

Islands of tension

ASEAN's engagement with external powers in response to China's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea

Master thesis

Fleur R. M. Havekes (751114)

Erasmus school of social and behavioural sciences; Erasmus University Rotterdam

In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements

for MSc International public management and public policy

Supervisor: Dr. Pieter Tuytens

Second reader: Dr. Clara Egger

29th of June 2025

Word count: 11.989

Abstract

This study analyses how China's growing assertiveness, specifically the case of militarisation of artificial islands, in the South China Sea (SCS) has influenced the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) engagement with external powers between 2010 – 2024. By examining ASEAN's strategic behaviour through the lens of alignment theories, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how regional organisations manage threats and engagement with external powers.

The study engages with three competing realist theories: (1) Balance of Power, (2) Balance of Threat, and (3) the Alliance Security Dilemma. Theoretically, it advances the debate on regional alliance adaptability and alliance management under threat. Societally, the findings on ASEAN's external alignment is relevant for policymakers, diplomats, and security analyst working on alliance dynamics. And even practically, this research gives more insight into the SCS dispute.

Methodologically, the thesis uses a congruence analysis approach, systematically testing theory-derived propositions against empirical evidence to assess which framework most convincingly explains ASEAN's behaviour. The evidence showed that the Alliance Security Dilemma provides the best explanation of ASEAN's behaviour regarding engagement with external powers. But the evidence points to outcome similarity but does not confirm whether ASEAN's alignment behaviour is truly motivated by fears of entrapment or abandonment.

These findings have implications for the applicability of realist theories on regional organisations and their engagement with external partners. However, further research is needed to understand the underlying motivations behind ASEAN's behaviour.

Keywords: Regional security, Alliance security, Geopolitics, South China Sea, External engagement

Acknowledgements

First of all, I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Tuytens, for his guidance, amazing feedback, and for not panicking (at least visibly) during the many sparring moment, whether in our thesis circle or via Zoom. I also thank the second reader for hopefully agreeing that this thesis is, indeed a thesis.

Shout-out to ASEAN and China without which this thesis would probably have been about something far less exciting (like EU regulatory frameworks or something).

Special thanks to my friends and family who pretended to know what I was talking about when I was chatting about this thesis. You are the real allies here.

To coffee, my constant and loyal co-author. And finally, to everyone involved in the IMP program, this year has been challenging, energising, and surprisingly fun. If this thesis has taught me anything, it's that navigating great power rivalry is hard... but finishing a master's thesis might be harder.

Table of Contents

List of figures.....	6
List of tables.....	7
List of abbreviations and acronyms	8
Chapter 1. Introduction	9
Chapter 2. Literature review	13
2.1 Elements of regional stability	13
2.2 Alliance resilience under challenge	16
Chapter 3. Theoretical framework	18
3.1 Balance of power	18
3.1.1 <i>Balance of power propositions</i>	19
3.2 Balance of Threat.....	20
3.2.1 <i>Balance of threat propositions</i>	20
3.3 Alliance Security Dilemma.....	21
3.3.1 <i>Alliance Security dilemma propositions</i>	22
Chapter 4. Research design.....	24
4.1 Choice of congruence analysis.....	24
4.2 The congruence analysis	24
4.3 Selection of theories.....	24
4.4 Case selection.....	25
4.5 Operationalisation	25
4.5.1 <i>Operationalisation BOP</i>	25
4.5.2 <i>Operationalization BOT</i>	27
4.5.3 <i>Operationalisation ASD</i>	29
4.6 Data collection	30
4.7 Validity and reliability	30
Chapter 5. Analysis.....	32

5.1 China's growing assertiveness (context of the case)	32
5.2 Empirical evidence Balance of Power (BOP).....	33
5.2.1 BOP1-A Joint military exercises with external powers	33
5.2.2 BOP1-B Diplomatic engagements with balancing powers.....	35
5.2.3 BOP2-C Defense procurement trends	38
5.2.4 BOP2-D Defense capacity-building with external actors	40
5.3 Empirical evidence Balance of Threat	41
5.3.1 BOT1-E Divergence in threat perception among ASEAN member states	42
5.3.2 BOT1-F Frequency or strength of joint ASEAN statements on security issues	43
5.3.3 BOT2-G Degree of alignment diversity among ASEAN members in security agreements with external powers.....	44
5.3.4 BOT2-H Variability in ASEAN participation among member states.....	45
5.4 Empirical evidence Alliance Security Dilemma.....	46
5.4.1 ASD1-I ASEAN avoids deep security commitments with great powers.....	46
5.4.2 ASD2-J Use of hedging language, vague or non-committal official statements	47
5.4.3 ASD2-K Preference for symbolic or non-military cooperation with external powers	47
5.5 Discussion of findings.....	48
Chapter 6. Conclusion.....	50
Chapter 7. Recommendations	52
Bibliography	53
Appendices.....	62

List of figures

Figure 1. PRC nine-dash line and approximate extent of Southeast Asian states' 200 nm EEZs.....	12
Figure 2. The Regional Powers and Security Framework (RPSF)	15
Figure 3. Arms imports by Major Southeast Asian countries after 2000 (USD million)	41

List of tables

Table 1. Overview of theoretical perspectives	23
Table 2. Operationalisation of BOP propositions	26
Table 3. Operationalisation of BOT propositions.....	27
Table 4. Operationalisation of ASD propositions.....	28
Table 5. Main events of the SCS dispute.....	32
Table 6. Combined military exercises in South China Sea (2010-2024).....	35
Table 7. Defence Budget Increase, 2000 to 2024 in Southeast Asia	39
Table 8. Military expenditure as a percentage of General Government Expenditure in ASEAN countries (2010-2020).....	39
Table 9. Joint ASEAN statements on SCS	43
Table 10. Congruence results.....	49
Table 11. External policies of ASEAN member states	68

List of abbreviations and acronyms

ADIZ	Air Defence Identification Zone
ADMM-Plus	ASEAN Defence Minister's Meeting
ARF	ASEAN Regional Forum
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BOP	Balance of power theory
BOT	Balance of threat theory
CFSP	Common Foreign and Security Policy
CON	Congruence Analysis approach
EU	European Union
EEZs	Exclusive economic zones
FONOPS	Freedom Of Navigation Operations
RPSF	Regional Powers and Security Framework
RCSs	Regional Security Complexes
RSCT	Regional Security Complex Theory
SAD	Security alliance dilemma
SCS	South China Sea
NATO	The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
UN	United Nations
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of Sea
U.S.	United States

Chapter 1. Introduction

The post-Cold War unipolar era dominated by U.S. hegemony is giving way to a more contested and multipolar international order (Wohlforth, 2014). The rise of China, the reemergence of Russia, and the relative decline of traditional Western powers are changing the global security landscape (Roland, 2021). In this evolving context, regional alliances, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), the African Union, and the Quad, are tested by rising external threats. In a time where global power shift, regional alliances must redefine their strategic roles.

Among these alliances, ASEAN stands out for its informal structure, consensus-based decision-making, and emphasis on regional autonomy (Heng, 2014; Leelianou, 2021). As China asserts growing military and economic influence in the region ASEAN struggles to present a cohesive response to security threats (Tay, 2017). “ASEAN has in the past been most successful when it has been united. Conversely, it has been the least successful and of limited consequence when it has been divided.” (Natalegawa, 2018). With these words, former Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa reflects on the defining condition for ASEAN’s strategic relevance: cohesion. Yet in the face of growing external threats, ASEAN’s unity has been repeatedly tested. As geopolitical competition intensifies, particularly between established and emerging powers, regional organisations find themselves increasingly drawn into complex security dilemmas. This illustrates the strategic dilemma that ASEAN is facing as it navigates the intensifying competition between major powers in the South China Sea (SCS). Confronted with China’s growing assertiveness in the region, ASEAN faces pressure to respond and manage its security.

1.1 Research objective and research question

At the core of this geopolitical competition is the militarisation of artificial islands in the SCS, an ongoing development that has changed the geopolitical landscape of the region and impacts ASEAN’s capacity to uphold regional stability and security (Beckman, 2017). China’s construction of military outposts, airstrips, and naval facilities on contested maritime features has intensified tensions and reinforced regional perceptions of Chinese assertiveness (Zhang, 2017). While China officially promotes diplomatic negotiations, its power-centric approach suggests a long-term strategy to establish *de facto* control over contested areas (Zhang, 2017). At the same time, external powers, e.g. the United States, Japan, and India, become involved in the dispute, with the U.S. in particular emphasising Freedom of Navigation

Operations (FONOPs) to challenge China's maritime claims and reinforce international law (Simon, 2012). The dispute continues to be a global high-stakes geopolitical contest, and the balance between diplomacy, legal arbitration, and military deterrence will shape the future security architecture of the Asia-Pacific (Zhang, 2017).

The majority of current studies on this dispute concentrate on bilateral power struggles, such as the competition between China and the U.S., or legal disputes surrounding maritime law (Chen, 2015; Chen, 2022; Zhang, 2023). There is a lack of academic literature focusing on how China's assertiveness affects ASEAN's strategic responses and its security behaviour, specifically the engagement with external actors.

ASEAN's engagement with external powers is far from a straightforward strategic decision due to the inherent contradictions and pressures stemming from multiple global powers and the interests of its eleven member states (Emmers, 2018). Therefore, the objective of this case study is to examine how regional alliances respond to threats in terms of setting up their relationships with external powers. By situating the ASEAN case within this broader debate, this study contributes to an understanding of regional stability. Using three realist theories on alignment, the research answers the question:

“Which realist theory, Balance of Power, Balance of Threat, or Alliance Security Dilemma, best explains ASEAN's engagement with external powers in response to China's militarisation of artificial islands in the South China Sea?”

1.2 Academic relevance

Scholars have examined how formal security alliances react to the assertiveness of dominant powers, especially in areas that are marked by contested sovereignty and strategic competition (Walt, 1997; Kendall-Taylor & Edmonds, 2019). Yet, how regional organisations manage to navigate these challenges remains under-researched.

Therefore, this study holds academic relevance by expanding the literature on alliance theory through a focused examination of a non-Western and informal regional organisation. This is still underexplored compared to formal western-centric alliances such as NATO. By connecting established realist frameworks to ASEAN, this study also tests the applicability of these theories beyond their traditional contexts, it explores the nuances and adaptations required when dealing with alliances that lack a formal structure and command. This will deepen scholarly understanding of how diverse alliances function in complex geopolitical landscapes.

1.3 Societal relevance

From a broader societal perspective, this research takes a closer look at how regional organisations act during high-stakes geopolitical tensions that have implications for regional and global stability. Understanding how a regional organisation approaches its strategic environment can inform discussion about regional stability and multilateral security cooperation. The findings may be of particular relevance to policymakers, diplomats, and security analyst working on alliance dynamics.

In addition, the SCS dispute itself is highly salient case within contemporary international relations. It involves competing territorial claims, strategic maritime interests, and increasing military posturing among regional and global actors (Simon, 2012). This sea is not only strategically significant but also a key economic asset for global trade (Zhong and White, 2017; Fels and Vu, 2016). As such, the question of control over its territories, resources, and strategic waterways is of critical importance to both regional actors and global powers (e.g. United States, China, Japan). The dispute centres on China's expansive claim, outlined by the nine-dash line (see Figure 1), which covers nearly the entire South China Sea and overlaps with the exclusive economic zones (EEZs) of several Southeast Asian states, including Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei (Simon, 2012). In contrast to other claimants who base their territorial assertions on specific islands and maritime features, China's claim is legally ambiguous because it does not conform to the principles outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (Simon, 2012). The SCS territorial dispute therefore provides an interesting case to explore tensions in regional governance. Understanding the patterns behind ASEAN's external alignment can thus also contribute to broader discussions on possible approaches for de-escalation, conflict prevention, and long-term stability in the region.

Figure 1.

PRC nine-dash line and approximate extent of Southeast Asian states' 200 nm EEZs.



Note. Retrieved from Beeson and Chubb (2021).

1.4 Structure of this thesis

The remainder of this thesis is structured as follows. Chapter two reviews the existing literature on regional stability and alliance resilience, situating ASEAN's strategic behaviour within broader scholarly debates. Chapter three outlines the theoretical framework, introducing the three competing theories: Balance of Power, Balance of Threat, and the Alliance Security Dilemma. These three theories will guide the analysis. Chapter four will discuss the research design, including the rationale for using congruence analysis, the operationalisation of propositions, and data collection methods. Chapter five presents the empirical analysis, followed by Chapter six that draws together the main findings and assesses which theoretical perspective offers the most convincing explanation. Finally, chapter 7 reflects the broader implications of the study, discusses the limitations of this study, and gives recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2. Literature review

2.1 Elements of regional stability

In this section, the literature on regional stability will be explored in order to identify the structural and institutional elements that contribute the resilience of regional orders.

A fundamental determinant of regional security stability is the **degree of institutionalisation and security cooperation** among member states. Scholars emphasise that strong security institutions enable regional organisations to prevent conflicts, facilitate military coordination, and enhance crisis management (Kupchan, 2010; Barnett & Adler, 1998). Highly institutionalised alliances such as NATO exemplify the benefits of collective defence and structured security cooperation, reducing the likelihood of intra-regional conflict (Lake & Morgan, 1997). In contrast, weaker institutional frameworks, as seen in the Arab League and African Union, struggle to coordinate security responses due to institutional fragmentation and competing national interests (Solingen, 2022). ASEAN exercises what is often referred to as “centrality” in regional affairs. This concept refers to its ability to mediate regional conflicts and set a framework for peaceful negotiations (Emmers, 2018). ASEAN promotes confidence-building measures like the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (The Governments of the Member States of ASEAN and the Government of the People’s Republic of China, 2012). While ASEAN lacks the military power of major states, its convening power is significant in addressing strategic issues in the Asia-Pacific (Tay, 2017). ASEAN represents a hybrid model, relying on informal consensus-based security mechanisms (Acharya, 2001). While ASEAN’s security architecture includes the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting (ADMM-Plus), scholars argue that its lack of legally binding commitments limits its ability to act decisively in regional crises (Emmers, 2018).

The stability of regional security also depends on the **diplomatic cohesion** of member states, the extent to which they present a unified security position in response to threats (Ikenberry, 2001). The European Union (EU) serves as an example of strong diplomatic cohesion, where member states coordinate their foreign and security policies through the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), increasing the strategic influence. ASEAN has a shared diplomatic culture and values. This originally shaped its intra-regional diplomacy, leading to the development of robust institutions capable of managing complex relationships with global powers (Wicaksana & Karim, 2023).

The role of external actors in shaping regional stability is a contested issues in regional security studies. At the heart of this debate lies the question of whether regional orders are shaped by internal dynamics or by external interventions. On one hand, neorealists argue that regional alliances function primarily as balancing mechanisms against dominant external powers (Walt, 1987; Mearsheimer, 2001). On the other hand, Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) scholars emphasise that security dynamics in a region are shaped by external power rivalries, where interference from global powers can either strengthen or fragment regional security frameworks (Ahmed, 2023; Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Empirical studies (Kelly, 2007; Aris & Wenger, 2014) show that regional organizations often exercise agency in either reinforcing or tempering external influence. More recent comparative work further complicates this binary by documenting a spectrum of outcomes. In some regions like the Sahel or MENA, external intervention has both enabled security arrangements and reinforced instability (Baldaro, 2020; Osland & Erstand, 2020). Others, like the Western Balkans, highlight the European Union's role in promoting stability, albeit constrained by unresolved internal divisions (Grillot et al., 2010).

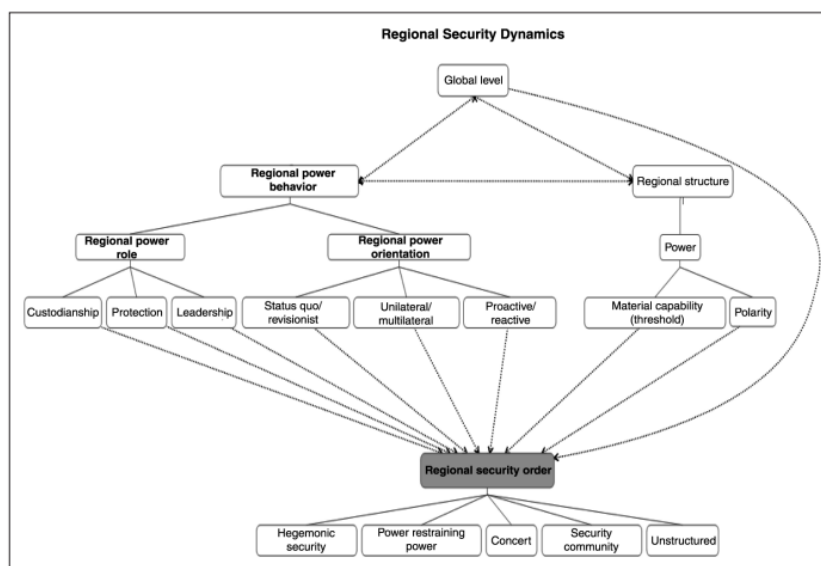
A fourth element that influences regional stability is **strategic autonomy**. Strategic autonomy is the capacity of a regional organisation to make independent decisions and implement policies without being overly influenced or constrained by external powers (Zhang, 2023). This involves economic self-reliance, military capabilities, and institutional independence. Which ASEAN does not have. The United States' FONOPs challenge China's maritime claims and signal US support for ASEAN states opposing Beijing's territorial expansion (Simon, 2012). However, increased US military presence risks turning the South China Sea into a battleground for great power competition, further complicating ASEAN's strategic autonomy (Beckman, 2017). Some scholars suggest that ASEAN's reliance on external security partnerships (external partners) weakens its ability to independently manage regional security challenges (Zhang, 2023).

In addition to these four elements, Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll (2010) offer a complementary framework that synthesis how material power, regional roles, and strategic preferences influence regional security dynamics. Their Regional Powers and Security Framework (RPSF) builds on the logic of the Regional Security Complex theory and helps to explain how internal and external actors interact to produce either stability or instability to a region. At the core of this framework lies the concept of **regional structure**, which refers to

the distribution of material capabilities, primarily military and economic power, among states within an RSC. Drawing from a neorealist thought, Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll (2010) argue that while capabilities are a necessary condition for regional influence, they are not sufficient on their own to ensure stability. In unipolar systems, a dominant regional power can establish a hegemonic order, promoting relative stability through control and enforcement of norms. In contrast, multipolar systems, often feature fluid alliances and balancing behaviours as states navigate shifting power dynamics. The presence of multiple influential actors creates a complex security environment where stability hinges not only on the distribution of power but also on the behaviours and strategic choices of regional actors (Frazier & Stewart-Ingersoll, 2010).

Figure 2.

The Regional Powers and Security Framework (RPSF)



Note. Retrieved from Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll (2010).

Beyond structural considerations, the roles of regional powers significantly influence the stability of security alliances. Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll (2010) identify **three primary roles that regional powers may adopt: leadership, custodianship, and protection**. Leaders shape the strategic direction of the RSC by guiding member states toward specific security policies, often seeking to align regional norms and practices with their interests. Custodians work to maintain and stabilise the existing security order, actively engaging in conflict

management and the preservation of cooperative frameworks. Protectors, on the other hand, focus on shielding the region from external threats, often taking on deterrence roles or acting as intermediaries in conflicts. The effectiveness with which regional powers perform these roles directly impacts alliance stability. For instance, in the SCS, China's island militarisation efforts reflect an attempt to assert leadership and protection roles. Conversely, ASEAN's attempts at custodianship, through mechanisms like the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (2012) highlight efforts to stabilize the region.

The final dimension in Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll's framework is **regional power orientation**, which captures a state's preferences and strategic approaches toward the existing security order. Orientations are analysed along three axes: status quo vs. revisionist, unilateralism vs. multilateralism, and proactive vs. reactive. Status quo-oriented powers seek to preserve existing arrangements, promoting stability through continuity, while revisionist powers aim to alter the regional order, often creating friction and instability. The proactive or reactive nature of a state's policies further shapes regional dynamics; proactive states may implement long-term strategies to consolidate influence, while reactive states often respond to immediate security threats without a broader strategic vision. (Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll, 2010).

The four elements, institutionalisation, cohesion, external influence, and strategic autonomy, discussed earlier help to understand the basic conditions for regional stability, the RPSF adds an extra layer. It doesn't just look at how much power countries have or how they cooperate, but it asks what they do with that power.

2.2 Alliance resilience under challenge

Regional stability, as discussed in the previous section, is shaped by a combination of institutional design, diplomatic cohesion, external engagement, and strategic autonomy. However, stability is not static. It is often disrupted by shift in power, rising threats, and contested claims. In such moments, the question becomes: how do alliances respond to when regional stability is directly challenged? Understanding how alliances behave in the face of threats is important not only for predicting resilience, but also for informing strategies to strengthen regional order.

Alliance behaviour in the face of external threats follows distinct theoretical logics. Neorealist and rational choice accounts stress that power disparities and security dilemmas prompt alliances to form defence and consultation pacts when a clear aggressor emerges (Johnson, 2015). States are willing to make more concessions in exchange for an alliance when

they are unlikely to defeat their challengers alone and when their allies have a large effect on their probability of winning in war (Johnson, 2015). This suggests that external threats prompt alignment with external actors.

In contrast, constructivist analyses document how shared norms and evolving identities drive responses such as NATO's adaptation to Russian aggression and alliance expansion amid emerging threats (Gheciu & von Hlatky, 2024). Prospect theory combined with Balance of Threat Theory distinguishes responses: when threats are seen as severe, multilateral alliances form to address potential losses; when threats appear more manageable, bilateral arrangements prevail (He and Feng, 2012). In cases of internal instability or doubt regarding a leading partner's commitment, there may even be a shift from loyalty toward exit strategies (Castillo and Downes, 2020). Concept of "omnialignment" suggest states may align with or against threats based on internal and external factors (Lieb, 2004). Collectively, some studies affirm that the combination of structural pressures, institutional commitments, and normative considerations governs how alliances adjust their collective security arrangements when directly challenged (Barany and Rauchhaus, 2011; Johnson, 2015).

In summary, the literature offers multiple explanations for how alliances respond when regional stability is challenged. This thesis narrows its analytical scope to the realist view.

Chapter 3. Theoretical framework

Previous chapter concludes that regional stability depends on a combination of internal conditions and external pressures. Yet stability is often tested by strategic shocks, coercion, or power shifts. In such moments it raises a critical question: how do regional alliances respond to threats, in terms of setting up their relationship with external powers? This question is central to understanding ASEAN's behaviour in the South China Sea, but it is neither self-evident nor easily answered. This chapter draws on three realist theories of alignment: Balance of power (BOP), Balance of Threat (BOT) and the Alliance Security Theory (AST). Each offers theoretical assumptions, an overview can be found in Table 1. Based on these paradigms, this chapter formulates a set of propositions to guide the empirical analysis of ASEAN's analysis of ASEAN's engagement with external powers between 2010 and 2024.

3.1 Balance of power

Balance of power is a concept in realist theory, especially classical realism, and neorealism (structural realism) within International Relations. Balance of power has served as a central analytical tool for understanding the behaviour of states in the anarchic international system. Within the realist paradigm, the international environment is characterised by the absence of a supranational authority, compelling states to operate in a condition of self-help where survival is the primary goal (Waltz, 1979). The balance of power refers to the process by which states respond to actual or potential threats by adjusting the distribution of capabilities in the system, either through internal balancing (e.g. military buildup) or external balancing (e.g., forming alliances). It assumes that no single actor should be allowed to dominate, and systemic stability is best maintained when power is evenly distributed. According to Kenneth Waltz, one of the leading figures in neorealist theory, "the first concern of states is not to maximise power but to maintain their positions in the system" (Waltz, 1979, p. 129). This shows that balancing is not necessarily driven by aggression but by the imperative of preserving equilibrium and autonomy.

The logic of balance of power assumes that states are rational actors who respond to shifts in relative power to ensure their continued independence and influence. When one state or coalition grows disproportionately strong, others are expected to align against it, creating a counterweight that restores equilibrium (Morgenthau, 1948; Waltz, 1979). This tendency to balance power is seen as both a natural and recurring feature of international politics. Classical realists like Hans Morgenthau considered the balance of power a mechanism of prudence and restraint embedded in human nature and political behaviour, whereas structural realists like

Waltz emphasise the systemic pressures that compel states to balance, regardless of their intentions. In this view, the structure of the international system, not the morality or preferences of individual leaders, produces predictable patterns of competition and alliance. The balance of power is not only a theory of conflict prevention but also a lens through which the formation of alliances, strategic alignments, and great power rivalry can be interpreted in world politics. (Schweller, 2016; Nexon, 2009; Wu, 2018; Mearsheimer, 1995).

3.1.1 Balance of power propositions

If the balance of power best fits ASEAN's response to China's growing assertiveness. Then there should be a significant degree of emphasis on preserving autonomy and regional equilibrium. Regional alliances respond to threats by actively engaging with external power to restore or preserve a favourable distribution of power in the international system (Walt, 1985). When a dominant actor poses a threat to regional equilibrium, like through military expansion or coercive diplomacy, alliances (like ASEAN) will likely seek to counterbalance this rising power by strengthening strategic partnerships with external actors. From a balance of power perspective, such engagement is not necessarily ideological or value-driven, but rather a pragmatic response aimed at preventing regional hegemony and maintaining autonomy. The alliance aligns externally to offset the capabilities of the threatening power, thereby reinforcing multipolarity or equilibrium within the system. In this logic, the more concentrated and unbalanced the power becomes within a region, the stronger the incentive for regional actors to deepen their ties with counterbalancing external powers.

The following propositions are derived from this theory regarding how ASEAN is expected to respond to external threats.

BOP1: ASEAN states will respond to China's militarisation by actively engaging with external powers to maintain regional balance.

BOP2: ASEAN's engagement will primarily focus on improving military or strategic capabilities to counterbalance China's rising military power.

The theoretical proposition thus exemplifies the core mechanisms of balance of power theory. This strategy is intended to create a counterweight to China's rising influence, thereby preserving regional stability and protecting their interests. The proposition thus demonstrates how the balance of power dynamics may shape states' behaviour in response to perceived threats.

3.2 Balance of Threat

The balance of threat theory, developed by Stephen M. Walt (1987), builds on a revision of the traditional balance of power theory, as explained above. He argues that states do not balance simply against power, but rather against perceived threats. In contrast to the neorealist assumptions that equate power with danger, Walt contends that states assess a combination of factors when determining whether another state constitutes a threat. These include a state's aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive capabilities, and most importantly, perceived intentions. Thus, it is not power alone that provokes balancing behaviour, but how threatening that power appears to be. According to Walt, "states balance against threats, not against power alone" (Walt, 1985, p. 5). This theoretical refinement accounts for variation in alliance behaviour that classical and structural realist approaches struggle to explain. For example, why states sometimes align with stronger powers (bandwagoning) or fail to balance at all in the face of overwhelming power (Walt, 1985). The theory implies that perceptions, misperceptions and divergent assessments among states are of significance in shaping alliance dynamics. Consequently, regional responses to rising powers may be inconsistent or fragmented if states differ in their evaluation of how threatening a given actor is. As such, the balance of threat theory is a competing, more nuanced and perception-sensitive perspective for analysing alliance formation and security behaviour. (He & Feng, 2012; Walt, 1985; Walt, 1990).

So, taking it back to the question stated earlier in this chapter, regional alliances respond to threats by adjusting their relationships with external powers based on shared perceptions of threat intensity, proximity, and intent. According to the balance of threat theory, alliances form not simply to respond to concentrations of power, but in reaction to how threatening that power is perceived to be.

3.2.1 *Balance of threat propositions*

This means that regional alliances like ASEAN will engage external powers more actively when a nearby actor, such as China, displays aggressive intentions or acts assertively in ways that challenge the status quo (He & Feng, 2012). However, if a member state within the alliance holds divergent threat perception, due to geography, political alignment, economic ties, or historical experiences, then the alliance's collective response may be incoherent or weak (Tu et al, 2024). Thus, the degree of cohesion in an alliance's external engagement is contingent on the extent to which its members share a common perception of the threat. When perception

is fragmented, the alliance's external orientation becomes inconsistent or passive. (He and Feng, 2012; Walt, 1985; Keohane, 1988).

The following propositions are derived from this theory regarding how ASEAN is expected to respond to external threats.

BOT1: Different threat perceptions among ASEAN member states reduce internal cohesion, resulting in a less coherent external strategy.

BOT2: ASEAN's ability to engage collectively with external security is constrained by heterogeneity in member states' alignment strategies.

When ASEAN states disagree on how threatening a power like China is, due to differences in geography, political alignment, or economic interdependence, this undermines their collective will to act. Given ASEAN's consensus-based decision-making, even a few divergent voices can obstruct coordinated initiatives, resulting in weaker or more symbolic forms of engagement. Rather than escalating or deepening partnerships with external powers, the alliance may retreat to ad hoc, minimal, or lowest-common-denominator forms of diplomacy. This can lead to a relative decline in external engagement, not necessarily from a fixed level, but in comparison to what would be expected under conditions of shared threat perception.

These propositions show that alliance behaviour is shaped not just by material power, but by subjective threat perceptions.

3.3 Alliance Security Dilemma

A third perspective on how alliances respond to threats can be found in the Alliance security dilemma. Glenn H. Snyder (1984) conceptualises this. The security dilemma in the alliance game has two phases: primary and secondary. The primary refers to the process of alliance formation, whereas the secondary one refers to after alliances have been formed (Snyder, 1984). In the anarchic international system, alliances are a means of enhancing security, yet they also introduce risk. Most notably, the fear of entrapment, being drawn into a partner's conflict (Cha, 2000). But also, the fear of abandonment, being left without support in times of need. According to Snyder (1984), states must constantly balance these two risks when engaging with allies. The dilemma lies in the fact that measures that reduce one risk often increase the other. Binding oneself too closely to an ally may ensure commitment but raises

the danger of entrapment; keeping one's distance avoids entanglement but increases the likelihood of abandonment. This tension is particularly acute in asymmetric alliances and regional organisations, where member states may differ in willingness to confront the threat or in the level of trust they place in external powers. E.g. in regional security arrangements where member states must coordinate responses to external threats while simultaneously managing internal differences in strategic priorities. In such contexts, alliance behaviour becomes marked by strategic ambiguity, hedging, and diversification of partnerships.

Rather than committing fully to one power or alliance structure, states may choose to hedge. Hedging means maintaining cooperative ties with multiple actors to keep future options open and avoid overdependence (Wang, 2021). This allows states to benefit from security assurances without locking themselves into strong commitments. Similarly, diversification of partnerships enables smaller powers or regional groupings to avoid binary alignments in great power competition (Wang, 2021). Also, the strategy of ambiguous posturing is a common response. This means being deliberately vague or having flexible foreign policy behaviour. This allows states or alliances to send mixed signals that maintain strategic flexibility and avoid provoking behaviour or overcommitting to allies. (Snyder, 1984).

3.3.1 Alliance Security dilemma propositions

Thus, the Alliance security dilemma could explain how regional alliances respond to external threats by carefully aligning their engagement with external powers to avoid the dual risks of abandonment and entrapment. In this perspective, responses to threats are measured, multifaceted, and intentionally non-committal.

The following propositions are derived from this theory regarding how ASEAN is expected to respond to external threats.

ASD1: ASEAN's engagement with external powers is cautious and limited due to fears of entrapment in a larger conflict (particularly a US-China confrontation).

ASD2: To manage the dual risks of entrapment and abandonment, ASEAN adopts a strategy of ambiguous posturing in its engagement with external powers.

These capture how the core mechanisms of the alliance security dilemma, managing the trade-off between abandonment and entrapment, shape both the degree and form of ASEAN's external alignments.

Table 1.*Overview of theoretical perspectives*

Theoretical perspective	Core assumption	Main driver of external engagement
Balance of Power (BOP)	States balance against concentrations of power to preserve autonomy and regional equilibrium. (objective)	Material power imbalance; engagement is pragmatic to restore balance.
Balance of Threat (BOT)	States balance against perceived threats , not just power; perception of intent, proximity, and capabilities matters. (subjective)	Shared perception of threat severity and intentions of the rising power
Alliance Security Dilemma (ASD)	Alliances carry risks of abandonment and entrapment ; states calculate engagement to manage these risks.	Strategic ambiguity to avoid entrapment/abandonment; engagement is cautious and diversified.

Chapter 4. Research design

To answer the research question: “Which realist theory, Balance of Power, Balance of Threat, or Alliance Security Dilemma, best explains ASEAN’s engagement with external powers in response to China’s militarisation of artificial islands in the South China Sea?”. This study will use a qualitative research design, employing the Congruence Analysis approach (CON).

4.1 Choice of congruence analysis

This study adopts a congruence analysis (CON) approach, as defined by Blatter and Haverland (2012), to compare the explanatory power of competing theories with a single case study. It is a small-N design, which allows for detailed examination of ASEAN engagement with external powers. Because of this, the researcher can collect diverse observations and reflect on the relationship between empirical evidence and abstract theoretical concepts (Blatter & Haverland, 2012). There are two subtypes of CON, namely the competing theory approach and the complementing approach. This study will use the competing theories approach. As defined by Blatter and Haverland (2012), this approach is best if research aims to identify the “best” or most important theory by comparing contradictory implications derived from divergent theories.

4.2 The congruence analysis

A congruence analysis involves certain steps. This corresponds to what Blatter and Haverland (2012) describe as the “vertical element of control, which separates theory and empirical evidence. (Blatter & Haverland, 2012). Comparing a broad set of empirical observations (data on ASEAN) with the implications derived from each theory made it possible to compare empirically. The degree of congruence between empirical evidence and theory has been assessed. A higher degree of congruence indicates a stronger explanatory power (Blatter & Haverland, 2012).

4.3 Selection of theories

Blatter and Haverland (2012) explain that to be able to apply a congruence analysis, the research must be based on at least two different theories. As explained in the section above, this could be either two complementary theories or two competing theories (Blatter & Haverland, 2012). The theories that have been chosen to provide the basis for this research are the Balance of Power theory, the Balance of Threat theory, and the Security Alliance dilemma. The realist theories are chosen because they provide a strong explanatory framework for

analysing strategic alignment behaviour, focusing on how states respond to power shifts and perceived threats (Wohlforth, 2009). While liberal and constructivist approaches offer important perspectives on norm-building and institutional development, they are less suited to explaining the strategic behaviour and threat-driven dynamics that characterise security politics (Smith, 2020). While these three theories share a common concern and realist paradigm, they emphasise different causal logics and generate divergent predictions.

4.4 Case selection

ASEAN is selected as the central case in this study because it represents a regional organisation in Southeast Asia that is facing a direct external threat, namely China's rising assertiveness in the SCS. Unlike formal military alliances such as NATO, ASEAN is non-binding, which allows this study to observe how informal cooperation functions in a contested geopolitical environment.

By applying realist theories to this case, this study contributes to diversifying the empirical basis of security studies and tests the generalizability of these theories outside of the traditional and formal alliance contexts.

This study focuses on the time period 2010–2024 and breaks it down into distinct phases (e.g., pre/post-2016 South China Sea ruling). The reason that this time period is chosen is because from 2016 onwards ASEAN's public posture towards China changed.

4.5 Operationalisation

In this research, the independent variable is the militarisation of artificial islands by China, while the dependent variable is ASEAN's engagement with external powers.

Tables 2, 3, and 4 show the operationalisation of each theoretical proposition, specifying the observable implications and indicators. This helps with the “vertical element of control, separating theoretical propositions from empirical observations (Blatter & Haverland, 2012).

4.5.1 Operationalisation BOP

The first proposition derived from the Balance of Power theory was: “ASEAN states will respond to China's militarisation by actively engaging with external powers to maintain regional balance”. Indicator A, the annual number of joint military exercises conducted with (balancing) third-party states, will be analysed. The scope, location, type, and frequency over

time will be considered. For indicator B, the number of high-level diplomatic meetings or strategic agreements signed with ‘other’ powers that are also counterbalancing China will be evaluated.

The second proposition was “ASEAN's engagement will primarily focus on military or strategic capabilities to counterbalance China's rising power”. Indicator C, data on the annual value of volume of defence imports from external powers, will be collected. Both the type of equipment and the percentage rise over time will be taken into account. Indicator D, data on arms import from external partners, will be examined.

Table 2.

Operationalisation of BOP propositions of ASEAN's response to China's assertiveness 2010 - 2024

Proposition	Observable implication	Indicator
BOP1: ASEAN states will respond to China's militarisation by actively engaging with external powers to maintain regional balance	Increased number of joint military exercises Diplomatic engagements with balancing powers	BOP1-A: Annual number of joint military exercises conducted with third-party states (Scope, location, type, frequency over time) BOP1-B: Number of high-level diplomatic meetings or strategic agreements signed with other powers that are also counterbalancing China.
BOP2: ASEAN's engagement will primarily focus on internal military or strategic capabilities to counterbalance China's rising power	Growth in military procurement (internal balancing) Defence capacity-building with external actors	BOP2-C: Annual value of volume of defence spending BOP2-D: Data on arms import from external partners

4.5.2 Operationalization of BOT

The first proposition derived from the balance of threat theory was: “Different threat perceptions among ASEAN member states reduce internal cohesion, resulting in less coherent external strategy”. Indicator E, the frequency and content of national-level statements or policy documents from ASEAN member states that reflect differing positions on China, will be analysed. Also, indicator F, changes in the number, timing and strength of ASEAN joint communiques or official responses to regional security developments will be taken into account in deciding whether the empirical evidence is congruent with this proposition.

The second proposition was “ASEAN’s ability to engage collectively with external security is constrained by heterogeneity in member states”. Indicator G, the degree of alignment diversity among ASEAN member states based on their security agreements and engagement with external actors, will be evaluated, together with H, the participation rate of ASEAN member states in ASEAN-led initiatives, will be considered.

Table 3

Operationalisation of BOT propositions of ASEAN’s response to China’s assertiveness 2010 - 2024

Proposition	Observable implication	Indicator
BOT1: Different threat perceptions among ASEAN member states	Divergence in threat perception among ASEAN member states	BOT1-E: Frequency and content of policy documents from ASEAN reflect differing positions on South China Sea dispute
reduce internal cohesion, resulting in a less coherent external strategy	Decrease in frequency or strength of joint ASEAN statements on security issues	BOT1-F: Changes in the number, timing, and strength of ASEAN joint communiques or official responses to regional security developments
BOT2: ASEAN's ability to engage collectively with external security partners is constrained by	Divergence in bilateral security partnerships between ASEAN member states and external actors	BOT2-G: Degree of alignment diversity among ASEAN member states based on their security agreements and engagement with external actors/powers.

heterogeneity in member states' foreign policies and strategies	Variability in ASEAN participation	BOT2-H: Participation rate of ASEAN member states in ASEAN-led initiatives
---	------------------------------------	--

4.5.3 Operationalisation of ASD

The first proposition derived from the Alliance security dilemma was: “ASEAN's engagement with external powers is cautious and limited due to fears of entrapment in a larger conflict”. Indicator I the absence or low number of defence treaties, mutual security pacts, or hard alliances between ASEAN (as a bloc) and external powers, will be investigated. An important with this indicator is that this could also be an observable implication for the Balance of Threat theory. This will therefore be shortly addressed in the discussion in 5.4.1.

The second proposition was “To manage the dual risks of entrapment and abandonment, ASEAN adopts a strategy of ambiguous posturing in its engagement with external powers”. Indicator J, neutral or ambiguous language in ASEAN's strategic communications, mainly the frequency of non-alignment phrases and avoidance of naming specific actors, will be analysed. Together with indicator K, the amount of ASEAN-external partners' non-military or military light engagement. The latter would suggest a preference for symbolic or non-military cooperation.

Table 4.

Operationalisation of ASD propositions of ASEAN's response to China's assertiveness 2010 - 2024

Proposition	Observable implication	Indicator
ASD1: ASEAN's engagement with external powers is cautious and limited due to fears of entrapment in a larger conflict	ASEAN avoids deep security commitments with great powers	ASD1-I: the absence or low number of defence treaties, mutual security pacts, or hard alliances between ASEAN (as a bloc) and external powers

ASD2: To manage the dual risks of entrapment and abandonment, ASEAN adopts a strategy of ambiguous posturing in its engagement with external powers	Use of hedging language, vague or non-committal official statements Preference for symbolic or non-military cooperation with external powers	ASD2-J: Neutral or ambiguous languages in ASEAN's strategic communications (frequency of non-alignment phrases and avoidance of naming specific actors) ASD2-K: Share of ASEAN-external power engagement that is non-military or military light.
--	---	---

4.6 Data collection

Several types of sources were used in this study, including primary and secondary sources. These include ASEAN official statements, national policy positions, security documents, military cooperation data, and responses to regional conflict. Primary sources include government statements, summit declarations, and defence white papers. Secondary sources consist of academic articles, policy reports, and think-tank analyses. This diverse range of materials is in line with Blatter and Haverland's (2012) emphasis on using diverse sources of empirical information for each indication (triangulation). The researcher has chosen to do this to strengthen the robustness and credibility of the study's conclusions (Blatter and Haverland, 2012).

4.7 Validity and reliability

In line with Blatter and Haverland (2012), this study addresses two key dimensions of (internal) validity in congruence analysis: vertical and horizontal control. Vertical control refers to the logical separation between theory and empirical evidence. This is achieved by deducing proposition and predictions from each theoretical framework and assessing the degree of empirical congruence with these propositions (as seen in Table 10). This way it is ensured that observations are not fitted to support a particular theory but are evaluated systemically against theoretical expectations. Strong confirmation bias is therefore avoided. (Blatter and Haverland, 2012). Horizontal control involves the comparative element of congruence analysis: evaluating the relative explanatory power of multiple competing theories (Blatter & Haverland, 2012). By identifying which theory is most congruent with the evidence, the study increases the internal validity of its conclusions.

Moreover, the use of a pluralist theoretical framework strengthens the study's robustness (Yin, 2013). Nevertheless, there are challenges regarding the subjectivity of the indicators. This subjectivity has the potential to restrict the replicability of the study, as other researchers may interpret or apply indicators in different ways. Furthermore, measurements errors tend to have a greater impact on case studies, due to the reduced number of empirical evidence. However, they are often more easily detected due to the close engagement with the data (Blatter & Haverland, 2012). Quintao et al. (2020) confirm that it is generally harder to replicate a case study under the same conditions, therefore its reliability is demonstrated by the triangulation of data (Quintao et al., 2020). Thus, it was decided to include multiple types of data sources, including primary documents (national policy papers, defence agreements) and

secondary analyses (academic articles, think tank reports, news articles). This approach has shown to reduce measurement error and strengthens the credibility of the findings (Quintao, 2020).

To increase the probability of other researcher replicating the study and thereby arriving at similar findings, the research has been as transparent as possible with regard to the data collection process (with more detailed data included in the appendices).

Chapter 5. Analysis

5.1 China's growing assertiveness (context of the case)

Between 2010 and 2024, China has steadily escalated its assertiveness in the area (Koga, 2022). China did this through a combination of militarisation, legal manoeuvres, and coercive maritime actions.

Table 5.

Main events of the SCS dispute

2013	2015	2016	2020
China's ADIZ declaration ¹ and island-building in the Spratlys	Intensification of artificial island construction and militarisation ²³	Permanent court of arbitration ruling against China's claims ⁴⁵ and U.S. FONOPS ⁶	Increasing tensions ⁷

Table 5 provides an overview of this dispute's main events. Central to the dispute is China's assertion of the so-called nine-dash line, which encompasses nearly the entire South China Sea and overlaps with the exclusive economic zones (EEZs) of these other claimant states. Unlike other actors, China's claim lacks clear legal grounding under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), contributing to heightened tensions and legal ambiguity (Simon, 2012).

A particularly provocative development within this dispute is the militarisation of artificial islands by China. Since 2013, China has undertaken extensive land reclamation and infrastructure development in the Spratly Islands, constructing military airstrips, radar systems, and naval outposts. These actions are widely perceived as efforts to establish de facto control over contested maritime zones, especially in the absence of a final legal or diplomatic resolution (Beckman, 2017; Zhang, 2017). The U.S. has conducted regular Freedom of

¹(Chang, 2016)

²(McCartney, 2025).

³(Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, n.d.)

⁴(Campbell & Salidjanova, 2016)

⁵ (Permanent Court of Arbitration 2016).

⁶ (U.S. Department of Defense, 2017)

⁷ (Center for Preventive Action, 2024)

Navigation Operations (FONOPs) to challenge what it views as excessive Chinese maritime claims and to reaffirm the principles of UNCLOS (Simon, 2012).

Although ASEAN has long promoted a vision of regional stability, non-interference, and dialogue, China's dual strategy of inducement and coercion has complicated intra-ASEAN consensus (Beeson, 2016; Hong, 2013). Some member states have deepened military and strategic cooperation with external powers, while others have adopted a more conciliatory approach toward Beijing due to economic dependency or political alignment (Thayer, 2011).

Against this backdrop, the present chapter evaluates how ASEAN's engagement with external powers has been shaped by these developments, testing the explanatory power of three competing realist theories: (1) Balance of power, (2) Balance of threat, and (3) the Alliance Security Dilemma.

5.2 Empirical evidence Balance of Power (BOP)

Drawing from the operationalisation laid out in Table 2, each subsection addresses a specific indicator linked to a BOP proposition. To evaluate the congruence with BOP1 "ASEAN states will respond to China's militarisation by actively engaging with external powers to maintain regional balance" two indicators are examined: (A) Annual number of joint military exercises conducted with third-party (balancing) states and (B) Number of high-level diplomatic meetings or strategic agreements signed with other powers that are also counterbalancing China. In addition, to assess whether ASEAN's behaviour aligns with BOP2 "ASEAN's engagement will primarily focus on military or strategic capabilities to counterbalance China's rising power" the following indicators are analysed (C) military procurement and (D) defence capacity-building with external actors.

5.2.1 BOP1-A Joint military exercises with external powers

An overview of the major exercises is compiled in Table 6. The overview shows the military exercises between 2010-2025. When taking a look at this table, ASEAN does not officially favour any single external partner for military exercises. As a bloc, ASEAN has been more open to conducting low/intensity, joint exercises with China, such as the ASEAN-China maritime exercises in 2018 and 2023, which focused on search-and-rescue and humanitarian coordination rather than combat readiness. In contrast, ASEAN avoided organising similar drills with the United States, despite the U.S.'s longstanding bilateral and minilateral military presence in the region through exercises like Balikatan, Cobra Gold, and CARAT. The U.S.-led drills, often involving live-fire scenarios and island defence operations, are typically

conducted with individual ASEAN member states such as the Philippines and Indonesia rather than through ASEAN institutions. This way ASEAN maintain some sort of institutional neutrality. Therefore, the empirical evidence is not congruent with the observable implication, there is no clear institutional-level pattern of balancing through joint military exercises. While individual member states do engage externally, this falls outside of the scope of ASEAN-wide engagement.

Table 6.*Combined military exercises in South China Sea (2010–2024)*

Year	Exercise	Participants	Location	Focus
2010	CARAT (annual from 1995) ⁸	USA + ASEAN navies	Various ASEAN coasts	Maritime security
2010	Cobra Gold (annual) ⁹	USA, Thailand, ASEAN (+China observer)	Thailand	Land/sea ops, humanitarian
2012	Scarborough Shoal standoff ¹⁰	China - Philippines	Scarborough Shoal	Gray-zone maritime coercion
2013	Joint Sea 2013 ¹¹	China - Russia	Peter the Great Gulf	Anti-sub, naval manoeuvres
2014	Komodo Multilateral Naval Exercise (MNEK) ¹²	ASEAN + 30+ partners	Indonesia	Disaster response, maritime drills
2015	PLA gray-zone ops ¹³	China vs regional navies	Paracels, Spratlys	Paramilitary coercion
2016	U.S. FONOP patrols ¹⁴	U.S. Navy	Around artificial islands	Freedom of navigation patrols
2017	ASEAN Multinational Naval Exercise (AMNEX) ¹⁵	ASEAN navies	Thailand	Naval cooperation

⁸ (Defense Visual Information Distribution Service, n.d.)⁹ (U.S. Army Pacific, 2025)¹⁰ (Green et al., 2017)¹¹ (Sakhuja, 2013)¹² (U.S. Embassy Jakarta, 2025)¹³ (Goldrick, 2018)¹⁴ (Kuok, 2016)¹⁵ (Lean, 2023)

2018	ASEAN - China Maritime Exercise ¹⁶	ASEAN - China	South China Sea	Naval coordination, SAR
2022	Balikatan 2022 ¹⁷	U.S. - Philippines	Palawan	Maritime security, live-fire
2023	ASEAN - China Maritime Exercise ¹⁸	ASEAN + China	Singapore/Natuna Sea	SAR, medevac
2023	Balikatan 2023 ¹⁹	U.S. - Philippines (+ Japan observers)	Luzon / West PH waters	Multi-domain, HIMARS live-fire
2023	Super Garuda Shield 2023 ²⁰	U.S., Indonesia, AUS, JAP, SG, UK	Java + Natuna	Combined drills near SCS
2023	ASEAN Solidarity Exercise (ASEX) ²¹	ASEAN navies	Natuna Sea	SAR, humanitarian drills
2023	Aman Youyi / China-led Drills ²²	China + CLMTV	Regional	Defence cooperation
2023	Blue Strike 2025 ²³	China & Thailand	Zhanjiang (SCS coast)	Counter-terrorism, anti-sub
2024	JOINT SWORD ²⁴	PLA Eastern Theater Command	Taiwan Strait (adjacent SCS)	Large-scale sea-air drills

¹⁶ (Parameswaran, 2018)

¹⁷ (Naval Technology, 2022)

¹⁸ (Noy, 2023)

¹⁹ (U.S. Embassy Manila, 2023)

²⁰ (U.S. Embassy Jakarta, 2024)

²¹ (Lean, 2023)

²² (Xuanzun & Yuandan, 2023)

²³ (Xingwei & Su, 2023)

²⁴ (Dotson, 2024)

2024	Balikatan 2024 ²⁵	U.S. - Philippines (+ France, others)	Palawan / West PH waters	Island defence, missile drills
2025	Balikatan 2025 ²⁶	U.S. - Philippines + Japan	Palawan/Luzon area	Island defence, expanded scope

Note. Author's own compilation based on various secondary sources (see footnotes).

²⁵ (U.S. Marine Corps Forces, Pacific, 2024)

²⁶ (United States Pacific Command, 2025)

5.2.2 BOP1-B Diplomatic engagements with balancing powers

To assess if ASEAN states engaged diplomatically with external powers to balance China's influence in the region, the number and frequency of high-level diplomatic meetings and engagements can be found in joint statements issued during the ADMM-Plus meetings (see Appendix I). These statements mention growing institutionalisation of defence cooperation, addressing themes as regional stability, disaster resilience, and counterterrorism.

ASEAN engages with external actors through a variety of institutional mechanisms: bilateral dialogues (ASEAN+1 Summits), multilateral platforms such as East Asia Summit (EAS), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and defence-focused meetings under the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus). These formats allow ASEAN to simultaneous dialogues with major powers. While ASEAN's dialogue partnerships with actors such as the United States, Japan, Australia, India and the European Union existed for decades (see Appendix II), the past decade has seen a notable shift both in depth and focus of these relationships. Strategic partnerships were formalised or upgraded in this period, such as the Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships with the United States (2022), Australia (2021), and India (2022).

However, this pattern is not entirely congruent with the expectations of BOP1. ASEAN has also formalized and upgraded its strategic partnership with China, including the 2021 launch of the ASEAN-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and continued engagement on the Code of Conduct in the SCS. This suggest dual-track diplomacy, implying that ASEAN pursues a strategy of broad, inclusive engagements rather than one of clear balancing.

Also, ASEAN operates as a consensus-based regional organization, this evidence reflects ASEAN as a collective actor and does not necessarily capture divergence or more assertive balancing strategies at the level of individual member states. Thus, while ASEAN's diplomatic engagement with external powers has intensified, the empirical data do not conclusively demonstrate that this trend is driven primarily by efforts to counterbalance China.

5.2.3 BOP2-C Defence procurement trends

For Indicator C, Defence procurement trends have been analysed to determine whether there has been growth in military capacity in ASEAN countries.

According to SIPRI Military Expenditure Database (See table 7), ASEAN states such as Indonesia (+877,7%), Cambodia (+788.9%), and the Philippines (+369,5%) significantly increased their defence budgets between 2000 and 2024. This surge in military expenditure

aligns with the expectations of BOP2, which predicts increased strategic and military capabilities in response to a dominant regional actor.

Table 7.

Defence Budget Increase, 2000 to 2024 in Southeast Asia

Country	2000	2010	2015	2018	2021	2024	Growth (%)
Brunei	244.21	390.72	424.02	357.71	453.34	558.61	128.75
Cambodia	81.03	167.86	325.19	543.20	630.41	720.54	788.89
Indonesia	1129.54	4663.37	7595.03	7493.74	8802.51	11042.84	877.67
Laos	13.72	15.36	...	...	...	...	...
Malaysia	1533.16	3854.29	4532.07	3445.04	3675.49	4312.86	181.30
Myanmar	9030.56	...	2552.37	1529.36	2642.73	5011.27	-44.50
Philippines	1303.08	2438.19	3335.55	4107.40	5546.09	6117.54	369.46
Singapore	4330.73	8108.85	9383.83	10581.92	11017.57	15061.03	247.77
Thailand	1880.86	5193.51	5434.00	6661.99	7123.13	5522.41	196.60
Vietnam	...	2672.29	4562.63	5500.00	...	...	105.82 ¹

Note. Based on SIPRI Military Expenditure Database. “Military Expenditure (current USD million)”, May. 2025. <https://milex.sipri.org/sipri>

¹ Growth Vietnam is from 2010-2018

The empirical data in Table 8 offers partial support for the notion of internal balancing through increased military procurement among ASEAN states. Countries like Vietnam (8,78%) and Malaysia (6.06%) show peaks in military expenditure as a percentage of government spending around 2016, coinciding with the heightened regional tensions following the ADIZ declaration. Myanmar and Singapore also maintain consistently high defence spending indicating sustained military prioritization. Note that this observation does not necessarily has a correlation with the SCS dispute. While other states like Indonesia and the Philippines show more a stable or declining trends. The overall table does not suggest a clear trend in regards to China’s assertiveness.

Table 8.

Military expenditure as a percentage of General Government Expenditure in ASEAN Countries (2010-2020)

Country	2010	2013	2016	2020
Malaysia	5.60	5.40	6.06	3.99

Myanmar	..	17.93	17.45	13.81
Cambodia	7.14	7.48	9.04	8.77
Singapore	32.20	27.60	19.81	11.40
Indonesia	3.66	4.81	4.71	4.78
Philippines	6.37	6.87	5.50	5.00
Brunei Darussalam	7.88	6.78	8.99	10.94
Thailand	7.04	6.13	6.40	5.77
Viet Nam	7.65	7.13	8.78	..
Lao PDR	0.91	0.78	..	..

Note. Based on Worldbank Database. “Military expenditure (% of general government expenditure)”, May. 2025. <https://databank.worldbank.org/>

In summary, the empirical evidence shows partial congruence with the observable implication of BOP2. Significant increases in military spending by countries indicate efforts toward internal balancing. While these trends align with the rise of China’s militarisation, it is difficult to attribute these trends solely or directly to this assertiveness.

5.2.4 BOP2-D Defence capacity-building with external actors

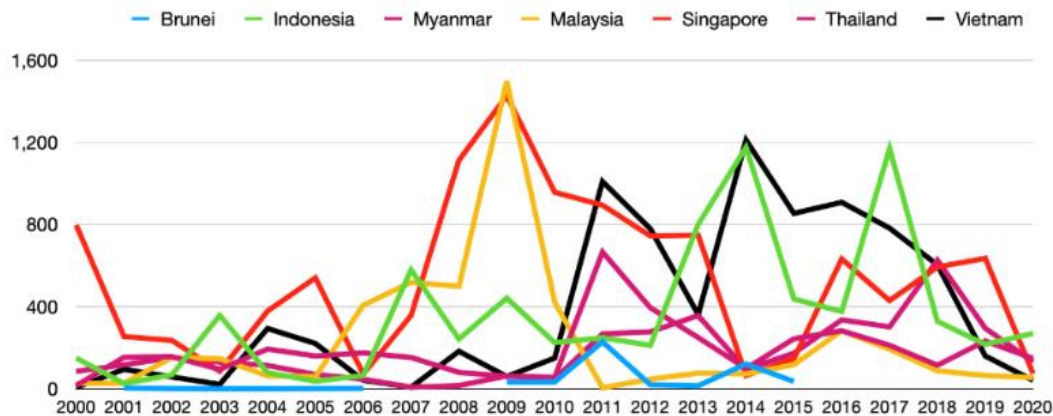
Chapter 5.2.1 looked closely at the military exercises with external partners, but for this indicator data on arms imports from external powers is examined to provide a different perspective on defence cooperation.

It was concluded that ASEAN, based on the military exercises in Table 6, did not favour an external actor. The empirical evidence is not congruent with the proposition that ASEAN actively engages with balancing powers after China’s growing assertiveness.

As for arms import data, Figure 3 shows the arms import by Southeast Asian countries after 2000. There was an increase in arms imports for Indonesia, Vietnam, and Malaysia after 2013, like stated earlier a period that coincides with China’s intensified militarisation of artificial islands. Vietnam’s arms import, in particular, peak around 2015-2017, aligning with increased tensions and the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling.

Figure 3.

Arms imports by Major Southeast Asian countries after 2000 (USD million)



Note. Based on Worldbank Database. “Arms Imports (SIPRI trend indicator values)” May. 2025.
<https://databank.worldbank.org/>

To assess more recent developments, a factsheet on trends in international arms transfer in 2024 from Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) shows that while overall arms imports by Southeast Asian states declined by 45% between 2015-2019 and 2020-2024, this drop masked significant national variations and qualitative shifts in procurement trends (George et al., 2025). Notably (see Appendix III), the Philippines stands out as the only major ASEAN state to increase its arms imports during this period (53%), with key suppliers being South Korea (33%), Israel (27%), and the USA (20%). This upward trend mirrors the Philippines' increased participation in high-profile joint exercises such as the Balikatan, which have grown more frequent and strategically significant since 2010. (George et al., 2025). This suggests a growing convergence between military diplomacy and defence procurement. Arms imports by states in Asia and Oceania dropped by 21 per cent between 2015-2019 and 2020-2024, mainly because of a sharp decrease in Chinese arms imports (George et al., 2025).

The empirical evidence of defence capacity-building through arms import and military exercises shows partial congruence with the observable implication of BOP2. Certain countries (Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia) did increase their imports, this trend is not consistent across the region.

5.3 Empirical Evidence: Balance of Threat

Moving on to the second theory: Balance of Threat. Drawing from the operationalisation outlined in Table 3, each subsection addresses a specific indicator linked to

the BOT propositions. A brief conclusion will be given at the end of the section. To evaluate the congruence with BOT1, “Different threat perceptions among ASEAN member states reduce internal cohesion, resulting in less coherent external strategy”, two indicators are examined: (E) Divergence in threat perception among ASEAN member states and (F) Frequency or strength of joint ASEAN statements on security issues. In addition, to assess whether ASEAN’s behaviour aligns with BOT2 “ASEAN’s ability to engage collectively with external security partners is constrained by heterogeneity in member states’ foreign policies and strategies” the following indicators are analysed (G) degree of alignment diversity among ASEAN members based on number and depth of bilateral security agreements with external powers and (H) participation rate of ASEAN member states in ASEAN-led multilateral security initiatives. Each subsection below presents the findings for these indicators.

5.3.1 BOT1-E Divergence in threat perception among ASEAN member states

To evaluate whether ASEAN member states have diverging threat perceptions regarding defence, (maritime) security and the South China Sea disputes, this research analysed the ASEAN Security Outlook 2021 (ASO, 2021). The executive summary on pages 5-7 in the Security Outlook shows a breakdown of which ASEAN member states prioritise which threats (full overview can be found in Appendix IV). From this, the following was observed. All 10 member states universally share the threat “competition between major powers”, showing that there is a uniform concern, and high salience. This can also be seen in issues such as terrorism and transnational crime. Notably, this can not be said about the South China Sea dispute. This threat is only shared by 6 out of 10 member states. Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Vietnam, and Singapore mention it. Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Laos, don’t share this perception. So, there is indeed a fragmentation in prioritising non-traditional threats. Despite this, the ASO (2021) does stress unity and collective efforts in normative language, but at the same time, it acknowledges challenges. To showcase:

“ASEAN unity and coordination should be improved to ensure creativity and flexibility in responding to such challenges” (p.11)

“Member states emphasise the transboundary and cross-cutting nature of issues... and call for the strengthening of cross-sectoral and cross-pillar coordination” (p.8)

This suggests that cohesion is aspirational, but not guaranteed, and the coordination mechanisms exist but require strengthening. Taken together with the diverging threat perceptions, these findings indicate that differing threat perceptions do constrain ASEAN’s collective security posture.

5.3.2 BOT1-F Frequency or strength of joint ASEAN statements on security issues

Table 9 demonstrates that since 2002, ASEAN has produced five formal joint statements addressing the SCS, indicating some level of external cohesion. However, there was a long gap between 2017-2022, this could reflect internal challenges and divisions within ASEAN. One clear example: in 2012, during the ASEAN Summit in Cambodia the organization failed to issue a joint statement on the SCS due to disagreements among member states (BBC News, 2012). This mixed evidence suggest partial congruence with indicator BOT1-F.

Table 9.

Joint ASEAN statements on SCS

Period	Statement	Note
2002	Declaration on the conduct of parties in the south china sea (DOC)	
10 May 2014	ASEAN foreign ministers' Statement on the current developments in the SCS	Expressed “serious concerns” and urged restraint, peace, and early COC conclusion.
25 July 2016	Joint statement of the ASEAN foreign ministers and China	Concluded at the China-ASEAN FMM in Vientiane, emphasised implementing the DOC and refraining from inhabiting disputed features
2017-2022	No formal statements referencing SCS	

December 2023	ASEAN foreign ministers' statement on maintaining and promoting stability in the maritime sphere in Southeast Asia	Expressed concern over recent SCS developments, reaffirmed UNCLOS, and emphasised the need for self-restraint and early COC adoption.
October 2024	Summit statement (Laos)	ASEAN leaders called for urgency in concluding the SCS Code of Conduct and managing differences with China

Note. Author's own compilation based on information from the ASEAN statement archive (ASEAN, n.d.) <https://asean.org/category/statements-meetings/>

5.3.3 BOT2-G Degree of alignment diversity among ASEAN members in security agreements with external powers

Table 11 (Appendix V) reveals substantial variation among ASEAN member states in their defence strategies, levels of military development, and external alignments. Countries like Brunei and Singapore maintain modern and externally integrated defence strategies, while others, such as Laos and Cambodia, prioritise stability and rely heavily on specific patrons like China (Salleh, 2021; Boupha, 2018; Chheang, 2022).

The Philippines and Thailand maintain long-standing defence ties with the United States, through bilateral alliances and major joint exercises (e.g. Balikatan, Cobra Gold) (Lai, 2019; U.S. Army Pacific, 2025). In contrast, Myanmar and Laos are aligned primarily with China and Russia, while Vietnam and Indonesia pursue strategic autonomy and diversified partnerships, including the US and Japan.

All member states are part of the ADMM-Plus (ASEAN-led). Meanwhile, Cambodia, Myanmar and Laos tend to emphasise bilateral defence cooperation with China, raising questions about their commitment to ASEAN-centric regional security dialogues. This is also in line with earlier findings on, like the consensus-based troubles (Chapter 5.3.2).

This empirical evidence is thus congruent with the indicator G. Individual ASEAN member states are diverse in their individual defence alignments.

5.3.4 BOT2-H Variability in ASEAN participation among member states

All ASEAN member states officially participate in ASEAN-led defence dialogues and exercises, notably the ADMM and ADMM-Plus (See Table 10). This indicates formal institutional cohesion and suggests a baseline level of unity. However, this surface-level participation does not reflect substantive alignment in threat perception, strategic priorities or defence commitments (elaborated upon with empirical evidence under discussions of indicators G, F, and E. While those sections show evidence for substantial variability in national defence strategies and alignments, such variation is not evident in ASEAN-led dialogues. Therefore, the empirical evidence is not congruent with indicator H.

5.4 Empirical evidence Alliance Security Dilemma

This analysis proceeds with the third theory: Alliance Security Dilemma. Drawing from the operationalisation outlined in Table 4, each subsection addresses a specific indicator linked to the ASD propositions. To evaluate the congruence with ASD1 “ASEAN’s engagement with external powers is cautious and limited due to fears of entrapment in a larger conflict”, one indicator is examined: (I) the absence or low number of defence treaties, mutual security pacts, or hard alliances between ASEAN (as a bloc) and external powers. In addition, to assess whether ASEAN’s behaviour aligns with ASD2 “To manage the dual risks of entrapment and abandonment, ASEAN adopts a strategy of ambiguous posturing in its engagement with external powers” the following indicators are analysed: (J) the use of neutral or ambiguous language in ASEAN’s strategic communications, and (K) the share of ASEAN-external power engagement that is non-military or military-light in nature.

5.4.1 ASD1-I ASEAN avoids deep security commitments with great powers

ASEAN is fundamentally shaped by the so-called ‘ASEAN Way’, which focuses on informal diplomacy, consensus-based decision making, and the avoidance of binding commitments. As such, ASEAN has no mutual defence treaty and relies on a range of flexible, non-binding frameworks that reflect its preference for autonomy and non-interference (Heng, 2014; Leelianou, 2021; Tay, 2017). This is discussed on different occasions through out this study and is empirical evidence for the indicator that ASEAN avoids binding security commitments.

These institutional characteristics are not directly tied to ASEAN’s behaviour in the SCS specifically, it does add context for understanding why ASEAN is reluctant to adopt collective security measures. This institutional tendency is congruent with the observable implication that ASEAN avoids deep security commitments. However, while the evidence supports this pattern, it does not necessarily confirm that the avoidance of security commitments is driven by fear of entrapment, as suggested by the Alliance Security Dilemma. In other words, institutional avoidance of commitments alone does not confirm ASD’s theoretical propositions. At the same time, this ‘finding’ could also be applied to the Balance of Threat theory, where internal political diversity can account for this behaviour. Therefore, it can be concluded that this implication is partially congruent, and needs to be interpreted carefully.

5.4.2 ASD2-K *Use of hedging language, vague or non-committal official statements*

ASEAN's security outlook (2021) is analysed again. There is a collective concern framed, but rather carefully. On page 6-8 the following is stated: "Territorial disputes are also identified as a security concern by the majority of member states since competing maritime claims, such as in the South China Sea, have led to increased tensions and near conflicts between claimant states ...". Using "such as" softens the centrality of SCS, also they say majority of member states, which means that it is not unanimous (this was also concluded in 5.3.1). The dispute is also framed as tensions, not violations or aggression.

In the ASO (2021), China is not mentioned in critical terms, only as a negotiating partner. There is no reference to the 2016 UNCLOS arbitration ruling (Philippines vs. China) No references to military incursions, coercion or grey-zone tactics.

The observations above are regarding the ASEAN-China relations. In ASO (2021), no external partner except China is linked to SCS. Even in ADMM-Plus countries (Australia, India, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, Russia, the US, and China), the association is implicit, via maritime security exercises, not explicit statements. From this document, it can be concluded that the SCS is treated as a sensitive issue best handled within ASEAN-China formats.

This empirical evidence aligns with ASD2. The framing reflects a strategy to avoid committal alignment.

5.4.3 ASD2-K *Preference for symbolic or non-military cooperation with external powers*

When researching ASEAN's engagement with external partners, one concept is very prominent. The concept "ASEAN way", which could be described as the principle of non-interference, peaceful dispute settlement, and consensus-based decision-making. ASEAN's principle of non-interference has become institutionalised as part of what is known as the "ASEAN Way" (Acharya, 1997; Loke, 2005). This is a diplomatic norm emphasising consensus and non-confrontation. This is underlined by scholars such as Acharya (2004) and Nguyen (2016), who describe non-interference as "sacrosanct" and deeply embedded in ASEAN's identity.

Take, for example, the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC, 1976), which is signed by all ASEAN members and over 50 external powers, including the US, China, EU, India and Japan. This shows ASEAN's preference for a diplomatic, non-military approach to regional relations. ASEAN tends to create a dialogue-oriented platform that focuses on symbolic reassurance, trust-building, and inclusive cooperation, rather than hard

security mechanisms, like ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). The ASEAN Charter and the workings of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) outline a system built on informal diplomacy and voluntary cooperation rather than centralised rule enforcement (Haacke, 2009). The ARF, for instance, follows procedures that emphasise national sovereignty and voluntary compliance, with no binding dispute settlement mechanisms. Also, the East Asia Summit (EAS) and ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) facilitate dialogue on security issues but do not form military alliances. ADMM-Plus has military exercises, but participation is framed as humanitarian or peacekeeping. ASEAN has no collective defence treaty like NATO. Member states engage bilaterally with the US, China, or other powers, but ASEAN as an organisation remains symbolically neutral.

Concluding, the empirical congruence of indicator K with SDA2 is strong. Although ASEAN continues to promote inclusive dialogue platforms, China's growing military presence in disputed areas has led to some ASEAN members (Vietnam, Philippines) to pursue stronger bilateral defence ties with external powers. This could suggest a partial erosion of circumvention of the "ASEAN Way" in practice, even as it remains officially upheld at the institutional level.

5.5 Discussion of findings

This chapter set out to assess the explanatory power of BOP, BOT, ASD, in explaining ASEAN's alignment security behaviour in response to China's growing assertiveness in the SCS between 2010-2024. The congruence result can be found in Table 10.

The analysis revealed mixed support for the balance of power perspective. While there is compelling evidence of increase defence procurement (BOP2-c) and selective capacity-building (BOP2-D), ASEAN's behaviour at the collective level, such as its approach to joint military exercises (BOP1-A) and diplomatic alignments (BOP-B) do not really reflect explicit balancing. The bloc appears to prioritise institutional neutrality and inclusivity over direct counterbalancing, thus limiting the explanatory reach of BOP.

The Balance of Threat (BOT) offered stronger explanatory leverage in accounting for ASEAN's internal cohesion challenges. The findings confirmed that divergent threat perceptions (BOT1-E) have contributed to inconsistent regional messaging (BOT1-F), with security alignments and engagement patterns varying widely among member states (BOT-G). The observations stress that ASEAN's collective action capacity (in the SCS) is constrained by internal heterogeneity.

The Alliance Security Dilemma (ASD) provided the most consistent empirical congruence. ASEAN has avoided hard security commitments with external Powers (ASD1-I), consistently employed neutral or hedging language in official documents (ASD2-J), and emphasised symbolic and non-military cooperation over binding defence pacts (ASD2-K). These behaviours align with the ASD logic, implying that ASEAN is cautious in its strategic posture. However, it is important to be critical about this results, because this congruence does not necessarily confirm that such behaviour is driven primarily by concerns over alliance dependency or entrapment (core assumption of the ASD framework). As such, while ASD offers a compelling explanatory perspective, caution is warranted in attributing causality solely to alliance-related concerns.

Table 10.

Congruence results

	BOP				BOT				ASD		
Indicator	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K
Empirical congruence	N	N	P	P	Y	P	Y	N	P	Y	Y

Note. Y/++ means yes, P/+ means partially, and N/- means no.

Chapter 6. Discussion

The research question of this study was: “Which realist theory (BOP, BOT, ASD) best explains ASEAN’s engagement with external powers in response to China’s militarisation of artificial islands in the South China Sea?”. Through a congruence analysis, it was found that both BOP and BOT demonstrated partial explanatory power. However, the Alliance Security Dilemma (ASD) emerged as the most congruent with ASEAN’s behaviour. This does not imply that ASEAN’s behaviour is explicitly driven by concerns over entrapment or abandonment (Snyder, 1984). Instead, the evidence shows alignment with ASD’s observable outcomes, such as hedging, ambiguity, and limited formal commitments, without necessarily confirming the underlying causal logic.

From an academic perspective, this research contributes to the field of defence and security studies by expanding the empirical scope of alliance theory. It tests the applicability of realist frameworks in different settings. In doing so, this study has illustrated the adaptive nature of realist theories but at the same time also exposes their limitations.

From a societal and policy-oriented perspective, this case offers broader lessons for regional organisations facing coercive pressure from external actors. The findings also suggest that ASEAN’s reliance on strategic ambiguity reflects institutional fragility (lack of strong cohesion within organisation) (Jones & Jenne, 2016). While ASEAN’s behaviour allows for flexibility, it may hinder long-term deterrence and therefore the ‘credibility’ as a regional security actor. Rather than resilience, its behaviour may reflect incapacity, stemming from the absence of enforcement mechanisms and divergent member interests and threat perceptions. This ultimately raises the broader question: Is ASEAN relevant as a regional security actor, or is its role increasingly symbolic? And if it is symbolic, is that necessarily problematic? Moreover, the results imply that other (similar) regional bodies may also default to ASD-type behaviour.

As with any study, several limitations surfaced. First, although the three theories were framed as competing, they fall within the realist paradigm, which means they share foundational assumptions. As a result, the analytical distinction between them is more complementary than sharply contrasting.

Second, the study relied heavily on official and formal documentation, such as declarations, white papers and government websites. While this was necessary for systemic

analysis, this created a risk of overlooking the informal diplomatic practices that can also shape strategic behaviour: informal consultations, off-the-record dialogues, and non-public exchanges.

A related limitation concerns the methodology itself. Doing a congruence analysis allowed for detailed theory-testing, but it did not extend beyond assessing theoretical plausibility. It did not establish causality. Nor does it provide external validity comparable to large-N quantitative studies (Blatter and Haverland, 2012). Similarly, in practice, ASEAN's actions often overlap and are non-linear, making it difficult to categorise data under a single theoretical framework. As a result, the interpretation of empirical congruence may be partially shaped by the researcher's analytical judgment, which could have influenced the outcome of this research. It is therefore important to acknowledge this.

Chapter 7. Recommendations

This study has shown theory-informed analysis can be used to better understand ASEAN's behaviour in the SCS dispute. As said in the previous chapter, it allowed for deep theory-testing but was limited in its empirical scope. In this respect, the study's contribution lies not in confirming single theory, but in testing the boundaries of theoretical applicability. ASEAN's alignment patterns do not fully match the assumption of just one theory. Realist frameworks can help clarify alignment patterns, but they cannot explain them in full. This limitation shows the strength of the approach, but at it also highlights where theory fails, and where future scholars might intervene.

The research findings do not lend itself to give direct policy recommendations for ASEAN. However, the analysis on ASEAN does give insight into this regional organizations behaviour. This can help other organizations or actors to manage similar disputes or regional instability. For security analysts, this research shows fragmented behaviour. The BOT framework shows how varying threat perceptions among ASEAN member states contribute in inconsistencies in regional messaging and alignment patterns. At the same time, the strong congruence with ASD framework at the collective level reveals why ASEAN refrains from taking a firm stance. This dual insight is interesting for analysts attempting to asses regional stability. Similarly, this research does show that realist theories can anticipate alliance patterns of regional actors, so a recommendation for policymakers and diplomats is to take this into account when deciding on external policy in relation to security.

The South China Sea remains a geopolitically sensitive region. As of writing this, new developments continue to happen. It would be a worthwhile direction for future research to examine China's narrative and framing of this dispute. One potential approach would be to apply a discourse analysis. Moreover, the findings of this research established congruence with Alliance Security Dilemma. But this congruence pointed more towards outcome similarly, not necessarily shared motivation. As it is not clear whether ASEAN's behaviour is genuinely driven by fears of entrapment or abandonment. A second recommendation is future research should further examine what drives ASEAN's behaviour. Could it be a response to domestic politics, economic factors, institutional norms or maybe even traditions and culture? Clarifying this would add a crucial depth for both theoretical refinement and policy relevance.

In wrapping up this thesis, this is the question that remains. Is ASEAN's current trajectory a conscious strategy or signals it deeper structural and internal constraints that sometimes limit its capacity to act as a unified diplomatic body?

Bibliography

- Acharya, A. (1997). Ideas, identity, and institution-building: From the 'ASEAN way' to the 'Asia-Pacific way'?. *The Pacific Review*, 10(3), 319-346.
- Acharya, A. (2004). How ideas spread: Whose norms matter? Norm localisation and institutional change in Asian regionalism. *International organisation*. 58(2), 239-275
- Ahmed, S. (2023). Regional Security Complex Theory: The South Asian Context. *Global Politics Journal*, 1(1), 13-27.
- Alatas, S. M. (2021). A Malaysian perspective on foreign policy and geopolitics: Rethinking West-centric international relations theory. *Global Studies Quarterly*, 1(4), ksab031.
- Aplianta, D. (2015). Indonesia's Response in the South China Sea Disputes: A comparative analysis of the Soeharto and the post-Soeharto era. *JAS (Journal of ASEAN Studies)*, 3(1), 1-21.
- Arif, M. (2021). Balancing with Jokowi's characteristics: A neoclassical realism approach to Indonesia's foreign and security policies in the South China Sea. *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, 8(3), 370-390.
- Aris, S., & Wenger, A. (2014). Introduction: 'Inside-out/outside-in': constructions and practices of security in regional organizations. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 27(2), 289-294.
- ASEAN Secretariat (1976) 'Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia Indonesia', ASEAN News, 24 February; accessed at <http://www.asean.org/news/item/treaty-of-amity-and-cooperation-in-southeast-asia-indonesia-24-february-1976-3>.
- Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative. (n.d.). *China Tracker*. <https://amti.csis.org/island-tracker/china/>
- Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (1967) 'The ASEAN Declaration', 8 August; accessed at <http://www.aseansec.org/1212.htm>, 23 March 2025.
- Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Charter of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), 20 November 2007, <https://www.refworld.org/legal/constinstr/asean/2007/en/64238> [accessed 14 May 2025]
- Bailes, A. J., & Cottey, A. (1992). 4. Regional security cooperation in the early 21st century. In *Conference on Interaction and* (p. 17a).
- Baldaro, E. (2021). Rashomon in the Sahel: Conflict dynamics of security regionalism. *Security Dialogue*, 52(3), 266-283.

- Barany, Z., & Rauchhaus, R. (2011). Explaining NATO's resilience: Is international relations theory useful?. *Contemporary Security Policy*, 32(2), 286-307.
- Baviera, A. S. (2014). Interests and foreign policy in China and the Philippines: Implications for the South China Sea disputes. *Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints*, 62(1), 133-143.
- BBC News. (2012, July 13). *Asean nations fail to reach agreement on South China Sea*. Retrieved February 8, 2025, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-18825148#:~:text=The%2010%2Dmember%20Association%20of,in%20the%20South%20China%20Sea>
- Beeson, M., & Chubb, A. (2021). Australia, China and the maritime 'rules-based international order': comparing the South China Sea and Timor Sea disputes. *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 21(2), 233-264.
- Beeson, M.. (2016). Can ASEAN Cope with China?. *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* , 35 , 28 - 5 . <https://doi.org/10.1177/186810341603500101>
- Blatter, J., Haverland, M. (2012). Congruence Analysis. In: Designing Case Studies. Research Methods Series. Palgrave Macmillan, London. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137016669_4
- Boupha, T. (2018). Laos' Perspectives on National Security. In The National Institute for Defense Studies (Eds.), *Security Outlook of the Asia Pacific Countries and Its Implications for the Defense Sector* (pp 19 -27). The National Institute for Defense Studies. https://www.nids.mod.go.jp/english/publication/joint_research/series16/pdf/
- Busbarat, P. (2014). Thailand's foreign policy: the struggle for regional leadership in Southeast Asia. *Globalization, development and security in Asia*, 1, 133-153.
- Campbell, C., & Salidjanova, N. (2016). *South China Sea Arbitration Ruling: What Happened and What's Next?*. US-China Economic and Security Review Commission.
- Castillo, J. J., & Downes, A. B. (2020). Loyalty, hedging, or exit: How weaker alliance partners respond to the rise of new threats. *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 46(2), 227–268. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2020.1797690>
- Center for Preventive Action. (2024, September 17). *Territorial disputes in the south china sea*. cfr.org. Retrieved Jun 1, 2025, from <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/territorial-disputes-south-china-sea>
- Cha, V. D. (2000). Abandonment, Entrapment, and Neoclassical Realism in Asia: The United States, Japan, and Korea. *International Studies Quarterly*, 44(2), 261–291. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0020-8833.00158>.

- Chang, K. F. (2016). China's ADIZ over the south china sea: Whole, partial, or none. <https://www.fpri.org/2016/04/chinas-adiz-south-china-sea-whole-partial-none/>
- Chen, C. J. (2022). Multilateralism in Law of the Sea and Its Implications for the South China Sea. In *Multilateralism in Peril* (pp. 89-106). Routledge.
- Chen, Y. H. (2015). South China Sea tension on fire: China's recent moves on building artificial islands in troubled waters and their implications on maritime law. *Maritime Safety and Security Law Journal*, 1, 1-15.
- Cheng, J. (2013). China's regional strategy and challenges in East Asia. *China perspectives* , 2013 , 53-65 . <http://doi.org/10.4000/CHINAPERSPECTIVES.6182>
- Chheang, V. (2022). Cambodia's multifaceted foreign policy and agency in the making. *The Pacific Review*, 35(2), 342-367.
- De Castro, R. C. (2016). The strategic balance in East Asia and the small powers: the case of the Philippines in the face of the South China Sea dispute. *Pacific Focus*, 31(1), 126-149.
- De Castro, R. C. (2020). The limits of intergovernmentalism: The Philippines' changing strategy in the South China Sea dispute and its impact on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 39(3), 335-358.
- Defense Visual Information Distribution Service. (n.d.). CARAT. DVIDS. Retrieved May 28, 2025, from <https://www.dvidshub.net/feature/CARAT>
- Dotson, J. (2024, October 30). *The PLA's joint sword 2024B exercise: continuing political warfare and creeping territorial encroachment*. Global Taiwan Institute. <https://globaltaiwan.org/2024/10/the-joint-sword-2024b-exercise/>
- Doung, C., Kang, W., & Kim, J. (2022). Cambodia's foreign policy choice during 2010 to 2020: from strategic hedging to bandwagoning. *The Korean Journal of International Studies*, 20(1), 55-88.
- Duong, V. H. (2023). Vietnam's Current Perceptions and Policies Regarding Its Relations with China. *Strategic Analysis*, 47(6), 547-564.
- Emmers, R. (2018). Unpacking ASEAN neutrality: The quest for autonomy and impartiality in Southeast Asia. *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 40(3), 349-370.
- Fels, E., & Vu, T. M. (2016). Introduction: Understanding the importance of the disputes in the South China Sea. *Power politics in Asia's contested waters: Territorial disputes in the South China Sea*, 3-23.

- Frazier, D., & Stewart-Ingersoll, R. (2010). Regional powers and security: A framework for understanding order within regional security complexes. *European Journal of International Relations*, 16(4), 731-753.
- George, M., Djokic, K., Hussain, Z., Wezeman, P. D., & Wezeman, S. T. (2025). *Trends in international arms transfers*, 2024. Stockholm: SIPRI. /https://doi.org/10.55163/XXSZ9056
- Gheciu, A., & von Hlatky, S. (2024). Irreconcilable Differences? NATO's Response to Russian Aggression Against Ukraine. *International Journal*, 79(2), 275-296.
- Goldrick, J. (2018). Grey zone operations and the maritime domain. In *Center of Security Studies ETH Zürich*. The Australian Strategic Policy Institute. https://www.aspi.org.au
- Green, M., Hicks, K., Cooper, Z., Schaus, J., & Douglas, J. (2017, June 26). *Counter-Coercion Series: Scarborough Shoal Standoff*. Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative. https://amti.csis.org/counter-co-scarborough-standoff/
- Grillot, S. R., Cruise, R. J., & D'erman, V. J. (2010). Developing security community in the Western Balkans: The role of the EU and NATO. *International Politics*, 47, 62-90.
- Haacke, J. (2009). The ASEAN Regional Forum: from dialogue to practical security cooperation? *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 22(3), 427-449. https://doi.org/10.1080/09557570903104057
- Haverland, M. (2010). If similarity is the challenge - congruence analysis should be part of the answer. *EPS: European Political Science*, 9(1), 68-73. https://doi.org/10.1057/eps.2009.47
- He, K. (2008). Institutional balancing and international relations theory: Economic interdependence and balance of power strategies in Southeast Asia. *European Journal of International Relations*, 14(3), 489-518.
- He, K., & Feng, H. (2012). 'Why is there no NATO in Asia?' revisited: Prospect theory, balance of threat, and US alliance strategies. *European Journal of International Relations*, 18(2), 227-250.
- Heng, K. (2017). Cambodia's ASEAN membership revisited: Challenges and opportunities. *The Cambodian Journal of International Studies*, 69.
- Heng, P. K. (2014). The 'ASEAN Way' and regional security cooperation in the South China Sea. *Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies Research Paper*, (2014/121).
- Heng, Y. K. (2015). ASEAN's position on the South China Sea and implications for regional peace and security. In *Territorial disputes in the South China Sea: navigating rough waters* (pp. 69-81). London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.

- Ho, H. V., & Tran, T. (2023). Vietnam's Foreign Policy With ASEAN: a National Interest Approach (1986-2020). *International Journal of Advanced and Applied Sciences*, 10(10).
- Hong, Z. (2013). THE SOUTH CHINA SEA DISPUTE AND CHINA-ASEAN RELATIONS. *Asian Affairs*, 44(1), 27–43. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03068374.2012.760785>
- Huang, J., & Billo, A. (Eds.). (2014). *Territorial disputes in the South China Sea: Navigating rough waters*. Springer.
- Johnson, J. C. (2015). The cost of security: Foreign policy concessions and military alliances. *Journal of Peace Research*, 52(5), 665-679.
- Jones, D. M., & Jenne, N. (2016). Weak states' regionalism: ASEAN and the limits of security cooperation in Pacific Asia. *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 16(2), 209-240.
- Kelly, R. E. (2007). Security theory in the “new regionalism”. *International Studies Review*, 9(2), 197-229.
- Kendall-Taylor, A., & Edmonds, J. (2019). IV. The Evolution of the Russian Threat to NATO. *Whitehall Papers*, 95(1), 54–66. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02681307.2019.1731209>
- Keohane, R. O. (1988). Alliances, threats, and the uses of neorealism.
- Koga, K. (2022). Four Phases of South China Sea Disputes 1990–2020. In *Managing Great Power Politics: ASEAN, Institutional Strategy, and the South China Sea* (pp. 43-160). Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore.
- Kuok, L. (2016). The US FON Program in the South China Sea. *East Asia Policy Paper*, 9, 1-31.
- Lai, C. J. (2019). Rhetorical traps and China’s peaceful rise: Malaysia and the Philippines in the South China Sea territorial disputes. *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 19(1), 117-146.
- Lai, Y. M., & Kuik, C. C. (2021). Structural sources of Malaysia's South China Sea policy: power uncertainties and small-state hedging. *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 75(3), 277-304.
- Laksmana, E. A. (2012). Regional order by other means? examining the rise of defence diplomacy in southeast Asia. *Asian Security*, 8(3), 251-270.
- Lean, C. K. S. (2023, October 27). *ASEX-01N strengthens the intra-ASEAN military landscape*. East Asia Forum. <https://eastasiaforum.org/2023/10/27/asex-01n-strengthens-the-intra-asean-military-landscape/>
- Leelianou, S. (2021). *Does ASEAN's Consensus Decision Making Remain Relevant?* (Doctoral dissertation, Flinders University, College of Business, Government and Law.).

- Lieb, D. (2004). The Limits of Neorealism. *Harvard International Review*, 26(1).
- Loke, B. (2005). The 'ASEAN Way': Towards Regional Order and Security Cooperation? *Melbourne Journal of Politics*, 30, 8.
- Luo, J. J. (2025). Cambodia's foreign policy (re) alignments amid great power geopolitical competition. *The Pacific Review*, 38(1), 60-89.
- Manantan, M. B. F. (2019). Pivot Toward China: A Critical Analysis of the Philippines' Policy Shift on the South China Sea Disputes. *Asian Politics & Policy*, 11(4), 643-662.
- McCartney, M. (2025, March 28). Satellite photos show island building in contested South China Sea. *Newsweek*. <https://www.newsweek.com/vietnam-island-building-south-china-sea-spratly-islands-2051195>.
- Mearsheimer, J. J. (1995). A realist reply. *International security*, 20(1), 82-93.
- Mendiola, G. A. (2019). An examination of foreign policy strategies of middle powers during great power competition: A case study of Thailand's strategic hedging between a dominant USA and ascending China. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Research (ISSN: 2408-1906)*, 4(1).
- Natalegawa, M. (2018). 5. ASEAN: Wither or Prosper?. In *Does ASEAN Matter?: A View from Within* (pp. 228-235). Singapore: ISEAS Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1355/9789814786751-006>
- Naval Technology. (2022, April 11). *US and Philippines conclude Balikatan 2022 annual bilateral exercise*. <https://www.naval-technology.com/news/us-and-philippines-conclude-balikatan-2022-annual-bilateral-exercise/>
- Nexon, D. H. (2009). The balance of power in the balance. *World Politics*, 61(2), 330-359.
- Nguyen, T. A. (2016). Norm or necessity? The non-interference principle in ASEAN. *Cornell International Affairs Review*, 9(1).
- Noy, H. (2023, November 18). China hosts military exercises with 5 ASEAN members. *Voice of America*. <https://www.voanews.com/a/china-hosts-military-exercises-with-5-asean-members/7360416.html>
- Osland, K. M., & Erstad, H. U. (2020). The fragility dilemma and divergent security complexes in the Sahel. *The International Spectator*, 55(4), 18-36.
- Pan, G., & Phan, T. H. (2024). The transformation of asymmetry: The evolution of Philippine and Vietnamese South China Sea policies and the asymmetry of attention. *The Pacific Review*, 37(1), 86-117.

- Parameswaran, P. (2018, October 22). *Why the First-China-ASEAN Maritime Exercise Matters*. The Diplomat. <https://thediplomat.com/2018/10/why-the-first-china-asean-maritime-exercise-matters/>
- Peng Er, L. A. M. (2021). Singapore-China relations in geopolitics, economics, domestic politics and public opinion: An awkward “special relationship”?. *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies*, 10(2), 203-217.
- Permanent Court of Arbitration. (2016, July 12). The South China Sea Arbitration (The Republic of the Philippines v. The People’s Republic of China) [Press release]. <https://pcacases.com/web/sendAttach/1801>.
- Pitakdumrongkit, K. (2015). Coordinating the South China Sea Issue: Thailand's roles in the code of conduct development. *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 15(3), 403-431.
- Quintao, C., Andrade, P., & Almeida, F. (2020). How to Improve the Validity and Reliability of a Case Study Approach. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Education*, 9(2), 264+. <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A662496407/AONE?u=erasmus&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=77d1590d>
- Roland, G. (2021). China's rise and its implications for International Relations and Northeast Asia. *Asia and the Global Economy*, 1(2), 100016.
- Rosyidin, M. (2017). Foreign policy in changing global politics: Indonesia’s foreign policy and the quest for major power status in the Asian Century. *South East Asia Research*, 25(2), 175-191.
- Sakhuja, V. (2013, July 10). *China and Russia: The Joint Sea 2013 exercise*. Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies. https://www.ipcs.org/comm_select.php?articleNo=4031
- Salleh, A. (2021, November 22). *Brunei Darussalam’s Conceptualizations of Maritime Security*. Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative. <https://amti.csis.org/brunei-darussalams-conceptualizations-of-maritime-security/>
- Schweller, R. (2016, May 09). The Balance of Power in World Politics. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*. Retrieved 24 Mar. 2025, from <https://oxfordre.com/politics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-119>.
- Simon, S. W. (2012). Conflict and diplomacy in the South China Sea. *Asian Survey*, 52(6), 995-1018.
- Smith, E. (2020). The traditional routes to security: Realism and Liberalism. In *International Security Studies* (pp. 12-29). Routledge.

- Snyder, G. H. (1984). The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics. *World Politics*, 36(4), 461–495. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2010183>
- Storey, I. (2013). Singapore and the rise of China: Perceptions and policy. In *China Threat: Perceptions Myths* (pp. 205-226). Routledge.
- Tay, S. S., Baviera, A., & Maramis, L. (2017). Imperatives for a new ASEAN leadership: Integration, community, and balance. *Building ASEAN Community*, 48.
- Terada, T. (2009). Competitive regionalism in Southeast Asia and beyond: role of Singapore and ASEAN. *Competitive regionalism: FTA diffusion in the Pacific Rim*, 161-180.
- Thayer, C. (2020). Vietnam's Foreign Policy. In *The Sage Handbook of Asian Foreign Policy* (pp. 709-729). SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Thayer, C.. (2011). Chinese Assertiveness in the South China Sea and Southeast Asian Responses. *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* , 30 , 104 - 77 . <http://doi.org/10.1177/186810341103000205>
- Thayer, C.. (2016). Vietnam's Strategy of 'Cooperating and Struggling' with China over Maritime Disputes in the South China Sea. *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* , 3 , 200 - 220 . <http://doi.org/10.1177/2347797016645453>
- The Governments of the Member States of ASEAN and the Government of the People's Republic of China,. (2012). DECLARATION ON THE CONDUCT OF PARTIES IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA. In *ASEAN.org*. ASEAN Secretariat. Retrieved February 21, 2025, from <https://asean.org/declaration-on-the-conduct-of-parties-in-the-south-china-sea-2/>
- Tu, C. C., Tien, H. P., & Hwang, J. J. (2024). Untangling threat perception in international relations: an empirical analysis of threats posed by China and their implications for security discourse. *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, 11(1), 2335766.
- U.S. Army Pacific. (2025, February). *Opening ceremony kicks off 44th iteration of Cobra Gold*. <https://www.usarpac.army.mil/Our-Story/Our-News/Article-Display/Article/4077352/opening-ceremony-kicks-off-44th-iteration-of-cobra-gold/>
- U.S. Department of Defense. (2017). *Freedom of navigation (FON) report for fiscal year (FY) 2016*. <https://policy.defense.gov/Portals/11/FY16%20DOD%20FON%20Report.pdf?ver=2017-03-03-141349-943>
- U.S. Embassy Jakarta. (2024, April 10). *United States, Indonesia, and Five Other Nations to Begin Super Garuda Shield 2023*. U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Indonesia.

<https://id.usembassy.gov/united-states-indonesia-and-five-other-nations-to-begin-super-garuda-shield-2023/>

- U.S. Embassy Jakarta. (2025, February 25). *U.S. Navy Joins Multilateral Naval Exercise Komodo in Indonesia*. U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Indonesia. <https://id.usembassy.gov/u-s-navy-joins-multilateral-naval-exercise-komodo-in-indonesia/>
- U.S. Embassy Manila. (2023, April 4). *Philippine, U.S. Troops to Hold Largest Ever Balikatan Exercise from April 11 to 28*. U.S. Embassy in The Philippines. <https://ph.usembassy.gov/philippine-u-s-troops-to-hold-largest-ever-balikatan-exercise-from-april-11-to-28/>
- U.S. Marine Corps Forces, Pacific. (2024, May 10). *Philippines and U.S. conclude Balikatan exercises, shoulder-to-shoulder*. <https://www.marforpac.marines.mil/Media-Room/Pacific-Marines-Stories/Article/Article/3771258/philippines-and-us-conclude-balikatan-exercises-shoulder-to-shoulder/>
- United States Pacific Command. (2025, May 6). *AFP-U.S. forces complete Balikatan 25 MARSTRIKE*. U.S. Indo-Pacific Command. <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/NEWS/News-Article-View/Article/4176685/afp-us-forces-complete-balikatan-25-marstrike/>
- Walt, S. M. (1985). Alliance formation and the balance of world power. *International security*, 9(4), 3-43.
- Walt, S. M. (1988). Testing theories of alliance formation: The case of Southwest Asia. *International Organization*, 42(2), 275-316.
- Walt, S. M. (1990). *The origins of alliance*. Cornell University Press.
- Walt, S. M. (1997). Why alliances endure or collapse. *Survival*, 39(1), 156–179. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396339708442901>
- Wang, Y. (2021). Hedging strategy: Concept, behavior, and implications for China-ASEAN relations. *East Asian Affairs*, 1(02), 2150012.
- Waltz, Kenneth N. (1979), *Theory of International Politics*, Reading: Addison-Wesley.
- Wicaksana, I. G. W. (2019). Indonesia in the South China Sea: Foreign Policy and Regional Order. *Global Strategis*, 13(2), 35-48.
- Wicaksana, I. G. W., & Karim, M. F. (2023). How regional organisation survives: ASEAN, hedging and international society. *Contemporary Politics*, 29(5), 659-679.

- Wivel, A. (2017). Realism in foreign policy analysis. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*.
- Wohlforth, W. C. (2009). Realism and security studies. In *The Routledge handbook of security studies* (pp. 25-36). Routledge.
- Wohlforth, W. C. (2014). The stability of a unipolar world. In *The Realism Reader* (pp. 383-395). Routledge.
- Wu, Z. (2018). Classical geopolitics, realism and the balance of power theory. *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 41(6), 786-823.
- Xingwei, S., & Su, Y. (2023, September 11). *China-Thailand Blue Strike-2023 joint naval training exercise concludes*. China Ministry of National Defense. http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/OverseasOperations/JointTrainingandExercises/16252113.html
- Xuanzun, L., & Yuandan, G. (2023, May 28). *China to join expanded military drills with SE Asian countries*. The Global Times. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202305/1291521.shtml>
- Yin, R. K. (2013). Validity and generalization in future case study evaluations. *Evaluation*, 19(3), 321-332.
- Zha, W. (2022). Great power rivalry and the agency of secondary states: a study based on China's relations with Southeast Asian countries. *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 22(1), 131-161.
- Zhang, F. (2017). Chinese thinking on the South China Sea and the future of regional security. *Political Science Quarterly*, 132(3), 435-466.
- Zhang, J. (2023). Rebuilding strategic autonomy: ASEAN's response to US-China strategic competition. *China International Strategy Review*, 5(1), 73-89.
- Zhong, H., & White, M. (2017). South China Sea: Its importance for shipping, trade, energy, and fisheries. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Ocean Law and Policy*, 2(1), 9-24.

Appendix I. Overview Joint Statements by the ADMM-Plus

Location	Date	Main Points	More Details
Vientiane, Lao PDR ²⁷	21 Nov 24	Resilience to climate-related and natural disasters	Focused on best practices exchange and capacity-building.
Jakarta, Indonesia ²⁸	16 Nov 23	Women, Peace and Security	Emphasized women's roles in peacekeeping, conflict resolution, and defence cooperation.
Siem Reap, Cambodia ²⁹	23 Nov 22	Strengthening defence cooperation for harmonised security	Stressed solidarity, trust-building, and collective security mechanisms.
Bandar Seri Begawan ³⁰	16 Jun 21	15th Anniversary Declaration	Called for a future-ready, peaceful, and prosperous ASEAN through enhanced defence ties.
Virtual (Chair country not specified) ³¹	10 Dec 20	Strategic Security Vision	Outlined long-term goals for regional stability, peace, and cooperation.

²⁷ Joint Statement by the ADMM-Plus on Resilience to Climate-Related and Other Natural Disasters, including through Best Practices Exchange and Capacity-Building, Vientiane, Lao PDR, 21 November 2024

²⁸ Joint Statement by the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus on Women, Peace and Security, Jakarta, Indonesia, 16 November 2023

²⁹ Joint Declaration by the ADMM-Plus Defence Ministers on Defence Cooperation to Strengthen Solidarity for a Harmonised Security, Siem Reap, Cambodia, 23 November 2022

³⁰ Bandar Seri Begawan Declaration by the ADMM-Plus in Commemoration of the 15th Anniversary of the ADMM on Promoting A Future-Ready, Peaceful and Prosperous ASEAN, 16 June 2021

³¹ Joint Declaration by the ADMM-Plus Defence Ministers on Strategic Security Vision of the ADMM-Plus, 10 December 2020

Bangkok, Thailand ³²	18 Nov 19	Advancing Partnership for Sustainable Security	Focused on sustainable security and defence diplomacy.
Singapore ³³	20 Oct 18	Preventing and Countering Terrorism	Outlined joint approaches to counter terrorism threats.
Singapore ³⁴	20 Oct 18	Practical Confidence-Building Measures	Promoted transparency and cooperation to reduce misperceptions among defence forces.
Bandar Seri Begawan ³⁵	29 Aug 13	Second ADMM-Plus Declaration	Reviewed progress since 2010, emphasized practical cooperation and capacity building.
Ha Noi, Vietnam ³⁶	12-Oct-10	First ADMM-Plus Declaration	Established ADMM-Plus, highlighting regional security dialogue and cooperation.

Note. Author's own compilation based on information from the ASEAN ADMM-Plus website (ASEAN, n.d.) from <https://admm.asean.org/index.php/2012-12-05-19-05-19/admm-plus/2013-01-30-04-31-02.html>

³² Joint Statement by the ADMM-Plus Defence Ministers on Advancing Partnership for Sustainable Security, Bangkok, 18 November 2019

³³ Joint Statement by the ADMM-Plus Defence Ministers on Preventing and Countering Terrorism, Singapore, 20 October 2018

³⁴ Joint Statement by the ADMM-Plus on Practical Confidence-Building Measures, Singapore, 20 October 2018

³⁵ Bandar Seri Begawan Joint Declaration on the Second ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus, Bandar Seri Begawan, 29 August 2013

³⁶ Ha Noi Joint Declaration on the First ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus, Ha Noi, 12 October 2010

Appendix II. Overview dialogues and strategic partnerships ASEAN with external actors

	Dialogue	Strategic	Comments on importance (esp. SCS context)
ASEAN-China	1991	2003	Core actor in SCS dispute; Code of Conduct (COC) negotiations ongoing
ASEAN-United States	1977	2015	Security balancer; Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs)
ASEAN-Japan	1973	2003	Maritime cooperation, rule-based order, infrastructure
ASEAN-India	1992	2012	Indo-Pacific strategy, capacity-building
ASEAN-Australia	1974	2021	Defence cooperation, maritime security
ASEAN-Republic of Korea	1989	2004	Tech, peacebuilding, ASEAN–Korea Centre
ASEAN-Russian Federation	1996	2005	Smaller player, supports regional stability
ASEAN-Canada	1977	2021	Defence cooperation; less central in SCS, but engages on multipolarity
ASEAN-EU	1977	2020	Not full summit partner like others; but deep economic ties, supports UNCLOS
ASEAN-New Zealand	1975	2015	
ASEAN-United Kingdom	2021	-	

Note. Author's own compilation based on information from the ASEAN External relations webpage (ASEAN, n.d.) <https://asean.org/our-communities/asean-political-security-community/outward-looking-community/external-relations/>

Appendix III. The 40 largest imports of major arms and their main supplies (2020-2024)

Table 2. The 40 largest importers of major arms and their main suppliers, 2020-24

Percentages below 10 are rounded to 1 decimal place; percentages over 10 are rounded to whole numbers.

Rank	Importer	Share of global arms imports (%)		Per cent change from 2015-19 to 2020-24 ^a	Main suppliers and their share of importer's total imports (%), 2020-24					
		2020-24	2015-19		1st	2nd	3rd			
1	Ukraine	8.8	0.1	9 627	USA	45	Germany	12	Poland	11
2	India	8.3	9.1	-9.3	Russia	36	France	33	Israel	13
3	Qatar	6.8	3.0	127	USA	48	Italy	20	UK	15
4	Saudi Arabia	6.8	11	-41	USA	74	Spain	10	France	6.2
5	Pakistan	4.6	2.8	61	China	81	Netherlands	5.5	Türkiye	3.8
6	Japan	3.9	2.0	93	USA	97	UK	2.0	Germany	0.5
7	Australia	3.5	4.8	-27	USA	81	Spain	15	Norway	1.3
8	Egypt	3.3	5.8	-44	Germany	32	Italy	27	France	19
9	United States	3.1	1.9	67	UK	18	France	15	Israel	13
10	Kuwait	2.9	0.5	466	USA	63	Italy	29	France	7.1
11	UAE	2.6	3.3	-19	USA	42	France	17	Türkiye	11
12	South Korea	2.6	3.4	-24	USA	86	Germany	9.7	UK	2.6
13	United Kingdom	2.5	1.8	36	USA	86	Israel	6.9	Spain	3.3
14	Poland	2.4	0.4	508	USA	45	South Korea	42	Italy	3.5
15	Israel	1.9	1.9	-2.3	USA	66	Germany	33	Italy	1.0
16	China	1.8	5.1	-64	Russia	72	France	13	Ukraine	12
17	Netherlands	1.8	0.6	220	USA	97	Italy	0.7	Finland	0.6
18	Norway	1.5	1.1	42	USA	91	South Korea	4.2	Italy	2.4
19	Greece	1.3	0.8	48	France	64	USA	19	UK	7.5
20	Singapore	1.2	1.5	-23	Germany	40	USA	32	France	14
21	Algeria	1.2	4.5	-73	Russia	48	China	19	Germany	14
22	Türkiye	1.1	1.7	-33	Spain	34	Italy	24	Germany	19
23	Bahrain	1.1	0.1	898	USA	97	Türkiye	1.4	UK	0.9
24	Italy	1.1	1.5	-27	USA	94	Germany	2.0	UK	1.5
25	Brazil	1.0	0.6	77	France	53	Sweden	20	Italy	11
26	Kazakhstan	0.9	1.0	-6.2	Russia	88	Spain	6.4	Türkiye	1.5
27	Philippines	0.9	0.6	53	South Korea	33	Israel	27	USA	20
28	Indonesia	0.9	1.7	-47	USA	33	France	15	South Korea	12
29	Denmark	0.9	0.2	311	USA	79	Switzerland	7.6	Germany	7.2
30	Romania	0.8	0.2	233	USA	61	Norway	15	Switzerland	8.4
31	Morocco	0.7	1.0	-26	USA	64	France	15	Israel	11
32	NATO ^b	0.7	0.1	729	France	74	UK	17	USA	9.9
33	Germany	0.7	0.2	334	USA	70	Israel	13	Sweden	5.1
34	Belgium	0.7	0.1	1 338	Spain	49	USA	43	Germany	8.1
35	Canada	0.7	1.0	-26	Spain	30	USA	26	Australia	22
36	Serbia	0.7	0.1	465	China	57	Russia	20	France	7.4
37	Hungary	0.7	<0.05	1 454	Germany	51	USA	17	Norway	11
38	New Zealand	0.7	0.1	879	USA	76	South Korea	10	UK	9.1
39	Taiwan	0.6	0.9	-27	USA	98	Italy	1.2	Germany	1.0
40	Thailand	0.6	1.2	-49	China	43	USA	14	South Korea	12

NATO = North Atlantic Treaty Organization; UAE = United Arab Emirates.

^a Figures show the change in volume of the total arms imports per importer between the two periods.

^b The data is for imports by the organization itself, not the total imports by NATO member states.

Source: SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, Mar. 2025.

Note. Retrieved from SIPRI fact sheet (George et al, 2025)

Appendix IV. Snapshot of the security concerns as identified by the ASEAN member states

Concern/ Issue	BN	CA	ID	LA	MY	MM	PH	SG	TH	VN
Competition between major powers	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Non-proliferation and disarmament of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs)	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Terrorism and violent extremism	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs)	√	√	√				√		√	
Transnational crimes, e.g.	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√

Concern/ Issue	BN	CA	ID	LA	MY	MM	PH	SG	TH	VN
trafficking in persons, people smuggling, irregular movement of persons, illicit drugs trafficking, arms smuggling, international economic crime and cybercrime										
Natural disasters	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Maritime security	√	√	√		√	√	√	√	√	√
Territorial disputes	√	√	√	√		√	√			√
South China Sea			√		√		√	√	√	√
Illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing			√		√		√		√	√
Marine environment protection, including marine debris			√		√		√		√	
Cybersecurity	√	√	√		√			√	√	√
Climate change				√	√	√	√			√
Food security				√	√				√	√
Water security					√					√
Transboundary haze pollution					√					
Environmental degradation							√			
Developments in Myanmar							√		√	√
Korean Peninsula							√	√		
Energy security				√	√					

Note. Retrieved from ASEAN Security Outlook (2021)

Appendix V. External policies of ASEAN member states

Table 11.

External policies of ASEAN member states

Country	Defence strategy	External engagements	Sources
Brunei Darussalam	Maintains a modest defence posture focused on territorial integrity and maritime security.	Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA): Participates alongside Malaysia, Singapore, Australia, and the UK. ADMM-Plus.	(Salleh, 2021)
Cambodia	Emphasizes internal stability and border security. ³⁷	China: Deepening military ties, including infrastructure development and joint exercises. ADMM-Plus	Chheang (2022) Heng (2017b) Luo (2025) Doung et al. (2022)
Indonesia	Aims for strategic autonomy with a focus on archipelagic defence and maritime security. ³⁸	United States: Co-hosts the annual "Super Garuda Shield" exercises, enhancing interoperability. Japan: Received maritime security assistance, including patrol vessels.	Wicaksana (2019) Rosyidin (2017) Aplianta (2015) Arif (2021)
Laos	Focuses on internal security and border management	ADMM-Plus: Active China and Vietnam: Primary defence partners, providing training and equipment. ADMM-Plus	(Boupha, 2018)

³⁷ <https://www.mfaic.gov.kh/page/2021-02-08-Cambodia-s-Foreign-Policy-Direction>

³⁸ <https://kemlu.go.id/washington/kebijakan/kebijakan-luar-negeri-ri>

Malaysia	Prioritises maritime security, especially in the South China Sea. ³⁹	FPDA: Active member, participating in joint exercises. The United States: Engages in bilateral exercises like CARAT and receives training support. Japan: Received maritime security assistance, including patrol vessels.	Lai and Kuik (2021) Lai (2019) Alatas (2021)
Myanmar	Historically focused on internal security; post-2021 coup, emphasis on regime preservation. ⁴⁰	ADMM-Plus China and Russia: Primary defence partners, supplying equipment and training. ADMM-Plus: Participation has been limited due to political developments.	Zha (2022)
Philippines ⁴¹	Modernisation efforts with a focus on maritime security and territorial defence.	United States: Long-standing alliance, conducting joint exercises like Balikatan. Japan: Signed a Reciprocal Access Agreement to facilitate joint military activities. European Union: Initiated a security and defence dialogue to address emerging threats.	Baviera (2014) Manantan (2019) De Castro (2020) De Castro (2016).

³⁹ <https://www.kln.gov.my/web/guest/foreign-policy>

⁴⁰ https://myanmarbsb.org/_site/foreign-policy-of-myanmar/

⁴¹ <https://dfa.gov.ph/about/phl-foreign-policy>

Singapore	Adopts a Total Defence approach, integrating military, civil, economic, social, psychological, and digital aspects. ⁴²	ADMM-Plus	
		United States: Strong defence ties, including hosting rotational deployments and joint exercises.	Storey (2013) Terada (2009) Peng Er (2021)
		FPDA: Active member, participating in multilateral exercises.	
Thailand	Employs a hedging strategy, balancing relations among major powers. ⁴³	ADMM-Plus	
		The United States: Co-hosts the annual "Cobra Gold" exercises, enhancing regional interoperability.	Busbarat (2014) Pitakdumrongkit (2015) Mendiolaza (2019)
		China: Engages in joint training and defence procurement.	
Vietnam	Focuses on modernising forces and safeguarding maritime sovereignty. ⁴⁴	ADMM-Plus	
		United States: Strengthening defence ties, including port visits and capacity-building.	Ho and Tran (2023) Duong (2023) Pan and Phan (2024) Thayer (2020)
		Japan: Elevated relations to a comprehensive strategic partnership, enhancing defence cooperation.	
		ADMM-Plus	

⁴² <https://www.mfa.gov.sg/Overseas-Mission/Bangkok/About-Singapore/Foreign-Policy>

⁴³ <https://www.mfa.go.th/en/page/foreign-policy?menu=5e1fcc1657b01e001a03f7d2>

⁴⁴ <https://vietnamembassy-usa.org/vietnam/foreign-policy>