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Why can ASEAN Promote Sustainable Development Cooperation?

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Abstract

ASEAN has arguably been one of the most successful regionalisms, which since its inception has undergone several profound challenges, including the 1997 Asian financial crisis. In response to the fierce competition among major powers and the economic and social challenges, ASEAN has concentrated on sustainable development to promote unity and centrality. Sustainable development cooperation aligns with the interests of ASEAN states and helps to promote the construction of the ASEAN community and strike a balance of power on the world stage. Nevertheless, there may be a need for more efforts to resolve the challenges facing sustainable development.

Keywords: ASEAN; Southeast Asia regionalism; ASEAN centrality; sustainable development goals.

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Introduction

Regionalism in the context of international relations is defined as the expression of a shared identity and purpose among countries in the same geographical region and involves the creation and implementation of institutions that manifest this regional identity and shape economic other activity within the region (Bloor 2022). Regionalism in Southeast Asia originated during the Cold War and has since undergone a series of profound challenges, including the 1997 Asian financial crisis, the 2003 SARS epidemic, the 2008 global financial crisis, the economic competition among major world powers, and COVID-19. It now involves a multi-level regional cooperation framework with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) at the center, which has become one of the most successful regionalism paradigms worldwide.

Amidst intense geopolitical and economic competition between major world powers, sustainable development cooperation

has attracted ASEAN's attention, providing a new impetus to regional cooperation. Over the past years, ASEAN has succeeded in promoting sustainable cooperation with its external partners. Why has ASEAN been successful in promoting sustainable development cooperation, and what are some of the challenges it has faced in realizing its sustainable development goals (SDGs)? This paper is an attempt to answer these two questions.

The current research found that despite differences in interests, sustainable development cooperation could integrate the interests of all parties, either the ASEAN member states, ASEAN or ASEAN's dialogue partners in the region. The reason for this is twofold. For one thing, sustainable development cooperation helps to resolve people's livelihood issues, which is the primary concern for Southeast Asian nations, to meet the needs of the United States and European Union to play a leading role in global governance by strengthening the development resilience and to enable China to achieve its high-quality economic development. For another, the cooperation also helps to promote regional ASEAN-centered multilateralism and strengthen regional governance. Nevertheless, ASEAN's efforts towards realizing its goal for sustainable development cooperation are hindered by challenges, most typically, the lack of funds, the low effectiveness of regional mechanisms, and the difficulties in maintaining unity and centrality with internal conflicts and external geopolitical turbulences.

Literature Review

Sustainable development has been a topic that has received global scholarly attention. Some experts studied specific issues of SDG and given suggestions to promote sustainable development in ASEAN. For example, the article "Water security in Southeast Asia: Regional, national, and sub-national challenges" seeks to explore how water security issues in the region affect states and societies and why they merit urgent attention and resources (Chen 2020). Matthew Gouett studies how gender bonds respond to issues of gender equality (SDG 5) and other SDGs (Gouett, 2023). The research by Chun Zhang pointed out that neither ASEAN nor its member states have developed a complete docking strategy to promote poverty reduction (Zhang, 2018). Xunpeng Shi and Lixia Yao suggest that ASEAN could still promote regional power connectivity even without a supranational authority, as in the case of the EU (Shi and Yao 2020).

Research has also been conducted on the SDG progress in some specific ASEAN countries. Cheng Savuth and Oum Sothea made an analysis of the digital transformation strategies in Cambodia (Savuth and Sothea 2023). Some scholars studied tourism in Thailand and made suggestions to promote sustainable development in the industry (Kattiyapornpong et al. 2023; Khaenamkhaew et al. 2023). Most of the research findings on the SDG in Myanmar focused on the agriculture issue (Myo 2020; Helena et al., 2022).

In recent years, China-ASEAN cooperation in SDG has attracted the attention of scholars based in China as well as in the ASEAN countries. Although cooperation in environmental

affairs has a long way to go in its mechanization process, depth and scope, it has a successful future and is expected to become the model of south-south Cooperation (Xu, 2014). Scholars from the ASEAN countries tend to hold that China's experience can help ASEAN to achieve the SDG (Thiladej 2019). Due to geographic reasons, the cooperation between China and ASEAN in the sustainable development of the South China Sea and blue partnership has been a hot topic (Xu et al., 2017; Xue, 2019; Feng and Pan, 2023). Moreover, studies have been carried out to examine the cooperation in sustainable tourism between the two sides (Gutierrez, 2021).

In general, the existing research focuses on the situations and challenges faced by ASEAN in achieving SDG. Few studies have approached ASEAN's sustainable development from the perspective of international relations. Limited attempts have been made to examine the sustainable development of ASEAN from a regionalist perspective.

Analytical Framework

The levels of analysis technique in international relations has been widely adopted as a scientific method for its ability to offer multi-layered explanations for international events. Pioneered by Kenneth Waltz in his book *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (Waltz, 2018). Waltz believed that the outbreak of war is related to three levels of factors, captured by the three famous "images" he put forward: the individual factor of decision-makers, the internal factor of the state, and the international system factor. These have since become the three of the most important layers of international relationship analysis.

In addition, as early as 1961, David Singer pointed out that the level of analysis is an important method in the study of international relations and discussed in detail its role in his article "The Level-of-Analysis Problem in International Relations" (Singer 1961). According to Singer, the study of international relations consists of two main levels: the international system and the state.

Scholars have frequently discussed different levels of analysis since then in an effort to provide a unified framework for categorizing the key influencing factors of international relations. At present, there are five or six levels discussed in the literature: the global level, international level, regional level, state level, non-state level, and individual level. The current paper focuses on three levels: systemic level, regional level, and state level.

The systemic or international level encompasses the global system in its entirety and looks at issues like the distribution of political power across the world. This level of analysis, therefore, focuses on the interactions of states themselves without regard to their internal makeup or the particular individuals who lead them (Goldstein 2005). The regional level emphasizes the influence of regional organizations and regional mechanisms. It focuses on how regional groupings of nations respond to the issues in their regions by holding summit meetings, signing trade agreements, and establishing alliances and security communities. Finally, the state or domestic level looks at

nation-states as actors in a set of particular external conditions. It concerns aggregations such as interest groups, political organizations, and government agencies within the state that influence state actions (Goldstein 2005).

In the context of Southeast Asian regionalism, the related nations encounter actors at all three of these levels. At the international level, ASEAN countries must deal with geopolitical pressure between world powers such as China, Japan, and the United States. At the regional level, ASEAN makes efforts to promote regional cooperation based on the ASEAN-centered framework for the purpose of maintaining its unity and centrality. At the state level, ASEAN member states play a dominant role in the organization's decisions and the construction of the ASEAN community.

The Evolution of Southeast Asian Regionalism

Since the establishment of ASEAN on August 8, 1967, Southeast Asian regionalism has gone through several stages: the Cold War, the Asian financial crisis, and community building. ASEAN has become the center of regionalism in Southeast Asia, and major powers inside and outside the region have integrated into multi-level regional cooperation mechanisms centered on ASEAN. On August 8, 1967, the foreign ministers of Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Singapore held a meeting in Bangkok and issued the Bangkok Declaration, announcing the establishment of ASEAN, launching the first-of-its-kind regional cooperation framework in Southeast Asia (Association of Southeast Asian Nations 1978)¹. In 1976, the first ASEAN Leaders' Meeting was held, and the participating countries signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) in Southeast Asia as well as the Declaration of ASEAN Concord, which defined the group's purposes and principles (Association of Southeast Asian Nations 2012). Twelve years later, Brunei joined ASEAN and a regional cooperation framework with ASEAN Summits and Foreign Ministers' meetings as the main mechanisms were built.

With its historical origin in the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, ASEAN has been making efforts towards equality and partnership to promote regional economic growth, social progress, and cultural development and to lay a solid foundation for building a prosperous and peaceful community of Southeast Asian countries. During its early years, ASEAN sought strategic independence in order to promote regional economic development.

Since the end of the Cold War, ASEAN has enlarged its membership and admitted Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia to the organization and has also launched the ASEAN +1 dialogue mechanism and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) with major partners in the region such as China, the United States, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia and New Zealand. The ASEAN-centered regional cooperation framework was also improved when the financial crisis swept Southeast

¹ Prior to 1967, Southeast Asian countries had already established other regional mechanisms, such as the Association of Southeast Asia (ASA) and Maphilindo.

Asia in 1997. Together with China, Japan, and South Korea, ASEAN held the first ASEAN +3 Leaders' Meeting, marking the beginning of modern East Asian cooperation. In 2000, the first ASEAN +3 Finance Ministers' Meeting in Chiang Mai, Thailand, adopted the famous Chiang Mai Initiative (CMI), which was the first regional currency swap arrangement that helped to address short-term liquidity difficulties in the region and to supplement the existing international financial arrangements. Five years later, the East Asia Summit (EAS) was set up, which comprised sixteen participating countries, including the ten ASEAN Member States as well as Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea. Hence, Southeast Asian regionalism made its first attempt to go beyond the scope of East Asia.

In 2007, the ASEAN Charter was promulgated, reaffirming ASEAN's commitment to build a politically cohesive, economically integrated, and socially responsible community. In response to the global financial crisis of 2008, ASEAN strengthened its economic and financial cooperation by holding an ASEAN +3 Finance Ministers' Meeting in 2009 to promote Chiang Mai Initiative Multilateralization (CMIM). The CMIM expanded the scale of the CMI from US \$80 billion to US \$120 billion, setting a new stage of monetary cooperation in East Asia. During this period, ASEAN and its regional partners worked jointly to maintain regional economic and financial stability during the financial crisis.

In 2010, the EAS was expanded with the joining of the United States and the Russian Federations as its new members. Additionally, five free trade agreements (FTA) between ASEAN and China, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia, and New Zealand came into effect, and economic cooperation topped the agenda of ASEAN regionalism. In the following year, negotiations on the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), the world's largest trading pact, between ASEAN and its FTA partners were launched. More importantly, however, on December 31, 2015, Malaysia, the rotating chair of ASEAN, announced the establishment of an ASEAN Community based on the three pillars of the Political and Security Community, the Economic Community and the Socio-cultural Community. ASEAN Community Vision 2025 emphasized the joint goals of political cohesion, economic integration, social and cultural harmony and stability by 2025. During this period, community building was the key driving force for ASEAN regionalism.

From the analysis above, we can summarize the following characteristics of Southeast Asian regionalism. First, Southeast Asia has formed a regional cooperation mechanism with ASEAN at the center involving a multi-level cooperation network of ASEAN, ASEAN +1, ASEAN +3 (ASEAN plus China, Japan, and South Korea), ASEAN +6, ASEAN +8 (such as the EAS and the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting), ARF, and the ASEAN-EU Summit. The "ASEAN+X" cooperation frameworks cover political, economic, security, social, cultural, information, science and technology, tourism, and other fields. Australia, Canada, China, the European Union, India, Japan, New Zealand, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States, and other major countries and international organizations have all become dialogue partners of ASEAN and have participated in its cooperation mechanisms.

Second, multi-level conference mechanisms have been established, including ASEAN Leaders' Meetings, Ministerial Meetings, Senior Officials' Meetings, ambassadorial meetings, ASEAN Coordination Council meetings, ASEAN Community Council meetings, and various special committee meetings. The Leaders' Meeting or Summit, the highest decision-making body of ASEAN, is currently held twice a year and is the most important mechanism for ASEAN countries to discuss regional cooperation plans. The Foreign Ministers' Meeting involves the body that sets the basic policies of ASEAN, and this meeting is also held twice a year in rotation among the member countries.

Third, Southeast Asian regionalism follows the "ASEAN way", which is a unique diplomatic model developed over a long period of time by ASEAN countries that emphasizes informal and concrete means of cooperation such as consultation and dialogue (Ramcharan 2000). Many important principles of the "ASEAN way", such as non-interference in internal affairs and non-use of force, were included in Chapter II of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia in 1976. The "ASEAN Way" includes at least four aspects: the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other member states, the principle of equal diplomacy, the principle of non-use of force, and the principle of resolving disputes through consultation (Katsumata 2003). These four aspects emphasize consultation and dialogue as the basis for cooperation, and informal consultations, in particular, have become a major feature of the "ASEAN Way". Former Malaysian Prime Minister Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad used "5Cs" to describe the ASEAN's spirit, i.e., Consolidation, Consultation, Consensus, Caring, and Cornerstone (Keling et al. 2011), reflecting the consultative nature of the "ASEAN way". Therefore, regionalism in Southeast Asia has become well known as soft regionalism with less legal binding and restrictions on its members.

Finally, ASEAN has been facing a challenge to integrate the interests of member states domestically with those of major international powers since the organization was built. Domestically, compared to the EU, ASEAN member states have diverse political systems, different ideologies, and different stages of development. Moreover, there are territorial and sea sovereignty disputes within ASEAN member states, and some of them have engaged in historical or recent conflicts. As a result, ASEAN's much-promoted cooperation may face more challenges than other regional cooperatives due to the various differences among its members. Nonetheless, ASEAN keeps unity as its key concern despite the pressure to deal with major regional or world powers in international dialogues. Thus, the question as to how to live in peace with external powers and safeguard ASEAN's guiding principles will be difficult to answer.

ASEAN's Efforts to Promote Sustainable Development Cooperation.

SDGs, also known as the "Global Goals", were adopted by the United Nations in 2015 as a worldwide call to action to end poverty, protect the planet, and work toward a world where, by

2030, all people enjoy peace and prosperity (United Nations Development Programme 2015). ASEAN placed a great emphasis on promoting sustainable development cooperation by including SDGs in its community-building goals and working jointly with the United Nations, the European Union, China, and the United States to realize its goals.

SDGs have been incorporated into ASEAN's development arrangement.

The 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm began a new era of global cooperation on environmental issues. After this conference, the environment as an area of concern was added to the agenda of ASEAN (Klynveld Peat Main Goerdeler 2021). Currently, all ten ASEAN countries are signatories to the United Nations SDGs. In the ASEAN Community Blueprint, ASEAN economic and Socio-Cultural Community building covers sustainable development cooperation as well. The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) Blueprint for 2025 adopted by the ASEAN Leaders at the 27th ASEAN Summit on November 22, 2015, in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, involves working towards (Association of Southeast Asian Nations 2009):

A committed, participative, and socially responsible community for the benefit of ASEAN people; an inclusive community that promotes high quality of life, equitable access to opportunities for all, and promotes and protects human rights; a sustainable community that promotes social development and environmental protection; a resilient community with enhanced capacity and capability to adapt and respond to social and economic vulnerabilities, disasters, climate change, and other new challenges; and a dynamic and harmonious community that is aware and proud of its identity, culture, and heritage.

To promote the necessary practical cooperation in the region, ASEAN set up a Coordinator on Sustainable Development Cooperation in 2016 and established the ASEAN Centre for Sustainable Development Studies and Dialogue in Thailand, helping to enhance sustainable development cooperation with dialogue partners and external parties. In June 2019, the 34th ASEAN Summit published its "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific". The outlook aimed to promote cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region with ASEAN-led mechanisms, such as the EAS, by implementing existing and exploring other ASEAN priority areas of cooperation, including maritime cooperation, connectivity, and SDGs. ASEAN believes the SDGs targets are in line with those of the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 as well as the wider EAS vision. This common objective of realizing SDGs under ASEAN's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific is poised to become a major contributor to the global community.

According to the Outlook, activities to attain the SDGs include the utilization of the digital economy; enhancing complementarities and aligning regional development agenda with

the SDGs, such as the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and the 2030 UN Agenda for Sustainable Development; and Promoting cooperation with the ASEAN Center for Sustainable Development Studies and Dialogue and other relevant institutions in the region (Association of Southeast Asian Nations 2009).

ASEAN has strengthened cooperation with the UN to achieve the UN's SDGs before 2030

As the two most important international organizations in the world and Southeast Asia, respectively, the UN and ASEAN have fostered strong cooperation on sustainable development over the years. The two sides made collective efforts to enhance the complementarities between the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Complementarities Initiative), which was endorsed by the ASEAN-UN Summit in 2016 (Association of Southeast Asian Nations 2016).

The Complementarities Initiative has since then played a catalytic role in advancing sustainable development cooperation in the ASEAN region and beyond. It has served as an approach for ASEAN policymakers both to optimize resources and align ASEAN work streams towards simultaneously achieving both goals by focusing on five priority areas as outlined in the Complementarities Roadmap (2020-2025), namely: poverty eradication, infrastructure and connectivity improvements, sustainable management of natural resources, sustainable consumption, and production and resilience enhancement.

To promote the implementation of the Roadmap, Thailand, the ASEAN Coordinator for Sustainable Development Cooperation, and the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific have organized, for six years running, the annual High-Level Brainstorming Dialogue on Enhancing Complementarities between the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. These meetings have provided a policy platform for ASEAN Member States and ASEAN's external partners to discuss how to advance sustainable development cooperation in ASEAN.

In addition, the UNDP (UN Development Programme) has been a very crucial institution of the UN to promote sustainable cooperation with ASEAN. In recent years, it has provided instructions for ASEAN countries to get more climate finance. UNDP is also establishing a workgroup with the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly (AIPA) to design and develop a multi-year project to advance women's rights in this region. Meanwhile, for UNDP, promoting the integration of some underdeveloped countries, such as Laos, into ASEAN is also an important issue on its agenda (United Nations Development Programme 2016).

ASEAN and China have made sustainable development a priority in their cooperation

Strengthening cooperation on sustainable development is an integral part of building a comprehensive strategic partnership between China and ASEAN. The two sides have agreed to seize the opportunities of green recovery, tap cooperation potential, vigorously explore cooperation in emerging areas such as the digital economy, scientific and technological innovation and the blue economy, and provide new impetus for green and low-carbon development in the region (“2023 ASEAN-China sustainable development cooperation conference was held in Huzhou, Zhejiang Province.” 2023). The Joint Statement on Strengthening China-ASEAN Common Sustainable Development published at the 25th China-ASEAN Summit in Phnom Penh in November 2022 emphasized the importance of ASEAN unity and “centrality” in promoting ASEAN’s sub-regional development and recognized the relevance of sub-regional development to ASEAN’s regional integration and community-building process, especially in narrowing the development gap within ASEAN and between ASEAN and the rest of the world.

In order to promote poverty reduction cooperation, China has held seminars such as the “China ASEAN Rural Poverty Alleviation Policy and Practice Seminar” and the “China ASEAN Tourism Promotion Poverty Alleviation Seminar” since 2011. The Chinese government has been organizing the “ASEAN+3” village official exchange project since 2013, exchanging and learning from each other’s experiences in grassroots poverty governance through discussions, learning, and participatory research.

Meanwhile, since 2016, China has been promoting cooperation with ASEAN countries in nontraditional security areas under the framework of Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China 2023). The framework supports cooperation among countries in terms of environmental protection, education, supply chain and industrial chain stability. China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam have held several activities to enhance the capacity of industrial environmental governance and water environment monitoring by providing training for Southeast Asian technical personnel (“Vietnamese expert sees promising prospects for Lancang-Mekong Cooperation.” 2020).

Furthermore, in 2021, the second largest economy has also put forward Global Development Initiatives featuring eight key areas of cooperation, including poverty reduction, food security, COVID-19 and vaccines, financing for development, climate change and green development, industrialization, the digital economy, and connectivity, which cover all 17 SDGs of the 2030 Agenda. The “Global Development and South-South Cooperation Fund” and the “China-UN Peace and Development Fund” both provide broad space for China-ASEAN cooperation in sustainable development. Through the Global Development and South-South Cooperation Fund in cooperation with the WFP, China launched its first project in Laos in 2022 by providing 930 tons of rice and 120 tons of canned fish to the WFP and the National School Meals Program of the Lao Ministry of Education and Sports, and provide school meals for more than 130,000 students in more than 1,400 elementary schools in eight provinces of Laos (Progress Report on the Implementation of

the Global Development Initiative 2023). China and ASEAN are also continuing to carry out exchange of activities and pilot projects such as the China-ASEAN Social Development and Poverty Reduction Forum and Village Leaders Exchange Program aiming at enhancing social development, poverty reduction, and regional food security (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2022).

ASEAN has strengthened its cooperation on SDGs with the United States

The United States has been ASEAN's key strategic partner since it established dialogue relations with ASEAN in 1977. The two sides elevated their relations to Strategic Partnership and Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2015 and 2022, respectively. In relation to sustainable development cooperation, ASEAN and the United States have agreed to advance efforts to achieve the UN SDGs, with particular emphasis on certain fields, such as education, conservation of natural resources and the environment, equitable development and sustainable economic growth ("ASEAN-U.S. Leaders' Statement on the Establishment of the ASEAN-U.S. Comprehensive Strategic Partnership." 2022).

Educational Cooperation is an important field of sustainable development cooperation between the two sides. Each year, the United States provides more than \$70 million to support educational and cultural exchanges with the people of Southeast Asia ("ASEAN-U.S. Leaders' Statement on the Establishment of the ASEAN-U.S. Comprehensive Strategic Partnership." 2023). Since 2013, the White House has built the leadership capabilities of youth in the region through the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI) to strengthen ties between the people of the United States and Southeast Asia (US Mission to ASEAN).

The US Agency for International Development (USAID) has been an active player in providing finance and skill training to ASEAN countries. The programme ASEAN-USAID Inclusive Growth through Innovation, Trade and E-Commerce has developed the ASEAN Single Window (ASW) Trader Survey, which was carried out in 2021 and 2022 and is underway now in 2023. The Trader Survey helps ASEAN improve the operation of the ASW through direct feedback from traders (US Mission to ASEAN 2023). This programme is also working to leverage the potential of women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) and promote greater linkages among the government, private sectors, and academia to encourage growth through research and development, including commercialization of research (Harris 2023).

ASEAN has considered the EU to be an important partner for sustainable development cooperation

The EU became ASEAN's Dialogue Partner in 1977, and this relationship was formally institutionalized following the signing of the ASEAN-EEC Cooperation Agreement on March

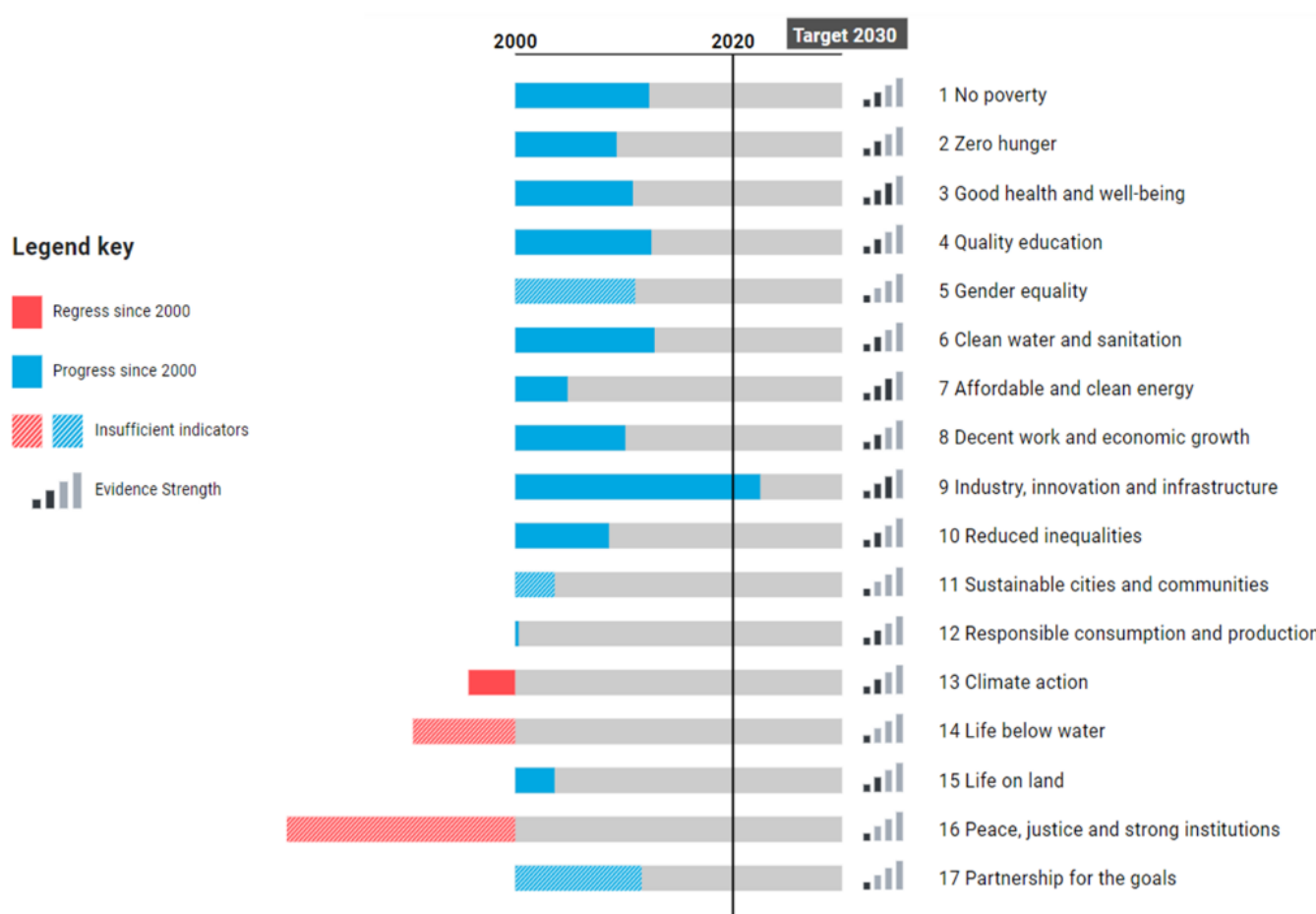
7, 1980. The cooperation between the EU and ASEAN covers political, economic, and social-cultural fields, including sustainable development cooperation. Presently, ASEAN is the EU's third largest trading partner outside Europe, following the United States and China, and the EU was the second-largest provider of FDI for ASEAN in 2021 (Singh 2022). The two sides convened the High-Level ASEAN-EU Dialogue on Sustainable Development: Towards Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in Bangkok, Thailand, in November 2017, and since then, the High-Level Dialogue has become a platform for promoting cooperation on the effective implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the 2015 Paris Agreement on Climate Change.

Since 2020, the EU-ASEAN engagement has led to a strategic partnership with a commitment to work towards enhancing prosperity, promoting security, strengthening resilience, and improving sustainable connectivity. In the EU-ASEAN 45th commemorative summit held in 2022, the EU reiterated its interest in ASEAN given the evolving geostrategic and geoeconomic situation. The summit adopted the EU-ASEAN plan of action 2023-2027, which has six pillars of cooperation, including several topics related to SDGs. Through these mechanisms and dialogues, the EU has been trying to play a bigger role in Southeast Asia, where its main purpose is to gain better economic access to the ASEAN market.

Addressing climate change has been a priority for sustainable development cooperation between the EU and ASEAN. The two sides have established a High-Level Dialogue (HLD) on Environment and Climate Change. In 2020, the EU launched a €10 million (\$11 million) program to support the ASEAN Coordinating Center for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management. The EU's development assistance to ASEAN also includes \$56 million under the ASEAN Catalytic Green Finance Facility from 2021 onward, \$6 million for forest governance in 2020-2023, \$22 million for sustainable peat management and haze mitigation in 2016-2023 (Lazard and Jayaram 2023).

With its internal and external efforts, ASEAN has made considerable progress in achieving most of its SDGs from 2000 to 2020 (Figure 1). Noticeably, there was a marked improvement in education in the region from 2016 to 2020. The proportion of qualified primary school teachers increased from 86.3% to 90.8%, and pre-primary participation improved from 74.4% to 76.2%. In addition, the usage of mobile phones and the Internet grew. According to the report, 87.8 percent of the population in the region was covered by mobile networks in 2020, an improvement from 2016's 84 percent, and 76.8 percent of individuals in the ASEAN region were reported to be using the Internet in 2020, showing a remarkable improvement from only 52.8 percent in 2016 (Association of Southeast Asian Nations 2022b).

Figure 1. Indicators of SDGs in ASEAN (2000 and 2020)



Source: ESCAP South-East Asia (SEA) country grouping of 11 countries: Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste, Viet Nam.

Why can sustainable development cooperation be promoted?

As discussed above, ASEAN has been actively engaged in recent years in sustainable development cooperation with China, the EU, the United States, and the UN. The reason why sustainable development cooperation is promoted by ASEAN is that the cooperation serves the interests of all parties.

At the state level, sustainable development is the major concern for the countries in the region. It is an urgent task for countries either in Southeast Asia or outside the region to promote high-quality development to pursue a better life with healthy economic growth, inclusive society and harmony between human beings and nature.

For ASEAN member states, the need to improve the people’s livelihood leads directly to the focus on sustainable development. In spite of many years of rapid economic growth, Southeast Asian countries are now facing pressing issues related to the people’s livelihood, like climate change, poverty reduction, unemployment and environmental protection. It is in great need to

promote sustainable development cooperation to improve the quality of people's lives and the environment for future generations.

In the first half of 2023, most of the countries in Southeast Asia experienced a heat wave that caused wide discussion of a possible emergency declaration to help those in the worst-affected areas cope with the phenomenon ("What would it take for a heat wave Emergency to be declared in Malaysia?" 2023). Earthquakes frequently took place in Indonesia and the Philippines, and these two countries also witnessed multiple volcanic eruptions since the early part of 2023. Additionally, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Malaysia suffered serious floods that caused significant levels of internal displacement. Statistics from the Indonesian government show that the funds used to deal with natural disasters in Indonesia are as high as 300-500 million US dollars every year, and in years of major disasters, losses after the disasters are often as high as 0.3% of Indonesia's total GDP, which seriously restricts its national economic and social development (BER staff 2019).

Climate-related disasters have become common challenges facing ASEAN states. According to the 2022 ASEAN SDG Snapshot Report, Southeast Asia has become more vulnerable to climate-related disasters in 2020 relative to 2016, as shown by the increasing average level of population affected by such disasters. Vulnerability to extreme weather is an important dimension of poverty, especially in areas that frequently experience these disasters since even the non-poor can easily fall into poverty as a result of them. In 2020, an average of 2,546.8 individuals per 100,000 either died, went missing, or were directly affected by climate-related disasters (Association of Southeast Asian Nations 2022a).

At the same time, stunted growth is another big problem in Southeast Asia. The 2022 ASEAN SDG Snapshot Report also shows that, on average, 25.4% of children under five years of age had stunted growth in 2020. This is slightly lower when compared to 27.0 percent in 2016. Individual ASEAN member states' recent performances on stunted growth show mixed results. Among the member states with available information for the periods of interest, nearly half of them experienced a worsening malnutrition problem (Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia), and the rest (Cambodia, Philippines, Vietnam, and Myanmar) showed some improvements in 2020 compared to 2016 (Association of Southeast Asian Nations 2022a).

For the United States and the EU, reinforcing leadership in sustainable development cooperation is the major interest. The world's superpower tried really hard to enhance its global leadership in sustainable development cooperation by strengthening development resilience. After Joe Biden became President, the White House vigorously pushed forward sustainable development issues, such as returning to the Paris Agreement, hosting the global climate summit, and strengthening clean energy research. By taking the lead in solving the global climate crisis, Biden's administration aims to strengthen multilateralism and reshape its global leadership (Brown, et al. 2021).

It is the same story for the EU. In response to global climate change, the EU became one of the first players in the world to put forward the goal of carbon neutrality and has been at

the forefront of green development in the world. By making efforts to shape a green industrial chain system, promote green development, and upgrade the Paris Agreement into a multilateral governance system, the EU wanted to enhance the international voice and soft power and lead a new round of global competition (Yucheng 2021).

For China, since 2012, its economy has shifted from a stage of rapid growth to a stage of high-quality development, which is a necessary requirement for maintaining sustained and sound economic development for adapting to the changes in the principal contradictions facing Chinese society. Therefore, China pays greater attention to the pursuit of common prosperity, as required for the full, accurate and comprehensive implementation of the new development philosophy, which includes innovative, coordinated, green, open and shared development. By adopting the new development concept, China will promote high-quality economic development and fully implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Given its adjacency, ASEAN shares much common interests with China in SDG, including environmental protection, transportation, trade facilities.

At the regional level, in the context of the emergence of unilateralism and exclusive unilateralism by the United States, sustainable development cooperation serves as an important platform for ASEAN to push real multilateralism to maintain its centrality and uphold ASEAN's role in regional governance.

Multilateralism refers to diplomatic actions in which three or more countries coordinate policies to meet common challenges and promote common interests. With the vigorous development of various international organizations after World War II, multilateral cooperation has increasingly become an important mechanism for the international community to maintain peace, promote development and address common challenges.

In an increasingly interconnected world, no country, no matter how powerful, can stand alone or solve the problems facing the world singlehandedly. Instead, it needs to attach importance to multilateral cooperation and the multilateral system from a strategic and principled perspective.

However, since Donald Trump took office, the United States has vigorously promoted unilateralism or unilateralism that excludes some regional countries in order to strengthen the so-called American hegemony. For example, on January 23, 2017, President Donald Trump took action to permanently withdraw the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a multinational trade agreement in the region, which upset ASEAN countries. Meanwhile, multilateralism was also severely damaged in the international arena and regional architecture by American-led unilateralism, like QUAD, which posed a serious threat to ASEAN-centered multilateralism when talking about regional security issues.

At the same time, in recent years, with the global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the frequent occurrence of extreme weather around the world, the spread of the Ukraine crisis, and the conflict between Palestine and Israel. Global and regional issues such as energy security, food security, poverty and hunger, and ecological environment have become more prominent. However, major countries failed to coordinate and collaborate to tackle the

common crisis, and global multilateral mechanisms such as the G20 failed to play their due role in global governance as well. Therefore, strengthening regional multilateral cooperation, especially cooperation on sustainable development to promote effective regional governance, becomes a must.

Under these circumstances, ASEAN released its leaders' declaration on October 26 2021, reaffirming their belief that regionalism and multilateralism are important principles and frameworks of cooperation (Association of Southeast Asian Nations 2021). For ASEAN, real multilateralism based on the principle of openness and inclusiveness is the foundation for stable regional mechanisms and balanced relations between ASEAN and external partners. To promote regional multilateralism, sustainable development cooperation is an important way because the cooperation is in line with the interests of each party. That is why ASEAN emphasized the importance of multilateralism and the significance of ASEAN's partnerships with regional partners to address common concerns, narrow the development gap, enhance sub-regional development for the benefit of people, including the effective realisation of the complementarities between the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Association of Southeast Asian Nations 2023).

At the international level, the "low politics" issues, such as sustainable development cooperation, tend to become more consensual for ASEAN to navigate when managing ties with major powers, especially against the background of present intensifying geopolitical games. By doing so, ASEAN can be relatively easier to maintain and consolidate its centrality in regional mechanisms to avoid becoming collateral damage.

ASEAN centrality serves the basis for regional mechanisms and the fundamental guarantee for ASEAN to promote regional cooperation. Since the end of the Cold War, ASEAN has established and strengthened its centrality in regional cooperation by continuously promoting political, economic and security cooperation. However, in recent years, with the great changes in the international situation, especially the intensification of the game between major powers, ASEAN is facing more and more difficulties in promoting political, economic, security and even scientific and technological cooperation with partner countries. Cooperation in the field of "high politics" has not only become a factor hindering regional cooperation but also poses a challenge to ASEAN's centrality.

Compared to sustainable development cooperation, it is harder for ASEAN to consolidate its centrality to keep balance in the power game by focusing on strategic, economic or science and technology cooperation. With regard to strategic cooperation, the United States has vigorously promoted its Indo-Pacific strategy in 2021 and 2022 in an attempt to win over ASEAN by promoting supply chain and regional military cooperation, disrupting South China Sea disputes, pushing forward joint maritime law enforcement and the concept of a free and open Indo-Pacific region. Such "divide and rule" policies pose serious challenges for ASEAN because the US Indo-Pacific strategy may affect the coherence of ASEAN by offering individual member states privileges if they depart from common policies of ASEAN's integration schemes (Chirathivat and Langhammer

2020). ASEAN countries are also well aware that cooperation with relevant powers in sensitive fields could trigger regional tensions if not properly handled. Under these circumstances, ASEAN needs to choose a cooperation issue that is less controversial, acceptable to all parties, and easy to promote on top of its existing mechanisms if it is to ensure the centrality of the region and the dominance of regional cooperation issues over international ones. Sustainable development cooperation is one such option.

In economic terms, ASEAN actively promotes economic cooperation with major powers, such as negotiation with China on the upgraded version of the Free Trade Agreement, promotion of RCEP cooperation with regional countries, and cooperation with the United States under the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework. However, by drawing seven ASEAN countries to participate in the “Indo-Pacific Economic Framework”, the United States has attempted to establish regional rules led by itself and to reorganize the industrial supply chain, promoting the “decoupling” of regional countries from the Chinese economy. This has presented ASEAN countries with a great dilemma because deepening economic cooperation with major countries, especially strengthening industrial and supply chain cooperation to decouple with China, is a sensitive issue in the current international landscape. It is easy to fall into the strategic trap of “choosing sides” if ASEAN is careless, which runs counter to its primary objectives. Therefore, although economic cooperation is in the best interest of all parties, it may not be the most unifying issue for ASEAN in the near future.

The field of science and technology is also a common issue of concern to all countries in the region, but it is not a common concern for regional cooperation because scientific and technological cooperation is the focus of competition between major world powers. The United States has forged and strengthened a so-called technological alliance with the EU and other tech-leading democracies, including Australia, Japan, and South Korea, to push back against China’s dominance of the tech sector (Scott and Barigazzi 2021). This alliance has encouraged Southeast Asian countries to “decouple” from China’s science and technology. In this context, ASEAN must be cautious when promoting science and technology cooperation under a regional framework. As the Lowy Institute, an Australian think tank, pointed out in an article titled “Is Southeast Asia ready for a US-China tech decoupling?” (Harjani 2021):

For Southeast Asia, a tech decoupling would likely be an unwelcome addition to existing issues sandwiching the region between China and the United States, such as trade and territorial claims in the South China Sea.

Therefore, scientific and technological cooperation may not make a good platform to support regional cooperation. By contrast, sustainable development cooperation issues, such as poverty, hunger, education, clean water and other issues, are lowly sensitive, which makes it easier to become a common interest for all players.

Challenges for ASEAN in Advancing Sustainable Development Cooperation

Since 2017, ASEAN has made progress with China, the United States, the UN and the EU in sustainable development cooperation. Nevertheless, ASEAN's efforts to realize its SDGs still face many challenges.

At the state level, some ASEAN countries lack sufficient funds to achieve their SDGs. According to a study entitled "Unleashing the Potential of Sustainable Finance in Southeast Asia", sustainable debt and markets in the ASEAN-5 countries of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam have grown rapidly over the past five years (Word Bank Group and the Institute of Finance and Sustainability 2022). Annual sustainable lending has grown from \$250 million in 2016 to \$6.75 billion in 2021, and the balance of sustainable lending has reached about \$24 billion. However, this growth fails short of meeting the trillion-dollar financing needs of the five countries for sustainable development (Word Bank Group and the Institute of Finance and Sustainability 2022).

The most recent United Nations review of SDG progress also showed that Southeast Asian countries will not be on track to meet any of their 17 SDGs by 2030 (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific 2020). What's worse, the goals of reduced inequality and increased peace, justice, and strong institutions have regressed across the region. Furthermore, due to the different situations facing the ASEAN member states, the regional bloc sometimes fails to take unanimous actions to tackle problems related to sustainable development cooperation. Take climate change for example. Even though each country realizes the need to work jointly to deal with the problem, some countries cannot follow the collective actions of the organization.

Southeast Asia's largest economy, Indonesia, is a major source of smog in the region. Every summer, residents of the Indonesian island of Sumatra often burn the land, which causes smoke and haze, resulting in serious air pollution that affects neighboring Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, and other countries. In fact, as early as 1977, ASEAN started intergovernmental exchanges on environmental protection and biodiversity and established afterwards a trans-boundary haze management body, with the ASEAN Senior Environmental Officials Organization (ASOEN) Cross-border Pollution Working Group being responsible for dealing with cross-border pollution issues and the ASEAN Special Technical Working Group on haze being tasked to deal with smog-related matters, but the haze problem has yet to be effectively solved. In 2002, ASEAN signed the ASEAN Agreement of Trans-boundary Haze Pollution, and the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Trans-boundary Haze Pollution Control (ACC) was established for the purposes of facilitating cooperation and coordination among the parties in managing the impact of land and/or forest fires and in particular the haze pollution arising from such fires. Nevertheless, the Indonesian Parliament did not ratify the agreement on haze pollution until October 2014. At present, haze is still a serious problem for Indonesia and its neighboring countries to solve.

At the regional level, the issue of unity among ASEAN members has become a tough challenge to regionalism. The situation in Myanmar has been volatile since the military government took power in 2021. The military and the opposition are intransigent, and the goals of each side are difficult to reconcile. The National Unity Government has gained popular support, and its armed force, the People's Defense Force, is closely pitted against the military. More than 5,000 people have fled from eastern Myanmar into Thailand since early April 2023 as fighting between Myanmar's army and armed resistance groups has intensified in the border area (Saksornchai 2023). ASEAN is very concerned about the situation in Myanmar and has put forward a five-point consensus on the settlement of the Myanmar issue, but this has been ignored by the Myanmar military. ASEAN, therefore, has refused to recognize the Myanmar military by not inviting the leaders of Myanmar authorities to attend the series of ASEAN meetings for three consecutive times since 2021.

Worse still, in May 2023, a convoy of several vehicles carrying diplomats from the embassies of Indonesia and Singapore and officials coordinating humanitarian relief from ASEAN was attacked by an unknown armed group in the Taunggyi township of eastern Myanmar's Shan state ("Convoy carrying Asean diplomats' attacked in Myanmar." 2023). The situation in Myanmar grows increasingly worrying, and the unity within ASEAN has begun to be more widely questioned.

Doubts about ASEAN in Myanmar and abroad have led to increasing public pressure on ASEAN. Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim mentioned as well that "ASEAN has not been able to resolve most problems, contentious ones. We are stuck with the principle of nonintervention... there is non-interference, but we will have a new vision that could give us some flexibility to navigate and maneuver the way forward", which underscores how the insistence on unanimity has paralyzed the regional body (Gomez and Tariganand 2023). The ASEAN foreign minister meeting concluded in Jakarta in July 2023 took no pragmatic measures to cope with the Myanmar issue and instead only emphasized the five-point consensus.

The political dilemma in Myanmar is hard to solve in the short term. Myanmar's absence from the series of ASEAN-related meetings may seriously affect the regional cooperation agenda. Only if ASEAN strengthens its own unity and cohesion can the regional bloc prevent the Myanmar crisis from escalating into an ASEAN crisis and ensure the steady progress of regional cooperation in various fields and relations with dialogue partners.

Besides Myanmar, Timor Leste's accession to ASEAN may have an impact on East Asian regional cooperation. ASEAN agreed in principle to admit Timor Leste as the group's 11th member at 2022 ASEAN summit, and a road map on Timor-Leste's full membership was adopted at the 42nd ASEAN Summit in May 2023. However, within ASEAN, the member countries differ in attitude towards the formal admission of Timor Leste into ASEAN. For example, countries like Indonesia and Vietnam strongly support Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN, whereas Singapore hesitates to join the supportive crowd. Singapore's Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan has commented, "I think everyone is fully supportive of Timor-Leste's full participation, but membership in ASEAN carries with it heavy responsibilities and obligations" (Shibata 2023). The fundamental reason is that Timor Leste's backward economy and unstable political and security situation could inflict

a heavy burden on the regional bloc. As one article explicitly put it, “This is a big stumbling block for Timor-Leste. The good intentions to admit it as a member might turn into problematic conditions for ASEAN in the future” (Mulia 2023).

Therefore, ASEAN must put in extra effort to sustain and enhance its unity. It has been a test for ASEAN since its inception to manage this challenge internally by advocating non-interference in internal affairs and accommodating the comfort level of all parties when member states face a domestic challenge with potential spillover effects.

At the international level, geopolitical strategic games between great powers have challenged ASEAN’s centrality. As the United States pushes forward its so-called Indo-Pacific strategy, the region has seen the emergence of small multilateral mechanisms, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) between the United States, Japan, India, and Australia, and the Australia-UK-US defense pact (AUKUS), which is a trilateral security partnership. ASEAN nations differ on strategic and security-related issues, posing a challenge to ASEAN centrality.

The QUAD, a major tool for the United States to promote strategic and security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region, has dominated many regional cooperation issues economically and strategically for the purpose of excluding China from the region. Furthermore, the United States and the West intend to promote the expansion of QUAD membership and attract Southeast Asian countries to join. For example, in 2020, the Quad Plus framework held roundtable conferences. On March 20 of that year, representatives from South Korea, Vietnam, and New Zealand were included in the weekly QUAD meeting. In May, the intent for the Plus format was strengthened when the United States hosted a meeting of QUAD nations that also included Brazil, Israel, and South Korea to discuss a global response to COVID-19.

Additionally, other multilateral mechanisms led by the United States, such as the Group of Seven (G7), have also invited ASEAN countries to participate. At the 2023 G7 Summit, leaders of Indonesia, Vietnam and other countries were invited to attend. Under the leadership of the United States and the West, the summit discussed issues such as support for Ukraine, disarmament and nuclear nonproliferation, clean energy transition, economic resilience and security, and global food security. In fact, both QUAD and G7 often discuss political and security issues in Southeast Asia, such as the South China Sea dispute and cross-strait relations.

The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework vigorously promoted by the United States has also been joined by seven ASEAN countries, but Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar were refused participation, making it hard for ASEAN to speak out on regional economic issues as a whole. On the South China Sea issue, the United States has also made great efforts to ally with the Philippines by deepening military cooperation with the Philippines and upgrading bilateral relations. In February 2023, US military forces gained access to four new bases in the Philippines under a new military agreement. Since then, the region has witnessed the largest military exercise in history between the Philippines and the United States, the meeting of the National security advisers between the United States, Japan, and Australia, and potential joint patrols in the South China Sea by the United States, Japan, Australia, and the Philippines. ASEAN is now facing its most difficult

situation since its establishment in 1967. As Cambodia's Prime Minister Hun Sen said at the opening of the East Asia Summit, "many current challenges and tensions have been hindering [their] past hard-earned efforts to promote sustainable development and causing greater hardship to people's lives" ("Southeast Asian leaders call for unity amid global tensions." 2022).

On the issue of Ukraine, although ASEAN has issued three consecutive statements expressing concern about the issue of Ukraine and calling for maintaining peace, ASEAN member states have vastly different stances on this issue. Myanmar has explicitly supported Russia, but Singapore has denounced Russia. Cambodia changed its stance from neutral at the outset of the conflict to condemning Russia's annexation of Ukraine's territory, and Vietnam and Laos abstained from voting on a UN General Assembly resolution condemning Russia's military action. Indonesia, Malaysia, and other countries are relatively neutral. In addition, Indonesian President Joko Widodo personally visited Russia and Ukraine in June 2022 to mediate the Ukraine conflict.

In relation to the issue of the trilateral Security Partnership (AUKUS) between the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, the attitudes of ASEAN countries are still quite different. At the ASEAN level, there has been no common position and very limited joint diplomatic action in response to AUKUS. The Philippines, Vietnam, and Singapore have been ostensibly supportive of the new security pact, and although Malaysia and Indonesia have openly voiced concerns over the risks of nuclear proliferation, they have not explicitly opposed the AUKUS. Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Brunei, and Myanmar have refrained from making open and unambiguous comments (Li 2022). ASEAN has thus failed to speak out unanimously on the above sensitive issues.

Conclusion

Southeast Asian regionalism, represented by ASEAN and its centered regional cooperation mechanism, has been one of the most successful examples of regionalism (Buszynski 1992). Since the establishment of ASEAN in 1967, it has influenced and shaped the regional order several different times. ASEAN's success lies not only in the progress made by the regional bloc in community building but also in its relations with member states and external partners simultaneously. The convergence of the interests of ASEAN, its member states, and external powers is guaranteed to spur the ASEAN-centered regional mechanism and its community-building to continue to evolve. Historically, ASEAN sought to collaborate with its member states and dialogue partners by maintaining strategic independence during the Cold War, when coping with the Asian financial crisis in 1997 and in pushing forward community building in the 21st century.

At present, against the backdrop of changes unseen in a century, especially the fierce geopolitical competition between major world powers, ASEAN has focused on sustainable development cooperation to strengthen its regional mechanism by cooperation with major powers and solving the economic and social difficulties of its member states. Sustainable development cooperation has become the new driving force for Southeast Asian regionalism. However, economic and social

difficulties in member states and the strategic games between international powers now challenge the regional cooperation led by ASEAN.

ASEAN's experience in sustainable development cooperation may also bring enlightenment to other regions, such as Latin America. In recent years, regionalism in Latin America has shown new vitality. The Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) has revived regional cooperation by bringing countries in the region together to tackle challenges ranging from climate change to food crises. Additionally, sub-regional integration organizations, such as the Pacific Alliance (AP), the Andean Community (CAN), the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR), and the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), also play an important role in the sustainable development of their regions. However, compared to ASEAN, Latin America, with its larger number of countries, differs greatly in member development levels and, as such, has encountered more difficulties in coordination within the region.

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