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Middle Power Diplomacy in Human Security: ASEAN's Comparative Strategies in Addressing South China Sea Territorial Claims and Transboundary Haze Pollution



Abstract: - The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) nonviolent approach to conflict resolution, known as 'the ASEAN Way,' has faced challenges in achieving desired outcomes due to various factors. As a regional organisation, ASEAN's role is crucial in strengthening human security among its member countries. Thus, this study aims to gain a deeper understanding of ASEAN's middle power diplomacy and its strategies in tackling critical human security issues in the region focusing on South China Sea territorial claims and transboundary haze pollution. This study employs a narrative review methodology to examine ASEAN's middle power diplomacy in addressing human security issues, particularly the South China Sea territorial claims and transboundary haze pollution. A systematic search of high-impact academic journals and articles published from 2019 onwards was conducted using databases like Google Scholar and Scopus, focusing on keywords related to ASEAN and its diplomatic strategies. Selected literature was analysed to identify key themes and frameworks illustrating ASEAN's conflict resolution approaches and regional cooperation. The analysis reveals that while ASEAN has made strides in addressing human security challenges, significant obstacles remain, including external pressures and the need for enhanced collaborative frameworks. The study highlights the importance of adapting strategies to maintain unity and effectively respond to emerging challenges in the region.

Keywords: Middle Power Diplomacy, Human Security, ASEAN, South China Sea, Transboundary Haze Pollution.

I. INTRODUCTION

Regional organisations play a crucial role in fostering stability and cooperation among nations in an increasingly interconnected world. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), recognised as a prominent middle power in Southeast Asia, employs a unique diplomatic approach known as "the ASEAN Way." This approach emphasises consensus-building, non-interference, and peaceful conflict resolution as essential tools for addressing the region's multifaceted challenges. However, ASEAN has faced obstacles in its efforts to address significant human security issues, particularly concerning territorial disputes in the South China Sea and the transboundary haze pollution.

Although ASEAN's nonviolent diplomatic strategies promote dialogue and cooperation, they encounter hurdles in achieving effective outcomes in the context of rising tensions and environmental challenges. Observers note that the reliance on consensus-driven decision-making can constrain action, especially when member states hold divergent interests. These shortcomings raise important questions about the organisation's ability to effectively address pressing security concerns that threaten regional stability and the well-being of its populations.

This paper examines the challenges and limitations of ASEAN's middle power diplomacy in addressing these critical human security issues. By analysing the effectiveness of its initiatives and the factors influencing its diplomatic strategies, this study aims to provide insights into the implications for future regional cooperation and stability. Ultimately, understanding ASEAN's role in addressing these challenges is essential for enhancing its influence and ensuring a secure and prosperous future for Southeast Asia.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In exploring ASEAN's embrace of middle-power diplomacy, this literature review highlights the essential function of the "ASEAN Way" in confronting regional issues. ASEAN's commitment to consensus-building and multilateral cooperation forms the backbone of its strategies for improving human security, resolving territorial disputes, and tackling transboundary haze pollution. This study evaluates the effectiveness of the "ASEAN Way" in sustaining regional stability and fostering resilience in the context of current challenges in Southeast Asia.

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A. *Middle Power Diplomacy, Human Security and ASEAN*

Middle powers are considered sovereign states with moderate influence and significant international recognition, positioned between superpowers and smaller states [1]. Historically, the concept of middle powers emerged during the Cold War [3]. Countries like Canada and Sweden exemplified middle powers through their proactive diplomacy despite their limited military capabilities [2]. These states exhibit key characteristics, including internationalism, multilateralism, good citizenship, moderate power, and regional influence [4]. They engage in multilateral diplomacy, bridge-building, and humanitarian initiatives, fostering global peace and stability by upholding international norms and addressing global challenges [5][6]. Through their unique blend of diplomacy and commitment to multilateralism, middle powers play a crucial role in shaping a more cooperative and stable international order.

The concept of human security encompasses various dimensions that aim to protect individuals and communities from a range of threats and there are seven pillars of human security which are economic security, food security, health security, environmental security, personal security, community security, and political security [32]. It focused on individual well-being over state security [7]. The interplay between human security and the actions of middle powers fosters a more stable and cooperative international environment [32]. Middle powers like South Korea and Indonesia have shown leadership in promoting peace, fostering cooperation, and addressing conflicts involving major powers like China and the U.S. [8]. Through niche diplomacy specialising in specific areas like climate change and peace negotiations, middle powers maximise their impact [9][10]. Middle powers, therefore, exemplify how a strategic emphasis on human security, combined with specialised diplomatic efforts, can lead to substantial advancements in global stability and cooperation, effectively addressing the multifaceted challenges posed by contemporary geopolitical dynamics.

ASEAN has exemplified middle-power diplomacy through its collective influence as a regional bloc by using its unique diplomacy approach termed the "ASEAN Way". Despite varying power levels among its member states, ASEAN fosters consensus-building, multilateralism, and non-interference, aligning with middle-power characteristics [11]. By promoting a rules-based order, ASEAN balances major powers like the U.S. and China, ensuring regional stability and economic growth [3]. Its platforms, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), facilitate dialogue on security issues and collective bargaining for smaller member states [12]. Through its cohesive approach and collective diplomacy, it highlights the strength of regional unity in shaping a balanced and stable international order while amplifying the voices of its smaller member states.

The "ASEAN Way" is a diplomatic culture based on fundamental norms and values that guide member states in shaping an international society and maintaining order through informal, consensus-based interactions [11]. This approach emphasises a shared understanding among member states, encouraging reliance on their own state capabilities to manage domestic issues while prioritising dialogue and cooperation over intrusive measures [29]. By adopting the ASEAN Way, the organisation seeks to foster a stable environment that supports economic growth and regional integration. This strategy has enabled ASEAN to address complex geopolitical challenges, maintain unity among its diverse member states, and solidify its role as a key player in regional security and cooperation [15]. However, while the ASEAN Way has been effective in managing intra-regional differences and promoting collaboration, it faces growing pressure to adapt to contemporary security challenges [16]. To remain effective, ASEAN must balance its traditional ASEAN Way with adaptive strategies to address modern security and regional challenges.

ASEAN's dedication to regional peace and stability is demonstrated by its approach to human security. Human security encompasses economic, health, environmental, and political security, all critical for fostering resilience in the region [13]. Mechanisms like the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre) demonstrate its proactive efforts in disaster response and addressing non-traditional threats like pandemics and climate change [14]. Collaborations with external partners, including Japan, Australia, and the U.S., enhance ASEAN's capacity to tackle complex issues and strengthen regional stability [10]. By prioritising human security and fostering partnerships, ASEAN reinforces its role as a key driver of resilience and stability in the face of evolving regional challenges.

By leveraging its middle-power status, ASEAN bridges the divide, fosters multilateral cooperation, and advances the human security agenda. These efforts ensure a cohesive and resilient region, contributing to global peace and stability. ASEAN must remain proactive in pursuing middle-power diplomacy to address emerging challenges and safeguard regional security.

B. The South China Sea Conflict and ASEAN's Intervention

There are several overlapping territorial claims in the South China Sea involving China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei. These disputes primarily centre on the Spratly and Paracel Islands, known for their strategic location and rich natural resources, including oil and gas [15]. Additionally, the South China Sea's importance as a maritime trade route makes it a critical strategic region, with control offering significant economic and military advantages [16]. China's extensive claims, based on the "nine-dash line" derived from historical maps, remain unrecognised by international law and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), leading to ongoing disputes [17][15]. The South China Sea's overlapping claims emphasise the region's geopolitical and economic significance, emphasising the need for multilateral dialogue and adherence to international law to ensure stability and equitable resource sharing.

UNCLOS grants coastal nations exclusive rights to resources within their Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) to manage and preserve marine environments [17]. While it aims to prevent conflicts by defining maritime boundaries, enforcement is limited, particularly against China's actions in the region. China's construction of artificial islands and disregard for UNCLOS boundaries have heightened tensions, leading to disputes over-fishing rights, oil exploration, and freedom of navigation [28]. This lack of enforcement exacerbates regional instability, underscoring the need for more effective international mechanisms [15]. Addressing these difficulties will need the international community to work together to strengthen compliance, foster discussion, and guarantee that maritime laws are followed to maintain regional peace and security.

Geopolitical competition among major powers further complicates the situation. China's assertive actions are met with U.S. Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS) aimed at challenging Chinese claims and asserting open navigation rights [16]. Simultaneously, alliances like AUKUS (Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) and the Quad (the U.S., Japan, India, and Australia) increase the military presence and strategic competition in the region [11]. While some ASEAN nations, such as Vietnam and the Philippines, welcome these external powers' involvement, others adopt a more cautious or neutral stance to avoid escalation [14]. These developments highlight the complexity of balancing power dynamics, safeguarding regional stability, and ensuring that national interests do not lead to heightened conflict.

ASEAN's efforts to manage South China Sea disputes rely on multilateral mechanisms and diplomacy. The organisation provides platforms for dialogue, such as discussions on a Code of Conduct (CoC) with China, aimed at establishing behavioural norms [15]. However, progress on the CoC remains slow due to China's assertive actions and the diverging priorities of ASEAN member states [15]. This fragmentation within ASEAN weakens its unified stance, creating opportunities for external powers like AUKUS and the Quad to play a more significant role in the region [18]. Hence strengthening ASEAN's unity and commitment to multilateralism is crucial to effectively addressing these challenges and ensuring a stable and rules-based order in the South China Sea.

The increasing militarisation of the South China Sea, coupled with overlapping claims, continues to pose significant challenges. ASEAN must navigate the complex dynamics of external involvement while strengthening its internal cohesion. By adopting a firmer and more unified approach, ASEAN can safeguard regional stability, mitigate tensions, and maintain its relevance in the face of escalating competition among global powers.

C. ASEAN's Strategy to Combat Transboundary Haze Pollution

Regional haze pollution remains a significant environmental issue in ASEAN, primarily caused by peat fires, forest fires, and land clearing through burning. These activities, concentrated in Indonesia's South Sumatra, Riau, and Kalimantan regions, release smoke and pollutants (PM_{2.5} and PM₁₀) into the atmosphere, severely reducing air quality and visibility [19]. Major haze events, such as the 2015 Southeast Asian haze crisis, caused hazardous air pollution across the region, impacting public health, the environment, and economies. For instance, in Malaysia, schools were closed, affecting over 2.6 million students [20][21]. Addressing this issue requires strengthened regional cooperation, stricter enforcement of environmental policies, and sustainable land management practices to mitigate the recurring impacts of haze pollution on ASEAN's communities and economies.

In response, ASEAN developed a comprehensive strategy to address transboundary haze pollution, focusing on legal frameworks, regional collaboration, and sustainable land management. Two foundational initiatives are the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution (AATHP) and the Regional Haze Action Plan (RHAP). The AATHP, signed in 2002 and ratified by all ASEAN Member States (AMS) by 2015, provides a legally binding framework to combat haze pollution. It imposes legal obligations on AMS to prevent and control haze, establishes monitoring and reporting mechanisms, and offers technical and financial support to enhance member states' capacity [22][23]. While these initiatives demonstrate ASEAN's commitment to tackling haze pollution, their effectiveness

depends on consistent implementation, enhanced accountability, and stronger cooperation among member states to achieve lasting environmental solutions.

To further enhance these efforts, ASEAN introduced the Roadmap on ASEAN Cooperation Towards Transboundary Haze Pollution Control in 2016. This roadmap operationalises the AATHP, aiming to achieve a haze-free ASEAN by 2020. It emphasises cooperation, capacity building, and progress monitoring through concrete strategies and actions [23]. Regional Haze Action Plan adopted in 1997, predates the AATHP and focuses on actionable measures to prevent land and forest fires, monitor fire activities, and strengthen regional firefighting capabilities. It establishes the Haze Technical Task Force (HTTF) and encourages national-level actions aligned with its goals. Unlike the AATHP, which serves as the primary legal framework, the RHAP provides practical guidelines to implement haze prevention and mitigation strategies.

Building on this foundation, ASEAN adopted the Second Haze Roadmap (2023–2030) in August 2023. Officially launched in 2024, it incorporates research-based approaches to better understand haze causes and impacts [24]. The Second Roadmap refines the original roadmap's goals and strategies while introducing a log frame for tracking progress. It outlines nine strategies to enhance AATHP implementation, focusing on regional collaboration and addressing subregional challenges [33]. This strategic refinement and focus on regional cooperation signify a proactive step towards more effective environmental governance in ASEAN.

Through these initiatives, ASEAN continues to prioritise regional cooperation and sustainable practices to address transboundary haze pollution, adapting its strategies to meet evolving environmental and policy challenges.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a narrative review methodology to explore ASEAN's middle power diplomacy and its effectiveness in addressing critical human security issues, specifically focusing on the South China Sea territorial claims and transboundary haze pollution. According to [30][31], narrative review is outlined to investigate a topic by describing and discussing its circumstances or subject matter based on theoretical structure or study context. Referencing various sources such as previous studies, articles, books, primary, and secondary materials, the narrative review method does not necessitate specific focus on data or methodological approaches, but it still requires critical assessment. This approach is chosen to be employed in this study due to particularly advantageous for synthesizing diverse perspectives and interpretations from a wide range of scholarly sources, enabling a nuanced understanding of the complexities surrounding ASEAN's diplomatic efforts.

Based on Figure 1, the research process began with a systematic search of academic articles published from 2019 onwards, utilising databases such as Google Scholar and Scopus. The search was guided by inclusive keywords related to ASEAN, middle power diplomacy, human security, ASEAN conflict resolution, South China Sea territorial claim and transboundary haze pollution. After filtering the results for relevance and quality according to category clustering, articles that provided insights into ASEAN's diplomatic strategies, challenges, and outcomes will be chosen.

The selected literature was then analysed to extract key themes, findings, and theoretical frameworks illustrating ASEAN's approach to conflict resolution and regional cooperation. This analysis included a critical examination of case studies, policy documents, and empirical research that highlight the effectiveness of ASEAN's initiatives in promoting peace and stability within the region. By synthesizing these findings, the study aims to contribute to the understanding of ASEAN's role as a middle power in addressing human security challenges, offering recommendations for future diplomatic efforts and regional cooperation.

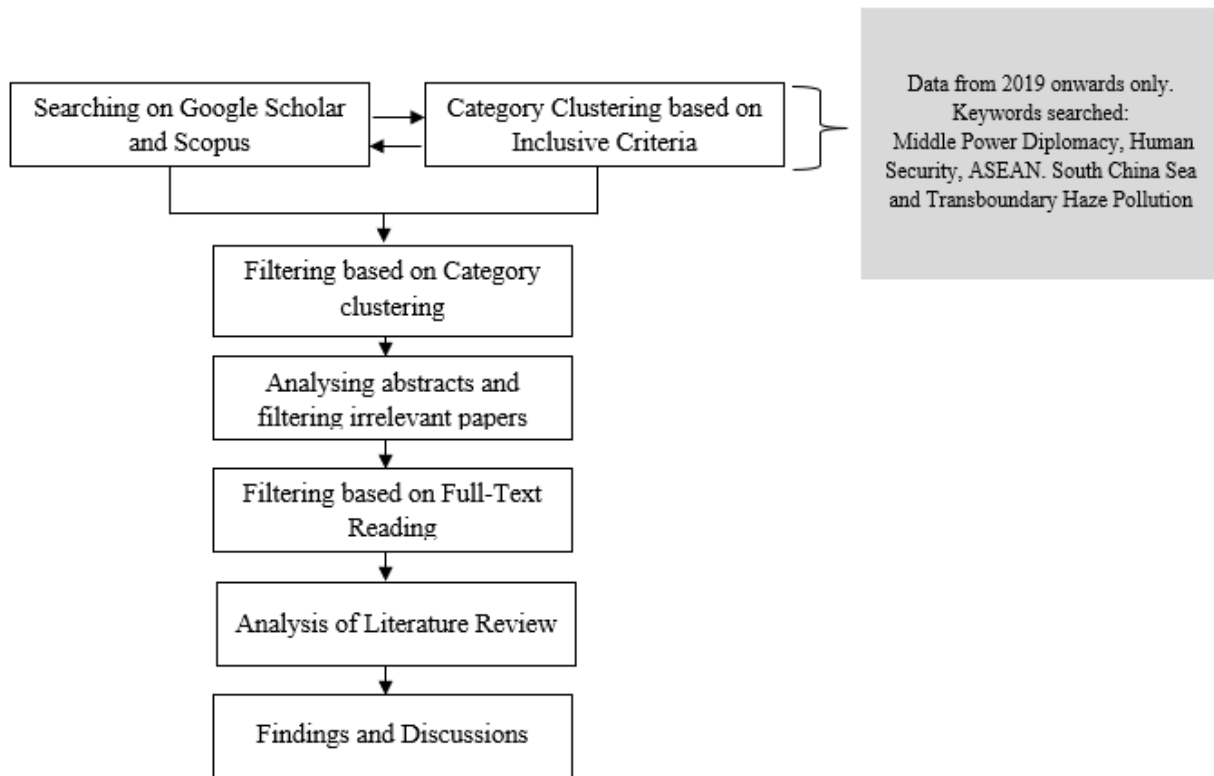


Fig. 1 Flow Chart of the Study

IV. FINDINGS

The analysis of ASEAN's responses to regional challenges reveals a nuanced and multifaceted approach to conflict resolution and cooperation. This section highlights the distinct strategies employed by ASEAN in addressing two critical human security issues: transboundary haze pollution and territorial disputes in the South China Sea. While both issues necessitate collaborative action, they differ significantly in their complexity and the nature of the interventions required. By examining these strategies, we can better understand ASEAN's commitment to maintaining regional stability and promoting solidarity among its member states.

A. Differences in ASEAN's Approaches

ASEAN has consistently employed a measured approach to resolving regional challenges, though the nature of these challenges often dictates the methods employed. For instance, the issue of haze pollution primarily stems from agricultural practices requiring technical and policy solutions related to land management and environmental protection. According to [25], addressing this issue necessitates action by all ASEAN Member Countries (AMCs) through strategies such as the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution (AATHP), the Regional Haze Action Plan (RHAP), and the development of haze-free roadmaps. These strategies emphasise monitoring, actionable plans, and collaborative implementation supported by technical and financial resources, with legally binding obligations for member states [26][27]. Ultimately, the success of these initiatives hinges on the commitment and cooperation of all member states to ensure a sustainable and haze-free environment in the region.

In contrast, the South China Sea issue revolves around geopolitical and security concerns, including territorial claims, strategic control, and maritime rights. As highlighted by [15], resolving these disputes requires a delicate balance of diplomacy, strategic negotiations, and adherence to international law. Unlike the more technical and cooperative approach to haze pollution, addressing the South China Sea disputes involves navigating complex geopolitical dynamics. [16] notes that these territorial disputes demand careful geopolitical manoeuvring and conflict resolution strategies, often influenced by external powers. Thus, fostering a collaborative environment among ASEAN member states is essential to effectively manage these challenges and maintain regional stability.

While haze pollution is largely an intra-regional issue, affecting only ASEAN countries, territorial disputes in the South China Sea involve global powers such as AUKUS and the Quad, whose strategic interests and military presence complicate ASEAN's position [11]. For instance, ASEAN's strategy for haze pollution reflects the "ASEAN way," characterised by consensus-driven decision-making and regional cooperation [27]. However, [28] argues that ASEAN struggles to maintain a unified stance on the South China Sea due to external influences and

differing member-state priorities. This divergence highlights the need for ASEAN to enhance its internal cohesion and develop a more unified approach to effectively address the complexities of regional security and geopolitical dynamics.

To address transboundary haze pollution, ASEAN has established a structured framework under the AATHP. This agreement mandates monitoring, action plans, and enforceable regulations for reducing haze pollution [26]. Member states are required to follow structured plans with ongoing supervision to ensure compliance [27]. ASEAN has also created a regional fund to support haze mitigation efforts and established the ASEAN Haze Task Force to coordinate implementation [29]. These measures reflect ASEAN's ability to enforce cooperation and accountability through binding agreements and collective action.

In contrast, ASEAN's approach to the South China Sea disputes has been less cohesive. While haze pollution strategies benefit from structured and enforceable measures, ASEAN's response to territorial disputes is fragmented. Member states' differing national interests, particularly their economic and political ties with China, hinder consensus. As a result, ASEAN has struggled to present a united front or enforce consistent policies. The issue of territorial sovereignty further complicates efforts to develop a collective stance without risking internal discord. This fragmentation has led to ongoing tensions and limited progress in resolving the disputes.

B. Similarities in ASEAN's Strategies

ASEAN has a long history of managing regional conflicts using strategies that, despite the diverse nature of these conflicts, share several similarities. A notable commonality is ASEAN's consistent use of multilateral approaches to address issues between states. For instance, in the case of haze pollution, ASEAN employs regional strategies emphasising cooperation among member states. The ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution (AATHP), adopted in 2002, serves as a key framework for collective action, holding all ASEAN Member Countries accountable for resolving haze pollution [25]. This framework not only facilitates collaboration but also reinforces the commitment of member states to work together towards sustainable environmental management.

Similarly, ASEAN's approach to territorial disputes in the South China Sea reflects its commitment to diplomatic and multilateral solutions. The Code of Conduct (COC) negotiations with China provide a framework for managing maritime disputes through dialogue and cooperation [15]. The COC emphasises peaceful resolutions and adherence to international law. [17] notes that the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) laid the groundwork for the COC, highlighting the importance of freedom of navigation, peaceful dispute resolution, and self-restraint in actions that could escalate tensions. This approach, like the AATHP, demonstrates collective responsibility and mutual agreement among member states, reinforcing the importance of collaboration in addressing complex regional challenges.

ASEAN consistently adopts a diplomatic approach, emphasising dialogue, joint monitoring, and mutual assistance rather than confrontation. For instance, to address haze pollution, ASEAN holds regular meetings, such as the ASEAN Ministerial Meetings on the Environment (AMME) and ASEAN Senior Officials on the Environment (ASOEN), to review progress and ensure compliance with agreements [26]. Public awareness campaigns and community-based fire management initiatives are also promoted to prevent haze and fires. This proactive engagement not only fosters collaboration among member states but also empowers local communities to take part in environmental stewardship, thereby enhancing the overall effectiveness of haze management efforts.

In the South China Sea, ASEAN similarly emphasises dialogue and consultation through established forums like the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) [11]. External partners in the ARF contribute to confidence-building measures, share best practices, and offer technical assistance in areas such as maritime security and environmental protection. [16] observes that these guidelines align with ASEAN's broader commitment to resolving disputes peacefully. By fostering an environment of cooperation and mutual trust, ASEAN aims to mitigate tensions and promote stability in a region marked by complex geopolitical dynamics.

ASEAN's non-confrontational approach to haze pollution focuses on capacity building, technical assistance, and sustainable land-use practices [27]. Positive reinforcement, rather than corrective actions, encourages member states to collaborate effectively. Similarly, in the South China Sea, ASEAN fosters mutual trust through confidence-building measures like joint maritime exercises, shared research initiatives, and hotlines for immediate communication during incidents. These efforts aim to promote regional stability and peaceful conflict resolution.

To better represent the data discussed, Table 1 below provides a concise comparison of ASEAN's approaches to transboundary haze pollution and the South China Sea territorial disputes. The table highlights the key differences across various aspects, including the nature of the issues, frameworks, strategies, challenges, and external influences, offering a clear and structured overview of the findings.

Table I. Comparison of Asean's Approaches

Aspect	Transboundary Haze Pollution	South China Sea Territorial Dispute
Nature of Issue	Environmental, intra-regional, technical	Geopolitical, inter-regional, strategic
Key Frameworks	AATHP, RHAP, Haze-Free Roadmaps	DOC, COC
Approach	Technical solutions, legally binding agreements, monitoring, and enforcement	Diplomatic solutions, multilateral dialogue, adherence to international law
External Influences	Minimal	Significant (e.g., China, AUKUS, Quad)
Challenges	Implementation and compliance	Fragmentation due to differing member-state interests and external pressures
Success Factors	Regional cooperation, structured frameworks, financial and technical support	Confidence-building measures, peaceful negotiations, and external partnerships

V. DISCUSSION

This section explores ASEAN's approach to tackling intra-regional environmental crises and inter-regional geopolitical tensions, focusing on the relevance of the "ASEAN Way" in fostering dialogue and stability. The transboundary impacts of haze pollution and the complex territorial disputes in the South China Sea illustrate the interconnectedness of ASEAN's human security challenges. This discussion assesses current policies and offers innovative strategies to strengthen ASEAN's role in maintaining regional and global stability.

Haze pollution poses significant health risks, including respiratory and cardiovascular illnesses, particularly for vulnerable populations like children and the elderly [25]. This not only strains public health infrastructure but also increases healthcare costs and reduces quality of life. Long-term exposure diminishes workforce productivity and economic stability, further exacerbating the issue. In the ASEAN region, haze disrupts key industries like agriculture and tourism, leading to economic instability and food insecurity [27]. Additionally, the strain on healthcare systems diverts resources from other critical areas, weakening public health resilience. The transboundary nature of haze pollution necessitates coordinated regional efforts, as inadequate collaboration can heighten tensions among neighbouring countries and compromise human security. While the ASEAN Way has played a pivotal role in addressing these challenges, the growing complexity of human security issues suggests the need for its evolution to ensure more effective solutions.

Social tensions can result from the transboundary nature of haze pollution, affecting bilateral relations and regional stability [27]. The transboundary nature of haze pollution can lead to significant social tensions within the ASEAN community, as affected countries may blame one another for the environmental crisis. These tensions can strain bilateral relations, making it challenging to foster regional cooperation and trust. Diplomatic disputes over haze management and accountability can hinder collaborative efforts to address the issue, thereby compromising human security and stability in the region. This highlights the limitations of the ASEAN Way, which emphasises consensus and non-confrontational diplomacy. While this approach has served the region well, its effectiveness in managing such complex and cross-cutting issues is increasingly questioned, especially with external pressures and diverging national interests.

The militarisation of disputed areas increases tensions and conflict risks, endangering the security and safety of populations in the region [16]. Territorial claims in the ASEAN community can undermine human security by heightening the risk of militarisation and armed conflict. As nations bolster their military presence to assert control over disputed areas, the potential for violent confrontations rises, threatening the safety of local populations. This increased militarisation not only diverts resources from essential public services but also creates an atmosphere of fear and instability, further eroding the region's human security. This exemplifies the inter-regional nature of security threats, where external powers and regional actors alike are involved, necessitating ASEAN to reconsider its approach to conflict resolution.

Territorial disputes over boundaries, such as those in the South China Sea, impact marine ecosystems through overfishing, land reclamation, and artificial island construction, threatening biodiversity, food security, and livelihoods [16][17]. These activities not only harm local economies and ecological balance but also displace communities dependent on fishing and marine resources, exacerbating economic instability within the ASEAN region. The inter-regional nature of these disputes, involving external powers like China, AUKUS, and the Quad, further complicates regional cooperation and resource management. ASEAN's traditional reliance on the ASEAN Way has proven less effective in addressing these geopolitical challenges, highlighting the need for more structured and assertive approaches.

To enhance its effectiveness, the study proposes several measures to strengthen ASEAN's mechanisms. First, ASEAN can focus on strengthening existing mechanisms by enhancing the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution (AATHP) framework. This would involve ensuring better enforcement of commitments and developing clearer guidelines for implementing the Second Haze Roadmap. By doing so, ASEAN would improve the region's capacity to address haze pollution more effectively, ensuring that member states are held accountable, and that progress is measurable.

Second, ASEAN member states could consider adopting innovative frameworks inspired by models such as NATO or the Paris Agreement. These frameworks emphasise structured cooperation and legally binding commitments, which could offer ASEAN a more robust mechanism for addressing both technical and geopolitical challenges. Such frameworks would not only enhance cooperation among member states but also provide a clear path for addressing issues that cross national boundaries.

Third, ASEAN should develop deterrence diplomacy as a proactive approach to addressing South China Sea territorial claims and external pressures. By fostering stronger partnerships with key international actors and leveraging ASEAN's collective voice in global forums, the organisation can assert its interests more effectively. This would help maintain regional stability and safeguard ASEAN's unity in the face of external influences, particularly from global powers involved in territorial and security issues.

Finally, ASEAN should adopt comprehensive strategies that promote collective action plans to effectively address both technical challenges, such as haze pollution, and geopolitical issues, like territorial disputes. By integrating lessons learned from haze pollution responses into the management of territorial disputes, ASEAN can foster greater unity among its member states. This holistic approach not only enhances cooperation in environmental matters but also strengthens regional security, highlighting the interconnectedness of human security and environmental sustainability.

Ultimately, ASEAN's approach to these interconnected human security challenges must evolve to meet the region's increasing complexity. As external powers continue to exert influence, ASEAN must strengthen its mechanisms, explore innovative frameworks, and adopt a more assertive and cohesive strategy. These steps will be crucial in ensuring long-term stability and security within the ASEAN community, allowing it to address both intra-regional and inter-regional challenges more effectively.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

The ASEAN Way, which emphasises consensus-building, non-confrontation, and regional harmony, has been an essential component of ASEAN's strategy for addressing human security and regional stability. However, recent developments from 2019 to the present indicate that the ASEAN Way has limitations and unexplored potential when faced with complex, inter-regional concerns. These concerns demand more structured and proactive actions, as ASEAN's traditional approaches may not be sufficient to negotiate the escalating geopolitical tensions and external pressures from powers like China, the U.S., and others.

The gap lies in ASEAN's need to evolve its approach to human security by adopting innovative frameworks, developing deterrence diplomacy, and enhancing its collective action strategies. While the ASEAN Way has served the region well in the past, the growing complexity of both environmental and security issues calls for a more assertive and cohesive strategy to ensure long-term regional stability and resilience.

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