

Comprehensive Security in a Multipolar Indo-Pacific: ASEAN's Balancing Act under Malaysia's Leadership

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Abstract

As the Indo-Pacific region undergoes profound geopolitical transformation marked by multipolar rivalries and non-traditional security threats, ASEAN faces a critical moment in redefining its role as a normative and functional convener of regional security governance. This article examines how Malaysia's 2025 chairmanship of the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) presents a strategic opportunity to recalibrate ASEAN's defence mechanisms and reinforce its centrality. By advancing the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) through integrative maritime and cyber initiatives, and expanding normative engagement with actors such as the Pacific Islands Forum and the Indian Ocean Rim Association, Malaysia can help operationalise ASEAN's comprehensive security agenda. The analysis highlights internal challenges—including divergent threat perceptions and capacity gaps—and external pressures from great power competition that risk undermining ASEAN's cohesion. Drawing on Regional Security Complex Theory, security community theory, and ASEAN's diplomatic culture, the study argues that institutional evolution does not require abandoning ASEAN's foundational principles but rather adapting them for contemporary governance. The findings underscore the importance of strategic autonomy, inclusive cooperation, and normative clarity in shaping a resilient and adaptive regional security architecture. Ultimately, Malaysia's chairmanship should be understood as a moment of normative leadership that can consolidate ASEAN's credibility and enhance its strategic role in moderating competition, managing risks, and fostering stability in a complex and uncertain Indo-Pacific order.

Keywords: ASEAN, ADMM, Malaysia 2025 Chairmanship, Comprehensive Security, Indo-Pacific, Strategic Autonomy, Regional Security Governance, AOIP.

1. Introduction

The post-Cold War era has fundamentally reshaped the international security architecture, transitioning from rigid bipolarity to a complex and fluid multipolar system. This reconfiguration has broadened the notion of security beyond state-centric and militaristic paradigms, embracing a multidimensional and cross-sectoral framework that addresses both conventional and non-traditional threats (Acharya, 2001; Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Nowhere is this shift more pronounced than in the Indo-Pacific, which has emerged as the strategic epicentre of global rivalries, particularly between the United States and China, while Russia continues to wield significant influence.

The region's security landscape is increasingly characterised by hybrid threats and so-called "grey zone" tactics, including cyber intrusions, maritime coercion, terrorism, disinformation, and climate-induced instability (Kello, 2013; Lindsay et al., 2016). These threats blur the boundaries between war and peace, state and non-state domains, necessitating comprehensive responses that integrate diplomatic, economic, technological, and environmental instruments (Cho, 2024).

Situated at the confluence of maritime and continental trade routes, Southeast Asia is compelled to rethink its security orientation. The Association of Southeast

Asian Nations (ASEAN) acknowledges that regional security is inextricably linked to broader Indo-Pacific dynamics. This has prompted collective efforts to institutionalise a rules-based order that upholds inclusivity and strategic autonomy.

A central instrument of this vision is the ASEAN Political and Security Community (APSC), designed to align national interests while promoting shared norms. ASEAN's strategic posture, often described as "hedging", has evolved to include formalised risk management approaches aimed at balancing external pressures without committing to exclusive alignments (C. C. Kuik, 2022). To reinforce this, ASEAN established the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) in 2006, which later expanded to ADMM-Plus, incorporating eight external partners: Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, Russia, and the United States.

ADMM and ADMM-Plus now serve as core platforms for fostering mutual trust and cooperation in key areas such as counter-terrorism, humanitarian assistance, disaster response, cyber resilience, and maritime security (Storey, 2019; Tan, 2020). These cooperative structures echo the logic of Barry Buzan's Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), which contends that geographically proximate states develop interconnected security concerns. However, the Indo-Pacific's broad interconnectivity suggests the emergence of a "security supercomplex" encompassing Southeast, East, and South Asia.

In 2019, ASEAN codified its strategic orientation through the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). This document represented a normative divergence from binary alignments, advocating dialogue, openness, and inclusivity. Under Indonesia's 2023 chairmanship, the AOIP gained practical momentum through defence engagements with partners such as the EU, France, the Netherlands, and Germany. Rather than exclude external stakeholders, ASEAN's model sought to foster a pluralistic and cooperative security community, consistent with Karl Deutsch's theory of institutionalised peaceful change (Deutsch, et al, 1957).

This vision materialised in December 2024 when ADMM hosted the Maritime Cooperation and Connectivity Conference. The event drew significant participation from ASEAN's partners and Pacific Island nations, symbolising ASEAN's ambition to anchor itself as a normative convener in maritime governance.

Yet, as ADMM grows in prominence, it faces mounting calls to evolve from a consultative forum into a more operationalised defence platform. These pressures, stemming from regional crises, great-power rivalries, and rising external interest, threaten to compromise ASEAN's consensus-based model and neutrality.

Malaysia's assumption of the ADMM and ASEAN Chairmanship in 2025 presents a critical inflection point. Charged with sustaining ASEAN centrality amid shifting power dynamics, Malaysia must strike a delicate balance between innovation and continuity, ensuring that ASEAN's defence diplomacy remains principled, inclusive, and adaptive.

This article offers a comprehensive analysis of these dynamics and proposes a strategic roadmap for Malaysia's leadership in advancing ASEAN's security governance. Accordingly, it seeks to answer the following research question: How can ASEAN, through the ADMM and the implementation of the AOIP from a Defence Perspective, strengthen its strategic and normative role in the Indo-Pacific's evolving security architecture, and to what extent can Malaysia's 2025 chairmanship consolidate ASEAN's comprehensive security agenda in the face of structural, geopolitical, and institutional challenges?

2. Method

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative approach utilising a case study design to examine regional security dynamics, with a particular focus on the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM). Following the methodological frameworks articulated by Cresswell (2007) and Bungin (2017), this approach facilitates a nuanced exploration of social phenomena within their natural contexts, allowing for rich, interpretative insights. The research methodology integrates multiple data collection techniques, including non-participant observation, document analysis, and semi-structured interviews, thereby enabling the triangulation of data to enhance credibility and validity.

The case study design is particularly suitable for the exploration of institutional behaviour and strategic patterns in regional security frameworks. Yin (2003) highlights the effectiveness of case studies in providing in-depth contextual analysis without the need to establish direct causal relationships. This methodological stance is widely accepted in international relations research (e.g. Acharya, 2021), particularly in the study of multilateral cooperation and regional diplomacy. Through this lens, the study interprets ASEAN's evolving defence diplomacy and its institutional adaptation amidst shifting geopolitical pressures, using narrative depth and theoretical insight as analytical tools.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

This study employs a multidimensional theoretical lens to analyse ASEAN's evolving role within the regional security architecture, with a particular emphasis on the institutional dynamics of the ADMM and ADMM-Plus. The framework integrates five interrelated conceptual strands, each contributing to an overarching understanding of how ASEAN fosters defence cooperation while preserving its foundational norms of non-alignment, consensus, and regional autonomy.

1. Comprehensive Security: A Multidimensional Paradigm

The primary analytical foundation of this study is the concept of comprehensive security, which broadens the traditional understanding of security to encompass not only military, political, and economic dimensions but also environmental, technological, and human dimensions. Within ASEAN, comprehensive security reflects an institutional recognition that traditional threats such as inter-state conflict coexist with non-traditional challenges, including climate change, cyber threats, pandemics, and socio-economic disruption (Prezelj, 2015; Räisänen et al., 2021). This paradigm enables ASEAN to construct inclusive, cooperative mechanisms, such as the ADMM and the APSC, that are adaptive to the full spectrum of emerging risks in the Indo-Pacific region.

2. Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT).

The Regional Security Complex Theory, developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver (2003), serves as a second key lens. RSCT posits that regional clusters of states exhibit patterns of interdependent security due to geographical proximity, historical interaction, and shared threat perceptions. Within this model, Southeast Asia forms a coherent security complex, wherein ASEAN functions as a regional security manager. ASEAN's role is to mitigate both intra-regional tensions and the impact of external power rivalries, particularly between the United States and China, through institutionalised mechanisms such as the ADMM-Plus. Importantly,

RSCT helps situate ASEAN's efforts within a broader security "supercomplex," acknowledging the deepening interconnectivity between Southeast, East, South Asia and the Pacific.

3. Security Community Theory.

Karl Deutsch's Security Community theory provides a normative complement to RSCT, especially through the notion of a pluralistic security community. Although ASEAN lacks the deep institutional integration of entities like the European Union, it has developed a shared political culture wherein the prospect of inter-member armed conflict is virtually inconceivable. This is achieved through norms of non-interference, consensus-building, and institutionalised consultation (Deutsch & et al, 1957). The ADMM reinforces this community by embedding confidence-building measures and cooperative defence initiatives into ASEAN's strategic culture, without resorting to binding military commitments or supranational oversight.

4. The ASEAN Way: Diplomatic and Security Culture.

A critical conceptual contribution to this study is derived from Jürgen Haacke's seminal analysis of ASEAN's diplomatic and security culture. The ASEAN Way is defined by procedural norms such as informality, non-interference, consensus decision-making, and incrementalism. Haacke argues that ASEAN's deliberate avoidance of legalism and militarisation reflects a distinctive mode of regionalism, one rooted in mutual trust rather than coercive enforcement. In this context, the ADMM is intentionally designed not to evolve into a military alliance akin to NATO. Instead, it serves as a forum for dialogue, technical cooperation, and strategic reassurance, safeguarding national sovereignty while facilitating collective security (Haacke & Williams, 2009). The architecture of the ADMM and its extension through the ADMM-Plus embody this ethos. It promotes transparency, flexibility, and inclusivity while ensuring that dialogue partners do not dominate the agenda or compromise ASEAN centrality. In doing so, ASEAN preserves its position as a neutral, norm-setting actor in a contested strategic environment.

5. Hedging, Strategic Autonomy, and Riskification.

Finally, the study integrates contemporary strategic concepts such as hedging, strategic autonomy, and riskification, particularly as articulated in the work of Kuik. Hedging describes ASEAN's strategy of engaging all major powers while deliberately avoiding alignment with any single actor. Strategic autonomy refers to ASEAN's pursuit of flexible partnerships that uphold independence and multipolarity, while riskification denotes institutional practices designed to anticipate and manage uncertainty through diplomatic foresight and resilience building (C. C. Kuik, 2022). These concepts illuminate the logic behind ASEAN's persistent commitment to neutrality and inclusivity. They explain how ASEAN maintains coherence amid divergent national interests and external pressure, preserving its centrality as an anchor of regional order.

By combining these theoretical perspectives, comprehensive security, RSCT, security community theory, the ASEAN Way, and strategic hedging, the study constructs a robust analytical framework. This multidimensional approach allows for a holistic understanding of how ASEAN simultaneously institutionalises security cooperation, resists alliance-based structures, and manages the complexities of multipolar geopolitics. The framework not only explains ASEAN's past behaviour but also provides a basis for evaluating future institutional trajectories under Malaysia's 2025 chairmanship.

3. Result and Discussion

ASEAN's Security Architecture in the Indo-Pacific: A Normative and Strategic Evolution

ASEAN's response to the evolving Indo-Pacific security environment represents a deliberate and strategic recalibration aimed at reinforcing its centrality amidst intensifying geopolitical rivalries and increasingly complex, multi-domain threats. The region is no longer defined solely by traditional military challenges but is now characterised by hybrid warfare, cyber intrusions, disinformation campaigns, grey zone coercion, and climate-induced instability. In this context, ASEAN has moved decisively to reposition itself not merely as a passive respondent to regional developments, but as a proactive convener of cooperative security.

The adoption of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) in 2019 marked a significant normative shift in ASEAN's strategic identity. It positioned ASEAN as a rule-shaping rather than rule-following actor in regional security discourse. Unlike unilateral or power-centric approaches such as the United States' Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy or China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the AOIP articulates a multilateral, inclusive vision based on principles of openness, transparency, dialogue, and respect for international law. The AOIP's four thematic pillars—maritime cooperation, connectivity, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and economic collaboration—provide a comprehensive framework that situates security within broader developmental and institutional contexts (Acharya, 2001; C.-C. Kuik, 2023).

Aspect	United States	China	European Union	Japan	AOIP
Strategic Objective	Preserve rules-based order, counter China's influence	Expand global connectivity, strategic economic influence	Diversify strategic partners, support multilateralism	Ensure free navigation and rule of law	Promote openness, cooperation, ASEAN centrality
Core Principles	Freedom, openness, sovereignty, rule of law	Win-win cooperation, non-interference	Multilateralism, sustainability, inclusivity	Rule-based order, inclusiveness, connectivity	Dialogue, inclusiveness, transparency
Security Approach	Military alliances (QUAD, AUKUS), forward presence	Development-based security (BRI, GSI)	Civilian-led, human security focus	Maritime security and civilian capacity-building	Non-confrontational comprehensive security (ADMM)
Regional Focus	Wider Indo-Pacific (India-Pacific-South Pacific)	Asia, Africa, Eurasia	Indo-Pacific with maritime and climate emphasis	Southeast Asia, South China Sea, Indian Ocean	Southeast Asia as regional gravity center
Position toward ASEAN	Supports ASEAN centrality but with hegemonic overtones	Uses ASEAN as economic and strategic partner	Treats ASEAN as equal partner	Strong supporter of AOIP and ADMM	Architect and core of Indo-Pacific inclusiveness
Key Instruments	QUAD, AUKUS, IPEF	BRI, GSI, FTA, AIIB	Partnerships, Green Deal Diplomacy	ODA, Maritime law training, FOIP Fund	AOIP, ADMM, EAS, ASEAN-led mechanisms
Strategic Character	Confrontational, combines hard and soft power	Expansive, integrated economic-political narrative	Normative, governance-focused strategy	Cooperative, rule-based, non-confrontational	Inclusive, non-aligned, consensus-based

Figure 1. Indo-Pacific Strategies Comparison (Author, 2025)

Institutionally, the operationalisation of the AOIP has become a transformative milestone in ASEAN's defence diplomacy. The 17th ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) in November 2023 witnessed the formal adoption of the Concept Paper on the Implementation of the AOIP from a Defence Perspective, which laid the groundwork for practical engagement across multiple security domains. These include enhancing maritime domain awareness, advancing scientific and technological

cooperation, and reinforcing strategic trust through multilateral confidence-building mechanisms. The emphasis on flexible, non-binding instruments reflects ASEAN's continued adherence to the ASEAN Way, prioritising dialogue, sovereignty, incrementalism, and voluntarism while gradually deepening institutional cooperation (Emmers, 2004).

One of the most tangible demonstrations of this evolving defence diplomacy was the Maritime Cooperation and Connectivity Conference held in December 2024, co-hosted by Indonesia and Japan under the ADMM framework. The event convened defence officials from ASEAN, ADMM-Plus countries, ASEAN External Partners and the Pacific Islands countries, focusing on shared vulnerabilities in maritime safety, climate resilience, and technological interoperability. What distinguished this engagement was its success in harmonising Japan's FOIP vision with ASEAN's AOIP without compromising ASEAN's neutrality or strategic autonomy. This affirms ASEAN's emergent role as a strategic bridge-builder capable of mediating between competing regional narratives while sustaining inclusivity.

ASEAN's expanding diplomatic bandwidth is further reflected in its engagement with non-traditional partners such as France, Canada, the UK, the European Union, and Germany. While not members of the ADMM-Plus, these actors have been actively involved in AOIP-aligned seminars and working groups, offering critical expertise in areas including maritime law, cyber governance, digital infrastructure protection, and environmental security. Their inclusion underscores ASEAN's hedging posture, expanding its partnerships beyond the binary strategic rivalry between China and the United States while maintaining institutional balance and normative coherence (Ba, 2017).

Theoretically, these developments are cogently explained through Buzan and Wæver's Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), which posits that security dynamics are most intense among geographically proximate states that share historical interaction and threat perceptions. Situated at the maritime crossroads of East, South, and Southeast Asia, ASEAN constitutes a critical node within the Indo-Pacific's emerging security supercomplex. Through institutional mechanisms such as ADMM and ADMM-Plus, ASEAN acts as a regional security manager, mitigating both intra- and inter-regional frictions via cooperative norms rather than military deterrence (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

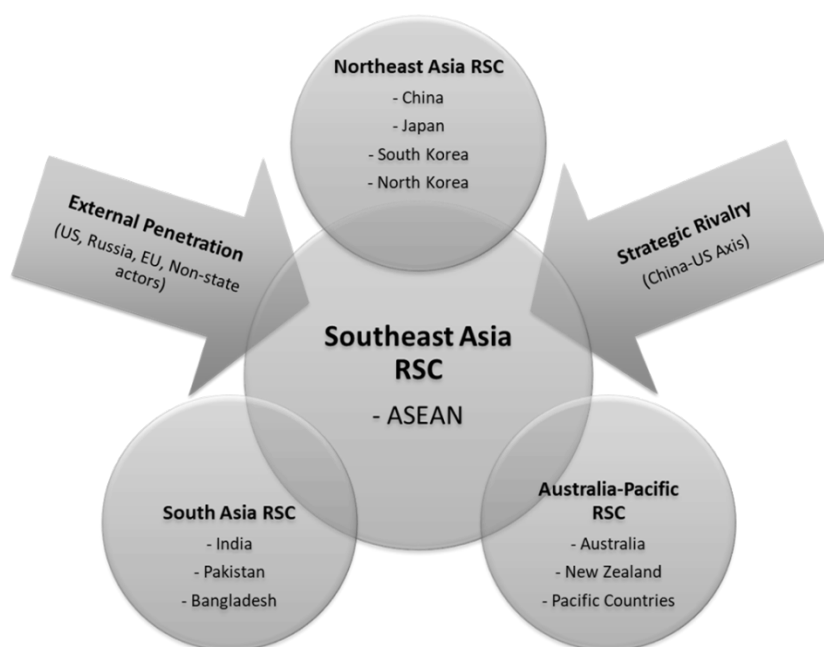


Figure 2. Formation of Security Supercomplex in Indo-Pacific (Author, 2025)

Simultaneously, ASEAN's security behaviour strongly aligns with Karl Deutsch's (1957) concept of a pluralistic security community. While ASEAN member states are politically and economically diverse, they have cultivated a shared political culture that makes inter-member conflict virtually unthinkable. The ADMM serves as a pivotal instrument in sustaining this peaceful order by institutionalising regular dialogue, joint exercises, and practical cooperation in non-traditional domains such as disaster relief and cybersecurity. The non-binding and voluntary nature of these engagements ensures alignment with ASEAN's core values of non-interference, equality, and consensus.

Moreover, the AOIP's integration of sustainable development, humanitarian coordination, and climate action into the security agenda marks a significant convergence with the comprehensive security paradigm. This approach recognises that state-centric defence frameworks are insufficient to address the region's multifaceted vulnerabilities. As evidenced in the AOIP's implementation paper and the outcomes of the 2024 maritime conference, ASEAN's security logic now embraces digital resilience, food and energy security, pandemic preparedness, and disaster risk reduction. This reflects an understanding that contemporary threats are intersectional, demanding cross-sectoral institutional responses.

These multidimensional efforts are undergirded by strategic behaviours such as hedging, strategic autonomy, and riskification, concepts elaborated by Kuik (2023) and other regional analysts. ASEAN's balancing act between major powers is not a product of indecision but rather a conscious diplomatic strategy that seeks to avoid strategic entrapment while maintaining freedom of manoeuvre. By engaging with all powers, Japan, India, Russia, Australia, the United States, China, and the EU, without aligning exclusively with any, ASEAN preserves its autonomy while ensuring that no single actor dominates the regional narrative. Riskification, in turn, refers to ASEAN's anticipatory practices, including institutional dialogues and scenario planning, designed to reduce uncertainty without sacrificing sovereignty or cohesion.

What distinguishes ASEAN's normative evolution is its ability to act not only as a convener but as a norm entrepreneur in the Indo-Pacific. The AOIP has emerged as a reference point for many regional stakeholders seeking alternatives to confrontational security paradigms. This normative influence is evident in the growing number of external actors aligning their Indo-Pacific strategies with AOIP principles—Australia's Defence Strategic Review, Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy, and India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative are illustrative cases. ASEAN's role in shaping these alignments through structured engagement—rather than institutional convergence—attests to its increasing soft power and agenda-setting capability.

Nevertheless, ASEAN's security architecture under the AOIP is not without challenges. The reliance on consensus may at times dilute policy outcomes, and the voluntary nature of participation can limit institutional enforcement. However, these constraints are the price of maintaining an inclusive, non-coercive, and adaptable regional order. ASEAN's commitment to peace and stability is underpinned not by power projection but by a political culture that privileges trust, dialogue, and mutual respect.

In sum, ASEAN's normative and strategic evolution under the AOIP constitutes a decisive departure from reactive diplomacy to active institutional shaping of the Indo-Pacific order. Through the ADMM and its broader diplomatic infrastructure, ASEAN has embedded a vision of cooperative security that is multidimensional, inclusive, and resilient. Rather than succumbing to great-power rivalry or abandoning its core principles, ASEAN has leveraged its unique diplomatic identity to craft a security model suited to the realities of the 21st century, marked not by polarity but by complexity, fluidity, and interdependence.

Strategic Challenges and Dilemmas Facing the ADMM in the Implementation of AOIP.

While ASEAN's security architecture under the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) has made commendable progress in embedding inclusive, multidimensional, and normative approaches to regional cooperation, the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) continues to face a constellation of strategic dilemmas and operational constraints. These challenges not only put ASEAN's foundational principles, namely non-alignment, consensus, centrality, and sovereignty, but also reveal the structural limitations of a security regime that is premised on voluntarism and informality. The tension between the aspirational goals of comprehensive security and the institutional reality of ASEAN's decision-making model creates persistent challenges in translating defence diplomacy into concrete, actionable mechanisms of collective security.

One of the most pressing and recurrent dilemmas pertains to the growing expectation, voiced both within and beyond the region, that the ADMM should evolve from a primarily consultative forum into an operationally responsive entity capable of rapid crisis management. Flashpoints such as the unresolved sovereignty disputes in the South China Sea, the protracted political and humanitarian crisis in Myanmar, and intermittent border frictions between ASEAN member states have amplified calls for ASEAN to assume a more assertive security role. However, ASEAN's enduring commitment to the principles of non-interference and consensus has constrained the ADMM's capacity to deliver timely and robust responses. The institutional inertia that results from this model reflects a deeper conundrum: how to preserve ASEAN unity,

legitimacy, and political inclusivity while also responding credibly to acute security contingencies (Emmers, 2020; Ba, 2022).

Compounding this challenge is the increasingly relevant discourse surrounding ASEAN's potential responsibility in managing extra-regional crises, particularly those involving the safety of ASEAN nationals abroad. For instance, the heightened tensions surrounding the Taiwan Strait, including the prospect of open conflict between China and Taiwan, have prompted concerns regarding the security of ASEAN citizens, particularly the millions of migrant workers who reside and work in potential conflict zones. Anticipating such eventualities would necessitate far-reaching contingency planning, coordinated evacuation protocols, and rapid response capabilities that significantly exceed ASEAN's current institutional design and the political willingness of its members. This underscores the disparity in defence capacities and strategic outlooks within ASEAN, and further reveals the structural asymmetries that complicate unified crisis responses.

In parallel, ASEAN's strategic posture is increasingly being tested by calls from external actors to deepen collaboration with established security groupings such as AUKUS and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD). These appeals are grounded in perceptions, particularly among some Western strategic communities, that ASEAN's neutral and inclusive model lacks sufficient deterrence to effectively confront emergent threats such as grey-zone coercion, cyber operations, and maritime militarisation. Despite these pressures, ASEAN has remained steadfast in rejecting formal defence alliances or security commitments that may compromise its non-aligned identity. It has consistently opted for flexible engagements with individual states, both bilaterally and multilaterally, without incorporating institutionalised bloc-based mechanisms. This position remains rooted in the ASEAN Way, which privileges strategic ambiguity, sovereignty, and diplomatic pragmatism over entrenchment in great-power rivalry.

However, new strategic configurations involving ASEAN member states, such as Indonesia's recent accession to BRICS and the consolidation of the Philippines, Japan, and the United States trilateral security dialogue, pose a long-term challenge to ASEAN cohesion. Although these arrangements are not explicitly designed to circumvent ASEAN structures, they raise important questions about member states' commitment to ASEAN's collective mechanisms, particularly when alternative alignments promise more immediate or tangible benefits. If left unaddressed, such trends may lead to the emergence of parallel security architectures in Southeast Asia, thereby diluting the normative and functional centrality of the ADMM. The resulting tension between national strategic calculus and regional consensus-building may inhibit the deepening of ADMM's institutional capacity and fracture ASEAN's collective voice in regional security affairs.

Equally salient is the challenge of managing the risk of external interference in ASEAN's internal deliberative processes. As ASEAN expands its engagements with dialogue partners, including defence and intelligence sharing, there is a growing perception that powerful external actors may attempt to shape outcomes, frame security agendas, or impose normative preferences under the guise of partnership. The potential instrumentalisation of the ADMM by external powers would not only undermine ASEAN's credibility as a neutral convener but also erode the legitimacy of its consensus-based decision-making process. Such a development would run counter

to the principles of equidistance and non-alignment that have long underpinned ASEAN's strategic identity and regional acceptance.

Furthermore, the continued reliance on consensus as ASEAN's *modus operandi* for decision-making frequently results in diluted policy outputs and slow progress. Diverging national threat perceptions, contrasting foreign policy priorities, and uneven defence capacities contribute to fragmented deliberations. While consensus ensures inclusivity and prevents dominance by any single member, it also constrains ASEAN's agility and responsiveness, particularly during fast-evolving crises such as natural disasters, cyber incidents, or sudden maritime encounters. This procedural inertia may increasingly be viewed as an institutional liability in a region characterised by strategic fluidity and accelerating threat convergence.

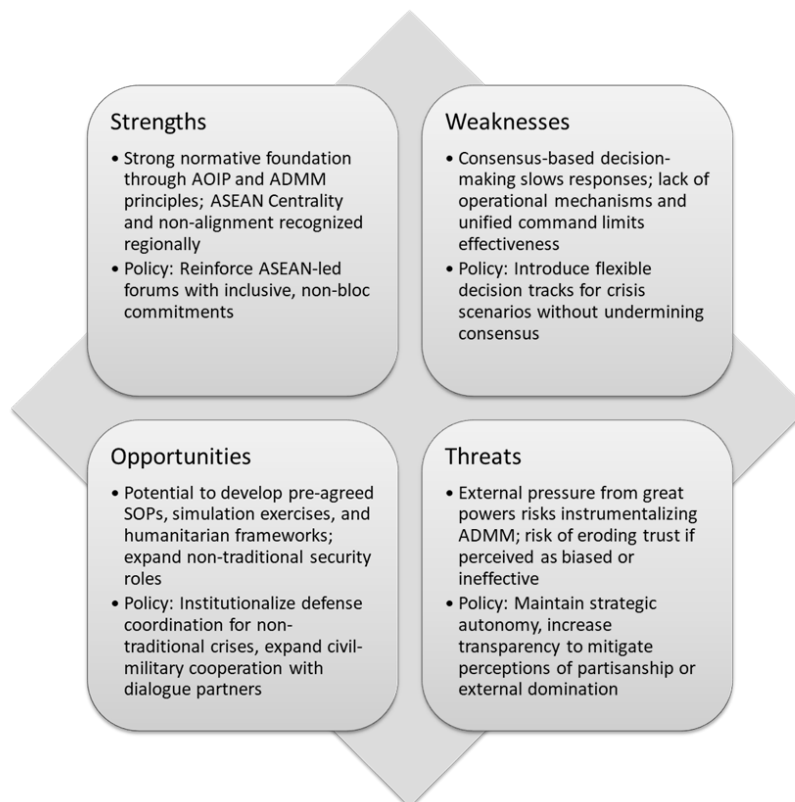


Figure 3. SWOT and Policy Implications: ADMM Strategic Challenges (Author, 2025)

Given these challenges, a recalibration of ADMM's role appears necessary. Crucially, this does not require a rejection of ASEAN's core principles. Rather, it calls for their reinterpretation in ways that allow for increased institutional agility, operational coherence, and strategic adaptability. A potential path forward may include the development of pre-agreed protocols for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), the establishment of ASEAN-wide contingency planning cells, and the institutionalisation of joint simulation exercises. These mechanisms would not undermine ASEAN's consensus norm but would create avenues for pre-authorised collective action under specific, non-political circumstances.

At the conceptual level, these challenges reaffirm the analytical relevance of Regional Security Complex Theory. While Southeast Asia remains an interdependent security complex, the diverging engagements of member states with external powers

and the variation in national defence postures threaten to erode the coherence of the regional security order. RSCT provides a valuable framework to understand how the interplay between internal divergence and external penetration may fragment security complexes if not managed through effective institutional responses.

In parallel, Karl Deutsch's theory of security communities remains insightful in explaining ASEAN's normative cohesion but also its operational limitations. While ASEAN has succeeded in cultivating a community in which violent conflict between members is highly unlikely, it has struggled to develop mechanisms for collective coercive action or rapid deterrence. The pluralistic community model, while effective in norm diffusion, may prove insufficient in responding to the hard security challenges of the 21st century, which often demand faster and more coordinated action than consensus-based systems can deliver.

Finally, ASEAN's comprehensive security doctrine, while normatively appealing, is under strain in an operational context. The hedging and riskification strategies that have historically undergirded ASEAN's survival may now require recalibration. Future iterations of the AOIP and the ADMM framework must grapple with the challenge of preserving ASEAN's diplomatic identity while expanding its functional relevance. Without meaningful enhancements in political resolve, strategic convergence, and institutional innovation, the ADMM risks being perceived as a symbolic platform—useful for dialogue, but insufficient for securing regional peace in an increasingly contested Indo-Pacific landscape.

Malaysia's Role and Leadership in the ADMM 2025: Advancing ASEAN's Security Governance Through Strategic Consolidation and Normative Innovation.

Malaysia's assumption of the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) and ASEAN Chairmanship in 2025 comes at a time of increasing complexity in the Indo-Pacific strategic landscape. The region is experiencing an intensification of great power rivalries, shifts in security doctrines, and the growing prominence of non-traditional security challenges such as cyberattacks, maritime disruptions, disinformation warfare, and climate-induced disasters. These developments demand a recalibrated strategic posture, not only at the national level but also at the institutional core of ASEAN. Malaysia inherits a legacy of institutional momentum from Indonesia's 2023 chairmanship, which successfully operationalised the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) from a defence perspective. The outcomes of the 2024 Maritime Cooperation and Connectivity Conference further consolidate this progress, placing Malaysia in a unique position to reinforce ASEAN's normative identity while steering its security governance towards a more operational and context-sensitive trajectory.

At the centre of Malaysia's strategic vision is the continued institutionalisation of comprehensive security, with specific emphasis on the convergence between maritime and cyber domains. In the Indo-Pacific, these two areas are increasingly intertwined, representing not only critical vulnerabilities but also key enablers of security cooperation. Malaysia's prior initiatives, such as the ASEAN Cyber Defence Network (ACDN), the ASEAN Defence Industry Collaboration (ADIC), and the ASEAN Military Ready Group (AMRG), offer an institutional foundation from which to launch a flagship ADMM agenda focused on digital-maritime integration. By framing cyber capabilities as instruments for enhancing maritime domain awareness, including the safeguarding of naval communications, logistics infrastructures, and port surveillance,

Malaysia is advancing a form of normative innovation anchored in operational relevance. This approach is consistent with the concept of comprehensive security as articulated by Caballero-Anthony (2019), wherein non-military domains are treated as integral components of collective defence preparedness.

Equally important is Malaysia's potential to expand ASEAN's normative influence beyond its traditional geographic bounds. Under Malaysia's chairmanship, there exists a critical window to intensify security dialogues with underrepresented regional groupings—most notably the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). These groupings, despite sharing overlapping maritime geographies and climate-related vulnerabilities with ASEAN, remain peripheral to its formal security structures. Drawing upon Buzan and Wæver's (2003) Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), Malaysia can function as a regional security manager by institutionalising cooperative mechanisms with PIF and IORA. Joint programmes on disaster preparedness, maritime search and rescue, and environmental risk reduction would not only reinforce ASEAN's integrative capacity but also support the emergence of a wider pluralistic security community, consistent with Karl Deutsch's vision of regional peace maintained through trust-based, non-coercive engagement.

Malaysia must, however, tread carefully in navigating the increasingly dense web of minilateral alliances forming across the Indo-Pacific. External actors and some ASEAN dialogue partners have intensified calls for ASEAN to participate more substantively in arrangements such as AUKUS and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD). These arrangements promise greater deterrence and technological cooperation but risk undermining ASEAN's strategic autonomy and diplomatic equidistance. In line with Kuik's conceptualisation of hedging, Malaysia must uphold ASEAN's longstanding policy of functional engagement with all major powers, without binding alignment to any particular strategic bloc. By resisting efforts to integrate non-ADMM-Plus actors into formal military exercises, Malaysia preserves the neutrality and credibility of the ADMM as a non-aligned, consensus-based platform.

This imperative becomes even more pronounced given the emergence of new strategic constellations involving ASEAN member states themselves. Indonesia's membership in BRICS and the Philippines' increasing engagement in trilateral security dialogues with Japan and the United States represent shifts in strategic orientation that, if left unchecked, may erode ASEAN cohesion. Although such partnerships have not formally disrupted the ADMM, they do present a risk of fragmentation, particularly if individual member states begin to prioritise external arrangements over ASEAN mechanisms. Malaysia must therefore emphasise the voluntary and inclusive nature of ADMM-led initiatives, reaffirming the centrality of the ASEAN Way, characterised by consensus, non-interference, and informality, as a safeguard against institutional dilution.

Internally, Malaysia faces an equally significant challenge: revitalising trust and cohesion within ASEAN amidst divergent national security priorities and asymmetrical defence capacities. Drawing on Amitav Acharya's interpretation of security community building, Malaysia's leadership must reinvigorate ASEAN's intra-regional consultation architecture. Mechanisms such as informal ministerial retreats, pre-negotiation senior officials' dialogues, and Track 1.5 diplomacy platforms offer pathways to convergence without the coercive weight of formalisation. These structures are essential in building the mutual understanding necessary to navigate

sensitive issues such as military modernisation, cyber sovereignty, and regional crisis response.

In advancing ASEAN's operational preparedness, Malaysia is also well-positioned to lead efforts aimed at strengthening regional resilience to transboundary emergencies. Building on the logic of comprehensive security, Malaysia can promote early warning systems, real-time communication protocols, and interoperability standards for disaster response and humanitarian relief. These tools not only enhance ASEAN's ability to respond to non-traditional security threats but also serve as confidence-building measures that reinforce trust among member states without infringing upon national sovereignty. In this way, Malaysia can exemplify how principled pragmatism, grounded in ASEAN's norms, can yield practical security dividends.

Malaysia's chairmanship also opens a strategic opportunity to synchronise AOIP implementation with the regional strategies of selected ADMM-Plus partners. For instance, Australia's 2023 Defence Strategic Review underscores themes of maritime cyber resilience, regional capacity building, and integrated deterrence, all of which resonate with ASEAN's security priorities. Similarly, India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) and the Republic of Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy align with ASEAN's emphasis on connectivity, maritime governance, and digital transformation. Without entering into exclusive defence arrangements, Malaysia can convene expert working groups, co-develop policy toolkits, and facilitate joint scenario planning exercises that reinforce ASEAN centrality while enabling convergence with like-minded partners. This pragmatic multilateralism strengthens ASEAN's strategic hedging posture while preserving the integrity of its consensus-based diplomacy.

Beyond tactical coordination, Malaysia's chairmanship should be conceptualised as a strategic inflection point in ASEAN's long-term security trajectory. The Indo-Pacific is increasingly coalescing into a security supercomplex, where the boundaries between subregional clusters are blurring, and threat interdependence is intensifying. In this context, ASEAN must no longer position itself as a peripheral actor or passive arena for external power projection. Rather, it must embrace its agency as a normative convener and functional moderator of regional security. Malaysia's leadership offers the opportunity to advance this reorientation by embedding forward-looking institutional reforms that are consistent with ASEAN's foundational ethos but responsive to contemporary strategic realities.

Through principled yet adaptive leadership, Malaysia can demonstrate how comprehensive security, RSCT, and the security community framework are not only theoretical constructs but also practical tools for institutional innovation. Malaysia's emphasis on multidimensional engagement, strategic inclusivity, and non-alignment can serve as a model for future ADMM chairmanships, particularly as ASEAN confronts an increasingly multipolar and unpredictable security environment.

In so doing, Malaysia not only enhances its diplomatic profile but also contributes meaningfully to the long-term consolidation of ASEAN as a credible, responsive, and autonomous pillar of Indo-Pacific security governance. If Malaysia is successful in aligning strategic innovation with normative continuity, its chairmanship will be remembered not as a routine exercise in regional diplomacy but as a transformative episode in ASEAN's institutional maturation and strategic relevance.

4. Conclusion

As the strategic contours of the Indo-Pacific continue to evolve amidst intensifying multipolar rivalries and the proliferation of non-traditional security threats, ASEAN stands at a critical juncture in redefining its role as a normative and functional convener of regional security governance. The elevation of comprehensive security as ASEAN's guiding paradigm, encompassing traditional defence imperatives alongside cyber, maritime, environmental, and humanitarian dimensions, signals the Association's intent to move beyond declaratory diplomacy towards meaningful institutional consolidation.

Malaysia's 2025 chairmanship of the ADMM arrives at a pivotal moment. It offers an opportunity not merely to preserve ASEAN's centrality, but to recalibrate and re-energise the ADMM as a credible, adaptive, and strategically autonomous defence mechanism. By advancing the AOIP through integrative maritime and cyber frameworks, Malaysia can operationalise ASEAN's multidimensional security agenda in a manner that is both principled and pragmatic. Its leadership in initiatives such as the ASEAN Cyber Defence Network and its engagement with underrepresented regional actors, such as the Pacific Islands Forum and the Indian Ocean Rim Association, illustrate the potential for normative expansion grounded in functional cooperation.

At the same time, Malaysia must carefully navigate internal constraints and external pressures. Internally, divergent threat perceptions, asymmetric capacities, and varying levels of political will continue to impede swift collective action. Externally, the allure of minilateral alignments and the instrumentalisation of ASEAN forums by major powers risk undermining the consensus-based, inclusive character of the ADMM. To address these challenges, Malaysia must reaffirm ASEAN's commitment to strategic autonomy, resist bloc-based entanglements, and reinforce intra-ASEAN trust-building mechanisms.

The analysis presented in this article affirms that ASEAN's institutional evolution does not necessitate a departure from its foundational ethos. Rather, it requires a strategic rearticulation of long-standing principles, non-alignment, consensus, and gradualism into tools of adaptive governance. Drawing on theoretical insights from Regional Security Complex Theory, security community theory, and ASEAN's own diplomatic culture, Malaysia can lead the ADMM towards greater coherence, responsiveness, and relevance.

Importantly, while this study is contextualised within Malaysia's 2025 chairmanship, the insights and strategic considerations it offers are equally applicable for future ADMM chairs. As ASEAN continues to navigate a volatile Indo-Pacific security environment, the institutional resilience, inclusive frameworks, and normative clarity discussed herein may serve as a reference point for subsequent leadership cycles. By institutionalising the principles of comprehensive security, fostering partnerships beyond traditional alignments, and preserving ASEAN centrality, successive chairs can sustain momentum towards a more cohesive and effective regional security architecture.

Ultimately, Malaysia's chairmanship should be viewed not as a procedural stewardship, but as a normative leadership moment. In steering ASEAN through an increasingly fragmented Indo-Pacific security landscape, Malaysia can help entrench a cooperative security architecture that is inclusive, non-coercive, and resilient. If successful, it will not only consolidate ASEAN's institutional credibility but also elevate

its role as a strategic anchor in the emerging regional order—one capable of moderating competition, managing risk, and fostering stability in a century defined by complexity and uncertainty.

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