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More Relevant, Less Coherent:
ASEAN's Future Trajectory

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Executive Summary

ASEAN enters its seventh decade more institutionally established, economically significant and diplomatically visible than at any earlier point in its history, but also under growing pressure from geopolitical rivalry, economic fragmentation, technological change and transnational challenges. This study finds that ASEAN is likely to remain highly relevant while becoming less coherent in the way that relevance is expressed. Regional cooperation will continue, but at different speeds across sectors and member states. The central question is therefore not whether ASEAN will survive or remain important, but whether it can turn its institutional density and diplomatic legitimacy into more consistent regional capacity and action.

The analysis draws on 20 semi-structured interviews conducted between April and July 2026 with policymakers, former government leaders and officials, diplomats, academics, policy researchers, think-tank leaders and civil-society practitioners from Timor-Leste, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia. The respondents do not represent a single Southeast Asian position, and the study does not treat national perspectives as uniform. Their value lies in the variation of their professional and national vantage points and in the recurring patterns that emerge across them.

The first major finding is that ASEAN integration will continue, but unevenness is likely to remain a defining feature rather than a temporary weakness. Economic and functional cooperation has the strongest prospects for deeper integration because governments can identify practical benefits in trade, supply chains, connectivity, digital systems, cross-border payments, energy cooperation and technical standards. Yet implementation gaps remain significant. Non-tariff barriers, regulatory differences, uneven administrative capacity, infrastructure gaps and differing levels of digital readiness continue to limit the emergence of a more integrated regional market. The interviews therefore point towards deeper but incomplete economic integration, including greater use of differentiated or variable-speed arrangements where members with greater capacity can move first while credible pathways remain open for others to join.

Political-security integration is likely to remain much more constrained. Consensus, consultation and non-interference have helped ASEAN accommodate very different political systems and national interests, and they remain central to its durability. At the same time, these principles limit collective action when governments disagree or resist regional scrutiny. Myanmar, the South China Sea and other politically sensitive questions expose the gap between ASEAN's institutional activity and its substantive authority. The problem is not simply a lack of mechanisms. ASEAN already has a dense architecture of meetings, declarations and sectoral bodies. The more persistent problem is whether member states are willing to use these institutions when significant national interests are at stake and whether regional programs are assessed by outcomes rather than by the number of meetings and activities conducted.

ASEAN centrality remains valuable, but its meaning needs to be sharpened. The study distinguishes institutional centrality, diplomatic centrality and substantive centrality. ASEAN performs strongly in the first two: it remains the region's most inclusive diplomatic platform and retains an unusual capacity to convene competing powers. Its weakness is substantive centrality, or the ability to translate its position at the center of regional architecture into collective decisions and influence over outcomes. Centrality cannot be sustained by repetition in diplomatic statements alone. It depends on internal cohesion, leadership, institutional follow-through and the willingness of member states to treat ASEAN as the first serious platform when regional interests are affected. Minilateral and bilateral arrangements will continue to grow, but they need not automatically undermine ASEAN if a stronger regional framework can connect these initiatives to wider Southeast Asian interests.

National interests will remain the decisive condition shaping ASEAN's future. The interviews reject the idea that integration requires governments to abandon national priorities. ASEAN advances when governments recognize that national security, prosperity and resilience can be served through regional cooperation. The more important distinction is between narrow national interests centerd on short-term political survival or bilateral advantage and broader interests that include economic resilience, regional stability, social trust and shared public goods. Leadership can help create overlap among these interests, but the annual chairmanship is too short to substitute for stronger institutional memory, clearer multi-year priorities, better regional data and more consistent monitoring.

Integration beyond governments is also increasingly important. Universities, professional communities, businesses, labour networks, civil society, youth groups and digital communities are creating regional connections that do not always depend on ASEAN institutions. These links can make regionalism more meaningful in everyday life, particularly through education, mobility, labour protection, professional recognition and cross-border collaboration. Yet a people-centerd ASEAN requires more than consultation. Non-state actors need meaningful opportunities to shape regional programs, while economic mobility needs to be accompanied by rights, social protection and public acceptance. ASEAN may become more connected economically without becoming more socially inclusive unless these issues are addressed.

Timor-Leste's accession as ASEAN's eleventh member is a major test of enlargement, inclusion and institutional adaptability. The study argues that readiness should not be treated only as a question of whether Timor-Leste can comply with existing ASEAN obligations. Timor-Leste must strengthen government coordination, civil-service capability, regulatory knowledge, English-language and negotiation skills, institutional continuity and domestic awareness of ASEAN. But ASEAN must also examine whether its own meeting-heavy processes, financing arrangements and

implementation expectations are suitable for a smaller and less-resourced member. Differentiated integration, targeted support and peer partnerships can help preserve equal membership while allowing obligations to be sequenced according to capacity. Timor-Leste should also be understood as a contributor, not merely a recipient of assistance. Its experience of self-determination, democratic transition, reconciliation, peacebuilding and small-state diplomacy may add perspectives that are less prominent within ASEAN, although the influence of those perspectives will depend on sustained institutional capacity and political confidence.

For Germany and the European Union (EU), the central implication is that external engagement should strengthen Southeast Asian capacity and choice rather than prescribe ASEAN's institutional future. Germany is well placed to make a focused, long-term contribution in technical and vocational education, SME and industrial development, the green transition, digital governance, institutional capacity and regional research. A dedicated program for Timor-Leste's ASEAN participation would be particularly useful if it links regional obligations to domestic institution-building rather than relying on isolated training activities. The EU can add scale through trade, connectivity, investment, digital interoperability, energy cooperation, education, regulatory cooperation and selected security fields. In both cases, European standards should be paired with finance, technology, early consultation and realistic implementation support, especially for smaller firms and less-resourced institutions.

The study's policy recommendations therefore favour concentration, continuity and joint accountability over a proliferation of projects. Germany should focus on a limited number of recognisable strengths, make vocational and technical education a central pillar of its ASEAN partnership, connect SME support with industrial upgrading and the green transition, invest in ASEAN's institutional memory and independent regional knowledge, and develop sustained support for Timor-Leste. At the EU level, priority should be given to digital integration, sustainable connectivity, energy cooperation, educational mobility and support for human rights and civil society that is locally owned and politically sensitive. Across all areas, success should be measured by whether cooperation changes institutional practice, improves implementation, widens participation and leaves regional actors with greater capacity after programs end.

The overall conclusion is that ASEAN is likely to become more necessary at the same time as maintaining coherence becomes more difficult. Its diplomatic architecture and habits of consultation remain significant regional assets, but necessity alone will not guarantee influence. ASEAN's future relevance will depend on whether it can convert convening power into practical regional agency, manage different speeds of integration without deepening permanent inequalities, and connect state-led cooperation more closely to the societies it represents. For Germany and the EU, the most constructive role is a patient, consistent partnership that supports these capacities on Southeast Asian terms.

Part I. ASEAN's Uneven Regional Trajectory

1. Introduction

ASEAN enters its seventh decade in a regional and global environment markedly different from the one in which it was first established in 1967 with a different political climate. The organization is now more institutionally developed, economically significant and diplomatically visible than at any earlier point in its history. Its meetings and mechanisms form an important part of the regional architecture, while its member states collectively occupy a central place in global production, trade and strategic competition. Yet ASEAN is also facing growing questions about its capacity to respond to the pressures surrounding it. The issue is no longer whether ASEAN remains relevant. It clearly does. The more difficult question is what kind of relevance it can sustain, and whether its existing principles and institutions are sufficient for the demands now being placed upon them.

The regional environment has become more fragmented and less predictable. Strategic competition between the United States (U.S.) and China now extends beyond conventional military and diplomatic rivalry. It increasingly shapes trade, technology, artificial intelligence, semiconductors, critical minerals, infrastructure, investment and supply chains. At the same time, issues such as climate change, demographic shifts, migration, energy insecurity, transnational crime and digital disruption are creating challenges that no Southeast Asian state can manage entirely on its own. These pressures strengthen the case for regional cooperation. They do not, however, automatically produce greater unity. In some areas, external uncertainty encourages ASEAN member states (AMS) to coordinate more closely. In others, it leads governments to prioritise bilateral relationships, domestic interests or narrower forms of cooperation outside ASEAN.

This tension lies at the heart of ASEAN's future trajectory. ASEAN is being asked to carry greater regional responsibility at a time when the AMS are also becoming more cautious about collective commitments. Governments continue to support ASEAN in principle, but they differ considerably in their political systems, levels of development, strategic outlooks and relationships with external powers. Their interpretations of regional interest are shaped by domestic politics, regime priorities, economic needs and differing perceptions of threat. ASEAN integration therefore develops through negotiation among states that recognize the value of regional cooperation but remain unwilling to transfer substantial authority to a regional organization.

ASEAN's long-term vision reflects an awareness of these challenges. ASEAN 2045: Our Shared Future, adopted in 2025, presents an ambition for a more

resilient, innovative, dynamic and people-centerd regional community. It calls for stronger institutions, more effective implementation, closer coordination across ASEAN's economic, political-security and sociocultural pillars, and a more proactive role in regional and global affairs (ASEAN Secretariat, 2025a). The vision is notable not only for the goals it sets, but also for the uncertainty it seeks to address. ASEAN is planning for a future in which geopolitical rivalry, technological change, environmental pressures and disruptions to the global economy are likely to become more pronounced.

The difficulty is that ASEAN has never lacked declarations, roadmaps or institutional activity. Its more persistent challenge has been the distance between its ambitions and implementation. ASEAN has developed a dense network of meetings, sectoral bodies, agreements and work plans, but their effects remain uneven across the AMS. Economic cooperation has moved further than political-security cooperation, yet even economic integration remains incomplete. Non-tariff barriers, differences in regulation, domestic protection, development gaps and uneven administrative capacity continue to limit the emergence of a more integrated regional market (Ishikawa, 2021).

ASEAN's political and institutional limits are equally visible. The principles of consensus, consultation and non-interference have helped ASEAN accommodate very different political systems and national interests. These principles have contributed to ASEAN's durability and have allowed the AMS with difficult bilateral histories to remain within a common regional framework. At the same time, they have restricted ASEAN's ability to act when member states are divided or when governments resist regional scrutiny. The same practices that protect unity can also weaken collective responses to crises with cross-border consequences. Non-interference, in particular, remains closely connected to member states' concern with preserving domestic authority and regime autonomy (Suzuki, 2019).

ASEAN should not be assessed simply as an incomplete version of the European Union (EU). The two regional organizations emerged from different historical experiences and rest on different understandings of sovereignty, law and political authority. ASEAN integration has not involved extensive pooling of sovereignty or the creation of powerful supranational institutions. Its achievements are found instead in regular consultation, economic cooperation, diplomatic convening, regional norms and the gradual development of common practices.

ASEAN's ability to convene dialogue is important, but convening is not the same as shaping outcomes. ASEAN centrality remains widely invoked in official statements, yet its practical meaning is increasingly contested. In recent times, major powers continue to attend ASEAN-led forums while also relying on

bilateral partnerships, strategic coalitions and minilateral arrangements when they seek faster or more decisive action. ASEAN may remain at the center of regional diplomatic architecture however, it does not necessarily possessing the authority to determine the direction of regional politics.

This distinction has become more important as the international order grows less stable. Multilateral institutions face greater pressure, while protectionism, geopolitical rivalry and competing economic frameworks increasingly shape international relations. For ASEAN, this creates both opportunity and risk. Southeast Asia's geographic position, economic growth and role in global supply chains make the region more important to external powers. Yet the same strategic attention may deepen differences among AMS, particularly when their security and economic interests pull them in different directions. ASEAN's future relevance will therefore depend not only on its ability to maintain dialogue, but also on its capacity to articulate regional interests with greater clarity.

Timor-Leste's accession adds a further dimension to this debate. Its admission as ASEAN's eleventh member in October 2025 completed the organization's geographic reach across Southeast Asia and ended a membership process that had begun with its formal application in 2011 (ASEAN Secretariat, 2025f). The accession carries considerable political and symbolic significance, but it also raises practical questions about enlargement, institutional capacity and regional inequality.

The issue is not only whether Timor-Leste is prepared to participate in ASEAN. It is also whether ASEAN is prepared to include a member with a smaller economy, limited administrative resources and different development needs. Timor-Leste must strengthen its civil service, regulatory knowledge, language capacity, institutional coordination and ability to participate in ASEAN's demanding meeting system. ASEAN and its partners must decide how to support this process without reducing membership to formal attendance or treating Timor-Leste primarily as a recipient of assistance.

Timor-Leste also brings a different political and historical experience into ASEAN. Its struggle for independence, democratic transition, peacebuilding experience and commitment to reconciliation may allow it to contribute perspectives that are less prominent within the organization. Yet this contribution cannot be assumed. Its influence will depend on its institutional capacity, economic position, political confidence and ability to navigate ASEAN's norms of consensus and non-interference. Timor-Leste's accession is therefore important not only as an enlargement case, but also as a test of what ASEAN means by inclusion and equal membership.

These questions are directly relevant to Europe. The EU and ASEAN have maintained a strategic partnership since 2020, with cooperation spanning trade,

digital connectivity, sustainable infrastructure, security, education, environmental protection and the green transition. The EU is also an important investor and trading partner in Southeast Asia (European External Action Service, 2025a). For European policymakers, ASEAN matters both as an economic partner and as a regional platform through which wider Indo-Pacific dynamics are managed.

Germany occupies a distinct position within this relationship. It has been an ASEAN Development Partner since 2016 and acceded to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia in 2020. German cooperation with ASEAN and its member states includes economic integration, environmental governance, renewable energy, vocational education, institutional support and professional training (Federal Foreign Office, 2026b). Germany's strengths in technical education, industrial development, small and medium-sized enterprises, renewable energy and institutional cooperation provide a substantial basis for deeper engagement.

The question is not simply how Germany and the EU can offer more assistance. It is how their engagement can support ASEAN's regional priorities without assuming that European institutional experience provides a ready-made model. European cooperation is most likely to be constructive when it responds to local political and economic conditions, strengthens regional capacity and supports initiatives developed with Southeast Asian actors. It is less likely to succeed when it is overly prescriptive, inconsistent in its application of norms or detached from the practical constraints faced by ASEAN institutions and member states.

Against this background, this study examines how regional experts understand the future of ASEAN integration and ASEAN's place in a changing regional and global order. Its purpose is not to evaluate ASEAN solely. It seeks instead to understand how policymakers, former government leaders, diplomats, academics, think-tank researchers and civil-society actors interpret ASEAN's trajectory from within Southeast Asia.

The study has four principal objectives. First, it assesses how regional experts understand the future direction of ASEAN integration, including the areas in which cooperation is expected to deepen and those in which progress is likely to remain limited. Second, it examines how experts interpret ASEAN centrality, national interests and regional cohesion in the context of growing geopolitical and economic pressure. Third, it explores the significance of Timor-Leste's accession for ASEAN enlargement, institutional capacity and the future character of the regional community. Fourth, it analyses regional perspectives on the role of Germany and the EU, including which forms of engagement are considered useful, insufficient or counterproductive.

The analysis draws on 20 semi-structured expert interviews conducted between April and July 2026 across six Southeast Asian countries. Three respondents were

from Timor-Leste, four from the Philippines, four from Singapore, three from Thailand, three from Malaysia and three from Indonesia. Interviews were conducted in person and online, depending on the respondent's location and availability.

The respondents included former heads of government, former ministers, diplomats, academics, policy researchers, think-tank leaders and civil-society practitioners. This range was intended to capture different professional experiences of ASEAN rather than produce a statistically representative account of national opinion. Some respondents approached ASEAN through diplomacy and security, while others emphasized economics, public policy, human rights, migration, civil society, development or regional institutions. These different vantage points are central to the study because ASEAN integration is not understood in the same way across sectors or professional communities.

The interviews followed a semi-structured format. Respondents were invited to reflect on ASEAN's likely trajectory over the next decade, the meaning and continuing relevance of ASEAN centrality, the relationship between national and regional interests, Timor-Leste's membership, and the role of Germany and the EU. The format allowed a common set of themes to be examined across all interviews while giving respondents sufficient space to introduce issues arising from their own professional and national experience.

The interview materials were analyzed thematically and comparatively. The analysis identified recurring arguments, points of convergence and significant disagreements across the six countries. Particular attention was given to differences between economic, political-security and sociocultural understandings of integration; the relationship between ASEAN's diplomatic role and its institutional effectiveness; the effects of major-power competition and economic fragmentation; the political and practical significance of Timor-Leste's accession; and regional expectations of Germany and the EU.

The study does not claim that the respondents represent a single Southeast Asian view. Nor does it treat national perspectives as uniform. The value of the interviews lies precisely in the variation among them. Regional experts differ in how they assess ASEAN's performance, what they consider realistic and whether they interpret institutional continuity as evidence of resilience or stagnation. The analysis therefore preserves disagreement rather than attempting to impose a single regional conclusion.

The paper argues that ASEAN integration will continue, but it will remain uneven, and strongly conditioned by national interests. Economic and functional cooperation is likely to progress further than political-security cooperation. ASEAN centrality will remain valuable as a source of diplomatic legitimacy and convening power, but its credibility will increasingly depend on whether ASEAN can use its institutions when significant regional interests are at stake.

The changing global order will make ASEAN more necessary, while also making it more difficult for member states to maintain common positions. Timor-Leste's accession will test both its own national capacity and ASEAN's ability to give practical meaning to inclusion. Germany and the EU can contribute to these processes, but their most useful role is to strengthen regional capacity and choice rather than prescribe the direction ASEAN should take.

The paper begins by examining the future trajectory of ASEAN integration and the uneven development of its economic, political-security and sociocultural dimensions. It then analyzes ASEAN centrality, national interests and regional cohesion. The third section places ASEAN within a changing regional and global order shaped by major-power competition, economic fragmentation and competing regional arrangements. The fourth examines Timor-Leste's accession and its wider implications for ASEAN enlargement. The final substantive section considers Germany's role, followed by the wider contribution of the EU. The paper concludes with a focused set of policy recommendations.

2. The Uneven Future of ASEAN Integration

ASEAN integration is often discussed as if it were a single process moving either forward or backward. The interviews point to a less straightforward trajectory. Integration is continuing, but it is not developing at the same pace across sectors, countries or levels of society. Economic and functional cooperation has acquired a firmer institutional and material basis than political-security cooperation. Formal regional commitments have expanded, but implementation still depends heavily on national institutions with different capacities and priorities. At the same time, regional connections are growing through universities, professional communities, businesses, civil society and the movement of people, although these relationships are not always well connected to ASEAN's formal structures.

Unevenness is therefore not simply a temporary weakness that will disappear as ASEAN becomes more mature. It is a feature of an intergovernmental regional organization whose members continue to retain authority over most areas of public policy. Governments cooperate when regional action is compatible with national priorities or offers practical benefits that are difficult to secure alone. They are more cautious when cooperation may constrain domestic authority, expose politically sensitive questions or distribute costs unevenly. ASEAN integration consequently advances through sector-specific negotiations rather than through a general transfer of authority from national governments to regional institutions.

From the interviews, this pattern is likely to persist. ASEAN may become more connected economically, digitally and administratively without becoming substantially more unified politically. It may deepen cooperation in supply

chains, cross-border payments, transport, energy and technical standards while continuing to struggle with security crises, human rights and politically sensitive disputes. Its future will therefore be defined not by uniform integration, but by different forms of regional cooperation moving at different speeds.

2.1 Economic and functional progress

Economic and functional cooperation remains the most developed dimension of ASEAN integration. This does not mean that ASEAN has created a single market comparable to the EU or that barriers between national economies have disappeared. It means that economic integration has a clearer institutional architecture, a larger body of agreements and more immediate material incentives than other areas of regional cooperation.

ASEAN's post-2025 economic agenda reflects this emphasis. The ASEAN Economic Community Strategic Plan 2026–2030 sets out six strategic goals covering market integration, sustainability, digital transformation, economic resilience, connectivity and ASEAN's role in the global economy. It also places greater weight on performance indicators and results-based monitoring, recognizing that the value of regional plans depends on implementation rather than the number of measures adopted (ASEAN Secretariat, 2025b).

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) similarly finds that regional integration has become an important source of resilience in Asia through trade, investment, production networks, migration, finance and tourism. At the same time, geopolitical tensions, trade policy uncertainty and global fragmentation increase the need for stronger regional cooperation while making that cooperation more difficult to sustain (Asian Development Bank, 2025, 2026a).

The interviews broadly support this assessment. One respondent expected economic and market integration to deepen as AMS confront supply-chain restructuring and uncertainty in the global trading system. The respondent was considerably less optimistic about political-security cooperation, where the incentives for collective action remain weaker (MY02, personal communication, July 31, 2026). Another respondent described economic integration as the most concrete form of ASEAN integration because its effects are visible through trade agreements, investment and production networks. Political-security relations, by comparison, remain closer to cooperation than integration because the AMS retain control over sovereignty and national security decisions (TH01, personal communication, May 26, 2026).

This distinction does not imply that economic integration is complete. ASEAN has developed extensive trade arrangements, but non-tariff measures, regulatory

differences, weak enforcement and domestic protection continue to restrict the development of a genuinely integrated market. Ishikawa (2021) argues that the ASEAN Economic Community has produced meaningful economic integration while remaining limited by implementation gaps and the absence of strong supranational authority. The more recent post-2025 assessment produced by the Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA) reaches a similar conclusion. It is found that ASEAN has strengthened its position as an economic bloc, but deeper integration requires stronger institutions, better monitoring, narrower development gaps and greater attention to digitalization, sustainability and inclusion (Rillo & Shepherd, 2025).

The interviews also suggest that economic integration should be understood more broadly than trade liberalization. One respondent identified three related layers: regional institutions and procedures; markets and supply chains; and societal and normative relationships. From this perspective, integration should make it easier for small firms, universities, professionals, start-ups and ordinary citizens to operate across borders. Digital rules, logistics, cross-border payments, education, health, climate cooperation and regulatory alignment are therefore part of economic integration rather than secondary additions to it (PH03, personal communication, May 30, 2026).

Digital cooperation is becoming one of the clearest examples of this wider agenda. ASEAN adopted the ASEAN Digital Masterplan 2030 in early 2026, setting a shared direction for digital cooperation, infrastructure, skills, inclusion, cybersecurity and the use of artificial intelligence (ASEAN Secretariat, 2026b). Negotiations on the ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement were concluded in May 2026, with formal signing expected in November 2026. The agreement is intended to establish regional rules for digital trade, cross-border data flows, electronic payments, cybersecurity and digital identification (ASEAN Secretariat, 2026e).

The importance of these initiatives lies not only in the projected size of ASEAN's digital economy. Digital integration could reduce the practical costs of doing business across a region in which firms continue to face different national systems, administrative procedures and technical standards. It could also support smaller firms that lack the resources to navigate multiple regulatory environments. Yet digital integration reproduces many of the inequalities found elsewhere in ASEAN. Differences in infrastructure, regulatory readiness, digital literacy and access to finance mean that members will not benefit at the same pace. Recent ERIA-supported work on the region's digital future emphasizes that digital integration must address gaps in skills, infrastructure, data governance and the capacity of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises to participate (Rillo & Shepherd, 2025; Sefrina, 2024).

Connectivity is another central part of ASEAN's functional agenda. The ASEAN Connectivity Strategic Plan 2026–2035 links physical infrastructure, institutional cooperation and people-to-people connections. It explicitly recognizes lessons from earlier connectivity plans, including weak national implementation, limited coordination between regional and domestic institutions, and difficulties in mobilizing resources (ASEAN Secretariat, 2026a).

These concerns also emerged in the interviews. One respondent argued that ASEAN's future integration will depend increasingly on physical and digital connectivity, energy cooperation, critical minerals, artificial intelligence and green technology. The respondent emphasized that integration should be judged by whether it improves practical connections between economies, firms and societies rather than by the production of further declarations (PH01, personal communication, May 19, 2026).

The development divide remains one of the most serious constraints. The AMS differ substantially in infrastructure, income, administrative capacity, technological readiness and ability to comply with complex regional commitments. The Initiative for ASEAN Integration Work Plan V, covering 2026–2030, seeks to address these disparities through programs on education, skills, public health, local communities, micro-enterprises and inclusive economic development. Timor-Leste is included as a beneficiary alongside the less-developed mainland members (ASEAN Secretariat, 2026c).

The scale of this challenge should not be underestimated. The 2026 State of Southeast Asia survey found that 30.2 per cent of respondents regarded domestic implementation capacity as the main obstacle to deeper economic integration, while 30.1 per cent identified economic disparities among member states. A further 27.5 per cent pointed to geopolitical pressure that encourages governments to prioritise national over regional interests (Lin et al., 2026).

The interviews offer a similar observation. One respondent warned that ASEAN already operates at more than one speed, with persistent differences between older, wealthier members and less-developed members. The concern was that these gaps could become more deeply entrenched unless ASEAN and its partners provide targeted support in digital infrastructure, public administration, regulatory readiness and human capital (MY01, personal communication, July 22, 2026).

These inequalities strengthen the argument for differentiated integration. Several respondents supported arrangements in which members with greater capacity move ahead in selected fields while others join when they are ready. One respondent suggested that more capable members could establish standards in areas such as the digital economy and trade regulation, provided that the

arrangement did not formally weaken the equality of membership (MY02, personal communication, July 31, 2026). Another described this approach as a more flexible form of centrality in which members share a common direction but do not necessarily implement every commitment at the same time (TH01, personal communication, May 26, 2026).

Differentiated integration is already present in ASEAN through arrangements such as ASEAN-minus-X, phased commitments and sector-specific participation. For now, requiring all members to move at the pace of the least-prepared or least-willing state can delay cooperation. Hence, it is more strategic by allowing a smaller group to proceed to maintain momentum. Differentiated integration in this context can therefore strengthen ASEAN only when accompanied by credible pathways towards wider participation.

The likely economic trajectory is consequently one of deeper but incomplete integration. Cooperation will continue because member states recognize the advantages of regional markets, shared infrastructure and common rules. Yet the effects will remain uneven because implementation takes place through national institutions and because states enter regional arrangements with very different economic capacities. The central question is no longer whether ASEAN has enough economic plans. It is whether those plans make cross-border activity easier and whether the benefits are distributed widely enough to sustain political support.

2.2 Political and institutional limits

The contrast between economic and political-security integration is one of the clearest findings in the interviews. Few respondents expected ASEAN to develop strong regional authority over political or security matters. In these areas, it is opined that the AMS remain unwilling to surrender decision-making power, and the costs of disagreement are more politically sensitive.

ASEAN's Political-Security Community Strategic Plan presents an ambitious vision of a peaceful, secure, rules-based and inclusive regional community. It includes commitments to democracy, good governance, human rights, conflict prevention, maritime cooperation and stronger responses to transnational security challenges (ASEAN Secretariat, 2025c). The problem is the limited capacity to convert that language into common action when the AMS disagree.

One respondent argued that political-security integration remains weak because ASEAN members have not accepted that regional interests should take precedence over national interests, even in selected areas. Myanmar, the South China Sea and unresolved disputes among members were identified as examples of situations in which ASEAN has not functioned as the first or most effective platform for action

(PH02, personal communication, May 20, 2026). Another respondent reached a more pessimistic conclusion, describing ASEAN as particularly fragile because of its inability to address simultaneous security crises and its continuing dependence on non-binding dialogue (PH04, personal communication, June 30, 2026).

The political-security weakness of ASEAN reflects more than formal rules. The AMS differ in their threat perceptions, strategic alignments and domestic political interests. For instance, an issue that one government regards as an immediate regional danger may be considered distant or politically inconvenient by another. Questions involving sovereignty, regime legitimacy, territorial claims or relations with major powers can also be different.

One respondent with experience of ASEAN institutional processes observed that agreement is usually easier in functional areas where negotiators can rely on established statements and technical language. Regional and international political issues are routinely the most difficult parts of ASEAN statements because they require governments to reconcile competing national positions. The result is often unity at the lowest common denominator rather than a genuinely shared position (SG04, personal communication, June 30, 2026).

The 2026 State of Southeast Asia survey captures the broader concern. Some 34.7 per cent of respondents identified ASEAN's slowness and ineffectiveness as their principal concern about the organization. A further 18.1 per cent pointed to its inability to respond effectively to internal crises. The report links these perceptions to institutional inertia, limited decision-making capacity and tension between sovereignty and growing expectations of collective responsibility (Lin et al., 2026).

Consensus and non-interference lie at the center of this tension. Both principles have helped ASEAN accommodate different political systems and keep all members within the same regional framework. Consensus ensures that smaller states cannot simply be overruled by larger ones. Non-interference protects governments from regional intrusion into domestic political affairs. These principles have contributed to ASEAN's durability.

Their limiting effects are nevertheless substantial. While consensus allows a single government to prevent a stronger collective position, the non-interference narrows the space for regional action when domestic crises create regional consequences. This is particularly challenging when it comes to issues such as refugees, migration, transnational crime, environmental damage, scam networks and political violence that do not remain neatly within national borders. ASEAN's ability to respond can be constrained when such issues are treated primarily as internal affairs.

The interviews do not suggest that national interests can or should disappear. Several respondents regarded such an expectation as unrealistic. One argued that ASEAN cooperation survives precisely because governments use regional arrangements to advance their national interests. National and regional interests are therefore not always opposites. Regional cooperation proceeds when governments recognize that national goals can be achieved more effectively through collective arrangements (MY01, personal communication, July 22, 2026).

Another respondent drew a distinction between narrow and broad definitions of national interest. When national interest is defined mainly through regime security, political survival or short-term advantage, it restricts regional cooperation. When it includes long-term economic resilience, regional stability, social trust and shared public goods, integration becomes a form of enlightened self-interest (PH03, personal communication, May 30, 2026).

This distinction matters because ASEAN possesses limited means to change national calculations. It can convene meetings, generate political expectations, coordinate programs and create diplomatic pressure, but it generally cannot compel compliance. The organization may therefore be highly active without exercising strong regional authority.

The gap between activity and outcomes was a recurring theme in the interviews. One respondent observed that regional programs are often evaluated by the number of meetings, workshops or participants rather than by changes in policy, institutional behaviour or protection. Under this approach, activity can become a substitute for impact, and programs may be repeated without clear evidence that they have changed practice (MY03, personal communication, July 24, 2026).

A further respondent suggested that ASEAN's actual priorities should be identified by following funding and implementation rather than official statements. The large number of meetings demonstrates institutional density, but it does not necessarily demonstrate that regional commitments are being carried out. Programs that receive sustained resources and political attention provide a more accurate picture of what governments are prepared to support (ID03, personal communication, July 3, 2026).

ERIA's review of ASEAN's post-2025 agenda makes a similar point. Monitoring has gradually shifted from checking whether measures were formally completed towards assessing their wider effects. Yet reliable evaluation remains difficult because implementation is distributed across sectoral bodies and national administrations, while data and indicators remain uneven (Rillo & Shepherd, 2025).

At the same time, the ASEAN Secretariat's limited authority and resources compound this problem. Its role is largely to coordinate, monitor and support processes agreed by the AMS. It cannot independently enforce agreements or require governments to comply. Institutional weakness should therefore not be understood as something separate from the AMS preferences.

The annual chairmanship also affects institutional continuity. An active chair can give visibility to particular issues and push initiatives forward. Yet one year is a short period for implementing complex regional commitments. Priorities change as the chair rotates, while unfinished initiatives may lose momentum. Several respondents argued that ASEAN's regional direction remains too dependent on the interests, capacity and political attention of the chair.

A related weakness is ASEAN's tendency to respond once an issue has already acquired international momentum. One respondent described ASEAN as largely reactive rather than anticipatory. Environmental and sustainability agendas have gained regional attention partly because of strong global support, whereas demographic change may remain neglected despite its likely long-term consequences for labour markets, welfare and migration (ID01, personal communication, July 30, 2026).

ASEAN 2045 and the new community plans seek to address some of these concerns through stronger coordination, monitoring, foresight and cross-pillar cooperation. These commitments are important. They do not, however, remove the political constraints. A stronger ASEAN Secretariat, improved data and more serious monitoring can make ASEAN more effective within its existing model. They cannot substitute for political will when governments reject collective action.

2.3 Integration beyond governments

ASEAN's official vision increasingly describes regional integration as people-centerd. The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Strategic Plan places the quality of life, social inclusion and participation of ASEAN citizens at the center of community building. The ASEAN Connectivity Strategic Plan similarly treats people-to-people relationships as one of the three foundations of regional connectivity, alongside physical and institutional links (ASEAN Secretariat, 2025e, 2026a).

The interviews indicate, however, that integration beyond governments remains both necessary and incomplete. ASEAN cannot become socially meaningful if citizens experience it only through summits, declarations and official campaigns. Regionalism becomes tangible when people can study, work, travel, organize, conduct business and gain access to services across national borders.

One respondent argued that societal integration should include educational mobility, social protection, shared standards, university cooperation, civic networks and the movement of knowledge. These connections matter because they create constituencies for ASEAN beyond governments and large corporations. The practical measure of integration is whether it enables ordinary actors to collaborate and operate across the region more easily (PH03, personal communication, May 30, 2026).

Labour mobility reveals both the possibilities and the limits of this agenda. ASEAN has developed mutual recognition arrangements for selected professions and has made commitments to facilitate skills mobility. Yet regional mobility remains restricted by national licensing rules, language requirements, immigration policies and protection of domestic labour markets. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) notes that mutual recognition arrangements can support professional mobility, but recognition does not automatically create the right to work in another country (Asian Development Bank, 2025).

Recent work by the International Labour Organization (ILO), together with joint work by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and ILO, similarly shows that labour migration is already a central feature of the ASEAN economy, while governance and worker protection remain uneven. Progress has been made in regional cooperation, skills recognition and protection frameworks, but migrant workers continue to face recruitment costs, unequal access to rights and inconsistent enforcement (International Labour Organization, 2025; International Organization for Migration & International Labour Organization, 2025).

One respondent approached this problem through the concept of social readiness. Formal integration may advance while host societies remain unwilling to accept migrants, refugees or other mobile populations as participants in social life. Integration is therefore a two-way relationship. Mobile populations must be able to participate in host societies, while local communities must be prepared to accept diversity and reciprocal obligations. Without this social dimension, ASEAN may become more economically connected without becoming more inclusive (MY03, personal communication, July 24, 2026).

This argument broadens the meaning of mobility. Cross-border movement cannot be treated solely as an economic matter involving visas, skills and labour supply. It also raises questions of rights, belonging, access to health care and education, social protection and public attitudes. The regional movement of labour may deepen economic integration while exposing workers to insecurity if political and social protections do not develop alongside it.

Integration beyond governments also takes place through networks that are not created by ASEAN. Civil-society organizations, professional associations, universities, research institutes, businesses, youth groups and cultural communities form relationships across national boundaries. These connections can sustain cooperation even when governments disagree or official regional processes move slowly.

One respondent expected community-level and people-to-people relations to become one of the strongest areas of regional connection over the coming decade. Civil-society networks, youth communities and digital culture can generate forms of Southeast Asian solidarity without direct state sponsorship. The same respondent nevertheless warned that government and non-governmental regionalism may move in different directions, creating a gap between formal institutions and the societies ASEAN claims to represent (ID03, personal communication, July 3, 2026).

Another respondent was more cautious, arguing that civil society and Track 2 engagement have themselves become fragmented and increasingly absorbed by national concerns. Transnational organization therefore cannot be assumed. It requires leadership, resources and a willingness among regional actors to view domestic problems as connected to wider Southeast Asian conditions (PH04, personal communication, June 30, 2026).

The idea of ASEAN as a form of network governance helps explain why these relationships matter. Sundram (2025) argues that ASEAN already operates through networks involving state agencies, businesses, researchers, civil society and other non-state actors. These networks can support information-sharing and cooperation where formal regional authority is limited. Their influence, however, differs across policy areas. Non-state participation is more accepted in economic, social and technical fields than in politically sensitive security debates.

The challenge is therefore not simply to invite more stakeholders to ASEAN events. Participation must influence policy. Consultations that occur after priorities have already been decided may increase visibility without changing outcomes. A people-centerd ASEAN requires more regular channels through which universities, labour organizations, professional groups, businesses, media, local governments and civil society can shape regional programs.

The 2026 publication of ASEAN's stakeholder compendium for the Socio-Cultural Community reflects an attempt to bring a wider range of voices into regional planning. Its significance will depend on whether these perspectives influence implementation and evaluation rather than remaining a record of consultation (ASEAN Secretariat, 2026f).

Integration beyond governments is not a softer or separate form of regionalism. It is where the effects of economic and political cooperation are most directly felt. Economic integration creates employment, investment and mobility, but it also produces social inequalities and risks. Weak political institutions affect whether people moving across borders receive protection. Civil society and professional networks can support regional problem-solving, but only where they have sufficient political space.

The uneven future of ASEAN integration can therefore be understood as a widening of regional connections without an equivalent growth in regional authority, capacity or social inclusion. Economic and functional cooperation is likely to deepen because its benefits are tangible and because external uncertainty makes regional resilience more valuable. Political-security cooperation will remain more constrained because governments continue to guard sovereignty and disagree over national priorities. Connections among people, institutions and communities may expand, but they will remain incomplete unless questions of rights, participation and inequality are addressed.

ASEAN's trajectory is consequently layered rather than linear. Markets, institutions and societies will not move forward together. Economic integration without stronger implementation will remain inconsistent. Institutional cooperation without public participation will struggle to build legitimacy. People-to-people connections without access to decision-making may create regional solidarity while leaving formal policy unchanged. ASEAN's future will depend not on eliminating these differences, but on preventing the distance between them from becoming too wide.

3. ASEAN Centrality, National Interests and Regional Agency

ASEAN centrality is among the organization's most frequently invoked but least settled ideas. It appears in ASEAN declarations, external-partner statements and discussions of the Indo-Pacific regional architecture, yet it does not have a single operational meaning. At different moments, centrality refers to ASEAN's position at the center of regional institutions, its ability to convene competing powers, its claim to set agendas, its role in protecting Southeast Asian autonomy, or its capacity to organize collective responses to regional problems. These meanings overlap, but they should not be treated as interchangeable.

The distinction matters because ASEAN can remain central in one sense while becoming weaker in another. It can continue to host the region's most inclusive diplomatic forums without determining their outcomes. It can provide accepted principles for regional engagement while lacking the political unity to apply them during crises. It can also be treated as an indispensable diplomatic platform even as individual governments and external powers increasingly act through bilateral or minilateral arrangements.

Centrality should therefore be examined through three related dimensions. The first is institutional centrality: ASEAN's position within the architecture of regional forums and partnerships. The second is diplomatic centrality: its ability to bring different actors together, preserve dialogue and provide a politically acceptable setting for cooperation. The third is substantive centrality: its capacity to translate that position into collective decisions, regional initiatives and influence over outcomes.

The interviews suggest that ASEAN continues to perform strongly in the first two dimensions but far less consistently in the third. This does not make centrality meaningless. It means that ASEAN's institutional position and diplomatic legitimacy have advanced further than its collective political agency.

3.1 The continuing value of ASEAN centrality

ASEAN centrality is formally embedded in the organization's understanding of its regional role. The ASEAN Charter identifies the maintenance of ASEAN's centrality and proactive role as one of the organization's purposes. It also affirms sovereignty, equality, non-interference and consultation and consensus as principles governing relations among its members (ASEAN Secretariat, 2008). The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) places centrality at the center of its approach to regional cooperation, identifying ASEAN-led mechanisms as the main platforms through which dialogue and practical cooperation should

be pursued (ASEAN Secretariat, 2019). At the same time, the ASEAN 2045 continues this position by calling for ASEAN to strengthen its centrality in external relations and remain a principal force for regional peace, stability and prosperity (ASEAN Secretariat, 2025a).

These documents show that centrality is not simply a claim to diplomatic status. It is ASEAN's preferred answer to a structural problem to indicate how a group of small and medium-sized states can retain influence in a region shaped by powers with far greater military and economic capabilities. ASEAN in this context seeks to organize the terms under which they engage Southeast Asia and one another.

Academic scholarship has similarly located ASEAN's centrality in the regional networks and institutions it has built. Caballero-Anthony (2014) argues that ASEAN's central position derives in part from its place within a dense network of regional relations. Yoshimatsu (2023) describes this as a form of productive power. ASEAN's influence comes not primarily from material strength, but from its ability to establish accepted meanings, practices and norms of participation. By embedding larger powers within open and inclusive regional institutions, ASEAN has helped shape the social and diplomatic environment in which regional cooperation occurs.

This interpretation is strongly reflected in the interviews. SG04 (personal communication, June 30, 2026) described centrality through four dimensions, namely ASEAN's role in the wider regional architecture, its ability to build internal consensus, its effectiveness in responding to regional flashpoints and its capacity to negotiate with dialogue partners from a common position. The first dimension remains the most firmly established. ASEAN continues to organize major forums such as the East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Regional Forum and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus. Its record is much weaker when centrality is tested through internal consensus or collective responses to politically difficult problems.

MY01 (personal communication, July 22, 2026) offered a related but more positive institutional assessment. ASEAN's centrality was described as earned rather than commanded. ASEAN cannot require stronger external powers to recognize its leadership. Its position rests on the architecture it has built, its institutional continuity and the willingness of external actors to continue participating in ASEAN-led processes. Centrality is therefore neither a permanent entitlement nor merely an empty slogan. It is a form of accumulated legitimacy that must be continually maintained.

This emphasis on external recognition identifies both ASEAN's strength and its vulnerability. The organization is acceptable to major powers partly because none sees it as a direct threat. ASEAN-led forums provide a neutral setting in which states with sharply different interests can participate without appearing to accept the leadership of a rival. This has allowed ASEAN to perform a brokerage role that would be difficult for China, the United States, Japan, India or Australia to perform independently. Qiao-Franco, Karmazin, and Kolmaš (2025) similarly argue that ASEAN centrality has been sustained because external powers have been willing to work through ASEAN-led arrangements, although their continued commitment cannot be assumed when core national-security interests are at stake.

Several respondents therefore defined ASEAN's principal value through convening rather than command. SG03 (personal communication, June 18, 2026) characterized ASEAN most directly as a convener. Its institutional strength lies in creating spaces where member states and external actors can meet through the ASEAN Regional Forum, East Asia Summit, ADMM-Plus and related mechanisms. Convening does not mean that ASEAN controls the content or outcome of those discussions, but it remains valuable in a region where no alternative organization has the same inclusiveness and legitimacy.

PH01 (personal communication, May 19, 2026) similarly argued that ASEAN provides its members with positioning, legitimacy and greater bargaining weight. Smaller states are less isolated when they engage external powers through a regional framework. ASEAN may lack the capacity to impose decisions, but it can shape the environment by keeping communication open, building confidence and providing a recognized space for negotiation.

ID02 (personal communication, July 9, 2026) went further by describing a functioning and central ASEAN as a regional public good. Major powers also benefit from an institution capable of moderating rivalry and maintaining channels of engagement. From this perspective, centrality is not valuable only because it protects ASEAN members from external domination. It also creates a less confrontational regional environment for actors whose direct relations may be characterized by distrust. The difficulty is that ASEAN has not fully used the legitimacy and social capital available to it.

The 2026 State of Southeast Asia survey lends some support to this continuing confidence in ASEAN's regional role. When respondents were asked which actor they trusted most to provide leadership in maintaining a rules-based order and upholding international law, ASEAN received the largest regional share at 23.4 per cent, narrowly ahead of the U.A. at 22.3 per cent and the EU at 20.5 per cent. This is not overwhelming confidence, but it shows that ASEAN is still viewed

as a potential source of regional leadership rather than merely an administrative platform (Lin et al., 2026).

The same survey also shows that Southeast Asian respondents do not believe centrality requires the AMS to withdraw from other arrangements. 33 per cent supported strengthening ASEAN's convening power and normative influence, while 29.4 per cent believed member states should be cautious about joining groupings that might undermine ASEAN centrality. Only 4.4 per cent supported concentrating exclusively on ASEAN multilateralism. The preference is therefore for a stronger ASEAN within a plural regional order, not an ASEAN monopoly over regional cooperation (Lin et al., 2026).

This finding is important because centrality should not be confused with exclusivity. AMS will continue to participate in bilateral, subregional and minilateral arrangements. A credible understanding of centrality must accommodate these activities while preserving ASEAN's broader role in setting regional norms, maintaining inclusive institutions and linking smaller initiatives to wider regional interests.

TH01 (personal communication, May 26, 2026) captured this need through the idea of "ASEAN Centrality 2.0." Centrality would remain important, but it would become more flexible and practical. It would allow different members to move forward at different speeds while retaining a shared regional direction. ASEAN would act as a bridge-builder or connector, maintaining relations across geopolitical divides while articulating its own interests more clearly. Centrality therefore retains value for three reasons. It gives AMS a collective diplomatic position, provides major powers with an inclusive regional platform and helps preserve a Southeast Asian voice in decisions affecting the region.

3.2 The gap between diplomatic language and collective action

The interviews repeatedly distinguish between the recognition of ASEAN centrality and its practical exercise. The term appears in almost every major statement involving ASEAN and its external partners, but repetition can create the impression that centrality exists automatically. In reality, it must be sustained through political investment, institutional performance and the willingness of member states to use ASEAN mechanisms when important interests are at stake.

ID01 (personal communication, July 30, 2026) described centrality as both real and rhetorical. It remains useful as diplomatic language because ASEAN governments can invoke the organization when negotiating with external powers and claim greater collective weight. Yet AMS often treat centrality as a settled condition rather than something that must be continuously produced. In this sense, centrality provides a narrative of regional unity even when substantive cohesion is limited.

ID02 (personal communication, July 9, 2026) made a similar distinction between social recognition and strategic use. External powers continue to affirm respect for ASEAN centrality because the concept carries diplomatic weight. That recognition, however, may remain largely symbolic unless AMS are willing to convert it into collective positions and initiatives. Centrality can therefore operate as a socially accepted norm without becoming an actively exercised regional capability.

This gap is also visible in the AOIP. The AOIP seeks to position ASEAN at the center of an open, inclusive and cooperative Indo-Pacific, with ASEAN-led institutions serving as the main platforms for implementation. It rejects an order organized solely around strategic rivalry and emphasizes maritime cooperation, connectivity, sustainable development and economic cooperation (ASEAN Secretariat, 2019). Subsequent ASEAN declarations have called for more concrete and practical projects under the AOIP, suggesting that ASEAN itself recognizes the need to move from principles to implementation (ASEAN Secretariat, 2022a, 2024).

Respondents nevertheless questioned whether the AOIP has developed into a sufficiently clear strategic agenda. ID03 (personal communication, July 3, 2026) described ASEAN centrality as an overused phrase that lacks a compelling contemporary narrative. The AOIP offered an ASEAN-centerd response to competing Indo-Pacific strategies, but its follow-through has been less visible than its diplomatic language. The concern was not that ASEAN lacked documents, but that the documents were insufficiently connected to projects, resources and outcomes.

PH02 (personal communication, May 20, 2026) was more critical, arguing that the AOIP emerged reactively because ASEAN feared being marginalized by strategies developed elsewhere. From this perspective, the document expresses ASEAN's wish to remain central but does not amount to a common strategy towards China, the U.S. or the wider redistribution of power. The respondent described ASEAN centrality as a mission rather than an achieved condition. It becomes meaningful only when AMS act together and use their collective weight.

The rise of minilateral arrangements sharpens this problem. Smaller coalitions can act more quickly because their members share more specific interests and do not require ASEAN-wide consensus. Some minilaterals complement ASEAN by addressing practical gaps, particularly in fields such as maritime security or transnational crime. Others compete more directly with ASEAN-led security mechanisms by offering external powers a setting for strategic coordination that excludes much of Southeast Asia. Chong (2024) argues that minilateralism is both a challenge and a possible remedy, where it can weaken ASEAN's institutional position, but it can also provide public goods that ASEAN has struggled to deliver.

The interviews reflect this ambiguity. PH02 (personal communication, May 20, 2026) treated minilateralism as a symptom of ASEAN weakness. States turn elsewhere when ASEAN is too slow or unable to address pressing political-security concerns. Minilateralism does not necessarily make ASEAN irrelevant, but it shows that ASEAN is increasingly not the first mechanism used when action is required.

SG03 (personal communication, June 18, 2026) viewed the Quad as a structural challenge because it brings together states with substantial military capabilities and an ability to perform practical security functions. Even where ASEAN and the Quad emphasise cooperation, the Quad's capacity to act highlights the limits of ASEAN-led mechanisms. The contrast is particularly visible when ASEAN's role is measured not by attendance and dialogue, but by the ability to respond to strategic contingencies.

The distinction between diplomatic and substantive centrality is most visible during regional crises. TH03 (personal communication, July 22, 2026) argued that ASEAN centrality should mean that ASEAN is the first credible platform through which regional disputes are discussed and managed. The main weakness is not an absence of institutions. ASEAN already has mechanisms, principles and established channels of consultation. The problem is that governments do not always choose to use them, particularly when domestic political incentives favour bilateral control or a firmer national position.

The Myanmar crisis illustrates the limits of a centrality based primarily on declarations and process. ASEAN adopted the Five-Point Consensus as a regional framework, but it has lacked the political unity and authority to secure

meaningful compliance. The issue is not only institutional weakness. Different AMS have maintained different relationships with Myanmar's authorities and have varied in their willingness to impose political costs. ASEAN has therefore remained formally involved while struggling to shape the conflict's trajectory.

The South China Sea presents a different version of the same problem. ASEAN provides a regional diplomatic framework and continues to support negotiations over a Code of Conduct. Yet AMS have different threat perceptions, legal interests and economic relationships with China. ASEAN can protect shared procedural interests, including peaceful settlement and respect for international law, but it has greater difficulty representing the distinctive national interests of individual claimant states. Hu (2023) argues that ASEAN is more effective when protecting broadly shared interests than when members' specific security interests diverge sharply.

SG04's (personal communication, June 30, 2026) four-dimensional account is useful here. ASEAN's role in convening the regional architecture is its most visible success. Centrality within ASEAN itself is weaker because members struggle to reach common positions. Centrality in relation to flashpoints is weaker still because politically difficult issues reveal divisions that technical cooperation can often conceal. Centrality towards dialogue partners consequently depends on whether ASEAN has first produced an internal position from which to negotiate.

The 2026 regional survey captures this credibility problem. The leading concern, selected by 34.7 per cent of respondents, was that ASEAN is slow and ineffective and cannot cope with fluid political and economic developments. Another 32.2 per cent worried that ASEAN was becoming an arena for major-power competition, while 18.1 per cent identified its inability to respond effectively to internal crises. These findings do not show that Southeast Asians consider ASEAN unnecessary. They show anxiety that the organization's political performance is not keeping pace with the demands placed on it (Lin et al., 2026).

The gap between language and action should not lead to the dismissal of diplomatic process. ASEAN's preference for consultation can reduce tension, provide governments with time and keep communication open. TH03 (personal communication, July 22, 2026) described ASEAN as a diplomatic cushion that allows governments to delay an immediate response while they assess a difficult situation. This can be valuable in moments of uncertainty. It can also allow governments to defer responsibility and present delay as regional consultation.

ASEAN centrality requires member states to treat ASEAN institutions as the first serious platform for addressing problems that affect the region, and to connect ASEAN's diplomatic architecture to practical initiatives, resources and follow-through.

3.3 National interests, leadership and regional cohesion

National interests are often presented as the principal obstacle to ASEAN unity. This is correct but analytically incomplete. ASEAN is an intergovernmental organization composed of sovereign states. Its members will continue to prioritise domestic security, economic development, political survival and bilateral relationships. The more important question is how and when national interests could support collective action, when they obstruct it and how governments define the relationship between national and regional interests.

The ASEAN Charter does not replace national authority with a regional interest. Its principles combine a commitment to common purposes with sovereignty, non-interference and consensus. This creates a system in which regional decisions depend on continuing national consent. ASEAN cohesion is therefore not based on the subordination of the national level. It is produced when governments identify sufficient overlap among their interests.

In the view of MY01 (personal communication, July 22, 2026), national and regional interests are not necessarily opposites. AMS cooperate because ASEAN allows them to achieve some national objectives more effectively, including economic development, diplomatic access and regional stability. This is why the ASEAN progresses through pragmatic bargains in which national interests overlap.

MY03 (personal communication, July 24, 2026) reached a similar conclusion from the perspective of human rights and migration. AMS are unlikely to sacrifice sovereignty or core national priorities for a general regional good. Progress is more likely where regional initiatives do not appear to threaten domestic authority and where governments can identify a workable common ground. Centrality can support regional ownership, but it can also be used defensively to resist scrutiny. Its political effect depends on whether it creates room for Southeast Asian agency or shields governments from responsibility.

PH03 (personal communication, May 30, 2026) distinguished between narrow and broad definitions of national interest. When governments define national interest in terms of short-term regime security, leadership survival or immediate distributive gain, regional cooperation becomes more difficult. When national interest includes longer-term economic resilience, social trust, accountable institutions and regional public goods, integration can be understood as enlightened self-interest. States do not need to abandon national interests. They need to recognize that many national outcomes depend on the conditions of the wider region.

This distinction helps explain why ASEAN cooperation is deeper in some areas than others. Trade facilitation, connectivity and disaster management often offer visible

national benefits. Political-security questions are more difficult because their costs, risks and urgency differ among members. A maritime claimant state may regard an incident in the South China Sea as an immediate sovereignty issue, while a non-claimant state may prioritise its wider economic relationship with China. A neighbouring state may experience the effects of the Myanmar conflict through refugees and border insecurity, while a more distant member may see fewer direct costs.

SG04 (personal communication, June 30, 2026) described member-state alignments as issue-specific rather than organized into fixed blocs. A country may work closely with the United States on security, China on trade and another partner on technology or infrastructure. ASEAN's collective commitment to maintaining relations with all partners is therefore compatible with highly varied national choices. The result, however, is that ASEAN unity on strategic questions often settles at the lowest common denominator.

ID01 (personal communication, July 30, 2026) characterized this solidarity as instrumental rather than supranational. Governments may present their own national preferences as regional priorities, while their commitment to ASEAN remains closely tied to the benefits it produces. This does not mean that ASEAN identity or regional norms are irrelevant. It means that those norms operate alongside continuing cost-benefit calculations rather than replacing them.

The 2026 survey shows a similar mixture of regional commitment and national flexibility. A majority of 55.2 per cent believed that ASEAN should strengthen its resilience and unity in response to U.S.–China rivalry. Yet respondents were much less supportive of requiring members to act only through ASEAN. They preferred stronger ASEAN convening power while retaining room for different external partnerships. The regional preference is therefore not for a rigid bloc, but for greater ASEAN cohesion within a diversified foreign-policy environment (Lin et al., 2026).

Leadership becomes particularly important in this context because ASEAN's institutions cannot easily compel collective action. A committed chair can elevate an issue, build coalitions and create momentum. Strong personal relationships among leaders can also facilitate compromise in a system that relies heavily on informality and trust. Leadership can therefore partly compensate for weak formal authority.

It cannot, however, remove underlying differences among AMS. TH03 (personal communication, July 22, 2026) argued that the rotating chair can increase ASEAN's visibility and frame regional priorities, but it cannot overcome structural disagreements embedded in consensus and non-interference. Each chair also brings national and subregional concerns that may not be shared equally across ASEAN.

PH02 (personal communication, May 20, 2026) criticised the annual chairmanship for producing discontinuity. One year is often too short to pursue

complex objectives, while each chair faces pressure to announce new priorities and symbolic achievements. Leadership becomes associated with the performance of the chairmanship rather than the sustained direction of ASEAN as an institution. The respondent therefore distinguished between hosting and ceremony on the one hand, and longer-term strategic leadership on the other.

ID02 (personal communication, July 9, 2026) made a comparable distinction between the leadership of ASEAN and ASEAN leadership. The first concerns the management of meetings and agendas during a national chairmanship. The second requires strategic cohesion that extends beyond the annual cycle. From this perspective, ASEAN's leadership deficit is connected not only to institutional weakness but also to the erosion of informal trust among political leaders. A more bureaucratized ASEAN may hold more meetings while providing fewer opportunities for frank political discussion.

Leadership is therefore necessary but insufficient. If ASEAN's relevance depends too heavily on a particularly active chair or individual leader, regional agency will remain episodic. Initiatives may advance rapidly for one year and then lose momentum when national attention changes. Stronger continuity requires an empowered Secretariat, clearer multi-year priorities, sustained coalitions among member states and institutional mechanisms capable of carrying initiatives across chairmanships.

Regional cohesion should also not be equated with complete agreement. ASEAN is unlikely to produce a single position on every strategic issue. A more realistic understanding of agency would allow groups of members to move ahead in selected areas while retaining ASEAN-wide principles and oversight. Such arrangements could generate action without requiring ASEAN to abandon consensus entirely. Their legitimacy, however, would depend on transparency, openness to later participation and consistency with wider regional interests.

The interviews ultimately suggest that ASEAN agency depends on the interaction of three conditions. The first is institutional legitimacy: ASEAN must remain accepted as the principal regional platform. The second is overlapping national interests: governments must see practical value in collective action. The third is leadership and follow-through: ASEAN must convert agreement into initiatives that survive the chairmanship cycle.

The central finding is that institutional importance and substantive influence are moving at different speeds. ASEAN remains the region's most legitimate and inclusive diplomatic platform. Its challenge is hence to use that position more consistently. Centrality will be sustained not by the frequency with which it is affirmed, but by whether AMS can act together when regional interests are genuinely at stake.

Part II. Enlargement and External Partnerships

4. Timor-Leste and the Meaning of ASEAN Enlargement

Timor-Leste's accession carries a significance that extends beyond the country itself. It was ASEAN's first enlargement since Cambodia joined in 1999 and completed the organization's geographic reach across Southeast Asia. Timor-Leste applied for membership in 2011, it was then admitted in principle and granted observer status in 2022, and subsequently followed a formal roadmap covering legal obligations and participation across ASEAN's three community pillars. Eventually, it became ASEAN's eleventh member on 26 October 2025 (ASEAN Secretariat, 2022b, 2025f).

The accession is often presented as the completion of a long diplomatic journey. Yet membership is better understood as the beginning of a more demanding process. Formal entry gives Timor-Leste a seat within ASEAN's institutions, but it does not automatically provide the administrative capacity, economic competitiveness or domestic coordination required to use that membership effectively. Nor does it guarantee that accession will produce material benefits for the Timorese.

Enlargement also places responsibilities on ASEAN. The conventional debate focused heavily on whether Timor-Leste was ready to join. This framing risks treating readiness as a burden borne entirely by the applicant state. A more balanced approach asks whether ASEAN is prepared to support a member with a smaller economy, limited administrative resources and different development needs. Accession is therefore a two-way test. Timor-Leste must develop the capacity to participate and contribute, while ASEAN must demonstrate that equal membership can remain meaningful in an increasingly diverse organization.

This distinction is important because enlargement affects the character of the regional community. It raises questions about what ASEAN membership entails beyond legal accession, whether all members must move at the same pace, and how the organization should respond when formal equality coexists with deep differences in capacity. Timor-Leste's membership consequently provides a lens through which to examine not only the country's readiness, but also ASEAN's understanding of inclusion, solidarity and regional responsibility.

4.1 Membership, readiness and institutional capacity

Timor-Leste's accession process involved extensive legal and administrative preparation. The roadmap adopted after the 2022 in-principle decision required participation in ASEAN meetings, accession to regional instruments and preparation to fulfil obligations across the political-security, economic and sociocultural pillars. Capacity-building programs supported by the ASEAN Secretariat, the ADB and other partners were intended to strengthen officials' understanding of ASEAN agreements and processes before full membership (ASEAN Secretariat, 2025d).

These efforts were necessary, but the interviews suggest that capacity building alone cannot resolve the underlying institutional challenge. The central issue is whether Timor-Leste possesses a sufficiently coordinated national system to manage ASEAN responsibilities across government.

TL03 (personal communication, April 28, 2026) placed particular emphasis on this coordination problem. ASEAN-related work involves numerous ministries, sectoral bodies and technical obligations. Without a central institution with sufficient authority, responsibilities may become fragmented and implementation inconsistent. The respondent argued for a more structured coordination mechanism, ideally located under the Prime Minister's Office, capable of directing ministries, monitoring commitments and linking ASEAN participation to national policy.

The same respondent highlighted civil-service readiness, human capital and language skills. Participation in ASEAN involves far more than attendance at summits. Officials are required to follow negotiations, understand technical agreements, prepare national positions, coordinate with other ministries and maintain continuity despite staff changes. English-language capacity is particularly important because ASEAN's working language is English, but technical competence must also extend to trade, customs, digital regulation, health, labour, agriculture, security and other sectoral areas.

The scale of ASEAN's institutional system makes this a substantial demand for any administration. Hundreds of meetings take place each year across different levels of government. A smaller civil service may face difficult choices about which meetings to attend and how many officials can be assigned to ASEAN portfolios without weakening domestic administration. The challenge is therefore not simply that Timor-Leste needs more trained individuals. It needs systems capable of retaining knowledge, coordinating positions and ensuring that participation in regional meetings is followed by implementation at home.

SG04 (personal communication, June 30, 2026) distinguished readiness across ASEAN's three pillars. Economic commitments were described as the most

technically demanding because they involve regulations, schedules, standards and in some cases legally binding obligations. Participation in this pillar may therefore require greater sequencing and more sustained technical support. Political-security instruments are often expressed through principles and diplomatic commitments, while many sociocultural programs allow more gradual participation. The respondent nevertheless argued that the deepest bottleneck lies in domestic institutional capacity. External partners can provide training, but they cannot substitute for the staffing, structures and authority that must exist within Timor-Leste's government.

PH03 (personal communication, May 30, 2026) similarly argued that readiness should not be treated as Timor-Leste's responsibility alone. ASEAN's large number of meetings and overlapping processes places pressure on all member states, but the burden is especially heavy for a smaller administration. Capacity-building should therefore be accompanied by an examination of whether ASEAN's own procedures can be made more efficient. Enlargement should prompt ASEAN to rationalise repetitive meetings, clarify priorities and reduce participation that produces little substantive value.

The same respondent made a significant point. Institutional readiness is frequently described as a matter of bringing Timor-Leste up to ASEAN standards. Yet enlargement can also expose weaknesses in those standards and processes. An organization that depends heavily on meetings, rotating officials and nationally implemented commitments may become more difficult to manage as its membership expands. Timor-Leste's limited capacity makes these weaknesses more visible, but it did not create them.

TH02 (personal communication, June 16, 2026) therefore argued that the most important question is not whether Timor-Leste can manage immediate matters of protocol or attendance, but how it will become integrated over the longer term. All members should be treated as contributors to the regional project. The assessment of readiness should focus on the quality and sustainability of participation rather than the ability to reproduce every existing ASEAN practice immediately.

The Timorese respondents also resisted an understanding of membership based primarily on access to benefits. TL02 (personal communication, April 28, 2026) framed accession as part of a wider state-building project. Timor-Leste should use ASEAN membership to strengthen its institutions, investment environment, education system and economic strategy. The respondent cautioned that the country could not approach ASEAN simply as a recipient of markets, assistance or political recognition. It must also identify how it can contribute to regional cooperation.

This argument gives readiness a broader meaning. It is not merely compliance with a list of technical obligations. It involves the ability to use regional commitments

as a basis for domestic reform. The World Bank's 2026 economic report similarly describes ASEAN membership as a possible anchor for sequencing reforms in customs, licensing, competition policy, border administration, skills and the investment environment. It argues that the years leading to 2031 provide an important window for converting accession from a political milestone into a platform for economic transformation.

Post-accession work has already begun in this direction. In November 2025, shortly after accession, Timor-Leste initiated work on an ASEAN Economic Community implementation roadmap for 2026–2030, intended to translate membership obligations into sequenced national measures. Such planning is necessary because commitments covering customs, standards, services, investment and digital systems cannot be implemented effectively through disconnected ministerial initiatives (European External Action Service, 2025b).

Yet membership should not be reduced to a program of technocratic reform. TL01 (personal communication, April 27, 2026) warned against treating accession as a symbolic national event or an elite project whose benefits remain distant from citizens. Readiness should be judged partly by whether people understand membership, can participate in the opportunities it creates and experience improvements in their well-being. Otherwise, accession risks becoming an achievement celebrated by political leaders without producing meaningful social ownership.

Public awareness matters because ASEAN membership will require policy choices with domestic consequences. Trade liberalization may expose some producers to greater competition. Regulatory reforms may change the way businesses operate. Labour mobility may create opportunities but also concerns over skills and employment. Membership will be more politically sustainable if citizens, local businesses, universities and civil society understand the opportunities, obligations and trade-offs involved.

A credible readiness strategy must therefore combine central coordination with wider domestic participation. Government institutions need the authority and technical capacity to implement commitments, but businesses, universities, professional groups and communities must also be included in defining how membership serves national development. ASEAN policy cannot remain the responsibility of a small circle of diplomats and senior officials.

The institutional challenge can be summarised in three parts. The first is coordination: Timor-Leste requires a central mechanism capable of directing and monitoring ASEAN work across government. The second is continuity: it needs a professional body of officials and institutions able to retain expertise over time.

The third is domestic connection: membership must be linked to economic policy, education, public administration and the interests of citizens rather than treated mainly as an external-relations portfolio.

4.2 Development gaps and differentiated integration

The most persistent reservations surrounding Timor-Leste's accession concerned development and administrative disparities. Timor-Leste enters a regional community whose members already differ significantly in income, productive capacity, infrastructure and state capability. Its membership does not introduce inequality into ASEAN, but it makes the existing development divide more visible.

The country has achieved political stability and maintained competitive democratic institutions, but its economic base remains narrow. Growth has been heavily influenced by public spending, while private investment, non-oil exports and formal employment remain limited. The end of production from the Bayu-Undan petroleum field has increased the urgency of economic diversification. ASEAN membership creates access to a wider regional market, but access alone will not make domestic firms competitive or generate exports (World Bank, 2026).

The World Bank reported that Timor-Leste's non-oil economy grew by 4.5 per cent in 2025, supported by tourism and public investment, and projected growth of around 4.1 per cent in 2026. These figures indicate positive momentum, but they do not remove structural constraints. The country's human-capital indicators remain low relative to other ASEAN members, and firms continue to face difficulties related to skills, licensing, logistics, finance and regulatory predictability (World Bank, 2026).

The ADB similarly identifies economic diversification, human-capital development, institutional strengthening, resilient infrastructure and private-sector capacity as central priorities. Its 2026 assessments emphasise stronger workforce skills, digital readiness, private-sector development and continued investment in infrastructure and human capital if Timor-Leste is to narrow the development gap and benefit from regional integration (Asian Development Bank, 2026b; Villafuerte et al., 2026).

These gaps should not be understood as proof that accession was premature. Membership and readiness do not necessarily follow a strict sequence in which all domestic weaknesses must be resolved before integration begins. Earlier ASEAN enlargement also involved states with limited economic and institutional capacity. Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam (CMLV) joined during the 1990s with substantial development gaps, and ASEAN subsequently established the Initiative for ASEAN Integration to assist newer members.

Gomes (2025) argues that Timor-Leste's present position is comparable in some respects to that of the newer mainland members at the time of their accession. The comparison is useful, but it should not be treated too mechanically. Timor-Leste performs better than some ASEAN members in areas such as political openness, press freedom and perceptions of corruption, while lagging substantially in infrastructure, economic diversification, digital connectivity and human capital. Its development profile is uneven rather than uniformly weak.

The interviews present two broad interpretations of this disparity. The first views accession as a risk of further stratification within ASEAN. MY01 (personal communication, July 22, 2026) argued that earlier enlargement produced a two-speed organization consisting broadly of older, wealthier members and newer, less-developed members. Because that divide has not been fully closed, Timor-Leste could create a "three-speed ASEAN" unless development, digital and administrative gaps are addressed quickly. The central concern was not the country's democratic system, but the possibility that continuing economic exclusion would produce frustration and weaken its sense of belonging within ASEAN.

The second interpretation treats Timor-Leste as part of a familiar ASEAN pattern. SG04 (personal communication, June 30, 2026) argued that its admission resembles the accession of the CLMV states and should no longer be debated primarily through the question of whether it should have been allowed to join. The more useful task is to identify which commitments require phased implementation and what resources are needed to bring the country into ASEAN's institutional and economic systems.

Both interpretations lead towards some form of differentiated integration. ASEAN's diversity makes it unrealistic to expect all members to implement every commitment at the same pace. The ASEAN Charter already permits flexible participation, including the ASEAN-minus-X formula, in the implementation of economic commitments (ASEAN Secretariat, 2008).

Differentiated integration can take several forms. Timor-Leste may receive longer timelines for particularly technical obligations. Participation may be phased according to sectoral readiness. Groups of more capable states may move ahead in selected areas while leaving pathways open for others to join later. Technical assistance may be concentrated on obligations with the greatest immediate importance rather than spread thinly across the entire ASEAN agenda.

TH01 (personal communication, May 26, 2026) argued that ASEAN should design a pathway suited to Timor-Leste's present development level rather than expecting it to reproduce the experiences of existing members. The country

should also be assessed through complementarity, on what it possesses and may contribute, not only what it lacks. Flexible arrangements could allow Timor-Leste to participate where it is ready while building capacity in more demanding areas.

PH03 (personal communication, May 30, 2026) similarly supported greater use of ASEAN-minus-X arrangements. Consensus may remain part of ASEAN's political culture, but it should not prevent willing members from advancing in areas where others require more time. In relation to Timor-Leste, phased participation would preserve equal membership while avoiding the unrealistic assumption that formal accession produces immediate regulatory parity.

MY02 (personal communication, July 31, 2026) also regarded variable-speed integration as increasingly necessary. More capable members may need to establish standards or working models in selected sectors before others join. However, the respondent recognized the political risk: differentiated participation may appear to divide ASEAN into members with greater and lesser influence.

This risk should be taken seriously. Differentiated integration can help ASEAN accommodate diversity, but it can also create a permanent regional periphery. If faster-moving groups determine standards without meaningful input from less-capable members, temporary flexibility may become structural inequality. Timor-Leste could retain formal equality while exercising limited practical influence over the rules it is later expected to implement.

Differentiation should therefore be governed by several principles. First, participation may occur at different speeds, but all members should retain a voice in setting the broad direction. Second, slower implementation should be accompanied by a clear pathway towards fuller participation. Third, technical and financial support should be tied to defined national priorities and measurable institutional needs. Fourth, flexible arrangements should not be used to exclude less-developed members from politically important discussions.

The Initiative for ASEAN Integration provides an existing mechanism for this purpose. Its 2026–2030 work plan includes Timor-Leste alongside less-developed AMS and focuses on education, skills, public health, micro-enterprises and inclusive development. The inclusion of Timor-Leste is important, but the effectiveness of the initiative will depend on whether assistance is tailored to national conditions rather than delivered through broad regional programs (ASEAN Secretariat, 2026c).

ID03 (personal communication, July 3, 2026) raised an additional institutional concern. The enlargement may increase pressure on ASEAN's already limited central resources. If equal member contributions are calibrated according to

the capacity of the least-developed member, Timor-Leste's entry could intensify questions about how the ASEAN Secretariat and regional initiatives are funded. Accession should therefore prompt a wider discussion of ASEAN's financing model and whether equal contributions remain appropriate in an organization with widening economic disparities.

The meaning of development support must also be considered carefully. Assistance should not position Timor-Leste indefinitely as a recipient of external expertise. It should strengthen the country's capacity to determine priorities, negotiate regional commitments and develop its own institutional knowledge. Long-term dependence on consultants or externally designed programs would meet immediate reporting needs without building national ownership.

Enlargement therefore requires a balance between obligation and solidarity. Timor-Leste accepted the responsibilities of membership, but ASEAN must recognize that equal obligations do not always imply identical implementation schedules. Differentiated integration is defensible when it enables participation and convergence. It becomes problematic when it normalises unequal influence or leaves less-developed members permanently behind.

4.3 Timor-Leste's potential contribution to ASEAN

Discussions of Timor-Leste's membership have been dominated by what the country needs from ASEAN. This emphasis is understandable given the scale of its institutional and economic challenges, but it risks obscuring what Timor-Leste may bring to the organization. Enlargement is not meaningful if the new member is treated only as a capacity deficit to be managed.

Timor-Leste's most frequently identified contribution is political and normative. Its post-independence history differs from those of other ASEAN states. The country emerged from occupation and conflict through an internationally supervised transition, established competitive electoral institutions and developed a political narrative centerd on self-determination, reconciliation and peacebuilding. These experiences do not make Timor-Leste politically exemplary in every respect, but they give it a distinctive position within a region marked by democratic regression and continuing political repression.

Several respondents believed that Timor-Leste could bring a stronger emphasis on democracy, accountability and human rights. MY02 (personal communication, July 31, 2026) argued that its history and political institutions may allow it to introduce a different normative orientation into ASEAN debates, although the ability to exercise influence will depend partly on economic capacity and institutional credibility.

TH03 (personal communication, July 22, 2026) similarly identified possible contributions in democracy, liberal values, reconciliation, conflict resolution and peacebuilding. Timor-Leste's experience gives it grounds to speak on these issues even without substantial economic or military power. The respondent nevertheless warned that membership may gradually socialize the country into ASEAN's prevailing norms and reduce its willingness to take independent positions .

PH03 (personal communication, May 30, 2026) viewed Timor-Leste's accession as a reminder that regional integration is not only about markets and technical agreements. Its history connects ASEAN membership to peace, participation and democratic aspiration. The respondent argued that enlargement should change not only who is seated at the table, but whose experiences and ideas are heard within the organization.

SG03 (personal communication, June 18, 2026) offered a similar interpretation. Timor-Leste's democratic identity, Portuguese colonial inheritance and political history may produce a perspective different from those of existing members. It could become more outspoken on democracy, political rights, external influence and regional democratic regression, even if such positions create discomfort within ASEAN.

Normative influence, however, should not be assumed. Several respondents expected Timor-Leste to act cautiously during its early years of membership. ID02 (personal communication, July 9, 2026) argued that the country would probably observe existing practices and learn the norms of ASEAN discussion before taking stronger positions. Accession was interpreted more as a strategic and geographic completion of ASEAN than as an immediate ideological rebalancing of the organization.

PH04 (personal communication, June 30, 2026) likewise expected an initial period in which Timor-Leste would avoid controversy while developing its bilateral relationships and understanding the internal politics of ASEAN. The country's revolutionary history may be less influential than its present need to establish itself as a dependable and pragmatic member.

ID01 (personal communication, July 30, 2026) pointed to a possible gap between high-level political enthusiasm and participation at the working level. Timor-Leste has sometimes been quieter than external observers expected in regional human-rights forums. Limited staff, caution and uncertainty about how to operate within ASEAN may explain this. The respondent therefore warned against assuming that the country would immediately function as a consistently progressive regional voice.

These observations suggest that normative contribution will depend on capacity. A state cannot shape regional debates merely by possessing a distinctive political history. It needs officials and institutions able to develop positions, participate consistently, build coalitions and follow debates across multiple ASEAN bodies. Normative influence requires administrative resources as well as political will.

Timor-Leste's foreign policy nevertheless demonstrates a long-standing effort to use multilateral institutions to strengthen sovereignty, recognition and national independence. Strating (2018) describes this as an aspirational foreign policy shaped by the vulnerabilities of a small post-colonial state. ASEAN membership fits this pattern. It anchors Timor-Leste within Southeast Asia while widening its diplomatic options and reducing dependence on any single external relationship.

The country may also contribute through small-state diplomacy. Its leaders have extensive experience in international advocacy, negotiation and peace diplomacy. This does not translate automatically into regional influence, but it gives Timor-Leste resources other than economic weight. Its post-conflict experience may be relevant to reconciliation, mediation and the inclusion of societies emerging from violence.

TL03 (personal communication, April 28, 2026) suggested that ASEAN can help reduce tensions among major powers and that Timor-Leste's strategic location, including its proximity to important maritime routes, gives it relevance beyond its economic size. The country's membership also creates links between ASEAN and other diplomatic spaces, including the Community of Portuguese Speaking Countries (CPLP) and the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF).

TL02 argued that Timor-Leste's democratic character and human-rights record constitute genuine strengths, but that principles must be combined with pragmatism. The country is still learning how to operate within ASEAN's norms, particularly the tension between its positions on Myanmar and the regional principle of non-interference. Its contribution will depend on whether it can maintain a principled voice while building the relationships necessary to influence a consensus-based organization (TL02, personal communication, April 28, 2026).

TL01 (personal communication, April 27, 2026) was however more sceptical about the likelihood of Timor-Leste transforming ASEAN politically. Political systems within the organization will remain diverse, and the addition of one democratic member is unlikely by itself to change ASEAN's operating principles. The respondent nevertheless saw value in ASEAN as a structure through which Timor-Leste could strengthen its economy and national capacity, provided that membership remained connected to collective effort and shared ownership.

Timor-Leste's economic contribution may initially be limited, but it should not be dismissed. Membership opens possibilities in tourism, agriculture, fisheries, coffee, labour mobility and services. Its links with Portuguese-speaking countries may also offer ASEAN additional diplomatic and commercial connections. The country's location between Southeast Asia, Australia and the Pacific gives it a position that does not fit neatly within existing regional divisions.

The more immediate contribution may lie in changing ASEAN's perspective on enlargement itself. Timor-Leste introduces a member whose political history, state-building experience and development needs differ from those of both ASEAN's founding members and the states admitted during the 1990s. Its participation may compel ASEAN to think more seriously about administrative inclusion, institutional support and how regional obligations are implemented across unequal states.

The country's eventual influence will depend on choices made by both Timor-Leste and ASEAN. Timor-Leste will need to move beyond symbolic membership, establish a coherent national ASEAN policy and develop fields in which it can contribute consistently. ASEAN will need to treat the new member as a participant in shaping regional priorities, not merely as a state required to catch up.

The broader meaning of the accession is therefore not that ASEAN has admitted a fully prepared member. Nor is it that Timor-Leste has joined an organization capable of resolving all its development challenges. Enlargement creates a political framework within which readiness can be built, inequalities negotiated and new forms of contribution made possible.

Timor-Leste's membership will be successful if it produces more than procedural compliance. It should help strengthen domestic institutions, expand economic and educational opportunities, and give the country a meaningful role in regional affairs. For ASEAN, success will depend on whether it can accommodate different capacities without turning formal equality into practical marginalization.

The accession ultimately tests ASEAN's political imagination. If enlargement is understood only as adding another government to existing meetings, its regional significance will remain limited. If it becomes an opportunity to rethink institutional participation, differentiated integration and the contribution of smaller states, Timor-Leste may shape ASEAN not by transforming its principles overnight, but by compelling the organization to give clearer meaning to inclusion

5. Germany, the European Union and the Future of Regional Cooperation

Germany and the EU occupy a distinctive position in Southeast Asia's external relations. Neither is a dominant security actor in the region, and neither possesses the geographic proximity or economic weight of China. Their role also differs from that of the U.S., whose regional presence remains closely associated with military alliances, strategic competition and changing political priorities in Washington. European engagement instead rests on a combination of trade, investment, development cooperation, regulatory experience, technical expertise, education, diplomacy and support for multilateral institutions.

This position creates an opportunity, but not an automatic advantage. Germany and the EU are generally regarded as useful partners, particularly in areas such as the rules-based international order, environmental governance, institutional development and economic regulation. At the same time, European engagement is sometimes perceived as distant, overly bureaucratic or insufficiently responsive to Southeast Asian political realities. European regulatory standards can be seen as valuable reference points, but also as external demands that impose unequal adjustment costs. Normative credibility remains an asset, but only when European positions are applied with consistency.

Germany's relationship with ASEAN already has an established institutional basis. Germany became an ASEAN Development Partner in 2016, and the partnership marked its tenth anniversary in 2026. The ASEAN–Germany Practical Cooperation Areas for 2023–2027 cover political-security, economic and sociocultural cooperation, including maritime affairs, peace and reconciliation, governance and human rights, trade and investment, the digital economy, carbon markets, micro, small and medium-sized enterprises, cybersecurity, education, youth exchange and disaster management (ASEAN & Federal Republic of Germany, 2022; ASEAN Secretariat, 2025g).

The wider ASEAN–EU relationship is more extensive. ASEAN and the EU became strategic partners in 2020, and the Plan of Action for 2023–2027 provides a broad framework covering political-security cooperation, economic integration, sustainable development, connectivity, digitalization, education and people-to-people relations. At the 25th ASEAN–EU Ministerial Meeting in April 2026, both sides called for more tangible and mutually beneficial initiatives and stressed that any further upgrading of the relationship must be grounded in concrete cooperation that delivers value to both regions (ASEAN & European Union, 2026).

The interviews suggest that Germany and the EU can contribute most effectively when they do not seek to define ASEAN's future for it. Their comparative value lies in strengthening the conditions under which Southeast Asian states and societies can pursue regional cooperation, such as capable institutions, skilled workforces, accessible markets, sustainable infrastructure, reliable rules and wider participation. The underlying expectation is not that Europe should reproduce its own model in Southeast Asia, but that it should become a more consistent, visible and practically useful regional partner.

5.1 How Southeast Asian experts view European engagement

The interviews present a broadly favourable but qualified view of European engagement. The EU is said to be frequently associated with international law, multilateral cooperation, environmental standards, human rights and a less coercive form of external influence. These attributes distinguish it from major powers whose engagement with Southeast Asia is more directly shaped by strategic rivalry.

Regional survey evidence supports this assessment. In the 2026 State of Southeast Asia survey, trust in the EU rose from 51.9 per cent in 2025 to 55.9 per cent, making it the second most trusted major power after Japan. The report attributes this standing largely to the EU's reputation for supporting international law, multilateral norms, environmental protection, human rights and climate action. The EU also received 20.5 per cent of responses when participants were asked which actor they trusted to uphold a rules-based order, placing it close behind ASEAN and the United States (Lin et al., 2026).

This favourable perception does not mean that the EU is regarded as sufficiently influential or present. The same survey notes continuing concern that Europe is preoccupied with its internal affairs and may lack the political focus required to exercise sustained international leadership (Lin et al., 2026). The interviews similarly distinguish between European credibility and European visibility.

MY02 (personal communication, July 31, 2026) argued that the EU should present itself as a reliable, consistent and long-term partner. Reliability has become particularly important as confidence in other major powers becomes less certain. Yet outside diplomatic and specialist policy circles, public awareness of the EU as a collective actor remains limited. Individual European countries may have recognisable cultural institutions, scholarships or educational programs, while the EU itself often lacks a clear public identity in Southeast Asia. Greater visibility should therefore come through education, professional exchange, cultural engagement and practical opportunities rather than through official messaging alone.

SG04 (personal communication, June 30, 2026) also saw the EU as a credible normative and economic partner at a time when confidence in the existing international order is under strain. The EU's strengths lie in its support for open trade, regulatory cooperation, sustainable infrastructure, the green transition and the digital economy. The respondent nevertheless stressed that regional visibility depends on practical delivery. Areas such as energy connectivity, secure digital systems, resilient infrastructure and cross-border standards provide opportunities for the EU to demonstrate relevance beyond diplomatic declarations.

The EU's normative identity is both a source of influence and a source of vulnerability. ID01 (personal communication, July 30, 2026) argued that Europe's regional standing depends heavily on its reputation for values and international law because it does not rely primarily on hard power. Perceived inconsistency therefore damages the EU more directly than it might damage an actor whose influence rests on military or economic coercion. The respondent identified European positions on Israel and Palestine as a major credibility problem in Southeast Asia. When principles appear to be applied selectively, the EU's claims to normative leadership become less persuasive.

This concern should not be interpreted as a rejection of European engagement on human rights or democratic governance. Several respondents argued that the EU should continue to defend standards. The criticism was directed more towards inconsistency, presentation and the relationship between external priorities and regional ownership.

TH03 (personal communication, July 22, 2026) described Europe's normative role as a comparative advantage. The EU and Germany should continue to support democratic standards, environmental regulation, governance and social development rather than abandoning these areas because some governments resist external scrutiny. The respondent nevertheless favoured persuasion and practical incentives over blunt pressure. European actors should explain how stronger standards improve public welfare, institutional performance or market access, while recognizing the different political conditions of individual ASEAN states.

PH03 (personal communication, May 30, 2026) similarly argued that European engagement should be respectful, practical and demand-driven. The EU can offer experience in digital skills, green transition, standards, vocational training, maritime awareness, renewable energy and small-enterprise development. It should not treat ASEAN states as passive recipients of European institutional models. Overly moralising, bureaucratic or securitised engagement may generate resistance and place local partners at risk of being portrayed as instruments of foreign agendas.

The role of European regulation was viewed with similar ambivalence. European environmental, labour, digital and product standards can help ASEAN firms move towards higher-value production and improve access to European markets. Yet they may also appear to transfer the costs of Europe's policy choices to producers and governments in Southeast Asia. TH01 (personal communication, May 26, 2026) stressed that European market access is valuable, but ASEAN firms require technical assistance, technology transfer and training to meet environmental and digital requirements. Standards should be accompanied by support across production chains rather than presented merely as conditions for entry into the European market.

ID03 (personal communication, July 3, 2026) raised the political sensitivity of issues such as palm oil in Indonesia and Malaysia. European standards are not received in an abstract regulatory environment; they affect sectors tied to employment, national development and domestic political identity. The respondent cautioned against assuming that European regulatory preferences should automatically become global norms. The EU should understand how its policies are interpreted within national political debates and should work with regional actors to address implementation costs.

A further concern is the imbalance between the institutional structures of the EU and ASEAN. PH04 (personal communication, June 30, 2026) argued that the relationship has often remained more substantial at the bilateral level than at the bloc-to-bloc level. The EU has a strong legal and administrative structure, while ASEAN has limited regional authority and relies on national implementation. This asymmetry makes it difficult to construct a relationship that resembles the EU's external partnerships with more centralised organizations. European states may consequently continue to pursue significant economic and diplomatic relationships with individual Southeast Asian countries even while endorsing ASEAN-level cooperation.

The regional view is therefore not that Europe lacks value. It is that European relevance must be demonstrated through consistency and practical engagement. The EU is trusted because of the principles it represents, but that trust cannot be separated from perceptions of its conduct. It is respected for its regulatory and institutional experience, but those strengths can become weaknesses when cooperation is presented as instruction. It possesses significant economic resources, but their impact depends on whether projects respond to regional priorities and become visible in the lives of institutions, firms and citizens.

5.2 Priorities for Germany

Germany should occupy a clear position within the wider European relationship rather than attempting to reproduce the full range of EU external action. Its comparative advantages are strongest in technical and vocational education, industrial development, small and medium-sized enterprises, renewable energy, environmental policy, institutional capacity and long-term development cooperation. These areas correspond closely with the priorities identified in the interviews and with the existing ASEAN–Germany cooperation framework.

Germany's status as an ASEAN Development Partner provides a practical foundation. The partnership already includes support for regional economic integration, human rights institutions, maritime cooperation, micro and small enterprises, consumer protection and climate policy. German-supported programs have contributed to regional platforms for small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) market information, online consumer protection, judicial cooperation and ASEAN economic planning (ASEAN Secretariat, 2025g; Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit [GIZ], 2025).

The tenth anniversary of the partnership in 2026 created an opportunity to move from a broad portfolio towards a more distinctive long-term contribution. High-level exchanges during the ASEAN Secretary-General's visit to Germany in February 2026 included maritime security, green energy, trade, science diplomacy and engagement with German research institutions. Germany also signalled its intention to deepen relations with ASEAN during ministerial engagement in Southeast Asia in early 2026 (ASEAN Secretariat, 2026d; Federal Foreign Office, 2026a).

The newly established South-North Commission on Development could provide an additional entry point for Germany's engagement with ASEAN. Launched by the German government in June 2026, the Commission is intended to bring together actors from the Global South and North to develop responses to shared global challenges, strengthen multilateralism and inform the future direction of German development policy. Its emphasis on equal participation, regional consultation and joint agenda-setting is particularly relevant to relations with Southeast Asia, where external partnerships are often judged by the extent to which they respond to regional priorities rather than reproduce donor-driven agendas (Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development [BMZ], 2026a).

Germany could use the Commission's Asian consultations to engage ASEAN governments, regional institutions, researchers, businesses and civil society in shaping areas of cooperation, while also bringing Southeast Asian perspectives into

wider debates on the post-2030 development agenda and reform of international institutions. In this sense, the Commission offers a mechanism through which ASEAN–Germany relations could become part of a broader conversation about how cooperation between Europe and the Global South should evolve in a more multipolar international order (BMZ, 2026a).

Against this wider institutional setting, one substantive priority should be technical and vocational education and training. PH03 (personal communication, May 30, 2026) identified Germany's experience in vocational education, advanced manufacturing, renewable energy and SME development as particularly relevant to ASEAN's needs. Germany can help connect education systems more closely to industry, support qualifications for green and digital sectors, and develop partnerships between training institutions and employers.

German development policy already treats vocational education as a flagship area in Asia and increasingly links skills to green employment and changing labour markets (BMZ, 2023). This experience should not be transferred as a fixed German model. ASEAN economies have different labour markets, educational systems, levels of informality and industrial structures. The more useful approach is to support locally designed systems that connect technical education to actual employment opportunities.

Germany could prioritise regional qualifications, industry-led curriculum development and training for sectors undergoing rapid change. These include renewable energy, energy-efficient manufacturing, digital services, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, electric mobility, logistics and climate-resilient agriculture. Training should also reach small firms and workers outside major urban centers rather than concentrating only on high-technology industries.

A second priority is support for SMEs and industrial upgrading. Smaller firms often struggle to participate in regional and European markets because they lack information, finance, certification, technology and distribution networks. MY02 (personal communication, July 31, 2026) argued that European engagement should move beyond government-to-government trade relations and help ASEAN firms, particularly those that are not yet export-oriented, enter European markets. Support could include standards guidance, export preparation, market knowledge and links to distribution networks.

Germany's own experience with the Mittelstand provides a useful reference, but it should not be treated as a template that can be reproduced without considering Southeast Asian business conditions. The most relevant elements include technical upgrading, relationships between firms and training institutions, access to specialised finance, business associations and integration into value

chains. Existing German support for ASEAN Access, a platform linking SMEs to regional market information and business networks, shows how this work can be organized at the regional level (GIZ, 2025).

A third priority is the green industrial and energy transition. Climate action is already part of the ASEAN–Germany cooperation framework. Germany has funded regional climate programs and supported ASEAN participation in international climate processes, sustainable production and policy development (Federal Foreign Office, 2023; GIZ, 2025).

The interviews suggest that this work should connect climate ambition with economic feasibility. ASEAN states need investment, technology, grid development, regulatory capacity and trained workers to shift towards lower-carbon production. Germany can contribute in renewable energy, energy efficiency, industrial decarbonization, green finance and carbon-market governance. It should also help firms understand and meet European environmental regulations.

This support is especially important because European climate measures can be perceived as external costs imposed on developing economies. Germany can play a bridging role between European regulatory objectives and Southeast Asian industrial realities. Technical cooperation should begin before new requirements become binding and should include smaller producers that have less capacity to document supply chains or invest in cleaner technology.

A fourth priority is digital capacity and governance. ASEAN's digital economy is expanding quickly, but national differences in infrastructure, data governance, cybersecurity and regulatory capacity remain large. Germany's contribution could focus on secure digital public infrastructure, interoperability, competition policy, consumer protection, SME digitalization and skills. The ASEAN–Germany cooperation framework already includes the digital economy, information and communication technology, cybersecurity and online dispute resolution (ASEAN & Federal Republic of Germany, 2022).

Digital cooperation should not be limited to the transfer of technical systems. It should address the institutional rules governing data, platform competition, consumer rights, artificial intelligence and online harms. Germany can support regional regulatory dialogue without assuming that European rules will be adopted unchanged. The objective should be compatibility, trust and public protection, not regulatory replication.

A fifth priority is institutional and research capacity. Several interviews highlighted the weakness of long-term strategic discussion within ASEAN and the decline or fragmentation of independent Track 1.5 and Track 2 engagement. ID02 (personal

communication, July 9, 2026) argued that Germany and the EU could create more spaces for strategic dialogue in which regional actors can examine difficult questions without the constraints of formal government negotiations. External partners should facilitate these spaces without determining their conclusions.

TH03 (personal communication, July 22, 2026) similarly called for sustained support to universities, researchers, think tanks, professional communities and civil society rather than concentrating only on governments and conventional development organizations. Strengthening independent regional knowledge can widen the constituency for ASEAN cooperation and generate ideas that official institutions may not yet be ready to endorse.

Germany has strong universities, foundations, policy institutes and development agencies capable of developing long-term institutional partnerships. Funding should support research networks that are led within Southeast Asia and connect scholars across ASEAN member states. Priority themes could include regional foresight, demographic change, digital governance, labour mobility, energy security, maritime cooperation and institutional reform. Short conferences should not substitute for multi-year collaboration, shared data and sustained intellectual exchange.

Germany should also consider a focused contribution to Timor-Leste's ASEAN participation. The EU and ASEAN reaffirmed support in April 2026 for Timor-Leste's full integration through targeted capacity-building (ASEAN & European Union, 2026). German strengths in public administration, technical education, digital systems, renewable energy, SME development and research make it well placed to support this process.

Such assistance should be linked to Timor-Leste's national priorities rather than organized as a series of disconnected ASEAN training programs. It could support the government's central coordination of ASEAN affairs, regulatory preparation, English and negotiation skills, digital public administration, vocational education and economic diversification. At the regional level, Germany could also support partnerships between Timorese institutions and counterparts elsewhere in ASEAN.

These priorities point towards a coherent German role, not as a geopolitical counterweight seeking visibility in every domain, but as a patient institutional partner. Germany's value lies in the combination of technical depth, industrial experience, development cooperation and support for rules-based multilateralism. Its challenge is to turn these strengths into fewer, more sustained commitments that respond to clearly identified regional needs.

Priorities for Germany

- Clear position: build on Germany's strengths in skills, industry, SMEs, green energy and long-term development cooperation
- 2026: 10th anniversary, shift from broad portfolio to lasting contribution
- Entry point: South-North Commission, locally designed

1



Technical and Vocational Education and Training

Connect technical education to actual employment opportunities, with regional qualifications and industry-led curricula.

Not a fixed German model. Reach small firms and workers outside major cities.

2



SMEs and Industrial Upgrading

Help ASEAN firms, especially those not yet exporting, to enter European markets.

Germany's *Mittelstand* offers a useful reference, with adaptation to Southeast Asia's business conditions.

3



Green Industrial and Energy Transition

Connect climate ambition with economic feasibility, and bridge European regulation and Southeast Asian industrial realities.

Start cooperation before new rules become binding, and include small producers.

4



Digital Capacity and Governance

Go beyond transferring technical systems to address rules on data, platform competition, consumer rights and AI.

The objective is compatibility, trust and public protection, not copying EU rules.

5



Institutional and Research Capacity

Create spaces for strategic dialogue and support universities, think tanks and civil society, with research networks led from within Southeast Asia.

Multi-year collaboration, shared data and sustained intellectual exchange, not short conferences.

+



Support for Timor-Leste

Back its full ASEAN integration, tied to Timor-Leste's own national priorities.

5.3 The wider role of the European Union

The EU has a scale and range of instruments that no individual member state can provide. Its role spans trade policy, investment, regional regulation, infrastructure finance, education, development cooperation, climate policy and security dialogue. This gives the EU the capacity to support ASEAN-wide initiatives that complement Germany's more focused bilateral and regional contributions.

The economic relationship is already substantial. In 2024, trade in goods between the EU and ASEAN reached €258.8 billion, consisting of €164.5 billion in EU imports and €94.3 billion in exports. The EU was ASEAN's third-largest trading partner and the third-largest source of foreign direct investment flows in that year (European External Action Service, 2026b). These figures give the EU considerable economic relevance, but trade volume alone does not produce an integrated region-to-region relationship.

The EU has pursued bilateral trade agreements with individual ASEAN members, including Singapore and Vietnam, while negotiations or implementation processes continue elsewhere. The EU–Singapore Digital Trade Agreement entered into force in February 2026, adding rules on digital trade to the existing free trade relationship (European Commission, 2026). Bilateral agreements can create building blocks for wider regional engagement, but they may also produce uneven regulatory relationships across ASEAN.

Several respondents remained sceptical about the immediate prospects for a comprehensive ASEAN–EU free trade agreement. SG04 (personal communication, June 30, 2026) identified continuing differences in environmental, labour, regulatory and data standards as major obstacles. The more practical path is to strengthen the capacity of ASEAN member states and firms to meet higher and increasingly compatible standards before pursuing a highly ambitious region-to-region agreement.

The EU should therefore treat regulatory cooperation as a long-term convergence process rather than a negotiation over a single agreement. Support is needed in customs, product safety, digital trade, intellectual property, competition, sustainable production and labour standards. This can reduce fragmentation within ASEAN while improving access to European markets.

Sustainable connectivity is another area in which EU-level engagement has particular value. At the 2022 ASEAN–EU Commemorative Summit, the EU pledged to mobilize €10 billion for connectivity projects in ASEAN under the Global Gateway framework. The Sustainable Connectivity Team Europe Initiative subsequently identified projects involving civil aviation, higher education, intellectual

property, digital systems, trade links and people-to-people cooperation. The wider agenda covers energy, transport, digitalization and climate-resilient infrastructure (European Commission, 2024; European External Action Service, 2026b).

The value of this agenda will depend on implementation and regional ownership.

Infrastructure should not be framed only as a European alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative. Such a framing risks reducing Southeast Asia to a field of competition among external powers. Projects should instead be judged by local and regional demand, financial sustainability, environmental quality, transparency and their contribution to ASEAN connectivity.

SG04 (personal communication, June 30, 2026) identified green transition, energy connectivity, sustainable infrastructure and the digital economy as areas in which the EU can make a substantial contribution. Infrastructure should be understood broadly to include undersea cables, cybersecurity, cross-border payments and disaster resilience, not only roads, ports and railways.

SG03 (personal communication, June 18, 2026) similarly located Europe's role in a hybrid space combining economics, infrastructure, rules and diplomacy. The EU is unlikely to match the United States as a military actor in Southeast Asia, but it can support maritime awareness, infrastructure, economic cooperation, mediation and the continued operation of rules-based frameworks.

The EU's security role should remain focused and connected to ASEAN priorities. At the April 2026 ministerial meeting, the two organizations identified maritime security, cyber cooperation, counter-terrorism, foreign information manipulation, space security and transnational crime as areas for practical cooperation. The joint statement also emphasized respect for ASEAN centrality, international law and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (ASEAN & European Union, 2026).

This creates a basis for cooperation that does not require the EU to become a conventional security guarantor. Maritime law, coastguard capacity, port safety, cybersecurity, crisis response and information integrity are fields where European experience and funding may be useful. Engagement should strengthen ASEAN-led institutions rather than create parallel mechanisms that further fragment the regional architecture.

The EU also has a wider role in supporting the rules-based order. In a region where governments seek to avoid binary alignment, the EU can contribute to a more plural distribution of partnerships. Its influence is strongest when it supports international law, open trade and institutional cooperation without demanding strategic alignment against another power.

This is reflected in regional perceptions. The EU's strong performance in the 2026 ISEAS survey was linked to international law and multilateral norms, even though respondents questioned whether Europe can translate normative influence into sustained global leadership (Lin et al., 2026). The EU should therefore focus less on asserting its status as a geopolitical actor and more on demonstrating the practical value of principled cooperation.

Education and people-to-people ties provide another underused area of influence. The ASEAN–EU Sustainable Connectivity Package includes higher-education cooperation, while the Plan of Action for 2023–2027 covers education, vocational training, science, research and mobility. In May 2026, the EU and ASEAN held a workshop on industry partnerships and vocational education linked to workforce preparation for the green and digital transitions (European External Action Service, 2026a).

The interviews suggest that these opportunities are not sufficiently visible. MY02 (personal communication, July 31, 2026) argued that scholarships and mobility programs should be easier to understand and access. Educational cooperation can create long-term relationships with societies rather than only governments, but this requires a clearer EU-level identity and wider outreach beyond established universities and capital cities.

The EU should also support regional civil society and progressive policy communities. ID01 (personal communication, July 30, 2026) noted that civil-society organizations continue to depend on European financial and technical support as political space narrows in several Southeast Asian countries. Assistance should include funding, training, institutional support and protection of independent regional networks. The respondent also encouraged European attention to issues beyond the most established areas of cooperation, including demographic change, social protection, disability inclusion, nuclear governance and transnational crime.

This support requires care. External funding can expose civil-society actors to accusations that they represent foreign interests. Programs should therefore be designed with local organizations, and European visibility should not become more important than the security and legitimacy of regional partners.

The wider EU role is consequently one of scale, coordination and regional connection. Germany and other member states can provide specialist experience, but the EU can link these contributions through trade policy, investment finance, regional standards, mobility and strategic dialogue. It can also ensure that bilateral partnerships contribute to ASEAN-wide cohesion rather than producing a patchwork of unrelated arrangements.

5.4 Principles for constructive engagement

The interviews point to several principles that should guide both German and EU engagement. These principles concern not only what Europe should support, but how cooperation should be organized. The first is regional ownership. External partners should not arrive with fully designed programs and ask ASEAN institutions to implement them. ID02 (personal communication, July 9, 2026) argued that the EU should create room for ASEAN actors to reflect, set priorities and develop their own agenda. External recognition can strengthen ASEAN's confidence, but European involvement should enable rather than direct regional decision-making.

MY03 (personal communication, July 24, 2026) made the same point in relation to human-rights programming. ASEAN institutions should have greater control over program themes, priorities and methods. Funding flexibility should be combined with accountability, but European financial support should not automatically lead to European control over program content.

This principle is consistent with the EU–ASEAN Plan of Action, which describes implementation as a shared responsibility and places cooperation within the obligations and priorities of both regional organizations (ASEAN & European Union, 2022). Co-creation should therefore become a practical standard rather than diplomatic language.

The second principle is consistency. Europe's standing depends heavily on the belief that it supports rules, rights and multilateral cooperation. Selective application of these principles weakens trust. This applies not only to major international crises but also to trade and climate policies. The EU cannot credibly call for partnership while designing regulations without serious consideration of their effects on producers and workers in Southeast Asia.

Consistency does not mean that Europe must avoid difficult political issues. It means that standards should be applied according to clear principles, and that engagement should combine criticism with sustained cooperation. The EU should not speak forcefully on human rights in less strategically important states while becoming more cautious where commercial or security interests are greater.

The third principle is contextual differentiation. ASEAN is not politically or economically uniform. Programs that are effective in Singapore or Malaysia may not be suitable for Laos, Myanmar or Timor-Leste. TH03 (personal communication, July 22, 2026) argued that European engagement should be country-specific and issue-specific rather than based on a single regional template.

Differentiation should not undermine ASEAN-wide objectives. The purpose is to recognize different starting points while linking assistance to regional convergence. Germany and the EU can support common goals through programs tailored to national capacity.

The fourth principle is long-term institutional commitment. Short funding cycles and isolated workshops may produce visible activities without creating lasting capability. MY03 (personal communication, July 24, 2026) criticised regional programing that measures success through attendance and event numbers rather than changes in policy, institutional practice or protection. Monitoring should examine whether programs produce follow-up, improve coordination or alter behaviour.

Germany's current development-policy reform emphasizes greater efficiency and clearer outcomes while also recognizing predictability and reliability as central strengths of development cooperation (BMZ, 2026b). These goals should be balanced carefully. Reducing administrative complexity is valuable, but it should not result in shorter relationships or a narrow preference for easily measurable outputs.

The fifth principle is support for regional institutions and non-state actors together. ASEAN cooperation remains state-led, but governments alone cannot build a people-centerd regional community. Universities, professional associations, labour organizations, civil society, media and businesses must be part of regional policymaking. Funding should strengthen their independent capacity rather than recruit them mainly to deliver externally designed projects.

The sixth principle is policy coherence. European trade, climate, development and foreign policies often operate through different institutions with different objectives. Southeast Asian partners may experience them as contradictory. Development programs may support small producers while new trade requirements impose costs that the same producers cannot meet. Diplomatic language may emphasise equality while financing and procurement procedures remain inaccessible to local organizations.

A more coherent approach would connect regulatory changes with early technical support, concessional finance and realistic implementation periods. It would also ensure that European commercial interests do not undermine governance, environmental or labour objectives.

The seventh principle is to avoid framing cooperation primarily through competition with China. Southeast Asian states generally seek diversified relationships and resist external pressure to choose sides. ID03 (personal communication, July 3,

2026) noted that regional actors may welcome European or Japanese technology and capacity-building while rejecting initiatives explicitly framed as containment of China.

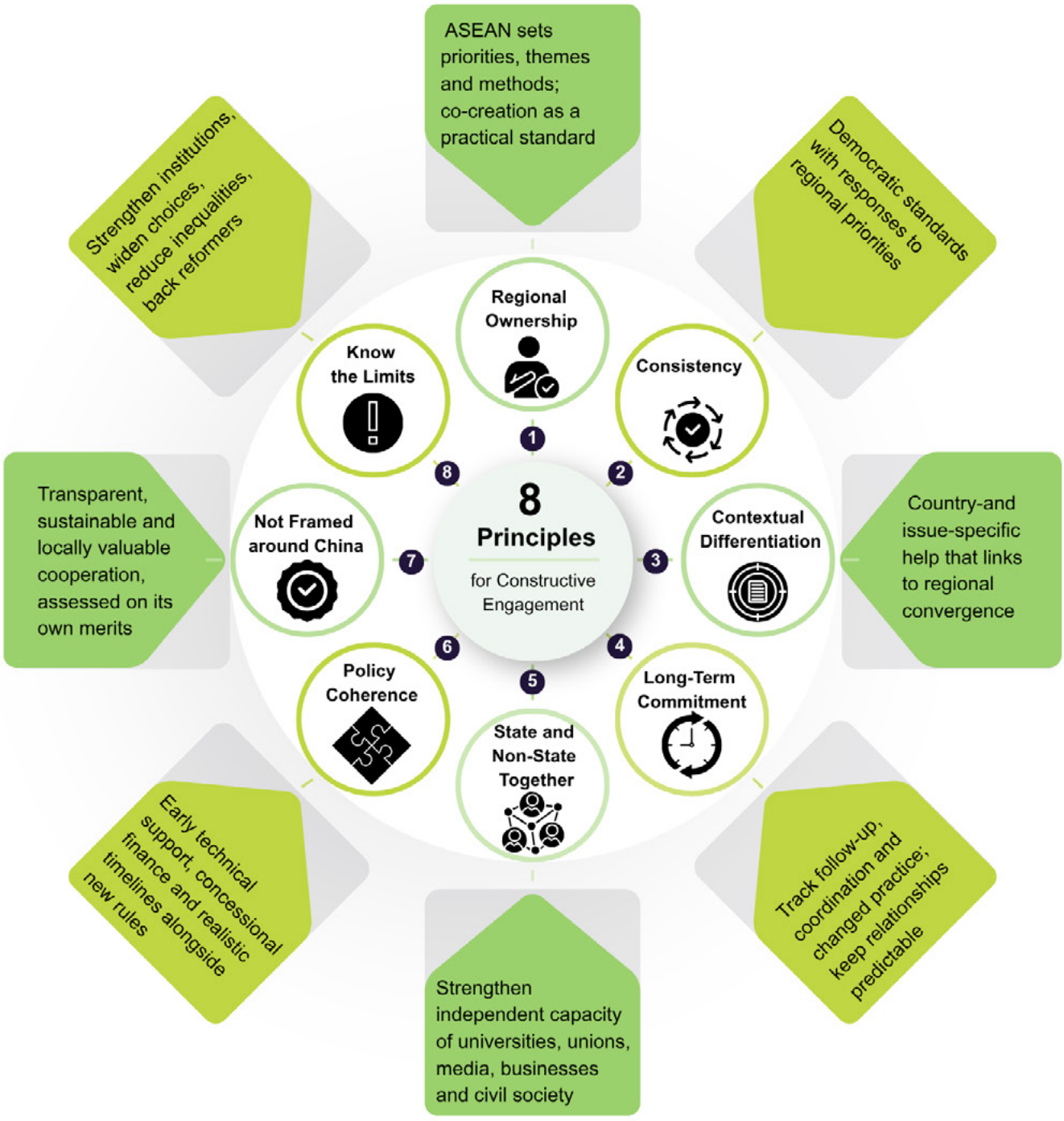
European projects should therefore be justified by their own quality and contribution rather than by comparison with Chinese initiatives. The strongest European offer is not that it is anti-China, but that it can provide transparent, sustainable and locally valuable cooperation.

Finally, Germany and the EU should recognize the limits of external influence. ASEAN's future will be determined principally by the choices of its member states. External partners cannot create regional cohesion where governments are unwilling to cooperate, nor can they substitute for domestic political commitment. Their role is to strengthen institutions, widen choices, reduce inequalities and support regional actors who are working towards more effective cooperation.

The central policy implication is that European engagement should be judged less by the number of dialogues, projects and strategy documents than by whether it increases Southeast Asia's capacity to act. Germany can make a distinct contribution through vocational education, industrial and SME cooperation, green technology, institutional development and long-term research partnerships. The European Union can add scale through trade, connectivity, investment, regional standards, education and security cooperation.

Both will be most credible when they combine principles with practical support, regional ambition with national sensitivity, and long-term consistency with genuine Southeast Asian ownership. The objective should not be to make ASEAN resemble Europe. It should be to help ASEAN states and societies build forms of regional cooperation that are more capable, inclusive and useful on their own terms.

How Europe Should Engage ASEAN



The goal is not an ASEAN that resembles Europe.

- Regional cooperation should be more capable, inclusive and useful on its own terms.
- Germany adds depth; the EU adds scale.

Part III. Policy Directions

6. Policy Recommendations

The findings of this study do not support a call for Germany or the EU to redesign ASEAN according to European assumptions about regional integration. ASEAN's institutional character, political diversity and understanding of sovereignty differ substantially from those of the EU. External engagement will be most effective when it strengthens ASEAN's capacity to pursue cooperation on its own terms, while remaining honest about the organization's political and institutional constraints.

Germany and the EU should also avoid measuring the success of their engagement primarily through the number of dialogues, workshops or projects conducted. The interviews repeatedly point to a gap between institutional activity and meaningful results. The central policy test should be whether cooperation improves implementation, strengthens regional institutions, widens participation and produces capabilities that remain after individual programs end.

The recommendations are presented in order of priority.

1. Concentrate German engagement in a limited number of areas where it can make a sustained and recognisable contribution.

Germany's current partnership with ASEAN covers a wide range of political-security, economic and sociocultural issues. The ASEAN–Germany Practical Cooperation Areas for 2023–2027 include trade, digitalization, climate policy, human rights, maritime cooperation, education, SMEs and disaster management (ASEAN & Federal Republic of Germany, 2022). This breadth demonstrates commitment, but it may also make Germany's contribution difficult to distinguish from the wider programs of the EU and other development partners.

The next phase of cooperation should focus on several connected areas including technical and vocational education, SME and industrial development, the green transition, digital governance, institutional capacity and regional policy research. These priorities reflect Germany's recognized strengths and correspond closely with the needs identified by Southeast Asian respondents.

A more focused approach would not require Germany to withdraw from other areas. It would mean organising different projects around a coherent long-term contribution rather than maintaining a collection of loosely connected initiatives. This is consistent with Germany's 2026 development-policy reform, which calls for cooperation that is more strategic, focused and partnership-based (BMZ, 2026b).

10 Policy Recommendations for More Effective Regional Cooperation

Strengthening the Germany-ASEAN-EU Partnership

1 Focus Germany's Engagement on Strategic Priorities

Prioritize skills, industrial development, SMEs, green transition, digital governance and institutional capacity.

2 Make Vocational Education the Pillar

Link training to actual labor-market needs, emerging technologies and mutual recognition of technical qualifications.

3 Connect SME Development, Industrial Upgrading and the Green Transition

Help smaller firms access finance, technology, certification and regional and European value chains.

4 Strengthen ASEAN's Institutional Capacity

Invest in institutional memory, strategic foresight, policy research and long-term regional networks.

5 Support Timor-Leste's Integration

Strengthen public administration, domestic coordination, regulatory knowledge and institutional partnerships with ASEAN members.

6 Advance Regional Connectivity

Prioritize digital interoperability, cross-border payments, energy connectivity and sustainable infrastructure.

7 Match European Standards with Practical Support

Provide early consultation, technology transfer, training and financial support to help firms meet new requirements.

8 Expand People-to-People Cooperation

Expand scholarships, vocational exchanges and research opportunities beyond established elites and capital cities.

9 Sustain Support for Human Rights and Civil Society

Strengthen local ownership, organizational resilience and regional networks while reducing risks to local partners.

10 Replace Activity-Based Cooperation with Joint Accountability

Measure progress through implementation, institutional change, improved coordination and tangible benefits.

2. Make technical and vocational education a central pillar of Germany's ASEAN partnership.

The shortage and unequal distribution of technical skills constrain ASEAN's economic integration, green transition and digital development. Regional commitments cannot be implemented effectively without civil servants, technicians, regulators, engineers and workers who understand new technologies and standards.

Germany should expand partnerships among vocational institutions, universities, government agencies and industries in Southeast Asia. Training should be linked to actual national and regional labour-market needs rather than built around generic capacity-building programs. Priority areas could include renewable energy, energy-efficient manufacturing, electric mobility, industrial digitalization, logistics, cybersecurity, artificial intelligence and climate-resilient agriculture.

PH03 (personal communication, May 30, 2026) identified Germany's experience in vocational training, advanced manufacturing, renewable energy and SME development as particularly useful to Southeast Asia. German experience should provide a reference rather than a model to be copied. ASEAN economies differ greatly in industrial structure, informality, educational systems and access to technology. Programs should therefore be designed with local institutions and employers, with particular attention to whether training leads to employment and professional mobility.

Regional cooperation could also support the mutual recognition of selected technical qualifications. This would connect skills development to ASEAN integration by making it easier for qualified workers to move across borders while maintaining professional and labour standards.

3. Link SME support, industrial upgrading and the green transition within a single German cooperation agenda.

ASEAN's economic integration cannot be sustained only by large corporations and globally connected firms. Smaller businesses frequently lack the finance, technology, certification and market information needed to enter regional or European value chains. European environmental and product requirements may increase these difficulties when firms receive little support to meet them.

Germany should strengthen programs that help ASEAN SMEs improve production, obtain certification, reduce energy use, understand European market requirements and build relationships with regional and German businesses. MY02 (personal communication, July 31, 2026) argued that European cooperation should move

beyond government-level trade diplomacy and help smaller ASEAN firms acquire the knowledge and distribution links needed to enter European markets.

Industrial and environmental cooperation should be planned together. Programs on renewable energy, carbon reduction and sustainable production should include financial and technical support for firms expected to implement new standards. Germany can play a useful bridging role by explaining emerging European requirements early and helping Southeast Asian producers prepare before compliance becomes a condition of market access.

This approach would reduce the perception that European environmental policy transfers adjustment costs to developing economies. It would also connect climate cooperation to jobs, productivity and industrial competitiveness rather than treating it as a separate policy field.

4. Invest in ASEAN's institutional memory, strategic foresight and independent regional knowledge.

Many of ASEAN's limitations are political and cannot be solved through technical assistance alone. Nevertheless, weak data, insufficient institutional memory, fragmented research capacity and short chairmanship cycles make collective action more difficult than it needs to be. Germany should support the ASEAN Secretariat and relevant national institutions in areas such as regional data, monitoring, policy evaluation, strategic foresight and the coordination of cross-pillar issues. ASEAN 2045 itself calls for stronger implementation, institutional capacity and coordination as the organization faces technological, environmental and geopolitical pressures (ASEAN Secretariat, 2025a).

Support should extend beyond formal ASEAN bodies. Germany can build long-term partnerships among Southeast Asian universities, think tanks, researchers and professional communities. ID02 (personal communication, July 9, 2026) argued that Germany and the EU could facilitate Track 1.5 and Track 2 spaces where regional actors can examine difficult issues more openly than is possible in formal negotiations. TH03 (personal communication, July 22, 2026) similarly stressed the importance of supporting universities, researchers, think tanks and non-state actors rather than concentrating assistance solely on governments.

Funding should prioritise multi-year research and institutional relationships rather than isolated conferences. Useful areas include demographic change, labour mobility, digital governance, energy security, maritime cooperation, regional crisis preparedness and the future of ASEAN institutions. These networks should be led within Southeast Asia, with Germany supporting their independence rather than directing their conclusions.

5. Develop a dedicated, long-term German program for Timor-Leste's ASEAN participation.

Timor-Leste requires support that links ASEAN obligations to domestic institution-building. A program limited to familiarisation workshops or attendance at ASEAN meetings would not address the deeper constraints identified in this study.

German support should focus on central government coordination, public administration, regulatory knowledge, English and negotiation skills, digital systems, vocational education, SME development and economic diversification. It should also help build Timorese research and policy institutions capable of developing national positions on ASEAN issues.

The program should be shaped by Timor-Leste's priorities and connected to ASEAN-wide initiatives, including the Initiative for ASEAN Integration. It should avoid treating Timor-Leste as an isolated capacity problem. The objective should be to strengthen the country's ability to participate as an equal member and make identifiable contributions in fields such as reconciliation, peacebuilding, democratic governance and links with Portuguese-speaking states.

German assistance should also support institutional partnerships between Timor-Leste and other ASEAN members. Peer relationships among ministries, universities, vocational institutions and business organizations are likely to produce more durable regional integration than programs organized entirely through external consultants.

6. Use the EU's regional scale to support digital integration, sustainable connectivity and energy cooperation.

Some forms of cooperation require the regulatory authority, financing and regional reach of the European Union rather than individual member states. The EU should prioritise cross-border projects that reduce fragmentation within ASEAN and strengthen the region's capacity to act collectively.

Priority areas include digital interoperability, cross-border payments, cybersecurity, energy connectivity, sustainable infrastructure, resilient supply chains and regulatory coordination. SG04 (personal communication, June 30, 2026) identified the green transition, digital economy, sustainable infrastructure and energy connectivity as fields in which European cooperation could fill important regional gaps.

These priorities are consistent with the ASEAN–EU relationship, which covers connectivity, digitalization, climate action, trade, education and security cooperation. At the April 2026 ASEAN–EU Ministerial Meeting, both sides called for more

tangible and mutually beneficial initiatives and reaffirmed support for ASEAN centrality and ASEAN 2045 (ASEAN & European Union, 2026).

EU-supported infrastructure should not be presented mainly as an alternative to Chinese financing. Projects should be justified through their contribution to ASEAN connectivity, local needs, environmental quality, transparency and financial sustainability. Framing European engagement primarily through competition with China risks weakening regional ownership and placing ASEAN states within a geopolitical choice they generally seek to avoid.

7. Pair European standards with finance, technology and realistic implementation support.

The EU's regulatory experience is an important source of influence, particularly in climate policy, digital governance, consumer protection, labour standards and sustainable production. Yet standards can become a source of resentment when they are designed in Europe and imposed on producers with limited influence over their formulation.

The EU should establish early consultation and technical-support mechanisms whenever new European rules have significant consequences for ASEAN exporters. Assistance should be available before requirements take effect and should extend to smaller producers, not only firms already connected to European markets.

TH01 (personal communication, May 26, 2026) emphasized that market access must be accompanied by technology transfer, training and support for firms seeking to meet European environmental and digital requirements. ID03 (personal communication, July 3, 2026) similarly cautioned against treating European regulatory preferences as universal standards without considering their domestic economic and political effects in Southeast Asia.

A partnership-based regulatory approach does not require the EU to lower its standards. It requires recognition that meaningful compliance depends on finance, knowledge and institutional capability. Standards are more likely to encourage improved production when regional actors view them as achievable and connected to economic opportunity rather than as barriers imposed from outside.

8. Expand educational mobility and people-to-people cooperation beyond established elites and capital cities.

European influence in Southeast Asia has often been strongest among diplomats, officials, researchers and graduates of European universities. These relationships matter, but their social reach remains limited.

The EU and Germany should expand scholarships, vocational exchanges, research mobility, professional placements, youth programs and institutional partnerships. Opportunities should be made easier to find and understand, particularly for applicants outside major cities and elite universities. MY02 (personal communication, July 31, 2026) noted that European mobility and educational opportunities remain less visible than they should be, despite their potential to build durable relationships with Southeast Asian societies.

People-to-people cooperation should not be treated as a symbolic addition to economic and strategic relations. It can strengthen the social foundations of regional cooperation and build trust that survives changes in governments. It can also connect ASEAN institutions more closely to students, researchers, professionals and communities who do not normally encounter regional diplomacy.

9. Maintain support for human rights and civil society, while strengthening local ownership and reducing risks to regional partners.

The interviews do not support the conclusion that Europe should retreat from human rights, democracy or civic-space programs. The EU's normative credibility remains an important part of its standing in Southeast Asia. The concern is how these programs are designed and whether European positions are applied consistently.

ID01 (personal communication, July 30, 2026) argued that European credibility has been weakened by perceptions of inconsistent application of international law, particularly in relation to Israel and Palestine. Since the EU relies heavily on legitimacy and soft power, such inconsistency directly affects its influence in Southeast Asia.

Programs should be co-designed with regional actors and sensitive to the political conditions in which civil-society organizations operate. European visibility should not place local partners at greater risk or allow governments to portray them as extensions of foreign policy. Funding should support organizational resilience, regional networking, research, legal assistance and long-term institutional capacity rather than only public events.

European actors should also retain support for politically difficult areas even when governments are unresponsive. The aim should be principled and sustained engagement rather than either moralising pressure or quiet withdrawal. TH03 (personal communication, July 22, 2026) described this as maintaining standards while using persuasion, incentives and contextual knowledge rather than humiliation or a paternalistic approach.

10. Replace activity-based cooperation with joint accountability for results.

Germany, the EU and ASEAN should agree on a limited set of outcomes for major programs and publish regular assessments of progress. These assessments should examine institutional changes, implementation, follow-up and who has benefited, rather than relying mainly on counts of meetings, workshops and participants.

MY03 (personal communication, July 24, 2026) criticised regional programs in which attendance and event numbers become proxies for success. The more important questions are whether programs change policy, improve coordination, strengthen institutions or provide better protection.

Greater accountability should not mean imposing complex European reporting systems on smaller ASEAN institutions or civil-society organizations. Evaluation should be proportional, jointly designed and focused on learning. A few clearly defined outcomes are more useful than extensive indicators that consume administrative resources without improving implementation.

Germany and the EU should also coordinate their own programs more closely. German bilateral and regional cooperation should complement EU-level work rather than reproduce it. A shared division of labour could position Germany as a specialist partner in skills, industry, SMEs, green technology, institutional development and research, while the EU provides wider scale through trade policy, regulatory cooperation, connectivity, investment and mobility.

The broader recommendation is to move from a project relationship towards an institutional partnership. This requires patience, predictability and an acceptance that meaningful regional cooperation cannot always be demonstrated within short funding cycles. Germany and the EU should judge their contribution by whether Southeast Asian institutions and networks are more capable of defining and pursuing their own regional priorities.

7. Conclusion

ASEAN's future is unlikely to be defined by either continuous progress towards deeper integration or steady decline into irrelevance. The evidence from this study points instead to a regional organization whose importance and limitations are growing at the same time. ASEAN remains necessary because it provides Southeast Asian states with a framework for economic cooperation, diplomatic engagement and the management of regional diversity. Yet the pressures placed on the organization increasingly exceed the political authority and institutional capacity its members have been willing to give it.

ASEAN integration will continue, but it will remain uneven. Economic and functional cooperation has the clearest prospects for further progress because governments can identify tangible benefits in trade, connectivity, digitalization, energy, supply chains and regulatory coordination. Political-security cooperation will remain more constrained. Questions involving sovereignty, regime interests, territorial disputes and relations with major powers carry unequal costs for member states and expose differences that technical cooperation can often avoid.

This unevenness does not mean that ASEAN integration is insubstantial. Regional production networks, economic agreements, institutional routines and professional relationships have changed how Southeast Asian states and societies interact. ASEAN has created habits of consultation and a regional framework that did not previously exist. Its achievements are often incremental rather than dramatic, and this makes them easy to underestimate.

At the same time, ASEAN should not use its distinct institutional character to avoid scrutiny. Consensus and non-interference have contributed to regional durability, but they have also allowed governments to block action and reduce collective positions to the lowest common denominator. The continued repetition of agreed principles cannot substitute indefinitely for implementation.

ASEAN centrality captures this tension. ASEAN remains central to the region's diplomatic architecture and retains an unusual capacity to convene competing powers. No other institution provides an equally inclusive Southeast Asian platform. Yet convening power does not automatically become regional agency. Centrality is weakest when member states must accept common responsibility for politically difficult problems.

The centrality debate should therefore move away from whether ASEAN occupies the center of regional meetings. The more important question is whether ASEAN institutions are used when significant regional interests are at stake. Centrality must be demonstrated through political choices, implementation and follow-

through. External recognition may sustain ASEAN's diplomatic position, but only its members can give that position substantive meaning.

National interests will remain the decisive condition shaping those choices. ASEAN is not likely to develop through governments abandoning their national priorities in favour of an abstract regional interest. Regional cooperation becomes possible when states understand that national security, prosperity and stability increasingly depend on conditions beyond their borders.

This requires a broader understanding of national interest. Short-term political survival, bilateral advantage and regime protection can weaken ASEAN cohesion. Longer-term interests in economic resilience, regional stability, social trust, open trade and shared public goods can support cooperation. The future of ASEAN agency will depend on its ability to organize these overlapping interests into regional arrangements that governments consider useful to their own national futures.

Leadership will remain important in this process, but it cannot be a substitute for stronger institutions. An active chair or influential political leader can create momentum, mediate differences and place neglected questions on the regional agenda. That momentum often weakens when the chairmanship changes. ASEAN requires stronger institutional memory, multi-year priorities, better regional data and more consistent monitoring if initiatives are to survive national political cycles.

The changing regional and global order makes these questions more urgent. Strategic competition now reaches into trade, technology, infrastructure, supply chains and digital systems. Southeast Asian states will continue to diversify their relationships and resist pressure to choose a single external alignment. ASEAN can help preserve this room for maneuver, but neutrality alone does not constitute agency. Regional autonomy requires a clearer understanding of shared interests and a greater willingness to act on them.

Timor-Leste's accession brings these questions into sharper focus. Membership completes ASEAN's formal geography, but it also exposes the limits of an integration process built around states with very different capabilities. The accession should not be judged only through whether Timor-Leste can comply with existing obligations. It should also be judged through whether ASEAN can support meaningful participation by a smaller and less-resourced member.

Timor-Leste must build stronger coordination, administrative capacity, regulatory knowledge and domestic awareness of ASEAN. It must also connect membership to economic development, education and institution-building. ASEAN, in turn, must provide flexible pathways, targeted support and genuine opportunities for the new member to influence regional priorities. Formal equality will mean little if Timor-Leste remains present in meetings but marginal to decisions.

The country's contribution should not be reduced to its development needs. Timor-Leste brings experience of self-determination, democratic transition, reconciliation and peacebuilding. Whether it becomes a distinctive regional voice will depend on political confidence and institutional capacity. Its influence may initially be cautious, but small states can shape regional agendas when they develop expertise, form coalitions and speak consistently.

Germany and the EU cannot resolve ASEAN's internal political constraints. Nor should they attempt to determine the institutional form ASEAN ought to take. Their contribution is most valuable when it strengthens the capacity of regional actors to make and implement their own choices.

Germany is well placed to develop a focused partnership based on technical education, SMEs, industrial upgrading, green technology, institutional development and long-term regional research. The EU can provide wider scale through trade, regulation, connectivity, digital cooperation, education and investment. Both should maintain their commitment to international law and human rights, while recognizing that normative influence depends on consistency and the credibility of European conduct.

Constructive engagement must also move beyond the assumption that more programs necessarily produce more cooperation. The interviews show considerable frustration with activities that generate meetings and reports but leave institutions unchanged. External support should be assessed through whether it builds lasting knowledge, improves implementation, widens participation and strengthens regional ownership.

The future of ASEAN integration will ultimately be shaped within Southeast Asia. It will emerge through negotiations among states that continue to protect sovereignty but increasingly confront problems they cannot manage alone. It will also be shaped by businesses, universities, civil society, professional communities and citizens whose regional relationships are growing beyond formal diplomacy.

ASEAN will remain necessary, but necessity alone will not guarantee relevance. Its relevance will depend on what the organization enables its members and societies to achieve together that they cannot achieve as effectively on their own. The task for ASEAN is not to become a different type of regional organization. It is to make its existing regionalism more capable, more inclusive and more closely connected to the political, economic and social realities it is meant to serve.

For Germany and the EU, the most useful response is neither distance nor prescription. It is a long-term partnership that combines principles with practical support, respects Southeast Asian agency and helps turn regional cooperation from an institutional promise into a more tangible shared capacity.

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Annex 1. List of Respondents (Anonymised)

The study draws on 20 semi-structured expert interviews across six Southeast Asian countries. Respondent names are withheld in this annex; the anonymous codes correspond to the interview citations used in the paper.

Code	Country	Respondent profile	Date and place / method
TL01	Timor-Leste	Former senior government official and regional human rights practitioner	27 April 2026, Dili
TL02	Timor-Leste	Academic leader and financial-sector governance practitioner	28 April 2026, Dili
TL03	Timor-Leste	Former senior national political leader and government official	28 April 2026, Dili
PH01	Philippines	Think-tank researcher and specialist in regional and China-related affairs	19 May 2026, Online
PH02	Philippines	Former senior foreign-policy and diplomatic training official	20 May 2026, Online
PH03	Philippines	Former senior government official and foreign-policy practitioner	30 May 2026, Online
PH04	Philippines	Former legislator and academic/public intellectual	30 June 2026, Online
SG01	Singapore	ASEAN-focused economic policy researcher	10 June 2026, Singapore
SG02	Singapore	Senior regional security and foreign-policy researcher	10 June 2026, Singapore
SG03	Singapore	Regional affairs researcher and editor	18 June 2026, Online
SG04	Singapore	ASEAN policy researcher and program coordinator	30 June 2026, Online
TH01	Thailand	Academic specialising in ASEAN and regional economic affairs	26 May 2026, Online
TH02	Thailand	Former senior regional organization official	16 June 2026, Bangkok

Code	Country	Respondent profile	Date and place / method
TH03	Thailand	Senior foreign-policy and security researcher	22 July 2026, Online
MY01	Malaysia	Former senior diplomat and public-sector official	22 July 2026, Online
MY02	Malaysia	Academic and public-policy practitioner	31 July 2026, Online
MY03	Malaysia	Human rights and regional policy researcher	24 July 2026, Online
ID01	Indonesia	Academic specialising in international relations and regional affairs	30 July 2026, Online
ID02	Indonesia	Academic and foreign-policy researcher	9 July 2026, Online
ID03	Indonesia	Foreign-policy think-tank practitioner	3 July 2026, Online

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