



ASEAN Centrality and the Global South: Exploring Possibilities for Cooperative Models*



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[*Abstract*]

This study examines ASEAN Centrality as a model of cooperation for the Global South amid intensifying U.S.-China strategic competition. While ASEAN has developed a distinctive multilateral framework based on non-interference, inclusiveness, and gradualism, its broader applicability remains underexplored. This paper moves beyond a normative assessment and advances a conditional argument: ASEAN Centrality is not a universally transferable model but one that depends on specific structural conditions. These include the presence of middle-power-driven multilateral diplomacy, a geopolitical environment that allows relative strategic autonomy, and a baseline level of institutionalization and accumulated cooperation. By comparing ASEAN with other Global South regional organizations, the study identifies the institutional and political factors underpinning ASEAN's relative success. At the same time, it highlights the historical and geopolitical specificity of Southeast Asia, which constrains direct replication elsewhere. The paper argues that ASEAN Centrality should be understood as a

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conditionally transferable framework, offering analytical insights into the possibilities and limits of cooperative models in the Global South.

Keywords: ASEAN Centrality, Global South, ASEAN Way, regional cooperation, multilateralism, U.S.–China strategic competition

I . Introduction

The term *Global South* refers to a broad group of middle- and low-income countries extending from the lower latitudes of the Northern Hemisphere to the Southern Hemisphere, and is commonly defined in contrast to the *Global North*, which encompasses traditional great powers such as the United States and Europe (Kim 2024: 20). States within the Global South have long invoked this shared identity—rooted not only in the historical experience of colonialism and Cold War–era structural inequalities but also in their collective aspiration for greater agency in shaping global norms and cooperative frameworks (UNDP 2013: 44). This identity thus functions as more than a historical reference; it has become an instrument for asserting normative autonomy and diplomatic influence.

In recent years, the political and economic weight of the Global South has expanded rapidly (Chun 2024: 4-6). The Russia-Ukraine war and the Israel-Palestine conflict have accelerated skepticism toward the traditional great-power-centered order and stimulated new forms of political alignment (Koga 2022: 173; Park 2024: 1). The anticipated rise of a more inward-looking US foreign policy under a second Trump administration in 2025 is also expected to weaken multilateralism and intensify the search for alternative models of collective cooperation. Indeed, South-South trade has already surpassed North-North trade, and the Global South is projected to grow at an annual average rate of 6.3% through 2029—far exceeding the Global North’s 3.9% (KOTRA 2024: 4). In this environment, China has expanded its diplomatic outreach through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), while India has

strengthened its leadership role through multilateralist engagement with Global South partners (Yoon 2024: 27).

These developments reflect a broader restructuring of international order marked by intensified US-China rivalry, the resurgence of protectionism, and weakening multilateral mechanisms (Brender 2024: 6). Within this shifting landscape, the Global South is increasingly seeking cooperative models that emphasize autonomy, resilience, and sustainable integration. In this context, *ASEAN Centrality*—originally conceived as a guiding principle for Southeast Asian regionalism—has emerged as a potentially replicable model for the broader Global South (Ashley 2023: 69). Since its founding, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has advanced peacebuilding and economic integration while accommodating substantial political and economic diversity among its member states. As the strategic importance of the Global South has grown in the 21st century, ASEAN has progressively positioned itself as a neutral, autonomous, and indispensable hub for regional and extra-regional cooperation (Ha & Cha 2024: 2-3).

ASEAN's diplomatic approach—rooted in the non-interference principle, consensus-based decision-making, and incrementalism, collectively known as the *ASEAN Way*—has enabled it to function as a flexible and institutionally robust platform for multilateralism. Compared with other regional groupings in the Global South, ASEAN demonstrates relatively high levels of institutionalization, diplomatic cohesion, and external engagement capacity.

This study examines how ASEAN Centrality may serve as a practical and normative model for cooperation within the Global South amid intensifying geopolitical competition. It is guided by four key research questions. First, what historical and institutional processes have shaped ASEAN Centrality, and how does ASEAN's cooperative structure differ from that of other regional organizations in the Global South? Second, how does ASEAN navigate external pressures—particularly US-China strategic rivalry—while preserving autonomy and diplomatic balance? Third, what opportunities and limitations arise when applying ASEAN Centrality as a model for

broader Global South cooperation? Fourth, what structural and political challenges confront ASEAN today, and what institutional and strategic reforms are necessary to strengthen its viability as a regional and cross-regional model?

To address these questions, the analysis explores the historical evolution of ASEAN Centrality, the principles and dynamics of its multilateral diplomacy, and its distinctiveness relative to other regional arrangements. The study further assesses ASEAN's engagement strategies, its efforts to institutionalize cooperative norms, and its potential to serve as both a facilitator of regional cooperation and a source of normative innovation in the Global South. In doing so, it seeks to illuminate the conditions under which ASEAN Centrality may evolve from a regional organizing principle into a broader template for multilateral cooperation in an era of global governance transition.

II . ASEAN Centrality and Regional Cooperation

2.1. The Historical Evolution of ASEAN Centrality

Since the end of the Cold War, ASEAN Centrality has expanded well beyond the political and diplomatic spheres to encompass substantial economic and security dimensions. Economically, ASEAN has deepened regional integration through initiatives such as the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and has assumed a leading role in shaping large-scale multilateral trade arrangements, most notably the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) (Jie 2021: 155). In addition, the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) and various sector-specific agreements have accelerated intra-regional economic cooperation while simultaneously strengthening ASEAN's connectivity with external economic partners and global production networks (Anwar 2024: 42). These efforts demonstrate ASEAN's broader commitment not only to market integration but also to narrowing development disparities and promoting inclusive and sustainable economic growth among member states (Jhamb & Singh 2018: 137). Through these frameworks, ASEAN has increasingly positioned itself as a central hub linking regional and global

economic dynamics.

In the security realm, ASEAN has institutionalized an extensive network of cooperative platforms, including the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM), with the aim of mitigating regional tensions, encouraging dialogue, and strengthening confidence-building measures among participating states (Mueller 2021: 750). The ARF functions as a key venue for addressing both regional and extra-regional security concerns through multilateral consultation, while the ADMM facilitates practical defense cooperation and collective responses to emerging security threats such as maritime disputes, terrorism, cybersecurity, and transnational crime (Budiana 2024: 3). By promoting continuous communication and preventive diplomacy, these institutions have contributed to reducing the risk of open military confrontation and reinforcing ASEAN's reputation as a stabilizing force within regional geopolitics. Furthermore, the adoption of the ASEAN Charter in 2007 represented a significant milestone by formally codifying ASEAN Centrality and enhancing ASEAN's legal, institutional, and normative status as a rules-based regional organization (Ferarú 2015: 31).

By the early twenty-first century, ASEAN Centrality had gradually begun to transcend the geographical boundaries of Southeast Asia itself. The establishment of the East Asia Summit (EAS) in 2005, which brought together major powers including the United States, China, Japan, India, and others, institutionalized ASEAN's position at the core of wider regional architectures and strategic dialogues (Shimizu 2021: 5). As geopolitical competition among major powers intensified, ASEAN's role as a neutral convener and intermediary became increasingly valuable. Consequently, major states came to recognize ASEAN as an indispensable regional partner capable of facilitating dialogue, maintaining regional balance, and supporting multilateral cooperation. This recognition significantly enhanced ASEAN's diplomatic visibility, international legitimacy, and strategic leverage within the broader Indo-Pacific order.

At the same time, the growing political and economic

influence of the Global South has encouraged ASEAN to further emphasize the ASEAN Way—characterized by non-interference, informality, consensus-building, and gradualism—as a distinctive diplomatic approach for preserving internal unity while expanding collaboration with partners across the developing world (Brender 2024: 8). ASEAN’s contemporary strategic orientation therefore extends beyond short-term crisis management toward broader goals of long-term regional integration, sustainable development, institutional resilience, and strategic autonomy. In an increasingly complex and competitive international environment, maintaining ASEAN Centrality will require more proactive regional leadership, stronger institutional cohesion, deeper integration initiatives, and enhanced diplomatic coherence among member states.

2.2. Geopolitical Competition and ASEAN’s Distinctiveness

ASEAN has consistently sought to mitigate geopolitical rivalry by utilizing its multilateral frameworks to encourage dialogue, reduce tensions, and cultivate mutual trust among regional and extra-regional actors (Mueller 2021: 751). Institutions such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN+3, and the East Asia Summit (EAS) not only facilitate communication among major powers but also create structured and predictable environments in which strategic competition can be managed peacefully. These platforms provide opportunities for preventive diplomacy, confidence-building, and regular consultation, thereby reducing the likelihood that regional disputes escalate into open confrontation. At the same time, ASEAN-led economic initiatives—including the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)—have strengthened economic interdependence across the Indo-Pacific by linking ASEAN economies more deeply with external partners, contributing to regional stability through mutually beneficial economic ties (Jie 2021: 159). Through this dual emphasis on security dialogue and economic integration, ASEAN has reinforced its role as a mediator and stabilizing force within the evolving regional order.

ASEAN’s strategic resilience is deeply rooted in the ASEAN Way, a distinctive diplomatic approach emphasizing non-interference, informality, consultation, and consensus-based decision-making

(Mueller 2021: 752). These principles have provided ASEAN with the flexibility and inclusiveness necessary to balance the competing interests of major powers while preserving its own autonomous voice in regional affairs. Rather than relying on rigid institutional enforcement, ASEAN prioritizes gradual accommodation and continuous dialogue, allowing member states with diverse political systems and national interests to maintain cooperation despite internal differences. This diplomatic culture has also strengthened trust and cohesion among member states, enabling ASEAN to operate as a coordinating hub amid intensifying geopolitical competition and external pressure. The ASEAN Way therefore functions not merely as a procedural norm, but as a strategic mechanism for maintaining regional unity and institutional continuity.

ASEAN's distinctiveness becomes even more apparent when compared with other regional organizations within the Global South, including the African Union (AU), MERCOSUR, and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Although these organizations have articulated ambitious visions for regional integration and cooperation, many continue to face challenges stemming from political fragmentation, weak institutionalization, and limited enforcement capacity. The AU, for example, has pursued deeper continental integration, yet its effectiveness has often been constrained by the diversity of political systems among member states, recurring conflicts, and persistent shortages of financial and institutional resources (Shintaro 2023: 703). MERCOSUR has likewise struggled to sustain momentum due to recurring political and economic divergences—particularly between Brazil and Argentina—as well as its historically protectionist and inward-looking trade orientation. Similarly, SAARC has experienced prolonged stagnation because of the enduring rivalry between India and Pakistan, a geopolitical tension so persistent that even the organization's routine summits have frequently been delayed or suspended altogether (Shintaro 2023: 706).

Beyond simple descriptive comparison, ASEAN's relative success can be explained through several institutional and political characteristics. Its flexible and informal institutional design allows

adaptation without creating institutional paralysis, while the practice of sustained middle-power diplomacy among member states helps prevent domination by any single regional actor. Moreover, ASEAN's gradualist approach has enabled the accumulation of trust and cooperation over time, in contrast to the more rigid, confrontational, or politically fragmented structures seen in many other regional organizations. This incremental model of cooperation has allowed ASEAN to maintain relevance despite significant internal diversity and external geopolitical pressures.

In contrast to many comparable organizations, ASEAN has maintained relatively stable patterns of regional cooperation, expanded its external partnerships, and institutionalized mechanisms that reinforce strategic flexibility and diplomatic centrality (Menon 2021: 6). Its ability to accommodate diversity while preserving institutional continuity has become a major source of international credibility. Consequently, ASEAN's relative stability and adaptive governance model have increasingly attracted attention as a potential framework for broader Global South cooperation in an era characterized by geopolitical uncertainty, intensifying major-power rivalry, and growing demands for inclusive multilateral governance.

III. Characteristics and Functions of ASEAN Centrality

3.1. Strategic Cooperation Model

ASEAN's neutral and multilateral diplomatic approach has emerged as one of its core strategies for preserving regional stability amid intensifying great-power rivalry and geopolitical uncertainty (Ha & Cha 2024: 12). By deliberately avoiding formal alignment with any single major power and instead maintaining constructive and balanced relations with multiple partners—including the United States, China, Japan, India, and others—ASEAN has sought to secure and preserve its strategic autonomy (Anwar 2024: 44). This balancing strategy enables ASEAN member states to avoid becoming overly dependent on external powers while simultaneously maximizing diplomatic and economic opportunities. ASEAN's autonomous positioning not only contributes to regional stability but also

strengthens its credibility as an impartial convener, mediator, and facilitator within the broader Indo-Pacific order. In this sense, neutrality has become not a passive posture, but an active diplomatic strategy aimed at sustaining regional equilibrium and institutional relevance.

ASEAN actively employs multilateral mechanisms such as ASEAN+3 and the East Asia Summit (EAS) to encourage cooperation, manage tensions, and deepen regional interdependence (Jie 2021: 146). These frameworks create institutionalized spaces in which major and middle powers can engage in regular dialogue, thereby reducing mistrust and lowering the risk of strategic escalation. Through these mechanisms, ASEAN maintains a central role in regional governance while simultaneously moderating competition among larger powers. ASEAN's multilayered diplomatic strategy is therefore designed not only to shield member states from the negative spillover effects of geopolitical rivalry, but also to protect regional political and economic interests through consultation, coordination, and cooperative engagement. By embedding great-power interactions within ASEAN-led institutions, ASEAN strengthens its capacity to shape regional agendas despite the asymmetry of power among participating states.

Importantly, ASEAN Centrality is not merely a symbolic or rhetorical concept; it functions as a substantive source of diplomatic bargaining leverage and institutional legitimacy. For instance, despite serious internal divergences following the Myanmar military coup, ASEAN collectively adopted the Five-Point Consensus as a coordinated regional response intended to preserve organizational unity and maintain diplomatic credibility (Bae 2022: 3). Although the implementation of the consensus has remained uneven and faced considerable criticism, the episode nevertheless demonstrates ASEAN's commitment to collective diplomacy and consensus-building even on highly sensitive political issues. It also illustrates ASEAN's preference for engagement and dialogue rather than coercive intervention, reflecting the enduring influence of the ASEAN Way in regional crisis management.

At the same time, ASEAN has sought to diversify its diplomatic

and strategic partnerships by strengthening cooperation with the European Union, India, Korea, Australia, and other external actors. This diversification strategy helps reduce excessive dependence on any single major power while preserving ASEAN's diplomatic flexibility and strategic space. Guided by the principle of "inclusive openness," ASEAN aims to harmonize competing interests and promote cooperative regionalism while continuing to uphold non-alignment, neutrality, and non-interference as foundational norms (Lombok et al. 2024: 63). Such an approach allows ASEAN to maintain broad external engagement without compromising its institutional autonomy or regional cohesion.

Beyond traditional state-centric diplomacy, ASEAN has increasingly emphasized the importance of soft-power instruments, including cultural exchange, educational cooperation, humanitarian assistance, and people-to-people connectivity. Through the three pillars of the ASEAN Community—Political-Security, Economic, and Socio-Cultural—ASEAN seeks to broaden its regional influence in ways that complement material and strategic power. Initiatives promoting cultural interaction, digital and physical connectivity, academic exchange, tourism, and humanitarian collaboration contribute to trust-building and social integration across Southeast Asia. These efforts also help ASEAN cultivate an international reputation as a constructive, cooperative, and norm-shaping regional actor rather than merely a platform for intergovernmental negotiation (Ishikawa 2021: 24). As a result, ASEAN's influence increasingly derives not only from institutional centrality, but also from its ability to project values of dialogue, inclusiveness, and regional cooperation in an increasingly polarized international environment.

3.2. Potential as a Model for the Global South

ASEAN represents a unique example of a regional organization built among states with distinct political systems, uneven levels of development, and diverse strategic orientations. Despite these asymmetries, ASEAN has managed to institutionalize cooperation under principles of mutual respect and non-coercive decision-making—an outcome that resonates strongly with other Global South

regions seeking feasible and inclusive models of cooperation.

The ASEAN model is characterized by inclusiveness, flexibility, and gradualism, with decision-making rooted in consultation and consensus rather than formalized, coercive rule-enforcement (Agastia 2021: 45). ASEAN also adapts external norms to local contexts, ensuring that cooperation aligns with the region's political realities rather than externally imposed standards (Menon 2021: 15).

ASEAN demonstrates its relevance for Global South cooperation in concrete areas such as development cooperation, trade facilitation, infrastructure development, digital transformation, and the energy transition. RCEP and AFTA illustrate ASEAN's capacity to drive economic integration among developing economies, providing tangible evidence that South-South cooperation can achieve scalable institutionalization (Lim 2024; Kim 2024). RCEP, in particular—now the world's largest trade agreement—serves as an alternative model to traditional, Global North-led trade regimes by incorporating a mix of advanced and developing economies (Shimizu 2021: 9).

Beyond trade, ASEAN initiatives promote knowledge-sharing, technology transfer, and human-capacity development, aligning with the priorities of Global South regions. The ASEAN Smart Cities Network (ASCN) exemplifies transboundary learning and provides a blueprint for digital urban development, influencing similar agendas in Africa and South Asia (Tan et al. 2021: 2). Internally, ASEAN also promotes equitable development through the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI), which focuses on narrowing gaps between more developed and less developed members such as Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar. This combination of economic integration and targeted support enhances ASEAN's coherence and offers a replicable model for other Global South regions facing internal inequalities (Jhamb & Singh 2018: 140).

While ASEAN Centrality presents a compelling model, its transferability is not universal and depends on specific structural conditions. First, a tradition of middle-power-driven multilateral diplomacy is essential. ASEAN member states have historically engaged in cooperative balancing rather than hegemonic

competition. Second, a geopolitical environment that allows partial strategic autonomy is necessary. Regions fully dominated by major-power rivalry may lack the space required for autonomous multilateralism. Third, a minimum level of institutionalization and accumulated cooperative experience is required. ASEAN's effectiveness is rooted in decades of gradual institution-building, which cannot be easily replicated in regions lacking similar historical trajectories. These conditions suggest that ASEAN Centrality should be understood not as a universal model, but as a conditional framework adaptable to specific regional contexts. However, the ASEAN model is deeply embedded in the historical and geopolitical context of Southeast Asia. The absence of similar conditions—such as relatively stable interstate relations or established norms of diplomatic restraint—may limit its applicability in other regions of the Global South.

3.3. ASEAN Centrality and Regional Initiative

ASEAN Centrality is increasingly evolving from a simple balancing mechanism into a more active form of regional initiative. Rather than functioning merely as a buffer zone between competing major powers, ASEAN has gradually positioned itself as a proactive rule-maker, institutional coordinator, and agenda-setter within the broader Indo-Pacific order. This transformation reflects ASEAN's growing institutional confidence and its desire to maintain strategic relevance in an increasingly competitive geopolitical environment. ASEAN Centrality today therefore represents not only a defensive strategy for preserving autonomy, but also an effort to shape regional governance.

ASEAN has also moved beyond its earlier role as a passive recipient of external assistance by developing institutional mechanisms that emphasize regional ownership, collective responsibility, and cooperative problem-solving (Budiana 2024: 5). This shift is particularly visible in ASEAN's response to the Myanmar crisis. Although criticized for slow implementation and limited enforcement, ASEAN adopted the Five-Point Consensus as a distinctly regional initiative without direct external imposition, reflecting its continued preference for dialogue, engagement, and

negotiated solutions over coercive intervention (Bae 2022: 3).

ASEAN's expanding agenda-setting role is especially evident in non-traditional security areas such as climate change, public health, disaster management, food and energy security, and digital governance. In these fields, ASEAN has developed cooperative frameworks and coordination mechanisms that complement or balance major-power initiatives (Ashley 2023: 71). Efforts in pandemic preparedness, regional disaster response, and digital connectivity standards reinforce ASEAN's growing role as a facilitator of regional governance and policy coordination.

Ultimately, ASEAN Centrality embodies a cooperative model grounded in inclusiveness, non-interference, gradual institutionalization, and consensus-based diplomacy. These principles make ASEAN an increasingly attractive reference point for Global South states seeking alternatives to externally driven regional orders. ASEAN's comparative advantage lies in its relatively institutionalized mechanisms for dialogue and cooperation, its diplomatic inclusiveness, and its strategic flexibility in adapting to shifting geopolitical conditions. ASEAN also retains a unique capacity to convene both major and middle powers within ASEAN-led frameworks, preserving its relevance amid broader global power transitions.

Taken together, these characteristics have elevated ASEAN beyond a conventional regional organization. ASEAN has increasingly emerged as a platform for multilateral diplomacy, a facilitator of regional governance, and a conditionally transferable model for broader Global South cooperation.

IV. Challenges to ASEAN Centrality

4.1. US-China Strategic Competition and ASEAN's Position

The deepening strategic rivalry between the United States and China represents the defining feature of the 21st-century geopolitical landscape, and ASEAN finds itself at the center of this emerging order (Jie 2021: 139). Geographically situated within the Indo-Pacific

and economically interconnected with both powers, ASEAN faces diplomatic pressures that transcend mere balancing. The region must now redefine its role not as a passive moderator but as an active architect of regional norms and governance structures (Paul 2024: 453).

The United States continues to expand its security-oriented initiatives under the banner of a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific,” supported by platforms such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS). Although these arrangements do not formally exclude ASEAN, they risk diluting ASEAN’s normative principles and marginalizing its central role in regional security architecture (Bae 2022: 4). China, meanwhile, advances its influence through major infrastructure projects and the Digital Silk Road while engaging Southeast Asian states bilaterally in ways that can sidestep ASEAN-led multilateral frameworks (Yang & Ha 2023: 6).

This dual-track competition imposes structural constraints on ASEAN but also—paradoxically—enhances its strategic value. As both Washington and Beijing seek to cultivate ASEAN as a cooperative partner, ASEAN gains bargaining leverage and expanded diplomatic space. The United States’ Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) and China’s reliance on RCEP as an economic and strategic tool exemplify this dynamic (Paul 2024: 468). Under these conditions, ASEAN’s ability to maintain “relative neutrality” becomes a form of strategic utility rather than mere hedging.

To sustain its relevance, ASEAN must clearly differentiate neutrality from strategic ambiguity. A passive or ambiguous stance risks eroding ASEAN’s credibility and enabling great powers to bypass ASEAN-led mechanisms. Instead, ASEAN must articulate value-based principles—openness, inclusiveness, rules-based cooperation—and encourage both the United States and China to engage within ASEAN’s institutional frameworks.

In essence, US-China rivalry presents both risk and opportunity. If ASEAN reinforces its internal mechanisms and enhances its agenda-setting capacity, it can transform geopolitical pressure into a catalyst for strengthening Centrality. The challenge is

to shift from being merely a buffer zone to becoming a crossroads of cooperation that shapes regional governance.

4.2. Structural Limitations and Institutional Constraints

While ASEAN Centrality has been an important organizing principle in Southeast Asia, its effectiveness continues to be constrained by persistent structural, political, and institutional challenges.

First, internal cohesion remains weak and uneven. ASEAN's ten member states vary widely in political systems, levels of development, strategic priorities, and external alignments. The South China Sea dispute exemplifies these divergences: while Vietnam and the Philippines adopt firm stances opposing China's maritime expansion, Cambodia and Laos maintain foreign policy orientations aligned closely with Beijing. These cleavages provide opportunities for external powers to exploit divisions and undermine ASEAN's collective bargaining power (Ha & Cha 2024: 10).

Second, consensus-based decision-making limits speed and effectiveness. Although consensus ensures equality and prevents domination by larger members, it often results in delayed or diluted responses to urgent regional issues (Jie 2021: 152). The Myanmar military coup highlighted this institutional rigidity; ASEAN's delayed and cautious approach was widely criticized by the international community (Bae 2022: 3).

Third, ASEAN lacks meaningful enforcement mechanisms. Although the ASEAN Charter establishes normative aspirations, it provides limited tools for ensuring compliance. For example, the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ) Treaty carries symbolic weight but lacks mechanisms for monitoring or sanctioning violations (Nandang 2019: 83). This gap contributes to perceptions of ASEAN as more adept at establishing norms than at implementing them.

Fourth, ASEAN faces reputational challenges concerning its external effectiveness. Critics increasingly portray ASEAN as overly cautious or institutionally weak, citing its limited influence over great-power behavior and perceived inability to respond decisively

to internal crises. Such narratives threaten ASEAN's image as a credible convener and undermine the legitimacy of its Centrality. To enhance the practical effectiveness of ASEAN Centrality, institutional reforms and strategic recalibrations are necessary.

Key reforms for strengthening ASEAN Centrality include making decision-making more flexible by moving beyond uniform consensus and allowing issue-based differentiation—such as majority voting or “ASEAN-X” formulas—for urgent or highly technical matters like climate action or public health, thereby improving responsiveness without weakening unity. At the same time, ASEAN must expand common interests and deepen interdependence by advancing joint initiatives in critical sectors including digital governance, supply chain resilience, renewable energy, smart logistics, and emerging technologies such as AI and big data; these efforts not only enhance economic integration but also reinforce political cohesion and a shared regional identity.

Strengthening the implementation capacity of ASEAN norms is also essential, which requires more effective monitoring mechanisms, clearer compliance expectations, and incentives that encourage cooperation and reduce gaps in execution across member states. In sum, although ASEAN faces structural and institutional constraints, these challenges are far from insurmountable, and by embracing flexible decision-making, cultivating shared strategic priorities, and improving enforcement capacities, ASEAN Centrality can develop into a more durable and effective model for the Global South.

V. Conclusion

This study examined the strategic potential and structural limitations of ASEAN Centrality as a model of cooperation for the Global South amid intensifying geopolitical competition. Within a complex historical and institutional context, ASEAN has developed a cooperative framework grounded in multilateralism, neutrality, and incremental integration. Through mechanisms such as ASEAN+3, the EAS, and the RCEP, ASEAN has strengthened both internal cohesion

and external partnerships while maintaining relative institutional continuity despite political and economic diversity among member states. These characteristics distinguish ASEAN from many other regional organizations in the Global South that continue to face fragmentation, weak institutionalization, and limited enforcement capacity.

The analysis also demonstrates that ASEAN is gradually evolving from a neutral broker into a more proactive agenda-setter. In areas such as climate governance, public health, digital transformation, and disaster management, ASEAN has sought to develop cooperative frameworks that complement or balance major-power initiatives. This growing role highlights ASEAN's increasing relevance as a facilitator of regional governance and multilateral cooperation.

At the same time, ASEAN Centrality continues to face significant constraints. Intensifying US-China strategic competition, internal heterogeneity among member states, consensus-based decision-making, and limited enforcement mechanisms all weaken ASEAN's ability to respond quickly and cohesively to regional challenges. To strengthen its long-term viability, ASEAN must improve institutional flexibility, deepen shared strategic interests, and enhance the implementation capacity of regional agreements.

In conclusion, ASEAN Centrality should not be understood as a universally applicable model, but rather as a conditionally transferable framework. Its relevance to the Global South depends on specific political, institutional, and geopolitical conditions. Nevertheless, ASEAN's experience demonstrates how middle and smaller powers can pursue cooperation, strategic autonomy, and regional stability through flexible and inclusive multilateralism in an increasingly fragmented international order.

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