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ASEAN Centrality amid Increasing Global Multipolarity

Francis Mark A. Quimba and Mark Anthony A. Barral



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ASEAN Centrality amid Increasing Global Multipolarity

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Abstract

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations is considered as one of the successful regional cooperations and has played a remarkable role in regional, and potentially global, order through its principles of consensus, non-interference, and peaceful resolution of conflicts, providing platform for dialogue both among its members and external partners. Crucial to its architecture is the ASEAN centrality, the principle that directs ASEAN to be at the center of every mechanism and discussion concerning political, security, and economic issues, among others. Over the years, however, regional and global developments have thrown some weights over the region, leaving the credibility of ASEAN's centrality in question. For instance, the global order, which is once thought to be aligned to a unipolar authority, the United States, is increasingly exhibiting the characteristics of a multipolar world, with the emergence of stronger and more independent economies. To understand how the increasing global multipolarity influences ASEAN, this paper investigates how the shifting global geopolitical landscape, characterized by power rivalries and economic interdependence, influences ASEAN in its central role in regional affairs. The study highlights the varied short-term geopolitical influences that diminish over time, emphasizing the need for ASEAN and the Philippines to strengthen regional integration, diversify partnerships, and balance external relations to maintain and sustain resilience and leadership in the region.

Keywords: ASEAN, centrality, cooperation, free trade, geopolitics, globalization, influence, integration, international relations, international trade, multipolarity, polar, power, regional cooperation, regional economy

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Francis Mark A. Quimba and Mark Anthony A. Barral*

1. Introduction

ASEAN has been a foundation of cooperation and integration in Southeast Asia since its establishment in 1967. With the cooperation of its ten member-states¹, ASEAN has been instrumental in promoting peace, security, and economic stability in the region through its various initiatives and mechanisms, including the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Plus One, and ASEAN Plus Three (ASEAN Secretariat 2024 and ASEAN 2016). Its success as a regional platform through these mechanisms can be attributed to its centrality principle, which guides the region's architecture in promoting dialogue and cooperation both among its members and its external partners. ASEAN centrality has been critical in maintaining regional stability, economic growth, as well as in fostering a sense of community and shared identity among its members, which helps the region mitigate tensions or conflicts (Parks et al. 2018 and ASEAN 2016).

ASEAN Centrality “is the notion that ASEAN should be the primary driving force in shaping the group’s external relations in a regional architecture that is open, transparent, and inclusive.” (Laksmana 2017, in Laksmana 2020, p. 109). This puts ASEAN at the center of every process that facilitates the region’s security architecture, and maintaining order and power dynamics with its partners, via direct membership to ASEAN Plus schemes, ARF, ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM+), EAS, and Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) (Tan 2012).

The potentials ASEAN developed and the progress it achieved over the years have attracted the interests of world economies, notable in terms of its growing partnerships, global trade, investments, and share to global GDP.

Southeast Asia’s share of world exports increased from 3.4 percent in 1990 to 7.6 percent in 2023, equivalent to more than 1.8 trillion USD (Figure 1).

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¹ Brunei Darussalam, Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.

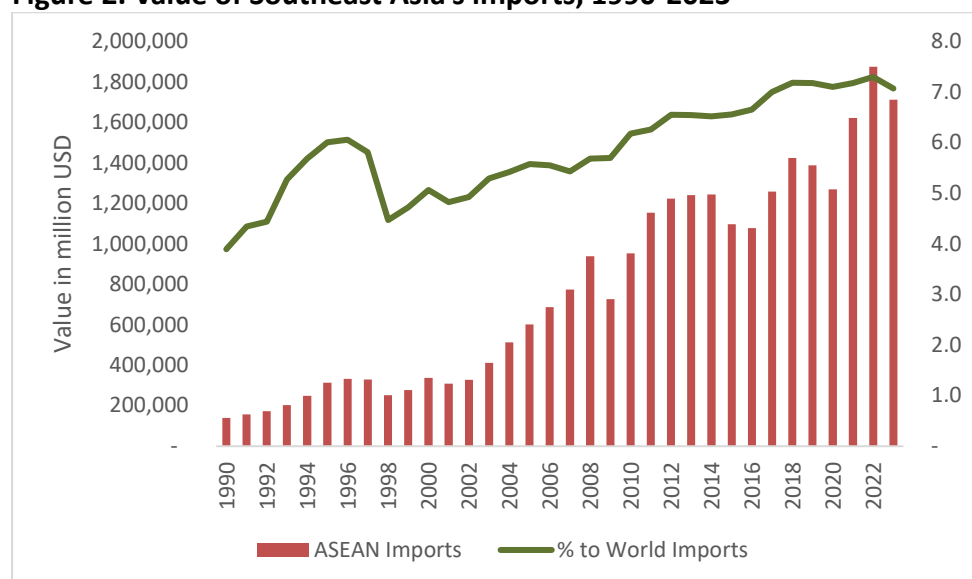
Figure 1. Value of Southeast Asia's exports, 1990-2023



Source: Authors' construct

Meanwhile, its share of imports rose from 3.9 percent in 1990 to 7.1 percent in 2023, equivalent to more than 1.7 trillion USD (Figure 2).

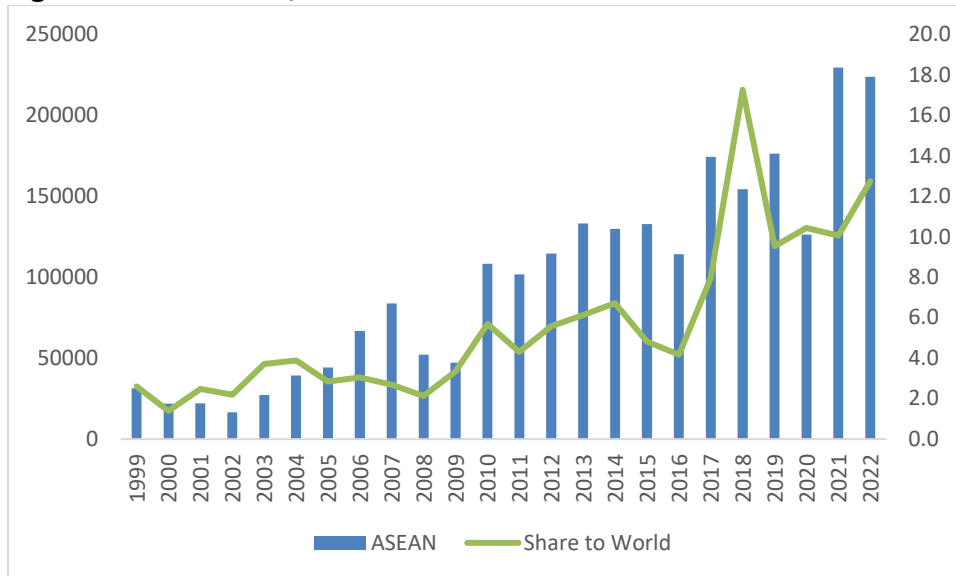
Figure 2. Value of Southeast Asia's imports, 1990-2023



Source: Authors' construct

Similarly, Southeast Asia's FDI has generally increased over the past two decades. Although it drops in 2020, ASEAN FDI remains high (Figure 3), suggesting investors' confidence in the region.

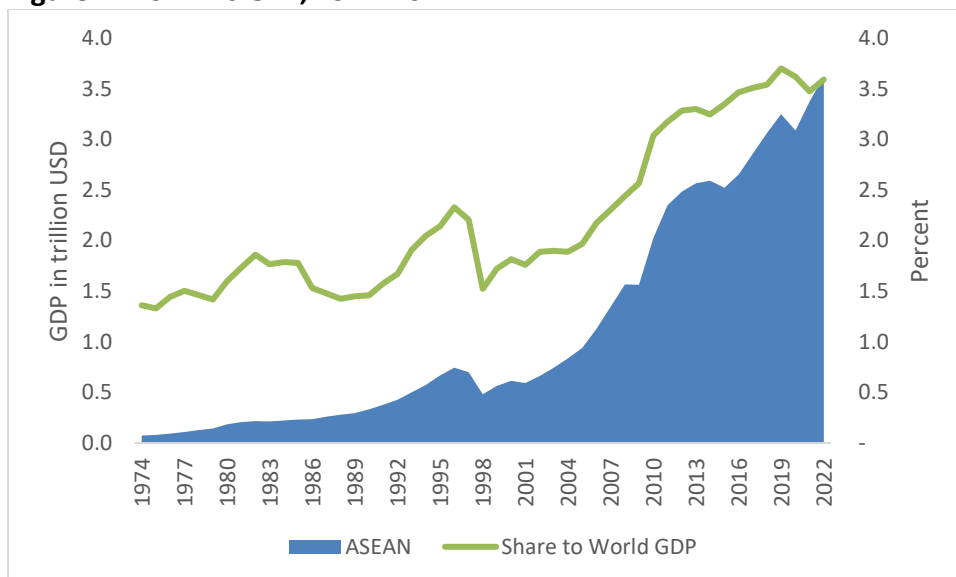
Figure 3. ASEAN's FDI, 1999-2022



Source: Authors' construct

On the other hand, Southeast Asia's GDP has exponentially increased to 3.6 trillion USD in 2022 (Figure 4).

Figure 4. ASEAN's GDP, 1974-2022



Source: Authors' construct

This is equivalent to an increase of its contribution to global GDP from an average of 1.4 percent in the 1970s to about 3.4 percent in the last decade (Table 1).

Table 1. Average share of Southeast Asia's share to global GDP, 1974-2022

	1974- 1980	1981- 1990	1991- 2010	2011- 2010	2011- 2020	2021- 2022
Average Share to GDP (%)	1.4	1.6	1.9	2.2	3.4	3.5

Source: Authors' estimate

ASEAN's trade and investment performance are just among the factors that make it an economic powerhouse and a sought-after partner for security and trade initiatives (Petri and Plummer 2014).

The United States, a single global superpower for a long time, has been exerting its influence in the region. It has been a global leader not only in terms of military but also trade, investment, finance, and technology, among others. As the middle-power countries catch up, however, the US is experiencing a decline in its share (ADB 2024). With the rise of emerging economies, such as China, India, and Europe, growing interests have been poured into the region. The shift of global order to multipolarity presents new challenges to ASEAN and its centrality, consequently, influencing the region's political and economic order, requiring ASEAN to be adaptive and evolving (Keling et al. 2011, Chong 2018, Parks et al. 2018, and ADBI 2024).

The current global multipolar order is described as a geopolitical fragmentation, marked by power competition, increasing rivalry and conflict among major economies, geopolitical instability, and differences in regional norms that lead to inconsistencies and political clashes in the global stage. With this set up, there is a perceived risk of fragmented, uncoordinated, and inefficient responses to global issues, such as climate change and pandemics, which may exacerbate due to disrupted supply chains and technological divides (WEF 2024).

The rise of nations like Brazil, Russia, India, and China, collectively known as BRIC, and later Brazil, South Africa, India, and China, or BASIC, marked a momentous shift in global geopolitics, with China and India emerging as key players in both groupings, leading the "Asian Century" (Wilson and Purushothaman 2003 and Mahbubani 2008, in James 2019). Emerging developing-world powerhouses, such as the BRIC, began to challenge the economic power of the G-7², increasing their share of global, financial, and labor flows (World Bank 2011).

Brazil and India are visibly rising powers, while Russia remains as a great power. China, on the other hand, is undoubtedly a global power that stretches its economic and political influence. Egypt and South Africa position themselves as regional and rising powers advocating for the Global South. Türkiye, also a rising power, aims to become a global and regional political leader, balancing East and West. Meanwhile, Indonesia recognizes the need for further development to attain rising power status. All these countries emphasize diplomacy and multilateral institutions, and contribute to global problem-solving, with varying degrees of military capability and political assertiveness (De Carvalho and De Coning 2013).

Having the means and financial capability, major economies exert their interests through development assistance and other initiatives. For instance, China expands its influence through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Parks et al. 2018). Its rise to power led to concerns about its

² G7 is the informal grouping of industrialized countries – the US, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, and the UK CFR 2014 (Council on Foreign Relations 2024).

intentions and ambitions, not only in Southeast Asia but globally. China's claims in the South China Sea, which overlaps with the claims of several ASEAN member states, including Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam, have created tensions and conflicts, testing ASEAN's ability to uphold its diplomatic relations with China and to maintain its centrality in promoting stability and cooperation (Roy 2005 and ICG 2021). Navigating between two of its major trading partners, the US and China, ASEAN member states try to maintain a dual alignment without the need to explicitly choose sides. However, the changing global dynamics and the tensions between these powers may erode the diplomatic luxury the region possesses, necessitating ASEAN to revisit its approach (Chong 2018).

ASEAN member economies generally want to maintain good relations with the two powers; however, recent rising assertiveness of China and the decline of the US influence heightened the tensions. China's Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB) and BRI programs attract Southeast Asian economies but also wary them of the potential attachments, especially that there is a perceived inconsistency of the US strategy in the region and its withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) (Denmark 2018).

Moreover, the shift of global power dynamics from the Atlantic-based center to Asia, particularly China and its integration into the global system, reveals the emergence of conflicts of interest (Koyuncu 2021).

The deepening engagement of emerging economies seems to balance and counter the influence of the growing influence of major economies. These emerging economies, however, do not only bring opportunities but also contribute to the growing tensions, making the region's relationships more complex and dynamic. Against these economic and political uncertainties, this paper finds it necessary to determine how the increasing multipolarity may influence the centrality of ASEAN.

Hence, the following objectives are put forward:

General objective: To determine how multiple polars influence ASEAN.

Specific objectives:

- a. To determine what constitutes global multipolarity.
- b. To determine how global multipolarity affects the region and the country.
- c. To understand ASEAN centrality and the need to strengthen it.

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1. Geopolitics: Power, Influence, and Polarity

Within the discourse of international relations, geopolitics is basically a product of the overlapping concepts of "influence" and "power". Power is traditionally referred to as the ability of a state to achieve its objectives and exert control over others by means of operationalizing its military strength, economic resources, and diplomatic and cultural influence. It is a tangible attribute based on a state's material resources and capabilities. Influence, on the other hand, is a relational concept that emphasizes the capacity of a state to induce changes in the behavior of another state. Influence, however, is not merely a coercive

act or control but involves persuasion, shaping perceptions, and steering the direction and action of other states by means of diplomatic negotiations, economic incentives, cultural exchanges, or ideological assertion. The sources of state influence vary depending on theoretical perspective. For the realist, it is military power. Liberals and constructivists, on the other hand, point out to economic and diplomatic tools. Merely analyzing state resources, however, does not fully explain how influence is cultivated, or the impact of power is gauged. Understanding the mechanisms is crucial to distinguish between a state's influence of activities and the underlying power mechanisms they deploy (Dahl and Stinebrickner, 2003; Baldwin, 2016; and Finnemore and Goldstein 2013; in Meierding and Sigman 2021).

Understanding the dynamics of influence and power mechanisms in international relations, as discussed in the context of multipolarity and ASEAN Centrality, is closely related to the discourse on the Global South. Just as ASEAN asserts its centrality amidst the competition of major powers in the region, countries of the Global South navigate their positions in the broader global order where multipolar actors exert varying degrees of influence.

The competition among superpowers, exemplified particularly during and after the Cold War, extended into various regions, including the Global South. This competition encompasses broad economic, cultural, and political issues, with each superpower pursuing its own interests and ideologies. The Global South became a crucial arena for this competition, with the USSR, the US, and China vying for dominance and strategic advantages. The superpowers employed different tactics and policies, often leading to conflicting interests and tensions. While some countries benefited from increased investment and access to global markets, others experienced negative consequences such as political instability and economic inequality. Overall, the competition among superpowers in the Global South had significant implications for regional stability and development, shaping the geopolitical landscape in profound ways (Huseynli 2023).

The study of international relations has traditionally focused on major powers, which are seen as crucial actors shaping global dynamics. Diplomatic histories and political science theories have predominantly centered on major power behavior. The realist tradition, long dominant in international relations scholarship, particularly emphasizes major powers, with Morgenthau's (1948) balance-of-power theory serving as a foundational framework. Neorealist scholars like Waltz (1979) have underscored the necessity of major powers in constructing a general theory of international politics, further solidifying their significance (Danilovic 2002).

Empirical evidence highlights the prominent role of major powers in global conflicts and crises throughout history. Studies show that major powers have been involved in a significant percentage of wars and international crises over the past two centuries. This extensive involvement underscores the importance of understanding major power behavior in analyzing the causes of war and conflict. However, despite their central role, there remains a lack of consensus on the definition of major powers, with the identification often treated as an empirical issue subject to individual interpretation. Consequently, the most used list of major powers tends to be a compromise, reflecting differing perspectives within the scholarly community (Danilovic 2002).

The term "major powers," which has supplanted "great powers" in contemporary usage, carries significant implications and requires a clear understanding of its meaning. Major powers are typically identified based on several defining elements. The power dimension assesses a nation's capabilities, although there may be methodological disagreements regarding the

threshold of capabilities required for major power status, acknowledging power potential is universally recognized as essential. The spatial dimension considers the geographic scope of a nation's interests, actions, or projected power, a criterion often overlooked but crucial for distinguishing major powers from regional powers. The status dimension reflects the formal or informal recognition of a nation's major power status, involving the nation's willingness to act as a major power, making it a more subjective and challenging criterion to empirically establish (Danilovic 2002).

The distribution of power among great powers determines the polarity of the international system. A multi-polar system is characterized by the presence of several great powers, each capable of exerting significant influence independently. In contrast, a bipolar system features two predominant great powers, often competing for global supremacy (Varisco 2013).

The rise of major powers and the spread of power concentrations led to the concept of multipolarity, which Morgenthau (2005) presents based on the concept of imperialism. Morgenthau (2005) refers to imperialism as the expansionist policies and practices of powerful nations to extend their influence, control, and authority over other territories, peoples, and resources beyond their own borders. Crucial to imperialism is national power, defined as a nation's capacity to achieve its goals and influence others' behaviors.

The concept of great powers and the distribution of power capabilities among them play a crucial role in shaping the international system's dynamics. The components by which this influence or control takes place, and which define a great power, include geography and territory; economic capability; natural resources; industrial capacity; military; population; national character, moral, culture, and ideology; and political stability, quality of diplomacy and government (Morgenthau 2005; Walts 1979, in Varisco 2013; and Shiraev and Gibson 2012).

Van Hooft (2010) explores the interplay between global multipolarity and traditional interstate competition, with a focus on the evolving global order, and argues that the current global landscape is shaped by both structural factors and domestic politics, particularly the realignment of US, European, and Chinese grand strategies. The increasing prominence of China and other rising powers, coupled with a trend towards renationalization and skepticism towards internationalism, is undermining current multilateral institutions. This tension is expected to lead to a hybrid and dysfunctional global order characterized by strategic opportunism. The study also examines the shift from American unipolarity to a more multipolar system, highlighting the challenges and opportunities this presents for international governance and strategic competition.

Further, Morgenthau (2005) explains the mechanisms through which imperialism plays a dual role, either shape or being shaped by the distribution of power among states, as follows:

- (a) Imperialism as a means of power consolidation. Powerful states often engage in imperialism to bolster their strength relative to others. By acquiring colonies or extending their spheres of influence, they aim to enhance their military, economic, and geopolitical capacities. This pursuit of power through imperialism contributes to shifts in the balance of power, as dominant states extend their reach and influence.

- (b) Imperialism as a response to power disparities: States may resort to imperialism in response to perceived threats or imbalances in power. Weaker states, confronted with dominant or expansionist rivals, may pursue imperialist actions to enhance their own security and counteract the influence of stronger actors. This can lead to competition and conflict as states vie for control over territories and resources, ultimately shaping the balance of power.
- (c) Imperialism and regional power dynamics: Imperialist endeavors also impact power dynamics within specific regions. Rivalry among states for control over strategic territories or maritime routes can lead to the emergence of regional hegemonies or the formation of alliances aimed at offsetting dominant powers. These regional power dynamics, in turn, have broader implications for the overall balance of power in the international system.

However, analyzing the international system solely through the lens of individual nation-states is inadequate. Instead, it requires a relational approach that considers the complexity of multipolarity across various levels of analysis. This involves examining interactions among demographic, economic, political, and geo-environmental factors, which are shaped by organizational memberships, economic alliances, and trading relationships. In essence, multipolarity's main structures are not solely determined by individual nation-states but also by the interconnected relationships and alliances between them (Peters 2022).

Hence, among the precursory conditions that determine or lead to a multipolar international system are the following (Peters 2022):

- Western Relative Decline: It highlights the decline of previous European great powers through decolonization, while ex-colonies and other countries are rising or emerging.
- Strategic Regrouping of the West: This includes the US and EU's cooperation through NATO, the US "pivot to Asia," and developments like the Quad and AUKUS. Brexit and the UK's repositioning within the Commonwealth are also mentioned.
- Rise of China: China's ascent is discussed, particularly its growing influence in the Asia-Pacific region, trade relationships with ASEAN, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and bilateral trade with Africa.
- China-Russia Axis and Eurasian Organizations: The partnership between China and Russia is noted, along with their involvement in organizations like the Eurasian Economic Union, Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the BRI. Xi Jinping's call to reshape the international system away from zero-sum games is highlighted.
- India's Position: India's role as a member of both the SCO and the Quad is emphasized, alongside its economic growth and repositioning as a global actor under Modi's leadership.
- Digital Interconnectivity: The rise of a global interconnected digital economy, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, is discussed, along with increased digital trade and digitization.

- Transnational Corporations: The development of global transnational corporations with significant influence is mentioned, highlighting their power relative to smaller nation-states.
- Rise of the Global South: The narrative reconstruction of the Global South and increasing levels of South-South cooperation.
- G77 and BRICS emerging as influential blocs within the UN and international system.
- Liberal International Architecture: The growth and institutionalization of world agencies and NGOs based on the traditional liberal international order, including various UN organizations, are highlighted.
- Regionalization: The trend towards regionalization for trade and security purposes is discussed, with examples including the European Union (EU), North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Regional Comprehensive Partnership Agreement (RCEP), Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Quad (Australia, India, Japan, and the US), and AUKUS (Australia, United Kingdom, and the US).

Meanwhile, Hartono (2022) discusses the concept of geopolitics as the political relationship between geographically related actors and based on two main branches – classical and critical. Classical geopolitics sees the states and relevant actors as resources. This usually focuses on the strategic importance of geographic locations, military power, and the control of territory, emphasizing the physical and material aspects of geopolitics. On the other hand, critical geopolitics consider the quality of the land as resources and the political roles of the actors as the determinants of the relationship. This highlights the importance of recognizing and analyzing the social and cultural dimensions of geography and how it shapes political dynamics.

The ongoing rivalry between China and the US; the rise and existence of emerging economies to major powers, such as China, the EU, Russia, India, Brazil, and South Africa, among others, altogether create a more decentralized global economy and multipolarity, leading a process of fragmentation and defragmentation of ASEAN. To add, the growing interests of these emerging and major economies in the Indo-Pacific, leading to the emergence of the Indo-Pacific regional order, increasing the regional polarization (Mishra and Wang 2023). While ASEAN Centrality offers a strategy for ASEAN member states to navigate global power rivalries, it also places the region in a complex position as it seeks to maintain beneficial bilateral trade with both China and the US, as well as other emerging powers. The influence of these major and emerging economies brings both opportunities and risks. Therefore, assessing the net gains is crucial for the strategic positioning within ASEAN. ASEAN's central role is increasingly challenging due to the involvement of other powers like Australia, Japan, India, and the EU. Additionally, the potential inclusion of Indonesia, Argentina, and Iran in BRICS further complicates the regional dynamics by representing the Global South (Yhome 2020).

The unwillingness of leading countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America to stand with NATO, particularly over the war in Ukraine, resulted to the resurfacing of the Global South (Heine

2023).³ Driven by increased autonomy in foreign policy, diversified partnerships beyond Western clientelism, and enhanced global connectivity and institutional support, the growth of the previously considered marginalized countries has altered the global economic order. The rise of the Global South is coupled with the decline of western hegemony (Schio 2024).

The contraction of the EU economy, evidenced in the slow growth projections, as it faces various challenges, such as high inflation rates and increasing interest rates that affect investments; perceived persistent inequality that resulted from its failed “Big Bang” integration initiative; rising populism and protectionism that threaten EU’s economic unity and efficiency; and reliance on external supply Chains, particularly from China (Schio 2024, Heine 2023, and Zhou 2024).

In a multipolar order, nations pursue divergent economic strategies, shifting away from global economic interconnectedness. This trend, known as 'slowbalisation', is driven by the natural slowdown of globalization, the rise of emerging economies, and geopolitical tensions, among others. Morgan Stanley (2020) identified the following reasons for this trend:

- Persistent tensions between the US and China.
- Europe, Japan, and other regions’ attempt to balance relationships with both the US and China.
- The decline of multilateralism, with consensus-based mechanisms struggling to accommodate diverse membership.
- The emergence of alternative development models, including China's Belt and Road Initiative and the New Development Bank, challenging traditional institutions like the World Bank.
- Concerns over health security, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, prompting governments and companies to diversify and re-examine the global supply chains.

2.2. Geopolitics, Trade, and Growth

Geopolitics plays a crucial role in shaping global trade and the economy. The interplay between nations' strategic interests, territorial disputes, and alliances directly impacts trade policies, investment flows, and market access. Geopolitical tensions can lead to trade conflicts, tariffs, and sanctions, disrupting supply chains and hindering economic growth. Conversely, stable geopolitical relations can foster trade agreements, economic cooperation, and technological innovation, driving global prosperity. Understanding the intricate connections between geopolitics, trade, and economic growth is essential in navigating the complexities of the global economy.

Growth leads to multipolarity through various channels by which growth poles drive global growth, influencing both central and peripheral economies. These channels include technological diffusion via trade, FDI, and migration; institutional transfers through policy inspiration and international agreements; and trade and economic integration, particularly through the exchange of intermediate goods. Capital flows, especially FDI, play a crucial role in technology transfer and financial market development. Labor mobility facilitates skill

³ The Global South refers to the countries that are considered “developing”, “less developed”, or “underdeveloped”. Many of these are from the Southern Hemisphere, largely Africa, Asia, and Latin America (Heine 2023).

transfer and knowledge diffusion, enhancing global productivity. These dynamics contribute to economic dynamism and policy coordination, where large and rapidly growing economies, defined as growth poles, drive growth in other economies through strong linkages. This interconnectedness results in a multipolar global economic structure, characterized by multiple centers of economic power influencing global growth and development (World Bank 2011).

Globalization and technological advances propelled the development of economies by opening markets and increasing connectivity. Economic integration brought by trade, investment, and adoption of technologies allowed economies to emerge, such as China and India, and to enter the global economy and grow rapidly (Schio 2024).

The issues of global trade and breach of confidence are intrinsically linked to the concept of multipolarity in several ways, such as through the diversification of trade partners, reduction of unilateral influence, emergence of new economic powers, strategic realignments, and economic resilience and autonomy. The diversification of trade partners and reduction of reliance on any single dominant power, such as the US, contribute to a more multipolar global economy. Unilateral sanctions drive countries to seek alternative economic relationships, reducing dependency on the imposing country's currency, such as in the case of the US dollar, and fostering multipolarity. The rise of new economic powers, such as China and India, and the growth of intra-Asian trade, illustrate the emergence of multiple economic centers. Strategic realignments, like "friend-shoring," and efforts to build economic resilience reflect a shift towards a multipolar global structure, where economic power is distributed more evenly, and countries develop more autonomous and resilient economic systems (Chenoy 2023).

Goes and Bekker (2023) illustrated the impact of geopolitics on trade, economic growth, and innovation by highlighting how the decoupling of global economy projects drastic welfare losses, especially for lower-income regions that rely heavily on technology spillovers from wealthier areas. This showcases the importance of ensuring global trade rules that guarantee open and free trade relations between smaller countries and major blocs, as trade costs exacerbate inefficiencies in the diffusion of ideas. Geopolitical fragmentation hinders the flow of knowledge and technology through restrictions on trade, travel, and communication, slowing the pace of innovations, which are crucial for technological advancements. Higher trade costs brought by geopolitical tensions disrupt supply chains making it more expensive to access technologies, causing delays and increases in production costs of industries and countries heavily reliant on international supply chains, reducing their ability in innovative activities (Goes and Bekker 2023).

A similar study also finds that severe trade disruptions and economic costs are associated with geopolitical divisions. Fragmenting the global economy into three blocs (Western, Eastern, and Neutral) based on UN voting behavior reveals reduction of trade flows by 22 to 57 percent, with the Eastern bloc having the most substantial welfare losses (Campos et al. 2023).

Differences in geopolitical ties create trade barriers that affect sectors like food and high-end manufacturing. The exposure to the shifts leads to lower trade and incomes, with emerging markets and developing economies being the recipient of the most significant real per-capita income losses (Hakobyan, Meleshchuk, and Zymek 2023).

Moreover, investigating the impacts of US-China tension in 2018 and the imposition of US sanctions on Russia in 2014 reveal how geopolitical tensions result to trade diversion on the exports of Mexico. The US-China tension caused higher trade diversion effects than what has

been reported in the literature. The magnitude of trade diversion across industries was influenced by changes in US tariffs on Chinese goods, reduced imports from China, and product substitutability with Chinese goods. The study also reveals that exposure of Mexico's trade to US does not significantly impact the magnitude of trade diversion. Similar positive trade diversion effects are observed in the US sanctions on Russia (Wang and Hannan 2023). These studies show how geopolitical tensions disrupt global trade, hindering economic growth, particularly affecting lower-income regions. Fragmentation into blocs exacerbates trade disruptions, especially for emerging markets. This highlights the importance of maintaining open trade relations to mitigate welfare losses and sustain global economic stability.

Geopolitics shapes the global economy through its influence on trade, investment flows, market access, driven by strategic interests, territorial advantage, and alliance of major economies, and which may result to either tension or stability. Geopolitical tensions often lead to trade conflicts, imposition of tariffs and sanctions, disruptions in global supply chains, and economic slowdown. On the other hand, more stable geopolitics fosters economic growth and trade and economic cooperation. In reality, however, the emergence of new economic centers, such as China and India, driven by globalization and technological advancement, may reinforce trade diversification and motivate reduced reliance on dominant powers, leading to a more complex multipolar global order.

2.3. Transitioning of the Global Order

In accordance with the number of players dominating the world international system, the global order is described as unipolar, bipolar, or multipolar. Unipolarity is a system where one state holds most of the cultural, economic, and military influence, among others. In this system, the hegemon or unipolar state faces little to no competition from other states and can exert its influences without significant opposition. Bipolarity, on the other hand, is a system where two states hold most of the power and influence. With these two states often in competition with each other, global order is most likely to be in a stable state as each power checks the other. Lastly, multipolarity is when there are multiple states holding significant power and influence in the global arena. With power distributed among several states, alliances often shift, creating frequent conflicts and power imbalances (Mearsheimer 2001).

The past 50 years are a period marked by frequent shifting of global arrangements. The pre-World War II, before 1940s, the international system was characterized by multiple great powers, including the UK, France, Germany, the US, Japan, and the Soviet Union (Varisco 2013).

Between the 1940s to 1980s, the Cold War era witnessed a world order dominated by two superpowers – the US and the Soviet Union. This period was marked by intense political, military, and ideological competition between the two, leading to a relatively stable international system due to the balance of power and Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) (van Hooff 2010 and Varisco 2013).

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the US emerged as the sole superpower, creating a unipolar world order, which lasted until the early 2000s. This period of “unipolar moment” allowed the US to exert significant influence on the global economic, political, and military affairs without being challenged. Since the early 2000s, however, emerging economies, such as China, Russia, India, and Brazil, began to challenge the US' hegemony,

increasing geopolitical competition and a more complex order (van Hooft 2010 and Varisco 2013).

At least since 2020s, the current global order is increasingly multipolar, with major powers exerting significant influence on global affairs. The strategic rivalry between the US and China creates a dynamic and usually unstable international system (van Hooft 2010 and Varisco 2013).

The transitions between these periods, at least for the last five decades, are driven by geopolitical events, including wars, economic shifts, and ideological changes, which reshape the power among the world's great powers (Mearsheimer 2001).

The contemporary trend towards multipolarity is partly a product of the US-China tensions, which are likely to endure, with tariffs and other barriers being put up around certain types of commerce (Morgan Stanley 2024). As countries try to avoid being caught in the crossfire between the two countries, they seek to diversify their trade partnerships, leading to a more distributed global trade network. While the two focus on their bilateral tensions, the rest of the world will have to strike a balancing act, seizing opportunities to assert greater economic influence by filling the gaps in global trade and investment.

With the weakening of multilateralism, consensus-based global cooperation struggles to address challenges due to the increasing number and diversity of nations. As a result, alternative development models emerge, as a response to the improvement in the Sino-Russian relations, exhibited in initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative and new development banks, which are challenging the dominance of traditional institutions (like the World Bank and IMF). In addition, with *slowbalization* acceleration, global health concerns prompt companies to diversify their supply chains and refrain from relying on single markets (Morgan Stanley 2024). In essence, the world is moving away from the interconnected global system towards a more fragmented and regionalized one, with new powers emerging, challenging traditional institutions.

The global order has transitioned from a multipolar system dominated by influential powers prior to the second world war, through a bipolar Cold War era dominated by the US and the Soviet Union, to a unipolar world ruled by the US following the decline of the Soviet Union, and finally back to a multipolar landscape arising from the emergence of new powers like China and India. This dynamic indicates the influence of geopolitics, economic transformations, and evolution of ideologies. The current multipolar arrangement is driven by the increasing tensions between the US and China that prompts countries to diversify their trade relations, resulted to the development of new alliances, shying away from the traditional multilateralism towards more varied and regional-focused economic strategies.

2.4. ASEAN Centrality and Its Balancing Ability

ASEAN centrality started as a vague concept, whose scope and mechanisms were never clearly defined. The concept originated from the region's early efforts to cooperate on extra-group issues, encompassing a range of internal and external policy decisions that have evolved and broadened over time (Petri and Plummer 2014). ASEAN Centrality functions in many ways and encompasses several interconnected issues. It serves the national interests of the member

states while also serving the interest of great powers who leverage the concept for their own interests (Parks et al. 2018).

The ASEAN Charter institutionalized the concept by aiming for a proactive role in regional economic and political affairs through practical implementation, involving bilateral agreements rather than unified actions, and requiring internal cohesion among the member states to effectively project influence and leadership in the broader Asian region (Petri and Plummer 2014). The Charter established the legal and institutional framework for ASEAN, formalizing its principles, structures, and mechanisms for regional cooperation. It defines the objective of ASEAN in promoting peace, stability, and economic growth, and outlines the roles of its main organs, including the ASEAN Summit, ASEAN Coordination Council, and ASEAN Secretariat. Affirming the organization's role as the primary driving force in regional cooperation and integration, the Charter commits the region to a central and proactive role in economic and political relations with its external partners (ASEAN Secretariat 2008/The ASEAN Charter).

Following the Charter, the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) Blueprint emphasized the role of member states in working together to maintain Centrality in its negotiations, including free trade agreements (FTAs) and comprehensive economic partnership agreements (CEPAs) (ASEAN Secretariat 2008/The ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint). The AEC Blueprint outlines the roadmap for integration and details the strategic measures to tackle and address issues across sectors, such as trade, infrastructure, investment, and human development. The Blueprint underscores the leadership role of ASEAN and aims to establish the region as a single market and production base, enhancing competitiveness and equitable economic development while integrating into the global economy (ASEAN Secretariat 2008/The ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint).

ASEAN centrality promoted economic integration and is positioned to yield substantial benefits through increased specialization, productivity, foreign direct investment, and enhancing the region's competitiveness and attractiveness. However, achieving common external positions is difficult as there are varying interests among member states. For instance, advanced economies, like Singapore, may find regional markets insufficient and would find the broader markets more interesting, whereas less developed economies may resist rapid liberalization due to development concerns. This poses a challenge for the region to come up with a balanced collective action that considers the capacities and capabilities of all member states to leverage the region's strategic position for economic growth (Petri and Plummer 2014 and Koyuncu 2021).

By placing ASEAN at the center of regional cooperation, ASEAN centrality helps the region enhance its influence and visibility, and elevates ASEAN's standing as a regional leader, emphasizing its ability to shape regional norms and institutions. This is exemplified in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which proves how crucial the principle of ASEAN Centrality is in advancing the region's integration goal. RCEP situates ASEAN in a central position as an initiator of agreements (Kim 2022).

ASEAN centrality helps the region to maintain a neutral stance between competing powers by promoting inclusive dialogue and cooperation through its various mechanisms. ASEAN's consensus- and consultation-based decision-making process allows the members to diversify and have a say in regional decisions, preventing one power from dominating an agenda (Kim 2022). Moreover, as ASEAN established ASEAN-centered systems, it is easier for the region

to rely on one geopolitical force. ASEAN mechanisms, such as the ARF, EAS, and ADMM Plus, provide members states with a room to maneuver and avoid choosing sides, between China and US, while at the same time being able to attract investments from these countries (Koyuncu 2021).

The changing regional environment, however, puts ASEAN's central role under threat. The emergence and proliferation of strong bilateral and multilateral trade agreements among East Asian states that no longer rely on a central oversight institution has created complex trade networks that diluted ASEAN's influence, questioning its ability to lead regional trade negotiations (Mueller 2019). These complex trade networks can be partly blamed from the rise of China and other countries joining the global competition, pursuing divergent interests and strategies; and these economies often impact ASEAN's internal economic cooperation efforts, undermining its ability to for a unified intra-ASEAN consensus before engaging with external partners. Because these external partners often have different ideologies and strategies, ASEAN Way', i.e. its emphasis on non-interference and consensus, is often neglected, limiting deeper integration within ASEAN. In addition, because external partners usually prefer bilateral cooperation over ASEAN-led initiatives, ASEAN's centrality is undermined by the contestation of their agenda. Moreover, ASEAN struggles not only because of the presence of these diverse economies. ASEAN's centrality is also affected by its failure to propose novel mechanisms to support its centrality by providing solutions to regional issues. For instance, ASEAN's centrality is reiterated in documents like the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, however it failed to detail innovative solutions on how it will address emerging issues (Mueller 2019).

According to Yap (2005), the primary benefit of closer economic integration is political in nature, which is likely to lead to economic gains, particularly in closing development gap and advancing common interests in the global rules setting, and such approach of securing political gains will require political rapprochement (Yap 2005). This emphasizes the importance of economic integration for achieving political benefits, which in turn, leads to significant economic gains, especially in narrowing development gaps and advancing common interests in global rule-setting. Thus, by fostering economic cohesion, ASEAN can maintain its centrality and strengthen its collective influences to ensure its relevance amidst the shifting dynamics of global power.

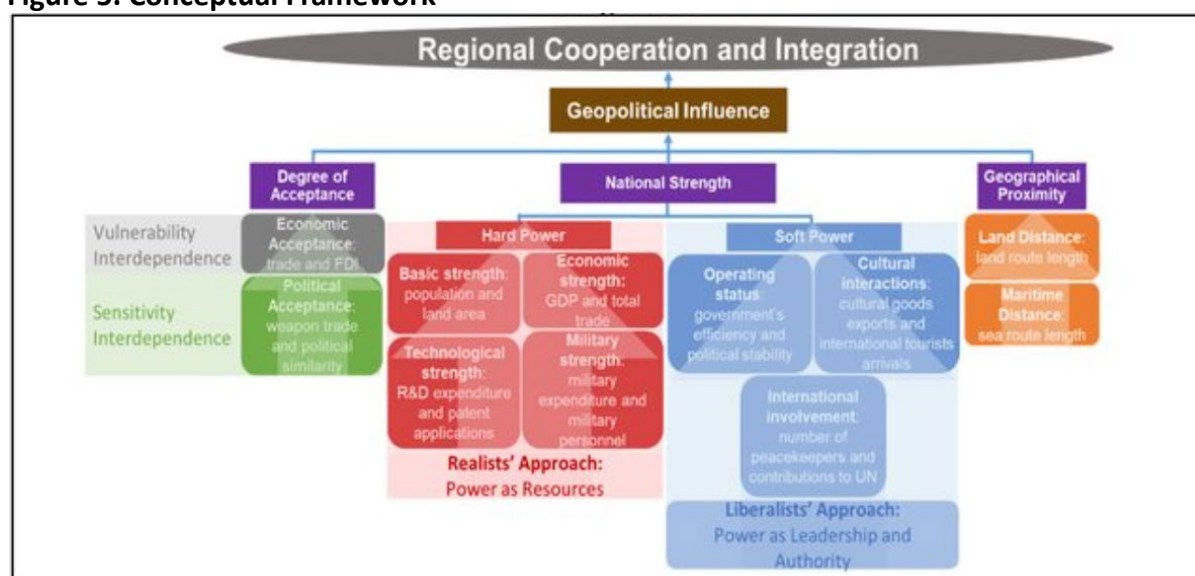
The balancing ability of ASEAN underscores the political advantages of economic integration to facilitate political and economic cooperation, which leads to substantial economic benefits such as reduction in developmental inequalities and strengthening the region's global position in rule-making processes. Global multipolarity brought by the presence of traditional and emerging global powers highlights the crucial role of economic integration and political rapprochement. By advancing economic ties, ASEAN can boost internal unity, which is vital for maintaining its centrality while navigating the challenges posed by external forces and, at the same time, leverage collective diplomatic strengths to effectively manage and balance the interests of major powers with its own interests and for its own benefits.

3. Methodology

3.1. Conceptual Framework

Hartono (2021) proposes a nuanced understanding of the impact of geopolitical influences on regions, emphasizing factors such as the degree of economic and political acceptance of specific global poles, a nation's strength in terms of both hard and soft power, and the geographical proximity to influential actors (Figure 5). The concept elucidates how the dynamics of multipolarity, and geopolitics shape regional cooperation and integration efforts.

Figure 5. Conceptual Framework



Source: Hartono (2021)

In a multipolar world characterized by competing power centers, countries within a region may strategically align themselves with various global actors to advance their interests. This pursuit often results in the formation of regional blocs or alliances aimed at bolstering collective security, fostering economic growth, and amplifying political influence. The complexities of multipolarity, however, also pose challenges to regional cooperation. Intense competition among major powers for influence and resources can escalate geopolitical tensions, potentially leading to conflicts that undermine stability and cooperation initiatives. Moreover, divergent interests and priorities among global actors can complicate consensus-building and cooperation within regional frameworks.

Hartono's (2021) framework underscores the intricate interplay between multipolarity, geopolitics, and regional cooperation, emphasizing the need to navigate both the opportunities and challenges posed by the presence of multiple power centers. By carefully considering these dynamics, stakeholders can work towards maintaining robust integration and cooperation within the region despite the complexities of the global landscape.

3.2. Measurement Framework

The paper considers multiple linear regression to initially measure the effect of global multipolarity on ASEAN centrality. In this model, ASEAN centrality, represented by an

integration index, is the dependent variable, while factors related to acceptance, national strength, and proximity, are the independent variables.

The model can be specified as follows:

$$ARCII_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 GI_{ikt} + \beta_2 FTA_{it} + \dots + \gamma_t + \varepsilon_{it} \quad (1)$$

Where:

- $ARCII_{it}$: The dependent variable representing ASEAN Centrality.
- β_0 : The intercept or constant term.
- GI_{ikt} : The Geopolitical Influence (GI) of polars k for country i in year t .
- FTA = Dummy for polar's membership in trade agreements or cooperation.
- β_s : The coefficients to be estimated.
- γ_t : Time fixed effects to control for changes over time.
- ε_{it} : Error term.

The ASEAN Regional Cooperation and Integration Index (ARCII) is used in the study to represent ASEAN centrality as it is considered to be comprehensive metric that quantifies the level of regional integration within ASEAN. As a proxy for ASEAN centrality, it reflects the region's cohesiveness, collaboration, and interconnectedness across various dimensions, such as trade, investment, finance, infrastructure, and institutional frameworks.

Among the strengths of ARCII are:

- Comprehensive measurement – encompasses multiple dimensions of integration, providing a holistic representation of ASEAN's centrality
- Quantifiable and comparable – the index allows for numerical comparison across time and among countries, facilitating empirical analysis of trends and variations in regional integration
- Policy-relevant – the index captures areas critical to ASEAN's economic and institutional performance, making it relevant for evaluating policies that are aimed to strengthen regional integration
- Reflects ASEAN's institutional goals – ARCII is aligned closely with ASEAN's objectives, such as the AEC, which prioritize deepening economic and institutional ties.

The index, however, may have certain limitations:

- Abstract representation – while the index captures the degree of regional integration, it may not fully reflect the broader political or strategic dimensions of ASEAN centrality.
- Data dependency – the quality of the ARCII depends on the availability and accuracy of data across ASEAN member states, which may vary significantly.

To derive the GI, the following model is employed:

$$GI_{ijt} = DA_{ijt} \times NS_{jt} \times e^{-d_{ij}} \quad (2)$$

Where:

- GI_{ijt} : Geopolitical influence of global power j on ASEAN country i at time t .
- DA_{ijt} : Time-varying degree of acceptance of ASEAN country i towards global power j , which could vary year by year depending on political or economic changes.

$$DA_{ijt} = a_1 \text{Political Similarity}_{ijt} + a_2 \text{Share of Imports}_{ijt} + a_3 \text{Share of FDI and Weapons Trade}_{ijt}$$

- NS_{jt} : Time-varying national strength of global power j (e.g., j 's GDP, military power, influence in at time t).

$$NS_{jt} = a_1 \text{InwardStrength}_{jt} + a_2 \text{OutwardStrength}_{jt} + a_3 \text{InternationalRecognition}_{jt} + a_4 \text{PotentialResources}_{jt}$$
- $e^{-d_{ij}}$: Geographic distance between ASEAN country i and global power j , which is time-invariant.

The geopolitical influence of one country over another is determined by how much the second country accepts the influence (degree of acceptance), the national strength of the influencing country, and how close the two countries are geographically. The greater the acceptance and national strength, and the shorter the distance, the higher the geopolitical influence.⁴

Table 2 presents the data used in the study.

Table 2: Data and Sources

Data	Definition	Source
GDP	Real GDP (constant 2015 US\$)	WDI
Total Trade	Value in USD	WITS
Cultural Goods Trade	Value in USD	UNESCO
Weapons Trade	Value in USD	WITS
FDI	Share of FDI inflow of country i from country j to FDI inflow of country i from the rest of the world	UNCTAD-Bilateral FDI Statistics
Political Similarity	Freedom score of country i compared to freedom score of country j (values closer to 1 indicate political similarity)	Freedom House
Population	Total	WDI

⁴ The exponential function $e^{-d_{ij}}$ reflects the idea that the impact of distance on trade or interaction decays exponentially. In other words, as the distance between two countries increases, the likelihood or volume of trade decreases at an exponential rate. This captures the reality that longer distances increase transportation costs, logistical challenges, and potentially cultural and regulatory differences, all of which make trade or cooperation less efficient.

Land Area	Square km	WDI
R&D Expenditure	Share to GDP	WDI
Patent Applications	No. of applications by residents	WDI
Tourist Arrivals	No. of persons	WDI
Armed Forces Personnel	No. of persons	WDI
Government Effectiveness	Index	WDI
Political Stability	Index	WDI
Contributions to UN	Financial contribution to the annual UN regular budget (US\$)	UN
UN Peacekeepers	Number of peacekeepers sent (persons)	UN
ARCII of Southeast Asian countries	Index of regional cooperation and integration ADB of Southeast Asian countries	

Source: Compiled by Authors

The following economies are selected as the polars considered in the paper:

a. United States

The US exerts significant geopolitical influence in ASEAN, primarily through its political and security partnerships. It maintains strong alliances with countries like the Philippines and Thailand and promotes regional security initiatives through joint military exercises and defense treaties.

Particularly for the Philippines, the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) allows increased US military visibility and access to the country's Philippine bases, reinforcing joint military capabilities in response to regional threats, particularly from China (Wingfield-Hayes 2023 and Gallo and Lopez 2023). Through joint military exercises, the US promotes regional security and defense treaties with ASEAN, strengthening military cooperation amid rising tensions in the South China Sea (Gallo and Lopez 2023 and Harding 2024).

Its military presence, particularly in the South China Sea, emphasizes its role in ensuring freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) in the region, which in a way challenges China's expansion and territorial claims but is considered crucial for maintaining open sea lanes vital for international trade and regional stability (SCSPI 2024, Sylvan 2017, and Swaine 2015).

Economically, the US remains an important trading partner and has promoted liberalization through initiatives like the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF). IPEF is yet another initiative through which the US seeks to strengthen its economic ties with ASEAN by promoting trade and investment and, at the same time, addressing supply chain challenges and economic security (Sylvan 2017 and Swaine 2015).

b. China

China is the region's largest trading partner with approximately 911.7 USD billion bilateral trade in 2023, accounting for 19.7 percent of ASEAN's total trade (VietnamPlus 2024 and Mission of PRC to ASEAN 2024). China is also a significant source of foreign direct

investment in the region. In 2023, China's FDI in ASEAN amounted to around 17.3 billion USD, approximately 7.5 percent of ASEAN's total FDI, making China the third-largest investor in the bloc (VietnamPlus 2024 and Wester 2023). China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has led to substantial infrastructure investments across the region, with Chinese companies reportedly investing over 100 billion USD in various projects aimed at enhancing connectivity and trade within the region. This initiative is pivotal for developing infrastructure that supports economic growth in ASEAN (HSBC 2020 and Wester 2023).

Politically, China seeks to shape regional governance through initiatives like the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). With ASEAN and China, RCEP is becoming the world's largest free trade agreement, promoting economic integration and governance in the region. This agreement enhances China's role in shaping regional policies and cooperation framework (Wester 2023 and Council on Foreign Relations 2023).

However, China's assertive actions in the South China Sea have created tensions with several ASEAN member states, affecting regional security dynamics. Despite its economic partnerships, China's territorial claims complicated diplomatic relations and raised concerns about regional security dynamics (Flores 2023 and CFR 2024). Negotiations for a Code of Conduct in South China Sea are ongoing as part of the efforts to manage the tensions in the contested areas (CFR 2024).

c. Japan

Japan has long been a key economic partner for ASEAN, with significant investments in infrastructure, manufacturing, and technology transfer. It supports regional economic integration through bilateral free trade agreements and participation in RCEP. Politically, Japan is a strong supporter of ASEAN centrality and multilateralism, engaging in forums like ASEAN Plus Three. In terms of security, Japan has expanded its role in defense cooperation and capacity-building efforts with ASEAN countries, enhancing regional security.

The ASEAN-Japan Comprehensive Economic Partnership (AJCEP), which was signed and entered into force in 2008, aims to strengthen economic ties between Japan and ASEAN by liberalizing trade in goods and services and in promoting investments (MITI Malaysia 2024 and Ministry of Finance Japan n.d.). Japan is a significant trade partner and source of FDI of ASEAN (MITI Malaysia 2024 and Akrasanee and Prasert 2003).

In terms of its political engagement, Japan is a consistent supporter of ASEAN's central role in the regional governance, where it actively participates in forums like the ASEAN Plus Three, underscoring the importance of multilateralism and cooperation among East Asian nations (MOFA Japan n.d. and Akrasanee and Prasert 2003).

Japan is also helping in maintain security in the region. It expanded its defense cooperation with ASEAN through capacity-building efforts and joint exercises and initiatives aimed at enhancing maritime security and disaster response. Its engagement in security dialogues reflects its commitment to promoting stability in Southeast Asia (Akrasanee and Prasert 2003).

d. India

India's relationship with ASEAN has strengthened through its Act East Policy (AEP), which emphasizes building closer economic and political ties. While India's trade and investment

with ASEAN are growing, they are still smaller compared to China and Japan. Politically, India participates in ASEAN-led forums like the East Asia Summit (EAS) and RCEP, promoting regional diplomacy. In terms of security, India is gradually expanding its naval presence in Southeast Asia, focusing on maritime security and freedom of navigation, particularly in the Indian Ocean.

Launched in 2014, AEP is a pivotal strategy that emphasizes closer economic and political relationship with Southeast Asia, enhancing connectivity, trade, and cultural exchanges. The policy led to a comprehensive partnership with ASEAN, with significant diplomatic and high-level engagements in the past decade (Sharma and Basu 2024 and Roche 2024).

Investment initiatives of India on ASEAN focused on infrastructure development projects to boost connectivity with the region, for instance the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport project, which are aimed to facilitate trade and investment between India and ASEAN (Sharma and Basu 2024 and Hussain and Hui 2024).

Since the implementation of AEP, India's trade with ASEAN has double to over 130 billion USD, although still lags behind China and Japan in terms of the overall trade volume (Roche 2024 and The Hindu 2024).

Political engagement of India can also be observed in its active participation in key ASEAN-led forums such as the EAS and the RCEP. Although it opted out of RCEP, its engagements with ASEAN on various diplomatic fronts continue (Sharma and Basu 2024 and Roche 2024). India's approach under the AEP highlights its support for ASEAN centrality in the regional governance and the promotion of multilateralism and collaborative frameworks that align with ASEAN's objectives (Sharma and Basu 2024 and Hussain and Hui 2024).

In addition, India's naval presence is gradually expanding in the region, focusing on maritime security and freedom of navigation. India also supports security capacity building as a significant step in defense cooperation (Roche 2024 and Louis and Singh 2024). It also participates in ASEAN wide military exercises to enhance collective security capabilities against common threats (Hussain and Hui 2024 and The Hindu 2024).

e. Russia

Russia's political influence in ASEAN has been growing, particularly through its participation in multilateral forums such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). Although Russia's economic ties with ASEAN are relatively modest, there is increasing cooperation in the energy sector, especially in oil and gas. Militarily, Russia is a significant arms supplier to several ASEAN countries, including Vietnam and Myanmar, and has been working to strengthen its defense ties with Southeast Asian nations.

The ARF serves as a platform for dialogue on political and security issues in the Asia-Pacific region. Russia active participation in the forum highlights its commitment to regional security and cooperation in promoting stability and addressing common security challenges within the ASEAN-led frameworks (MOFA Russian Federation 2023 and ASEAN 2023).

Russia's overall economic ties with ASEAN are not as engaging as other ASEAN partners, but its engagement on non-contentious sectors is increasing, such as in energy sector. In 2023, ASEAN and Russia engage in talks concerning enhancing energy cooperation, including

investments in energy infrastructure and technology transfers, which align with Russia's broader strategy of increasing its economic footprint in the region (Mission of the Russian Federation to ASEAN 2024 and ASEAN 2023).

In terms of military cooperation, Russia is a significant arms supplier to several ASEAN member states, notably Vietnam, Myanmar, and Indonesia. Between 2000 and 2021, Vietnam purchased approximately 6.5 billion USD worth of arms, Myanmar acquired about 1.7 billion USD, and Indonesia at about 1.2 billion USD (Strangio 2022). Russia is also participating in ASEAN's joint military exercises and capacity-building programs, engaging in various defense dialogues aimed at enhancing regional security (Gubin 2022 and ASEAN 2023).

f. Australia

Australia has a long-standing economic partnership with ASEAN, being a member of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and promoting trade through the ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement (AANZFTA). Politically, Australia is aligned with ASEAN's commitment to regional multilateralism and actively participates in ASEAN-led forums like the East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Regional Forum. In terms of security, Australia has increased its involvement in regional efforts, particularly in maritime security and counter-terrorism cooperation with ASEAN members.

AANZFTA, which came into effect in 2010, aims to reduce trade barriers and enhance economic cooperation between Australia, New Zealand, and ASEAN. The agreement has been upgraded to include new chapters on trade and sustainable development, enhancing cooperation in areas such as climate change and energy transition (PM&C Australia n.d. and Kilic 2024). Its membership to RCEP further solidifies its economic ties with ASEAN (Kilic 2024 and PM&C Australia n.d.).

Australia is also committed to regional multilateralism. It has aligned with ASEAN by actively participating in ASEAN-led forums such as the EAS and the ARF. This engagement has been further strengthened with the establishment of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) in 2021 to collaborate on issues like regional stability and security (PM&C Australia n.d., PM&C Australia n.d., and Choong and Seah 2024). This alignment can also be observed through Australia's supports on the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) (PM&C n.d. and PM&C n.d.).

Similarly, Australia has also involved in maritime security exercises within the region, increasing its commitment to support initiatives that focus on transnational crime and disaster response in the region (PM&C Australia n.d., PM&C Australia n.d., and Choong and Seah 2024). Australia also helps enhancing the region's counter-terrorism capabilities by contributing training and resources to effectively combat terrorism (PM&C Australia n.d. and PM&C Australia n.d.)

g. South Korea

South Korea: South Korea is an important economic partner for ASEAN, particularly in sectors like manufacturing, electronics, and automobiles. Politically, South Korea's New Southern Policy focuses on strengthening diplomatic and economic ties with ASEAN, while fostering cultural exchanges. Although South Korea's direct security influence in ASEAN is limited, it

participates in regional forums and contributes to discussions on maritime security, supporting ASEAN's broader security goals.

In 2022, trade volume between South Korea and ASEAN was valued at 207.46 billion USD, making South Korea the second-largest trading partner of ASEAN. Exports in manufacturing, electronics, and automobiles are most significant. The country's automotive presence in ASEAN markets contributes to the region's manufacturing capabilities (ASEAN-Korea Centre n.d. and MOFA South Korea n.d. Investments, on the other hand, reached 10.81 billion USD in the recent years, making South Korea the second-largest investment destination of ASEAN (ASEAN-Korea Centre n.d.).

South Korea's political engagement in the region is outlined in its New Southern Polic, which was launched in 2017, emphasizing the pillars people, prosperity, and peace. In 2022, the Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative (KASI) was announced, further enhancing partnership by focusing on various sectors (ASEAN-Korea Centre n.d. and MOFA South Korea n.d.).

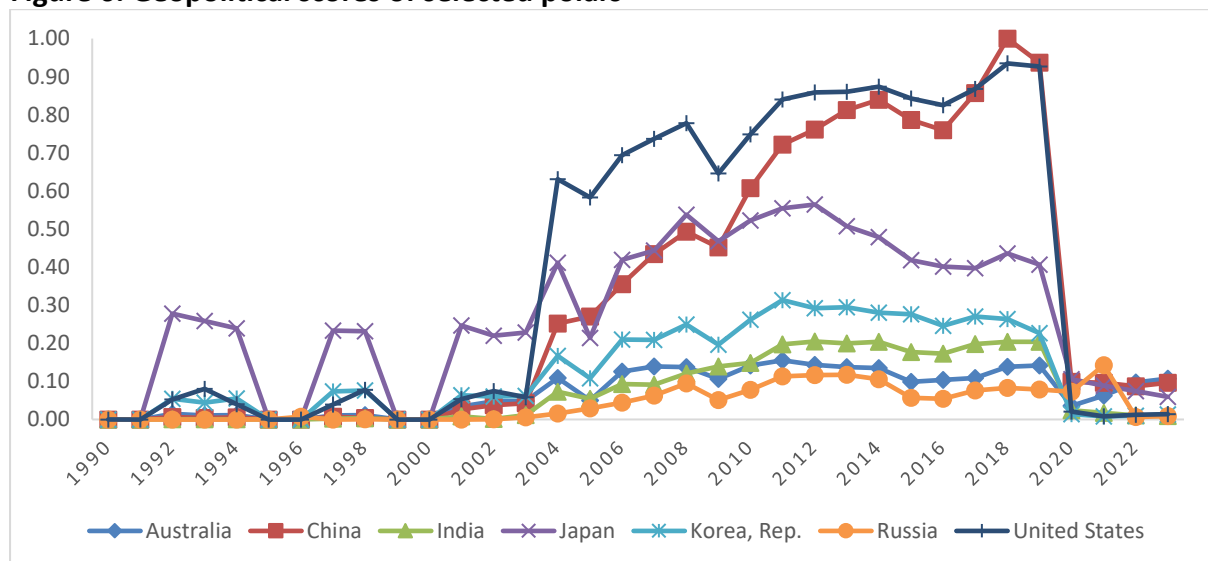
In terms of security cooperation, South Korea's influence on security in the region is limited compared to other major powers, despite its participation on security forums such as the EAS and ARF. Nevertheless, South Korea supports discussion on maritime security and has engaged in joint exercises on counterterrorism and transnational crime to enhance regional security through collaborative efforts (Lee 2024 and MOFA South Korea n.d.).

4. Results and Discussions

4.1. Geopolitical Influence on ASEAN

Figure 6 presents the trends in geopolitical influences of selected polars. In general, the influences diverge over time, with some countries, such as the United States, China, and Japan, experiencing rapid growth in influence, while others stagnate or decline.

Figure 6. Geopolitical scores of selected polars



Source: Authors' construct

Australia's influence remains relatively low and stable over time. Considered as a middle power relative to the rest, its influence is limited to strategic partnerships.

China's influence, on the other hand, shows consistent and significant growth, peaking during the mid-2010s. This suggests how China's economic growth and initiatives, such as the Belt and Road, help increase its global presence.

India's influence shows gradual growth – steady but moderately increasing over the years. India's influence in the region exemplifies its growing global recognition as an emerging power, brought by its economic growth and strategic partnerships.

Japan's influence in the region has been fluctuating, with a sharp rise in the 1990s and 2000s, followed by gradual decline in the 2010s. It can be noted that Japan initially rises to economic dominance and technological advancements post-war. It, however, experienced economic stagnation. The trend in its influence, however, can also reflect its passive approach to geopolitics despite being a major ally in the region and the Indo-Pacific.

South Korea's influence also experienced a steady growth but remains moderate compared to others. This influence can be attributed to its economic success, cultural exports (e.g. K-pop, films), and the role it plays as a key US ally in East Asia. South Korea, however, remains overshadowed by powers like China and Japan.

Like the others, Russia's influence has also been relatively stagnant, with some minor fluctuations. Russia's influence peaked post-Cold War but declined due to the economic challenges and limited soft power it experienced. Russia's recent geopolitical actions (e.g. the war with Ukraine) may have increased its influence but reduce global acceptance.

Lastly, the United States' exhibit sustained dominance but also experienced sharp decline in some years. Due to its economic, military, and diplomatic power, the US maintained high influence.

Generally, the influences declined post-2020, which may probably be due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The figure also indicates how China and US influences balance each other.

Table 3 presents the results of regressing ARCII, which represents ASEAN integration, using different model specifications. Model 1 shows the relationship between ARCII and individual geopolitical influence of polars considered in the paper. As it appears, China and the United States have the significant effect on ASEAN.

Model 2, on the other hand, investigates how the FTA or bloc may influence ASEAN centrality. The results suggest that if the polar is a member of either of QUAD, ASEAN Plus 3, or both, they may negatively influence ASEAN.

Models 3, 4, and 5 show the results using aggregate GI. The results suggest that polar's involvement in any ASEAN FTA has positive influence on ASEAN, except for ASEAN Plus 3 and QUAD.

Models 6 to 12 regressed ASEAN centrality using individual GI. The results show consistent negative and significant influence on ASEAN centrality. The results also suggest that polars who are members of QUAD and are involved in any ASEAN FTA have significant influence on ASEAN centrality.

4.2. Response to Geopolitical Influence

The paper employs impulse response function (IRF), derived from Local Projection Model (LPM), to understand how ASEAN centrality responds to geopolitical influence. IRF will provide valuable insights into the temporal relationship between an endogenous variable (e.g. ASEAN centrality) and a shock (e.g. GI).

Figure 7 presents the results of IRF analysis. For Australia, the response starts negative in the short term and become slightly positive in the medium term, peaking at around the seventh year, although the effects are essentially insignificant throughout.

For the influence of China, the response is initially positive and potentially significant but stabilizes and declines toward zero in the medium and long term, with diminishing significance.

For India, the response also begins positively in the short term but consistently diminishes over the medium and long term that eventually converges to zero with no significance.

The influence of Japan initially starts nears zero and rises positively in the medium term but stabilizes near zero in the long term, indicating no significance over the horizon.

Similarly, the response towards the influence of South Korea is initially positive and peaks during the medium term but steadily declines, showing no significance in the long-term.

For Russia, the influence fluctuates between positive and negative but stabilizes near zero in the long term, indicating no significance.

Table 3: Results of regressing ASEAN regional integration

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
GI (Aggregate)			-0.00088 (0.00202)	-0.00054 (0.00240)	0.00055 (0.00216)							
GI_Au	-0.12060 (0.11780)					-0.15289*** (0.03359)						
GI_Ch	0.09657** * (0.02836)						-0.00594 (0.00466)					
GI_In	-0.08964 (0.10597)							-0.04424* (0.01948)				
GI_JP	0.00744 (0.04127)								- 0.03758** * (0.00795)			
GI_SK	-0.01033 (0.06433)									- 0.04588** * (0.01235)		
GI_Ru	-0.06752 (0.06846)										- 0.12947** * (0.04660)	
GI_US	- 0.06476** * (0.03006)											-0.00974* (0.00404)
AANZFTA				0.00679** (0.00214)								
ASEANChina				0.01757*** (0.00364)								
ASEANIndia				0.00681** (0.00209)								
ASEANJapan				0.019452** * (0.00369)								
ASEANSK				0.01842*** (0.00352)								
ASEANFTA			0.00637** * (0.00161)									
ASEAN FTA , ASEAN Plus 3, and QUAD		0.00165 (0.00165)			0.00165 (0.00165)							

ASEAN Plus 3	-	-0.00344	-0.01465***	-							
	0.01853**	(0.00178)	(0.00333)	0.01847**							
	*			*							
	(0.00396)			(0.00397)							
QUAD	-0.00329*	0.00089	0.00016	-0.00335*	0.00526	0.00576	0.00626	0.00753	0.00547	0.00824	0.00537
	(0.00146)	(0.00126)	(0.00191)	(0.00148)	(0.00515)	(0.00564)	(0.00555)	(0.00514)	(0.00530)	(0.00557)	(0.00551)
ASEAN FTA and QUAD	0.00380**			0.00397**	0.021205**	0.02452**	0.02561**	0.02208**	0.02341**	0.02859**	0.02277**
	(0.00139)			(0.00153)	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
					(0.00467)	(0.00533)	(0.00519)	(0.00463)	(0.00481)	(0.00540)	(0.00499)
ASEAN Plus 3 and QUAD	-0.01679**			-0.01680**							
	(0.00552)			(0.00552)							
N	112	112	112	112	107	107	107	107	107	107	107

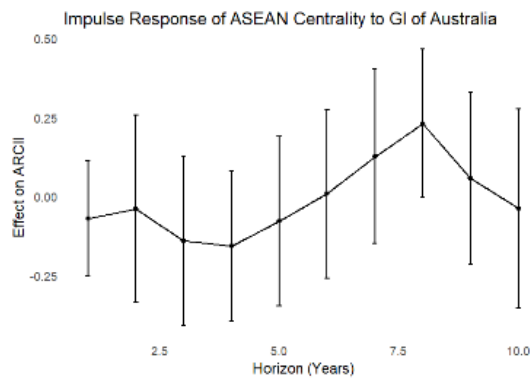
Note: *** - p-value < 0.001, ** - p-value < 0.01, * - p-value < 0.05. GI – Geopolitical Influence (Aggregate); GI_Au – GI of Australia; GI_Ch – GI of China; GI_In – GI of India; GI_Jp – GI of Japan; GI_SK – GI of South Korea; GI_Ru – GI of Russia; GI_US – GI of United States; AANZFTA – ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations)-Australia-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement; ASEANChina – ASEAN-People's Republic of China Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement; ASEAN-India – ASEAN-India Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement; ASEANJapan – ASEAN-Japan Comprehensive Economic Partnership; ASEANSK – ASEAN-Republic of Korea Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement; ASEANFTA – ASEAN Foreign Trade Agreement, pertains to any agreement with ASEAN; ASEAN Plus 3 – ASEAN Plus China, Japan, and South Korea; QUAD – Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, includes USA, Japan, India, and Australia.

Due to data constraints, Brunei Darussalam, Lao PDR, and Myanmar are excluded in the analysis.

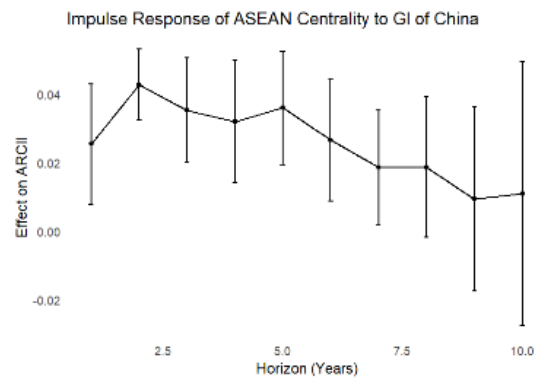
Source: Authors' calculations

Figure 7. Response of ASEAN integration index to geopolitical influence

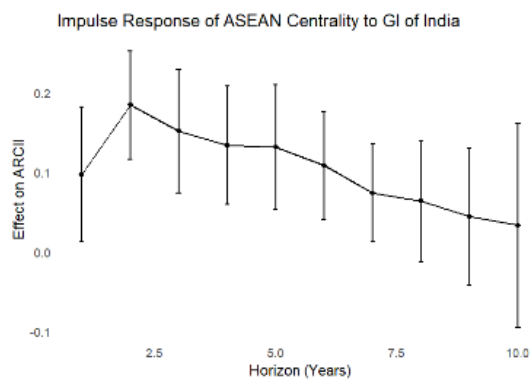
a. ARCII vs GI of Australia



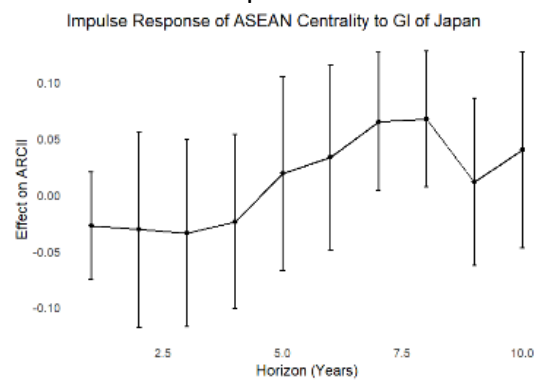
b. ARCII vs GI of China



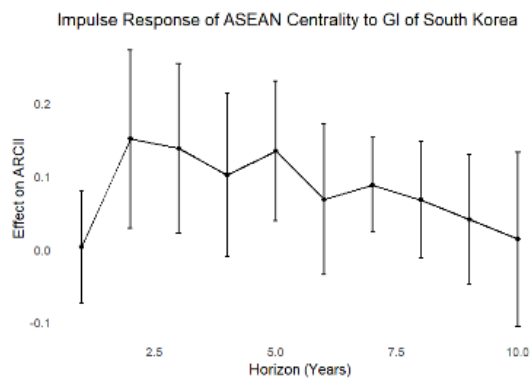
c. ARCII vs GI of India



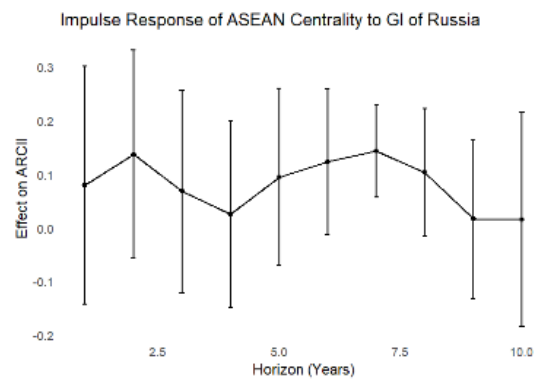
d. ARCII vs GI of Japan



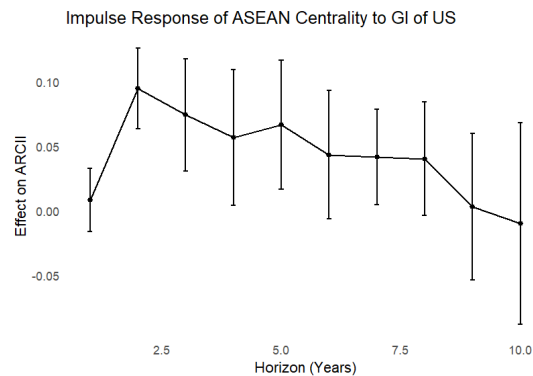
e. ARCII vs GI of South Korea



f. ARCII vs GI of Russia



g. ARCII vs GI of US



Note: Due to data constraints, Brunei Darussalam, Lao PDR, and Myanmar are excluded in the analysis.

Source: Authors' rendition

Lastly, for the United States, the response is positive in the short-term but diminishes over time, stabilizing near zero and losing significance in the long term.

Across all power, the IRF highlights varied response, with potentially significant responses to the influence of China and US. However, most influences diminish over time, converging to negligible or statistically insignificant influence on ASEAN centrality in the medium and long-term. This suggests limited long-term effects of external geopolitical powers on ASEAN centrality.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The geopolitical dynamics in the 1990s and 2020s reveal remarkable shifts in power and influence. China and Japan emerge as Dominant powers, with the US maintaining global leadership. By the 2010s, China surpassed Japan, while India and South Korea catching up in their geopolitical roles. During the last decade, China and US saw a slowdown in their influence due to economic and geopolitical tensions. The global trust towards US leadership waned, while others, such as India and South Korea, emerge.

The results of the analysis highlights China's rapid growth followed by pushback, while the US remains dominant but increasingly contested by Japan and Russia, although struggling to maintain relevance, as well as India and South Korea's steady rise in global importance. Australia, on the other hand, remains largely unchanged, focusing its regional role as a middle power.

For ASEAN, these shifting of influence and power imply the need to a careful navigation of a complex and evolving geopolitical landscape. This entails that strengthening partnerships with rising powers like India and South Korea could provide potential benefits, such as alternatives to over-reliance on traditional dominant players like China and the US, ensuring a more balanced approach to its regional strategy.

The findings of the study suggest that while external geopolitical influences have varying short-term effects, their long-term significance on the region diminishes. ASEAN, as well as the

Philippines, should prioritize strengthening regional integration, diversifying partnerships, and balancing external relationships to maintain or enhance resilience, and, for ASEAN, to remain at the front of all its regional endeavors.

Considering these findings, the paper pushes forward the following recommendations:

For ASEAN:

- Enhance regional integration to reduce dependency on external powers. Focusing on strengthening regional frameworks, such as the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), can mitigate the negative impact of clashing external influences of powers like China and the US. This will help the region push its interests and navigate the evolving global order while fostering regional self-reliance. The region should also expand and deepen intra-ASEAN cooperation both in trade, innovation, and defense, and other emerging non-traditional trade and international cooperation issues, like climate change and sustainable development. Building a stronger collective identity can reduce vulnerability to external geopolitical fluctuations. Strengthening the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) Work Plan IV (2021–2025) is essential for reducing development gaps among member states, enhancing capacity-building, and ensuring more inclusive growth across ASEAN. Building a stronger collective identity can reduce vulnerability to external geopolitical fluctuations."
- Diversify strategic partnerships. Leveraging partnerships with emerging powers, such as India and South Korea, which promising influence in the region, can provide alternatives to the dominance of superpowers while promoting multipolar engagement. Promoting partnerships with middle powers, such as Australia, can help achieve stable and mutually beneficial cooperation, focusing on areas like climate action, regional stability, and infrastructure development.
- Leverage neutrality in a multipolar world. ASEAN should maintain its neutral stance amidst competing geopolitical interests. Initiatives, like the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), can help advance its position as a mediator and stabilizing force in the global politics.
- Reassess the degree of participation of the region in external blocs (e.g.. QUAD, IPEF and BRICS). While QUAD, IPEF and BRICS provide avenues for cooperation, which ASEAN should view as opportunities to push for developments in the region, ASEAN's participation should ensure that ASEAN's own initiatives should take precedence over being subsumed under broader geopolitical blocs.
- Focus on sustainable and inclusive development. Aligning regional goals with sustainable development by leveraging FTAs can promote green and inclusive growth. This will not only strengthen the region's collective identity but also increase ASEAN's global relevance.

For the Philippines:

- Maximize benefits from regional and bilateral agreements. The country should proactively participate in ASEAN initiatives like RCEP and AFTA to benefit from

increased market access and economic integration. Strengthening bilateral ties with emerging powers, focusing on trade, technology transfer, and infrastructure development, offers opportunities for growth without being overly influenced by dominant powers.

- Strategic alignment with middle powers and emerging economies. Collaborating closely with countries like Australia on issues such as climate resilience, education, and defense partnerships can promote stability and regional leadership. Similarly, enhancing ties with India, focusing on digital transformation and healthcare cooperation, where India's influence is growing.
- Leveraging China's economic initiatives while balancing interests. China is an important economic partner. While this remains true, the Philippines should carefully navigate its engagement, ensuring that initiatives like the BRI do not undermine national sovereignty or its alignment with ASEAN centrality. ASEAN-led mechanisms collectively address concerns over China's growing influence, particularly in the South China Sea; leveraging these mechanisms can be a favorable stance for the country.
- Strengthening regional and domestic capacities. The country should reduce the risk of being too dependent on external powers by investing in domestic industries and human capital and strengthening trade facilitation measures to align with ASEAN-wide initiatives. It can also support initiatives that promote regional resilience, such as joint infrastructure projects and environmental cooperation, enhancing its role in ASEAN. In addition, implement programs that assist SMEs in upgrading technologies and processes to meet international standards, including training initiatives funded through public-private partnerships aimed at enhancing competitiveness within the global value chains (GVCs). Fostering innovation and technology transfer within the region and supporting the development of sustainable and inclusive value chains will further strengthen economic integration and resilience.
- Maintain balanced relations with the US. The Philippines should remain capitalizing on its historic ties with the US for defense and economic cooperation. Over-reliance, however, should be avoided. A balanced approach should prioritize ASEAN unity and align with regional interests.
- Focus on long-term ASEAN relevance. Its geographical position and strong ties with both the West and Asian countries can be leveraged to highlight the country's role as a bridge between ASEAN and external powers.

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