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To cite this article: Laura Southgate (06 Jul 2025): Explaining ASEAN institutional balancing success and failure, Asian Security, DOI: [10.1080/14799855.2025.2527885](https://doi.org/10.1080/14799855.2025.2527885)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14799855.2025.2527885>



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Published online: 06 Jul 2025.



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ABSTRACT

ASEAN members have a mixed record of success at balancing external threats. During the Cold War, member states cooperated to contain Vietnamese aggression after its occupation of Cambodia. This success has not extended to the South China Sea, where ASEAN claimant states have failed to generate a united response to China's violation of maritime sovereignty. What explains ASEAN member state's mixed record of success at balancing external threats? This article outlines the factors that impact state ability to mobilize ASEAN to balance against a common threat. Through an examination of state capabilities, state allies, and institutional constraints, the paper demonstrates the important role of the target state for institutional balancing. In doing so, it presents an original contribution to both neorealist and institutional realist theory.

Introduction

In a speech in November 2011, Singapore's former deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng reflected on Vietnam's invasion and occupation of Cambodia from 1978 to 1989, and the impact of the crisis for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). He tells the story of a special meeting of ASEAN Foreign Ministers held in Bangkok shortly after the invasion, the purpose of which was to draft and release a joint statement condemning Vietnam's actions in Cambodia. The meeting was "not short of dramatics," with ASEAN Ministers each having their "own views on how to go about achieving ASEAN's objectives."¹ Despite this, Wong recalls that "not issuing a statement would have significantly damaged the credibility of ASEAN."² With both Vietnam and the international community watching for an ASEAN response, "despite our differences, we worked together to mount a sustained campaign towards our goal."³ Ultimately, a joint statement was issued in time. Summarizing the event, Wong argues that "ASEAN unity was not to be taken for granted. It had to be forged and then maintained continually."⁴

Three decades later, and ASEAN's ten member states failed to issue a joint statement for the first time in its 45-year history. The point of contention was how ASEAN should respond to China's sovereignty claims over disputed territory in the South China Sea. Both Vietnam and the Philippines wanted the joint statement to reference their territorial disputes with China. The Philippines' Foreign Minister Albert del Rosario stated that the South China Sea involved multiple ASEAN states and should therefore be resolved multilaterally.⁵ Rosario took "strong exception" to the role of Cambodia as ASEAN Chair, which had "consistently opposed any mention of the Scarborough Shoal."⁶ Cambodia again blocked any mention of the South China Sea dispute at a meeting in 2016. Both the Philippines and Vietnam wanted the communique to mention the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) ruling on the South China Sea, which had found in favor of the Philippines earlier that month. Rather than fail to issue a statement for the second time in its history, the Association released a last-minute watered-down statement that avoided mentioning China directly.

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What explains ASEAN member state's mixed record of success at balancing external threats? Adopting an institutional balancing theoretical approach, the paper considers the different variables that impact the success or failure of intra-organizational alignment. Institutional balancing refers to behavior whereby states "pursue their realist agendas, such as power and influence, through multi-lateral institutions in the anarchical international system."⁷ It works from the basis that small, weaker states can use an institution to respond to external challenges and balance against power.⁸ Institutional balancing can occur internally and externally, including intra-organizational balancing and institutional balancing with an external threat. The paper makes an original contribution to the institutional balancing argument, by clearly delineating the variables that impact balancing outcomes. These variables have been grouped into three categories: ASEAN state-target state capabilities, ASEAN state-target state allies, and ASEAN institutional controls and constraints.

To understand the internal and external factors that might impact state ability to mobilize ASEAN to balance against a common security threat, a case study analysis has been adopted that compares the Cambodia conflict with the South China Sea dispute. These cases have been selected to show variation in success, ASEAN member state targeted, and adversary/target state. Comparing cases across different time periods and conflicts demonstrates scope and allows for variation. Whilst the geopolitical context differs between the two time periods, most significantly the shift from a Cold War to a post-Cold War era, many systemic pressures remain the same. Both 1978–1991 and 1992 to present exhibit high levels of external interference in Southeast Asia, continued Great Power rivalry causing instability, and the critical role played by the United States and China. ASEAN also went through a period of growth and change during this period, including member expansion and greater institutionalization. However, the institution has remained bound by the same guiding principles since 1967, as encapsulated in the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) and the "ASEAN Way" model of diplomacy. The cases share additional commonalities which make them further suitable for comparison. Both are cases where the crisis occurs within the Southeast Asian region, where the sovereignty of an ASEAN state is threatened, and where there is an interplay between regional and external actors. Analysis of these cases highlights the importance of the target state for effective institutional balancing. Of particular importance is a target states' ability to secure allies from within the institution, thus undermining ASEAN member state unity and its capacity to balance effectively. This approach helps to bridge a gap in the realist literature, which is polarized between neorealism's prioritization of the role of Great Powers and institutional realism's prioritization of the role of weaker powers in institutions.

The article will begin by examining the different arguments for state alignment in an institution, followed by an in-depth discussion of the institutional balancing concept and the internal and external variables. These will then be applied to the Cambodian conflict and the South China Sea dispute. The conclusion will summarize key findings to deepen our understanding of when and why institutional balancing succeeds or fails.

Arguments for Intra-Asean Alignment

Arguments for state alignment within an institution vary according to theoretical perspective. Constructivists perceive ASEAN membership as critical in developing a common identity and shared set of norms that promote a sense of community and harmonious relationships.⁹ ASEAN abides by a unique set of diplomatic norms that guide state behavior, referred to as the "ASEAN Way." These include noninterference in the affairs of member states, nonuse of force, informality, and decision making through consensus. Constructivists emphasize the positive regulatory effect that these norms have had for state cooperation, behavior, and regional stability.¹⁰ Nguyen and Ba apply constructivist theorizing to Vietnam's membership of ASEAN¹¹ and China-ASEAN relations,¹² claiming a process of socialization has promoted cooperative relations between the regime, ASEAN member states and external powers. These arguments may explain ASEAN state cooperation during the Cambodia conflict. However, they struggle to explain ASEAN's inability to generate intra-ASEAN alignment

on the South China Sea issue. Socialization has not assisted Vietnam in establishing intra-ASEAN cooperation when it comes to the maritime dispute, nor has it prevented China from aggressively pursuing its sovereignty claims vis-à-vis ASEAN. Whilst the constructivist perception of ASEAN security cooperation implicitly rejects traditional balance of power politics in favor of the “ASEAN Way,” Emmers finds that power constraints have influenced both the workings of the Association and the underlying perceptions of its members due to “persistent feelings of mistrust, bilateral disputes and contradictory strategic perspectives.”¹³

Neoliberal institutionalists also view institutions as playing a crucial role in developing cooperative relations, reducing uncertainty, and enhancing security between states.¹⁴ ASEAN state attempts during the Cold War to respond to the threat posed by Vietnam resulted in the institutions’ “transformation from a multilateral forum for regional co-operation to a subsystemic security regime.”¹⁵ Increasing multilateralism in Southeast Asia has lent credence to neoliberal perceptions on regional cooperation. ASEAN has been the architect of several regional institutions, including the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEAN Plus Three (APT). These have been established to enhance political and security dialogue with extra-regional powers. For Simon, “increasingly neoliberalism will explain more of the region’s future security orientation.”¹⁶ However, ASEAN as an institution has “prospered by deliberately avoiding the creation of well-defined institutional structures or quasi legal binding obligations,” which neoliberalism argues are essential elements of a regime.¹⁷ ASEAN was established without a regional or international hegemon. There is therefore “no single dominant player within ASEAN who can induce cooperation by providing benefits to others.”¹⁸ ASEAN has also traditionally been characterized by low levels of economic interdependence, despite developing into a competitive global economic actor. ASEAN’s record of cooperation has also been frustrated by institutional disunity and division, as evident during the Asian Financial Crisis (1998), the East Timor Humanitarian Crisis (1999) and the COVID-19 Pandemic (2020).

For Neorealists, in an anarchic system characterized by self-help, institutions reflect the distribution of international power and “the self-interested calculations of great powers.”¹⁹ In his discussion of the ARF, Leifer states that the institution “has reflected the condition of the more important regional relationships and, in particular, that between the US and China.”²⁰ Similarly, Jones and Smith claim that ASEAN has engaged in classic balance of power politics to retain “US influence in the Asia-Pacific to offset the rising power of China.”²¹ ASEAN is described as having “little discernible influence on the behavior of its own members,”²² with the ASEAN Way having “stymied efforts to build effective and powerful institutions.”²³ ASEAN member state alignment during the Cambodia conflict, the development of positive relations between ASEAN member states, and the Association’s continued existence and institutional expansion in the post-Cold War period undermine realist claims that ASEAN’s purpose is limited to maintaining a United States (US) presence to balance a rising China. As noted by He, ASEAN has also defied realist balancing behavior predictions.²⁴ ASEAN members have resisted balancing against China as the state that poses the greatest regional threat, a fact at odds with Walt’s 1987 balance-of-threat theory.

What all three theories have in common is the assumption that cooperation is difficult in the international realm, representing a problem to be explained. This is despite evidence to suggest that states regularly cooperate if it is in their self-interest to do so. These weaknesses present an opportunity for an alternative theoretical perspective explaining ASEAN state institutional alignment.

Institutional Balancing: Variables and Outcomes

He’s realist-based institutional theory helps to bridge the gap between the preceding theoretical perspectives to explain the role of institutions in enhancing regional security. The theory begins from the neorealist premise that the international system is anarchical, that anarchy typically leads to state balancing behavior, and that states are security-seeking unitary actors. The theory acknowledges the impact of economic interdependence, arguing that “with growing economic interdependence, states, especially middle-sized and small states, can rely on both formal and informal institutions to

conduct a balance of power strategy.”²⁵ In this view, weaker states can use institutions to balance against power and threats to enhance security. They do so through internal balancing, where states “balance other members within the institutions,” and external balancing of outside threats.²⁶ The strength of this theoretical approach is that it acknowledges the importance of institutions and the role of weaker states in enhancing their own security, areas which neorealism has traditionally overlooked. The theory also acknowledges the impact of non-realist variables on state behavior, particularly the forces of economic interdependence, which necessitates state cooperation both within the institution and with external powers. However, by viewing cooperation as a by-product of balancing for security, it departs from neoliberal theory and remains rooted in realist thinking.

Institutional balancing therefore offers a more explanatory approach to state alignment within an institution than existing alternative theoretical perspectives. He’s approach is one of a new wave of thinkers that go beyond the traditional realist analysis of ASEAN’s limitations²⁷ to explore ASEAN institutional behavior and its relations with external powers. Adopting a neoclassical or institutional realist approach, these works explore domestic factors that impact on ASEAN state foreign policy,²⁸ ASEAN internal and external balancing behavior,²⁹ and small state-external power relations.³⁰ These contemporary theoretical works have developed as a response to weaknesses in the prevailing constructivist analysis, which struggle to account for ASEAN norm divergence, fractured relations, and instances of weak or failed institutionalism. Contemporary realist analysis is important, as it shows the development of realist theory through the incorporation of both systemic and domestic factors.

For He’s institutional realist approach, balancing occurs through alliances based on military power, and rules-based balancing such as norm setting and agenda controlling, which he claims are the basis for state institutional interactions.³¹ Formalization of the ASEAN Summit and the establishment of annual ministerial-level meetings are two examples of internal balancing, which have reinforced ASEAN member institutional commitment.³² External institutional balancing initiatives include establishment of the ARF to discuss regional security challenges with external powers, and the creation of the APT to strengthen economic cooperation with China, Japan, and the Republic of Korea (ROK). Constrained by economic interdependence, which increases the costs of traditional balancing strategies that rely on military power, and lacking the military capabilities to form effective alliances, the ASEAN states rely on low-cost, soft balancing strategies that utilize institutions and intra-ASEAN norms and practices to constrain challenges, particularly a rising China. Developing the theory further, He categorizes three different types of balancing strategy: inclusive, exclusive, and inter-institutional. Inclusive balancing involves including a target state in an institution to constrain its behavior through institutional rules and agendas. Inclusion of China in the ARF would be one example of this strategy. Exclusive balancing is used to exclude a target state from an institution. Regional resentment toward the US following the 1998 Asian Financial Crisis led to the establishment of the APT, an economic arrangement that deliberately excluded the US. Inter-institutional balancing “suggests that states can use one institution to challenge the relevance and the role of another institution.”³³ Inter-institutional balancing between the APT and the East Asia Summit (EAS) is one example of this, where the EAS has been used to reduce China’s economic dominance in the APT.

He argues that ASEAN “is inherently a means for its members to balance state-to-state relations over military and security issues.”³⁴ This implies that ASEAN has been successful at performing this function. Indeed, He claims that “the ARF setting, especially the dialogue agendas on confidence building and preventative diplomacy, has successfully softened China’s behavior in the South China Sea since 1995.”³⁵ This paper disputes this claim, adopting Baldwin’s conceptualization of success, whereby “success is defined in terms of favorable or desired outcomes . . . without excessive costs.”³⁶ When considering dimensions of success, including the degree of goal attainment, costs to the state(s) and the target state, and identification of who has most at stake in the issue,³⁷ our analysis of the South China Sea will show that ASEAN states have been unsuccessful at inclusive institutional balancing of China through the ARF.

He’s institutional balancing theoretical framework, where economic interdependence among states and the distribution of power impacts state balancing behavior, has the potential to develop realist

thinking on the importance of institutions. However, the theory is lacking in three important areas. First, He presents an overly positive assessment of ASEAN member state balancing that does not adequately account for variation in balancing outcomes and instances of balancing failure. This is particularly relevant when examining the forces of economic interdependence, which have undermined state cooperation and constrained institutional balancing attempts. Second, the theory pays less attention to the individual member state dynamics within ASEAN and the impact that this has on institutional alignment and unity. Finally, the theory does not pay enough attention to the adversary/target state and its interactions with the institution and its members. This article contributes to the balancing literature by examining institutional balancing outcomes. It provides a more in-depth delineation of the factors that constitute and impact institutional internal and external balancing to accurately explain instances of both balancing success and failure. According to this new theoretical framework, successful institutional balancing outcomes are dependent on five main variables, grouped into three categories: capabilities, allies, and institutional constraints. These independent variables have their theoretical foundations in Walt's balance of threat theory, which states that balancing can be framed in terms of capabilities and allying as a response to threats,³⁸ and He's institutional balancing theory which incorporates inclusive, exclusive, and inter-institutional balancing strategies. These variables are examined in more detail below:

(a) Capabilities of the ASEAN State(s), and (b) Capabilities of the Adversary/Target State

The greater a state's material and diplomatic capabilities, the greater its ability to mobilize against an external threat or to deter challenges. Material capabilities include "the actual capacity to raise armies, deploy navies, occupy territory, and exert various forms of pressure against other states."³⁹ This can be determined from a state's military and economic resources, population and territorial size, and geographic location. States must also be able to extract these resources in pursuit of their foreign policy objectives.⁴⁰ Military power represents only one facet of a state's capabilities. Small to medium size states that possess more limited material capabilities will also use political and diplomatic avenues to balance an external threat.⁴¹ These "soft balancing" strategies include using international institutions, diplomatic arrangements, and economic statecraft to establish a basis for cooperation.⁴² They "can reflect the effect of ideology ... and common cultural influences on threat perception and balance-of-power politics."⁴³

The types of capabilities that are most relevant to a state's ability to engage in effective institutional balancing include identifying shared interests and threat perceptions, exploiting political and diplomatic avenues, leveraging existing bilateral relationships, alliances, and institutional membership, and diversifying bilateral trade, investment, and security relationships. Specific strategies might include releasing joint declarations, collectively raising issues at international forums, attempts to lobby the international community, confidence building and information sharing initiatives, high-level strategic talks and partnerships, and use of bargaining and incentives. The aim of these strategies is to raise awareness, garner support, and elicit condemnation. Conversely, a target state may have the diplomatic power capabilities to block these attempts to mitigate reputational damage. This is in addition to its military and economic capabilities, which can also be utilized to deter challenges if they exceed those of the ASEAN state(s). Where more than one ASEAN state is under threat, the degree to which they can cooperate militarily and politically is also important. This presents an opportunity to combine capabilities, increase interoperability and present a united front both within ASEAN and to the target state. To generate cooperation, states require mutual interests including shared threat perceptions, a reputation for reliability and credibility, and open channels of communication.⁴⁴

(c) ASEAN Member State Allies, and (d) Adversary/Target State Allies

The more allies a state and adversary have, both within ASEAN and externally, the greater its ability to balance a threat or deter challenges. The allies own power capabilities are relevant here. Forming

a partnership with a Great Power or a major regional power will provide greater scope to balance a threat. For both the ASEAN state and the target state, forming alliances within ASEAN is crucial. For the ASEAN state, cooperation within the institution is necessary for effective balancing and to generate a united front. For the target state, having ASEAN allies can undermine a coordinated response to an issue and weaken institutional unity. Target states make attractive partners for potential allies due to the economic, political, and security benefits greater cooperation can provide. Target states can offer incentives to develop bilateral relationships, including offers of financial aid, economic investments, and mutually beneficial agreements, in addition to appealing to shared historical, cultural, or political ties. The degree to which an ASEAN state is economically interdependent on the target state is particularly important here, as it can increase the costs of traditional balancing strategies and constrain ASEAN state actions. The ability to secure internal and external allies is also dependent upon state proximity to the security challenge.⁴⁵ Cooperation is more likely where all states are impacted by the issue and have some stake in how it is resolved.

(e) Institutional Controls and Constraints

The more that a target state is incorporated into ASEAN, the greater the ability for member states to mitigate threat. He's inclusive, exclusive, and inter-institutional balancing strategies can be incorporated here. This approach recognizes that whilst ASEAN's ability to act may be restricted by the space afforded to it by the contesting great powers, ASEAN member states can attempt to utilize the institution to constrain the behavior of a target state and diminish the threat it poses. Deliberately including or excluding a state from institutional forums or partnerships is one example of institutional constraint. Reinforcing institutional commitments through treaties and guiding principles is another example.⁴⁶ Crucially, these soft balancing strategies reflect rational state behavior shaped by power disparity and economic dependence.⁴⁷ As determined by He and Feng, "hard balancing aims at increasing the relative power of a state against a powerful and threatening state through domestic military buildups and external alignments; soft balancing focuses on undermining the relative power of the strong and threatening state through bilateral and multilateral coordination among other states."⁴⁸ These five variables will now be applied to each case study to assess ASEAN member state institutional balancing outcomes.

Institutional Success: The Cambodia Conflict (1978–1991)

Context to the Conflict

The Cambodia conflict, also known as the Third Indochina War, was a protracted proxy war that began during the Cold War. In 1978, Vietnam deployed approximately 150,000 troops into neighboring Cambodia.⁴⁹ The invasion and occupation were a by-product of the Cold War, rooted in Sino-Soviet rivalry and Vietnam's own attempts to enhance regional security and develop a sphere of influence in Indochina.⁵⁰ Vietnam successfully consolidated power in Laos between 1975 and 1978.⁵¹ In 1977, the two signed a 25-year Treaty of Friendship. Vietnam had less success extending its influence in Cambodia, where the anti-Vietnamese Khmer Rouge pushed back against Vietnamese expansion.⁵² Cambodia's cessation of diplomatic relations with Vietnam in December 1977 sparked Vietnamese attempts to trigger a military coup in Phnom Penh.⁵³ When this failed, Vietnamese troops invaded the country, installing a puppet government led by Heng Samrin, a Khmer Rouge defector. The invasion sent shockwaves throughout Southeast Asia. Sharing a border with Cambodia, Thailand exhibited the most alarm. These concerns increased in 1979, when Vietnamese troops launched several armed incursions into Thailand claiming the government was harboring Khmer Rouge resistance fighters.⁵⁴ Mortar rounds fired into Thailand from Cambodia killed and wounded several civilians. At the same time, an influx of Cambodian refugees threatened to undermine Thailand's territorial integrity. At least 150,000 refugees set up camps along the Thai border, with another 150,000 in

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) camps inside Thailand.⁵⁵ The Thai government believed this was a deliberate move by Vietnam to destabilize the country.⁵⁶ Vietnam posed a significant threat to Thailand at this time, with the conflict seriously undermining regional security in Southeast Asia.

ASEAN State – Adversary Capabilities

Thailand lacked the material capabilities in 1979 to respond militarily to the threat posed by Vietnam. This is despite Thai military capabilities exceeding those of its Southeast Asian neighbors due to its active role in the Vietnam War and the provision of substantial military aid and hardware from the US.⁵⁷ In 1974, Thailand had military manpower of 396,000, 195 tanks, 200 armored personnel carriers, 12 artillery cannons and 105 combat aircraft.⁵⁸ As a result of conflict in Indochina, Thai military expenditure increased significantly between 1975 and 1979, from 2.8% of GDP to 4.4% of GDP.⁵⁹ Thai military modernization efforts also increased from 1975 onwards. In 1979, the US increased military sales to Thailand from \$4 million to \$40 million, including F-5E fighters, tanks, armored personnel carriers, and smaller ammunitions.⁶⁰ As tensions increased on the Thai-Cambodia border, Thailand spent approximately \$400 million on foreign arms, receiving 50 tanks, antitank missiles and F5 fighter-bombers from the US.⁶¹ Thailand's position in ASEAN also provided political and diplomatic avenues to balance the Vietnamese threat. The Thai government wanted regional states to “stand up and be counted in a collective demonstration of ASEAN solidarity.”⁶² It pushed for a collective response through local news reports⁶³ and wrote letters to the UN Secretary General detailing Vietnam's armed border incursions.⁶⁴

Whilst Thailand's capabilities were not insignificant, they were dwarfed by those of Vietnam. At the height of the Vietnam War in 1968, the North Vietnamese had a well-organized and equipped army of approximately 480,000.⁶⁵ It had 217 combat aircraft,⁶⁶ 432 artillery, 310 tanks and 50 assault guns.⁶⁷ Vietnam's military capabilities increased significantly from 1975 onwards, when Vietnamese communists acquired US military hardware at the end of the Vietnam War.⁶⁸ It is estimated that \$1 billion in American military weapons, including artillery, trucks, planes, tanks, armored personnel carriers, and ammunition were lost by the South Vietnamese in 1975.⁶⁹ Vietnam also received consistently high levels of economic and military aid from the Soviet Union, much of which was channeled to Vietnamese troops in Cambodia.⁷⁰ In 1974, Hanoi imported approximately \$260 million of military equipment from the Soviet Union, China, and Eastern Europe.⁷¹ In 1979, Vietnam received total Soviet economic and military aid of US\$2.2 billion, of which US\$1.5 billion was arms deliveries from the Soviet bloc.⁷² As a newly reunified state, Vietnam was not a member of ASEAN and only became a member of the UN in 1977. Whilst this undermined its diplomatic capabilities, its superior military power made up for this shortcoming.

ASEAN State – Adversary Allies

Whilst Thailand may have lacked its own substantial military capabilities, it was able to form close partnerships with the US, China, and the states of ASEAN. Concerned about a Soviet-backed, communist-controlled Vietnam expanding into Southeast Asia, the US offered significant political and economic support to Thailand. President Carter confirmed its commitment to the security of Thailand in 1979, stating “our nation is intensely interested and deeply committed to the integrity and to the freedom and the security of Thailand – that your borders stay inviolate.”⁷³ This support extended across the member states of ASEAN, with the Carter administration indicating “its sympathy to weapons requests from members of ASEAN,” particularly the “non-communist governments of Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand.”⁷⁴ Carter sought authorization from Congress to transfer \$11.3 million of US ammunition, in addition to improving the quality of its military presence in Asia.⁷⁵ Thailand also formed a close alliance with China, which viewed Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia as an extension of Soviet influence in Asia.⁷⁶

Sino-Soviet rivalry and Sino-American rapprochement opened the door for closer relations between China, Thailand, and the ASEAN states. This was driven by Chinese fears that “Vietnam has become totally Soviet controlled,” with ASEAN “now in the front line.”⁷⁷ China informed Vietnam that it faced “grave danger” if it continued military raids into Thailand, stating it would “resolutely support” Thai efforts to defend its sovereignty.⁷⁸ This support extended across ASEAN, with China’s Deng Xiaoping informing US Vice President Walter Mondale in 1979 that “in the event of an attack against the ASEAN countries, we will stand on their side.”⁷⁹ China took military action against Vietnam in February 1979, waging a short attack along the Sino-Vietnamese border. Chinese Premier Hua Guofeng informed President Carter that it would assist the Thais through shipments of natural resources and by “taking pressure off Thailand by tying down 29 Soviet Republic of Vietnam infantry divisions along the Sino-Vietnamese border.”⁸⁰

Thailand was actively involved in generating support from both the US and China during this time. China in particular had a critical role due to its extensive military capabilities. For China, the importance of the relationship was reciprocated. Thailand was an important regional state that could be used in a Vietnamese containment strategy.⁸¹ China also feared that if Thailand succumbed to Vietnamese aggression “the rest of ASEAN will fall like dominoes.”⁸² In a bid to formalize security cooperation, Deng Xiaoping traveled to Bangkok following Vietnam’s signing of the Soviet Treaty of Friendship.⁸³ Deng assured the Thai Prime Minister, General Kriangsak Chamanan, that Beijing would end its support for the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT), enhance Thai security against the Vietnamese threat, and punish Hanoi for its hegemonic behavior.⁸⁴ From 1974, bilateral trade between China and Thailand increased substantially, from US\$4.7 million to US\$136.4 million in 1976.⁸⁵ On 13 January 1979, senior members of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) flew to meet with Thai premier Kriangsak. In a “secret meeting between Chinese and Thai military leaders . . . a foundation of de facto Sino-Thai alliance was laid.”⁸⁶ A US telegram from the Embassy in China confirmed that “Beijing’s strategy is heavily reliant on Thai cooperation . . . if the Vietnamese spill over into Thailand, the risk of a major PRC military strike against Vietnam will be commensurately greater.”⁸⁷ As part of the Sino-Thai alliance, Kriangsak agreed to allow the Chinese use of its territory to support Khmer guerrilla fighters.⁸⁸

Thailand was also able to garner support from within ASEAN, despite internal disagreements regarding the threat that Vietnam posed.⁸⁹ Indonesia sympathized with Vietnam’s resistance struggle, believing China to pose the greater regional threat. Malaysia also hoped that ASEAN could develop a cooperative relationship with the Vietnamese communist government. Both Indonesia and Malaysia championed a Zone of Peace Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) in Southeast Asia to avoid becoming trapped in a wider Sino-Soviet dispute.⁹⁰ However, an influx of Cambodian refugees into Southeast Asia coupled with a series of armed incursions by Vietnamese troops into Thailand strengthened ASEAN institutional cohesion. These events caused “obliging wavering members of ASEAN to close ranks once more in support of the Association’s front-line state,” with ASEAN becoming “more explicit in its challenge to Vietnam” from 1979 onwards.⁹¹

Vietnam’s main ally during this period was the Soviet Union and the wider Soviet bloc. Sino-American rapprochement meant that Vietnam was reliant almost exclusively on the Soviet Union for economic and military aid. Vietnam joined Moscow’s Socialist Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) in June 1978. In November 1978 the two signed a treaty of friendship and cooperation. The Soviets also agreed to improve strategic railroads linking Hanoi with Ho Chi Minh City.⁹² As of 1979, 65% of Vietnam’s total trade was with the USSR.⁹³ A postwar aid agreement between the two included Soviet funding of \$3.2 billion for industrial, energy and agriculture projects.⁹⁴ Both hoped to improve bilateral relations with ASEAN member states. For the Soviets, closer ties with Southeast Asia would reduce Chinese and US influence and tilt the region toward Moscow. For Vietnam, there was the potential for economic aid, and a desire to enhance security along its borders. In September 1978, Vietnam’s Prime Minister Pham Van Dong visited the ASEAN capitals promising nonintervention and a mutual respect for independence.⁹⁵ Suspicious of Soviet intentions and wary of Vietnam’s close ties to Moscow, these efforts were ultimately unsuccessful. This limited the number of regional allies Vietnam could acquire.

ASEAN Institutional Constraints

From 1979 to 1991, ASEAN member states were effective at utilizing the institution to constrain and isolate Vietnam. This was not the driving factor that ended Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia. However, it was successful at dampening hostilities and preventing Vietnam's puppet regime in Phnom Penh from receiving international recognition. Many of these diplomatic initiatives were aimed at the United Nations (UN), where ASEAN states lobbied for Democratic Kampuchea to keep its UN seat. Singapore's Ambassador to the UN Tommy Koh stated in a speech before the General Assembly in October 1980 "it would be very strange if we were to punish the victim of foreign armed aggression by denying that victim the right to represent its country in the United Nations. To do so would be tantamount to rewarding the aggressor."⁹⁶ On 20 February 1979, Indonesia issued an ASEAN Standing Committee statement, "appealing for a cessation of hostilities and withdrawal of all foreign forces from all areas of conflict in Indo-China."⁹⁷ This statement became the basis for a draft UN resolution, sponsored by the ASEAN members, to be considered at a Security Council meeting held on 16 March. Responding to the statement, the Council urgently called upon all parties to "cease all hostilities forthwith, withdraw their forces to their own countries and settle their disputes by peaceful means."⁹⁸ On 17 August 1979, the ASEAN states sent a letter to the UN, requesting inclusion of an item on "The situation in Kampuchea" in the agenda of the General Assembly's 34th (1979) session. China supported inclusion of the item, "charging Viet Nam with aggression against Democratic Kampuchea, which, it said, posed a serious threat to the security and stability of Southeast Asia."⁹⁹ The General Committee decided, by 19 votes to 5, with 1 abstention, to recommend that the General Assembly include the item in its agenda. On 14 November, the General Assembly adopted resolution 34/22 by which it "called for the immediate withdrawal of foreign forces from Kampuchea." The resolution was adopted by a vote of 91 to 21, with 29 abstentions.

Hoping to resolve the conflict, the International Conference on Kampuchea was held in New York in July 1981. The ASEAN states requested that representatives of three Cambodian factions be present, and that the international community support their proposals for the withdrawal of foreign forces from Cambodia and the commencement of free and fair elections under UN supervision.¹⁰⁰ The Declaration was approved in October 1981 by the General Assembly. ASEAN Foreign Ministers also released joint statements and communiqués to reinforce its stance and raise awareness of the conflict. In a March 1980 Ministerial Meeting between ASEAN and members of the European Community, ASEAN states again called for a total withdrawal of foreign forces from Cambodia.¹⁰¹ They also proposed a political settlement involving a UN peacekeeping force and the disarming of Khmer factions in a joint ministerial communiqué in June 1981.¹⁰² In a further diplomatic initiative, ASEAN member states designated Indonesia with the role of "official ASEAN interlocutor" with Vietnam.¹⁰³ Under this guise, Indonesian officials visited Hanoi in 1980, 1982 and 1984 to seek a resolution to the conflict. In 1984, Indonesia invited Vietnamese, Cambodian and ASEAN officials to meet for discussions at a cocktail party in Jakarta, later dubbed the Jakarta Informal Meeting (JIM). This allowed all actors in the dispute to meet in person for the first time,¹⁰⁴ although a resolution to the dispute remained elusive. It was ultimately the end of the Cold War and Soviet support that forced Vietnam to withdraw from Cambodia. Moscow cessation of support for Vietnam in Cambodia was a condition of normalization of relations with China.¹⁰⁵ Beijing also offered Vietnam reduced border tensions and lower defense costs in return for its withdrawal.¹⁰⁶ Whilst ASEAN may not have been directly involved in the end of the dispute, member states remained successful at preventing Vietnam from achieving a *fait accompli* in Cambodia.

Institutional Failure: The South China Sea Dispute (1992 to Present)

Context to the Conflict

The South China Sea dispute is a complex and long-standing maritime conflict. The dispute relates to several conflicting sovereignty claims over islands, reefs and banks involving the regional states of China, Taiwan, Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam. China has historically claimed all disputed maritime territory to be under its control. In 1992 it passed a law exercising its sovereignty

over the region and the right to punish infringements of its security.¹⁰⁷ China has increasingly vocalized these sovereignty rights, laying claim to all territory that falls within the “nine-dash line.” This demarcation was first shown on a map of the region in 1946 and has been repeatedly upheld by China, despite its dubious legal basis.¹⁰⁸

Whilst the disputed islands have very little land value, maritime resources and the islands’ geostrategic location makes them of significant national interest for the claimant states. The seas have 11 billion barrels of untapped oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas.¹⁰⁹ The islands also straddle major sea-lanes through which almost one-third of the world’s maritime trade transits annually. China is locked in disputes with Vietnam with regards to the Paracel Islands and the Spratly Islands. The latter is subject to several conflicting claims, including those of China, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Taiwan. Despite this, China has undergone an extensive campaign of land reclamation and military construction in the region. This includes the installation of surface-to-air missiles on Woody Island in the Paracels and missile arsenals and aircraft hangars on Mischief Reef, Subi Reef, and Fiery Cross. According to US Indo-Pacific commander Admiral John C Aquilino, China has “advanced all their capabilities and that buildup of weaponization is destabilizing to the region.”¹¹⁰ China has increasingly used force to uphold its sovereignty claims. Of the ASEAN states, the Philippines and Vietnam have borne the brunt of China’s maritime attacks. Chinese coast guard vessels have repeatedly attacked Filipino and Vietnamese fishing vessels. In 2021, the Philippines condemned Chinese vessels for blocking and firing a water cannon on two of its supply ships in contested waters.¹¹¹ Between 2014 and 2022, 98 Vietnamese boats were destroyed by Chinese vessels in the South China Sea.¹¹² The dispute therefore represents a significant security challenge for both the Philippines and Vietnam.

ASEAN State – Adversary Capabilities

The Philippines and Vietnam can be classified as middle powers in Asia.¹¹³ The Philippines’ military expenditure was 1% of GDP in 2021, with a GDP of \$394 billion.¹¹⁴ This can be compared to 2.3% of GDP for Vietnam with a GDP of \$310 billion.¹¹⁵ Available manpower is similar between the two, at 49,276,808 for the Philippines and 53,980,326 for Vietnam.¹¹⁶ Similarly, the Philippines has total aircraft of 188 and a naval fleet strength of 93, compared to Vietnam’s 223 aircraft and 109 fleet strength.¹¹⁷ Vietnam dwarves the Philippines in land power however, having 1829 tanks compared to the Philippines zero.¹¹⁸ This difference is linked in part to geography. As an archipelago, the Philippines shares no land borders with another country. Vietnam shares borders with Laos, Cambodia, and China. Past border conflicts with China make it more geographically vulnerable than the Philippines and explains its quest for greater military capabilities. Of the 26 countries in Asia, Vietnam ranks 12th and the Philippines 16th in the Asia Power Index based on economic, military, defense, and diplomatic capabilities.¹¹⁹

Both states also have diplomatic avenues available to balance an external threat. This was most apparent in 2013, when the Philippines instituted arbitral proceedings against China under Article 287 of the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The Permanent Court of Arbitration tribunal concerned the role of historic maritime rights in the South China Sea. The Philippines also requested that the tribunal address the lawfulness of China’s action in the region, including interference in Filipino maritime sovereignty, fishing, and navigation.¹²⁰ Vietnam independently joined this legal challenge in 2014, although not as a co-plaintiff. This was the beginning of an increasing level of coordination between the Philippines and Vietnam. The two signed a Strategic Partnership in 2015. Confidence building between the two has increased since, particularly in maritime cooperation. The two have held regular navy staff-to-staff talks (STST), naval personnel exchanges, and information sharing on maritime security.¹²¹

As a regional and global superpower, China’s military capabilities vastly exceed those of the Philippines and Vietnam. It is ranked 2nd in Asia for comprehensive power behind the United States.¹²² Its military expenditure was 1.7% of GDP in 2021, with a GDP of \$17.73 Trillion.¹²³ This

translates into a significant quantity of military resources. China has a total military personnel of approximately 3.1 million, 3,284 aircraft, 4,950 tanks, and total naval assets of 730.¹²⁴ China has leveraged its economic and military strength to enhance its diplomatic power. This has been effective in shielding China from ASEAN member state's efforts to balance it diplomatically. This was evident in 2016, when the PCA tribunal found in favor of the Philippines, stating China had no legal basis to claim historic rights within the nine-dash line and that it had violated the Philippines' sovereign rights in its exclusive economic zone.¹²⁵ China dismissed the ruling as "naturally null and void," stating it "will neither acknowledge it nor accept it."¹²⁶ In the wake of the ruling, China's actions in the South China Sea have escalated. In 2017, the Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte stated China's Xi Jinping had threatened him with war if the Philippines attempted to tap gas reserves in Reed Bank.¹²⁷ Vietnam was also forced to suspend offshore oil development in 2017 after it was threatened by Chinese military force, causing its oil output to fall by 12%.¹²⁸

ASEAN State – Adversary Allies

The ASEAN states under threat have struggled to secure consistent allies in the South China Sea dispute. The United States has provided most support, but the levels of engagement have varied depending on the administration in charge. Until 2020, the US had provided tacit support for those countries impacted by the dispute, whilst maintaining a position of neutrality on the territorial claims.¹²⁹ Refusing to explicitly take sides on the sovereignty dispute, the US refrained from employing force to protect claimant countries' resource rights and did not specify how it would respond to China's continued seizure of maritime features.¹³⁰ The US adopted this strategy as it did "not want to increase its direct involvement in China's sovereignty disputes nor make the South China Sea a central issue in the U.S.-China relationship."¹³¹

US Secretary Mike Pompeo announced a shift in the US position in July 2020, claiming for the first time that China's maritime claims were illegal. President Biden has continued this combative stance from taking office in 2021. His administration rejected most of China's maritime claims in the South China Sea. Secretary of State Antony Blinken assured the Philippines in a meeting in August 2022 that the US would come to its defense if it were attacked in the South China Sea. He stated, "the Philippines is an irreplaceable friend, partner, and ally to the United States . . . An armed attack on Philippine armed forces, public vessels and aircraft will invoke US mutual defense commitments."¹³² To boost the Philippines defense capabilities, the US granted Manila \$100 million in foreign military financing in October 2022.¹³³ The US increased its presence in the South China Sea in a bid to counter Chinese expansion and uphold the rules-based maritime order. In a show of strength, the US *Ronald Reagan* naval aircraft carrier strike group was operating in the region in 2022. The *USS Dewey* and *USS Preble* conducted Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) near the Spratly Islands in November 2023 and November 2024 respectively. Under the new Donald Trump Administration in January 2025, Secretary of State Marco Rubio again pledged an "ironclad" commitment to defending the Philippines in the South China Sea, reiterating US policy to invoke mutual defense commitments in the event of an armed Chinese attack.¹³⁴ US support has extended across ASEAN, with a US Coast Guard (USCG) approved in 2022 to support ASEAN maritime training, capacity building, and security cooperation.¹³⁵ Despite these stronger commitments, the US has remained wary of triggering conflict with China in the region. This was evident during the Biden presidency, with the US preferring a risk averse China strategy that sought to stabilize relations to prevent a wider conflict.¹³⁶

Unlike the Philippines, Vietnam does not have a Mutual Defense Treaty with the US. This has not prevented Washington from providing Vietnam with financial military support, including \$32.3 million in defense exports between 2015 and 2019, \$60 million in security assistance funding and \$20 million in maritime security.¹³⁷ Vietnam has also bolstered its capabilities with security assistance from other regional powers. This includes a bilateral defense cooperation agreement with India in June 2022, and maritime capacity-building assistance from Japan in November 2021. The efforts of Vietnam and the Philippines to balance China has been complicated by their own economic

interdependence with Beijing. In 2021, China was the Philippines highest export partner, totaling \$1.04 billion.¹³⁸ China is also a major investor in the Philippines. From 2017 to 2021, China approved investments for the Philippines worth \$3.2 billion.¹³⁹ Similarly, China is Vietnam's largest trade partner, with imports of \$110 billion in 2022.¹⁴⁰

China's regional political and economic clout has successfully undermined ASEAN member state unity on the South China Sea issue. Xi Jinping was effective at forging a close relationship with Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte between 2016 and 2022. China pledged the Duterte government \$9 billion in soft loans and \$15 billion in direct investments.¹⁴¹ The two agreed to upgrade their relationship to one of comprehensive strategic cooperation in 2018, with joint plans to advance Belt and Road construction. In a 2021 phone conversation with Jinping, Duterte is reported to have stated that "the Philippines cherishes its friendship with China. The country will not engage in geopolitical activities that harm China's interests."¹⁴² As a result of these close relations, the Philippines did not pursue the PCA tribunal ruling, despite it finding in its favor. Upon taking office in 2022, Philippines' new president Ferdinand Marcos pledged a tougher stance on the South China Sea. With Filipino fishing vessels under increasing attack by the Chinese Coast Guard in disputed waters, he strengthened ties with the United States. Marcos issued a warning at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore in 2024, stating that the death of any Philippine citizen in the South China Sea would be "very, very close to . . . an act of war."¹⁴³ However, close economic ties continue to necessitate a balanced relationship with China. On a state visit to Beijing in 2023, Marcos and Xi Jinping agreed to resume oil and gas exploration talks and to establish a direct communication mechanism to reduce maritime tensions.¹⁴⁴

China has also forged close relationships with other ASEAN states, many of which rely on the economic giant for investments and trade. The partnership with Cambodia is so close that it has been referred to as a Chinese client state.¹⁴⁵ China is Cambodia's largest trade partner, with \$14.7 billion invested in Cambodia's agriculture, industry, and infrastructure sectors between 1994 and 2016.¹⁴⁶ China also provided nearly 44 percent of Cambodia's total foreign direct investment from 1994–2014, making it heavily reliant on Chinese support.¹⁴⁷ Laos has also publicly stated its support for China in the South China Sea. Like Cambodia, Laos has been politically and economically dependent on China for large scale infrastructure, financial aid, trade, and investment, including US\$800 million in foreign development assistance and US\$3.4 million in infrastructure aid in 2018.¹⁴⁸ China applies fewer political conditions to its development assistance compared to other major powers such as the US. This makes it an attractive aid option for ASEAN's more autocratic or authoritarian member states. ASEAN enlargement from 1995 to include Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia has acted as a complicating factor, limiting ASEAN members' ability to engage in effective institution-building. This, coupled with the fact that many ASEAN states are not directly impacted by the dispute, has frustrated claimant state attempts to generate institutional allies and unify the Association against China in the South China Sea.

ASEAN Institutional Constraints

China's ability to infiltrate ASEAN has impacted on the institution's diplomatic unity. This was most evident in 2012 and 2016, when Cambodia sought to block any mention of the South China Sea dispute from the Foreign Minister's Joint Statements. After much internal debate, ASEAN avoided any mention of the PCA court ruling in its 2016 statement. This was a diplomatic victory for China, after which Cambodia received \$600 million in aid and loans.¹⁴⁹ China has also thwarted ASEAN member state attempts to constrain its behavior through regional institutions such as the ARF. ASEAN members hoped that engagement with China in the ARF would "temper China's hostile stance against the other claimant states, enhance defense transparency, and promote peaceful and cooperative solutions for existing disputes."¹⁵⁰ Whilst Raymond and Welch argue that China has ceased to exhibit a policy of "assertive unilateralism" in the South China Sea since 2016 in favor of a policy of "stealthy compliance" to balance domestic and international pressures,¹⁵¹ evidence from 2021 undermines this assessment. China's continued resistance to resolve the dispute on a multilateral basis, and the lack of

any institutional enforcement mechanism to compel it to act otherwise, means that there has been very little progress in finding a resolution.

Since 2022 China has escalated incursions in the South China Sea using militia vessels, military drills, and nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBN).¹⁵² ASEAN hopes that a Code of Conduct for the South China Sea can be implemented, providing a set of principles of behavior to prevent the escalation of conflict. A “Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea” (DOC) was adopted in 2002. However, the DOC was not legally binding, was only partially implemented, and has been routinely violated by the claimant states.¹⁵³ ASEAN members have since pushed for the adoption of a legally binding code of conduct. China’s reluctance to be drawn into a legally binding agreement means that progress on this front has been slow. A framework for a code of conduct was agreed in 2017, but this did not contain many new provisions and any reference to the code being legally binding was removed.¹⁵⁴ As of 2025 the code of conduct was still to be finalized, leaving ASEAN’s claimant states still under threat in the South China Sea.

Explaining Institutional Failure and Success

Examination of the two case studies demonstrates the important influence of the target state for ASEAN member state institutional balancing. In both cases, the adversary/target state had greater military capabilities than the ASEAN state under threat. In the case of the Cambodia conflict, Vietnam’s experience during the Vietnam War meant that it was both combat ready and in receipt of vast amounts of military hardware. Whilst Thailand’s capabilities were not inconsequential, it was not able to match this degree of military power. In the case of the South China Sea dispute, the difference in military capabilities between the Philippines, Vietnam and China were even greater. China’s status as a Great Power has provided it with the economic, military, and diplomatic capabilities to secure its interests and deter challengers. Both cases present examples where the target state has the greater material capabilities. That the cases show mixed levels of success suggests that capabilities alone cannot explain institutional balancing. The ability of the target state to recruit allies within ASEAN is crucial. In the case of Cambodia, Vietnam was relatively isolated in Southeast Asia. Soviet support provided considerable economic benefits but deterred the ASEAN states from forming close partnerships with Vietnam. The geopolitical context was also significant, with the international system divided into Eastern and Western blocs. Thailand on the other hand had aligned with two Great Powers, as well as successfully generating intra-ASEAN unity. This kept pressure on Vietnam and prevented the Heng Samrin regime from gaining international acceptance at the UN.

Unlike Vietnam, China has been successful in securing allies from within ASEAN. Regional state economic interdependence with China, plus the additional political and security incentives that it can provide, has undermined ASEAN state ability to generate alignment on the South China Sea dispute. China has been effective at bringing ASEAN member states into its sphere of influence, further reducing claimant state ability to coordinate a response. China has also been successful at leveraging its institutional power through membership of ASEAN forums such as the ASEAN Regional Forum and East Asia Summit. The Philippines and Vietnam have attracted external allies, most notably the US which has provided both with financial assistance and political support. However, China’s extensive material capabilities have deterred these allies from challenging Beijing directly for fear of triggering conflict. China’s ability to secure allies from within ASEAN has also undermined the efficacy of its institutional constraints. ASEAN has no enforcement mechanisms to compel China to change its behavior in the South China Sea. A lack of unity has further weakened the diplomatic avenues at its disposal, including the release of Joint Statements and confidence building within the ARF.

These findings contribute to institutional realism in two important ways. First, it supports the claim that smaller powers will attempt to use an institution to balance an external threat. In both cases, member states have attempted to utilize ASEAN membership and the Association’s various institutions to generate unity, leverage external relations, and influence regional policymaking. Second, it

demonstrates the importance of economic interdependence for successful institutional balancing, both within ASEAN and between ASEAN and the target state. This is particularly evident in the case of the South China Sea, where high levels of interdependence with China have stymied effective institutional balancing. Where it advances institutional realism is by paying greater attention to the target state and its impact on institutional unity. Through the introduction and examination of ASEAN-target state capabilities, allies, and ASEAN institutional constraints, we can provide a more accurate assessment of ASEAN member state balancing outcomes, and the ability of the organization to advance security in Southeast Asia.

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Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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