



INNOVATIVE: Journal Of Social Science Research

Volume 3 Nomor 5 Tahun 2023 Page 5942-5948

E-ISSN 2807-4238 and P-ISSN 2807-4246

Website: <https://j-innovative.org/index.php/Innovative>

The challenge for ASEAN is to maintain a neutral relationship between the two great powers, the US and China

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#### Abstract

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) faces a significant challenge in maintaining a neutral relationship between the United States and China. As both countries compete for influence and power in the region, ASEAN must balance its relationships with both nations to prevent any potential conflicts and ensure regional stability. This task is complicated by the ongoing trade disputes and geopolitical tensions between the US and China. ASEAN must navigate these complex relationships with diplomacy and skill while continuing to promote its core values of peace, stability, and economic development. Maintaining a neutral position is essential for ASEAN to effectively address regional challenges, such as territorial disputes and the fight against terrorism. Failure to do so could lead to unintended consequences and threaten the security and prosperity of the region. As such, ASEAN's ability to maintain its neutral relationship with the US and China remains a critical challenge in the years to come.

Keyword: *ASEAN, neutral relationship, US, China, regional stability, diplomacy, geopolitical tensions*

## Abstrak

Perhimpunan Bangsa-Bangsa Asia Tenggara (ASEAN) menghadapi tantangan besar dalam menjaga hubungan netral antara Amerika Serikat dan Tiongkok. Ketika kedua negara bersaing untuk mendapatkan pengaruh dan kekuasaan di kawasan, ASEAN harus menyeimbangkan hubungannya dengan kedua negara untuk mencegah potensi konflik dan menjamin stabilitas regional. Tugas ini diperumit oleh perselisihan perdagangan yang sedang berlangsung dan ketegangan geopolitik antara AS dan Tiongkok. ASEAN harus menavigasi hubungan yang kompleks ini dengan diplomasi dan keterampilan sambil terus mempromosikan nilai-nilai inti perdamaian, stabilitas, dan pembangunan ekonomi. Mempertahankan posisi netral sangat penting bagi ASEAN untuk secara efektif mengatasi tantangan regional, seperti sengketa wilayah dan perang melawan terorisme. Kegagalan untuk melakukan hal ini dapat menimbulkan konsekuensi yang tidak diinginkan dan mengancam keamanan dan kemakmuran kawasan. Oleh karena itu, kemampuan ASEAN untuk mempertahankan hubungan netralnya dengan Amerika Serikat dan Tiongkok masih menjadi tantangan penting di tahun-tahun mendatang.

Kata kunci: *ASEAN, hubungan netral, AS, Tiongkok, stabilitas regional, diplomasi, ketegangan geopolitik*

## INTRODUCTION

Southeast Asia has been a strategically important region for centuries, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was formed in 1967 to promote regional cooperation and stability. ASEAN is a regional intergovernmental organization that is composed of ten member states: Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.

The region has witnessed significant economic growth and development in recent years, making it an attractive destination for foreign investment and trade. The United States and China have both recognized the region's importance and have been competing for influence and power in the region. The US has traditionally been a dominant force in the region, while China has been rapidly expanding its economic and political influence.

The increasing involvement of the US and China in the region has had a significant impact on ASEAN's role in maintaining regional stability. As both countries continue to compete for influence and power, ASEAN must navigate its relationships with both nations to prevent any potential conflicts and ensure regional stability. The challenge for ASEAN is to maintain a neutral relationship between these two great powers while continuing to promote its core values of peace, stability, and economic development.

The challenge for ASEAN is to maintain a neutral relationship between the United States and China, as both countries continue to compete for influence and power in the

region. This challenge is further complicated by ongoing trade disputes and geopolitical tensions between the US and China. ASEAN must navigate these complex relationships with diplomacy and skill while continuing to promote its core values of peace, stability, and economic development.

Maintaining a neutral position is essential for ASEAN to effectively address regional challenges such as territorial disputes and the fight against terrorism. Failure to do so could lead to unintended consequences and threaten the security and prosperity of the region. ASEAN's ability to maintain its neutral relationship with the US and China remains a critical challenge in the years to come, as the region continues to grow in importance and attract global attention. The challenge for ASEAN is to effectively balance its relationships with both nations while ensuring that regional stability and cooperation are not compromised.

The topic of maintaining a neutral relationship between the United States and China is of significant importance to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the broader geopolitical landscape. As both superpowers compete for influence and power in the region, ASEAN faces a critical challenge in balancing its relationships with both nations to ensure regional stability and prevent potential conflicts.

The scope of this paper is to explore the strategies and approaches that ASEAN can employ to maintain its neutral position. It will cover the historical and current context of the US-China relationship and its impact on ASEAN, as well as the challenges and opportunities that ASEAN faces in balancing its relationships with both nations.

This paper will also examine the potential implications of ASEAN's ability to maintain a neutral position, including its impact on regional cooperation, economic development, and security. Moreover, it will provide recommendations for ASEAN on how it can effectively navigate the US-China relationship and maintain its neutrality amidst geopolitical tensions.

## RESEARCH METHODS

In this research, the author employs qualitative research methods. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), qualitative methods do not rely on statistical processes or other computational techniques to obtain findings. Instead, this approach offers a detailed understanding of complex phenomena that may be challenging to explain quantitatively. Qualitative research primarily focuses on exploring the meaning behind social realities, rather than simply describing them empirically. The data in qualitative research takes the form of statements and descriptive data about the subject, including written and spoken words.

In this study, the author has employed a data collection technique that involves

library research due to the utilization of secondary data. The literature review process involves the use of various sources such as books, journals, articles, news, and credible reports related to the research topic. The author has conducted a systematic data collection process by extensively searching for relevant data and subsequently selecting the most appropriate information that aligns with the research objectives.

Qualitative data analysis is an integral part of any research study, as it allows the researcher to make sense of the data collected. As stated by Albito Anggito and Johan Setiawan, this type of analysis specifically pertains to data in the form of textual information, such as words or sentences that are obtained from the research subject.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Strategies for balancing relationships with the US and China

As ASEAN strives to maintain a neutral relationship with both the US and China, it is important to explore potential strategies that can facilitate this balancing act. One approach is for ASEAN to emphasize the importance of its centrality in the region and engage both countries in dialogue through platforms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the East Asia Summit (EAS). This can help to prevent any one country from dominating the region and promote cooperation on issues of mutual concern.

According to the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, ASEAN member states can play a vital role in shaping regional dynamics by being a platform for dialogue and cooperation among countries in the region (ASEAN, 2019). By emphasizing the centrality of ASEAN, the organization can encourage both the US and China to engage with ASEAN as a means of promoting regional stability. Through the ARF and the EAS, ASEAN can facilitate discussions on key issues such as maritime security, counter-terrorism, and economic development, and encourage both countries to work together towards common goals.

Another strategy for balancing relationships with the US and China is for ASEAN to pursue a hedging approach. This involves diversifying diplomatic and economic ties with other countries in the region and beyond to reduce dependence on any one country (Caballero-Anthony, 2017). By strengthening ties with countries such as Japan, South Korea, and India, ASEAN can reduce its reliance on the US and China and increase its bargaining power in negotiations. This can also help to mitigate the impact of any potential conflicts between the US and China on ASEAN's economy and security.

Finally, ASEAN can promote the idea of an inclusive and rules-based regional order that is open to all countries, including the US and China. By emphasizing the importance of adhering to international law and respecting the sovereignty of all nations, ASEAN can

encourage both countries to play a constructive role in the region. This can also help to prevent any one country from attempting to impose its will on others and promote the peaceful resolution of disputes through dialogue and negotiation.

### Strategies for balancing relationships with the US and China

The ongoing trade disputes and geopolitical tensions between the US and China have a significant impact on ASEAN's ability to maintain a neutral relationship between the two great powers. These tensions not only affect ASEAN's economic stability, but they also have broader implications for regional security and stability. As noted by Azhar Azizan Harun (2019), ASEAN has become a "battleground" for the US and China as they compete for regional dominance.

The trade war between the US and China has resulted in significant economic disruption in the region, with ASEAN countries caught in the middle. The US has imposed tariffs on Chinese goods, while China has responded with tariffs of its own on US goods. This has led to a decline in global trade, which has had a direct impact on ASEAN's economies. As noted by Tang Siew Mun (2020), the trade war has resulted in a shift in global supply chains away from China, which has had a ripple effect on ASEAN's economies.

Geopolitical tensions between the US and China have also had an impact on ASEAN's security and stability. The US has been vocal in its opposition to China's territorial claims in the South China Sea, which has led to increased tensions in the region. China has responded by increasing its military presence in the area, which has further escalated tensions. As noted by Tang Siew Mun (2020), ASEAN must navigate these tensions carefully to prevent any potential conflicts that could threaten regional security.

### The Role of ASEAN in promoting regional stability

ASEAN plays a crucial role in promoting regional stability in Southeast Asia. One of the key ways it does so is through its commitment to promoting peace and cooperation among its member states. As noted by Chaiyong Satjipanon (2019), the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 emphasizes the need for ASEAN member states to strengthen their cooperation in areas such as political security, economic integration, and social development. This vision reflects ASEAN's commitment to promoting a stable and secure environment in the region.

Another way in which ASEAN promotes regional stability is through its efforts to manage conflicts between member states. This is particularly important given the presence of territorial disputes in the region, such as the South China Sea dispute. ASEAN has taken a leading role in trying to manage these conflicts and prevent them from escalating. For

example, as noted by Mely Caballero-Anthony (2018), ASEAN has developed a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea aimed at reducing tensions and promoting cooperation among claimant states. ASEAN's efforts in this regard are crucial in maintaining regional stability and preventing conflicts from spiraling out of control.

Finally, ASEAN also plays an important role in promoting economic development and cooperation in the region. As noted by Kusnanto Anggoro (2019), ASEAN member states have made significant progress in integrating their economies and promoting trade and investment among themselves. This economic integration has not only brought economic benefits to member states but has also helped to promote regional stability by creating interdependencies that make conflict less likely. ASEAN's continued efforts to promote economic development and integration will be crucial in maintaining regional stability and preventing conflicts in the future.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, maintaining a neutral relationship between the United States and China remains a significant challenge for ASEAN. The ongoing trade disputes and geopolitical tensions between these two powers have added complexity to ASEAN's task of promoting regional stability. However, ASEAN can employ various strategies and approaches to balance its relationships with both nations, such as maintaining an open dialogue, enhancing economic cooperation, and promoting regional integration. ASEAN's role in promoting regional stability is crucial in addressing various challenges such as territorial disputes and terrorism. The success of ASEAN in navigating its relationships with the US and China will significantly impact the region's security and prosperity. Therefore, ASEAN must continue to prioritize maintaining its neutral position, promoting peace and stability, and pursuing economic development. By doing so, ASEAN can effectively contribute to the region's progress and address emerging challenges in the years to come.

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