

Research on the ASEAN Way and ASEAN Integration

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Abstract: For more than half a century, ASEAN has evolved from the early five-member bloc to the current ten-member bloc, transforming from "Little ASEAN" to "Greater ASEAN." This transformation has been guided by the "ASEAN Way," which has played a crucial role in maintaining peace and stability in Southeast Asia. However, as ASEAN's integration process deepens, the drawbacks of the "ASEAN Way" have become increasingly apparent, hindering the integration process. As a result, while some changes have occurred in the "ASEAN Way," they have had limited impact. With the Asia-Pacific order facing a reshaping, ASEAN's central position is under threat. Therefore, advancing ASEAN's integration process has become particularly important. By upholding its central role and the essential characteristics of the "ASEAN Way," as well as flexibly leveraging external forces to address regional issues, ASEAN can create conditions for peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region, thereby promoting the integration process.

Keywords: ASEAN Way; ASEAN Integration; ASEAN Central Position.

1. "ASEAN Way" and ASEAN Integration

Since its establishment in 1967, ASEAN has undergone two expansions, growing from a "small ASEAN" comprising only five founding members to the current ten-member bloc. The transition from "small ASEAN" to "greater ASEAN" has deepened the region's integration. Southeast Asia, known as the "Balkan Peninsula of Asia," has a history marked by conflict. After the formation of ASEAN, the region achieved lasting peace and stability, a feat largely attributed to the guidance of the "ASEAN Way." [1] The existence of the "ASEAN Way" has facilitated the resolution of mutual hostility and misunderstanding among Southeast Asian countries, which have diverse social and cultural backgrounds, significant ethnic traditions, and varied religious beliefs. It has also helped ease territorial disputes and prioritize unity and cooperation.

The "ASEAN Way" has no official definition and is a relatively loose concept. It is a common principle formed over the long-term practice of ASEAN, unique to the region, aimed at helping member states resolve conflicts and promote cooperation. The term "ASEAN Way" was first proposed by General Mutapak of Indonesia. In 1974, he attributed ASEAN's success to the many efforts within ASEAN that addressed various issues faced by member states through consultation, referring to it as the "ASEAN Way." [2] Therefore, the essence of the "ASEAN Way" is based on the decision-making habits and communication methods of early ASEAN leaders, rooted in the shared cultural and value systems of Southeast Asia, and has evolved over decades into a common code of conduct for the ten ASEAN countries. The uniqueness of the "ASEAN Way" is primarily reflected in its characteristics, such as informality, non-interference principles, and consensus through consultation. As the largest regional organization in Asia composed of countries with vastly different historical and cultural backgrounds, ASEAN's achievements today can be attributed not only to the efforts of its member states but also largely to the ability of the "ASEAN Way" to standardize member states' behavior, ease tensions between countries, and promote the development of

ASEAN integration.

2. The Dilemma and Reform of "ASEAN Way"

2.1. The Dilemma of the "ASEAN Way"

2.1.1. Low Decision-making Efficiency

The limitations of the consensus principle in the "ASEAN Way" have led to low decision-making efficiency in ASEAN. In recent years, this dilemma has been most evident in the issue of Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN. Since its independence, Timor-Leste has been planning to join ASEAN, seeking to enhance its national status and international influence through membership. Previously, ASEAN was open to all countries in Southeast Asia that were willing to adhere to ASEAN norms and principles. Given Timor-Leste's geographical location, identity, and willingness to join, it met the conditions for membership. However, the approval process for Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN has been extremely lengthy, and it remains officially a non-member state. The reasons behind this not only relate to the development process of ASEAN integration but also highlight how the consensus principle in the "ASEAN Way" hinders Timor-Leste's accession. On one hand, the views of ASEAN member states are inconsistent. Singapore is skeptical about Timor-Leste's purpose for joining ASEAN, arguing that its economic development lags far behind that of ASEAN countries, and it relies heavily on foreign aid, thereby draining resources from ASEAN and potentially weakening the overall strength of ASEAN. Consensus is at the core of the "ASEAN Way," and Singapore's opposition has made it difficult for Timor-Leste to gain approval at ASEAN summits. On the other hand, the 13th ASEAN Summit in 2007 formally signed the "ASEAN Charter," the first legally binding document in ASEAN's 40-year history. With the entry into force of the "ASEAN Charter," ASEAN's institutionalization has been continuously improved, making the procedures for admitting new members far more complex than those during the second expansion in the 1990s. As the youngest country in Southeast Asia, Timor-Leste has relatively weak economic strength and development level. Moreover, it was the first country to apply for ASEAN membership after the ASEAN Charter came into

effect, making the accession process more complex. In short, ASEAN countries have differing views on many issues, and a lack of unified stance within ASEAN seriously affects its decision-making efficiency.

2.1.2. The Dilemma of the Principle of Non-Interference in Internal Affairs

In recent years, the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of ASEAN member states has also influenced stability within ASEAN. This is most evident in the impact of Myanmar's internal crisis on the "ASEAN Way." The military coup in Myanmar in 2021 overthrew the democratic government, causing a significant internal crisis. This was the first coup since Myanmar joined ASEAN, and ASEAN managed the issue as an internal affair. ASEAN member states had mixed attitudes toward the Myanmar crisis; some advocated a tough stance, while others adhered to the principle of non-interference. However, regardless of their stance, ASEAN struggled to effectively address the Myanmar crisis. When the 2021 Myanmar crisis remained unresolved, another conflict erupted in 2023. The Three Brothers Alliance, led by the National League for Democracy, issued a statement announcing the launch of Operation 1027, which involved coordinated attacks on the Myanmar military government forces in multiple areas, including Lashio and Kyaukpyu in northeastern Shan State. This conflict indicates that the political crisis in Myanmar is becoming protracted, severely hindering the progress of ASEAN integration. The principle of non-interference in the "ASEAN Way" has once again faced widespread international scrutiny, with critics arguing that ASEAN's handling of this internal crisis was not decisive enough.

And in terms of non-traditional security issues, as the Myanmar crisis has become protracted, armed conflicts between the Myanmar military and opposition armed groups have led to large-scale displacement of civilians, who have fled to ASEAN countries, plunging ASEAN into a severe humanitarian crisis. As the overall situation in Myanmar continues to deteriorate, transnational security challenges cannot be addressed by the policies of a single country alone; regional mechanisms for resolution are also needed. Although ASEAN, as the primary security community, still adheres to the principles of defending national sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs regarding territorial disputes and non-traditional security issues, for member states, national interests take precedence over those of ASEAN, with national survival and territorial integrity being the top priority. In the face of an intractable humanitarian crisis, the "ASEAN way" is once again being tested. It is evident that under the principle of non-interference, ASEAN finds it difficult to intervene and find solutions to the Myanmar crisis, thus the relationship between ASEAN's unity and the internal affairs of its members remains a challenge for ASEAN to explore.

2.2. The Reform of the "ASEAN Way"

As the ASEAN integration process continues to advance, the drawbacks of the "ASEAN Way" have gradually become apparent, and calls for its reform are growing louder. The introduction of the ASEAN Charter marks a significant transformation in the "ASEAN Way." Its greatest achievement is that it enables ASEAN to operate under a new legal framework and provides a new platform for the organizational development of the ASEAN Community. [3] The ASEAN Charter officially establishes the ASEAN Summit as the highest decision-making body, granting it the

authority to arbitrate important disputes among member states and make final decisions on major issues facing ASEAN [4]. Although the ASEAN Charter holds epoch-making significance for ASEAN's development, it has successfully demonstrated to the outside world its determination to move forward on the path of regional integration and seek reforms in the "ASEAN Way." However, the ASEAN Charter has struggled to change ASEAN's weak position in non-traditional security issues and in promoting economic integration. For member states like Myanmar, which are highly sensitive to sovereignty concessions, the ASEAN Charter falls short of expectations. In addition to the ASEAN Charter, ASEAN has shifted from non-interference to limited intervention in the long-term Myanmar crisis. This is specifically reflected in the 2021 Myanmar crisis, where ASEAN placed great importance on it and convened a special ASEAN summit, with member states unanimously adopting the "Five-Point Consensus." However, Myanmar's negative attitude toward the "Five-Point Consensus" has eroded ASEAN's international credibility and threatened its central position. This has forced ASEAN to abandon its neutral stance. For the first time in its history, ASEAN rejected leaders from its member states from attending the ASEAN Summit. The 2021 ASEAN Summit excluded the Myanmar military government, marking the first time ASEAN intervened due to internal issues within a member state. However, ASEAN's intervention in Myanmar was limited and did not fully exceed the boundaries of the "ASEAN Way." ASEAN did not take firm measures against the Myanmar military government. If it were to completely break the non-interference principle and apply it to all ASEAN member states, this would be unacceptable to the member states. It is evident that the transformation of the "ASEAN Way" is both progressive and faces certain challenges.

3. The "ASEAN way" and the Future Path of ASEAN Integration

3.1. Upholding the Centrality of ASEAN

The most significant contribution of the "ASEAN Way" is to promote the formation of a multilateral cooperation mechanism centered on ASEAN. In the 21st century, exchanges between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific have become more frequent. With the enhancement of maritime strategic importance and the escalation of strategic competition between China and the United States in the Asia-Pacific region, the Indo-Pacific area has gradually become a new strategic focus. The "Indo-Pacific Strategy," aimed at planning new geopolitical outcomes, has thus emerged. The rise of the U.S.-led "Indo-Pacific Strategy" has challenged ASEAN's central position and affected the external implementation of the "ASEAN Way." The loss of ASEAN's central status will lead to its marginalization in international affairs, and the continued implementation of the "ASEAN Way" cannot do without the role of ASEAN's central status in regional affairs. In September 2023, the 43rd ASEAN Summit was held in Jakarta, Indonesia. Before the summit, Indonesian President Joko Widodo emphasized that "ASEAN must avoid getting caught up in the vortex of major power disputes" and "avoid becoming an agent for major powers in the region." Additionally, "ASEAN's pivotal role: growth center" was the theme of this summit, indicating that ASEAN's primary goal remains economic development, while avoiding sensitive issues such as security. ASEAN continues to maintain a

"balance of power" policy with the two major powers, China and the United States, adhering to the "ASEAN centrality" theory. To counter the impact of the "Indo-Pacific Strategy," ASEAN issued the "ASEAN Indo-Pacific Outlook" at the 34th ASEAN Summit, outlining new propositions for regional cooperation. At the 43rd summit, the importance of the "ASEAN Indo-Pacific Outlook" for ASEAN's future development was once again emphasized. ASEAN's use of the "Indo-Pacific" concept is not only a response to the U.S. "Indo-Pacific Strategy," but more importantly, it emphasizes maintaining ASEAN's central position, promoting cooperation and engagement, and stressing economic win-win outcomes. The strategic rivalry between China and the United States has kept the Asia-Pacific region in a state of tension. Only by adhering to the "ASEAN centrality" under the "great power balance strategy" can ASEAN help the "ASEAN way" play a better role in the process of ASEAN integration, maintain regional peace and stability, and advance the development of ASEAN integration.

3.2. Adhere to the Essential Characteristics of the "ASEAN Way"

ASEAN, as one of the world's leading regional organizations, sees the development and transformation within any member country impact the entire region. Issues such as domestic politics, refugee crises, and interference from major powers within the ASEAN region challenge the "ASEAN Way." Therefore, the ASEAN Way needs moderate innovation, and flexibly applying the "ASEAN Way" is a significant trend for future ASEAN development. Handling regional affairs through flexible application of the "ASEAN Way" facilitates the advancement of ASEAN integration. Will the ASEAN integration process follow the path of the EU? The answer is no. The vast differences among ASEAN member states indicate that ASEAN cannot adopt the highly political integration model of the EU. The ASEAN integration process is a gradual one, rooted in the common colonial history of ASEAN countries. Any supranational institution that threatens national sovereignty will face resistance from ASEAN member states. If the transformation of the "ASEAN Way" is too hasty and the core content of the "ASEAN Way" is abandoned, it can only lead to the division and disintegration of ASEAN. Therefore, given the significant differences among ASEAN member states, the "ASEAN Way" will remain the optimal solution for ASEAN's principles of conduct. Currently, ASEAN remains a relatively loose regional organization, and its organizational nature dictates that the "ASEAN Way" must exist. Although the "ASEAN Way" may not meet the needs of ASEAN in handling specific issues, it is precisely because of the "ASEAN Way" that ASEAN exists and develops. While the "ASEAN Way" has its limitations and can be moderately reformed, the future advancement of ASEAN integration still requires adherence to the essential characteristics of the "ASEAN Way."

3.3. Flexibly Use External Forces to Solve Regional Problems

In the unprecedented great transformation of the century, the Asia-Pacific region is entering a new phase of reshaping regional order, and ASEAN's central position faces severe challenges. When the ASEAN approach struggles to address specific issues, ASEAN can flexibly leverage external forces to solve regional problems. ASEAN and China share the same

political aspirations — to maintain peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region. Moreover, the "ASEAN approach" not only coordinates differences among ASEAN member states but also influences external factors, playing a significant role in the Asia-Pacific region. Although China's diplomatic principles differ from those of the "ASEAN approach" due to different cultural backgrounds, they share many commonalities, both advocating for peaceful resolution through consultation and communication, opposing force, and fundamentally reflecting the shared essence of Asian culture. Currently, changes in the Asia-Pacific order have made major powers eager to reshape a new order that better aligns with their national interests. The new order ASEAN aims to promote is primarily characterized by the "ASEAN approach," conducting regional affairs through peaceful consultations while adhering to a "balance of power strategy" to ensure ASEAN's leading role in regional affairs. China consistently supports ASEAN's central position in regional affairs. In November 2021, President Xi Jinping emphasized during the commemorative summit marking the 30th anniversary of China-ASEAN dialogue relations that China remains committed to prioritizing ASEAN as a diplomatic priority, firmly supporting ASEAN's unity and community building, ASEAN's central role in the regional architecture, and ASEAN's greater influence in both regional and international affairs. [5]

On the other hand, China has always supported ASEAN in handling regional affairs using the "ASEAN Way." History bears witness to China's pivotal role, whether in the Cambodian crisis of the 1970s or in recent Myanmar crises. China is irreplaceable in maintaining security in the Asia-Pacific region. In the Myanmar crisis that erupted again in 2023, under China's active mediation and relentless efforts, relevant parties in Myanmar signed a ceasefire agreement, with China working together with ASEAN to resolve the Myanmar issue. The essential nature of the "ASEAN Way" aligns with China's values, and China has repeatedly extended a helping hand to ASEAN in situations where it was difficult for ASEAN to act. Currently, the situation in the Asia-Pacific region is undergoing complex and profound changes. ASEAN and China should consistently uphold the fine traditions of mutual respect and keeping promises, abandon narrow self-interest, and embrace the spirit and principles of openness, cooperation, and win-win outcomes. Together, they can forge a new "Asian Security Concept." Therefore, ASEAN can flexibly seek China's help and give full play to the role of "ASEAN way" in maintaining regional order, so as to promote the rapid development of ASEAN integration process.

4. Conclusion

Undoubtedly, the "ASEAN Way" has played a significant role in ASEAN's integration process. It not only promotes peace and stability in Southeast Asia but also balances the power of major external countries, safeguarding its own interests and independence. However, with changes in the international landscape and the ongoing advancement of ASEAN integration, the "ASEAN Way" faces challenges in managing regional affairs. The "ASEAN Way" has undergone some reforms, but these have had limited success. In the current context of reshaping the Asia-Pacific order, although the "ASEAN Way" has encountered numerous difficulties, it is believed that in the context of peace and development as the themes of our times, ASEAN and the "ASEAN Way" will

likely see more positive interactions and continued progress. In summary, the "ASEAN Way" plays a more positive role in advancing ASEAN's integration process, and ASEAN should continue to use the "ASEAN Way" to resolve regional disputes.

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