

Navigating Asymmetric Interdependence: A Neoliberal Institutional Perspective on ASEAN-China Ties

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Abstract— In the dynamic geopolitical landscape of Southeast Asia, the relationship between ASEAN and China has emerged as a pivotal strategic partnership. This paper analyzes how ASEAN manages the asymmetric interdependence stemming from disparities in economic and political power, addressing the central research question: How can ASEAN effectively navigate this relationship through regional institutions? This topic is significant as it reveals the diplomatic strategies ASEAN employs in the face of uneven power dynamics. The study examines key mechanisms, such as ASEAN+3, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which have been underexplored in addressing asymmetric interdependence. Using a qualitative research approach grounded in liberal institutionalism theory, the analysis is based on secondary data from policy documents and relevant literature. Findings indicate that these institutions are vital in establishing norms and frameworks that enhance interaction between ASEAN and China while minimizing conflict risks. Additionally, ASEAN's use of soft power diplomacy is discussed in shaping China's regional behavior, emphasizing principles such as ASEAN centrality and peaceful dispute resolution. The conclusion highlights that strengthening regional institutions enables ASEAN to better manage its relationship with China despite asymmetric interdependence. This research illustrates that diplomatic strategies and multilateral cooperation are essential for promoting stability and collaboration in Southeast Asia.

Keywords— Asymmetric Interdependence, ASEAN-China Relations, Neoliberal Institutionalism.

I. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between ASEAN and China has indeed evolved significantly over the past few decades, marked by an increasing asymmetric dependency that emphasizes shifts in the geopolitical and geoeconomic landscape in Southeast Asia. Economically, ASEAN countries are increasingly linked to China's vast and rapidly growing market. This interdependence is largely driven by China's large direct investment and increased bilateral trade, which is further supported by large-scale infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

As a result, the economic growth and stability of many ASEAN countries are now closely related to China's economic health. This economic dependence is evident from trade and investment data. China has become ASEAN's largest trading partner, with bilateral trade volumes reaching significant figures every year. In addition, the BRI has resulted in a significant increase in China's

greenfield Foreign Direct Investment (GFDI) in ASEAN countries, particularly in sectors related to infrastructure and connectivity, reflecting strong diplomatic relations and a favorable regulatory environment in those host countries (Tritto et al., 2022).

On the other hand, infrastructure development facilitated by BRI is crucial in enhancing connectivity and trade between China and ASEAN, such as high-speed trains and ports in various ASEAN countries (Shen, 2023) The interconnectivity of this infrastructure is important for regional economic integration, as it can address the historical infrastructure deficit that has hindered trade and investment flows (Park, 2022) Collectively, ASEAN countries have adopted a neoliberal institutional approach in their relations with China, through regular engagement and interaction ASEAN hopes that this engagement process will persuade China to respect ASEAN norms and view ASEAN in a more cooperative context.

Furthermore, China's political and security influence in the region continues to strengthen This is evident from China's active role in regional forums, its diplomatic support for several regimes in Southeast Asia, and its increasingly assertive presence in the South China Sea. This situation creates a dilemma for ASEAN countries in balancing their economic interests with the need to maintain political autonomy and security This asymmetric dependence also affects ASEAN's cohesion as a regional bloc, with some member states showing a tendency to get closer to China, while others strive to maintain strategic distance as a form of balance (Wrobel, 2019)

The strategic competition between the US and China is further complicating this scenario, as ASEAN countries are pressured to align with one of the major powers, challenging the longstanding principle of ASEAN Centrality in regional diplomacy (Tan, 2020) The complexity of these relationships reflects the challenges ASEAN faces in navigating a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape, where China's role as a regional and global power continues to grow.

Therefore, this article will explore how ASEAN, as a regional institution, seeks to mitigate imbalances in its relationship with China through institutional mechanisms and norms developed over the years, using the perspective of institutional neoliberalism as a theoretical framework.

Conceptualization of ASEAN-CHINA Asymmetric Interdependence

Asymmetric interdependence, a concept introduced by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye in *Power and Interdependence* (1977), has become a relevant concept for understanding the dynamics of contemporary international relations, particularly in the context of ASEAN-China relations This concept describes a situation where actors in the international system are interdependent, but at unequal levels, leading to power imbalances and potential conflicts.

Asymmetric dependence is defined as the condition in which two or more actors in international relations have different levels of dependence on each other, resulting in uneven distribution of power and influence According to Keohane and Nye, the main characteristics of asymmetric dependence include: (1) sensitivity, which refers to how quickly changes in one country affect another country, and (2) vulnerability, which pertains to a country's ability to bear the costs arising from changes in that relationship (Keohane & Nye, 1977).

In the context of ASEAN-China, asymmetric dependence becomes highly relevant Evelyn Goh, in her book *The Struggle for Order: Hegemony, Hierarchy, and Transition in Post-Cold War East Asia* (2013), describes how China, with its significantly larger economy and military power, holds significant leverage over ASEAN countries Goh highlights that although ASEAN is important to China as a trading partner and geopolitical buffer, China's level of dependence on ASEAN is relatively lower ASEAN's adherence to the ASEAN Way principles is less appealing to China because ASEAN does not have many material incentives to offer to China, thus making any change unlikely (Ba, 2006).

The economic and trade relations between China and ASEAN have indeed developed rapidly since the formal dialogue in 1991 and the establishment of the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area (FTA) in 2010 This has significantly increased bilateral trade volume, especially through infrastructure improvements based on initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the ASEAN Connectivity Master Plan (Shen, 2023).

On behalf of ASEAN, interactions have greatly helped alleviate some past suspicions and define its relationship with China. Although significant challenges still exist and deeper trust is not yet guaranteed, developments indicate that a decade of cooperation has yielded a stabilization of expectations. Furthermore, some shared understanding regarding the roles of each party and a newfound appreciation for their relationship have been achieved.

Furthermore, despite fundamental differences on certain issues, there was an increase in consensus regarding security matters in East Asia and the Asia-Pacific during the 1990s. At least there was agreement on the best approach to addressing these questions. According to Yuan Foong Khong, achievements like this are more crucial for the long-term stability of the regional order compared to most cooperative efforts that make headlines (Khong, 1997).

II. RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with a literature study method to analyze ASEAN-China relations through institutional neoliberal theory. The selection of this method is based on the need to conduct an in-depth analysis of various relevant literature sources, build a solid theoretical foundation, and enable a comprehensive understanding of historical and contemporary developments in the dynamics of ASEAN-China relations.

The data collection process is carried out through systematic tracing of various secondary sources, including academic journal articles from leading databases, textbooks and monographs, official reports from ASEAN and the Chinese government, as well as news articles and analysis from credible mass media and international think tanks. Inclusion criteria for the sources used include relevance to the topic, actuality (published in the last 15 years, except for significant classical sources), and the credibility of the author or institution in the field of international relations and Southeast Asian studies.

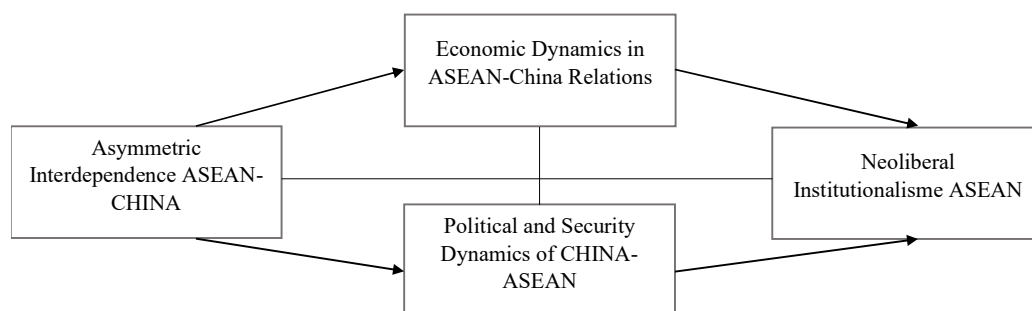


Figure 1. *Brainstorming*

III. RESULT

A. *Economic Dynamics in ASEAN-China Relations*

Since the establishment of the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area (ACFTA) in 2010, the trade volume between the two parties has significantly increased. According to data from the ASEAN Secretariat (2021), China has been ASEAN's largest trading partner for 12 consecutive years, with a total trade reaching \$731.9 billion in 2020. This growth indicates an intensification of economic relations, but also reflects ASEAN's increasing dependence on the Chinese market. Although trade relations between China and ASEAN are characterized by varying levels of competition and mutual benefit, with some countries experiencing trade friction while others enjoy mutually beneficial trade relationships (Ruan et al, 2022).

China has also become a major source of FDI for ASEAN countries. The ASEAN Investment Report (2020) indicates that China's investment in ASEAN reached \$77 billion in 2019, a significant increase from previous years. This investment is primarily focused on infrastructure, manufacturing, and the digital economy. Despite the development benefits, some observers, such as David Arase in *China's Two Silk Roads Initiative: What It Means for Southeast Asia* (2015), warn of the potential debt trap diplomacy that could enhance China's political leverage over ASEAN countries.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by China has been a key catalyst in the economic dynamics between ASEAN and China. Projects such as the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway in Indonesia and the East Coast Rail Link in Malaysia are examples of significant infrastructure progress facilitated by the BRI, which plays a crucial role in promoting bilateral trade and economic growth (Liu et al, 2022). BRI's focus on infrastructure has led to improvements in road networks, ports, shipping, and communication, all of which are essential for enhancing trade volume between China and ASEAN countries, particularly for island nations like Indonesia.

Furthermore, BRI has contributed to the convergence of regional income disparities in China by promoting trade openness and industrial transformation, thereby enhancing total factor productivity (TFP) in key provinces (Qin et al, 2022). However, this initiative is not without challenges and criticism. Concerns about excessive corporate debt levels have been noted, with a worrisome trend observed in the debt levels of companies participating in BRI projects (Li et al, 2022). As analyzed by Evelyn Goh in *Contesting Hegemonic Order: China in Southeast Asia* (2019), BRI also raises concerns about excessive economic and geopolitical dependence on China.

The economic integration between ASEAN and China is also reflected in the development of regional value chains. Research by the Asian Development Bank (2019) indicates that ASEAN countries are increasingly integrated into supply chains centered in China. Although this enhances production efficiency, it also makes the ASEAN economy more vulnerable to economic shocks in China.

The signing of RCEP in 2020, which includes ASEAN, China, and several other major economies in the Asia-Pacific, marks a new chapter in regional economic integration. As argued by Sanchita Basu Das in *RCEP: Economic Potential and Challenges* (2021), this agreement has the potential to deepen ASEAN-China economic interdependence, but also offers opportunities for ASEAN to balance China's influence through cooperation with other countries in the agreement.

This agreement also aims to achieve intra-regional trade liberalization, promote integration and regional economic sustainability, which is crucial for the long-term stability of the Asia-Pacific region and balanced distribution of benefits (Jia et al, 2022). Additionally, RCEP can mitigate trade frictions and foster mutually beneficial trade relationships, as seen in the ecological trade dynamics between China and ASEAN countries, where most relationships are symbiotic, thus reducing the possibility of trade conflicts (Ruan et al, 2022).

From the perspective of neoliberal institutionalism, it can be seen how ASEAN strives to utilize institutional mechanisms and regional economic regimes to manage these relationships, create a more balanced playing field, and maximize benefits while minimizing risks from asymmetric dependence with China.

B. Political and Security Dynamics of CHINA-ASEAN

The rise of China as a global power has brought challenges and opportunities for ASEAN countries, which seek to maintain their strategic autonomy while leveraging China's economic growth. One key issue defining China-ASEAN political and security relations is the territorial dispute in the South China Sea. China's overlapping claims over much of this maritime area have created tensions with several ASEAN member states, particularly Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei. China's increased military presence in the disputed region, including the construction of artificial islands and military installations, has raised concerns among ASEAN countries about the possibility of conflict escalation (Hu, 2021).

In responding to this situation, ASEAN has endeavored to manage tensions through diplomatic dialogue and multilateral negotiations. The Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC), signed in 2002, and ongoing efforts to draft a legally binding Code of Conduct (COC) reflect ASEAN's approach in handling disputes through institutional mechanisms. However, progress in these negotiations is often hindered by differing interests and perceptions of threats among ASEAN member states, as well as China's reluctance to be bound by restrictive rules (Huang, 2022).

Outside of the South China Sea dispute, China has increased its involvement in the regional security architecture of ASEAN. China's participation in forums such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the East Asia Summit (EAS) demonstrates its desire to play a larger role in the regional security framework. However, some ASEAN countries remain cautious of China's regional ambitions and seek to balance its influence by engaging other external powers, particularly the United States. The US, along with

Japan and India, views China's expanding presence in Southeast Asia as a threat to their strategic and economic interests, prompting them to devise counter-strategies to manage China's influence (Behan et al, 2021).

The security dynamics between China and ASEAN are also influenced by transnational issues such as terrorism, organized crime, and maritime security. Cooperation in these areas has increased, with China offering support through training, intelligence exchange, and technical assistance. However, the level of cooperation varies among ASEAN countries, reflecting differences in threat perceptions and comfort levels in working with China. According to Gong (2020), China's strategic partnership and non-traditional security cooperation with Southeast Asia aim to strengthen China's geopolitical position and mitigate the impact of the US-led 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' strategy.

The increasing strategic competition between China and the United States has significantly impacted the political and security dynamics between China and ASEAN, forcing ASEAN countries to confront a complex geopolitical landscape. ASEAN countries, in particular, feel caught between Beijing and Washington, striving to maintain ASEAN centrality while avoiding difficult choices between the two. This situation has prompted some ASEAN nations to adopt more sophisticated balancing strategies, seeking to maintain constructive relations with both powers while strengthening intra-ASEAN cooperation.

For instance, the Philippines has adopted a dynamic balancing strategy, maintaining economic cooperation with China while also strengthening bilateral cooperation with the United States to safeguard its national interests (Chao, 2022). Similarly, Malaysia has maintained strategic ambiguity, navigating global geopolitical economic changes by reconciling domestic and international interests, and emphasizing the importance of ASEAN solidarity and cohesion to ensure a coordinated regional response to the increasing strategic competition between China and the United States (Chin, 2022).

C. *Neoliberal Institutionalism ASEAN*

Neoliberal institutionalism argues that international institutions can help address collective action dilemmas, reduce uncertainty, and lower transaction costs in international relations. According to Keohane in his work *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (1984), institutions can facilitate cooperation by providing information, reducing negotiation costs, creating transparency, and shaping expectations about the behavior of member states.

Lisa L Martin and Beth A Simmons, in their article *Theories and Empirical Studies of International Institutions* (1998), further explain that international institutions can influence state behavior by creating incentives for compliance and sanctions for rule violations. They argue that institutions can help countries address coordination and collaboration issues, even in situations where their interests are not fully aligned.

Regional institutions play a crucial role in shaping the dynamics of relations between ASEAN and China. These institutions serve as platforms for dialogue, negotiation, and cooperation, enabling both parties to manage tensions and build trust. As the primary regional organization in Southeast Asia, ASEAN has developed various mechanisms to engage with China and other external powers within a multilateral framework (Acharya, 2014).

One important forum is the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), which was established in 1994. ARF provides a platform for discussions on regional security issues, including the South China Sea dispute. Through ARF, ASEAN strives to engage China in constructive dialogue and promote a rules-based approach to conflict resolution. Although ARF has not yet produced concrete solutions for territorial disputes, this forum has played a role in building trust and transparency among member states (Emmers & Tan, 2011).

The ASEAN Plus Three (APT), which includes the 10 ASEAN countries plus China, Japan, and South Korea, is another important mechanism for economic and political cooperation. APT has facilitated increased regional economic integration and cooperation in various fields, including finance, agriculture, and disaster management. Initiatives such as the Chiang Mai Initiative Multilateralization (CMIM) under the APT framework have strengthened regional financial resilience and reduced dependence on global financial institutions (Stubbs, 2002).

The East Asia Summit (EAS) also plays a significant role in the regional architecture EAS, which includes ASEAN, China, and other major powers such as the US, Russia, and India, provides a high-level forum for strategic dialogue on regional and global issues Through EAS, ASEAN strives to balance the influence of various powers and maintain its centrality in regional dynamics (Tan, 2017).

In the context of the South China Sea dispute, ASEAN has endeavored to develop specific mechanisms such as the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) and the ongoing negotiations for the Code of Conduct (COC) Despite slow progress in implementing the DOC and finalizing the COC, these efforts reflect ASEAN's approach in managing conflicts through agreed norms and principles (Thayer, 2018).

Furthermore, various sectoral forums and working groups under the ASEAN umbrella also contribute to the management of ASEAN-China relations For instance, the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area (ACFTA) has facilitated increased bilateral trade and investment, while mechanisms such as the ASEAN-China Joint Cooperation Committee (JCC) enable closer coordination in various areas of cooperation (Ba, 2014).

However, the effectiveness of these regional institutions in managing tensions and promoting equal cooperation between ASEAN and China remains a subject of debate Some critics argue that ASEAN's approach, emphasizing consensus and non-confrontation, sometimes yields non-binding and less substantial outcomes (Jones & Smith, 2007) Additionally, differences in interests among ASEAN member states themselves can hinder the formation of coherent positions in dealing with China.

IV. DISCUSSION

The asymmetric dependence between ASEAN and China poses various challenges for ASEAN countries in their efforts to maintain strategic autonomy while leveraging economic opportunities One of the main challenges is balancing the economic benefits of close relations with China against the risk of excessive dependence The reality of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is seen as an opportunity for ASEAN countries to enhance connectivity, infrastructure, and economic growth The Asian Development Bank estimates that ASEAN's infrastructure investment needs from 2016 to 2030 range from USD 28 trillion to USD 31 trillion, underscoring China's crucial role in meeting these requirements (Park, 2022).

However, this economic interdependence also brings risks, as seen in the fluctuating China-Myanmar relationship, where Myanmar's shifting external dependence on China has constrained its policy options (Dossi et al, 2022) As expressed by Goh (2016), ASEAN countries face a dilemma in optimizing short-term economic gains while maintaining long-term strategic flexibility.

The differences in interests and capacities among ASEAN member countries also create challenges in developing a coherent approach towards China Some countries, such as Cambodia and Laos, have a greater economic dependence on China, while others, like Vietnam and the Philippines, are more cautious about China's influence due to territorial disputes (Storey, 2017) Meanwhile, other Southeast Asian countries, including Malaysia, navigate this competition by maintaining strategic ambiguity to avoid excessive reliance on any one power, although room for hedging may decrease as tensions rise (Chin, 2022) These differences can weaken ASEAN solidarity and make the organization vulnerable to China's divide and rule tactics.

The South China Sea dispute remains a highly sensitive issue in ASEAN-China relations Overlapping territorial claims and China's increased military presence in the disputed areas create tension that could threaten regional stability ASEAN's efforts to mediate the conflict through the Code of Conduct (COC) have progressed slowly, partly due to China's reluctance to be bound by restrictive rules (Thayer, 2018).

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by China, despite offering significant investment opportunities and infrastructure development, also poses challenges for ASEAN countries Concerns about “debt traps” and geopolitical implications of BRI projects have arisen in several ASEAN nations As noted by Jones and Hameiri (2020), there is a need for ASEAN countries to carefully manage their participation in BRI to ensure alignment with their national interests and not compromise their sovereignty.

The increasing strategic competition between China and the United States in the Asia-Pacific region creates additional pressure for ASEAN The principle of ASEAN Centrality is increasingly threatened as member states feel caught between two major powers

Maintaining a neutral position while maximizing the benefits of engagement with both powers requires delicate diplomatic balance (Tan, 2020).

Furthermore, there are challenges in ensuring that ASEAN's institutional mechanisms are strong enough to manage the increasingly complex relationship with China. Criticisms of the ASEAN Way, which emphasizes consensus and non-intervention, suggest that this approach may not be sufficient to address shifting power dynamics in the region (Jones & Smith, 2007).

Finally, the differences in political systems and values between most ASEAN countries and China can pose challenges in deepening cooperation in various fields. Issues such as human rights, governance, and freedom of navigation can be potential points of friction in ASEAN-China relations (Acharya, 2017).

In facing these challenges, ASEAN needs to continually strengthen its institutional mechanisms, promote internal cohesion, and develop more sophisticated strategies to manage its asymmetric dependence on China. This may involve diversifying economic and strategic relationships, enhancing collective negotiation capacity, and working towards deeper regional integration to enhance ASEAN's bargaining power.

The form of ASEAN engagement is characterized by informal, non-confrontational, open, and mutually beneficial interactions, which have the potential to significantly influence China's perception and response towards ASEAN. This approach, often referred to as the ASEAN Way, emphasizes non-intervention, decision-making based on consensus, and peaceful dispute resolution, collectively underscoring the importance of state autonomy and non-interference in the affairs of other nations (Stubbs, 2008).

By fostering cooperation, ASEAN has successfully involved civil society organizations (CSOs) in its policy-making process, thereby addressing the 'democracy deficit' and legitimizing its market-oriented reform programs (Gerard, 2015). This inclusive approach can help ASEAN present itself as a stable and reliable partner for China, which is crucial given China's growing political influence and economic activities in the region (Maier-Knapp, 2016).

Furthermore, ASEAN's strategy of 'complex engagement' with China, involving argumentative persuasion through deliberative and non-coercive processes, contrasts with more coercive and beneficial strategies that facilitate social learning and mutual understanding (Ba, 2006). This engagement method is highly relevant in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), where the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia faces opportunities and challenges, necessitating a balanced and cooperative approach (Ren et al, 2021). Additionally, ASEAN's diverse responses to the 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' (FOIP) strategy promoted by the United States and other Quad countries demonstrate ASEAN's commitment to hedging and maintaining limited alignment amidst great power competition, thus preserving its centrality in regional development (Tan, 2020).

The historical institutionalist approach highlights ASEAN's alternative paradigm towards Western liberal governance, rooted in Asian culture and colonial experiences, which has gained increasing influence in global affairs, particularly with China's support (Stubbs, 2008). The concept of flexible engagement, although initially rejected, has led to informal agreements on enhanced interaction, allowing each member state to comment on each other's domestic affairs when they have cross-border implications, thus maintaining a balance between non-intervention and necessary intervention.

Furthermore, the proactive role of think tanks and policy research institutions in regional debates on economic integration and security cooperation underscores the importance of informal diplomacy in shaping regional agendas and institutionalizing discourse on cooperation. By leveraging this mechanism, ASEAN can effectively persuade China to view ASEAN more positively and be more responsive to existing issues, thereby enhancing regional stability and cooperation. This approach aligns with the broader narratives of the Shanghai Spirit and the ASEAN Way, which promote loose regionalism while safeguarding national sovereignty, offering a pragmatic and flexible framework for international relations in a multipolar world.

Furthermore, Kaedah Rashid and Amitendu Palit in *ASEAN-China Economic Relations: Asymmetries, Interdependence, and Uncertainties* (2020) identify several strategies employed by ASEAN to address this dependency. Firstly, ASEAN strives to diversify its economic partners through trade agreements with other parties such as the United States, the European Union, and India. This diversification aims to reduce excessive reliance on the Chinese market and provide alternatives for ASEAN member countries in

their trade and investment relationships By expanding its international trade network, ASEAN can enhance its bargaining power and mitigate risks associated with economic dependence on a single country.

Secondly, ASEAN strives to strengthen its internal capacity through initiatives such as the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) The AEC is designed to create a single market and a more integrated production base within the ASEAN region, thereby enhancing regional economic competitiveness This initiative includes various steps to eliminate trade barriers, improve connectivity, and promote economic cooperation among member countries By bolstering its internal economic framework, ASEAN can better face external challenges and reduce dependence on external economic powers.

Thirdly, ASEAN utilizes multilateral forums such as ASEAN+3 and the East Asia Summit to balance China's influence These forums allow ASEAN to collaborate with other major countries in the East Asian region, such as Japan and South Korea, as well as involve external actors like the United States, Russia, and India Through this multilateral cooperation, ASEAN can build a more complex and dynamic network of relationships that can help counterbalance China's dominant influence in the region.

Overall, these strategies reflect ASEAN's efforts to manage the asymmetric dependence on China in a more balanced and sustainable manner Economic partner diversification, strengthening internal capacity, and utilizing multilateral forums are important steps taken by ASEAN to address challenges arising from close economic ties with China with this approach, ASEAN aims to ensure that its relationship with China remains beneficial while maintaining autonomy and regional economic stability.

CONCLUSION

ASEAN-China relations reflect complex asymmetric interdependence dynamics, where ASEAN's economic and political dependence on China has increased significantly in recent decades. Through the perspective of institutionalist neoliberalism, the author can understand how ASEAN seeks to manage these imbalances by utilizing various institutional mechanisms and regional economic regimes. ASEAN uses institutions such as ASEAN+3, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) to manage relations with China. These forums allow ASEAN to collaborate with other major countries such as Japan, South Korea, and involve external actors such as the United States, Russia, and India. The mechanism also allows ASEAN to promote principles such as ASEAN centrality, peaceful dispute resolution, and confidence-building, in the hope of internalizing those norms in China's behavior in the region. In addition, the proactive role of think tanks and policy research institutions in shaping regional agendas and institutionalizing cooperative discourses shows the importance of informal diplomacy in ASEAN strategies.

Through a combination of these strategies, diversification of economic partners, strengthening internal capacity, the use of multilateral forums, and informal diplomacy, ASEAN seeks to create a balance in its relations with China. This approach aims to optimize the economic benefits of the relationship with China while minimizing the political and strategic risks that may arise from asymmetric interdependence. Thus, ASEAN demonstrated its ability to adapt and navigate the complexities of international relations in the multipolar era, while still maintaining its centrality and relevance in the Southeast Asian region.

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