

RESEARCH ARTICLE

ASEAN's Leadership Capacity as the Heart of the Indo-Pacific

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Abstract

Amid intensifying great power competition, the Indo-Pacific concept has emerged as a crucial geopolitical framework that expands traditional constructs of the Asia-Pacific. As major powers such as the United States, Japan, India, and Australia develop Indo-Pacific strategies to counter China's growing influence, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) seeks to maintain regional stability and relevance through the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). Based on the principle of ASEAN Centrality, the AOIP reflects ASEAN's commitment to an inclusive and rules-based regional order and its ambition to be a key architect of Indo-Pacific cooperation. This paper examines ASEAN's leadership using the leadership-institution model, which distinguishes between ideational leadership—grounded in ideas, norms, and identity building—and executive leadership—rooted in material capabilities and institutional authority. The findings highlight ASEAN's strong ideational leadership through its ability to uphold shared principles and facilitate dialogue among diverse actors, despite lacking a binding enforcement authority. However, ASEAN's executive leadership remains hampered by weak collective military capacity,

economic disparities among member states, and consensus-based decision-making, which often results in non-binding outcomes. Overall, this study demonstrates that while ASEAN plays a crucial role in promoting inclusivity and sustaining dialogue, significant challenges remain in translating its centrality into decisive institutional leadership within the evolving Indo-Pacific architecture.

Keywords: *ASEAN Centrality, Executive Leadership, Ideational Leadership, The AOIP*

I. Introduction

In the context of great power rivalry, the concept of the Indo-Pacific as an expanded geopolitical space has emerged and gained prominence. The term "Indo-Pacific" refers to a region stretching from the Indian Ocean to the western Pacific Ocean, with Southeast Asia at its centre. It represents a broadening of the traditional Asia-Pacific concept, which is assumed to have limitations in scope and no longer meets the current geopolitical requirements (Pulipaka & Musaddi, 2021). Strategic anxiety over China's rise as a global power is the primary driver for Australia, India, Japan, and the United States to promote the term "Indo-Pacific" to enhance regional security. It offers a rational alibi for forming a military alliance against China, especially in maritime security. Implementing the Indo-Pacific strategy involves strengthening alliances and partnerships, increasing security cooperation, and promoting economic connectivity. This includes initiatives such as the Quad, a strategic dialogue between the United States, Japan, Australia, and India, aimed at promoting a free and open Indo-Pacific to compete with assertive China (He, 2018).



However, this intensifying great power competition threatens regional stability and places Southeast Asian states in a strategically sensitive position. The rise of China has generated both opportunities and concerns for ASEAN member states. On one hand, China is ASEAN's largest trading partner and an important source of investment, making it an indispensable economic partner for regional development (Anwar, 2020). On the other hand, China's growing strategic influence has contributed to regional security anxieties, particularly through the unresolved territorial disputes in the South China Sea involving several ASEAN members, including the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam (Yoshimatsu, 2023). Moreover, broader geopolitical tensions, such as the Sino-Indian rivalry and the increasing strategic competition between China and the United States, have raised concerns that the Indo-Pacific could become a theatre of major power confrontation (Ha, 2018). In response, ASEAN, as the principal regional institution and collective voice of Southeast Asia, sought to prevent the region from being drawn into competing strategic blocs by introducing the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) (ASEAN, 2019). Rather than viewing China solely as either a threat or a partner, ASEAN adopts a hedging and inclusive approach that seeks to engage all major powers while preserving regional autonomy, stability, and ASEAN Centrality (Wicaksana & Karim, 2023).

The AOIP reflects ASEAN's intention to avoid being drawn into competing strategic blocs while preserving its autonomy amid intensifying rivalry among major powers. More importantly, it demonstrates ASEAN's ambition to shape an inclusive and rules-based

regional architecture anchored in ASEAN-led mechanisms and guided by the principle of ASEAN Centrality. Through the AOIP, ASEAN aims to ensure that the Indo-Pacific remains a region of dialogue, cooperation, and peaceful coexistence, rather than one of confrontation. However, achieving this objective presents significant challenges, including divergent interests among ASEAN member states, growing competition between the United States and China, and the emergence of alternative regional arrangements such as the Quad and AUKUS. These developments raise important questions regarding ASEAN's capacity to maintain its central role and exercise effective leadership in the evolving Indo-Pacific order (ASEAN, 2019; Anwar, 2020; Ha, 2021; Yoshimatsu, 2023; Wicaksana & Karim, 2023).

Although ASEAN's ability to manage intensifying great power rivalry has often been questioned (Ciaorciari, 2017; Sundararaman, 2021), the organization has actively sought to prevent regional polarization through the adoption of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). Rather than acting as a military balancer against any major power, ASEAN positions itself as a regional convener, mediator, and facilitator of dialogue among competing actors. Through ASEAN-led mechanisms such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus), ASEAN seeks to maintain an inclusive platform where major powers can engage peacefully and manage strategic differences.

The AOIP further reflects ASEAN's ambition to shape an inclusive regional



architecture rather than allow the Indo-Pacific order to be defined solely by external powers. As stated in the Outlook, ASEAN seeks to play a leading role in promoting peace, security, stability, and prosperity by strengthening cooperation across the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions (ASEAN, 2020). In this sense, ASEAN's role extends beyond preserving regional autonomy; it also seeks to ensure that regional governance remains anchored in ASEAN-led institutions and principles.

According to Ha (2019), the AOIP represents "old wine in a new bottle," reflecting ASEAN's long-standing preference for neutrality and non-alignment, similar to its approach during the Cold War. Through the AOIP, ASEAN attempts to preserve its central position amid growing competition between major powers while avoiding alignment with any particular bloc. However, ASEAN's ability to perform this role is complicated by differing perspectives among its member states regarding the Indo-Pacific. For example, Indonesia generally promotes a constructivist and ASEAN-led approach, whereas Vietnam tends to emphasize a more realist balance-of-power strategy (Ha, 2021). These differences illustrate that ASEAN's role as a regional leader depends not only on managing external rivalries but also on maintaining internal cohesion among its members. Therefore, reinforcing ASEAN's leadership under the principle of ASEAN Centrality and strengthening ASEAN-led cooperative mechanisms remain essential for positioning ASEAN at the heart of the Indo-Pacific's evolving regional architecture.

Against this background, ASEAN seeks to maintain its central role in the evolving Indo-

Pacific architecture by promoting an inclusive, rules-based, and ASEAN-led regional order. Through the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), ASEAN aims to prevent the region from being divided into competing strategic blocs, while preserving regional stability, strategic autonomy, and cooperation among all major powers. Rather than supporting any particular power coalition, ASEAN positions itself as a neutral convener that facilitates dialogue and promotes peaceful engagement through ASEAN-led mechanisms.

Therefore, this paper examines ASEAN's capacity to realize the principle of ASEAN Centrality amid intensifying major power rivalry in the Indo-Pacific. It analyses how ASEAN seeks to position itself as an active architect of regional order rather than merely a passive arena for strategic competition. Specifically, the study explores ASEAN's perspective on the Indo-Pacific, its efforts to strengthen ASEAN-led regional mechanisms, and the role of the AOIP in advancing ASEAN Centrality. Furthermore, it assesses ASEAN's leadership capacity through the dimensions of ideational leadership and executive leadership, both internally in maintaining cohesion among member states and externally in engaging major powers and shaping regional cooperation. By applying He and Feng's leadership-institution model, this study evaluates whether ASEAN possesses the ideational and executive leadership necessary to sustain its central position in the evolving Indo-Pacific order.



II. Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach based on document analysis. Primary sources include the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), ASEAN declarations, and official ASEAN documents, while secondary sources consist of scholarly literature on ASEAN Centrality, Indo-Pacific regionalism, and institutional leadership. The study applies He and Feng's (2020) leadership-institution model as an analytical framework to assess ASEAN's capacity to exercise leadership in the Indo-Pacific. To operationalize the framework, indicators of ideational leadership and executive leadership are derived from the original theoretical concepts and used to evaluate ASEAN's role within the evolving regional architecture.

III. Theoretical Framework

Understanding ASEAN's strategy to transform the principle of ASEAN Centrality into practical leadership in the Indo-Pacific can be meaningfully examined through Kai He and Huiyun Feng's leadership-institution model (2020). The model emphasizes the importance of leadership in shaping regional institutions by managing both material and ideational dimensions of cooperation. Institution-leadership refers to the ability of actors to facilitate the formation, development, and consolidation of regional institutions through executive and ideational forms of leadership. This framework is particularly relevant for analysing ASEAN's ambition to move beyond its geographical position at the centre of the Indo-Pacific and become an active architect of regional order.

Importantly, He and Feng (2020) characterize ASEAN-led institutions as an example of "thin institutionalization," referring to institutions that possess limited formal authority, weak enforcement mechanisms, and strong reliance on consensus-based cooperation. This assessment is reflected in ASEAN's preference for informality, non-interference, and voluntary compliance. While this study generally agrees with He and Feng's characterization, it argues that ASEAN's institutional limitations do not necessarily diminish its regional influence. Instead, ASEAN's continued relevance stems from its ability to exercise ideational leadership through norm-setting, agenda-setting, and the promotion of ASEAN Centrality. Therefore, this study examines whether ASEAN's strong ideational leadership can compensate for the limitations associated with its relatively weak executive leadership.

The leadership-institution model identifies two forms of leadership: executive leadership and ideational leadership. Executive leadership refers to the use of material resources, political authority, and institutional capabilities to mobilize cooperation and overcome collective action problems. Ideational leadership, by contrast, relies on ideas, norms, and persuasive visions that shape how actors perceive their interests and the benefits of cooperation. Whereas executive leadership is largely associated with material capabilities and institutional authority, ideational leadership emerges through the promotion of shared identities, common interests, and regional norms. The interaction between these two forms of leadership provides the analytical basis for



assessing ASEAN’s capacity to maintain its central role in the Indo-Pacific.

Tab 1. Leadership Assessment Indicators

Type of Leadership	Strong Leadership Indicators	Weak Leadership Indicators
Ideational Leadership	Formulates a compelling regional vision	Lacks of coherent regional vision
	Shapes regional norms, ideas, and perceptions	Limited influence on regional norms and ideas
	Promotes shared identity and common interests among members	Fails to generate shared identity or common interests
	Gains acceptance and legitimacy for its proposed framework	Proposed ideas received limited support or recognition
Executive Leadership	Initiates and coordinates regional cooperation	Limited ability to coordinate collective action
	Mobilizes member states to support institutional initiatives	Difficulty securing member-state commitment
	Maintains institutional cohesion and consensus	Internal divisions undermine institutional effectiveness

	Influences regional agenda-setting and external actors	Limited influence over regional developments and external powers
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Source: Authors

Given ASEAN's limited material capabilities and consensus-based decision-making process, the assessment of executive leadership in this study focuses primarily on ASEAN's capacity to coordinate collective action, mobilize member-state support, and sustain regional initiatives rather than on traditional measures of military or economic power. This approach is consistent with ASEAN's character as a regional organization and with He and Feng's characterization of ASEAN as an institution exhibiting relatively thin institutionalization. At the same time, particular attention is given to ASEAN's exercise of ideational leadership through norm-setting, agenda-setting, and the promotion of ASEAN Centrality within the Indo-Pacific regional architecture.

IV. Findings and Discussions

a. ASEAN’s View of the Indo-Pacific

Indonesia has been one of the most active and influential members in ASEAN since the establishment of ASEAN itself. The spirit of ASEAN mainly lies in its non-alignment principle. This non-alignment spirit also inspired Indonesia to propose what is now called the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific. After months of consideration and hesitation, ASEAN’s leaders finally adopted the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific in June 2019 (Anwar, 2020). There are two motivations that



urged Indonesia to make intensive lobbying about it (Feldman, 2024). The first reason was in response to “the competing strategic camps” by the great powers' rivalry in the region (Laksmna, 2019). Then it was added by the need to support ASEAN Centrality as it is stated in the ASEAN Charter Article 1 No. 15.

The adoption of the AOIP also illustrates ASEAN's capacity to exercise ideational leadership within the Indo-Pacific. One of the key indicators of ideational leadership is the ability to formulate and promote a compelling vision that is accepted by other actors despite differences in their interests and strategic preferences. In the case of the AOIP, ASEAN member states initially approached the Indo-Pacific concept from different perspectives. Indonesia, as the principal proponent of the AOIP, advocated an inclusive and ASEAN-led framework that emphasized dialogue, cooperation, and regional autonomy. Meanwhile, countries such as Vietnam tended to view the Indo-Pacific through a more strategic lens, particularly in relation to concerns over China's growing influence and the South China Sea disputes. Thailand, on the other hand, has traditionally pursued a flexible foreign policy orientation often described as “bending with the wind,” whereby policymakers seek to adapt to changing geopolitical circumstances and maintain constructive relations with all major powers rather than aligning with a particular bloc (Sudō & Yamahata, 2023). Similar variations can also be observed among other ASEAN members, reflecting their differing security concerns, economic interests, and external partnerships.

Despite these differences, ASEAN successfully developed a collective Indo-Pacific

outlook that was ultimately endorsed by all member states in 2019. This achievement demonstrates ASEAN's ability to construct a shared narrative centred on inclusivity, openness, dialogue, and ASEAN Centrality. Rather than adopting the Indo-Pacific concept as a containment strategy against China or aligning itself with any major-power coalition, ASEAN reinterpreted the concept through its own normative framework. The AOIP therefore represents more than a policy document; it serves as a manifestation of ASEAN's ideational leadership by providing a common vision capable of accommodating diverse national preferences while preserving regional cohesion. In this regard, ASEAN's success lies not in eliminating policy differences among its members, but in generating sufficient normative consensus to sustain collective action and maintain ASEAN's relevance within the evolving regional order.

The significance of this ideational leadership is closely linked to ASEAN's long-standing commitment to non-alignment. Since its early years, ASEAN has sought to preserve regional autonomy through principles such as the ASEAN Way, non-interference, and the Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality (ZOPFAN). These principles emerged from the recognition that Southeast Asian states, as relatively small and middle powers, would benefit more from maintaining strategic flexibility than from becoming aligned with competing great powers. The AOIP can therefore be understood as a contemporary extension of these principles. Its emphasis on inclusivity and cooperation reflects ASEAN's belief that regional stability is best achieved through engagement and dialogue rather than confrontation and bloc politics. By promoting



this vision, ASEAN demonstrates its ability to shape regional norms and influence how the Indo-Pacific is understood and governed, thereby reinforcing its claim to ASEAN Centrality in the region.

As stated in the AOIP document, ASEAN views the Indo-Pacific region as encompassing the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions. Therefore, there are four priority areas under the AOIP, namely maritime cooperation, connectivity, SDGs, and economic development, as well as other possible areas of cooperation (ASEAN, 2019). The foundation of maritime cooperation is grounded in universally recognised international law principles, such as the UNCLOS 1982. Besides, this maritime cooperation covers collaboration for peaceful dispute settlement, promoting maritime safety as well as freedom of navigation and overflight, and tackling any transnational crimes primarily at sea. Connectivity as the second priority area complements and supports the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) 2025 through increasing integration and interconnection among countries in the Indo-Pacific. The third pivotal area within the AOIP involves aligning with the SDGs 2030. Through the utilization of the digital economy and promoting cooperation with the ASEAN Center for Sustainable Development Studies and Dialogue, and other regional institutions proves that the region (Indo-Pacific under the AOIP) will give a significant contribution to the global community. Beyond areas of maritime cooperation, connectivity, and the SDGs, the AOIP also encompasses a broad spectrum of economic and other potential areas of cooperation. This includes fostering the South-

South Cooperation. These efforts are directed towards the digital economy in Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) to participate both regionally and globally.

The AOIP is not actually something new for ASEAN. It is because, since its establishment, ASEAN members have committed to their ASEAN Way, which includes some of them being non-aligned, regional autonomy, and the ZOPFAN (Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality) Area. These key principles make it clear to ASEAN that they will not choose sides, whatever happens in the region. Thus, the AOIP is their official way to reassure ASEAN's Centrality. ASEAN will play a central role as a regional organisation at the epicentre of 21st-century geopolitical volatility.

b. ASEAN Centrality in the Indo-Pacific: Ideational Leadership and Executive Leadership

The release of the AOIP is a clear manifestation of ideational leadership. ASEAN's consensus on the AOIP highlights its significance, which marks a cautious yet positive step toward a shared Indo-Pacific vision (Singh & Henrick, 2020). Rather than pursuing hegemony or building exclusive blocs, ASEAN frames its leadership around an inclusive, open, rule-based order, and promotes its led mechanisms, aiming to engage all actors in the region. The narrative of centrality promoted through the AOIP serves precisely to establish the foundation of shared interest in the Indo-Pacific.

This consensus did not emerge overnight. In 2013, Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa proposed "An Indonesian Perspective on the Indo-Pacific" (Natalegawa, 2013), which promoted the idea



of the “Indo-Pacific Treaty” promoted in the 2014 ASEAN Meeting (ASEAN, 2014). Later, in a Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) May 2018, Indonesia’s Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi proposed a more flexible “Indo-Pacific Cooperation Concept” that emphasized openness, inclusivity, dialogue, and international law, avoiding treaty-based complications (Tham, 2018). The document, then formally received by ASEAN and renamed “Outlook” to reflect its forward-looking, collective vision, eventually gained consensus among ASEAN members (Weatherbee, 2019). These initiatives reflect how ASEAN’s ideational leadership is shaped through a bottom-up process, where policy ideas introduced by member states are deliberated, socialized, and gradually aligned with collective norms to form a unified regional vision.

Internally, the AOIP strengthens collective identity among ASEAN member states by framing ASEAN as a cohesive actor at the centre of regional cooperation. The vision reflects a shared outlook of the ten Southeast Asia countries that range from small to middle powers, showing their eventual acceptance of the Indo-Pacific concept. The AOIP once again shows the ASEAN Ways to reinforce ASEAN’s identity and promote internal unity through mutual engagement and collective outreach beyond the region (Gill, 2023). This reinforces solidarity in the Southeast Asia region amid the geopolitical dynamics within the Indo-Pacific framework.

Externally, the AOIP positions ASEAN as the legitimate convener and agenda-setter in the Indo-Pacific. Through the AOIP, ASEAN seeks to prevent the regional order from being dominated by major-power competition,

particularly the strategic rivalry between the United States and China, which has increasingly shaped political, economic, and security dynamics across the Indo-Pacific (Yoshimatsu, 2023). Rather than supporting one power against another, ASEAN promotes an inclusive regional framework that accommodates the interests of all actors while preserving ASEAN Centrality. In this regard, ASEAN’s ideational leadership shapes regional discourse by advancing a vision of the Indo-Pacific based on dialogue, cooperation, openness, and respect for international law, reflecting ASEAN’s long-standing principles of non-alignment and strategic engagement.

ASEAN’s ideational leadership is therefore reflected in its capacity to set norms, build confidence among regional actors, and promote a shared understanding of regional order. By asserting ASEAN Centrality, ASEAN seeks to ensure that regional cooperation remains anchored in ASEAN-led mechanisms rather than being determined solely by the preferences of external powers (Acharya, 2019). The AOIP thus represents an important expression of ASEAN’s ideational leadership, demonstrating its ability to shape regional norms and influence how the Indo-Pacific is understood and governed. Although ASEAN lacks the material capabilities associated with major powers, its influence stems from its ability to provide a broadly acceptable vision of regional cooperation that can be embraced by states with diverse strategic interests.

In the AOIP, ASEAN Centrality is emphasized as the foundation for the association and its members to enhance connectivity across the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions (ASEAN, 2020). ASEAN recognizes that the region faces significant



dynamics stemming from the great power rivalry and will continue to experience geopolitical and geostrategic shifts. In response, the release of the Outlook on Indo-Pacific in 2019 serves as a clear assertion of ASEAN's own regional leadership and its intent to shape the regional agenda. In view of the Indo-Pacific dialogue, ASEAN grounds the Centrality with the ASEAN-led mechanism as its principle for promoting cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region. In doing so, ASEAN positions itself as the anchor of stability and cooperation in the broader Indo-Pacific region. The ideational leadership stems from ASEAN's role in promoting inclusive frameworks where others fall short, and successfully engages all major Indo-Pacific powers in its led mechanisms (Tuan & Hai, 2021).

The AOIP defines ASEAN Centrality through three core ideas. First, ASEAN positions itself as an active regional leader. By uniting its members, ASEAN aims to "lead the shaping of economic and security architecture" and "maintain its central role in the evolving regional architecture". Rather than staying passive, ASEAN asserts collective leadership to navigate great power rivalry and prevent the region from becoming a proxy battlefield. Next, ASEAN Centrality reflects a commitment to non-alignment and peace. The AOIP continues ASEAN's long-standing approach of engaging all great powers equally, instead of siding with any major powers. This stance aligns with ASEAN's agreements, such as the Declaration for a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (1971), the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (1976), and the Treaty of Nuclear Weapon Free Zone (1995). The non-alignment, thus, makes ASEAN act as a mediator and keeps the focus on cooperation

as opposed to rivalry (Ha, 2019; Piromya, 2023). Last, ASEAN strengthens its centrality through ASEAN-led mechanisms, including ASEAN-Plus, the East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Regional Forum, and the ADMM-Plus. In ASEAN words, these platforms foster trust, inclusiveness, and a rules-based order with ASEAN at the centre (ASEAN, 2022). These mechanisms serve as instruments of ideational leadership. They operationalize ASEAN's core norms, embedding the ASEAN Way and Visions in engaging and socializing external powers under a rule-based Indo-Pacific (Milner, 2025). In essence, the AOIP frames ASEAN Centrality as regional leadership, principled non-alignment, and institution-driven cooperation.

Moreover, ASEAN-led mechanisms likewise function as a form of ASEAN's executive leadership. These ASEAN-led mechanisms possess organizational authority, allowing ASEAN to convene meetings, set agendas, and facilitate dialogue among its member states as well as external partners in the Indo-Pacific. Through platforms such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Defence Ministers Meetings (ADMM)-Plus, and various ASEAN-Plus frameworks (ASEAN, 2020). ASEAN brings together great powers, including the United States, China, India, Japan, South Korea, and Australia, under its institutional umbrella. This is arguably the most remarkable contribution, fostering an inclusive architecture that balances great powers within ASEAN regional mechanisms (Goh, 2018). This convening power highlights ASEAN's ability to act as a central node in regional governance, demonstrating its executive leadership in the Indo-Pacific.



ASEAN-led mechanisms serve as a vital institutional framework for ensuring continuity and stability in the Indo-Pacific (Anwar, 2022; Koga, 2022). Despite lacking a formal overarching leadership or supranational authority, ASEAN facilitates inclusive dialogue among regional actors, allowing them to engage with one another through consensus-based processes. This institutional design enables ASEAN to maintain a central role in the Indo-Pacific's regional architecture (Gill D. M., 2024). In this way, ASEAN's mechanisms act as stabilizing anchors in a fluid strategic environment, reinforcing its relevance and credibility as a regional convenor, and aspires to be a respected moderator (Yang, 2022).

Unlike more exclusive groupings such as the Quad Security Dialogue (Quad) and AUKUS, which are often perceived as a counterbalance to China (Bisley, 2024; Sarkar, 2020; Wei, 2024), ASEAN operates on the principles of inclusivity and non-interference. This approach helps to manage geopolitical tensions and prevents the escalation of great power rivalries, particularly between the US and China. ASEAN's approach to great power management offers valuable cooperative frameworks that reduce the burden of regional security governance on great powers (Wicaksana & Karim, 2023). Moreover, "ASEAN Way" limits the ability of external actors to deeply intervene in intraregional and domestic affairs, allowing ASEAN to shape the behaviour of powerful military actors and mitigate efforts to impose a hard power-centric regional order (Quayle, 2020). Thus, ASEAN's inclusive and norm-based mechanisms help the region avoid sharp alignments and support the development of a cooperative Indo-Pacific order.

c. *Assessing ASEAN's Leadership Capacity*

With ASEAN aiming to be the heart of the Indo-Pacific dialogue, this part systematically examines its leadership capacity to determine whether this ambition might translate into reality. Dissecting the Institutional-leadership model of ideational and executive leadership proposed by He and Feng (2020), this study contributes by operationalizing the model into applicable guiding criteria in evaluating ASEAN's leadership strength.



Tab 2. Ideational Leadership Indicators Matrix

Indicators	Operationalization	Characteristics
Influential ideas	Prominence ASEAN Centrality and ASEAN Way	The AOIP reinforces ASEAN Centrality and the ASEAN Way (non-interference, consensus)
Identities and common interests	Presence of shared principles	Region of inclusivity and stability. Shared interests include peace, development, and sovereignty respect.
Legitimacy and normative authority	Recognition and endorsement of ASEAN's central role	ASEAN Centrality is recognized as the key convener, reinforcing its ideational legitimacy

Source: Authors



For ideational leadership, it is grounded in the promotion of influential ideas, shared regional identities, and its normative legitimacy within the Indo-Pacific architecture (Table 2). A core tenet of this ideational influence lies in the prominence of ASEAN Centrality and the ASEAN Way. Internally, ASEAN member states consistently invoke these principles—non-interference, consensus-based decision-making, and informality—as foundational norms shaping regional architecture (Kausikan, 2020; Padmakumara, 2021). This was notably reaffirmed in the AOIP, which collectively articulated ASEAN’s strategic vision in response to growing geopolitical contestation. Despite internal diversity, ASEAN members demonstrate general alignment with these values, though consensus can sometimes mask deeper divergences. The ASEAN Way continues to hold prominence during periods of heightened tensions, making ASEAN’s role as a regional consensus builder and agenda setter even more crucial (Caballero-Anthony, 2022).

ASEAN continues to cultivate a non-aligned and inclusive regional identity, positioning itself as a middle ground in the face of intensifying strategic competition between the United States and China. This assertive stance allows ASEAN to avoid overt alignment with any major power while promoting a cooperative regional order based on dialogue, inclusivity, and mutual respect (Anwar, 2022; Ha, 2022). The significance of this approach lies in ASEAN’s ability to preserve regional autonomy and prevent the Indo-Pacific from becoming divided into competing geopolitical blocs. By maintaining an inclusive framework, ASEAN provides regional and external actors

with a platform for engagement that reduces the risk of strategic polarization and reinforces the principle of ASEAN Centrality.

Platforms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the East Asia Summit (EAS) exemplify this approach, as they remain among the few regional mechanisms specifically designed to facilitate open dialogue and confidence-building among diverse stakeholders (Qiao-Franco, Karmazin, & Kolmaš, 2024). Through these forums, ASEAN acts as a neutral convener capable of bringing together states with competing interests and strategic preferences. This role contributes to regional stability by creating opportunities for communication, trust-building, and cooperative problem-solving in an increasingly contested geopolitical environment.

However, sustaining this position presents significant challenges. ASEAN’s non-aligned posture is frequently tested by the intensifying rivalry between the United States and China, particularly when member states possess differing strategic and economic interests. While some ASEAN members prioritize economic engagement with China, others are more concerned with security issues such as the South China Sea disputes. These differences can complicate ASEAN’s efforts to maintain a unified regional position and may weaken its ability to project a coherent strategic vision. Furthermore, the emergence of alternative regional arrangements such as the Quad and AUKUS has generated concerns regarding the future relevance of ASEAN-led mechanisms. Consequently, although ASEAN has demonstrated considerable ideational leadership through norm-setting, inclusiveness, and confidence-building, its



long-term effectiveness depends on its ability to maintain internal cohesion and preserve its central role amid an increasingly competitive Indo-Pacific order.

ASEAN's legitimacy and normative authority as a regional convener remain strong. Internally, the organization's rotating chairmanship, regular summits, and consensus-based governance reinforce shared ownership and legitimacy. Despite political tensions, ASEAN members have not fundamentally challenged ASEAN Centrality. Externally, ASEAN leads a wide range of forums—including the East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and ADMM-Plus—which include nearly all major Indo-Pacific powers (Allison-Reumann, 2017). Furthermore, at the rhetorical level, major powers continue to emphasize their commitment to the principle of ASEAN Centrality. The requirement for countries to accede to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) as a prerequisite for joining the East Asia Summit (EAS) (Jones, 2024), coupled with their consistent rhetorical support (Qiao-Franco, Karmazin, & Kolmaš, 2024), reflects widespread recognition of ASEAN's normative authority. These mechanisms collectively reinforce ASEAN's enduring role as a central meeting platform in the Indo-Pacific. While ASEAN's decisions often lack binding enforcement, its capacity to shape regional discourse and establish normative frameworks underscores its ideational leadership. By defining the principles and values that guide multilateral interactions, ASEAN not only sets the tone for regional dialogue but also legitimizes its position as a facilitator of inclusive cooperation. This ability to influence the regional agenda through norms and

consensus-building has enabled ASEAN to maintain strategic relevance amidst the dynamics of competition among major powers.

Henceforth, ASEAN's ideational leadership can be considered relatively strong, rooted in the principles of ASEAN Centrality and the ASEAN Way, which emphasize non-interference, consensus, and inclusiveness. Its neutral and inclusive identity enables ASEAN to manage great-power rivalry by bringing together diverse actors through ASEAN-led platforms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the East Asia Summit (EAS). A clear example of this ideational leadership is the adoption of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) in 2019. Despite differing strategic preferences among member states and growing pressure from competing Indo-Pacific strategies promoted by major powers, ASEAN successfully developed and secured support for a common regional vision centred on inclusivity, dialogue, and cooperation. Rather than endorsing a particular power bloc or containment strategy, the AOIP reframed the Indo-Pacific discourse through ASEAN's own normative principles and reinforced ASEAN Centrality as the foundation of regional cooperation. This demonstrates ASEAN's ability to shape regional norms and influence how the Indo-Pacific is understood and governed. Therefore, although ASEAN lacks binding enforcement mechanisms and substantial material power, it continues to exercise significant influence through norm-setting, agenda-setting, and consensus-building, thereby maintaining its legitimacy and strategic relevance in the Indo-Pacific.



Tab 3. Executive Leadership Indicators Matrix

Indicators	Operationalization	Characteristic
Mutual resources and capabilities	Military and economy	ASEAN lacks collective military capabilities and faces significant economic disparities among its members
Bargaining power and collective action	Presence and effectiveness of ASEAN-led mechanisms	limiting its ability to project hard power, non-binding outcomes
Proactive diplomatic engagement	Nature of membership and partnership (institutional, member commitment, and participation)	Non-binding commitment and limited institutional capacity

Source: Authors



ASEAN's executive leadership is constrained by limited resources and collective capabilities (Table 3). The organization lacks collective military power and faces significant economic disparities among its member states, which limit its ability to project hard power and effectively respond to regional security challenges. Its bargaining power and capacity for collective action are also limited. While ASEAN-led mechanisms such as the ARF, the EAS, and the ADMM-Plus provide valuable platforms for dialogue, they often produce non-binding outcomes due to consensus-based decision-making processes and divergent national interests. This reduces ASEAN's ability to mobilize strong collective action when needed. In terms of proactive diplomatic engagement, ASEAN demonstrates strength in conducting dialogue and forging partnerships with external powers. However, its efforts are undermined by non-binding commitments from members and limited institutional capacity, which makes it difficult to sustain initiatives or enforce agreements. Taken together, these factors highlight structural weaknesses in ASEAN's executive leadership, which relies heavily on diplomacy and soft power rather than collective military or economic strength.

V. Conclusion

ASEAN has actively sought to position itself at the centre of the evolving Indo-Pacific regional architecture through the principle of ASEAN Centrality, most notably through the adoption of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). Rather than responding to intensifying major-power competition through balancing or alignment strategies, ASEAN has attempted to secure its position by promoting

an inclusive regional vision grounded in dialogue, cooperation, and non-alignment. Through the AOIP and ASEAN-led mechanisms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the East Asia Summit (EAS), and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus), ASEAN has sought to shape regional norms, facilitate engagement among major powers, and ensure that regional cooperation remains anchored in ASEAN-led institutions.

The findings of this study suggest that ASEAN's greatest strength lies in its ideational leadership. By advancing the principles of inclusiveness, consensus, and ASEAN Centrality, ASEAN has successfully developed a shared regional narrative that allows it to maintain legitimacy and relevance despite intensifying geopolitical competition. The successful adoption of the AOIP demonstrates ASEAN's ability to influence regional discourse and provide a normative framework that accommodates diverse interests without aligning with any particular major power. However, ASEAN's executive leadership remains constrained by structural limitations, including the absence of collective military capabilities, uneven economic capacities among member states, and a consensus-based decision-making process that often limits decisive action and produces non-binding outcomes.

This study contributes to the literature by operationalizing He and Feng's leadership-institution model into a set of analytical indicators for assessing the leadership capacity of regional organizations. The findings indicate that strong ideational leadership can enable a regional organization to maintain influence and relevance even under conditions of



relatively thin institutionalization. More broadly, the ASEAN case demonstrates that regional leadership is not solely determined by material capabilities but can also emerge through norm-setting, agenda-setting, and the construction of shared regional identities. Nevertheless, sustaining such leadership in an increasingly contested Indo-Pacific will require ASEAN to strengthen its institutional capacity, deepen member-state commitment, and translate its normative influence into more effective collective action. Otherwise, ASEAN risks seeing its central role gradually eclipsed by alternative regional initiatives and unilateral arrangements. Despite these challenges, ASEAN's convening power and normative legitimacy remain valuable assets for promoting stability, inclusiveness, and cooperative regional governance in the Indo-Pacific.

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