

Asean at the Crossroads: Rethinking Regionalism Through the Lens of the Asean Political-Security Community (APSC)

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ABSTRACT

The evolution of the ASEAN Political Security Community (APSC) represents both the achievements and limitations of Southeast Asia's efforts to build a stable and cooperative regional order. The APSC plays a key role through initiatives to promote dialogue, prevent regional conflicts and strengthen mutual security cooperation. Structural challenges, including unresolved territorial disputes, the rise of China, adherence to the principle of non-intervention, and the growing influence of populism and nationalism, are among the key challenges that the APSC needs to address. These challenges suggest that ASEAN's normative and institutional frameworks are facing security and governance issues. Therefore, this paper aims to analyze the research landscape on leadership and regionalism in Southeast Asia, with a specific focus on the evolution of the APSC. Scopus-AI analytics were used in the analysis process. Using a comprehensive search string across political, economic and security dimensions, this study draws insights from five Scopus-AI analytics features (summary, extended summary, concept map, topic experts and emerging themes) to map the thematic evolution of the APSC. The findings reveal consistent themes such as the enduring US–China rivalry and ASEAN's institutional adaptation, rising themes including populism and nationalism, and novel themes such as the role of higher education leadership in fostering regional resilience. Moreover, topic experts highlight the importance of network governance, communicative practices through joint communiqués, and the blue economy as cross-sectoral dimensions influencing security cooperation. Theoretically, the study contributes to debates on regionalism and security community theory by reaffirming ASEAN as an incomplete but evolving security community. Practically, the results highlight the need for institutional reforms, capacity building, and people-centered approaches to enhance ASEAN's centrality in regional affairs. By synthesizing thematic insights and expert perspectives, this study underscores that the future of the APSC depends on ASEAN's ability to reconcile sovereignty-centered practices with the demands of deeper integration and collective resilience.

Keywords— ASEAN Political Security Community (APSC) ; Regionalism in Southeast Asia; Leadership and Governance; US–China Rivalry ; Security Community Theory

INTRODUCTION

Regionalism has long been a defining feature of international relations in Southeast Asia, where diverse political systems, historical legacies, and external pressures converge to shape collective security arrangements. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), established in 1967, presently joined by ten member countries - Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, Philippines, Brunei, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam - now plays a key role in maintaining regional peace and stability. In fulfilling this role, ASEAN has taken steps to strengthen its political security dimension through the ASEAN Political Security Community (APSC) as part of its broader community-building agenda (Acharya, 2014; Khoirunnisa, 2023). The decision-making framework within ASEAN is steered by Article 20 of the ASEAN Charter, which mandates that consultation and consensus form the central basis of all decisions. Therefore, leadership both within individual member states and collectively as a regional organization, is an essential component in navigating internal challenges and external competition.

ASEAN's development as a political security community has been constrained by structural limitations and

normative principles. The “ASEAN Way” mechanism has contributed to conflict management by preventing the escalation of disputes through the principles of sovereign equality, consensus, and non-interference (Haacke, 2013; Dosch, 2008). However, ASEAN’s ability to respond decisively to pressing security challenges, such as the South China Sea dispute and the crisis in Myanmar, is somewhat limited by the same principles (Agussalim & Wicaksono, 2024). Moreover, ASEAN’s institutional weaknesses and the diversity of its political regimes create further obstacles to deepening regional integration (Jones & Jenne, 2016).

Past scholarship has provided valuable insights into ASEAN’s normative framework (Haacke, 2013), regional leadership dynamics (Katsumata, 2014), and its evolving role amid great power rivalries (Ram, 2022; Lina & Kun, 2016). While these studies have highlighted ASEAN’s centrality and limitations, less attention has been given to systematically analyzing how leadership—whether through state actors like Indonesia, collective mechanisms, or external influences—has shaped the trajectory of ASEAN’s political-security community. In particular, there remains a gap in synthesizing emerging themes on leadership’s interplay with ASEAN’s institutional development, regional security challenges, and public perceptions (Abdullah & Benny, 2013).

This study aims to address that gap by critically analyzing the evolution of APSC through the lens of leadership and regionalism. Drawing on existing literature, expert perspectives, and conceptual mapping, the paper examines how leadership has influenced ASEAN’s capacity to maintain stability, respond to crises, and project centrality in the broader Indo-Pacific order. This study also identified significant emerging themes such as tensions between great power competition, balancing sovereignty with collective action, ASEAN centrality, and the need for greater public engagement in community building.

The contribution of this paper can be traced in three forms. First, it provides a comprehensive review of ASEAN’s leadership dynamics in shaping its political-security trajectory, offering clarity on recurring debates. Second, it develops a conceptual synthesis that highlights leadership as a critical but underexplored dimension of ASEAN’s regionalism. Third, it outlines future research directions on how leadership innovation could enhance ASEAN’s institutional resilience and legitimacy in an era of heightened geopolitical uncertainty.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The next section reviews the theoretical underpinnings of leadership and regionalism in Southeast Asia. This is followed by a historical analysis of ASEAN’s political-security development and its normative framework. The following section examines leadership challenges, external influences, and emerging issues, culminating in a discussion of ASEAN’s future prospects as a political security community. Finally, the conclusion highlights key insights, contributions, and avenues for further research.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts bibliometric and thematic approaches using Scopus AI Analytics, accessed on 11 September 2025, to investigate the research landscape on leadership and regionalism in Southeast Asia, with a particular emphasis on the evolution of the APSC. Scopus AI was used because of its comprehensive indexing of multidisciplinary scholarly output and advanced analytics, which allow structured insights into knowledge domains, author networks, and emerging thematic areas. The methodology combines database-based analysis with interpretive synthesis to ensure both conceptual rigor and depth in addressing the study’s objectives.

The search strategy utilised a Boolean query designed to encapsulate relevant literature of leadership, governance, regionalism, and ASEAN political-security integration. The following search string was applied in Scopus: ("leadership" OR "governance" OR "authority" OR "management") AND ("regionalism" OR "regional" OR "localism" OR "territorial") AND ("Southeast Asia" OR "ASEAN" OR "Indochina" OR "Mekong") AND ("politics" OR "policy" OR "diplomacy" OR "international relations") AND ("development" OR "integration" OR "cooperation" OR "collaboration"). This query retrieved peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and conference proceedings published up to September 2025, ensuring a robust dataset covering both foundational works and recent contributions.

Scopus AI produced several key layers of analysis. The Summary reveals a growing trend in publications addressing ASEAN’s political-security framework, with a significant increase in scholarship after 2010,

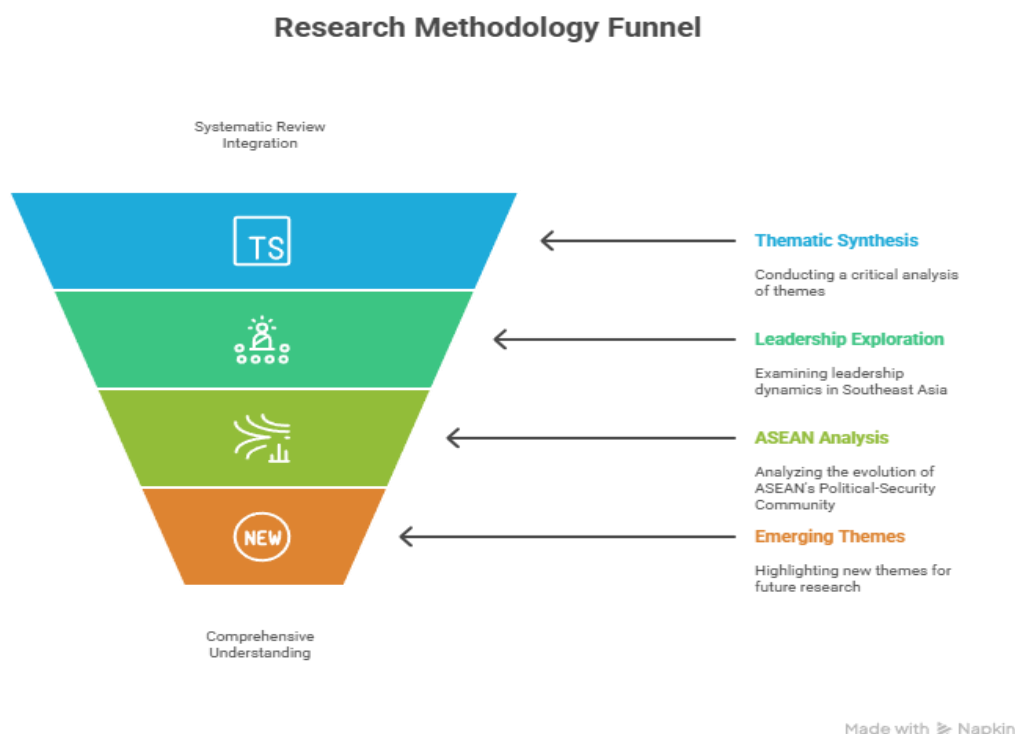
reflecting heightened geopolitical tensions and ASEAN's efforts to institutionalize a Political-Security Community (Acharya, 2014; Khoirunnisa, 2023). The Expanded Summary further details thematic clusters, including ASEAN's normative principles known as "the ASEAN Way", leadership in conflict management, and the influence of external powers such as the United States and China on Southeast Asian regionalism (Haacke, 2013; Lina & Kun, 2016).

The Concept Map generated to visualize intellectual linkages discovered by Scopus AI. The Concept Map also highlighted interconnected domains of research, with leadership positioned at the focal point of themes such as sovereignty, regional cooperation, and institutional capacity. This mapping explained how leadership acts as both a driver and constraint in ASEAN's regionalism, linking issues of governance, diplomacy, and security cooperation.

Finally, Scopus AI identified Emerging Themes that are relevant to advancing current debates. The themes include: (1) ASEAN's struggle to harmonize its principle of non-interference with the need for decisive action in crises such as Myanmar (Agussalim & Wicaksono, 2024); (2) the role of great power rivalry in testing ASEAN centrality (Ram, 2022); and (3) the significance of public perceptions in legitimizing ASEAN's political-security efforts (Abdullah & Benny, 2013). Collectively, these themes reveal areas of contestation and innovation that warrant further scholarly attention.

By integrating Scopus AI's bibliometric insights with a critical thematic synthesis, this methodology directly supports the study's aim: to provide an in-depth exploration of leadership and regionalism in Southeast Asia, analyze the evolution of APSC, identify key topic experts shaping the discourse, and highlight emerging themes for future inquiry.

Figure 1 : Research Methodology Funnel



RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results derived from Scopus AI Analytics (11 September 2025) reveal that scholarship on leadership and regionalism in Southeast Asia, particularly in relation to ASEAN's Political-Security Community, has grown steadily since the early 2000s, with research converging around ASEAN's normative principles, leadership dynamics, and external power influences. The Summary and Expanded Summary highlight that while the

“ASEAN Way” of consensus and non-interference has sustained stability, it has also limited decisive action in crises such as Myanmar and the South China Sea disputes. The Concept Map positions leadership as the central axis connecting themes of governance, diplomacy, sovereignty, and institutional capacity, underscoring leadership’s role as both a driver and constraint of integration. Insights from Topic Experts, including Acharya (2014), Haacke (2013), and Katsumata (2014), reinforce foundational debates on ASEAN’s security community and diplomatic culture, while newer contributions (Khoirunnisa, 2023; Agussalim & Wicaksono, 2024) address contemporary challenges. Finally, Emerging Themes emphasize ASEAN’s struggle to reconcile non-intervention with collective responsibility, the implications of U.S.-China competition particularly on ASEAN’s centrality, and the significance of public perceptions on legitimacy. Overall, these findings convey the message that leadership remains a crucial factor in shaping ASEAN’s ability to maintain sovereignty through regional cooperation and maintain its political security objectives in a challenging geopolitical environment.

Insights from Summary and Expanded Summary

The evolution of the APSC is influenced by the complex interaction of historical experience, institutional norms, and contemporary geopolitical constraints. As described in the Summary and Extended Summary from Scopus AI Analytics (11 September 2025), ASEAN’s normative framework (the ASEAN Way), characterised by sovereign equality, non-interference, and consensus decision-making, has been the foundation of its regional conflict management approach (Haacke, 2013; Acharya, 2014). This “ASEAN Way” has contributed significantly to conflict prevention by preventing disputes, such as those in the South China Sea, from escalating into open hostilities (Dosch, 2008; Khoirunnisa, 2023). However, its effectiveness in conflict resolution remains limited, especially in crises involving interstate conflicts such as Myanmar (Agussalim & Wicaksono, 2024; Emmers, 2017).

From a historical standpoint, the APSC has been plagued by territorial disputes, Cold War dynamics, and the rise of external powers in the region. The South China Sea disputes and the growing influence of China have forced ASEAN to strive for proper balance between maintaining unity and preserving sovereignty (Putra et al., 2019; Lina & Kun, 2016). While ASEAN has projected itself as the hub of regional cooperation and sought to institutionalize its centrality in Asia-Pacific security dialogues, the challenges of balancing U.S. and Chinese strategic competition have exposed its structural weaknesses (Ram, 2022; Acharya, 2021). This reflects the dual pressures of external power rivalry and intra-regional diversity. Both continues to test ASEAN’s cohesion and leadership capacity.

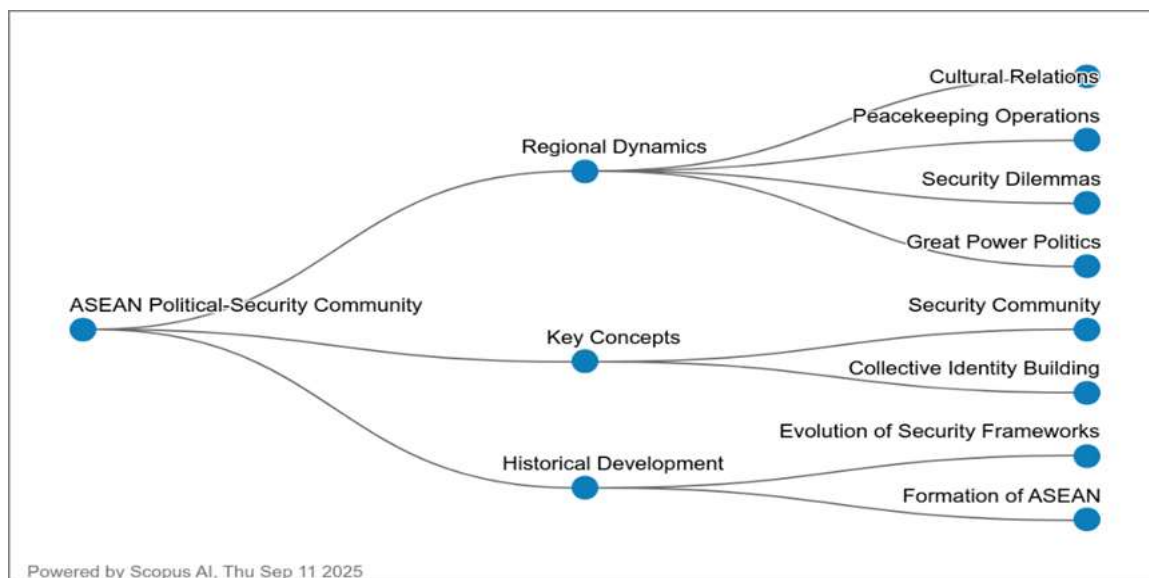
Leadership emerges as a crucial determinant in ASEAN’s political-security evolution. ASEAN lacks consistent, strong and capable leadership to mobilise collective action (Agussalim & Wicaksono, 2024; Katsumata, 2014). This leadership deficit has been evident on various issues. Among other things, the ASEAN’s cautious response to the Myanmar humanitarian crisis and the ongoing maritime dispute indirectly raise questions about its long-term credibility as a security community. While ASEAN aspires towards cooperative security, it has not developed into a collective security or defence system, leaving it vulnerable to external strategic pressure (Nasu et al., 2019; Saragih et al., 2020).

Public perception is another significant dimension of ASEAN’s political-security orientation. Research suggests that citizens in most ASEAN countries are still lack awareness of ASEAN’s political-security mechanisms. Some also perceive the ASEAN Political Security Community as elitist and government-driven, despite ongoing initiatives to build confidence in their potential to enhance peace and stability (Abdullah & Benny, 2013). Such findings signify that deeper engagement with civil society is crucial and necessary to strengthen legitimacy and foster a sense of shared ownership of ASEAN’s security interest.

In sum, the Summary and Extended Summary imply that the APSC has advanced from a conflict prevention mechanism to a hub of security cooperation. However, it is still hampered by several hurdles such as leadership deficits, institutional fragility and external geopolitical pressures. ASEAN’s ability to reinforce its centrality will depend on several elements. These include ASEAN’s capacity to accomodate the principle of non-intervention with the calls for collective responsibility, strengthen leadership among its member states, and engage the public more effectively in regional security discourse.

Concept Map

Figure 2 : Concept Map of Evolution of ASEAN Political-Security Community



Concept Map of Evolution of ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC)

A concept map showing a structured visualization of the research landscape involving the APSC was generated with the support of Scopus AI Analytics (11 September 2025). Three thematic dimensions are presented in the concept map including; historical development, key concepts and regional dynamics. Those three themes collectively trace the evolution and contemporary challenges of the APSC framework. The first theme, the historical development branch emphasizes the formation of ASEAN in 1967 and the evolution of the security framework that has shaped its institutional norms and actions over time. The second theme, the key concepts branch highlights the fundamental ideas of a security community and collective identity building, underlining ASEAN's aspirations to foster regional stability through shared norms and mutual trust. The third theme, the regional dynamics branch captures contemporary challenges and external influences, including four elements comprising cultural relations, peacekeeping operations, security dilemmas and great power politics. Together, these interrelated branches imply that the APSC is not only rooted in its historical origins but is also continuously shaped by the evolving conceptual framework and dynamic pressures of regional and global security.

A Review of Concept Map of The Evolution of ASEAN Political Security Community (APSC)

The evolution of the APSC signifies ASEAN's long-standing commitment to fostering regional stability through cooperative mechanisms. The APSC, initially established under the framework of the ASEAN Vision 2025, aims to institutionalize the "ASEAN Way" approach in the region by highlighting core principles such as consensus and non-intervention to ensure peace, stability, and resilience (Chairil, Putri, & Pertiwi, 2022). However, while the community has applied more advanced mechanisms for dialogue and consultation, it remains primarily limited to cooperative security, which is less effective in developing collective security capacities. This scenario reflects ASEAN's continued preference for an informal, non-binding, consensus-driven approach that limits progress and also limits deeper integration (Saragih, Yani, Bainus, & Sumadinata, 2020).

Despite multiple initiatives exercised, the APSC still faces ongoing challenges that expose its structural weaknesses. The rise of China and its assertiveness in the South China Sea have resulted into divisions among ASEAN member states. Some member states have chosen to prioritize economic relations over collective security responses (Putra, Darwis, & Burhanuddin, 2019). Inflexible adherence to the principle of non-interference also prevented ASEAN from addressing a variety of issues. Among the emerging issues are the backsliding of democracy and human rights abuses, particularly in Myanmar (Khoirunnisa, 2023). All of these limitations present a recurring dilemma for the APSC. While its framework accommodates a dialogue mechanism, it lacks capacity to effectively enforce and manage high-risk security crises.

The APSC through its institution ; the ASEAN Secretariat has been constrained by the limited role, which largely acts as a facilitator rather than a policy-making body. The Secretariat's influence in matters concerning political security is constrained by member state pressures, especially in intergovernmental decision-making. This institutional weakness not only restricts ASEAN's ability to pursue long-term strategic initiatives but at the same time also places the burden of leadership on rotating chairs and dominant member states. As a result, ASEAN's security strategies has often seen fragmented and its direction is determined by the political will of national governments rather than driven by strong regional institutions.

Another critical dimension of the APSC are the tension between state sovereignty and people-centred aspirations. Rhetorically, ASEAN often emphasizes the creation of a "people-centred community". However, as suggested by Caballero-Anthony (2020) ASEAN's security practices remain dominated by the principles of sovereignty and non-intervention. This contradiction is clearly identified in ASEAN's limited application of global norms such as the Responsibility to Protect (R2P). Sukma (2012) states R2P remains marginalised within ASEAN due to member states' hesitation to accept external scrutiny of their domestic affairs. On the other hand, lack of interests among public to engage in regional security debates is also a challenge for ASEAN. In this regard, civil society organizations and transnational networks must play their significant role in advancing people-to-people connections, aligning ASEAN with elements of social trust and interdependence.

Prospectively, the APSC future will depend on its ability to adapt to shifting geopolitical and societal pressures. Regional threats such as maritime disputes, terrorism, and great power rivalry, particularly between the United States and China require ASEAN readiness to reconcile its foundational principles. Meanwhile, enhancing the ASEAN Secretariat's institutional capacity and deepening inclusivity through civil society engagement could help solidify ASEAN's legitimacy as a security actor. While ASEAN's gradualist and consensus-based approach has ensured its survival and its centrality in regional diplomacy, the APSC's credibility as a political-security community will ultimately depend on its ability to shift from conflict avoidance mode to meaningful conflict management mode in an increasingly complex security environment.

Linkages between The Evolution of the ASEAN Political Security Community (APSC) and Regional Dynamics

The APSC is closely associated with the complex regional dynamics of Southeast Asia. Inter-state disputes, power competition, and enduring sovereignty principles are among several identified hurdles. The APSC has uplift ASEAN's desire to institutionalize security cooperation within the confines of its "ASEAN Way" approach which emphasizes non-intervention, consensus, and informality (Putra, Darwis, & Burhanuddin, 2019). These guiding norms shape the manner ASEAN responds to issues of external pressures, such as the rise of China, and internal conflicts, such as territorial disputes thereby bringing the APSC directly into the dilemma of regional security and the balance of power (Khoirunnisa, 2023).

The Southeast Asian regional dynamics also make it difficult to foster collective security under the APSC framework. Putra et al. (2019) observes that the ASEAN's multilateralism approach is tested by several issues such as overlapping interests of member states and the influence of external actors, which continue to complicate security cooperation initiatives. It has indirectly reveals the organization's bureaucratic rigidity and its reliance on intergovernmental processes. The existing ASEAN approach has facilitated dialogue but remains government-driven and largely reactive to crises. The approach is quite successful in preventing conflicts from escalating, but ironically also hinders its ability to develop into a robust political security community (Jones & Smith, 2007).

In measuring awareness of APSC mechanisms, public opinion is important. It is also significant to illustrates the link between the APSC and regional dynamics. Surveys carried out in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore revealed positive support for the idea of a political-security community, despite limited awareness of APSC (Abdullah & Benny, 2013). The respondents also perceived the APSC as elitist and dominated by state agendas. This suggests there is a clear gap between elite-level security cooperation and broader societal engagement. This elitist orientation also demonstrates how regional dynamics are often interpreted through the state-centric priorities, which creates limited space for public participation or civil society engagement.

Normative foundations of ASEAN is another factor. The Southeast Asian regional identity is influenced by informal norms, sovereignty concerns, and non-interference principles, which collectively give ASEAN a distinct normative structure (Pervez, 2019). Although these values foster trust and cohesion among elites, they also limiting Asean's ability to enforce collective decisions and . weaken its institutional foundations. Political fragility and weak state capacity in some member states further limit ASEAN's ability to materialise its community-building rhetoric into concrete institutionalization. Thus, ASEAN's regional identity reinforces both the strengths and weaknesses of the APSC as it evolves within Southeast Asia's dynamic environment.

Finally, the paradox of ASEAN's community-building is shaped by efforts of the militarized security culture in parts of Southeast Asia. While the APSC seeks to promote peace and stability, some challenges such as regional arms dynamics and entrenched militarism, continue to undermine its people-centred rhetoric and long-term aspirations for a cohesive security community. This scenario shows that APSC evolution is not only factored by intergovernmental diplomacy but also by broader regional dynamics, including historical insecurities, military postures, and great power rivalries. As such, the APSC represents a balancing act between regional visions for stability and the realities of Southeast Asia's complex and contested security environment.

Linkages between The Evolution of ASEAN Political Security Community (APSC) and Key Concepts

The APSC is one of the three pillars of the ASEAN Community, which is designed to build a peaceful, stable and just region. Korolev (2019) describes the APSC adopts the key concept of a security community, where countries develop mutual trust and commit to seeking peaceful settlement of disputes through peaceful negotiations. The APSC differs from formal defense alliances, in that it focuses more on cooperative security and confidence-building than on collective defense mechanisms. However, Li & Tianyi (2019) suggest its evolution has been shaped by the opportunities and limitations of ASEAN's normative principles including sovereignty and the principle of non-interference that have limited its ability to fully implement community-building measures.

According to Acharya (2021), the ASEAN's notion as a security community is dynamic and evolving, therefore he argued that ASEAN's security community status is still vulnerable and contingent on the absence of major intraregional conflicts. With the territorial disputes in the South China Sea is still ongoing, it is quite hard to see ASEAN to emerge as a credible security community. Korolev (2019) suggests occasional deviations from its consensus-based approach and institutional stagnation expose the tension between the aspirational rhetoric of community-building and the pragmatic realities of geopolitical contestation. These developments reveal that the concept of security community within ASEAN is still a 'work in progress' rather than a fully consolidated achievement.

ASEAN's cooperative security approach to conflict is also significant. ASEAN prefers to engage in dialogue, mediation, and confidence-building to avoid tensions among members and with external powers (Saragih, Yani, Bainus, & Sumadinata, 2020). The cooperative security framework has effectively contributed to preventing open conflict in the region and further reinforcing ASEAN's role as a mediator of peace processes. Anyhow, as suggested by Putra et al. (2019), ASEAN's reliance on cooperative security exposes its limitations and weak enforcement capacity to address serious violations of human rights, political repression, or large-scale humanitarian crises.

Another key pillar of the APSC is people-centered orientation that aimed to elevate inclusivity and resilience in the region. Caballero-Anthony (2020) points out that ASEAN's advocacy for "people-oriented, people-centered" community is well-highlighted in its vision, yet tensions between state sovereignty and broader societal concerns reveals more needs to be done. Despite ASEAN progressive measures to address non-traditional security issues including terrorism, pandemics, and climate change, its member states remain reluctant to compromise especially on matters pertaining to sovereignty, this act impedes deeper integration. This situation illustrates the structural dilemma of the APSC particularly in balancing a normative aspirations to people-centered security with the entrenched practices of state-centrism and non-interference.

Putra et al. (2019) argues that the APSC exposes the limits of multilateralism in regional security affairs, where the relationships between states remain plagued by differences of political values, uneven capacities and

competing national interests. Although ASEAN has been quite successful in normalising dialogue and deterring large-scale conflicts, ASEAN's weak institutionalisation and its overreliance on consensus have resulted in its progress toward integration. The APSC framework demonstrates two side of coins ; the resilience and fragility of ASEAN's political-security order. The APSC is resilient in maintaining peace and stability for over five decades, but at the same time quite fragile in its ability to adapt to new regional and global challenges. In substance, the APSC together with its key concepts of security community, cooperative security, people-centeredness, and multilateralism demonstrate that it remains an aspiration and continue to evolve at the intersection of regional norms and geopolitical uncertainties.

Linkages between The Evolution of ASEAN Political Security Community (APSC) and Historical Development

The historical development of the APSC can be traced back to the establishment of ASEAN in 1967 through the Bangkok Declaration which was created to promote economic, political, security and social cooperation in Southeast Asia during the Cold War era (Lee, 2021). In the early stages of its establishment, ASEAN adopted an approach of fostering dialogue and cooperation to prevent conflict between countries, reflecting broader goals that include regional resilience and political stability. From decade to decade, ASEAN sought to institutionalize these initiatives into the creation of three main pillars under the framework of the ASEAN Community which also emphasized political, economic and socio-cultural security. All three elements are officially stated in the 2007 ASEAN Charter (Cuyvers, Chen, & Lombaerde, 2019). The APSC in this context also represents the culmination of decades of cooperation that evolved from informal diplomacy to a more structured framework of regional integration.

The APSC historical course has been influenced by ongoing challenges. The rise of China and its growing influence in the South China Sea has put significant pressure on regional unity. Putra et. al (2019) argues this situation has put the principle of non-intervention and firmness of stance among member countries into test. While Khoirunnisa (2023) observes the inability to effectively deal with human rights crises, such as the situation in Myanmar, further reveals the weakness of ASEAN's consensus-based approach. This situation indicates a gap between ASEAN's aspirations to act as a collective security institution and its continued reliance on principles that prioritize regime sovereignty and security over regional accountability.

Another key dimension in the historical development of ASEAN lies in the direction of ASEAN as a security community. Emmers (2017), notes although ASEAN has successfully helped prevent large-scale conflicts among its members before, persistent mistrust and unresolved disputes show that it has yet to achieve the depth of integration required for a mature security community. In this perspective, ASEAN has progressed beyond dialogue but continues to fail to achieve binding security guarantees. Some scholars describe APSC as "thin" security communities, where norms and habits of peaceful interaction exist but remain vulnerable to collapse during crises (Nasu, McLaughlin, Rothwell, & Tan, 2019).

The historical development of the APSC has also been overshadowed by regional resilience and growing maritime security concerns. Herrmann (2015) highlights ASEAN, which initially focused on managing Cold War-era competition in their own backyards, gradually included non-traditional security (NTS) issues, including sea piracy, terrorism and climate change, into the dimensions of its political security agenda. One of the issues contributing to geopolitical tensions in the region is maritime disputes in the South China Sea. All of these security issues are pushing ASEAN to adopt a cooperative approach that emphasizes regional resilience and preventive diplomacy. This broad understanding of security reflects ASEAN's adaptation to contemporary challenges. Moreover, it also reveals the difficulty of balancing traditional sovereign concerns with the need for collective action.

Emerging Themes

The analysis of emerging themes in ASEAN studies highlights the complex interplay between enduring geopolitical realities, evolving domestic political dynamics, and new areas of regional cooperation. These themes reflect how ASEAN's Political-Security Community (APSC) continues to adapt to both long-standing and novel challenges, particularly as the region navigates pressures from major powers, internal sociopolitical shifts, and

developmental priorities.

A consistent theme in the literature is the US-China rivalry and Southeast Asia's strategic positioning. The competition between both sides continue to define the geopolitical context in which ASEAN operates. Dosch (2021) notes that Southeast Asian states exercise hedging strategies to balance their relations with both Washington and Beijing, aiming to avoid overdependence on either while maintaining strategic autonomy. This enduring theme underscores ASEAN's centrality as both a buffer and a facilitator of dialogue in a contested regional order. The US-China rivalry provides advantages for ASEAN to strengthen its institutional cohesion, as regional integration is increasingly deemed as a mechanism to enhance collective bargaining power against external pressures.

The second consistent theme is ASEAN's institutional adaptation and regional integration. Jones & Jenne (2022) suggests since the establishment of the ASEAN Community in 2015, institutional reforms have aimed at improving the association's capacity to manage political, security, and economic challenges. These reforms are vital for addressing non-traditional security issues, ranging from climate change to cybersecurity, while also ensuring economic resilience. Nevertheless, the literature highlights persistent weaknesses in ASEAN's decision-making, rooted in its consensus-based "ASEAN Way" and the principle of non-interference, which at times limit the bloc's ability to respond decisively to regional crises (Acharya, 2021). Institutional strengthening remains central to ASEAN's strategy for maintaining regional stability and coherence in the face of external and internal challenges.

The resurgence of populism and nationalism in Southeast Asia is also identified as part of the rising themes. Populist leaders in countries such as the Philippines, Indonesia, and Thailand have reshaped domestic political landscapes and influenced regional cooperation. These movements often prioritize national sovereignty and inward-looking policies, which risk undermining ASEAN's collective objectives and its potential to pursue deeper integration. The growing attention to this theme indicates concerns that populist and nationalist pressures could distract regional solidarity and complicating efforts to build a cohesive political-security community. Together, these emerging themes demonstrate that ASEAN's evolution is shaped by both continuity and change. The persistent influence of great-power rivalry and institutional adaptation underscores the resilience and centrality of ASEAN in regional politics, while rising themes such as populism and nationalism reveal new dynamics that will increasingly define the direction of Southeast Asia's political-security community. These findings suggest that ASEAN's ability to remain relevant will depend on its capacity to balance external pressures, manage internal sociopolitical shifts, and invest in developmental areas that strengthen regional integration.

CONCLUSION

This study has analyzed the evolution of the APSC through a Scopus-AI analytical lens, with a specific concentration on its fundamental concepts, historical development, relevance to regional dynamics, and emerging themes that influence current debates. While the APSC has successfully fostered a habit of dialogue, conflict prevention, and cooperative security, its progress is still plagued by structural weaknesses such as the rigid application of principle of non-interference, protracted territorial disputes, the rise of China, and the growing influence of populist and nationalist politics within member states. New themes identified, including the enduring US-China rivalry, and institutional adaptations underscore that both traditional security concerns and evolving non-traditional challenges will shape the future of ASEAN's political security. Overall, these findings reaffirm ASEAN's dual roles as a stabilizing tool for regional cooperation and an institution struggling to reconcile sovereignty-centric practices with demands for deeper integration. Theoretically, this study contributes to debates on regionalism and security community dimensions by highlighting that ASEAN remains an incomplete or seen as "thin" security community, where elements of trust-building and cooperative mechanisms are in existence but limited in scope. The findings support Acharya's (2021) argument that ASEAN's normative framework which founded by informality, consensus, and sovereignty creates both results ; resilience and fragility. Moreover, the study reveals the relevance of hedging theory for understanding how ASEAN member states engage in balancing external pressures, particularly in the context of US-China rivalry. Practically, in terms of ASEAN policymaking, the findings imply that institutional reforms particularly empowering the ASEAN Secretariat and enhancing decision-making capacity are required to respond effectively

to regional security challenges. Furthermore, recognizing the impact of populism and nationalism is crucial for crafting inclusive regional moves that avoid alienating domestic constituencies while promoting integration. In order to maintain regional stability, multilateralism must be continuously utilised to position ASEAN as a cohesive entity rather than selectively working with individual states. In sum, the APSC has achieved positive results in fostering dialogue and avoiding conflict, yet it continues to face limitations in areas of institutional weakness, sovereignty-centered practices, and shifting geopolitical trends. Addressing these limitations will require theoretical rethinking of ASEAN as a security community and practical reforms that enhance its adaptability in a rapidly changing regional order.

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