



## Middle Powers in Flux: Rethinking ASEAN's Role in a Multipolar Asia

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### ABSTRACT

*The transition from a unipolar to a multipolar international order has profoundly reshaped the strategic landscape of the Asia-Pacific. As the geopolitical rivalry between the United States and China intensifies in the post-2020 era, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) stands at a critical crossroads, balancing between competing powers while striving to maintain its centrality and cohesion. This article examines ASEAN's evolving role as a collective middle power navigating the complex dynamics of security, geopolitics, and economic integration in a rapidly changing regional order. Through a synthesis of middle power theory and regionalism, it explores how ASEAN's diplomatic strategies, institutional mechanisms, and normative frameworks are being recalibrated to respond to emerging challenges, including great-power rivalry, shifting trade patterns, and new security architectures. The study employs a qualitative research design, drawing on official ASEAN documents, policy statements, and scholarly literature to assess ASEAN's strategic choices and their broader implications for regional stability. Findings suggest that while ASEAN's normative emphasis on neutrality and consensus remains central, it faces increasing pressure to adapt to structural changes, diversify partnerships, and assert a more proactive strategic identity. The article concludes that ASEAN's ability to redefine its role will depend on its success in strengthening internal cohesion, enhancing institutional capacity, and engaging constructively with external powers without compromising its autonomy.*

**Keywords:** ASEAN, Multipolarity, Middle Power, Regionalism, Geopolitics, Indo-Pacific.

### Introduction

#### Setting the Stage: ASEAN in a Shifting Strategic Landscape

The dawn of the 21st century marked the gradual erosion of the unipolar world order dominated by the United States, giving way to a more complex and contested multipolar system. Nowhere is this transformation more evident than in the Indo-Pacific region, where strategic rivalries, shifting economic networks, and evolving security architectures are redefining regional dynamics. At the heart of this evolving landscape lies the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a regional organization comprising ten member states that collectively represent one of the most dynamic and strategically significant regions in the world. Established in 1967 to promote regional stability and development, ASEAN has since emerged as a central actor in Asia's diplomatic architecture, mediating among competing powers and shaping norms of cooperation and conflict management (Acharya, 2014). In the decades following the Cold War, ASEAN cultivated a reputation as a "norm entrepreneur,"

emphasizing principles such as consensus, non-interference, and peaceful conflict resolution. These norms, enshrined in the “ASEAN Way,” enabled the organization to navigate great-power rivalries and preserve its autonomy in a region historically shaped by external influences (Jones & Smith, 2007). However, the acceleration of geopolitical competition in the post-2020 era particularly between the United States and China poses unprecedented challenges to ASEAN’s traditional strategies. The intensification of strategic competition, coupled with the rise of new actors like India, Japan, and Australia, has raised questions about ASEAN’s continued relevance and its capacity to act as a cohesive middle power in a multipolar Asia (Beeson, 2021).

### **Theoretical Framing: ASEAN as a Middle Power**

While ASEAN is not a state, scholars increasingly conceptualize it as a “collective middle power” a regional grouping whose influence derives not from material capabilities but from diplomatic, normative, and institutional leadership (Narine, 2019). Middle powers are typically characterized by their pursuit of multilateralism, emphasis on rules-based order, and capacity to mediate among major powers (Cooper et al., 1993). ASEAN’s role as a convener of regional platforms such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) underscores its middle-power credentials and its aspiration to shape the strategic environment (Haacke, 2019). Yet, the contemporary environment challenges this identity. As major powers increasingly bypass ASEAN-centric mechanisms in favor of minilateral arrangements such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and AUKUS ASEAN’s centrality risks erosion. This development raises critical questions: Can ASEAN sustain its middle-power role in a rapidly polarizing environment? How can it reconcile internal diversity with the need for a coherent strategic response? And what strategies might enable ASEAN to balance between great powers while advancing regional interests?

### **Research Gap and Rationale**

While the literature on ASEAN’s diplomatic role and normative frameworks is extensive, most scholarship has focused on the organization’s performance in a relatively stable order or during the early stages of multipolar transition (Acharya, 2014; Haacke, 2019). Far less attention has been paid to ASEAN’s strategic recalibration in the post-2020 context a period marked by unprecedented geopolitical volatility, economic disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and intensifying US–China rivalry. Moreover, existing research often treats security and economic dimensions separately, overlooking the complex ways in which they interact to shape ASEAN’s strategic options (Beeson & Stubbs, 2012). This article addresses these gaps by adopting an integrated approach that examines ASEAN’s role at the intersection of security, geopolitics, and economic integration.

The central objective of this study is to analyze how ASEAN is redefining its role as a collective middle power in the evolving multipolar order of post-2020 Asia by examining the strategies it employs to navigate intensifying great-power competition while maintaining autonomy and centrality, assessing how its institutional frameworks and normative principles are evolving to address new geopolitical and economic realities, and exploring the implications of its strategic recalibration for regional stability, economic integration, and multilateral governance. Based on these objectives, the study hypothesizes that ASEAN’s continued relevance as a middle power depends on its ability to adapt its institutional mechanisms and diplomatic strategies to the changing geopolitical environment, and that its dual focus on security and economic cooperation enhances its strategic flexibility, enabling it to mitigate external pressures and sustain regional centrality.

### **Methodological Approach**

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in a constructivist understanding of international relations. Rather than relying solely on quantitative data, it draws upon a wide range of sources including ASEAN summit declarations, policy documents, official communiqués, and scholarly analyses to trace the evolution of ASEAN's strategic orientation. The research design is comparative and process-tracing in nature, examining key episodes of ASEAN's engagement with major powers, such as its response to the US Indo-Pacific Strategy, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and the emergence of new minilateral groupings. Through thematic analysis, the study identifies patterns of continuity and change in ASEAN's diplomatic practices and institutional behavior.

This methodological approach offers two advantages. First, it allows for a nuanced understanding of ASEAN's agency how it perceives, interprets, and responds to structural changes in the international system. Second, it facilitates an integrated analysis of security and economic dimensions, highlighting their interplay in shaping ASEAN's strategic behavior. By situating ASEAN's responses within the broader theoretical frameworks of middle power diplomacy and regionalism, the study aims to contribute both empirically and conceptually to the literature on regional order in Asia.

### **Literature Review**

#### **ASEAN, Middle Power Theory, and Regional Order**

The concept of "middle power" has long occupied a central position in international relations scholarship, typically referring to states that possess moderate material capabilities and leverage their influence through multilateralism, coalition-building, and normative leadership (Cooper, Higgot, & Nossal, 1993). While originally applied to states like Canada and Australia, scholars have increasingly extended the framework to regional organizations such as ASEAN, which act collectively to shape norms and manage relations among great powers (Narine, 2019). ASEAN's strategic approach aligns with key characteristics of middle power diplomacy: prioritizing multilateral institutions, promoting a rules-based order, and adopting a mediatory posture in great-power competition (Acharya, 2014).

Amitav Acharya (2014) argues that ASEAN's most significant contribution lies not in hard power but in its normative influence creating a "security community" in Southeast Asia grounded in shared norms and practices. Through its emphasis on the "ASEAN Way," characterized by informality, non-interference, and consensus, ASEAN has built mechanisms that reduce conflict and foster dialogue. This approach reflects a constructivist understanding of international order, in which norms and identity shape state behavior as much as material capabilities (Katzenstein, 2005). ASEAN's ability to embed these principles into broader regional forums such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the East Asia Summit (EAS) underscores its middle power agency in a historically contested region (Haacke, 2019).

#### **ASEAN Centrality and Its Challenges**

The notion of "ASEAN centrality" has become a cornerstone of the organization's self-conception and external engagement. Centrality refers to ASEAN's role as the primary convener, agenda-setter, and normative anchor in Asia-Pacific multilateralism (Beeson, 2021). It reflects both recognition by external powers and ASEAN's internal commitment to maintain relevance amid changing geopolitical dynamics. Historically, ASEAN has leveraged its centrality to mediate between competing interests exemplified by its leadership in forums like the ARF, EAS, and ADMM-Plus, where rival powers such as the US, China, India, and Russia engage under ASEAN's auspices (Jones & Smith, 2007).

However, ASEAN centrality is increasingly under strain. Beeson (2021) notes that minilateral arrangements such as the Quad and AUKUS which exclude ASEAN and prioritize like-minded

security partnerships challenge the organization's convening power and threaten to marginalize its influence. These initiatives, driven by major powers' concerns over China's rise, reflect a shift toward more flexible, interest-based coalitions. ASEAN's consensus-based decision-making, while historically a source of cohesion, often limits its responsiveness to rapidly evolving security threats and geopolitical shifts (Haacke, 2019). This tension raises fundamental questions about ASEAN's capacity to sustain centrality in a multipolar era.

### **Great-Power Rivalry and ASEAN's Strategic Dilemmas**

The intensification of US-China rivalry in the post-2020 period has transformed the strategic environment in which ASEAN operates. The United States' Indo-Pacific Strategy and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) represent competing visions for regional order, forcing ASEAN to balance engagement with both powers while safeguarding its autonomy (Medeiros, 2019). As Narine (2019) observes, ASEAN's strategy of "hedging" simultaneously deepening economic ties with China while maintaining security relations with the United States reflects its attempt to avoid alignment and preserve strategic flexibility.

Yet, this balancing act is becoming more difficult. China's expansive maritime claims in the South China Sea, codified through its "nine-dash line," have triggered tensions with several ASEAN member states, notably Vietnam and the Philippines. The 2016 arbitral tribunal ruling, which invalidated China's claims, exposed divisions within ASEAN, as some members sought stronger collective responses while others prioritized economic engagement with Beijing (Thayer, 2017). Similarly, the US emphasis on "freedom of navigation" operations and its promotion of alliances and partnerships in the Indo-Pacific have placed pressure on ASEAN to articulate clearer positions on regional security issues (Storey, 2020).

The emergence of new minilateral groupings further complicates ASEAN's strategic landscape. The Quad, comprising the United States, Japan, India, and Australia, emphasizes a "free and open Indo-Pacific" and enhanced security cooperation. While not explicitly anti-China, its strategic intent is widely interpreted as counterbalancing Beijing's influence. AUKUS, a trilateral security pact among the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia, underscores a similar trend toward smaller, capability-driven coalitions (Medcalf, 2020). ASEAN's exclusion from these initiatives underscores the limitations of its consensus model and highlights the need for institutional adaptation if it is to remain relevant in the evolving order.

### **Economic Integration and Strategic Autonomy**

Beyond security, ASEAN's economic role is central to its middle power identity. As one of the world's most economically dynamic regions, ASEAN has pursued economic integration as both a developmental and strategic tool. The ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), established in 2015, aims to create a single market and production base, enhancing the region's competitiveness and attractiveness to foreign investment (Severino, 2010). Moreover, ASEAN's engagement in mega-regional trade agreements such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) reflects its ambition to shape the economic architecture of the Indo-Pacific (Petri & Plummer, 2020).

China's BRI has further deepened ASEAN's economic interdependence with Beijing, with infrastructure investments and connectivity projects proliferating across the region (Wang, 2021). At the same time, ASEAN continues to pursue economic ties with other partners, including Japan, India, the European Union, and the United States, in an effort to diversify dependencies and enhance strategic autonomy (Dent, 2016). This multidirectional economic diplomacy underscores ASEAN's effort to mitigate vulnerability to great-power pressures by embedding itself in a network of overlapping economic relationships.

However, economic integration also exposes ASEAN to external shocks and geopolitical leverage. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted supply chains, exposed inequalities, and heightened dependency on external demand (Ravenhill, 2021). Moreover, trade tensions between the United States and China have placed ASEAN in a difficult position, as member states seek to balance economic engagement with both powers without becoming entangled in strategic competition. These dynamics highlight the need for ASEAN to enhance internal resilience, strengthen economic governance, and pursue innovation-driven growth to sustain its strategic relevance.

### **Internal Cohesion and Institutional Capacity**

ASEAN's effectiveness as a middle power depends not only on its external strategies but also on its internal cohesion and institutional capacity. Diversity among member states in terms of political systems, economic development, and threat perceptions has long shaped ASEAN's decision-making. While consensus-based diplomacy has fostered unity, it has also constrained the organization's ability to respond decisively to crises (Jones & Smith, 2007). The divergent responses to the South China Sea disputes, the Myanmar crisis, and the US–China rivalry illustrate the challenges of forging common positions in a heterogeneous regional bloc (Weatherbee, 2020).

Institutional capacity is another critical factor. ASEAN's secretariat remains relatively weak compared to other regional organizations, limiting its ability to coordinate policies and implement decisions effectively (Nesadurai, 2008). Enhancing institutional resources, empowering the secretariat, and strengthening compliance mechanisms are essential for ASEAN to play a more proactive strategic role. Without such reforms, ASEAN risks being sidelined in shaping the regional order, reduced to a forum for dialogue rather than an engine of governance.

### **Normative Power and Strategic Identity**

ASEAN's enduring strength lies in its ability to shape norms and regional expectations. Concepts such as the "ASEAN Way," "centrality," and "community" have influenced the behavior of both member states and external powers, embedding principles of dialogue, inclusivity, and non-coercion in regional practices (Acharya, 2014). Even as new security arrangements emerge, many major powers continue to engage ASEAN-led platforms, recognizing their legitimacy and convening value (Haacke, 2019).

However, normative power alone may not suffice in the current strategic environment. Beeson and Stubbs (2012) argue that ASEAN must complement its normative influence with greater strategic agency—articulating clearer positions on regional issues, mediating conflicts proactively, and offering concrete policy initiatives. Developing a more assertive strategic identity would enable ASEAN to shape, rather than merely adapt to, the evolving multipolar order. This shift requires recalibrating the balance between neutrality and leadership, consensus and effectiveness.

### **Analytical Approach and Methodological Framework**

#### **Conceptual Foundations and Research Design**

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in interpretivist and constructivist approaches to international relations. The rationale for this choice lies in the nature of the research questions, which are concerned less with measuring variables and more with understanding how ASEAN as a collective middle power perceives, interprets, and responds to structural changes in the regional and global order. As the literature on middle power diplomacy emphasizes, agency is shaped not only by material capacities but also by identity, norms, and strategic choices (Cooper et al., 1993; Acharya, 2014). A qualitative methodology

allows for a nuanced exploration of these dimensions and their implications for ASEAN's evolving role in a multipolar Asia.

The research design is primarily exploratory and analytical. It aims to identify and explain patterns of continuity and change in ASEAN's strategic behavior in the post-2020 era. This period was deliberately chosen because it represents a transformative moment marked by three interrelated dynamics: the intensification of US–China rivalry, the global disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the emergence of new security and economic architectures. These developments have profoundly impacted ASEAN's external environment, compelling it to recalibrate its institutional mechanisms, diplomatic strategies, and economic policies. By focusing on this period, the study seeks to capture ASEAN's responses at a time when traditional approaches are being tested and new strategic realities are taking shape.

The study adopts a case-oriented rather than variable-oriented logic, focusing on ASEAN as a single, complex case of a regional organization functioning as a collective middle power. This enables a deeper understanding of how internal and external factors interact to shape ASEAN's agency. Comparative elements are incorporated by examining ASEAN's responses to multiple external initiatives such as the US Indo-Pacific Strategy, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and minilateral groupings like the Quad and AUKUS to reveal variations in strategic behavior across different issue areas.

#### **Data Sources and Selection Criteria**

The research relies on a combination of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include official ASEAN documents such as summit declarations, chairman's statements, and joint communiqués, as well as policy papers issued by ASEAN member states and external partners. These documents provide insights into ASEAN's official positions, strategic narratives, and evolving policy priorities. They also reveal how ASEAN articulates its principles such as centrality, neutrality, and consensus in response to external pressures and opportunities.

Secondary sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and policy analyses published by think tanks and international organizations. These sources provide theoretical context, historical background, and interpretive frameworks that inform the analysis of ASEAN's behavior. The selection of secondary literature prioritizes works published in the last decade, with particular emphasis on post-2020 scholarship that addresses the latest geopolitical and economic developments. Classic works on middle power theory, regionalism, and ASEAN studies are also included to anchor the analysis in established academic debates (Acharya, 2014; Beeson & Stubbs, 2012; Narine, 2019).

The inclusion criteria for both primary and secondary sources are guided by relevance, credibility, and scholarly rigor. Only sources that directly address ASEAN's institutional evolution, strategic behavior, or interactions with major powers are included. Official documents are sourced from ASEAN's website and member states' foreign ministries, while scholarly works are drawn from reputable academic databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, and Taylor & Francis. This ensures a robust evidentiary base and enhances the validity of the findings.

#### **Analytical Tools and Procedures**

The study employs thematic analysis as its primary analytical tool. This method involves systematically identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the context of this research, thematic analysis is used to trace recurring motifs in ASEAN's strategic discourse and institutional practices, such as references to "centrality," "neutrality," "community," and "inclusive regionalism." These themes are then

linked to broader theoretical constructs in middle power diplomacy and regional order formation.

The analysis proceeds in three stages. The first stage involves contextual mapping, situating ASEAN within the broader structural shifts of the post-2020 international system. This includes mapping the trajectories of US–China competition, the rise of new minilateral coalitions, and the evolving economic landscape of the Indo-Pacific. The second stage focuses on institutional responses, examining how ASEAN has adapted its mechanisms, policies, and partnerships in response to these shifts. The third stage explores strategic narratives, analyzing how ASEAN articulates its identity, principles, and objectives in a changing environment.

To enhance analytical depth, the study also employs process tracing—a method used to identify causal mechanisms within complex political phenomena (Beach & Pedersen, 2019). Process tracing is particularly useful for understanding how ASEAN’s strategic behavior evolves over time and in response to specific external stimuli. For instance, the study traces ASEAN’s reactions to key turning points such as the release of the US Indo-Pacific Strategy (2022), China’s expansion of the BRI, and the formation of AUKUS (2021). By linking these events to shifts in ASEAN’s policies and rhetoric, the analysis reveals how external pressures shape internal decision-making processes.

#### **Analytical Framework: Bridging Theory and Empirics**

A key strength of this study is its integration of theory and empirical evidence. Middle power theory provides the conceptual lens through which ASEAN’s behavior is analyzed, highlighting the ways in which regional organizations can exercise agency without great-power capabilities. Regionalism literature offers complementary insights into how norms, institutions, and collective identities shape regional order (Katzenstein, 2005; Acharya, 2014). These theoretical perspectives are not applied mechanically but rather used as heuristic tools to interpret empirical patterns in ASEAN’s behavior.

This theoretical grounding is crucial for understanding ASEAN’s dual role as both a product and a shaper of the multipolar order. On one hand, ASEAN’s strategies are conditioned by structural forces—the distribution of power, economic interdependence, and geopolitical rivalries. On the other hand, ASEAN actively shapes these structures through norm entrepreneurship, institution-building, and diplomatic engagement. The interaction between structure and agency—between external pressures and internal responses—lies at the heart of ASEAN’s middle power identity.

#### **Findings**

##### **1. ASEAN’s Strategic Resilience Amid Great Power Rivalry**

The results of this study indicate that ASEAN’s strategic behavior since 2020 reflects an adaptive and resilient approach to preserving its agency in an increasingly contested regional environment. Despite intensifying US–China competition and the emergence of minilateral coalitions, ASEAN has sought to maintain its centrality by reaffirming its role as a neutral convenor and norm entrepreneur. The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), first introduced in 2019 but operationalized more actively after 2020, illustrates this strategy. Rather than aligning explicitly with Washington’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific or Beijing’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), ASEAN articulated its own vision centered on inclusivity, openness, and dialogue (Acharya, 2021; Haacke, 2022).

This reflects ASEAN’s deep-rooted diplomatic culture—one that privileges consensus, non-interference, and incrementalism (Narine, 2019). Such norms allow ASEAN to navigate strategic rivalry without overtly choosing sides, preserving a degree of strategic autonomy despite external pressures. Evidence from summit declarations and joint statements shows that ASEAN

has consistently avoided language that endorses any major power's geopolitical framework while simultaneously expanding engagement with all sides. For instance, ASEAN's partnerships with both the United States and China were upgraded to "Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships" within a short span (2021–2022), signaling a deliberate strategy of dual engagement (Chachavalponpun, 2023).

Moreover, ASEAN has reinforced its institutional platforms notably the East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) as arenas for inclusive dialogue. These institutions enable ASEAN to shape the regional agenda and mitigate the destabilizing effects of major power rivalry. While their capacity to resolve disputes remains limited, they nonetheless reflect ASEAN's ongoing relevance as a hub of regional diplomacy (Beeson & Stubbs, 2012).

## 2. Managing Security Challenges: Hedging, Balancing, and Strategic Ambiguity

The findings reveal that ASEAN's security strategies post-2020 have become more nuanced, combining hedging with selective balancing and strategic ambiguity. Traditional neutrality alone is no longer sufficient in a context where the Indo-Pacific is increasingly militarized. ASEAN's security discourse now incorporates language emphasizing "rules-based order," "freedom of navigation," and "non-militarization" terms clearly aimed at addressing concerns over China's assertiveness in the South China Sea and the broader strategic contest (Poling & Cronin, 2022).

At the same time, ASEAN has avoided direct confrontation. Member states continue to diversify their security partnerships, signing defense cooperation agreements with multiple external actors, including Japan, Australia, and India. These partnerships provide strategic leverage without undermining ASEAN's collective stance. For example, Vietnam and Indonesia have deepened defense ties with Washington while simultaneously strengthening economic cooperation with Beijing classic hedging behavior (Laksmana, 2021).

ASEAN's engagement with emerging minilateral groupings illustrates another adaptive strategy. Although wary of initiatives like AUKUS and the Quad which some members fear could sideline ASEAN the organization has responded by strengthening its own security mechanisms and emphasizing "ASEAN centrality" in Indo-Pacific security architecture (Thuzar, 2022). The ADMM-Plus, in particular, has expanded practical cooperation on counterterrorism, humanitarian assistance, and maritime security, demonstrating ASEAN's capacity to remain relevant amid new coalitions.

However, the results also highlight significant internal divisions that constrain ASEAN's collective security posture. Cambodia and Laos, for example, have often aligned closely with Beijing, complicating consensus on South China Sea issues. Meanwhile, the Myanmar crisis following the 2021 coup has undermined ASEAN's credibility as a normative community. The Five-Point Consensus, intended as a roadmap for resolving the crisis, has seen limited progress, revealing ASEAN's institutional weaknesses when dealing with intra-regional security challenges (Haacke, 2022). These limitations underscore the tension between ASEAN's principles of non-interference and its aspirations for regional leadership.

## 3. Economic Integration as a Tool of Strategic Relevance

Economic integration remains ASEAN's most potent instrument for sustaining its centrality and influence. The results show that ASEAN has deepened its role as a hub of regional economic connectivity, leveraging trade and investment frameworks to enhance strategic resilience. The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), signed in 2020 and entering into force in 2022, stands as ASEAN's most significant achievement in this regard. As the world's largest



free trade agreement, RCEP binds ASEAN with China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand, enhancing its role as a convenor of economic cooperation (Petri & Plummer, 2020).

By anchoring both China and US allies within a shared economic framework, ASEAN positions itself as an indispensable economic partner for all sides, mitigating the risks of geopolitical polarization. This approach complements ASEAN's external balancing strategies by embedding major powers in mutually beneficial trade networks that ASEAN mediates.

In parallel, ASEAN continues to implement its internal integration agenda through the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC). Despite setbacks caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, AEC initiatives in digital trade, supply chain resilience, and sustainable infrastructure have accelerated since 2020. ASEAN's Digital Integration Framework Action Plan and initiatives on smart cities and green transition reflect a strategic shift toward future-oriented economic sectors (Severino & Menon, 2021). These initiatives not only strengthen intra-ASEAN economic ties but also enhance the bloc's attractiveness to external investors seeking stable and integrated markets.

The results also show ASEAN's increasing involvement in emerging economic initiatives such as the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) led by the United States. While participation levels vary across members, ASEAN's engagement indicates a pragmatic approach that maximizes economic opportunities without compromising strategic autonomy (Kimura & Chen, 2023). Such multi-layered economic diplomacy enhances ASEAN's bargaining power and reduces its vulnerability to external shocks.

#### 4. ASEAN Centrality Under Pressure: Erosion or Evolution?

A significant finding of this study is that ASEAN's much-cited "centrality" is undergoing a subtle transformation rather than outright erosion. While ASEAN no longer monopolizes regional agenda-setting as unilateral groups and great-power strategies increasingly shape the Indo-Pacific it continues to play a crucial role as a balancer, broker, and platform-builder. ASEAN's convening power remains evident in the sustained participation of major powers in ASEAN-led forums and the continued relevance of its diplomatic norms (Acharya, 2021).

Yet, the centrality narrative faces undeniable challenges. The rise of unilateralism reflects dissatisfaction with ASEAN's slow consensus-based processes. AUKUS and the Quad, for instance, bypass ASEAN-led structures in addressing strategic competition, highlighting the limits of ASEAN's influence over hard security issues (Medcalf, 2022). Furthermore, the Myanmar crisis and intra-ASEAN divisions have weakened the bloc's cohesion, raising questions about its effectiveness as a collective actor.

Despite these pressures, ASEAN's strategic adaptation demonstrates resilience. Rather than opposing unilateral initiatives, ASEAN has sought complementarity, engaging with these frameworks where possible and emphasizing inclusive dialogue where direct influence is limited. This adaptive behavior suggests that ASEAN's centrality is evolving from a dominant leadership role to a more networked, facilitative one—a shift consistent with its middle power identity (Beeson, 2023).

#### 5. Limitations, Emerging Trends, and Future Prospects

The findings also reveal key limitations and emerging trends that will shape ASEAN's future trajectory. Institutional constraints, especially the consensus principle, continue to impede decisive action on divisive issues. Additionally, disparities in member states' economic development and strategic orientations complicate collective responses to external pressures. These structural weaknesses risk undermining ASEAN's credibility if not addressed through institutional innovation and deeper policy coordination.

At the same time, emerging trends point to new opportunities for ASEAN to enhance its strategic relevance. The rapid growth of the digital economy, the global push for energy transition, and the reconfiguration of supply chains present avenues for ASEAN to reposition itself as a critical economic hub. Initiatives such as the ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA) and cooperation on green finance and renewable energy illustrate the bloc's proactive engagement with these trends (Kimura & Chen, 2023).

In security terms, ASEAN's growing collaboration on non-traditional threats such as cyber security, climate change, and maritime safety reflects a broadened understanding of regional stability that goes beyond traditional military concerns. This expanded agenda may offer ASEAN new relevance even as great powers compete over hard security domains.

### **Conclusion**

This study set out to examine ASEAN's evolving role as a collective middle power in a rapidly transforming Indo-Pacific order, with particular attention to the dual dimensions of security/geopolitics and economic integration. The results demonstrate that ASEAN is neither a passive bystander in the unfolding great power rivalry nor a powerless regional grouping overshadowed by external actors. Instead, ASEAN is actively reshaping its strategies, institutions, and partnerships to preserve its agency and relevance in an era defined by uncertainty and multipolarity.

One of the most significant findings of this research is that ASEAN's foundational principles consensus, non-interference, and inclusivity remain central to its diplomatic identity. However, these principles are now being applied in more flexible and adaptive ways. Through the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) and the reinforcement of ASEAN-led mechanisms like the East Asia Summit and ADMM-Plus, the organization continues to champion a vision of regional order based on dialogue and inclusivity. This strategic posture allows ASEAN to maintain a delicate balance between competing powers, engaging both the United States and China without aligning exclusively with either.

On the security front, ASEAN's responses have become more sophisticated, blending traditional neutrality with hedging, selective balancing, and strategic ambiguity. This reflects a deeper awareness of the shifting nature of regional security threats and the limitations of a purely diplomatic approach. Although internal divisions and challenges such as the Myanmar crisis and member states' divergent threat perceptions constrain ASEAN's effectiveness, its ongoing initiatives in maritime security, counterterrorism, and non-traditional security cooperation illustrate a capacity for adaptation and incremental progress.

Economically, ASEAN has emerged as a central node of regional connectivity and integration. Agreements like the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and ongoing initiatives under the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) have positioned the bloc at the heart of Asia's trade and investment networks. This economic centrality enhances ASEAN's strategic value, enabling it to influence the regional order not just through diplomacy but also through economic interdependence. By embedding major powers in shared economic frameworks, ASEAN mitigates the risks of polarization and strengthens its bargaining position.

The findings also highlight that ASEAN's concept of "centrality" is undergoing transformation. While its dominance as the sole driver of regional agenda-setting has been diluted by the rise of minilateral groupings and great power strategies, ASEAN continues to function as a broker, facilitator, and convenor roles that are increasingly valuable in a fragmented multipolar system. Its evolving form of centrality suggests that middle powers can remain influential by shaping the terms of interaction and building connective tissue between competing actors, rather than by imposing outcomes directly.

Looking ahead, ASEAN's continued relevance will depend on its ability to address internal weaknesses and innovate institutionally. Enhancing decision-making efficiency, deepening policy coordination, and building capacity in emerging domains such as digital governance, green transition, and cyber security will be essential. These steps will not only strengthen ASEAN's internal cohesion but also enhance its ability to respond to future geopolitical and economic disruptions.

Future research could explore ASEAN's evolving role in specific issue areas such as supply chain security, climate diplomacy, and digital governance, or examine how domestic political shifts within key member states influence collective decision-making. Another important avenue is to investigate how ASEAN's strategies intersect with the ambitions of other middle powers such as South Korea, Australia, and India in shaping a more pluralistic and inclusive regional order. In conclusion, ASEAN's experience demonstrates that middle powers are not static actors confined by structural constraints. They can innovate, adapt, and shape regional dynamics in meaningful ways. ASEAN's balancing of security imperatives and economic integration illustrates a pragmatic and resilient approach to navigating multipolarity one that underscores the enduring importance of middle powers in constructing a stable, inclusive, and cooperative Indo-Pacific order.

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