital forum ends? Do alumni continue cross-border collaboration or do ties dissolve for lack of follow-up? These unanswered questions highlight the need for continuity. A review of ASEAN scholarship schemes likewise finds no common evaluation methodology, varied funding horizons, and weak alignment with ASEAN's strategic frameworks, all of which undermine sustainability (Atherton et al., 2020). Without sustained investment, ASEAN's ability to build a resilient network of young regional leaders remains limited. Short-term cycles cannot foster deep, lasting engagement.

Re-Centering Youth in ASEAN's Post-2025 Vision

To unlock youth's full potential in ASEAN regionalism, a strategic shift is required that moves beyond symbolic inclusion and addresses the structural barriers that prevent meaningful participation. Three interconnected challenges continue to constrain youth engagement across the region: unequal access to programs, limited influence in policymaking, and fragile program sustainability. As ASEAN enters the post-2025 era, it must reimagine youth not as future stakeholders but as present agents actively shaping the region's identity, governance, and resilience.

While initiatives such as the AIMS and the AYVP have laid important groundwork, their benefits remain concentrated among youth from urban, well-resourced, and institutionally connected settings. Analyses of flagship exchange and volunteer schemes show that participation is often limited to universities inside the ASEAN University Network or to cohorts below 1,000 participants, leaving many young people ineligible (Rizky et al., 2023). For youth in rural areas or from lower-income households, the barriers are not just infrastructural but also linguistic, economic, and institutional (Schwittek & de los Reyes, 2023). A more inclusive system must extend these opportunities to excluded communities through targeted scholarships, localized preparatory initiatives, bilingual onboarding, and community-based exchanges beyond elite academic networks. Localized programs such as intra-provincial or vocational school partnerships can serve as viable pathways for underrepresented youth to engage with the regional agenda.

Yet access alone is insufficient. Institutionalized youth representation must become a formal component of ASEAN's governance architecture. Youth summits and consultation sessions, while symbolically important, often remain disconnected from actual decision-making processes. Regional SDG reviews illustrate that only a few member states embed youth in official SDG sub-committees, and meaningful engagement in formal policy remains "critical but rare" (Yusof et al., 2021). Embedding youth councils within ASEAN bodies such as the Coordinating Council or sectoral ministerial meetings and including youth observers in official delegations, would bridge this gap. These mechanisms not only enhance the legitimacy of ASEAN's claim to be "people-centered," but also foster intergenerational governance and leadership.

Digital platforms also offer transformative potential for participatory regionalism. Youth are already engaging in transnational dialogue, knowledge-sharing, and activism through social media and grassroots digital forums. Research on intercultural programs notes that social media and low-cost virtual tools are already enabling cross-border dialogue and collaboration among young people, even when physical mobility is limited (Rizky et al., 2023). However, these efforts remain disconnected from formal ASEAN institutions and are often limited by digital divides. Multilingual, mobile-friendly, and accessible in low-bandwidth areas could serve as a hub for policy input, collaboration, and innovation. Partnering with telecommunications firms and digital stakeholders to subsidize access would help address the infrastructure gap (Schwittek & de los Reyes, 2023).

To ensure long-term sustainability, robust program design and stable funding are essential. Many youth initiatives across ASEAN rely on donor-based or short-term project funding, which undermines continuity, alumni engagement, and impact assessment. Comparative SDG reviews conclude that "voluntary works and youth-led activities are plentiful, but institutional

arrangements that secure youth seats and follow-up resources remain limited (Yusof et al., 2021). ASEAN must invest in structured monitoring and evaluation systems, establish regional youth leadership networks, and support long-term follow-up mechanisms. Empowering youth social enterprises, supporting regional incubation hubs, and funding community-led innovation will ensure that youth agency becomes embedded in ASEAN's long-term development strategy (ASEAN Secretariat, 2016).

Today's young people are not merely digital natives but ASEAN natives. Their stories, whether they take place in WhatsApp groups or on muddy farmland, must no longer be seen as isolated anecdotes but as core to ASEAN's regional identity and trajectory. Re-centering youth in ASEAN's post-2025 vision is thus not merely an act of inclusion but a strategic necessity. A people-centered ASEAN cannot be built solely through elite diplomacy; it must be co-constructed with those who will inherit its future. Recognizing and empowering youth as present actors will not only diversify and democratize regionalism but also equip ASEAN to respond more effectively to the challenges of a multipolar, climate-vulnerable, and digitally integrated world.

Conclusion

Youth mobility and engagement are not peripheral but central to ASEAN's integration project, particularly in advancing the ASCC post-2025. Through academic exchanges, volunteerism, and digital platforms, youth develop intercultural understanding, empathy, and shared regional values that form the socio-cultural capital necessary for long-term cohesion. These experiences contribute to building "ASEAN-ness" from the ground up.

Constructivist perspectives highlight that identities and regional belonging are shaped through social interaction and shared meaning. Youth are not passive recipients of regionalism, but active agents constructing ASEAN identity through their everyday engagements. Initiatives like AIMS and AYVP provide spaces for cross-cultural immersion, while digital platforms expand access to regional discourse. However, barriers remain. Structural inequalities, limited youth representation in formal policymaking, and fragmented program funding restrict the potential impact of youth initiatives. Without inclusive and sustained investment, these efforts risk becoming performative rather than transformative.

To ensure the long-term success of ASEAN's youth integration agenda, policymakers should institutionalize youth participation beyond symbolic engagement. This includes developing inclusive mobility schemes that prioritize access for marginalized groups, investing in digital infrastructure to reduce the urban-rural gap, and embedding youth voices into ASEAN's formal decision-making channels. Regional programs should also adopt multilingual, hybrid, and community-based approaches to increase reach and relevance. By treating youth not merely as participants but as equal stakeholders, ASEAN can realize a more resilient, inclusive, and people-centered community beyond 2025.

In sum, youth are not just ASEAN's future; they are its present. Their agency, solidarity, and shared aspirations offer a bottom-up foundation for regionalism in an increasingly fragmented world. Supporting youth engagement is not simply a moral imperative, but a strategic necessity for the region's unity and sustainability.

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Chapter 7

India's Strategic Relations with ASEAN Amid Increasing Regional Uncertainties

Prasanna Kumar G S

Background

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) forms the central pillar of India's Act East Policy (AEP). ASEAN serves as a gateway to India for the larger East Asian Economic and security frameworks. India and ASEAN elevated their ties to the level of a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2022, marking the 30th anniversary of diplomatic ties between them. There are around 30 dialogue mechanisms between the two, spanning across sectors. India's interaction with ASEAN members through mechanisms such as ASEAN-India Defence Ministers' informal meeting, ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM–Plus), and the ASEAN-India Maritime Exercise (AMIE-2023) highlight the growing strategic convergence between the two. Additionally, there are several overlaps between the visions of India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) and ASEAN outlook on Indo-Pacific (AOIP). The ten-member regional bloc holds a pivotal place in India's strategic outlook as reflected in Prime Minister Modi's remarks at the 21st India-ASEAN summit in Laos in October 2024, where he asserted that India's partnership with ASEAN is critical to shaping Asia's future (India Today, 2024). Meanwhile, China's economic influence and assertiveness in Southeast Asia have grown leaps and bounds. This has led to a power struggle between the United States and China in the region and beyond. As a consequence, rifts within the ASEAN bloc have started emerging. The long-held centrality of ASEAN in regional affairs is also getting threatened due to the increasing role of external players in regional security, especially in the maritime domain. In this context, this chapter explores evolving dynamics in India's strategic relations with ASEAN members amid escalating great power rivalry and rising regional uncertainties.

Threat to ASEAN Centrality and Great Power Rivalry

Beijing's increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea (SCS) and success in creating fissures within ASEAN, added to Washington's efforts to counterbalance China through hard military power, has created immense pressure on ASEAN centrality. As a turbulent global order disturbs the post-Cold War era strategic balance in Southeast Asia, ASEAN is caught between the rising geopolitical rivalry, internal fragmentation and economic uncertainty (Sim, 2024). Additionally, internal divisions in ASEAN further complicate its role. The regional bloc is increasingly perceived to be ineffective in addressing emerging challenges in the region (Hussain, 2024). As Singaporean Prime Minister Lawrence Wong says that "ASEAN faces a 'moment of truth' to step up or risk losing relevance in a changing world" (Wong, 2025).

Maritime tensions over overlapping territorial claims between China and other claimant states, such as the Philippines, Vietnam and Indonesia (to some extent), added to tensions in the Taiwan Strait, threatening regional stability. China's militarization and aggressive behavior in the waters of the SCS undermine ASEAN sovereignty claims. Freedom of navigation in the SCS is increasingly becoming risky amid the increasing intensity of naval activities. Additionally,

the delay in introducing a binding Code of Conduct (CoC) limits ASEAN's conflict management tools, and it exposes legal ambiguities, strategic divergences and internal divisions within the ASEAN bloc (Lin & Sothirak, 2025). Thus, ASEAN seeks to strengthen maritime diplomacy and legal frameworks that ensure freedom of navigation and rules-based order in the region.

Despite the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue's (QUAD) rhetorical support for the idea of ASEAN centrality, there is an increasing trend among the external players that ASEAN-led mechanisms are insufficient to address the challenges posed by Beijing (Laksmana, 2020). Furthermore, US President Donald Trump's return for a second term has introduced new challenges into the regional strategic dynamics. Trump 2.0 has reshaped the geopolitical landscape in ways that pose multiple strategic dilemmas for ASEAN, especially in aspects such as managing regional stability, navigating trade uncertainties and maintaining cohesion in the bloc (Hutagalung, 2025). The ongoing erratic shifts in the geopolitical scenario could be an indication of the end of the post-Cold War peace dividend. The ten-member regional bloc that was once championed for successful regionalism and neutrality now struggles to face increasing pressure to adapt to the rapidly evolving strategic dynamics of the Indo-Pacific. The return of Cold War-era pressure that nurtures the rivalry bloc politics, especially between the US and China, has strained ASEAN's institutional relevance, tested the regional bloc's cohesion, and has challenged its ability to manage regional stability. Concurrently, trade disruptions due to increasing trade wars between the US and China, which include high tariff impositions, have exposed the loopholes in ASEAN's collective capacity not only at the economic level but also at the diplomatic level (Jiang & Zulkifli, 2024). Additionally, the Myanmar crisis, triggered by the coup in 2021, poses a significant challenge to ASEAN's principle of non-interference and regional unity. ASEAN seeks to dialogue and provide humanitarian aid along with its five-point consensus approach to effectively address the Myanmar conundrum. However, so far, the efforts have turned out to be slow and ineffective, thereby showcasing that ASEAN centrality is weakening (Jones, 2025).

Impact on India-ASEAN Strategic Equations

From New Delhi's perspective, strengthening strategic ties with ASEAN serves two important strategic objectives: balancing the rising Chinese threat and strengthening its economic prowess through increased trade and investments. Prof. Harsh Pant argues that "as the US-China competition becomes sharper, many countries would like to engage or expand the spheres of cooperation with a country like India, just to be away from this competition and just to ensure their equities are preserved" (Ganapathy, 2023). This highlights the growing strategic convergence between the two. Additionally, the convergences between AOIP and IPOI also pave the way for increased trust and collaboration between the two. In this context, New Delhi is focusing more on strengthening maritime security partnerships with ASEAN and its members. Cooperation in the maritime security and defense modernisation efforts has also emerged as a key enabler of India-ASEAN strategic ties. India interacts with ASEAN through mechanisms such as ASEAN-India Defence Ministers' informal meeting, ADMM–Plus, and the first-ever ASEAN-India Maritime Exercise (AMIE-2023). Through new initiatives such as IPOI and Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR), New Delhi has been making visible efforts to evolve into a more assertive and constructive regional stakeholder. Several ASEAN members aim towards diversifying their diplomatic and economic partnerships, although such moves may in some ways challenge ASEAN centrality (Pushpanathan, 2025). Indonesia's joining of BRICS in January 2025, and the addition of Malaysia, Thailand, and

Vietnam as partner countries of BRICS in October 2024, can be seen in this light. India, on its part, recognises this opportunity and seeks to position itself as a long-term developmental and strategic partner that is reliable and non-intrusive, and without geopolitical strings attached. Meanwhile, the Trump 2.0 administration has intensified existing concerns over the US's long-term commitment to the security of the Indo-Pacific region, which could potentially increase ASEAN members' vulnerability to China's increased aggressiveness in the context of the SCS (Hutagalung, 2025). This, in a way, has forced a few ASEAN members to prepare for strategic uncertainty in the region. It is here that India, with its considerable military might and geographical positioning in the Indian Ocean, could emerge as a key partner to balance the strategic equations in the region.

At the institutional level, initiatives such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ADMM-Plus, and AIME provide the necessary frameworks for Indo-ASEAN cooperation in the strategic architecture of the region. However, it is the bilateral engagements that have been the key driver of India-ASEAN strategic relations, deepening the defense, maritime and economic cooperation. The following section explores new opportunities for India with each of the ten individual ASEAN members, in the context of the US-China tussle in the region.

From India's perspective, Singapore is seen as its 'eastern anchor' of maritime security, and Singapore considers India as a 'benign security partner' in the region (Brewster, 2009, p. 19). Both countries share an interest in preventing any single power from dominating the strategic landscape of the region. Singapore has long believed that Southeast Asia needs India to cope with China (Ray, 2009, p. 5). Singapore has been serving as a gateway to India's engagement not just with ASEAN but also with broader East Asia. Although this trust in India's capabilities hasn't reached its full potential, Singapore sees India as a stabilising force in maritime security and a future driver of ASEAN's economic growth. India and Singapore enjoy bilateral ties that are robust and multifaceted, and their positions have been in sync at the East Asia Summit, the G-20, the Commonwealth of Nations, and the Indian Ocean Rim Association. The joint naval exercise Singapore-India Maritime Bilateral Exercise "SIMBEX" between India and Singapore in the South China Sea is of the utmost strategic importance due to the increasing maritime tensions in the region. It is the longest continuous naval exercise that India has with any country.

Similarly, Vietnam and India share historically strong politico-diplomatic ties. Vietnam views India as a trustworthy and non-hegemonic partner that supports a rules-based international order. Being one of the major claimant states in the SCS dispute, Vietnam aims to further strengthen its strategic ties with India, but in a nuanced way so that it can manage its complex interdependence with China, especially in the economic arena. India has been actively playing a role in helping Vietnam to modernise its Navy. For instance, in 2022, Vietnam received 12 high-speed guard boats under a 100 million USD defense Line of Credit given by India (Ministry of Defence, 2022). The next year, India gifted INS Kirpan, the indigenously built-in service missile corvette, to Vietnam, the first ever such gesture by India towards any friendly foreign country (The Hindu, 2023). During Prime Minister Pham Minh Chin's visit to India in August 2024, both countries signed several agreements to deepen the comprehensive strategic partnership between the two countries. It's worth noting that despite significant opposition from China, India is the only country that has actively collaborated with Vietnam in the South China Sea's oil and gas development efforts.

With the Philippines, India is experiencing the speedy convergence of strategic interests, especially in the context of managing China's aggressiveness in the waters of the SCS. EAM S Jaishankar firmly reiterated India's support for the Philippines in upholding its territorial integrity during his visit to Manila in March 2024 (Haider, 2024). The launching of the India-Philippines' first-ever joint naval patrol in the disputed SCS for two days from August 3, 2025, marks a significant milestone in their growing strategic partnership (Hindustan Times, 2025). What is important to note is that this joint patrol coincides with President Marcos's five-day visit to New Delhi for high-level talks. In April 2024, India delivered the Brahmos supersonic missiles with integrated logistic support to the Philippines as a part of a 375 million USD deal signed in 2022, thus further solidifying the increasing strategic convergence between the two countries, especially with respect to the comparable security challenges (Mangosing, 2025) faced by both countries. Nonetheless, laggard trade ties between India and the Philippines limit their mutual strategic appeal in an era where economic linkages play a crucial role in global dynamics.

Indonesia, being the biggest state in Southeast Asia, with its significant maritime power, naturally plays a crucial role in shaping strategic dynamics in the ASEAN region. For decades, Jakarta has been following the "*bebas-aktif*" (i.e., independent and active) approach to foreign policy, which aligns closely with India's long-held strategic autonomy policy. Meanwhile, Jakarta is considering the 'hedging plus' policy against the regional uncertainty due to great power rivalry and the increasing assertiveness of China (Anwar, 2023). President Prabowo is promoting the idea of an "ASEAN plus" strategy to pursue strategic engagements beyond ASEAN's consensus-based collective framework (Singh, 2025). Indonesia seeks to diversify its partnerships and looks beyond ASEAN to work towards regional stability. In recent years, security cooperation between India and Indonesia has also increased, especially in the maritime domain. Today, Indonesia is one of the active partners in the IPOI. New Delhi and Jakarta are likely to view each other as a viable alternative for pursuing broader strategic objectives towards building a rules-based and multipolar order in the Indo-Pacific.

Meanwhile, the Myanmar conundrum that began in the form of the coup in 2021 has continued to be the biggest challenge to ASEAN and its external partners, including India. Some parts of Myanmar, especially the border areas, are slowly slipping away from the control of the Tatmadaw into armed ethnic groups (Head, 2024). In this context, amid ongoing sanctions from the Western world and the ill effects of strings attached to overdependence on China, the Tatmadaw is desperate for external support in the region. Unlike most of the allies and partners of the US, India, despite being a member of the QUAD grouping, has still not harshly condemned the junta regime in Myanmar. This indicates that India aims to carefully balance its strategic interests (in the context of Northeast India) and its moral support to democratic aspirations inside Myanmar. In 2020, India presented Myanmar with its first submarine, a 3,000-ton diesel-electric, Kilo-class Russian-built submarine that had been rebuilt and christened UMS Minye Theinkhathu, a historical figure in Myanmar (Nitta, 2020). New Delhi has also provided the Myanmar Navy with hardware, including homegrown sonars, radars, and even computer games based on actual combat scenarios (Nitta, 2020). ASEAN seeks sustained dialogue with all the stakeholders in conflict-ridden Myanmar, which includes a coordinated response with international players (Thuzar & Seah, 2024). In this context, India, being a next-door neighbour with considerable strategic heft, naturally appears to be capable of making a small yet meaningful contribution in resolving Myanmar's conundrum.

Thailand is considered to be the swing state in the US-China tussle for regional dominance (Shambaugh, 2021, p. 185). However, the coup in 2014 and the consequent criticism from the US-led West have, in a way, helped China to tilt the balance in its favour in Bangkok. Thailand, being a key ally of the US in the region and with huge economic interlinks with China, seeks to maintain a delicate balance between the two powers (Banerjee, 2023). Bangkok seeks to diversify its economic partnerships by reducing its dependence on China (Wolf, 2018). India's growing strategic presence in the region offers an alternative to Thailand's strategic interests in the region. Siegfried Wolf (2018, p. 1) argues that the Thai government increasingly seems to view India as a key priority for access to the West.

In the context of Malaysia, unlike Vietnam and the Philippines, Malaysia has shown limited enthusiasm for involving New Delhi in its approach to managing the SCS disputes. It is believed that "India-Malaysia relations in that sense, will be independent and divorced from any developments in the South China Sea, despite being on the same page on China's sweeping territorial claims" (Meena, 2024). Nonetheless, while maintaining ties with China, Kuala Lumpur also prioritises strengthening its strategic ties with New Delhi, as this would help it to navigate the complexities of the US-China strategic rivalry. The bilateral ties between the two countries were upgraded to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in August 2024, during Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's visit to India. The first-ever India-Malaysia Security Dialogue that was held on 7 January 2025, is a testament to this renewed push by both sides to strengthen defense cooperation.

Brunei is considered to be the quieter claimant in the SCS dispute (Putra, 2024). With Brunei's low-profile, ASEAN-centered diplomacy, New Delhi aims to expand its influence without triggering geopolitical sensitivities. In the context of "*Wawasan Brunei 2035*" that aims to address issues such as hybrid/grey zone threats, defense self-reliance and economic diversification (Ministry of Defence of Brunei Darussalam, 2021), India seeks to quietly enhance maritime security collaboration, offer capacity building in defense and cyber domains and strengthen cooperation in sectors such as healthcare, education and renewable energy.

Meanwhile, most of India's engagement with Cambodia and Laos is limited to developmental cooperation through Quick Impact Projects (QIP) and cultural and heritage conservation activities. While China's influence is at its peak in these countries, India seeks to provide Cambodia with meaningful choices without directly competing with Beijing, an approach that is increasingly resonating in Phnom Penh's strategic circles. Some experts believe that Cambodia's desire to deepen its defense ties with India comes as a response to criticism from the Western powers, mainly Washington, over the Chinese presence at Cambodia's Ream Naval Base on the coast of the Gulf of Thailand (Ganapathy, 2023).

Challenges to India's Strategic Engagement with ASEAN

Despite India's consistent support for ASEAN centrality, New Delhi's ability to substantively reinforce ASEAN's centrality in the regional security architecture remains limited. India's deterrent role is still a long way from being realized, and its ability to sustain a long-term presence in contested waters is uncertain (Tarapore, 2024). This is supported by a survey conducted in 2025 by the ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore, which found that only 35.3 percent of respondents were confident(including those who were very confident) that India would do the 'right thing' in contributing to global peace, security, prosperity and governance

(Seah, et al., 2025). Nonetheless, there is an improvement of around 10 percent when compared to the results of the same question in a survey conducted by the same institute in 2024. Meanwhile, New Delhi's growing involvement in minilaterals such as QUAD also indirectly contributes to the dilution of ASEAN's traditional central role in the Indo-Pacific architecture. Additionally, India, with its urge not to overtly antagonize China, faces a significant challenge in its efforts to increase its strategic influence in the ASEAN region. Furthermore, there exists a deep divergence between India and ASEAN over their perceptions towards the two big powers. For instance, unlike most ASEAN members, which prefer deep economic and institutional cooperation with China, India operates in a cautious mode in its dealings with Beijing. Additionally, the delay in completion of the India-led key connectivity projects, such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway (IMTTH) is also fuelling mistrust of India's strategic capabilities in delivering the promises in time (India Today, 2025).

ASEAN, being one of the vibrant economic zones in the world, naturally gives significant importance to the economic relevance of any external partners. Observed in this context, India's absence in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) further reduces the chances of a rapid rise in FDI inflows and supply chain linkages between India and several of the ASEAN members, at least in the near future. India is facing an increasing trade deficit with ASEAN year by year. Thus, New Delhi is actively working with ASEAN to review the terms of the ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement (AITIGA) in order to address concerns related to tariff and non-tariff barriers that exist for Indian goods and services. India's weak export-oriented manufacturing capability reduces the opportunity for strengthening value chain links with ASEAN. At present, only 16.92 percent of India's GDP comes from its manufacturing sector (The Economic Times, 2024). Moreover, New Delhi is relatively poorly positioned to assist ASEAN in coping with the transactional approach of the Trump 2.0 administration, especially in the context of erratic tariff imposition on friends and foes alike. India itself is grappling with US-imposed tariffs, and its absence in regional trade groupings such as RCEP further reduces its chances to regional trade norms. Moreover, India is far behind China in terms of providing economic opportunities to ASEAN. India's weak integration into the regional value chains reduces its ability to serve as an economic buffer during global economic uncertainties. In this context, the speed at which India brings domestic economic reforms would decide the pace at which it can attract export-oriented FDIs, which in turn can boost its bilateral-level ties with ASEAN.

Conclusion

As ASEAN aims to balance its strategic ties between increasingly assertive China and reengaging US, India benefits from both dynamics. Although ASEAN countries have deep economic ties with China, most of them share huge concerns over rising Chinese aggressiveness in the SCS and beyond. In this context, India has been carefully nurturing its defense and maritime security cooperation with ASEAN partners through joint naval exercises, defense exports and increasing port calls. Through maritime domain awareness cooperation, joint naval exercises, and freedom of navigation advocacy under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), India is aiming to contribute to building a rules-based order in the region. Additionally, India is also helping several ASEAN members to strengthen their defense capabilities and naval prowess. Furthermore, some ASEAN members (especially those who share close strategic ties with China) view strengthening ties with India as a way to avoid criticism from the US and some fellow ASEAN members for too much dependence

and closeness with China. Together, these strategic shifts are drawing ASEAN and India closer than ever before into a more substantive partnership. With its dominance in the Indian Ocean Region and through initiatives such as the Act East Policy and frameworks like the India-ASEAN comprehensive strategic partnership, India offers some alternative strategic options for several ASEAN members that are wary of being forced to choose between the US and China. In summary, India's engagement with ASEAN serves as a necessity driven by shared security concerns along with opportunities for collaboration in various sectors, especially in the areas of economic diversification and developmental cooperation. While India is seen as a potential balancer against rising regional strategic uncertainties, ASEAN expects it to assume a more concrete role in shaping the regional security architecture. Nonetheless, while New Delhi aspires to be a meaningful strategic partner to ASEAN, its current capabilities, domestic and South Asian pressures, economic positioning, and slow-paced implementation of connectivity projects to link with ASEAN place certain limits on how much it can get involved in ASEAN's core strategic objectives. However, the commonalities around aspects such as ASEAN centrality and building a rules-based international order also bring India and ASEAN closer to each other. With the increasing trend of converging interests in maritime security, digital resilience, and economic diversification, India-ASEAN relations are expected to further rise in the coming years.

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Chapter 8

Navigating Quasi Superposition: ASEAN Members' Strategic Position on the Taiwan Strait Issues

Tonny Dian Effendi

Introduction

ASEAN Member States (AMS) navigate a complex diplomatic landscape, formally adhering to the One China Policy while maintaining robust non-diplomatic ties with Taiwan. Despite the absence of formal recognition, Taiwan has become ASEAN's sixth-largest trading partner (M. Chen, 2024), with investment and trade since the 1980s fostering a sense of a regional economic community (Huang, 2009). By 2025, ASEAN is projected to be Taiwan's second-largest exports destination (19 percent), after the United States (30 percent) and ahead of China (16 percent) (International Trade Administration, 2025). Taiwan's New Southbound Policy (2016) further solidified ASEAN's role as its second-largest trading partner (15 percent) after China (21.2 percent) (Hoang & Pham, 2024). Beyond trade, Taiwan is a key destination for Southeast Asian migrant workers, whose remittances strengthen home economies (Tsay, 2016). These ties, however, intersect with security concerns over the Taiwan Strait, raising questions about ASEAN's potential role as a neutral forum in fostering Indo-Pacific regional stability (Jerzewski, 2025; Kurniawan, 2024). How, then, can we understand AMS position in managing the One China Policy's implications for non-political recognition of Taipei while simultaneously sustaining vital economic and social relations with it? Does this position constitute a double standard?

While extensive scholarship details the empirical dimensions of the relations between ASEAN's member states and Taiwan, theoretical discussions within the field of International Relations (IR) remain notably scarce. Among the few scholars addressing this gap, Chen Wei-hwa (1999) examines ASEAN-Taiwan cooperation within the context of Asia Pacific anarchy. He critiques Western IR theories like realism and liberalism for their limitations in explaining international anarchy, arguing instead that ASEAN and Taiwan exemplify a "collective self-reliance" that fosters cooperation among small states without Great Power leadership. Similarly, Alan H. Yang (2018) introduces international socialization to illuminate Taiwan-ASEAN strategic interactions, emphasizing Taipei's proactive engagement initiatives, including shifts in domestic mentality and the positive roles of transnational actors. Furthermore, Pasha L. Hsieh (2019) contends that the diverse forms of recognition extended by ASEAN members to Taiwan, even while adhering to the One China Policy, represent a unique IR approach. This approach, he argues, demonstrates a gradual process of recognition in state practice that does not strictly conform to traditional notions of statehood recognition in international law. These limited theoretical engagements in understanding the intricate interactions between ASEAN members and Taiwan underscore a significant opportunity to re-examine these relations through a non-classical theoretical lens within IR.

The unique relationship between ASEAN members and Taiwan presents a significant challenge to conventional IR theories, underscoring the necessity of a practice-based understanding of recognition. Dominant IR paradigms, especially realism and liberalism, provide useful starting

points but struggle to fully account for this complexity due to their inherent deterministic and binary logics. Realism interprets state behavior through balancing or bandwagoning, while liberalism emphasizes cooperation or competition under institutional and interdependence frameworks. Constructivism, in turn, highlights the role of compound identities and norms. These perspectives illuminate important aspects—such as strategic hedging, economic interdependence, and regional norms—yet their binary assumption ultimately drive them toward deterministic conclusions in which states must eventually adopt one clear position. In practice, however, ASEAN member states demonstrate that behavior can be ambiguous, asynchronous, and even overtly contradictory by classical logic: formally upholding the One China Policy while simultaneously sustaining critical informal and economic ties with Taiwan. This paradox exposes the limits of traditional paradigms and invites alternative approaches. It is precisely here that Quantum International Relations (QIR) offers a novel lens, enabling us to conceptualize state behavior not as fixed binary choices but as existing superposition—where contradictory positions can be simultaneously held and strategically maintained.

This chapter examines ASEAN-5's (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand) strategic position in the Taiwan Strait, specifically focusing on its complex relationship with Taiwan. It seeks to explore the complexity and seemingly contradictory behavior of ASEAN member states in managing their relations within the context of the Taiwan Strait. To this end, the chapter begins with an overview of QIR, followed by a brief historical account of ASEAN-5 relations with Taiwan. The QIR framework—particularly its concept of superposition, which allows actors to simultaneously engage in seemingly contradictory relationships—offers a critical lens through which to understand the strategic positioning of these five countries in relation to both China and Taiwan. Historically, the ASEAN-5 countries exhibited diverse approaches toward Beijing and Taipei; however, since the 1970s, their political alignment has largely shifted toward China through adherence to the One China Policy, while maintaining strong economic ties with Taiwan. The core of this chapter analyzes these dual strategies from a QIR perspective. It argues that the ASEAN-5's concurrent commitment to the One China Policy and robust unofficial engagement with Taiwan should not be seen as anomalous. Rather, it reflects a nuanced expression of a sophisticated form of superposition.

The Quantum of International Relations (QIR)

The idea of borrowing concepts from physics into IR is not entirely new. The behavioral revolution in the social sciences during the 1960s and 1970s introduced a "scientific approach," modeled IR research and analysis on Newtonian physics (Biersteker, 2021). Alexander Wendt emerged as a key voice critiquing this classical foundation by adopting a quantum perspective as a critique of the Cartesian foundations of social science (Wendt, 2006). In 2010, he outlined his foundational ideas in what would become Quantum Mind and Social Science in 2015 (Wendt, 2010, 2015), and later co-edited the volume QIR with James Der Derian in 2022 (Derian & Wendt, 2022).

The idea originates from a critique of social science's foundational reliance on classical physics. As Wendt (2010: 280) argues social science is bound by the "causal completeness of physics," assuming objects must conform to physical laws. While classical physics explains macroscopic behavior, it fails at the subatomic level, where quantum mechanics demonstrates that observation alters outcomes, subject and object are entangled, and reality is contingent rather than fixed (Wendt, 2015: 36). Quantum theory challenges five core assumption of classical

physics—materialism, reductionism, determinism, mechanism, and objectivism—through principles like wave-particle duality, entanglement, uncertainty, and non-local causation (Wendt, 2010: 284).

Der Derian and Wendt (2020) highlight core features of quantum theory—superposition, entanglement, uncertainty, and measurement—emphasizing that observation is a creative act shaping reality. These principles have inspired scholars to "quantize" IR. Biersteker (2021) advance a dialectical, practice-based model; Murphy (2022) situates quantum critique alongside critical theory; and Albert and Bathon (2022) link quantum ideas to systems theory. Empirical implications include Salter's (2022) use of entanglement to reconceptualize sovereignty in Canadian-Indigenous relations and Orrell's (2022) quantum analysis of money as a dualistic and nonlinear force shaping security and economics.

This study applies QIR to ASEAN5's position in the Taiwan Strait. ASEAN states appear ambiguous: formally endorsing the One China Policy while sustaining robust ties with Taiwan. Rather than a double standard, this reflects quantum superposition—simultaneous normative alignment with Beijing and pragmatic engagement with Taipei. Even when ASEAN's One China stance functions as a "measurement," the collapse is partial: non-official relations with Taiwan persist. This duality reflects broader systemic decoherence—ASEAN's non-interference principle, external power dynamics, and internal heterogeneity. Because superposition is probabilistic, future shifts—such as regional conflict or major power pressure—could trigger further collapse, carrying serious implications for security and stability.

ASEAN-5 Positions on the Taiwan Strait Relations

When ASEAN was established in 1967, the Republic of China (ROC) still held China's seat at the United Nations, including its position on the UN Security Council. At the time, both Thailand and the Philippines maintained formal diplomatic relations with the ROC before shifting recognition to the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1975 (Bangkokpost.com, 2025; Bellows, 1976; Chinwanno, 2008; OCAC, 2025; Sukma, 1999). The ROC had established a Consulate General in Kuala Lumpur in 1964 (TECO Malaysia, 2018), but Malaysia formalized diplomatic relations with the PRC in 1974 (Embassy of Malaysia Beijing, 2023). In Singapore, the ROC opened a trade mission in 1969 (Chen, 2002), yet Singapore established diplomatic relations with China in 1990 (MOFA Singapore, 2025). Indonesia stands out as the only ASEAN founding member to have established diplomatic relations with the PRC prior to ASEAN's formation; doing so in 1950 (Anwar, 2019). By the 1990s, all five founding ASEAN member states had formally recognized the PRC. Nevertheless, they continued to maintain unofficial relations with the ROC, now commonly referred to as Taiwan.

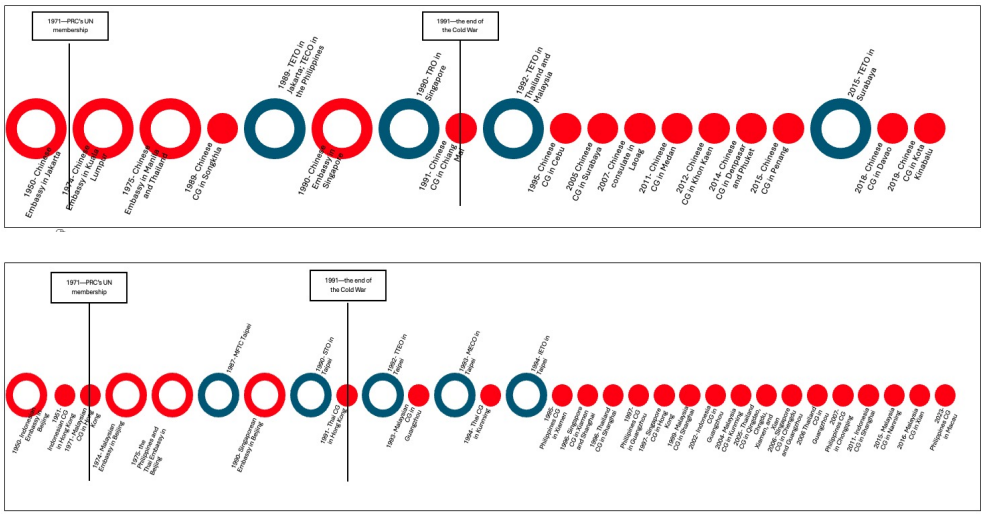
The ASEAN-5 countries have all established offices in Taipei, primarily to manage economic and cultural relations with Taiwan. Indonesia established the Indonesian Chamber of Commerce in Taipei in 1970, following the appointment of an officer from the State Intelligence Coordination Agency (BAKIN) in Taipei in 1967 (KDEI, 2020). In 1994, this office was renamed the Indonesian Economic and Trade Office (IETO) in Taipei, operating as a non-governmental economic office under the Ministry of Trade. In 1987, Malaysia established the Malaysian Friendship and Trade Centre (MFTC) in Taipei, administered by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which serves as a crucial point of contact for trade, investment, and cultural exchanges between Malaysia and Taiwan (MFTC Taipei, 2023). Singapore set up the Singapore Trade Office in Taipei

in 1990, also under its Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to safeguard Singaporean interests and promote economic and cultural ties (MFA Singapore, 2025). Similarly, Thailand established the Thailand Trade and Economic Office in Taipei in 1992 under the purview of its Ministry of Foreign Affairs (TTCO Thailand, n.d.). The Philippines established the Manila Economic and Cultural Office (MECO) in 1993 as a non-political and non-security entity that functions closely with the Philippine Department of Trade and Industry (MECO, 2025a, 2025b). The structure of these offices reflects variations in institutional alignment: Indonesia's and the Philippines' offices are linked to economic ministries, while those of Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand are managed by their respective foreign ministries.

In response to shifting political dynamics, Taiwan undertook a series of renaming efforts for its representative offices in the ASEAN-5 countries. In 1989, Taiwan renamed its Chinese Chamber of Commerce in Jakarta (established in 1971) to the Taipei Economic and Trade Office (Chen, 2002; TETO Jakarta, 2016). That same year, it renamed the Pacific Economic and Cultural Center (established in 1975 to replace its former embassy in Manila) to Taipei Economic and Cultural Office (TECO) (Chen, 2002; Chiu, 2017). In 1990, the Trade Mission of the ROC in Singapore, originally established in 1969, was renamed the Taiwan Representative Office (Chen, 2002). Similarly, Taiwan's Far East Trade Center in Malaysia (established in 1974) and its office in Thailand (established in 1980) were both renamed as Taipei Economic and Cultural Offices in 1992 (Chen, 2002; Chiu, 2017: 24). These renaming efforts reflect Taiwan's strategic adaptation to the shifting diplomatic landscape in Southeast Asia while emphasizing trade and cultural engagement in the absence of formal political recognition.

While trade offices symbolized growing economic ties between ASEAN-5 and Taiwan in the 1990s, Beijing was simultaneously expanding its engagement with these nations. Following the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the five founding ASEAN members, Beijing actively opened consulates general. For instance, consulates were established in Chiang Mai in 1991 and Cebu in 1995. Reciprocally, ASEAN-5 also set up consulates general in Chinese cities: Thailand opened offices in Kunming (1994), and Shanghai (1996). Malaysia established a Consulate General in Guangzhou in 1993, followed by one in Shanghai in 1999. The Philippines opened consulates in Xiamen (1995) and Guangzhou (1997), while Singapore established consulates in Xiamen and Shanghai in 1996. In the post-2000 period, a massive expansion of diplomatic presence from both sides, mirroring China's escalating economic development and deepening trade relations with ASEAN member countries (see Figure 8.1).

Figure 8.1 *Timeline of the establishment of China's Embassies and Consulates and Taiwan's Trade and Culture Offices in ASEAN-5 (top), and ASEAN-5's Embassies and Consulates in China and their Trade Office in Taiwan (bottom).*



Source: Compiled by author based on official directories from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) websites of China, Taiwan, and the ASEAN-5 member states.

Figure 8.1 not only charts the establishment of representative offices but also visually underscores a core paradox: even as the ASEAN-5 nations formally embraced the One China Policy following diplomatic relations with Beijing, they concurrently maintained robust non-diplomatic ties with Taipei. While Indonesia and the Philippines specify that their representative offices in Taiwan operate outside the purview of their respective foreign ministries, Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore explicitly state that their offices in Taipei function under their Ministry of Foreign Affairs—albeit emphasizing a focus on economic, trade, and people-to-people relations.

This intriguing situation highlights the inherent ambiguity of the ASEAN-5's position within the intricate China-Taiwan, or Taiwan Strait, dynamic. On one hand, the leadership of these nations consistently demonstrates a strong commitment to the One China Policy. For instance, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. explicitly stated his non-endorsement of Taiwan independence to avoid conflict, a stance echoed by the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA Philippines, 2024; Reuters, 2024). In a 2024 joint statement with Chinese President Xi Jinping, Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto reiterated Indonesia's adherence to the One China Policy, affirming Taiwan as an inalienable part of China (MOFA RI, 2024). Similarly, Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim has affirmed Malaysia's commitment to the One China Policy, vowing not to support any calls for Taiwan's independence (MOFA Malaysia, 2025). Thai Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra has underlined Thailand's support for China's "One Country, Two Systems" policy while firmly upholding the One China Policy (MOFA Thailand, 2025). During a 2024 meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping at the 31st APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting, Singaporean Prime Minister Lawrence Wong clearly reiterated Singapore's

consistent adherence to the One China Policy and opposition to Taiwan independence (MOFA Singapore, 2024).

On the other hand, these countries maintain strong economic and trade relations with Taiwan, complemented by active people-to-people relations. Taiwan serves as a key destination for migrant workers from several ASEAN-5 countries, particularly Indonesia, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Thailand. To manage these non-political ties, the establishment of their trade and economic offices in Taiwan has been essential, serving as institutional mechanisms to facilitate economic cooperation and consular service without violating the One China Policy.

Superposition, Quasi-Superposition, and Potential Measurements: Rethinking Asean-5 Relations in The Taiwan Strait

QIR provides insights into understanding ASEAN-5's position in the Taiwan Strait relations through the notions of superposition, entanglement, and measurement. The analysis drawing upon QIR illustrates that the seemingly contradictory behavior of ASEAN-5—upholding the One China Policy while maintaining robust unofficial ties with Taiwan—is not an anomaly or a mere double standard. Instead, it represents a sophisticated form of superposition within the international system. In this regard, these states existed in a state of quantum-like superposition, where myriad possibilities regarding their engagement with both Beijing and Taipei coexisted. This includes the option of simultaneous formal ties or maintaining frozen diplomatic relations with one while fostering burgeoning economic and cultural links with the other. This situation also demonstrates that the relations with Beijing and Taipei are deeply entangled, though they reflect different degrees of engagement by each state. The complexity increases when a "measurement" occurs—namely, when the ASEAN-5 established formal diplomatic relations with China. In principle, this should have ended the quantum-like superposition. However, it did not terminate their relations with Taipei, which instead continued in the form of economic and socio-cultural ties.

A partial collapse occurred when these states made the "measurement" of formal diplomatic recognition, particularly by adopting the One China Policy. This diplomatic shift, exemplified by Thailand and the Philippines severing formal ties with Taiwan in 1975, while Malaysia (1974) and Singapore (1990) established relations with Beijing while already having strong relations with Taiwan, did not result in a complete erasure of all previous possibilities. Crucially, this "partial collapse" is maintained by decoherence, as the "environment" of ASEAN's complex internal norms (like the ASEAN Way of non-interference) and external interaction (such as deep economic interdependencies with Taiwan and pragmatic development interests) prevents a full, classical collapse into a single, definitive state. Consequently, a new, stable quasi-superposition emerged. In this state, the formal commitment to the One China Policy coexists with, and is intricately entangled with, ongoing and significant non-diplomatic (economic and cultural) relations with Taiwan. This framework moves beyond the deterministic binaries of classical international relations, offering a nuanced understanding of how seemingly contradictory positions can operate simultaneously and interdependently within the complex social reality of international politics.

Among ASEAN-5, Indonesia illustrates a distinctive case. Unlike the others, it has not had formal diplomatic relations with the ROC, having established diplomatic relations with the PRC in 1950. While the ROC may have had a representative office in Batavia prior to the

establishment of the Republic of Indonesia, Indonesia does not have a diplomatic history with Taiwan. This situation means the 'measurement' has existed for Indonesia from the beginning, as the country maintained diplomatic relations with Beijing, thereby adhering to the One China Policy. However, following the freezing diplomatic relations with Beijing, Jakarta established its unofficial office in Taipei, which was followed by the increasing economic relations. Therefore, when other ASEAN-5 experience the quasi superposition, Indonesia may have started to experience the superposition itself.

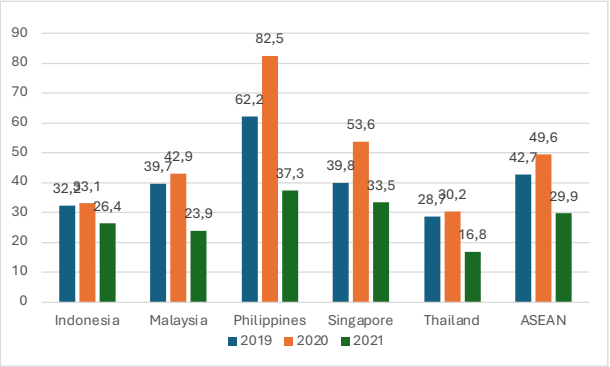
The current quasi-superposition is not necessarily a permanent state. Drawing further on QIR, the possibility of the future "measurements" could force a collapse of this delicate balance, leading to a more definitive and deterministic foreign policy posture for ASEAN-5. One such measurement could be escalating pressure from China, potentially culminating in military conflict in the Taiwan Strait. Such a scenario would act as a powerful measurement, compelling ASEAN states to make a stark choice—aligning with or against China, like the definitive stances seen during the US's war on terrorism. This would impose severe economic and social repercussions, forcing a difficult calculation regarding their economic ties with Taiwan versus complete alignment with China.

A survey of foreign ministry statements across the Asia-Pacific reveals that Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines all adopt a "neutral" stance regarding the Taiwan Strait crisis (Tiezzi, 2022). According to Tiezzi, these countries consistently issued statements of "concern," urging "all parties" to exercise restraint and avoid escalation. Ngeo Chow Bing further highlights the difficulty of predicting Southeast Asian governments' responses in the event of a Taiwan conflict. He underlines the assumption that Beijing is unlikely to launch an all-out invasion using maximum force, as it remains sensitive to Southeast Asian perceptions due to geographic proximity and the need to secure a favorable diplomatic environment that ensure at least regional neutrality (Bing, 2024). To maintain this neutrality, Beijing might provide incentives such as limiting spillover effects from Taiwan Strait conflict into the South China Sea and offering assistance in evacuating Southeast Asian citizens. Bing also suggests variation across ASEAN-5: the Philippines has a higher likelihood of involvement due to its strong stance on South China Sea disputes and its proximity to the US, but with the risk of opposition from other ASEAN members; Thailand, despite being a US ally, may remain neutral given its low threat perception of China; Singapore might also maintain neutrality if China refrains from direct hostilities against it, despite its close military ties with Washington; while Indonesia and Malaysia appear most likely to sustain neutrality. This scenario underscores the difficult position of ASEAN-5 in the event of a Taiwan conflict, highlighting the profound implications for both regional security and economic stability, and even more so for ASEAN unity.

At the public opinion level, the Taiwan Strait is consistently ranked among the top three geopolitical concerns in Southeast Asia, underscoring its security and economic implications for the region. The State of Southeast Asia Survey Report by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute (2019-2021) identifies the Taiwan Strait as one of the major security flashpoints, alongside the South China Sea and the Korean Peninsula (Figure 8.2). Among the ASEAN-5, public concern is highest in the Philippines, where rising military tensions, including those in the Taiwan Strait, are perceived as particularly alarming. The 2021 survey further reveals that China's strong-arm tactics toward Taiwan have become one of the major concerns of public unease over Beijing's

economic dominance and political influence in the region (ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2023).

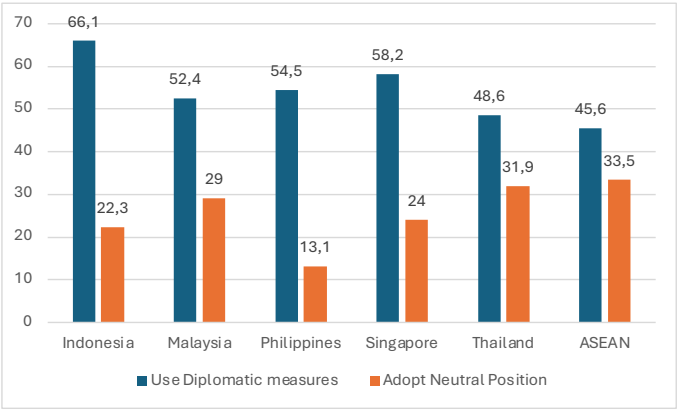
Figure 8.2 Public Perception in ASEAN-5 and ASEAN on Increased Military Tension Arising from Three Potential Flashpoint (South China Sea, Taiwan Strait, and Korean Peninsula)



Source: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute (2019, 2020, 2021).

Survey data also indicate widespread concern about the destabilizing effects of a potential Taiwan Strait conflict. Roughly 40 percent of respondents across ASEAN-5 believe that tension in the Strait would destabilize the region, with 24.8 percent of Indonesians, 29.8 percent of Malaysians, 30.3 percent of Filipinos, 32.2 percent Singaporeans, and 41.7 percent of Thais warning that the crisis could force ASEAN states to take sides. Despite these concerns, the public in these countries generally favors diplomatic measures and the prevention of neutrality over the use of force (Figure 8.3).

Figure 8.3 Public Perception in ASEAN-5 and ASEAN on the Use of Diplomatic Measures and Adopt Neutral Position in response to Taiwan Strait Conflict



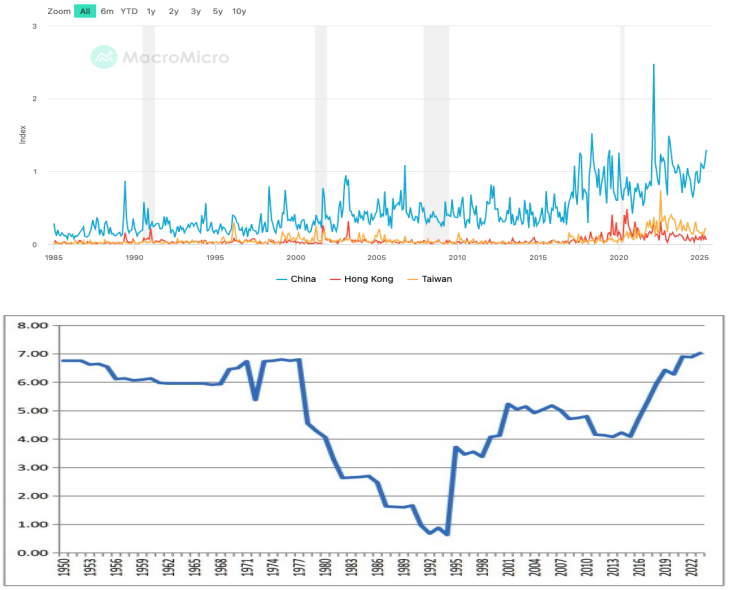
Source: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute (2023).

The 2024 survey highlights a growing sense that Taiwan Strait hostilities could push ASEAN states into sharper alignments. Specifically, 15.5 percent of Indonesians, 20.9 percent of Malaysians, 18.6 percent of Filipinos, 37.7 percent of Singaporeans and 32.3 percent of Thais believe that the conflict would compel their countries to choose between the US and China (ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2024). In addition, respondents identify broader negative effects,

such as a repatriation crisis for ASEAN citizens, the exposure of ASEAN's ineffectiveness crisis response, and severe disruptions to supply chains linking China, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia.

Figure 8.4 illustrates a slight increase in the geopolitical risk index for both China and Taiwan over the past decades, with Taiwan's index consistently remaining lower than China's. Similarly, the Cross-Strait Relations Index follows an upward trend, reaching its highest point in six decades in 2022. Closely monitoring these trends and the evolving situation in the Taiwan Strait is crucial for predicting any upcoming "new measurements" that could necessitate preventive policies.

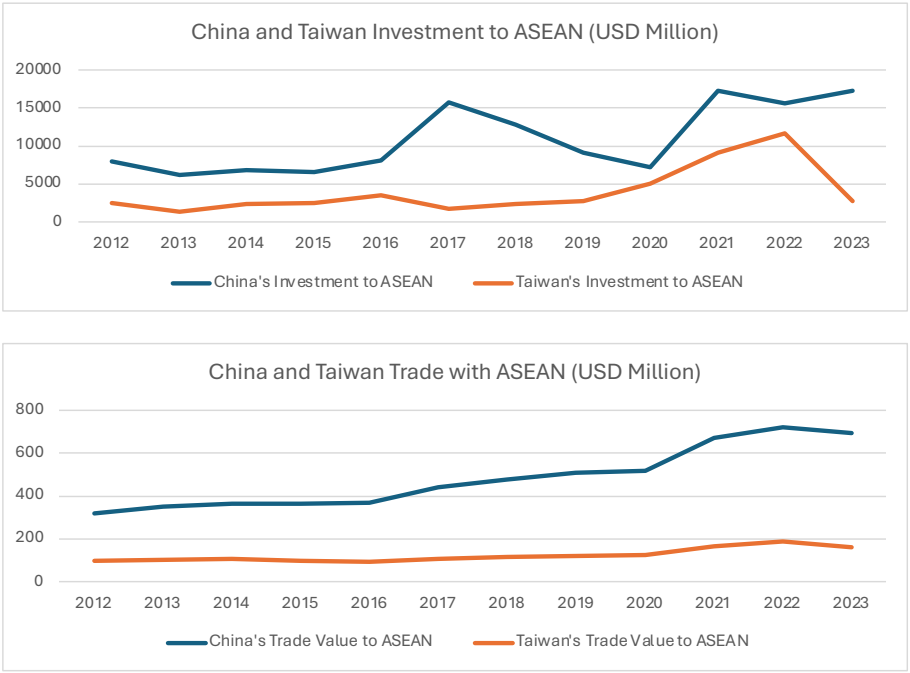
Figure 8.4 Taiwan Strait-Geopolitical Risk Index (top) and Cross-Strait Relations Risk Index (bottom)



Source: https://en.macromicro.me/charts/55605/taiwan-strait-geopolitical-risk-index; Author processed the figure from the Report on 2021 Cross-Strait Relations Risk Index.

Another potential measurement could arise from shifting economic dynamics, where China's economic and cultural influence surpasses that of Taiwan, thereby degrading the pragmatic value of maintaining unofficial ties with Taipei. ASEAN states currently underline economic gains from Taiwan's trade and investment. Should this economic calculus diminish while engagement with China becomes overwhelmingly more lucrative, a new measurement could emerge, expanding beyond the diplomatic realm of the One China Policy to encompass comprehensive economic relations. Figure 8.5 illustrates that while a perfect comparison of economic relations between ASEAN, China, and Taiwan is challenging, it effectively shows how economic ties with Taiwan have relatively balanced those with China. The gap in Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) has been dynamic, notably narrowing to 3,952.99 million USD in 2020. Conversely, the gap in trade relations, while slightly increasing, follows a remarkably similar trend for both. The COVID-19 pandemic also "reset" the number of Chinese and Taiwanese visitors to ASEAN to nearly equal levels, though the trend now indicates a widening gap.

Figure 8.5 Investment, Trade, and Total Visitors from China and Taiwan to ASEAN (in person)



Source: Author processes the figure from data available in aseanstats.org

Furthermore, a radical shift in external factors, such as a change in US policy regarding Taiwan Strait security, could force ASEAN states out of their current positions into more definitive balancing or bandwagoning strategies. Finally, internal ASEAN dynamics, including deepening divisions among member states (like the growing proximity of Laos and Cambodia to China), might constitute a measurement, compelling the bloc to make definitive choices to prevent regional fragmentation. Anticipating these potential measurements is crucial for ASEAN to proactively manage regional stability, peace, and prosperity, ensuring it remains resilient in an evolving geopolitical landscape.

Conclusion

This chapter posits that the seemingly anomalous behavior of ASEAN member states—their simultaneous adherence to the One China Principle and robust unofficial engagement with Taiwan—can be more comprehensively understood through the lens of QIR. Unlike traditional International Relations theories, which often adopt a binary, deterministic logic inherited from classical physics, QIR offers a more balanced explanatory framework that integrates both positivistic and interpretive elements. This quantum approach allows for the understanding that seemingly contradictory states can coexist and remain intertwined within a system until a definitive "measurement" occurs. The behavior of the ASEAN-5 nations, often perceived as ambiguous or inconsistent due to their formal recognition of the One China Policy alongside sustained non-official ties with Taiwan, instead exemplifies how opposing situations can operate concurrently and maintain a state of superposition. Consequently, QIR holds significant potential to enrich our understanding of international relations phenomena that defy straightforward, classical explanations.

Nevertheless, this application of QIR is not without its limitations. First, the interpretations of quantum theory itself are diverse, even if its fundamental principles are widely accepted. The author's limited understanding of quantum mechanics might lead to conceptual inaccuracies, particularly regarding terms like "partial collapse" or "quasi-superposition," which may not be standard or universally recognized within the pure quantum theoretical framework. Therefore, a deeper engagement with quantum theory and its rigorous application within the discipline of International Relations is warranted and encouraged. Second, rather than developing a clear mathematical language characteristic of quantum theory, this analysis primarily employs QIR as a metaphor to illuminate the complexities of international relations. While heuristically powerful, a more formalized, mathematical articulation could potentially offer a more comprehensive and logically robust understanding of these complex phenomena.

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Chapter 9

Re-Imagining Asean For The Future: Push Towards Emancipation And Enhancing Relevance

Idil Syawfi and Adrianus Harsawaskita

"Let us resolve to be masters, not the victims, of our history, controlling our own destiny without giving way to blind suspicions and emotions."
— John Kennedy
"The strength of a person's spirit would then be measured by how much 'truth' he could tolerate, or more precisely, to what extent he needs to have it diluted, disguised, sweetened, muted, falsified."
— Friedrich Nietzsche
"Change before you have to."
— Jack Welch, CEO of General Electric
"I believe that imagination is stronger than knowledge; …; dreams are more powerful than facts; …"
— Robert Fulghum, American writer

Introduction

ASEAN is a notable regional organization in the Indo-Pacific. Beyond its region, ASEAN has played a role in intra-regional and inter-regional organizational activities. ASEAN seeks to manage great power rivalry by refusing to align with a specific power and obliging to manage the relationship to maintain regional stability. ASEAN aspires to be central in the greater Indo-Pacific region and insists on its openness, inclusivity, and non-interference principles.

Whether one agrees or not, the extensive and high-profile activities are artificial. The ability of ASEAN to influence, let alone to steer, the course of events, actions, or policies in the region is minimal. ASEAN seems to be a follower or passenger, rather than in the 'driving seat'. Worse, ASEAN has become hostage to close relations with countries that are, underlyingly, unreliable. Although ASEAN members observe impartiality in international issues or situations, such a move features an uncertain posture and indecisiveness. Moreover, great power politics overrun that posture.

We believe that re-imagining ASEAN for the future involves turning back the situation(s). We posit that it requires interpreting the current regional situation affecting ASEAN. Currently, ASEAN is sidelined on issues relating to or becoming a spectator in its backyard. To embark on the quest to re-imagine ASEAN for the future and to contextualize ASEAN's experience so far, we employ the point of view of Emancipatory International Relations (EIR). It will guide the discussion of our mental image. This mental image comprises elements of emancipatory vision and Active Non-Alignment (ANA).

The EIR and ANA will be the opening section of the chapter to provide readers with the

frameworks. Followed by sections on analysis, that is, problems with ASEAN, and the implementation of ANA in ASEAN. We wrap up the article by showcasing the findings in the Conclusion.

Framework for Re-imagining the Future: Emancipatory Vision and Active Non-Alignment

For re-imagining the future, one must disperse the idea of progress as a historical "fact." It confuses legacies of colonialism, imperialism, and contemporary neocolonialism with a notion of social, political, economic, or technical-scientific progress. We employ the EIR approach to disentangle from confusion, which borrows ideas and concepts from the critical theory tradition. It is a theory that seeks not only to understand the world but to transform it (Alway, 1995: 2). It contains a conception of a better world, and how to realize it by the actor who can play a role in it. This is what we call the emancipatory vision.

Politics of emancipation unwraps the identification and critique of power relations and domination. The present, considered as a fact, and must be accepted. It is the product of the activities of its inhabitants. It views the individual as passive and dependent, while society consists of individuals as active. Society, as a matter of fact, is founded on oppression, or a byproduct of conflicting forces (Horkheimer, 1972: 200). Individuals receive reality as a sequence of facts. Reality develops along the life process of society. The ideas then revolve: the world is a product of human activities, and these activities are the ideas through which individuals recognize the world. Nonetheless, the above process is not everlasting. The integration of facts into a conceptual system and the revision of facts are part of the activities. Here, the emancipatory ideas come into play.

Individuals should be cognizant of the necessity to change by identifying problems and conceptualizing solutions from history, biography, and intellectual heritage. Individuals should be aware of the emergent trends and developments that are oppressive and contradict the cohesion of society. The conditions considered oppressive and inconducive are inferred from the position and experiences of the actors. The critical theorists — Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Jürgen Habermas — are concerned with practical intent. Relating to the conditions, the theorists propose how the individual makes the social change. This is the central theme of emancipation.

At the heart of the emancipatory vision is the self-aware individual. The essence of the vision is: first, the conception of a better world; and second, how to realize such a world, with the belief that intentional action by the actor can change. The vision concerns the actor(s) and the action. The agent of change has been identified, and the action to change should be identified.

Surely, it is important to analyze the contemporary social, economic, and political conditions. The significant trends and the actor(s) reveal the possibilities and strategies for change. Here, Alway departs from most critical theorists who treat agents and change briefly (Alway, 1995).

Alway refers to the actor as the model of the subject. It is the individual who can do, or behave in a way as a human, seeking out, and acting according to meaning. The model of the subject itself lives in certain contemporary social conditions. The conditions inform the existence of the model of the subject. The conditions become the launching pad for change or improvement. Thus, the model of the subject and the conception of history, e.g., the conditions, are the foundations of the emancipatory vision. The individual becomes the subject, the creator of

their own course of history.

The concept of "coloniality of power," coined by Aníbal Quijano, represents the conception of history. By coloniality of power, Quijano portrays the form of domination. In the post-colonial age, colonial domination persisted in all areas of human existence. Power, he asserts further (Quijano, 2007):

"is a matter of the capacity of one group to obtain and find, to impose itself over others and articulate existence under its control, …. let virtually everyone to admit that in a totality the whole has absolute determining primacy over each and one of the parts, and thus that there is one and only one logic that governs the behavior of the whole and each and every one of the parts."

Unfortunately, as prophesied by Horkheimer and Adorno, the struggle to turn back the dominant external nature (the physical world) turns inward. They portray the situation as the triumph of wickedness over natural drives, instincts, and passions, that is, the desire for happiness. The body becomes the object of possession, to be used and manipulated (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1947). As reflected from the enlightenment in the 17th and 18th century Europe, they point out, the positive goal of the enlightenment proceeded toward a regressive moment, the self-destruction of enlightenment: "the curse of irresistible progress becomes irresistible regression." To eke out a progress, they caution us to liberate from blind domination — reified as law and organization. In this context, the instruments of power, among others, are language, weapons, and machines. Power is intended to include everyone.

How can we turn back the gloomy picture above? First of all, a changing situation involves more than one individual. The agent of change, the affected party, has to change the equation, *vis-à-vis* the party(ies) that has(ve) the upper hand. Here, Thomas Risse helps our reimagination. Risse raises some points relevant to ours, and we should carefully consider (Risse, 2000):

- Developing a common knowledge about the situation;
- Agreeing to "rules of the game";
- The actor, especially the affected, should be flexible and able to change their view of the world, interests, and possibly identities, as well as their perception of the situation.

Especially point 3 above, they can be employed from the perspective of the affected. Risse reminds us of the importance of engaging other party(ies) besides the affected party. Nevertheless, the strategy to engage other(s) is beyond the scope of the chapter. We are concentrating on the issue that can invite other(s). For that, it is relevant to underline what Risse's translation of Habermas's communicative action is:

"… the action orientations of the participating actors are not coordinated via egocentric calculations of success, but through acts of understanding. … they pursue their individual goals under the condition that they can coordinate their action plans on the basis of shared definitions of the situation. … to seek a reasoned consensus."

This chapter tries to offer ideas that can invite others, that is, active non-alignment. Before discussing the concept, let us recap what we plan as the first step, reimagination guided by the emancipatory approach. Emancipation becomes the motive and the driver of the [new] source of conduct. It conveys careful calculation and hope (Booth 2007: 250). Moreover, to recap the

EIR approach, we take what Spegele (2014) accounts for:

… studying international relations … by transforming, transfiguring or liberating the political communities in which we live; … for liberating individuals, groups and peoples from structures or conditions that hinder them from actualizing freedom in thought and in practice.

To make it parsimonious, Spegele develops four key elements to be identified within the EIR approach: (1) a subject (X) that requires emancipation; (2) an obstacle (Y) that prevents emancipation; (3) the form of emancipation (Z); and (4) the articulation of mechanism (Q) that generates transformation toward emancipation. Spegele dubs this as the "XYZ+Q formula."

Applying the EIR approach to this chapter essentially, then: (1) ASEAN is the subject; (2) the regional/global situation that hampers the centrality of ASEAN; (3) ASEAN emancipates from the obstacle to centrality by applying a policy of active non-alignment; then (4) how to put active non-alignment for ASEAN into practice.

Our discussion of non-alignment for ASEAN departed from the Cold War context, when the newly independent countries and post-colonial states established a platform for coping with development challenges and fragile sovereignty. It was the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM).

NAM originated from the Bandung Conference of 1955. The conference resulted from the failure of the Western powers to involve those colonial states in issues affecting them. Then, tensions existed in Vietnam and Southeast Asia. Also, the United States set up the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1954, as part of its global strategy. In both events, the new states were disregarded, became merely spectators. The leading figures of the conference, such as Nehru of India and Sukarno of Indonesia, felt that the great power politics divided the newly independent states by forcing them to take sides in the global struggle. Furthermore, they felt that big powers endeavored to regain former colonial territories, including them within their sphere of influence (Fourie, 1992).

Whatsoever, the conference itself did not produce the non-alignment. However, the outcome of the meeting itself created two important milestones: first, placing the priority on individual sovereignty and rendering the country a player in its own right; and second, evoking the feeling of political possibility through the "Third World" solidarity (Lee, 2010). The feeling was referred to as the "Bandung Spirit." The Spirit calls for abolishing asymmetrical relationships and the establishment of a harmonious system of international relations.

The first summit of the NAM was the Belgrade Conference of 1961. The summit was attended by leaders of the newly independent countries and countries that did not formally align with either bloc of the Cold War. Singham and Hune (1986) succinctly summarize the five basic principles of the Movement based on the concerns of the members:

- Peace and disarmament, especially the reduction of tensions between the major powers;
- Independence, including the right of self-determination of all colonial peoples and the right of equality between all races;
- Economic equality, with an emphasis on restructuring the existing international economic order, particularly with respect to the growing and persistent inequality between rich and poor nations;
- Cultural equality, with an emphasis on restructuring the world information and

communications order, and opposing cultural imperialism and the Western monopoly of information systems; and
- Universalism and multilateralism through strong support for the United Nations system — whose principles are also non-aligned principles.

More simply put, NAM emphasizes non-intervention, national sovereignty, peaceful coexistence, and respect for multilateralism. Reaffirmed in the Sixth Conference of NAM in Havana in 1979, the Movement aims to transform international relations, free from subordination and backwardness (Sarajcic, 1981). As the Sixth Conference, Article 12 stated:

"… the principles of national independence, sovereignty, and integrity of territory, as well as of equality of the independent social development of all countries. The preservation of national independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the safety of all non-aligned countries were emphasized as the most essential aim of the movement."

Eventually, the destabilization period of decolonization dimmed, and the post-colonial states became the "normal" states. The fervor of Afro-Asianism as an ideology declined. Another trend in world politics supplanted the turbulence of decolonization: the states want more say in controlling the shape of the global order and influencing the specific outcomes (Sweijs and Mazar, 2023).

Following their predecessors, the leaders of the states tend to be included in the global struggle of the great powers, currently the US and China. They pursue strategies that secure their position *vis-à-vis* great powers, including hedging, balancing, and bandwagoning. In the context of the new circumstances, Fortin, Heine, and Ominami coined the term "active non-alignment (ANA)." Its basic premise is that the weaker powers now have more freedom in opting for specific policies and more choice in their foreign relations. Unlike in the past, they do not have to pick sides in the current great power struggle (Heine, 2025).

Fortin *et al.* put forward that the countries:

Not to accept a priori and in toto the positions of any of the Great Powers in conflict, but to define their international behavior according to their own sovereign interests, without giving in to diplomatic, political, or economic pressure from hegemonic powers.

What is more, weaker power(s) can "play the field," playing one great power against another. They can pursue their own agendas related to economic and social issues. The weaker powers' concerns are primarily domestic in nature, which can be pursued with the great powers' support. For instance, the weaker powers have interests in their domestic economies that depend on the openness of the great powers' economies and their economic groupings. They are translated into the term "active", disguised as a reference to (Fortin, Heine, and Ominami, 2023):

… a foreign policy in constant search of opportunities in a changing world, evaluating each of them on their own terms. It recognizes the historical roots of the policy of Non-Alignment but adapts the concept to the realities of the new century. It requires an especially deft foreign policy, one attuned to the emerging challenges in the international environment.

Furthermore, they assert that:

… this non-alignment is perfectly compatible with taking a position (critical or supportive) of the decisions adopted by any of the Great Powers. Each of these decisions will be evaluated on its merits without a priori prejudice of any kind. … ANA contemplates taking a position based on convictions.

Lastly, Fortin, Heine, and Ominami remind us not to confuse ANA with pragmatism:

… pragmatism leads to opportunism, doing nothing but eroding the credibility and standing of those who apply it. The ANA option would allow … to reposition in international affairs in a way that no other kind of alignment can. If adopted as a doctrine, the ANA option could remove … from the marginality and irrelevance …"

To recap non-alignment and active non-alignment, we conclude that to implement emancipatory international relations, we begin from the context, namely, reinvigorating the relevance and centrality of the individual in a social setting that is divisive. Meanwhile, the situation requires the subject not to take sides. Furthermore, both conflicting parties in the externality are needed.

We know that only a great power and its allies have the resources to fulfill the needs of the individual(s) as the subject. Here, "active", as put forward by Fortin et al., becomes the overriding factor when taking sides and fulfilling the needs and problems.

Normatively, the subject is guided by the five basic principles of the Movement. The five become the runway lights, navigating the cluttered world politics. Observing the five, we are aware of our needs in international relations, and the principles of national independence, sovereignty, and integrity of territory become the basic norms in foreign policy.

Putting ANA into organizational form, we know each organization member has interests. "Active" frees the members to choose their own path; it combines with national independence, sovereignty, and integrity of territory adhered to by the members.

The amalgam of the above ingredients reflects the differences within the organization, which does not necessarily mean the organization is in disarray. Cultivating good relationships with either great power without a priori acceptance of each position of the conflicting great powers does not mean they become their follower, losing independence. As long as the relationship is built upon sovereign interests, the independence of foreign policy-making is guaranteed.

More importantly, each member's relationship with either great power is based on openness and transparency, which is the very basis of a nation's foreign policy. Furthermore, based on "independence" and "equality", the fundamental notion of the NAM, other members acknowledge their counterparts' position and opposite stance.

Problems with ASEAN: Eminence and Obstacles

Many scholars believe that ASEAN has and will succeed as the center of regionalism in Asia. Acharya appraises ASEAN as the most successful experiment in regional cooperation in the developing world due to its ability to moderate intra-regional conflicts (2001) and inspired other regional mechanisms, such as APEC (1997). Anthony and Emmers (2022) also said that

ASEAN was behind Southeast Asia as the most stable and peaceful region in the world, giving its leadership in building multilateral institutions. In addition, Anwar highlights that ASEAN has played an important role in managing its member relations with extra-regional powers (2023). Furthermore, Mahbubani calls ASEAN's ability to manage geopolitical competition between China and the US a model for the developing world. In other words, it has been the center of Asian regionalism and multilateralism since the end of the Cold War (He & Feng, 2022). This central position is why ASEAN is deemed the most successful regional grouping in the developing world (Weatherbee, 2009).

ASEAN reiterates several roles in managing great power rivalry, such as at the driving seat, highlighting its capacity to stabilize great power relations in the region (Jones, 2010). ASEAN is also called the leading Asian security architecture, with its ASEAN Way, which emphasizes a multilateral process that resists the domination of a great power in the region (Tom & Taylor, 2010). With this role, ASEAN is viewed as the regional hub that has linkages with its dialogue partners, that is, great powers such as the US, China, Russia, and other powers, and simultaneously serves to be the diplomatic platform for its members and their dialogue partners to create networks through ASEAN (Tan, 2017).

Instead of an empty narrative, ASEAN claims are based on the modalities it possesses. Its ten member countries have traditionally practiced a hedging policy in navigating great powers' rivalry, especially between the US and China (Gerstl, 2024). Indonesia has long implemented the "independent and active" as its foreign policy strategy, on today's basis, this strategy is reflected in economic cooperation with China and simultaneously enhances defense cooperation with the US (Anwar, 2022). Similarly, Malaysia implements the equidistant and "friendly to all" policy, highlighting its independence and non-alignment with big powers (Alatas, 2021). Thailand has also implemented the so-called 'bamboo bending with the wind' policy. This pragmatic and adaptive policy helps Thailand maintain good relations with great powers without losing trust or advantages (Tahir & Huda, 2023). In addition, Vietnam implements a similar stance with their "three no's" policy, which consists of No foreign troops on Vietnamese soil, No external balancing, and No military alliance, which also reflects the hedging policy (Bijendra De Gurung, China, Vietnam and the South China Sea). Alternatively, Singapore's foreign policy is portrayed as cooperative and aligned, yet independent and neutral to keep options open and refuse to choose between Washington and Beijing (Lee, 2024).

Besides that, ASEAN's institutional capacity supports its role. ASEAN has multiple forums that can strengthen its strong relations with its extra-regional powers. It includes the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), which focuses on security dialogue to enhance the region's confidence-building measures, conflict resolution, and preventive diplomacy. ASEAN Plus Three is a forum with its East Asia counterparts, including China, Japan, and South Korea, especially in economic and social issues. The East Asia Summit focuses on strategic, political, and economic issues among ASEAN member countries and their partners, including the United States and Russia. ASEAN also holds regular bilateral dialogues with its partners.

ASEAN partners are also committed to playing an active role in ASEAN based on its norms and principles called "The ASEAN Way". This principle highlights the informality, non-interference, consultation, and consensus building (Koga, 2010). With this principle, the United States can sit with China, Russia, or South Korea at the same table with North Korea. Together with all ASEAN members, the extra-regional partners discuss all the regional issues in a non-binding

and informal manner, making ASEAN the diplomatic channel for their interests. All of its partners are also ratifying the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation that emphasizes peaceful coexistence, renunciation of the threat or use of force, and highlights friendly means. Signing the TAC gives ASEAN security assurance about the involvement of great powers in the region (Kun, 2009).

With that, ASEAN aspires to be central to the region. Based on its charter, ASEAN seeks to maintain its centrality as the primary driving force in regional arrangements and its relations with its external partners based on open, transparent, and inclusive principles. (ASEAN Charter, 2011). With these terms, ASEAN refuses the domination of a great power in the region and is ready to maintain the stability of the region through its mechanism. This centrality is also reemphasized through the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), which states that ASEAN claims that Southeast Asia lies at the center of the Indo-Pacific region, which is interested in shaping the regional dynamics. ASEAN underlies its centrality to promote cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region. With this centrality, ASEAN highlights its central and strategic role that refuses rivalry and pursues dialogue, cooperation, and inclusivity in the region (ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific).

Centrality cannot be defined as the predominance of a unit. The unit predominates because of its structural prestige or existence on every occasion (Marsden, 2004). Centrality of a unit is reflected in the intensity of interaction in its environment. The ASEAN centrality, as stated in the ASEAN Charter and AOIP, can be defined as ASEAN becoming the main driver in relations and cooperation with extra-regional powers, playing an important role in regional architecture aimed at mutual strengthening and supporting, and becoming a foothold to overcome mutual challenges within the region. It is in the very interests of ASEAN to pursue its centrality in the region. With its centrality, ASEAN, as a group of lesser powers, can play its role and create more policy options for survival. Centrality guarantees their existence, refuses the domination of a great power in their region, either by the United States or China, and ensures it is not ignored or maintains its relevance.

Meanwhile, ASEAN has challenges and obstacles in realizing its centrality in its region and the broader Indo-Pacific. Wanandi once reminded us that ASEAN's main challenge in the future is maintaining its relevance (2006). This challenge becomes a problem because Emmers's analysis shows that the level of cohesion and unity across its members has been diminished. On the other hand, the rising tension between the US and China undermines ASEAN's ambition to manage great power competition in the region (2023). These problems have made ASEAN struggle to reach a collective position in responding to its region's rapid geopolitical changes, which have put its centrality under question (Beeson, 2022).

The increasingly sharp rivalry between the US and China has given rise to various forms of regional minilateralism. Parameswaran said the creation of AUKUS and Quad has become a challenge for ASEAN as an institution, which encounters ASEAN centrality, and the exclusivity of those institutions undermines ASEAN's aspiration for inclusivity in the region (2024). Thus, the creation of QUAD and AUKUS reflects the US choice of exclusive and competitive tendencies in containing China's growing power in the region, which replaces the inclusive and cooperative mechanism built by ASEAN (Beasley, 2024).

Another problem is ASEAN's inability to address its internal problems due to a lack of cohesion.

The Myanmar Crisis has been a test for ASEAN cohesiveness, the inability to address this crisis is due to internal opposition within ASEAN. Thailand and Cambodia have different stances with other ASEAN members, they maintain pragmatic relations with the Myanmar Junta, which is likely to obstruct any ASEAN initiative in Myanmar (Iannone, 2024). Similar problems occurred in 2016 when Cambodia blocked the ASEAN Statement on South China Sea, causing it to fail to reach an agreement on maritime disputes with China after the international court ruled against China's claim in South China Sea (Mogato, Martina, and Blanchard, 2016). Especially in the South China Sea, the inability of ASEAN has led the Philippines to turn to the United States and leave ASEAN. The US also committed to enhancing the Philippines' defense capability to manage China's threats in the South China Sea. In their latest piece, Kong and Liow feature the alignment of individual ASEAN countries towards a great power based on their policy choices. Their study shows that the Philippines is clearly aligned with the US; conversely, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Brunei prefer China. Other countries show their hedge status but leaning on some great power, such as Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore, and tendencies are moving in China's direction (Khong & Liow, 2025).

ASEAN member countries themselves are active in other multilateral mechanisms outside ASEAN. Indonesia, for instance, has become a member of the G20, Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), BRICS, and other mechanisms. Malaysia is also a member of APEC, NAM, Five Power Defense Arrangement (FPDA), RCEP, also the Commonwealth. This is also followed by Singapore (NAM, APEC, RCEP, Commonwealth of Nations, among others), Thailand (APEC, NAM, RCEP, among others), the Philippines (APEC, RCEP, among others), and Vietnam (APEC, NAM, RCEP, among others). Nevertheless, their activity in those multilateral mechanisms is only as a minor player. For example, Indonesia, the new member of BRICS+, still has limitations in playing a significant role in the bloc. In addition, Thailand and other ASEAN member countries are still limited in RCEP compared with Australia, Japan, or China. Alternatively, Indonesia's trajectory in the G20 is still being undermined compared with other great powers such as the US, China, or Russia. This condition is not aligned with ASEAN's ambition to be central in the greater Indo-Pacific region.

The Implementation of ANA in ASEAN

ASEAN has a diverse membership, including countries from different backgrounds, historical experiences, and perspectives in international relations. In the past, the countries in the mainland of Southeast Asia viewed China as the hegemonic power; meanwhile, the countries in the maritime domain of Southeast Asia viewed China as a threatening major power.

Almost all countries consider China a benefactor: a source of investment and economic cooperation that does not interfere with the domestic politics of the countries. The threat of communism of the past is forgotten, and the economy prevails over history. Regarding the United States, the countries in mainland Southeast Asia experience bad memories as Washington bombarded the territories during the Vietnam War. On the other hand, the maritime nations of Southeast Asia, the founders of ASEAN, tended to be pro-Western countries and viewed communism coming from the mainland as a threat.

In today's regional politics, the US is still viewed as the provider of security. However, its economic role is decreasing due to shifting US priorities (Ba, 2008: 108). As history divides

experiences and economic necessity dictates friendships, it should be acceptable for countries to choose their partners. The diverse nature of partnerships should be an asset for ASEAN. It enables ASEAN to be impartial to any big/great power.

We deem that loose institutions and openness among members and with the extra-regional partners make ASEAN more relevant and a power to be reckoned with. The openness and impartiality make it more appealing for ASEAN to be invited to cooperate. ASEAN should learn from the experiences of its Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) and Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ).[1] They were good on paper as a concept, ideas, and ambition. However, in practice, ASEAN could not implement them. They became paper tigers; worse, ASEAN is considered hypocritical.

In the future, ASEAN will encourage building discourse about ideas, but not binding. This anti-institutionalism, however, maintains ASEAN stability until today. We propose that ASEAN adhere to "omni-alignment." It is a policy based on the national interests of the member countries. Diverse interests make ASEAN non-alignment because no external powers can dictate or interfere in their policies. Diverse interests create a check-and-balance regionally. The members are actively involved in various fora, relationships, and partnerships. This is not a sign of disunity. The key is to make it transparent and open, as stated openly during the ASEAN Meeting. In this regard, every member learns that their cooperation, prioritizing their interests, has implications for ASEAN.

In building relations with others, it is clear that national interests are the basic things that states struggle for. The main principles include national independence, sovereignty, and integrity of the territory. The non-aligned movement countries, including ASEAN members, always emphasize that. Each ASEAN member state may build relations with any country or any power, as long as it is based on its respective interests and circumstances. Other ASEAN members shall respect the choice of other members regarding their relationship. For example, it is normal for the Philippines to turn into the US in the case of the South China Sea, because China is threatening the Philippines' integrity of territory and sovereignty. Based on its rationality, the Philippines independently chose to bandwagon with the US, that has been a long-time alliance since the Philippines was a former US colony from 1898 to 1946 and has built a formal alliance since 1951, making their relations the oldest alliance in the global south (Beaver & Peters, 2024). Alternatively, in the case of Cambodia that have become a loyal ally to China that supports the "One China Policy" and actively engages with the China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is simply because Cambodia try to keep its national independence that being interfere by western countries that impose sanctions and tariff as Cambodia become "undemocratic" and "human rights violation." On the other hand, China offers trade and funding for economic development through several mechanisms, including BRI (Tan, et.al, 2025). Other ASEAN member countries must respect the choices of those countries and not view the differences as ASEAN's weakness, and make it a source of division.

It is also the aspiration for lesser power, including in the Global South, especially AMS, to transform international relations free from subordination and backwardness (Davies, 2024).

[1] ASEAN countries conduct joint military exercises with the US in the Southeast Asia region regularly, involving the US warships and aircrafts. Bear in mind, the US adheres to "The Neither Confirm Nor Deny Policy." The policy asserts that no military personnels can disclose whether the warships or the aircrafts carry nuclear weapons. See further in Nuclear Brief February 8, 2006. Available at https://www.nukestrat.com/us/navy/ncnd.htm

ASEAN always advocates inclusivity in the region, so that no one is left behind (Jaelani, 2020). ASEAN member states should emphasize that all countries are equal based on their sovereignty and authority over their territory. Every ASEAN country refuses to choose and implement hedging in their foreign policy to avoid becoming a Vassal State in front of a Suzerain State. However, the current dynamic where great power rivalry becomes more intense and increasingly pressures lesser powers to choose puts ASEAN countries in a difficult position. In the future, ASEAN member countries can freely choose a partnership with any power as long as it is based on their national interests and the choice is diverse, so that it can have implications for active non-alignment at the ASEAN level. With the diversity of choices among its member countries, ASEAN may capitalize on this as its leverage. When ASEAN has issues with the US, it can use the Philippines as a US ally to address them; similarly, when there are problems with China, it may use Cambodia as China's closest partner in the region for diplomacy. This divergence shall become ASEAN eminence, not an obstacle.

The share of member states' relationships and activities shall be ASEAN capital for centrality. For example, Indonesia's membership in G20 and BRICS, along with Singapore's activity in FPDA and RCEP, and Malaysia's relationship with OIC and APEC members, shall become ASEAN's leverage to be involved in every regional issue and policy. On the other hand, ASEAN should be well-informed about every regional initiative. Like in the past, regarding the creation of SEATO, Soekarno insisted on having the right to be informed and to associate with the issues (Thomas, 1957). This stance is similar to the creation of minilateralism in the region, which should inform ASEAN the least. So as not to create confusion, ASEAN is still regarded as the foremost regional organization in the region.

Those imaginations about the future ASEAN shall ensure ASEAN is not ignored in regional issues and may prevent great power domination in the region. That is what we imagine about centrality. This kind of centrality is based on the honesty that ASEAN consists of lesser powers, that they struggle for their survival and national interests, and that they shall do anything they can to punch above their weight.

Conclusion

This is the reimagination for the future of ASEAN based on an emancipatory vision and ANA. We believe that ASEAN can return to its relevance in its backyard, so that it can fulfill its aspiration for centrality. For that objective, ASEAN should dare to presume NAM ideas that advocate for the equality and sovereignty of the nations. ASEAN should capitalize on opportunities in the changing world to fulfill its needs. ASEAN shall consider its members' divergent interests and activities as leverage rather than liabilities. This is not merely pragmatism; instead, it is an effort to move away from marginality and irrelevance. ASEAN must avoid an inflated self-perception and delusion of grandeur; as an organization of lesser powers, it should strategically engage with competing interests to advance its own agendas.

Based on the above discussions, we propose plans for ASEAN. First, ASEAN and its member(s) should be involved in any grouping and initiatives, whether bilateral, minilateral, or multilateral, related to their own region and play a significant role, not merely as spectators or followers. Second, ASEAN accepts and respects the different positions of its members regarding the situation and partnership based on interests, independence, and equality. Third, during the ASEAN meeting, each member state openly and clearly stated its position on any

issues, without fear of division within the organization. Fourth, ASEAN should capitalize on differences to gain a prominent role in the region, Southeast Asia, as well as the Indo-Pacific.

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About The Habibie Center

The Habibie Center was founded by Bacharuddin Jusuf Habibie and family as an independent, non-governmental, and non-profit organization on November 10, 1999. Our vision is to promote the modernization and democratization of Indonesian society based on morality and integrity of sound cultural and religious values.

The missions of The Habibie Center are:

1. First, creating a culturally and structurally democratic society that recognizes, respects, and upholds human rights, as well as examines and raises issues of democratic development and human rights

2. Second, promoting and improving human resources management and technology socialization efforts.

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