

Southeast Asian Regionalism: An Examination of the Progress and Priorities of ASEAN through its Joint Communiqués

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Abstract

In pursuit of ASEAN's objective to formalize the ASEAN Community, this article critically examines the community-building progress and the organization's key priorities. The research is guided by two research problems. First, what are the subjects discussed in each ASEAN community pillar? Second, how are the key issues addressed in relation to each ASEAN community pillar? A thematic analysis of the joint communiqués published by ASEAN from 2004-2019 was conducted to respond to these questions. More specifically, each communiqué was tagged and analyzed, and themes were subsequently derived, enabling a comprehensive examination of each area of the ASEAN community. The article contributes significant insights into the evolving landscape of ASEAN's cooperation and integration. The findings elucidate on the shifting dynamics and complexities that shape ASEAN's political-security, economic, and socio-cultural communities, shedding light on the organization's changing priorities and challenges. The ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) prioritizes key growth areas, such as tourism, Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), and energy. For the ASEAN political-security, its focus is on ascertaining continued peace in the region as exemplified by collaboration on non-traditional security issues. Meanwhile, the ASEAN socio-cultural community primarily centers on environmental issues, disaster response and management, and the youth. However, the advancement of the ASEAN community has faced setbacks caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2021 Myanmar coup d'état. Overall, the joint communiqués manifests the different initiatives that ASEAN has taken to deepen integration and a sense of community.

Keywords: ASEAN community, joint communiqué, ASEAN priorities, regional integration, Southeast Asian geopolitics

Introduction

The forming of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) entails the amplification of regionalism within Asia. It can be traced back to August 8, 1967, when the Bangkok Declaration was signed by five countries in Southeast Asia, namely Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Philippines, and Indonesia. This initiative from the five founding states formed ASEAN. ASEAN's former Thai foreign minister and one of the ASEAN founding fathers, Thanat Khoman, revealed that there were four major stimuli in the founding of the organization, as follows.

The first was to prevent external powers from exploiting the power vacuum left after the rapid decolonization of the region. Second, the founders of ASEAN saw an opportunity to foster cooperation among countries with common interests in the same geographic region. Third, the founders were convinced that the countries of Southeast Asia would have a stronger voice in addressing major global powers if they could speak together. Finally, ASEAN's founders believed "cooperation and ultimately integration served the interest of all – something that individual efforts could never achieve" (Mahbubani & Severino, 2014).

Despite these four significant driving factors in the establishment of ASEAN, it is undeniable that the tumultuous climate of the Cold War has played a significant role in the organization's formation. ASEAN was founded at the height of the Cold War when the region was often likened to 'the Balkans of Asia' (Mahbubani & Severino, 2014). Consequently, the pact's primary objective was to ensure resilience and peace in the region (Idris & Kammarudin, 2019). Overall, these considerations highlight the need for regional cooperation, especially for countries within a shared geographic location. Subsequently, it paved the way for smaller countries within Southeast Asia to have a more robust and collective voice in relation to global powers.

At its inception, ASEAN's establishment seems improbable, given the presence of intra-regional and bilateral conflicts, including border disputes and secessionist groups (Nesadurai, 2008). According to Rahman (2018), additional attention on the challenges faced by conflict-hit countries like Cambodia and Laos should be considered. Similarly, the violent interstate conflict is highlighted between Indonesia and Malaysia (Kivimäki, 2001). The Philippines and Malaysia are also embroiled in a territorial dispute, notably concerning the issue of Sabah (Samad & Bakar, 1992). Despite disagreements, the Southeast Asian countries mentioned above manage to practice collective diplomacy (Leifer, 1999). In the years following ASEAN's establishment, several additional states sought membership in the organization: Brunei in 1984, Vietnam in 1995, Laos and Myanmar in 1997, and Cambodia in 1999. Presently, ASEAN comprises ten member countries. The expansion of the ASEAN is a testament that the original framers are "determined to make [the] organization a success" (Rahman, 2018). According to Stubbs and Mitrea (2017), the benefits of ASEAN membership outweigh the negative aspects, contributing to the organization's ongoing growth and development.

Since its establishment in 1967, the ASEAN has progressively advanced its objectives of enhancing economic and security cooperation while fostering cultural understanding. However, critiques of ASEAN's regional integration, rooted in the realist tradition, argue that the "proliferation of declarations and protocols that are intended to deepen ASEAN integration after 1997 is largely rhetorical" (Kim, 2011). However, other scholars argue that ASEAN has emerged as a successful integration model and has been largely compared to the European Union (EU) (Idris & Kammarudin, 2019). The EU and ASEAN operate differently; the former follows institutionalized regionalism, while the latter employs an informal approach (Wunderlich, 2012). Structurally, the EU is a supranational organization, and ASEAN is an inter-governmental organization (Koh & Hwee, 2020). Essentially, members of the EU have pooled their sovereignty on certain issues such as trade and finance. Such is not the case for ASEAN; each member country maintains sovereignty over its affairs. ASEAN is principally seen "as one of the more successful regional organizations in the developing world, credited for maintaining regional peace and stability in Southeast Asia for more than three decades" (Nesadurai, 2008).

The ASEAN Way of Regionalism in Asia

As its guiding principle, non-interference is enshrined in ASEAN's founding documents (Astarita, 2013). Specifically, Article 2(D) of the Association of Southeast Asian Nation (2008) Charter requires adherence to "non-interference in the internal affairs of member states". While the principle of non-interference is not unique to ASEAN, it allows the organization to weather multiple challenges throughout the decades (Yukawa, 2018). The ASEAN Way, in general, involves a commitment to constant consultation without a particular modality or formula in seeking to achieve the preferred outcome (Acharya, 1997). In essence, the objective of adhering to the principle of non-interference is to uphold unity and harmony among ASEAN members (Kipgen, 2012). It enables ASEAN to preserve the organization, even in the face of significant political, cultural, and economic disparities and mistrust among its members (Tan, 2022).

This working philosophy of ASEAN led to critiques from some scholars. For instance, it is argued that ASEAN's practice of non-interference hampers ASEAN from conducting meaningful actions and responses toward a host of regional problems, such as economic crises, problematic members, and threats to regional security (Jones, 2010). However, it is noteworthy that the practice of non-interference allows ASEAN member states to coexist with relative stability and continuity. Recognizably, a key purpose of observing the principle of non-interference is due to the existence of undemocratic regimes within the organization (Suzuki, 2019). While there has been no shortage of assessments on the effectiveness of the ASEAN way, one thing is certain; it allows the organization to collaborate and work on contentious issues instead of allowing differences to derail regional cooperation (Narine, 2008). It allows members of ASEAN to perform diplomacy without necessarily undermining solidarity within the regional bloc. It is also argued that the most remarkable achievement of ASEAN is its ability to maintain inter-state relations (Kivimäki, 2001). Despite previous

conflicts among its member states before their membership, ASEAN has successfully prevented any wars among its members to date. In addition, cooperation within ASEAN has been manifested in multiple ways, especially in the case of disaster and humanitarian response, e.g., the creation of the ASEAN Coordinating Center for Humanitarian Response on Disaster Management (AHA Center) and the collective response to the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004. However, there are still some contentious issues that remain to be collectively resolved, particularly the South China Sea dispute and the crisis in Myanmar.

The ASEAN Community: Issues, Challenges, and Collective Efforts

ASEAN member states are diverse in terms of economic trajectories, political systems, and religious majorities and minorities. When the first set of countries formed ASEAN, there was apprehension that the subsequent membership of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam will create a two-tier system. This can be attributed to the development gap among ASEAN countries. Table 1 highlights the differences among member states in terms of population, land area, primary language, ethnic majority, and political regimes.

Table 1 Population, Land Area, Primary Language or Mother Tongue, Ethnic Majority, and Political Regimes of ASEAN Member States

Country	Population (in million)	Area (in sq. km.)	Primary Language/ Mother Tongue	Ethnic Majority	Political Regime in 2021
Brunei	0.437	5,270	Malay	Malay	Closed Autocracy
Cambodia	16.719	176,520	Khmer	Khmer	Electoral Autocracy
Indonesia	273.524	1,877,519	Indonesian	Javanese	Electoral Democracy
Laos	7.276	230,800	Lao	Lao	Closed Autocracy
Malaysia	32.366	328,550	Malay	Malay	Electoral Autocracy
Myanmar	54.410	652,790	Burmese	Bamar	Closed Autocracy
Philippines	109.581	298,170	Filipino	Visayan/ Tagalog	Electoral Democracy
Singapore	5.850	709	English	Chinese	Electoral Autoracracy
Thailand	69.800	510,890	Thai	Thai	Closed Autocracy
Vietnam	97.339	310,070	Vietnamese	Vietnamese	Closed Autocracy

Note: Information from Table 1 is restated from Idris and Kamaruddin (2019) and Croissant (2022).

As shown in Table 1, there are great discrepancies among ASEAN members in terms of population size, land area, language, ethnic groups, and political regimes. According to Idris and Kamaruddin (2019), the differences in language, religious and cultural values, and political ideologies can be a challenge to integration, specifically due to the “lack of trust, communication barriers, and contradicting priorities of various ASEAN communities”. It is clarified that “the region is very diverse and lacks shared historical moments that can unite

the member states” (Azis, 2018). Nevertheless, ASEAN makes efforts to address the aforementioned challenges, particularly by bridging communication gaps and emphasizing collective regional interests and security challenges e.g., ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) and ASEAN Regional Forum.

Perhaps one of the most notable impediments to ASEAN was the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. It exposed the inability of ASEAN to respond in a coordinated manner (Freistein, 2005). It also damaged the region’s reputation as an emerging economic growth engine, especially with its substantial population, market potential, and economic performance. During the crisis, bilateral rifts were made more apparent among ASEAN members. It is further narrated as follows.

Within one year of the crisis, numerous conflicts had broken out; they were fueled by confusion and instability in the aftermath of the crisis and demonstrated that the level of intra-ASEAN cohesion was lower than ever. Malaysia and Singapore fought over water supplies and customs procedures, while Malaysia and Indonesian ties soured over the expulsion of illegal labor migrants to Malaysia. Malaysia and the Philippines disagreed over the charge of sodomy, and Singapore and Indonesia quarreled over various issues, among them the purges against the Chinese minority in Indonesia after the crisis [...] The East Timor crises exacerbated ASEAN’s troubles, too. When the East Timorese voted for an independent state in 1999, Indonesia reacted with active support for violent anti-independence militia (Freistein, 2005).

Given the simmering tensions at the time and ASEAN’s paralysis in responding to the consequences, there was a need to reinvigorate relations. It was done through the Bali Summit of 2003, a pivotal moment in ASEAN’s history. The ASEAN Bali Summit of 2003 established the means for the deepening of ASEAN integration. Bali Concord II in the said year encouraged ASEAN to conceptualize concerted initiatives to enhance regional cooperation by means of an integrated regional community (Moorthy & Benny, 2012). Several structural imperatives underscored the need for deeper ASEAN integration. The summit occurred a few years after the Asian Financial Crisis. The member states realized the need to build resilience against future financial shocks and economic crises. Concurrently, regional competition was intensifying, particularly with the rapid growth of China and India’s economic sectors. The evolving geopolitical landscape and the global post-9/11 environment emphasize the necessity for a more unified response to global and regional security issues (Chow, 2005). ASEAN needed to increase its relevance in response to these developments development, and the Bali Summit of 2003 paved the way for a roadmap toward deeper integration among members of ASEAN.

While there are challenges to ASEAN’s institutional capacity to implement the integration process fully, it subsequently came to fruition (Poole, 2015). The three pillars of cooperation were established, focusing on political-security, economic, and socio-cultural issues. This framework became the foundation for ASEAN’s continuous efforts and initiatives to achieve closer integration. This framework is further explained in Table 2.

Table 2 Pillars of ASEAN Cooperation in the Bali Concord II

ASEAN Community Pillar	Area of Cooperation
ASEAN Security Community (ASC)	Promoting greater regional security engagement (Moorthy & Benny, 2012) <i>"Reaffirms the cooperation principle of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, stresses the role of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), underlines the challenges posed by transnational crime, and proposes ways to strengthen the ASC (norm-setting, conflict prevention, approaches to conflict resolution, and post-conflict peace building)" (Freistein, 2005)</i>
ASEAN Economic Community (AEC)	Promoting economic collaboration (Moorthy & Benny, 2012) <i>"Envisaging the free flow of goods, services, investment and a freer flow of capital, equitable economic development and reduced poverty and socio-economic disparities, the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) shall establish ASEAN as a single market, and institute new mechanisms and measures to strengthen the implementation of its existing economic initiatives including the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA), ASEAN Framework Agreement on Services (AFAS) and ASEAN Investment Area (AIA) as well as accelerate regional integration in the priority sector" (Freistein, 2005)</i>
ASEAN Socio-cultural Community (ASCC)	Promoting people-to-people interaction (Moorthy & Benny, 2012) <i>"Intensify cooperation in the fields of public health, education, training, science and technology development, job creation, social protection, and social development" (Freistein, 2005)</i>

More recently, ASEAN further intensified cooperation among the pillars and adopted the ASEAN Community Vision 2025. The document "sets out the direction for a politically cohesive, economically integrated, socially responsible and a truly rule-based people-oriented, people-centered ASEAN" (Idris & Kamaruddin, 2019). Table 3 outlines the key aspirations of ASEAN with the formal establishment of the ASEAN Community in 2015. It is regarding what the catalyst is for expanding the Bali Concord II and establishing the ASEAN Vision 2025. Essentially, the former sets the direction for and lays out a framework for forming an ASEAN community. The latter entails operationalizing and cooperation among various sectors. The ASEAN Community Vision 2025 is a time-bound strategy for implementing the integration process. ASEAN recognized the need for a detailed plan to address the complexities of integration, which includes regulatory and legal frameworks.

With closer integration envisioned by ASEAN, the organization is at a turning point as it moves forward. According to Idris and Kamaruddin (2019), further challenges that ASEAN will encounter are as follows:

Although the first fifty years of integration have brought about peace and prosperity to the region, the next fifty undoubtedly will be fraught with unprecedented challenges. Today ASEAN not only has to contend with its own internal challenges arising from highly diverse political, economic and socio-cultural systems of its member countries, it also has to deal with external factors amidst shifts in geostrategic balance, fraying global consensus on free trade, populism and xenophobia, ideological extremism, climate change, digital revolutions and cybercrimes (Idris & Kamaruddin, 2019).

Table 3 ASEAN 2025 Key Aspirations across the Three Pillars

ASEAN Community Pillar	Area of Cooperation
Political Security Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A rules-based, people-oriented, people-centred ASEAN in a region of peace, stability, and prosperity; • A consolidated ASEAN Community; • A dynamic, resilient and harmonious community to effectively respond to social and economic vulnerabilities and other non-traditional security threats; • A community that can respond effectively to challenges affecting ASEAN from within and beyond the region; • A community that steadfastly maintains ASEAN centrality in regional mechanisms; • Strengthen ASEAN's unity and cohesiveness to protect its leading and central role in dealing with matters of common concern; and • Enhance dialogue and cooperation with ASEAN external partners for mutual benefit and interest.
Economic Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A well-integrated and connected economy within the global economic system; • A business-friendly, trade-facilitative, market driven and predictable environment which inspires investor confidence; • A region with a key role in global value chains and increasing participation in added high value and knowledge-based activities; • A competitive and dynamic region that inspires innovation and where businesses of all sizes thrive, and where consumers' rights are protected; • A community where the benefits from economic integration are equitably shared among and within ASEAN member states, including with micro, small and medium enterprises, youth, and women entrepreneurs; and • A connected region where improvements in transport linkages and infrastructure help peoples and businesses move efficiently and work more productively across borders, and expand market reach and strategically source goods and services.
Socio-Cultural Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An inclusive community that is people-oriented, people-centred and promotes a high quality of life and equitable access to opportunities for all, and engages relevant stakeholders in ASEAN processes; • A sustainable community that promotes social development and environmental protection through effective mechanisms to meet current and future needs of the peoples; • A resilient community with enhanced capacity to continuously respond and adapt to current challenges and emerging threats; and • A dynamic, open, creative and adaptive community with an ASEAN identity reflecting the region's collective personality, norms, values and beliefs as well as aspirations as one ASEAN community.

Note: Information in Table 3 is derived from the ASEAN 2025 document.

Nevertheless, the region still holds on to the promise of integration as envisioned by the ASEAN founders. The belief remains that “cooperation serves the interest of all – something that individual efforts can never achieve” (Mahbubani & Severino, 2014). Ultimately, there is unanimity that ASEAN will benefit from regional integration (Moorthy & Benny, 2012). Specifically, the establishment of regional community building and closer integration serves

to narrow the development gaps between more developed and less developed ASEAN countries (Morada, 2008). Additionally, it enables streamlined regional governance by facilitating member states' coordination and collaboration on both global and regional issues and challenges. Since ASEAN has the primary agenda for regional cooperation and community building, the research seeks to answer the following questions. First, what are the subjects under discussion within each ASEAN community pillar? Second, How is the discourse on key issues articulated in the context of each ASEAN community pillar? Responding to these questions will shed light on how ASEAN frames its sense of integration concerning its community-building activities and initiatives based on examining official ASEAN documents. This approach further elucidates ASEAN's role in shaping its future and securing its interests as a regional entity.

Materials and Methods

The article analyzes the joint communiqué published by the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting from 2004–2019, further elaborated in Table 4. The ASEAN standing committee includes foreign ministers of ASEAN countries (Rahman, 2018). The joint communiqué published by ASEAN at the end of every meeting covers its achievements adequately (Indorf, 1975). The rationale for choosing the joint communiqué from 2004–2019 is that the three pillars were established in the Bali Declaration II in 2003 and further intensified through the ASEAN 2025 document. In more specific terms, the article dissects the joint communiqués from the said period to determine the statements in relation to the pillars of cooperation.

In operationalizing the methodology, desk research with a literature review was conducted. Desk research is the process by which existing document document data are processed and analyzed (Kožuch & Sienkiewicz-Małyjurek, 2015). The data analysis was guided by the research questions and further enriched by integrating commentaries from existing literature (Bryman, 2016). Qualitative data analysis software, specifically NVivo, was utilized in comprehensively organizing and analyzing the data. The process was guided by the process of Braun and Clark (2006) in thematic analysis, which entails familiarizing the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and finally producing the report. The analysis aims to systematically examine the joint communiqués, investigate patterns of meanings, and determine consistencies among the statements.

The approach that is utilized in the article is content analysis. According to Payne and Payne (2004), content analysis “seeks to demonstrate the meaning of written or visual sources [...] by systematically allocating their content to pre-determined, detailed categories”. As mentioned earlier, the categories for analysis are as follows: economic community, political-security community, and socio-cultural community. They are all based on the specific pillars in Bali Concord II and the ASEAN 2025 document. The unit of analysis of this inquiry is the items stipulated in the said pillars of cooperation in each joint communiqué. Overall, 15 joint communiqués are analyzed.

Table 4 Joint Communiqués Analyzed in the Research

Meeting	Theme	Date	City
37 th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting	Striving For Full Integration of ASEAN: A Prosperous, Caring and Peaceful Community	June 29–30, 2004	Jakarta
38 th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting	Towards The Harmony, Dynamism and Integration of ASEAN	July 26, 2005	Vientiane
39 th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting	Forging a United, Resilient and Integrated ASEAN	July 25, 2006	Kuala Lumpur
40 th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting	One Caring and Sharing Community	July 29–30, 2007	Manila
41 st ASEAN Ministerial Meeting	One ASEAN at the Heart of Dynamic Asia	July 21, 2008	Singapore
42 nd ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting	Acting Together to Cope with Global Challenges	July 20, 2009	Phuket
43 rd ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting	Enhanced Efforts towards the ASEAN Community: From Vision to Action	July 19–20, 2010	Hanoi
44 th ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting	ASEAN Community in a Global Community of Nations	July 19, 2011	Bali
45 th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting*	One Community, One Destiny	July 13, 2012	Phnom Penh
46 th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting	Our People, Our Future Together	June 29–30, 2013	Bandar Seri Begawan
47 th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting	Moving Forward in Unity to a Peaceful and Prosperous Community	August 8, 2014	Nay Pyi Taw
48 th ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting	Our People, Our Community, Our Vision	August 4, 2015	Kuala Lumpur
49 th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting	Turning Vision into Reality for a Dynamic ASEAN Community	July 24, 2016	Vientiane
50 th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting	Partnering for Change, Engaging the World	August 5, 2017	Manila
51 st ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting	Resilience and Innovation	August 2, 2018	Singapore
52 nd ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting	Advancing Partnership for Sustainability	July 31, 2019	Bangkok

Note: ASEAN failed to publish a joint communiqué in 2012 due to the inability to achieve consensus regarding the South China Sea dispute.

Results and Discussion

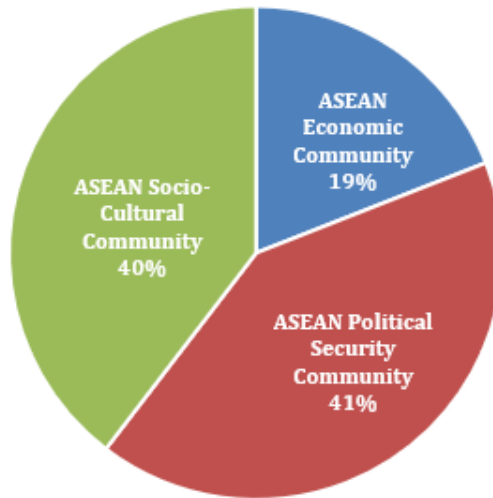


Figure 1 Institutional framework for halal food in ASEAN.

Source: Author's modification from ASEAN Secretariat

Figure 1 shows the number of statements subsumed under each major area of the key pillars of the ASEAN community from the joint communiqués from 2004 until 2019. In total, 548 clauses are coded into the three pillars. For the ASEAN economic community, 140 clauses are coded, which is 19%. For the ASEAN political-security community, 304 clauses are coded, which is 41%. Lastly, 291 items are coded into that ASEAN socio-cultural community. As can be seen in Figure 1, discussion on security has been the most prevalent in the joint communiqués followed by the economic and socio-cultural community.

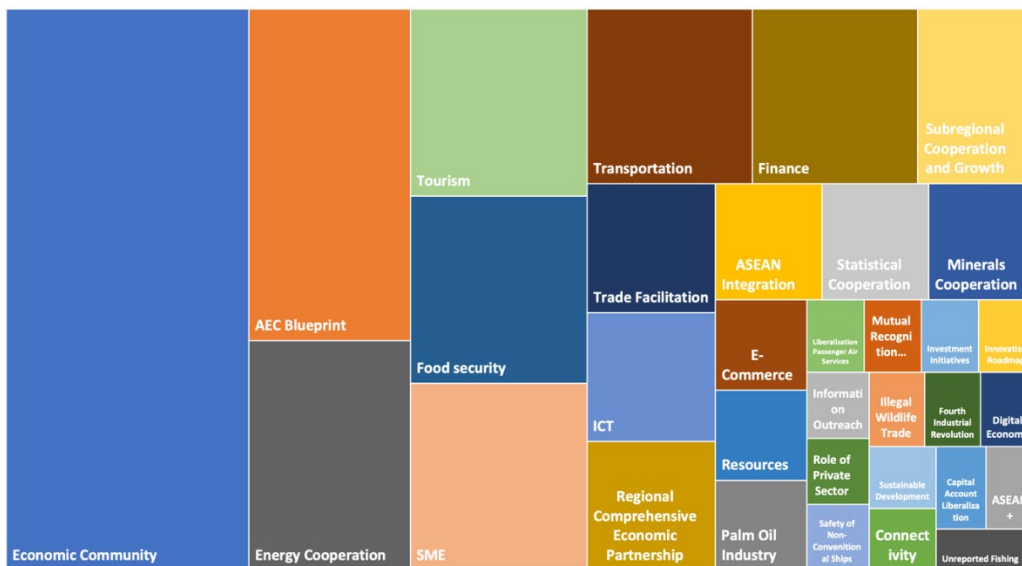


Figure 2 Tree Chart of Items Coded under ASEAN Economic Community

Figure 2 shows the tree chart of the items coded in the ASEAN economic community. The six most frequent clauses involve statements pertaining to the ASEAN economic community (33), ASEAN economic blueprint (13), energy cooperation (9), tourism (8), Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) (8), and food security (7). Focusing on the node of the AEC, most of the items refer to the realization of the said pillar through initiatives such as linkages with ASEAN dialogue partners, e.g., China, South Korea, Japan, and the United States, development of priority sectors, and facilitation of trade and investment flows. Subregional frameworks within ASEAN likewise complement the AEC. Some of these initiatives include the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT), Brunei Darussalam-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA), and the Mekong Subregion. These subregional frameworks facilitate further economic integration within ASEAN. The development and integration of priority sectors include logistics, tourism, air travel, fisheries, agro-based products, wood-based products, healthcare, Information and Communications Technology (ICT), and electronics (Hew, 2008). The forming of the AEC benefits member states in different ways. For example, Indonesian business groups' international capital expansion largely benefits from economic integration initiatives (Al-Fadhat, 2022).

The energy cooperation node includes areas of cooperation on energy sufficiency, renewable energy, and the ASEAN Plan of Action for Energy Cooperation (APAEC) 2016-2025. Energy cooperation is an instrument for bolstering ASEAN's economic integration efforts among member states (Nicolas, 2009). Considering the node on tourism, it reports on the trends of tourism growth within the region and the ASEAN Tourism Strategic Plan (ATSP) 2016-2025. The SME node contains clauses encouraging the AEC to support entrepreneurs and the general importance of SMEs in the region. Likewise, this aspect also mentions the ASEAN Strategic Action Plan for SME Development 2016-2025. The food security node refers to the enhancement and competitiveness of ASEAN's agriculture and forestry sectors. Similar to the aforementioned areas, there is also a plan for food security, aptly named the Strategic Plan for ASEAN Cooperation in Food, Agriculture and Forestry 2016-2025. These six nodes from the analysis of the joint communiqué reveal that significant understanding has been made among ASEAN members as regards the priority for AEC, which includes enhancing tourism, energy, food security, and SMEs.

Figure 3 shows the tree chart of the clauses coded into the ASEAN political-security community. The seven most frequent clauses involve statements pertaining to the Southeast Asia Nuclear-Weapon-Free Treaty (36), Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (25), transnational crimes (20), South China Sea (20), non-traditional security issues (20), defense and security cooperation (20), and ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (20). These nodes further point to underlying security concerns for ASEAN. The South China Sea remains a geopolitical concern in the region, and developing a code of conduct remains challenging (Chairil et al., 2022). Counter-terrorism, particularly through the rise of extremist groups, leads to the adoption of the ASEAN Convention in Counter Terrorism, which will be discussed further. The Treaty of Amity is an instrument of peace among ASEAN members and other states within the period that countries such as Australia, Brazil, France, the UK, and entities like the EU have acceded to the treaty. Aside from the treaties, transnational crime is of great concern to ASEAN. Specifically, the efforts to mitigate the occurrence of transnational

crimes have been conducted in the form of the ASEAN Ministers’ Meeting on Transnational Crime, ASEAN Chiefs of Police Conferences, and ASEAN Comprehensive Plan of Action on Counter-Terrorism.

ASEAN also faces non-traditional issues in terms of security. According to the Senior Official Meeting on Transnational Crimes, there are eight priority areas. It includes “trafficking in persons, counter-terrorism, illicit drugs trafficking, money laundering, arms smuggling, sea piracy, international economic crime, and cybercrime” (ASEAN Joint Communiqué, 2013). In line with issues on security, ASEAN also promotes efforts in cooperation on defense and security through the ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting, ASEAN Convention on Counter-Terrorism, ASEAN Maritime Forum, and ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus. Human rights issues are a significant matter for ASEAN. The ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights is seen to be the encompassing institution that promotes and protects human rights in the region. Focusing on some of the items mentioned here, the ASEAN Convention on Counter-Terrorism has paved the way for more robust intelligence sharing among member states. It also urges revising counter-terrorism legislation, such as prosecuting individuals associated with terrorist activities and freezing assets related to terrorism. The ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights provides direction toward addressing human rights issues and promotes international human rights standards.



Figure 3 Tree Chart of Items Coded under ASEAN Political-Security Community



Figure 4 Tree Chart of Items Coded under ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community

Figure 4 shows the tree chart of the clauses coded into the ASEAN socio-cultural community. The five most frequent clauses refer to disaster management (45), environment (27), climate change (25), youth (19), and labor (15). Disaster management as a node includes expressing support or sympathy for areas affected by calamities and similar events. Likewise, in this facet of the joint communiqués, multiple mechanisms are formulated to respond to disasters. For example, regarding disaster cooperation, the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami led to the creation of the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Center). In addition, the 2012 Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines and the 2008 Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar prompted a concerted response from ASEAN (Howe & Bang, 2017).

The environment is one of the most discussed areas in the socio-cultural community, which involves the establishment of the ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity. Likewise, the issue of haze pollution is a significant issue that necessitated the guidance of the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution. ASEAN meetings have been transformed into debate forums for Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia (Yani & Robertua, 2018). The haze pollution within the region does have diplomatic implications due to its cross-border nature. In terms of ASEAN’s approach to regional environmental governance, it tends to be slow and uneven. “ASEAN environmental regionalism, rather than being constructed through private, bottom-up, and spontaneous processes, has been very much driven by ASEAN member states” (Elliott, 2011).

Nevertheless, matters pertaining to climate change are recurrent in the joint communiqués, with emphasis on a “clean and green ASEAN” (ASEAN Joint Communiqué, 2011). In addressing climate change, ASEAN calls for implementing the Climate Change Initiative (ACCI) and the ASEAN Action Plan on Joint Response to Climate Change (ASEAN Joint Communiqué, 2013). Likewise, the 2018 Special ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Climate Action (SAMCA) concerns the realization of the Paris Agreement. Through its meetings on climate change, ASEAN provides a consultative and engaging platform to strengthen cooperation in this area (Lian & Bhullar, 2011). ASEAN is generally torn between trying to meet development aspirations while responding to climate change (Qiao-Franco, 2022).

The employment of youth in ASEAN is considered a significant issue. It calls for the empowerment of the youth through their involvement in numerous sectoral and mainstream programs. As such, the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Youth was conducted. In addition to the aforementioned initiatives, programs, such as the ASEAN First Young Entrepreneurs Seminar and Expo, the ASEAN Youth Volunteers Program (AYVP), and the ASEAN Young Professionals Volunteers Corps (AYPVC), are continuously implemented. These aforementioned programs seek to engage the youth of ASEAN in cultural exchange, volunteer activities, and environmental issues.

On matters of labor, most of the initiatives come from the ASEAN Labor Ministers Meeting, emphasizing human resource development, labor mobility, and rights of migrant workers. A tangible outcome on labor in the region is the creation of the ASEAN Occupational Safety and Health Network (ASEAN-OSHNET). It consolidates efforts toward better standards and stronger labor inspection among ASEAN member states (Trajano, 2020).

The joint communiqués published by ASEAN serve important functions. First, it is a platform for member states to reiterate their commitment to the organization and enhance cooperation. Second, it is a forum through which member states address and respond to collective challenges. Functioning as a critical instrument in advancing the region’s shared interests, the joint communiqués emphasize ASEAN’s institutional framework by encouraging its members to work with the organization’s various bodies dynamically. In a broader sense, these communiqués reflect the evolving norms and values of ASEAN, illustrating the organization’s adaptability to regional and global dynamics.

The Future Prospects of the ASEAN Community:

The COVID-19 Pandemic and Myanmar Issue

The ASEAN integration is epitomized by its three foundational pillars: the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), and the ASEAN socio-cultural community. These pillars collectively embody the essence of ASEAN’s integration efforts. The article systematically analyzes the developments and dynamics within each pillar through the joint communiqués published by the organization. Simply put, the project provides further insights into ASEAN’s progress in terms of cooperation and

integration. The findings reveal that ASEAN has evolving priorities and challenges in its political-security, economic, and socio-cultural dimensions.

Djalante et al. (2020) mentioned that in 2020, the COVID-19 global pandemic affected Southeast Asia, with ASEAN countries responding differently, ranging from strict lockdowns to “business as usual”. Rüländ (2021) raised a critical observation in ASEAN’s response to the pandemic, which was the privileging of conservative elite groups, particularly military establishments. I argue that there is also increased securitization of health in the region. The pandemic created new challenges for ASEAN in terms of its different communities, particularly with its economies, public health, governance, and the process of democratization. Chen (2020) highlighted the recent developments that emerged across Southeast Asia:

In Indonesia, people were arrested for spreading inaccurate information on social media. In Thailand, people critical of the government’s response to COVID-19 are prosecuted. In Myanmar, terrorism law has been mobilized to crackdown on journalists, block websites and Internet as well as people’s access to information. In Vietnam, which was praised for limiting the number of infected cases successfully due to its culture of surveillance, people who are suspected of sharing fake news risk being reported and fined. Contact tracing apps, such as those promoted in Singapore, also raise suspicion of increasing governmental surveillance means beyond COVID-19.

It has tremendous implications for ASEAN’s goal of moving toward a people-centered and people-oriented agenda (Yang, 2016). Scaling back some policies that have been established at the height of the pandemic seems to be a challenge for certain countries in Southeast Asia (Rüländ, 2021). Southeast Asian countries have made tremendous progress in democratization but have subsequently regressed (Wicaksana et al., 2023). Individual liberties, such as the freedom of expression and association, judicial independence, and media freedom, have been eroded. It has consequently shifted the culture of governance toward elite interests.

The Myanmar issue also garnered significant post-pandemic attention following the takeover of the civilian government by the military faction in February 2021. It transformed the country into an authoritarian Junta-led military regime. The coup d’état results from the seething political tensions between the National League for Democracy and the military (Ryu et al., 2021). The developments in Myanmar are considered a “serious blow to the ASEAN democratic order” (Dalpino, 2021). In response to the crises, ASEAN put forward the peace plan called the 5-Point Consensus, which requires (1) the cessation of violence, (2) all concerned parties engaging in dialogue and seeking a peaceful solution, (3) a special envoy from ASEAN to facilitate mediation and dialogue, (4) ASEAN providing humanitarian assistance, and (5) a special envoy and delegation visiting Myanmar to meet with the parties involved (Reuters, 2022). With the lack of progress in implementing the 5-Point Consensus, ASEAN decided to ban Myanmar from attending meetings (Kurlantzick, 2022). The role of ASEAN has now been put into question in light of its incapacity to facilitate peace in Myanmar. It can be further opined that ASEAN member states allowed the situation in

Myanmar to deteriorate (Dunst, 2021). ASEAN continues to have piecemeal strategies against the Tatmadaw, and such will not dissuade the Junta from its systematic oppression of its citizens (Kapur, 2022).

With these issues hounding ASEAN, the prospect of furthering the ASEAN community is made more challenging. It is further compounded by the continuously evolving regional and global order, increasingly belligerent China, the Sino-U.S. rivalry, and a host of non-traditional security threats (Caballero-Anthony, 2022). ASEAN, therefore, is in a complicated position of seeking to practice the policy of non-intervention while invoking a host of strategies to advance the goals of the ASEAN community. As noted by the ASEAN Chair in 2021, domestic stability is needed to ensure a “peaceful, stable, and prosperous ASEAN Community” (Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 2021). Despite these challenges, ASEAN remains committed to advancing its community-building project. The Hanoi Declaration was established during the 37th ASEAN Summit, marking a significant step toward realizing the ASEAN Community Post-2025 Vision. In 2022, the High-Level Task Force on the ASEAN Community’s Post-2025 Vision (HLTF-ACV) was convened to strengthen these efforts further.

Conclusion and Future Directions

The annual joint communiqués published by ASEAN are comprehensive documents that reflect the collective goals, vision, aspirations, and even the uncertainties of member countries. The creation of the ASEAN community and its pillars allows for the gradual integration of various aspects of life in Southeast Asia. The three pillars of the ASEAN community have evolved into multifaceted areas of cooperation among members of the regional bloc. Initiated in 2003 through the Bali Concord II, the ASEAN community project is a response to the challenges member countries face. Moreover, it provides a mechanism through which stakeholders can pursue multilateral engagement to address critical issues related to security, economy, society, and culture within the broader context of ASEAN community building. Much has been discussed in each ASEAN community pillar, as shown in the analysis. However, key aspects are made prominent through its recurrent in the joint communiqués.

As delineated in the joint communiqués, the AEC shows different dimensions of cooperation in key growth areas, such as tourism, SMEs, and energy. It highlights ASEAN’s commitment to fostering regional economic resilience through initiatives promoting trade facilitation, financial integration, and innovation-driven growth. The ASEAN political-security community focuses on ascertaining continued peace in the region, as exemplified by collaboration on non-traditional security issues, transnational crime, and terrorism. It underscores the importance of diplomatic dialogue and conflict resolution, highlighting the organization’s role in promoting peaceful coexistence. Regarding the ASEAN socio-cultural community, environmental and disaster management initiatives are evident. Likewise, there is also a concerted effort to address issues related to the youth. It reflects an emphasis on ASEAN’s diverse inhabitants and culture as integral components of the region’s identity.

The advancement of the ASEAN community was hindered by the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2021 coup d'état in Myanmar. While intra-ASEAN engagement persists, it is crucial to reassess the process of ASEAN community building. This reevaluation should be based on the current regional context and an acknowledgment of the interests of ASEAN member states. Nevertheless, recent efforts have been made to revive the community-building process through the ASEAN Community Post-2025 Vision.

The article explores the three pillars of ASEAN through the analysis of documents, specifically the joint communiqués published annually. From a more pragmatic perspective, some recommendations are offered to further the progress of the ASEAN community. First, there is a need to strengthen accountability mechanisms to evaluate progress within each pillar. Second, it should promote the participation of civil society organizations and the private sector and leverage their expertise in the ASEAN community-building projects. There should also be continuous reviews of integration processes and adaptation to new opportunities and challenges in the region. The following recommendations are also made to enrich this area of inquiry. This project exclusively examines ASEAN joint communiqués from 2004 to 2019. Future research endeavors can extend their scope to encompass prior documents, shedding light on ASEAN's operations before the formulation of the Bali Concord II. Employing discourse analysis on these joint communiqués will provide deeper insights into how ASEAN frames issues and the diplomatic dynamics embedded within the documents. Additionally, investigations into the impact of integration within ASEAN member countries, particularly its effects on specific populations, hold promise as valuable areas of study.

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