THE DILEMMA AND RECONSTRUCTION OF ASEAN'S CEBTRALITY: A NEOCLASSICAL REALIST PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract Neoclassical realism (NCR) posits that the influence of international organizations on international politics is not merely an epiphenomenon arising from the political competition and cooperation of great powers, but rather uniquely autonomous conditioned feedback. The interaction of international organizations with domestic variables among these states within regions yields independent outcomes, and self-determining international political results are a distinguishing characteristic of NCR's research approach. Consequently, if a state's foreign policy preferences significantly impact international outcomes, international organizations may wield greater importance within the region than major powers. This article initiates by examining the historical roots of ASEAN's concept of "centrality" and subsequently explores its internal mechanisms for cooperation. Drawing upon the NCR theoretical framework and incorporating Strategic Culture as an intervening variable, this article aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the Dilemma that ASEAN Centrality encounters at three distinct levels of growth in the present stage: Systemic, Domestic, and Unit-level. Moreover, drawing on the aforementioned analysis, the article puts forth efficacious approaches for revitalising ASEAN Centrality, with the objective of maintaining its significance in the face of intense power dynamics and rationalising the feasibility of the Hedging strategy.

Keywords: *ASEAN; ASEAN's Centrality; Neoclassical Realism; Strategic Culture; Collective Decision Making*

INTRODUCTION

Observers with an interest in security and development in the Asia-Pacific region may have observed the strategic implementation of the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road (MSR), which has been advocated by Beijing as part of its renewed engagement in the Asia-Pacific region (Song & Fabinyi, 2022; Szilágyi, 2022). This initiative has encountered opposition from many actors. Southeast Asia, predominantly represented in the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), is growing increasingly apprehensive about the surge of protectionism led by Trump and the occurrence of unforeseen events like the Covid-19 pandemic. This unease is further exacerbated by the escalating competition between the United States and China (He & Li, 2020; Tan, 2020).

ASEAN is now the third largest economy in Asia and the fifth largest in the world (Allurentis, 2023). Dynamic economic policies have given the region enormous growth potential. Three ASEAN countries-Cambodia, Indonesia and Thailand-are particularly bright in the post-pandemic era of the end-2022 summit season. Cambodia hosts the East Asia Cooperation Leaders Series; Indonesia hosted the 17th G20 Leaders' Summit and Thailand hosted the 29th Informal Meeting of the Leaders of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). The three summits, covering East Asia, Asia-Pacific and the world, form ASEAN's home turf and demonstrate the integration of ASEAN's approach and the effectiveness and role of ASEAN centrality.

ASEAN, as a regional international organisation, has been a major participant in or affected by these recent international events. The ability of international organisations to genuinely maintain world peace and promote international security has always been the subject of highly enthusiastic scholarly attention (Acharya, 2017; Buensuceso, 2022; Caballero-Anthony, 2005, 2022; Hara et al., 2019; Hong, 2019; Mueller, 2019, 2021). Certainly, Kant's 'democratic pacifism' is one of the main reasons why international organisations have been able to take their place in international politics, yet realists (Foulon, 2015; He, 2006; Lobell et al., 2009; Schweller, 2003) argue that international organisations can only reflect, rather than influence, international political developments, and certainly not international security. At the same time, there are also scholars (He, 2006; Kun, 2009; Narine, 1997; Shan, 2002) who argue that the institutional structures of international organisations, their goals, and objectives and, in general, the internal cohesion of their member states vary greatly, and that the uneven development within ASEAN, for example, is the main reason for their differing conflictual and peaceful roles vis-à-vis each other.

This article argues that the construction of ASEAN centrality is derived from the international political landscape outside the region as a significant independent variable as systemic stimuli react on international organisation (ASEAN) filtered by the communal strategic culture developed by member states (including regional regionalism, multilateralism, the 'ASEAN way', etc.) as an intervening variable. Particularly, this article initiates by examining the historical roots of ASEAN's concept of "centrality" and subsequently explores its internal mechanisms for cooperation. Drawing upon the NCR theoretical framework and incorporating Strategic Culture as an intervening variable, this article aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the Dilemma that ASEAN Centrality encounters at three distinct levels of growth in the present stage: Systemic, Domestic, and Unit-level. Moreover, drawing on the aforementioned analysis, the article puts forth efficacious approaches for revitalising ASEAN Centrality, with the objective of maintaining its significance in the face of intense power dynamics and rationalising the feasibility of the Hedging strategy.

The Origins and Definition of ASEAN Centrality

The presentation of the ASEAN centric theory as a fruit of regionalism and development has been on a fast track since the development of ASEAN in 2011, marked by the joint accession of the Extra-Regional Superpowers, the United States and Russia, to the East Asia Summit (EAS). Ever since the advent of the ASEAN Charter, the goal of ASEAN centrality was codified, becoming both the goal and the guiding principle for all activities of ASEAN. It describes centrality as "the primary driving force in its relations and cooperation with its external partners (Hafner-Burton et al., 2009; Hafner-Burton & Montgomery, 2010)."

As Amitav Acharya aptly points out, the formulation of ASEAN centrality[1] is not a unique terminology or an extremely novel expression; it exists on multiple levels of argument. The emergence of the concept of ASEAN centrism is a specific historical product of the process of the establishment of ASEAN until it reached a mature stage in its development, and the optimistic regionalism it seeks to express reflects the strategic and normative international political landscape and context of the post-Cold War period; in this context, the principle of ASEAN centrality is strategic and normative in purpose. And the placement of the ASEAN Cluster at the very centre of the regionalist architecture is to emphasise its high relevance in interacting with ASEAN's strategic interests. At the same time, the normative purpose of ASEAN centrality is linked to the conscious notions of ASEAN core values, beliefs, and identity; most importantly, it is assumed that without these distinctive ASEAN normative features and strategic precursors there could be no responsive mechanism and co-creation platform for an ASEAN-centred multilateral security framework.

ASEAN centrality is a synonym to ASEAN as the leader, driver, architect, institutional hub, vanguard, nucleus, or fulcrum of regional cooperation in the wider Asia-Pacific. It is engraved in the ASEAN Charter as one of its key purposes and principles. Simply put, it is about positioning ASEAN at the centre of regional architecture that would allow it to set the scope and depth of regionalism in its relations with regional and major powers. The formation of ASEAN centrism, as interpreted from the perspective of Jie (2021); Xianwu (2004)'s view of historical formation, is a specific product of the geopolitical development of the Asia-Pacific region. It is defined in terms of a hierarchical analysis of international relations as a product of the interaction between ASEAN member states and external states, in particular, regionalist strategic motifs arising from the interaction between regional and global powers, including the US, China and the EU. Both the regionalisation of ASEAN in the Asia-Pacific region and the implementation of the recent Indo-Pacific strategy of the major powers have posed an inescapable challenge to ASEAN centrism, forcing ASEAN itself to pursue a more far-reaching multilateralism and pragmatic regionalism.

These visions and goals require unified, outstanding, and cohesive action by ASEAN's member states. Teh (2022) believes that the identical essence of ASEAN's central existence lies in internal unity, which states that: "Without strong internal unity, a single voice and a decision-making mechanism that is not held hostage by the ASEAN Way, ASEAN will be the centrality of goodwill at best." Continuing to explore the core of ASEAN centrality, we find that it is the normative and ingenious design of the system that ensures that ASEAN's centrality will not be shaken. For example, the relationship between the ASEAN chairmanship and member states; the fact that the ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting must be held after the Foreign

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[1] For some of the first usage of the term "ASEAN centrality", see the documents of the 2nd EAS Summit, the 10th APT Summit, and the 12th ASEAN Summit, all in January 2007. These can be found on the website of the ASEAN Secretariat, available at <www.aseansec.org>. See also the ASEAN Charter for referring to it as the "primary driving force" of wider East Asian and Asia-Pacific regionalism.

Ministers Meeting and the Ministerial Meeting; the fact that participating countries in the ASEAN Multilateral Mechanism Forum and Summits must be at least full dialogue partners with ASEAN; and the signing of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, among others. In a broader sense, ASEAN centrality was established to connect with more of its associated platform mechanisms for development and cooperation in line with the 'ASEAN Way'.

For example, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN Plus Three (APT), the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and extraterritorial platforms such as the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM-Plus) of the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF) are institutionalised cooperation mechanisms that have gradually moved the original ASEAN centrality towards intra-regional centrality. Caballero-Anthony (2014) believes that the overall objective of creating an ASEAN community has generated a great deal of interest within and beyond the Southeast Asian region. The development of ASEAN has given the grouping a prominent position in the international community. The developments in ASEAN have catapulted the grouping to a prominent position in the international community. This heightened profile has been depicted as 'ASEAN centrality'.

Caballero-Anthony (2005, 2014, 2022) employs the Social Networks Analysis (SNA) methodology to delineate the concept of ASEAN centrality. The argument posits that ASEAN's centrality may be attributed to its structural placement inside the network density it has established, as well as the network density it is affiliated with. Despite its limited material capabilities, ASEAN has managed to establish a prominent role due to its strategic position within a network of interconnected relationships. This "highly mediated" condition enables ASEAN to exert influence in regional dynamics, while gaining the acceptance and cooperation of key global powers.

In a nutshell, this article elucidates the notion that the establishment of ASEAN centrality is rooted in the development and execution of the ASEAN omnipotence concept. This concept represents a collective and cohesive strategic culture that can be embraced by existing and prospective ASEAN member states. It is underpinned by the principles of regional integration, multilateralism, and regionalism. The ASEAN subordinate mechanisms, platforms, and institutions serve as the operational standards for the establishment of an ASEAN community encompassing political-security, economic-development, and socio-cultural dimensions. The primary aim is to foster external independence and autonomy for each member state of ASEAN, thereby upholding neutrality, internal peace, stability, and overall cohesion.

A Neoclassical Relist Perspective of ASEAN Centrality

According to Fisher (1962), the Southeast Asian region in its early stages shown a proclivity towards 'Balkanisation', therefore making the issues of peace, stability, conflict, and collaboration in the region a matter of significant interest for global and extraterritorial powers. The focus lies on the specific function of intra-mural relations within ASEAN in the context of security. This necessitates a re-examination of the underlying question pertaining to how ASEAN, as an international organisation, attains its objective of establishing itself as a central entity within the region. This section will commence by examining the manner in which NCR conducts evaluations of foreign policy for small states within the context of ASEAN. *Innenpolitik* asserts that the primary objective of a state's political, diplomatic, and military capacities, whether individually or in conjunction, is the attainment of security (Chan, 2015; Clarke, 2020).

The potential security danger to ASEAN in the form of collective defence, which has been traditionally observed, may not have been considered imminent after the conclusion of

the Cold War (Nesadurai, 2009; Singh, 2021). On the other hand, the changes in ASEAN's overall reputation and how it is perceived by entities outside the region align more closely with the current strategic cultural development of ASEAN. In context with systemic pressures and stimuli such as the tension and rivalry between China and the United States in the Indo-Pacific region, sometimes referred to as the New Cold War or Cold War 2.0, the concept of ASEAN Centrality has experienced a notable decline (Heydarian, 2022). This deterioration has led to the adoption of a more biased and polarised strategy, characterised by either balancing or bandwagoning. In the midst of a more restricted domestic political landscape, ASEAN member states may potentially pursue hedging techniques in a manner that could be perceived as hazardous and perhaps provocative.

This study employs the NCR framework to examine ASEAN Centrality and its collective decision-making mechanism. The NCR framework offers the benefit of integrating classical realism elements with a more profound comprehension of domestic factors (Foulon, 2015; Hor, 2022; Kitchen, 2010; Lai, 2008; Lobell et al., 2009). This approach provides an enhanced perspective on how small states, specifically ASEAN members, navigate the intricate dynamics of international relations.

NCR posits that the impact of international organisations on global politics is not solely a by-product of political rivalry and collaboration among major powers, but rather exhibits a distinct and independent mode of conditioned feedback (Hor, 2022). Therefore, the autonomous international political outcome is frequently regarded as the fundamental core value that sets NCR apart from other realist perspectives (He, 2006; James, 1993, 2002; Sterling-Folker, 1997; Wendt, 1994). Fundamentally, the concept of NCR recognises that a nation's foreign policy is influenced not only by the structure and power dynamics of the international system, but also by the acts taken by individual states (Foulon, 2015; Kitchen, 2010; Waltz, 2014).

NCR recognises the fundamental notion that the foreign policy of a country is shaped not only by the structure and power dynamics of the international system, but also by the domestic political, economic, and societal contexts within which nations operate (Lobell et al., 2009; Schweller, 2003). When implemented in the context of smaller nations, NCR acknowledges that these states frequently have distinct obstacles stemming from their constrained resources, susceptibilities, and their susceptibility to the actions of more influential and formidable entities (Lai, 2008).

According to Lobell et al. (2009), it is imperative for the NCR research pathway to contribute in comprehending the conduct of international intergovernmental organisations that consist of sovereign states. As emphasised by realist scholars (He, 2006; Hor, 2022; Kitchen, 2010; Lai, 2008; Lobell et al., 2009), international regimes rely on member states' implementation and adherence to organisational policies, lacking autonomous influence. They primarily manifest as a result of power dynamics within the international system and the policy decisions made by states within it. The theory is deemed more valuable in elucidating the behaviour of intergovernmental organisations (IGOs) because to the greater influence exerted by NCR on state policy decisions and its ability to provide insights into global power dynamics (Foulon, 2015; James, 2002; Sterling-Folker, 1997; Waltz, 2014).

When examining the policies of small countries separately, the NCR places significant emphasis on the interplay between leaders' perceptions of the global context and the limitations they face within their own domestic sphere (Kitchen, 2010; Putra & Abdul Razaq, 2020; Sterling-Folker, 1997). This interaction ultimately influences the strategic decisions made by these leaders (Jones, 2010; Mueller, 2019; Putra & Abdul Razaq, 2020; Stubbs, 2014). For example, Malaysia adopts a cautious and defensive foreign policy position in response to perceived threats from China between 1957 and 1974 (Kuik & Lai, 2023; Lai et al., 2023; Ngeow, 2017), particularly in light of the expansion of communism in Southeast Asia. The

NCR considers the leadership's strategic assessments in order to figure out an equilibrium between safeguarding their national interests and mitigating the potential hazards associated with provoking more influential nations (Mueller, 2019; Putra & Abdul Razaq, 2020).

However, it does not disregard the element of worldwide capability distribution as outlined in neorealism. Within the ASEAN context, the NCR conducts an examination of the collaborative and competitive dynamics among small states operating within the framework of collective decision-making (Acharya, 1997; Wendt, 1994) The less powerful member states of ASEAN endeavour to optimise their influence through capitalising on the collective capabilities of the organisation, forging alliances, and establishing novel avenues of international power through diplomatic engagement in order to protect their respective interests. The concept of NCR provides valuable insights into the strategies employed by smaller states in navigating the consensus-driven decision-making process within the ASEAN (Allurentis, 2023; Buensuceso, 2022; Heydarian, 2022; Teh, 2022). These countries must carefully consider their own national interests while also considering the imperative of maintaining regional cohesion.

Furthermore, NCR emphasises the significance of internal variables, including bureaucratic interests, public opinion, and economic considerations, in influencing the foreign policy of a tiny nation (Foulon, 2015; Kitchen, 2010; Lai, 2008; Lobell et al., 2009). Smaller states may find it necessary to effectively handle their domestic constituencies while simultaneously manoeuvring the expectations and demands imposed by more influential powers. This particular method provides a more extensive comprehension of the intricacies that tiny nations encounter in their endeavour to achieve their foreign policy goals.

This section aims to utilise the theoretical perspectives and premises of the NCR to examine the successful interaction between member states of the ASEAN and domestic politics, specifically strategic culture (Acharya, 2017; Caballero-Anthony, 2022; He & Li, 2020). Strategic culture will be considered as an intervening variable in the development of regionalism, the establishment of ASEAN Centrality oriented Foreign Policy (FP), and the inherent mechanisms involved in its strategic choices and deployments.

Mounnarath (2021) points out that collective security can be expressed in the most common terms: unity is strength. Like ants, they rarely act alone with the aim of working together to combat external threats while coordinating internal crises. To simplify this concept, the security of each member state is seen as the collective security of the whole. At the heart of collective security is the need for mutual recognition and mutual trust between ASEAN member states to achieve unity of purpose. Clearly, factors such as mutual identity and identity dominate Alexander Winter's constructivist theory. As Wendt (1994, 1995) points out, it is how a state, within the framework of the international system, can continually accept binding international norms, which in turn generate and expand a constitutive shared consensus through mutual interaction, and generate and nurture the collective security identity of individual states on the basis of shared knowledge.

Many scholars (Caballero-Anthony, 2022; Jie, 2021; Mueller, 2021; Suzuki, 2021) have long criticised ASEAN centrism as an unrealistic 'mirage', because of the laxity of its internal decision-making systems and mechanisms. This is especially true when it comes to the resolution of disputes and the most fundamental interests of the member states. At the same time, realists (He, 2006; Hor, 2022) are criticising the effectiveness of ASEAN's jurisdiction in the region and the ability of these institutionalised platforms to provide effective solutions and room for manoeuvre in Southeast Asia and even East Asia, although of course these objections are to be compared with the major powers in the region. At this stage, for example, is ASEAN really able to do what Japan has done with the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) and the Quadripartite Mechanism (QUAD), balancing the regional powers while using diplomatic leverage to achieve its own goal of centring the international political arena.

At least not alone, Acharya (1997, 2017); Buensuceso (2022); Jie (2021); Suzuki (2021) argue that the centrality of ASEAN is both a product of external players and the ultimate product of interaction among ASEAN member states and between member states and international organisations in the inter-region. In a more depth explanatory, Kishore Mahbubani gave his keynote speech in the "THINK ASIA 2022" points out:

> *"Asia states have to give up psychological dependence on the west, ASEAN is a vivid example. The West keeps saying that ASEAN is a weak organisation. It's true. ASEAN is a weak organisation, but the paradox of ASEAN is that its strength lies in its weakness. It's why everybody trusts ASEAN. Why do you think all the world leaders are going to come to the East Asia Summit in 2 weeks' time? Because nobody feels threatened by ASEAN, they all come, and that gives ASEAN a convening power that others don't have."*

At the same time, in his book 'ASEAN Miracle', he emphasises that over half a century, ASEAN's internal culture, decision-making mechanisms, consensus and disagreement have fully reflected its tendency and sufficient conditions for gradual centralisation within the region (Mahbubani & Sng, 2017). For example, the Musyawarah and Mufkat concept of collaborative and cooperative organisational management in Indonesia, a rapidly growing regional power within ASEAN in the 21st century, is implicitly outlining the central themes of harmonious coexistence and development within ASEAN. This is why the interaction between regional intergovernmental national organisations and member states is capable of generating independent dependent variables, a theoretical basis comparable to cross-level interactions.

It is generally accepted that the centrality of ASEAN in the regionalisation process has been shaped by its regional leadership. More importantly, this leadership has been a major factor in ASEAN's ability to resolve many regional differences and disputes within the existing regional framework and to secure the political environment (Dent, 2012; Jones, 2010). However, Stubbs (2014) emphasises that while leadership is important, can it really make a real difference in the face of, for example, economic development or the establishment of new regional institutional mechanisms?

Therefore, Caballero-Anthony (2014) adds and opens up a new theoretical framework (SNA) to explain that the establishment of ASEAN centrality stems from ASEAN's central role as a function of its structural position in various networks, in order to test ASEAN's ability to influence its 'followers' to achieve common goals, to access resources and information, and to act as a a channel for the transmission of beliefs and norms, demonstrating how ASEAN's structural position as a node in a cluster of networks enables it to play a central role in the institutional architecture of the region, including the great powers.

Hara et al. (2019) argue that approaches to explaining the centrality of ASEAN are at this stage too limited to neo-realism and constructivism, but that both perspectives usually emphasise only one aspect alone, namely external stimuli or intra-state factors. In contrast, by utilising a neoclassical realist perspective, the attainment of ASEAN centrality depends to a large extent on the ability of policy makers to develop firm attitudes and positions in the face of challenges and opportunities in the international landscape. Without the effective development of a common response, ASEAN member states are vulnerable to infiltration by external interests.

Strategic Culture and ASEAN's Impetus

This article argues that the formation of ASEAN centrality under the theoretical framework of the NCR is in fact a process of strategic culture formation within the region. The formation of ASEAN centrality is both the result of stimuli from the international political environment

outside the region and the product of collective decisions shaped by multiple political factors within the member states as intervention variable. As shown in the figure below (Figure 1.0), the results of Lobell et al. (2009)'s investigation of the 'Neoclassical Realist Model of Foreign Policy' can be exploited to show that strategic culture is the only existing one of four categories intervening variables that can simultaneously influence three domestic processes (perception, decision making and policy implementation) at the same time as potentially distorting national foreign policy responses to international systemic stimuli.

Figure 1: Neoclassical Realist Model of Foreign Policy, source from: Lobell et al, 2009, Neoclassical realism, the state, and foreign policy.
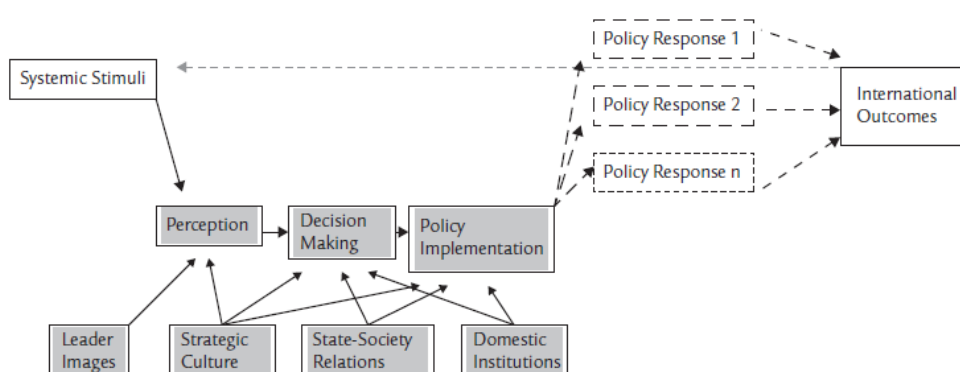
Meanwhile, Sterling-Folker (1997) and Schweller (2003) point out that the choice of different mediating variables affects the timing and extent of decision making. For example, strategic culture variables relate to the face of the process, including the autonomy of leaders and the constraints under which they act, their socialisation, domestic distributive competition, and mechanisms for resolving disagreements. The characteristics of strategic culture in these factors exert a more comprehensive influence from the short to the medium term and from the medium to the long term. In particular, strategic culture can shape and condition policy planning and the development of grand strategies between countries. As shown in (Figure 2.0), we can identify why strategic culture was chosen and when it is most influential, using the clarity of the international system (from high to low) and the nature of the strategic environment (from restrictive to permissive).

Figure 2: Intervening Variable Clusters by The Degree of Systemic Clarity and The Natures of Strategic Environment, source from: Lobell et al, 2009, Neoclassical realism, the state, and foreign policy.

		Degree of Systemic Clarity (High to Low)	
		High Clarity	Low Clarity
Nature of Strategic Environment (Restrictive to Permissive)	Restrictive Environment	*Leader images and Strategic culture*	*Leader images and Strategic culture*
	Permissive Environment	*Strategic culture, Domestic institutions, and State-society relations*	*Indeterminate—all four clusters could be relevant.*

In short, in high-definition constrained environments, where states are aware of the high threat, short time horizon and limited options they face, we would expect strategic culture and leader perceptions to be the most relevant intervening variables governing how leaders perceive the external environment and how they respond to it; conversely, in inclusive environments with high clarity, where countries have ample time and no imminent threats or weak opportunities, we would expect strategic culture to remain in play as foreign policy practitioners become more forward-looking in their considerations and expectations of the country's long-term future strategy over time; in an inclusive setting with low clarity, we expect intervening variables to be relevant in all mediating variables shown in Figure 1.0 (including, Leader images, Strategic Culture, Domestic intuitions and State society relations).

However, in a less clear-cut constrained environment, this theoretical model remains convinced that strategic culture plays the greatest role, as the importance of high threat or weak opportunity leads to the exclusion of social actors from state interests, while encouraging the state to ignore the demands of society at large on strategic grounds. For instance, ASEAN established in 1967 during the early stages of the Cold War, initially adopted an inherently exclusive approach as an international organization among states. However, the concept of ASEAN Centrality, which emerged in 2007 after a span of forty years, signifies a notable period of transformation in the global arena. The dissolution of the bipolarity of the Cold War, the emergence of emerging power dynamics, and the rise of unanticipated challenges like terrorism have collectively reshaped the global landscape. The events and shifts observed during this time established the foundation for the complex geopolitical processes that continue to shape the present-day international system.

After briefly contextualizing the international political environment in which the proposal of ASEAN Centrality emerged, this article draws upon the insightful framework of Neoclassical Realism (NCR) presented by Lai (2008:86, 2013:97) as a coherent and applicable analytical tool for dissecting the foreign policy choices/preferences of states (here refer to ASEAN).

Figure 3:NCR Framework of Strategic Culture and ASEAN Behaviour/Preferences, source from: Lai (2008: 86, 2013:97) Nationalism and power politics in Japan's relations with China: a neoclassical realist interpretation.
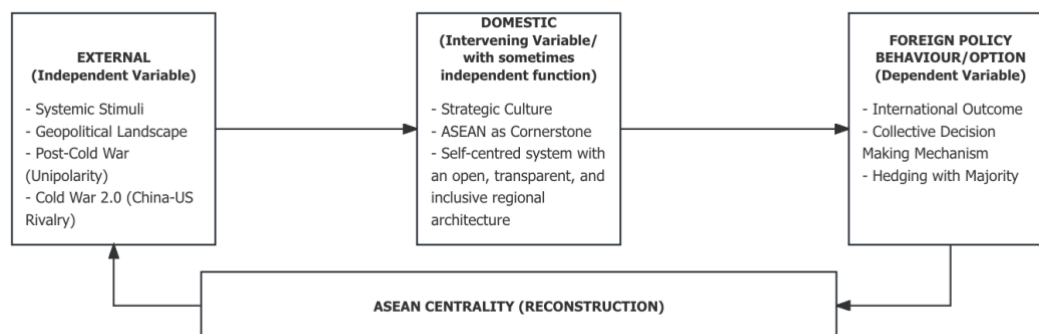
This NCR framework (Figure 3.0) illustrated that strategic culture serves as an essential link between systemic pressures and domestic decision-making processes. Besides that, ASEAN's strategic culture is not solely derived from the implicit and elusive descriptions found within the ASEAN Chater (2007). Instead, it is shaped by an impetus rooted in domestic politics and oriented from within to outside, encompassing the active involvement of member states.

Interpreting Systemic Constraints

The NCR recognizes that the international order imposes both limitations and possibilities on nation-states. The concept of strategic culture assists member governments of the ASEAN in comprehending and effectively responding to the systemic challenges they face, by providing a framework to interpret these forces and transform them into coherent and purposeful policy choices. An example can be provided of a state that possesses a strategic culture characterised by cooperation and consensus-building. Such a state may demonstrate a greater inclination towards pursuing multilateral approaches within the ASEAN in order to tackle regional difficulties. This inclination can be seen as a manifestation of the state's aspiration for stability and cooperation.

Furthermore, as power dynamics change in the region, strategic culture helps ASEAN states adapt their foreign policy orientations. A state with a flexible strategic culture may be more open to recalibrating its policies and alignments in response to shifting power dynamics within ASEAN and the broader international system.

Filtering Domestic Perceptions

Diverse interpretations of the influence of the international system on the security and interests of their respective states are held by domestic political elites and decision-makers in ASEAN countries. The concept of strategic culture offers a framework through which these perspectives can be interpreted and analysed. A state exhibiting a defensive strategic culture, characterised by a preference for self-reliance and non-alignment, may place a high priority on implementing policies aimed at preserving autonomy and minimising susceptibility to external forces.

The potential of the intervening variable is situated within the theoretical framework of NCR, which provides a more advantageous analytical approach for examining domestic

political concerns. Consequently, it bestows upon it a lasting efficacy. The political elites and decision-making executives of ASEAN member states engage in deliberations over the wider ramifications of the organization's strategic development in the medium to long term, as well as their own standing within it. The individuals in question ascertain their reactions to diplomatically prioritised decisions that are treated ASEAN/ASEAN Centrality as a Cornerstone for Foreign Policy (Keling et al., 2011) formulation, which are influenced by differing levels of domestic political constraints or flexibility.

Influencing Policy Preferences

The foreign policy preferences and priorities of ASEAN member nations are influenced by their respective strategic cultures. States characterised by an offensive strategic culture, driven by aspirations of regional domination and assertiveness, may argue for an enhanced and aggressive involvement within the ASEAN in order to effectively project their influence and protect their interests. On the other hand, a state characterised by a prudent and risk-averse strategic culture may place a higher value on the avoidance of conflicts and the promotion of cooperative engagement as means to maintain stability.

Figure 4: ASEAN Member States Strategy Preference at a Glance with general investigated perspective, source from: Authorship cited from (Kuik, 2015); Kuik (2016); (Kuik, 2022); Mueller (2021); Ng and Li (2023)

ASEAN Member States	Strategic Preference	Rationale and Focus (Strategic Culture Consideration)
Singapore	(Hedging) Economic Hub Strategy	Positioning as a global economic hub through infrastructure and trade facilitation. Economic diversification and connectivity for sustained growth.
Indonesia	(Hedging) Maritime Security Strategy	Modernizing navy and maritime surveillance to safeguard vast maritime territories. Protecting sovereignty and maritime domain.
Malaysia	(Hedging) Multi-Ethnic Harmony Strategy	Emphasis on social cohesion, multiculturalism, and equitable development. Fostering domestic harmony for stability.
Thailand	(Hedging) Regional Leadership Strategy	Positioning as a regional leader within ASEAN through diplomatic initiatives and integration efforts. Enhancing influence in Southeast Asia.
Brunei	(Hedging) Economic Diversification Strategy	Reducing dependency on hydrocarbon revenues through economic diversification. Sustainable growth and development through tourism and finance.
Myanmar	(Hedging) Seeking for Engagement	Carefully managing its alliances and partnerships to maximize options and minimize risks
Philippines	(Bandwagoning) Territorial Dispute Strategy	Diplomatic negotiations and legal arbitration combined with defense strengthening. Protecting sovereign rights and seeking peaceful resolutions.

Cambodia	(Bandwagoning) with China	Cultivated close economic and political ties with China, benefiting from investments and development projects
Vietnam	(Balancing) Balancing Between Major Powers	Diversifying foreign relations to leverage different partners for economic and security cooperation. Avoiding overreliance on a single actor.

The findings by Kuik (2015, 2016, 2021, 2022) underscore the logical applicability of current hedging approaches to the main countries of the ASEAN, namely Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia. This article conducts a thorough examination and integration of diverse literature sources to present Figure 4.0 that showcases the strategic preferences of ASEAN member states. These preferences are categorised under concepts such as "strategic pool" (Alignment, Choosing-side, Engagement, Containment, Equidistance, Balancing, Bandwagoning, and Hedging) (Kitchen, 2010; Mueller, 2021; Ng & Li, 2023; Szilágyi, 2022; Tan, 2020). Figure 4.0 also includes the rationale and focus provided by each member state. Member states develop strategic deployments that are in line with their national power, domestic governance legitimacy, and national interests. These deployments are managed by Foreign Policy Executives (FPEs) or political elites that possess an understanding of and consider the domestic strategic culture.

Additionally, this article uncovers that within the political landscape of the rivalry between the United States and China, the strategic culture of the ASEAN is influential. This influence is manifested through international developments such as the implementation of the hedging strategy following the official establishment of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in 2023 and the United States-led "Indo-Pacific Economic Cooperation." These developments, in turn, have an impact on the prevailing global order, leading to the restructuring and formation of fresh geopolitical configurations (Kuik, 2022; Mueller, 2019).

This article acknowledges its inherent limitations, as depicted in Figure 4.0, which highlight the varying and distinct autonomous strategic preferences among ASEAN countries over different time periods. Since achieving independence in the post-World War II period, countries in the ASEAN have gained considerable familiarity with the historical context of the Cold War era. In the aftermath of the Cold War, the international political landscape has witnessed a heightened level of complexity (Ng & Li, 2023).

Figure 4.0 indicates that while 6 out of 10 ASEAN member states have adopted hedging strategies, the structural logic of this approach becomes more intricate due to domestic factors. These factors influence their perceptions of the severity and urgency of perceived threats, as well as their views on the effectiveness of available support. This complexity is evident in the distinct hedging behaviour patterns exhibited by countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore (Kuik & Lai, 2023; Lai et al., 2023; Teh, 2022). However, due to space constraints and the focus of this article on an overarching analysis of ASEAN Centrality, the exploration of how strategic culture conveys systemic stimuli and how collective decision-making mechanisms are applied within ASEAN takes precedence.

This has presented actors with a multifaceted array of problems, encompassing not just traditional security concerns and domestic political dynamics, but also non-traditional perils emanating from economic, social, and cultural dimensions. Hence, the strategic choices of the ASEAN exhibit a range of discrepancies and fluctuations (Caballero-Anthony, 2022; He & Li, 2020; Koga, 2021; Ng & Li, 2023).

The implementation of ASEAN Centrality has appeared to enhance the foreign policy formulation of each country, resulting in FPEs' decisions being influenced by a sense of unity

and coherence (Acharya, 2017). This has led to the alignment of domestic politics with the process of ASEAN integration. In short, the increasing hostilities between China and the United States during the present period, the challenges confronted by the Asia-Pacific area as a result of the economic decline following the pandemic, and the protracted dispute between Ukraine and Russia highlight the imperative need for the reconstruction of ASEAN Centrality. The incorporation of the domestic variable of Strategic Culture into the NCR framework offers a more concise and effective approach to understanding the reconstruction of centrality.

Furthermore , in exceptional cases, due to conscious government involvement, the impact of major historical events and other irresistible factors, Lobell et al. (2009) argue that the strategic culture of the state may be shaped and reconfigured over time, a part that will be explained in the fourth part of this article. Yukawa (2018)'s understanding of such a similar passage as a negative 'ASEAN way' discourse and its evolution over the years suggests that the rationality of non-interference and consensus decision-making has changed over time and has altered the positioning of the 'ASEAN way' as a marker. This presents a new empirical explanation for the change in ASEAN norms. It is also one of the driving forces behind the transformative impact of strategic culture and the formation of ASEAN centrality.

At the same time, the strategic culture under the NCR was also particularly concerned with introducing dominant ideology as an important component which would influence national attitudes towards international affairs. Haas (2007) argues that the ideological gap is an important factor in determining the form of international alliances. As long before ASEAN was formed, in 1956, the Philippines and Malaysia agreed on the concept of the Association of Southeast Asia. The main purpose for the formation of this alliance was the desire to resist the communist threat to Soviet power through a joint approach, based on considerations of the political environment at the time. It also defined the international outcome of an ideological convergence in the nature of the future regional organisation. However, a number of other Southeast Asian countries did not join the alliance, which they saw as part of the Cold War (Busbarat, 2017; Hara et al., 2019; Heydarian, 2022). This was also a technical problem of ideological differences that ASEAN had to overcome from its early initial stages to the later formation of the completed body (the ASEAN with Ten), especially as Laos at the time was becoming the focus of an international struggle between East and West.

Strategic culture can be a false multiple constraint on the ability of elites to adjust strategically in response to systemic change, and Lobell et al. (2009) highlight that even in less extreme circumstances, strategic culture can constrain and shape national policy choices when the country is in a more inclusive external environment. Let us continue to recall that after 1965, prior to the establishment of ASEAN, the rest of the Southeast Asian region entered a period of stable political and economic development, and international cooperation gradually increased. Indonesia quickly adjusted its internal and external policies after Suharto came to power. It fell back to the West politically and sought Western assistance economically. Putra and Abdul Razaq (2020) argue that Indonesia's liberal and active foreign policy in Southeast Asia reflects the influence of inter-state regionalism during the Cold War and that much of the interaction was partly due to the political culture of Javanese ethnicity.

Nicholas Kitchen (2010) suggests that notions are important in international political affairs, particularly in terms of their impact on foreign policy making or the nature of the international system. The NCR has the potential to consider the influence of ideas and simultaneously reveal intervening notional variables between the distribution of power in the international system and the foreign policy behaviour of states, thus constituting key elements of the neoclassical realist research agenda.

These elements include national leaders, institutions (including cognitive communities, formal rules, and procedures) and the cultural preferences of states. Thus, it is easy to see that the formation and construction of ASEAN centrality is an 'an evolving regional architecture',

which Caballero-Anthony (2014, 2022) emphasises encompasses more than simply the establishment of mechanisms from the ARF, extending to the broader EAS to the current strategic deployment and cooperation of the AOIP, but also multilateralism, the 'openness' of regionalism. It is a convergence of cultural identities and the building of a regional community that encompasses concepts such as multilateralism, 'openness' and regionalism.

The ASEAN Community is a reference to the contribution of the ASEAN Community to the formation of ASEAN centrality. The initial mechanisms for the formation of the ASEAN Community were characterised by a focus on security cooperation. From the early days when the focus was on ethnic strife between member states, it was only after the Asian financial crisis in 1997 that it became clear that non-traditional issues could cause incalculable damage. It was not until the completion of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) in 2015 that the member states realised that ASEAN should have been an integrated whole since its inception (Narine, 1997). This strategic cultural identity from the inside out has contributed to the construction of the three dimensions of ASEAN countries - political-security, economic-development and socio-cultural - and has provided the core action agenda for the trend of ASEAN centrality.

Notably, Dueck (2008) argues that policy makers choose to design adjustments and revise strategic options to reflect acceptable cultural preferences in order to maintain domestic support. Just as, after the end of the Cold War, the strategic culture of the Asia-Pacific region has generally favoured the pursuit of normative improvements and adjustments in the direction of 'stability'. The external political environment has seen the collapse of the Cold War-era Indo-Chinese bloc as a direct threat to Southeast Asia's security, the move towards a political settlement in Cambodia and the dilution of ideological rivalries.

However, leaders may be unwilling or unable to win support because of the role of strategic culture, as certain strategic ideas resonate more culturally and conceptually with the public than other options. The main reason for this is the low level of political mutual trust between the major powers dominating the Asia-Pacific landscape and the overall fragility of security relations, which present a state of 'sub-stability'; the serious political mistrust and widely divergent values in major power relations that exist in a China-US-Japan triangle (Jones, 2010; Mahbubani, 2010; Weiner, 2022). Therefore, it is impossible to establish effective great power coordination and collective security mechanisms. At the same time, the main creators and manipulators of traditional strategic cooperation are the regional powers, with small and medium-sized countries on the periphery and unable to create a strategic cultural resonance with the public at the domestic social level.

Under these circumstances, the task of advocating and organising multilateral security cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region has historically fallen to ASEAN, a sub-regional international organisation of small and medium-sized countries. The ARF was established by ASEAN to promote multilateral cooperation and stability in the Asia-Pacific region and was held in Bangkok in 1994 (Narine, 1997). The first and foremost reason for the acceptance of the ARF is that this concept of a strategic culture of cooperative security is in line with the post-Cold War realities of the Asia-Pacific region and its diversity; secondly, as the only official multilateral security dialogue and cooperation mechanism in East Asia and the Asia-Pacific region as a whole, the ARF is a positive outcome of ASEAN's long-standing strategy of balancing great powers.

As shown in the figure below (Figure 5.0), the important norms and key elements covered by ASEAN centrality are outlined through a brief historical retrospective perspective of the development of ASEAN from before its establishment through its inception to the end of the Cold War, combined with the NCR theoretical analysis framework of strategic culture as an intervening variable to filter the external political environment stimuli from the system. The presentation of the Stacked Venn diagram highlights the themes and emphases that have been highlighted throughout the different periods of ASEAN's history as it has developed and

evolved along with itself, highlighting its diverse culture and open and inclusive strategic deployment. To this present day, Acharya (2017) points out that the dilemmas and reconstructions of ASEAN centrality are ongoing, but require attention and response from all member states, the days of ASEAN centrality are almost certainly numbered.

Figure 5:The Imputes of ASEAN Centrality filtered by Strategic Culture, source from author.
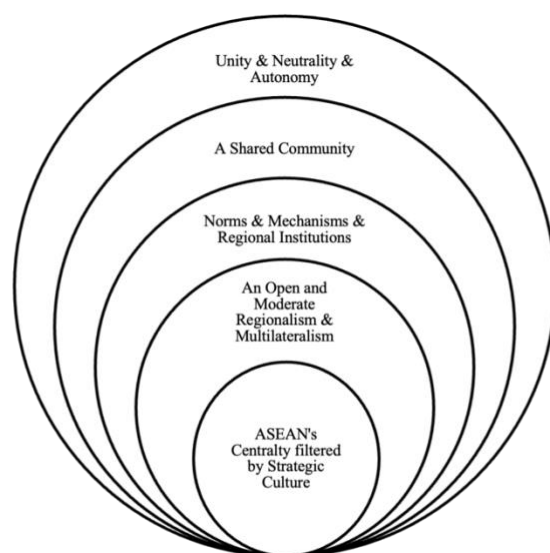
The external political environment that ASEAN has been stimulated by so far must be filtered and responded to through the prism of the state, within the unique domestic political environment vis a vis Strategic Culture, in order to be considered as the optimal international outcome for ASEAN in line with public demand. Equally, such an autonomous international outcome is in line with the core of ASEAN's centrality and development principles.

ASEAN centrality, filtered through a unified and coherent strategic culture, is based on the guiding philosophy of regional integration, multilateralism and regionalism; the ASEAN-affiliated mechanisms, platforms and institutions as a norm of action; and the core objective of building an ASEAN community that includes political-security, economic-development and socio-cultural aspects, in order to achieve the external independence and autonomy of each ASEAN member state to maintain neutrality; and internal peace and stability to ensure that the ASEAN community is independent.

Collective Decision Making and ASEAN's Choice

The particularity of the third type of NCR theoretical model utilised in this article is to outline how strategic culture as an intervening variable filters international systemic stimuli and generates policy choices with collective decision-making implications. At the same time, the international outcomes resulting from the interaction between these choices, as well as the system structure itself-are occasionally influenced by international outcomes (Foulon, 2015; Hor, 2022; Lobell et al., 2009).

This article argues that the international outcomes produced in the formation and development of ASEAN centrality can reshape the political landscape of the Asia-Pacific region at this stage, and at the same time play a pivotal role in the Indo-Pacific strategy is inextricably linked. In essence, the NCR helps to explain the expansion of the scope of the

dependent variable over time. Not only does it shed light on the process of national policy planning and grand strategic adjustments in the face of imminent crises, but it also involves responding to anticipated power shifts and future challenges and opportunities and, most importantly, explains changes in the structure and nature of the international system (James, 1993, 2002).

For example, policy makers have more time to reach broader agreements with other countries, which is more similar to the situation of ASEAN members. Bilateral military cooperation has long been established between some ASEAN members, and these military cooperation and joint planning are aimed at promoting comprehensive alliances between different armed forces (Shan, 2002). In general, strategic culture affects both short-term foreign policy decisions and long-term strategic planning (Dueck, 2008; Goldstein & Keohane, 2019).

On the one hand, strategic culture affects how top decision-makers discuss and interpret international events in the short term; on the other hand, as foreign policy executives (FPEs) and related bureaucracies draw up plans for grand strategic adjustments, we expect national values, attitudes towards the use of force, and cultural preferences to have an important impact (Kitchen, 2010). Thus, national leader's vis a vis ASEAN policymakers are unlikely to adopt policy options that run counter to domestic values. Thus, following the Cold War, the 'enlargement strategy' implemented by ASEAN has ushered in an era of unpredictable uncertainty in the regional landscape, so in the absence of significant changes in domestic public attitudes (Than & Gates, 2001; Wu, 2020).

Either the expansion of domestic armaments or the pursuit of security alliances in the region were accepted by the nation, for example, the US-Philippines Mutual Defence Treaty, the US-Thailand Mutual Security Act and the accelerated modernisation of Malaysian armaments during the same period were the result of a combination of systemic incentives and strategic culture (Busbarat, 2017; Lohman, 2011).

Eisenhardt and Zbaracki (1992) posits that Decision Making, meaning making a choice or 'a strategy or approach to a decision', emphasises how to achieve a goal or solve a problem. Decision making is an extremely widely used term, and many decisions are made every day to guide our specific actions, whether by international organisations, government departments, businesses, or ordinary people. Despite its importance to us, there has been no uniform understanding or conceptual definition of decision-making.

A further delineation of the types of decision-making can be made from different perspectives. Based on the subject of decision-making, this article considers ASEAN as a regional interstate organisation to be Collective Decision Making (Bose et al., 2017). Decision-making is a complex process that is influenced by subjective factors as well as objective conditions, and is profoundly influenced by political culture, political institutions, customs, and religious beliefs. Chiou (2010) contended that different countries, regions and organisations may have certain differences in their decision-making patterns.

At present, there are some representative models and theories of decision-making in the international arena, such as complete rationality model, limited rationality model, progressive model, system model, hybrid scanning model, elite theory, institutional theory, game theory, group theory and public choice theory. Different decision models and decision theories make different assumptions about decision objectives, decision makers, decision principles, and the specific decision behaviours to which they apply (Bose et al., 2017; Carlesso et al., 2023; Gao & Yu, 2020; Horsevad et al., 2022; Hudson & Day, 2019; Mann, 2018; Nitzan & Paroush, 1985).

For example, Chiou (2010) uses Rational choice theory (RCT) as a starting point to explore the logic of ASEAN decision-making from a historical perspective. He argues that ASEAN decision-making is based on consensus and consultation, that the outcomes of non-binding and watered-down resolutions make it difficult for ASEAN to make substantive

progress, and that the characteristics of such decision-making mechanisms allow member states to act on how individual states perceive collective resolutions to be in their best interests.

Feraru (2016) focuses on the important function of ASEAN's formal and informal processes and shows that much of the early decision-making practice has been reinforced by subsequent institutional and normative developments. However, Caballero-Anthony (2005, 2014, 2022) also highlights the importance of these processes for regional cooperation as underlined by the consensual decision-making demonstrated by ASEAN and the persistence of consultations conducted in an informal manner. The centrality of ASEAN remains the preferred model of regional security governance. However, despite the limited success of informality in addressing certain regional issues in the past, the pressure on ASEAN to recalibrate its informal processes and enable the organisation to respond to twentieth century security challenges on purpose has become more pressing than ever.

Indeed, Mueller (2019, 2021) uses domestic politics in the unitary hierarchy as a starting point and finds that the hedging strategies of ASEAN member states are not aligned with the regional vision, highlighting the lack of coherence within ASEAN. National-level players entrench existing incoherence in the governance of ASEAN connectivity, further weakening the centrality of ASEAN. ASEAN centrality in implementing connectivity hedging strategies is symbolic it attempts to extend its reach into new policy areas, but there are also its persistent governance constraints.

This article examines the concept of collective decision-making within the ASEAN by adopting a Group Decision Making Model (GDM) framework (Meng et al., 2020). In this particular situation, the collective entity is not merely an aggregation of individual decision-making behaviours, but rather possesses distinct and essential attributes. First and foremost, individuals possess autonomy in their decision-making. Every individual possesses the capacity to exercise autonomous decision-making, and their behaviours are not subject to the control of a superior authority (Zhang & Chen, 2022). However, this does not preclude the existence of reciprocal influence and intervention among individuals within a group (Kaarbo, 2003). All decision-making individuals make choices within a set of well-known conditions.

When certain individuals abstain from making a choice, despite the completion of decision-making activity by other members, it does not signify the conclusion of the decision-making process (Urena et al., 2019). Ultimately, the decision culminates in mutual benefits for all involved parties. The ultimate determination reached by the collective is inherently the one that garners unanimous agreement from all individuals involved (Cottam, 2019; Shapiro & Bonham, 1973). Nevertheless, it should be noted that not all participants necessarily hold the same value preference. In certain cases, individuals may hold opposing viewpoints but are compelled to reach a compromise when confronted with the ultimate decision made by the group.

The decision-making process employed by ASEAN is based on a rotational system within its Standing Committee (Bi, 2021; Damayanti, 2019; Khan et al., 2020). The aforementioned mechanism undergoes an annual reconstitution, wherein the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the host country presides over the Standing Committee during the Foreign Ministers' Meeting. Additionally, the Ambassadors of the other Member States present in the host nation assume the role of committee members. The composition of the Standing Committee is structured to facilitate the rotational process of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting and embodies the core idea of complete equality among all member states of ASEAN. The Standing Committee serves as the apex of ASEAN's executive entity, known as the Standing (Functional) Committee (Chater, 2007; Feraru, 2016).

The Special Committee, ASEAN Secretariat, and ASEAN National Secretariats are formally subordinate to the Standing Committee. Additionally, the Chairman of the Standing Committee assumes the role of ASEAN's political representative (Müller, 2023). The rotation

mechanism within the ASEAN organisation provides each member state with the opportunity to host a meeting of foreign ministers and assume leadership of the Standing Committee. This committee holds a somewhat centralised position within the organisation (Allurentis, 2023; Suzuki, 2021). The operational framework of the Standing Committee enables all member nations of ASEAN to effectively uphold the concept of absolute equality, both in the decision-making process and in the subsequent execution of those decisions (Dalpino, 2021; Djalal, 2021). The process of reconciling divergent perspectives and achieving international agreements within an organisation such as ASEAN, which operates on a consensus-based approach, faces the risk of impasse due to the presence of veto power as the sole determinant of decision-making.

Suzuki (2021) believes that the roundtable meetings between ASEAN and its member foreign ministers did result in some meaningful agreements, that the chair has the power to play an agenda-setting role, and that the combination of a rotating chair and a limited number of member states means that each country will enjoy strong power for a fairly short period of time. As each member state knew that it was its turn, it was willing to allow other countries to exercise the power of the Chair and to lead the consensus to reach an agreement in the Chair's national interest had confirmed the prominence of the Chair in the overall mechanism. The coexistence of the ASEAN Secretariat with the ASEAN National Secretariats was largely a move towards absolute equality between all ASEAN member states, and Guoping (1997) points out that the ASEAN Secretariat was established later than the ASEAN National Secretariats, and was originally intended to be a central secretariat to coordinate the work of the ASEAN National Secretariats.

However, due to the disagreement among countries on the functions and powers of the ASEAN Secretariat, although the post of Secretary-General was rotated among countries, many countries were concerned that the ASEAN Secretariat, which was based in Indonesia, would be more or less manipulated by Indonesia. As a result, the ASEAN Secretariat ended up as a body with little real power. In order to ensure the absolute equality of all ASEAN members, the ASEAN National Secretariat was retained, but the name of the Secretary-General of the ASEAN National Secretariat was changed to "Director General" to distinguish it from the Secretary-General of the ASEAN Secretariat. The ASEAN National Secretariat still plays the role of managing and coordinating the ASEAN-related affairs of each member state. In a series of strategies and practices in the relationship between the ASEAN Secretariat and the ASEAN National Secretariat, Renhe and Bin (2002) and He (2006) concluded that ASEAN has not only strived for a non-core mechanism in its decision-making structure, but has also been deliberate in its executive structure to avoid having a core executive body that could be influenced by a particular country.

It is unblemished from the above analysis that ASEAN's executive bodies are quite fragmented and heterogeneous, and that some of them can be seen as a result of ASEAN's deliberate pursuit of absolute equality. Such a loose and heterogeneous set of executive bodies depends entirely on ASEAN's diverse and flexible policy-making approach. ASEAN's policy-making and executive bodies are interlinked, and the implementation of policymaking depends on the executive bodies, whose competence and functions are determined by the policy-making bodies. In this way, the decision-making bodies and the executive bodies must coordinate and adapt to each other. The ASEAN executive bodies are set up in accordance with this principle.

The Dilemma and Construct of ASEAN Centrality

The Dilemma from Systemic Level

In the context of the U.S.-China rivalry, ASEAN has become the main battleground for the "Asia-Pacific" region and the "Indo-Pacific strategy."

Of late, the term Asia-Pacific has now been replaced by 'Indo-Pacific' to reflect the changing dynamics in the region and growing importance and influence of major powers. Other than the US and China, these would also include Japan, India, and Australia. The 'Indo-Pacific Strategy' has made the creation of a new US-led regional order its main objective (Hara et al., 2019; Mueller, 2019). In the process of reshaping the regional order, the attitudes and policies of small and medium-sized countries and regional organisations deserve a great deal of attention, as their strategic autonomy will make the development of the new regional order highly uncertain, and this is an important diplomatic space for Beijing to strengthen its game against Washington, while at the same time having the opportunity to promote a new regional order that is more conducive to the common development of the countries in the region. However, the recognition of ASEAN's centrality has not diminished its unease, and its strategic anxiety has increased significantly. Some ASEAN countries have expressed the view that great power competition has become a dominant feature of the current regional order and that the centrality of ASEAN is under threat (Caballero-Anthony, 2022).

For these small countries of a similar nature in Southeast Asia, survival in the midst of a power struggle between the big powers is extremely precarious and dangerous. The mechanisms and platforms for cooperation under the ASEAN hub have not evolved in full accordance with the ASEAN vision and visions. As at the US-ASEAN summit in Washington, DC in May 2022, the financial assistance promised by the Biden administration to ASEAN was 'light as a feather' compared to the US$15 billion military aid provided to Ukraine. Therefore, Oh (2022) points out that the 'paying lip service to the word' of the big powers in the Asia-Pacific region is the substance of the ASEAN-centric dilemma in the face of the small states.

In fact, QUAD under the FOIP strategy is a ruthless trampling by the great powers on the weakening of the regional integration dimension and on the rejection of regionalism to reconstruct ASEAN centrality within the framework of AOIP (Koga, 2021). For, only if ASEAN centrality is truly in line with the tangible interests pursued by the great powers can it find more of a home for itself in international politics, otherwise it is 'just a piece of paper'. Just as Japan has left EAS behind and instead 'detoured' to seek out India and Australia to form 'horns' to balance the increasingly 'aggressive' rise of China in Northeast Asia This is the first time that China has been able to balance the growing 'aggressiveness' of China in Northeast Asia. Among other things, the centrality of ASEAN, in the face of the declining US-led liberal international order, is considering how to strengthen existing mechanisms and avoid the 'dragging down' of norms centred on 'strategic allies' of the US.

However, this practice of stopping the meetings of ASEAN entities began to change as early as the beginning of the most stringent operational control phase of the Covid-19 pandemic. Assuming that such large multilateral meetings continue to be put on hold, the quadripartite meetings are likely to evolve into stand-alone events. The Quartet Foreign Ministers have agreed to hold regular ministerial meetings, with a third scheduled for 2021 (Amin & Krishnan, 2021). This would certainly cast a shadow over the convening power that ASEAN has traditionally prided itself on, including the fact that meetings in which ASEAN is not directly involved are no small shock to the centrality of ASEAN.

Managing the South China Sea issue holds paramount importance for ASEAN's prospective growth (Caballero-Anthony, 2022; Heydarian, 2022; Kuik, 2021; Ng & Li, 2023).

However, due to the lack of consensus or room for compromise among member states on various matters, these South China Sea disputes have triggered internal divisions within ASEAN, even escalating into potential conflicts. These challenges underscore the presence of irreconcilable contradictions within ASEAN, with the South China Sea (SCS) disputes serving as incendiary triggers that either ignite or exacerbate these events (Huy, 2022; Narine, 2008). Particularly, territorial disputes involving claimant states and external major powers pose a significant external context that undermines ASEAN's centrality. The stability of Southeast Asian nations hinges on ASEAN centrality, especially in the face of South China Sea disputes. This centrality is most apparent in its role as a buffer against potential conflicts and in managing the competition among major powers (Caballero-Anthony, 2022).

For instance, Huy (2022) criticizes the diplomatic ambitions of major powers. For example, the U.S. aims to enhance its security relationship with the Philippines, while China has recently deepened its military ties with Cambodia. These pursuits could potentially undermine the painstaking efforts of ASEAN in establishing a secure structure in the South China Sea. If these relationships become the primary forums for dispute resolution, they may render ASEAN more fragile, irreparable, and unable to contribute to regional peace. Owen (2013)emphasizes that leaders and decision-makers of ASEAN member countries must deeply recognize that ASEAN's regional centrality is not a feat accomplished overnight, akin to the saying, "Rome wasn't built in a day."

The Dilemma from Domestic Level

The "irreconcilable" structural contradiction between rising powers and hegemonic powers adds uncertainty to ASEAN's development.

The current international political landscape is undergoing significant changes, with realists believing that the era of American unipolar hegemony is entering a "twilight" phase, while the rise of emerging nations is irreversibly reshaping new forms of international relations (Wen, 2022). This transformation cannot be simply analyzed as a historical extrapolation from unipolarity to bipolarity or multipolarity, necessitating the establishment of a new awareness of international political patterns and adaptation to global changes (Besch & Bond, 2019).

Mearsheimer (2021) argues that the reconstruction of the international political landscape prompts Western countries to engage in a balancing act between maintaining the existing order, largely under the dominance of American global hegemony, and revising their positions in response to irreconcilable and unavoidable structural contradictions.

The challenge for ASEAN lies in how to avoid taking sides in great power competition while striving for regional centrality (Caballero-Anthony, 2022; He & Li, 2020; Ng & Li, 2023). The fundamental basis for such diplomatic strategic decisions lies in the foreign policy preferences of member states. Notably, through an analysis of the domestic political dimensions of the ten ASEAN countries, scholars have found that the "hedging" strategy is a commonly adopted method of strategic hedging by medium and small-sized nations (Kuik, 2015, 2022; Ng & Li, 2023). Specifically, many Southeast Asian countries tend to seek security protection from the United States in the Asia-Pacific region, particularly through security frameworks based on military bases and alliance policies. Simultaneously, these countries increasingly rely on China's economic and trade opportunities resulting from its post-reform opening up, which radiates a supportive effect on neighbouring countries within the world economy.

However, achieving true "non-alignment" or "neutrality" is not entirely feasible for many ASEAN countries (Southgate, 2021). This is since, at the systemic level, China's expanding regional perspective and methods are often perceived as expansionist or revisionist. Yet, in reality, these actions serve to harness extra-mural major powers in East Asia within the process

of ASEAN centrality, in order to maintain relatively balanced and mutually beneficial policies to assuage the fears and soft power "clashes" caused by shifts in the systemic structure.

The Dilemma from Unit Level

In comparison, the question arises as to whether the pursuit of sustainable economic development to ensure domestic regime legitimacy outweighs or takes a back seat to the current geopolitical security landscape in Southeast Asia.

A fundamental factor that challenges the framework and internal cohesion of ASEAN centrality is the ambition and expansion of ASEAN's centrality itself. While the reform and transformation of ASEAN into a regional economic community are commendable, it has led to the broadening of the scope of "ASEAN Way," encompassing political, security, ecological, and other issues. Amitav Acharya (1997, 2017) argues that ASEAN's limited institutional capacity has led to increasing burdens, rendering the process of centralization more challenging and regional integration more difficult.

To some extent, is attributed to ASEAN's unique inherent loose connections – despite longstanding competition among member states, they are indeed held together. However, when some member states prioritize their interests in other bilateral and multilateral cooperation mechanisms over their ASEAN membership, the risk of serious divisions emerges.

Due to the pandemic, Southeast Asian countries have experienced varying degrees of economic recession (Amul et al., 2022). As illustrated in the figure, economic downturn triggers a chain reaction of domestic issues. For instance, increased instability in domestic regimes, questioning of governing legitimacy, decreased social cohesion, and reduced capacity of the state machinery to extract resources from society. According to some scholars' observations, these domestic political issues can ultimately lead to regional democratic backsliding (Kitchen, 2010; Putra & Abdul Razaq, 2020; Snyder, 1991; Sterling-Folker, 1997).

The Reconstruction for ASEAN Centrality

Internal cohesion among member states is an indispensable factor for reshaping ASEAN's continued vibrancy within the region. A robust ASEAN serves as the sole avenue for a collective of relatively smaller nations to aggregate into a global mediating force. The stability of member states' regimes and the legitimacy of their governance constitute the foundational prerequisites that ensure the further development of ASEAN's "centrality" remains viable.

ASEAN and the institutionalised institutions and platforms from which it derives are essential for ASEAN to be able to reconfigure its centrality (Buensuceso, 2022; Mueller, 2019; Yukawa, 2018). These institutionalised institutions and platforms are characterised by 'inside-out' decision-making mechanisms that are upheld by ASEAN member states. Caballero-Anthony (2022) emphasis that a key feature in the ASEAN-led institutions is the informality and low levels of institutionalisation of these arrangements. Absent formal structures like a Secretariat, the ARF, APT and the EAS are nonetheless established institutions defined by ASEAN-like set of informal processes geared towards addressing issues that threaten the peace, security and prosperity of Southeast Asia and the wider Asia–Pacific or Indo-Pacific Asian region. The success of ASEAN as an institution builder has earned it its 'centrality' in Asia's regional security architecture.

ASEAN's collective foreign policy decision to adopt an appropriate hedging strategy and at the same time reduce excessive security dependence on extraterritorial powers is the trend of the 'centrality' doctrine (Buensuceso, 2022; Caballero-Anthony, 2014; Ng & Li, 2023). There is a difference between what is recognised as ASEAN centrality and what is centrality in the ASEAN context. ASEAN has always constructed the concept and role of centrality in a

dynamic and flexible manner. When relations between the major powers are relatively mild, ASEAN gives priority to maintaining its dominant position in the direction of the regional economic, political and security architecture, in the advancement of the process and in the setting of issues.

While faced with a regional environment of intensifying competition between major powers, ASEAN is aware of the importance of acting as a 'broker', promoting the interface between different regional programmes and willing to provide a platform for dialogue between major powers in order to maintain the necessary political communication and even crisis management, reflecting its irreplaceable role, which is another manifestation of its centrality (Cheeppensook, 2020). This is another manifestation of its centrality. The ASEAN centrality emphasised by the US and other countries is in fact a "shell listing", intended to use ASEAN-led regional mechanisms such as the EAS, ARF, and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting to build a networked security architecture for itself and to maintain US dominance of the order (Carlesso et al., 2023; Khan et al., 2020; Mueller, 2021). This in effect makes ASEAN more of a platform provider for dialogue than a "driver" who decides the direction of the route. Therefore, this "endorsement" will not appease ASEAN, which must come up with its own vision of the regional architecture in order to maximise its centrality and unity.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This article seeks to elucidate the challenges facing ASEAN's current development by delving into the origins of ASEAN centrality and its internal cooperative mechanisms. Based on this foundation, it explores effective ways to reconstruct ASEAN centrality to achieve strategic autonomy and balance. The paper contends that employing the Neoclassical Realism (NCR) theoretical framework unveils the intrinsic nature of ASEAN centrality as a distinct strategic culture shaping and filtering through the international system.

Since its inception, ASEAN has made collective decisions at various historical junctures, which collectively culminate into the inevitable international outcomes that form ASEAN centrality. The core essence of ASEAN centrality lies in its open multiculturalism, moderate regionalism, pragmatic multilateralism, loose institutions, and mechanisms, as well as its commitment to neutrality and consistency. However, in the face of the ever-changing, uncertain, and impending multi-tiered global landscape, ASEAN centrality encounters challenges and disruptions.

The remedy to reconstructing ASEAN's central role lies in enhancing its internal cohesion. This cohesion serves as a potent remedy to bolster ASEAN's resilience and efficacy in the face of the complex and dynamic global environment that lies ahead. As Acharya (2017) says:

> *"Without strong internal unity, a single voice and a decision-making mechanism that is not held hostage by the ASEAN Way, ASEAN will be the centrality of goodwill at best." Perhaps, rather than overreaching itself and trying to claim control beyond its own region, it would be more meaningful to dial back several notches and focus on addressing internal injustices such as the Rohingya issue and enforced disappearance, wrestling democratic backsliding, expanding civic spaces, empowering the minority and marginalised communities, and genuinely transforming the organisation into a truly people-centred and rules-based Community."*

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