

Indonesia's Leadership in the Formation of ASEAN Identity

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Abstract

The discourse on ASEAN identity has recently come under renewed scrutiny amid the Association's efforts to play a more active role in shaping the regional architecture of the Indo-Pacific region, particularly through the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). Having previously established a strong reputation as the driving force of regionalism in East Asia and the broader Asia-Pacific, thereby giving rise to the concept of ASEAN Centrality, ASEAN's relevance is now being questioned once again in the context of renewed great-power competition between the United States and the People's Republic of China. A key concern in this regard is the internal coherence of ASEAN itself. Lacking a centralized institution endowed with authoritative executive powers, ASEAN traditionally relies on its member states to take proactive roles in initiating proposals and achieving consensus through consultative processes (musyawarah). In this context, Indonesia has emerged as a country striving to fulfill such a leadership role. Often described as a natural leader within ASEAN, owing to its significantly larger territory and population compared to other Southeast Asian nations, Indonesia has actively promoted ASEAN's role in realizing the shared aspirations of peace and regional integration in Southeast Asia. The findings of this article demonstrate that Indonesia currently satisfies several key criteria for regional leadership and effectively performs various regional leadership functions within ASEAN. These efforts have produced a series of initiatives that foster closer relations among ASEAN member states and, indirectly, contribute to the perception of a collective ASEAN identity.

Keywords: *Indonesia, ASEAN, Regional Initiatives, Regional Leadership, ASEAN Identity*

INTRODUCTION

The Southeast Asian region has long served as an arena for competition among major global powers. This is evident from the historical context of Southeast Asia, where the majority of countries were former colonies of European empires. The establishment of ASEAN was closely tied to the contest for influence among major powers during the Cold War era, particularly between the Soviet Union and the United States. Initially, the founding of ASEAN aimed to prevent the spread of communism by promoting the prosperity of non-communist states. The five original members of ASEAN (Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines) were, at the time of its establishment, politically aligned more closely with the United States. (Keling, et al. 2011). ASEAN subsequently expanded by admitting Brunei, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar as members, thereby establishing itself as a major regional community in Southeast Asia and, more broadly, in Asia as a whole. In the post-Cold War era, Southeast Asia has once again confronted the same underlying issue: competition for influence among major powers, this time with the United States and China as the principal actors. Given that ASEAN now encompasses countries leaning toward the United States, others aligned with China, and still others maintaining a neutral stance simultaneously, this longstanding dynamic in the Southeast Asian region has reemerged as a significant new challenge for ASEAN. (Majid 2012).

According to Majid (2012), U.S. influence in Southeast Asia faces a serious challenge from China, which, in the post-Cold War era, has normalized its relations with Southeast Asian countries and thereby strengthened its presence in the region. Majid also argues that, in order to confront the threat posed by the contest for influence in Southeast Asia between the two major powers, the United States and China, ASEAN must be capable of strengthening itself so as to emerge as a new regional power. In his view, an ASEAN regionalism led by a strong country in

Southeast Asia, such as Indonesia, would serve as the solution to the problems currently confronting ASEAN.

Indonesia currently declares ASEAN to be the cornerstone of its foreign policy. In the Strategic Plan of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia (Renstra Kemlu) for the period 2015–2019, it is explicitly stated that “The Government of Indonesia positions ASEAN as the cornerstone or primary pillar of Indonesia’s foreign policy.” (Kementerian Luar Negeri RI 2015). The continuity of positioning ASEAN as the cornerstone of Indonesia’s foreign policy is reaffirmed in the Strategic Plan of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia for the period 2020–2024, which states that ASEAN “will remain the cornerstone of Indonesia’s foreign policy” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia 2020). Meanwhile, the Renstra Kemlu 2015–2019 also notes that “Indonesia’s leadership in ASEAN has become increasingly relevant given that Indonesia is regarded as the natural leader of ASEAN.” (Kementerian Luar Negeri RI 2015).

Since the transfer of power from President Soekarno to Soeharto in 1966, the New Order government under Soeharto placed greater emphasis on cooperation rather than coercive measures, abandoning Soeharto’s predecessor’s revolutionary and confrontational foreign policy. (Sukma, 2012). The de facto natural leadership role of Indonesia in ASEAN began to become evident under the Suharto administration, during which Indonesia took the lead in shaping various major peace and security agreements among the ASEAN member states. Indonesia steered ASEAN toward the formulation of two key principles that aligned with its national interests in preserving regional peace and security while countering external threats. These were the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN), adopted on 27 November 1971, and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), established at the Bali Summit in February 1976. (Putra 2015)

Indonesia was one of the countries that participated in the Bangkok Conference of 1967, which gave birth to ASEAN, thereby making Indonesia one of the initiators of ASEAN. As the largest country in Southeast Asia in terms of population, territory, and economy, Indonesia constituted a crucial component in the establishment of ASEAN. This demographic and geographic weight lent the nascent organization immediate strategic credibility and a sense of regional balance, ensuring that ASEAN would not be perceived as a small-state club but as a grouping anchored by a major power capable of projecting stability across Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, prior to ASEAN’s founding, the Indonesia-Malaysia Confrontation represented a significant episode in the process leading to the creation of ASEAN. Amid that Confrontation, countries in Southeast Asia harbored high levels of suspicion and fear toward Indonesia, as the Confrontation policy, which threatened plans for the formation of the Federation of Malaysia, portrayed Indonesia as a confrontational regional power (Anwar, 1994, pp. 23-24) (Putra 2015). The policy under President Sukarno not only strained bilateral ties but also risked fracturing any possibility of broader regional cooperation, highlighting the fragile nature of Southeast Asian relations at the time and the urgent need for a new framework once political conditions shifted.

Although President Sukarno persisted with the Confrontation policy despite lacking international support, Indonesia’s worsening economy and mounting domestic and international pressures from the dispute contributed to his downfall and the rise of Soeharto’s New Order regime. In the turbulent transition period, the Soeharto government quickly adopted policies of de-escalation, aiming to “restore relations with Malaysia by silencing discussion of disputed issues” (Antolik, 1990: 20) (Rattanasevee 2014). This pragmatic shift transformed Indonesia from a regional source of tension into a facilitator of reconciliation, rebuilding trust essential for multilateral cooperation in a region still shaped by colonial legacies and ideological divisions.

Improved relations between Indonesia and Malaysia revived the stalled Association of Southeast Asia (ASA), which had faltered amid early-1960s conflicts. Foreign Minister Adam Malik conducted diplomatic visits across Southeast Asia to foster cooperation and promote

broader regional unity beyond ASA. These efforts laid the groundwork for ASEAN's establishment on 8 August 1967 (Danang 2020). On that date, the foreign ministers of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand met in Bangkok and signed the ASEAN Declaration, formally founding the organization (ASEAN 2012). The Declaration enshrined principles of mutual respect and non-interference that became central to ASEAN's normative framework, with Indonesia's active participation reflecting its commitment to a cooperative rather than dominant regional role from the beginning.

Throughout its history, Indonesia has played a key mediating role in Southeast Asia, most prominently through the Jakarta Informal Meetings (JIM) I and II during the Cambodian conflict. In January 1979, Foreign Minister Mochtar Kusumaatmadja, alongside ASEAN counterparts, met in Bangkok to address the issue. This was followed by his July 1987 meeting with Vietnam's Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach in Ho Chi Minh City, resulting in the Ho Chi Minh City Understanding, an agreement to convene informal talks on Cambodia. After Mochtar's successor Ali Alatas took office in March 1988, prospects for peace improved with Vietnam's full troop withdrawal from Cambodia in 1989. To enable free dialogue among conflicting parties, Indonesia volunteered as a neutral host. JIM I (25–28 July 1988) was held at Bogor Palace, and JIM II (16–18 February 1989) took place in Jakarta under Alatas's chairmanship. These meetings produced key agreements on ceasefire, phased Vietnamese withdrawal by 30 September 1989, and international supervision (Sudrajat et al. 2020). Indonesia's neutral facilitation and leadership not only enabled Vietnam's orderly exit but also bolstered ASEAN's credibility as a regional conflict-resolution actor, demonstrating low-profile yet effective diplomacy that averted escalation and upheld regional autonomy (Sudrajat et al. 2020).

In addition to the JIM process, Indonesia played a key mediating role in the South China Sea territorial disputes involving the People's Republic of China and several ASEAN member states (Brunei Darussalam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam, with overlapping claims creating high conflict potential) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia 2013). From the late 1980s to the mid-1990s, Indonesia convened four informal workshops on managing the disputes, despite China's initial refusal to participate. After bilateral relations normalized in 1990, China joined the workshops and expressed willingness for joint exploration in the Spratly Islands, contingent on recognition of its sovereignty. These Indonesian-led initiatives fostered dialogue that culminated in the 1992 ASEAN Declaration on the South China Sea (Suryadinata and Izzuddin 2017). This was later expanded into the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC), signed in Phnom Penh on 4 November 2002. The DOC commits ASEAN members and China to peaceful dispute resolution, adherence to international law, respect for freedom of navigation, self-restraint to avoid escalation, and cooperation to maintain peace and stability. It also serves as a key confidence-building instrument and mandates ongoing negotiations toward a Code of Conduct (COC) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia 2013). Indonesia's sustained facilitation underscored its role as a consensus-builder and promoter of regional stability in one of Southeast Asia's most strategically sensitive areas.

In 2012, ASEAN failed to produce a joint communiqué for the 45th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting, primarily due to disagreements over the involvement of the PRC in formulating the Code of Conduct (COC) for the South China Sea issue. Cambodia argued that the PRC should be involved from the outset in the formulation process, while other members, particularly the Philippines and Vietnam, maintained that ASEAN should first unify its position before negotiating the COC with the PRC. Indonesia's Foreign Minister at the time, Marty Natalegawa, conducted shuttle diplomacy to four countries, Cambodia, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Singapore, with the aim of finding common ground among them and promoting agreement on the Six-Point Principles on the South China Sea. The proposed draft also included encouragement to intensify further consultations among ASEAN Foreign Ministers in accordance with ASEAN ways, namely peaceful conflict resolution in line with the TAC and the ASEAN Charter of 2008

(Aziz 2019). This shuttle diplomacy episode vividly illustrated Indonesia's indispensable role as consensus-builder, rescuing ASEAN unity at a critical juncture and preventing the organization from appearing divided before external powers.

Indonesia also hosted the first ASEAN Summit, held in Bali in February 1976. Initiated by Indonesian President Soeharto, the 1976 ASEAN Summit in Bali produced two key documents: the Declaration of ASEAN Concord (also known as Bali Concord I) and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC). The TAC became a legally binding code of conduct for ASEAN member states. According to Articles 4, 9, and 11 of the TAC, the means to achieve peace and stability include not only regional cooperation in economic, social, technical, scientific, and administrative fields through regular contact and consultation, but also national economic and consultation among members (Emmers 2014). Bali Concord I established the form, objectives, and institutional priorities of ASEAN. Its goal was "the stability of each member state and of the ASEAN region," and to achieve this, ASEAN prioritized the fostering of national development and the strengthening of ASEAN through institutional cooperation, including political, economic, social, and cultural cooperation (Emmers 2014). These foundational documents, born under Indonesian initiative and hospitality, institutionalized the "ASEAN Way" of consensus and non-confrontation, embedding norms that continue to define the organization's identity.

Building on the success of Bali Concord I, which produced the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, Indonesia sought a higher role through Bali Concord II in 2003. Aiming to achieve a major leap forward after the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, Indonesia envisioned the creation of a security community within ASEAN. This vision later evolved into the ASEAN Political-Security Community, which, together with the ASEAN Economic Community and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community, was agreed upon as the three pillars of the ASEAN Community in Bali Concord II (Putra 2015). In the area of economic cooperation, at the ASEAN Economic Ministers Meeting in December 1989 in Bandar Seri Begawan, Indonesian economic officials agreed that the time had come for ASEAN to explore deeper economic cooperation in response to the growing trend of regionalism worldwide. Within two years, ASEAN agreed on the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) project, based on Indonesia's Common Effective Preferential Tariff (CEPT) proposal, and launched it in 1992 (Ponciano S. Intal and Chen 2017). Subsequently, during Indonesia's chairmanship in 2003, ASEAN established the ASEAN Community, one of whose pillars is the ASEAN Economic Community. Indonesia's Foreign Minister Hassan Wirajuda then emphasized that Indonesia has consistently provided intellectual leadership for the institutional evolution of ASEAN to better address extra- and intra-regional challenges (Syarip 2020).

In 2011, with Indonesia holding the ASEAN chairmanship, Indonesia introduced the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) initiative. This initiative emerged as a response to pressures from several of ASEAN's free trade area (FTA) partners, particularly China and Japan. Indonesia successfully persuaded ASEAN members to develop a mega-FTA that would encompass all of its FTA partners and presented the initiative to all ASEAN FTA partners in November 2011, at the end of Indonesia's leadership term (Gultom 2020). RCEP itself was agreed upon by ASEAN and its partners, except India, in 2020 (Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Hanoi, Socialist Republic of Vietnam 2020). This economic architecture project exemplified Indonesia's ability to translate its market size and strategic location into region-wide benefits, further cementing its leadership credentials.

Furthermore, Indonesia has actively contributed to the narration of ASEAN identity. During Indonesia's chairmanship of the ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting on Culture and Arts (SOMCA) from 2018 to 2020, Indonesia formulated a narrative concept on ASEAN identity, drafted by Indonesian experts, which was then presented for discussion and further development at the ASEAN level (Saehu 2019). At the 37th ASEAN Summit held in November 2020, ASEAN

officially adopted the Narrative of ASEAN Identity that Indonesia had formulated. Collectively, these initiatives—from foundational diplomacy in 1967 through conflict mediation, norm-setting summits, economic integration, and identity articulation—illustrate Indonesia’s unbroken trajectory as ASEAN’s pivotal actor, converting national attributes into sustained regional influence while nurturing a shared collective identity grounded in resilience, autonomy, and cooperative norms.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a descriptive qualitative method with a case study approach focusing on Indonesia’s leadership role in shaping ASEAN identity without manipulating variables, consistent with Creswell and Poth (2018) on describing phenomena in natural contexts and suited to international relations inquiries as demonstrated in Indraswari (2022).

The analysis proceeded as follows:

1. Data sources and collection via primary official documents (ASEAN declarations, TAC, Bali Concord, Narrative of ASEAN Identity, Renstra Kemlu) and secondary scholarly literature on regionalism, gathered through systematic document analysis per Bowen (2009) covering events such as Jakarta Informal Meetings, South China Sea workshops, ZOPFAN, Bali Concord initiatives, RCEP proposal, and AOIP.
2. Qualitative content and thematic analysis per Bowen (2009), including skimming, pattern identification, and interpretation aligned with Park’s three criteria for regional leadership, Börzel’s and Van Langenhove et al.’s functions of regional leadership, and Acharya and Layug’s content of collective identity.
3. Data reduction by summarizing initiatives and selecting evidence of leadership claims, resource conversion, peer acceptance, public goods provision, plus identity elements (constitutive norms, social purposes, relational comparisons, cognitive models), followed by narrative presentation of historical processes and conclusions on norm entrepreneurship, with credibility via source triangulation per Bowen (2009) across diverse texts.

The phenomenon examined Indonesia’s fulfillment of regional leadership functions and direct contribution to ASEAN’s normative framework and collective identity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

Indonesia has demonstrated significant regional leadership in ASEAN since 1967, fulfilling Park’s (2012) three criteria: a claim to leadership, conversion of resources into political influence, and acceptance by peers. Indonesia explicitly claims leadership, as stated in Renstra Kemlu 2015–2019 (“Indonesia is regarded as the natural leader of ASEAN”) and Renstra Kemlu 2020–2024 (enhancing its role through ASEAN cooperation) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia 2015; 2020). Resource conversion leverages population, territory, economy, and geography, evident in post-Sukarno reconciliation after the Confrontation (Anwar, 1994, pp. 23-24; Putra 2015), hosting the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta (Anwar 1994), and initiatives like RCEP (Gultom 2020; Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Hanoi 2020) and AOIP. Acceptance is shown through peer reliance on Indonesian mediation, such as shuttle diplomacy yielding the Six-Point Principles in 2012 (Aziz 2019) and hosting JIM I/II for Cambodian peace (Sudrajat et al. 2020).

Indonesia provides regional public goods (Ferroni 2002; Van Langenhove, Zwartjes, and

Papanagnou 2016), stabilizes the region via ZOPFAN (1971), TAC, Bali Concord I (1976), and Bali Concord II (2003) (Koga 2012; Emmers 2014), and builds community through ASEAN expansion to CLMV, AFTA/AEC (Ponciano S. Intal and Chen 2017; Syarip 2020), and the Narrative of ASEAN Identity (adopted 2020) articulating constructed (e.g., non-interference, unity in diversity) and inherited values (ASEAN 2020; Saehu 2019).

ASEAN identity content (Acharya and Layug 2012, drawing on Abdelal et al. 2008) includes constitutive norms (TAC, peaceful settlement), social purposes (regional autonomy/resilience), relational comparisons (security community, not defense pact), and cognitive models (neutrality amid uncertainties). Indonesia shaped these via summits, TAC/Bali Concord I, and NAI as “mirror” (shared values) and “wall” (boundaries) identity (Cerutti and Enno 2001).

Discussion

These patterns position Indonesia as a norm entrepreneur and low-profile leader (Börzel 2011; Flemes 2009), transitioning from confrontation to consensus-building (“ASEAN Way”) to repair image and deter great-power intervention (Koga 2012). Challenges persist: occasional consensus blocks (e.g., 2012 South China Sea) and varying member dependencies undermine full cognitive alignment. Nonetheless, initiatives like NAI consolidate identity, enhancing resilience and “we-feeling.” Implications include strengthened ASEAN centrality amid Indo-Pacific rivalries, though sustaining leadership requires balancing national interests with inclusivity to maintain peer acceptance and advance community-building.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Indonesia functions as a regional leader within ASEAN and actively contributes to the formation and consolidation of an ASEAN Identity. Indonesia meets Park’s (2012) criteria for regional leadership through its explicit claim in Renstra Kemlu documents (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia 2015; 2020), its ability to convert national resources (population, territory, economy, geography) into political influence, and peer acceptance demonstrated in diplomatic interventions (e.g., 2012 Six-Point Principles; Aziz 2019) and institutional choices such as hosting the ASEAN Secretariat (Anwar 1994). As a leader, Indonesia provides regional public goods, stabilizes the region, and supports community-building and institutional development (Börzel 2011; Van Langenhove, Zwartjes, and Papanagnou 2016; Flemes 2009).

Indonesia’s norm entrepreneurship has decisively shaped ASEAN Identity content (Acharya and Layug 2012), including constitutive norms (TAC, Bali Concord I and II), social purposes (regional resilience/autonomy), relational comparisons (security community), and cognitive models (neutrality amid great-power uncertainties). Through sustained initiatives, including the Narrative of ASEAN Identity (ASEAN 2020), Indonesia has advanced both constructed legal-political principles and inherited cultural values, reinforcing ASEAN’s normative coherence, institutional resilience, regional autonomy, and collective “we-feeling.” These contributions position Indonesia as pivotal in sustaining ASEAN centrality and stability in an evolving Indo-Pacific landscape.

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