

The Effectiveness of ASEAN Regional Cooperation in Resolving Territorial Disputes and Democratic Crises in Southeast Asia



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A B S T R A C T

This study examines the effectiveness of ASEAN regional cooperation in addressing territorial disputes and democratic crises within Southeast Asia. Utilizing a qualitative approach through library research, the analysis is based on a systematic review of ten selected scholarly articles relevant to ASEAN's conflict management, normative framework, and institutional behavior. The findings reveal that ASEAN's foundational principles—namely, non-interference, consensus-based decision-making, and informal diplomacy—play a dual role. While they foster regional unity and prevent inter-state conflict, they simultaneously hinder ASEAN's capacity to take assertive and timely actions in responding to internal political turmoil and complex geopolitical disputes. Notably, ASEAN's response to the Myanmar political crisis and the prolonged South China Sea territorial disputes illustrates its institutional limitations and the lack of robust enforcement mechanisms. The analysis, grounded in Constructivist regionalism and Regime Theory, underscores the gap between ASEAN's normative aspirations and its operational capabilities. ASEAN's emphasis on process over outcome, as well as the symbolic nature of its diplomacy, limits its impact in addressing democratic backsliding and sovereignty-related tensions. This study concludes that without strategic institutional reform, ASEAN risks declining regional relevance in the face of evolving political and security challenges. It recommends that future research explore comparative models of regional governance and consider reforms that strike a balance between state sovereignty and regional accountability. Strengthening ASEAN's institutional capacity is imperative if it is to remain a credible and effective actor in Southeast Asia's regional architecture.

1. Introduction

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has long been heralded as a cornerstone of regional stability, economic integration, and diplomatic engagement in Southeast Asia (Acharya, 2014). Since its inception in 1967, ASEAN has positioned itself as a neutral platform for dialogue and cooperation among its member states, especially in areas of security and political conflict resolution (Caballero-Anthony, 2005). However, the effectiveness of ASEAN in addressing sensitive issues such as territorial disputes and democratic crises remains contested and underexplored in scholarly literature (Emmers, 2010; Ba, 2009).

Despite numerous declarations and institutional frameworks, ASEAN's principle of non-interference often limits its capacity to mediate conflicts such as the South China Sea dispute and democratic regressions in Myanmar and Thailand (Jones & Smith, 2007; Thuzar, 2021). These limitations have raised critical questions about ASEAN's ability to act as a cohesive and responsive regional mechanism in the face of both traditional and non-traditional security challenges (Rüland, 2012). The recent military coup in Myanmar and escalating maritime tensions with China underscore the urgency to reassess ASEAN's institutional capabilities and normative commitments (Kurlantzick, 2021; Leifer, 1999).

Previous studies have largely focused on ASEAN's normative structure and its role in fostering regional dialogue, yet few have empirically assessed its effectiveness in resolving high-stakes conflicts or restoring democratic order among its member states (Haacke, 2003; Katsumata, 2004). Moreover, the literature often treats territorial disputes and democratic crises as separate analytical domains, without recognizing their interconnected implications for regional stability and ASEAN's legitimacy (Weatherbee, 2009). This reveals a significant research gap that this study intends to address.

The urgency of this research lies in the growing disillusionment with regional mechanisms that appear inert in the face of democratic backsliding and sovereignty disputes, particularly as these issues threaten to unravel decades of regional cooperation and trust-building (Dosch, 2015; Tan, 2021). As geopolitical competition intensifies in Southeast Asia, the credibility of ASEAN as a conflict resolution actor is increasingly under scrutiny (Ba, 2020). Failure to effectively manage these crises risks undermining the regional order and empowering extra-regional actors to fill the vacuum (Sukma, 2011).

This study builds upon previous works but introduces a novel analytical framework that jointly examines ASEAN's response to both territorial and democratic crises as intertwined dimensions of regional governance. It posits that ASEAN's institutional design and diplomatic culture may hinder rather than help in situations requiring decisive intervention and enforcement (Jetschke & Portela, 2012). The study further explores whether ASEAN's mechanisms — such as the ASEAN Charter, ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), and ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) — are sufficient to address current regional challenges.

The primary objective of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of ASEAN's regional cooperation in managing territorial disputes and democratic crises among its member states. By conducting a comparative analysis of key case studies — such as the South China Sea conflict and the Myanmar democratic crisis — the study seeks to identify institutional strengths, normative constraints, and political dynamics that shape ASEAN's conflict resolution capacity.

The expected contributions of this research are twofold: first, to provide a comprehensive understanding of ASEAN's current limitations and potential in managing multidimensional regional crises; and second, to offer policy recommendations for enhancing ASEAN's responsiveness and

coherence in dealing with future security and governance challenges in Southeast Asia.

Political and Security Cooperation

ASEAN regional cooperation in the realm of political and security affairs centers on the promotion of regional peace, stability, and conflict prevention. Guided by principles such as non-interference, peaceful dispute settlement, and consensus-based decision-making, ASEAN has established frameworks like the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) to institutionalize diplomatic norms and prevent open conflicts among member states. The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) further enhance dialogue with external partners and foster trust-building measures in the wider Asia-Pacific region. However, the lack of enforcement mechanisms often limits the organization's ability to respond decisively to pressing issues like maritime disputes or coups d'état.

Economic and Developmental Cooperation

Economically, ASEAN has made significant strides in fostering regional integration through the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), which aims to create a single market and production base with free flow of goods, services, investment, skilled labor, and capital. Initiatives such as the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) reflect ASEAN's role as a key player in promoting economic connectivity and competitiveness. Through developmental cooperation, ASEAN also addresses disparities among member states via programs like the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) and partnerships with dialogue partners such as the European Union, China, and Japan. These mechanisms help support inclusive growth and reduce economic gaps within the region.

Socio-Cultural and Humanitarian Cooperation

Beyond politics and economics, ASEAN also promotes cooperation in socio-cultural and

humanitarian fields. Through the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC), the organization works to strengthen shared regional identity, protect human rights, promote education, and coordinate disaster management. One prominent institution in this domain is the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR), though its mandate remains limited by ASEAN's non-interference norm. The organization also coordinates humanitarian efforts during natural disasters via the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre). These cooperative efforts aim to enhance social cohesion and resilience while fostering a sense of shared community among diverse Southeast Asian nations.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach with a literature-based study design to analyze the effectiveness of ASEAN regional cooperation in addressing territorial disputes and democratic crises in Southeast Asia. A qualitative method is considered appropriate for exploring complex political phenomena that are deeply embedded in historical, institutional, and normative contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By using a literature study, this research seeks to systematically examine academic publications, policy documents, regional treaties, ASEAN declarations, and official statements from ASEAN institutions and member states. This method enables a critical understanding of both formal mechanisms and informal diplomatic practices employed by ASEAN in handling regional challenges.

The sources of data for this study are primarily secondary in nature and include peer-reviewed journal articles, books, official ASEAN publications, reports from international organizations (e.g., UN, Human Rights Watch), and credible news media. The selection of sources is guided by their relevance, credibility, and contribution to the themes of regional cooperation, conflict resolution, and democratic governance. Data were gathered using a documentary research technique, which involves identifying, reviewing,



and interpreting key texts that provide insight into ASEAN's institutional responses to specific cases, such as the South China Sea dispute and the Myanmar democratic crisis (Bowen, 2009).

To analyze the collected data, this study employs qualitative content analysis, which allows for the systematic coding and interpretation of textual materials to identify patterns, themes, and meanings relevant to the research objectives (Schreier, 2012). The analysis was conducted in several stages: (1) organizing the data by thematic categories (e.g., institutional response, diplomatic engagement, legal mechanisms), (2) identifying similarities and contradictions across cases, and (3) drawing interpretive conclusions about ASEAN's effectiveness. Triangulation was used by comparing various types of sources (academic, institutional, and media-based) to enhance the validity and reliability of the findings. Through this methodological approach, the study aims to offer a

comprehensive and nuanced understanding of ASEAN's role in regional governance and conflict resolution.

3. Result and Discussion

The following table presents the key findings from a literature review conducted as part of this study. From an initial pool of scholarly works and policy documents, ten (10) academic articles were selected based on their relevance to the research themes of ASEAN regional cooperation, territorial disputes, and democratic crises. The selection criteria included publication in peer-reviewed journals, thematic focus on Southeast Asia, and analytical depth concerning ASEAN's institutional responses and limitations. These studies form the empirical and theoretical foundation for assessing ASEAN's effectiveness in regional conflict resolution and democratic governance.

Table 1. Summary of Selected Literature on ASEAN Regional Cooperation

No	Author & Year	Title	Findings
1	Acharya (2014)	<i>Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia</i>	ASEAN fosters dialogue and peace but lacks enforcement power.
2	Emmers (2010)	<i>ASEAN and the Securitization of Transnational Crime</i>	ASEAN has symbolic influence but weak practical tools in security matters.
3	Haacke (2003)	<i>ASEAN's Diplomatic and Security Culture</i>	ASEAN's conflict management relies on informal mechanisms.
4	Ba (2020)	<i>ASEAN Centrality Imperiled?</i>	ASEAN faces internal fragmentation and external pressures.
5	Katsumata (2004)	<i>Why is ASEAN Diplomatic and Security Culture?</i>	ASEAN's legitimacy rests on normative consensus rather than intervention.
6	Thuzar (2021)	<i>ASEAN's Myanmar Dilemma</i>	ASEAN lacks mechanisms to enforce democratic norms in member states.
7	Rüland (2012)	<i>Limits of Democratizing Regional Organizations in Asia</i>	AICHR is institutionally weak and politically constrained.
8	Jones & Smith (2007)	<i>Making Process, Not Progress</i>	ASEAN prioritizes process and unity over tangible outcomes.
9	Dosch (2015)	<i>Sovereignty Rules: Human Security in Southeast Asia</i>	Non-interference principle undermines ASEAN's ability to act on domestic democratic failures.
10	Jetschke & Portela (2012)	<i>ASEAN: From Regional Organization to Security Community?</i>	ASEAN has not evolved into a robust regional security community.

Interpretasi Data Hasil Temuan Literatur Review

The review of the ten selected articles reveals a consistent pattern regarding ASEAN's normative framework, which prioritizes consensus, non-interference, and dialogue over coercive or interventionist measures. As emphasized by Acharya (2014), ASEAN's diplomatic culture plays a key role in maintaining peace and avoiding open conflict, yet this same culture significantly constrains the organization's ability to respond decisively to complex political and territorial disputes. The reliance on informal mechanisms and "quiet diplomacy," while effective in preserving unity, has often translated into inaction during critical regional crises.

A central theme across the literature is ASEAN's institutional limitation in enforcing democratic norms among its member states. Works by Thuzar (2021) and Rüländ (2012) demonstrate that ASEAN lacks robust enforcement mechanisms and tends to avoid direct engagement with domestic political issues, even when those issues threaten regional stability. The Myanmar crisis stands out as a clear example, where ASEAN's response has been widely criticized as delayed, inconsistent, and ineffective. This suggests a fundamental structural weakness when ASEAN is confronted with democratic backsliding within its own community.

The reviewed literature also highlights a persistent gap between ASEAN's ambitions and its capabilities. Authors such as Jones and Smith (2007) and Ba (2020) argue that ASEAN has often prioritized process—such as issuing statements and holding meetings—over producing tangible outcomes in resolving disputes. The emphasis on "ASEAN Centrality" and maintaining a united front has, paradoxically, contributed to its inability to act swiftly or decisively in high-stakes situations. This process-oriented approach has raised questions about the organization's relevance in rapidly evolving geopolitical contexts.

In terms of territorial disputes, particularly those in the South China Sea, ASEAN's limited influence has been repeatedly exposed. Emmers (2010) and Jetschke & Portela (2012) note that while ASEAN provides a valuable platform for dialogue, it has not succeeded in creating binding agreements or deterring aggressive actions by external actors. This has reinforced perceptions of ASEAN as a passive observer rather than an active mediator in security issues that affect its collective interests. These findings support the argument that ASEAN's conflict resolution mechanisms are under-institutionalized and lack strategic coherence.

The literature further suggests that ASEAN's strength lies in its symbolic and normative power rather than in direct political influence. Authors like Katsumata (2004) and Haacke (2003) explain that ASEAN's diplomatic culture emphasizes face-saving, mutual respect, and non-confrontation, which has helped prevent escalation but has also limited transformative political outcomes. This cultural dimension is both a strength and a liability: it fosters trust among member states but hinders ASEAN's ability to tackle contentious issues that demand firm action.

In conclusion, the literature points to a clear disconnect between ASEAN's stated goals of promoting peace, democracy, and regional stability, and its operational capacity to fulfill those goals. While ASEAN remains a vital regional institution with symbolic importance, its effectiveness in resolving territorial disputes and democratic crises is compromised by structural constraints, political diversity, and adherence to non-intervention. This interpretation suggests a pressing need for institutional reform and a reevaluation of ASEAN's principles if it is to remain credible and effective in the face of contemporary challenges.

Discussion and Analysis

The findings of this study reveal a persistent gap between the normative aspirations of ASEAN and its actual performance in managing regional conflicts, particularly territorial disputes and democratic

breakdowns. Despite ASEAN's long-standing commitment to regional peace, stability, and democratic values, its operational mechanisms remain weak and fragmented. The reviewed literature collectively points to ASEAN's dependence on informal diplomacy and the principle of non-interference, which significantly undermines its effectiveness when decisive action is needed.

This limitation is most clearly illustrated in the ongoing crisis in Myanmar following the 2021 military coup. ASEAN's initial response, particularly the Five-Point Consensus, was met with international skepticism due to its vague commitments and lack of enforcement measures. Although ASEAN appointed a special envoy and called for dialogue, the Myanmar military junta has largely ignored regional efforts. This reflects what Rüländ (2012) described as the "illusion of democratization" within ASEAN, where regional norms are promoted rhetorically but not institutionally enforced.

From a theoretical perspective, the effectiveness of ASEAN can be examined through the lens of Constructivist regionalism, which emphasizes shared norms, identity, and social interactions over material power. As Acharya (2014) notes, ASEAN's strength lies in its identity as a "security community," where war among member states is considered unlikely due to deepening trust and diplomatic traditions. However, this same identity framework becomes problematic when intra-state conflicts and democratic regressions arise, as ASEAN lacks both the legal mandate and political will to confront such issues.

Furthermore, Regime Theory highlights how regional institutions can influence state behavior through rules and norms. However, for regimes to be effective, they must possess enforcement mechanisms and clear expectations. The ASEAN Charter, while outlining democratic principles, contains no punitive provisions for violations. This renders ASEAN a "soft regime," unable to condition member state behavior effectively. The Myanmar case, once again, exemplifies this theoretical weakness, as ASEAN's

normative regime has failed to deter authoritarian backsliding.

The situation in the South China Sea similarly reflects ASEAN's ineffectiveness in managing territorial disputes. Despite its role in facilitating the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC), ASEAN has been unable to finalize the long-awaited Code of Conduct (COC) with China. Meanwhile, unilateral actions by China—including militarization of disputed areas—continue unabated, with ASEAN countries like the Philippines and Vietnam increasingly turning to external powers such as the United States for security guarantees. This reinforces Emmers' (2010) observation that ASEAN's institutional tools are largely symbolic and reactive.

In light of these observations, ASEAN appears to be at a strategic crossroads. Its traditional norms—while effective in fostering regional unity—are insufficient for addressing the complex security and governance challenges of the 21st century. The organization's reluctance to revise its foundational principles, particularly non-interference and consensus-based decision-making, restricts its ability to evolve into a proactive regional actor. Ba's (2020) critique of "ASEAN centrality under threat" resonates strongly in this context, as member states increasingly pursue bilateral or minilateral arrangements to protect their interests.

The literature also highlights the inherent tension between sovereignty and regionalism in Southeast Asia. As Dosch (2015) and Jones & Smith (2007) argue, ASEAN's preference for process over outcomes reflects the deep-rooted sensitivities of its members regarding sovereignty. While this ensures respect among diverse political systems, it prevents ASEAN from functioning as a normative community capable of upholding democratic standards. The establishment of the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) was a positive step, but its limited mandate and lack of

enforcement capacity reflect the broader structural inertia within ASEAN.

As the author of this study, I argue that ASEAN must confront the dilemma of either reforming its institutional design or continuing its symbolic diplomacy at the cost of diminishing relevance. The current international environment—marked by rising geopolitical competition, democratic recession, and increasing intra-state conflicts—demands a more assertive and capable regional organization. ASEAN's continued inaction in cases like Myanmar risks eroding public trust and international credibility, potentially undermining its role as a regional anchor of peace and order.

Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that ASEAN's consensual approach has historically prevented interstate conflict and promoted economic integration, as seen through initiatives like the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC). Thus, rather than abandoning its norms, ASEAN should seek to complement them with new mechanisms, such as majority-based decision-making in specific issue areas (e.g., human rights or crisis response), greater empowerment of the ASEAN Secretariat, and clearer enforcement frameworks within its charters and declarations.

In conclusion, the literature and present-day realities converge to suggest that while ASEAN has played a valuable role in regional stability, its current structure and normative framework limit its capacity to effectively manage territorial disputes and democratic crises. The path forward requires strategic reform that balances respect for sovereignty with a stronger commitment to collective governance and accountability. Without such reforms, ASEAN risks becoming increasingly irrelevant in addressing the pressing challenges faced by Southeast Asia today.

4. Conclusion

This study concludes that while ASEAN has played a critical role in maintaining regional peace and fostering diplomatic engagement among Southeast

Asian nations, its overall effectiveness in resolving territorial disputes and democratic crises remains limited. The literature demonstrates that ASEAN's guiding principles—especially non-interference and consensus-based decision-making—have created a normative culture that prioritizes stability over substantive political action. Although these principles have prevented open conflict among member states, they have also constrained ASEAN's institutional ability to respond to challenges such as China's maritime assertiveness in the South China Sea and the political repression in Myanmar.

The findings further highlight that ASEAN's conflict management is often symbolic, relying on declarations and dialogues without the necessary enforcement mechanisms to ensure compliance. This gap between aspiration and capacity has led to growing skepticism, both regionally and internationally, about ASEAN's credibility and centrality in addressing pressing political and security challenges. Theoretical perspectives such as Constructivist regionalism and Regime Theory suggest that ASEAN's emphasis on norms must be complemented by institutional reforms if it is to evolve into a more effective and proactive regional organization.

Future research is recommended to explore comparative regional models, such as the African Union or the European Union, to identify potential institutional innovations that could be adapted to ASEAN's unique political and cultural context. Additionally, further empirical investigation into specific case studies—such as ASEAN's mediation efforts in the South China Sea or its engagement with the Myanmar crisis—would deepen our understanding of the organization's internal dynamics and external pressures. A more interdisciplinary approach, combining legal, political, and sociological analysis, may also provide richer insights into the pathways for enhancing ASEAN's effectiveness in regional governance.

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