

# **The ASEAN Way In Practice: Achievements And Challenges In Maintaining Regional Cooperation And Stability**

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## **Abstract**

*This paper evaluates whether the ASEAN Way, characterized by informal consensus, non-interference, and gradual institutionalization, has successfully fostered regional cooperation and stability in Southeast Asia. The initial half of the paper analyzes the origins of the ASEAN, including its evolution from earlier initiatives, including the SEATO and ASA, as well as highlighting the geopolitical climate of the Cold War and the containment of communism as major drivers of its formation. The paper then proceeds to explore ASEAN's normative frameworks, notably the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN), and the principle of ASEAN centrality. The latter half of the paper contains case studies that illustrate both successes of the ASEAN Way, including Cambodia's integration and ASEAN's mediating role in the 2025 Thailand-Cambodia crisis, and failures such as the unresolved South China Sea disputes and Myanmar's 2021 coup. The findings suggest that while the ASEAN has effectively prevented large-scale interstate conflict, it remains limited in addressing internal crises and enforcing compliance.*

**Key Words:** ASEAN, ASEAN Way, Southeast Asia, regional cooperation, political stability

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## **I. Introduction**

Established through the Bangkok Declaration in 1967, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has since evolved from a loosely structured grouping of five states into a ten-member regional organization. As time has passed, ASEAN has become increasingly recognised as a central actor in Southeast Asian politics. However, what has really attracted attention and also become a grounds of debate amongst some is the distinct approach that ASEAN takes to diplomacy - what is known as the ASEAN Way, and prioritizes informality, non-interference, and consensus-based decision making.

While the ASEAN Way has been praised for creating an environment of peace and cooperation in a region historically prone to conflict, it has also been critiqued for its perceived inability to address political and security crises decisively. For example, the persistent tensions in the South China Sea (SCS) as well as domestic political upheavals within member states have raised questions regarding the long-term effectiveness of the association's approach. Accordingly, this research paper aims to answer the following question: **To what extent has the 'ASEAN Way' been successful in maintaining regional cooperation and stability in Southeast Asia?**

The paper argues that while the ASEAN Way has played an important role in enabling dialogue and a sense of regional identity, it has also limited ASEAN's ability to respond decisively to security challenges, and this has significant implications for regional cooperation and stability.

## **II. Background - ASEAN's Origins and Historical Development**

ASEAN's establishment in 1967 was a pivotal turning point in the trajectory of regional political cooperation in Southeast Asia. To understand the relevance of the association today it is vital to look back at its history and origin and know that the formation of it was not an isolated event, but instead a combination of regional insecurities, prior efforts as well as growing recognition of the need for collaboration in an era which was marked by Cold War rivalries, ideological fragmentation and economic vulnerability.

Elaborating further on the prior efforts, the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), of which Thailand and the Philippines were members, was established in 1954 under American influence and leadership (Britannica, 2023). SEATO aimed to contain communism through a NATO-style military alliance. However, the failure of this organization, evidenced by its disbandment in 1977, was a result of its lack of genuine regional support resulting from its reliance on Western strategic interests and overlooking of Southeast Asian diversity (Gentilucci, 2015). Indonesia, for instance, strongly opposed allowing foreign powers the ability to

influence or control security matters in the region and instead hoped for greater self-reliance. Adam Malik, Foreign Minister of Indonesia, articulated this view forcefully in 1974 by stating that “Regional problems, i.e., those having a direct bearing upon the region concerned, should be accepted as being of primary concern to that region itself. Mutual consultations and cooperation among the countries of the region in facing these problems may...lead to the point where the views of the region are accorded the primacy they deserve in the search for a solution” (Acharya, 2014).

Even the Association of Southeast Asia (ASA), formed in 1961 by Thailand, the Philippines, and Malaya, was an attempt to create a more regionally rooted forum for cooperation (Haas, 2023). Once again, however, its effectiveness was curtailed by its narrow membership and limited scope, combined with the tensions created by the Cold War and bilateral disputes. Finally, MAPHILINDO, a tripartite confederation of Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia, which was created in 1963 to promote Malay unity, was another failed attempt (V. de Viana, 2015). Its collapse was a result of the Indonesia-Malaysia Confrontation, driven by Sukarno’s opposition to the formation of Malaysia (Omar, 2008). Ultimately, all these failures exposed divides in the region and highlighted the need for a newer, politically neutral, and genuinely Southeast Asian-led platform.

Focusing on the geopolitical tensions and events occurring during the time, the Vietnam War, a proxy war within the wider Cold War context, and the ideological contest between the United States, China, and the Soviet Union had transformed Southeast Asia into a geopolitical flashpoint. The domino theory, i.e., the belief that if one state fell to communism, others would follow, drove the superpower involvement in the region, including the U.S. military intervention in Vietnam and support for anti-communist regimes (McDougall, 1999). The internal tensions among Southeast Asian nations further underscored the need for cooperation. As mentioned previously, the Indonesia-Malaysia confrontation in the early 1960s, as well as the Philippines’ claim to Sabah and ideological differences arising between regimes, all contributed to an atmosphere of mistrust (Beng, 2025). This significantly triggered a feeling of urgency among Southeast Asian leaders to form what would be considered a cohesive bloc that could successfully resist external interference and avoid becoming pawns in superpower rivalries.

Following years of instability, the formation of ASEAN was catalysed by Thai-led diplomatic efforts with the intent to heal regional tensions. Amidst peace talks with Indonesia in the mid-1960s, the Thai foreign minister, Thanat Khoman, proposed the idea of a new regional organisation which would be grounded in Southeast Asian ownership and non-alignment (Krishnamra, 2024). These early discussions, often referred to as “sports-shirt diplomacy”, as a result of their informal and amicable nature in Bang Saen, played a key role in bridging the ideological divide and laid the groundwork for the ASEAN signature consensus approach. Against the backdrop of Cold War rivalry and the Vietnam War spillovers, five foreign ministers, namely Adam Malik representing Indonesia, Narciso R. Ramos from the Philippines, Tun Abdul Razak from Malaysia, S Rajaratnam from Singapore, and Thanat Khoman from Thailand, met in Bangkok in August 1967 (ASEAN, 2021). It was here that they signed the ASEAN declaration, also commonly known as the Bangkok declaration, and this formally established what is now known as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). This foundational document articulated the goals of the association, which at that time entailed accelerating economic growth, promoting social and cultural development, and ensuring regional peace and stability. Most importantly, however, it committed members to the principles of mutual respect for sovereignty, non-interference in internal affairs, and alignment with the United Nations charter.

Albeit the primary driver of getting the original five members to gather was the political and security concerns, specifically the containment of communism (Teekah, 2019), the ASEAN declaration deliberately avoided defining the bloc as anti-communist or military aligned. This was an intentional choice as the framing then helped distinguish ASEAN from SEATO and also ensured broader regional legitimacy. Therefore, ASEAN was conceived as a non-confrontational, non-aligned organisation which was grounded in dialogue and mutual respect. Following this, ASEAN’s early years focused heavily on confidence-building rather than institutional depth. However, essential steps towards formalization were eventually taken in the 1970s. For instance, the first ASEAN summit held in Bali in 1976 was responsible for producing the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), which codified principles of peaceful dispute resolution, mutual respect, and non-interference (Teekah, 2019). These principles would eventually become ASEAN’s normative core and serve as a diplomatic foundation for later expansion and regional engagement.

The 1990s marked a significant phase of growth for the association. In particular, ASEAN expanded to include Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia following the resolution of Cambodia’s civil war and the normalisation of US-Vietnam relations (CFR, 2025). This successfully completed the vision of a 10-member regional bloc and asserted ASEAN’s role as a stabilising force in a post-Cold War Southeast Asia. In the years henceforth, institutional development continued with the establishment of the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) in 1992, the first collective effort to promote regional economic cooperation through a minilateral preferential trade agreement among ASEAN member states (Lee, 2023), as well as the Chiang Mai initiative in 2000, which

was a regional financial agreement formed in response to the 1997 Asian financial crisis (Chow, 2019). The adoption of the ASEAN charter in 2007 was another milestone whereby, for the first time, ASEAN acquired legal personality and formal structure around three key pillars, i.e., the ASEAN Political-Security Community, the ASEAN Economic Community, and the ASEAN Sociocultural Community. These pillars represented a maturing organisation that sought to balance sovereignty with integration and promote comprehensive regional cooperation.

Overall, ASEAN's formation and development have been greatly shaped by a blend of external pressures, internal reconciliation, and what may be described as a shared desire for regional autonomy and peace. While it did have modest beginnings, ASEAN has evolved into a central mechanism for political cooperation and stability in Southeast Asia and beyond.

### **III. The ASEAN Way - Normative Frameworks and Centrality in Regional Politics**

In critically analyzing the successes and challenges of the ASEAN in maintaining regional political cooperation, it is vital to shed light on the deeply rooted, distinctive diplomatic culture that is commonly referred to as the 'ASEAN Way'; the foundation of the association's political identity and institutional design. This concept is an encapsulation of the association's set of informal norms and procedures, which primarily emphasise non-interference, consensus-driven decision making, mutual respect, and non-confrontational diplomacy (Tekunan, 2014). Constructivism highlights how norms, ideas, and identities, rather than merely material interests, drive international cooperation (Theys, 2018). Therefore, as per the constructivist theory, ASEAN's norms are indicative of more than procedural habits; they are socially constructed values that shape state behaviour, cultivate a sense of collective identity, and define appropriate conduct among the Southeast Asian states (Jhuswanto, 2024).

Speaking to this, Amitav Acharya (2014), a well-known scholar of Southeast Asian regionalism, has described the ASEAN as a normative framework drawing on both modern inter-state principles as well as culture-specific practices which are unique to the region, including informality, non-adversarial negotiation, and consensus building. Acharya argues that the sociocultural norms are what have ultimately given ASEAN its distinctiveness and durability. As a result, over time, he says that they have developed a 'stickiness', i.e., a deep-rooted legitimacy which continues to influence the behaviour of ASEAN states and external partners alike. Similarly, Jürgen Haacke (2009) also defines the ASEAN as a "normative framework... in mediating disputes, guiding interactions and underpinning a process of identity construction". Additionally, it is worth mentioning that ASEAN's ability to maintain regional order by emphasising normative legitimacy over coercion resonates powerfully with the English School of international relations, as well, which conceptualises international society as a community of states that are governed by shared norms, rules, and institutions.

The foundational documents, such as the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) of 1976 and the earlier ZOPFAN declaration (Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality) in 1971, institutionalized ASEAN's core normative commitments. The texts reinforced a shared understanding between the nations that sovereignty, peaceful dispute resolution, and regional autonomy were crucial in guiding interstate behaviour. Such instruments have consequently laid the groundwork for ASEAN's collective diplomacy and have become touchstones in its engagement with member states as well as external actors.

Furthermore, in the ASEAN Charter of 2007, the concept of ASEAN centrality was formally institutionalized, mandating the maintenance of "the centrality and proactive role of ASEAN as the primary driving force in its relations and cooperation with its external partners in a regional architecture that is open, transparent, and inclusive" (ASEAN, 2012). This codification was a reflection of the recognition that ASEAN should serve as the architect of the regional order and function variously as a leader, conveyor, hub, and driver of progress. The idea gained traction after the bloc's expansion in the 1990s to include Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam, which prompted a need for a new framework for both intra-ASEAN and external relations (Yaacob, 2024). Over the years, ASEAN centrality has also served a more strategic narrative, which has been deployed to reinforce the association's legitimacy and preserve its autonomy amid great power rivalry. Ultimately, however, the success of ASEAN centrality is dependent on unity between member states.

### **IV. Successes of the ASEAN Way in Maintaining Regional Political Cooperation**

The normative frameworks have enabled the association to have some tangible successes in maintaining regional cooperation. For instance, ASEAN's engagement with Cambodia from the 1970s till their eventual accession in 1999 is a significant demonstration of this. Even though Cambodia had a prolonged civil war, multiple regime changes, and foreign interventions, ASEAN played a persistent diplomatic role in the country's reintegration into the regional order. While ASEAN initially respected Prince Sihanouk's neutrality during the Cold War, it refused to recognise the Khmer Republic regime after the 1970 coup and later also condemned the Vietnamese military occupation of Cambodia, issuing joint statements defending the country's sovereignty (Charadine, 2020). By the 1980s, ASEAN played a key role in facilitating the Coalition

Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK) and supported peace talks through the Jakarta Informal Meetings, which culminated in the 1991 Paris Peace Agreements (Sastrohandoyo, 2016). Following Cambodia's internal crisis in 1997, when Hun Sen ousted co-Prime Minister Ranariddh, ASEAN's non-interference principle was tested (Adams, 2007). Initially citing the norm as a reason to avoid direct involvement, ASEAN delayed Cambodia's admission, and under external pressure and recognising the fragility of the situation for the region, sent a Troika delegation to mediate the crisis (Jones, 2007). While many consider this a breach of ASEAN's usual hands-off stance (Nguyen, 2016), it may instead be viewed as 'principled flexibility' wherein the association adapted the non-interference norm without abandoning it altogether to safeguard regional credibility and stability. The eventual admission of Cambodia in April 1999, therefore, marked the culmination of years of norm-based engagement and quiet diplomacy, which reinforced ASEAN's role in guiding post-conflict integration while subtly evolving its consensus-based model of cooperation (Charadine, 2020).

More recently, the 2025 Thailand-Cambodia border conflict emerged when clashes in the Emerald Triangle undermined the ASEAN TAC, prompting the Malaysian Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim, the current ASEAN chairman, to call for resolution through the ASEAN way (Vu, 2025). As per Kao Kim Hourn, the secretary-general of ASEAN, the role of the association in this matter was to "keep it under control" and ensure a space for negotiations was created with swift mediation by Malaysia to prevent further escalation (Baharudin, 2025). This view and leadership led to a 13-point plan negotiated after talks were held in Kuala Lumpur, starting in July and running till the beginning of August in 2025. This plan secured an immediate ceasefire, prohibited further proactive actions, put a halt to troop reinforcements, and also established proper communication lines between the military leaders (Strangio, 2025). ASEAN also facilitated the deployment of interim observer teams, coordinated by Malaysia, to monitor the compliance of the states until a formal observer mission was launched. Moreover, the agreement also laid the grounds for commitments to comply with international humanitarian law to ensure humane treatment and repatriation of any captured soldiers and the dignified return of deceased individuals (Bedi, 2021). While domestic politics and mutual trust still remain obstacles to a lasting resolution, the coordinated diplomacy, consensus-based negotiation, and adherence to non-confrontational principles by the ASEAN were a successful demonstration of the capacity of the association to contain intra-regional conflicts and reinforced the bloc's role as a mediator capable of balancing respect for sovereignty with proactive conflict management.

## **V. Failures of the ASEAN Way in Advancing Regional Political Cooperation**

That being said, ASEAN has not only had successes in maintaining regional stability. Unfortunately, somewhere, the very principles that form the foundation of ASEAN have limited the organisation's capacity to respond decisively to certain high-stakes security crises. The South China Sea (SCS) dispute is a perfect demonstration of this limitation, whereby despite its centrality to regional security, the association has struggled to date to provide a unified political stance. When analysing the reason for this, it becomes evident that the principles of the ASEAN create weak obligations, and as a result, member interests and national stances diverge significantly. For instance, while claimants such as Vietnam and the Philippines take more assertive positions bolstering maritime defences (Strangio, 2024), Cambodia and Laos align closely with China due to their aid and investment ties (Pang, 2017), often blocking stronger ASEAN statements. Because ASEAN makes decisions by consensus, every member must agree. Therefore, such differences imply that consensus tends toward the lowest common denominator, which leads to outcomes such as the non-binding 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) and delaying progress on a binding Code of Conduct (COC) (Lin and Sothirak, 2025). The fragmentation created as a result of diverging national interests has raised many concerns over the erosion of ASEAN centrality. If the member states increasingly bypass the association's mechanisms in favor of bilateral and regional arrangements, ASEAN's role as a central conveying power in Asia-Pacific's security architecture will continue to weaken.

The coup that took place in Myanmar in 2021 also exposed the limitations of ASEAN and the ASEAN way in safeguarding regional peace and cooperation. In February of 2021, the National League for Democracy was overthrown by Myanmar's Military, known as Tatamadow (Sinha, 2021). Although this was a direct violation of ASEAN's Political Security Community's democratic principles, the association's norm of non-interference muted its response. While the bloc agreed on a five-point consensus (SPC), the lack of enforcement mechanisms meant that the junta was able to ignore commitments to end violence and engage in dialogue effectively, rendering the agreement symbolic (Saha, 2024). As a consequence of ASEAN's inaction, instead of a unified strategy, fragmentation of centrality was witnessed with unilateral initiatives taking the lead, including Thailand pursuing talks with the junta and rebel leaders, and Cambodia attempting to engage with Aung San Suu Kyi, only to be rebuffed (Teekah, 2019). Opportunities for inclusive dialogue were further undermined by ASEAN's refusal to engage directly with the pro-democracy National Unity Government or ethnic armed groups. This was perceived as legitimizing the coup. On the ground, the humanitarian cost has been staggering.

According to mid-2024 estimates, amid widespread violence in Myanmar, “over 2.5 million people have now been displaced internally in the country since the beginning of the coup, and over 100,000 people have been displaced into neighboring countries” (Yang and Corkery, 2024). Moreover, a third of the 55 million population needs humanitarian aid as of August 2024 (Teoh, 2024). This reflects the structural weaknesses of the ASEAN way, where consensus and sovereignty norms prevent decisive intervention even in a crisis that threatens regional stability.

Both instances discussed here serve as evidence of how, sometimes, ASEAN principles can end up enabling prolonged instability instead of fostering unity, eroding both the association's credibility and its capacity to act as a guarantor of peace in Southeast Asia.

## VI. Conclusion

The ASEAN Way has most definitely played a significant role in sustaining a relatively peaceful and cooperative regional order in Southeast Asia since the inception of the association in 1967. As analyzed in the paper, the success is evident in the avoidance of major interstate wars, the gradual integration of politically divided states such as Cambodia, and the capacity to mediate certain disputes, as demonstrated recently in the resolution achieved for the 2025 Thailand-Cambodia crisis. All these achievements reinforce the association's value as a confidence-building platform and a diplomatic space for dialogue even amongst states that have historically had animosity.

That being said, the ASEAN Way's structural limitations are also evident. The reluctance of the association to confront member states on sensitive domestic issues has hindered the effectiveness of responses to crises like the 2021 Myanmar coup. Furthermore, diverging national interests, especially when it comes to complex disputes like the South China Sea, have prevented ASEAN from presenting a unified and decisive stance, thereby limiting its strategic influence. While the principle of non-interference fosters trust, it often impedes collective action in situations where decisive intervention is necessary for regional stability.

Therefore, when it comes to answering the research question, this study concludes that the ASEAN way has been moderately successful, whereby it has shown effectiveness in preventing large-scale conflict and maintaining a baseline of cooperation, yet it has proven insufficient in enforcing compliance or addressing deeply divisive issues. Moving forward, to stay relevant in the ever-evolving geopolitical landscape, the ASEAN must balance its traditional approach with mechanisms that allow for timely, collective, and enforceable action when regional security is at stake.

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