



Journal of Hunan University (Natural Sciences)

Vol. 52 No. 8

August 2025

Available online at

<https://jonuns.com>



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Open Access Article

 <https://doi.org/10.55463/issn.1674-2974.52.8.2>

The Middle Power Potential of ASEAN: Capabilities and Constraints in Maintaining Regional Stability

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Article History:

Received: July 7, 2025

Revised: August 13, 2025

Accepted: August 24, 2025

Published: September 30, 2025

Abstract

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), comprising ten member states in Southeast Asia, plays a pivotal role in maintaining regional security and stability. Its capacity as a regional actor is underpinned by a robust legal foundation, encompassing internal agreements, international legal instruments, and a shared commitment among member states to uphold peace and order in the region. These frameworks collectively support ASEAN's identity and function as a middle power in regional security governance. Positioned strategically along major global trade routes and situated amidst intensifying great power rivalries, ASEAN has emerged as a key stabilizing actor in the Indo-Pacific. Through institutional mechanisms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM), the organization has actively engaged in addressing both traditional and non-traditional security challenges, including maritime disputes in the South China Sea and the growing threat of terrorism. Despite its achievements, ASEAN faces notable internal constraints, such as divergent national interests among member states and the increasing external influence of major powers, which may hinder its collective autonomy and decision-making coherence. Nevertheless, ASEAN holds significant potential to enhance its role as a middle power, particularly in fostering multilateral cooperation on non-traditional security issues. This study examines ASEAN's capacity across five key dimensions: strategic geographical positioning, institutional architecture, response to security challenges, internal limitations, and future prospects. By



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adhering to a consensus-based diplomatic model and an inclusive regional approach, ASEAN continues to be a critical actor in shaping and sustaining regional security and order.

Keywords: ASEAN, regional security, middle power, multilateral cooperation, Southeast Asia.

东盟作为中等强国的潜力：维护区域稳定的能力与制约因素

摘要：由十个东南亚国家组成的东南亚国家联盟（东盟）在维护区域安全与稳定方面发挥着关键作用。其作为区域行为体的能力，建立在坚实的法律基础之上，包括内部协议、国际法律文书，以及成员国之间为维护地区和平与秩序所达成的共同承诺。这些法律与政治框架共同构建了东盟作为中等强国在区域安全治理中的角色和认同。凭借其位于全球重要贸易通道的战略地理位置，以及在大国竞争加剧的背景下的独特区位优势，东盟逐步成为印太地区的重要稳定力量。通过包括“东盟地区论坛”（ARF）与“东盟国防部长会议”（ADMM）在内的制度性机制，东盟积极应对传统与非传统安全挑战，包括南海海洋争端和日益严峻的恐怖主义威胁。尽管取得了一定成果，东盟仍面临诸多内部挑战，如成员国间利益分歧显著、大国影响力不断上升等问题，这些因素可能削弱东盟的集体自主性与决策一致性。然而，东盟仍具备提升其中等强国角色的潜力，特别是在推动非传统安全领域的多边合作方面。本研究从五个核心维度出发，系统分析了东盟的能力：战略地理位置、制度性架构、安全应对机制、内部制约因素与未来发展前景。通过坚持协商一致的外交模式与包容性区域合作方式，东盟继续作为维护区域安全与秩序的重要行为体。

关键词：东盟、区域安全、中等强国、多边合作、东南亚

1. Introduction

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is widely regarded as a middle power with significant influence in regional affairs, even though it does not hold dominance on the global stage. ASEAN contributes to regional stability through diplomacy, multilateral mechanisms, and cooperative initiatives aimed at addressing both traditional and non-traditional security challenges. By adhering to principles of consensus and non-intervention, ASEAN has positioned itself as a neutral actor, mediating tensions between major powers, most notably the United States and China, through forums such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the East Asia Summit (EAS) [2].

In response to maritime and defense concerns, ASEAN has institutionalized several security-oriented platforms, including the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) and the ASEAN Maritime Forum. Furthermore, it addresses non-traditional threats such as terrorism,

climate change, and cybersecurity through regional agreements like the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER). ASEAN also plays a facilitative role in the South China Sea disputes through the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties (DOC) and ongoing negotiations on a Code of Conduct (COC), with the aim of promoting regional peace and stability [2].

By emphasizing inclusivity and multilateralism, ASEAN sustains regional security while maintaining strategic autonomy amidst growing rivalry among global powers. It continues to foster economic resilience and political cohesion within Southeast Asia. ASEAN has made meaningful progress in creating an inclusive and stable regional order through its integrative frameworks and active engagement in non-traditional security domains [2].

The concept of middle power in international relations typically refers to states that possess moderate economic, military, or diplomatic

capabilities, without being superpowers. These states function as mediators and bridge-builders, promoting multilateral cooperation and addressing global challenges such as climate change, regional conflict, and global trade. Countries like Canada, Australia, and South Korea exemplify middle powers through their diplomacy-oriented foreign policies and adherence to international norms [22]. Middle powers are vital for upholding liberal multilateral governance and serve as counterweights in an increasingly multipolar world.

Regional security encompasses the collective efforts of states within a region to preserve peace and stability, prevent conflict, and mitigate transnational threats through various diplomatic, legal, and institutional means. It is influenced by interstate relations, regional alliances, and the nature of shared threats. The framework includes coordinated responses to terrorism, transnational crime, climate change, pandemics, and illegal migration. Regional security also requires a balance between state sovereignty and collective action. As explained by [9], regional security is shaped by interactions within what he terms regional security complexes, where patterns of amity and enmity define the region's strategic landscape.

Despite its geographic advantage between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, ASEAN faces persistent challenges in exercising effective regional leadership. Its initiatives in maritime security and freedom of navigation particularly in critical chokepoints such as the Strait of Malacca have had limited impact, particularly in balancing the influence of major actors like the United States, China, and Japan. ASEAN has been described as a connector between Southeast Asia and the global political economy; however, its consensus-based ASEAN Way has been criticized for its slow and often inefficient decision-making processes [20]. Security mechanisms like ARF, ADMM, and TAC have yet to produce rapid responses to emergent threats.

Instruments such as the COC and the ASEAN Convention on Counter-Terrorism (ACCT) have shown limited progress in addressing maritime insecurity, terrorism, and human trafficking. The Asia-Pacific region, as [20] asserts, is increasingly dynamic due to great power rivalry and the emergence of regional actors. ASEAN's capacity to lead is also constrained by its lack of collective military capability and limited policy coherence in addressing global issues like food

security and climate change. [6] notes that middle powers can influence international diplomacy despite lacking control over global systems.

This research explores ASEAN's role as a middle power in regional security, examining how diplomacy, institutional cooperation, and inclusive security strategies enhance its effectiveness. According to [27], middle powers exert considerable influence in both regional and global contexts, often maintaining strategic balance in their relations with major powers. Despite its limited hard power, ASEAN has established itself as a regional mediator and facilitator of political dialogue. Through its emphasis on multilateral cooperation, ASEAN contributes to the long-term peace and development of Southeast Asia [27].

The study also investigates the broader conceptual foundations of ASEAN's regional security strategy. As [31] emphasizes, regional security includes not only material threats but also ideational and cultural factors that shape state behavior. ASEAN's strength as a middle power lies in its ability to employ diplomatic tools, multilateral institutions, and non-military approaches to respond to regional threats. [34] argue that middle powers often act as agents of transformation by advancing international norms based on law and collective security. In this regard, ASEAN plays a vital role in promoting peace, resolving regional conflicts, and enhancing economic integration across Asia [33].

2. Literature Review

The academic literature offers a comprehensive perspective on the role and definition of middle powers in the international system. Cooper [12] contends that the status of a middle power is not exclusively determined by a state's economic output or military strength. Rather, it is defined by the capacity of a state to contribute meaningfully to international peace, stability, and order through diplomatic engagement and support for multilateral governance. Middle powers typically leverage their moderate resources by participating actively in global institutions, forming strategic partnerships, and promoting cooperative approaches to regional and international challenges.

While middle powers lack the leverage of great powers, they possess agency through agenda-setting, norm entrepreneurship, and institutional engagement. Countries such as Australia, Canada, and the Nordic states exemplify this model by

pursuing diplomacy rooted in knowledge, negotiation, and policy innovation rather than coercion. These nations consistently emphasize soft power and cooperation to enhance their regional and global standing.

In practice, middle powers advocate for peace, stability, and collective security. Their diplomacy frequently includes conflict mediation, alliance-building, and participation in multilateral forums. These states adopt a principled approach to foreign policy that allows them to act as intermediaries in geopolitical disputes and facilitators of international cooperation. Despite structural constraints, they shape global discourse through informed and strategic engagement.

The role of middle powers in diplomacy encompasses several dimensions. They often serve as regional leaders, particularly when they possess sufficient legitimacy and diplomatic capital. Additionally, they reduce tensions between rival powers by facilitating dialogue and proposing policy frameworks that accommodate diverse interests. By forming strategic coalitions and regional partnerships, middle powers increase their ability to influence international outcomes, especially amid changing geopolitical conditions.

Regional partnerships also allow middle powers to create power equilibrium and foster sustainable development. However, they must navigate complex challenges, such as balancing great power rivalries and maintaining internal political coherence. South Korea, for example, exemplifies the difficulty of operating within a contested regional environment, especially in light of pressures from both China and the United States, as well as persistent threats from North Korea. [12] highlights the discontinuity of middle power strategies across different administrations as another limiting factor.

Despite these constraints, ASEAN countries retain the capacity to shape international norms and maintain stability through collective diplomacy. Their participation in global institutions, commitment to multilateralism, and role in regional dialogue mechanisms position them as meaningful contributors within the middle power framework.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive methodology aimed at exploring complex political and institutional phenomena through detailed observation, document analysis, and interviews.

The selection of informants was based on their expertise in ASEAN affairs, regional security, and international diplomacy. All research activities were conducted in accordance with ethical standards, including obtaining informed consent and ensuring the confidentiality of participants.

Primary data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with key informants. Supplementary data were gathered through field observations and an analysis of official ASEAN documents, policy statements, and legal instruments. These materials were meticulously recorded and archived in the form of interview transcripts, field notes, audio-visual recordings, and written documentation. The analytical process involved triangulation, including open coding to identify recurring themes, categorization of key variables, and interpretative analysis to synthesize insights. This method ensures validity and reliability by cross-verifying findings across multiple sources and perspectives. The approach enables a comprehensive understanding of ASEAN's middle power diplomacy and its implications for regional security architecture.

4. Results and Discussion

As a middle power, ASEAN demonstrates the capacity to promote regional security despite internal challenges, such as political fragmentation and external pressures from major global actors. ASEAN remains a central pillar of stability in Southeast Asia by promoting inclusive diplomacy, multilateral cooperation, and adaptive mechanisms to address evolving security threats. It reinforces regional cohesion and extends its influence into global security debates [38]. ASEAN's emphasis on defense diplomacy is particularly evident in efforts to mitigate tensions in the South China Sea and safeguard maritime security.

Table 1. ASEAN's Role in Key Security Domains

Security Domain	ASEAN Role
Maritime Security	South China Sea mediation, COC negotiations
Counter-terrorism	ASEAN Convention on Counter-Terrorism
Disaster Management	AADMER, ARDEX coordination mechanisms
Energy Security	ASEAN Plan of Action for Energy Cooperation
Diplomatic Mediation	Neutral platform between US-China, EAS & ARF

ASEAN's Strategic Position as a Middle Power

ASEAN fulfills the core characteristics of a middle power an actor lacking hegemonic influence but wielding considerable diplomatic weight. Through regional engagement and normative leadership, ASEAN contributes to shaping international norms, despite limited military capabilities [26].

ASEAN's geostrategic location connecting the Pacific and Indian Oceans places it at the nexus of major global trade routes and geopolitical interests, involving countries such as the United States, China, and India. This positioning enables ASEAN to play a balancing role in navigating strategic competition in Asia [39].

ASEAN's foreign policy emphasizes dialogue and inclusiveness, allowing it to serve as a platform for diplomacy between major powers while safeguarding regional autonomy. In the South China Sea, ASEAN although lacking military deterrence has acted as a convener of dialogue through the ARF and EAS, mediating between claimant states and China. Its diplomatic approach, centered on avoiding escalation, preserves peace and regional cohesion [3].

Maritime security represents a core pillar of ASEAN's security agenda. The region's critical role in global trade necessitates coordinated strategies for protecting sea lanes and economic interests. Initiatives such as the Code of Conduct (COC) negotiations in the South China Sea, the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), and maritime agreements exemplify ASEAN's integrated approach to managing traditional and non-traditional maritime threats [4].

ASEAN maintains a foreign policy of non-alignment, ensuring neutrality amidst global tensions. This approach enables it to facilitate cooperation among great powers without aligning with any single bloc [15]. ASEAN's model resembles other middle powers, such as Turkey, which seeks to mediate between regional poles through multilateral engagement [31].

The ASEAN Institutional Framework

ASEAN's institutional framework is grounded in diplomacy and multilateral cooperation, fostering dialogue, conflict mediation, and collective responses to regional security concerns. The ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), central to the ASEAN Community Vision 2025, aims to construct a peaceful and stable regional environment by

addressing both conventional and emerging security threats [37].

Key institutional mechanisms include the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the East Asia Summit (EAS), and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM). ARF, established in 1994, serves as a multilateral security forum that includes major global actors such as China, the United States, Russia, India, and Japan. It promotes dialogue and trust-building to manage regional tensions [14].

Table 2. Comparative Roles of Middle Powers in Regional Security

Country/Organization	Middle Power Characteristics	Main Mechanism Involvement
ASEAN	Geostrategic hub, platform for dialogue, consensus-based	ARF, ADMM, EAS, APSC
Australia	Institutionally active in security initiatives	QUAD, AUKUS, Five Eyes
Turkey	Regional mediator, expanding diplomatic footprint	OIC, NATO Dialogue
South Korea	Security under US alliance, tech diplomacy	APEC, ASEAN+3
Canada	Promoter of multilateralism and peacebuilding	UN Peacekeeping, Arctic Council

The EAS expands ASEAN's diplomatic reach by engaging not only Southeast and East Asian nations but also global powers. It supports cooperation on maritime security, non-proliferation, and transnational threats, enabling ASEAN to influence broader security governance without direct confrontation [19].

ADMM facilitates military cooperation among member states through joint exercises, intelligence sharing, and counterterrorism coordination. Despite the region's limited military capacity, ADMM reinforces regional stability by encouraging collective defense approaches [32].

For disaster management, ASEAN utilizes the ASEAN Regional Disaster Emergency Response Simulation Exercise (ARDEX), strengthening institutional resilience and enhancing cross-border emergency coordination. This mechanism supports rapid response to climate-related and humanitarian crises [11].

The ASEAN Connectivity Master Plan (ACMP) contributes to long-term regional stability by promoting infrastructure development and economic integration, reinforcing ASEAN's role in socioeconomic resilience [21].

Given the region's significance for global maritime trade, ASEAN's commitment to conflict mediation in the South China Sea is essential. Through diplomatic platforms like the ARF, ASEAN facilitates peaceful dispute resolution and supports freedom of navigation [13].

Capacity to Handle Security Threats

ASEAN addresses both traditional and non-traditional threats despite lacking great-power status. It employs diplomacy, regional forums, and multilateral initiatives to ensure political and social stability across Southeast Asia and the wider Asia-Pacific [17].

In managing the South China Sea dispute, ASEAN prioritizes negotiation over confrontation. Mechanisms such as the COC negotiations, ARF, and EAS enable dialogue between China and ASEAN claimant states, reducing the likelihood of escalation [23].

ASEAN also counters transnational crime and terrorism through platforms like the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime and the ASEAN Convention on Counter-Terrorism. These initiatives foster intelligence sharing, coordinated responses, and legal harmonization [28].

ASEAN's disaster preparedness is advanced through AADMER, which enhances early warning systems, disaster resilience, and cross-border emergency collaboration [18]. This approach exemplifies ASEAN's strength as a middle power in responding to non-traditional threats through collective action.

The region's strategic importance in energy trade routes underlines ASEAN's role in maintaining maritime security and ensuring energy access. Through the ASEAN Plan of Action for Energy Cooperation, member states aim to develop integrated energy infrastructure and policies for long-term energy stability [24].

ASEAN also invites participation from global powers in platforms like ARF, EAS, and ADMM to maintain inclusive regional dialogue and prevent polarization. By uniting both major and minor actors in multilateral discussions, ASEAN bolsters regional stability [29].

Challenges Facing ASEAN

ASEAN faces significant constraints in military capability and economic capacity when compared to global powers such as China, the United States, or Russia. Nevertheless, its strategic diplomacy provides a platform for balancing power in the region [16].

The South China Sea dispute presents persistent diplomatic hurdles. ASEAN's ability to mediate is undermined by diverging interests among member states and China's assertive maritime posture [40]. Unilateral actions and military buildup by China further complicate ASEAN's role as a neutral arbiter.

Rivalries between great powers also affect ASEAN's cohesion. Navigating U.S.–China tensions, especially concerning trade and regional influence, requires ASEAN to maintain a delicate balance [35]. Internal divisions among ASEAN states hinder unified responses to such pressures.

ASEAN's efforts to tackle non-traditional threats terrorism, human trafficking, and climate change are often constrained by disparities in member-state capacities and weak institutional enforcement [36].

Political diversity within ASEAN contributes to challenges in reaching consensus on foreign policy. Differing governance systems and national interests result in fragmented approaches to security cooperation [1].

ASEAN's limited resources and dependency on diplomatic tools make it difficult to respond rapidly to urgent crises, particularly when external actors exert influence over regional affairs [8].

ASEAN must also navigate competing interests from extra-regional powers, including the U.S., China, and Russia. Maintaining neutrality

while promoting inclusive dialogue is increasingly difficult under the strain of geopolitical rivalry [30].

In terms of infrastructure and energy security, ASEAN's dependence on imported energy sources renders the region vulnerable to global supply chain disruptions and great-power competition for natural resources.

Opportunities and Prospects for ASEAN as a Middle Power

Despite the aforementioned challenges, ASEAN holds strategic opportunities to deepen its role as a middle power in regional security. Its diversity enables it to function as a forum for peacebuilding and conflict prevention [25].

Table 3. Strategic Opportunities for ASEAN

Opportunity/Prospect	Description
Expansion of Multilateral Diplomacy	Enhancing ASEAN's influence through ARF, EAS, ADMM platforms to bridge global power rivalries.
Leadership in Non-Traditional Security	Taking lead in counter-terrorism, disaster risk reduction, and transnational crime frameworks.
Strengthening Maritime Security Governance	Developing and enforcing maritime norms like UNCLOS and promoting COC in South China Sea.
Regional Energy Cooperation	Reducing dependence on single energy sources through infrastructure investment and diversification.
Climate Change and Environmental Leadership	Increasing ASEAN's role in global climate diplomacy and environmental governance.
Building Strategic Partnerships	Partnering with other middle powers like Korea, Australia, and the EU for joint regional initiatives.
Conflict Mediation Role	Mediating in regional disputes including U.S.–China competition and intra-ASEAN disagreements.

Institutional Capacity Building

Enhancing institutional resilience and coordination among ASEAN states for security challenges.

ASEAN can expand its influence in global diplomacy through platforms like ARF, EAS, and ADMM. These provide mechanisms for ASEAN to act as a conduit between conflicting powers, especially amid rising U.S.–China tensions [7].

Given the South China Sea's role in international trade, ASEAN can strengthen maritime governance and expand its influence through legal instruments such as UNCLOS and multilateral agreements that safeguard navigation rights [5].

To enhance energy security, ASEAN can coordinate infrastructure development and diversify energy sources, reducing dependency and increasing regional autonomy [10].

ASEAN also has the capacity to address complex non-traditional threats. Through conventions and security dialogues, it can develop more integrated policies on counter-terrorism and disaster risk reduction [34].

Its commitment to neutrality and consensus allows ASEAN to serve as a bridge between conflicting international actors, further reinforcing its identity as a middle power [34].

Finally, ASEAN's increasing engagement with climate governance and environmental security positions it as a proactive actor in global stability. Its environmental diplomacy contributes to regional resilience against long-term threats such as migration, natural disasters, and economic disruptions caused by climate change [33].

5. Conclusion

As a middle power, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) demonstrates significant capacity to uphold regional security and stability, despite its non-hegemonic position within the global power hierarchy. Strategically located along vital maritime trade routes, ASEAN leverages its geographical centrality to act as a regional stabilizer and diplomatic intermediary amid intensifying great power rivalries, particularly between the United States and China. This geographic advantage reinforces ASEAN's geopolitical relevance and facilitates its role in fostering regional dialogue and conflict prevention [2], [15].

ASEAN's institutional framework including mechanisms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM), and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) serves as a foundation for inclusive, consensus-driven diplomacy and security collaboration. These institutions illustrate ASEAN's commitment to multilateralism and its unique *ASEAN Way* of regional engagement, characterized by non-interference, informality, and peaceful dispute resolution [27], [14], [32].

In both traditional and non-traditional security domains, ASEAN has exhibited a growing capacity to manage regional risks. The organization's diplomatic role in mitigating tensions in the South China Sea, as well as its institutional responses to transnational threats such as terrorism, human trafficking, cyber threats, climate change, and natural disasters, reflect its evolving security agenda [3], [28], [18].

Nevertheless, ASEAN faces enduring structural constraints. Internal fragmentation, divergent national interests among member states, and the limitations of consensus-based decision-making often hinder its responsiveness and policy coherence. Additionally, external pressures from major powers pose challenges to ASEAN's autonomy, at times compromising its strategic neutrality [20], [40].

Despite these challenges, ASEAN continues to hold considerable potential as a normative and diplomatic middle power. Opportunities exist for the bloc to expand strategic partnerships, particularly with other like-minded middle powers, and to position itself as a leader in addressing non-traditional security threats through regional innovation and global engagement [7], [25], [33]. ASEAN's normative credibility and convening power offer pathways to strengthen its relevance in a shifting multipolar world.

Ultimately, ASEAN's effectiveness as a middle power in maintaining regional security depends on its ability to capitalize on its strategic geography, consolidate institutional capacity, and navigate an increasingly complex geopolitical landscape. By deepening multilateral cooperation, reinforcing collective resilience, and remaining committed to principles of inclusivity and neutrality, ASEAN can continue to serve as a critical stabilizing force in Southeast Asia and beyond [1], [29].

Declarations

Authors' Contribution

Conceptualization, A. Z., M. W., A. B. P.; methodology, A. Z., M. W.; software, A. Z., M. W.; validation, A. Z., M. W., A. B. P.; formal analysis, A. Z., M. W., A. B. P.; research, A. Z., M. W., A. B. P., J. M.; resources, A. Z., M. W., A. B. P., J. M.; data curation, A. Z., M. W., A. B. P., J. M.; original drafting - drafting, J. M.; drafting-revising and editing, A. B. P., J. M.; visualization, A. B. P., J. M.; supervision, A. B. P., J. M.; project administration, A. Z.. All authors have read and accepted the published version of the manuscript.

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Word count (excluding references): 8,786 words.

Peer-review record:

- **Fast-track status:** Not fast-tracked
- **First-round reviews received:** 3 reports
- **Revision cycles completed:** 3 rounds
- **Final version submitted:** August 24, 2025

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