

INEFFECTIVE GREAT POWER MANAGEMENT

ASEAN and the Belt and Road
Initiative From 2010-2024

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Abstract

To what extent has ASEAN effectively managed the great powers? This paper is situated in an ongoing debate on ASEAN's effectiveness. It specifically looks at three cases which challenge ASEAN's unity and central goals: **(1) China's Belt and Road Initiative; (2) the South China Sea territorial disputes; and (3) the emerging arena of cybersecurity.** Two indicators will guide the analysis, reflecting Cui and Buzan's (2016) definition of successful great power management: **(A) ASEAN's ability to exert international influence and (B) its capacity to maintain domestic autonomy.** It finds that while international influence was partially successful in BRI, all other indicators failed, ultimately proving that ASEAN's great power management has been ineffective in addressing the region's most pressing current issues.

1. Introduction

Great power management—the ability of a state or organization to navigate relations with dominant powers—has been a central challenge in Southeast Asia. Asian Nations (ASEAN) was established to collectively manage external influences, giving rise to various strategic approaches. Examples of this would include the following. ‘Bamboo diplomacy’ describes the flexible allegiance of states like Vietnam and Thailand (Chachavalpongpun, 2015; Hoang, 2017), while ‘hedging’ involves aligning with one power to counter another (Jones & Jenne, 2021). ‘Soft balancing’ relies on institutional cooperation to prevent conflicts (He, 2022; Yuzawa, 2022), and ‘pragmatism’ highlights ASEAN’s cautious foreign policy (Nadalutti & Rüländ, 2024).

While these approaches are foundational to understanding how ASEAN operates strategically, this paper evaluates ASEAN’s great power management through Cui & Buzan’s (2016) definition of successful great power management: maintaining international influence while limiting external control over domestic affairs. This definition aligns with ASEAN’s principle of non-interference, sovereignty, and international cooperation (ASEAN, 2025). It specifically looks at three cases which challenge ASEAN’s unity and central goals: **(1) China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and US counter-initiatives; (2) the South China Sea territorial disputes; and (3) the US-China rivalry in cybersecurity.** Two indicators will guide the analysis, reflecting Cui and Buzan’s definition of successful great power management: **(A) ASEAN’s ability to exert international influence and (B) its capacity to maintain domestic autonomy.** This study asks: To what extent have ASEAN’s strategies effectively managed the great powers? To what extent have they enabled ASEAN to balance influence while protecting domestic autonomy? It concludes that ASEAN has not been effective in preserving international influence and resisting external influence on domestic affairs.

First, this paper will provide contextual background on the three phenomena used to evaluate ASEAN’s great power management, including the BRI, the South China Sea, and cybersecurity. It will then review the literature on ASEAN’s great power management, identifying two prevalent camps: the first believes that ASEAN has been effective at great power management by imposing

its norms to influence the actions of great powers; the second believes that ASEAN has become ineffective in the face of rising geopolitical tensions. The following section expands on my research framework, case selection, and key success and failure indicators, before discussing results and addressing counter arguments. The conclusion will summarize the paper, discuss implications of the findings, and address where future scholarship should focus.

2. Contextual Background

2.1. Belt and Road Initiative

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is an incredibly ambitious infrastructure initiative launched under Xi Jinping’s leadership in 2013. Southeast Asia has been the primary site for BRI initiatives. Major infrastructure projects in Southeast Asia include the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed railway in Indonesia, the Nam Ngum hydropower plant in Laos, and a Myanmar-China pipeline, among many others (Dayant & Stanhope, 2024; Yang & Li, 2019). In the plans shared on BRI’s ten-year anniversary in October 2023, a sixth of China’s 349 planned BRI outcomes will be in Southeast Asia (Parameswaran, 2023). Though the wider motives behind this are contested, Xi Jinping expressed his hopes that BRI could carve out more space for China in the US-dominated international order (Yang & Li, 2019). This also pushed the US to launch the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) as a counter-initiative, one of several developments which have signaled a return to geopolitical and security-centered regional collaborations (Ji, 2024). There is substantial debate on whether ASEAN has handled BRI effectively. Many scholars laud BRI’s ability to provide ASEAN nations with much-needed infrastructure and foster regional interdependence in the process (Busbarat et. al., 2023; Fitriani, 2024; Swaziland and Orix, 2020). Others argue that it has created reliance on China, not interdependence, through debt traps (Schneider, 2021).

2.2. South China Sea

Following the Cold War, the South China Sea soon became a flashpoint for regional conflict. China’s territorial claims around the nine-dash-line conflict with several ASEAN states, including Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, and most strongly,

the Philippines. This conflict would explode into its present-day precarity with the Scarborough Shoal Incident in 2012, which saw the Philippines and China have a maritime standoff which ASEAN, for the first time, was unable to establish communication around (Koga, 2022). The US would soon become active in this conflict, fearing Chinese expansionism and hegemony in the region (Koga, 2022). Since then, the South China Sea has been the site of multiple small-scale conflicts, often between the Chinese Coast Guard and Filipino fishermen, as well as naval demonstrations (Koga, 2022). This would escalate further with the election of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. in 2022, who reversed the China-friendly approach of the previous president by aligning strongly with the US (Koga, 2022). ASEAN's ability to deal with the South China Sea disputes has been regarded as the 'litmus test' in the organization's effectiveness as it brings about several concerns regarding regional peace, ASEAN unity and centrality, and ASEAN-China relations (He, 2021).

2.3.

Cybersecurity

Cybersecurity is a novel yet pressing concern both globally, and especially in Southeast Asia. The EU has stated that cyber threats could severely undermine stability and cohesiveness if left unattended to (European Parliament Committee on Foreign Affairs, 2012). A cyberattack is defined as an act that seeks to undermine the security of an information system (Lee and Iskandar, 2024). This has mainly included hacking to breach data, steal important information, or disrupt government proceedings. These threats are particularly concerning to ASEAN as the number of internet users in Southeast Asia are rapidly increasing and ASEAN's digital economy is projected to grow exponentially (Ramadhan, 2023). From 2021 to 2022, cyber threats became 80 percent more prevalent, showing how critical this issue is becoming (Lee and Iskandar, 2024).



China has had particular interest in ASEAN's digital capabilities, with one of the BRI's goals being to increase internet access and connectivity in the region (Bharti and Kumari, 2024). ASEAN and China have expressed a desire to collaborate in creating a cybersecurity framework for the region (Ramadhan, 2023; Center for Eurasia Development Policy Research [CEDPR], 2025). Despite this, China has been involved in cyberattacks against the Philippines, a claimant in the South China Sea (Lee and Iskandar 2024). Great power rivalry is evident in the US and cyber espionage China's competition over digital infrastructure in the region, as well as in the and attacks by China (Ramadhan, 2023). The majority of ASEAN's cybersecurity approach is found in the Cybersecurity Cooperation Document for 2021–2025, which commits to coordinating cyber policy in the region (ASEAN, 2021). ASEAN has created an ASEAN Cybersecurity Coordinating Committee which comprises representatives from several other ASEAN sectors to oversee emerging cybersecurity issues (ASEAN, 2021). ASEAN has also set up the informal ASEAN Ministerial Conference on Cybersecurity, where in 2018 member-states agreed to the eleven non-binding norms of state behaviour in cyberspace as outlined by the UN Group of Governmental Experts in 2015, making them the first region to do so (ASEAN, 2021).

3. Literature Review: ASEAN's Great Power Management

This paper identifies two prevailing perspectives on ASEAN's great power management: that ASEAN's multilateral institutions effectively influence and 'socialize' the behaviours of great powers, China especially; and, contrastingly, that ASEAN's cohesion and strength have been lost as geopolitical tensions escalate in the region. While both camps provide a nuanced perspective on the merits and shortcomings of ASEAN, one side of these arguments always takes centre stage. This paper will begin by surveying the logic of both arguments before concluding that describing ASEAN's great power management as inadequate is most convincing when considering current economic, geopolitical, and security tensions in the region.

3.1. ASEAN is Effective at Great Power Management

Scholars of the first camp often place their analyses of ASEAN great power management in the organization's multilateral institutions. Indeed, ASEAN owes much of its inception to the great power rivalries which created a need among newly sovereign Southeast Asian nations for a cohesive organization capable of dealing with much larger actors (Ciorciari, 2017; Dayley, 2024; Tan, 2018). The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), established in 1994, was considered incredibly successful at facilitating dialogue with the great powers competing for influence at the time (He, 2022; Yuzawa, 2022). The ASEAN Plus series and the East Asia Summit from 2003–2007 would serve to address the Sino-Japanese tension for regional leadership (Yuzawa, 2022). ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM+) is another institution which addresses regional security and territorial concerns, along with the ASEAN Political-Security Community (Dayley, 2024; Rymarenko, 2021). Koga (2022) argues that this institutional robustness has allowed ASEAN to prevent an escalation of great power rivalry in the South China Sea, an issue of major concern in contemporary affairs. Other scholars have made non-institutional arguments. ASEAN's extensive participation in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has improved ASEAN's bargaining power and autonomy by creating interdependence with China while attracting retaliatory investments from the US (Bharti & Kumari, 2024; Fitriani, 2024). Wicaksana & Karim (2022) argue that ASEAN's hedging strategies have allowed it to appease opposing great powers while still representing Southeast Asian interests. These arguments suggest that ASEAN can successfully influence great power behaviour by centring, and consequently imposing, the ASEAN norms of deliberative consensus-building and peaceful conflict management in their foreign relations.

3.2. ASEAN is Ineffective at Great Power Management

In contrast, several scholars argue that ASEAN's strategies have become inadequate in the face of rising tension between great powers, namely the USA and China in the new era of great power politics. While recognizing the merits of ASEAN multilateral institutions, like ARF and ASEAN Plus, Goh (2011) predicted the unsustainability of ASEAN's 'brokerage' role with the great powers. It is argued that the success of these institutions was largely due to the willingness of great powers to cooperate, and the compulsion of ASEAN centrality has since waned

with recent developments (Goh, 2011; Kraft, 2017; Yuniarti, 2024). ASEAN's ideal of cohesiveness has been muddled as member-states are becoming increasingly polarized, mirroring the polarization of the US and China (Hartono & Cooray, 2024). Additionally, it is impossible to look past the failure of ASEAN to uniformly address the most pressing security crisis in the region, which include the South China Sea disputes and the civil war in Myanmar (Ciorcasi, 2017; Dayley, 2024; Tan, 2018). Additionally, while China's BRI has indeed provided much-needed infrastructure to ASEAN countries, it has also raised valid concerns over indebtedness and dependency to China, exemplified most clearly by Cambodia (Ujvari, 2019). What these scholars call for is a strengthening of ASEAN's great power management by implementing mechanisms by which member-states can be held accountable to uphold consistent norms.

4. Research Strategy

4.1. Research Framework

This paper evaluates ASEAN's ability to manage great power rivalry by using Cui & Buzan's (2016) standard of successful great power management: a state's ability to have legitimate international influence while minimizing the influence of great powers on domestic affairs. This definition aligns with ASEAN's fundamental belief in "the right of every State to lead its national existence free from external interference, subversion or coercion" (ASEAN 2025). It will use this definition to critically engage with both camps. If it is the case that ASEAN has been unable to maintain international influence nor maintain control of domestic affairs, this paper will conclude that ASEAN's great power management has been inadequate. Conversely, if it is found that ASEAN's multilateral institutions have in fact aided ASEAN in preserving its international influence and domestic affairs, this paper will conclude that ASEAN's great power management has been effective.

4.2. Case Selection

This paper will apply this definition to three cases of great power rivalry involving ASEAN, as detailed in section 2. These cases are the following: **(1) China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the USA's counter-initiatives;** **(2) the continuing**

territorial disputes in the South China Sea; and (3) novel rivalry in technology and cybersecurity. A case was chosen if it met the following criteria: it is a currently relevant and substantive issue; several or all states are affected by it; ASEAN is required to address it; and there is significant involvement with a great power, whether that is the US, China, or both. Other potential cases were climate change and security architecture. Climate change was excluded because while it poses a severe threat to all ASEAN states, it does not have the same contested nature as the other cases. Security architecture was excluded due to the relatively bilateral nature of defence in the region and the lack of a coherent collective security or military agreement.

4.3. Success and Failure Indicators

This section outlines the success and failure indicators that will be used to assess ASEAN's great power management as defined by Cui and Buzan. Indicator A will measure *international influence* and Indicator B will measure *domestic autonomy*.

4.3.1. Belt & Road Initiative

- A** ASEAN states have negotiating power in BRI initiatives **OR** ASEAN states do not have negotiating power and may be dominated by decisions by China or the US.
- B** Such projects provide domestic benefits which do not tie the state to a great power **OR** ASEAN states become economically reliant on a great power resulting in less control over domestic affairs.

4.3.2. South China Sea Disputes

- A** ASEAN states are able to impose regional security norms and offer collective bargaining **OR** great powers act unilaterally without consultation of ASEAN.
- B** ASEAN states can maintain territorial claims for their own interests **OR** ASEAN states undergo coercion by China or the US.

4.3.3. Cybersecurity and Technology

- A** ASEAN determines its own cybersecurity and can influence cybersecurity norms **OR** ASEAN's cybersecurity is determined by the US or China.
- B** ASEAN states are able to make technological decisions **OR** ASEAN states must follow US or Chinese models.

4.4. Scope and Limitations

This paper will focus on ASEAN as an organization when considering *international influence*. This is because the ASEAN principle of 'ASEAN centrality' encourages multilateral dialogue with external powers through ASEAN, rather than through bilateral negotiations. When considering domestic autonomy, this paper mainly evaluates country-specific issues to measure ASEAN's ability to promote sovereignty. Additionally, this paper will focus on ASEAN after 2010. As such, it will only consider ASEAN's performance in this period, with special consideration for the current events and situations discussed above. Some may argue that it is important to consider ASEAN's earlier years when its norms and processes were initially established. However, this timeframe is specifically chosen as it represents the new era of great power politics and Sino-American rivalry in the region and is thus most relevant to current literature (Yuzawa, 2022).

5. Analysis

5.1. Belt and Road Initiative

5.1.1. International Influence – PARTIAL SUCCESS

ASEAN's engagement with China's Belt and Road Initiative has been characterized by both strategic negotiations and significant challenges. Some ASEAN states, such as Indonesia and Malaysia, have demonstrated negotiating power by renegotiating BRI terms to secure better financial conditions and local economic benefits (Yang and Li, 2019). Through this, they have been able to obtain critical infrastructure, particularly through state-of-the-art high-speed rail networks

(Fitriani, 2024). Additionally, ASEAN's collective economic stance has led to competition between China and the US, with the US introducing counter-initiatives such as the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (Ji, 2024). These factors suggest ASEAN has had some influence over investment dynamics rather than being entirely dictated by China's economic strategy. However, there is also evidence of ASEAN's limited influence. Some states, particularly Cambodia and Laos, have accepted BRI projects with minimal leverage, leading to significant economic dependence on China (Schneider, 2021). Additionally, ASEAN has not established a unified regulatory framework for BRI engagement, allowing China to pursue bilateral rather than ASEAN-led agreements, reducing ASEAN's collective negotiating power. As such, the *international influence* indicator fails.

5.1.2. **Domestic Autonomy – FAIL**

In many ways, BRI has allowed many ASEAN states to acquire major infrastructure projects which they otherwise could not have achieved alone. High-speed rail in Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, and Laos have been a key contribution of BRI to the region (Fitriani, 2024). Less wealthy ASEAN states, like Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar have benefitted the most from BRI (Fitriani, 2024). However, these ASEAN states have had to borrow money from Chinese banks and face debt they are unlikely to pay back, creating a reliance and indebtedness to China (Basbarut et. al., 2023). Countries like Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar have expressed disdain for the high-interest rates of China's loans for its BRI initiatives, raising a concern over 'debt-diplomacy' in which China leverages this debt to influence these countries (Gong, 2019) In Cambodia this has also encouraged illegal gambling and speculation in the Sihanoukville Special Economic Zone where China has been quite involved (Schneider, 2021). As such, the domestic autonomy indicator for BRI fails.

5.2. **South China Sea**

5.2.1. **International Influence – FAIL**

When the South China Sea issue first surfaced following the Cold War, ASEAN released the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC). This non-binding document urged ASEAN countries to maintain its longstanding friendship with China while also upholding the norms of ASEAN and the

international community, specifically the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (ASEAN, 2012). Since then, China has become increasingly aggressive in the South China Sea in the post-2010 period, demonstrating ASEAN's inability to influence the security norms of China. In 2012, ASEAN arrived at a gridlock in approaching the Scarborough Shoal Incident as Cambodia, Brunei, and Myanmar were concerned that a strongly worded statement would affect their close ties with China. Philippines' strong alliance with the US, who recently approved four F16 fighter jets to the Philippines, further demonstrates ASEAN's internal divisions (Nikolov, 2025). Meanwhile, China has had an increasing presence in the South China Sea despite committing to do otherwise in ASEAN meetings, ultimately undermining ASEAN multilateralism and influence. As such, the international influence indicator fails.

5.2.2. **Domestic Autonomy – FAIL**

China's sweeping claims over the South China Sea clearly violates ASEAN's norms of sovereignty. But while Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei have all opposed China's aggression in the South China Sea, these states have resorted to careful and limited language when discussing the South China Sea issue. This is due to China's strong use of economic, military, and political coercion over ASEAN states. For example, China has conducted several naval demonstrations in the South China Sea while building artificial islands which collude with claimant countries' exclusive economic zones as outlined by UNCLOS (Koga, 2022). Additionally, ASEAN states have all expressed a desire to resolve the conflict in South China, even Cambodia, yet the issue persists and is even escalating. This indicates that ASEAN has not been able to properly fulfil its domestic wishes due to the threat of China, thus domestic autonomy fails.

5.3. **Cybersecurity**

5.3.1. **International Influence – FAIL**

As described in section 2.3, ASEAN has recently begun substantive work on coordinating cyber policy. However, China and the US have undoubtedly entered this new realm of competition, and China has been in the lead in terms of influence. China dominates as a leading provider of 5G, the fifth generation of mobile

technology which provides faster internet connection, lower latency, and overall higher efficiency when coordinated with government information systems (Anuar, 2020). Chinese companies, like Huawei and ZTE, are the main providers of 5G technology to ASEAN countries due to the comparative advantage they have in 5G (Baark, 2024; CEDPR, 2025). Additionally, China has invested millions in artificial intelligence in Southeast Asia, including \$2.4 billion in AI development in Singapore and \$38 million in Indonesia (Ramadhan, 2023). As such, there have been widespread concerns, especially from the US, that this makes ASEAN more vulnerable to cyberattack from China, or that China will have influence in ASEAN's cyber policy (CEDPR, 2025). Indeed, the Philippines has been particularly targeted by cyberattacks, most of which are traced back to China (Lee and Iskandar 2024). While ASEAN has adopted UN norms with how to behave in cyberspace, it has been unable to influence China to adopt similar norms. Finally, while Chinese cyberattacks have persisted in the Philippines, ASEAN has refrained from making any statements on this due to the geopolitical fragility of the situation. As such, ASEAN fails in having international influence in cybersecurity.

5.3.2. **Domestic Autonomy – FAIL**

ASEAN is increasingly dependent on technology from external powers, especially China. There are disparities in cybersecurity capability among ASEAN countries despite ASEAN's framework for cybersecurity cooperation. While Singapore has a high cybersecurity capability and has sufficiently responded to cyberthreats, less developed countries like the Philippines have struggled to combat increasingly frequent data breaches (Lee & Iskandar, 2024). Similarly, Vietnam and Indonesia's reliance on Chinese digital infrastructure have hindered their development of a domestic cybersecurity industry (Wicaksana and Karim, 2022). As a result, these states are vulnerable to geopolitical leverage as powerful countries advocate for the ban of Chinese technology despite it being crucial for many ASEAN countries. Indeed, while ASEAN members formally retain the right to make their own technology choices, the strategic and economic benefits offered by both the U.S. and China often limit their ability to act with full independence in digital policymaking. As such, the domestic autonomy indicator fails.

5.4.

Findings

The findings are summarized in table 1 below.

Table 1. Summary of Research Findings

	International Influence	Domestic Autonomy
BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE	PARTIAL SUCCESS	FAIL
SOUTH CHINA SEA	FAIL	FAIL
CYBERSECURITY AND TECHNOLOGY	FAIL	FAIL

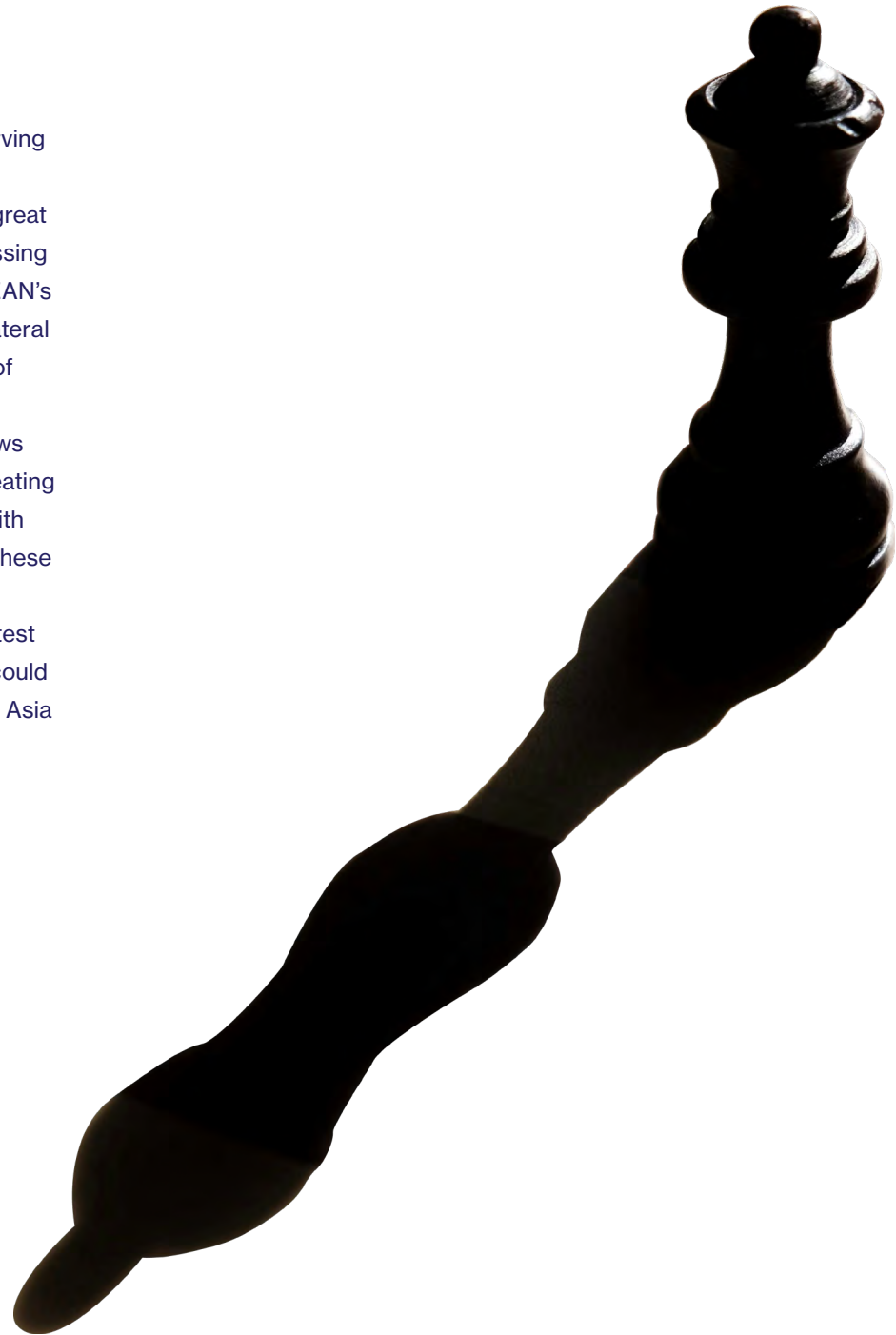
5.5.

Addressing Counter Arguments

Ultimately this paper argues that ASEAN has been ineffective at great power management as it is unable to have international influence while maintaining domestic autonomy pertaining to BRI, the South China Sea, and cybersecurity. There are several potential counterarguments to this. First, it may be said that while ASEAN has been unsatisfactory in these three dimensions, the region would in fact be worse off had ASEAN not existed. Indeed, ASEAN has been central to fostering regional dialogue, both among its member-states and with external powers, coordinating regional goals, and providing a larger collective voice for its smaller member-states. However, this is a strawman argument as there is no current reality in which ASEAN does not exist, and while ASEAN has allowed much conflict to be avoided, it should not be exempt from scrutiny. This paper has evaluated ASEAN based on a definition which reflects ASEAN's self-proclaimed goals of self-determination, regional stability, and international cooperation (ASEAN, 2025). On these metrics, this paper has proven that ASEAN has failed to manage great powers. Other critics may argue that ASEAN has indeed been successful as it has managed to preserve regional peace and prevent war in the region. However, it can be argued that non-traditional security threats, like those analysed in this paper, have taken centre stage in today's international context (Prayuda et. al., 2023).

6. Conclusion

This paper has evaluated ASEAN's great power management using Cui and Buzan's definition: a state's ability to exert international influence while preserving domestic autonomy. It has found that international influence was partially successful in BRI, all other indicators failed, ultimately proving that ASEAN's great power management has been ineffective in addressing the region's most pressing current issues. The implications of this are twofold. First, this means that ASEAN's centrality in external negotiation is weakening. While it is still used as a multilateral forum, it has been unable to impose its norms and interests onto the actions of external powers, particularly China. Second, this means that Southeast Asian sovereignty is being undermined as China's influence on domestic affairs grows stronger. ASEAN will have to adapt to these growing issues, potentially by creating more mechanisms through which member states can settle disagreements with one another to ensure cohesiveness. Future scholarship could tackle one of these three dimensions with more depth and rigour, considering that this paper has prioritized breadth and diversity of issues. Additionally, future scholars could test the indicators used in this paper on other arenas of great power rivalry. This could provide comparative insights to determine what makes the case of Southeast Asia and ASEAN a unique one.



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