Resisting the Polar Pull: Can ASEAN Forge a Non-Aligned Future?

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Abstract-

In the evolving geopolitical architecture of the Indo-Pacific, ASEAN finds itself increasingly at the crossroads of competing strategic ambitions. While great powers—from the United States and China to India, Japan, and the European Union—continue to intensify their presence in the region, ASEAN seeks to uphold its foundational principle of strategic non-alignment. This article explores whether ASEAN can genuinely resist the polarizing pull of major power blocs and instead forge an autonomous, inclusive, and non-aligned future amid a rising multipolar order.

Drawing from recent developments—including the South China Sea flashpoints, Myanmar's internal crisis, and the digital and climate agendas—the article analyses the organization's strengths, such as its convening power and expanding digital-economic frameworks, as well as its vulnerabilities like internal divides, normative inconsistencies, and asymmetric dependencies on external actors. Special attention is given to emerging strategies such as strategic hedging, multilateral diplomacy, and the crafting of ASEAN's identity through human, climate, and digital security priorities. By interrogating the balance between economic dependency and strategic autonomy, this study argues that ASEAN's future relevance lies not in passive neutrality but in active, value-based multilateralism. The article concludes that ASEAN can remain central to Indo-Pacific affairs only if it deepens internal cohesion, strengthens institutional mechanisms, and asserts a cooperative vision that transcends bipolar logics. ASEAN's potential to redefine regional diplomacy rests not just on avoiding alignment, but on offering an alternative framework for peace, security, and sustainable development in the Asian century.

Keyword- Strategic Non-Alignment, Indo-Pacific Geopolitics, ASEAN Centrality, Multipolarity, Strategic Hedging, Digital and Climate Security

Introduction

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), founded in 1967, has long prided itself on maintaining a position of strategic neutrality amid global power shifts. Yet, in the curren Indo-Pacific climate, defined by escalating rivalry between the

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United States and China, this stance is increasingly being tested. The year 2024 witnessed heightened maritime confrontations in the South China Sea—particularly between China and the Philippines at the Scarborough Shoal—raising fresh concerns about ASEAN's ability to enforce regional norms and unity[1]. Simultaneously, the Myanmar crisis continues to fracture internal consensus, as members remain split over how to handle the junta's non-compliance with ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus.[2] Moreover, major powers are re-engaging Southeast Asia with renewed vigour. The U.S. launched its Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) with digital trade and clean energy as key priorities,[3] while China has deepened its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) outreach through new agreements with Cambodia and Laos.[4] In response, ASEAN released its Digital Economy Framework Agreement draft and advanced the ASEAN Green Deal 2025, reflecting a subtle but significant pivot toward issue-based diplomacy over bloc alignment.[5] This geopolitical flux, marked by economic interdependence, climate vulnerability, and digital transformation, calls into question whether ASEAN can maintain its traditional non-aligned posture. As external pressures grow and internal cohesion weakens, the bloc must explore adaptive strategies—neither full neutrality nor overt alignment, but a calibrated, pragmatic autonomy.

ASEAN in a multipolar Indo-Pacific-

The Indo-Pacific is no longer a bipolar theatre defined solely by U.S.-China tensions. It has evolved into a multipolar arena where actors like India, Japan, Australia, the European Union, and even middle powers like South Korea and the United Kingdom are increasingly assertive. In this shifting matrix, ASEAN's strategic relevance depends on how it positions itself amidst converging and diverging interests. In 2024–25, ASEAN's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) has gained rhetorical reaffirmation but faces practical limitations. The QUAD (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue), with its increasing military coordination, notably the 2025 Malabar Exercises near the South China Sea, has been viewed as both a balancing force and a source of ASEAN anxiety.[6] Similarly, the AUKUS pact's expansion into cyber-defence and AI, with Japan recently joining as an observer, has further challenged ASEAN's "centrality" narrative.[7] China's presence remains assertive, especially through the Blue Dragon 2030 Plan, which builds upon the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to integrate maritime Southeast Asia via digital and energy corridors.[8] However, member states like Vietnam and the Philippines have increased defense engagements with the U.S. and India to hedge against Chinese aggression. Notably,

Vietnam's 2024 Defense White Paper emphasized "selective strategic partnerships" rather than strict neutrality.[9] ASEAN's response has been to promote issue-based engagement, emphasizing cooperation in climate resilience, food security, and digital regulation. The ASEAN Digital Ministers' Meeting 2025 initiated a framework with the EU and India on cross-border data governance-underscoring ASEAN's intent to lead in new domains without aligning military.[10] ASEAN's challenge in a multipolar Indo-Pacific is to assert functional centrality while resisting overt strategic polarization. This approach—anchored in "inclusive minilateralism"—may serve as the only viable alternative to choosing sides in an increasingly fragmented regional order.

Economic Dependence vs Strategic Autonomy-

ASEAN's evolution in the 21st century has been shaped by a duality: its deepening economic interdependence with China and its desire to maintain strategic autonomy amid intensifying power rivalries. The region's economic fate is tightly linked with China, which has remained ASEAN's largest trading partner since 2009, with bilateral trade reaching USD 722 billion in 2023, a 15 per cent rise from the previous year.[11] The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), spearheaded by ASEAN and including China, further entrenched this economic relationship. Yet this interdependence comes at a cost. The Scarborough Shoal confrontation in March 2024 between the Philippines and China, wherein Chinese coast guards obstructed Filipino fishermen, reignited debates over how economic ties influence sovereignty and strategic decisions.[12] Despite strong trade flows, trust deficits and maritime disputes have led many ASEAN states to diversify their strategic and economic options. In recent years, several member states have intensified security and investment partnerships with India, Japan, the European Union, and the United States. Vietnam signed new digital infrastructure agreements with the EU in 2024 and hosted the inaugural India-Vietnam Maritime Security Dialogue.[13] The Philippines finalized a long-term Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement with the U.S., while Indonesia and India launched joint space and digital diplomacy initiatives.[14] These moves reflect a calculated strategy of hedging—engaging multiple powers to reduce over-reliance on any single one.The ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA), expected to be finalized in 2025, also signals a subtle reorientation. It proposes data localization norms and cross-border regulatory standards, diminishing Chinese tech monopolies in ASEAN e-commerce markets.[15] Similarly, the ASEAN Green Deal 2025 aims to attract

diversified green finance and infrastructure from EU, Korean, and Indian sources, loosening China's dominance in energy and logistics.[16] Nevertheless, balancing economic dependency with strategic freedom is not uniform across ASEAN. Cambodia and Laos remain highly dependent on Chinese aid and political patronage, often blocking ASEAN consensus on critical issues. Meanwhile, Singapore, Vietnam, and Indonesia push for a "rules-based multipolar engagement model", seeking to build resilience through diversification and regional capacity building. In essence, ASEAN is walking a tightrope—leveraging economic growth opportunities while safeguarding its political agency. Strategic autonomy is increasingly being redefined not by absolute neutrality but by adaptive diversification, enabling member states to manage asymmetrical dependencies without becoming proxy players in great power rivalry.

Internal Divides: The Myanmar Challenge-

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Strategic hedging as a Doctrine-

In the increasingly polarized Indo-Pacific, strategic hedging has emerged as ASEAN's most pragmatic and adaptive doctrine. Unlike classical balancing or bandwagoning, hedging allows states to engage with multiple powers simultaneously—maximizing economic gains while minimizing strategic dependency or vulnerability. For ASEAN, this doctrine has evolved into a de facto regional strategy in response to the uncertainties created by U.S.-China rivalry, internal fragmentation, and emerging minilateral security arrangements. Strategic hedging manifests in multiple dimensions: military cooperation with one actor, economic engagement with another, and normative distancing from both. For instance, while Vietnam and the Philippines are expanding defense ties with the U.S., they continue to maintain robust trade and investment linkages with China.[23] Similarly, Singapore engages deeply in American-led digital and defense dialogues but is also a founding member of the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).[24] The rise of issue-based coalitions—such as the IPEF (Indo-Pacific Economic Framework), ASEAN's Digital Economy Framework Agreement, and cooperation with India on maritime domain awareness—illustrates how hedging is moving from reactive to proactive strategy. These frameworks allow ASEAN to shape global governance without becoming trapped in ideological binaries.[25] However, strategic hedging is not without limits. It requires institutional coherence, credible diplomatic leadership, and external restraint. The Myanmar crisis, ASEAN's failure to present a united front on

the South China Sea Code of Conduct, and Cambodia's tilt toward China all expose the fragility of this doctrine.[26] Moreover, rising pressure from both Washington and Beijing for clearer alignments, particularly in the domain of semiconductors, AI governance, and 5G infrastructure, is narrowing the space for middle-path diplomacy. Nevertheless, for ASEAN, strategic hedging remains the only viable path to navigate a fragmented world order while preserving national sovereignty, economic interdependence, and regional agency. It reflects the evolution of non-alignment from a Cold War principle into a modernized, flexible, and interest-driven practice.

Climate, Digital, and Human Security: ASEAN New Identity-

As the Indo-Pacific turns increasingly volatile due to geostrategic tensions, ASEAN is quietly redefining its identity around non-traditional security paradigms—namely, climate resilience, digital sovereignty, and human security. This shift marks an evolution from strategic passivity to normative leadership, allowing ASEAN to maintain relevance and assert "functional centrality" without directly aligning with competing global powers. These domains also reflect ASEAN's aspiration to become a "rules-shaper" rather than a mere "rules-taker" in a multipolar Indo-Pacific.

Climate Security as a Regional Priority

Climate change is no longer a future risk for Southeast Asia—it is a lived reality. From rising sea levels in Vietnam's Mekong Delta, to increased typhoon intensity in the Philippines, and prolonged droughts in Thailand and Indonesia, the region is among the world's most climate-vulnerable zones.[27] Recognizing this, ASEAN in its "Joint Statement on Climate Action" (April 2025) committed to enhancing cooperation on climate finance, disaster risk reduction, and green infrastructure. Singapore and Vietnam are leading regional hubs for green finance and carbon trading, while Indonesia, with its new Nusantara capital project, is promoting climate-resilient urbanization.[28] Additionally, ASEAN's Green Deal 2025, developed with the EU and Japan, aligns environmental governance with trade and investment standards. China, too, is involved via the Blue Dragon 2030 initiative focused on low-carbon logistics in Cambodia and Laos.[29] Thus, climate security has become a shared agenda where multipolar engagement coexists without polarization.

Digital Sovereignty and Tech Diplomacy

In the age of data colonialism and technological decoupling, ASEAN's digital policy is increasingly geopolitical. The proposed ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA)—slated for conclusion by late 2025—seeks to

harmonize data privacy, cybersecurity, and AI ethics across the bloc[30]. This allows ASEAN to push back against surveillance capitalism, while attracting diversified investments from the EU, India, South Korea, and the United States.

Singapore and Malaysia are emerging as AI and fintech centers, Indonesia is focusing on digital literacy and rural internet, while Vietnam and Thailand are investing in semiconductor and hardware manufacturing. The China-ASEAN Digital Silk Road, although active in infrastructure, is facing competition from India's ASEAN Digital Capacity-Building Program and the U.S.-ASEAN Digital Connectivity Partnership.[31] Rather than choosing sides in the U.S.-China tech rivalry, ASEAN is pursuing interoperable sovereignty—the ability to work with all actors while preserving regulatory independence. This approach complements the bloc's broader non-aligned identity and helps build a rules-based digital order with Asian values and priorities at the centre.

Human Security and Normative Credibility

The Myanmar crisis, cross-border trafficking, climate migration, and pandemic preparedness have placed human security at the forefront of ASEAN's agenda. The region is grappling with the fact that economic growth alone cannot ensure societal stability. In 2024, ASEAN created a Human Security Coordination Mechanism under the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC), tasked with coordinating policy on health, migration, labor rights, and education equity[32].Thailand and the Philippines are championing migrant worker protection frameworks, while Indonesia and Malaysia are investing in Islamic humanitarian diplomacy, especially in response to the Rohingya crisis. Singapore, meanwhile, is developing regional protocols for pandemic response, cybersecurity hygiene, and urban resilience.

These efforts, although uneven, mark a significant pivot from state-centric to people-centric security, reinforcing ASEAN's moral standing in international fora. The bloc is also collaborating with the UNDP and the Global South Cooperation Fund to localize Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) across member states.

The Role Ahead: Opportunities and constraints-

The ASEAN of today stands at a delicate crossroads: it is increasingly courted by major powers, yet challenged from within. In navigating a multipolar Indo-Pacific, ASEAN must forge a future that is non-aligned yet not irrelevant, cooperative yet not compliant, and sovereign yet not isolated. The road ahead is not without

opportunity—but it is fraught with deep structural constraints that demand urgent and innovative responses.

Internal Unity vs. Political Fragmentation

One of the most visible constraints on ASEAN's strategic coherence is its internal disunity, exemplified by the Myanmar crisis. ASEAN's inability to implement its own Five-Point Consensus or present a unified diplomatic posture has undermined its normative authority. While Indonesia and Malaysia advocate for robust democratic standards, countries like Cambodia and Laos have leaned toward quietism or even alignment with Chinese positions. This asymmetry in political will and governance values limits ASEAN's ability to speak or act in unison, especially on regional crises or contentious global issues. Without structural reform—such as qualitative decision-making, issue-based coalitions, or a tiered membership model—ASEAN risks becoming a "talk shop," unable to project serious regional leadership.

Geopolitical Leverage vs. Economic Dependency

Economically, ASEAN is an attractive partner for global actors. Its collective GDP crossed $4 trillion in 2024, and it hosts some of the world's fastest-growing digital and green economies[34]. This presents a unique opportunity: ASEAN can extract mutually beneficial agreements in trade, tech transfer, infrastructure, and climate finance without aligning with any one bloc. However, over-reliance on China for trade (with intra-regional trade only at 22 per cent) and Western powers for digital governance exposes ASEAN to external shocks and strategic coercion.[35] Initiatives like the ASEAN Digital Economy Framework and Green Deal 2025 offer a way to diversify partnerships and deepen internal integration—but only if implemented with real political backing and regulatory harmony.

Technological Futures vs. Sovereignty Risks

In the domain of digital and AI governance, ASEAN has the chance to lead the Global South. With growing interest from India, Japan, South Korea, and the EU, ASEAN can become a standard-setter in ethical tech, cyber-hygiene, and data democracy.[36] But this also means it must resist becoming a proxy in the U.S.-China tech rivalry. The challenge is to develop interoperable sovereignty—where multiple standards can coexist without compromising core regional values. ASEAN's digital diplomacy must therefore be driven by inclusive innovation, regional capacity-building, and youth engagement, particularly in Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines, where the median age remains under 30.

Normative Ambition vs. Institutional Inertia

ASEAN aspires to be a normative leader on climate justice, digital ethics, and human security. But such ambitions require more than declarations—they demand delivery. From building local climate resilience to protecting migrant rights and democratizing access to digital tools, the implementation gap is the biggest bottleneck. Too often, ASEAN's vision documents remain aspirational texts, not actionable blueprints. Addressing this would mean empowering ASEAN institutions with more autonomy, financing independent regional think tanks, and creating accountability mechanisms across member states.[37]

Conclusion-

In an increasingly fragmented Indo-Pacific, where strategic binaries are rapidly solidifying, ASEAN's insistence on charting a non-aligned path is not merely a political stance—it is an existential imperative. The organization today finds itself in a paradox: it is more geopolitically relevant than ever, yet also more structurally vulnerable. As great powers intensify their courtship of Southeast Asia, ASEAN's challenge is not to choose a side but to redefine what it means to have a side in a world no longer divided into clean camps. Throughout this article, it is evident that ASEAN's non-alignment is not about passivity or indecision, but about pragmatism and adaptive resilience. Strategic hedging, digital multilateralism, climate diplomacy, and human security frameworks have all emerged as tools to assert sovereignty without succumbing to geopolitical coercion. While internal divisions—particularly the Myanmar crisis—and overdependence on specific external actors present serious constraints, ASEAN has also shown it possesses the normative space and diplomatic ingenuity to assert a new kind of regional leadership. The pursuit of climate, digital, and human security has opened an avenue for ASEAN to craft a future-focused identity—one rooted not in hard balancing but in functional centrality and inclusive multilateralism. It has shown the capacity to attract diverse partnerships—from the U.S. and EU to India, Japan, and even China—without entirely compromising its core principle of consensus-based diplomacy. However, time is of the essence. Without genuine institutional reform, stronger internal coherence, and a bolder implementation mechanism, ASEAN's ambitions may remain rhetorical. The credibility of its non-aligned vision will depend not on its declarations but on its delivery. Regional integration must go beyond economics and touch governance, human rights, technology, and environmental justice with equal weight.

Ultimately, ASEAN's survival and success as a non-aligned actor will rest not on how well it avoids great power alignment, but on how effectively it offers an alternative: a vision for a plural, cooperative, and decentralized Indo-Pacific. If ASEAN can embody this alternative, it will not only remain relevant—it will shape the very terms of engagement in the Asian century.

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