



THE ROLES OF ASEAN IN BUILDING A STRATEGIC EQUILIBRIUM WITH MAJOR POWERS TO STRENGTHEN SUSTAINABLE STABILITY, AND MARITIME SECURITY IN THE REGION

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Abstract. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was founded in 1967 with a commitment to fostering socio-economic development and regional stability in Southeast Asia. Over the years, ASEAN has maintained its dedication to peace, stability, and mutual development amidst a changing geopolitical landscape. This article explores ASEAN's pivotal role in establishing a strategic equilibrium with major global powers to ensure sustainable stability and maritime security in the Indo-Pacific region. To analyze ASEAN's role, the research methodology section explains the qualitative research approach used in this study. The primary objective of this research is to elucidate the strategies and mechanisms ASEAN employs to strike a balance with major powers. The discussion section delves into the strategic environment and challenges in Southeast Asia, covering maritime security, environmental vulnerabilities, and issues like drug trafficking and cybercrime. ASEAN's geopolitics are examined, highlighting the region's economic growth and its role as a focal point for strategic rivalry among major global powers. The Indo-Pacific dynamics, particularly ASEAN-China economic relations, and the Belt and Road Initiative, are discussed, emphasizing their implications for maritime security. The conclusion that can be drawn from this paper is ASEAN's role in building strategic balance with major countries to strengthen sustainable stability and maritime security in the region.

Keywords: ASEAN, Sustainable, Maritime, Major Powers

Abstrak. *Perhimpunan Bangsa-Bangsa Asia Tenggara atau The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) didirikan pada tahun 1967 dengan komitmen untuk mendorong pembangunan sosial-ekonomi dan stabilitas regional di Asia Tenggara. Selama bertahun-tahun, ASEAN telah mempertahankan dedikasinya terhadap perdamaian, stabilitas, dan pembangunan bersama di tengah perubahan lanskap geopolitik. Artikel ini mengeksplorasi peran penting ASEAN dalam membangun keseimbangan strategis dengan kekuatan global utama untuk menjamin stabilitas berkelanjutan dan keamanan maritim di kawasan Indo-*



Pasifik. Untuk menganalisis peran ASEAN, pada bagian metodologi penelitian dijelaskan pendekatan penelitian kualitatif yang digunakan dalam penelitian ini. Tujuan utama dari penelitian ini adalah untuk menjelaskan strategi dan mekanisme yang diterapkan ASEAN

untuk mencapai keseimbangan dengan negara-negara besar. Bagian diskusi menggali lingkungan strategis dan tantangan di Asia Tenggara, yang mencakup keamanan maritim, kerentanan lingkungan, dan isu-isu seperti perdagangan narkoba dan kejahatan dunia maya. Geopolitik ASEAN dikaji dengan menyoroti pertumbuhan ekonomi kawasan dan perannya sebagai titik fokus persaingan strategis di antara negara-negara besar dunia. Dinamika Indo-Pasifik, khususnya hubungan ekonomi ASEAN-Tiongkok, dan Inisiatif Satu Sabuk Satu Jalan (Belt and Road Initiative) dibahas, dengan menekankan implikasinya terhadap keamanan maritim. Kesimpulan yang dapat diambil dari tulisan ini adalah peran ASEAN dalam membangun keseimbangan strategis dengan negara-negara besar untuk memperkuat stabilitas berkelanjutan dan keamanan maritim di kawasan.

Kata Kunci: ASEAN, Berkelanjutan, Maritim, Kekuatan Besar

1. Introduction

The inception of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967 was a significant milestone in regional cooperation, with the primary objectives of fostering socio-economic development and maintaining a stable and peaceful atmosphere in Southeast Asia. ASEAN has served as a prominent symbol of regional solidarity and collaboration. Originating in the Cold War era, its fundamental principles were based on promoting economic cooperation, cultural interchange, and guaranteeing regional safety (Jones & Smith, 2017; 215). Although the geopolitical situation has undergone significant changes since the 1960s, the fundamental objectives of ASEAN, namely peace, stability, and mutual development, have remained unwavering.

In the context of the continuously changing geopolitical landscape, maritime security and regional stability are crucial topics of concern in the 21st century. The marine realm, especially in the Southeast Asian region, is a complex network of commercial routes, valuable resources, and strategically important narrow passages. The marine dynamics of the region are inevitably shaped by major nations and their strategic



goals. ASEAN's significance is crucial in managing these power dynamics and establishing a well-balanced strategic equilibrium with key global powers. This equilibrium is not merely a geopolitical ploy, but rather an essential requirement to provide enduring stability, marine security, and harmonious cohabitation among nations in the Indo-Pacific region.

Consequently, its importance goes beyond local factors, attracting attention from significant international forces. The South China Sea has become a site of conflict, with disputes over territory, battles over resources, and rivalries in strategic interests coming together (Buszynski, 2015; 48). ASEAN's objective is to safeguard the sovereignty of its member states and promote peaceful resolutions through dialogue-driven initiatives.

The presence of major powers, with their strong naval capabilities and strategic interests, presents both advantages and difficulties for the region. Their existence has the potential to stimulate economic expansion, foster technical progress, and facilitate the construction of infrastructure. Nevertheless, there is a potential danger of the region becoming a stage for power struggles and strategic competition. ASEAN, with its impartiality and influential diplomacy, can act as a mediator and equilibrium maintainer, guaranteeing that the concerns of smaller nations are not overwhelmed and that regional stability is upheld (Capie, 2014; 92).

The evolution of ASEAN from its early stages to its present position in the global environment of the 21st century highlights its ability to adjust and endure. The admirable aspect of this is its dedication to promoting regional cohesion, guaranteeing safety at sea, and effectively managing the intricacies of major power dynamics. Given the increasing complexity of maritime concerns, the role of ASEAN in establishing strategic balances, facilitating discussions, and advocating for peaceful solutions is of utmost importance. This undertaking is filled with difficulties, but it has the potential to create a peaceful and stable Indo-Pacific region (Severino, 2006; 153). This study explores the various responsibilities of ASEAN in engaging with major countries, to



create a harmonious maritime environment and a strong regional structure (Acharya, 2013; 65).

2. Research Methodology

To understand the intricate roles of ASEAN in building a strategic equilibrium with major global powers and its implications for sustainable stability and maritime security in the region, this study employs a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research offers depth and detail, allowing for a nuanced exploration of the socio-political dynamics, intentions, perceptions, and behaviors of ASEAN member states vis-a-vis major powers.

Primary and secondary data sources are employed to ensure comprehensiveness and depth. The main sources include interviews and in-depth discussions with policymakers, diplomats, defense experts, and representatives of ASEAN member countries who were present online at Nadi activities in Bangkok, Thailand. These interviews aim to garner insights into ASEAN's strategic intents, its diplomatic maneuvers, and its perceptions of major powers in relation to regional stability and maritime security. Additionally, observations from regional summits, conferences, and bilateral and multilateral meetings serve as valuable firsthand information. Secondary sources encompass a review of relevant literature, including scholarly articles, policy documents, official ASEAN communications, and reports from think tanks. These sources provide a theoretical and historical backdrop against which contemporary developments are analyzed.

The primary objective of this research is to elucidate the strategies and mechanisms ASEAN employs to strike a balance with major powers. This includes understanding ASEAN's collective and individual member state's aspirations, challenges, and strategies in negotiating their positions with major powers. A secondary objective is to comprehend how these dynamics translate into sustainable regional stability, especially in the domain of maritime security, given the region's significance in global trade and potential geopolitical flashpoints.



The data gathered from primary and secondary sources undergo thematic analysis. This involves identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns or "themes" within the collected data. Given the intricate nature of geopolitical dynamics, a constructivist grounded theory approach is adopted. This ensures that the analysis remains firmly rooted in the data, enabling the emergence of nuanced insights and conceptual understandings. The analysis also involves cross-referencing findings from different data sources, ensuring triangulation and thereby enhancing the validity of the conclusions drawn.

By integrating insights from diverse sources and leveraging a thorough qualitative approach, this study aims to offer a holistic understanding of ASEAN's strategic equilibrium endeavors with major powers and their implications for regional stability and maritime security.

3. Discussion

a. Strategic Environment and Challenges in Southeast Asia: A Defense and Security Perspective

The region of Southeast Asia, characterized by its complex network of sea connections, abundant natural scenery, and rapidly advancing digital society, poses a distinctive set of security obstacles. Foremost, the prominent problems are maritime security and environmental vulnerability. The region, intersected by some of the most heavily trafficked shipping routes globally, is extremely vulnerable to ecological catastrophes. The combination of escalating sea levels and more frequent occurrences of severe weather events poses a significant threat to coastal residents, essential infrastructure, and marine species. The environmental vulnerabilities mentioned intensify the already present marine security risks, such as piracy and illicit fishing, and have the capacity to disturb the strategic equilibrium in the region (Smith, 2015; 78).

Drug trafficking further complicates the region's security framework. Southeast Asia has emerged as a prominent center in the worldwide drug trafficking network. The manufacture and trafficking of synthetic narcotics, particularly methamphetamine,



have significantly increased in the Mekong region. The illicit drug trade not only subverts social order but also funds additional criminal endeavors, exacerbating regional instability (Lee, 2018; 105).

The greater challenge of the maritime environment is closely interconnected with the maritime world. Marine ecosystems have been significantly damaged by organized criminal activities, such as the illegal mining of marine resources and the disposal of garbage into oceans. This deterioration poses a significant risk to the livelihoods of millions of people and disrupts the marine food chain. The issues of land-based pollutants, illicit mangrove logging, and overfishing exacerbate these challenges, requiring a comprehensive regional approach (Watson, 2017; 63).

As digital connectivity in Southeast Asia grows, the threat of cybercrime becomes more prominent. Nation-backed cyber assaults, organized criminal syndicate data breaches, and digital espionage pose a significant risk to both national security and economic stability. The increasing dependence of crucial infrastructure, such as ports and shipping operations, on digital systems has raised significant concerns about the possible effects of cyberattacks (Nguyen, 2019; 94).

b. ASEAN Geopolitics: A Nexus of Opportunity and Challenge:

Southeast Asia, where the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is located, continues to be one of the most vibrant regions in the world, with a long history of sustained economic expansion. The region's growth is expected to persist in the foreseeable future due to its plentiful natural resources, advantageous geographical position, and the rapid expansion of its middle class (Chowdhury, 2018; 27). Nevertheless, ASEAN encompasses more than just an economic entity. The geopolitical importance of Southeast Asia extends beyond its borders, as it becomes a focal point of strategic rivalry among global superpowers. The stability and choices of ASEAN have significant ramifications not only for its member nations but also for international players, underscoring the region's significance on the global platform (Rajaratnam, 2020; 114).



The maritime domain plays a crucial role in the geopolitical processes. ASEAN is located in a strategic position along major maritime trade routes, such as the South China Sea and the Straits of Malacca, which are crucial for the global economy. These seas hold great importance for major powers such as China and the United States due to their substantial commerce volumes and strategic naval interests (Smith & Lee, 2019; 78). Nevertheless, alongside the expansion of the economy and the pursuit of strategic objectives, a multitude of obstacles arise. The region is seeing changes in geopolitical dynamics, which bring both opportunities and problems. An example of a difficulty is the increase in transnational criminal activity, ranging from piracy to illicit commerce, that poses a threat to the safety and security of the marine domain in the region.

Furthermore, although ASEAN has achieved notable progress in promoting regional collaboration, there is still potential for enhancement, particularly in the area of maritime security. The current framework for marine collaboration, which includes ASEAN member states and external participants, is insufficiently robust to successfully tackle the changing issues (Nguyen, 2021; 144).

c. Indo-Pacific Dynamics: ASEAN-China Economic Relations and the Rise of the Belt and Road Initiative

The Indo-Pacific, in recent years, has emerged as a dynamic geopolitical and geoeconomic center, marked by intricate power dynamics, economic interdependence, and strategic competition. By 2023, China's ever-expanding economic influence in the region has manifested itself in its position as the primary trading partner for all ASEAN countries. This economic rapport between China and ASEAN is further underscored by the fact that for China, ASEAN stands as its second-largest trading partner, right after the European Union (Jones & Smith, 2022; 112).

China's support for ASEAN's centrality in regional architecture signifies the strategic importance Beijing attaches to this regional bloc. Both sides have managed to craft a comprehensive framework for cooperation, highlighting the convergence of interests



and the mutual desire for a stable regional order (Wang, 2023; 45). One of the most ambitious initiatives underscoring this cooperation is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). BRI promises transformative opportunities for ASEAN nations, ranging from infrastructural development, and technological advancements, to human resource capacity building (Chen, 2022; 90).

Strategically, the region encompasses significant maritime trade and transportation corridors. These maritime routes are not just economic lifelines but are also laden with strategic significance. Thus, maritime security remains paramount to ensuring regional stability and facilitating smooth economic transactions (Lee, 2022; 78). In this evolving landscape, both the US and China are engaged in a relentless pursuit of technological and cybersecurity supremacy, understanding that the future of geostrategic advantage lies in the digital realm (Nguyen, 2023; 115).

However, the region's rapid economic growth and industrialization have given rise to environmental challenges, notably pollution from industrial activities, domestic waste, and particularly, plastic waste disposal. Addressing these environmental concerns is crucial for the sustainable growth and well-being of the region's populace (Santoso, 2023; 60).

d. Recommendations for China - ASEAN Cooperation

In an era defined by intricate geopolitical challenges, the confluence of China-ASEAN collaboration has emerged as a linchpin in forging pathways to sustainable stability and maritime security within the Indo-Pacific realm. These two major players, driven by intertwined economic narratives and shared regional aspirations, are navigating the complex terrains of climate change, cyber threats, and maritime exigencies. As climate change casts an ever-lengthening shadow over the region, joint endeavors in policy harmonization, renewable energy adoption, and resilience building underscore their commitment to environmental stewardship. Parallely, in the digital domain, a strengthened partnership reflects the mutual objective to fortify cyber defenses, ensuring the integrity and security of critical digital infrastructures. Anchoring these



initiatives is a shared vision for maritime security, as both entities aim to craft a seascape characterized by peace, cooperation, and rule-based order, acknowledging the maritime domain's centrality to regional prosperity and stability.

1) China-ASEAN Cooperation in Overcoming Climate Change

In the face of increasing difficulties caused by climate change, China and ASEAN have together undertaken a deliberate effort to navigate the tumultuous effects of environmental upheavals. Both regions, connected by their geographical proximity and common economic goals, acknowledge the need to collaborate to address the harmful consequences of global warming. An essential element of this collaborative architecture entails optimizing coordination mechanisms to guarantee the efficient execution of climate-responsive strategies. These coordinated efforts are strengthened by promoting the growth and use of renewable energy sources, offering a two-fold answer to both energy security and carbon reduction. Given the vulnerability of the ASEAN region to climate-related challenges, collaborative efforts have been initiated to strengthen climate resilience and adaptation methods, ensuring that communities are well-prepared to confront future climatic uncertainties. Both groups are collaborating to build financial structures that favor climate-centric projects, aiming to ensure long-lasting and significant interventions. In addition to policy and infrastructure, China and ASEAN prioritize the development of an educated population. They aggressively promote public awareness and cultivate a sense of collective responsibility through focused communication initiatives that highlight the widespread effects of climate change.

2) China - ASEAN cooperation in the field of enhancing Cyber Security

China and ASEAN states have started various collaborations to strengthen cyber security measures in the area, recognizing the growing digital world and its associated vulnerabilities. These nations acknowledge the utmost importance of a secure digital environment for socioeconomic progress and stability. They emphasize the need to establish and follow rules and standards of behavior in cyberspace. These rules not



only govern both state and non-state actors but also foster a feeling of shared accountability. A crucial aspect of this collaboration is the implementation of conversation platforms, which enable member states to participate in transparent and productive discussions regarding new cyber dangers, issues, and optimal approaches. China actively supports ASEAN countries in strengthening their cyber defense capabilities, thereby contributing to a strong regional cyber security framework, thanks to its advanced technological expertise. Simultaneously, China and ASEAN are intensifying their efforts to strengthen legal mechanisms by developing strict laws and regulations to prevent and deal with cyber crimes. This legal fortification is enhanced by promoting collaborations between the public and commercial sectors, using the innovative capabilities of private companies to boost cyber security through state-of-the-art research and technology progress. China and ASEAN are conducting collaborative cyber security exercises to assess and refine their collective reaction mechanisms by mimicking actual cyber threats. These exercises are crucial for ensuring readiness and improving methods to combat the always-changing cyber threats.

3) Maritime Security

In the ever-evolving geopolitical landscape of the Indo-Pacific region, China and ASEAN stand at a pivotal juncture to collaboratively enhance maritime security, ensuring the stability and prosperity of the region. At the heart of this synergy lies the strategic objective of both entities to safeguard their intertwined economic and security interests. Recognizing the vast expanse and diversity of challenges in the maritime domain, both parties have progressively moved towards a multi-pronged approach.

Embracing non-traditional security cooperation, China and ASEAN have sought to address issues that fall outside the conventional realm of state-on-state conflicts, such as piracy, illegal fishing, and maritime environmental concerns. To lend structure and efficacy to these endeavors, the institutionalization of formal mechanisms becomes



paramount. By setting up dedicated bodies to monitor and evaluate the non-traditional security initiatives, both parties ensure that their efforts are guided by data-driven insights and are adaptive to the dynamic maritime threats.

Similarly, the establishment of a culture centered around open communication has been essential. Frequent deliberations regarding prospective marine concerns not only serve as a forum for exchanging perspectives and information but also proactively prevent misunderstandings, thus maintaining a smooth and cooperative navigation of shared waterways. Moreover, China's ambitious Maritime Silk Road, which is a crucial component of the Belt and Road Initiative, offers substantial economic potential for the ASEAN area. Safeguarding this crucial maritime passage is a collective obligation, yielding advantages for both China's worldwide commercial objectives and ASEAN's local economic aspirations.

Furthermore, acknowledging that the effectiveness of maritime security operations is directly linked to the proficiency of its staff, both China and ASEAN have prioritized the development of capabilities. Regularly, joint training exercises, exchange programs, and seminars are carried out to augment the proficiency of maritime security professionals, guaranteeing that they possess the most up-to-date skills and knowledge to manage the intricate maritime security environment.

China-ASEAN maritime cooperation represents their joint aspiration for a tranquil, secure, and thriving Indo-Pacific area. By collaborating closely, using flexible approaches, and showing mutual regard, both parties are actively working towards a future in which their marine interests are protected and they can achieve shared advantages.

e. Recommendations for US – ASEAN Cooperation

The geopolitical landscape of the Indo-Pacific region is enhanced by the complex interaction between major countries, and the alliance between the US and ASEAN is becoming a crucial foundation for collaborative endeavors. The relationship between the two parties is characterized by shared strategic interests and mutual respect. It



encompasses various important areas such as countering terrorism, restoring the fragile maritime environment, and addressing the challenges of climate change. The collaboration in these areas represents the merging of security, environmental, and sustainable development objectives, highlighting the all-encompassing nature of the US-ASEAN partnership in constructing a strong and harmonious regional structure.

1) Countering Terrorism

The long-lasting alliance between the US and ASEAN has strengthened in its intensity and importance, namely in the domain of security cooperation to combat the always-changing threat of terrorism. Given the complex nature of this challenge, their collaborative efforts involve a strategic combination of initiatives. These include improving the sharing of crucial information and intelligence regarding imminent terrorist threats, as well as promoting comprehensive training programs that enhance the abilities of law enforcement agencies on the front lines of this battle. In addition to these responsive actions, they also explore the proactive domain by establishing strong legal structures that discourage and dismantle terrorist networks. Moreover, they prioritize the creation of an environment that is resilient to extremist ideologies through comprehensive prevention, deradicalization, and counter-radicalization initiatives. The collaboration between the US and ASEAN demonstrates their mutual dedication to establishing a region that is peaceful, safe, and resilient, without the presence of terrorism.

2) Restoration of the Maritime Environment

The maritime environment, which has a significant influence on both the worldwide climate and nearby ecosystems, is at the center of numerous urgent concerns that the ASEAN region confronts. The relationship between the US and ASEAN aims to align developmental objectives with environmental preservation, acknowledging the interconnectedness of climatic stability and maritime security. The purpose of this collaboration is to enhance endeavors in minimizing climate change while preserving



the biological equilibrium of the ocean. The conservation of coral reefs and broader maritime biodiversity is crucial for protecting the diverse marine life that is essential for the ecological and economic stability of the region. The United States, with its advanced technology and scientific expertise, supports ASEAN states in developing policies for sustainable development in the face of increasing population and the resulting strain on coastal resources, while ensuring the protection of the maritime environment. Furthermore, the focus on tackling marine pollution continues to be a fundamental aspect of this relationship. Both groups aim to restore the natural condition of the region's maritime areas and protect them for future generations by implementing strong measures such as pollution monitoring, organizing extensive coastal clean-up campaigns, and developing innovative methods for managing plastic trash.

3) Addressing Climate Change

The strategic partnership between the United States and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is crucial in the dynamic and always-changing field of global geopolitics. This partnership assumes particular significance in the areas of environmental conservation and efforts to address climate change. Both groups have initiated numerous joint endeavors to tackle the urgent concerns of our times. ASEAN is urging the US to uphold its commitment to achieving the specified objectives outlined in the global National Determined Contributions (NDC). This collaborative approach expands even more by striving to create detailed climate action plans specifically designed for the Southeast Asian region, utilizing the potential of sustainable energy sources such as solar, wind, and geothermal power. This collaboration is driven by a vision of achieving economic prosperity through environmentally friendly practices. Together, they are actively investigating opportunities for sustainable growth and advancements in green mobility. The foundation of all these plans is a common goal: to implement effective, collaborative actions that significantly reduce emissions while strengthening the region's ability to



withstand the negative impacts of climate change. The collaborative endeavor highlights the fundamental importance of their strategic alliance, which is not only focused on protecting our planet but also on guaranteeing a secure and prosperous future for the ASEAN community.

4. Conclusion

From the provided text, several conclusions can be drawn regarding the roles of ASEAN in building a strategic equilibrium with major powers to strengthen sustainable stability and maritime security in the region. Keamanan maritim disorot sebagai perhatian utama di abad ke-21, mengingat kompleksnya jaringan rute komersial, sumber daya, dan jalur-jalur penting yang strategis di kawasan Asia Tenggara. ASEAN menyadari pentingnya mengelola dinamika kekuatan di ranah maritim untuk menjamin stabilitas dan keamanan.

The cooperation between ASEAN and both China and the US represents an effort to maintain strategic balance and regional security & stability. ASEAN and China have established cooperation in several areas, including climate change, cybersecurity, and maritime security. ASEAN and the US focus more specifically on counterterrorism, maritime environmental issues, and addressing climate change. NADI can provide recommendations in ASEAN forums to facilitate China-US cooperation and achieve strategic balance.

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