

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### Emerging Ethical AI Governance in Southeast Asia through Global and Regional Frameworks

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#### Abstract

Artificial intelligence (AI) has generated increasing governance and ethical concerns worldwide, including issues related to transparency, accountability, fairness, privacy, and human rights. In response, international organizations and governments have developed frameworks intended to promote responsible and ethical AI development. Within Southeast Asia, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) introduced the ASEAN Guide on AI Governance and Ethics in 2024 as a regional framework to support ethical AI governance and policy coordination among member states. This study examines how global AI governance principles are translated into ASEAN's regional framework and adapted within national AI governance strategies in Singapore, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Thailand. Using qualitative documentary analysis and a comparative case study approach, the study analyzes international, regional, and national AI governance frameworks through the lenses of global governance and norm diffusion. The findings indicate that ASEAN has emerged as an important platform for promoting ethical AI principles and regional policy coordination through a soft-governance approach. However, substantial variation exists in governance readiness, institutional capacity, and implementation across member states. While Singapore demonstrates a relatively advanced AI governance framework, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Thailand remain at different stages of policy development and

implementation. The study further finds that global AI governance principles originating from frameworks such as UNESCO and the OECD are transmitted through ASEAN's regional framework and selectively adapted within national governance systems. Although ASEAN provides a common ethical foundation, its voluntary and non-binding nature limits its ability to ensure consistent implementation across the region. Strengthening regional coordination, institutional capacity, and implementation mechanisms will therefore be essential for advancing ethical AI governance in Southeast Asia.

**Keywords:** Ethical AI Governance, ASEAN, Artificial Intelligence, Global Governance, Norm Diffusion, Southeast Asia

#### I. Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) has rapidly evolved into a transformative technology with significant implications for governance, economic development, and society. As AI systems become increasingly embedded in public administration, healthcare, education, and decision-making processes, concerns regarding transparency, accountability, fairness, privacy, and human rights have intensified. Consequently, AI governance has emerged as a major policy challenge, encompassing the institutions, norms, and regulatory mechanisms that guide the responsible development and deployment of AI systems (Dafoe, 2018). Scholars increasingly argue that effective AI governance requires coordination across global, regional, and national levels rather than relying solely on technical regulation (Bostrom et al., 2018).

In response to these challenges, international organizations have developed frameworks intended to promote ethical and trustworthy AI. Instruments such as the



UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence and the OECD AI Principles have established widely recognized principles relating to transparency, accountability, fairness, human oversight, and responsible innovation (UNESCO, 2022; OECD, 2024). Although these frameworks are largely non-binding, they increasingly influence national and regional policy development through processes of policy learning, adaptation, and norm diffusion.

Southeast Asia presents a distinctive context for examining AI governance. The region is characterized by considerable diversity in political systems, regulatory capacity, technological readiness, and levels of digital development. While countries such as Singapore have developed relatively advanced AI governance frameworks, others remain at earlier stages of policy development (US-ASEAN Business Council, 2023). This diversity creates challenges for regional policy coordination while simultaneously generating opportunities for governance cooperation and policy learning.

Recognizing the growing importance of AI governance, ASEAN introduced the ASEAN Guide on AI Governance and Ethics in 2024 as a regional framework promoting principles such as transparency, fairness, accountability, privacy, human-centricity, and safety (ASEAN Secretariat, 2024). Consistent with ASEAN's preference for consensus-based and non-binding governance approaches, the Guide serves as a voluntary framework intended to support policy coordination rather than impose legally binding obligations on member states.

Despite these developments, limited research has examined how global AI

governance norms are translated into ASEAN's regional framework and subsequently reflected in national AI governance strategies. Existing studies tend to focus either on international governance initiatives or individual national policies, providing less attention to the interactions between global ethical standards, regional governance mechanisms, and domestic implementation processes (Htoo, 2025). Furthermore, significant challenges remain regarding governance readiness, institutional capacity, and implementation across ASEAN member states.

This study examines how ethical AI governance is emerging in Southeast Asia through interactions among global governance frameworks, the ASEAN Guide on AI Governance and Ethics, and national AI governance strategies in Singapore, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Thailand. Specifically, the study seeks to: (1) examine the influence of global AI governance principles on ASEAN's regional framework; (2) compare the incorporation of ethical AI principles across selected ASEAN member states; and (3) evaluate implementation challenges affecting ethical AI governance in the region. This study contributes to the AI governance literature by examining how global AI governance principles are translated into ASEAN's regional framework and adapted within national governance systems characterized by varying levels of institutional capacity and governance readiness. Unlike previous studies that focus primarily on either global AI governance frameworks or individual national strategies, this study adopts a multi-level governance perspective to examine the interaction between global norms, ASEAN regional governance, and national policy adaptation.



## II. Conceptual Framework: Global Governance, Norm Diffusion, and the ASEAN Way

### *a. Global AI Governance*

Global AI governance refers to the development of norms, standards, and regulatory approaches through international organizations, regional institutions, standard-setting bodies, and non-state actors. Key frameworks such as the UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence, the OECD AI Principles, the EU AI Act, and G7/G20 initiatives have established common principles relating to transparency, accountability, human oversight, and trustworthy AI. Although most of these instruments are non-binding, they exert significant influence on national and regional policy development through processes of policy learning and norm diffusion (Schmitt, 2021; UNESCO, 2022; OECD, 2024; G7, 2023). Table 1 summarizes major global AI governance instruments and their relevance to ASEAN AI governance.

The instruments surveyed above collectively illustrate the layered and predominantly soft-law architecture through which global AI governance is being constructed. While only the EU AI Act carries binding legal force, the non-binding nature of the remaining instruments has not diminished their normative influence; rather, declarations, recommendations, and principles issued through UNESCO, the OECD, the G20, and the G7 have proven effective in shaping the vocabulary, priorities, and institutional design of AI governance across regions, including Southeast Asia. ASEAN engagement with this framework is neither passive nor merely

imitative, as the ASEAN Guide on AI Governance and Ethics demonstrates a deliberate effort to align with internationally recognized standards while tailoring governance approaches to the region's developmental context and political diversity. Taken together, these global instruments provide ASEAN with both normative reference points and diplomatic entry points into broader international AI governance deliberations.



**Tab. 1.** Major Global AI Governance Instruments and their Relevance to ASEAN AI Governance

Instrument	Binding-ness	Scope	Relevance to ASEAN
UNESCO Recommendation on Ethics of AI (2021)	Non-binding	Global (194 states)	Sets universal ethics standards. ASEAN’s Guide explicitly draws on UNESCO values (human rights, oversight). Many Southeast Asian policies echo UNESCO’s principles.
OECD AI Principle (2019, updated 2024)	Non-binding (Adopted by OECD/G20)	OECD + Partners (47 countries, including ASEAN members)	First intergovernmental AI standard. Emphasizes trustworthy, innovation-friendly AI. ASEAN countries (e.g. Indonesia, Thailand) have publicly supported OECD principles and the ASEAN Guide’s risk-based approach.
EU Artificial Intelligence Act (2023)	Binding (EU Regulation)	EU (extra-territorial effect)	Imposes risk-based regulation on AI providers. ASEAN looks to it as a model for high-risk AI governance, but ASEAN states have not adopted its mandates.
G20 AI Principles (Osaka 2019, New Delhi 2023)	Non-binding (Leaders’ declaration)	G20 member states	Promotes inclusive, human-centered AI. These principles reinforce ASEAN’s inclusive development goals and legitimize ASEAN engagement in global AI discussion
G7 Hiroshima AI Process (2023)	Non-binding (Leaders’ declaration)	G7 + global outreach	Focus on safe, secure AI and closing digital divides. Explicitly includes developing countries in consultations. Signals high-level support for multi-stakeholder AI frameworks, encouraging ASEAN to engage with these processes.
ISO AI Standards	Voluntary standards	Global technical standards	Provides norms for interoperability, ASEAN markets benefit from aligning with ISO standards. Not treaties, but ASEAN governments monitor them to inform domestic regulation.

**Source:** Author's synthesis based on UNESCO (2022), OECD (2024), G20 (2023), G7 (2023), European Parliament (2024), and ASEAN Secretariat (2024).



*b. Ethical AI and Regional Cooperation in Southeast Asia: The 2024 ASEAN Guide on AI Governance and Ethics*

Released in February 2024, the ASEAN Guide on AI Governance and Ethics represents the most significant regional effort to date to establish a shared normative framework for responsible AI development and deployment in Southeast Asia (ASEAN Secretariat, 2024). The Guide articulates seven governing principles, namely transparency, fairness, safety, human-centricity, privacy, accountability, and robustness while drawing on ethical principles promoted by UNESCO and the OECD (ASEAN Secretariat, 2024). Structurally, the Guide adopts a risk-based, multi-stakeholder model that emphasizes human-in-the-loop oversight mechanisms while explicitly preserving national regulatory autonomy by declining to supersede existing domestic laws. Its voluntary and non-binding character reflects both the practical realities of ASEAN's consensus-based institutional culture and the significant disparities in regulatory capacity that exist across the ten member states. As such, the Guide functions primarily as a voluntary blueprint for policy alignment and cross-border interoperability rather than as an enforceable regional standard, a design choice that enhances its political achievability while simultaneously limiting its capacity to produce consistent governance outcomes across the region.

*Norm Diffusion and AI Governance*

Norm diffusion refers to the process through which international norms and governance practices spread across political systems and become incorporated into regional and national policy frameworks (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). In AI governance,

frameworks such as the UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence and the OECD AI Principles serve as sources of governance norms that influence policy development beyond their original institutional settings. This study applies a norm diffusion perspective to examine how global AI governance principles are transmitted through the ASEAN Guide on AI Governance and Ethics and subsequently adapted within national AI governance strategies in Southeast Asia.

*c. The ASEAN Way and Its Application to AI Governance*

The ASEAN Way refers to a regional governance approach characterized by consensus-based decision-making, non-interference in domestic affairs, and a preference for dialogue over legally binding commitments (Acharya, 2001; Kivimäki, 2011). In the context of AI governance, these principles are reflected in the ASEAN Guide on AI Governance and Ethics (2024), which adopts a soft-governance approach based on voluntary implementation, policy learning, and regional coordination. Rather than imposing binding obligations, the Guide provides common ethical principles—including transparency, fairness, accountability, privacy, human oversight, safety, and robustness—while allowing member states flexibility in implementation.

The ASEAN Way helps explain both the strengths and limitations of regional AI governance. While it facilitates cooperation among countries with diverse political systems and levels of development, the non-binding nature of ASEAN instruments results in uneven implementation across member states. Through processes of norm diffusion, global AI governance principles originating from



UNESCO and the OECD are transmitted through ASEAN's regional framework and subsequently adapted within national governance systems according to domestic institutional capacities and policy priorities (Acharya, 2004). Consequently, ethical AI governance in Southeast Asia is shaped not only by global norms but also by regional governance traditions that prioritize flexibility, sovereignty, and gradual policy convergence. Emerging initiatives such as the ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA) may further strengthen policy coordination and interoperability among national AI governance frameworks.

### III. Methods

Comparative case study combined with documentary analysis and adopts an interpretive policy analysis approach to examine how global AI governance principles are translated into regional and national governance frameworks in Southeast Asia. The analysis focuses on four ASEAN member states—Singapore, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Thailand. These cases were selected through purposive sampling to capture variation in AI governance maturity, institutional capacity, and policy development. The study analyzes international, regional, and national policy documents published between 2019 and 2026, including the UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence, the OECD AI Principles, the ASEAN Guide on AI Governance and Ethics, Singapore's National AI Strategy 2.0 and Model AI Governance Framework, Vietnam's National Strategy on AI, Indonesia's National AI Strategy, and Thailand's AI governance policy documents.

An analytical framework was developed from the ethical AI principles

articulated in the UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence, the OECD AI Principles, and the ASEAN Guide on AI Governance and Ethics. These principles were used to assess the extent to which ethical AI governance has been incorporated into national policy frameworks. For each country, policy documents were examined for provisions related to transparency, accountability, fairness, privacy, human oversight, safety & risk management, and robustness. The findings were then compared across cases to identify similarities, differences, and patterns of adaptation in relation to regional and international governance frameworks. The analysis was conducted in three stages: (1) reviewing global AI governance frameworks to identify core ethical principles; (2) examining the ASEAN Guide to assess how these principles were translated into a regional governance framework; and (3) comparing national AI policy documents to evaluate governance readiness, institutional capacity, and implementation readiness. Governance readiness was assessed based on the existence of national AI strategies, regulatory frameworks, and implementation mechanisms. Institutional capacity was evaluated through the presence of designated government agencies, oversight structures, and coordination mechanisms responsible for AI governance. Implementation readiness was assessed by examining evidence of operational measures, regulatory instruments, public-sector initiatives, and policy coordination arrangements supporting the practical application of AI governance principles. These indicators were applied qualitatively to facilitate cross-case comparison rather than to generate numerical rankings.



#### **IV. Results**

The comparative analysis reveals substantial variation in ethical AI governance across the four countries examined. Singapore demonstrates the highest level of governance readiness, supported by a comprehensive AI strategy, established oversight mechanisms, and implementation tools. Vietnam occupies an intermediate position, with national policies incorporating key ethical principles but exhibiting less institutionalized governance arrangements. Indonesia and Thailand have introduced AI strategies and governance guidelines; however, implementation mechanisms and regulatory coordination remain under development. Across the seven ethical AI dimensions, transparency, privacy, and fairness were the most consistently represented principles in national policy documents. In contrast, accountability, human oversight, and risk-management mechanisms were less systematically institutionalized, particularly in Indonesia and Thailand. In addition, the assessment of institutional capacity and implementation readiness reveals considerable variation across the four countries. These findings indicate that ethical AI principles are more frequently articulated at the policy level than operationalized through governance and oversight arrangements. Table 2 summarizes the comparative assessment of ethical AI governance across the four cases.

The findings reveal a common pattern of normative convergence alongside implementation divergence. While all four countries have incorporated core ethical principles promoted by UNESCO, the OECD, and the ASEAN Guide on AI Governance and Ethics, substantial differences remain in governance readiness, institutional capacity,

and implementation. This suggests that global AI governance norms have influenced national policy development across Southeast Asia, but their institutionalization continues to depend on domestic governance capacity and regulatory priorities.



**Tab. 2.** Comparative Assessment of Ethical AI Governance Across Selected ASEAN Member States

<b>Ethical AI Dimension</b>	<b>Singapore</b>	<b>Vietnam</b>	<b>Indonesia</b>	<b>Thailand</b>
Transparency	Strong	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
Accountability	Strong	Moderate	Emerging	Emerging
Fairness	Strong	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
Privacy	Strong	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
Human Oversight	Strong	Moderate	Emerging	Emerging
Safety & Risk Management	Strong	Moderate	Emerging	Emerging
Robustness	Strong	Moderate	Emerging	Emerging
<b>Governance Capacity Indicator</b>	<b>Singapore</b>	<b>Vietnam</b>	<b>Indonesia</b>	<b>Thailand</b>
Institutional Capacity	High	Medium	Medium	Medium
Implementation Readiness	High	Medium	Low-Medium	Low-Medium

**Source:** Author's compilation based on policy documents.



## V. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that ethical AI governance in Southeast Asia is developing through a complex, multi-layered process in which global normative frameworks, ASEAN regional initiatives, and national policy priorities interact in ways that are neither uniformly convergent nor entirely fragmented. Three overarching themes emerge from the analysis: the persistent implementation gap, the tension between digital sovereignty and global normative convergence, and the structural limitations of soft governance as the primary regional mechanism.

### *a. The Implementation Gap and Heterogeneous Readiness*

The findings reveal significant variation in AI governance readiness across the four cases examined. Singapore demonstrates the highest level of institutional capacity and implementation readiness, while Vietnam, Indonesia, and Thailand remain in transitional stages of governance development (Htoo, 2025; US-ASEAN Business Council, 2023). These disparities contribute to uneven implementation of ethical AI principles across Southeast Asia, suggesting that governance readiness remains a critical determinant of effective AI governance.

This heterogeneity is not merely a technical or administrative concern but reflects deeper structural inequalities in digital infrastructure, institutional capacity, and regulatory expertise across the region. The implementation gap may constrain ASEAN's efforts to achieve greater regional policy coherence and raises important questions about whether a voluntary regional framework

can function effectively in the absence of baseline institutional parity among member states. As Htoo (2025) observes, governance gaps in lower-capacity states create conditions in which high-risk AI applications, particularly in finance and public surveillance, may operate within underdeveloped regulatory environments, posing risks that extend beyond national borders given the transnational character of contemporary AI deployment.

### *b. Digital Sovereignty and the Limits of Global Normative Convergence*

The findings support a norm diffusion perspective in which global AI governance principles originating from UNESCO and the OECD are transmitted through ASEAN's regional framework and subsequently adapted within national governance systems. However, diffusion does not result in uniform convergence. Instead, member states selectively incorporate global principles while maintaining policy flexibility to address domestic priorities and digital sovereignty concerns. Examples such as Indonesia's localization of AI ethics through Pancasila and Vietnam's emphasis on data sovereignty illustrate how global norms are adapted rather than directly adopted. Consequently, ethical AI governance in Southeast Asia is characterized by selective convergence, whereby common principles are shared but implementation pathways remain nationally differentiated.

### *c. The Structural Limitations of Soft Governance*

The findings highlight the limitations of ASEAN's reliance on soft governance mechanisms. Although the ASEAN Guide on AI Governance and Ethics represents an important milestone in establishing a shared



regional framework, its non-binding nature limits enforcement and leaves accountability largely to national governments and corporate self-regulation (ASEAN Secretariat, 2024). Unlike the European Union's AI Act, which imposes legally enforceable obligations for high-risk AI systems (European Parliament, 2024), ASEAN's consensus-based approach prioritizes flexibility and national sovereignty over regulatory harmonization. Nevertheless, soft governance should not be dismissed, as non-binding frameworks such as those developed by UNESCO and the OECD have played an important role in shaping national policy agendas and promoting common governance principles (Dafoe, 2018; UNESCO, 2022; OECD, 2024). The central challenge for ASEAN is therefore to complement soft governance with stronger institutional mechanisms, capacity-building initiatives, and regulatory coordination to improve implementation across member states.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that ethical AI governance in Southeast Asia is shaped by the interaction of global norms, regional governance frameworks, and domestic institutional conditions. While ASEAN has emerged as an important platform for promoting ethical AI principles, implementation outcomes continue to depend largely on national governance capacity. The study therefore supports a norm diffusion perspective in which global AI governance principles are transmitted through ASEAN's regional framework and selectively adapted within diverse national contexts.

## **VI. Policy Recommendation**

Strengthening ethical AI governance in Southeast Asia requires stronger implementation mechanisms at both regional and national levels. While the ASEAN Guide on AI Governance and Ethics provides a common foundation, its effectiveness depends on institutional capacity and policy coordination across member states.

### *a. Strengthening Regional Coordination*

ASEAN should establish a dedicated AI Governance Working Group under the ASEAN Digital Ministers' Meeting (ADGMIN) to monitor progress, update regional guidance, and coordinate capacity-building initiatives. AI governance should also be integrated into the Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA) to promote interoperability, cross-border data governance, and regulatory cooperation. In addition, a regional knowledge-sharing platform could support the exchange of regulatory practices, technical expertise, and implementation tools among member states.

### *b. Combining Soft and Hard Governance*

While ASEAN's regional framework should remain voluntary, member states should adopt binding regulations for high-risk AI applications, particularly in sectors such as healthcare, finance, and public services. ASEAN can further promote regulatory coherence by developing common guidelines for high-risk AI systems and increasing participation in international standard-setting bodies such as ISO and the ITU.

### *c. Strengthening National Governance Capacity*



National governments should translate ethical AI principles into sector-specific regulations and implementation mechanisms. Indonesia and Thailand could accelerate the development of AI-specific legislation, while other member states may adapt elements of Singapore's risk-based governance model to strengthen public-sector AI oversight. Establishing multi-stakeholder AI advisory bodies would further support accountability, expert consultation, and public trust.

## VII. Conclusion

This study examined the emergence of ethical AI governance in Southeast Asia through the interaction of global governance frameworks, the ASEAN Guide on AI Governance and Ethics, and national AI strategies in Singapore, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Thailand. The findings reveal significant variation in governance readiness, institutional capacity, and implementation across the four cases, resulting in uneven adoption of ethical AI principles despite the existence of a shared regional framework.

The analysis demonstrates that ASEAN has become an important platform for regional coordination and policy learning. Consistent with the ASEAN Way, its soft-governance approach facilitates cooperation and normative convergence while preserving national sovereignty and regulatory flexibility. However, the voluntary nature of the ASEAN Guide limits the consistency of implementation and accountability across member states.

From a theoretical perspective, the study supports a norm diffusion process in which global AI governance principles

promoted by organizations such as UNESCO and the OECD are transmitted through ASEAN's regional framework and selectively adapted to domestic institutional and regulatory contexts. The study therefore contributes to the AI governance literature by illustrating how global norms are translated through regional institutions and implemented under varying national conditions.

The findings suggest that the effectiveness of ethical AI governance in Southeast Asia will depend on stronger regional coordination, sustained capacity-building efforts, and more robust implementation mechanisms. This study is limited by its reliance on documentary analysis and its focus on four ASEAN member states. Future research could incorporate stakeholder interviews and extend comparative analysis to additional countries to further examine the dynamics of AI governance across the region.

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