

Research Paper

## ASEAN at the Crossroads of US-China Rivalry: The Role of Majority Voting and the Introduction of a Permanent Secretary-General

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**Abstract:** This paper examines ASEAN's need for structural reform amidst the US-China rivalry, highlighting the limitations of its consensus approach during crises. It proposes majority voting as an emergency measure and advocates for a Permanent Secretary-General position, ensuring consistent leadership. The analysis balances the benefits and challenges of these reforms, emphasizing the necessity for ASEAN to evolve while maintaining its core values, ensuring relevance and unity in addressing major geopolitical challenges.

**Keywords:** ASEAN Consensus Mechanism, Discourse Analysis, Non-Interference Policy, Policy Reform, Regional Conflicts.



## 1. Introduction

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) stands at a pivotal juncture in its history. As the geopolitical landscape of the region undergoes rapid transformation, primarily driven by the escalating tensions between global superpowers like the United States and China, ASEAN's traditional mechanisms of decision-making and conflict resolution are being tested like never before. The South China Sea dispute, while a significant flashpoint, is but one of the myriad challenges that underscore the need for ASEAN to introspect and reform.

## 2. Literature Review

The "ASEAN Way," characterized by principles of consultation, consensus, and non-interference, has long been the bedrock of the organization's approach to regional cooperation and diplomacy. However, the intensity of today's geopolitical tensions, especially between the United States and China, has driven major powers to invest more in minilateral coalitions than in ASEAN institutions to advance their strategic goals [1]. This shift poses a risk of sidelining ASEAN and undermining its centrality in regional affairs.

Furthermore, the consensus-based approach, while fostering unity in less contentious times, now runs the risk of causing fragmentation during critical geopolitical events. In scenarios where ASEAN member states are forced to choose sides in the US-China rivalry, a fragmented response could weaken the organization's collective stance and diminish its influence on the global stage.

The stakes are high. ASEAN's relevance, unity, and effectiveness in navigating these challenges will determine its role in shaping the future of the region. This paper aims to explore the pressing need for ASEAN reforms, emphasizing the importance of a united front in the face of major geopolitical challenges and proposing measures to ensure the organization's continued significance in the evolving international order.

## 3. Methodology

In this study, we employ discourse analysis to critically examine the ASEAN Way, its policies, and their respective strengths and weaknesses. Our approach involves a thorough examination of narratives, language, and communication as presented in ASEAN's official documents, member state communications, and relevant academic literature. Primary sources for this analysis include ASEAN communiqués, policy documents, official statements, and resolutions, providing direct insights into the organization's policy approaches and decision-making processes. Additionally, secondary sources such as academic journal articles, books, and expert analyses offer critical perspectives and contextual background, essential for a comprehensive understanding.

The methodology centers around an in-depth narrative examination, where we analyze the narratives constructed in ASEAN documents and literature to understand the framing of policies and decision-making processes. A critical look at the language used in ASEAN communications helps uncover underlying assumptions, ideologies, and power dynamics. This analysis extends to identifying and assessing the strengths and weaknesses of ASEAN policies as portrayed in the discourse, particularly focusing on how the consensus mechanism is discussed in the context of regional conflicts and challenges.

A comparative analysis approach is also employed, comparing the discourse across different sources and over time to understand the evolution of the ASEAN Way and its impact on policy effectiveness. The analytical framework includes thematic analysis, where themes related to consensus, non-interference, regional stability, and conflict resolution are identified and analyzed across different sources. This is complemented by contextualization, placing the findings within the broader geopolitical and historical context of Southeast Asia, and a critical evaluation, where the effectiveness of the ASEAN Way and consensus voting in addressing regional challenges is scrutinized.

The expected outcomes of this methodology are a nuanced understanding of the ASEAN Way and its decision-making processes, insights into the strengths and limitations of ASEAN policies in managing regional disputes and challenges, and recommendations for policy reform or enhancement within ASEAN based on the analysis.

## 4. Finding and Discussion

### 4.1. The Evolving Landscape of ASEAN Challenges

The South China Sea has emerged as a significant flashpoint in the geopolitical landscape, particularly in the context of the escalating rivalry between the United States and China. China's newfound assertiveness in this maritime region has been attributed to various factors, including the growth of its military power, heightened nationalism, and its perception of triumphalism following the Western financial crisis [2]. This assertiveness has been met with concern by other littoral states of the South China Sea, who are troubled by the opacity of Chinese politics and the seemingly fragmented control over its maritime forces.

The South China Sea is not just a matter of territorial disputes; it represents a convergence of sovereignty concerns and economic interests, particularly in the realm of oil and natural gas [3]. The situation creates a flashpoint with significant policy implications for the U.S., Japan, and other Asian nations. The U.S.-China rivalry in this region has been further complicated by a delicate power balance, giving each side a sense of conviction to prevail, despite the challenges of building alliance systems and navigating ideological differences [4].

Furthermore, the South China Sea dispute underscores the need for ASEAN to adapt and evolve. The organization's traditional mechanisms, while facilitating peaceful interactions and cooperation among member states, are now facing scrutiny in the face of these contemporary challenges [5]. The increasing competition between the US and China places ASEAN in a delicate position. A united stance on the South China Sea issue is crucial for ASEAN to maintain its centrality and relevance in the evolving regional order [6].

In addition to the geopolitical tensions, ASEAN faces other challenges, including economic disparities and integration hurdles within its community [6]. Environmental concerns, such as climate change and natural disasters, further compound the regional impact, necessitating a coordinated response [7]. Regional health crises, like pandemics, underscore the need for a unified and effective strategy to safeguard the well-being of the ASEAN populace.

#### **4.2. The "ASEAN Way": Its Strengths and Limitations**

The "ASEAN Way" stands as a distinctive approach to regional cooperation, characterized by its unwavering commitment to consultation, consensus, and non-interference. This approach fosters a sense of harmony and unity among the member states, ensuring that decisions are made collectively and with the consent of all parties involved [8]. However, while this method has been instrumental in maintaining stability and cooperation within the region, it is not without its limitations.

In situations of emergency or during major geopolitical events, such as the US-China rivalry, the consensus-based system of the "ASEAN Way" can pose significant risks. The requirement for unanimous agreement among all member states can lead to indecision or inaction, particularly when swift and decisive action is needed [9]. This potential for fragmentation in critical moments highlights a vulnerability in the ASEAN decision-making process, underscoring the need for a more agile and responsive mechanism to address urgent issues.

Furthermore, the "ASEAN Way" often prioritizes international issues over domestic ones, respecting the sovereignty of each member state and ensuring that their internal affairs remain under their control. This approach fosters trust and cooperation among the member states, as they can be assured that their domestic policies and decisions will not be interfered with [10]. However, this focus on international affairs can sometimes lead to a neglect of pressing local issues and challenges, as the organization may be too preoccupied with regional and global concerns to address domestic matters effectively [11].

The evolving landscape of regional and global politics necessitates an urgent evolution of the "ASEAN Way." The experiences of other regional organizations, such as the European Union, demonstrate the potential benefits of institutional evolution and adaptation in response to changing circumstances [12]. Regional organizations play a crucial role in promoting governance standards and fostering regional order, and ASEAN must be prepared to evolve and adapt to continue playing this pivotal role effectively [13].

Therefore, while the "ASEAN Way" has served the organization well in fostering unity and cooperation, the changing geopolitical context and the emergence of new challenges highlight the need for evolution and adaptation. The organization must find a balance between maintaining its foundational principles and adopting more agile and responsive decision-making processes to ensure its continued relevance and effectiveness in the region.

### 4.3. Proposed ASEAN Reforms

#### • **Majority Voting as Stop-Gap Measures in ASEAN**

Since its inception, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has steadfastly adhered to a consensus-based decision-making process, necessitating unanimous agreement among all member states for any decision to be finalized. This approach has cultivated a strong sense of unity and cooperation across the member states, fostering a collaborative environment that is unique to ASEAN [5]. However, this method of decision-making is not without its challenges, particularly in times of crisis or when quick, decisive action is imperative.

The geopolitical landscape in which ASEAN operates is constantly shifting, with issues such as the US-China rivalry in the South China Sea highlighting the complex and urgent nature of the challenges faced by the organization. In such situations, the consensus-based model can lead to indecision or inaction, as the need for unanimous agreement among all member states can be a significant hindrance to swift decision-making [5]. This is especially concerning when the stability of the region is at risk, underscoring the need for a more agile and responsive decision-making process.

Recognizing these challenges, there is a growing call for reform within ASEAN, specifically the introduction of majority voting as a stop-gap measure during crises. This proposed reform aims to enable ASEAN to make decisions based on a majority vote, ensuring quicker responses in emergency situations [14]. The advantages of this approach are manifold. It facilitates swift decision-making, crucial in times of crisis when delays can have significant repercussions. It also helps to prevent deadlocks in the decision-making process, ensuring that a single member state or a small group of member states cannot stall progress or block decisions, even when there is wide support across the organization [15]. Furthermore, by setting the threshold for majority voting at 70%, decisions made under this system would still reflect a broad consensus among member states, preserving the spirit of unity that is central to ASEAN [16].

However, this proposed reform is not without its disadvantages. Introducing majority voting, even as a temporary measure, could potentially undermine the consensus principle that has been a foundational element of ASEAN since its establishment. There is also a risk of alienating member states whose positions do not align with the majority, which could lead to divisions within the organization (Guan, 2014). Additionally, determining the appropriate threshold for majority voting is a contentious issue, with the need to strike a balance between ensuring broad agreement and preventing decision-making paralysis [17].

Therefore, while the consensus-based approach has served ASEAN well in fostering unity and cooperation, the changing geopolitical context and the need for timely and effective decision-making in crises necessitate a reevaluation of this approach. The introduction of majority voting as a stop-gap measure presents a potential solution, balancing the need for swift action in emergencies with the preservation of ASEAN's foundational principles. However, careful consideration must be given to the potential disadvantages and challenges associated with this reform to ensure that it strengthens, rather than undermines, the organization's effectiveness and cohesion.

#### • **Why Stop-Gap and Not Permanent?**

While the challenges posed by the consensus model are evident, it's also essential to respect the "ASEAN Way," which emphasizes non-interference, consensus, and unity. Making majority voting a permanent feature might be seen as a departure from these principles. By introducing it as a stop-gap measure, ASEAN can strike a balance between being responsive in emergencies and staying true to its foundational principles. Furthermore, by limiting its use to international issues (especially those involving non-ASEAN members), the organization ensures that this measure is not used to interfere in the domestic affairs of member states, respecting their sovereignty [18].

Overall, while the majority voting stop-gap measure presents a departure from the traditional consensus model, it might be a necessary evolution for ASEAN in the face of contemporary challenges. By carefully delineating the circumstances under which it can be invoked and setting a high threshold, ASEAN can ensure that this reform enhances its effectiveness without compromising its core values.

#### • **Permanent Secretariat General Position in ASEAN**

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), since its establishment, has played a pivotal role in fostering a sense of cooperation and unity among its member states, contributing significantly to regional stability and development. However, the organization's structural framework and decision-

making processes have faced criticism for their informal nature and lack of sustained continuity. The ASEAN Secretariat, situated in Jakarta since 1976, serves as the central coordinating body for the organization's various activities. Despite its central role, the Secretariat's functions are primarily administrative, and it does not possess the executive powers that are characteristic of other regional organizations, limiting its ability to effectively implement policies and respond to challenges [19].

In light of the rapidly evolving geopolitical landscape and the myriad of challenges that the region is confronted with, there is a pressing need for ASEAN to reassess and strengthen its leadership structure. The establishment of a permanent Secretariat General position stands out as a viable solution to address these challenges. Such a position would ensure a consistent and authoritative leadership voice within the organization, enhancing ASEAN's capacity to effectively implement its policies and initiatives, and enabling a more agile response to emerging regional challenges [20].

To further bolster the effectiveness of this proposed reform, the consideration of a co-Secretariat General model, encompassing both a permanent and a rotating Secretariat General, could be explored. This hybrid model aims to strike a balance between ensuring leadership continuity and maintaining equitable representation of all member states. The permanent Secretariat General would provide stability and consistency in leadership, while the rotating Secretariat General would ensure that all member states have an opportunity to contribute to and influence the organization's direction and policies. This dual approach would not only enhance the effectiveness of ASEAN's decision-making processes but also uphold the principles of inclusivity and equal representation that are central to the organization's ethos.

Therefore, the introduction of a permanent Secretariat General position, potentially complemented by a co-Secretariat General model, represents a strategic evolution in ASEAN's organizational structure. This reform is crucial for ensuring that ASEAN remains well-equipped to navigate the complexities of the contemporary geopolitical environment, uphold its commitment to regional cooperation and development, and continue to play a vital role in shaping the future of Southeast Asia.

It is also worth noting that the introduction of a permanent Secretariat General within ASEAN brings with it a myriad of advantages and disadvantages that warrant careful consideration. On the one hand, the stability and continuity provided by a permanent Secretariat General are invaluable, ensuring a consistent leadership presence and oversight of ASEAN's activities. This continuity is crucial for maintaining the momentum of ongoing initiatives and for providing a steady hand during times of uncertainty or crisis [21]. Furthermore, the permanency of the position allows for the accumulation and retention of institutional memory, ensuring that valuable lessons from the past are not lost and that the organization can continue to build upon its previous successes.

In addition to these benefits, a permanent Secretariat General has the potential to enhance the overall efficiency of ASEAN's decision-making processes. With a dedicated individual or team at the helm, there is a greater opportunity for streamlined and coherent policy development and implementation, ensuring that the organization is well-positioned to respond swiftly and effectively to emerging regional challenges [20].

Despite these advantages, there are also notable disadvantages associated with the establishment of a permanent Secretariat General. One such concern is the potential for increased bureaucracy, which could inadvertently slow down decision-making processes and hinder the organization's ability to respond to urgent matters in a timely manner [20]. Additionally, the neutrality of the Secretariat General could come into question, particularly if the position wields significant power. There is a risk that certain member states or external powers could unduly influence the Secretariat General, potentially compromising the impartiality and effectiveness of ASEAN's decision-making processes [22].

The question of resource allocation also presents a challenge, as the establishment and maintenance of a permanent Secretariat General position would undoubtedly require substantial financial and human resources. Member states would need to reach a consensus on how to fund this position, and disagreements over resource allocation could potentially lead to tensions within the organization.

In summary, while the introduction of a permanent Secretariat General in ASEAN offers numerous benefits in terms of stability, institutional memory, and efficiency, it is not without its challenges. Concerns regarding potential bureaucracy, neutrality issues, and resource allocation need to be carefully addressed to ensure that the advantages of this reform are fully realized and that ASEAN continues to thrive as a regional organization.

- **Why a Permanent Secretariat General Position?**

ASEAN is at a critical juncture. The challenges it faces, from geopolitical tensions to economic disparities and environmental concerns, require a more robust organizational structure. A permanent Secretariat General position can provide the leadership continuity that ASEAN needs to navigate these challenges effectively. While the "ASEAN Way" emphasizes non-interference and consensus, the organization also needs to evolve to address the contemporary challenges it faces. A permanent Secretariat General, while respecting the principles of the "ASEAN Way," can ensure that the organization remains relevant and effective in the changing geopolitical landscape [23].

In conclusion, introducing a permanent Secretariat General position in ASEAN can enhance the organization's efficiency, effectiveness, and responsiveness. While there are challenges associated with this reform, they can be managed with careful planning and by ensuring that the Secretariat General remains neutral and is accountable to all member states.

- **Permanent Representatives in ASEAN Linked to the Permanent Secretariat General Position**

The current structure of ASEAN, with its reliance on rotating chairmanship and representation, has served the organization well in ensuring equitable participation from all member states. However, the changing geopolitical dynamics and the complexity of regional challenges necessitate a reevaluation of this representation mechanism [20]. The rotating system, while democratic, may not provide the continuity and consistency required to effectively address long-term and complex regional issues. Furthermore, the increasing prominence of ASEAN on the global stage demands representatives who possess a deep understanding of multilateral negotiations and can articulate the collective positions of the member states with clarity and conviction [24].

In light of these considerations, the introduction of permanent representatives, in conjunction with a Permanent Secretariat General, emerges as a viable reform. This structural adjustment would ensure continuous representation of each member state within ASEAN, providing a stable and consistent voice in the organization's deliberations and decision-making processes. These permanent representatives would play a crucial role in the governance of ASEAN, participating actively in policy formulation and also in the election of key positions, such as the Permanent Secretariat General [25].

The benefits of this reform are manifold. Permanent representatives would enhance ASEAN's capacity to present a unified and coherent stance in various international forums, ensuring that the interests and perspectives of all member states are adequately represented [24]. These representatives typically possess specialized skills that are particularly valuable in multilateral settings, further contributing to ASEAN's effectiveness on the global stage. Moreover, the consistency provided by permanent representation ensures that the interests of member states remain a central focus in ASEAN's activities, regardless of changes in the regional or global context [20].

However, this reform is not without its challenges. The enhanced rights and privileges of permanent representatives could potentially pose a threat to the organization, particularly if their actions diverge from the collective interests of ASEAN. Additionally, there is a risk that these representatives may become overly detached from their home countries over time, leading to decisions that do not align with the national interests of the member states they represent [26].

With this in mind, the potential of the introduction of permanent representatives in ASEAN, linked to a Permanent Secretariat General, presents a strategic opportunity to enhance the organization's representation and governance mechanisms. While careful consideration must be given to the potential challenges and risks associated with this reform, the benefits in terms of enhanced representation, skill specialization, and consistency make it a promising avenue for strengthening ASEAN's role and effectiveness in the regional and global arena.

Link to the Permanent Secretariat General: The introduction of permanent representatives is intrinsically linked to the establishment of a Permanent Secretariat General position. Their consistent presence and deep understanding of ASEAN's workings would ensure that the election process for the Permanent Secretariat General is informed, transparent, and in line with the collective interests of the member states [25].

In conclusion, the introduction of permanent representatives, in tandem with the Permanent Secretariat General, can provide ASEAN with the consistency and expertise it needs to navigate the complex geopolitical landscape. While there are challenges associated with this reform, with careful

planning and clear guidelines, it can significantly enhance ASEAN's representation and decision-making capabilities.

- **Representatives Elected by Election Cycle of Their Representative Country**

The traditional mechanism of rotating chairmanship and representation in ASEAN has ensured that all member states have an equal opportunity to lead and voice their concerns within the organization. However, the evolving geopolitical landscape and increasing complexities of regional challenges necessitate a more consistent and democratically legitimate representation mechanism [20].

The current situation, where representatives are not necessarily aligned with their home country's political cycle, can lead to a misalignment between the representative's position and the prevailing political climate in their country. This misalignment can hinder the effectiveness of ASEAN's decision-making processes and its ability to respond to regional challenges.

To address this issue, it is proposed that ASEAN aligns the election of its representatives with the election cycles of their respective home countries. This alignment would ensure that the representatives are in tune with the current political sentiments and policies of their countries, enhancing their effectiveness in representing their nation's interests within ASEAN. This approach would also increase the democratic legitimacy of the representation, as the representatives would be more closely aligned with the electoral mandates of their home countries [27].

The benefits of this approach are numerous. It would enhance the democratic legitimacy of ASEAN's representation, ensuring that the representatives are truly representative of their home countries' political climates. It would also ensure that the representatives are in sync with the current policies and priorities of their home countries, making their representation more effective and relevant. Additionally, this approach could lead to increased voter turnout in regional elections, as the electorate may feel a stronger connection to the regional representative if they are elected in line with their home country's political cycle [28].

However, this approach is not without its challenges. Aligning the election of representatives with national election cycles could lead to fragmented election schedules, potentially causing logistical challenges [29]. There is also a risk of increased political interference in the representative's decisions, especially if their home country's government changes during their term [29]. Additionally, in regions with complex territorial structures, the pattern of subordination of regional elections could be disrupted by territorially specific influences [30].

Therefore, aligning the election of ASEAN representatives with their home country's election cycle presents a promising approach to enhancing the democratic legitimacy and effectiveness of ASEAN's representation. While there are challenges associated with this approach, careful planning and clear guidelines can mitigate these challenges, leading to a more representative and effective ASEAN.

- **Implications of the Proposed Reforms**

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has long been a cornerstone of regional cooperation and stability in Southeast Asia. Its foundational mechanisms, deeply rooted in the "ASEAN Way," have prioritized consultation, consensus, and non-interference [20]. However, the contemporary geopolitical milieu, characterized by rapid shifts and emergent regional challenges, necessitates a critical reevaluation of these time-honored mechanisms.

The exigencies of the present regional context, marked by heightened geopolitical tensions, pronounced economic disparities, and pressing environmental concerns, underscore the imperative for ASEAN to recalibrate its operational modalities to be nimbler and more responsive. The suite of reforms proposed herein seeks to augment ASEAN's decision-making acumen while concurrently preserving its foundational ethos [31].

Central to these reforms is the enhancement of ASEAN's decision-making capabilities. By introducing mechanisms such as majority voting as a stop-gap measure, instituting a permanent Secretariat General, and endorsing the role of permanent representatives, the decision-making processes within ASEAN are poised to become more streamlined and agile, thereby enabling a more prompt and efficacious response to regional challenges [20].

Yet, it is imperative to note that these reforms are not a departure from the "ASEAN Way" but rather an evolution. The emphasis on international challenges and the circumscribed use of the majority voting mechanism as a stop-gap measure are reflective of a conscious effort to respect and uphold the foundational principles of ASEAN. This delicate balance ensures that while ASEAN is

poised to evolve and adapt to the exigencies of the contemporary world, it remains firmly anchored in its traditions [32].

Furthermore, the unity and cohesiveness of ASEAN are paramount, especially in the face of potential fragmentation during geopolitical crises, such as the ongoing US-China rivalry. A united front not only amplifies ASEAN's voice on the global stage but also fortifies its position to safeguard the collective interests of its member states [19]. With these reforms, ASEAN is not only poised to enhance its decision-making capabilities but also to bolster its global influence, ensuring that the region's interests are robustly represented in global geopolitics [33].

In summation, the reforms proposed are not merely reactionary measures but a proactive strategy designed to equip ASEAN with the requisite tools to adeptly navigate the multifaceted challenges of the 21st century. While the path of change is invariably fraught with challenges, these reforms endeavor to harmonize evolution with tradition, ensuring that ASEAN continues to thrive as a formidable and influential regional organization.

#### • Recommendations and Implementation Strategies

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has played a pivotal role in fostering cooperation and unity among its member states. However, the rapidly changing geopolitical landscape and the increasing complexity of regional challenges necessitate a reevaluation and strengthening of ASEAN's institutional framework. This paper outlines key recommendations and implementation strategies aimed at enhancing ASEAN's effectiveness, responsiveness, and influence in the regional and global arena.

Firstly, there is a pressing need for clear guidelines regarding the activation of emergency measures within ASEAN. A comprehensive document should be developed, detailing the circumstances under which emergency measures can be activated, the procedures to be followed, and the roles and responsibilities of various stakeholders. The criteria for what constitutes an "emergency" should be clearly defined, taking into account potential geopolitical tensions, natural disasters, and pandemics [34]. A designated committee or role, potentially the Permanent Secretary-General, should be responsible for declaring an emergency based on these predefined criteria [35]. Additionally, the guidelines should specify the duration of the emergency measures, include provisions for periodic reviews to assess the necessity of continuing these measures, and outline a communication strategy to ensure all member states are promptly and adequately informed.

Secondly, regular reviews and assessments of the Permanent Secretary-General and Representatives are crucial to ensure their continued relevance and effectiveness. A periodic review process, conducted biennially by a committee comprising representatives from each member state, should be established. Clear performance metrics should be developed, and a feedback mechanism should be put in place to allow member states to provide input on the performance of the Permanent Secretary-General and Representatives. This process will ensure accountability, transparency, and the continuous improvement of ASEAN's leadership.

Thirdly, ASEAN's diplomatic channels need to be strengthened to enhance its negotiation and conflict resolution capabilities. Regular training sessions for diplomats and representatives should be organized to equip them with the latest negotiation techniques and conflict resolution strategies [36]. A dedicated mediation mechanism should be established within ASEAN to address disputes between member states or with external entities [37]. Efforts should also be made to foster stronger diplomatic ties with major global players and regional organizations through regular diplomatic engagements, joint exercises, and collaborative projects. Additionally, a centralized platform for information sharing should be created to ensure a coordinated response to potential threats, disputes, or conflicts, and to prevent isolated decision-making [38].

In conclusion, by adopting these recommendations and associated implementation strategies, ASEAN can fortify its institutional framework, ensuring that it remains agile, responsive, and influential in addressing the multifaceted challenges of the contemporary regional landscape. These reforms will not only enhance ASEAN's internal cohesion and effectiveness but also strengthen its position as a key player in the global arena. By adopting these recommendations and associated implementation strategies, ASEAN can fortify its institutional framework, ensuring it remains agile, responsive, and influential in addressing the multifaceted challenges of the contemporary regional landscape.



## 5. Conclusion

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) finds itself at a critical crossroads, facing the imperative to evolve in response to the rapidly changing global landscape. The organization's longstanding traditions and practices, encapsulated in the "ASEAN Way," are being rigorously tested in the face of new challenges and the shifting dynamics of international relations [19]. The increasing assertiveness of major global powers, particularly evident in the South China Sea disputes, highlights the urgent need for ASEAN to reassess and strengthen its institutional mechanisms [7].

While ASEAN has achieved notable success in fostering economic integration among its member states, this progress has also exposed underlying disparities and challenges that require urgent attention [6]. Furthermore, the organization's normative practices, which have been a source of strength in the developing world, are now under scrutiny as they grapple with contemporary challenges [39]. The "ASEAN Way," with its emphasis on consultation, consensus, and non-interference, has facilitated peaceful cooperation among member states, but it has also faced criticism for its perceived inflexibility and slow response to crises [5].

In this context, the proposed reforms are crucial for ensuring that ASEAN remains relevant, united, and effective, particularly during critical geopolitical events. The introduction of a majority voting mechanism as a stop-gap measure, the establishment of a Permanent Secretary-General position, and the alignment of representative elections with their home country's election cycle are all aimed at enhancing ASEAN's decision-making capabilities and responsiveness.

Importantly, these reforms also address the need for ASEAN to present a united front in the face of the US-China rivalry, ensuring that the organization is not sidelined or fragmented by external pressures. By bolstering its internal cohesion and decision-making processes, ASEAN can better navigate the complexities of this rivalry, safeguarding the interests of its member states and maintaining regional stability.

As ASEAN considers these reforms, it is crucial to find a balance between embracing necessary changes and preserving the core principles that have defined the organization for decades. The challenge lies in modernizing ASEAN's institutions while remaining true to the spirit of the "ASEAN Way" [40]. The future of ASEAN depends on its ability to adapt, stay united, and effectively address both intra-regional and global challenges.

In conclusion, the path forward for ASEAN requires a collective commitment to reform and adaptability, ensuring that the organization remains a pivotal force in shaping the future of Southeast Asia. Through unity, foresight, and a willingness to evolve, ASEAN can continue to play a central role in navigating the complexities of the 21st century and upholding the prosperity and stability of the region.

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