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Built on Sand, Not Steel: Colonial Legacies and ASEAN's Struggles for Integration

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Abstract

This article investigates how colonial legacies shape integration processes within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Frequently compared to the European Union (EU), ASEAN has made notable progress in economic cooperation over recent decades, but it faces criticism for its fragmentation and limited consensus on high-stakes political issues like the South China Sea disputes, Myanmar's crisis, and US-China rivalry. Additionally, ASEAN's security cooperation remains sporadic, falling short of forming a cohesive security community. This article conceptualizes ASEAN as a "security community of the colonized states," given that nearly all its members were once under Western colonial rule-by powers such as Britain, France, the Netherlands, Spain, and the United States-during the 19th and early 20th centuries. This article identifies three key characteristics-lingering distrust, inherent flexibility, and being a group still in the making-that shape and influence ASEAN's integration and consensus-building efforts, particularly regarding the South China Sea disputes and US-China rivalry.

Keywords

ASEAN, colonial legacies, integration, South China Sea disputes, US-China rivalry

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Introduction

Founded in 1967 and expanded in the 1980s, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has become an increasingly influential player in both regional and international affairs (ASEAN 2025). The organization's economic integration deepened significantly with the signing of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in 2020, where ASEAN was a central driving force alongside other key countries such as China, Japan, and South Korea (ASEAN 2020b). Notably, ASEAN also launched its first formal document, *The Narrative of ASEAN Identity*, at the 37th ASEAN Summit in 2020, emphasizing a collective identity of "a we-feeling" and a sense of belonging among its member states and citizens (ASEAN 2020a).

However, despite these positive developments, ASEAN continues to face significant challenges in achieving consensus on a plethora of high-level political issues such as disputes in the South China Sea, the Mekong River, Myanmar's ongoing civil conflict, and so on. More recently, the organization has struggled with the growing pressure of the US-China rivalry, finding it difficult to adopt a unified stance. For example, following the Trump administration's announcement of reciprocal tariffs in April 2025, ASEAN countries found themselves caught in the crossfire-facing US tariffs while being inundated with redirected Chinese goods. Some states sought to comply with Washington's demands to curb the rerouting of Chinese exports, while China, in turn, has warned against any actions that might undermine its interests, highlighting how ASEAN countries risk being trapped in the escalating trade conflict (Xiao and Liu 2025). For these reasons, ASEAN is frequently compared to the European Union (EU), particularly in terms of integration and cohesion (Plummer 2006).

Particularly, a persistent question in international relations is why ASEAN's level of integration lags behind that of the EU. Scholars have pointed to several factors, including the diverse political regimes of its member states (Rattanasevee 2014), ASEAN's institutional framework (Kim 2011), the independent pursuit of political cohesion and economic

integration (Severino 2007), and the absence of a dominant power to drive deeper integration (Rattanasevee 2014). However, less attention has been given to the historical legacies that may shape ASEAN's integration, particularly the impact of colonialism. This article seeks to address that gap by exploring how the region's colonial and postcolonial legacies, particularly those shaped during the Cold War, have influenced ASEAN's integration. The integration here does not merely imply economic elements, but also includes political relations.

This article argues that the colonial experience, shared by nearly all ASEAN member states except for Thailand, continues to shape interstate relations and the organization's integration efforts. While the colonial histories of Southeast Asian countries are diverse and cannot be easily generalized, this article foregrounds a foundational regional condition: a collective memory of being colonized. Within this framework, ASEAN is conceptualized as a "security community of the colonized states," characterized by three defining traits including lingering distrust, inherent flexibility, and a group still in the making. These traits are not accidental but serve as key mechanisms through which colonial legacies continue to influence ASEAN's political integration.

More specifically, the article contends that ASEAN's often-criticized fragmentation and limited consensus on high-stakes political and security issues, such as the South China Sea disputes or navigating the US-China rivalry, are not signs of institutional weakness, but instead reflect a deliberate strategic posture rooted in the colonial past. This posture is guided by two foundational premises: first, the region's colonial encounters were uneven, with each country shaped by different imperial powers and administrative legacies, making uniformity both difficult and undesirable. Second, its commitment to consensus, non-interference, and sovereign equality reflects a normative response to shared colonial trauma.[1] Rather than a deficit, ASEAN's reluctance toward coercive or inter-

[1] I am grateful to anonymous Reviewer 1 for suggesting the inclusion of these two foundational premises in the article's argument.

ventionist integration is better understood as a post-colonial model of cooperation that values autonomy and mutual respect over hierarchical integration models.

The article is divided into four main sections. The first section elaborates on the concept of a "security community of the colonized states." The second and third sections analyze how three defining characteristics of the "security community of the colonized states" are reflected in two cases of the South China Sea disputes and the ongoing US-China rivalry. The last section summarizes the key findings of this article.

ASEAN as a Security Community of the Colonized States

European colonization of Southeast Asia dates back to the 16th and 17th centuries when European powers competed for dominance over the spice trade, particularly in commodities such as pepper and cinnamon. This period of colonization began with the Portuguese capture of Malacca in 1511, followed by the Dutch and Spanish expansion. Spain colonized the Philippines in 1599, while the Dutch, through the Dutch East India Company, took control of Sunda Kelapa (modern-day Jakarta) in 1619 (Osborne 2004; Owen 2005; Ba and Beeson 2008, 17-33). By the 19th century, nearly all Southeast Asian countries had fallen under European rule as colonies or protectorates, with the notable exception of Siam (now Thailand), which later served as a buffer state between British Burma and French Indochina (LePoer 1989; Booth 2007). While the pursuit of wealth and natural resources was a primary motivator, European colonization during this period was also driven by geostrategic rivalries between the major European powers (Owen 2005).

Following the end of World War II, Southeast Asian countries gradually declared their independence. Decolonization proceeded rapidly in the region with countries starting to construct modern states more or less modeled after the Western system (Booth 2007). As newly independent nations, they were vulnerable to external influence, particularly from

their former colonizer states. Simultaneously, colonial legacies–enduring impacts of colonial rule–have continued to shape the political, economic, and social structures of former colonies long after colonial powers have left. In this article, the colonial legacies in Southeast Asia are understood as including both spatial–political boundaries established during colonial rule and enduring conceptual norms such as sovereignty, autonomy, and equality.

Anne Booth (2007, 16–17) argues that these legacies account for the divergent economic and social development strategies adopted by post–independence governments. These strategies, she argues, were largely influenced by the distinct political regimes that emerged following the decolonization process after 1945. Nevertheless, despite limited democratic foundations and strong nationalist sentiment, none of the newly emerging nation–states during decolonization sought to return to precolonial forms of government (Frederik 2018).

During the Cold War, Southeast Asia became a region divided by the global competition between capitalist and communist blocs. This ideological confrontation manifested as a struggle for influence, threatening the fragile sovereignty of newly independent Southeast Asian states from the late 1940s onward. In this context, the US spearheaded the creation of the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1955, headquartered in Bangkok, Thailand. SEATO was established under the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty signed on September 8, 1954, in Manila, the Philippines, as part of the Truman Doctrine's broader strategy to forge anti–communist alliances (Franklin 2006, 1).

Despite its regional name, SEATO primarily consisted of non–Southeast Asian countries, with only the Philippines and Thailand being the actual members from the region. As a more regionally grounded initiative, ASEAN was established in 1967 by then anti–communist states, including Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Singapore, with the goal of preventing the spread of communism in the region. Initially, ASEAN functioned as an anti–communist coalition, which partly contributed to a tense and polarized regional atmosphere (Acharya 2013, 149–179). However, with the end of the Cold War, ASEAN transitioned

into a period of reconciliation and expansion (Acharya 2013, 180–212).

At its inception, ASEAN's member states united to confront common external threats, particularly the spread of communism in Southeast Asia. However, these anti-communist nations did not have a unified approach to addressing these threats collectively. Instead of forming a single political entity, each state retained its independence and distinct identity. At its core, ASEAN can be understood as a "security community of the colonized states." This security community is pluralistic, as its members preserve their sovereignty and independence. According to Amitav Acharya in his 2009 book *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order,* a pluralistic security community consists of sovereign states in a transnational region whose populations hold a stable expectation of peaceful change. Two key characteristics define such a community: the absence of war among its members and the lack of significant organized preparations for conflict between them (Acharya 2009, 16).

Meanwhile, the term "colonized states" refers to the shared history of colonial subjugation by Western powers experienced by nearly all of ASEAN's founding members. Despite later expansions that included former adversaries such as communist Vietnam, ASEAN retains its identity as a security community of the colonized states, blending its original characteristics with new dynamics. Three key traits, as coined by this article, define this security community and shape ASEAN's integration and internal relations: lingering distrust, inherent flexibility, and its evolving nature as a group still in the making.

The first defining trait is the lingering distrust within ASEAN. This distrust stems from the region's colonial past, where nearly all Southeast Asian countries were subjugated by Western powers. While countries do not have a uniform colonial experience, their shared history and collective memory of colonization have led to a persistent wariness toward the intentions of great powers and mutual suspicion among ASEAN member states. As lesser powers, they often assume that larger nations may harbor harmful intentions or view them as pawns in broader geopolitical games. Vietnamese scholar Pham Quang Minh observed that during the war,

Vietnam often became a pawn in the US–China–Soviet ideological and power struggle, with its interests compromised during great power rapprochement. The lesson for Vietnam is to avoid taking sides and maintain a balance while strengthening its own position (Minh 2015). The historical experience of colonization reminds Southeast Asian countries that when Western powers approached them, their independence was compromised, their territories were lost, and their autonomy was undermined.

As a result, Southeast Asian nations have become highly sensitive to concepts such as independence, sovereignty, autonomy, and equality–principles that, though originally developed in the West, have taken on new meanings in the Global South. For example, the idea of sovereignty emerged in Europe during the religious wars, as part of efforts to transcend the authority of the City of God. It was initially framed as a right for European princes to choose their own form of Christianity. However, in the centuries that followed, sovereignty was largely denied to colonies, with non–Western regions excluded from its benefits. It was only after World War II, during the wave of decolonization, that the concept of sovereignty was extended to former colonies. While the definition of sovereignty has shifted over time, particularly in its application to Christian nations, achieving sovereignty has long represented a significant triumph for non–white, non–Christian communities–especially those in the Global South that had historically been colonized (Shih 2024, 205–206).

The reason Southeast Asian states place great emphasis on these concepts is clear: sovereignty, historically violated by the Western colonizer states, has become especially crucial to protect. Likewise, autonomy, once manipulated or undermined by foreign powers, is now held in even higher regard. The historical experience of colonialism has made safeguarding these principles a priority, as they represent not only political independence but also the preservation of national dignity and self–determination.

While colonial legacies initially instilled this emphasis, the post–1945 decolonization process and the Cold War further reinforced these priorities. Notably, the 1955 Bandung Conference, held in Indonesia, provided a platform for newly independent Asian and African nations to

articulate shared principles–such as respect for sovereignty, non–intervention, peaceful coexistence, and neutrality—many of which echoed the *Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence* outlined in the 1954 Sino–Indian Agreement (Fifield 1958). These ideas directly influenced ASEAN's foundational emphasis on sovereignty and its enduring norm of non–interference. The spirit of Bandung also carried into the formation of the Non–Aligned Movement in 1961, which included several Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia, Myanmar, and Cambodia. This movement sought to protect the autonomy of developing nations amid the polarizing pressures of the Cold War (Munro 2025).

As a result, ASEAN countries are particularly vigilant in ensuring respect for each other's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence. Interestingly, despite borrowing these concepts from their former Western colonizer states, Southeast Asian nations now champion them even more fervently. In his 2024 book, *Relations and Roles in China's Internationalism: Rediscovering Confucianism in a Pluriversal World,* Shih Chih–yu argues that sovereignty remains at the core of security issues, and only former colonial powers appear to have successfully achieved de–securitization (Shih 2024, 209). In contrast, a Global South security community—composed of former colonized states–places a strong emphasis on sovereign independence, unlike the security community of former colonizers, such as the EU, which seeks to restrain sovereignty to foster cooperation and integration. For the Global South, sovereignty is seen as essential to maintaining autonomy and addressing historical injustices, rather than something to be limited in the pursuit of regional integration (Shih 2024, 211).

ASEAN's commitment to the principle of non–intervention vividly reflects this sensitivity. The colonial experience has made member states acutely aware of any perceived infringements on their sovereignty or autonomy. This sensitivity was further reinforced by the Cold War's polarized geopolitical environment, which heightened the urgency for Southeast Asian countries to safeguard their independence and autonomy. The emphasis on non–interference, articulated during the 1955 Bandung Conference (Munro 2025), became a foundational norm. As a result, ASEAN

has consistently upheld non—intervention, a principle later enshrined in the *2008 ASEAN Charter* (ASEAN Main Portal 2008). Even in situations where a member state or leader is accused of violating human rights, the principle remains intact, despite international calls for intervention, as evident in the case of Myanmar's civil war since 2021 (UN News 2023). Although this stance may seem counterintuitive, the non-intervention principle actually helps reduce the level of distrust among member states.

Additionally, this lingering distrust fuels the member states' quest for equality, particularly given the power imbalances in international politics and within Southeast Asia itself. Smaller states fear being dominated by larger ones while engaging in international cooperation, making equality an essential principle in ASEAN's framework. To address this, ASEAN has adopted a consensus-based decision-making model (ASEAN Main Portal 2008), where each country, regardless of their size, has an equal vote. This symbolic equality helps counterbalance the structural inequality in the broader international system, ultimately fostering trust among member states.

The second defining characteristic is the inherent flexibility within ASEAN. While ASEAN is a security community, meaning member states cooperate in security and military matters to reduce security dilemmas or deter perceived external threats to their survival, it does not operate like a Western-style alliance. ASEAN countries are cautious about committing to strict security agreements or fixed alliances. For example, Thailand's alliance with the US, established by the 1954 Manila Pact, is not seen by Thailand as holding significant obligations. Instead, it serves more as a symbol of friendship and goodwill, which explains why the US-Thailand relationship has gradually evolved, despite the formal alliance (Shambaugh 2020).

In fact, security and military cooperation among ASEAN member states is relatively limited compared to other forms of cooperation such as trade and investment. This is because entering a security alliance often requires countries to sacrifice some degree of sovereignty and autonomy (Walt 1985)—values that ASEAN members hold in the highest regard. As a result, member states tend to avoid rigid alliances, preferring flexible,

loosely-organized, and symbolic relationships with minimal commitments and institutionalization (Acharya 2009, 63-70).

ASEAN's flexibility is also evident in its "no one-size-fits-all" approach, which often results in a preference for bilateral engagement. The organization has introduced various multi-layered arrangements, adopting different standards to accommodate the unique circumstances of each member state. If a country is unable to implement a particular policy or meet specific criteria, there is no punishments or binding regulations, allowing for a high degree of flexibility in how member states engage with ASEAN initiatives. For example, the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) operates with considerable flexibility, as it primarily functions as a consultative body without the authority to impose sanctions for human rights violations (AICHR 2009). Thus, countries like Myanmar have experienced limited pressure from within ASEAN, despite growing international concerns. Moreover, without a strict set of shared values, ASEAN implicitly relies on bilateralism. Since its inception, member states have engaged in numerous bilateral agreements to foster joint ventures, peace initiatives, and anti-terrorism campaigns (Shih 2024, 211). For ASEAN, bilateral meetings-especially face-to-face encounters between leaders-are crucial for building trust and deepening cooperation among member states (Majumdar 2015, 74).

Another key aspect of ASEAN's flexibility is its emphasis on patience, embodied in the "ASEAN Way." This approach is often characterized by a decision-making process that prioritizes extensive consultation and consensus-building among member states (Acharya 2009, 64). It also prioritizes informal, quiet diplomacy and stresses the importance of patience when addressing sensitive issues, even if it results in slow responses to pressing challenges such as the South China Sea disputes. ASEAN believes that sensitive issues can be resolved more effectively through gradual, behind-the-scenes negotiations rather than through public confrontation. In this context, patience is not seen as dangerous or ineffective; immediate solutions are not always necessary (Shih 2025).

The third defining trait-a group still in the making-captures ASEAN's ongoing process of identity building, as it strives to forge a cohe-

sive group identity and a collective self in the wake of colonial fragmentation. This aspiration is reflected in ASEAN's motto: "One Vision, One Identity, One Community" (ASEAN 2025). As a regional organization, ASEAN is often compared to the EU, and the international community–especially Western nations–has high expectations for ASEAN's role in global and regional affairs. Western countries, in particular, tend to view ASEAN as a security community similar to the EU, expecting it to act with a unified approach toward deterring threats and fostering shared prosperity. However, ASEAN's collective preferences are less clear and more unpredictable in its rise and fall (Shih 2025).

Western actors, particularly the EU and the US, often expect ASEAN to take on international and regional interventions, a stance that clashes with ASEAN's core principle of non-intervention. This Western expectation is sometimes described as a form of universalism, but it can also be seen as "disguised colonialism," where Western countries, in an attempt to mask the inhumanity of past colonialism (Shih 2024, 209), impose their own rules, values, and ethical standards on ASEAN. For former colonizer states, a multilateral regime often carries significance only when it is linked to a broader mission, such as promoting peace and human rights to nonmembers. These regimes tend to view their role as not just fostering cooperation among themselves, but also exporting their values and norms (Shih 2024, 211). In response to these external expectations, ASEAN has become somewhat "socialized," learning from and imitating the EU in various ways. ASEAN has gradually started to see itself as a distinct entity with a self-defined role in international and regional affairs (Tan 2017). At times, ASEAN may present a unified and proactive stance on pressing issues, in part to meet these external expectations.

Nevertheless, ASEAN's group identity is not solely shaped by external pressures and expectations; it also stems from its own internal agency. This group identity-building process must be understood in the broader context of Southeast Asia's shared experience of colonization. The collective identity of having been colonized fosters a sense of solidarity among ASEAN nations, despite their cultural and ideological dif-

ferences. A history of collective suffering under colonial rule can create a bond between ASEAN member states and its citizens, and this can reinforce the notion of mutual support within the group (Shih 2025).

ASEAN's ongoing process of identity-building is also evident in its promotion of "ASEAN Centrality" and its leadership in regional initiatives and mechanisms, independent of existing frameworks led by external powers. This focus on centrality is enshrined in the 2008 ASEAN Charter, which states, "ASEAN and its member states shall act in accordance with the centrality of ASEAN in external political, economic, social, and cultural relations" (Chapter 1, Article 2, m) (ASEAN Main Portal 2008). Besides, according to the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, ASEAN Centrality emphasizes that ASEAN should serve as the dominant regional platform for addressing common challenges and engaging with external powers (ASEAN 2021). In doing so, ASEAN positions itself as a hub where major powers come together to resolve regional and global security issues, with ASEAN playing a key role in facilitating these dialogues.

Nevertheless, ASEAN Centrality carries a certain degree of ambiguity and ambivalence. The uncertainty surrounding ASEAN's central role in East Asian regional governance allows for multiple interpretations of the concept, which ASEAN uses strategically to protect its members' interests. This vagueness acts as a political tool, offering the relatively weaker ASEAN countries greater flexibility in navigating complex regional dynamics (Tan 2017, 735). It also provides both ASEAN as a whole and its individual member states more diplomatic maneuverability when confronting external shocks, enabling them to adapt to shifting geopolitical circumstances without being rigidly tied to one approach or framework.

The South China Sea disputes and ASEAN

The South China Sea (SCS), located at the western edge of the Pacific Ocean, holds critical economic and geostrategic significance. Rich in

natural resources, the SCS contains approximately 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas and eleven billion barrels of oil in proved and probable reserves, with even more likely undiscovered, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration (Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative 2025). Additionally, the SCS is a vital maritime corridor, with an estimated US$3.4 trillion worth of goods transiting through its waters annually, which accounts for over 21 percent of global trade, as per recent *ChinaPower* data (China Power Team 2021). Its waters are particularly crucial for China, Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea, all of which depend heavily on the Strait of Malacca, a narrow waterway connecting the SCS with the Indian Ocean. This strategic chokepoint is a cause for concern due to its vulnerability, given the immense concentration of commercial traffic passing through it (China Power Team 2021).

What further complicates the region is the historical context of sovereignty disputes, which have persisted since at least the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Archival records suggest that Dai Viet (Vietnam) conducted the earliest known occupation of the Paracel Islands in 1816, followed by China's Qing Dynasty in 1909, and Japan in 1938 (Hayton 2022). In the present day, seven claimants–China, Taiwan, and five Southeast Asian nations (Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam)–compete for sovereignty over various islands, reefs, and waters in the SCS. These overlapping claims are considered among Asia's most dangerous flashpoints, fueling tensions between Southeast Asian countries and China (McLaughlin 2023). Simultaneously, the involvement of external powers like the US, Japan, and the EU countries, which have vested strategic interests in the region, further complicates to the situation.

ASEAN's role and stance on the SCS disputes have garnered significant attention, as the disputes primarily involve Southeast Asian nations and China. While ASEAN has consistently sought to prevent the escalation of tensions into armed conflict, as reflected in its joint statements following summits, it has struggled to achieve consensus on key issues. The organization remains divided on how to resolve the disputes, whether to welcome external powers like the US, and the scope of the

Code of Conduct (COC) in the SCS (Grossman 2023; Tung 2024). These challenges can be better understood by examining ASEAN's defining characteristics as a security community shaped by its history of colonization, which influences its cautious approach to the SCS disputes.

Distrust toward major powers, coupled with internal suspicions within ASEAN, continues to divide its member states on how to approach the SCS disputes. Smaller Southeast Asian nations, wary of the influence of larger powers, often prefer a multilateral approach to negotiations, believing they would be disadvantaged in bilateral talks with China (Kipgen 2018; Tung 2024). However, this preference for multilateralism has not gained unanimous support within ASEAN, largely due to lingering suspicions between member states and adherence to the principle of non-intervention. Some Southeast Asian claimants, eager to resolve the issue, actively raise the SCS disputes during ASEAN meetings (Tung 2024). In contrast, non-claimants like Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar show less enthusiasm, as they have no direct conflict or stake in the SCS waters. This divergence makes it difficult to convince non-claimants that resolving the SCS disputes serves the broader interests of ASEAN (Storey 2018). These non-claimant countries can easily justify their stance by pointing to the non-intervention principle, which holds that bilateral disputes should be resolved without external interference.

Distrust of ASEAN's ability as a supranational organization to effectively address territorial disputes also hampers collective action. Member states often prioritize national interests over regional concerns. Cambodia, for example, has been criticized for aligning with China on the SCS disputes. In 2012, when Cambodia chaired ASEAN, the organization failed to issue a joint statement for the first time in its history, largely because Phnom Penh obstructed the Philippines' efforts to condemn China's actions in the SCS (Thul and Grudgings 2012). Cambodia's stance is often viewed as supportive of China, prompting accusations that it acts as a "vassal state," and fueling concerns and suspicions in neighboring Vietnam (Tung 2025). However, Cambodia has countered this criticism by pointing out ASEAN's failure to support it during its territorial dispute with Thailand over the Preah Vihear Temple. In Phnom

Penh's view, if ASEAN did not stand by Cambodia in that instance, it is under no obligation to support other claimants in the SCS disputes.[2]

Taken together, this combination of distrust and adherence to the non-intervention principle prevents ASEAN from adopting a unified stance on the SCS disputes. For instance, ASEAN has remained relatively silent in supporting the Philippines during its tensions with China over the Second Thomas Shoal between 2023 and 2024 (Sanjaya 2024; Tung 2024, 20). As a result, claimants and non-claimants remain divided, and external powers, such as China and the US, have greater opportunity to influence individual ASEAN member states. The ongoing tensions among key players, coupled with the lack of progress toward a resolution, create uncertainty and trigger security dilemmas (Storey 2018). While maintaining non-intervention allows countries to safeguard their sovereignty, it also weakens ASEAN's capacity to act as a cohesive force in regional security. This fragmentation creates a power vacuum that external actors can readily exploit.

Despite not yet achieving a unified stance, ASEAN demonstrates a flexible approach in addressing disputes between its member states and China. This flexibility is evident in the joint statements released after ASEAN Summits. While some member states, particularly claimants, push to include their specific disputes with China in these statements, others resist. As a result, ASEAN often reaches a compromise by using neutral language, expressing "concerns" about actions in the SCS and calling for self-restraint and peaceful dispute resolution, as seen in the "ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Statement on Maintaining and Promoting Stability in the Maritime Sphere in Southeast Asia" released on December 30, 2023 amid growing tensions between the Philippines and China in the South China Sea (ASEAN Main Portal 2023). By employing such ambiguous wording without directly mentioning China, ASEAN manages to satisfy its member states while avoiding the risk of provoking China. Furthermore, ASEAN does not rush to respond to specific incidents

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[2] Interview with Cambodian scholars, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, November 2019.

or take immediate positions on disputes between its members and China. Instead, it shows patience, often waiting for tensions to cool before attempting to mediate or encourage reconciliation between the involved parties.

Simultaneously, this inherent flexibility also extends to ASEAN claimants themselves, who, despite overlapping claims in the SCS, continue to cooperate. For instance, during Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s state visit to Vietnam in January 2024, Manila and Hanoi signed two memoranda of understanding (MoUs) on maritime security and cooperation (Vietnam Plus 2024). In August 2024, a Vietnamese coast guard vessel, CSB-8002, made its first port visit to Manila for a joint drill with the Philippine coast guard, marking a new level of cooperation (Gomez and Calupitan 2024). In return, the Philippine Coast Guard's most advanced offshore patrol vessel, BRP Gabriela Silang, docked in Da Nang, Vietnam for the first time in April 2025, marking another step toward strengthening military ties between Manila and Hanoi (Moaje 2025). Such bilateral collaborations have occurred without objection from non-claimants within ASEAN, further showcasing the organization's adaptability. These actions underscore the ability of ASEAN claimants to set aside their differences temporarily to enhance maritime security, particularly in response to escalating tensions with China.

Additionally, flexibility is apparent in the ongoing discussions around ASEAN's decision-making process. As stated above, ASEAN operates under a consensus-based model, giving each member state an equal vote. However, concerns have arisen regarding the influence of China on certain states' voting behavior. In response, the Philippines and Vietnam have begun exploring "complementary mechanisms" that would introduce more flexibility in handling emerging security issues (Le 2016). One such mechanism is the proposal for a "majority consensus-based decision-making" model (Le 2016). This approach would allow ASEAN to issue joint statements with stronger, clearer language on disputes without requiring unanimous approval. For instance, joint statements could indicate which countries endorse a particular stance by explicitly stating, "ASEAN except country A/B/C," thus preserving flexi-

bility while enabling decisive action (Le 2016).

Moreover, Richard Heydarian, an associate professor at De La Salle University in the Philippines, has advocated for a more focused form of regional cooperation. At an international seminar in Washington, D.C., in 2019, he suggested that Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, and Malaysia–the key ASEAN countries involved in the SCS–form a "mini–lateralism" or "small ASEAN" within the broader ASEAN framework to tackle pressing issues more effectively. He argued that this smaller group should also strengthen ties with external powers such as the US, Japan, India, and Australia to balance China's influence (VOA Vietnamese 2019). While these proposals could potentially reshape ASEAN's decision–making model, they reflect a willingness within ASEAN to adapt to evolving challenges, demonstrating flexibility not only in its actions but also in its mindset.

The final defining trait of ASEAN as a security community that shapes its attitude toward the SCS disputes is its ongoing effort to build a cohesive group identity, a process influenced by its gradual socialization within the international community. Historically criticized as fragmented and lacking cohesion, ASEAN has internalized these external criticisms and sought to reshape its image, moving away from being seen as merely a "talking shop" (Lambe 2022). This shift became evident after 2012, the first year ASEAN failed to issue a joint statement since its founding. Since then, ASEAN has consistently issued statements following its summits, signaling a commitment to present a unified front. It has also sought to show that ASEAN does have shared interests and a common policy regarding managing the disputes (Hu 2023).

Simultaneously, ASEAN has communicated to external powers that if one major power succeeds in dividing ASEAN by influencing a specific member state, others could follow suit, ultimately undermining ASEAN Centrality. ASEAN Centrality is vital for maintaining a neutral and balanced approach to resolving the SCS disputes, as it ensures that the interests of all major powers in the region are considered. By emphasizing this, ASEAN aims to safeguard its central role in the region's security architecture and remind external powers to respect its leadership in man-

aging the SCS disputes (Tan 2017). As a result, all parties to the dispute have so far agreed to consider ASEAN a vehicle for promoting dialogue, recognizing its value as a platform for fostering communication and reducing tensions in the region (Majumdar 2015, 82).

The development of a group identity within ASEAN is further evident in the collective endorsement of the Declaration of Conduct (DOC) and the ongoing negotiations for a Code of Conduct (COC) in the SCS. Originally proposed by the Philippines and other claimants, these agreements have evolved from individual initiatives into a shared goal for all ASEAN member states (Thayer 2013; Zou 2021). Although the SCS disputes continue to divide ASEAN, the organization has cultivated the ability to mobilize collective support for the DOC and for the COC, demonstrating a growing sense of unity. This process reflects ASEAN's socialization, where member states have come to recognize that maintaining centrality through ASEAN-led initiatives like the DOC and COC benefits the entire group and aligns with the expectations of the international community. These developments highlight ASEAN's progress toward becoming a more institutionalized and effective supranational organization, capable of managing complex regional issues and navigating the challenges of the SCS disputes.

A security community in the storm: ASEAN amid US–China rivalry

The strategic competition between the US and China is intensifying, making it a central topic of global discussion. Governments worldwide are closely monitoring this rivalry, as it holds the potential to significantly alter the international landscape. Southeast Asia, particularly the ASEAN member states, has naturally become a focal point of this competition between the two superpowers. As Jonathan Stromseth notes, the region's proximity to China makes it particularly vulnerable to becoming a "testing ground" for China's role as a global power (Stromseth 2019, 2).

This is evident in China's initiatives, both past and present, such as

the "Going Out Strategy," the "Belt and Road Initiative," and the "Community with a Shared Future for Mankind" (CSFM), all of which have placed ASEAN countries at the center of their focus. Meanwhile, the US also views Southeast Asia as a crucial region in its efforts to counter China's influence and advance its broader strategic goals, as seen in policies like the "Rebalancing to Asia," the "Indo-Pacific Strategy," and the "Indo-Pacific Economic Framework" (IPEF). From Chinese perspectives, these initiatives are often perceived as efforts to contain China. Following the launch of the IPEF in May 2022, China claimed that the initiative was designed to disrupt regional cooperation and serve as a tool to coerce regional countries (Xinhua Net 2022).

As a result, the geopolitical structure in Southeast Asia is shifting, with both superpowers promoting their own visions of security and economic world order. This intensifying competition has placed unprecedented pressure on ASEAN states to choose sides. The traditional hedging strategy that many ASEAN countries adopted after the Cold War, when great power competition was less pronounced, is gradually becoming untenable. Simply put, ASEAN nations are under mounting pressure, as neither Washington nor Beijing is willing to continue being used without expecting something in return (Tung 2022). Both superpowers, either explicitly or implicitly, are urging states to take decisive positions on key issues. The ambiguity that ASEAN once relied on is fading; accommodating one superpower is now likely to be seen by the other as a direct challenge to its interests.

ASEAN, as a bloc, has not yet reached a consensus on how to respond to this rivalry (Grossman 2023). Instead, only individual leaders have occasionally voiced their stances. For instance, at the 27th International Conference on the Future of Asia in Tokyo in 2022, Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong emphasized that most Southeast Asian countries do not wish to take sides (Barret 2022). The organization's stance on the US-China competition can be understood through the lens of a security community shaped by the shared legacy of colonialism, which exhibits three defining characteristics.

First, lingering distrust rooted in ASEAN's colonial history with

larger powers, including the US and China, has prevented the bloc from adopting a unified position. At the same time, Cold War legacies continue to influence the region, as each ASEAN country maintains a different relationship with the US and China (Hansson et al. 2020, 501–503). Some countries, such as the Philippines, Laos, and Cambodia, have clearer preferences based on historical and contemporary ties. For instance, as a US treaty ally, the Philippines leans more toward Washington, while Cambodia's closer relationship with China makes it appear more aligned with Beijing. Despite claims by some ASEAN members that they do not wish to take sides, these relationships make neutrality difficult (Sim 2024).

Moreover, ASEAN countries with differing preferences often regard each other with suspicion, which in turn complicates efforts to reach a consensus. As a result, at this stage, forging a unified ASEAN stance on the strategic competition between the US and China seems neither viable nor feasible. For example, following the Trump administration's imposition of reciprocal tariffs on ASEAN countries in April 2025, the bloc struggled to articulate a coordinated response. Diverging national circumstances and preferences made consensus difficult: while Cambodia and Vietnam faced steep tariffs, countries like Singapore and the Philippines were less affected due to economic diversification and lower reliance on the US (Medina 2025).

Distrust toward major powers lingers among ASEAN states, rooted in their histories of colonization and, in some cases, subsequent abandonment by these powers. This difficult historical experience prevents most ASEAN countries from fully committing to formal alliances with either the US or China. Despite ongoing US efforts to rally ASEAN states to its side, inconsistencies in Washington's policies toward the region have caused hesitation (Shambaugh 2020, 184). As for China, its geographical proximity may make it seem like a viable security option for some states, but there is widespread distrust. This is evident in the results of the *State of Southeast Asia Surveys* conducted from 2019 to 2025, which show deep skepticism among ASEAN countries and citizens toward China (ASEAN Studies Center 2025). This distrust makes it even harder for

ASEAN to lean decisively toward one superpower or reach a consensus on such matters.

Even though ASEAN strives for a consensus-based approach, compelling its members to follow a unified stance risks violating the organization's core principle of non-intervention. In both theory and practice, ASEAN, as a supranational body, lacks the authority to force any specific member state to act in a particular way, even when a state clearly aligns itself with either the US or China. ASEAN and its members, therefore, do not rush other members to take sides, as doing so would be seen as an infringement on the autonomy of member states, eroding trust in the organization and creating more instability in the region.

ASEAN's inherent flexibility is another characteristic that shapes its approach to the US-China rivalry. For most ASEAN members, the primary goal is to maximize their national interests. However, the tactics and strategies they employ toward Washington and Beijing remain highly flexible. This flexibility explains why many ASEAN members participate in both US-led initiatives like the IPEF and China-led initiatives like the CSFM. More specifically, as of 2024, seven ASEAN countries-Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam-have endorsed or supported China's CSFM (Seah et al. 2024, 45), while seven ASEAN states-Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam-are part of the US-led IPEF (U.S. Department of Commerce 2024).

This flexibility allows ASEAN countries to engage in initiatives led by either the US or China, or both, depending on their interests. From the ASEAN perspective, participating in these initiatives signals autonomy in policymaking rather than allegiance to one superpower. Their participation is less about alignment and more about safeguarding their own interests and maintaining sovereignty. For ASEAN states, any alliance or cooperation mechanisms are seen as flexible relationships. This contrasts with the more rigid, camp-based view of alliances typically held by Western powers. ASEAN's relationships with both the US and China remain fluid and non-committal. Participating in initiatives led by either side is simply a signal of cooperation, not an expression of opposition,

and does not imply full endorsement or rejection. ASEAN countries carefully choose areas of cooperation with the US or China on certain issues while opposing them on others, ensuring that their own interests and autonomy are preserved.

Both Washington and Beijing recognize this flexibility in ASEAN's approach and have adapted accordingly. In response, both the US and China have adapted by becoming more accommodating, patient, and generous in their dealings with ASEAN states. For instance, the US-led IPEF allows member countries to selectively engage in areas of interest, rather than mandating participation across the board. This flexibility leads to more tailored cooperation agreements. Specifically, IPEF's four pillars–trade, supply chains, clean economy, and fair economy–allow countries to choose which pillars to join, without obligating them to participate in others unless they opt to do so (Vietnam National Trade Repository 2022). This flexibility means that joining the IPEF does not equate to fully embracing US rules or choosing the US over China in their rivalry. Similarly, China has shown a greater willingness to cooperate with ASEAN and has publicly affirmed its respect for their autonomy. From Beijing's perspective, the mere fact that ASEAN countries refrain from explicitly choosing sides is, in itself, a win (Huang 2022). The overall flexibility in both the IPEF and China-led initiatives allows ASEAN states to engage without strong pressure, preserving their freedom to navigate between the two superpowers while safeguarding their national interests.

As a group, ASEAN has actively sought to present itself as a unified and autonomous entity, not easily swayed by major powers. It aims to demonstrate its own agency, positioning itself as an equal player among global powers (Khoo 2022). This approach is evident in ASEAN's efforts to include both the US and China, despite their intensifying conflicts, in ASEAN-led discussions and mechanisms where the two superpowers can engage directly. For example, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken agreed to meet on the sidelines of the ASEAN Summit in Vientiane, Laos, on July 27, 2024. During this meeting, they openly discussed pressing issues such as the

South China Sea disputes, Taiwan, and other regional challenges (China Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2024). While such dialogues may often be seen as mere talk, ASEAN views them as opportunities to promote understanding and socialization, where constructive rhetoric might gradually influence the behavior of both the US and China. By offering these platforms, ASEAN bolsters its credibility and reputation, ensuring that it retains a central role amid the ongoing US–China rivalry.

Despite ASEAN's efforts to project unity, centrality, and integration, its non-intervention principle creates a paradox. This specific principle limits ASEAN's ability to directly influence the stances of its member states or forge a consensus regarding the US–China strategic competition. As a result, ASEAN's collective response is often limited to symbolic statements that signal to the international community its intent to engage with the strategic rivalry. These statements, however, are sufficient to remind both the US and China of ASEAN's importance and centrality. For instance, in 2021, ASEAN released the five-page ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, which highlighted the group's interest in shaping the region's economic and security architecture. The document outlined areas of cooperation, including maritime collaboration, connectivity, the UN Sustainable Development Goals 2030, and other key issues (ASEAN 2021). Through such initiatives, ASEAN aims to maintain its centrality, though it remains a loosely-organized body that represents a group still in the making.

In essence, while ASEAN may not always present the most united front on various issues, it is largely unanimous in its decision to remain neutral in the US–China conflict (Shambaugh 2020, 180). Most ASEAN countries have maintained their autonomy in engaging with both powers, and the member states remain distrustful of both the US and China. Across Southeast Asia, there is a pervasive distrust regarding the presence of major powers in the region. According to the State of Southeast Asia: 2024 Survey Report, 37.6 percent of Southeast Asian respondents express distrust toward the US, while a larger proportion–50.1 percent–distrust China in their contributions to global peace, security, prosperity, and governance (Seah et al. 2024, 56, 64). This distrust enables them to

pragmatically engage with both sides without openly criticizing either. In this context, distrust is not entirely detrimental; rather, it creates space for ASEAN's centrality. Since all member states share a common wariness of major powers, this mutual distrust reinforces ASEAN's neutrality, which, in turn, enhances its central role. In short, where there is distrust, there is space for neutrality, which fosters centrality and ultimately, autonomy–ASEAN's most cherished value.

Nevertheless, while ASEAN countries currently avoid explicitly aligning with either the US or China, there may come a time when they are forced to choose sides. Unless ASEAN can create more overlapping interests between the two superpowers–such as by fostering mutual dependencies through investment and supply chains–it may face future situations where neutrality is no longer an option. By intertwining US and Chinese interests within the ASEAN framework, the group could potentially delay or avoid having to take sides altogether.

Conclusion

This article has explored the influence of colonial history on ASEAN integration, addressing a topic that has received insufficient scholarly attention in international politics. Given that nearly all ASEAN members were once under colonial rule, the organization exhibits many characteristics of a post-colonial entity, which this article conceptualizes as a "security community of the colonized states." This framework offers both theoretical and empirical insights, presenting a unique perspective on ASEAN's integration.

Theoretically, this security community of the colonized states is contrasted with the "security community of the colonizer states," exemplified by the EU. ASEAN's distinct identity is defined by three key traits: lingering distrust, inherent flexibility, and its status as a group still in the making. The history of colonialism has fostered a deep distrust among ASEAN states toward larger powers, particularly regarding potential threats to their sovereignty and autonomy. This distrust underpins the

non-intervention principle that ASEAN upholds. Flexibility is also a defining feature, as ASEAN member states tend to view alliances and international cooperation as fluid and flexible relationships, unlike the more rigid frameworks seen in the West. The concept of a group still in the making reflects ASEAN's ongoing efforts to build a collective identity that emphasizes the organization's centrality and agency. These three traits-distrust, flexibility, and evolving group identity-shape ASEAN's behavior and the dynamics of inter-state relations in Southeast Asia.

Empirically, this article has examined ASEAN's stance toward two key geopolitical challenges including the South China Sea disputes and the ongoing US-China strategic competition. Despite their limitations, ASEAN's norms and values-particularly its emphasis on consensus and non-interference-have played a stabilizing role, helping to maintain peace and regional order amid rising tensions. In both cases, the three defining traits of ASEAN's security community are clearly visible. The non-intervention principle has hindered ASEAN from adopting a unified stance on the South China Sea disputes, leaving the organization vulnerable to external influence. However, ASEAN states have demonstrated flexibility by setting aside their differences and cooperating on broader maritime issues. ASEAN has also played a central role in advancing negotiations such as mobilizing member states' support for the conclusion of the earlier DOC and the ongoing COC negotiations.

In the context of the US-China rivalry, ASEAN's lingering distrust of both superpowers-due to China's geographical proximity and history of tributary relations, and the US's inconsistent policies toward the region-has made it difficult for the organization to fully align with either. Yet, the flexibility of ASEAN states allows them to engage with both US-led and China-led initiatives, often participating in both simultaneously. As a group, ASEAN continually strives to assert its autonomy and demonstrate that it is not being swayed by Washington or Beijing. The organization's efforts to maintain ASEAN-led forums and involve both superpowers in these mechanisms underscore its commitment to preserving its centrality amid great power competition.

In conclusion, the colonial legacies of ASEAN member states have

deeply influenced the organization's integration and the behavior of its member states. What is often perceived as fragmentation or lack of consensus is, in fact, a strategic posture rooted in a shared history of subjugation. This posture reflects two key premises: the region's varied colonial experiences make uniformity neither feasible nor desirable, and ASEAN's principles of consensus, non-interference, and sovereign equality serve as a post-colonial response that privileges autonomy and mutual respect over hierarchy. Framing ASEAN as a security community of the colonized states highlights the enduring influence of history in shaping regional security and economic architecture and offers a fresh lens for understanding ASEAN's response to contemporary geopolitical challenges.

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