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How regional organisation survives: ASEAN, hedging and international society

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ABSTRACT

How can a regional organisation survive in great power contests? This article uses the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as the empirical case to address the puzzle. The inquiry is important for three reasons. First, the recent developments in world politics have shown the increasingly penetrative actions of the major powers into regional multilateral organisations. Second, looking at ASEAN, the internal cohesion and solidity of the Association's member countries over the last decade have been challenged by the competition between China and the U.S. Third, the existing literature on ASEAN regional strategic affairs has been focused on hedging as the weaker states' agential choice to manage their relations with the stronger states. However, there is insufficient explanation of what makes sustainable Southeast Asian states' hedging possible. Working within the English School theory of IR, this article offers two factors explaining ASEAN's survival as a regional international society: elite diplomatic culture and great power management. The argument is that ASEAN has developed its ideas and values of intra-regional diplomatic relations and built institutions that can mitigate the damaging consequences of the U.S.–China order contestation. Furthermore, this study promotes an English School perspective on hedging based on the ASEAN case. Arguing against the realist theory of hedging, which focuses on the domestic function of foreign policy strategy, the narrow conception of national interests and the relative distribution of power at the systemic level, hedging works because of viable institutions of the regional international society oriented toward constructing and preserving order .

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Introduction

One of the most glaring phenomena of twenty-first-century international politics is the return of traditional power plays, which have challenged the feasibility of multilateral organisations (Mead, 2014; Mearsheimer, 2018). International Relations (IR) scholars debate the prospects of regional and global institutions in world politics. We can see

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what happens following Russia's latest invasion of Ukraine as empirical evidence of how power politics has unfavourably penetrated diplomacy in various international organisations. The global reactions to the Russia-Ukraine war demonstrate that the emergence of a new Cold War is increasingly possible (Bremmer, 2022). The United States and NATO explicitly oppose Russia and impose enormous economic sanctions on Moscow. Their objective is to weaken the Russian ability to expand its military campaign and destabilise Vladimir Putin's regime. In response, Russia and China pledge to support each other against the Western alliance. It is the most apparent structural division in post-Cold War world politics. Although the armed conflict in Ukraine is not escalating to other regions, its unpredictable end and extensive consequences have created worldwide crises and tensions.

In the Asia-Pacific or Indo-Pacific region, uncertainty is felt in the capital cities of South-east Asian countries. In addition, regional think tanks warn leaders and policymakers of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states to anticipate potential internal splits resulting from the ongoing global geopolitical turbulence. This warning is not an exaggeration. ASEAN is not solid in responding to the Russia-Ukraine war. Myanmar and Vietnam favour Russia, while Singapore joins the anti-Russia camp. Others, like Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand, try to be impartial, though initially, they have leaned toward the West. Intra-ASEAN differences in dealing with extra-regional affairs have become a common view, particularly since the 2010s. China-U.S. contests have divided Southeast Asia. ASEAN critics, such as Beeson (2022), opine that though the Association has struggled to accommodate the bigger states, the former fails to influence the latter's behaviour significantly. But how can ASEAN survive?

Thus far, ASEAN governments have maintained hedging as their strategic option to keep good relationships with Beijing and Washington and simultaneously ensure Southeast Asian stability (Ciorciari, 2010; Jones & Jenne, 2022; Kuik, 2016; Shekhar, 2012; Tan, 2020). Studies on hedging have focused on what smaller states do to secure their vital interests in the face of greater states. Nonetheless, they need to address the question of why hedging works and supports the existence of ASEAN. This article examines the deeper social realities that enable ASEAN states to hedge against the more powerful actors and continue their multilateral roles in a divided and contested regional environment. Working within the English School theory of IR, we answer the puzzle by exploring the viability of ASEAN's elite diplomatic culture and great power management. The argument is that ASEAN has developed its ideas and values in conducting intra-regional diplomacy and built regional institutions that can facilitate and preserve norms-based relationships with stronger external powers. These habits and practices help mitigate the damaging impacts of China-U.S. order contestation on ASEAN. Based on the case of ASEAN, we offer an English School perspective on hedging. Essentially, hedging is enabled by keeping up the institutions of ASEAN as a regional international society. In addition, hedging aims to construct and preserve regional order, which ensures ASEAN's survival.

This article proceeds in six steps. After this introductory part, the second section elaborates on the conceptual framework to analyse the significance of diplomatic culture and great power management for sustaining the effectiveness of a regional organisation, focusing on ASEAN. Here we also review the significant hedging conceptualisations and explain why an English School reconsidered hedging concept. The third part explores strategic challenges ASEAN has to cope with due to the China-U.S. order competition. Sections four and five elucidate how ASEAN's elite diplomatic culture and great power management

can confine the destructive impacts of the competing regional actors on ASEAN. The sixth part advances the English School's explanation of hedging based on the ASEAN case. Finally, in the concluding section, we summarise our argument and emphasise our contribution to the debate on the prospects of regional organisations in international politics.

Securing regional organisation: ASEAN and English School

Perceiving regional international society

The English School in IR advances international society, understood as an association of sovereign states (Manning, 1975, pp. 166–167). International society is formed by states having commonalities in interests and values. Members of society are aware of standard rules governing their interaction within functional institutions (Bull, 1977, p. 13). Institutions refer to 'habits and practices shaped towards the realisation of common goals' (Bull, 1977, p. 74). The three elementary objectives are survival, compliance with agreements and protection of properties (Bull, 1977, p. 4). Essentially, institutions function to create and keep order in international society. Based on this basic understanding of the attributes of international society, which are reflexive of the European political histories, English School theorists have introduced two models of the society of states: global and regional. The global international society is represented by the establishment and advancement of the European Union (EU) toward a cosmopolitan/solidarist society of states. In contrast, regional international societies live beyond the EU and continue conserving their communitarian/pluralist identities (Alderson & Hurrell, 2000; Bain, 2021). Although having different features and stages of evolution, both forms of international society coexist (Keene, 2002).

Studies on the historical developments of the regional international societies show that local cultural and political traditions have generated homogeneity within a local community of states, but created heterogeneity at the global level (see, for instance, Buzan & Gonzalez-Pelaez, 2009; Buzan & Zhang, 2014; Spandler, 2018; Suzuki, 2005). Every regional international society builds specific primary institutions and translates them into secondary ones (Buzan & Zhang, 2014, p. 7).

However, English School scholars differ in locating the fundamental and instrumental institutions operating in the regional international societies. Bull (1977, pp. 95–222) mentioned five primary institutions, including diplomacy, international law, great power management, the balance of power and war. Buzan (2004, pp. 181–187) adds to this list some foundational institutions for the modern international society, such as sovereignty, territoriality, equality of people, nationalism and environmental stewardship. These basic institutions are operationalised to become procedural ones like agreements, organisations and regimes suitable to the objectives of the regional international society. For example, five institutions exist in Southeast Asia to keep order: nationalism, sovereignty, economic development, diplomacy and great power management (Emmers, 2012; Quayle, 2013). They have developed into ASEAN treaties and regional bodies.

Explaining ASEAN's survival

Departing from the above conceptual understanding of regional international society, ASEAN can maintain its existence by creating and preserving its fundamental institutions.

In the current contested regional order context, the most relevant are diplomatic culture and great power management. Diplomatic culture is the primary institution that enables ASEAN to deal with its critical affairs. Bull (1977, p. 204) defines diplomatic culture as ‘the common stock of ideas and values possessed by the official representatives of states’. The ideas and values become the practical guide, consisting of certain general principles of procedure, for interactions among members of the society of states. Nonetheless, a standard of excellence is made according to a particular tradition of interpretation (Navari, 2011). In this regard, ASEAN has established its collective activity based on specific norms adopted from the region’s diverse indigenous cultural and political heritages. Milner (2017, p. 860) argues the two inseparable dimensions of culture matter: “‘culture’ as a community – as a focus of identity, an object of allegiance or rallying; on the other, the emphasis on cultural specificities, on ‘culture’ as operational equipment’. Therefore, in the case of ASEAN, the dominant elements of the cultural factor depend on the Association’s leaders’ perception of their most favoured common objectives as a community (Haacke, 1999, 2003, 2005).

In the broader sense of diplomatic practice, interstate relations, either conflict or cooperation, involve aspects of national cultural expressions (McConnell & Dittmer, 2016). We argue that the specific diplomatic culture found how the regional states develop crisis management systems, including great power management. In international politics literature, the concept of great power management relates to several theoretical perspectives, such as global and regional governance. Cui and Buzan (2016), Foot (2017), Little (2006) and Zala (2020) underscore the meaning of great power management as not only the right of powerful states to pursue their international roles but also to legitimise them by taking international responsibilities directed at preserving the existing order. Thus, this definition of great power management stresses a vital aspect of governance. Although the expectation is originally pertinent to certain great powers and mainly rooted in eighteenth-century European international politics, for knowledge advancement, we link it up with the working of regional institutions established by ASEAN. One consequence of this conceptual shift is broadening the conventional understanding of great power management as constituting the most influential actors. In contrast, the potential influence of the weaker states deserves consideration (Chong, 2011).

Therefore, we need to appreciate the concept and practice of agency of the regional organisation like ASEAN, as Brems Knudsen (2019, p. 24) argues that regional organisations drive changes in the underlying institutions of international society. Since its establishment in 1967, ASEAN has enabled great power management for regional relations by fostering a relatively stable and peaceful geostrategic environment so that major wars never happen. In other words, ASEAN’s normative infrastructure building has developed a norms-based order in Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, we acknowledge contending arguments on ASEAN’s regional role and position. Realists underestimate the merit of ASEAN-driven multilateralism and security arrangement. For instance, Bisley (2017) reveals that ASEAN and the East Asia Summit (EAS) could not function if the great powers did not support them. They narrow the institutional achievements of the Association merely as the extension of the big players’ foreign policy interests. A more optimistic view is expressed by liberalist scholars, like Simon (2008), who associate ASEAN’s institutional achievements with the expanding global economic integration schemes, considering globalisation and interdependence help ASEAN move forward. The most important point of

the liberals is that ASEAN will continue to exist so long as it can reap the benefits of economic globalisation. On the other side, constructivists promote the importance of an evolving security community project for maintaining peace and stability in Southeast Asia (see, for example, Acharya, 2001). Covering the weakness of the constructivist argument, which too much focuses on the significance of norm-setting, an English School piece by Narine (2006) explains ASEAN's durability by the Association's importance as a symbolic representation of Southeast Asian states' adherence to the institutions of national sovereignty.

On these contentious views, we will confirm the significance of the international society pillars for ASEAN's continuing relevance. We appreciate the contributions made by constructivists to understanding ASEAN from its normative elements. We pay attention to Acharya's (2011) theory about norm localisation and norm subsidiary. Yet, the English School allows for a more nuanced analysis of ASEAN's maintained order-building project. The concept of international society informs not only how group members comply with rules/norms but can also provide the basis for explaining why the states in a regional organisation must keep the norms-based interaction. In addition, working within the English School scholarship allows us to understand how a region-specific multilateralism directed to develop networking of security arrangements in East Asia can result in a distinct order beyond the contesting China and the U.S. orders (Ba, 2020).

Reconsidering ASEAN's hedging

As we aim to propose a new explanation of hedging in an English School way of thinking, here it is important to present the key features of the hedging concept and explain our different standpoint from the existing literature on hedging. This conceptual narrative can also bridge the theoretical proposal for ASEAN's survival and the established hedging scholarship before we analyse and reconceptualise hedging relevance using the concepts of English School's primary institutions applied to ASEAN.

We should understand hedging as an alternative strategic policy to the great powers' balancing or bandwagoning and a unique option the weaker states take to keep their different order. Hedging is effectively conducted at unit or regional levels while balancing and bandwagoning matters for the systemic one (Korolev, 2016). Every region has its hedging features depending on how regional international society member states construct their relationships with the greater external players. Multiple domestic political considerations and the dynamics of regional powers' relations drive Southeast Asians to hedge against China and the U.S. (Murphy, 2017). In addition, Jackson (2014) provides an interesting analysis of why hedging endures as a strategic policy of Asian countries amid the growing competition between Beijing and Washington. The uncertainty resulting from the power transition, multipolarity and complex structure of the Asian security environment will continue to force the smaller states to hedge toward the more powerful ones.

Regional security specialists like Kuik (2021, p. 302) stress that hedging, as smaller states' alignment behaviour in the greater powers' competition arena, should not be conceived of as wholly an outcome of rational calculations. But, hedging is more likely understood as 'instinctive behaviour that prevails under high-stakes, high-uncertainty circumstances, i.e. when risks are real and potentially consequential to the prioritised

values of a rational state'. Thus, hedging is defined as an 'insurance-seeking behaviour' consisting of non-taking side action, diversification of economic, political and security areas of bilateral cooperation, and readiness for executing a contingency plan (Kuik, 2021, p. 302). Other scholars, such as Goh (2016) and Haacke (2019), favour Kuik's claim about the nature of hedging. Nevertheless, they have developed different hedging operationalisation elements for ASEAN states. For example, Kuik (2008, 2016) has focused more on hedging in pursuing secure ground upon which economic ties between the ASEAN members and China or the U.S. can be beneficial for Southeast Asians amid the rising military contests of the U.S. against China, while Goh (2016) and Haacke (2019) see the best quality of applying hedging against the great powers during the increasingly threatening extra-Southeast Asia's power games in the South China Sea.

Our English School's view of hedging will move away from the above realist tradition of thinking. Goh (2016) mentions hedging and great power management, which indicates a reference to the English School. Yet, in her details, she does not explain the concept of great power management she refers to. More importantly, the logic behind Goh's emphasis on 'triangular hedging' and policy ambiguity is built upon individual states' foreign security policy toward China and the U.S. at the expense of the institutional roles played by ASEAN as a regional international society of states. We reconsider hedging by examining the connection between it and the trusting relationship, an important foundation of interaction within a regional society of states. Norms, rules and institutions are significant in enabling countries to collaborate and sustain their organisation. We think of how ASEAN's elite diplomatic culture and great power management have helped Southeast Asians to hedge against China and the U.S. With this in mind, we show that ASEAN's hedging differs from realists' domestic-international foreign policy reasoning. Still, it is the form of the regional states' agency to shape their favoured order.

The challenges of order contestation to ASEAN

This section explains the multifaceted situations in which ASEAN's order-making agenda must be maintained. The most challenging development for ASEAN's regional role is the emergent order contestation between the liberal international order led by the U.S. and the anti-liberal/developmental order ushered by China. During the Cold War, Washington did not push hard for its Asian allies to install liberal values and institutions in their domestic economic and political systems. The American most crucial interest was to contain Soviet communist expansion. However, recently, since China has moved quite aggressively in expanding its developmental geo-economic, which received enthusiastic responses from Southeast and South Asians, the U.S. government has strengthened and widened connections with the proponents of the liberal order (Stubbs, 2018). Unwanted, but it happened, there were some interruptions to the American liberal policies and strategies in Asia during the administration of President Donald Trump. Trump's populist nationalist-framed rhetoric and actions disturbed the established formal institutions of the U.S. liberal hegemony in Asia, including the regional economic and security organisations. Beijing benefitted from undermining the Asian and the liberal great power relations. The major Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) institutions progress impressively beside the U.S. – and Japan-long-supported financial and trade institutions. Some analysts even speculate that China could take over the U.S. leadership

and responsibility for governing non-traditional security issues, such as climate change (Beeson, 2018; Beeson & Watson, 2019).

Trump's populist-nationalist era was damaging enough to Washington's standing in Asia. His overt ignorance of ASEAN led the Association's founding members – Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines – to increase ties with China. Besides its vast investment in infrastructure development sectors, China's anti-liberal profile attracts the Southeast Asian states closer to Beijing's geo-economic sphere. The ASEAN-initiated economic and trade cooperation organisation, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), strongly supported by China, was signed in November 2020 amid the global pandemic of COVID-19 that has devastated the world economy. The intensification of RCEP's trade agreement implementation was claimed by its signatories as the way out of the coronavirus crisis (Shengxiong et al., 2020). On the contrary, Trump withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) founded under Barack Obama's administration to maintain liberal dominance throughout the Indo-Pacific. The uncertainty following the U.S. left of TPP added to regional anxieties on the prospects of the Indo-Pacific wing of the global liberal order. Although U.S. relations with Asia and ASEAN are revitalised under the Joe Biden presidency, the impacts of the divided regional orders on ASEAN remain unfavourable. The outbreak of the Russian-Ukraine armed conflict, followed by the increasing tensions in Taiwan Strait and the Korean Peninsula, accelerated regional power politics. The U.S. policy on China has yet to be altered.

Therefore, one may question the viability of dialogue fora and leader meetings, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Plus Three (APT), ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) Plus and EAS. They were established as diplomatic arenas where ASEAN has attempted to mediate conflicting influences and interests of the extra-regional powers. But, their presence is becoming insignificant. The most important task this summit diplomacy has to accomplish is managing the South China Sea disputes. Observers and scholars criticise ASEAN's conservative multilateral approach to the power contests in the waters. The code of conduct in the South China Sea, delivered by Indonesia and backed by most other ASEAN colleagues, finds no positive response from China. While the U.S. has tried to rebalance the Chinese growing military and political impacts in both the South and East China Seas, the Xi Jinping government is more assertive in responding to the American strategy within the balance of hard power. This policy is taken, although Beijing believes that hierarchical order in the region serves more values and material benefits for China's Asia-Pacific roles (Odgaard, 2007). In addition, the Taiwan Strait has been heating up over the last ten years, partly because of the surge of ultranationalist politics in Beijing, Taipei and Washington. China and the U.S. would not be content to approve the East Asian regional multilateral institutions involved in their long-term conflict over the island state. A comparable case is the North Korean nuclear challenge. The U.S. pragmatism and Chinese defensive courses of action do not provide the space for regional middle powers or weaker states to optimise their potential mediating role.

So, how ASEAN's minor influence on the *realpolitik* stage of the region's conflict zones will be improved is a big question mark. Practically, suppose ARF and EAS, as the prominent cooperative security organisations of the Indo-Pacific, remain to function only diplomatically. In that case, the regional architecture will be directed significantly by the non-Southeast Asian powers. This tendency is evident in the new multilateralism, such as the

Quad and AUKUS, which aimed to improve security cooperation among the leading Indo-Pacific players, excluding the Southeast Asian countries. The absence of ASEAN states within the Quad and AUKUS' military and security arrangements reflects the decrease in the extra-regional actors' confidence in the existing ASEAN-led regional bodies. The Quad affirms its exclusiveness, which contradicts ASEAN's principle of inclusive regionalism. Meanwhile, since its launch in September 2021, AUKUS has been directed to deter China, suggesting the renewal of the old Pacific military strategy of the early Cold War years. The presence of the United Kingdom and the absence of any ASEAN members within AUKUS also display the eagerness of the non-Southeast Asian powers to lead the process of the Indo-Pacific order-building without engaging ASEAN.

Furthermore, the destabilising forces outside Southeast Asia will also affect ASEAN's ability to tackle non-traditional security challenges, such as climate change, infectious diseases and transnational terrorism (Caballero-Anthony & Emmers, 2022; Mursitama et al., 2021; Wicaksana, 2019). These issues have become more pressing for Southeast Asian governments because, in the context of global governance, great power politics is evident to hinder the improvement of intergovernmental cooperation and domestic policy implementation. In other words, ASEAN's security roles are challenged by inter-related traditional and non-traditional security problems. Perhaps, for this reason, the Quad Alliance is taking non-traditional security issues seriously. However, ASEAN can continue to exist, although, in reality, its capacity to respond to the complex and contested developments in the region is doubted.

ASEAN's elite diplomatic culture matters

We mean ASEAN's diplomatic culture is the 'ASEAN Way' in organising regional relations and resolving issues arising in the member states' intra- and extra-regional affairs. The ASEAN Way is a diplomatic culture because it constitutes fundamental norms and values that guide member states in shaping an international society and creating order. As Bull (1977) suggested, international society shapes, and is shaped by, its members. The sources of the norms and values include ASEAN's most important documents, which denote the journey of the Association toward its current form. Starting from the ASEAN Declaration in 1967, the Zone of Freedom, Peace and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) in 1971, the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in 1976, the Bali Concord II in 2003 and the ASEAN Charter in 2007. According to these documents, a package of six norms works in ASEAN, including sovereignty equality, non-interference in members' internal affairs, non-violent conflict settlement, non-involvement of ASEAN in bilateral disputes of member countries, mutual respect and quiet diplomacy to resolve sensitive domestic or transnational issues. These norms are practised so that no ASEAN states feel subjugated or alienated in the group (Antolik, 1990). In parallel, problem-solving practices within ASEAN are conducted by following principles, such as informality, non-legally binding agreement, flexibility, consensus, pragmatism and close personal relationship among ASEAN leaders. Rüländ (2018, p. 41) calls them the secondary norms of the ASEAN Way.

The values promoted through these norms-based interactions are stipulated in ASEAN's basic declaration and the ASEAN Charter. All member countries highlight regional stability, economic cooperation and territorial integrity as the most valued

objectives for ASEAN regionalism. In achieving these goals, it is a necessity that every ASEAN state consult with each other, particularly on a matter which may cause irritating bilateral impacts. Consultation within ASEAN is the affair and responsibility of high-ranking officials or government leaders. Hence, the application of ASEAN's diplomatic culture is highly elitist. To some extent, this style of diplomacy prevents the advancement of subnational or non-state diplomatic activity within ASEAN. Yet, regarding security and strategic interests, the preserved elite diplomatic culture is valuable and salient for regional order-building.

Firstly, the relevance and significance of elite diplomatic culture are made possible by historical and political developments that have institutionalised the state sovereignty norm and practice into Southeast Asian regional relations. One of the most significant effects of Western colonialism on Asian nations was the expanding Westphalian territorial states into the colonised societies. It marked the modernisation project of Asian states, which was accompanied by internal and external contradictions, tensions and conflicts because of incompatibilities among traditional and modern forces elements. While none of the Western core powers' colonies could resist the wave of Westphalian state formation, Southeast and East Asia demonstrated a common characteristic of development and international relations called unitary state mentality (Ba, 2014, pp. 126–127). The intra-Asian politics showed a high degree of reluctance among states to submit a significant part of their domestic authority to a supranational organisation. Post-colonial Asian states were keen to retain as much sovereignty as possible under the control of the national government, and it extended to the low-level formalisation of regional cooperation.

It was difficult for Southeast Asians to leave their historical experiences and past political and territorial disputes behind. Indonesia under Soekarno was involved in bitter bilateral ideologically driven conflict with Malaysia, and so did the latter with neighbouring Southeast Asian countries, making the post-colonial region home to internal disputes, with intraregional relations shadowed by enduring mistrust (Emmers, 2017). Consequently, there is little confidence among Southeast Asians to subscribe to cosmopolitan regionalism. The collective security arrangement primarily depends on the domestic requirement to stabilise the immediate geopolitical environment and not regionalise interstate problems (Wicaksana, 2016, pp. 754–757). This objective is achieved under the ASEAN's informal and flexible diplomatic style (Rüland, 2018, pp. 39–43). The nationalist governments in the region are comfortable walking within this political corridor.

Secondly, the ASEAN diplomatic culture allows the member governments to deal with the recent global and regional security environments where supporters of the liberal order have broadened the scope of their preferred norms and practices worldwide. In many respects, the liberal powers pressure ASEAN to comply with their standards and apply their values of liberal democracy, free trade and human rights. Therefore, over the 1990s and 2000s, ASEAN had to adjust its normative structures to meet external demands while securing its states' identities and interests. For example, human rights norms were recognised through the ASEAN Charter but were not implemented in ways that conform to the Western model (Katsumata, 2009). The process of norm localisation in Southeast Asia is made very selective to suit the national cultures and political systems of all ASEAN countries. As a consequence, to be accepted, the global norms must be ASEANised. In the case of the responsibility to protect (R2P), ASEAN governments

adopted it in 2005. However, it has never been consistently applied to respond to humanitarian crises like what happened to the Rohingya Muslims. Instead, ASEAN undertakes a different form of peace-making efforts, demonstrating compliance with its primary and secondary codes of conduct, particularly quiet diplomacy (Rosyidin, 2020). The norm-sub-sidiary mechanism protects ASEAN's members against a sensitive agenda like R2P. The result is a paradox. On the one side, the Southeast Asian state governments look like they are responsive and function well as human rights protectors, but on the other side, the human rights violators and violations are left untouched. On top of this, the Association can maintain its internal cohesion and resist the Western pressure for actions. In addition, ASEAN's important decisions regarding adapting foreign norms demonstrate a high degree of state-centrism, for which the pluralist regional society of states can be independently preserved by its members.

Thirdly, the ASEAN diplomatic culture prevents bilateral issues among member states from spilling over into a regional crisis. Various territorial-related issues and non-traditional security problems have caused bilateral uneasiness between individual members of ASEAN. The triggers for territorial-related issues are mainly incidents over unclear state borders. They involve many aspects of physical and also culturally defined boundaries. Almost all ASEAN countries are continually in border disputes with their neighbours. However, only a few can resolve the problems through formal dispute settlement mechanisms. Moreover, the disputing member states prefer to avoid conflict and approach the border issues informally through bilateral talks. Similarly, ASEAN's roles are limited to dealing with transnational security threats from domestic sources, such as the haze disaster, infectious diseases and extremist terrorism, to become merely a coordinating body for interstate cooperation (Caballero-Anthony, 2008). No concrete frameworks are ever created to direct supranational intervention in the state's internal problem, even though such a collective response is urgent. The practice of ASEAN's norms enables this mode of securitisation and governance. Real problem-solving is executed at the national level. With this approach preserved by the current governments of Southeast Asia, ASEAN must be kept solid and cohesive internally.

Finally, ASEAN successfully expands the practices of its diplomatic culture into the Asia-Pacific multilateral institutions where the rival great powers are embraced. Despite criticisms of the weaknesses of the ASEAN-driven regional bodies, it is apparent that the destructive effects of the U.S.–China contests on Southeast Asia can be institutionally mitigated. We understand that the region of Southeast Asia has been divided along with China's and U.S.' extensive influences. But, ASEAN can still manage its intraregional affairs independently. There were occasions when consensus was not achieved, especially about the South China Sea issue, yet ASEAN leaders could find ways to secure their organisational cohesiveness. Flexibility and pragmatism ensure an assertive reconciliatory political behaviour within ASEAN; hence, the grouping can sustain amid troubles prompted by splitting geopolitical forces. During COVID-19 and the current global crisis due to the conflict in Ukraine, ASEAN's responses are sometimes not united. But, the Association's diplomatic culture averts those differences from interrupting the ongoing ASEAN Community agendas. Little intense quarrel or controversy comes from the troubling events exasperating the member states. ASEAN proves to withstand the crystallised great power polarisation.

Looking closer at the events within ASEAN during 2020 and 2021's critical situations due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the Myanmar political conflict, which have unpacked intra-ASEAN disagreements on how to manage the impacts of domestic crises on South-east Asian regional security, we see that by complying with the established diplomatic norms ASEAN members could isolate any potential for prolonged instability (Wicaksana et al., 2023). Regarding the Myanmar democratic crisis, ASEAN members differ from each other in responding to the Junta government. Malaysia and Singapore wanted that ASEAN took a tough stance on Myanmar, while others like Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia and Vietnam preferred to act cautiously. As the military coup became an international concern, Western countries pushed ASEAN to suspend Myanmar's membership. Yet, on the other side, China backed the Junta. ASEAN was caught in both internal and external contending positions in Myanmar. As expected, ASEAN dealt with them by returning to its normative measures: (1) no one would intervene in Myanmar, (2) all conflicting parties should sit down and talk to find out solutions for their causes, (3) ASEAN colleagues would bring needy humanitarian assistance and supplies for affected Myanmar's populations, and (4) Myanmar could continue to take part in ASEAN's activities, but only represented by its non-military and political officials. Despite critics being directed at its perceived unsatisfactory crisis response, by taking the four diplomatic steps, the nine members of ASEAN could mitigate the pressures that would reduce the importance of the Association's existence to the region.

In various respects, ASEAN has shown that the minimalist mode of bureaucratisation and formalisation in conducting diplomacy can be a favourable feature of a regional interstate organisation to survive in the contested environment. As a result, the practice of compliance with ASEAN diplomatic norms determines the member state's eligibility to stay in the Association (Martel & Glas, 2023, p. 228). In addition, to the outside world, ASEAN can resist external pressures from expanding superpowers' order contestation while simultaneously sustaining its working institutions, which underpin intra-regional commitments to conform with common norms and objectives.

The feasibility of ASEAN's great power management

Currently, ASEAN centrality is the most explicit expression of the Association's intention to manage relations with the more powerful regional players. The notion of centrality refers to three interrelated elements. The first element is ASEAN as the centre for regionalism activity in Southeast Asia and the broader East Asian and Asia-Pacific regions. Second, it also means that Southeast Asia is the central point of developing regional international societies in Asia. Third, promoting ASEAN-led regionalism demonstrates that it has changed its role. During the Cold War, ASEAN diverted most of its energy to prevent the influence of external great powers from shaping Southeast Asian relations. Nevertheless, after the Cold War, ASEAN leaders were aware that it would be impossible to close the door for more intensive interaction with non-Southeast Asian actors, significantly when Asian geopolitics was increasingly affected by rising powers like China and India (Acharya, 2017, pp. 273–274; Emmers, 2018). Consequently, ASEAN must enmesh the powerful players and reconstruct its regionalism features and identity.

ASEAN attempts to realise its centrality since the strategic competition between China and the U.S. has intensified over the last decade. Therefore, ASEAN approaches to the

contested formulas of China's BRI and the U.S.' Indo-Pacific strategy are conducted consistently within the Association's primary institutions. Non-militarisation of the regional society of states is the heart of the ASEAN's approach to the greater states (Acharya, 2021). ASEAN makes itself the role model for establishing other non-militarised sub-regional Indo-Pacific organisations. In other words, ASEAN will retain its significance though the region is getting more polarised militarily. This prediction is not baseless. ASEAN was the most successful regional organisation in Asia after World War II. Its success creates a prominent and even fixed status as the core institution of the Indo-Pacific region.

ASEAN-led multilateral bodies are criticised for their inability to make concrete progress in advancing a stable order in East Asia (Jones & Smith, 2007). ASEAN addresses the criticism by empowering its institutions. Dynamising ASEAN's institutions meet the challenge of disorder. The Southeast Asian regional society of states is conditioned to move toward an ASEAN Community comprising ASEAN Economic Community, ASEAN Political and Security Community and ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community. The plans for the ASEAN Community are executed in diversified areas of cooperation with ASEAN's most favoured extra-regional partners. For example, with China, ASEAN fosters economy and trade, making the former the latter's largest trading and investment partner, replacing the U.S. and Japan that dominated Southeast Asian markets during the Cold War. In the security area of cooperation, the U.S. continues to become ASEAN's number one collaborator, covering traditional military and non-traditional fields of security cooperation. The ASEAN's security frameworks also embrace other regional powers focusing on defence diplomacy (Laksmana, 2012). What ASEAN is doing with China and the U.S. is not simply a traditional military balancing policy implementation. As the Indonesian former Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa (2018) says, ASEAN tries to apply its transformative power to hold a dynamic regional equilibrium, despite its members' lack of military and political resources.

Dynamic equilibrium suggests a combination of institutional balance of power, ASEAN's established diplomatic culture and the notion of ASEAN centrality. ASEAN can pursue its security goal by transforming the geostrategic environment from chaotic into order. Though the transformation is not solely the result of ASEAN's effective institutional enlargement, it is enabled by the complex process of regional order formation. ASEAN benefits from the current social changes spurred by globalisation in developing its great power management strategy. Some of the globalisation effects which support ASEAN's great power management and, at the same time, restrict the possibilities of the outbreak of open clashes among the military superpowers are (1) the growth of economic interdependence and transnational production networks, (2) the increasing significant roles of non-state actors in regional governance of non-traditional security problems, (3) the resistance to hegemonic power, and (4) the heightening participations of the regional middle power states in driving peaceful change in the Indo-Pacific (Pempel, 2022). As a result, the great powers cannot dominate the entire process of order-building.

On the Indo-Pacific security architecture initiative, the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) intends to create an inclusive, plural and non-military-centric order beyond the U.S.–China rival order formulations. The Outlook recycles the principles of conduct issued from the EAS leader summit in Bali in 2011, with an emphasis on three aspects of ASEAN's norms-based order: (1) the respect for state sovereignty, (2) peaceful

relations among regional countries, and (3) cooperation between ASEAN and its dialogue partners. Of course, ASEAN's principal norms are well-articulated in the Indo-Pacific proposal. But, according to ASEAN critics, the problem is ASEAN's norm-setting exercises must be adequate to cope with the changing geopolitics of a non-ideological great power game. In addition, ASEAN has to face the risk of norm contestation, which can arise from China's BRI and the U.S.'s Free and Open Indo-Pacific models. Whose norms-based order matters depends on the material basis of the multilateral institutions. The evolution of the Indo-Pacific describes the prominence of material considerations behind the major regional powers (Beeson & Lee-Brown, 2021). In turn, what is at stake is ASEAN's aspiration for significant space in the ongoing Indo-Pacific order-making.

ASEAN's great power management addresses this criticism. The latest developments have demonstrated that either Beijing or Washington has sent a more positive gesture to support the ASEAN's Indo-Pacific proposal. From the U.S. side, the Biden administration has acknowledged the importance of harmonising the objectives of the ASEAN outlook, the FOIP, and the Quad in making the broad interests of a stable and peaceful Indo-Pacific region a reality. More importantly, Washington commits to standing by ASEAN centrality (ASEAN-United States Summit, 2021). In its latest summit in May 2022, the Quad leaders' statement reiterated support for ASEAN, regional peace and stability (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2022), even though formal meetings between the two organisations have not been held. ASEAN leaders welcome this outcome and are searching for agreeable mechanisms for the Association and the Quad to start their joint regional functions. On the other side, the Chinese government, who initially opposed the concept of Indo-Pacific, has indicated an acceptance. It was stated during the ASEAN-China leaders' regular meeting in October 2021, among other agendas, to strengthen their political and security cooperation (ASEAN-China Summit, 2021). Following these positive signs from China and the U.S. on the AOIP over 2022, amid the turbulence of the war in Ukraine, ASEAN consolidated its regional diplomacy, mainly to avert the ramification of power tensions in the South China Sea. Several ministerial gatherings were conducted to solidify ASEAN's collective response to the global crisis. In the ASEAN leaders' summit on 11 November 2022, the AOIP was reinstated to become ASEAN's code of interaction with other Indo-Pacific powers (ASEAN Summit, 2022).

However, ASEAN critics counter such positive developments of the Southeast Asian institutions by noting the more significant values of the European experiences in making a peaceful change in their region. For instance, Beeson (2020) argues that ASEAN fails to emulate the impressive achievements of the EU. To his mind, Europe and Asia have the same historical backgrounds of interstate conflicts and disastrous wars that destroyed their economies. Europeans learned much from their past, advanced economic cooperation, and institutionalised political links under a bureaucratic supranational entity. The result is an unthinkable peace and prosperity later enjoyed by peoples of the previously war-torn states. On another part of the globe, Asia's long peace after World War II, according to Beeson (2020), has not been achieved by consolidating regional states into truly effective multilateral institutions. ASEAN cannot correctly utilise the tremendous benefits of its members' economic development and political stability to influence the conflicting East Asian powers, mainly China and Japan. More focus on domestic issues make ASEAN states unable to promote their optimum regional roles. In other words, such a Euro-centric critique underscores ASEAN's imperative to follow in its European counterpart's footsteps.

We contend that every region has limits and opportunities to develop its society of states and build its peaceful order. The circumstances under which great power management in Europe is more effective through formal and strict regional affairs administration should not simply be copied by Southeast Asians. As mentioned earlier, among ASEAN and Asian countries, generally, there is enduring mistrust that prevents the formation of a solidarity type of supranational institutions in the regional society of states. However, norms and rules governing sovereignty can work among Southeast Asian states, whose extra-regional partners do not object to compliance with them. Therefore, managing the relationship between ASEAN and the bigger regional actors is based on recognising everyone's right to be a sovereign nation. At the same time, they are responsible for keeping up each other's sovereignty. With this normative but viable arrangement, a more appropriate assessment of ASEAN's effort in managing the great powers is that the objective of the Indo-Pacific as a zone of peace is achievable by a different means from one applied in Europe. The good lesson from the ASEAN's approaches to managing the contested regional environment is that the weaker states contribute to legitimating the emergence of a plural regional order beyond the great power settings.

Hedging in international society

Learning from the previous discussions on how ASEAN survives in the region of great power contests, we can now propose a conceptualisation of hedging from an English School point of view. It also explains ASEAN's survival. Davies (2022) considers the prevalence of hedging among ASEAN states due to the absence or the end of trust among them. For the first three decades of ASEAN, the five founding countries plus Brunei had attempted to build trusting relationships grounded upon ASEAN organisational aims, principles and values. However, the trust-building efforts were severely distracted by the 1997/1998 Asian Financial Crisis, followed by many disturbing events and issues after the admittance of four new members. Up to now, the ASEAN 10 sustains without trusting relationships. Hedging among ASEAN states is intensifying, evident in the intra-ASEAN states' violent border conflicts, which have outnumbered the violent clashes involving ASEAN states with non-Southeast Asian ones. What happens in ASEAN now is only the performance of trust in various ceremonial, diplomatic meetings exposed by the Association's leaders. Davies' argument aligns with Keating and Ruzicka (2014) and Keating and Abbott (2021), who claim that trusting relationships no longer exist when states hedge. However, we link the English School's concept of international society and hedging by arguing against these works.

We argue for the inseparability between trust and hedging as the starting point. Studies on the role of trust and trusting behaviour in international society corroborate that norms, rules and institutions can help states develop habits of trust. But, if trust is violated by states breaking the agreements they have already made, it will destroy the norms, rules and institutions governing diplomacy and bring destructive effects to the international society more broadly (Barnes & Makinda, 2022; Rengger, 1997). This argument on the ethics of trust has a lot to do with Bull's concept of order (1977, p. 4), noting that keeping promises is one of the most important goals of international society. In ASEAN, if members of the society of states are hedging in the dynamic and uncertain geopolitical environment and order is created and can be maintained, it is

worth re-examining the connection between hedging and trusting relationships that have shaped the order. Therefore, trust and hedging should not be viewed as a binary opposition. There may be a prolonged consequence of mistrust which has had states avoid making full-pledged commitments to joining an alliance pact, yet, there are other motives for them to cooperate, such as cost calculation which can lead to reciprocal trust. The presence of cooperation does indicate the existence of trust (Kydd, 2005); hedging, which is performed in several ways, including economic and military cooperation, conceives and needs some degree of trust. Hedgers cannot feel secure relating to untrusted actors, meaning rational trust works behind them. In other words, hedgers must overcome the vulnerability risks from their strategic action, demonstrating that a trusting relationship exists (Hoffman, 2002; Wheeler & Booth, 2008).

The complex developments of ASEAN-led regional bodies show that in the economic field of cooperation, both ASEAN members and their extra-regional partners could advance wide-ranging multilateral schemes, despite politically having bilateral incompatibility issues. The economic-related regionalism is followed by establishing security arrangements with a narrower scope of collaboration. Hence, ASEAN can operate an economic-security nexus of East Asian multilateralism because the parties involved have shown a significant degree of trust toward each other, making hedging work effectively (Pempel, 2010). ASEAN leaders understand that China's assertive military activity in the South China Sea cannot be matched by hard power. Inviting the U.S. to intervene to check the Chinese Navy will bring more security dangers than guarantees. Thus, ASEAN creates its multilateral institutions, which embrace global governance agendas, to influence the great powers' behaviour while simultaneously trying to provide public goods for the region. Essentially, ASEAN offers cooperation that can lower the costs of regional security governance burdening the great powers. It is the utility of hedging (Rüland, 2011). The cost and benefit reason must play out in shaping ASEAN and the non-Southeast Asian states' decision to form institutions, and the trust factor is also significant in making them.

Furthermore, ASEAN's working institutions, the established elite diplomatic culture and great power management enable hedging in Southeast Asia. The availability of norms that guide ASEAN's diplomacy in dealing with regional and global issues helps its members to hedge against the competing big powers. Norm-based cooperation enables sovereign actors to keep their collective objectives. The ASEAN Way limits external states' ability to engage deeply in intraregional and intrastate affairs. This tendency supports ASEAN to lead its most powerful regional military partners, such as China, India, Russia and the U.S., to hold their respective desire for constructing an intrusive hard power-driven order in the region. It is a significant achievement of ASEAN's hedging practices, more than just a type of security arrangement network, as explained by Quayle (2020). Moreover, ASEAN's primary and secondary institutions, which are not guided by liberal/cosmopolitan values, have normatively prevented ASEAN from taking a pure bandwagoning to the U.S. FOIP strategy and simultaneously balancing against China. The best choice is to develop a cooperative regional system limitedly allied with powers and orders.

ASEAN's great power management underpins how hedging can be effective. Indeed, member states of the Association do not demonstrate the same military security preference. Thailand and the Philippines are close military partners of the U.S. Malaysia and

Singapore joined the Five Powers Defence Arrangement (FPDA) with the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand. Myanmar and Cambodia are closer to China than others. Indonesia pledges non-alignment, despite strengthening its military cooperation with the West. ASEAN critics see that this divided pattern of relations with the great powers will invariably put the Association at a disadvantage, affected by the stronger states' strategic interests if hedging persists as its agency. However, ASEAN does not take up this prediction. It is even more confident in diversifying the trajectories of cross-regional relationships. Since the U.S. and Britain have intensified their presence in the Indo-Pacific through AUKUS, ASEAN initiated to broaden the area of the ASEAN-EU free trade agreement (Hsieh, 2022). This practice of great power management enlarges the space for ASEAN countries to impede the moves of the Western alliances into its geopolitical sphere on the one side and reduce Southeast Asians' dependence on China's BRI on the other.

Finally, different from the realist theory of hedging, which highlights domestic political causes, the national interest and power distribution in the external environment as explanations of states taking strategic hedging, in an international society perspective, it is the viability of primary institutions of ASEAN that has supported the members to hedge against China and the U.S. It reflects the agential characteristic of the smaller powers in the contested great power politics. Realists consider ASEAN states' limited economic and military capacities as 'objects' of the big players' foreign policies. The structural influence and intention of the greater non-Southeast Asian states restrict the outcome of ASEAN countries' international activity. Consequently, hedging is taken by ASEAN states to secure more internal objectives rather than pursuing regional or even global ones. Against this argument, in ASEAN, the agency of the weak can be realised through non-material or ideational forms, including mitigating military power rivalries through interaction frameworks applied bilaterally or multilaterally (Eun et al., 2022).

Hedging as a foreign policy strategy of the weaker states is also not reflexive to the foreign policies of the major powers. Instead, it is conducted to create an international order which allows the smaller actors to arrange their regional relations. Therefore, while undertaking a hedge, ASEAN states keep on improving and enlarging the reach of their primary and secondary regional institutions. So hedging and ASEAN's institutional development go hand-in-hand as opposed to realists arguing that domestic interests and regional power distribution direct ASEAN members to hedge as well as the material cost and benefit calculation can change the trajectories of ASEAN's internal and extra-regional relations. ASEAN does not function only as a formalised collectiveness without any substantive influence on its members. The Association remains feasible, underpinned by its diplomatic culture and great power management. It is visible when in particular, hedging cases, mainly against China and ASEAN states like Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and Vietnam, have demonstrated different orientations, as noted by Wen (2022); they continue to rely on and keep up the ASEAN's institutions and values.

Conclusion

The previous discussion sections have shown that elite diplomatic culture and great power management, which are ASEAN's primary institutions, can secure the relevance and maintain the significance of Southeast Asian regional international society.

Contesting order formations between China and the U.S. have challenged ASEAN's roles as an order-maker in the region. The Association's internal cohesiveness is sometimes weakened due to member states taking different stances on great powers-related issues. Nonetheless, ASEAN unity can be preserved since members of the society of states comply with the intra-ASEAN norms of interaction. ASEAN's elite diplomatic culture provides ideas and values which work as guiding principles for every member to resolve sensitive problems despite mistrust among them endures.

Regarding external relations with the more powerful regional actors, ASEAN's ability to create dynamic and accommodative institutional frameworks has helped save Southeast Asia from the destructive impacts of China–U.S. competition. These explanations lead to an English School perspective on hedging as ASEAN states' strategic policy toward the great powers. Against realists' domestic function of foreign policy argument of hedging, we explain that functional regional institutions make sustainable hedging possible.

Reflecting on the case of ASEAN's survival, we take an optimistic position on the debate on the prospects of international and regional organisations in today's and future world politics. We contend that the intensifying great power games have terminated the effectiveness of multilateral diplomacy and institutions. Events in Southeast Asia are demonstrating international organisations are weakening, but they continue to exist. Conceptually, this article differs from scholarly work that argues for the maintenance and sustainability of multilateralism as part of the liberal international order (for instance, Ikenberry, 2018). According to Ikenberry, the liberal international order, although it is under crisis, will sustain under its widespread and profoundly entrenched ideas, values and institutions in modern world politics. Besides this, the factor of American hegemonic power will still matter to bolster liberal projects. On the other hand, our study indicates that region-specific international societies like ASEAN can survive because of their particularities. They develop different habits and practices amid the challenges of external powers and orders. Therefore, this weaker state's agency should be appreciated as an authentic feature and deserves theoretical consideration.

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