

## ASEAN's Role in Enhancing Regional Security and Economic Stability Through Defense Cooperation

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### Abstract

*The role of ASEAN in strengthening regional security and economic stability through defense cooperation is becoming increasingly pivotal in response to evolving global geopolitical and economic challenges. This study employs a qualitative methodology, specifically a literature study approach, to analyze ASEAN's mechanisms for fostering defense collaboration and their impact on the region's stability. Central to this analysis are key initiatives such as the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) and ADMM-Plus, which have enhanced regional security through joint military exercises, intelligence sharing, and maritime security efforts. These initiatives have been instrumental in mitigating tensions, particularly in contested areas like the South China Sea, safeguarding critical trade routes, and promoting economic resilience. The findings indicate that ASEAN's defense cooperation directly supports economic stability by fostering a secure environment that encourages foreign investment, intra-ASEAN trade, and infrastructure development. However, the study identifies significant challenges, including disparities in member states' defense capabilities, limited inter-state trust, and a tendency to prioritize arms modernization over institutional collaboration. Moreover, ASEAN faces the growing need to address non-traditional security threats, such as cybercrime and terrorism, which require adaptive strategies and enhanced cooperation. The research concludes that while ASEAN's defense collaboration bolsters military preparedness, it also significantly contributes to political stability and economic growth in Southeast Asia. To sustain and amplify these benefits, ASEAN must address existing challenges through measures such as enhancing transparency, fostering trust among member states, and investing in capacity-building initiatives.*

**Keyword :** ASEAN, Regional Security, Economic Stability, Defense Cooperation, ADMM, ADMM-Plus.

## INTRODUCTION

ASEAN's role in enhancing regional security and economic stability through defense cooperation has become a very relevant and important topic amidst the current global geopolitical and economic dynamics (Lee, 2022). ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), which consists of ten member states, namely Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia, has played a strategic role in maintaining regional stability through various defense cooperation initiatives. Enhanced regional security not only contributes to political stability but also to sustainable economic growth in the region (Sarjito et al., 2022). Basically, ASEAN was established in 1967 with the main objective of promoting economic, social, and cultural cooperation and strengthening regional peace and stability. However, with the times and the increase in security threats, both traditional and non-traditional, ASEAN's focus has shifted to include defense and security aspects. This defense cooperation aims to enhance the collective capabilities of member states in dealing with various threats, including terrorism, maritime conflicts, and natural disasters, which can disrupt regional and economic stability.

One of the key initiatives in ASEAN defense cooperation is the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) and ADMM-Plus. The ADMM, first held in 2006, is the main forum for ASEAN defense ministers to dialogue and coordinate on defense and security issues. ADMM-Plus, launched in 2010, expands this cooperation to include ASEAN's eight major dialogue partners, namely Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, Russia and the United States (ADMM, 2024). The forum aims to strengthen defense cooperation between

ASEAN and these partners through joint military exercises, information sharing, and maritime security initiatives. One concrete example of the success of ADMM-Plus is the regularly conducted joint military exercises, which involve forces from member states and dialogue partners (Shoji, 2023). These exercises not only enhance interoperability between forces but also strengthen collective capacity in dealing with common threats. For example, maritime security exercises conducted in the South China Sea have contributed to reducing tensions in the region and ensuring the safety of trade routes vital to the regional economy.

The South China Sea conflict is one of the most prominent security issues in the ASEAN region. The region is a major trade route with annual trade value reaching around \$3.37 trillion. The South China Sea is also rich in natural resources, including oil and natural gas. However, overlapping territorial claims between some ASEAN countries and China have led to significant tensions (Simoes, 2022). ASEAN defense cooperation through ADMM and ADMM-Plus has played an important role in managing this conflict. Through dialog and diplomacy, ASEAN has encouraged peaceful resolution of conflicts based on international law (Ik, 2024). For example, ADMM-Plus has held joint meetings and exercises focusing on maritime security and search and rescue (SAR), which not only enhance technical capabilities but also build trust between member states.

Regional security stability enhanced through ASEAN defense cooperation has a direct impact on economic stability. Assured security enables a stable business environment, encourages foreign investment, and facilitates free trade in the region. For example, the stable economic growth of ASEAN countries can be seen from the GDP per capita data that has been steadily increasing in recent decades. The following graph shows the growth of GDP per capita in several ASEAN countries from 2000 to 2020:

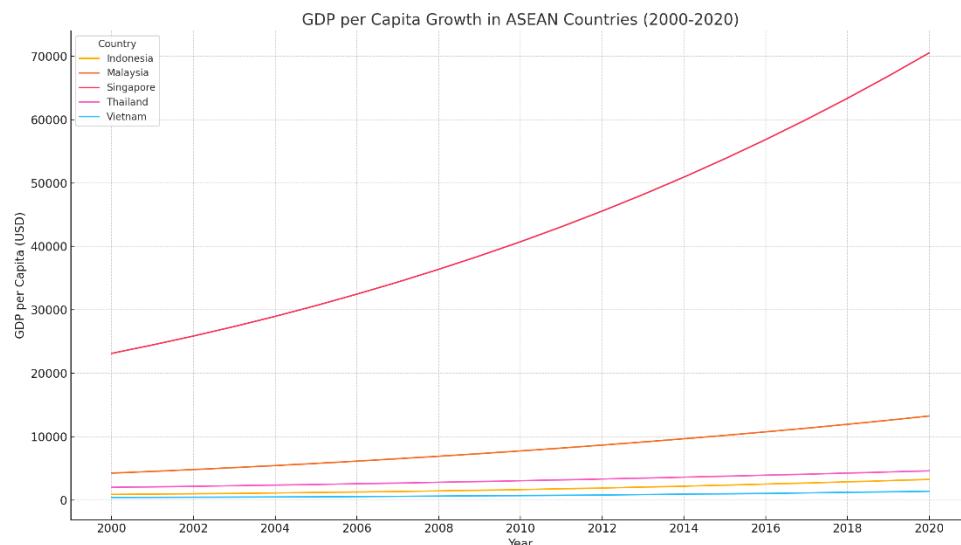


Figure 1. GDP growth in ASEAN

Data Source: World Bank

The graph above depicts the growth of GDP per capita in the five ASEAN countries (Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam) from 2000 to 2020, providing a snapshot of their economic evolution over the past two decades. Singapore stands out with the highest GDP per capita, increasing from around \$23,130 in 2000 to around \$70,540 in 2020 (O'Neill, 2024). This progress is reflected in the dominance of sectors such as technology, finance and international trade, supported by security stability and strong pro-business economic policies. Malaysia also experienced a steady increase, from about \$4,240 in 2000 to about \$13,250 in 2020. Manufacturing, services, and natural resource sectors underpinned this growth, along with progressive foreign investment and trade policies, supported by regional defense

cooperation through ASEAN. Thailand showed steady growth from around \$1,990 in 2000 to around \$4,600 in 2020, supported by tourism, exports, and manufacturing sectors. Regional political stability and security have played an important role in supporting the Thai economy, reinforced by ASEAN cooperation in defense.

Indonesia recorded significant growth from around \$877 in 2000 to around \$3,250 in 2020. As the largest economy in ASEAN, Indonesia relies on its natural resources, manufacturing, and services sectors, supported by stable economic policies and infrastructure improvements, as well as the positive impact of ASEAN's efforts to enhance regional security (Chairil et al., 2013). Vietnam shows rapid growth, from around \$390 in 2000 to around \$1,380 in 2020. Extensive economic reforms and global integration have supported the development of sectors such as manufacturing, technology, and agriculture, with ASEAN defense cooperation contributing to creating a stable environment for Vietnam's economic growth (Ledesma et al., 2022).

This phenomenon shows how ASEAN defense cooperation has contributed to regional stability, which is one of the important factors in supporting economic growth in its member states. Security stability creates a conducive environment for investment, trade and economic development. Initiatives such as ADMM and ADMM-Plus have helped ASEAN countries deal with various security challenges, both traditional and non-traditional, and ensure the stability necessary for sustainable economic growth.

## RESEARCH METHODS

The research employs a qualitative methodology using the literature review approach, which systematically gathers and analyzes information from various written sources to gain an in-depth understanding of a specific topic (Sugiyono, 2022). In this study, the literature review method focuses on examining ASEAN's role in strengthening regional security and economic stability through defense cooperation. This process involves defining the research objectives, conducting a comprehensive search across academic databases and publications, critically evaluating the relevance and quality of sources, and synthesizing the findings to construct a cohesive analysis. By leveraging this approach, the study offers a nuanced understanding of the subject, while acknowledging the inherent limitations posed by the availability and quality of existing literature (Creswell, 2022). This method not only facilitates the identification of research gaps but also serves as a foundation for advancing future inquiries into ASEAN's defense collaboration mechanisms.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

ASEAN, as a regional organization comprising ten countries in Southeast Asia, has played an increasingly important role in maintaining security and economic stability in the region. Against a historical backdrop of conflict and tension, ASEAN member states recognize that security and stability are key prerequisites for development and prosperity. In recent decades, ASEAN has developed various defense cooperation mechanisms aimed at enhancing military capabilities, building trust, and creating a safe and conducive environment for economic growth. Through close and sustained cooperation, ASEAN seeks to address the various security challenges, both traditional and non-traditional, faced by the region.

### ASEAN Defense Cooperation Framework

Defense cooperation in ASEAN has undergone significant evolution since its establishment in 1967. The history and evolution of ASEAN defense cooperation reflects the continuous efforts of member states to create a secure and stable environment. One of the key

mechanisms established is the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM), followed by ADMM-Plus involving partner countries such as the United States, China, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia, New Zealand and Russia. This mechanism serves as a platform for dialogue and cooperation in defense, as well as strengthening trust among member states (Dosch & Kliem, 2023). ADMM-Plus is an expansion of ADMM which was established in 2006. ADMM-Plus aims to strengthen security cooperation in the region through joint military exercises, information exchange, and defense capacity building. Through this mechanism, ASEAN member states and dialogue partners can build closer ties and enhance preparedness in the face of common security threats. ADMM-Plus also serves as a platform to discuss strategic security issues relevant to the Indo-Pacific region, including terrorism, maritime security, natural disasters, and cyber security (Prayaga, 2020).

However, as Rosyidin (2023) argues, ASEAN's focus on arms modernization often hinders the development of a more cohesive security community. This reflects the low level of trust among member states, where prioritization of weaponry over institutional cooperation can negatively impact the prospects for peace in the region (Rosyidin, 2023). Nevertheless, these defense cooperation structures and mechanisms remain important in building military capability and readiness among ASEAN countries. ASEAN member states also play significant individual roles in this defense cooperation. Through defense diplomacy, countries like Indonesia improve their military capabilities and create a more harmonious climate. Defense diplomacy not only serves to improve military capabilities but also to maintain equal relations among Southeast Asian countries (Yusro et al., 2022). For example, Indonesia has been active in conducting joint military exercises with other ASEAN countries as well as with partner countries, to improve military interoperability and preparedness. This shows that despite the challenges in building trust, ASEAN defense cooperation still has a positive contribution to regional security.

ASEAN has also established various other mechanisms to strengthen defense cooperation, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the East Asia Summit (EAS). The ARF, established in 1994, serves as a platform for dialogue and cooperation in security between ASEAN countries and their dialogue partners. The ARF focuses on regional security issues such as arms proliferation, terrorism, and maritime security (Durmaz, 2023). The EAS, which involves ASEAN countries along with eight major dialogue partners, also serves as a forum to discuss strategic and security issues in the East Asian region. In addition, ASEAN has also introduced various initiatives to enhance cooperation in the defense industry. One important initiative is the ASEAN Defense Industrial Collaboration (ADIC), which aims to promote cooperation in the production and development of defense equipment between ASEAN member states (Dilahwangsa et al., 2019). ADIC assists in building national defense industrial capabilities, reducing dependence on imported military equipment, and improving interoperability among ASEAN armed forces. Through this cooperation, ASEAN strives to create a more independent and integrated defense industry ecosystem in the region.

However, defense cooperation in ASEAN also faces various challenges. One of the main challenges is the difference in military priorities and capabilities among member states. For example, some ASEAN member states have larger defense budgets and more advanced military capabilities compared to other countries in the region. This can create imbalances in defense cooperation and hamper efforts to create a more cohesive security community (Syafril & Saputro, 2023). In addition, mistrust between member states is also an obstacle in strengthening defense cooperation. Nevertheless, ASEAN continues to strive to overcome these challenges through dialogue and closer cooperation. One of the efforts made is to increase transparency and information exchange between member states. Through various mechanisms that have been established, ASEAN strives to increase trust and build closer relationships among its member states. Thus, defense cooperation in ASEAN can continue to grow and contribute to security and stability in the region.

In order to improve the effectiveness of defense cooperation, ASEAN also needs to pay attention to increasingly complex non-traditional security threats. Threats such as terrorism, cyber crime, and natural disasters require a comprehensive and coordinated approach among member states (Estiyovionita & Sitamala, 2022). ASEAN needs to continuously adapt to global and regional security dynamics, and strengthen its capacity and preparedness to deal with emerging threats. Overall, ASEAN's defense cooperation framework reflects the commitment of its member states to create a secure and stable environment in the region. Despite the challenges, continued efforts in strengthening this cooperation remain key to achieving peace and prosperity in Southeast Asia. By strengthening dialog mechanisms, enhancing transparency, and building better military capabilities, ASEAN can continue to serve as a major actor in creating security and stability in the region.

### **The Impact of ASEAN Defense Cooperation on Regional Security**

ASEAN defense cooperation has a significant impact on regional security, especially in conflict prevention and dispute resolution. One obvious example is how ASEAN plays a mediating role in various regional conflicts through informal mechanisms, creating stability that supports economic development and a conducive environment for national economic activities (Dosch & Kliem, 2023). These informal mechanisms are often referred to as the "ASEAN Way," which emphasizes dialogue and consensus over direct confrontation (Caballero-Anthony, 2022). ASEAN defense cooperation has also successfully reduced tensions in the region through various joint military exercises and increased interoperability among member states' armed forces. Military exercises such as the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting-Plus Maritime Security Field Training Exercise (ADMM-Plus MS FTX) and the ASEAN Regional Forum Disaster Relief Exercise (ARF DiREx) serve to enhance joint capabilities in responding to security threats and natural disasters (Prayaga, 2020). These exercises not only enhance military capabilities but also build trust and cooperation among ASEAN countries.

Non-traditional security threats such as terrorism, human trafficking and maritime security are also a major focus in ASEAN defense cooperation. For example, ASEAN counter-terrorism cooperation faces major challenges in preventing the arrival of foreign terrorist fighters, as seen in the Marawi conflict in the Philippines. This failure shows the need for enhanced defense measures and closer cooperation among member states (Siallagan, 2023). To address this threat, ASEAN has introduced various initiatives such as the ASEAN Plan of Action to Combat Transnational Crime and the ASEAN Convention on Counter Terrorism. In addition, ASEAN has also started to pay attention to cybersecurity, which has become increasingly important in this digital era. Cooperation in enhancing cybersecurity is part of the overall strategy to maintain regional security stability. The ASEAN Cybersecurity Cooperation Strategy aims to enhance the capacity of member states in dealing with cyber threats and establish a comprehensive framework for cooperation in this area (Estiyovionita & Sitamala, 2022). With this cooperation, ASEAN countries can be better prepared to face various cyber threats that can disrupt stability and security in the region.

Improved military and security capabilities among ASEAN member states is also one of the positive impacts of this defense cooperation. Joint military exercises and intelligence sharing are an important part of this effort. For example, the ASEAN Defense Industry Collaboration (ADIC) has helped in building trust and balance of power in the region, which in turn enhances regional security (Dilahwangsa et al., 2019). Through this cooperation, ASEAN countries can deal with various security threats more effectively and in a coordinated manner. ASEAN defense cooperation also contributes to political stability in the region. With a platform for dialogue and cooperation, member states can reduce the risk of conflict and enhance political stability. This is important for creating a conducive environment for economic and social development. In addition, defense cooperation also helps in addressing security issues that can affect political stability, such as arms smuggling and drug trafficking (Amanda & Saputro, 2023). ASEAN

defense cooperation also has a significant impact on the external relations of member states. Through mechanisms such as ADMM-Plus and ARF, ASEAN can build closer ties with partner countries such as the United States, China, Japan and India. This cooperation not only improves defense capabilities but also strengthens ASEAN's position in the international arena (Prayaga, 2020). With closer relations with partner countries, ASEAN can be more effective in dealing with various security threats and strengthening regional stability.

However, despite the many positive impacts, ASEAN defense cooperation also faces various challenges. One of the main challenges is the difference in military priorities and capabilities among member states. Some countries have larger defense budgets and more advanced military capabilities compared to other countries in the region. This can create imbalances in defense cooperation and hamper efforts to create a more cohesive security community (Amanda & Saputro, 2023). In addition, mistrust between member states is also an obstacle in strengthening defense cooperation. ASEAN also needs to continue to adapt to changing global and regional security dynamics. Threats such as climate change, natural disasters and global pandemics require a comprehensive and coordinated approach among member states. ASEAN needs to enhance its capacity and preparedness to deal with these threats through closer and more integrated defense cooperation (Durmaz, 2023). Overall, the impact of ASEAN defense cooperation on regional security is significant. Through various mechanisms and initiatives, ASEAN has successfully enhanced military capabilities, built trust, and created stability in the region. Despite the challenges, continued efforts in strengthening defense cooperation remain key to achieving security and stability in Southeast Asia. By strengthening dialog mechanisms, increasing transparency, and building better military capabilities, ASEAN can continue to serve as a major actor in creating security and stability in the region.

### **Contribution of Defense Cooperation to Economic Stability**

The relationship between security and economic growth is one of the important aspects of ASEAN defense cooperation. Improved security stability through defense cooperation creates a conducive environment for economic growth in the region. Research by Saputro (2022) shows that ASEAN countries can improve regional security by prioritizing defense budget allocations, managing purchasing power parity, and promoting regional defense cooperation (Saputro, 2022). This stability is important to attract foreign investment and increase intra-ASEAN trade. Security stability also contributes to increased investment and trade in the region. With a safe and stable environment, ASEAN countries are able to attract more foreign investment, which in turn boosts economic growth. Multilateral mechanisms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and ADMM-Plus also play an important role in promoting defense cooperation for peace, prosperity and stability in the Indo-Pacific region (Prayaga, 2020). In addition, the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) also benefits from security stability, as it creates a more integrated single market and facilitates the flow of goods, services, and capital among member states.

In addition, ASEAN defense cooperation also supports infrastructure development and economic cooperation. Regional infrastructure projects such as the ASEAN Connectivity Master Plan become easier to implement in a stable and secure environment. With defense cooperation, member states can focus more on economic development and reduce the development gap between them (Durmaz, 2023). Better infrastructure not only improves connectivity but also strengthens the region's economic competitiveness. ASEAN defense cooperation also contributes to improving the competitiveness of the defense industry in the region. Through initiatives such as the ASEAN Defense Industrial Collaboration (ADIC), member states can share technology and knowledge in the production of defense equipment. This not only reduces dependence on imported military equipment but also creates new economic opportunities in the defense industry (Dilahwangsa et al., 2019). Improved defense industry capabilities can also encourage technological innovation and development, which in turn improves the overall competitiveness of the ASEAN economy.

Maritime security is also an important focus in ASEAN defense cooperation, given the importance of sea lanes to regional trade and economies. Cooperation in maritime security helps maintain freedom of navigation and the security of sea lanes vital to international trade. For example, ASEAN has adopted various initiatives to enhance maritime security, such as the ASEAN Maritime Forum (AMF) and cooperation with dialogue partners such as the United States and China in dealing with threats such as piracy and smuggling (Toruan, 2021). By keeping sea lanes secure, ASEAN can ensure the smooth flow of goods and services that are essential to the region's economic growth. Defense cooperation also plays an important role in maintaining economic stability by addressing non-traditional threats such as natural disasters and climate change. Natural disasters often have a significant impact on regional economies, and cooperation in disaster management can help minimize such impacts. The ASEAN Coordinating Center for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre) is a clear example of this cooperative effort. The AHA Centre serves as a regional coordination center for humanitarian assistance and disaster management, assisting member states in responding to disasters quickly and effectively (Prayaga, 2020).

In addition, cooperation in cybersecurity is also important to maintain economic stability. In the digital age, cyberattacks can have a devastating impact on economies and critical infrastructure. Through the ASEAN Cybersecurity Cooperation Strategy, member states seek to enhance capabilities and cooperation in dealing with cyber threats. This cooperation helps to protect critical infrastructure and economic systems from cyberattacks that can disrupt economic stability (Estiyovionita & Sitamala, 2022). However, while there are many benefits, ASEAN defense cooperation also faces challenges in achieving economic stability. One of the main challenges is the difference in the level of economic development and military capabilities among member states. Some countries have more developed economies and stronger military capabilities, while others are still struggling to improve their capacities. This imbalance can create tensions and hinder closer cooperation (Amanda & Saputro, 2023). Therefore, ASEAN needs to continue working to reduce this gap through more inclusive development and cooperation programs. ASEAN also needs to continue strengthening its institutional framework to support defense and economic cooperation. By strengthening regional institutions and improving cooperation mechanisms, ASEAN can more effectively address security and economic challenges. Improved coordination between various cooperation mechanisms is also important to ensure that efforts are mutually supportive and reinforcing (Durmaz, 2023). Overall, the contribution of ASEAN defense cooperation to economic stability is significant. By enhancing security and creating a conducive environment for economic growth, this cooperation helps create prosperity and well-being in the region. Despite the challenges, continued efforts in strengthening this cooperation remain key to achieving ASEAN's shared goal of creating sustainable security and stability. By strengthening dialog mechanisms, enhancing military capabilities, and building closer cooperation, ASEAN can continue to serve as a major actor in creating economic stability in Southeast Asia.

## CONCLUSION

ASEAN defense cooperation has proven to play an important role in enhancing regional security and economic stability in the Southeast Asian region. Through mechanisms such as the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) and ADMM-Plus, ASEAN member states have successfully created platforms for dialogue and cooperation that strengthen their military capabilities and readiness. Nonetheless, challenges such as low levels of trust among member states and an excessive focus on weapons modernization still need to be overcome to achieve a more cohesive security community (Rosyidin, 2023). ASEAN defense cooperation has also had

a significant impact on regional security stability through conflict mediation, informal mechanisms such as the "ASEAN Way," and enhanced defense measures to deal with non-traditional threats such as terrorism and cyber security (Caballero-Anthony, 2022; Estiyovionita & Sitamala, 2022). Despite some failures, such as in counter-terrorism cooperation in the Marawi conflict, enhanced defense measures remain a priority to strengthen regional security (Siallagan, 2023).

In addition to its impact on security, ASEAN defense cooperation also contributes to regional economic stability. The security stability created by this cooperation creates a conducive environment for economic growth, attracts foreign investment, and increases intra-ASEAN trade (Prayaga, 2020; Syafril & Saputro, 2023). Regional infrastructure projects such as the ASEAN Connectivity Master Plan also benefit from a secure and stable environment, which helps reduce the development gap among member states (Durmaz, 2023). To improve the effectiveness of ASEAN defense cooperation, several recommendations need to be considered. First, efforts to increase trust among member states need to be enhanced through more institutional cooperation and transparency in defense policy. This approach will help reduce reliance on arms modernization which often reflects low levels of trust (Rosyidin, 2023). Second, ASEAN should strengthen cooperation mechanisms to deal with non-traditional security threats such as terrorism, human trafficking and cybersecurity. Capacity building in these areas will help member states to be more effective in dealing with evolving threats (Estiyovionita & Sitamala, 2022; Siallagan, 2023).

In addition, ASEAN must continue to encourage collaboration through multilateral mechanisms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and ADMM-Plus to create stability in the Indo-Pacific region. This collaboration is important to maintain regional peace, prosperity and stability (Prayaga, 2020). ASEAN member states also need to prioritize effective defense budget allocations by managing purchasing power parity and promoting regional defense cooperation. This approach will help improve military capabilities and security in the region (Syafril & Saputro, 2023). Defense diplomacy should also be utilized for military capacity building and maintaining harmonious relations among member states. Defense diplomacy will help create a more stable and equal climate in the region (Yusro et al., 2022). In addition, it is important to continue to integrate economic aspects in defense cooperation. Projects such as the ASEAN Connectivity Master Plan should continue to be supported in a safe and stable environment, which will help reduce development gaps and promote more equitable economic growth (Durmaz, 2023).

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