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BEYOND CENTRALITY : RETHINKING ASEAN'S RELEVANCE IN A FRAGMENTED INDO-PACIFIC REGION

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Abstract
Indo-pacific region is increasingly complicated; with rising tension, evolving friendships, and growing great power competition; creating an environment where ASEAN seeks to maintain relevance within its borders and under external pressure both internally and externally.
While earlier research has largely described ASEAN's purpose as a facilitator of dialogue and collaborative action, placing it in a central role within regional affairs; this characterization does not adequately capture how ASEAN is repositioning itself in a region being drawn in opposite directions and facing uncertainty.
A different perspective is warranted regarding ASEAN's current conditions, because of the power struggle for dominance, differences between member states, and changes in the geopolitical environment. All of these factors increase the difficulty of the predicament; thus, raising questions whether ASEAN's historical methodology of accomplishing objectives will be successful at addressing new realities.
ASEAN remains an intrinsic element of the world stage; however, the current environment calls into question whether its traditional practices will provide a successful cradle from which to develop new methods for maintaining its relevance in an increasingly fractured and evolving Indo-Pacific region. The research examines ASEAN's transformation, providing analysis to some of the possibilities through which ASEAN may respond to change.
Keywords : ASEAN , Indo Pacific , power competition, changing regional dynamics , fragmented , new realities , major powers , regional groups.

1. INTRODUCTION

Today's world of Global Politics is changing quickly and becoming difficult to understand in this new international environment. The new Indo Pacific Region is quickly developing into an important strategic part of the global strategy. The Indo Pacific Region has now gone from trading and commercial purposes only to also having become an important area of power competition, security concerns, and increased geopolitical tensions.

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The Indo Pacific concept is very dynamic within itself. The Indo Pacific region is a global geographical area stretching from the Indian Ocean to the a Pacific Ocean where the major global economic and rising powers are located. These major global power countries including United States, China, Australia, India and Japan are seeking to have influence throughout the Indo Pacific Region therefore the Indo Pacific region has become a battleground for global power where cooperation and competition co-exist.

To place ASEAN in this new international setting, ASEAN is an association that has become extremely important and influential in the new international system as a result of the changing geopolitical environment of today and globalization. ASEAN was created by the Bangkok Declaration of 1967 by 5 member countries with the primary goal of promoting cooperation for regional peace and stability among nations. The continued emergence of Asean has become one of the most influential characteristics of this region.[1] It has strengthened its position as an important mechanism for promoting the dialogue between its member countries and working towards the economic integration of its member states. Furthermore, Asean has introduced the concept of ASEAN Centrality into its operational framework, positioning itself as the nucleus of interaction between its members, being the primary mediator, and serving as a conduit for the further development of dialogue between them. [2]

Today, however, the geostrategic environment within the Indo-Pacific region has changed dramatically. Competition for dominance by both the United States and China has created a significant increase in the competition for influence within the region by both countries using alternative strategies to increase their area of influence. Additionally, the introduction of the new groups QUAD and AUKUS into this region is also contributing to the creation of divisions in this region.[3] Your dissertation will examine the changes that have occurred in the ASEAN Way and the relevance of ASEAN as a facilitator and mediator for continuing to promote both the inter-state dialogue between its member countries and economic integration of these member states in this increasingly complex geopolitical environment.

II. LITREATURE REVIEW

Most scholars researching ASEAN agree that it plays a significant role in maintaining peace and cooperation in Southeast Asia - this notion of "ASEAN centrality". Over the years, ASEAN has become a mechanism for countries to engage in dialogue and work to peacefully resolve issues, rather than have disputes escalate into conflict. In 2001, Amitav Acharya wrote a book titled

[1] Rodolfo C. Severino , Southeast Asia in Search of and ASEAN Community: Singapore: Institute of South-east Asian Studies , 2006, pg .37

[2] Amitav Acharya, Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the problem of Regional Order (London: Routledge, 2014) , pg 52

[3] David Schambaugh , Where Great powers Meet : America and China in South east Asia (New York : Oxford University Press ,2021 ,pp 14 – 16 .

International Journal of Engineering, Science and Humanities
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ASEAN and Regional Order in which he uses the metaphor of a "security community" to describe ASEAN member states. In this metaphor, member states do not engage in hostile military engagement with one another and have mechanisms to enable cooperative security among the group. Acharya identifies two primary ways in which ASEAN maintains stability within its member states: first, through the establishment of rules prohibiting interference within a member state's domestic affairs; and second, through decision making processes that ensure all members participate in each decision made by ASEAN.

Rory Medcalf's 2014 book, Indo-Pacific Empire, examines how the Indo-Pacific has evolved as a strategic construct over time. In his book, he discusses the extent to which countries in the Indo-Pacific have become politically and economically integrated as a result of growing maritime interaction. Medcalf also discusses the three primary regional powers (the US, China and India) and how the competition between these three powers is creating the regional architecture. However, there is a substantial amount of research on how these powers are shaping the Indo-Pacific that is not well represented in this article.

Various researchers have commented on the centrality of ASEAN. In other words, ASEAN and its member states play an important role in terms of regional relationships. According to Evelyn Goh (2019), ASEAN provides a platform for numerous countries to share thoughts and ideas in one location. Therefore, ASEAN can also serve as a "convener" of multiple countries.

However, there are many changes occurring in the Indo-Pacific region due to increasing political and military competition (primarily, that between the US and China) combined with the establishment of new regional organizations. Consequently, this has created a serious impact on the centrality of ASEAN. In response to these challenges, ASEAN attempts to maintain neutrality by avoiding aligning itself with either political or military power. The strategy ASEAN employs to maintain neutrality is often referred to as a "hedging strategy."

In addition to the centrality of ASEAN, many scholars also note that ASEAN has some challenges to face. Kishore Mahbubani, in his book "Has the West Lost it?" (2017), suggests that while ASEAN is good for facilitating discussions among member nations, decision-making is often delayed due to the need for consensus among ASEAN member nations .

Recent research papers have questioned the relevance of ASEAN in the Indo-Pacific. In their studies entitled "ASEAN Centrality: Opportunities and Challenges" (2023) and "Can ASEAN Maintain Centrality in the Indo-Pacific?" (2021), the authors discuss the centrality of ASEAN and the subsequent decline in its significance within the region.

Additionally, some studies suggest that ASEAN is attempting to adjust to these dynamic changes, as evidenced by the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (2019), which emphasizes the importance of cooperation and working together, while some studies suggest that ASEAN will struggle to manage its relationships with both the US and China if competition continues to

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increase. In contrast, there seems to be a general lack of consensus on how ASEAN will shape the future of the Indo-Pacific, as scholars are split along ideological lines and have differing opinions on how ASEAN will respond to these increasing tensions and competition.

This research seeks to provide a more thorough examination of ASEAN's relevance today within the fragmented Indo-Pacific region and how competition, the development of new alliances, and shifting power dynamics will impact ASEAN's ability to play a central role in the future. There is no question that the Indo-Pacific is currently undergoing a significant transformation. The influx of leading countries with diverse and conflicting interests has added complexity to an already complicated region.

ASEAN's internal operation is also worth noting as new variations of cooperation in the region have developed through cooperation among smaller numbers of countries pursuing narrow objectives. The ongoing evolution of this type of cooperation has the potential to impact the standing of ASEAN; however, the related discourse in the existing literature has not remained consistent due to limitations in either scholarly analysis or empirical evidence of ASEAN's activities in this regard—the need to conduct more comprehensive and balanced assessments of ASEAN's role, particularly as the original structure of the region is less stable and uncertain than before. The research paper consists primarily of qualitative data. Scientific publications and historical documents, including but not limited to, books, research articles, and government reports constitute its primary body of secondary data.

Research Questions:

- What is the relevance of ASEAN within the Indo-Pacific in this current context?
- Can ASEAN have an effective response with respect to the changing regional context?
- In light of the changing distribution of power within the region, what implications do these developments have for ASEAN's role?
- Is ASEAN becoming less significant as the regional configurations are consistently changing?

In 1967 , The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was established in order to promote closer ties among Southeast Asian Nations and to help to reduce conflicts in he region . At the time of ASEAN 's creation , Southeast Asia was plagued by political instability stemming from fear of outside interference during the Cold war . As a result , Indonesia, Malaysia , Philippines , Singapore and Thailand which were some of the Southeast Asian Nations experiencing the above mentioned political instability came together to sign the Bangkok Declaration.[4]

The primary objective of ASEAN's creation was to provide peace and stability to its member nations, while also promoting enhanced cooperation with one another, by creating an environment

[4] Association of Southeast Asian Nations ASEAN, The ASEAN Declaration, ASEAN Secretariat, Jakarta, pg . 1- 2 .

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that would minimize conflict. Over the years, several other Southeast Asian countries became members of ASEAN, and, therefore, ASEAN has now evolved into a significant international organization.[5]

The term Indo-Pacific is used to describe the large expanse of the earth's surface that comprises the Indian and Pacific Oceans. The Indo-Pacific region is not just a geographical concept, but a concept that encompasses the political and economic ideas that have acquired increasing significance in today's world. The Indo-Pacific region is home to many of the world's most important shipping routes, on which a significant percentage of the world's trade occurs. Therefore, many nations have a strong interest in the Indo-Pacific region as a result of the connection between trade, security, and political interests in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, particularly due to China's emergence on the global stage.

In light of the increasing importance of the Indo-Pacific Region (IPR), it is important to understand the significance of the role ASEAN plays within this region by looking at the concept of 'ASEAN Centrality'. ASEAN Centrality is a concept describing the importance of ASEAN within the IPR. Specifically, ASEAN provides a framework for fostering peaceful communication among countries to reach consensus on important decisions. While ASEAN's Centrality is largely facilitative, in that it provides a conduit for communication rather than exercising direct authority over decision-making, ASEAN's Centrality has now evolved from being a strategic concept to one that is mainly symbolic.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has been portrayed as a neutral ground for countries to interact with one another and have discussions. Its importance lies in the fact that it ensures communications between countries can remain open even during moments of tension. However, the limitation of this method becomes evident when these discussions do not lead to expected outcomes.

In several instances, ASEAN can provide the venue for conversation, but it does not always have the means to advance decisions in an efficient manner. This creates a disparity between the way in which it is viewed as important and the manner in which it truly has an impact.

The geopolitical significance of the Indo-Pacific is well documented; however, the political and economic significance is less well known, but equally important. The region has emerged as a primary focus for the three largest global powers (USA, China, and India) as they each seek to expand their sphere of influence; therefore, the three powers exhibit a high level of cooperation within the IPR.

It is important to recognize that many significant events occurring in the Indo-Pacific region are influenced by powerful countries rather than ASEAN itself. The United States and China are two

[5] Kishore Madhubani and Jeffery Sng , The ASEAN Miracle: A catalyst for peace (Singapore: NUS Press , 2017) , pg 1- 15 .

International Journal of Engineering, Science and Humanities
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of these powerful countries, with each having unique strategies, partnerships, and long term aspirations that help shape the region. In order for ASEAN to maintain a balance between the two of these powerful states, its overall position may be weakened. As a result of this, a question arises in regards to the definition of centrality; centrality should include the ability to have an impact on the outcome of discussions in addition to simply being the host of the discussions.

The limitations in ASEAN's centrality are illustrated through the example of the current South China Sea situation. There are several ASEAN member states that are directly involved with the issue, but ASEAN, as an organization, has been unable to effectively address the dispute. [6]

ASEAN's consensus mechanism has been referred to as both a strength and a weakness of the Association. While member states are all treated equally and cannot have decisions handed down upon them by other members, any one member can have the ability to stop action by refusing to give its agreement. Therefore, in a world with rapidly evolving geopolitical dynamics, ASEAN's actions might seem less responsive than those of other regional organisations because of the delay imposed by a member state's refusal to provide its agreement. Additionally, it is not clear whether the traditional way of doing business through consensus within the Association is still adequate for navigating contemporary problems.

Equally, there have been new forms of engagement evolving in the Indo-Pacific. For example, the Quad has emerged as a security and strategic cooperation group that has distinctly visible activities. Unlike ASEAN's approach of being cautious, these types of groupings are more likely to be action-oriented. Hence, questions are being raised about ASEAN's ability to remain relevant in a region where there are multiple major powers pursuing influence simultaneously.

Taking into account all of these developments leads to the assertion that ASEAN's centrality is neither fixed nor guaranteed. Furthermore, ASEAN's centrality is constantly being redefined by internal cohesion amongst members and external pressures outside of ASEAN. Simply being the centre of discussions is not enough for ASEAN ; its has to prove that it is capable of responding and effecting change .The ability to adapt to new realities whole maintaining unity will determine how relevant ASEAN remains in future.[7]

For ASEAN to function effectively in its central role, it is essential for all member countries to work together as one. Member countries' national interests often differ, making it difficult to present a united front on various issues, thus reducing ASEAN's ability to influence external factors. Therefore, being at the centre of regional discussions is not only about being physically positioned at the centre, but also having the ability to act collectively in a coordinated and substantial way. As such, in order to maintain its existing role, ASEAN will require improved

[6] Ian Storey , ASEAN and The South china Sea : Movement in lieu of progress (ISEAS) 2013, Pg 8 – 18.
[7] Kishore Madhubani and Jeffery Sng , The ASEAN Miracle: A catalyst for peace (Singapore: NUS Press , 2017) , pg - 221.

International Journal of Engineering, Science and Humanities
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unity between its members and better coordination among them via the adoption of more efficient and effective decision-making processes.

Background and Rethinking ASEAN's Relevance in the Indo-Pacific :

Before analyzing ASEAN's participation in the Indo-Pacific today, it is necessary to take into account how it was created and how it has evolved since then (i.e., created as an organization). An example of ASEAN at its conception in 1967 when ASEAN was established in response to prevailing geopolitical tensions arising from the Cold War given that at that time there were great concerns on behalf of many countries in Southeast Asia regarding the growing number of conflicts and increasing influence of larger countries.

At that time, there was considerable apprehension among countries across the region regarding potential conflict, particularly due to competition among developing nations in terms of territory, population, resources, etc.; therefore, ASEAN was created to ensure sustained peace and stability throughout the region by way of promoting mutual respect and goodwill.

ASEAN member states agreed upon a very basic approach to resolving conflict with one another through non-interference within the internal affairs of member states through achieving resolution through reasoned discourse and consensus between/among member states. This approach led to an increase in trust between countries that had varying systems of politics and interests.

Over time, ASEAN expanded its focus from strictly addressing issues of security (i.e.); it became more involved with a wider range of regional issues (i.e.) regional economic and political ties after the end of the Cold War when the establishment of additional members to ASEAN allowed for ASEAN to reflect the interests of the entire region rather than simply those of Southeast Asia alone.[8]

During this phase, ASEAN started playing a bigger role in regional discussions by creating platform where both small and big countries could practicipate . This shift was important because it showed that ASEAN was not just trying to protect itself , but also trying to shape the way countries in the region interact with each other . [9]

In the contemporary Indo-Pacific, ASEAN is positioned to play a unique role in relation to major world powers, given that it is not a powerful country that either uses its military capability or applies economic leverage to exert influence on the Indo-Pacific region.[10] Rather, ASEAN's value derives from its actions as a convener and facilitator that brings countries with varying interests, and at times with competing interests, together in dialogue.

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[8] Donald E . Weatherbee , International Relations in Southeast Asia: The struggle for autonomy , 4th ed. (Lanham : Rowman & Littlefield, 2019, pp . 145 – 160.

[9] Alice D.Ba, Negotiating East and South east Asia : Region , Regionalism, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Stanford : Stanford University Press, 2009) ,pp 111 – 117.

[10] Ba ,Alice D. (2012) ."ASEAN Centrality in the Regional Security Architecture " International Relations of the Asia Pacific , Vol 12, No , pg 451 .

International Journal of Engineering, Science and Humanities
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Therefore, ASEAN acts as a coordinator and facilitator for its member states and other countries that seek their agreement and can utilise ASEAN's ongoing relationships with the countries of Southeast Asia to promote effective dialogue and communication between them in instances of rising levels of competition between such countries.

Lastly, ASEAN attempts to maintain balance in the region by remaining neutral with respect to its affiliated major powers. Through cooperation rather than expressing who it openly supports, ASEAN assists little countries in feeling secure and not requiring them to choose sides. This also reduces tension in the region since ASEAN promotes the philosophy of collaborative ways of doing business rather than the aggressive competition that is common today. In an environment of international competitiveness such as the Indo-Pacific, ASEAN's role as a balancer of major powers provides significant benefits. [11]

ASEAN has demonstrated its adaptability as an organization to the changing international environment. In response to the rise of interest in the Indo-Pacific region (traditionally known as the Asia-Pacific), for example, ASEAN has made an effort to provide an alternative understanding of the Indo-Pacific, one based on the principles of openness, inclusivity, and peaceful cooperation. In doing so, ASEAN has demonstrated that it is active and engaged, and that it can remain relevant by influencing how the diplomatic conversations around the region are conducted. Furthermore, the strength of ASEAN is that it can adjust to meet new challenges while still adhering to its core values.

In more simple terms; it may be stated by taking all of the elements into account that ASEANS' centrality is no longer considered fixed, but is rather considered a continually evolving concept, and as such, the place of ASEAN, in relation to the rest of the world, specifically, the Indo-Pacific, is based on its ability to facilitate connections between countries; provide a medium for dialogue; and promote and maintain a balance between the various nations involved; notwithstanding the challenges that it currently faces (students, adults, and governments) its inability to continue as a platform for communication and co-operation will make it unable to fulfill its critical role in the regional community.

III. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION

This portion examines ASEAN's significance throughout the Indo-Pacific region by collating the major conclusions and research inquiries. It takes stock of ASEAN's position amidst material shifts in the geopolitical landscape and increased strategic rivalry in the Indo-Pacific region.

The region itself is changing quickly, with more competition occurring, as well as forming new partnerships. In such an environment, while still having a role to play, ASEAN acts differently. Rather than attempting to control the region, it provides a venue for conversation and staying in

[11] Evelyn Goh , (2013) , The struggle for Order: Hegemony, Hierarchy and Transition in Post Cold War East Asia , Oxford University Press , pg 210- 235.

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touch, even when there is disagreement. As such, ASEAN is still significant; however, the degree to which it continues to be so will hinge on how effectively it can maintain this avenue of communication.

When asked if ASEAN can adapt, the answer is partially yes. ASEAN has not overlooked the concept of the Indo-Pacific and attempts to adapt by endorsing concepts such as openness and cooperation. This indicates that ASEAN wants to maintain involvement. However, with the fact that decisions are made by consensus among all ASEAN members, the ability of ASEAN to respond quickly is diminished due to differences amongst members' interests .[12]

The shifts in the power structure will have effects on ASEAN's role. The presence of large countries engaged in international relations and the emergence of new groupings to address specific issues, has had an impact on the role ASEAN plays because many significant decisions are now made outside the context of ASEAN's forums. This does not mean that ASEAN is no longer useful or that it does not play a significant role, however the organization does not play as central a role in all situations.

With the proliferation of new partnerships, the environment has become far more convoluted. Many of these collective entities are moving faster and are more focused on defined goals and objectives; thus, causing ASEAN to appear as being slow or ineffective. Nevertheless, ASEAN serves an important contribution to international relations; while the collective entities focus on particular problems, ASEAN provides a larger forum for numerous nations to work together to discuss and evaluate a variety of issues; therefore, ASEAN remains relevant even if its role has evolved.

ASEAN's performance is affected by the internal system of the organization. The system's emphasis on consensus, respect and non-interference as a means of unity reduces the ability of ASEAN to make timely decisions or take forceful action. Thus, while ASEAN does not always respond effectively to needs, it does provide an anchor of stability, combining some of its strengths and weaknesses.

ASEAN's future role as a regional actor in the Indo-Pacific is not fixed. Although it still has an important role to play, the nature of this role continues to evolve. Therefore, how well it continues to cope with its internal differences and adapt to emerging regional realities will determine its future relevance.

ASEAN's role in the Indo-Pacific remains important but may not be as prominent. It does not seek to become a dominant player in the regional political arena, but rather strives to provide a forum for states with differing interests to interact. As such, the importance of its role is increased in a region characterized by competition and shifting political dynamics.

[12] ASEAN Secretariat , ASEAN Outlook on the Indo Pacific (Jakarta : ASEAN Secretariat, 2019)pp, 1- 5 .

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ASEAN has also faced constraints in the execution of its functions. Disparities among members and the dominance of other governmental authorities have limited ASEAN's effectiveness and timeliness in responding to regional issues. These challenges reinforce the complexity of ASEAN's role, but do not detract from its importance.

The study discusses how ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) is vital to the Indo-Pacific and the various scenarios in which this could be realized over time. There are influences on the role of ASEAN due to shifts in power in the region and the effect that the various countries have on ASEAN. However, ASEAN will continue to be a venue for member countries to communicate with each other, cooperate, and maintain a stable region if all member countries are cooperative with other member countries.

To explain the concept referred to in this paper, "beyond centrality": ASEAN must go beyond simply being the regional leader of ASEAN, which requires ASEAN to develop a more diversified means of acting independently (i.e. based upon their own decision-making) and develop mechanisms to assist ASEAN in adapting to changes in the manner that they conduct their diplomatic relations with other nations.

Ultimately, the research concludes that ASEAN continues to have significance within the framework of the Indo-Pacific region, and thus, if ASEAN is to sustain its role with heightened importance, it is necessary for ASEAN member countries to become and work together towards becoming more unified, pursue more cohesive approaches, and develop mechanisms of cooperation so that ASEAN can remain relevant in the emerging Indo-Pacific order.

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