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Research Articles

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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

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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.

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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.

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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).

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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

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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.

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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.

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

Ethical AI Dimension	**Singapore**	**Vietnam**	**Indonesia**	**Thailand**
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
Governance Capacity Indicator	**Singapore**	**Vietnam**	**Indonesia**	**Thailand**
Institutional Capacity	High	Medium	Medium	Medium
Implementation Readiness	High	Medium	Low-Medium	Low-Medium

Source: Author's compilation based on policy documents.

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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

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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

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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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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Localizing Global Energy Norms: Agency and Modality in Nusa Penida's Bottom-Up Energy

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Abstract

This article examines how non-state actors orchestrate bottom-up localization of energy transition norms in Indonesia, using Nusa Penida as a case study. Drawing on Acharya's norm localization framework and employing qualitative analysis of secondary data, the study explores how norm entrepreneurs mobilize cultural, strategic, and financial modalities to create conditions for localization. The Nusa Penida Initiative (NPI), initiated by a network of local non-state actors, demonstrates an emerging success through cultural framing, systematic roadmap planning, and community-based financing. The findings underscore that the formulation of an effective strategy for localization depends critically on the role of non-state agency, funding modality, and local adaptive capacity. The article concludes that centering local actors and leveraging endogenous modalities are essential for inclusive and sustainable energy transitions in peripheral regions.

Keywords: Energy Transition, Global Norms, Norm Diffusion, Non-State Actors, Nusa Penida, Renewable Energy

I. Introduction

Current debates in international relations have identified norm diffusion not merely as an external pressure, but as a central mechanism through which global standards influence the behavior of state and non-state actors. This is particularly apparent when global norms are adapted to fit domestic contexts. The concept explains processes where norms are transmitted from global to domestic arenas through persuasion, imitation, pressure, or strategic adaptation, often led by international organizations, government at the developed countries, and/or transnational networks (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). Drawing on Acharya (2004), localization is framed not as a process of passive adaptation of external norms. It is a process where local actors put deliberate effort in orchestrating the adoption of global norms, to fit local beliefs, practices, and modalities (Acharya, 2004). Using this perspective, we examine how local non-state actors in Nusa Penida play the role of active agency and utilize endogenous modalities to reshape global energy transition norms within culturally and institutionally local context.

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Over the past two decades, energy transition has emerged as a global norm driven by climate concerns, energy security, and sustainable development objectives. The 2015 Paris Agreement strengthened international commitments to decarbonization and accelerated renewable energy adoption worldwide. These efforts have generated measurable outcomes, with energy-related CO_2 emissions in advanced economies declining by 1.1%, including reductions of 5.7% in coal-related emissions and 0.5% in oil-related emissions (IEA, 2025).

The diffusion of energy transition has taken diverse forms in the Global South. China leads in new eco-friendly technologies, India shows strong renewable goals, Southeast Asia is divided between fossil exporters and importers, South America leads in clean solutions, while Africa holds potential in renewables (Butler-Sloss & Singh, 2022). Although diverse in forms, energy transition in the Global South generally faces finance, technology, and trade challenges. This process is largely shaped by the interrelated issues of structural dependencies, financing conditions, and technology transfer from the Global North. In addition, problems of persistent inequalities in investment flows, governance capacity, and access to technology have constrained Southern countries in transitioning their energy (Goldthau et al., 2020). In the case of Nusa Penida, for example, challenges for energy transition are basically centered not only around technical and financial but also institutional and social, particularly in aligning global decarbonization objectives with local development priorities. Alocating it within the biggest context of effort put by the government of Indonesia in its energy transition mission, Nusa Penida is particularly unique because of its isolated grid, its reliance on diesel, its orientation towards tourism, and its renewable energy potential, make Nusa Penida as a distinctive case for norm localization.

Different cases discussed above, shows the necessity of formulating a strategy to localize the norm of energy transition. Not just any strategy which presumably will work in any case in any place, but a strategy that fits, respects, facilitates, and accommodates the local context where it will be applied. This is to include acknowledging the role of multi-actors, leveraging local modalities, while making the most of possible external opportunities. The context of Nusa Penida highlights the importance of having such strategy. Despite Indonesia's ambitious Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) commitments, the domestic diffusion of energy transition norms continues to face institutional, policy, and socio-political barriers that reinforce fossil fuel dependency and limit inclusive planning. These constraints have hindered previous initiatives, including early renewable energy projects in Nusa Penida (2007) and

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the Sumba Iconic Island program, both of which struggled with weak institutional integration and limited community ownership.

Furthermore, national funding mechanisms like the Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP) largely support grid-connected, large-scale projects, with minimal distribution to remote, off-grid communities. Collectively, these historical barriers highlight the impediments faced by centralized models in achieving effective and just energy transitions, creating a context where alternative approaches become necessary. At the same time, a notable bottom-up initiative has emerged in Nusa Penida, which distinctively utilizes local cultural and financial modalities to drive transition. Triggered by the launch of the Bali Net Zero Emissions (NZE) 2045 initiative, a coalition of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) supporting the provincial government, called the NPI Coalition (discussed below), has committed to transforming the island into a 100% renewable energy territory by 2030.

To date, despite the critical importance of decentralized governance in the Global South, few studies have systematically examined the distinct role of local non-state actors in championing bottom-up localization processes of global energy transition norms, particularly within complex emerging economies like Indonesia. This article investigates how transnational and national norm entrepreneurs orchestrate localization efforts in Nusa Penida by creating institutional, cultural, and financial conditions for future norm localization. Guided by this objective, this study revolves around one question: while state actors remain relevant in regulation and implementation, how does the agency of non-state actors; serving as primary local architect, shape the bottom-up localization strategy of global energy transition norms in peripheral regions through specific local initiatives and endogenous local modalities? By answering the question, this study contributes to the deepening of concepts on norms localization by Acharya (discussed in the Conceptual Framework section below), in a way that it provides elaborations on how the actors do what they do in localizing the norms. While the initial concept focuses on the three possible outcomes of the localization process, the addition which central on the actor's behaviors in order to achieve the outcomes will increase the applicability of the theory.

II. Conceptual Framework & Methodology

a. Conceptual Framework

This research discusses the process of developing the strategy for localization of global norm taking the case of energy transition norm in Nusa Penida, a

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peripheral island in the Province of Bali (illustrated in Figure 1). As the intellectual basis of our research, we refer to Amitav Acharya's concept of norm localization (2004). This concept provides logics to explain how local actors reacts to the global norms imposed from the external in a situation where local beliefs and practices, whose values are incompatible to the global norms, does exist. According to Acharya, in their attempt to make the norms accepted, local actors applying three key mechanisms to the global norms namely framing, grafting and pruning. This will lead to three possible outcomes, namely norm resistance, norm localization, or norm displacements. However, Acharya misses to explain what exactly is the local actors do in their attempt to frame, graft, and prune the norms, what are their modalities, who they partnered with, etc. This research will elaborate on these particular aspects of the localization process.

The decision to take Acharya's Norm Localization as the main conceptual reference in this research is not without justification. Despite the above limitations, compared to the other existing norms localization concepts, Acharya's is the closest to explain the situation in Nusa Penida. Other concepts are not applicable mainly because the assumed character and behavior of the actors do not match the actors of Nusa Penida. Norm Vernacularisation (Merry, 2006) argues that the global norms are localized by actors who 'have one foot in the transnational community and one at home' (p.42); Norm Propagation (Dubash, 2009) portrays the alignment between government, civil society, and private sectors together for the deliberation of the global norms; Norm Empowerment (Checkel, 1997) explains how norms localization is centralized on the interest of society and elite; Norm Reproduction (Florini, 1996) sees norm localization as about the change of state's behavior; Spiral Model (Keck & Sikkink, 1999) focuses on the role of the transnational advocacy networks (TANs) during the cycle of five different situations which put pressure on the government to fully adopt the global norms; lastly, Norm Interpretations (Sundrijo, 2021) argues that norms localization happen within the context of the dynamic actions and interactions of both national and regional 'authoritative decision-making'. Acharya himself have developed two other concepts related to norms localization, those are Norm Subsidiarity (2011) which highlight the role of local actors as norm makers, and Norm Circulation (2013) focuses more on how the less powerful actors become marginalized in the norm localization process as the more powerful actors have become abusive to the new adopted norm during the implementation stage.

The reference to Acharya's (2004) norm localization allows us to assess the involvement of local actors and local modalities, in addition to the partnerships

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developed by the local actors with various different other actors, including the transnational actors. The analysis followed Acharya's four stages: pre-localization, local initiative, adaptation, and amplification to trace the evolution of norms across policy and social layers with specific attention to how local actors centered themselves in each stage of the process. While Acharya's framework encompasses all local actors, this study specifically isolates non-state actors to analyze their distinct capacity to localize norms in the absence of strong central state directives. It includes local civil society organizations such as the Institute for Essential Services Reform (IESR), customary village institutions, community groups, tourism stakeholders, and local residents, as well as the transnational actors with whom the local actors develop partnership, those are World Resources Institute (WRI) Indonesia, New Energy Nexus Indonesia, philanthropic organizations such as Bloomberg Philanthropies, IKEA Foundation, Sequoia Climate Foundation, ClimateWorks Foundation, Tara Climate Foundation, and Viriya ENB.

All and all, Acharya's Norm Localization is referred to in this research as it acknowledges the central role of the local actors without getting to deep in explaining the details of their behavior. The weakness of this concept; the lack of the details which has become the opportunity of academic contribution of this research.

b. Methodology

To understand the construction of the strategy of the localization of global energy transition norms in Nusa Penida, this research employs a qualitative case study design. It involves the use of non-numerical data in order to explore and interpret social phenomena (Lamont, 2015). By linking conceptual frameworks with empirical findings, this approach allows researchers to evaluate the relevance and coherence of existing concepts in explaining specific cases (Neuman, 2014). The case was selected for its regulatory relevance under Bali Provincial Regulation No. 45/2019 and its geographic disconnection from Indonesia's main power grid conditions that make it an ideal laboratory for localized transition processes.

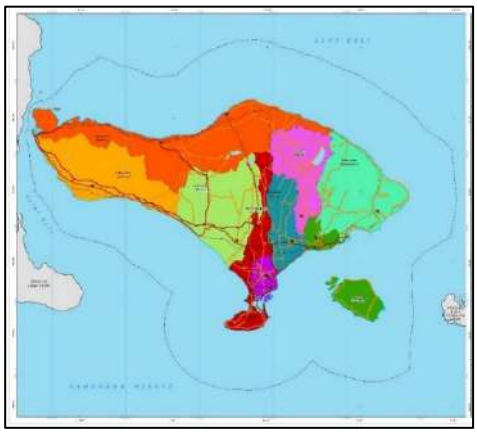


Fig. 1. Map of Nusa Penida in Bali Province
Source: Sistem Informasi Wilayah dan Tata Ruang Bali (Pemerintah Provinsi Bali, n.d.)

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The study relies entirely on secondary data covering the period of 2007-2025, starting from the launch of Nusa Penida's first renewable pilot to the ongoing implementation of the Nusa Penida 100% Renewable Energy Roadmap. Data sources include national and provincial policy documents, documents published by Perusahaan Listrik Negara (PT. PLN (Persero) or State Electricity Company) mainly PLN's RUPTL (Rencana Usaha Penyediaan Tenaga Listrik or Electricity Supply Business Plan) year 2025-2034, government regulations, NGO and donor reports, international agency publications, peer-reviewed journals, and local media. The selection was following two criteria: direct relevance to Nusa Penida or comparable subnational energy transition cases, and credibility of institutional or scholarly provenance. Relying on secondary data is not unintentional. While it does not permit ethnographic assessment on community-level norm acceptance or behavioral change, this type of data provides rich empirical evidence on the discourses, policy frameworks, planning instruments, and institutional strategies through which norm entrepreneurs seek to localize global energy transition norms. As the NPI remains at the planning and coalition-building stage, these sources are particularly valuable for tracing localization efforts, actor interactions, and modality formation prior to implementation. Documents were assessed and later categorized to trace the agency of local actors and the utilization of local modalities, specifically cultural, institutional, and financial resources, within bottom-up localization processes. While global norms provide the bigger picture, the analysis focuses on how bottom-up initiatives drive the localization process through adaptation and framing.

To establish a linkage between findings that have been categorized, this study employs process tracing method. This method fits our needs as it allows us to craft explanations based on events and mechanisms (Collier, 2011) which further lead to a particular outcome (George & Bennett, 2005) The outcome does not necessarily prove that certain theory, in this case, Acharya's Norm Localization, is correct, but it can be justified as the best possible explanation (Beach & Pedersen, 2019) of what happened based on the researcher specific observations. To ensure rigor and credibility, this study applied several validation strategies. First, we conducted data triangulation for cross-checking key facts across source types, such as corroborating NGO project claims with government reports and press coverage. Triangulation of data sources served to ensure the credibility of the reported bottom-up mechanism. We also involved multiple methods in data collection and analysis, as well as reduced individual bias through peer review. We sought disconfirming evidence (e.g. local

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resistance or project failure) to challenge our interpretations.

III. Discussions

a. Contextualizing the Bottom-Up Initiative

Indonesia's energy transition efforts have gained stronger coordination and consistency since the launch of the G20 Energy Transition Forum in February 2022 (Pribadi, 2022). Beyond representing a domestic policy agenda, Indonesia's energy transition reflects the diffusion of broader global norms emphasizing decarbonization, renewable energy deployment, and NZE pathways. These norms have increasingly shaped national and subnational development strategies as governments seek to align economic growth with climate commitments. At subnational level, Bali has positioned itself as a frontrunner in energy transition through the Bali Net Zero Emissions 2045 declaration that was announced in August 2023 under the Governor Regulation No. 45/2019. The initiative supports low-carbon development, clean energy autonomy, and electric vehicle uptake (Kasih, 2023).

Initial efforts to localize global energy transition norms emerged through the involvement of IESR and the Bali NZE Coalition, consisting of WRI Indonesia, and New Energy Nexus Indonesia (Simanjuntak, 2023). Acting as norm entrepreneurs, these organizations introduced and promoted renewable energy transition pathways that were compatible with Bali's development priorities. IESR contributed energy system planning and advocacy, WRI strengthened governance integration, and New Energy Nexus expanded clean technology entrepreneurship and financing access. Rather than framing energy transition solely as a climate mitigation agenda, these actors linked renewable energy development to Bali's aspirations for sustainable tourism, environmental preservation, and long-term economic resilience. This process marked an initial stage of localization in which global norms were translated into narratives and objectives that resonated with local priorities.

Within this broader context, Nusa Penida emerged as a strategic site for advancing localized energy transition efforts. One of the key efforts to achieve the Bali NZE 2045 target is to accelerate the 100% renewable energy transition in Nusa Penida by 2030. As one of Bali's leading tourism destinations, attracting up to 6,000 visitors daily during peak seasons (Wiguna & Lazuardi, 2024), Nusa Penida faces rising electricity demand while possessing abundant renewable resources, including solar, biomass, biofuel, and wind energy. It also has abundant renewable energy resources, including solar energy, biomass from municipal waste and gamal plants, biofuel from castor plants and seaweed, and wind energy. The expansion

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of tourism infrastructure, such as hotels, restaurants, and supporting facilities, has significantly increased electricity demand, while the aging diesel power plants continue to generate noise, vibration, and air pollution (IESR, 2025). These conditions created an opportunity to connect global decarbonization objectives with local concerns regarding energy security, environmental sustainability, and tourism development.

Recognizing this opportunity, IESR and its partners sought to translate Bali's broader net-zero ambitions into a more concrete and place-based initiative. According to study conducted by IESR and CORE Udayana, to achieve 100% renewable energy in Nusa Penida requires the development of a supportive ecosystem that positions local communities not only as energy consumers but also as participants in the transition process. This vision culminated in the establishment of the NPI, formalized through a Memorandum of Understanding signed at the 2024 Indonesia International Sustainability Forum in Jakarta. The initiative brought together key stakeholders in Indonesia's energy sector, including PLN, the Indonesian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Indonesian Renewable Energy Society, the Indonesian Solar Energy Association, the Indonesian Wind Energy Association, and PT Bali Kerthi Development Fund Ventura (Simanjuntak & Hasjanah, 2024).

The NPI was further supported by global and national institutions, such as Bloomberg Philanthropies, IKEA Foundation, Sequoia Climate Foundation, ClimateWorks Foundation, Tara Climate Foundation, and Viriya ENB. For the purpose of this research, hereafter, this coalition of actors engaged in Nusa Penida's energy transition will be referred to as the NPI Coalition and are treated primarily as norm entrepreneurs that provide funding, expertise, advocacy, and technical planning support. On the other hand, local actors in Nusa Penida are incorporated into the planning process as prospective agents of localization. Given that the NPI remains at an early planning stage, this study does not assume that renewable energy norms have already been fully internalized or translated into local practices. Rather, the analysis focuses on how transnational and national actors seek to create enabling conditions for future localization through stakeholder engagement, cultural framing, and institutional arrangements.

b. Orchestrating Localization: Cultural, Strategic, and Financial Modalities

To achieve this objective, the NPI Coalition employs bottom-up strategies which include three interrelated modalities. The first modality is cultural, seeking to enhance the local legitimacy of the energy transition by embedding it

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within Tri Hita Karana (THK) a Balinese philosophy emphasizing harmony among spirituality (parhyangan), society (pawongan), and nature (palemahan) (Disbud Buleleng, 2021). The principle of palemahan is used to frame renewable energy as consistent with environmental stewardship and sustainability. Pawongan informs stakeholder engagement and capacity-building activities, while parhyangan provides an ethical narrative linking environmental protection to the preservation of the island's cultural and spiritual heritage. In this sense, THK functions as a cultural modality through which global energy transition norms are translated into locally meaningful narratives.

By linking renewable energy development to THK values, the NPI Coalition attempts to graft global decarbonization norms onto existing local cultural understandings. As argued by Acharya (2004), external norms are more likely to gain local legitimacy when they are adapted to existing values and social contexts. Accordingly, the significance of THK in this case lies not in demonstrating the successful internalization of renewable energy norms, but in illustrating how norm entrepreneurs seek to make those norms culturally resonant and socially acceptable. This process is further reinforced through efforts to position Nusa Penida not only as a tourism destination but also as a prospective energy-independent island aligned with Bali's broader eco-tourism agenda (Yasa et al., 2025).

The second modality is the development of a 100% Renewable Energy Roadmap for Nusa Penida (shown in Figure 3) based on a study conducted by CORE Udayana, grafting onto local values and the island's potential as mentioned earlier.

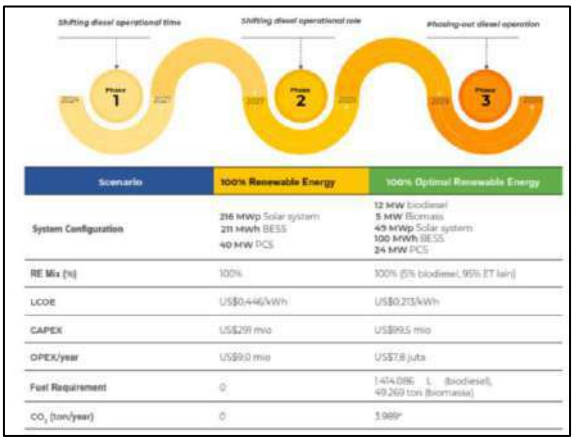


Fig. 2. Nusa Penida 100% Renewable Energy Roadmap
Source: IESR (Sisdwinugraha & Riyandi, 2024)

The Roadmap consists of a three-phase strategy: Phase I (2024-2027) targets the elimination of daytime diesel usage by prioritizing solar photovoltaic and Battery Energy Storage Systems (BESS); Phase II (2027-2029) introduces biomass power plants to reduce nighttime diesel reliance, relegating it to a backup role; and Phase III (2029-2030) focuses on integrating additional sources such as biodiesel and tidal energy. The strategy was designed based on the island's abundant renewable potential to meet its own demand and potentially export power to Bali. Nusa Penida's grid operates

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independently from the JAMALI system (the Jawa-Madura-Bali interconnected grid (Indonesia's largest electricity system), thus, the island offers a strategic testing ground for a fully renewable island model (Sisdwinugraha & Riyandi, 2024).

Rather than constituting evidence of completed norm localization, the Roadmap functions as a planning instrument through which global energy transition norms are translated into locally relevant objectives, priorities, and implementation pathways. Its significance therefore lies in institutionalizing decarbonization goals within a locally grounded development strategy rather than demonstrating that renewable energy norms have already been internalized by local communities. To ensure the implementation of the Roadmap, IESR maps key stakeholders and their expected contributions across various sectors (as shown in Figure 3).



Fig. 3. Multi-stakeholders in Nusa Penida 100% Renewable Energy Development
Source: IESR (Sisdwinugraha & Riyandi, 2024)

The collaborative design of the Roadmap with PLN, provincial and sub-district authorities, civil society organizations, and tourism actors aims to embed the 2030 transition agenda within local governance structures. This potentially will reduce the perception of an externally imposed agenda. Public campaigns that frame renewable energy within THK values and Bali's eco-tourism identity seek to translate abstract decarbonization goals into culturally resonant narratives and encourage future community engagement. Moreover, detailed technical planning based on fieldwork, including the phased substitution of diesel generators with renewable-based electricity, and rooftop installations on commercial and community facilities, aims to build public confidence in achieving the energy transition goals. Local communities, including traditional councils, village heads, and farmer groups, are envisioned as future participants in renewable energy governance and the potential management of technologies such as rooftop solar, biomass, and biodiesel systems. At the current stage, however, these actors should be understood as prospective participants in future localization processes rather than as actors who have already fully internalized renewable energy norms.

The third modality concerns financial arrangements that support the long-term feasibility of the transition.

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Financing remains a major challenge in peripheral regions such as Nusa Penida. Given the limited reach and disbursement constraints of national funding mechanisms such as JETP (Hakim, 2025), the NPI Coalition mobilizes philanthropic support for feasibility studies, planning, outreach, capacity building, and pilot projects, including rooftop solar installations currently under procurement. According to the Roadmap, achieving a 100% renewable electricity system by 2030 requires approximately USD 291 million in investment. Philanthropic organizations and NGOs therefore play a key role in financing, project development, and stakeholder coordination while encouraging community involvement in renewable energy initiatives. Learning from previous state-led off-grid projects that faced sustainability challenges due to limited local management capacity (MEMR, 2018), the Coalition incorporates community engagement into its financial design. Rather than demonstrating established economic ownership, this modality seeks to create institutional and financial conditions necessary for future localization and long-term sustainability.

IV. Conclusion

This study advances literature on norm diffusion by demonstrating how giving agency to local actors and leveraging local modalities can be a strategy which facilitates the bottom-up process of localization of energy transition norms in peripheral contexts. It takes Nusa Penida as a focused case to show how a coalition of non-state actors serves as the primary catalyst in guiding state and community actors to initiate and lead the processes. Referring to Acharya's (2004) norm localization concept, the findings suggest the potential effectiveness of the bottom-up strategies in adapting global energy transition norms to local contexts, through three initiatives: (1) integrating local values and cultures in the frameworks; (2) developing a roadmap as a systematic and measurable scenario, involving a larger multi-stakeholder participation; and (3) applying community-based, decentralized financial governance. Collectively, these initiatives illustrate that effective localization requires centering agency with local architects who can adapt norms using culturally and financially resonant modalities.

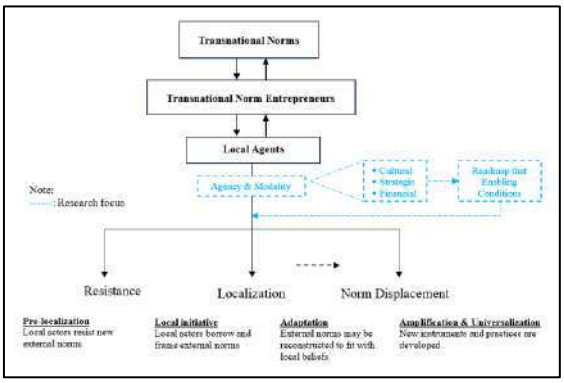


Fig. 4. Local Agents' Strategy of Norm Localization (an adjustment of Acharya's (2004) model)
Source: Constructed by author based on research findings.

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The primary strength of this research lies in the mapping of actor configurations, funding modalities, and localized adaptation mechanisms, supported by policy and institutional analysis. The integration of cultural and local values into energy transition discourse demonstrates conceptual and practical relevance, especially in peripheral areas that have often been excluded from centralized planning. Furthermore, this study underscores the roadmap's role as a solid foundation for anticipating and mitigating energy transition failures. Its potential effectiveness is reinforced by philanthropic support as a catalyst to decentralize financing. Community involvement ties energy transition with local values, hence contributing to its long-term sustainability.

Nevertheless, several limitations should be acknowledged. As this study relies on secondary data, it is unable to capture local realities and community perceptions. Additionally, technical and regulatory feasibility of fully transitioning to 100% renewable energy in Nusa Penida requires further empirical investigation, especially after the target year is reached in 2030. Therefore, future research should prioritize the application of more field-based, participatory methods to evaluate the long-term social legitimacy and institutional embeddedness of bottom-up initiatives. By situating the Nusa Penida initiative within broader theoretical and policy debates, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how global norms are internalized through local agency, institutional adaptability, and culturally resonant narratives in the context of energy transition in the Global South.

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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).

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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

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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.

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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

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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

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

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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 (Laksmana, 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

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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

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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

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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.

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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.

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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

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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

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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.

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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

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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

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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 minilateral 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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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Rethinking Regionalism: Institutional Change, Security, and Development in the Sahel's Alliance of States

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Abstract

This article examines the institutional evolution of Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso from externally driven regional forums to the creation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), a confederate alliance established in 2023. This research analyzes the draws on institutionalist and neoclassical realist frameworks, as well as qualitative document analysis, empirical data,, and comparative review. The study finds that persistent insecurity, developmental stagnation, and the withdrawal of international actors are key drivers for the move towards greater regional autonomy. The article shows the advantages and the risks of the confederate structure of the AES by comparing it with previous and parallel African regional organizations. The findings highlight the propositions for sovereignty, governance, and external partnerships and the importance of inclusive regional governance in preventing democratic backsliding. Policy recommendations are provided to national governments, regional organizations, and international partners to promote stability, resilience, and development in the Sahel region.

Keywords: Sahel, regional integration, confederation, security, development, Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso.

I. Introduction

The Sahel has emerged as a case study in regional security and development challenges in contemporary Africa. From the Atlantic to the Red Sea, the ecological richness of the region is tarnished by entrenched poverty, rapid population growth, weak state institutions, and recurrent environmental shocks (UNDP, 2023; World Bank, 2023). A decade of intersecting crises in Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso, with rising jihadist insurgencies, transnational criminal networks, and local militias exploiting porous borders and weak governance, has undermined efforts at sustainable development and destabilised the region (ACLED, 2024; International Crisis Group, 2023). The response of international actors has been through military interventions, humanitarian aid, and development programs (Walther, 2023; International Crisis Group, 2024). These actors include the United Nations, the African Union, ECOWAS, the European Union, and France.

Nonetheless, there has been empirical evidence of the fact that some of the interventions that were supposed to aid have ended up increasing the locals' grievances or creating dependency (Batch, 2016; Leocoq etal,.2019; Akintoye & Ukeje, 2023). For instance, Lecocq et al. (2019) proved that the G5 Sahel's dependence on the external donors and the consensus-based governance led to

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fragmented and delayed responses, hence weakening the local ownership and legitimacy.

The approach of institutionalism explains the creation and growth of institutions in order to solve common problems, focusing on the roles of rules, structures, and norms in influencing the states' behaviors (March & Olsen, 1989; Keohane, 1984).

According to rational choice institutionalism, organizations such as the G5 Sahel and AES are formed to maximize their strategic interests, reduce costs, and cooperate when facing uncertain situations (Pierson, 2004). Nevertheless, the institutional designs can create path dependencies. Neoclassical realism combines both the international system influences and the domestic determinants, such as regime type, leaders, and legitimacy, to explain the states' actions (Rose, 1998; Smith, 2023).

The current situation in the Sahel region, characterized by the withdrawal of French and UN militaries, sanctions imposed by ECOWAS, and military regimes, gives the basis for reconsideration of the regional cooperation (Walther, 2023; International Crisis Group, 2024). Therefore, the AES should be understood as a response to the security voids at the international level and domestic demands at the same time. Consequently, the AES can be seen as a reaction to external security vacuums as well as internal demands for regime consolidation and legitimacy.

This double lens is central to understanding why Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso withdrew from the G5 Sahel and adopted a confederate model that privileges sovereignty andautonomy. Neoclassical realism is frequently linked to the foreign policy of states, but it is a useful framework for the analysis of regional institutional change in times of crisis because it incorporates systemic as well as domestic factors. The study also notes the growing importance of norms, identity, and legitimacy for regional trajectories, in line with recent studies (Akintoye & Ukeje, 2023; Stewart, 2022).

II. Literature Review

Previous research sheds light on the challenges of establishing efficient regional bodies in the complex and precarious environment of Africa. For instance, Bach (2016) posits that most African regional organizations like ECOWAS and the G5 Sahel operate as pragmatic solutions to ongoing insecurity and economic fragmentation while being rather externally dependent and poorly institutionalized. Akintoye and Ukeje (2023) note that donor-driven frameworks are unable to adapt to the situation and develop sustainable capabilities, hence leading to institutional exhaustion and disillusionment of the population.

For example, according to Stewart (2022), the G5 Sahel faced some operational difficulties, such as consensual decision-making and dependence on Western states. These things prevented the organization from timely adaptation to changing threats. At the same time, this organization lost its legitimacy because of conflicts among its leaders and its inability to solve crises quickly, especially after

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the withdrawal of Mali in 2022 (Africa Confidential, 2024).

Comparative research claims that while confederate arrangements like the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) can provide some flexibility. They may lead to possible fragmentation and inefficiency without proper institutions and popular legitimacy (Alhaj, 2019; Stewart, 2022). Moreover, the International Crisis Group (2023) argues that recurrent intervention by external actors has resulted in the deepening of grievances, complication of power structure, and emergence of new dependencies in the region.

Civil society and human rights NGOs have raised concerns about the possibility of the promotion of authoritarianism if regional partnerships headed by military regimes are not properly controlled and monitored (Amnesty International, 2024; Burkina Faso Human Rights League, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2024). These concerns are heightened in the context of the trend of military coups in the region since 2020. Most previous studies have focused on the structural weaknesses of donor-funded, consensus-driven regional cooperation and offered little analysis of the rise of sovereignty-centered, confederate models such as the AES.

There is also a lack of comparative research on the impact of these models on development, civil society, and the relations with key external actors such as France, the EU, and Russia. This research seeks to fill these gaps by analysing the drivers and early impacts of the AES, comparing it with previous and parallel models, and evaluating its implications for sovereignty, development, and governance in the Sahel.

The following questions guide the study:

1) Motivations of the establishment of the AES, and what distinguishes it from previous regional frameworks?
2) How can the theories of institutionalism and neoclassical realism account for this change in regional cooperation?
3) What are the early impacts of the AES on security, development, and governance
4) How do these compare with other African organisations?
5) What are the wider implications for sovereignty, external engagement, and democratic governance in the region?

There is also a lack of comparative research on the impact of these models on development, civil society, and the relations with key external actors such as France, the EU, and Russia. This research seeks to fill these gaps by analysing the drivers and early impacts of the AES, comparing it with previous and parallel models, and evaluating its implications for sovereignty, development, and governance in the Sahel.

III. Methodology & Data

To analyze the institutional transition of the G5 Sahel to the AES and its impact on security, development, and governance, a qualitative case study methodology was

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employed. The data consist of the documents of the AES; governmental and regional communiques (2022-2024). NGO reports (Amnesty International, 2024; Burkina Faso Human Rights League, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2024), international media (Jeune Afrique, 2024; Deutsche Welle, 2024), and academic literature (International Crisis Group, 2023; Walther, 2023; Akintoye & Ukeje, 2023). ACLED conflict event data (2024), World Bank development indicators (2023), UN OCHA humanitarian reports (2023).

All primary and secondary sources were systematically coded according to the thematic analysis. The themes include security cooperation, institutional changes, sovereignty, foreign intervention, and development impacts. The codebook and coding process were refined by means of constant comparison across the sources. It was useful for finding convergent and divergent themes.

The AES was systematically compared to G5 Sahel, ECOWAS, EAC, and GCC. The comparison includes such aspects as organizational structures, decision-making procedures, involvement in security and development activities, and interaction with external players. The results of analysis were triangulated using several data sources, including official statements, NGO reports, empirical datasets, and academic literature.

In case of any discrepancies or contradictions, e.g., in different evaluations of security improvement or internal governance, it was discussed and contextualized in the findings part. The triangulation increased the validity and credibility of the results as it used at least two sources to prove the claim. Data visualization shows that the trends and findings are presented in tables and timelines for clarification.

Please refer to Tables 1 and 2 at the new country-level breakdowns and figures in the findings. Fieldwork and interviews could not be conducted due to security and political constraints. Thus, the research is based on publicly available sources and data.

IV. Discussion

a. From Regional Forum to Confederated Partnership

In 2014, the G5 Sahel was created to coordinate security and development actions between Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger (International Crisis Group, 2023). Its rotating presidency, consensus-based decision-making, and donor dependence (mainly France and the EU) led to slow responses and undermined local ownership (OECD, 2024; Stewart, 2022). The fall of the G5 was marked by the withdrawal of Mali in 2022 and coups in all three AES countries. This situation created the need for new regional arrangements.

The AES was established in 2023 as a direct consequence of these failures. The AES has a joint command and permanent secretariat, binding commitments to collective defence, and a development agenda that seeks to reduce external dependency and increase bargaining power with donors (Africa Confidential, 2024).

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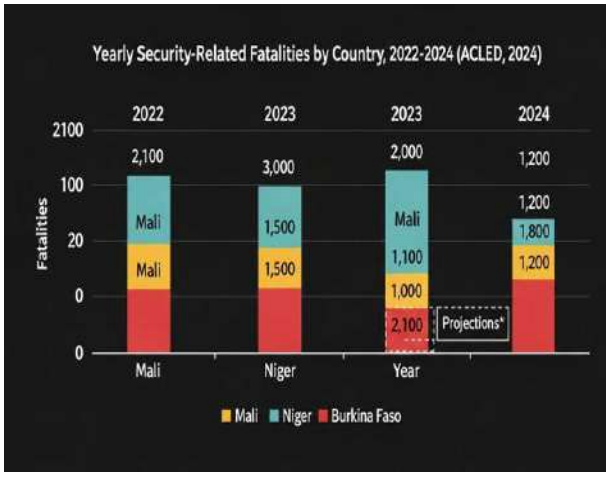


Fig. 1. Yearly Security-Related Fatalities by Country, 2022–2024
Source: ACLED (2024).
Notes: 2024 figures are first-half projections

Mali recorded the highest number of security-related deaths in 2023, as shown in Table 1 and Figure 1, and saw a decrease in the first half of 2024 amid an increase in joint AES operations. Violence in Niger and Burkina Faso followed a similar pattern, although localised violence continued in border areas.

Tab. 1. Major Security Incidents and Fatalities in AES States, 2022–2024

Year	Incidents	Fatalities	Notable Events
2022	1.500	5.000	Mali coup, Barkhane exit
2023	2.100	7.200	AES formed, Niger Coup
2024	1.600	4.000*	Joint AES operations (Q1-Q2)

Source: ACLED (2024)

1) Security Needs

Since 2012, jihadist violence and state collapse in northern Mali have spilled over into Niger and Burkina Faso, overwhelming security forces and resulting in displacement and humanitarian crises (International Crisis Group, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2024). In early 2024, the AES responded with joint military operations, intelligence sharing, and border closures, leading to a measurable reduction in cross-border attacks (Ministry of National Defence of Niger, 2023).

International interventions were often limited by a lack of resources, ambiguous mandates, and changing donor priorities (Walther, 2023). The French and UN missions' withdrawal has left a vacuum to be filled by local actors, highlighting the need for regional self-reliance (Sahel Tribune, 2024).

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2) Development Drivers

Development concerns remain relevant even as security dominates the agenda. Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso rank among the poorest countries in the world on the Human Development Index (UNDP, 2023). Poverty, malnutrition, and lack of infrastructure contribute to instability in the region. The goal of the AES is to bring coherence into the agricultural policies, infrastructure, and social development funding pools in order to improve aid effectiveness and reduce donor dependence (OECD, 2024).

Pooled humanitarian efforts like those in the response to the 2023 Niger floods show improvement in terms of coordination, although the key challenge lies in providing development to communities (United Nations OCHA, 2023; World Bank, 2023). Comparative Perspective The confederation-style organization of the AES makes it unique in Africa. As ECOWAS stresses democracy and uses sanctions against military governments, the AES stresses autonomy and security (ECOWAS, 2023). The EAC is less involved in security issues and more focused on economic cooperation, whereas divisions within the GCC limit its collective security agenda (Alhaj, 2019; Stewart, 2022).

3) Comparative Perspective

The AES's confederate model is unique in Africa. While ECOWAS highlights democratic norms and sanctions military regimes, the AES emphasises autonomy and security (ECOWAS, 2023). The EAC is less interventionist in security and more concerned with economic integration, while internal divisions hinder the GCC's collective security efforts (Alhaj, 2019; Stewart, 2022).

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Tab.2 Comparative Features of Regional Organizations

Organization	Structure	Security Role	Donor Dependency	Civil Society Inclusion	Decision-making
AES	Confederacy	High	Low	Weak	Joint command
G5 Sahel	Forum	Medium	High	Weak	Consensus
ECOWAS	Union	Medium	Medium	Limited	Rotating President
EAS	Community	Low	Medium	Medium	Secretariat
GCC	Confederacy	High	Low	Weak	Supreme Council

Source: Stewart (2022) ; Akintoye & Ukeje (2023)
Notes: Compiled by authors

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This comparative analysis aligns with Findings from Stewart (2022) and Akintoye & Ukeje (2023) that regional organizations' effectiveness depends on institutional design, leadership, and external relations**.**

b. Country-Specific Dynamics and Domestic–International Interplay

Internal political dynamics play a decisive role in shaping each member's stance within the AES:

1) Mali's leadership, following the expulsion of French/UN forces, adopted a narrative of national sovereignty to justify restricting civil society, consolidating military authority, and seeking new security alliances, especially with Russia.

2) Niger's 2023 coup placed it at the center of AES security planning. The junta used the alliance to legitimize its rule internationally while suspending domestic democratic institutions and intensifying security measures.

3) Burkina Faso balanced domestic demands for stability with a deliberate distancing from France and an embrace of Russian support, aiming to shore up regime stability and assert regional leadership.

This domestic–international interplay produced both cooperation and friction within the AES, as differences in regime priorities, civil liberties, and external partnerships required negotiation to maintain alliance cohesion. For example, while all three states reject Western military presence, they differ in their openness to civil society engagement and their approach to regional economic integration. External actors such as France and the EU have been marginalized, suspending aid and imposing sanctions. Russia's influence is growing through security partnerships and military support to AES states (Walther, 2023; ACLED, 2024).

NGOs remain essential to humanitarian response but face regulatory constraints and a shrinking civic space (Burkina Faso Human Rights League, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2024)**.**

c. Governance, Civil Society, and Democratic Risks

All AES governments are military-led, having suspended constitutions and elections. Civil society organizations warn that without genuine reform and accountability, the AES could entrench military rule and exclude public participation that "The alliance must not become a vehicle for indefinite military rule or the marginalization of citizens' voices" (Burkina Faso Human Rights League, 2024; Amnesty International, 2024**).**

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d. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study's reliance on secondary data and coverage of the AES's early years are limitations. The analysis does not capture gender- or community-level effects, nor can it fully assess long-term impacts on development and governance. Future research should 1) conduct fieldwork and interviews with local actors, civil society, and affected communities (Human Rights Watch, 2024), 2) employ mixed-methods, including surveys and participant observation, to track the AES's evolution, 3) compare AES with other regional confederate models in Africa and globally, and 4) examine the impact of AES on marginalized groups and local governance.

e. Policy Recommendations

The first part of the policy recommendations is for AES Member States:

1) Publicly commit to credible electoral and constitutional timelines, 2) Establish transparent, independent oversight bodies for AES operations with civil society representation, 3) Prioritize inclusive, locally led development, and ensure humanitarian response reaches the most vulnerable, and 4) Guarantee freedom of expression and civic participation to prevent authoritarian drift.

The second part of the policy recommendations is for Regional Organizations (ECOWAS, AU): 1) Move beyond blanket sanctions; engage with AES governments through targeted dialogue and technical support, and 2) Facilitate knowledge sharing on governance, crisis management, and democratic transitions.

The third part of the policy recommendations is for International Partners: 1) Align financial and technical assistance with local priorities and human rights benchmarks, 2) Balance security support with funding for civil society and independent media, and 3) Monitor the impact of external partnerships (especially with Russia and Turkey) for compliance with good governance and human rights.

VI. Conclusion

The Alliance of Sahel States represents a major shift in African regionalism, combining pragmatic adaptation to crisis with a strong assertion of sovereignty. By drawing on institutionalist and neoclassical realist frameworks, this study shows that the AES's emergence was driven by intertwined security, developmental, and political imperatives in a context of external withdrawal and internal upheaval. Early signs suggest improved security coordination and humanitarian response, but the alliance's long-term legitimacy will depend on its ability to balance sovereignty and autonomy with inclusive development and accountable governance. The AES's confederate model challenges established norms and provides important lessons for scholars and practitioners seeking adaptive, resilient approaches to regional crisis management in Africa and beyond.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Integration of ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific (AOIP) Cooperative Functionalism in the Joko Widodo Era: An Analysis of Indonesia's Strategic Mechanisms and Regional Impact (2014-2024)

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Abstract

This article examines Indonesia's implementation of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) during President Joko Widodo's administration (2014-2024), focusing on the country's "open-ended mechanism" approach to regional integration. Drawing on functionalist integration theory, we analyze how Indonesia leveraged AOIP's framework to create flexible cooperation platforms that accommodate diverse interests while building functional integration across maritime cooperation, connectivity, sustainable development, and economic domains. Through examination of diplomatic initiatives, sub-regional programs like BIMP-EAGA, and external partnership frameworks, we assess whether Indonesia's strategy generated genuine regional integration or merely episodic cooperation. Our findings reveal a mixed outcome: while AOIP achieved moderate success in institutional development and sector-specific interdependence, particularly in maritime and economic domains, it failed to demonstrate functionalist spillover effects or political convergence among member states. The study concludes that Indonesia's open-ended mechanism represents "integration without supranationalism" a distinctively flexible approach to regionalism that increases interdependence without sovereignty pooling, reflecting both the possibilities and limits of middle power leadership in an era of intensifying great power competition.

Keywords: ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific, Indonesia foreign policy, Joko Widodo, functionalist integration, regional cooperation, middle power diplomacy

I. Introduction

The Indo-Pacific has emerged as one of the most contested geopolitical constructs of the twenty-first century, with multiple great and middle powers advancing competing visions for regional order (Strating, 2025). The concept itself reflects divergent strategic narratives: from Washington and Tokyo's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) emphasizing security alignments and democratic values, to Beijing's rejection of what it perceives as containment frameworks, to

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ASEAN's quest for strategic autonomy amid intensifying great power competition (Hanada, 2019). Within this complex landscape, the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), adopted at the 34th ASEAN Summit in Bangkok in June 2019, represents a distinctive attempt by Southeast Asian nations to articulate their own vision for regional governance one that prioritizes inclusivity, ASEAN centrality, and rules-based multilateralism over exclusive security arrangements.

AOIP's significance extends beyond mere rhetorical positioning; it embodies ASEAN's attempt to maintain its centrality in regional governance structures while responding to fundamental shifts in the geopolitical landscape (Nabbs-Keller, 2020). The framework identifies four priority areas for cooperation: maritime cooperation, connectivity, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and economic cooperation, domains deliberately chosen to emphasize functional collaboration over security competition. As Hanada (2019) notes, AOIP seeks to uphold the rules-based order and regional integrity by promoting "habit of dialogue" and collaborative problem-solving rather than exclusive security arrangements that risk fragmenting the region into competing blocs.

However, the critical challenge facing AOIP lies not in its articulation but in its operationalization. The framework's open-ended and flexible nature, while politically necessary to secure consensus among ASEAN's ten diverse member states and maintain engagement with external powers holding divergent strategic visions, creates inherent implementation challenges. As Hashim (2024) demonstrates through analysis of sub-regional initiatives like BIMP-EAGA, translating AOIP's broad principles into concrete programs requires not only political will but also institutional mechanisms that can coordinate action across multiple levels of governance and diverse stakeholder groups. The gap between aspiration and implementation becomes particularly acute when examining specific national approaches to AOIP, with member states demonstrating varying degrees of commitment and capacity for advancing the framework's objectives.

Indonesia's role in conceptualizing, championing, and implementing AOIP deserves particular scholarly attention. As the architect of the original Indo-Pacific concept within ASEAN, Indonesia under President Joko Widodo's leadership (2014-2024) pursued what Anwar (2020) characterizes as "middle power diplomacy" aimed at shaping regional order without triggering balancing coalitions or forcing divisive alignments. President Jokowi's administration invested considerable diplomatic capital in building consensus around AOIP, framing it as consistent with Indonesia's constitutional mandate to contribute to world peace while advancing the nation's strategic interests through a maritime-focused foreign policy orientation. This diplomatic approach reflects Indonesia's recognition of both its responsibilities as ASEAN's largest member and its limitations as a developing nation with finite resources for shaping regional outcomes.

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Yet despite AOIP's geopolitical significance and Indonesia's central role in its development, systematic scholarly analysis of how Indonesia has translated the framework into concrete policy outcomes remains limited. While existing literature has examined AOIP's rhetorical construction (Anwar, 2020), its strategic rationale (Nabbs-Keller, 2020), and its relationship to broader Indo-Pacific discourses (Strating, 2025), less attention has been devoted to analyzing the specific mechanisms through which Indonesia has pursued AOIP implementation during the Jokowi era, the effectiveness of these mechanisms in advancing integration objectives, and the broader implications for understanding ASEAN-led regional governance in an era of strategic flux.

This article addresses this gap by examining Indonesia's strategy for implementing the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific during President Joko Widodo's administration, with particular focus on what we term the "open-ended mechanism", Indonesia's approach to creating flexible, inclusive platforms for cooperation that accommodate diverse interests while gradually building functional integration across priority sectors. Drawing on functionalist integration theory, we analyze how Indonesia has attempted to leverage AOIP's framework to expand opportunities for cooperation not only among ASEAN member states but also with external partners, promoting a model of competitive cooperation rather than rigid alliance-building. Our central research question asks:

How has Indonesia employed open-ended cooperative mechanisms within AOIP to foster integration in the Indo-Pacific region during the Jokowi era, and what does this reveal about the possibilities and limitations of ASEAN-led regional governance in an era of great power competition?

II. Literature Review

a. Functionalist Integration Theory and Regional Cooperation

Functionalist integration theory, developed by David Mitrany (1966), posits that cooperation in technical, non-political sectors creates interdependence that gradually expands into political domains through a process of "spillover" or "ramification." Unlike realist approaches that emphasize zero-sum competition, functionalism argues that states can achieve common welfare objectives through sector-specific collaboration that transcends traditional sovereignty concerns. The theory's core mechanism operates through two pathways: first, successful cooperation in one functional domain (e.g., maritime security) creates practical pressures and incentives for collaboration in adjacent sectors (e.g., maritime trade, fisheries management); second, the development of specialized transnational networks and institutions gradually builds habits of cooperation that reduce conflict potential (Mitrany, 1966).

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This framework proves particularly relevant for analyzing ASEAN's approach to regional integration, which has historically eschewed the supranational institutions of European integration in favor of flexible, consensus-based cooperation across specific functional domains. As Hanada (2019) observes, ASEAN's effectiveness stems not from formal institutional power but from its ability to create "habits of dialogue" that facilitate collaborative problem-solving across diverse issue areas while respecting member states' sovereignty. The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific exemplifies this functionalist logic by identifying four priority cooperation areas, maritime collaboration, connectivity, sustainable development, and economic integration, each representing domains where functional cooperation can advance without requiring political alignment or sovereignty pooling (ASEAN, 2019; Soeya, 2019).

However, functionalist integration faces significant challenges in the contemporary Indo-Pacific context. The theory assumes that technical cooperation can remain insulated from political competition, yet AOIP operates in an environment where infrastructure projects, maritime governance, and economic connectivity are deeply entangled with great power rivalry (Strating, 2025). Moreover, functionalism's spillover mechanism requires sustained commitment and institutional capacity that may exceed what ASEAN's diverse membership can consistently provide. As Hashim (2024) demonstrates through analysis of sub-regional initiatives like BIMP-EAGA, translating broad functional cooperation frameworks into concrete implementation requires overcoming substantial coordination challenges, resource constraints, and divergent national priorities. This gap between functionalist theory's optimistic logic and implementation realities forms a central problematic for understanding AOIP's potential and limitations.

b. Middle Power Diplomacy and ASEAN Centrality

Indonesia's approach to AOIP must also be understood through the lens of middle power diplomacy, the strategic behavior of states that lack superpower capabilities but possess sufficient resources and diplomatic influence to shape regional outcomes (Anwar, 2020). Middle powers typically pursue multilateral engagement, coalition-building, and institutional entrepreneurship rather than unilateral power projection. Indonesia's championing of AOIP reflects this middle power strategy: rather than aligning with either the United States or China, Indonesia has attempted to construct an inclusive regional framework that preserves ASEAN centrality while accommodating diverse great power interests (Nabbs-Keller, 2020).

This middle power approach faces inherent tensions. As Nabbs-Keller (2020) argues, ASEAN centrality depends on member states' ability to maintain collective cohesion and resist being divided by external powers, yet ASEAN

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members have increasingly divergent relationships with China and the United States. Indonesia's leadership in promoting AOIP represents an attempt to resolve this tension by creating an "open-ended mechanism" that allows flexible cooperation without forcing exclusive choices. However, the effectiveness of this approach remains contested, particularly as implementation requires concrete resource commitments that may expose the limits of Indonesia's capacity to lead regional integration efforts (Anwar, 2020).

III. Methods

a. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative case study approach examining Indonesia's implementation of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific during President Joko Widodo's administration (2014-2024). The research uses process tracing methodology to analyze how Indonesia's diplomatic initiatives and policy mechanisms evolved across bilateral, sub-regional, and multilateral dimensions, allowing systematic examination of causal pathways linking Indonesia's strategic choices to regional cooperation outcomes. This approach is appropriate for investigating complex policy processes where outcomes result from interactions among multiple actors and institutional contexts (Anwar, 2020; Hashim, 2024).

b. Data Sources

Primary data sources include: (1) Official ASEAN documents, particularly the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (2019) and summit communiqués from 2019-2024; (2) Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs policy statements, press releases, and strategic planning documents related to Indo-Pacific cooperation; (3) Bilateral and multilateral agreements involving Indonesia and AOIP partner countries; (4) Parliamentary records and testimonies regarding AOIP implementation.

Secondary sources comprise scholarly literature on ASEAN regionalism, Indo-Pacific geopolitics, functionalist integration theory, and Indonesian foreign policy (Anwar, 2020; Hanada, 2019; Hashim, 2024; Nabbs-Keller, 2020; Soeya, 2019; Strating, 2025). Academic journals, policy reports, and analytical assessments from regional think tanks supplement the analysis. Document selection criteria prioritized: (a) relevance to AOIP implementation mechanisms; (b) official status and authoritative sourcing; (c) temporal coverage of the Jokowi administration; (d) geographic scope encompassing bilateral, sub-regional, and multilateral dimensions.

c. Analytical Procedures

Analysis proceeded through three stages: First, document analysis systematically examined policy statements and official documents to identify Indonesia's stated objectives, strategic rationales, and implementation mechanisms for

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AOIP. Documents were coded thematically to identify patterns in Indonesia's diplomatic framing across bilateral, sub-regional, and multilateral contexts.

Second, process tracing reconstructed the sequence of diplomatic initiatives, institutional developments, and policy decisions through which Indonesia operationalized AOIP. This involved mapping temporal sequences, identifying critical junctures, and analyzing causal mechanisms linking Indonesia's actions to cooperation outcomes. Evidence from multiple sources was triangulated to verify causal claims and identify competing explanations.

Third, theoretical analysis assessed whether observed cooperation patterns exhibit functionalist integration dynamics, specifically, evidence of sectoral spillover, institutional deepening, or expanding networks of interdependence.

d. Limitations

This study acknowledges several limitations: (1) Limited access to confidential diplomatic correspondence restricts analysis to publicly available documents; (2) The short time period since AOIP's adoption (2019-2024) constrains assessment of long-term integration effects; (3) Language barriers necessitate reliance on official English translations of Indonesian-language documents, though key documents were verified by Indonesian-speaking researchers; These limitations are addressed through triangulation of multiple data sources and transparent acknowledgment of analytical constraints.

IV. Results and Discussion

a. Indonesia's Strategic Framework for AOIP Implementation

Indonesia's approach to implementing the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific during President Joko Widodo's administration (2014-2024) reflects a carefully calibrated middle power strategy aimed at preserving ASEAN centrality while accommodating diverse great power interests in the region (Anwar, 2020). At the 34th ASEAN Summit in Bangkok (June 2019), President Jokowi articulated three foundational principles that have guided Indonesia's AOIP diplomacy: (1) engagement rather than rejection of existing Indo-Pacific frameworks, including the U.S.-Japan "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" and minilateral arrangements like the Quad; (2) advancement of the "ASEAN Way" emphasizing dialogue, consensus, and non-interference to ensure regional architecture does not undermine ASEAN's institutional centrality; and (3) multi-level diplomatic engagement across bilateral, sub-regional, and multilateral forums to build overlapping networks of cooperation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2019).

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This strategic framework represents what Nabbs-Keller (2020) characterizes as "hedging through institutional entrepreneurship", Indonesia seeks to shape regional order not through military power or exclusive alliances, but by creating inclusive platforms that reduce pressures for binary alignment choices. Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi emphasized at the 35th ASEAN Summit that AOIP provides a mechanism for "competitive cooperation" where major powers can pursue their interests through collaborative rather than confrontational pathways (Kemlu RI, 2019).

b. Multi-Level Cooperation Mechanisms: Evidence from Implementation

Bilateral Engagement: Strategic Partnerships Without Exclusive Alignment. At the bilateral level, Indonesia has pursued strategic partnerships that advance AOIP objectives while avoiding exclusive alignment. President Jokowi's February 2020 visit to Australia, commemorating 70 years of diplomatic relations, produced the Indonesia-Australia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, which explicitly references AOIP principles and establishes cooperation frameworks in maritime security, infrastructure connectivity, and Pacific development assistance (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Australia, 2020). This partnership demonstrates Indonesia's strategy of building bridges between ASEAN and external partners: Australia's engagement with Pacific Island nations complements Indonesia's geographic position as the only ASEAN state with direct land borders in the Pacific region, creating potential pathways for ASEAN-Pacific integration that bypass great power rivalry dynamics (Hashim, 2024).

Similarly, Indonesia's bilateral engagement with Japan has leveraged Tokyo's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" framework to secure concrete infrastructure investments while maintaining strategic autonomy. At the 2019 ASEAN-Japan Summit, Foreign Minister Tarō Kōno praised ASEAN's AOIP as providing a "common platform" for cooperation, and Japan subsequently committed US$3 billion to ASEAN connectivity projects explicitly aligned with AOIP priorities (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2019). This demonstrates how Indonesia's diplomatic framing has enabled external powers to contribute resources to ASEAN-led initiatives without requiring ASEAN members to endorse external powers' competing strategic visions, a key achievement of middle power diplomacy (Anwar, 2020).

c. Sub-Regional Initiatives: Building Functional Integration

At the sub-regional level, Indonesia has championed the revitalization of existing frameworks like the Brunei-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA) as implementation vehicles for AOIP. As Hashim (2024) documents, BIMP-EAGA's 2021-2025 Implementation Blueprint explicitly incorporates AOIP's four priority areas, with specific projects in

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maritime cooperation (establishing integrated coastal management systems), connectivity (Trans-Borneo Highway completion), and sustainable development (renewable energy microgrids in remote areas). By 2023, BIMP-EAGA had mobilized US$8.7 billion in infrastructure investments, demonstrating how sub-regional platforms can translate AOIP's broad principles into concrete outcomes (BIMP-EAGA Secretariat, 2023).

This sub-regional approach addresses a critical implementation challenge: ASEAN's ten members have vastly different capabilities and priorities, making comprehensive region-wide programs difficult to execute. Sub-regional initiatives allow smaller groups of countries with shared interests and geographic proximity to achieve deeper functional integration that can subsequently expand to other ASEAN members, exemplifying functionalist spillover logic (Hashim, 2024).

d. Multilateral Forums: Expanding Cooperative Networks

At the multilateral level, Indonesia has utilized middle power coalitions and existing regional forums to amplify AOIP's reach. Within MIKTA (Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey, Australia), a middle power grouping established in 2013, Indonesia has promoted AOIP as a model for inclusive regionalism that avoids great power bloc formation. At the 2020 MIKTA Foreign Ministers Meeting, Indonesia secured endorsement of AOIP principles and established working groups on maritime governance and sustainable development that include both ASEAN and non-ASEAN MIKTA members, creating cross-regional policy learning networks (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2020).

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Tab.1. Indonesia's Multi-Level AOIP Implementation Framework

Dimension	Key Mechanisms and Outcomes
Bilateral	Strategic partnerships with Australia (2020), Japan (2019-ongoing), and Pacific Island nations (Fiji, Papua New Guinea) focusing on: maritime security cooperation, infrastructure connectivity (US$3B+ Japanese commitment), development assistance (Rp 3 trillion for Pacific disaster relief), and avoiding exclusive security alignment while securing concrete resource commitments (Anwar, 2020; DFAT Australia, 2020).
Sub-Regional	BIMP-EAGA revitalization (2021-2025): Implementation Blueprint aligned with AOIP priorities mobilized US$8.7B in infrastructure investments, Trans-Borneo Highway completion, integrated coastal management, renewable energy microgrids. Demonstrates functional integration through geographically-focused initiatives that achieve deeper cooperation than region-wide programs (Hashim, 2024; BIMP-EAGA Secretariat, 2023).
Multilateral	MIKTA endorsement (2020): Working groups on maritime governance and sustainable development creating cross-regional policy networks. ASEAN-IORA cooperation (Jakarta Declaration 2021): Collaboration frameworks for maritime security, blue economy, disaster risk reduction. Demonstrates building overlapping institutional memberships and expanding Indonesia's influence beyond Southeast Asia (Anwar, 2020; IORA, 2021; Kemlu RI, 2020).

Source: MOFA (2019-2024); Anwar (2020) ; Hashim (2024)

Notes: Compiled from Ministry of Foreign Affairs statements, BIMP-EAGA reports, and scholarly analysis

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Indonesia has also advanced AOIP through the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), where it assumed the Vice-Chair position in 2019-2021. President Jokowi's advocacy for enhanced ASEAN IORA cooperation resulted in the 2021 Jakarta Declaration, which commits both organizations to collaborate on maritime security, blue economy development, and disaster risk reduction, all AOIP priority areas (IORA Secretariat, 2021). This demonstrates Indonesia's strategy of building overlapping institutional memberships that create multiple pathways for cooperation, reducing dependence on any single forum while expanding Indonesia's diplomatic influence beyond Southeast Asia (Anwar, 2020).

e. The Open-Ended Mechanism: Flexibility as Integration Strategy

The concept of "open-ended mechanism" that Indonesia has employed in AOIP implementation represents a distinctive approach to regional integration that differs from both traditional ASEAN incrementalism and formal institutional integration models. This mechanism operates through three key characteristics: inclusivity without compulsion, flexibility in participation levels, and functional cooperation without political preconditions (Hanada, 2019).

First, the mechanism's inclusive framework allows participation from any state or actor willing to contribute to AOIP's four priority areas without requiring formal membership commitments or political alignment declarations. This addresses what Strating (2025) identifies as a fundamental challenge in contemporary Indo-Pacific regionalism: how to construct cooperative frameworks that accommodate both status quo powers (U.S., Japan) and revisionist actors (China) without forcing countries to choose sides. By framing cooperation around functional domains, maritime security, connectivity, sustainable development, economic integration, rather than geopolitical orientation, AOIP creates "neutral" spaces where states with competing strategic visions can nevertheless collaborate on shared interests (Soeya, 2019).

Second, flexible participation acknowledges that ASEAN members and external partners have varying capabilities and priorities. Unlike NATO's collective defense obligations or the EU's acquis communautaire, AOIP imposes no mandatory commitments, states can engage deeply in some areas while remaining inactive in others. This "variable geometry" approach has enabled progress despite ASEAN's heterogeneity: Singapore and Indonesia have led maritime security initiatives, Thailand and Vietnam have championed sustainable development programs, and Malaysia has focused on connectivity projects, with no member state required to participate in all areas simultaneously (Nabbs-Keller, 2020).

Third, functional cooperation without political preconditions separates technical collaboration from political disputes. AOIP participants can cooperate on fisheries management, disaster response, or infrastructure development without resolving underlying territorial disputes (South China Sea), regime type differences (democracy vs. authoritarianism), or

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alliance commitments. This functionalist logic assumes that successful cooperation in low-politics domains gradually builds trust and interdependence that eventually constrains conflict in high-politics areas, though as Hashim (2024) notes, this spillover mechanism has shown limited evidence in practice, with functional cooperation and political tensions often proceeding on parallel but disconnected tracks.

f. Indonesia's Middle Power Role: Facilitator, Catalyst, and Manager

Indonesia's operationalization of AOIP reflects what Anwar (2020) characterizes as a "trilateral" middle power function: facilitator, catalyst, and manager of regional cooperation. As facilitator, Indonesia has created institutional platforms and diplomatic frameworks that enable dialogue among actors who might otherwise lack channels for engagement. The ASEAN-Australia Special Summit (2023) and the ASEAN-Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting (2024) both resulted from Indonesian diplomatic initiatives aimed at building bridges between Southeast Asia and adjacent regions, facilitating cooperation that transcends traditional geographic boundaries of ASEAN-centered regionalism (Ministry of Foreign Affairs RI, 2024).

As catalyst, Indonesia has mobilized resources and political will for initiatives that individual states might not undertake independently. President Jokowi's advocacy for the ASEAN Connectivity Master Plan 2025 expansion secured US$30 billion in commitments from development partners (ADB, World Bank, Japan, China) for infrastructure projects explicitly aligned with AOIP priorities, demonstrating Indonesia's capacity to leverage its diplomatic credibility to catalyze concrete resource flows (Asian Development Bank, 2022).

As manager, Indonesia has attempted to coordinate diverse AOIP initiatives to prevent fragmentation and ensure complementarity. The establishment of the ASEAN Secretariat's Indo-Pacific Coordination Unit (2021) resulted from Indonesian advocacy for institutionalized management of AOIP implementation, though this unit remains understaffed and underfunded, reflecting persistent tensions between Indonesia's leadership ambitions and ASEAN's reluctance to strengthen supranational bureaucracy (Jakarta Post, 2023). Indonesia's chairmanship of ASEAN in 2023 prioritized AOIP implementation, producing the Jakarta AOIP Progress Report that documented 47 ongoing projects across the four priority areas, though the report also acknowledged significant implementation gaps and called for enhanced coordination mechanisms (ASEAN Secretariat, 2023).

However, Indonesia's middle power role faces inherent constraints. As Nabbs-Keller (2020) argues, middle power influence depends on other states accepting the middle power's leadership, and Indonesia's capacity to shape regional outcomes remains circumscribed by great power dynamics. The intensification of U.S.-China competition during 2022-2024, manifested in

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technology restrictions, Taiwan Strait tensions, and competing infrastructure initiatives, has complicated Indonesia's balancing strategy, as some ASEAN members have moved toward closer alignment with either Washington or Beijing, undermining the consensus foundation that Indonesian leadership requires. Moreover, domestic political transitions (President Prabowo Subianto's inauguration in October 2024) introduce uncertainty about policy continuity, as new administrations may prioritize different foreign policy objectives.

g. Integration Outcomes and Persistent Challenges

On the positive side, AOIP has achieved several concrete successes such as AOIP has successfully established itself as ASEAN's authoritative framework for Indo-Pacific engagement, with all major external partners (U.S., China, Japan, India, Australia, EU) explicitly referencing AOIP in their ASEAN dialogue partnership statements a significant diplomatic achievement given initial skepticism from some powers (Hanada, 2019; Strating, 2025). This institutional recognition creates path dependencies that constrain future policy choices, as external powers seeking ASEAN cooperation must work through AOIP's frameworks rather than imposing alternative architectures.

However, significant challenges constrain AOIP's transformative potential: First, limited spillover from functional to political domains. Despite extensive functional cooperation, political tensions have intensified rather than diminished. South China Sea disputes have escalated, with increased militarization and more frequent standoffs between claimant states and Chinese forces (BBC News, 2023). Myanmar's military coup (2021) and ASEAN's paralyzed response exposed limits to ASEAN's conflict management capacity, with AOIP's frameworks providing no meaningful mechanisms for addressing intra-regional political crises. The functionalist assumption that technical cooperation builds political trust has shown little empirical support in Southeast Asia's contemporary context (Hashim, 2024).

Second, implementation gaps between frameworks and outcomes. While AOIP has produced numerous agreements, action plans, and frameworks, translation into concrete deliverables remains inconsistent. The 2023 Jakarta Progress Report acknowledged that only 47 of 89 proposed projects had achieved meaningful implementation, with financing gaps, bureaucratic coordination failures, and divergent national priorities cited as primary obstacles (ASEAN Secretariat, 2023).

Third, ASEAN member divergence on external partnerships. Despite AOIP's emphasis on collective ASEAN positioning, member states have pursued increasingly divergent bilateral relationships with major powers. Cambodia and Laos have deepened alignment with China through Belt and Road Initiative projects and diplomatic support on South China Sea issues, while the Philippines and Vietnam have strengthened security ties with the United States,

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and Singapore maintains equidistance through dense economic integration with both powers (Reuters, 2024). This fragmentation undermines Indonesia's strategy of using AOIP to preserve ASEAN unity, as member states increasingly view AOIP as diplomatic rhetoric rather than binding framework for external engagement (Nabbs-Keller, 2020; Strating, 2025).

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Tab. 2. Opportunities and Challenges for AOIP Implementation

Opportunities	Challenges
AOIP establishes ASEAN's autonomous framework for Indo-Pacific engagement, reducing external agenda-setting (Hanada, 2019; Soeya, 2019)	Growing divergence in member states' external alignments undermines collective positioning (Nabbs-Keller, 2020; Strating, 2025)
Flexibility enables variable participation levels, accommodating ASEAN heterogeneity while enabling progress (Anwar, 2020)	Flexibility creates implementation inconsistency and coordination failures across initiatives (Hashim, 2024)
Four priority areas (maritime, connectivity, SDGs, economics) mobilize substantial external resources: US$50B+ since 2019 (ASEAN Secretariat, 2023)	Resource dependency on external powers constrains autonomy; financing creates implicit political alignments (ADB, 2023)
Sub-regional platforms (BIMP-EAGA, GMS) enable deeper functional integration than region-wide programs (Hashim, 2024)	Limited spillover from functional to political domains; technical cooperation hasn't reduced political tensions (South China Sea disputes escalating despite cooperation)
Indonesia's middle power leadership provides credible neutral broker role, facilitating dialogue among competing powers (Anwar, 2020)	Indonesia's resource constraints limit capacity to finance initiatives independently; leadership depends on consensus that is increasingly difficult to achieve (Nabbs-Keller, 2020)

Source: Anwar (2020) ; Hanada (2019) ; Hashim (2024) ; Nabbs-Keller (2020) ; Soeya (2019) ; Strating (2025); ASEAN Secretariat (2023) ; ADB (2023)

Notes: Synthesized from academic literature and implementation reports

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h. Assessing Integration: Beyond Cooperation to Functional Interdependence?

The central analytical question is whether Indonesia's open-ended mechanism approach to AOIP has generated genuine integration, defined as increasing interdependence, institutional deepening, and spillover effects, or merely expanded cooperation, defined as episodic collaboration without structural transformation. Evidence suggests a mixed outcome that defies simple categorization.

The evidence presented demonstrates that AOIP has achieved mixed results when assessed against functionalist integration theory. On the positive side, the framework has generated moderate institutional development, with AOIP principles embedded across multiple ASEAN documents and dialogue mechanisms, creating path dependencies that constrain future policy divergence. Sector-specific integration has advanced in maritime and economic domains, where joint patrols, information sharing systems, trade agreements like RCEP, and connectivity infrastructure have created operational interdependencies among national agencies and economic actors.

However, AOIP has failed to demonstrate the spillover dynamics that functionalist theory posits as essential to genuine integration. Functional cooperation has not generated pressures for political convergence; indeed, member states have pursued increasingly differentiated external strategies despite shared commitments to AOIP cooperation frameworks. The persistence and even intensification of political tensions, particularly regarding South China Sea disputes, despite expanded technical cooperation in maritime domains, suggests that in highly contested geopolitical environments, states successfully compartmentalize cooperation and competition rather than allowing functional collaboration to transform political relationships.

V. Conclusion

This study has examined Indonesia's implementation of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific through the lens of the "open-ended mechanism" during President Joko Widodo's administration (2014-2024). Our analysis reveals that Indonesia's approach to AOIP operationalization represents a sophisticated attempt to advance regional integration through functional cooperation while accommodating the diverse interests and varying capacities of both ASEAN member states and external partners. The open-ended mechanism, characterized by its flexibility, inclusivity, and emphasis on practical cooperation across maritime, connectivity, sustainable development, and economic domains, reflects Indonesia's recognition that sustainable regional order in the Indo-Pacific requires building dense networks of interdependence rather than forcing rigid alignments.

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The study's findings carry important implications for understanding contemporary regionalism and middle power diplomacy. Indonesia's open-ended mechanism represents what we term "integration without supranationalism" a form of regional ordering that increases interdependence and institutionalization without sovereignty pooling or binding political commitments. This approach may constitute a distinctively flexible model of regionalism appropriate for managing diversity in complex geopolitical environments, or it may simply reflect the inherent limitations of middle power leadership when confronted by intensifying great power competition. The Jokowi era established AOIP's frameworks and demonstrated Indonesia's capacity to shape regional discourse, but the ultimate test of this integration strategy will be whether functional cooperation proves sustainable as strategic competition intensifies further.

Looking forward, the Prabowo administration (2024-2029) inherits both opportunities and challenges in advancing AOIP implementation. The institutional foundations and partnership frameworks established during the Jokowi era provide platforms for deepening functional integration, while sub-regional mechanisms offer pathways for variable-geometry cooperation that accommodates ASEAN diversity. However, growing divergence in member states' external alignments, resource dependencies on competing powers, and the intensification of strategic competition in critical domains like technology and critical minerals pose fundamental challenges to ASEAN centrality and Indonesia's mediating role. The success of AOIP will ultimately depend not only on Indonesia's diplomatic skill in maintaining consensus and mobilizing resources but also on whether the major powers choose to respect ASEAN's autonomy or continue pressuring member states toward exclusive alignments. In this context, Indonesia's open-ended mechanism represents both a pragmatic response to current constraints and an aspirational vision for a more inclusive, stable Indo-Pacific regional order.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Amnesty International's Challenge in Addressing the Women's Rights Crisis (Gender Apartheid) after the Taliban's Political Coup in Afghanistan

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Abstract

After the Taliban coup in Afghanistan, women's rights deteriorated further, creating a state of so-called Gender Apartheid. Violations included restrictions on access to schools and jobs, forced marriages, withholding of identity cards, and bans on public appearances. Many women were imprisoned and tortured for violating religious rules. As evidenced by Amnesty International's report, more than 50% of women in Afghanistan currently experience Gender Apartheid, down from 78% in 2021 and 60% in 2022. This research examines the multifaceted challenges Amnesty International faces in addressing the escalating women's rights crisis in the post-coup landscape. The method used is a Qualitative Approach with a Liberal Feminism Perspective and International Organization Theory according to Clive Archer. Clive Archer explains the role of international organization through three approaches, first, international organization as instruments, second, international organization as forum/arena, and third, international organization as independent actor. The results showed that the challenges were divided into internal and external challenges. Internal challenges such as the safety of activists and lack of funding. External challenges include a lack of support from major countries, the complex Taliban culture, and distrust of Amnesty International.

Keywords: Amnesty International, Gender Apartheid, International Organization, Liberal feminism, Taliban.

I. Introduction

Human rights are an important concept that protects the dignity, freedom and well-being of individuals. Everyone has the right to live with dignity, but it is also necessary to respect and protect those rights. The state must protect the rights of its citizens and ensure justice. However, discrimination based on race, gender, religion and sexual orientation continues to be a serious problem around the world. Liberal feminism emphasizes that biological differences between men and women cannot be used as a basis for limiting women's rights and opportunities. This school of thought holds that every individual possesses the same rational capacity and is therefore entitled to equal freedom and opportunities in various aspects of life. One of the leading figures in liberal feminism, Naomi Wolf, asserts that women must continue to fight for equal rights and the freedom to make life choices without dependence on men. From this perspective, the crisis of women's rights following the Taliban coup in Afghanistan represents a form of gender inequality stemming from a patriarchal system and male dominance that

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restricts women's freedoms and rights (Azizah, 2021).

This study employs Clive Archer's theory of international organizations to analyze the role of Amnesty International. Archer explains that international organizations, including International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs), can act as actors with distinct identities and objectives, even while remaining dependent on state support and other actors. In this context, Amnesty International functions as an INGO that promotes the protection of human rights through advocacy, research, and international campaigns. This theory is relevant for analyzing the challenges faced by Amnesty International in addressing the crisis of women's rights or gender apartheid in Afghanistan (Hayati, 2023, p. 17).

The role gap between men and women is still evident in various aspects of life, such as education and employment. The following data show a significant gap in gender equality between men and women in Afghanistan:

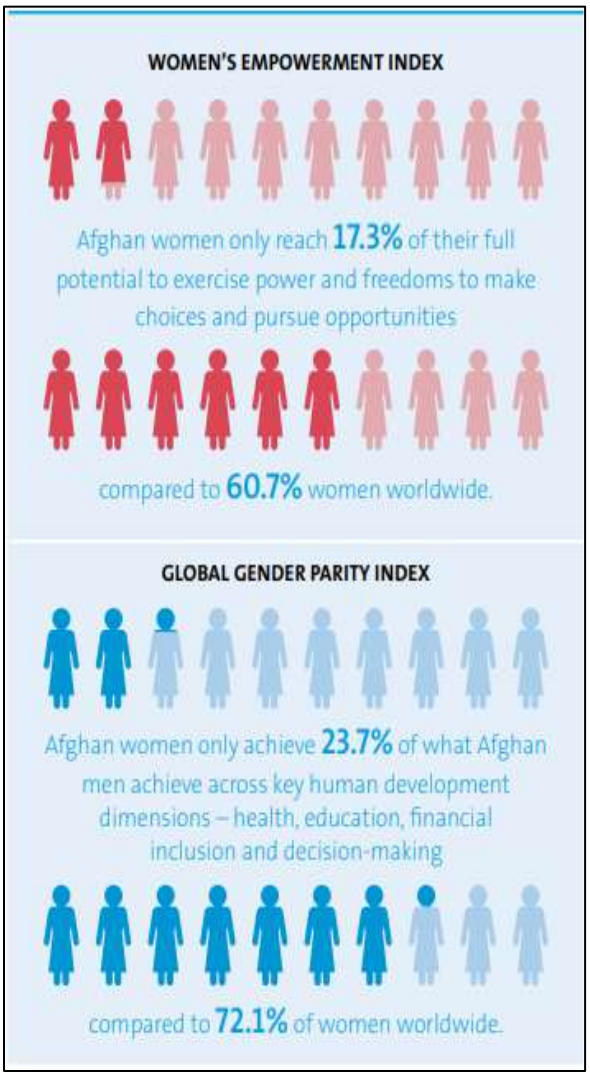


Fig 1. Afghanistan Gender Index 2024
Source: Gender Index (2024)

Afghanistan remains one of the countries with a high level of gender inequality. This disparity has worsened since 2021, as the Taliban has taken control of most of the country. The Taliban's far-right ideology severely restricts access to gender equality, resulting in the rights of many women being neglected. This Gender Index report shows that only 17.3% of women in Afghanistan are able to exercise their rights to freedom. Meanwhile, in terms of human development—which includes health, education, financial

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inclusion, and opportunities for decision-making—the figure stands at only 23.7%. These numbers are certainly far from the expectations for the implementation of gender equality there (Gender Index, 2024).

This crisis is reflected in the Taliban's various discriminatory policies toward women. According to a report by Mehran Metra, the Taliban has repealed a number of regulations protecting women's rights, including the Law on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, and dissolved human rights monitoring agencies. In addition, women face various forms of rights violations, such as forced marriage, gender-based violence, arbitrary detention, and extrajudicial killings. In the first year and a half of the Taliban's rule, 159 women were killed and 1,115 women were imprisoned on charges of "moral corruption" (Ameliya, 2024).

This gender inequality is further evident through more than 40 decrees issued by the Taliban since 2021. These policies include a ban on co-education, gender-segregated classrooms, restrictions on women's access to employment, the dissolution of the Afghanistan Human Rights Commission, and a ban on women working at the United Nations (UN) office in Afghanistan in 2023. These various policies demonstrate systematic and institutionalized discrimination against women, thereby reinforcing practices of gender subordination and apartheid in Afghanistan. Although there are various regulations that regulate gender equality based on the principle that every individual, both men and women, are entitled to equal rights, challenges still remain. there are several obstacles in achieving gender equality. These include cultural and social situations that still adopt the concept of patriarchy, the double workload faced by women between reproductive and productive tasks, and the false beliefs that still develop in society regarding marginalization, subordination, stereotypes, violence, and workload (Audina, 2022, p. 11).

Discrimination against women, particularly in Afghanistan, is a pressing issue that needs attention in international relations. Women in Afghanistan face severe discrimination and poverty, which limits their access to education, health and employment. With the withdrawal of US and NATO troops in 2021, the Taliban managed to seize much territory, including the provincial capital of Zaranj on August 6, 2021. After the Taliban coup, policies were adopted that severely restricted women's rights, including mandatory face coverings and banning education for girls beyond the primary level. These policies violated the human rights of women and children (Setyawan et al., 2024, p. 22).

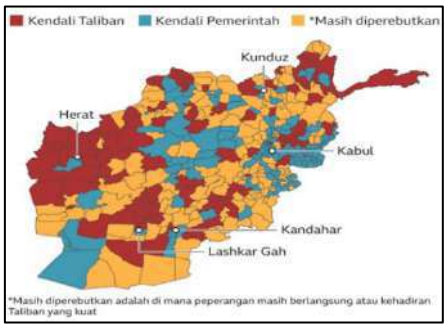


Fig 2. Afghanistan power map 2021
Source: BBC News (2021)

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In 2021, most of Afghanistan, namely 90%, is under Taliban control, except for a small number of other areas. For example, in the provinces of Ghazni and Maidan Wardak which are located in the North and Northeast. Then there are also urban areas such as Kunduz, Herat, Kandahar, and Lashkar Gah. This organization established a government based on a very strict interpretation of Islamic law. In this context, the Taliban controls several districts in the administrative center as well as in terms of security and other government institutions (Sundari et al., 2024).

The Taliban implemented more than 40 discriminatory decrees that could be considered "Gender Apartheid." International conventions consider gender apartheid to be a form of apartheid. "International conventions consider apartheid a serious crime and severe discrimination. These decrees include harsh sanctions against women, such as forced marriage and domestic violence. The issue of gender apartheid in Afghanistan can be understood through a human rights perspective, particularly the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, 1979).

Gender disparity becomes a human rights issue when women are denied equal access to education, employment, political participation, and freedom of movement. Under Taliban rule, restrictions on Afghan women systematically limit these rights, constituting violations of internationally recognized human rights standards. CEDAW further defines discrimination against women as any distinction or restriction that impairs women's enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms. Therefore, gender apartheid in Afghanistan can be viewed as an institutionalized form of gender-based discrimination that deprives women of their fundamental rights, making it both a gender issue and a human rights concern. Many laws protecting women's rights were repealed, and institutions monitoring human rights violations were disbanded (Mehran, 2023).

Tab.1. Data on access to public services for women and men in 2024

Health Service	Men : 77% Wowen : 67%
Education	Men : 48% Women : 3%
Mental Health Support	Men : 22% Women : 15%
Formal Dispute Resolution	Men : 50% Women : 3%
Informal Dispute Resolution	Men : 50% Women : 7%
None	Men : 18% Women : 2%

Source: UNAMA Report (2024)
Notes: Adopted from United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan

Amnesty International considers the practice of Gender Apartheid a crime under international law and continues to collect evidence of abuses committed by the Taliban. However, they have not been able to make a significant impact. An analysis of the challenges Amnesty International faces in addressing the situation of women's rights in Afghanistan is needed (Nabiyyin & Sinambela, 2021).

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II. Methods

The purpose of this research is to understand how Amnesty International's efforts and challenges in overcoming the crisis of women's rights (gender apartheid) after the political coup of the Taliban group in Afghanistan. In this study, the researcher used a descriptive qualitative research method that allowed the author to collect data through analyzing documents relevant to the issue being studied. With this approach, the author can deeply understand the causes of Gender Apartheid in various countries, especially in Afghanistan, and observe the various responses to this issue from the international community and international institutions.

This approach also allows the author to explain in a complex and structured manner the issues that are the focus of the research. In addition, this research aims to present informative results regarding Amnesty International's challenges in dealing with the Women's Rights Crisis (Gender Apartheid) following the political coup by the Taliban group in Afghanistan.

III. Theoritical Framework

As an international organization, Amnesty International has made various efforts to address the women's rights crisis (gender apartheid) that emerged after the political coup by the Taliban group in Afghanistan. As we know, Amnesty International cannot directly stop this gender Apartheid issue, because as an international organization, its power is limited by the sovereignty of the country controlled by the Taliban. The Taliban group considers Afghanistan as its territory, so neither other countries nor international organizations have the right to intervene. However, it cannot be denied that until now, Amnesty International has carried out many efforts as an independent instrument, arena and actor according to Clive Archer in fighting for women's rights.

a. Effort as an Instrument

As a tool for governments, Amnesty International plays an important role in assisting policy and decision-making, especially in the context of diplomacy and interstate cooperation. Amnesty International's role as an instrument is crucial to support a country's interests. However, it is important to note that not all decisions taken within the organization are designed to meet the interests of every member. The creation of an international organization indicates that the states involved have reached a limited consensus through multilateral agreements to govern their activities in a particular field. Amnesty International has a vital role to play in national policy, with the government's long-term goals remaining focused on multilateral coordination (Desyanti & Sushanti, 2025).

Amnesty International's independent reports emphasize the importance of oversight to ensure accountability and prevent women's rights violations. In a recent report, they stated that the Taliban have targeted women's rights defenders and activists, who are often arbitrarily arrested without legal protection (Hayer et al., 2024).

Amnesty International is calling on all UN Member States to take immediate and decisive steps to end impunity and ensure

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justice for women victims of abuses committed by the Taliban. This call comes in line with the recent report submitted by the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Afghanistan at the 52nd session of the Human Rights Council, which states that in recent years, the Taliban have targeted women's rights defenders, academics and activists with unlawful detentions. Many of them were arbitrarily arrested, without access to legal remedies or their families. These detentions are believed to have occurred as a result of their public criticism of Taliban policies. Amnesty International calls on the United Nations Human Rights Council to urgently establish an independent investigative mechanism in Afghanistan, focusing on preserving evidence to pursue international justice. They emphasized the need to collect and preserve evidence for future prosecutions in accordance with international principles of justice (Amnesty International, 2021).

In a recent report, Amnesty International highlighted that during the conflict in Afghanistan, women have experienced injustice, lost access to the truth and redress. They propose principles to support accountability in conflict and provide justice for all victims. In its latest public statement, Amnesty International calls on all countries to establish a Fact-Finding Mission or independent investigative mechanism in Afghanistan similar to those already in place in countries such as Ethiopia, Iran and Myanmar. This mechanism should have a mandate and sufficient resources for several years to investigate, collect and preserve evidence of human rights violations occurring across the country (Amnesty International, 2023).

Therefore, in Amnesty International's report presented at the 57th session of the UN Human Rights Council, it was stated that during the four decades of conflict in Afghanistan, women have suffered injustice and lost access to truth and redress. Human rights violations committed by the Taliban and other armed groups occurred before August 2021, and failure to address these cases risks neglecting the victims. Amnesty International emphasizes the importance of rebuilding trust in Afghan society and providing justice for all victims (Ramcharan, 2025).

Amnesty International's Crisis Evidence Laboratory has authenticated photos and videos from at least eight incidents uploaded to social media between May and August 2022. In these incidents, large numbers of women were arbitrarily arrested and detained without trial by the Taliban in Panjshir. The videos show at least 87 women at various stages of detention, many with their hands tied. Witnesses reported that the Taliban detained civilians after clashes with the National Resistance Forces (NRF) in Panjshir (Zalalzai, 2021).

b. Effort as an Arena

Amnesty International acts as a platform that brings its members together to discuss current developments. Within the organization, members have the opportunity to discuss, debate and work together, even when there are differences of opinion. As a collaborative forum, Amnesty International allows its members to exchange views on issues of common concern, while understanding each other's perspectives. As

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such, the organization serves as an arena for members to gather, consult and collectively formulate international decisions or agreements, such as conventions, treaties, protocols and other agreements (Ristovska, 2021).

In-depth consultations with over 150 stakeholders, including human rights defenders in Afghanistan, academics, protesters, women activists, youth, civil society representatives and journalists. The Bahhan meeting brought together delegates from several countries in South Asia (Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Bhutan). Amnesty International had brought them together to give voice to the frustrations of the Afghan people with the international response (Putri et al., 2023).

The human rights community in Afghanistan states that they not only face ostracization by the Taliban, but also by the international community. Human rights defenders who spoke to Amnesty International expressed concern about the deepening human rights crisis in Afghanistan, which is largely distorted by Taliban rhetoric and propaganda. They seek to convince the world that Afghanistan is now more "secure" and has a thriving economy, where citizens are valued and treated with dignity according to Sharia (Islamic law) and local culture. However, the reality is that the Taliban have created an environment filled with fear and tight control (Brobbey, 2023).

After three years, the frustration in the Afghan society has become more prominent. Despite numerous statements and meetings, the world still feels uneasy as the Taliban continue to violate human rights and destroy two decades of progress in many aspects of public and private life. Every actor involved in Afghanistan needs to collaborate, find safe and creative platforms to discuss and find effective long-term solutions. This can only happen if they have access to the necessary tools, resources and skills. The international community must commit to supporting these measures, respect the diverse voices of the people, and avoid unprincipled engagement with the Taliban, which will only harm these collective efforts (Amnesty International, 2025).

c. Effort as an Independent Actor

In its capacity as an independent actor, Amnesty International has a crucial role in formulating policies without external interference. Archer explains that Amnesty International functions as an autonomous entity, capable of taking action globally without significant influence from outside forces. They have the freedom to make decisions and act within established corridors. Furthermore, the international organization contributes to the dynamics of world development through policies taken based on the aspirations of its members. For more than six decades, the organization has been exposing the darker side of the world. As a global movement with more than 7 million members, Amnesty International strives to create a world where all human beings respect human rights (Diego, 2022).

Amnesty International is committed to utilizing funds in accordance with the Global Strategic Framework. The total spending on human rights is divided into six strategic results and flexible work areas, namely 20% to

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strengthen freedom of expression and association, 13% to guarantee the right to peaceful assembly for every individual, 18% to promote gender, racial and intersectional justice, 8% to strengthen the right to health, housing and social security, 4% to ensure climate justice, 13% to protect the rights of refugees, migrants and individuals on the frontlines of crisis, 24% earmarked for flexible work areas. As such, Amnesty International strives to make a significant impact in the fight for human rights around the world. 91% of Amnesty International's income is "unrestricted", meaning it has the freedom to allocate it according to the most pressing needs (Ganzfried, 2021).

Amnesty International in the report "Death in Slow Motion: Women and Girls under Taliban Rule" states that the Taliban's policies violate human rights governed by international treaties. This report analyzes whether these violations can be categorized as crimes under international law, specifically related to gender persecution. The data in this report comes from research involving interviews with 90 women and 10 girls from 20 provinces in Afghanistan between September 2021 and June 2022 (Amnesty International, 2024).

Other sources include interviews with Taliban detention staff members, NGOs, UN representatives and experts on the situation in Afghanistan. The report's conclusions show systematic human rights violations from August 2021 to January 2023. The lack of oversight of the situation points to the need for further investigations into violence and violations of the rights of women and girls in Afghanistan (Amnesty International, 2023).

Amnesty International has interviewed a number of female protesters who recounted their experiences of physical violence perpetrated by Taliban agents during peaceful protests. In some cases, the treatment they experienced could be categorized as torture or even as cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment, which is clearly prohibited by international law. Methods of violence used against women during protests include beatings with pipes, whips, or firearms; torture with electric shocks; and the use of tear gas. Based on information compiled by Amnesty International and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) as of February 2022, more than 30 women have been arbitrarily arrested and detained in the country simply for taking part in peaceful protests (Watch, 2024).

IV. Findings and Discussions

a. Amnesty International's Internal Challenges in Overcoming Apartheid Gender in post-Taliban political coup Afghanistan

As an international organization, Amnesty International certainly faces various internal challenges in carrying out its role. These challenges arise from within the organization itself. As a non-governmental organization, Amnesty International cannot operate alone. Despite their status as independent actors, they still need support in the form of human resources and funds, which are clearly internal challenges that must be faced. The following are some of the internal challenges faced by Amnesty International as an independent instrument and actor.

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b. Challenges as Instruments

The safety of local activists and journalists who work with Amnesty International in field data collection is an issue for Amnesty International as an Instrument. As an organization committed to promoting human rights, Amnesty International has sought to compile reports describing grave abuses committed by Taliban groups against women. However, due to the limitations of going directly to the field, Amnesty International relies heavily on the support of journalists and human rights activists to gather information (Afghanistan, 2024).

Unfortunately, many journalists, volunteers and human rights activists have been subjected to abuses by the Taliban, which in turn has hampered Amnesty International's efforts to gather evidence of these crimes. More than 80% of women journalists were forced to cease their activities between August 2021 and August 2023 due to increasingly stringent restrictions. In addition, the UN reported that between March and June 2024, 95 women-led protests were recorded across Afghanistan. In an attempt to disperse these protests, the Taliban reportedly used firearms, water cannons and stun guns (Amnesty International, 2022).

During the period between August 2021 and August 2023, at least 64 journalists were detained by the Taliban, for various lengths of time. One example is Murtaza Behboodi, a French-Afghan journalist, who was released after nine months of detention. On the other hand, activists, human rights defenders and members of civil society continue to face violence, intimidation and surveillance. Many of them are subjected to arbitrary arrest, enforced disappearance and illegal detention. According to UN reports, detainees are often subjected to torture and other ill-treatment, including sexual abuse. Nida Parwani and Zhulia Parsi, two female human rights activists, were arrested on September 19 and 27, 2024 respectively along with their family members, but were released in December. Matiullah Wesa, an education rights activist, was also released in October 2024 after seven months in prison. Nargis Sadat and Parisa Azada Mubariz were arbitrarily arrested by the Taliban, but were released after some time. Meanwhile, many other activists and journalists remain in prison (Amnesty International, 2025).

Some of these cases show that the Taliban are trying to prevent the international community from highlighting their abuses. Anyone deemed to be hindering the group in implementing their ideology is arbitrarily arrested. The Taliban did not hesitate to torture anyone who became their opponents. To this day, the Taliban still frequently carry out arbitrary arrests of journalists and human rights activists. This is part of their efforts to silence criticism and prevent independent reporting on their human rights abuses. Since returning to power in Afghanistan in August 2021, the Taliban has taken harsh measures against press freedom and freedom of expression, including the arrest, exile and intimidation of journalists and human rights defenders. International organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have denounced these actions as serious violations of human rights and press freedom. Amnesty International urgently needs journalists and human rights activists

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who can be key witnesses to the atrocities committed by the Taliban (Watkins, 2021).

d. Challenges as Independent Actor

Amnesty International, as an independent actor, often faces challenges related to financial limitations that can affect its efforts to maintain neutrality and credibility. Given the fact that Amnesty International relies heavily on individual donations, we cannot ignore the impact of the economic instability that has hit various countries since 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This causes the organization to face major budgetary challenges, especially as most of the funding they receive comes from voluntary contributions and donations from members and individuals. Amnesty International derives its financing mainly from voluntary contributions and individual donations, without relying on support from governments or international institutions (Rodriguez, 2023).

Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 problem, individuals, the private sector and countries have been focusing on how to recover from this health disaster. In the midst of the pandemic, in 2021, new conflicts continue to emerge, while unresolved conflicts are getting worse. In countries such as Myanmar, Ethiopia, Israel/Palestine, Afghanistan, Yemen, Libya and Burkina Faso, these conflicts have led to massive violations of human rights and international humanitarian law (Callamard, 2021).

Most of Amnesty International's income comes from small individual donations. In 2023, more than 1.7 million people donated, with an average contribution of €13.30 per month. Total fundraising reached €370 million, down 4% from the previous year. 72% of funds came from individual donations, with the remainder from grants, major donors and other sources. Amnesty recognizes that rising global costs are impacting donors, leading to a 13% decrease in average individual donations. For 2023, spending stands at €383 million, an 8% increase from last year. The budget is allocated to human rights research, campaigns and fundraising. However, challenges remain due to the uncertainty of donations from donors (Amnesty International, 2025).

A report published by Amnesty International shows that since 2021, funds raised have decreased significantly, while global problems have increased. Although 91% of the funds raised are flexibly allocated according to the priority issues identified by Amnesty International, challenges remain. The unpredictability of donations from donors, which vary in size, is an obstacle to the organization addressing the issues at hand (Amnesty International, 2023).

e. Amnesty International' External Challenges in Overcoming Apartheid Gender in post-Taliban political coup Afghanistan

The challenges faced by Amnesty International are not only internal, but also external. In fact, external challenges are often more complex and hamper the organization's journey. In an effort to address the women's rights crisis (gender apartheid) in Afghanistan, support from various parties is crucial. Without the help of other countries and the support of

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the Afghan government itself, Amnesty International will find it difficult to take the necessary actions. Therefore, there are several external challenges that Amnesty International faces as an independent instrument, arena and actor in dealing with the women's rights crisis (Gender Apartheid).

f. Challenges as Instruments

The lack of support and assistance from major countries is a challenge for Amnesty International in carrying out its functions. Amnesty International can serve as an important tool for countries in formulating foreign policy, imposing sanctions, and pressuring Afghanistan to end discrimination against women. Unfortunately, many countries are still indifferent to the issue of violence against women. For example, China does not see the Taliban group or the form of government in Afghanistan as the perpetrators of women's crimes or a problem. China's main focus in the Afghan region is on economic factors (Amnesty International, 2021).

China sees security stability in Afghanistan as critical to protecting security in Xinjiang province and their investments in the region. Conflict in Afghanistan could affect Chinese investments, including in large projects such as copper mining in Mes Aynak, which is worth 3.4 billion USD. To keep these projects safe, China chose to cooperate with the Taliban and avoid conflict. They put less pressure on the Taliban over the issue of violence against women, prioritizing China's economic stability and national security (Mawardi et al., 2022).

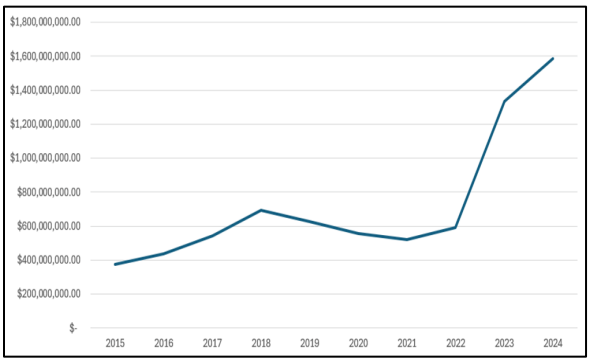


Fig 4. China-Afghanistan Total Bilateral Trade 2015-2024
Source: General Administration of Customs of China (GACC) (2025)

In the global context, the issue of equality has become a major concern of many international organizations, including the United Nations (UN). The UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development sets gender equality and reducing inequality as two main goals that all countries need to achieve. This reflects the importance of the principle of equality in creating a more just and harmonious world. Gaps in the understanding and implementation of human rights can be seen in various contexts, such as economic inequality, racial discrimination, unfair treatment of women, and political oppression. Developed countries often enjoy better access to human rights compared to developing countries, creating significant inequalities among the global community. Therefore, concerted efforts from the international community are needed to address these disparities and ensure that human rights are recognized and respected equally around the world. In this context, research and advocacy continue to strive to raise global awareness of the importance of human rights and the need for concrete action to address this gap (Nguyen, 2025).

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g. Challenges as Arena

Afghanistan's cultural and religious complexities pose challenges to Amnesty International's universal advocacy efforts. This complicates the organization's role as a forum for discussion to find effective solutions. Amnesty International and similar organizations are often faced with the dilemma of either consistently championing universal values or adjusting their approach to operate and engage in dialogue in a highly conservative region like Afghanistan under Taliban rule. This creates ethical and strategic challenges that are not easy to overcome (Welchman, 2021).

The Taliban viewed Afghanistan at the time as a place far removed from the teachings of Islam, so their return to power was aimed at bringing pure Islam back under their control. In this process, the Taliban believed that such purification would rid Afghanistan of the influence of modernization and Western propaganda. The Taliban were more readily accepted in Afghanistan due to the high degree of homogeneity of the society, which is dominated by Sunni Islam of Pashtun ethnic origin. This dominance has allowed religion to legitimize power based on Islamic law, which is often used to justify violence against women, known as Gender Apartheid (Amnesty International, 2025).

Islamic identity is deeply embedded in the Taliban, not only as an official label on the name of the government or the flag that is the symbol of the state, but also seen in the physical appearance and activities of individual members. Akhundzada, as the supreme and undisputed leader of the Taliban regime, did not provide reasons or justifications for his rejection of girls' education. However, in his short written decisions that were widely disseminated by Taliban officials, he always emphasized that his decisions were in full accordance with Islamic law (Schmeding, 2023).

Meanwhile, some experts argue that the Taliban leadership's opposition to girls' education is likely based on Afghanistan's tribal patriarchal traditions, rather than religious teachings. Misogynistic practices, including in Muslim-majority countries like Afghanistan, continue to promote male domination over women and girls, with the Taliban's un-Islamic ban on girls' education a clear example of this phenomenon (Piela, 2021).

h. Challenges as Independent Actor

The Taliban's reticence towards the intervention of international organizations poses a challenge to Amnesty International as an independent actor. Amnesty International operates without interference from any state interest. However, the Taliban view international organizations, including Amnesty International, as tools for the West to undermine Islamic governments. The Taliban's distrust of Amnesty International makes every effort made by the organization perceived as an intrusion from Western countries (Tjäder, 2021).

Furthermore, the Taliban believe that Afghanistan is under their control, so no other state or international organization has the right to control their internal affairs. The provisions contained in Article 7 of the 1998

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Rome Statute provide an explanation of the various acts that can be considered international crimes. In this context, the implementation of humanitarian intervention can not only be carried out based on the existence of crimes against humanity occurring in a country, but must also receive a mandate or permission from the UN Security Council, either through collective or individual actions (Amnesty International, 2023).

In relation to the steps taken by Amnesty International in overcoming Gender Apartheid in Afghanistan perpetrated by the Taliban group, this is in accordance with the provisions of Article 7 of the Rome Statute of 1998, precisely in paragraph 10, which regulates Apartheid as an international crime. Thus, the intervention that has been carried out by Amnesty International can be considered to have a strong foundation. Despite being based on a solid legal foundation, namely the Rome Statute which is the basis for Amnesty International's intervention, the resulting changes have been minimal (Amnesty International, 2025).

Various reports published by Amnesty International have clearly demonstrated the immunity that the Taliban group enjoys, which has limited any decisive action that can be taken to date. Impunity continues to apply to such crimes under Taliban rule. There have been no adequate or transparent investigations into extrajudicial executions or other gross human rights violations. Taliban officials continue to deny the existence of such violations and reject the findings of non-governmental organizations, including Amnesty International (Jaya, 2023).

It can be traced back where the conflict in Afghanistan was not entirely triggered by the behavior patterns of local people but external influences also played a big role, making this country often trapped in tension. It can be seen back to the reign of King Zhahir Shah in 1973, who was considered a "puppet" of the Soviet Union. At that time, King Zhahir was given the authority to carry out a cultural revolution, which was one of the Soviet Union's strategies to spread communism in the Afghanistan region. However, this revolution actually caused controversy that triggered rejection from the Islamic community (Murtazashvili & Murtazashvili, 2021).

Given this situation, this has led the Taliban to feel that Amnesty International is not trying to eliminate Gender Apartheid, but they also see it as a tool for Western countries to intervene in Afghanistan and destroy Islamic ideology. The poor relationship between Western countries and Islamic countries has given rise to various prejudices. History records that interactions between the West and Islam, and vice versa, are often filled with suspicion and even hatred. In various Western media, there is also prejudice that has emerged against Islam, reflecting Western dissatisfaction with the presence of Islam, which is often considered a marginalized entity. This has led the Taliban to doubt the credibility of Amnesty International, which is seen as one of the institutions originating from the West (Amnesty International, 2023).

Amnesty International is known as a supporter of liberal values such as individual freedoms, including freedom of speech, religion, and expression. The organization also

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consistently supports human rights and democratic principles. Political parties that uphold liberal principles generally receive support from groups that agree with these ideas. On the other hand, the Taliban group adheres to strict Islamic conservatism. The strict Islamic conservatism implemented by the Taliban refers to an extreme and literal interpretation of sharia (Islamic law), which is combined with Pashtun customary norms. As a result, the resulting policies are very restrictive, especially for women and minority groups (Kamal, 2021).

As a supporter of liberalism, Amnesty International puts forward rational reasoning without considering the context in depth. Meanwhile, the Taliban group argues that the Islamic ideology they adhere to teaches the importance of seeking welfare, not just freedom that does not pay attention to common interests. For them, the products of international organizations from the West that contain liberal values are far from the essence of Islamic values that are oriented towards welfare as a whole, because liberalism is often understood only as a search for freedom alone (Ife et al., 2022).

V. Conclusion

Amnesty International faces challenges in carrying out its role, which are divided into internal and external challenges. Internally, the organization seeks to protect local activists and journalists who help collect data on human rights violations under the Taliban, particularly those affecting women. However, many local partners experienced abuses from the Taliban, which hindered information gathering. Financial limitations were also a challenge, as reliance on individual donations made it vulnerable to unstable economic situations.

External challenges are more complex, with a lack of support from major countries that sometimes manipulate human rights issues for political gain. Nevertheless, reports of human rights violations are important for influencing foreign policy. Afghanistan's cultural and religious complexities complicate Amnesty International's advocacy efforts, where a universal approach often conflicts with the Taliban's strict interpretation of Islamic law. In addition, the Taliban see international organizations including Amnesty International as a threat to their rule, adding to the difficulty in carrying out the organization's mission.

The efforts made by the Taliban group are difficult to define as effective or not. On the one hand, Amnesty International has been successful in terms of international advocacy and raising public awareness. However, the organization has limitations in creating direct change in Afghanistan, with the Taliban's ideology and lack of mechanisms to enforce change and the political and security situation also hindering intervention.

However, the pressure from Amnesty International is meaningful to keep the world's attention on women's rights violations which is important for future measures. Amnesty International played a key role in raising the issue of Gender Apartheid internationally, even without the power to pressure the Taliban. As evidenced in Amnesty International's 2023 Report, more than 50% of women in Afghanistan are experiencing a

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women's rights crisis (Gender Apartheid), better than the previous years which reached 78% in 2021 and 60% in 2022. In addition, Amnesty International also successfully encouraged the UN special rapporteur to consider the Taliban's treatment of women as "crimes against humanity". Although the Taliban's stance remains unchanged, international pressure has resulted in many countries refusing to officially recognize the Taliban as a legitimate government.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Role of Global Civil Society in Challenging the Hegemony of Pharmaceutical Corporations

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Abstract

This research examines how global civil society groups challenge the power of richer countries and drug companies under the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS). Most research has focused on TRIPS's legal and health impacts, with less attention to civil society's efforts to push back against the dominance of developed countries and big pharmaceutical companies. Using Hegemony Theory, this research examines examples through document analysis of WTO agreements, reports, campaign materials, and academic writing. It focuses on efforts to make generic drugs more available and civil society actions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Results show that civil society has shifted access to medicine to a global justice and human rights issue. They did this through legal work, public action, and cross-border cooperation. However, initiatives such as the Doha Declaration and the TRIPS waiver have been limited by persistent power imbalances. These findings underscore both the potential and the limitations of civil society in advancing more equitable global governance.

Keywords: TRIPS, Global Civil Society, Global Governance, Pharmaceutical Corporations

I. Introduction

Recent developments in global governance have expanded the influence of non-state actors, particularly global civil society, in international policymaking processes. This trend is particularly evident in debates over intellectual property rights and access to medicines, where civil society organizations have become increasingly active in transnational advocacy networks and global policy discussions. Within the framework of neoliberal globalization, international economic rules are often negotiated by states, multinational corporations, and other influential actors whose bargaining power is far from equal. These power asymmetries have fueled ongoing debates about the fairness and legitimacy of global regulatory frameworks, particularly in the field of public health. Against this backdrop, global civil society has emerged as an important force in shaping international norms, mobilizing public opinion, and advocating for greater consideration of social justice in global governance. Its influence has been especially evident in debates surrounding the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS), particularly regarding its impact on access to essential medicines in developing countries.

One example of this inequality is evident in the management of global intellectual property rights protection, primarily through the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS), which was adopted under the auspices of the World Trade Organization and entered into force on 1 January 1995. The TRIPS Agreement introduced a comprehensive system of patent protection that extended to pharmaceutical products, fundamentally reshaping the global regulation of medicines. For many developing countries, this marked a significant shift, making it more difficult to ensure affordable access to generic medicines. By strengthening patent rights over essential drugs, TRIPS has limited the policy options

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available to governments seeking to expand access to healthcare and has reinforced existing inequalities in the global health system. Many developing countries have faced legal and economic barriers to producing or importing low-cost generic medicines, with important consequences for public health (Karlsbakk, 2005). These tensions became particularly visible during the HIV/AIDS epidemic, when strict patent protections often conflicted with the urgent need to provide life-saving antiretroviral treatment to millions of people. Rejection of the use of TRIPS flexibilities, such as compulsory licensing, is often accompanied by diplomatic pressure and threats of economic retaliation from developed countries and global pharmaceutical corporations (Joseph, 2003).

Existing scholarship has largely focused on the technical dimensions of the TRIPS Agreement and global health advocacy. Yet it has devoted comparatively little attention to the structural and ideological power relations that shape the possibilities—and limits—of resistance in global governance. Most studies focus on how civil society campaigns function, but often miss the deeper Gramscian ideas of engineered consent and structural dependency that keep developing countries tied to unequal trade systems. This study aims to fill that gap by asking two main questions. First, how do industrialized countries and pharmaceutical companies use their power within the World Trade Organization (WTO) to weaken resistance and control information? Second, can global civil society truly act as a force for change, or does it end up supporting the current trade system? This research applies Hegemony Theory to the post-COVID-19 intellectual property debate, moving beyond legal details to show how economic elites design global justice systems to absorb opposition and to highlight the limits of reforming the system from within.

II. Methods

This research employs a qualitative descriptive-critical approach to examine the dynamics of power within the TRIPS regime and the strategies of resistance pursued by global civil society actors. A qualitative method particularly well-suited to exploring meanings, narratives, social interactions, and power relations among states, pharmaceutical corporations, international organizations, and civil society groups as they relate to intellectual property rights and access to medicines.

The research is guided by Hegemony Theory, which explains how dominant actors maintain and reproduce power within international systems not only through coercion but also through the construction of norms, institutions, and ideas that become widely accepted as legitimate. From this perspective, global governance arrangements often reflect the interests of powerful states and economic actors while appearing neutral and universally beneficial. Hegemony is therefore sustained through a combination of material capabilities, institutional influence, and ideological consent. The study relies on secondary data collected from academic journals, books, institutional reports, civil society publications, official documents from international organizations, and credible online news sources. Data collection was conducted through a systematic literature review of scholarly and policy discussions on TRIPS, access to generic medicines, pharmaceutical patents, and civil society activism in global health governance.

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The collected data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. This technique enables the identification of recurring themes, patterns of argumentation, and representations of power across various sources. Particular attention is given to narratives concerning intellectual property rights, access to essential medicines, and the role of civil society in advocating policy change. Through this analytical process, the study critically evaluates the extent to which global civil society can challenge structural inequalities within the international intellectual property regime and contribute to greater global health justice.

III. Discussion

a. Inequality in TRIPS Governance

The TRIPS regime at the WTO represents a form of global knowledge hegemony, in which the interests of developed countries and multinational pharmaceutical corporations are institutionalized into international rules. Drahos and Braithwaite (2004) demonstrate that a small group of US elites in the 1980s successfully established US-style intellectual property standards as a global norm through the WTO. The result is "information feudalism": a global IP regime that effectively binds other countries to U.S. patent standards. The TRIPS Agreement's mandatory provisions require all WTO members to adopt high standards (many of which are modeled on US domestic law) and enforce them through trade mechanisms. Since its birth in 1994, the WTO has been the institution that enforces US IP standards globally. In this context, patent rules (e.g., antiretroviral drugs) become a "matter of life and death" for developing countries, as patents determine whether cheap generic drugs can be produced or imported (Drahos & Braithwaite, 2004).

Institutionally, the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) is administered by the WTO Council for TRIPS, which monitors its implementation and operation (World Trade Organization [WTO], n.d.). However, many scholars argue that the TRIPS regime has been shaped largely by the interests of developed countries, especially the United States, the European Union, and Japan, working closely with major pharmaceutical companies. Historical studies show that a small group of U.S. corporations, led by Pfizer and other pharmaceutical firms, played a key role in pushing intellectual property protection onto the multilateral trade agenda during the 1980s (Drahos & Braithwaite, 2004; Sell, 2003). According to Drahos and Braithwaite (2004), Pfizer viewed weak patent regimes in countries such as India as a threat to its long-term commercial interests and therefore actively promoted stronger international patent standards. The United States subsequently persuaded the European Communities and Japan to support the incorporation of intellectual property rules into the GATT negotiations, thereby consolidating a powerful coalition of developed states and corporate actors (Correa, 2025).

During the Uruguay Round, developing countries initially opposed the inclusion of intellectual property in the trade regime, arguing that it would restrict industrial development and access to technology. However, under strong political and economic

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pressure from developed countries, they eventually accepted the TRIPS Agreement (Winanti & Young, 2009). The United States reinforced this pressure through Section 301 of the U.S. Trade Act, threatening trade sanctions against countries with weaker patent laws. Brazil, for example, faced retaliation for refusing to recognize pharmaceutical product patents. Former negotiators also acknowledge that developing countries had limited influence over the final agreement because of unequal political power, technical expertise, and negotiating capacity (Correa, 2025).

Pharmaceutical companies have continued to shape global intellectual property rules since the adoption of TRIPS. Drahos and Braithwaite (2004) argue that the industry built strong alliances with business groups, policymakers, and advocacy organizations to promote stricter patent protection. This influence was also evident during the WTO negotiations on the COVID-19 TRIPS waiver. Between 2021 and 2024, over 500 lobbyists participated in the debate, nearly 90 percent of whom opposed the waiver. In 2022, opponents outnumbered supporters by about 32 to 1, highlighting the pharmaceutical industry's far greater lobbying power than civil society groups advocating wider access to medicines (Public Citizen, 2024).

This structural hegemony is also evident in WTO law, although formally, each member state has an equal position (one vote), negotiation by consensus allows strong dominance by developed countries. Small countries often lack the capacity to negotiate and fear sanctions, so the interests of powerful states outweigh theirs. In hegemonic terms, the TRIPS regime reinforces the view of knowledge as a private commodity to be controlled, supporting the industrialization (patent-based) of developed countries while curbing independent innovation in developing countries. As a result, developed countries and pharmaceutical corporations are based there (Drahos & Braithwaite, 2004; Oxfam America, n.d.). As a result, developed countries and pharmaceutical corporations based there maintain their structural dominance under the umbrella of the WTO's TRIPS. The interests of major industrialized countries, particularly the United States, the member states of the European Union, Japan, and Switzerland, have historically played a dominant role in shaping international intellectual property rules. From a hegemonic perspective, the TRIPS regime reinforces the conception of knowledge and innovation as private commodities subject to proprietary control. This framework primarily reflects the interests of developed countries with advanced pharmaceutical and technology sectors, while restricting developing countries' ability to expand access to medicines and to support domestic innovation. Large pharmaceutical companies such as Pfizer, Merck & Co., Johnson & Johnson, Novartis, Roche, GlaxoSmithKline (GSK), and Sanofi have significantly influenced global intellectual property rules, benefiting from stronger patent protection and longer market exclusivity that reinforce their market dominance.

b. TRIPS and Its Impact on Developing Countries

The implementation of TRIPS has a heavy impact on many developing countries. High minimum standards obligations (20-year patents, protection of industrial formulas, etc.) limit public policy options in poor countries and add to the economic burden. Oxfam notes

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that more than 2 billion people in developing countries currently lack access to affordable medicines. The main factor is the high price of new generic drugs that are protected by patents (Oxfam America, n.d.). The high level of IP protection in developing countries can exacerbate the problem of access to cheap drugs, because the longer patent protection lasts, the longer the delay in the entry of much more affordable generic drugs. For example, research shows that granting compulsory licensing (the TRIPS flexibility mechanism) can dramatically lower drug prices – case studies in Taiwan and India found price drops of 73–97% after CL was granted (Tenni, et al., 2022). However, many developing countries are unable or reluctant to utilize these flexibilities due to political, economic, and legal pressures from developed countries. Although the TRIPS Agreement allows measures such as compulsory licensing, many governments hesitate to use them for fear of trade retaliation, diplomatic pressure, or reduced foreign investment. Many developing countries also lack the technical and institutional capacity to use these flexibilities fully.

The continued compliance of developing countries with the TRIPS regime can also be understood through the lens of structural dependence and institutional legitimacy. Despite growing criticism of the WTO and attempts by some actors to question its legitimacy, WTO membership remains closely linked to access to global markets and participation in international trade. As a result, many developing countries perceive compliance with TRIPS as less costly than confronting the economic and political risks associated with non-compliance. From a hegemonic perspective, this situation reflects not only coercion but also the internalization of intellectual property norms that portray strong patent protection as a prerequisite for innovation and economic development. Consequently, even when TRIPS may constrain access to affordable medicines, many developing countries continue to operate within its framework rather than openly challenging it. Meanwhile, generic medicines remain the most effective and sustainable mechanism for reducing drug prices and expanding access to essential treatments (Oxfam America, n.d.; Vawda & Shozi, 2022).

Overall, the IP rules strengthened by TRIPS have negative economic consequences for developing countries. The "TRIPS-plus" patent rules (often adopted in free trade agreements by developed countries) are generally associated with rising drug prices, delays in drug availability, and increased costs for consumers and governments. While the flexibility of TRIPS (such as compulsory licensing and parallel imports) is, on paper, intended to help access, in practice, their use remains rare (Tenni, et al., 2022). Many developing countries also face technical and financial difficulties in meeting these obligations (e.g., building strong patent institutions and enforcement systems), despite limited resources. As a result, while developed countries pursue strengthening IP rights, developing countries often bear the high costs (royalties, patent prices) without receiving technology transfers. In fact, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) once estimated that if patent royalties that had not been paid to developing countries were returned, they would receive around US$5.4 billion per year (Fauziah, 2020).

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In other words, TRIPS prevents the flow of wealth from IP production centers to all corners of the world. The agreement also affects other sectors, such as plant patents, which fuel biopiracy. It concentrates global research on medicines that benefit rich markets, while poor, endemic diseases are ignored. The impact of this system has been particularly evident in the treatment of HIV/AIDS. During the late 1990s and early 2000s, patented antiretroviral medicines were priced at more than US$10,000 per patient per year in many developing countries, making treatment inaccessible for the vast majority of affected populations (Wirtz, Forsythe, Mendoza, & Arredondo, 2009). The introduction of generic alternatives dramatically reduced prices to less than US$100 per patient per year in some cases, demonstrating the critical role of generic competition in expanding access to life-saving medicines (Love, 2007). Similar concerns have emerged regarding treatments for hepatitis C, cancer, and other serious diseases, where patent-protected medicines often remain beyond the financial reach of poor households (Assefa, Hill, Ulikpan , & Williams, 2017).

The impact of this inequality is evident in the health sector, and although TRIPS includes a general health clause, the protections it affords are often insufficient to overcome structural barriers. Data shows that the cost of medicines remains a heavy burden for poor countries. For example, a Peruvian government study (2010) found that the cost of a specific patented cancer drug was 880 times the minimum daily wage, making it clearly unaffordable. Similar conditions are found in many developing countries, where most people pay for medicines out of their own pockets (Oxfam America, n.d.). In short, TRIPS strengthens the dominance of the drug market by U.S./European corporations, while forcing developing countries to sacrifice the policy independence of their pharmaceutical industries.

c. Global Civil Society Resistance Strategy

Given the injustice of TRIPS, global civil society (NGOs, people's movements, human rights advocates) has pursued various strategies of resistance and advocacy. Since the onset of the HIV/AIDS crisis, a consortium of health activists (such as the Treatment Action Campaign in South Africa, Médecins Sans Frontières, Public Citizen, Third World Network, etc.) has raised the narrative of the right to health and the right to medicine, countering the idea that medicine is just a commodity. In its early stages (1990-2000s), the movement successfully used TRIPS' flexibility strategically: threatening and implementing mandatory licensing, fighting for paragraph 6 of the Doha Declaration, and conducting litigation. Their actions prompted a drop in ARV prices in countries such as Brazil and Thailand, so that millions of AIDS patients could be saved (Tenni, et al., 2022). At this point, civil society is blending human rights arguments, legal advocacy, and transnational solidarity to challenge patent monopolies.

However, the current position of CSOs is changing as new challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, increase. Sekalala & Rawson (2022) note that while traditional TRIPS-based approaches (focusing on waivers and flexibility) have been successful in expanding access to antiretroviral medicines (ARVs) used to treat HIV/AIDS, similar strategies have been less successful in improving access to COVID-19 vaccines.

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Therefore, civil society adapted the strategy: they highlighted "vaccine apartheid" and advocated radically. For example, the health rights movement demanded the removal of copyright barriers, rejected the framing of "charity" that burdened the South, and encouraged the scale of vaccine production in developing countries to improve health sovereignty. Global alliances have also protested against distribution inequality, encouraged open-tech initiatives (such as the WHO mRNA Hub), and mobilized public opinion against monopoly pricing. In addition, CSOs use legal channels (human rights litigation, WTO, or domestic court cases) and public diplomacy. For example, the WHO's raising of human rights awareness (through its proposal for a pandemic treaty) is supported by activists as a way of instilling the principle of "right to treatment" in an internationally binding manner.

In this case, the resistance strategy pursued by civil society is fragmented and adaptive, ranging from the use of TRIPS flexibilities (e.g., compulsory licensing and parallel imports) to global campaigns (e.g., media advocacy and political lobbying for TRIPS waivers). Despite facing the power of developed countries and corporations, the civil sector has reframed the problem not only as an IP law issue but also as a matter of global justice and human rights. Movements such as the *Access to Medicine Campaign*, *People's Vaccine Alliance*, *Health Justice Initiative*, as well as active regional activist networks demanding transparency, technology transfer, and accountability. For example, petitions and public lobbying have successfully persuaded many developing countries to apply for IP waivers at the WTO and have pressured some Western governments (such as the Biden administration in 2021) to first support the temporary waiver of vaccine rights (PIH, n.d.). Alternative multilateral efforts were also initiated, such as the establishment of the Medicines Patent Pool (WHO/UN) to facilitate the voluntary licensing of essential medicines. These approaches represent a shift from the old strategy: instead of relying on unequal WTO mechanisms, CSOs are now rallying South-South solidarity and creating global public pressure to address health inequalities.

c. Evaluation of Justice Mechanisms in Global Governance

Various remedial instruments have emerged within the global regime to address access inequality arising from TRIPS, but their effectiveness is limited. The 2001 Doha Declaration was an important political statement affirming that "TRIPS should not deter countries from taking steps to protect public health." (Tenni, et al., 2022). This declaration symbolically guarantees the right to exercise flexibility (e.g., licensing, patent limitations, time extensions for LDCs). However, an evaluation two decades later showed weaknesses in implementation. South Centre (2022) asserts that Doha's promise is "not realized": developed countries often erode the Declaration through FTAs that include stricter TRIPS-plus provisions, thereby weakening the space for developing countries. For example, the imposition of data exclusivity, the right to *Term Extension,* and *Patent Linkage* in TPPs and other FTAs reduces the effectiveness of compulsory licensing. When developing countries seek to take advantage of flexibility (e.g., Brazil 2007, India 2012, Thailand 2006), they are often confronted with intensive litigation by pharmaceutical companies and trade pressure (e.g., US 301

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Watch List). As a result, such a balancing mechanism is primarily confined to paper.

Recent global initiatives, such as the TRIPS waiver for the COVID-19 pandemic, illustrate the dynamics of power politics. The India-South Africa waiver proposal (2020) received widespread support from developing countries, but developed countries withheld it for almost 2 years. Finally, the WTO compromise agreement (June 2022) only covers vaccines with country-specific implementation, which many activists criticize as too narrow. This process shows that formal mechanisms of global justice (temporary waivers, WTO consensus) can be politicized; Although small concessions were eventually reached, developed countries managed to keep almost the entire IP regime intact. The stems of this compromise – such as the technical subsidies in the Article 28 TRIPS patent exemption for COVID-19 vaccines – are appreciated but should be considered skeptically, given their temporary and limited nature (Cullinan, 2022; Hassan, 2022).

In general, global mechanisms for access to justice are passive. No international institution truly prioritizes the right to health over economic interests. The WTO, for example, does not recognize human rights priorities; The decision must be made through consensus negotiations. WTO dispute settlement is more often used by developed countries to sue for patent infringement than by developing countries. Recommendations from the World Health Organization (WHO) or the UN human rights body on access to medicines are non-binding. Even the UN SDGs and the principles of global justice are often ignored when DRR (politics) prioritizes market rhetoric. At first glance, the reform appears to be the extension of the TRIPS transition period for LDC countries until 2033, which extends the time (formally) without pharmaceutical patent obligations, and the agreement in the US Congress (May 10 Agreement 2007) has delayed some TRIPS-plus obligations. However, these efforts are only a gesture; in the context of global power dynamics, their effect is minimal. This condition gives rise to a call for a new paradigm: for example, an invitation to approach *Decolonality* in IP, the mainstreaming of health rights in human rights forums, and the demands for profit-sharing in the pharmaceutical industry (Oxfam America, n.d.; Tenni, et al., 2022).

Gramscian hegemony theory suggests that dominant power is upheld not just through force, but by shaping ideas and convincing people that strict intellectual property rights are essential for economic growth. As a result, critics, developing countries, and global civil society groups often accept these basic beliefs and focus their efforts on limited reforms, such as negotiating TRIPS flexibilities, the Doha Declaration, or temporary COVID-19 waivers, rather than pushing for a complete overhaul of the system. This situation is reinforced by the influence of powerful states and large pharmaceutical companies, which use their financial, technical, and legal advantages to maintain their position and manage advocacy efforts. Developing countries, deeply involved in global production and reliant on the WTO system for market access and legal stability, face high economic risks if they try to break away, making a radical challenge unlikely. While international solidarity campaigns can change public debate and address short-term gaps, they do not have enough power to shift the overall balance. This shows that only a truly transformative

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movement could break the dominance of states and corporations in global trade and create fairer global governance.

IV. Conclusion

The struggle of global civil society against the TRIPS system reveals fundamental inequalities in the current global governance framework. TRIPS does not function as an impartial legal structure. Instead, it has established a global information hegemony that puts the financial interests of transnational pharmaceutical corporations above the basic right to health in the Global South. The World Trade Organization (WTO) claims to operate based on democratic consensus. However, industrialized countries often exploit institutional procedures, a problem exacerbated by excessive corporate lobbying. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed this inconsistency. Business lobbyists delayed and restricted waivers of intellectual property rights for specific national agreements. In response to this information hierarchy, global civil society has changed from a reactive humanitarian actor into a dynamic, counter-hegemonic force. These networks use strategies such as domestic litigation, reframing human rights, and promoting alternative multilateral initiatives, such as the WHO mRNA Hub. They contest the idea that life-saving medicines are only market commodities. However, the 2001 Doha Declaration shows that civil society interventions remain limited. This is due to the passive nature of global justice mechanisms and the rise of bilateral "TRIPS-plus" agreements. Incremental reforms have eased some health inequalities but have not changed the distribution of power.

Achieving equity in global health governance needs structural and transformative policy changes. First, international organizations should establish a formal system within the WTO to automatically suspend patent enforcement during declared global health emergencies. This would replace case-by-case waiver talks with a predictable process. Second, developing countries should unite to reject "TRIPS-plus" rules in trade deals. By forming South-South coalitions, they can protect domestic policy options such as compulsory licensing and parallel importation. Third, global health governance should move away from voluntary licensing. Instead, fully funded, multilateral systems like the Medicines Patent Pool and regional production hubs should be adopted to promote health sovereignty in the Global South.

These challenges highlight future research directions in international political economy. Studies should examine how decolonial approaches to intellectual property rights are implemented. This includes testing alternative, non-proprietary models that separate drug development costs from final pricing. Further research should consider whether emerging economies can build self-sustaining generic manufacturing to lessen reliance on Western supply chains and markets. Using Hegemony Theory can deepen the analysis of the intellectual property regime. This approach suggests legal structures are crafted by economic elites to channel resistance into manageable reform. The role of global civil society is not only to win incremental legal exemptions but also to question the basic norms of neoliberal globalization. This study offers a framework for understanding how transnational solidarity

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can challenge entrenched power and reshape global norms on human rights, equity, and survival.

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Book Reviews

***The Problem of China: Persoalan dan Prediksi Masa Depan Cina [The problem of China: Issues and Predictions of China's Future]*. By Bertrand Russell (S. Abdullah, Trans.). Yogyakarta: Millennial Readers, 2019. ISBN: 978-602-5689-15-4. (Original work published 1922).**

This book explores the China history, political, social power and its tendency especially in early 20th century, the turbulence period when China Kingdom ends. Based the experience during in China 1920 – 1921, Bertrand Russell wrote this book to explain and analyze China including political commentary, philosophical reflection, and cultural analysis to explain China's challenges and possibilities in the contemporary world. Bertrand Russell, poses multiple related inquiries, why has Chinese civilization endured for centuries despite political instability and foreign intervention? In what ways can China modernize while preserving its cultural identity? He started with the arguments; the key problems in China divided into three parts: Politic, economic and culture, and those parts cannot be separated, those have connected each other. The culture is very vital, when these problems solved, politic and economy would gain the goal. Russell offers more interpretation by emphasizing the intellectual and moral strengths embedded within Chinese civilization.

In the main argument of this book, Russel argues that the modern China is designed by the preservation of its cultural foundations, however foreign interventions exist in China. In this book Russell has own argument that is not like other western writer, he opposes the westernization. Western imperialism and militarism had tried harm China. He argues that China has ethical and philosophical traditions, especially those linked to Confucianism. It could contribute positively to global civilization. China's longstanding focus on moderation, education, and social harmony offers a contrasting approach to the militant nationalism and industrial militarism prevalent in Europe following the First World War.

One of the book's strengths is the comparison of between east and west civilization. Russel sees the differences in the western industrial society which base materialistic, in terms of wealth and technology, western is in advance but morally exhausted. While China has intellectually sophisticated shown by its fundamental culture yet economically underdeveloped. By his experiences during in China, Russell questioned the modernization which designed by Western, the modernization must imitate western political and social system. Substantially, the social system, education, governance and international relations express the boarder of civilization and human development intellectually, rather than materially. The phenomenon of the western centered in early twentieth century is constructed by limit observations of the China with occasionally relying on generalizations about Chinese society and culture.

The book is divided into several thematic chapters discussing Chinese history, Japan as the influence country to China, the international power, cultural philosophy, education, industry, and China Expectancy. Russell begins with his analysis and describing

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the social and political conditions when he came to China. Then, He saw the China principle on its culture is very strong while effects of foreign powers, particularly Japan and Western imperial states on Chinese sovereignty. He argues that imperial competition weakened China politically while simultaneously exposing it to modern economic and technological systems.

The novelty in this book is Russell saw China had potential to modernize without embracing the militaristic tendencies visible in Europe and Japan. This perspective offered an alternative model that civilization can be adopted in the modern world. The intellectual traditions of Confucianism and Taoism can be tools of China modernization softly and without destruction.

One of the chapters also discussed about stressing the education. For China, national development especially scientific and technical knowledge should be expanded without abandoning traditional Chinese values. Then, Russell argues the industrial growth and modernization should not exploitative capitalism and authoritarian governance.

Overall, The Problem of China remains a significant contribution to early twentieth-century political and cultural analysis. Although some arguments may appear dated today, the book is valuable for its effort to understand China sympathetically during a period of global transformation. Russell's reflections on imperialism, modernization, nationalism, and cultural identity continue to resonate in discussions about China's role in world politics.

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Book Reviews

Digital Diplomacy in Indonesia's Foreign Policy. **By Albert Triwibowo. London: Routledge, 2025. ISBN: 9781003505884**

The practice of diplomacy in the contemporary era has evolved significantly thanks to the massive digital transformation. Advances in information and communication technology have increasingly facilitated diplomatic practices, enabling them to reach audiences across the globe without the constraints of time and space. Thanks to this development, contemporary diplomacy has further expanded the spaces for diplomacy and interactions among actors, both state and non-state. This shift in diplomatic dynamics has given rise to the concept of digital diplomacy, which is now receiving considerable attention in the study of international relations. The rapid expansion of the digital world and the emergence of increasingly sophisticated artificial intelligence make understanding digital diplomacy increasingly crucial for adapting to current situations and conditions.

This book is systematically structured and contains six chapters. The first chapter serves as an introduction, laying the foundation for understanding Indonesian foreign policy, diplomacy, and technology. Albert demonstrates that the development of the digital world has transformed the way the Indonesian government applies digital diplomacy and Indonesia's position within the development of digital diplomacy. Chapter two provides an analytical framework for understanding digital diplomacy, utilizing various literature reviews compiled by the author. Some of the literature reviewed includes digital diplomacy, public diplomacy, strategic communication, and the use of information and communication technology in international relations. According to Albert, digital diplomacy cannot be understood solely as the use of social media by state actors, but rather as part of a broader transformation of the diplomatic communication process (Albert, 2025).

In the chapter third, Albert explains the research methods he used to analyze Indonesia's digital diplomacy. The combination of document analysis, observation, and interviews helps the book present a comprehensive overview of the policy formulation and implementation process. This coherent, systematic presentation of the methodology lends credibility to the discussion in subsequent chapters. Furthermore, the chapter fourth discusses Indonesia's journey in implementing digital diplomacy. According to Albert, the use of information and communication technology in Indonesia's digital diplomacy was not carried out through a grand, centrally designed strategy. Rather, it was carried out gradually, adapting to changes in the international environment and the increasing use of technology as a medium for public communication (Albert, 2025). This is evidenced by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and various Indonesian representatives abroad using social media and other digital platforms. This effort is an effort to expand the reach of their public communication. Furthermore, Albert views Indonesia's digital diplomacy as more adaptive than transformational (Albert, 2025). In the fifth chapter, this book provides an analysis of Indonesia's digital diplomacy practices across three main issues: Indonesian palm oil diplomacy, Indonesia's response to the Rohingya crisis, and digital diplomacy

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during the COVID-19 pandemic. These three issues demonstrate how information and communication technology is used in digital diplomacy across different issue contexts. In the palm oil diplomacy issue, Indonesia seeks to build a counter-narrative to the growing negative image that has developed internationally. In contrast, in the Rohingya crisis, the Indonesian government utilized digital diplomacy to demonstrate Indonesia's humanitarian position to the global community. Meanwhile, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Indonesian government used digital diplomacy to maintain diplomatic communication amid significant restrictions on physical mobility. Chapter six presents the author's conclusions based on the research.

Overall, Albert argues that Indonesia's digital diplomacy has increased its international visibility and expanded the reach of its public diplomacy. Furthermore, the use of various digital platforms has been found to be highly effective in helping Indonesia convey its foreign policy messages to international audiences. Indonesia's digital diplomacy is considered to have significant potential to become a key instrument in Indonesia's future foreign policy. While this book makes an important contribution to the study of international relations, several key aspects warrant critical reflection. The book tends to view Indonesia's digital diplomacy as capable of enhancing its bargaining power on the international stage. However, the discussion of its concrete impacts is limited, leaving insufficient evidence to support this capability. Furthermore, Albert points out that digital diplomacy can increase Indonesia's visibility, but, as previously mentioned, this increased visibility has not yet fully translated into changes in the policies and preferences of other parties. Furthermore, this book does not explicitly link Indonesia's digital diplomacy to its identity as a middle power. This book would be more interesting if it included a discussion of how Indonesia's digital diplomacy can contribute to its middle-power diplomacy strategy. Furthermore, discussion of non-state actors is still relatively limited. The book still predominantly discusses state actors as actors in Indonesia's digital diplomacy. In reality, digital diplomacy, as part of contemporary diplomacy, cannot be separated from the role of non-state actors such as digital corporations, organizations, academics, media, and individuals. The effectiveness of digital diplomacy is also determined by the role of non-state actors. Collaboration between state and non-state actors is one of the main keys to success in implementing digital diplomacy. The various limitations in this book do not diminish its academic content, but rather provide opportunities for further research.

This book demonstrates that digital diplomacy has become an integral part of Indonesia's foreign policy practices. It is powerful in highlighting how Indonesia employs digital diplomacy to achieve its national interests. This book could still be further developed, particularly regarding the measurement of digital diplomacy effectiveness, the relationship between technology and power, the role of non-state actors, and the strategies of middle powers in their diplomatic practices.

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