

Navigating The Storm: ASEAN's Strategy Amidst Two Major Powers

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze ASEAN's stance and approach, particularly in managing confrontational politics amidst major power competition, this article will also demonstrate ASEAN's attitudes and policies in navigating confrontational politics, including how ASEAN leverages its regional community norms to respond to such competition. Through this exploration, the author seeks to delve into the role and theoretical implications of ASEAN as a regional actor grappling with the management of political competition in the rapidly evolving East Asian and Indo-Pacific regionalism. The author used an impartial enmeshment concept and a descriptive qualitative method. The results showed that the intense geostrategic competition between China and the United States has placed ASEAN in a dilemma. ASEAN strives to maintain its centrality in the region by fostering fair, impartial, and neutral cooperation relationships. ASEAN bases its approach on the norms and principles of the organization, such as transparency, openness, inclusivity, good conflict management, and the importance of sovereignty and non-intervention (ASEAN Way). The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) is one policy that reflects ASEAN's efforts to build a new framework of cooperation based on its own rule in the region. However, this Southeast Asia organization faces several challenges that can threaten its position.

Keywords— ASEAN, Indo-Pacific, Impartial, Enmeshment, Geostrategies

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

ASEAN, an international organization that has existed for over half a century, has proven that differences and conflicts among its member states are not barriers to integration (Luhulima, 2008). ASEAN demonstrates unwavering dedication to building a constructive regional community by fostering strong political and economic ties, including nations boasting greater economic prowess. Additionally, ASEAN actively engages in cooperation within the multilateral institutions it has established, further

reinforcing its commitment to regional development.

In the contemporary world, the global stage is witnessing a significant rise in competition among major powers, encompassing a multitude of dimensions, particularly geostrategic interests. This escalating competition is evident as China, a prominent player in the international arena, solidifies its presence in the region through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a diplomatic initiative aimed at enhancing connectivity and trade (Khoo, 2023). Concurrently, the United States (US) has responded by introducing a novel geopolitical construct known as the "Indo-

Pacific," signaling its determination to shape regional dynamics and counterbalance China's influence (Stromseth, 2021).

The intensifying rivalry between the US and China has far-reaching implications, extending beyond their bilateral dynamics and having a profound impact on ASEAN, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. ASEAN, as a regional organization, finds itself at the intersection of these competing powers and is compelled to recalibrate its approach to multilateral cooperation and address the complex array of regional challenges (Stromseth, 2021). Under these circumstances, ASEAN faces the pressing need to exercise prudent judgment and articulate a clear vision in responding to the evolving developments in the Indo-Pacific and the expansive scope of the BRI. The changing landscape of power dynamics necessitates strategic foresight and an astute understanding of ASEAN's interests and objectives, as well as the interests and expectations of its member states.

Moreover, ASEAN must navigate a delicate balance between maximizing the benefits offered by the BRI while safeguarding its core principles, including neutrality, inclusivity, and transparency. ASEAN's ability to effectively engage with the US and China, as well as other regional and global stakeholders, will play a pivotal role in shaping the future trajectory of the Indo-Pacific region and determining the extent to which ASEAN can maintain its centrality in regional affairs. By proactively engaging with all relevant actors and leveraging its established platforms for cooperation, ASEAN has the potential to shape a more inclusive, balanced, and prosperous regional order that accommodates the interests of its member

states and contributes to global peace and stability.

1.2 Objective

The primary objective of this article is to accentuate key aspects. Initially, the author will delve into ASEAN's stance and approach, particularly in managing confrontational politics amidst competing major powers. Second, the article will demonstrate ASEAN's attitudes and policies in navigating confrontational politics, including how ASEAN utilizes its regional community norms to respond to such competition. Through this exploration, the author seeks to delve into the role and theoretical implications of ASEAN as a regional actor grappling with the management of political rivalries in the rapidly evolving East Asian and Indo-Pacific regionalisms.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Impartial Enmeshment

The concept of "impartial enmeshment" will be used by the author to illustrate ASEAN's management mechanisms regarding confrontational politics among competing major powers. The term "impartial" refers to a neutral, unbiased, and fair approach in treating all competing parties. It is defined as the behavior of an actor restraining itself from heavily supporting one side in a conflict and actively acting as a mediator, aiming to create a conducive environment for resolving differences (Khoo, 2023). In the meantime, the notion of "enmeshment" pertains to the phenomenon of extensive involvement of a country within wider regional and global frameworks (Khoo, 2023). This enmeshment will

ultimately lead to exchanges that foster interdependence and sustainable relationships, thereby realizing long-term regional integration. In other words, "impartial enmeshment" illustrates the efforts of a regional entity to navigate competing states toward beneficial regional cooperation while reducing confrontations among them.

Drawing from theoretical frameworks, the idea of "impartial enmeshment" is linked to the concept of "hedging," encompassing three distinct attributes. Firstly, it seeks to avoid favoring or aligning with a single major power. Secondly, it insists on pursuing actions that are in opposition to balance different risks. Lastly, it positions itself in the middle to minimize potential losses (Ciorciari & Haacke, 2019). Essentially, enmeshment, one of the three hedging strategies, alongside soft balancing, engagement, and enmeshing, refers to the management mechanism utilized by ASEAN to engage major powers in its region to form a network of power and reach a consensus on behavioral norms based on collective interests. Moreover, this strategy is also applied preventively and anticipatively to address potential conflicts that may arise among competing powers in the Asia-Pacific regional scope. Furthermore, "impartial enmeshment" serves as a clever step for ASEAN to reduce the possibility of great powers intervening in the domestic affairs of smaller states in the region.

3. Methods

The study employs a descriptive qualitative approach, where the researcher utilizes words to depict and connect the data and issues to the relevant theory. Umar Suryadi Bakry highlights that qualitative

research emphasizes interactive processes and events, while also distinguishing theory from data (Bakry, 2015). Data collection is conducted through thorough research, utilizing library studies to gather information from various sources such as books, research journals, and articles pertaining to the discussed topic.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 ASEAN: Collaboration Management and Regional Contention Handling

In the ASEAN Charter of 2007, ASEAN's strategic position in the East Asia and Asia-Pacific regions was enshrined in the sacred term "ASEAN centrality" (Acharya, 2005). Situated at a key juncture in the region, ASEAN has employed various means to uphold its centrality within the community. Now, this Southeast Asian regional organization must endure and navigate the politics of competition among major powers. Collaborating with countries whose resources and material capabilities surpass its own represents one of the mechanisms ASEAN has chosen to maintain its grip on the regional architecture (Stromseth, 2021).

As a regional entity, ASEAN demonstrates its positive commitment to not align with either of the two major powers in international politics through impartial enmeshment. ASEAN seeks to direct and bind these countries into regional institutions with established rules. In this regard, institutions are believed to play a crucial role in maintaining peace among voluntarily integrated states. Moreover, the process of establishing institutions through the coordination of planning and decision-making endeavors cultivates interconnectedness, thereby posing challenges for all parties involved,

including major powers, to independently engage in negotiations and implement abrupt policy modifications (Ciorciari & Haacke, 2019). With extensive political interactions, high levels of interdependence, and expectations among member states, all participants are encouraged to engage actively and constructively. By establishing strong linkages between the primary roles and functional roles of member states, the dynamics of power struggles Among major players, a shift is anticipated, where they are expected to transition from competitive and zero-sum scenarios to collaborative and mutually beneficial approaches (Nye, 2023).

The growing multipolarity in the Asia-Pacific since the early 2000s has laid the foundation for ASEAN's focus on maintaining independence and neutrality (Zhao, 1997). Buildi upon the previously established Declaration of the Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) in 1971, ASEAN employs the concept of "impartial enmeshment" as a long-term diplomatic strategy to manage conflicts. ASEAN has proven to be a significant contributor to maintaining stability in Southeast Asia by establishing regional cooperation frameworks such as the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) (ADMM, 2015). The identity of ASEAN, which is based on creating neutral cooperation schemes where all parties have equal opportunities, supports the organization's role as a trusted mediator of regional public goods. Thus, the notion of "impartial enmeshment" as a long-term strategy signifies ASEAN's establishment of its regional role as a fair and impartial mediator.

As an association of nations in Southeast Asia, ASEAN continues to

enhance its capabilities in defining issues among member states, offering resolution options, and persuading relevant countries to accept them. These capabilities add value and legitimacy to ASEAN as a key leader, encouraging other states to participate in its initiatives and engage in regional integration. In other words, in order to enhance its leadership legitimacy, ASEAN continually strives to expand its conflict management capabilities within the region. Legitimacy is defined as "the perception or general assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (Bërdufi & Dushi, 2015). In the 1990s, evolving organizational legitimacy presented three types: moral, cognitive, and pragmatic. Moral legitimacy is grounded on an awareness of societal norms and reflects a moral assessment of an organization and its actions. This emphasizes the importance of collectively upholding norms, values, beliefs, goals, means, and targets. Cognitive legitimacy is based on the assumption that organizational activities are unavoidable and necessary. On the other hand, pragmatic legitimacy relies on the personal interest calculations of the immediate audience of the organization (Bërdufi & Dushi, 2015). Moreover, through the ASEAN Way, a number of arguments supporting its institutional centrality are formulated with the principle that no country should interfere in the domestic affairs of another, including major powers.

ASEAN's Response: Sino-Japanese Relations and the Dynamics of East Asian Regionalism

The uncertain political contestation between China and Japan is one of the factors shaping regionalism in East Asia.

Both countries present different approaches in designing the framework and regional cooperation initiatives. While Japan supports regionalism through the (CEPEA) Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement in East Asia, China promotes cooperation through ASEAN+3, the East Asia Free Trade Area (EAFTA), and (ERIA) the Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia. Consequently, Association of Southeast Asian Nations seeks to govern enterprise that can steer this confrontational competition towards healthy and beneficial collaboration between both sides.

In order to survive between these two giants in East Asia, ASEAN declines the invitations from Japan or China to establish bilateral institutions aimed at forging closer partnerships and integrating them into its own initiatives, such as Japan's proposal for a Japan-ASEAN Charter (Khoo, 2023). ASEAN member states refuse to accept these invitations because they are unwilling to bind themselves to exclusive collaboration solely with Japan among multiple dialogue partners. However, both ASEAN and Japan have released the Tokyo Declaration for a Dynamic and Enduring Japan-ASEAN Partnership in the New Millennium. This declaration follows the same format as with other partners, including the ASEAN-ROK Joint Vision Statement in 2019. Additionally, ASEAN also rejected China's proposal during the 16th ASEAN-China Summit in 2013, which aimed to foster strategic cooperation through closer institutional ties. ASEAN is concerned that China's invitation may subvert the existing (TAC) Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (Emmerson, 2017).

Based on the above explanation, ASEAN's actions towards these significant powers exhibit a firm dedication to

incorporating Sino-Japan into its regional institutions impartially. In the political realm, the Association of Southeast Asian Nation endeavors to integrate Sino Japan, and other partners into the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC). Originally designed as an internal agreement outlining ASEAN's fundamental principles, the association now aims to employ it as a means to encourage external partners to endorse established norms, such as upholding sovereignty, avoiding involvement in internal matters. and promoting harmonious resolution of discourse. In July 2004, Japan agreed to sign the TAC, further strengthening friendship and cooperation with the Southeast Asian region (MOFA, 2003).

After the political dimension, the ASEAN+1 Free Trade Agreement (FTA) encompasses economic collaboration that spans East Asia. Collaboration within the ASEAN+1 FTA framework began with the signing of the Framework Agreement on China-ASEAN Comprehensive Economic Cooperation in 2002 (Jusuf, 2003). This agreement served as the legal foundation for the establishment of the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area. Not staying idle, Japan swiftly reacted by initiating the issuance of a Joint Declaration on Comprehensive Economic Partnership on November 5, 2002, together with ASEAN. Remaining committed to the concept of impartial enmeshment, ASEAN has also established comparable ASEAN+1 Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) with South Korea, India, Australia, and New Zealand. Moreover, within the ASEAN+3 framework, and East Asia Summit (EAS) economic minister meetings in August 2011, Japan and China jointly proposed the formation of a regional FTA in East Asia. Based on the principle of ASEAN centrality, this offer was seriously

considered while taking into account its strategic leadership position. As a result of these considerations, in November 2011, coinciding with the 19th ASEAN Summit, ASEAN proposed the framework for the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) (Emmerson, 2017).

ASEAN pays attention to the principle of balanced development, taking into account the varying levels of development among its member states, as trade liberalization continues to pursue market efficiency. This is reflected in the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) through the framework of the previously established RCEP. The principle of balanced development embraced by ASEAN acknowledges the importance of supporting equitable economic development among member states. This form of ASEAN's concern also opens up opportunities for economic cooperation aimed at narrowing the development gap in the region. However, the fact that special treatment and flexibility toward member countries are still categorized as developing countries are necessary to understand the differences in their capacities.

It is no secret that China and Japan have the potential to manipulate ASEAN given their material power. These two major countries could exploit regional solidarity rhetoric for the sake of regional hegemony interests. However, China's or Japan's initiatives can also result in mutually reinforcing effects and contribute to the consolidation of long-term relationships with ASEAN as a key player in regional cooperation (Tomotaka, 2014). Both China and Japan continue to emphasize that ASEAN is "at the driver's seat" in influencing the trajectory and parameters of regional cooperation in East Asia. In this regard, ASEAN's "centrality"

was affirmed in the arrangement of cooperation in the fifth Trilateral Summit, which also involved South Korea in May 2012. This arrangement emphasizes ASEAN's role as an important partner in regional cooperation and a key player in the region. Although such arrangements could be seen as mere rhetoric, Japan and China demonstrate their sensitivity to ASEAN's centrality.

In summary, ASEAN has relatively succeeded in managing the political rivalry between the two nations, Sino-Japan in fostering regionalism in East Asia. ASEAN has been careful not to establish specific economic or political arrangements with any of them. ASEAN has also put forward its own initiatives regarding the development of regionalism in East Asia and the Asia-Pacific as a whole through the establishment of new institutions. In response to this, Japan has enthusiastically participated in these emerging institutions, such as the ASEAN+1 FTA network, the ASEAN+3 cooperation framework, and RCEP.

4.2 ASEAN's Balancing Act: Navigating Geopolitical Competition in the Indo-Pacific

In 2013, China reaffirmed its geo-economic and geopolitical presence in Asia, one of which was through the development of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Most ASEAN members strive to seek economic advantages presented by projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects with a primary focus on supporting infrastructure development. In this regard, significant economic benefits and regional connectivity are seen as a breath of fresh air brought by the BRI in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, the projects supported by the BRI also aim to alleviate the development gap between developed

and developing countries, which was previously evident.

Although China's grand strategy through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was welcomed enthusiastically by most member states, ASEAN still applies the concept of "impartial enmeshment" in its relations. ASEAN, as a regional organization consisting of ten member states in Southeast Asia, has demonstrated its commitment to cooperation in infrastructure connectivity through a policy known as the "Joint Statement on Further Deepening the Cooperation on Infrastructure Connectivity." In the joint statement, ASEAN recognizes the importance of comprehensive and connected infrastructure development to facilitate inclusive economic growth in the region (Jusuf, 2003). However, specific attention to the BRI in ASEAN Ministerial Meetings in 2015 was not clearly evident. This indicates that ASEAN still adheres to the principle of "impartial enmeshment" in its cooperation with China. The principle of "impartial enmeshment" refers to ASEAN's approach that prioritizes collective interests and ensures that cooperation with external partners benefits all parties involved. This principle aligns with ASEAN's vision of achieving shared prosperity and stability in the region.

ASEAN has stressed the need to adopt best practices, international standards, and principles of international law in infrastructure projects, including those related to the BRI. Despite offering significant economic opportunities for countries in Southeast Asia, concerns regarding environmental impacts, financial transparency, and fair ownership rights remain the focus of ASEAN. Therefore, when facing major initiatives like the BRI, ASEAN continues to uphold the principle of "impartial enmeshment" to ensure that

such cooperation benefits all parties involved and aligns with ASEAN's goals and values.

Not wanting to be left behind by China, Japan and the United States initiated strategic steps to secure the region through the Free and Open Rules Based Indo-Pacific (FOIP) in 2016 (Emmerson, 2017). The FOIP framework was introduced by the United States and supported by Japan to promote freedom, justice, and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region. Both countries strive to address strategic challenges such as the expansion of non-democratic powers, human rights violations, and regional instability. FOIP aims to ensure that the Indo-Pacific region remains secure, peaceful, and prosperous, while respecting the sovereignty of nations and upholding international rules.

Furthermore, ASEAN emphasizes caution regarding the arrangements formed by the US and Japan. ASEAN chooses to demonstrate impartiality towards the concepts and programs attached to the China-US competition. This is evident in ASEAN's response, stating that it will actively participate and engage in the Indo-Pacific scheme, as well as with the BRI, during the 51st ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in 2018 (Emmerson, 2017). The AOIP consists of six parts, such as historical context, urgency, perspectives on the Indo-Pacific, objectives, principles, areas of cooperation, and mechanisms. The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific outlines key value that support sustainable regional development, including ASEAN centrality, transparency, openness, inclusivity, good conflict management, the importance of sovereignty and non-intervention, and others.

The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) represents an initiative that represents a rules-based strategic and

mutually beneficial cooperation orientation. The AOIP reflects the principles of equality and fair treatment towards any dialogue partner, with an emphasis on transparency, openness, and inclusivity, which are characteristics of ASEAN norms. In the AOIP, ASEAN is committed to creating cooperation arrangements based on community values, with consultation and consensus as the distinctive approaches. This approach differs from the alliance systems implemented by the United States and China's Institutional Network. Through a community-based approach involving all members and based on ASEAN norms, the AOIP aims to create a balance of interests and promote peace, stability, and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region (Emmerson, 2017). It is important to note that the AOIP does not seek to replace the Indo-Pacific concepts developed by countries outside ASEAN, including the United States and China. However, the AOIP offers a different ASEAN perspective and complements existing frameworks for cooperation. In this context, the AOIP is one of ASEAN's efforts to play a central role in the security and economic architecture of the Indo-Pacific region.

4. 3 ASEAN's Indo-Pacific Conundrum: Navigating Challenges in Regional Engagement

With an unwavering commitment to coordinating and bridging the choices and interests of major powers, ASEAN is presenting the Outlook on The Indo-Pacific (AOIP). Through the AOIP, ASEAN is committed to continuing to be a trusted and impartial intermediary in the strategic cooperation environment among various interests (ASEAN.ORG, 2019). This framework further underscores ASEAN's distinctive normative approach rooted in

previous encounters with regional cooperation and institution building.

Given that China's endeavors to reshape the strategic and territorial landscape have raised concerns about the interests and territorial integrity of other nations, leading to heightened tensions with the United States and its allies (Emmerson, 2017). In this regional climate, ASEAN needs to incorporate the possibilities of threats and opportunities arising from geostrategic political developments as considerations. ASEAN also needs to position itself as a wise "controller" to enhance long-term institutional capacity under the AOIP framework.

ASEAN has limitations in facing the challenges offered by Indo-Pacific regionalism. First, ASEAN's position among its member states must be maintained. Although ASEAN uses the "impartial enmeshment" scheme to maintain internal relations, sometimes this principle becomes a double-edged sword as it leads to internal disputes among members. One example of differing perspectives is the contrasting views among the Philippines, Vietnam, and Cambodia regarding the South China Sea conflict. While the Philippines and Vietnam seek to claim certain areas deemed overlapping with China, Cambodia has opposed ASEAN's criticism of China's actions in the South China Sea. Some observers argue that Cambodia may feel trapped in the regional power dynamics between China and other countries in the region. ASEAN also encounters internal challenges in managing relationships while implementing its strategy toward Indo-Pacific regionalism.

On the other hand, Cambodia remains steadfast in demanding the removal of words related to overflight and freedom of navigation. The discussion

persisted despite the implementation of the AOIP in 2019. As Indonesia envisions an Indo-Pacific region characterized by freedom,—unled by the US or China—and positioning ASEAN as a crucial element to promote standardizing frameworks and cooperative enterprise. Vietnam advocates for a realist power-balancing orientation of the Indo-Pacific, considering it easier to accept the involvement of other countries outside the ASEAN framework (Agastia, 2020). On the verge of maintaining internal relations among members, ASEAN needs consensus to preserve its relationships. On one hand, ASEAN's optimistic stance in promoting the concept of collaboration through "impartial enmeshment," but at the same time, internal conflicts due to these differences of opinion can hinder ASEAN in developing its centrality.

Second, besides the general and comprehensive principles and norms in the AOIP, practical cooperation is needed to realize ASEAN's principles. ASEAN norms and principles are not formulated solely to obtain pragmatic legitimacy from China or the US. In this regard, the goals outlined in the AOIP may be abstract, normative, and idealistic. However, the action plans to achieve these goals must be concrete and realistic. Specifically, the vision offered by ASEAN must offer efforts to integrate its regional connectivity with the Indo-Pacific—such as using the Indo-Pacific Infrastructure and Connectivity Forum and preparing the Master Plan on Indo-Pacific Connectivity.

Important principles that serve to maintain ASEAN's strategic position in cooperation with the Indo-Pacific can be formulated in the AOIP. These two principles include the principle of inclusivity and the rule-based principle. The principle of inclusivity, which serves as the foundation for cooperation among

ASEAN member states (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), refers to efforts to ensure that every member state, regardless of size, economic level, or political power, can participate in decision-making processes and benefit from cooperation. Key points in reflecting the principle of inclusivity include involving all member states, no discrimination based on economic size or political power, and encouraging active participation in various initiatives and programs (ASEAN.ORG, 2019). By involving all stakeholders and considering diverse interests, ASEAN strives to achieve shared goals in creating peace, stability, and prosperity.

The rule-based principle is one of the fundamental principles that underpin cooperation among ASEAN member states (Association of Southeast Asian Nations). This principle emphasizes the importance of following agreed-upon rules and norms as a basis for interaction and managing differences among member states. Key points in this principle include compliance with international law, adherence to the ASEAN legal framework—such as the ASEAN Charter, Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, and ASEAN conventions—peaceful dispute resolution, and promoting transparency and accountability in interactions among member states (ASEAN.ORG, 2019). The rule-based principle is an important foundation in ASEAN's efforts to achieve goals and maintain stability in the region. By following agreed-upon rules and norms, ASEAN seeks to build trust, strengthen cooperation, and manage differences in an orderly and predictable manner. For example, China's confident and determined policies in the South China Sea contradict the provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea

(UNCLOS) and have threatened the maritime rights of claimant states in Southeast Asia. This phenomenon certainly goes against the rule-based framework expected within the AOIP.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Intense geostrategic rivalry between China and the United States has brought ASEAN, as a Southeast Asian regional organization, into a dilemma. In the face of pressure and political conflicts between these two superpowers, ASEAN strives to maintain its centrality in the region by building fair, impartial, and neutral cooperation relationships. ASEAN's distinctive community approach serves as the foundation for their efforts to maintain leadership and influence. ASEAN bases its approach on its organization's norms and principles, such as transparency, openness, inclusivity, good conflict management, and the importance of sovereignty and non-intervention (ASEAN Way). By upholding these principles, ASEAN aims to preserve its strategic position in cooperation in East Asia and the Indo-Pacific. The AOIP (ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific) is one policy that reflects ASEAN's efforts to build a new framework of cooperation based on their own rule in the region.

However, this Southeast Asia organization faces several challenges that can threaten its position. One of them is the threat to the sovereignty of member states from external interventions. Additionally, differences in views and potential internal divisions among ASEAN members are factors that need to be overcome. Therefore, ASEAN requires pragmatic legitimacy from its dialogue partners, especially the United States and China, while maintaining a cooperative strategy

that is impartial to any single power. In facing these challenges, ASEAN needs to maintain a balance in its relationships with China and the United States by continuing to apply consensus-based diplomacy and dialogue involving all its members. These efforts aim to ensure that ASEAN remains the controller in regional cooperation without sacrificing the sovereignty and interests of its member states.

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