

The Role of ASEAN in Maintaining Political Stability in Southeast Asia: Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract

This study highlights the diplomatic limitations of ASEAN in addressing two major political conflicts in Southeast Asia: The South China Sea dispute and the political crisis in Myanmar. Employing a qualitative approach through literature review and policy analysis, the research evaluates ASEAN's conflict resolution mechanisms. The findings reveal that ASEAN's consensus-based model, political diversity among member states, and adherence to the non-intervention principle are key barriers to decisive regional action. The study recommends strengthening policy enforcement mechanisms, enhancing international cooperation, and reconsidering the non-intervention policy to improve ASEAN's effectiveness. Reforming ASEAN's governance structure is essential to reinforcing its role in regional stability and global diplomacy.

Keywords: ASEAN; conflict resolution; non-intervention; political stability; regional security.

1. Introduction

In the introduction section, start with a brief background of that tells us why: 'why did you choose that topic for research and why it is necessary. Then state Political stability is a crucial factor in ensuring sustainable development, economic growth, and regional security in Southeast Asia. The region, home to diverse political systems ranging from democracies to authoritarian regimes, has historically faced numerous challenges, including territorial disputes, internal conflicts, and governance instability (James et al., 2024). Given its geopolitical importance and economic potential, Southeast Asia has been a focal point for regional and global powers, further complicating its political landscape.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has played a vital role in fostering peace and stability in the region through diplomatic engagement, economic cooperation, and conflict resolution mechanisms. Since its establishment in 1967,

ASEAN has been instrumental in mediating disputes among member states and external actors, promoting economic integration, and implementing policies to enhance security cooperation (Gomes, 2024). However, despite its successes, ASEAN continues to face challenges, including its principle of non-interference, which limits its ability to address internal political crises effectively. Esearch Gaps:

While previous studies have examined ASEAN's role in regional governance and security cooperation, there remains a gap in assessing the effectiveness of its mechanisms in mitigating political conflicts in Southeast Asia. Existing literature primarily focuses on economic collaboration and diplomatic frameworks but lacks a comprehensive evaluation of ASEAN's interventions in political crises, such as military coups, election-related disputes, and sovereignty conflicts (Hue, 2025; Nahar, 2025). Furthermore, with the rise of China's influence and evolving geopolitical dynamic

s, ASEAN's ability to maintain neutrality and foster stability remains uncertain.

This research aims to bridge this gap by analysing ASEAN's political stability mechanisms, evaluating their strengths and weaknesses, and proposing potential reforms to enhance the organization's effectiveness in conflict resolution.

Research Objective:

The primary objective of this study is to explore ASEAN's policies and mechanisms for ensuring political stability in Southeast Asia. Specifically, the study seeks to:

- a. Assess ASEAN's historical role in mitigating regional political conflicts.
- b. Evaluate the effectiveness of existing ASEAN frameworks, including the ASEAN Charter, the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), and conflict resolution initiatives.
- c. Identify key limitations in ASEAN's ability to address political instability and propose policy recommendations for improvement.

Research Question:

This study aims to answer the central research question: Based on the concepts of regionalism and collective security, **how effective is ASEAN in mitigating political conflicts in Southeast Asia?**

Sub-questions include:

- a) Based on the concepts of regionalism and collective security, what mechanisms has ASEAN implemented to promote political stability in the region?
- b) How have ASEAN's mechanisms been applied in two major conflicts: the South China Sea dispute and the Myanmar crisis?
- c) What are the major challenges hindering ASEAN's effectiveness in resolving conflicts?

- d) What reforms can enhance ASEAN's role in fostering long-term stability in Southeast Asia?

Research Novelty and Contribution:

This study contributes to the academic discourse on regional governance by providing a nuanced evaluation of ASEAN's political stability mechanisms. Unlike previous research that primarily focuses on economic cooperation and diplomatic engagements, this study emphasizes conflict resolution strategies and political crisis management within ASEAN (Maki & Punthumasen, 2025). By incorporating case studies of two contemporary political crises, the Myanmar political crisis and the South China Sea dispute, this study provides an empirical assessment of ASEAN's response (Hamit, 2024; Yong & Hussain, 2024).

By offering policy recommendations based on an analysis of ASEAN's institutional framework and real-world applications, this research aims to contribute to the discourse on strengthening regional stability mechanisms. The findings of this study will be valuable for policymakers, scholars, and regional organizations in designing more effective strategies for political stability in Southeast Asia.

2. Theoretical Perspective

Regionalism is a fundamental concept in international relations that refers to the formation of regional blocs or organizations aimed at fostering economic, political, or security cooperation. It emphasizes the idea that states within a defined geographical area can achieve greater stability and development through collaborative frameworks. In Southeast Asia, this is exemplified by the establishment and evolution of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which seeks to promote peace,

stability, and integration among its member states (Müller & Beeson, 2022).

Regional integration, often considered a mechanism of regionalism, involves harmonizing policies, coordinating governance structures, and developing institutional linkages to achieve common objectives. It is both a political process and a functional one, aiming to reduce tensions, increase economic interdependence, and ensure collective responses to regional challenges.

ASEAN has become a distinct model of regionalism through its emphasis on informal diplomacy, mutual respect for sovereignty, and decision-making by consensus, a process referred to as the "ASEAN Way" (Acharya, 2021). Unlike the European Union, which operates with supranational legal instruments, ASEAN remains intergovernmental and voluntary in nature. This preference for non-binding agreements and informal dialogue is rooted in the diversity of political systems and historical sensitivities among its members (Sarjito, 2024).

While ASEAN-style regionalism has enabled peaceful coexistence and sustained dialogue among states with divergent regimes, scholars have increasingly questioned its effectiveness in responding to acute political crises. In particular, ASEAN's institutional design lacks coercive tools, such as sanctions or binding enforcement mechanisms, limiting its capacity to respond to internal coups (e.g., in Myanmar) or external pressures (e.g., China's assertiveness in the South China Sea) (Raeisinejad & Student, 2022).

Furthermore, critics argue that ASEAN's model of "soft regionalism" prioritizes elite-level diplomacy over democratic consolidation or human rights enforcement. This has led to a form of *regime-preserving regionalism*, where stability is pursued at the expense of political accountability (Best,

2025). However, proponents argue that ASEAN's approach has been successful in preventing inter-state war and promoting inclusivity, particularly in a region marked by colonial legacies and ideological fragmentation.

In this study, the concept of regionalism is used as the theoretical lens to assess how ASEAN's institutional character, shaped by voluntary cooperation, sovereignty respecting norms, and consensus, influences its effectiveness in managing political conflicts. By applying regionalism not only as a descriptive framework but also as a normative critique, this study interrogates the structural limitations embedded in ASEAN's design and their impact on political crisis response.

2.1 Citations

Collective security is a principle that assumes an attack on one member of a group constitutes an attack on all, necessitating a unified response. The theory underpins many international security organizations, including the United Nations and NATO. In the ASEAN context, however, the application of collective security has been limited due to its principle of non-intervention (Prayuda et al., 2023). ASEAN does not operate as a military alliance; instead, it focuses on preventive diplomacy, confidence-building measures, and regional forums, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (Mayer, 2021).

Despite ASEAN's non-interventionist stance, there have been instances where collective security concerns have emerged, particularly in the South China Sea disputes and the Myanmar crisis (Agastia, 2021). The lack of a formal collective defence mechanism weakens ASEAN's ability to respond to regional conflicts, limiting its effectiveness in enforcing peace and stability (Rosyidin & Pattipeilohy, 2020). Scholars

have debated whether ASEAN should adopt a more robust security framework but concerns over sovereignty and internal divisions have hindered progress in this area (Emmers & Le Thu, 2021).

The ASEAN Way Consensus Model

The "ASEAN Way" is a distinctive diplomatic model characterized by informal decision-making, consensus-building, and non-interference in member states' domestic affairs (Wu, 2021). Rooted in the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), this approach seeks to promote peaceful resolution of disputes and regional harmony without external coercion or military intervention (Kim, 2025).

While the ASEAN Way has been praised for fostering stability and dialogue, it has also been criticized for its inefficacy in addressing urgent crises. For instance, the Myanmar military coup in 2021 exposed ASEAN's limitations in enforcing democratic principles, as its non-interference policy prevented decisive action against the junta (Best, 2025). Similarly, in the South China Sea dispute, ASEAN's consensus-driven model has made it difficult to take a firm stance against China's territorial claims, given the divergent national interests among member states.

Despite these challenges, ASEAN's diplomatic framework continues to serve as a unique model of regional cooperation. Some scholars argue that incremental reforms, such as stronger enforcement mechanisms and enhanced diplomatic coordination, could improve ASEAN's ability to address regional security threats (Henry, 2007).

3. Method

Research Approach

This study employs a qualitative research design, utilizing literature review and policy analysis to examine ASEAN's role in managing regional conflicts. A qualitative

approach was chosen due to its ability to provide in-depth insights into ASEAN's diplomatic mechanisms, institutional frameworks, and policy effectiveness in conflict resolution (Carl Dick MA, 2025). The methodology focuses on understanding ASEAN's historical responses to political and territorial conflicts, identifying key patterns, and assessing policy effectiveness.

By adopting a literature review, the study synthesizes existing scholarly works, government reports, and ASEAN policy documents to provide a comprehensive overview of regional stability mechanisms. Policy analysis is used to evaluate ASEAN's institutional responses to crises, examining the successes and limitations of its approaches in different conflict scenarios (Boshnjaku & Krasniqi, 2024).

Data Collection and Sources

The study relies on secondary data sources, which include:

- a. Peer reviewed journal articles: Published research on ASEAN's conflict resolution policies from Scopus and other academic databases.
- b. ASEAN official documents: Statements, agreements, and resolutions related to security cooperation, diplomatic responses, and peace initiatives.
- c. Government and policy reports: Analysis from international think tanks, such as the ASEAN Studies Centre and the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- d. Case studies: Examination of ASEAN's role in regional conflicts, including diplomatic negotiations and policy interventions.

Case Study Approach

To assess ASEAN's effectiveness in mitigating political conflicts, the study adopts a comparative case study method. This

involves analysing ASEAN's response to two major crises:

a. The South China Sea Dispute

The South China Sea dispute reflects ASEAN's role in managing territorial tensions among claimant states while promoting regional stability. ASEAN has played a crucial role in fostering dialogue, particularly through the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) and ongoing negotiations on the Code of Conduct (COC) to establish binding guidelines for dispute resolution (Carl Dick MA, 2025). Additionally, ASEAN's approach reflects a complex balance between a collective regional stance and individual state actions in responding to China's maritime assertiveness, raising questions about the organization's effectiveness in maintaining unity amidst geopolitical pressures (Rendtorff, 2024).

b. The Myanmar Political Crisis

The Myanmar political crisis underscores ASEAN's challenges in responding to the 2021 military coup, particularly in implementing the Five-Point Consensus aimed at restoring stability. ASEAN has pursued diplomatic measures, including the appointment of special envoys and humanitarian aid initiatives, to mediate the crisis and provide relief (Nshom & Croucher, 2024). However, the organization's effectiveness remains constrained by its non-intervention principle and the diverging interests of member states, which have hindered decisive action and a unified regional approach (Alves et al., 2024).

Data Analysis

The study employs content analysis and comparative policy evaluation to assess ASEAN's conflict resolution strategies:

1. **Content Analysis:** Identifies recurring themes, key policy trends, and ASEAN's diplomatic rhetoric in official documents and scholarly literature (Rendtorff, 2024).
2. **Comparative Policy Evaluation:** Compares ASEAN's responses across different conflicts to determine factors contributing to policy effectiveness or failure.

Data is analysed using qualitative coding techniques, where patterns in policy effectiveness, diplomatic challenges, and regional responses are systematically categorized.

4. Result and Discussion

ASEAN's Mechanisms for Maintaining Political Stability

ASEAN plays a crucial role in ensuring regional stability through various diplomatic and security mechanisms. These mechanisms aim to foster peace, prevent conflicts, and enhance cooperation among member states. The three primary mechanisms contributing to ASEAN's stability framework are the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC). Each of these frameworks provides a structured approach to regional peace and security, though they also face significant limitations.

a. Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC): A Foundation for Non Aggression

The Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), signed in 1976, serves as ASEAN's cornerstone for regional peace and stability. It establishes principles of non-aggression, peaceful conflict resolution, and respect for national sovereignty among member states (Jati, 2014). The TAC is significant as it forms the legal and political foundation for ASEAN's diplomatic engagements and serves

as a prerequisite for countries wishing to engage with ASEAN as dialogue partners (Sundram, 2025).

Strengths of the TAC:

1. Promotes non-interference in domestic affairs, which has contributed to ASEAN's stability (Chairil et al., 2022).
2. Has expanded beyond ASEAN, with major global powers such as the United States, China, and the European Union signing the treaty as a commitment to non-aggression in the region (Agastia, 2021).
3. Provides a framework for dispute resolution through diplomatic channels rather than military confrontation (Yuniarti, 2024).

Limitations of the TAC:

1. The principle of non-interference has hindered ASEAN's ability to address human rights violations and democratic backsliding in member states, such as in Myanmar following the 2021 military coup (Hamed Ja whar Hassan, 2021).
2. Lacks enforcement mechanisms, meaning ASEAN cannot impose sanctions or compel compliance from violating states (Caballero-Anthony, 2022).

b. ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF): Addressing Security Challenges

Established in 1994, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) is ASEAN's principal platform for multilateral security dialogue. It includes ASEAN members and key external partners, such as China, the United States, Japan, and India, fostering a cooperative approach to regional security (Agastia, 2021).

Key Contributions of the ARF:

1. Addresses both traditional and non-traditional security threats, including maritime disputes, terrorism, cyber threats, and climate change (Caballero-Anthony, 2022).
2. Encourages confidence-building measures through joint military exercises, humanitarian assistance programs, and security dialogues (Agastia, 2021).
3. Serves as a bridge between ASEAN and global powers, allowing external actors to engage in regional security matters while maintaining ASEAN's centrality (Han, 2020).

Challenges Facing the ARF:

1. Lacks decision-making power due to its consensus-based approach, which often results in vague diplomatic statements rather than concrete actions (Chalermpananupap, 2014).
2. The ARF's slow response mechanism has led to criticisms, particularly in cases such as the South China Sea dispute, where ASEAN has struggled to adopt a unified stance against Chinese maritime assertiveness (Baviera, 2017).

c. ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC): Strengthening Political Cooperation

The ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) was officially established in 2015 to deepen ASEAN's political and security cooperation. Its objectives include promoting democracy, human rights, and the rule of law while ensuring a stable regional environment (Acharya, 2021).

Strengths of the APSC:

1. Establishes mechanisms for regional security cooperation, including intelligence-sharing, counterterrorism efforts, and joint peacekeeping operations (Buendia, 2016).
2. Strengthens ASEAN’s legal and institutional framework for dealing with political instability and security threats (Jati, 2014).
3. Enhances cooperation with global security organizations, including the United Nations and the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) (Yuniarti, 2024).

Weaknesses of the APSC:

1. The ASEAN Way consensus model limits the ability of the APSC to take firm actions against member states violating democratic principles or engaging in human rights abuses (Chairil et al., 2022).
2. Internal political divisions among ASEAN members weaken collective decision-making, particularly in addressing crises such as the Myanmar coup or the South China Sea disputes (Agastia, 2021).
3. No legally binding enforcement mechanisms, meaning that ASEAN states are not obligated to follow APSC guidelines if national interests’ conflict with regional agreements (Sundram, 2025).

ASEAN’s mechanisms for maintaining political stability TAC, ARF, and APSC play a vital role in fostering regional peace and security. However, these frameworks face structural weaknesses, primarily due to ASEAN’s emphasis on non-interference and consensus-based decision-making. While these mechanisms have successfully prevented major interstate conflicts, they remain ill-equipped to address internal political crises and security challenges that

require decisive intervention. Strengthening the legal enforcement mechanisms within ASEAN and enhancing collective security cooperation could improve ASEAN’s ability to respond to emerging threats in the region.

To further illustrate the roles and challenges of ASEAN’s key stability mechanisms, the table below provides a comparative overview.

Table 1: Comparison of ASEAN’s Political Stability Mechanisms

Mechanism	Objective	Strengths	Weaknesses
Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC)	To promote non-aggression and peaceful dispute resolution	Prevents direct conflicts and expands ASEAN’s influence globally	Lacks enforcement mechanisms, making it ineffective against violations
ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF)	To enhance multilateral security cooperation	Encourages dialogue among ASEAN and external partners	Decision-making is slow due to the consensus model
ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC)	To strengthen political and security cooperation in the region	Supports counter-terrorism efforts and democratic governance	No binding enforcement, leaving implementation to the discretion of member states

Source: Adapted from various ASEAN policy documents and academic analyses

As shown in the table, each ASEAN mechanism has its strengths but also faces significant limitations. The consensus-based approach often hampers swift decision-making, reducing the effectiveness of ASEAN in addressing regional crises.

Case Study: ASEAN’s Role in Myanmar’s Political Crisis

The 2021 military coup in Myanmar posed a significant challenge for ASEAN’s diplomatic and security framework. The overthrow of the democratically elected government by the Tatmadaw (Myanmar’s military) led to political turmoil, violent crackdowns on civilian protests, and a humanitarian crisis (Gunawan, 2023). ASEAN, which traditionally adheres to a non-interference policy, was compelled to respond due to mounting regional and international

pressure. However, its response, particularly the Five-Point Consensus, has been met with mixed reactions, raising questions about ASEAN's effectiveness in handling internal crises among its member states.

a. ASEAN's Response to Myanmar's Military Coup

ASEAN's response to the Myanmar coup has been gradual and cautious, reflecting its consensus-driven approach. In April 2021, a special ASEAN summit was convened in Jakarta, where regional leaders met with Myanmar's military chief, General Min Aung Hlaing. This led to the establishment of the Five-Point Consensus (5PC), a diplomatic initiative aimed at de-escalating the crisis (Ganesan, 2024).

The Five-Point Consensus called for:

1. An immediate cessation of violence in Myanmar.
2. Dialogue among all parties involved in the conflict.
3. The appointment of a Special Envoy to mediate negotiations.
4. The delivery of humanitarian assistance coordinated by ASEAN.
5. A visit by the Special Envoy to Myanmar to meet all stakeholders (Gunawan, 2023).

While these measures were intended to de-escalate tensions, implementation challenges soon emerged due to Myanmar's non-compliance and ASEAN's lack of enforcement mechanisms.

b. Implementation and Challenges of the Five-Point Consensus

The Five-Point Consensus, although not formally a part of ASEAN's institutional mechanisms like TAC, ARF, or APSC, reflects the operational limitations embedded in those frameworks, particularly the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) which

is tasked with conflict resolution and political cooperation among member states.

Its failure to be enforced illustrates how ASEAN's adherence to the "ASEAN Way", grounded in consensus and non-intervention (as established in the TAC), weakens the APSC's ability to act decisively in internal political crises such as Myanmar.

Despite ASEAN's diplomatic efforts, the Five-Point Consensus has largely failed to achieve its objectives. The Myanmar military junta has ignored ASEAN's calls to end violence, continued its crackdown on opposition groups, and placed severe restrictions on political activists (Gabusi & Neironi, 2022). Additionally, the Special Envoy appointed by ASEAN faced significant obstacles, including limited access to detained leaders such as Aung San Suu Kyi (Muhammad & Sahide, 2022).

Several challenges have hindered the implementation of the consensus:

Lack of Enforcement Mechanisms:

1. ASEAN operates based on voluntary compliance, meaning there are no legal or political tools to compel Myanmar's junta to adhere to the agreement (Ware & Skidmore, 2021).
2. Unlike the European Union or the African Union, ASEAN does not impose sanctions or intervene militarily, leaving the Five-Point Consensus as a purely diplomatic effort (Gabusi & Neironi, 2022).

Division Among ASEAN Member States:

1. ASEAN's consensus-based decision-making has resulted in divided stances among member states (Lee, 2022).

2. Countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines have been vocal in criticizing Myanmar's military and advocating for stronger measures.
3. Conversely, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam have taken a softer stance, fearing that strict action could set a precedent for future interference in their domestic affairs (Sirijintana, 2022).

Exclusion of Myanmar from ASEAN Meetings:

1. In an unprecedented move, ASEAN barred Myanmar's military representatives from major summits in 2022 and 2023, signalling frustration over its lack of cooperation.
2. However, this measure did not yield significant changes, as the junta continued to consolidate its power despite being diplomatically sidelined (Yuniarti, 2024).

Limited Engagement with Pro-Democracy Forces:

1. ASEAN has been criticized for engaging primarily with the junta while sidelining the National Unity Government (NUG), a shadow government formed by ousted elected officials (Ba, 2023).
2. The NUG has called for ASEAN to recognize it as Myanmar's legitimate representative, but ASEAN's reluctance to do so has further eroded its credibility.

c. Effectiveness of ASEAN's Approach and Criticisms

ASEAN's handling of the Myanmar crisis has been widely criticized for its ineffectiveness and slow response. While the Five-Point Consensus initially signalled

ASEAN's willingness to take action, its failure to enforce the agreement has led to growing frustrations from both regional and international stakeholders.

Key Criticisms:

ASEAN's Soft Diplomacy is Insufficient. Critics argue that ASEAN's reliance on quiet diplomacy and its non-intervention principle has enabled Myanmar's junta to prolong its rule without facing serious consequences (Ware & Skidmore, 2021). Unlike the United Nations or Western powers, which imposed sanctions to pressure the regime, ASEAN has hesitated to take punitive measures, fearing that such actions could destabilize the region and undermine its principles of consensus and engagement (Gunawan, 2023).

Weak International Standing: ASEAN's failure to resolve the Myanmar crisis has weakened its global credibility as a regional problem-solver, raising doubts about its effectiveness in addressing internal conflicts (Roewer, 2025). As a result of ASEAN's inaction, the United Nations and Western countries have been compelled to take unilateral measures, including targeted sanctions and arms embargoes, to pressure Myanmar's military regime and address the ongoing humanitarian crisis (Gabusi & Neironi, 2022).

Failure to Prevent Humanitarian Crisis: The Myanmar military's continued offensives against pro-democracy groups and ethnic minorities have resulted in mass displacement and a worsening humanitarian crisis (Lee, 2022). Although ASEAN has pledged humanitarian aid, its efforts have been severely obstructed by the Myanmar military, which has restricted access to affected communities, further complicating relief operations and highlighting ASEAN's limited influence in addressing the crisis (Sirijintana, 2022).

The table below evaluates ASEAN's response to the 2021 Myanmar coup, highlighting the measures taken, their effectiveness, and the challenges faced.

Table 2: ASEAN's Response to the Myanmar Political Crisis

Response	Action Taken	Results & Challenges
Diplomatic Statements	ASEAN issued the Five-Point Consensus urging an end to violence	The Myanmar junta ignored the agreement, continuing repression
Appointment of a Special Envoy	ASEAN appointed envoys to mediate with all parties	Envoys faced restricted access and had little influence
Humanitarian Aid Efforts	ASEAN provided limited humanitarian assistance	Access to affected populations was obstructed by the military
Sanctions or Diplomatic Pressure	ASEAN excluded Myanmar from key summits in 2022-2023	Myanmar's leadership remained defiant and sought support from China and Russia

Source: ASEAN statements, regional news reports, and academic analyses on ASEAN diplomacy in Myanmar

The table highlights that despite ASEAN's diplomatic engagements, its response to the Myanmar crisis has been largely ineffective due to the lack of enforcement mechanisms and the divergent interests of ASEAN member states.

Challenges in Maintaining Political Stability in Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia faces a range of challenges that test ASEAN's ability to maintain political stability. While ASEAN has been instrumental in fostering peace through regional cooperation, territorial disputes, political diversity among member states, and the limitations of its non-intervention principle continue to hinder its effectiveness. This section explores three key challenges: the South China Sea dispute and China's growing influence, the complexities of diverse political systems within ASEAN, and criticisms of the non-intervention principle.

a. South China Sea Dispute and ASEAN's Role in Balancing China's Influence

One of the most pressing security threats in Southeast Asia is the South China Sea dispute, involving territorial claims by China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Indonesia. China's assertiveness—manifested through military build-up, artificial island construction, and maritime confrontations, has put ASEAN in a difficult position, as some member states favour stronger resistance, while others seek diplomatic engagement (Rivera, 2020).

ASEAN's Challenges in Addressing the Dispute:

1. **Lack of a Unified Stance:** ASEAN has struggled to present a coherent and collective response due to the divergent interests of its member states. Countries such as Vietnam and the Philippines have pushed for a firmer stance, while others, including Cambodia and Laos, prefer to avoid confrontation with China (Luc, 2024).
2. **Code of Conduct (COC) Negotiations:** ASEAN and China have been negotiating a Code of Conduct for the South China Sea (COC) for over two decades, but progress remains slow. China prefers a bilateral approach to negotiations rather than dealing with ASEAN as a bloc, which weakens ASEAN's negotiating power (Wijitthaworn & Aroonpipat, 2018).
3. **China's Economic Leverage:** China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has deepened economic ties between China and ASEAN member states, leading some countries to avoid actions that could jeopardize Chinese investments (Sundram, 2025). This economic dependence makes it harder for ASEAN to take a unified stance against China's maritime claims.

ASEAN member states have varying positions on the South China Sea dispute, with some nations advocating for stronger resistance against China, while others prefer

diplomatic engagement. The table below summarizes these differences.

Table 3: ASEAN Member States’ Positions on the South China Sea Dispute

Country	Position in the Dispute	Approach to China
Vietnam	Opposes China's claims, has faced maritime conflicts	Strong protests, increased naval defenses
Philippines	Opposes China's claims, won a 2016 arbitration case	Strengthens ties with the U.S. and calls for ASEAN unity
Malaysia	Claims some disputed areas but takes a diplomatic stance	Maintains economic cooperation with China
Indonesia	No direct territorial claims but rejects China's extended EEZ	Conducts diplomatic negotiations and joint military exercises
Cambodia	No direct claims, supports China in ASEAN discussions	Strengthens economic and political ties with China

Source: ASEAN foreign policy statements and regional security analyses

The table illustrates ASEAN’s internal divisions regarding the South China Sea, which complicate efforts to present a unified response. While some nations advocate for a firm stance, others prioritize economic relations with China, reducing ASEAN’s leverage in negotiations.

Effectiveness of ASEAN’s Approach:

ASEAN has played a role in diplomatic de-escalation, but its effectiveness remains questionable. The Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) signed in 2002 has not prevented China’s continued militarization in the region. Without a binding agreement, ASEAN’s influence in mitigating territorial tensions remains limited.

b. Diverse Political Systems Among ASEAN Members and the Challenge of Unified Policymaking

ASEAN consists of ten member states with vastly different political systems, ranging from democracies (Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia) to authoritarian regimes (Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar). This political diversity complicates consensus-based decision-making, particularly on issues related to

democracy, governance, and human rights (Spastyono et al., 2024).

Key Issues Stemming from Political Diversity:

1. **Conflicting Priorities:** Democratic states like Indonesia and the Philippines often push for stronger human rights commitments, whereas authoritarian states such as Myanmar and Vietnam prioritize state sovereignty and political stability over civil liberties (Fortich, 2023).
2. **Slow and Ineffective Policy Implementation:** ASEAN’s policymaking is based on consensus, meaning that decisions can be easily blocked by a single member state. This weakens ASEAN’s ability to respond swiftly to crises (Roosmalen, 2020).
3. **Different Attitudes Towards External Influence:** Some ASEAN members, like Singapore and Vietnam, advocate for stronger engagement with Western powers, while others, such as Cambodia and Laos, align more closely with China, leading to policy fragmentation (Luc, 2024).

Impact on Political Stability:

The political divergence within ASEAN prevents the organization from taking decisive action on governance and democracy-related crises, such as the Myanmar coup. This inaction has damaged ASEAN’s credibility and has led some experts to argue that ASEAN must reconsider its consensus model to become a more effective regional organization.

c. Criticism of the Non-Intervention Principle and Calls for a More Proactive ASEAN

ASEAN’s non-intervention principle, enshrined in the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), is one of its foundational norms. While this principle has helped prevent direct conflicts among ASEAN members, it

has also hindered ASEAN's ability to respond to internal crises.

Limitations of the Non-Intervention Principle:

- 1) Failure to Address Political Crises: The 2021 Myanmar coup revealed ASEAN's inability to intervene effectively in internal conflicts, as its Five-Point Consensus had little impact on the junta's actions (Sahin, 2023).
- 2) Inability to Enforce Human Rights Norms: ASEAN's hands-off approach has prevented it from taking action against authoritarian abuses in countries like Myanmar and Cambodia, raising questions about its commitment to democratic principles (Carl Dick MA, 2025).
- 3) Reduced Regional Influence: While ASEAN's centrality is emphasized in regional affairs, its reluctance to take decisive action on political and security matters has led to perceptions that ASEAN is a weak and ineffectual organization (Mayer, 2021).

Should ASEAN Rethink Non-Intervention?

- a) Proponents of Reform argue that ASEAN should move towards a conditional intervention policy, where intervention is justified in cases of humanitarian crises, military takeovers, or mass human rights violations.
- b) Traditionalists Defend Non-Intervention, stating that ASEAN's stability depends on non-interference, and stronger intervention mechanisms could lead to divisions and political instability.

Despite increasing calls for reform, ASEAN's institutional constraints and political diversity make significant changes unlikely in the near future.

5. Conclusions

ASEAN has played a crucial role in maintaining political stability in the Southeast Asian region by serving as the primary platform for regional diplomacy, economic integration, and security cooperation among its member states. ASEAN's existence creates a space for ongoing dialogue for countries with diverse political backgrounds, ideologies, and national interests, enabling potential conflicts to be managed through peaceful and deliberative approaches. Through various mechanisms and norms developed gradually, ASEAN strives to build a rules-based regional order, strengthen trust between nations, and prevent open conflict that could disrupt regional stability. However, ASEAN's effectiveness in carrying out this role still faces various limitations, particularly related to policy implementation challenges, the strong principle of non-interference in member states' domestic affairs, and the complexity and diversity of internal political dynamics within each member state.

The limitations of ASEAN's political stability mechanisms can be clearly observed in a number of regional strategic issues that have yet to be optimally resolved. The South China Sea dispute demonstrates that the lack of a solid, shared stance among member states has weakened ASEAN's position as an effective mediator, thus underperforming the organization's role in mitigating tensions between major powers and regional states. A similar situation is reflected in the political crisis in Myanmar, where various diplomatic efforts and agreements facilitated by ASEAN have failed to produce meaningful change due to low levels of compliance from relevant parties and the absence of clear and binding enforcement mechanisms. Furthermore, the consensus-based decision-making model that has been ASEAN's hallmark, while successful in maintaining unity and preventing internal divisions, has also slowed the decision-making process and limited ASEAN's ability to act quickly, decisively, and responsively

when faced with pressing political and security crises.

This research contributes to the development of academic discourse on ASEAN's role in maintaining regional political stability by highlighting the gap between ASEAN's diplomatic ambitions and the practical limitations faced in their implementation. The research findings emphasize that ASEAN faces the challenge of adapting its governance structure and working mechanisms to be more adaptive to changing geopolitical dynamics, without sacrificing the principles of unity, dialogue, and cooperation that have long been the organization's foundation.

To increase effectiveness and maintain long-term regional stability, ASEAN needs to undertake institutional reform and adopt a more proactive stance in responding to regional crises. Strengthening policy enforcement mechanisms is crucial to ensure that regional agreements and commitments are not merely normative but also have real binding force. ASEAN needs to promote a stronger and more authoritative dispute resolution mechanism, capable of effectively mediating conflicts and encouraging member states' compliance with mutually agreed agreements. Furthermore, increased cooperation with other international and regional organizations is a strategic step to strengthen ASEAN's capacity to maintain peace, resolve conflicts, and promote adherence to democratic norms and human rights. The involvement of civil society and non-governmental organizations is also crucial to increase transparency, accountability, and legitimacy in managing regional political crises.

In the face of political crises that have a broad impact on regional stability and humanitarian conditions, the principle of non-intervention, long upheld by ASEAN, needs to be contextually reviewed. While state sovereignty remains a fundamental principle,

flexibility in the application of non-intervention can create space for limited and targeted collective action when a crisis has the potential to threaten overall regional stability. Strengthening crisis response mechanisms that enable swift and coordinated diplomatic action, political pressure, or humanitarian assistance is an urgent need to address contemporary security challenges.

ASEAN's long-term success as a pillar of regional stability depends heavily on its ability to adapt and evolve with the changing global strategic environment. While ASEAN's diplomatic model has proven effective in preventing large-scale conflict, the organization needs to modernize its governance to be more effective.

Effectively addressing political and security challenges in an increasingly complex global era. By strengthening policy enforcement mechanisms, expanding global partnerships, and prudently reviewing its non-interventionist approach, ASEAN can enhance its credibility, influence, and leadership in maintaining peace and security in Southeast Asia. Going forward, ASEAN's role in regional stability will be largely determined by its willingness to undertake constructive reforms while upholding its core values of unity, dialogue, and cooperation.

This research is based entirely on secondary data and therefore does not raise ethical issues related to the direct involvement of human participants. Nevertheless, maintaining academic integrity remains a primary concern through the use of credible, peer-reviewed sources, and by recognizing and acknowledging potential biases that may arise in ASEAN's policy narratives. In closing, the author expresses sincere gratitude to the Indonesian Defense University for the support and facilities provided throughout the research process. Appreciation is also extended to the lecturers, supervisors, and fellow academics who have provided valuable guidance, input,

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