

Contested Seas, Unsettled Order: Great Power Rivalry and the Limits of ASEAN Centrality in the South China Sea

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Abstract

The South China Sea has become the primary arena through which the broader Sino-American rivalry is playing out, and in doing so it has placed ASEAN Centrality, long the organising principle of Southeast Asian diplomacy, under unprecedented strain. This article examines how great power competition has eroded ASEAN's institutional agency over the decade from 2016 to 2026. Drawing on qualitative document analysis and a tripartite theoretical framework, the study applies Neorealist, Neoliberal Institutionalist, and Constructivist lenses to account for ASEAN's growing inability to manage maritime disputes. The findings show that China's gray-zone coercion, the persistent failure of the Code of Conduct negotiations, and the proliferation of exclusive minilateral arrangements such as AUKUS and the Quad have collectively undermined the credibility of ASEAN-led multilateralism. Individual member states have responded by pursuing sharply divergent hedging and bandwagoning strategies, deepening the organisation's internal fractures. The article concludes that without meaningful institutional reform that moves beyond the rigid "ASEAN Way," ASEAN Centrality will remain an aspiration rather than a practical reality.

Keywords: ASEAN Centrality; Great Power Rivalry; Minilateralism; South China Sea; Strategic Hedging

INTRODUCTION

The Indo-Pacific's security architecture is undergoing a profound structural shift, driven above all by escalating rivalry between the United States and the People's Republic of China. At the centre of this transition lies the South China Sea (SCS), a waterway through which over one-third of global maritime trade passes and which has become the main theatre of hegemonic contestation and stress-testing of the rules-based international order (Heydarian, 2020). Between the landmark 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling and the volatile strategic landscape of 2026, the regional security environment has moved from managed diplomatic engagement toward rapid militarisation, sophisticated gray-zone coercion, and the blunt application of great-power logic (Laksmana, 2019). Against this backdrop,

ASEAN faces a genuine existential question about its institutional relevance and the continued viability of its founding diplomatic principles (Goh, 2007).

ASEAN Centrality, the doctrine that ASEAN should serve as the primary driving force in shaping the region's external relations and security architecture, has been the bedrock of Southeast Asian regionalism since the end of the Cold War (Kuik, 2021). Historically, ASEAN leveraged its position as a neutral convener to build inclusive multilateral institutions, including the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the East Asia Summit (EAS), and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus), through which major powers were drawn into norms-based frameworks (Acharya, 2021). This design rested on the premise that sustained engagement would gradually socialise great

powers into a peaceful regional order (Goh, 2016).

That premise has been severely tested. As the Sino-American relationship shifted from interdependence to strategic competition, ASEAN's consensus-based model has struggled to keep pace. China's assertive pursuit of the nine-dash line, combined with Washington's reinvigoration of its bilateral alliances and forward military posture, has exposed the structural limits of ASEAN diplomacy (Heydarian, 2020). What critics once called the "ASEAN Way," a culture of informality, strict non-interference, and absolute consensus, now appears to many observers as the organisation's principal strategic vulnerability rather than its strength (Serey, 2021).

This article investigates how great power rivalry and regional institutionalism intersect to challenge ASEAN Centrality in the South China Sea context. Three questions guide the inquiry. First, how do the diverging strategic imperatives of the United States and China undermine ASEAN's collective agency? Second, to what extent do Neorealism, Neoliberal Institutionalism, and Constructivism explain ASEAN's institutional paralysis and the intractability of maritime disputes? Third, how are individual member states navigating the pressures of the emerging dual hierarchy through hedging, and what do their varied responses mean for regional cohesion?

The central argument of this article is that ASEAN Centrality was not a structural geopolitical given but a historically contingent arrangement, essentially granted by default during the post-Cold War period of strategic uncertainty (Laksmana, 2017). In the current era of acute great-power competition, external powers have effectively paralysed ASEAN's collective decision-making by exploiting the divergent economic dependencies and threat perceptions of member states (Serey, 2021). As a result, the regional security architecture is fragmenting into capability-driven minilateral coalitions, signalling a decisive shift away from ASEAN-centric multilateralism (Vijaya, 2024).

Scholars broadly agree that the post-Cold War period of unchallenged American hegemony in East Asia has ended, giving way to a contested environment that is neither cleanly unipolar nor

multipolar. Structuralist scholars, notably G. John Ikenberry and Evelyn Goh, describe a dual hierarchy in which an "Economic Asia" increasingly gravitates toward China, while a "Security Asia" remains anchored to U.S. alliance structures and forward deployment (Goh, 2007). Amitav Acharya complicates this picture with his "multiplex cinema" metaphor, arguing that U.S.-led liberal institutions may persist in some domains even as a more fragmented, multipolar order takes shape in others (Acharya, 2017).

Recent scholarship suggests that the neat security-economics divide is eroding. China has used Belt and Road Initiative leverage to translate economic ties into political influence, while Washington has turned its security architecture into a vehicle for restructuring supply chains and technology ecosystems (Kuik, 2023). Survey data from the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, collected consistently between 2019 and 2026, show growing elite perception across Southeast Asia that Chinese regional influence is overtaking that of the United States, lending empirical weight to these theoretical assessments (Patton & Sato, 2023).

The second major debate concerns how secondary states position themselves within this transitioning order. Cheng-Chwee Kuik defines hedging as an insurance-seeking strategy that maximises economic and diplomatic returns through engagement with a rising power while simultaneously managing security risks through partnerships with the established power (Kuik, 2016). Evelyn Goh frames a similar dynamic as "omni-enmeshment," in which Southeast Asian states attempt to socialise China into responsible behaviour while sustaining U.S. presence as a structural counterweight (Goh, 2007). A growing body of literature, however, questions how long hedging remains viable. As Sino-American competition intensifies and extends into technology, military interoperability, and 5G infrastructure, the middle ground that hedging requires is shrinking. States face increasingly binary choices, which strains the fundamental premise of hedging as a non-committal strategy (Aristotle, 2024; Kuik, 2023).

Constructivist scholars long credited ASEAN with building a genuine security community through socialisation, norm-building, and shared

identity. Yet an expanding body of realpolitik-informed scholarship, associated with scholars such as Michael Leifer, Lee Jones, and Evan Laksmana, argues that ASEAN Centrality has always been contingent on great-power convenience rather than on any independent institutional authority (Laksmana, 2017). When divergent national interests produce only lowest-common-denominator joint statements, ASEAN's claim to centrality becomes increasingly difficult to sustain. The "ASEAN Way" is, from this perspective, not a diplomatic achievement but a structural flaw that invites external manipulation and prevents meaningful conflict resolution (Serey, 2021).

Closely related to this critique is a fourth body of literature examining the rise of minilateralism as a direct response to ASEAN's limitations. The Quad and AUKUS are analysed as forms of institutional balancing or hard balancing against Chinese maritime assertiveness (Vijaya, 2024). While these arrangements offer agility and high-trust capability-sharing among like-minded states, scholars note that they structurally marginalise ASEAN by shifting the locus of regional security management to external actors (Bisley, 2024; Wilson Center, 2024). By bypassing ASEAN entirely on hard security questions, minilateralism implicitly challenges the legitimacy of the organisation's self-proclaimed centrality.

The regional order in Asia today can be understood through what Ikenberry and Acharya describe as a *dual hierarchy*, a division between Chinese economic dominance and U.S. security primacy (Acharya, 2017; Goh, 2007). Nevertheless, the boundary between these two domains is increasingly blurred, as economic and security competition now intersect rather than run along separate tracks. This condition has pushed small and middle powers in the region toward a strategy of hedging: maximising the benefits of both great powers while avoiding binding commitment to either (Kuik, 2016; Goh, 2016). Yet, as Kuik and Goh demonstrate, the space available for hedging is steadily narrowing, as mounting pressure forces regional states toward taking sides — a direct consequence of the sharpening dual hierarchy described above.

Amid this structural pressure, ASEAN was expected to serve as a platform enabling its

member states to manage hedging collectively. Leifer, Laksmana, and Jones show, however, that the consensus principle underpinning ASEAN which was meant to safeguard the autonomy of its members has instead become a source of structural vulnerability, as it hampers the organisation's capacity to take decisive collective positions and leaves it open to manipulation by external powers (Laksmana, 2017; Serey, 2021). In other words, the very mechanism designed to facilitate collective hedging turns into a constraint precisely when pressure from the dual hierarchy intensifies. This failure of ASEAN to mount an effective collective response is, according to Bisley, what has driven the emergence of exclusive groupings such as AUKUS and the Quad — minilateral arrangements filling the security vacuum left by ASEAN's paralysis.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

Neorealist Theory: Power Asymmetry and Self-Help

Neorealism treats the international system as anarchic, with state survival as the paramount objective and self-help as the only reliable guarantee of security. From this vantage point, institutions like ASEAN carry no independent coercive weight; they are epiphenomenal, reflecting the distribution of material capabilities among states (Serey, 2021; Hope Buenaventura, 2024). China's nine-dash line claims and its rapid militarisation of artificial maritime features are read as rational offensive behaviour aimed at establishing regional hegemony, securing sea lines of communication, and constructing an Anti-Access/Area Denial envelope that pushes U.S. power projection beyond the First Island Chain. Conversely, American Freedom of Navigation Operations and alliance reinvigoration are defensive balancing measures against a rising peer competitor.

For ASEAN member states, the asymmetry between their individual capabilities and China's power makes unified internal balancing essentially impossible. Neorealism therefore predicts bifurcation: weaker, economically dependent states bandwagon with Beijing out of necessity, while more exposed states seek

external balancers to underwrite their security (Kuik, 2023; Serey, 2021).

Neoliberal Institutionalism: Regime Utility and Its Limits

Neoliberal Institutionalism counters that international regimes can mitigate anarchy by reducing transaction costs, promoting transparency, and embedding cooperation norms that generate absolute rather than relative gains (Keohane, 1984). This logic informed ASEAN's construction of the ARF and the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties (DOC): the bet was that drawing China into a rules-based institutional web would raise the costs of defection above those of continued engagement (Serey, 2021). The United States' SCS posture, on this reading, is not merely power politics but a defence of global public goods, including free navigation and UNCLOS-based maritime order (Heydarian, 2020).

The theory's limits are equally apparent. When vital security interests are at stake, great powers routinely bypass or ignore institutional constraints. The multi-decade failure to conclude a legally binding Code of Conduct illustrates a central Neoliberal vulnerability: without enforcement mechanisms, institutions can be exploited or simply disregarded by powerful revisionist states (Storey, 2024).

Constructivism: Identity, Norms, and the Absence of Trust

Constructivism shifts attention to the non-material determinants of state behaviour, arguing that identities, interests, and even definitions of security are socially constructed through interaction rather than materially determined (Wendt, 1992). In Southeast Asia, a shared history of colonialism and Cold War proxy conflict produced a deep collective commitment to state sovereignty and regime survival, which in turn gave rise to the "ASEAN Way," a diplomatic culture centred on informality, non-interference, and consensus (Acharya, 2021; Serey, 2021). Crucially, this identity was not merely inherited but actively constructed through ASEAN's founding process itself.

The 1967 Bangkok Declaration was signed not by heads of state but by foreign ministers (with Malaysia represented by its Deputy Prime Minister), a deliberately low-commitment,

reversible gesture reflecting the founders' caution after years of intra-regional distrust, most notably the Indonesia-Malaysia Confrontation. Tellingly, all five founding members, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand, were non-communist states informally aligned with the Western bloc, yet the organisation they created explicitly proclaimed neutrality through the 1971 Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) declaration. This tension between individual alignment and collective non-alignment reveals that hedging was not a later adaptation but a founding condition of ASEAN itself.

Equally significant is what ASEAN's founders chose not to build: a formal military alliance on the SEATO model. The Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (1954), dominated by external powers and widely regarded as ill-suited to the region, was abandoned in favour of an indigenous, non-military framework better able to manage intramural disputes without provoking Cold War entanglement. This distinction, between an alliance built for collective defence against an external enemy and a security community, in Deutsch's (1957) sense, built to prevent conflict among its own members, identifies as the conceptual foundation of ASEAN. The subsequent accession of Brunei (1984) and, following the Cold War's end, Vietnam (1995), Laos and Myanmar (1997), and Cambodia (1999) marked a further shift: from an anti-communist grouping toward an inclusive, pan-Southeast Asian community defined by norm-based coexistence rather than shared threat perception.

This genealogy matters because it explains, rather than merely describes, ASEAN's present predicament. A regionalism founded as a community of norms, not an alliance of collective defence, and one in which individual hedging toward external great powers was present from the outset, was never institutionally equipped to mount a unified response to alliance-based minilateral arrangements such as the Quad and AUKUS. It likewise explains the persistent divergence among ASEAN member states over the South China Sea: their positions reflect not a departure from ASEAN's founding logic, but its continuation.

Constructivism helps explain why ASEAN consistently favours dialogue over legal

adjudication: the relational process is valued above the substantive outcome. But the Constructivist diagnosis of ASEAN's weakness is equally damning. Member states lack what scholars call "generalised trust," both among themselves and in relation to external actors. Because no state is confident that others will prioritise collective regional security over bilateral economic ties with China, each clings to consensus rules as a defensive shield. This norm persistence privileges the status quo and allows China to engineer divisions through targeted economic incentives (Acharya, 2017; Serey, 2021).

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative document analysis design, chosen because the research questions concern state-level and institutional behaviour recorded in official statements, treaties, and incident data, rather than individual perceptions requiring direct engagement with informants (Bowen, 2009; Creswell, 2014). Data collection proceeded in three stages. First, peer-reviewed journal articles were purposively sampled from Scopus Q1 and Q2 indexed databases, using keyword combinations such as "ASEAN centrality," "South China Sea," "minilateralism," and "strategic hedging," restricted to publications between 2015 to 2025 to capture the most recent shifts in regional dynamics; articles were screened for direct relevance to the tripartite framework before inclusion. Second, primary and official documents were collected to triangulate scholarly interpretation with state practice, including the 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy, ASEAN Chairmanship statements issued by Malaysia (2025) and the Philippines (2026), and relevant joint communiques and declarations issued by ASEAN and its dialogue partners during the same period. Third, maritime incident data were drawn from the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, covering 2016 to 2026, to establish a chronological anchor of naval confrontations, coast guard standoffs, and related flashpoints in the South China Sea, against which shifts in state rhetoric and minilateral formation could be cross-referenced.

Analysis was conducted through theory-driven, deductive coding, following the qualitative

analysis framework of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014). An initial codebook was developed based on the three theoretical lenses employed in this study, namely regional order and dual hierarchy, strategic hedging, and constructivist identity and norms, with each lens generating indicative categories such as bilateral economic dependence, consensus deadlock, and minilateral hedging behaviour. Each empirical event identified in the collected documents, including naval confrontations, treaty negotiations, ASEAN summit outcomes, and minilateral formations such as the Quad and AUKUS, was coded against these categories to identify patterns of convergence or divergence between member states. Coded events were then sequenced chronologically and cross-referenced against the historical genealogy of ASEAN's founding norms, allowing the analysis to trace continuity or change in state behaviour over time rather than treating each event as an isolated data point. Source triangulation was applied throughout by cross-checking claims in scholarly literature against primary documents and incident-tracking data, reducing reliance on any single source type for the study's core arguments.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Gray-Zone Coercion and Escalation in the South China Sea (2016-2026)

The geopolitical landscape of the SCS changed substantially after the July 2016 PCA ruling, which invalidated China's nine-dash line claims under UNCLOS (Heydarian, 2020). Rather than complying, Beijing rejected the tribunal's authority and accelerated a strategy of "gray-zone coercion," deploying maritime militia, heavily armed coast guard vessels, and economic pressure below the threshold of conventional conflict to change facts on the water without triggering U.S. treaty obligations (Storey, 2026; Laksmana, 2019).

The period from 2020 to 2026 brought sharply escalating physical confrontations. China Coast Guard (CCG) patrols doubled at Scarborough Shoal; water cannons, military-grade lasers, and deliberate ramming became routine instruments of pressure against Philippine resupply missions and fishing craft (Storey, 2026; Suderio, 2025). Chinese harassment was not confined to the Philippines. The CCG monitored Vietnamese

fishing vessels in the Paracel Islands and disrupted energy exploration within the exclusive economic zones of Malaysia and Indonesia (AMTI, 2026). In response, claimant states accelerated their own military build-ups, generating a classic security dilemma: Vietnam undertook a major infrastructure programme across the Spratlys, including a 3.2-kilometre runway on Barque Canada Reef capable of operating combat aircraft (East Asia Forum, 2026), while China countered with expanded dredging in the Paracels (Defense News, 2026).

August 2025 marked a particularly significant escalation when a collision between CCG vessels and a Philippine coast guard ship near Scarborough Shoal prompted China to deploy Type 052D guided-missile destroyers to the immediate vicinity, a clear signal of willingness to accept substantially higher escalatory risk (East Asia Forum, 2025). In parallel, the United States integrated the Navy-Marine Expeditionary Ship Interdiction System (NMESIS) coastal-defence missiles into Exercise Balikatan 25 in the Batanes Islands, establishing a sea-denial capability along the First Island Chain (PACOM, 2025). Taken together, these developments confirm that the SCS has ceased to be a bounded territorial dispute and has become the physical expression of a broader hegemonic transition. Table 1 summarises these key confrontations and their strategic consequences across the 2016–2026 period.

Table 1. Major Maritime Confrontations and Gray-Zone Tactics (2016-2026)

Year	Location	Nature of Confrontation	Strategic Consequence
2016	Permanent Court of Arbitration	Ruling invalidates the nine-dash line under UNCLOS.	China rejects ruling; accelerates island-building and reef militarisation.
2020	Paracel Islands	CCG vessel rams and sinks Vietnamese fishing boat QNG 90617 TS.	Ramming against civilian vessels becomes a normalised CCG tactic.
2023	Second Thomas Shoal	CCG fires water cannons at Philippine	Philippines deepens U.S. alliance;

Year	Location	Nature of Confrontation	Strategic Consequence
		resupply mission to BRP Sierra Madre.	advocates joint minilateral patrols.
2025	Scarborough & Sabina Shoals	Maritime collisions; CCG deploys water cannons, lasers, and swarming tactics.	China deploys Type 052D destroyers; U.S. responds with NMESIS missiles in Batanes.
2025–2026	Spratlys (Barque Canada Reef)	Vietnam completes infrastructure build-up and 3.2 km runway.	Arms-race dynamic solidifies among secondary claimant states.

Neorealist Dynamics: The Rise of Minilateralism

ASEAN's demonstrated inability to generate credible security deterrence has accelerated a structural fragmentation of the regional architecture, consistent with Neorealist expectations that institutions matter only insofar as great powers find them useful (Hope Buenaventura, 2024). The most consequential development between 2021 and 2026 has been the proliferation of U.S.-led minilateral defence arrangements. The revitalised Quad and the AUKUS pact represent a deliberate shift toward hard balancing against China's maritime assertiveness (Vijaya, 2024). While these arrangements offer agility and advanced capability-sharing (including nuclear-powered submarine technology under AUKUS), they also present ASEAN with an existential challenge: by routing the region's core security business through exclusive groupings that exclude ASEAN, they effectively reduce the organisation to a peripheral role in the security domain (Bisley, 2024; Wilson Center, 2024).

Washington's 2025 and 2026 National Defense Strategies explicitly frame integrated deterrence and denial defence along the First Island Chain as the central operational objectives, focusing on bilateral and minilateral force integration with Japan, South Korea, Australia, and the Philippines (White House, 2025). This posture treats ASEAN multilateral forums as too slow and too susceptible to Chinese economic

influence to be operationally relevant. Although some Southeast Asian governments, particularly Vietnam, the Philippines, and Singapore, quietly welcome AUKUS and the Quad as necessary counterweights to Chinese dominance, the official ASEAN stance remains fractured and publicly ambivalent (Seah et al., 2022).

Institutional Paralysis: The AOIP and the Stalled Code of Conduct

In 2019 ASEAN launched the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) as an institutional response to the region's growing polarisation (ASEAN Secretariat, 2019). Grounded in Neoliberal Institutional logic, the AOIP emphasised inclusivity, economic cooperation, and respect for international law, deliberately avoiding the zero-sum framing of Washington's Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy (Lin, 2024). In practice, however, the AOIP has functioned more as a diplomatic statement than an operational instrument. Between 2024 and 2026, analysts consistently noted the absence of dedicated funding, meaningful enforcement mechanisms, or any capacity to shape hard security outcomes (Purnama & Rakhmat, 2026).

The Code of Conduct negotiations offer the clearest illustration of Neoliberal Institutionalism's limits in this context. Conceived as a legally binding successor to the non-binding 2002 DOC, formal COC talks began in 2018 but have stalled repeatedly on three fundamental disagreements. First, on geographic scope: China refuses to define specific maritime boundaries, preserving the strategic ambiguity of the nine-dash line, while claimant states demand UNCLOS-based delimitation (Storey, 2026). Second, on legal status: the Philippines and Vietnam insist on an enforceable treaty with third-party dispute resolution, whereas China prefers a non-binding political declaration relying on voluntary compliance (Storey, 2026). Third, on external power involvement: China seeks provisions that would give it an effective veto over joint exercises with extra-regional powers and restrict Western energy firms from operating in the SCS, terms that ASEAN members regard as incompatible with their sovereign foreign-policy prerogatives (Imperial, 2026). Under the Philippine ASEAN Chairmanship in 2026, negotiators claimed roughly 70 percent of the text had been agreed, but critics noted that the agreed portions comprised largely generic

language on environmental protection and search-and-rescue, while the substantively contested provisions remained unresolved (Purnama & Rakhmat, 2026). These unresolved points of contention are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. Contentious Issues in the ASEAN-China Code of Conduct Negotiations

Issue	ASEAN Claimants (PH, VN, MY)	China's Position	Prospect of Resolution (2026)
Geographic Scope	Must be defined strictly by UNCLOS EEZs	Rejects precise delimitation; seeks to preserve nine-dash line ambiguity	Extremely low. Delimitation implies sovereignty concessions
Legal Status	Legally binding treaty with third-party dispute settlement	Prefers a non-binding political declaration based on voluntary compliance	Low. China will not accept external legal constraints
Military Exercises	Sovereign right to conduct drills with any external partner	Demands effective veto over exercises involving extra-regional powers	Zero. ASEAN states regard this as surrendering foreign-policy autonomy
Resource Extraction	Open to Western firms in their respective EEZs	Insists only China and ASEAN states may participate in marine resource extraction	Very low. Restriction would undermine ASEAN states' economic interests

Constructivist Dynamics: The "ASEAN Way" as a Structural Liability

From a Constructivist standpoint, ASEAN's failure to manage the SCS crisis is not simply a political will problem but is embedded in the organisation's institutional DNA. The norms of absolute consensus and non-interference were designed to protect newly independent, post-colonial states with divergent political systems and were vital to ASEAN's early cohesion (Acharya, 2021). In the current context, however, these same norms grant any single economically dependent member state an effective veto over the collective voice of the

organisation, creating a structural opening for external manipulation (Laksmna, 2017).

This vulnerability was starkly demonstrated at the 2012 ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Cambodia, when Cambodian economic dependence on China led to the unprecedented failure to issue a joint communiqué, the first such failure in ASEAN's history (Serey, 2021). China has since systematically exploited what might be called the "consensus trap," using Belt and Road leverage to maintain reliable proxies, particularly Cambodia and Laos, that can be counted upon to block consensus on SCS-related language (Heydarian, 2020; Acharya, 2017).

The divergence between successive ASEAN Chairmanships further illustrates this fragmentation. Malaysia's 2025 Chairmanship prioritised quiet diplomacy to avoid antagonising Beijing while the Philippines' 2026 Chairmanship, guided by the theme "Navigating Our Future, Together," pressed hard for COC conclusion and the institutionalisation of joint maritime patrols (Imperial, 2026). That two consecutive chairs would adopt such contrasting approaches signals the depth of ASEAN's internal divisions and the absence of the generalised trust that collective security action requires (Serey, 2021).

Divergent Hedging and Alignment Behaviours

Unable to rely on ASEAN as a security provider, individual member states have pursued markedly different national strategies. The Philippines under President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. has moved toward assertive alignment, expanding EDCA basing agreements with the United States, deepening joint maritime patrols with Japan and Australia, and publicly documenting CCG provocations to build international accountability (Suderio, 2025). This trajectory reflects what Kuik (2016) terms "risk contingency" behaviour pushed to its hardest edge, driven by the tangible daily experience of CCG harassment. Malaysia and Indonesia have maintained traditional hedging postures, welcoming Chinese investment while conducting quiet security cooperation with the United States and incrementally upgrading their own asymmetric capabilities (Kuik, 2026). This "active neutrality" depends on preserving sufficient political space to avoid choosing sides, a space that is itself narrowing as Chinese

EEZ incursions in the Natuna Islands and Vanguard Bank become more frequent (AMTI, 2026).

Vietnam represents a distinctive case of asymmetric hedging, combining intensive bilateral diplomacy with China to manage tensions with a substantial internal balancing programme, including the Spratly build-up, alongside upgraded strategic partnerships with the United States, India, and Japan (Storey, 2026). Cambodia and Laos, meanwhile, have moved well beyond hedging into effective bandwagoning, allowing Chinese military access to Ream Naval Base and consistently acting as proxies in ASEAN deliberations to prevent consensus against Beijing (Serey, 2021; Patton & Sato, 2023). Table 3 presents a comparative typology of these divergent alignment strategies across ASEAN member states.

Table 3. Typology of ASEAN Member States' Strategic Alignment and Hedging Behaviours

State	Posture	Security Actions	Economic Alignment	SCS Threat Perception
Philippines	Hard Hedging	Deepening U.S. alliance; EDCA expansion; joint minilateral patrols	Reducing economic vulnerability to Chinese coercion while maintaining trade	Acute; highest frequency of violent incidents
Malaysia & Indonesia	Active Neutrality	Quiet military modernisation; no public confrontation	High reliance on Chinese FDI and BRI; vocal support for AOIP	Moderate; focus on resource protection in Natuna and Sabah waters
Vietnam	Asymmetric Hedging	Upgraded partnerships with U.S., India, Japan; major Spratly build-up	High economic integration with China managed through bilateral party diplomacy	High; informed by historical experience of conflict
Cambodia & Laos	Bandwagoning	Minimal Western ties; deep integration with PLA (e.g., Ream Naval Base)	Near-total reliance on Chinese BRI investment and political patronage	Negligible; serve as proxies to block ASEAN consensus against China

CONCLUSION

The trajectory of the South China Sea dispute over the past decade offers a sobering assessment of the limits of multilateral institutions in an era of resurgent great-power competition. The maritime domain of Southeast Asia has transitioned from a space theoretically governed by international law into a highly contested strategic arena, shaped by Chinese gray-zone pressure and an increasingly assertive U.S.-led minilateral network. ASEAN Centrality has not kept pace with this transformation.

The tripartite theoretical framework applied in this article reveals that ASEAN's institutional failure is structural rather than merely political. The organisation lacks the material capabilities to deter physical aggression; its institutional regimes, most notably the DOC and the stalled COC, lack the enforcement mechanisms needed to bind a major power; and its consensus-based diplomatic culture actively prevents the formation of the collective trust that genuine security cooperation requires. In combination, these weaknesses render ASEAN systematically vulnerable to external manipulation.

China's strategic use of economic leverage has turned ASEAN's consensus principle into a reliable mechanism for gridlock. The COC negotiations serve less as a genuine peace process than as a diplomatic facade that provides Beijing with the cover and the time needed to consolidate its position on the water. In response, capable member states and external powers have largely abandoned the ASEAN multilateral framework in favour of more agile, capability-driven arrangements, which in turn further marginalises the organisation.

Looking ahead to the ASEAN Community Vision 2045, the organisation faces a genuine choice. If it continues to privilege diplomatic process over substantive security outcomes, relying on consensus statements while member states independently pursue divergent survival strategies, it risks becoming irrelevant in precisely the domain that defines regional order. Retaining real centrality will require reforming the consensus model, perhaps through "ASEAN Minus X" flexibility on security matters, institutionalising maritime domain awareness among willing claimant states, and building a

more unified negotiating position vis-a-vis external coercion. Without those changes, ASEAN Centrality will remain what it has increasingly become: a statement of intent rather than a description of how power actually operates in Southeast Asia.

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