


RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Meanings, norms, and social constitution: revisiting ASEAN centrality in East Asian regionalism

Hidetaka Yoshimatsu<sup>1,2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Graduate School of Asia Pacific Studies, Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University, Beppu, Japan and <sup>2</sup>Faculty of Arts, Business, Law and Economics, School of Social Sciences, University of Adelaide, Adelaide, Australia  
Email: [yoshih@apu.ac.jp](mailto:yoshih@apu.ac.jp)

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## Abstract

This article examines the implications of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) centrality in East Asian regionalism. It seeks to address the question of how ASEAN created and maintained its central position in East Asian regionalism by managing regional cooperation in general and institution-building in particular. This article addresses the question by relying on the theoretical concept of productive power and tangible attributes associated with the concept. This article makes three arguments. First, ASEAN maintained its central position in East Asian regionalism by exerting productive power that works in generalized and diffuse social processes and through constitutive social relations. Second, the Association developed and employed specific meanings and norms that constituted the foundation for regional cooperation. Third, ASEAN maintained its central position in the complicated Sino–Japanese rivalry by embedding them in constitutive social relations and avoiding exclusive links with each of the two states.

**Keywords:** ASEAN centrality; China; Japan; productive power; regionalism

## 1. Introduction

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has developed its distinctive position as the sole region-based international organization that handles political, economic, and security affairs in East Asia. The association has fostered close diplomatic relations with its dialogue partners including those with far greater material capabilities than any of its member states. The dialogue partners were embedded in ASEAN-initiated regional architectures and have engaged in policy talks on regional cooperation. The multilateral institutions in East Asia and the Asia-Pacific have functioned as key multilateral forums where ASEAN has maintained its pivotal status.

In the new millennium, ASEAN began to emphasize ‘ASEAN centrality’ in dealing with regional affairs and developing regional institutions in its internal documents and policy talks with its dialogue partners. This emphasis reflects the Association’s past engagement in leading regional institution-building. At the same time, the aspiration for remaining at the centre of managing regional issues is facing crucial challenges. China’s growing economic power has been transformed into assertive diplomacy for preserving its core interests, and such diplomacy is directed at southeast Asia. China’s political leverage and economic weight invite strategic counteractions from the USA and its allies, accompanying the emergence of a new geographical concept of the ‘Indo-Pacific.’

In examining the implications and prospects of ASEAN centrality in evolving regional environments, it is crucial to elucidate the essence of ASEAN’s handling of regional affairs. This study tackles this issue in the context of regionalism in East Asia. ASEAN led the development of institution-building in East Asia from the 1990s, and the ASEAN Plus Three (ASEAN + 3), East Asia Summit (EAS), and ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) were created in such development. The process of

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institution-building in East Asia accompanied great complexities because China and Japan, which have long soured due to historical animosity and territorial disputes, competed for regional leadership in building trade and financial institutions for regional cooperation (Terada, 2006; Yoshimatsu, 2008). ASEAN sought to embed China and Japan with greater material power in multilateral institutions and encouraged them to contribute to advancing concrete programmes for regional cooperation under these institutions. The understanding of specific ways through which ASEAN coordinated the strategic interests of its northern neighbours is crucial for elucidating the Association's status and role in regionalism in East Asia.

This article examines ASEAN's position and power in regionalism including institution-building in East Asia by seeking to address the question of how ASEAN created and maintained its central position in East Asian regionalism by managing regional cooperation in general and institution-building in particular. More concretely, it explores answers to the following two questions. How did ASEAN foster and utilize specific ideational factors in consolidating its central position in regional cooperation? And how did ASEAN create a specific social constitution in which it coordinated relationships with China and Japan, the two regional powers? The examination of these questions contributes to deepening the understanding of key factors that enable ASEAN to produce positive outcomes in interstate cooperation in complicated regional politics.

As explained in the following section, this article seeks to address the questions by relying on the theoretical concept of productive power and the tangible attributes associated with it. Indeed, several studies of ASEAN's regional affairs have touched upon the concept of productive power (Rüland, 2011; Koga, 2018), but this is the first study that digs into the concrete analysis of how the key attributes drawn from the concept can explain ASEAN's position and role in the process of regionalism and regional cooperation.

This article makes three arguments. First, ASEAN maintained its central position in East Asian regionalism by exerting productive power that works in generalized and diffuse social processes and through constitutive social relations. Second, the association developed and employed specific meanings and norms that constituted the foundation for regional cooperation. Third, ASEAN maintained its central position in the complicated Sino–Japanese rivalry by embedding them in constitutive social relations and avoiding exclusive links with each of the two states.

This article is organized as follows. Section 2 provides an analytical framework for examining ASEAN's position and engagement in East Asian regionalism. Sections 3 and 4 explore the association's commitments to shared meanings and norms in regionalism and scrutinize their implications for ASEAN centrality. Section 5 investigates ASEAN's attempts to create and develop a specific social constitution in the Sino–Japanese rivalry.

## 2. Productive power and ASEAN in East Asian regionalism

ASEAN has been regarded as the core entity of regionalism in East Asia. Major regional institutions including ASEAN + 3, EAS, ARF, and ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus have developed under ASEAN's initiative and prominent involvement, and consequently, these institutions have the 'ASEAN plus' format. Given these empirical developments, ASEAN's position and role in East Asian regionalism have been intensively studied among scholars specializing in international relations of East Asia and southeast Asia.<sup>1</sup> Significantly, ASEAN pushed forward the word 'centrality' after it was first used in the joint statement of the ASEAN Economic Ministers Meeting in 2006 in the context of ASEAN's external economic relationship (Fukunaga, 2015: 106). The term was then used in documents including the ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint and the ASEAN Charter. This development contributed to producing research on the meaning and implications of ASEAN centrality.

ASEAN centrality means that ASEAN, as the 'origin' or the first viable regional grouping in Asia, lies and must remain at the core of Asia or Asia-Pacific regional institutions (Acharya, 2017: 274). In

<sup>1</sup>Numerous studies have examined ASEAN's role and influence on regionalism in East Asia. For representative studies, see Ba (2009), Emmers (2012), Ba *et al.* (2016), and Yeo (2019).

considering ASEAN centrality, ASEAN is regarded as an autonomous and unitary actor with a focus on its actions, decisions, and agreements. Several scholars have elucidated concrete properties of ASEAN centrality. Tan (2017) presents five interrelated conceptions of ASEAN centrality: regional leader, regional convener, regional hub, regional driver of progress, and regional convenience. Mueller (2019) also conceptualizes four roles associated with ASEAN centrality – regional leader, regional convener, regional convenience, and regional necessity – and evaluates ASEAN’s role in the policy fields of trade and connectivity. Some scholars have explained key factors that enable ASEAN centrality in regional politics in East Asia. Acharya (2015) and Kuroyanagi (2015) scrutinize ASEAN’s intrinsic factors pertinent to historical records to manage its intra-mural disputes and produce stability and peace in southeast Asia and external conditions where great powers ‘cancel each other out’, accepting ASEAN’s lead in forming regional consultation mechanisms. Caballero-Anthony (2022) explores the implications and challenges for informality and informal institutionalism that are associated with ASEAN centrality. Others have explored the functions and implications of ASEAN centrality in East Asian regionalism. Ba (2012) investigates ASEAN’s institutional centrality to regularize more region-focused attention and policies from major powers and contends that ASEAN still faces significant challenges in response to western members’ dissatisfaction with its institutional approaches and achieving functional ends. He (2014) explains the effectiveness of ASEAN in terms of the strategic functional theory of institutions and argues that the successes and failures of ASEAN’s institutions depended on strategic uncertainty and the conflicting interests of issues.

Past studies grasp the implications of ASEAN centrality in regional politics and regionalism in East Asia. The rationalist studies underscored the Association’s limited capacity to manage the interests and policies of external powers and offered cautious views on ASEAN centrality (Jones and Jenne, 2016; Yuzawa, 2018; Beeson, 2022). In particular, studies underlined growing challenges to ASEAN centrality amid China’s belligerent position on the South China Sea issue and the growing rivalry between China and the USA (Hermawan, 2015; Kraft, 2017; Caballero-Anthony, 2022). Given Beijing’s ascendancy as an emerging great power and Washington’s strategic reactions to it, it is highly difficult for ASEAN, an association of relatively small countries, to manage regional security affairs. At the same time, it is a fact that despite weak material resources and limited institutional capability, ASEAN has offered initiatives and platforms to promote practical cooperation, particularly in the political-economy field. It is possible and necessary to examine and evaluate the social context in which ASEAN develops and maintains its central position in handling political-economic affairs in East Asia.

This article seeks to enrich the debate on ASEAN centrality by investigating the development of East Asian regionalism in the political-economy field. In so doing, it relies on the concept of productive power. Productive power implies ‘the socially diffuse production of subjectivity in systems of meaning and signification’ (Barnett and Duvall, 2005: 3). This power works in generalized and diffuse social processes, not through an immediate, direct, and specific relationship. Productive power resides in the social arena, not in sovereign agency, and it is often exercised through discursive means – language, habitus, cognition, and social construction (Lipschutz, 2005: 750–753). Moreover, productive power functions, not through behavioural relations or interactions of specific actors, but through constitutive social relations that ‘precede the social or subject positions of actors and that constitute them as social beings with their respective capacities and interests’ (Barnett and Duvall, 2005: 9). The social relations construct collectively shared beliefs that actors use to orient their behaviour and endow them with a sense of social identity and what practices they are socially empowered to undertake (Chwieroth, 2013: 70). The actors with productive power can create and advance systems of knowledge and discursive practices that (re)produce subjectivities through indirect, socially diffuse, and temporally distant social relations.

There is a crucial issue of whether productive power is either an outcome of social relations or an influence that an actor intentionally employs towards other actors in a group. Barnett and Duvall (2005) consider that productive power relates to the outcomes of social relations that are generated through socially diffused discourses, processes, and systems of knowledge. This article concerns the influence that a regional actor intentionally exerts through the development of institutions and

discourses. The concept of productive power is associated with constructivism. Both pay attention to ideational elements such as norms, rules, and discourses, and underline the fostering of collective identities through the construction of social cognitive structures (Bukh, 2022). The constructivists present ideational resources in contrast to material ones and consider that ideational resources are employed as diplomatic means for managing interstate relations. Productive power concerns ideational elements in terms of social relations of constitution in collective systems and discourses by groups.

A crucial question in applying productive power to an empirical case is how a specific actor wields productive power to develop social relations of constitution among members of a social group. Three attributes are drawn from the essence of productive power. The first is the creation of shared meanings among the group members. Productive power relates to ‘discourse, the social processes and the systems of knowledge through which meaning is produced, fixed, lived, experienced, and transformed’ (Barnett and Duvall, 2005: 20). For creating order and building a community in a social group, an actor needs to foster a common perception of the real world, which is expressed as shared meanings that are fostered by discourse and social processes. The meanings constitute the foundation for the social group because ‘intersubjective meaning gives a people a common language to talk about social reality and a common understanding of certain norms, but only with common meanings does this common reference world contain significant common actions, celebrations, and feelings’ (Taylor, 1977: 122). The actor with productive power creates and fixes shared meanings that a certain kind of actor considers in joining a social group, and produces a set of ideas, values, norms, and even identities that confirm and advance stable social relations.

One of the major characteristics of East Asia is diversity in terms of political systems, economic development, and cultural traditions including religion. This diversity is often cited as a major impediment to regional cooperation in comparison with the European Union (EU) whose members share commonalities in democratic political systems, capitalist economic systems, the history of the Roman Empire, and Christianity. Given noteworthy diversities that work against regional cooperation, it is crucial to set up shared meanings regarding key social behaviour for developing subjectivities among states in East Asia.

This study examines the meaning of ‘participation’ – a fundamental action for an actor to belong to a group. More specifically, participation implies states’ action to join institutions to pursue specific policy objectives, but a group of states can attach diverse meanings to this action. It explores what ideational and practical meanings of participation in institutions ASEAN has produced, fixed, and lived in the process of regional cooperation.

Second, the members of a social group that holds shared meanings often produce a set of norms that are referred to as ‘standards of behaviour defined in terms of rights and obligations’ (Kratochwil, 1989: 59). Not only do norms prescribe and regulate an actor’s behaviour by specifying standards of proper behaviour but they also define and constitute an actor’s identity by specifying actions that cause other actors to recognize a particular identity (Katzenstein, 1996: 5). Norms can ‘establish intersubjective meanings that allow the actors to direct their actions toward each other, communicate with each other, appraise the quality of their actions, criticize claims and justify choices’ (Kratochwil, 1993: 76). Put another way, norms provide actors with specific meanings that guide their behaviour that confirm expectations and roles within a given social group.

Quite a few scholars have paid attention to shared norms in southeast Asia, the ASEAN Way, as components that constitute the configuration of diplomatic relations among ASEAN members (Acharya, 1997, 2014; Haacke, 2003). Past research has examined sovereignty-protective norms in the ASEAN Way such as respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity and non-interference in domestic affairs. The sovereignty-protective norms have to do with regional elites’ intention of establishing a framework to mediate estrangement and insecurity given fragile domestic sovereignty and have constrained ASEAN’s capabilities to shift from a dialogue-based to a rule-based organization (Haacke, 2003: 51; Breslin and Wilson, 2015: 136).

This article examines the position and influence of norms that ASEAN has developed from a slightly different angle. It locates pragmatic flexibility, a representative norm fostered by ASEAN, in

the process of regional cooperation in southeast Asia and East Asia. This study investigates how ASEAN employed pragmatic flexibility as a key principle for promoting smooth cooperation in southeast Asia and building regional institutions in East Asia by overcoming implicit and explicit conflicts of interest among members.

The third is the production of a specific social constitution for a group of actors. The specific social constitution is (re)created by intersubjective understandings of self and others. In such intersubjective relationships, expectations and roles within a group constitute an actor's identity. The social constitution does not necessarily envision hierarchical and binary relations of dominance between materially stronger states and weaker ones. It is generally admitted that one or two states in a group hold preponderant material capabilities, which are transformed into their structural power and leadership (Kindleberger, 1981; Gilpin, 1987: 72–80). However, it is also predictable that leadership could be provided through other forms. A group of small states could exert leadership when it creates a specific social constitution in which its members develop their perception of position, role, and expectation. In other words, the group's presence and associated practices could create and maintain regionally accepted order under a specific social constitution.

This study pays attention to a specific social constitution in leading regional cooperation in terms of legitimacy. Legitimacy is defined as 'a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions' (Suchman, 1995: 574). A regional entity can gain the legitimacy to lead regional cooperation for its long-term experiences in articulating common challenges for the region, preparing options to resolve them, and persuading other actors to accept desirable solutions. In East Asia, China and Japan, two of the world's eminent states, have greater political and economic capabilities than any of the ASEAN members. However, ASEAN holds the legitimacy to draw widespread acceptance for initiating regional institutions (Stubbs, 2014). The Association has accumulated expertise and knowledge for managing multilateral political affairs with a long history since 1967, playing a key role in building intergovernmental forums. ASEAN has raised capabilities to set agendas for discussions on regional affairs, define problems in advancing regional cooperation, and prepare policy options to resolve them. Such legitimacy in leading regional cooperation enables ASEAN to create a special social constitution in which China and Japan are embedded.

ASEAN has made efforts to maintain this special social constitution in East Asia by providing institutional frameworks where ASEAN can shape the basic configuration of and the process for regional cooperation. China and Japan are embedded in these frameworks. This study explores how ASEAN created a specific social constitution with the legitimacy to lead cooperative processes, and how such a constitution is accepted by China and Japan. It also examines concrete methods that ASEAN employed to integrate China and Japan into constitutive social relations.

As the first step for elucidating ASEAN's position and power in East Asian regionalism in the political-economy field, the following section examines ASEAN's engagement in shared meanings for regional cooperation.

### 3. Shared meanings of participation and regional cooperation

ASEAN has advanced social processes and systems of knowledge regarding regional cooperation since its founding in 1967. In its development, the Association has developed specific meanings of participation in institutions. Participation is the starting point to make all parties concerned gather in one setting and enable them to forge and maintain continuous dialogues and communications. Participation provides the foundation for deepening social relationality that is fostered by personal networks in the steady process of consultation. Through this process, participants socialize themselves to learn how to develop mutual respect and an ethic of self-restraint and to create a comfortable atmosphere to discuss common challenges and find solutions to them with non-adversarial posturing. Self-discipline and self-transformation are achieved in a group through the process of interactions with other members. Thus, participation in institutions is crucial for 'creating a conducive socio-psychological setting for intra-mural problem solving' (Acharya, 2014: 67).

Although the frequency of interactions among actors increases through participation, participation does not necessarily guarantee the enhancement of their connections. In some cases, frequent interactions raise the risk of undermining sound relations previously formed by actors by clarifying conflicts of interest. This is an undeniable possibility, but creating platforms or institutions and encouraging actors concerned to participate in them have values in strengthening cooperative relationships through continuous social processes, better mutual understanding, and joint efforts to meet common challenges.

ASEAN gives value to maintaining the cooperation process as an end in itself – one that is more important than achieving immediate and tangible results (Qin and Nordin, 2019: 609). The cooperation process begins with members' participation in institutions. ASEAN encourages members to participate in every institution, and the nature of soft institutions with little legalistic element enhances their willingness to participate. The association pursues institutional thickening rather than institutional strength, adhering to soft regionalism that underlines 'form' over 'function' (Acharya and Layug, 2012: 31–32). ASEAN expects that members employ opportunities for consultation in institutions, ranging from ministerial and senior officials' meetings to committees, councils, and working groups. Such opportunities enable them to deepen personal networks to manage tensions and seek solutions to regional problems (Stubbs, 2014: 531). ASEAN elites underscore the value of participation through which ASEAN managed to build a web of formal and informal ties that allowed various stakeholders to communicate with each other, averting miscalculations and reducing the likelihood of conflict (Singh *et al.*, 2017: 115). Moreover, ASEAN has pursued 'unity in diversity' through a strong degree of social relationality, not institutional codification and formalization, and participation in institutions is a prerequisite for fostering social relationality. ASEAN's shared meanings of participation are associated with 'inclusive regionalism' to bring together like-minded and non-like-minded countries to promote regional cooperation. Although participation underscores the values of the starting point to develop social processes and interactions for mutual understating and partnership, inclusive regionalism represents a specific preference or form to adopt an open and constructive approach to forming regional institutions.

ASEAN's attachment to participation can be explained by a different understanding of what participation in institutions means. In the US approach, an institution is created to attain a particular mission and is managed in effective ways in which non-participation of an expected member produces no or little problem. The USA prefers mission-oriented, ad hoc multilateralism aiming at a specific task or objective and composed of a 'coalition of the willing' (Cossa, 2009: 43). Put another way, the US approach underscores 'function' rather than 'form' to collect qualified members to join an institution (Feigenbaum and Manning, 2009). Participation is just a result in that members gather to meet specific functional needs. The US approach finds little value in participation *per se*, and an important is the 'result' that is produced through negotiations and bargaining among participating members.

ASEAN has attached importance to participation from its foundation with the wording that 'the Association is open for participation to all States in the South-East Asian Region subscribing to the aforementioned aims, principles and purposes' in its ASEAN Declaration in August 1967. In the 1990s, ASEAN accepted Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia as new members. There was a concern that the inclusion of these countries would undermine ASEAN's cohesion and unity given differences in the political system and gaps in economic development (Oba, 2014: 183). However, the old members accepted their participation with an informal condition to sign the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. They expected that participation would encourage the newcomers to socialize themselves to stabilize political links with other countries and enhance the unity of the region. The handing of Myanmar's status in ASEAN also sustained its political reforms that began with a transition to civilian rule in 2011.<sup>2</sup> Western countries criticized ASEAN's policy to maintain Myanmar's position

<sup>2</sup>After this change in political regime, the new government implemented a series of political reforms that included the release of political prisoners, the relaxation of press and internet censorship, and the adoption of new labour laws that allow unions and strikes (Sun, 2012).

despite its government's suppression of democratic movements and the serious violation of human rights. ASEAN found the values in maintaining its position that would allow Myanmar to benefit from the range of resources made available to and accessed by ASEAN and helped it to widen the space for and quicken the pace of political reforms (Caballero-Anthony, 2014: 577).

ASEAN's emphasis on participation influenced the formation and function of multilateral institutions in East Asia. ASEAN-led institutions – the ARF, ASEAN + 3, EAS, ASEAN + 1 Free Trade Agreements (FTAs), and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) – were formed with ASEAN as the core. Although most of the members in these institutions were the same, a strict division of labour for performing specific functions was not pursued. For instance, EAS leaders identified, at the first meeting in December 2005, five priority areas of functional cooperation – energy, education, finance, avian influenza, and disaster management – although energy and finance had been major targets of ASEAN + 3 cooperation. Despite initial ambiguity in pursuing functional performance, it was expected that frank talks and deepened trust among participants gradually foster shared understanding about the effective use of institutions. The members made clear the relationship between the EAS and ASEAN + 3: the EAS is regarded as a leaders-led forum for dialogue and cooperation on broad strategic, political, and economic issues of common concerns, and the ASEAN + 3 functions as a regional forum to promote practical and tangible cooperation in specific policy areas. Furthermore, ASEAN made efforts to realize North Korea's participation in the ARF. Surin Pitsuwan, then Thai Foreign Minister, played a crucial role in encouraging North Korea to participate in the 7th ARF meeting in Bangkok in July 2000. He contacted Hun Sen, the Cambodian Prime Minister, and through him asked the Cambodian monarch, King Sihanouk who once took refuge in North Korea during Cambodia's crisis in the 1980s (Rhyu, 2009: 157). The presence at the ARF meeting enabled North Korea to develop dialogues and exchanges with other members. Surin contended that 'this is a big step forward for security and diplomacy in the region' (Lee, 2000). Thus, ASEAN added special meanings to participation in initiating interactions among all parties concerned and producing deepened relationality and better understanding through social processes.

Sceptics cast doubt on ASEAN-centred multilateralism in East Asia, regarding the association as a mere talk shop or a toothless tiger. Such an evaluation makes a point from the standpoint that institutions are created for producing functional outcomes. However, multilateral institutions in East Asia reflect ASEAN's meaning of participation that pays respect to interactions and social processes that lead to the gradual deepening of participants' relationality and confidence-building. Kuik (2022) raises the wider scope of memberships and institutionalized partnerships as one of the advantages possessed by ASEAN-led multilateralism compared with the US-led hub-and-spokes military alliances and the China-led developmental networks. The specific meaning that ASEAN attached to participation produces this advantage.

#### 4. Pragmatic flexibility as a shared norm

With the specific meaning of participation in institutions, ASEAN has used a set of norms to promote regional cooperation. These shared norms include behavioural norms embodied in a code of conduct such as non-interference in internal affairs and peaceful settlement of the conflict and procedural norms for organizational management, which include consultation-based consensus and informality. The concrete value of shared norms becomes apparent by picking up a specific norm and exploring its function in the development of East Asian regionalism. This study examines pragmatic flexibility as a representative norm.

Pragmatic flexibility implies that formally determined rules or agreements are modified according to practical needs or conditions. An emphasis on practical needs in this pragmatic approach may be regarded as underscoring practical facts by depreciating values. Pragmatic flexibility is not necessarily value-free. This norm encourages actors to keep in mind core values or principles and realize them in concrete actions by considering realistic conditions.

Pragmatic flexibility influenced the process of forming the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA). In the process, original commitments to market liberalization were sometimes breached as Malaysia and Indonesia required the revision of commitments from those previously agreed (Nesadurai, 2003;

Jones and Smith, 2007: 176–177). Such revisions implied the member governments' limited capacities to deal with domestic opposition to the AFTA. At the same time, the adoption of flexible revisions enabled the members to find practical ways to maintain overall frameworks for trade liberalization (Stubbs, 2000). Nesarurai (2008: 233) evaluates this flexibility, contending that 'without incorporating some measure of flexibility that allowed member governments to protect, albeit temporarily, a small number of strategically important and politically influential domestic businesses, the AFTA project would have been abandoned by governments for whom inflexible regional liberalisation targets were politically infeasible'.

An additional example of pragmatic flexibility in regional cooperation relates to the ASEAN minus X (ASEAN – X) formula. Under this formula, two or more member states proceed with the implementation of economic arrangements first and other states will join the process at the latter stage. Although some members that can overcome domestic difficulties implement required obligations, others that are unable to meet such requirements request additional time for compliance. Article 1 (3) of the 1992 Framework Agreement on Enhancing ASEAN Economic Cooperation lays down the principle that 'all member states shall participate in intra-ASEAN economic arrangements. However, in the implementation of these economic arrangements, two or more member states may proceed first if other member states are not ready to implement these arrangements'. The 2007 ASEAN Charter also adopts the formula as Article 21(2) stipulates that 'In the implementation of economic commitments, a formula for flexible participation, including the ASEAN Minus X formula, may be applied where there is a consensus to do so'. An important element in the ASEAN – X formula is that there is a consensus among all member states to implement an economic arrangement even if some members are not ready to participate at a given time.

Pragmatic flexibility was applied in the process of regional cooperation in East Asia. This was typical in trade arrangements. Pragmatic flexibility was included in ASEAN + 1 FTAs. For instance, the China–ASEAN Free Trade Area (ACFTA) included phrases about 'provision of special and differential treatment', 'flexibility to the newer ASEAN Member States', and 'provision of flexibility to address their sensitive areas'. Similar phrases were included in FTAs with Japan and South Korea. The flexibility clauses were adopted in the RCEP, the final format of the East Asian FTA that bundled the existing ASEAN + 1 FTAs. The RCEP Guiding Principles document noted that 'the RCEP will include appropriate forms of flexibility including provision for special and differential treatment, plus additional flexibility to the least-developed ASEAN Member States, consistent with the existing ASEAN + 1 FTAs, as applicable'. This wording indicated that although it was necessary to improve the level of liberalization from the existing ASEAN + 1 FTAs, it still needed special and differentiated treatment for the less-developed ASEAN members, and flexibility is key to meeting such a need.

Pragmatic flexibility was applied to concrete mechanisms in the RCEP. There are two formats for services schedules. One is the positive-list method in which members write down areas where they are able and willing to make commitments, and the other is the negative-list method in which every sector and subsector is presumed to be open unless members agree to allow specific reservations to the overall commitment. The RCEP enabled members to schedule services under whichever method worked with the promise to have all members switch to the negative-list method to create greater harmony in the future (Elms, 2021: 375–376). The RCEP also includes many clauses where the dispute settlement system is not applicable and others that contain a wide array of specific exceptions. These clauses would be revised by a built-in review mechanism set for 5 years after the start of the agreement and every 5 years afterwards (Elms, 2021: 377).

Pragmatic flexibility was also applied to the accession of new members to the RCEP. The RCEP is generally open for accession of a new member 18 months after entry into force but admitted an exception for India, which decided to opt out of the RCEP in November 2019. Article 20.9 adopts a special treatment for India with the clause that 'this Agreement shall be open for accession by India, as an original negotiating State, from the date of entry into force of this Agreement'. Given India's special status as a member of the ASEAN + 1 format and an original negotiation associate, the RCEP adopted a flexible method for New Delhi, which reflected the spirit of the ASEAN – X method.



Pragmatic flexibility contributed to launching successfully new architectures in financial cooperation in East Asia. In launching the Chiang Mai Initiative's multilateralization, coordination on contribution quotas among China, Japan, and South Korea was the most difficult challenge. Japan adhered to the highest weighting whereas China insisted on a weighting equal to it. A flexible compromise was that Japan and China contributed 32% each, but the latter's share included 3.5% from Hong Kong, which was specially added to a membership. This flexible settlement enabled China to claim co-equality with Japan whereas Japan could claim the largest individual contribution (Rathus, 2011: 114). Similar flexibility was seen in the appointment of the first director of the ASEAN + 3 Macroeconomic Research Office who would serve a 3-year term. Both Japan and China applied for the post of the first director. A flexible compromise was that the 3-year term would be divided into the first 1 year and the next 2, and the Chinese candidate Wei Benhua and the Japanese candidate Nemoto Yoichi assumed the term, respectively (Sussangkarn, 2011: 213). Flexible compromises were often suggested by ASEAN and its members. The members encouraged China and Japan to go halves in order not to prolong consultations on the contribution quota (*Asahi Shimbun*, 2009).

ASEAN's pragmatic flexibility becomes clearer in comparison with the development of regionalism in other regions. The EU members have developed regional integration through a formal and legalistic approach. This development is illustrated by the Copenhagen criteria – the rules required for a state to become a member of the EU. The criteria include democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and respect for and protection of minorities, and the EU has carefully examined the application for a new membership by employing the criteria. A regional organization with tight institutional and legal systems can set up explicit rules and principles for developing regional integration. ASEAN with weak institutional systems used pragmatic flexibility as a useful standard to advance regional cooperation among diverse members with a strong sense of sovereignty.

As already explained, ASEAN's position as a provider of norms has been explored by scholars who have interest in the ASEAN Way. This study examined concrete cases of how the association exerted capabilities to employ a specific norm for facilitating regional cooperation. Pragmatic flexibility contributed to maintaining the momentum of regional cooperation when specific members of the group faced great difficulty in propelling the process of cooperation by considering real constraints that members confronted and adopting practical measures to overcome such constraints.

## 5. Sino-Japanese relations in the ASEAN-centred social constitution

In the 1990s, ASEAN extended its geographical reach to the entire southeast Asia by accepting Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia as its members. The Association then consolidated internal integration from the ASEAN Vision 2020 in 1997 to the ASEAN Community in 2015. It has expanded the scope of regional cooperation from traditional to non-traditional security fields, underlining the people-oriented policy initiative, and it has developed rules of implementation and operational guidelines through multilateral consultations. Through the steady progress of internal integration, ASEAN raised its capacity to manage and promote regional cooperation by accumulating knowledge and experience. Such capacity constituted the foundation for leading the process of regional cooperation in East Asia.

As confirmed in the previous sections, ASEAN has established specific systems of knowledge and practice in East Asia. The Association employed particular meanings and procedural norms that were conducive to fostering collective identities. Through such systems of knowledge and practice, ASEAN created constitutive social relations in which it maintained the legitimacy to grip the ownership of institution-building and embed China and Japan in this social constitution. The ASEAN-related meetings are held on the sidelines of ASEAN meetings such as the ASEAN Summit, ASEAN Ministerial Meeting, and ASEAN Economic Ministers Meeting, and these meetings take place in the capital of the country that assumes the chair of ASEAN. The ASEAN chair also becomes the chair of ASEAN-extended gatherings such as ASEAN + 3, EAS, and so on. This practice constitutes a core

of conference diplomacy, serving to maintain ASEAN's privilege and power to set agendas for the meetings and coordinate the phrases of formal statements after the meetings. The ASEAN Charter extended ASEAN-privileged mechanisms to the working level by adopting the dialogue coordinator system, which allows ASEAN to appoint one member as a coordinator to coordinate and promote 'the interests of ASEAN in its relations with the relevant Dialogue Partners' (Article 42). All 10 members are allocated one of the dialogue partners and assume the coordinator role for 3 years (2012–2015, 2015–2018, 2018–2021). This mechanism made it difficult for external powers including China and Japan to take an initiative directly to exert influence on the entire ASEAN.

Under ASEAN-centred constitutive social relations, China and Japan made efforts to attract ASEAN by launching regional initiatives competitively. Japan followed China's initiatives in forming closer links with ASEAN in several cases. Critical momentum for the FTA network in East Asia was given by the formation of ASEAN + 1 FTA networks. China took the lead in the networks, signing the Framework Agreement on China–ASEAN Comprehensive Economic Cooperation in 2002, a legal foundation for establishing the ACFTA. Japan responded to this Chinese initiative swiftly by issuing the Japan–ASEAN Joint Declaration on the Comprehensive Economic Partnership on 5 November 2002, 1 day after the signing of the Framework Agreement (Yoshimatsu, 2014: 42). China proposed organizing a network of think tanks and the first meeting of the Network of East Asian Think-tanks was held in Beijing in 2003. Japan reacted to China's initiative in regional research cooperation and proposed founding the Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA) in 2007. Japan's proposal focused on ASEAN, and the ERIA has researched the development of the ASEAN economies and economic integration. China's initiatives drew Japan's counterpolicies to promote links with ASEAN.

China followed Japan's initiatives in several cases. Japan was the main advocate of establishing a regional rice reserve system in preparation for food shortages due to natural disasters mainly in south-east Asia. With Japan's initiative and financial support, a pilot project for the East Asian emergency rice reserve system began in 2004. China pledged to offer the largest amount of reserved rice to the system as one of several initiatives to support ASEAN's development and stability (Yoshimatsu, 2014: 104–111). After China's positive contribution, ASEAN + 3 members successfully launched the regional rice reserve system by signing the agreement on the ASEAN + 3 Emergency Rice Reserve in October 2011. At the 17th summit in October 2010, ASEAN leaders adopted the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC). The ERIA, which was founded under the Japanese initiative, suggested three connectivity dimensions of physical, institutional, and people-to-people as a basic framework for the MPAC. After the announcement of the MPAC, China strengthened support for ASEAN Connectivity, proposing to provide US\$10 billion in credit including US\$4 billion in preferential loans and US\$6 billion in commercial loans. Moreover, the three dimensions of physical, institutional, and people-to-people connectivity became the key original approach embedded in the Silk Road Fund that China created in 2014 to facilitate investment in countries along the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Rivalry sentiment encouraged Beijing and Tokyo to take independent initiatives in attracting ASEAN or adopting counteractions towards the other's policies. Importantly, such rivalry engagements were made within regional institutions created by ASEAN. ASEAN's engagement in regional cooperation in East Asia related to institutional power, which is based on formal and informal institutions with the rules and procedures to guide, steer, and constrain the actions and conditions of existence of others (Barnett and Duvall, 2005: 15–20). ASEAN exhibited productive power, going beyond institutional power, by fostering the social constitution in the region through an impartial manner. Sarith (2013) comments, in assessing ASEAN's importance to East Asian regionalism, that 'China and Japan might not trust each other, but ASEAN is believed to be impartial'. The social constitution, which was developed by ASEAN and its institutions, encouraged China and Japan to compete to cooperate, and to 'cultivate relational networks, actualize opportunities, and enlarge partnerships in a mutually reinforcing and mutually beneficial manner, in due course institutionalizing ASEAN centrality' (Kuik, 2022: 369).

ASEAN's efforts to maintain a special social constitution were seen in an intensifying geopolitical confrontation involving Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) and China's BRI. Japan launched the FOIP strategy in 2016 and implemented policies and measures for infrastructure investment and the rule of law under the banner of the FOIP. The political leaders from southeast Asia were worried about the FOIP's balancing orientation to counter China's aggressive diplomacy and offensive actions. Singapore encouraged Japan to reconsider the FOIP's exclusive nature, and Tokyo changed its formal title from the FOIP 'strategy' to the FOIP 'vision' (Nippon.Com, 2018). In the meeting with the Malaysian Prime Minister in November 2018, Prime Minister Abe Shinzo formally used the term 'vision' instead of 'strategy.' Individual ASEAN members have made commitments to BRI projects, which was the case for Indonesia which has territorial disputes with China in the North Natuna Sea. However, ASEAN has not given special attention to the BRI, regarding it as one programme in parallel to others such as Japan's Partnership for Quality Infrastructure to promote mutually beneficial cooperation. The Chinese government was reluctant to endorse the term Indo-Pacific, which was incorporated into the USA and Japan's strategies to counter China's regional influence. However, the government used the term Indo-Pacific for the first time in the context of forging closer cooperation with ASEAN (Xinhua, 2021). ASEAN and its members attempted to soften confrontational postures adopted by Japan and China in the emerging Indo-Pacific construct, and the two powers took note of such attempts.

ASEAN sought to maintain a special social constitution in East Asia by changing individual proposals from Japan and China into modified initiatives to promote regional cooperation. During his visit to southeast Asia in January 1997, Japanese Prime Minister Hashimoto Ryutaro proposed holding a regular top-level conference between Japan and ASEAN. ASEAN at first did not react to this proposal but later surprised Japan by suggesting a meeting among ASEAN members, Japan, China, and South Korea (Yoshida, 2004: 7–8). This led to the holding of the ASEAN + 3 summit whose first meeting took place in Malaysia in December 1997. Towards the Japan–ASEAN Commemorative Summit in December 2003, Japan proposed concluding the Japan–ASEAN Charter that would indicate, based on the past 30-year bilateral relationship, the direction of future bilateral relationships. ASEAN members showed a disapproving view of the proposal because they were reluctant to conclude an agreement with legally binding power with Japan alone among dialogue partners (Oba, 2014: 205). Alternatively, Japan and ASEAN launched the Tokyo Declaration for the Dynamic and Enduring Japan–ASEAN Partnership in the New Millennium. ASEAN produced a similar format for partnership with other dialogue partners, issuing, for instance, the ASEAN–Republic of Korea Joint Vision Statement for Peace, Prosperity, and Partnership at a commemorative summit to celebrate the 30th anniversary of diplomatic ties held in Busan in November 2019.

ASEAN declined China's attempts to forge exclusive institutional connections. When Chinese President Xi Jinping disclosed the idea of the Maritime Silk Road in his speech to the Indonesian Parliament in October 2013, he referred to the discourse, the 'China–ASEAN Community of Common Destiny'. This discourse was crucial as Xi strengthened a preference for advancing China's regional and global diplomacy under the slogan of the Community of Shared Future for Mankind (Zhang, 2018). ASEAN showed ambivalent and selective responses to the discourse of the 'Community of Common Destiny.' This aspect was shown in cautious wordings in the ASEAN–China Plan of Action to Implement the ASEAN–China Strategic Partnership (2016–2020) to 'deepen existing ASEAN–China cooperation by further exploring areas of cooperation through proposals and initiatives noted by ASEAN Leaders, such as China's proposed 2 + 7 Cooperation Framework for ASEAN–China relations and China's initiative to build up ASEAN–China Community of Common Destiny' (Ha, 2019: 240–241). At the 16th ASEAN–China summit in October 2013, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang proposed concluding a treaty on good-neighbourliness and friendly cooperation, which aimed at strengthening strategic cooperation between China and ASEAN. The joint statement of the summit contained the phrase that 'we noted with appreciation China's proposed treaty on good-neighbourliness and friendly cooperation. We acknowledged Indonesia's idea in having a treaty of friendship and cooperation that includes a wider Indo-Pacific region, beyond ASEAN and China'.

The phrase indicated ASEAN's preference for an open and inclusive treaty covering a broader region by avoiding an exclusive framework with China alone (Fukuda, 2014: 110).

Jones and Smith (2007: 181) contend that ASEAN could be manoeuvred by China and Japan because it faced great difficulty in preventing the two states' attempts to use ASEAN-initiated institutions to compete for influence in southeast Asia. This assessment is reasonable given China's offensive behaviour in the South China Sea and Japan's actions to forge close diplomatic and military links with the USA. At the same time, ASEAN forged a special social constitution with an open and inclusive character and sought to change Beijing and Tokyo's attempts to develop closed and exclusive links into open and inclusive ones. China and Japan acknowledged ASEAN's legitimacy to maintain the overall social constitution to manage political-economy affairs in East Asia.

In summary, the ASEAN-centred social constitution has been formed in East Asia with the legitimacy to develop regional cooperation impartially. ASEAN as the key node in the cluster of social networks exerted power to maintain the social constitution in East Asia (Caballero-Anthony, 2014). Both China and Japan acknowledged the constitution and sought to develop closer connections with the association. ASEAN successfully drew their positive commitments to regional cooperation, avoiding exclusive connections with each of the two powers and developing institutional systems to maintain its central position.

## 6. Conclusion and prospects

This article examined ASEAN's distinctive position in East Asian regionalism and its efforts to maintain such a position. It elucidated ASEAN's status and engagement by relying on the concept of productive power. It regarded shared meanings, common norms, and a specific social constitution as key properties with which ASEAN exerted productive power in managing regional cooperation in the political-economy field and developing regional institutions in East Asia.

ASEAN developed specific meanings of participation in institutions and incorporated common norms in regional institutions. It attached distinctive meanings to participation as the foundation for social relationality and encouraged all parties concerned to join the process of institution-building and confidence-building. The association reflected such meanings in multilateral institutions that were established and developed under its initiative in East Asia. ASEAN paid respect to pragmatic flexibility as a common norm used in promoting regional cooperation. Pragmatic flexibility contributed to maintaining the momentum of regional cooperation under critical conditions. ASEAN served as the key source of meanings and norms that consolidated the foundation for cooperation in the long process of institution-building. In this sense, ASEAN centrality constituted a critical pillar of development in regionalism and regional institutions in East Asia. ASEAN developed a specific social constitution with the legitimacy to lead regionalism by maintaining the ownership of institution-building in East Asia. Although China and Japan held greater material capabilities than any of the ASEAN members, they endorsed ASEAN's special position in deciding on the pace and direction of regional cooperation in the political-economy field. ASEAN also developed constitutive social relations in which China and Japan were embedded and avoided forming exclusive diplomatic connections with each of the two powers and successfully drew their positive engagements in promoting cooperative projects in East Asia.

ASEAN is required to make independent engagements in the emerging Indo-Pacific construct in the intensifying US–China rivalry. Although ASEAN has welcomed rules-based principles embedded in the FOIP, it has been cautious about the US' confrontational approach towards China through alliance formation. Under such conditions, ASEAN exhibited an open and inclusive posture on cooperation in the Indo-Pacific by launching its Indo-Pacific vision – the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific (AOIP) – in June 2019. ASEAN has sought to make its dialogue partners endorse the AOIP with inclusive normative structures. ASEAN has also entangled major dialogue partners including the USA and China into tighter diplomatic frameworks by concluding comprehensive strategic partnerships. ASEAN has surely continued its efforts to keep its central position for maintaining regional social construction under evolving regional circumstances. With US–China confrontation on the

rise, the material power structure is intensifying in the emerging Indo-Pacific. ASEAN's efforts to maintain constitutive social relations as the key node of regional social networks will become increasingly crucial for maintaining regional stability in the region.

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