



THE TRANSFORMATIVE ROLE OF SPORTS DIPLOMACY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: FROM COLD WAR UNITY TO REGIONAL CONFLICT MITIGATION

¹RAYMOND TOH MENG HUI
^{2*}ASMADY IDRIS

^{1,2}Fakulti Sains Sosial dan Kemanusiaan, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Jalan UMS, 88400, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia

*Corresponding author: asmadyi@ums.edu.my

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Abstract This study examines the role of sports diplomacy in fostering unity and resolving conflicts in Southeast Asia, with a focus on the Cold War era and the SEA Games. During the Cold War, the Southeast Asian Peninsular (SEAP) Games enabled nations with differing ideologies to engage constructively, emphasizing shared values. In the post-Cold War era, the SEA Games played a critical role in mitigating conflicts, such as the Indonesia-Malaysia Confrontation and the Thailand-Cambodia Preah Vihear Temple dispute, by promoting dialogue and cultural exchange. While challenges like economic disparities and hyper-nationalism persist, this research highlights the enduring potential of sports as a diplomatic tool for peace and regional cohesion. By analysing historical and contemporary contexts, the study provides insights into innovative approaches for regional integration and conflict resolution, emphasizing the importance of leveraging ASEAN's cultural and athletic traditions for unity.

Keywords: sports diplomacy, regional unity, ASEAN, SEA Games

INTRODUCTION

Sports diplomacy has emerged as a powerful mechanism for fostering regional unity, addressing geopolitical conflicts, and promoting cultural integration in Southeast Asia. Within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), multilateral sports events such as the Southeast Asian (SEA) Games have played a central role in facilitating dialogue and trust among nations with diverse political systems and historical tensions. This study explores the evolution of sports diplomacy in the region, focusing on its role during the Cold War and its subsequent use in mitigating regional conflicts like the Indonesia-Malaysia Confrontation (Konfrontasi) and the Thailand-Cambodia Preah Vihear Temple dispute.

The importance of this study lies in its examination of sports diplomacy as a nontraditional tool for conflict resolution and regional cohesion. By analysing the historical and contemporary contexts of sports in Southeast Asia, this research highlights the capacity of sports to transcend political barriers, foster mutual understanding, and strengthen ASEAN's shared identity. The SEA Games, as a recurring multilateral event, not only serve



as a stage for athletic competition but also as a forum for informal diplomacy and cultural exchange. Understanding the successes and challenges of ASEAN sports diplomacy is crucial for addressing present and future conflicts and enhancing regional integration.

This study explores the role of sports diplomacy in Southeast Asia, focusing on its significance in regional cooperation, conflict resolution, and the challenges it faces. It defines sports diplomacy as a tool for bridging cultural and political divides, fostering mutual understanding, and shaping a collective ASEAN identity. The study highlights the SEA Games as a key diplomatic platform, examining historical cases like the Indonesia-Malaysia Confrontation and the Thailand-Cambodia Preah Vihear conflict, where sports played a role in easing tensions. Additionally, it addresses challenges such as economic disparities and hypernationalism that impact the effectiveness of sports diplomacy. By analyzing past events and contemporary issues, the research provides insights for policymakers and scholars on leveraging sports for peacebuilding and regional integration in ASEAN.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sports diplomacy has gained traction in international relations as a mechanism for promoting dialogue, easing tensions, and cultivating regional unity. Within Southeast Asia, this form of diplomacy has found expression particularly through multilateral sporting events like the Southeast Asian (SEA) Games. The literature reveals an evolving discourse that traces the development of sports diplomacy from soft power theory to more targeted policy tools for regional integration and peacebuilding.

Murray (2012, 2013, 2018) laid the theoretical foundation for understanding sports diplomacy by framing it as a form of public diplomacy capable of operating parallel to official diplomatic channels. He emphasizes the informal nature of sports diplomacy, which facilitates mutual understanding through cultural interaction. Drawing from global cases such as U.S.-China relations during the Cold War, Murray's work provides a conceptual framework that can be applied to Southeast Asia, even though his studies focus largely on Western and East Asian contexts. He argues that sports offer an alternative means of negotiation when formal diplomatic engagements reach an impasse.

Building on this theoretical approach, Glas (2017) introduces the concept of ASEAN's "habits of peace." He argues that ASEAN's long-term commitment to regional harmony is strengthened by regular social and cultural interactions, including sports. Glas's emphasis on embedded regional practices aligns with Murray's belief in the informal strength of sporting events, although Glas localizes the theory within the Southeast Asian context. Both scholars underscore the potential of sports to build trust, though Glas offers a more institutional interpretation through the lens of ASEAN norms.

Kheokao (2017) supports Glas's institutional focus by discussing the SEA Games as an ASEAN initiative under the Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) framework. He highlights how the Games create shared cultural experiences that help overcome political and economic differences. This is complemented by Smith (2017), who views the SEA Games as a site of "people-to-people" diplomacy. While Kheokao emphasizes formal ASEAN narratives, Smith's attention is directed toward grassroots connections among athletes and audiences. Together, these scholars demonstrate how sports diplomacy functions at both official and societal levels.



Weatherbee (2009), although not directly writing on sports diplomacy, provides an important geopolitical background for understanding the need for non-traditional diplomacy in Southeast Asia. His work highlights the ideological divisions of the Cold War and the struggle for autonomy among Southeast Asian states. This context explains why states in the region began to favour informal, culturally grounded diplomatic channels such as sporting exchanges. Weatherbee's insights serve as a backdrop for Creak's (2020) historical analysis of the Southeast Asian Peninsular (SEAP) Games. Creak illustrates how the SEAP Games offered a neutral platform during a time of regional ideological division. He argues that these games provided opportunities for nations with contrasting political systems to build cultural ties, reinforcing Glas's argument about habits of peace through repeated interactions.

Hayase (2020) extends this historical perspective by examining how nationalism evolved within the SEA Games from 1959 to 2019. He acknowledges the role of the games in fostering unity but warns of emerging hyper-nationalist sentiments that risk undermining regional cohesion. Wong (2020) echoes this concern, arguing that national pride often overshadows ASEAN solidarity, especially when host nations manipulate events for domestic prestige. These critiques contrast with the optimistic tones of earlier scholars like Kheokao and Smith. Where Smith highlights soft diplomacy at the interpersonal level, Hayase and Wong point to the risk of sports becoming politicized in ways that fuel rivalry rather than unity.

Ramcharan (2021) bridges these contrasting views by suggesting that the success of sports diplomacy depends on the broader regional commitment to inclusive development. He argues that sports diplomacy must be embedded within ASEAN's strategies to address inequality and underrepresentation. His approach aligns with Glas and Kheokao in viewing ASEAN's institutional frameworks as essential but expands the conversation to include structural inequalities, a concern not previously emphasized.

Trotier (2021) focuses on Indonesia's use of the 2018 Asian Games to enhance its diplomatic leadership within the region. He argues that Indonesia successfully leveraged this mega-event to project soft power and promote ASEAN unity. His case study supports Ramcharan's assertion that states can use sports strategically to promote regional integration, although he presents a more state-centric interpretation compared to Ramcharan's emphasis on institutional support.

Min and Choi (2019) provide a critical counterpoint to these perspectives. Writing in the context of Korea, they argue that sports diplomacy is often overstated in its capacity to produce real political change. They claim that while sports may foster symbolic goodwill, such effects are frequently short-lived and do not lead to long-term conflict resolution. This critique resonates with the concerns raised by Hayase and Wong about the limitations of sports events in addressing deeper structural issues.

Caballero-Anthony and Emmers (2022) address these structural concerns directly by proposing a more integrated approach to ASEAN's sports diplomacy. They argue that sports initiatives must be supported by broader economic and security strategies to contribute meaningfully to regional stability. Their position strengthens Ramcharan's call for inclusivity and anticipates the institutional reform proposals found in later literature.



Deivasagayam (2023) reinforces the theme of ASEAN centrality in conflict de-escalation, particularly through cultural and non-traditional diplomacy. He views sports as one component of ASEAN's broader effort to maintain peace without violating the principle of non-interference. His analysis aligns with Glas's and Kheokao's emphasis on institutional norms while also echoing Caballero-Anthony and Emmers on the need for strategic coherence.

Ponio (2023) examines how the Philippines has incorporated sports into its public diplomacy framework, using national events to promote ASEAN solidarity and address shared regional challenges. His work provides a national-level case study similar to Trotier's, but with greater attention to how local initiatives can support ASEAN-wide goals.

Finally, Creak and Trotier (2024) synthesize earlier debates by asserting that the SEA Games now serve both symbolic and practical functions within ASEAN diplomacy. They argue that the games have matured into a soft power mechanism capable of responding to contemporary issues, such as sustainability and inequality. Their work supports earlier findings while proposing that ASEAN must now modernize and institutionalize sports diplomacy in order to remain relevant.

The literature reviewed above presents a rich and diverse understanding of sports diplomacy in Southeast Asia. However, despite its growing significance, there remains a limited focus on empirical case studies that link specific multilateral sports events to measurable diplomatic outcomes. Most analyses have either focused on theoretical frameworks or broader regional narratives. There is insufficient scholarly attention to how the SEA Games have concretely shaped post-conflict relations or facilitated policy-level reconciliation, especially in cases such as the Indonesia-Malaysia Confrontation and the Thailand-Cambodia Preah Vihear dispute. This study addresses this gap by examining specific historical and political moments where sports diplomacy had a direct influence on easing tensions. It also explores how ASEAN can strengthen its institutional capacity to deploy sports diplomacy as part of its peacebuilding toolkit in an increasingly complex regional environment.

ASEAN CONFLICT AND RESOLUTION: HISTORY, CHALLENGES AND EXAMPLES

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was established on 8 August 1967 by five founding members: Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. The organisation was formed in response to geopolitical instability, ideological rivalry, and recent memories of regional conflict. The primary motivation behind ASEAN's formation was to promote regional peace and security while fostering economic, social, and cultural cooperation among its members. ASEAN's foundational principles, as outlined in the Bangkok Declaration and later reinforced in the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) of 1976, reflect a strong commitment to sovereignty, non-interference, and consensus-based decision-making. These principles were adopted as mechanisms to ensure internal stability and to avoid military confrontations among member states (ASEAN, 1976; Centre for International Law, 2024).

This commitment to consensus and restraint has come to be known as the "ASEAN Way." While it has helped avoid direct military conflict within the region, scholars have raised concerns about its limitations. Acharya (2014) explains that although the ASEAN Way



has supported regional cohesion, its reliance on consensus has often slowed decision-making and limited ASEAN's ability to act during moments of crisis. This section examines three major regional disputes, the South China Sea conflict, the Indonesia–Malaysia Confrontation, and the Thailand–Cambodia Preah Vihear dispute in order to assess how ASEAN's diplomatic mechanisms have operated in practice.

The South China Sea Dispute

The South China Sea dispute remains one of ASEAN's most persistent and complex challenges. Several ASEAN member states, including Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei, have overlapping territorial claims with China. China's expansive "nine-dash line" claim overlaps with the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) of these countries. Despite the strategic importance of the area, ASEAN has struggled to adopt a unified stance on the issue (Hoang, 2020; Kuik, 2025).

In 2002, ASEAN and China signed the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC). This agreement was intended to promote mutual trust and prevent conflict. However, the DOC is non-binding and lacks enforcement mechanisms. As a result, it has not prevented the continued militarisation of the region. Efforts to negotiate a more robust Code of Conduct (COC) have been ongoing for years, but progress remains slow. According to Lin and Sothirak (2025), internal divisions among ASEAN member states have hindered consensus. For example, Cambodia has occasionally blocked joint ASEAN statements that criticise China, due to its close bilateral ties with Beijing.

Hoang (2020) argues that ASEAN's internal fragmentation and its over-reliance on soft diplomatic tools have limited its ability to act as a credible mediator. Kuik (2025) supports this view by pointing out that while ASEAN has managed to maintain dialogue and avoid large-scale conflict, it lacks the legal and institutional authority to enforce any resolution. These shortcomings highlight the need to reform ASEAN's mechanisms in order to deal with high-stakes disputes more effectively.

The Indonesia–Malaysia Confrontation

Although the Indonesia–Malaysia Confrontation occurred before ASEAN was founded, it provides valuable insight into why ASEAN adopted its current diplomatic framework. The confrontation took place between 1963 and 1966, when Indonesia opposed the formation of Malaysia. President Sukarno believed that Malaysia was a British-backed neo-colonial project that threatened Indonesia's regional influence. The conflict involved military incursions, guerrilla warfare, and political hostility, particularly in Borneo (Leong, 2016; BiblioAsia, 2024).

The confrontation ended in 1966 through a combination of diplomatic efforts and leadership changes in Indonesia. The resolution of this conflict demonstrated the importance of regional cooperation and laid the groundwork for the founding of ASEAN in 1967. Acharya (2012) notes that the experience of Konfrontasi strongly influenced ASEAN's emphasis on non-interference, peaceful resolution, and the avoidance of external military involvement. These principles were institutionalised in the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) of 1976. Articles 13 to 16 of the treaty created the High Council, a dispute resolution mechanism that allows ASEAN members to engage in mediation, inquiry, and conciliation (Centre for International Law, 2024).



Despite being a formal mechanism, the High Council has rarely been invoked. Nonetheless, it remains a symbol of ASEAN's commitment to peaceful dispute settlement. The period following Konfrontasi also saw the use of informal diplomacy and cultural exchanges to restore trust between Indonesia and Malaysia. Events such as the Southeast Asian Peninsular (SEAP) Games provided neutral spaces for interaction, helping to rebuild relationships and reinforce shared regional identity (Creak, 2020).

The Thailand–Cambodia Preah Vihear Temple Dispute

The border dispute between Thailand and Cambodia over the Preah Vihear Temple is another example of ASEAN's involvement in regional conflict management. Although the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled in 1962 that the temple belonged to Cambodia, disputes over the surrounding territory persisted. Tensions escalated in the late 2000s, resulting in several military clashes between 2008 and 2011 (Yoosuk, 2013; Wagener, 2011).

ASEAN played an unusually active role in this case. Under Indonesia's leadership in 2011, ASEAN facilitated direct dialogue between the two parties and agreed to deploy observers to the conflict area. Sothirak (2013) notes that this intervention marked a significant departure from ASEAN's traditionally passive approach. Singhaputargun (2016) explains that the organisation's involvement helped to reduce tensions and provided a platform for confidence-building.

However, limitations were also apparent. Steinemann (2013) and Turcsányi and Kříž (2017) argue that ASEAN's mediation lacked long-term impact due to the absence of binding enforcement. Despite the existence of the High Council under the TAC, this mechanism was not activated. Analysts suggest this was due to a combination of political sensitivity and procedural ambiguity. Even so, the Preah Vihear case demonstrates that ASEAN can facilitate de-escalation when member states are willing to cooperate.

STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES IN ASEAN CONFLICT RESOLUTION

While ASEAN has proven capable of managing tensions through informal diplomacy and dialogue, its institutional limitations remain a persistent challenge. The organisation's commitment to consensus and non-interference has prevented it from taking firm action in several critical situations. This approach, while preserving national sovereignty, has also limited ASEAN's ability to respond swiftly to crises. The South China Sea and Preah Vihear disputes reveal the structural weakness of relying solely on soft mechanisms (Hoang, 2020; Kuik, 2025).

The Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and the ASEAN Charter offer formal mechanisms such as the High Council, but these have not been fully utilised. Limsiritong (2020) and Amer (2009) argue that political reluctance and the lack of institutional support have contributed to the underuse of these tools. Instead, ASEAN has often preferred informal negotiations, people-to-people exchanges, and confidence-building measures to manage tensions.

Nevertheless, ASEAN's diplomatic resilience should not be dismissed. Its role in preventing war among its members is a significant achievement. As the region faces new geopolitical challenges, there is a growing need to strengthen ASEAN's institutional frameworks. Scholars suggest that this could involve revisiting the use of existing mechanisms such as the



High Council and expanding the role of non-traditional diplomacy. Approaches that incorporate cultural, educational, and sporting exchanges may offer additional tools for peacebuilding in Southeast Asia.

THE HISTORY OF THE SEA GAMES AND ITS CONTRIBUTION TO SPORTS DIPLOMACY IN ASEAN

The Southeast Asian (SEA) Games, established in 1959, have emerged as a vital platform for fostering regional unity, cultural exchange, and diplomatic engagement within Southeast Asia. Initially known as the Southeast Asian Peninsular (SEAP) Games, this biennial event was created to promote goodwill and cooperation among member states through sports. Over the decades, the SEA Games have not only expanded in scope and participation but also gained prominence as a tool for sports diplomacy, aligning closely with ASEAN's broader objectives of regional stability and integration.

The SEA Games were first conceived by six founding members: Thailand, Burma (now Myanmar), Cambodia, Laos, Malaya (now Malaysia), and South Vietnam. These nations sought to use sports as a vehicle for uniting a region grappling with the aftermath of colonial rule and the pressures of Cold War geopolitics. The inaugural SEAP Games took place in Bangkok, Thailand, in December 1959, featuring over 500 athletes competing in a range of sports. Despite their modest scale, the games set the stage for what would become a key institution in Southeast Asia's regional diplomacy (Amara et al., 2020; Creak, 2020).

In 1977, the SEAP Games were rebranded as the SEA Games to reflect the inclusion of Indonesia and the Philippines, two major players in the region. This transformation marked a significant expansion in both membership and ambition, aligning the games more closely with the principles of ASEAN, which had been established a decade earlier. The inclusion of Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia further underscored the games' role in fostering inclusivity and solidarity across a diverse and evolving Southeast Asia (Smith, 2017; Ramcharan, 2021).

The SEA Games have played a pivotal role in shaping a collective Southeast Asian identity by celebrating shared cultural traditions and fostering mutual understanding. Unlike global competitions such as the Olympics, the SEA Games emphasize the unique heritage of the region, often incorporating traditional sports like sepak takraw and pencak silat into their roster. These culturally significant games not only highlight the diversity of ASEAN nations but also reinforce a sense of pride and unity among participants and spectators alike (Ponio, 2023; Creak, 2020).

By bringing together athletes, officials, and fans from across the region, the SEA Games foster people-to-people connections that transcend political and economic differences. This emphasis on cultural exchange and shared values has been instrumental in building trust among ASEAN member states, particularly during periods of tension or conflict.

The SEA Games have consistently served as a powerful tool for sports diplomacy within Southeast Asia. They provide a unique platform for fostering dialogue, mutual respect, and reconciliation among nations with diverse political and cultural systems. One of the most significant contributions of the SEA Games is their role in mitigating regional conflicts. For example, during the Indonesia-Malaysia Confrontation (Konfrontasi) in the 1960s, the SEA



Games provided a neutral platform for engagement. Despite the ongoing hostilities, Indonesian athletes participated in the 1965 SEAP Games in Kuala Lumpur, symbolizing a willingness to maintain cultural and athletic ties. This act of engagement demonstrated the potential of sports to serve as a bridge for dialogue and understanding, laying the groundwork for post-conflict reconciliation (Ramcharan, 2021; Smith, 2017).

Similarly, during the Thailand-Cambodia border conflict over the Preah Vihear Temple, the SEA Games facilitated informal diplomacy. The 2007 SEA Games in Thailand saw the participation of Cambodian athletes despite the ongoing territorial dispute. The games emphasized shared cultural heritage and fostered interactions that softened nationalist rhetoric, paving the way for future negotiations (Creak, 2020; Amara et al., 2020).

In addition to mitigating conflicts, the SEA Games have played a crucial role in fostering regional cooperation. By encouraging participation from all ASEAN member states, the games emphasize inclusivity and mutual respect. Hosting the games has provided smaller nations such as Laos and Cambodia with opportunities to showcase their culture and hospitality on an international stage. These events have helped foster a sense of pride and solidarity within the region, contributing to ASEAN's broader goal of regional integration (Zaini, 2018; Yeo, 2021).

Moreover, the games have facilitated the exchange of ideas and best practices in sports administration, infrastructure development, and event management. This collaboration has strengthened institutional ties among ASEAN member states, further enhancing regional cooperation.

Through the SEA Games, ASEAN has also successfully projected an image of unity and collaboration to the international community. The games highlight Southeast Asia's capacity to organize large-scale events while showcasing its rich cultural heritage. This has enhanced ASEAN's soft power, contributing to its global diplomatic efforts and positioning the region as a cohesive and cooperative bloc (Wong, 2020; Smith, 2017).

The SEA Games have been a cornerstone of ASEAN's efforts to promote unity, cooperation, and cultural exchange. From their origins as the SEAP Games to their evolution into a major multilateral event, the games have consistently fostered dialogue, trust, and mutual understanding among ASEAN member states. By celebrating shared traditions and addressing regional conflicts, the SEA Games have demonstrated the transformative power of sports in promoting peace and regional cohesion. As ASEAN continues to navigate new challenges, the SEA Games remain a testament to the enduring importance of cultural and athletic diplomacy.

SPORTS AS A DIPLOMATIC TOOL IN THE COLD WAR ERA: SOUTHEAST ASIA'S PERSPECTIVE

During the Cold War (1947–1991), Southeast Asia was a significant theatre of ideological and geopolitical tension. Countries in the region became focal points in the rivalry between the capitalist bloc led by the United States and the communist bloc led by the Soviet Union and China. Despite being heavily impacted by proxy wars, insurgencies, and external interventions, Southeast Asia demonstrated remarkable resilience in fostering regional cooperation and peace. Sports emerged as a vital tool for diplomacy, offering a neutral



platform for dialogue and cultural exchange amidst ideological conflicts. This section explores how sports diplomacy functioned in Cold War-era Southeast Asia, emphasizing key initiatives like the Southeast Asian Peninsular (SEAP) Games and the evolving role of sports in promoting peace and unity.

Southeast Asia's strategic location made it a critical region during the Cold War, with superpowers seeking influence through military alliances, economic aid, and cultural diplomacy. Countries like Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos became battlegrounds for ideological warfare, while others like Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore aligned themselves with the West to resist communist insurgencies (Weatherbee, 2009). In this complex environment, sports provided an alternative medium for engagement, enabling nations to build relationships despite ideological divides.

The establishment of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967 marked a turning point in the region's history. Founded by Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand, ASEAN sought to promote regional stability and integration (Acharya, 2001). Even before ASEAN's formation, regional sports events such as the SEAP Games (established in 1959) laid the groundwork for using sports diplomacy to strengthen bonds between nations. The SEAP Games were inaugurated in Bangkok, Thailand, in 1959 with six founding members: Thailand, Burma (now Myanmar), Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, and Malaya (now Malaysia). The games aimed to promote mutual understanding and goodwill among Southeast Asian nations, many of which were grappling with post-colonial challenges and Cold War pressures (Creak, 2020). The SEAP Games symbolized a commitment to regional solidarity. Participating nations, despite their varying political alignments, came together to celebrate shared values of sportsmanship and cultural exchange. As Creak (2020) observes, the games played a pivotal role in fostering trust among countries navigating ideological tensions.

During the Cold War, Vietnam strategically used sports diplomacy to navigate the region's intense ideological and geopolitical tensions (Nguyen, 2021). South Vietnam's participation in the Southeast Asian Peninsular (SEAP) Games (1959–1975) symbolized its commitment to fostering regional cooperation and cultural exchange amidst conflict. These games provided a neutral platform where nations with differing ideologies could engage in peaceful competition, promoting solidarity in Southeast Asia. South Vietnam leveraged its participation in the SEAP Games to assert legitimacy, counter isolation, and reinforce regional ties. Its athletes competed alongside neighbours like Thailand, Malaysia, and Cambodia, despite the ongoing Vietnam War. This involvement allowed South Vietnam to foster goodwill and engage in informal diplomacy with neighbouring countries. For example, the 1965 SEAP Games in Kuala Lumpur saw South Vietnamese officials using the event to strengthen relationships with allies such as Thailand and Laos (Creak, 2020).

Vietnam's presence in these games also highlighted its cultural identity and resilience, as its athletes excelled in various sports despite limited resources. However, as the Vietnam War escalated, the country's participation waned, culminating in its absence after North Vietnam's victory in 1975. Vietnam's Cold War-era sports diplomacy left an enduring legacy, highlighting how sports could bridge divides and promote regional unity. This legacy persisted in Vietnam's later role in ASEAN sports initiatives, including hosting the SEA Games in 2003 and 2021. Through sports, Vietnam demonstrated that even in times of division and conflict, shared cultural and athletic traditions could foster dialogue, trust, and cooperation. Sports diplomacy during the Cold War set the foundation for Vietnam's



integration into ASEAN and highlighted the transformative power of sports in building peace and regional identity.

MITIGATING ASEAN REGIONAL CONFLICTS THROUGH MULTILATERAL SPORTS: THE ROLE OF THE SEA GAMES

The Southeast Asian (SEA) Games, as a regional multilateral sports event, have consistently provided a neutral platform for fostering unity and cooperation among ASEAN countries. Beyond their athletic significance, the games have served as a diplomatic stage for addressing and mitigating regional conflicts. This section explores the role of the SEA Games in easing tensions during two significant conflicts in ASEAN history: the Indonesia-Malaysia Confrontation (*Konfrontasi*) and the Thailand-Cambodia Preah Vihear Temple dispute. These case studies demonstrate how multilateral sports platforms like the SEA Games promote trustbuilding, dialogue, and conflict resolution in divided regions.

Case Study 1: The Indonesia–Malaysia Confrontation (1963–1966)

The Indonesia–Malaysia Confrontation, or *Konfrontasi*, was one of the most significant regional conflicts in Southeast Asia during the Cold War. Initiated by Indonesian President Sukarno, the confrontation stemmed from Indonesia's strong opposition to the formation of Malaysia in 1963, which included Malaya, Singapore, Sabah, and Sarawak. Sukarno regarded Malaysia as a neo-colonial creation that threatened Indonesia's regional interests and autonomy. As a result, Indonesia launched military incursions, propaganda campaigns, and cross-border raids, particularly targeting Malaysian Borneo, while intensifying diplomatic isolation efforts against Malaysia (Leong, 2016; BiblioAsia, 2024).

Despite the severity of the conflict, early initiatives toward regional reconciliation began before its formal conclusion in August 1966. Among these efforts, the 1965 Southeast Asian Peninsular (SEAP) Games held in Kuala Lumpur played a unique and underappreciated role in Malaysia's broader strategy to project regional stability and internal resilience. The Games were organised at the height of the confrontation and symbolised Malaysia's determination to present itself as a functioning, peaceful, and independent state amidst military pressure.

Malaysia's Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, positioned the 1965 SEAP Games not only as a sporting occasion but also as a diplomatic signal. His administration aimed to showcase Malaysia's legitimacy, foster domestic unity, and assure neighbouring countries of its commitment to peace and multilateral cooperation (Kanchchanadit, 2024). Seven Southeast Asian countries participated, excluding Indonesia, which remained hostile at the time. The deliberate omission of Indonesia carried political significance and reflected the use of soft exclusion to counter Sukarno's aggression without escalating the conflict.

The Malaysian government used the event strategically to boost national morale and international credibility. Internal communications retrieved from the National Archives of Singapore (Record MC111–65) document the use of government departments, civil society, and mass media to promote the SEAP Games as a moment of national pride and unity. Parades, ethnic representation in teams, and state-sponsored broadcasts were all employed to frame Malaysia as a peaceful and modernising state. According to Kanchchanadit (2024), this was a calculated form of sports diplomacy that operated in tandem with Malaysia's official foreign policy.



Lim and Aman (2015) argue that the SEAP Games served as a symbolic counterweight to Sukarno's military posturing. By hosting a successful international event, Malaysia projected itself as a stabilising actor in the region. Although the games did not feature Indonesia, the very act of organising them during a time of heightened tension communicated a commitment to regional dialogue and interdependence. The event was also significant in fostering interpersonal networks and sports exchanges among participating states, which became foundational for future cooperation frameworks.

The SEAP Games did not singlehandedly end the confrontation. However, they formed part of a broader constellation of reconciliation strategies. Alongside behind-the-scenes diplomatic negotiations and a shift in Indonesian leadership, Malaysia's cultural and sporting diplomacy contributed to a climate of de-escalation. These developments culminated in the signing of the Bangkok Agreement in August 1966, followed by the establishment of ASEAN in 1967, which institutionalised the principles of peaceful dialogue, mutual respect, and non-interference that had been promoted during this period.

The 1965 SEAP Games demonstrated how sports could function as a form of quiet diplomacy, even during active conflict. While traditional diplomacy was constrained by ideological division and military aggression, sports provided a neutral platform for state-led symbolic action and public messaging. This case illustrates the early potential of sports diplomacy to complement formal diplomatic efforts and reinforce political narratives of peace, legitimacy, and regional solidarity.

In conclusion, the 1965 SEAP Games were more than a domestic sporting event. They were a carefully orchestrated diplomatic tool embedded within Malaysia's broader effort to navigate a hostile regional environment. The Games helped Malaysia reinforce its international standing, promote regional ties, and prepare the ground for post-conflict cooperation. This case affirms that even amid geopolitical confrontation, sporting platforms can contribute to confidence-building and political normalisation—functions that would later be formalised under ASEAN's regional diplomacy mechanisms.

Case Study 2: The Thailand–Cambodia Preah Vihear Temple Dispute (1954–2013)

The territorial dispute between Thailand and Cambodia over the Preah Vihear Temple and its adjacent area represents one of the most prominent test cases for ASEAN's role in regional conflict resolution. Although the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled in 1962 that the temple itself was under Cambodian sovereignty, the issue remained unresolved for decades due to disagreement over the surrounding territory. Both countries claimed control of the land surrounding the temple, and these claims were deeply rooted in colonial-era border demarcations and national identity narratives (Yoosuk, 2013; Wagener, 2011).

Tensions re-escalated between 2008 and 2011, triggered by UNESCO's decision to designate the Preah Vihear Temple as a World Heritage Site under Cambodia's application. The move provoked a strong nationalist response in Thailand, leading to military skirmishes, artillery exchanges, and casualties on both sides. The dispute soon evolved into a broader diplomatic crisis, with both countries deploying troops to the area and accusing one another of violating territorial integrity (Singhaputargun, 2016).

Amid this heightened tension, ASEAN was compelled to take a more proactive role. Under Indonesia's leadership in 2011, the organisation moved beyond its traditional passive diplomatic posture. Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa engaged in shuttle



diplomacy between Bangkok and Phnom Penh to de-escalate the situation. As a result, both governments agreed to a ceasefire and accepted ASEAN's proposal to send observer teams to the conflict area. This marked a turning point, as it was the first time ASEAN implemented a semi-operational conflict monitoring mission involving unarmed observers from member states (Setyowati & Nurulita, 2023).

Although ASEAN did not activate the High Council mechanism under the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), the mediation effort demonstrated how ASEAN could operate within its existing norms while still taking concrete action. Mangku (2011) observed that the process revealed a flexible interpretation of the ASEAN Way. Rather than strict adherence to non-interference, member states supported a collaborative regional response that upheld sovereignty while reducing the likelihood of open conflict. The observer mission also strengthened ASEAN's credibility in managing inter-state disputes.

The ICJ played a complementary legal role throughout the dispute. In response to ongoing tensions, Cambodia submitted a request for interpretation of the 1962 judgment. In 2013, the ICJ clarified that Cambodia's sovereignty extended beyond the temple itself to include the entire promontory on which it sits. The Court ruled that Thailand was obliged to withdraw all military and police forces from the area. It also stressed that both parties were bound by the World Heritage Convention to cooperate in preserving the site (ICJ, 2013).

The ICJ's decision was accepted by both governments. The Thai prime minister acknowledged the ruling and emphasised Thailand's commitment to peaceful resolution in line with ASEAN cooperation norms. Cambodia, for its part, declared the judgment a diplomatic victory. Analysts such as Turcsányi and Kříž (2017) argue that this outcome was achieved not solely through legal channels but through a confluence of judicial, diplomatic, and regional confidence-building measures. ASEAN's early intervention and continuous dialogue created the environment necessary for both countries to accept the ICJ's ruling without renewed conflict.

Although not as central as in the Indonesia–Malaysia confrontation, sports diplomacy contributed to the broader peacebuilding process. During the most intense phase of the dispute in 2011, Cambodia proposed a "Friendship Match" volleyball tournament in Phnom Penh and invited Thai athletes to participate. While official Thai teams did not attend, civil society organisations and university-level teams engaged in informal friendly matches in Siem Reap and Surin later that year. These events were organised with support from regional NGOs and covered positively in the local media, symbolising attempts at reconciliation and restoring public trust between the two societies (Yoosuk, 2013).

These symbolic exchanges played a supplementary role in shaping public narratives. They counterbalanced the polarising effects of nationalist rhetoric and demonstrated how soft power could be mobilised to support formal diplomatic processes. Although these gestures did not lead to direct policy shifts, they helped to maintain dialogue and reinforce peace-oriented messaging at a time of political fragility.

In summary, the Preah Vihear dispute provides a valuable case study of ASEAN's evolving role in conflict mitigation. The organisation demonstrated that its informal and consensus-driven methods could still deliver meaningful results when supported by active leadership and regional trust. The involvement of the ICJ brought legal clarity, while ASEAN's mediation efforts helped maintain stability and prevent renewed violence. Furthermore, soft



diplomacy, including sport and cultural exchanges, supported the broader reconciliation effort by engaging civil society and calming public opinion. This case shows that ASEAN's approach to dispute resolution, although imperfect, continues to adapt and diversify in response to regional needs.

CHALLENGES OF ASEAN SPORTS DIPLOMACY

While ASEAN sports diplomacy, particularly through the SEA Games, has been effective in fostering regional unity and addressing conflicts, it faces significant challenges that can undermine its potential. These challenges stem from structural issues, economic disparities, political rivalries, and broader regional dynamics.

ASEAN consists of nations with varying levels of economic development, leading to disparities in their ability to host and participate in regional sports events. Wealthier nations such as Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand often dominate the medal tallies and the opportunity to host the SEA Games, leaving less-developed nations like Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar struggling to compete on equal terms. These disparities can lead to perceptions of inequality and exclusion, undermining the spirit of unity. For example, the 2015 SEA Games in Singapore showcased innovative facilities and infrastructure, highlighting the gap between wealthier and less-developed member states. According to Ramcharan (2021), such disparities can marginalize smaller nations, reducing their capacity to engage meaningfully in sports diplomacy. Limited funding in less-developed countries affects athlete preparation, coaching, and access to competitive opportunities. The uneven playing field perpetuates a cycle where wealthier nations continue to dominate, while smaller nations find it difficult to build competitive sports programs (Amara et al., 2020).

While the SEA Games are intended to promote regional cooperation, they often become a stage for hyper-nationalism. Host nations frequently prioritize national pride over regional solidarity, as seen in controversies surrounding biased officiating and disputes over medal counts. For instance, during the 2019 SEA Games in the Philippines, accusations of unfair judging and inadequate accommodations for visiting athletes sparked criticism from other ASEAN nations (Clarke, 2020). Such instances of nationalism can exacerbate tensions rather than foster unity, undermining the broader diplomatic goals of the SEA Games. Longstanding territorial disputes, such as the Preah Vihear Temple conflict between Thailand and Cambodia, can spill over into sports events. Nationalist fervour during competitions often reignites these tensions, detracting from the games' diplomatic potential (Smith, 2017).

ANALYSIS OF SPORTS AS A DIPLOMATIC TOOL IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Sports diplomacy in Southeast Asia has played a pivotal role in fostering unity, addressing conflicts, and promoting cooperation across diverse political and cultural contexts. From the Cold War era to the modern-day, the region has used sports as a mechanism for building trust and strengthening regional identity, with events like the Southeast Asian Peninsular (SEAP) Games and the SEA Games at the forefront of these efforts.

During the Cold War, Southeast Asia was heavily divided by ideological and geopolitical pressures. In this tense environment, sports diplomacy emerged as a transformative tool, providing a neutral platform for dialogue and interaction. The SEAP



Games became a symbol of regional solidarity, transcending political differences and emphasizing cultural and athletic commonalities. South Vietnam's active participation in these games, despite its internal and external conflicts, reflected the potential of sports to reinforce a shared Southeast Asian identity. Similarly, Thailand's leadership in hosting the inaugural SEAP Games in 1959 demonstrated how sports could foster trust and facilitate interaction among nations with divergent political alignments. Through these efforts, the region established a foundation for the role of sports in promoting peace and cooperation.

In the post-Cold War era, the SEA Games evolved into a powerful diplomatic platform for mitigating regional conflicts. For instance, during the Indonesia-Malaysia Confrontation (Konfrontasi), the 1965 SEAP Games in Kuala Lumpur symbolized a willingness to maintain cultural and athletic ties amid military hostilities. By fostering informal exchanges between officials and creating opportunities for people-to-people connections, the games contributed to rebuilding trust between the two nations. Similarly, during the Thailand-Cambodia dispute over the Preah Vihear Temple, the 2007 SEA Games in Thailand provided a neutral stage for interaction. The shared participation of Thai and Cambodian athletes and cultural exchanges through traditional sports helped soften nationalist tensions and paved the way for future diplomatic efforts.

Despite these successes, ASEAN sports diplomacy is not without its challenges. Economic disparities among member states create imbalances in hosting opportunities and participation, while political rivalries and nationalist sentiments can detract from the inclusive spirit of multilateral events. However, these challenges should not overshadow the substantial achievements of ASEAN sports diplomacy. Instead, they highlight areas for reform and improvement. Addressing economic inequalities through resource-sharing and increasing institutional coordination within ASEAN could enhance the inclusivity and effectiveness of regional sports initiatives.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This study has examined the evolving role of sports diplomacy in Southeast Asia through a historical and comparative analysis of two conflict episodes: the Indonesia-Malaysia Confrontation (1963–1966) and the Thailand-Cambodia Preah Vihear Temple dispute (2008–2013). The findings suggest that while sports diplomacy alone does not resolve geopolitical tensions, it can serve as a complementary tool for promoting reconciliation, building trust, and reinforcing regional identity. When aligned with broader diplomatic strategies, sporting platforms can create informal spaces for confidence-building and symbolic gestures that help reduce hostility and pave the way for formal peace processes.

The 1965 SEAP Games in Kuala Lumpur demonstrated how sports could be used strategically by state actors to project unity, defy external aggression, and generate international support. Malaysia's ability to successfully host a multi-national event at the peak of Konfrontasi was not merely a cultural achievement but a calculated diplomatic manoeuvre. The Games helped Malaysia frame itself as a peaceful and legitimate regional actor, which indirectly contributed to a climate conducive to negotiation and post-conflict regionalism. This case shows that sports diplomacy, when integrated into statecraft, can serve as a low-risk channel for soft engagement even during periods of armed hostility.



In contrast, the Preah Vihear dispute illustrated how ASEAN's formal and informal mechanisms could operate in tandem with legal and cultural diplomacy. While the ICJ delivered authoritative rulings, it was ASEAN's shuttle diplomacy, observer deployments, and confidence-building efforts that ensured compliance and prevented the resurgence of conflict. Although the use of sports diplomacy in this case was more limited, symbolic gestures like friendly matches and youth exchanges played a subtle role in tempering public hostility and demonstrating political intent for peace.

These case studies reveal that sports diplomacy in Southeast Asia is not a monolithic practice but a flexible instrument shaped by context, political will, and institutional support. Its effectiveness depends on timing, credibility, and integration with broader diplomatic strategies. Importantly, the study reaffirms that ASEAN's preference for non-confrontational diplomacy does not preclude creativity or initiative. When supported by capable leadership and multilateral trust, non-traditional tools such as sports and cultural diplomacy can play a meaningful role in conflict mitigation.

As Southeast Asia continues to navigate a complex geopolitical environment—including maritime disputes, rising nationalism, and emerging security threats—there is an urgent need to diversify its diplomatic toolkit. Institutionalising sports diplomacy under ASEAN's socio-cultural framework could help translate symbolic cooperation into structured, recurring platforms for engagement. Future efforts should focus on strengthening ASEAN's capacity to integrate these non-traditional instruments into its peace architecture, particularly in preventive diplomacy and post-conflict confidence-building.

In conclusion, sports diplomacy in Southeast Asia has demonstrated both symbolic and practical value in managing conflict and enhancing regional solidarity. It offers ASEAN an opportunity to renew its relevance by embracing forms of diplomacy that resonate with younger generations and civic communities. By strategically bridging the gap between people-to-people initiatives and state-led diplomacy, ASEAN can reinforce its significant role in maintaining peace, identity, and integration across a diverse and dynamic region.

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BIOGRAPHY

Raymond Toh Meng Hui holds a Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts in International Relations from Universiti Malaysia Sabah. His work explores how sports events, especially the SEA Games, support regional cooperation and peacebuilding. He is also active in regional sports, which strengthens the practical relevance of his research.

Asmady Idris is an International Relations Professor and currently the Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities at the Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS), Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia. He earned his M.A. and Ph.D. in International Relations from University of Newcastle upon Tyne, UK. He has written numerous articles and books on the Middle East-Asia Pacific relations, as well as on developments in the Middle East.