

## **ASEAN Non-Interference Under Heavy Pressure: Is It Change or Crises for ASEAN Peace?**

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### **Abstrak**

*Artikel ini bermaksud untuk ikut dalam diskusi mengenai tekanan yang cukup besar terhadap non-interference ASEAN. Dengan pendekatan kualitatif, artikel ini menyelidiki dari mana tekanan tersebut berasal dan apakah non-interference benar-benar merugikan ASEAN. Dengan menggunakan analogi medis, “dosis membuat racun,” dan hikmah Acton tentang kekuasaan, kami berpendapat bahwa kerugian non-interference dan kritik yang mengarah pada ASEAN adalah hasil dari penggunaannya yang berlebihan daripada prinsip itu sendiri yang merugikan. Menghindari, menunda, dan menyembunyikan masalah di balik non-interference menjadi tempat perlindungan yang nyaman bagi ASEAN saat dihadapkan pada tantangan yang sulit. ASEAN memang perlu berubah. Namun, mengingat perbedaan politik, budaya, dan bahasa yang beragam di ASEAN, menghilangkan pengaruh non-interference di ASEAN adalah pertimbangan yang berlebihan. Prinsip tersebut bukanlah racun dengan resep yang tepat. Oleh karena itu, sebagai kesimpulan artikel ini mendorong pembentukan forum formal yang dapat menjadi sarana resmi untuk mendiskusikan solusi atas permasalahan tabu anggota yang dapat menjaga kebebasan negara-negara anggota untuk memutuskan, daripada mengatur satu-satunya cara untuk mengendalikan dosis non-interference yang dibutuhkan dalam sistem ASEAN. Seperti sebuah keluarga, negara-negara anggota ASEAN dapat menggunakan forum ini untuk meyakinkan yang lain bahwa ada solusi yang lebih baik untuk permasalahan mereka dan memajukan wilayah bersama-sama.*

**Kata Kunci:** *Non-intervensi ASEAN, ASEAN ways, perdamaian regional.*

### **Abstract**

*This paper intends to join the discussion over the heavily pressured ASEAN’s non-interference. With a qualitative approach, this paper investigate where the pressure comes from and whether non-interference actually harms ASEAN. Utilizing the medical analogy, “the dose makes the poison,” and Acton’s wisdom on power, the paper argue that the non-interference harm and critics inducing to ASEAN is a result of its excessive uses rather than the principle itself harmful. Avoiding, delaying, and brushing issues aside behind non-interference becomes a comfortable refuge for ASEAN when faced with difficult challenges. ASEAN indeed needs to change. However, given ASEAN’s diverse political, cultural, and language differences, eliminating non-interference influence in ASEAN is an outrageous deliberation. The principle is not poisonous with the right prescription. Therefore, as conclusion the paper advocate the creation of a formal forum that can serve as a formal means to brainstorm solutions for members’ taboo predicament that could preserve member states freedom to decide, rather than dictating one, to control the dosage of non-interference needed in the ASEAN system. Like a family, ASEAN member states can use the forum to convince each other’s that there are better solutions for their predicament and advance the region together.*

**Keywords:** *ASEAN non-interference, ASEAN ways, regional peace.*

## Introduction

Amid the backdrop of escalating global and regional instability after the Second World War, ASEAN has chosen a different path from creating military alliances that can make them a tall tree ready to be chopped down. Instead, ASEAN's founding members opted for a normative forum that is good at preventing misunderstandings and building confidence (Acharya 2021), all grounded in the principle of not interfering in each other internal matters and not doing any intrusive action (especially the use of force) with the consent of all parties involved.

ASEAN took this strategic choice under the awareness that the dangerous one is not their burgeoning and progressing neighbours but external actors (Tilman 2019). Those with an ambition to define what is good for the world, such as the communist agenda feared by many ASEAN iron hand leaders, come up with ideals that cannot be easily achieved, or even if they could be achieved; it will make the member states enemy of US and its allies (Hadiwinata 2017).

However, when one inquires whether ASEAN is entirely against interference (being nosy) and (blunt act of) intervention, the answer is not entirely. In international relations, it is too challenging for one nation not to interfere or intervene in the affairs of another nation, even if they are in an optimistic relationship. Against the inevitable interference idea, (Suzuki 2019) argues that interference between one country and another internal matter may take more work in ASEAN. She found that the factors often cited in the literature as reasons for regional institution intrusiveness, such as the presence of more democratic regimes, the hegemon's interest in instigating change, spill-over effects of crises, and the weak state conditions of member states, are insufficient to make ASEAN more intrusive than its members' utilitarian interests allow. Even proposals for increased intrusiveness often serve as symbolic gestures for the member's domestic audience. Above all, ASEAN members believe that each member can solve their domestic issues, and other members do not need to come in and complicate the matters.

This paper intends to join in the discussion about ASEAN's non-interference policy. The authors agree with ASEAN's critics who express concerns about why ASEAN has yet to undergo significant changes and continues to hide behind non-interference when problematic issues arise. However, we do not entirely agree with them. The fact that ASEAN does not turn into an intrusive organization despite various pressures and criticisms highlights ASEAN's need for non-interference. The shortcomings and setbacks due to this principle should not make ASEAN abandon it, especially when it is about preserving regional peace in ASEAN, which becomes our main argument.

## Methods

The paper employ a qualitative approach to investigate the challenges of ASEAN's non-interference principle. Our objective is to determine the significance of the non-interference principle in today's ASEAN and whether it should continue to be strictly adhered to or if it is time to relax its influence on how ASEAN conducts its affairs. The thought are drawn base on the medicinal analogy of "the dose makes the poison" to examine whether the non-interference principle is detrimental to ASEAN, akin to a toxin that poisons and weakens ASEAN, as many skeptics have asserted. The answer can be found through these three key indicators: (1) internal resistance or opposition within ASEAN to this principle, (2) criticism and external pressure exerted on the non-interference principle, and (3) the instances of harm or loss suffered by ASEAN as a result of non-interference.

Next, by applying the concept famously articulated by Lord Acton, which suggests that excessively powerful powers are susceptible to corruption (Morris 2021), the paper will assess whether non-interference is inherently harmful to ASEAN, like poison, or more because it has become too powerful before it corrupts ASEAN. This approach allows us to discern the nature of non-interference— whether it initially existed for benevolent purposes before becoming too influential and changing its nature, the same as Lord Acton's assertion about power when it is less powerful (Morris 2021), or if it has always been detrimental to ASEAN, as skeptics argue.

Suppose ASEAN non-interference is not inherently toxic or harmful. In that case, an interpretation can be drawn that what makes non-interference toxic is the dosage administered by ASEAN. It is poisonous to corrupt and poison ASEAN because of ASEAN's irresponsible intake. The outcome then will determine what we propose for ASEAN to control the dosage of non-interference interfering negatively in its system.

## Theoretical Framework

One of recent critical work about ASEAN (Stubbs 2019) has brought together arguments from skeptics and proponents of ASEAN, allowing for a better objective tool to evaluate ASEAN's success and failure that truly entitles it. The three values employed for this evaluation are effectiveness, legitimacy, and efficiency, which are typically used as a checklist to assess the success of regional institutions. The viewpoint of the skeptics such as (Ravenhill 2009) argues that the balance of power at the extra-regional level plays a more significant role than ASEAN, and another skeptic. In addition another sceptic, (Beeson 2014) also argues that the overall percentage of violence worldwide. Both contend ASEAN's and its non-interference policy contribution to peace in Southeast Asia. Meanwhile, the proponent asks us to see ASEAN through ASEAN's rearview, a turbulent region, an how

ASEAN brought peace to it, which (Mahbubani and Sng 2018) deems as a miracle.

This paper does not aim to counter the perspectives of skeptics. In a way, it aligns with their concerns, as ASEAN also acknowledges the need for reform, given the mounting internal pressure on the principle of non-interference. This paper aims to reaffirm that non-interference is under scrutiny and heavy pressure, even from within, with failure of Myanmar five peace plan (Widianto and Teresia 2022), and from proponents (Natalegawa 2022), who calls for ASEAN action on Myanmar). However, we want to clarify how ASEAN has yet to move far from this principle (e.g., still grappling with regional community issues), demonstrating that the problem does not lie with the principle. This principle is not harmful to ASEAN; the problematic dosage used by ASEAN is the one that causes harm, and this is what ASEAN should change--- it will be our main exploration point and contribution to the existing debate.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Heavily Pressured Principle**

The principle of non-interference is ASEAN's protective barrier that safeguards each member state from the fear that their neighbours might become involved or exploit (the member) internal instability for their nefarious self-interest. At the same time, the non-interference principle serves as an amulet that rationally justifies ASEAN members to resist the clamour of international collective opinion for not intervening with other members in any manner. Hence, in good faith, whether from outside or from ASEAN and other members, ASEAN perceives any interference, even for the right reason, as an attempt against ASEAN's goals to preserve peace in the region.

However, due to this stubbornness, ASEAN has faced much criticism and pressure that calls for ASEAN to be a more intrusive organization. We list some variables that put ASEAN's non-interference principle under heavy pressure in the table below:

**Table 1. Variables pressuring ASEAN's Non-Interference Principle**

**Table 1.**  
Variables pressuring ASEAN's Non-Interference Principle

Type	Variable	Correlation with non-interference
Internal challenges	ASEAN anthem	Incompatible, when we share and care, our main purpose is to nurture each other and collectively achieve our goals.
	ASEAN Community	Precedent and source for any concession over non-interference principle, with the ASEAN community's name in their respective departments, the voice of interference (especially for change) in soft diplomatic messages is heard every day within the secretariat, aiming to improve ASEAN.
	Minus mechanism	x Sign of surrendering to preserve non-interference, and raise a futility believe that those resistant to change may can change their minds if some succeed on their endeavors.
	Minilateralism	Admission of defeat: Suggesting that it would be better to select only those who are willing to invest and work effectively for the goals.
External Challenges	Globalization and the magnified global shared responsibilities	Pressure to change and fit with the larger global standards concerning democratization, human security, the environment, and numerous other conventional and unconventional issues.
	US-China competition	Complex duality, the situation can be likened to a bittersweet cake; while it offers benefits, it can also erode what ASEAN seeks to protect with non-interference.
Challenges from failure	Myanmar and junta crises	Inadequate, UN may step in if ASEAN doesn't act. Myanmar crises show it hinders democratic progress despite similar beginnings.

Source: The Author

The ASEAN anthem, which (Tkachenko et al. 2022) describe as evidence of community logic and one of the sources of ASEAN identity, repeatedly tells ASEAN and its people to care for each other and share what they have. To walk away from indifference towards each other, be a part of each other's lives, and grow the region. The non-interference principle currently used as practice by ASEAN does not fit with the anthem wishes. Moreover, the ASEAN way of consensus decision-making (another foundation of ASEAN way), if used on what to share and care about, will also dampen ASEAN's (members and its people) motivation to care for each other, much less share what they have to improve each other's lives.

When non-interference clashes with ASEAN's collective will and aspirations to better itself, non-interference loses, and ASEAN becomes more intrusive. A prime example of such a challenge is the aspiration for ASEAN to create a unified community, which now stands as one of the three pillars of ASEAN. The vision of an integrated community becomes everyday contention in the ASEAN secretariat, compelling ASEAN to reconsider many times and, at times, decide to dilute its non-interference policy to forge ahead collectively with all its member states or with additional dialogue partners (Müller 2023). One evident case is in the work of the ASEAN Economic Community, which works to better the ASEAN single market that needs more intrusive laws and regulations (Desierto and Cohen 2020), and one of the biggest challenges is intellectual property law that demands ASEAN intrusiveness to its member.

Still, from within, the Minus-X mechanism existence is a sign of ASEAN surrendering to the limitation that fully embracing non-interference is not a viable development path for itself and its members. Achieving consensus by compelling other members in a way that does not constitute interference is often too challenging, and it is shown in ASEAN's slowness when it tries to create an ASEAN Economic Community (Lee 2022). Therefore, the mechanism was established under the consensus of all (Woon 2016) to enable two or more members ready for change and development to proceed with the project without being hindered by others who may need more preparation, and the late one may join after they are more prepared.

Although Minus X seen as a formula for flexible participation of the agreed commitments (Petcharamesree 2016), this mechanism has set a precedent for ASEAN members to leave out some members who could not join (unable to ratify it) or are not interested in joining (only signing to be not left out or labelled as troublemaker); and in (Khmer Times 2021) narration inadvertently lead to kind of exclusion for those that left out. The "minus x" mechanism also affects relationships among the pioneers and latecomers, potentially causing division when there is excessive inequality in benefit gains between members with better capabilities and those who are weaker. With better governance and preferable policies, Singapore continues to get a great part of foreign direct investment to South East Asia (ASEAN 2022), which could generate jealousy and suspicion to any proposal Singapore raises. Then, a crack in the relationship becomes unavoidable, even if all know the cause of such an outcome.

While ASEAN minus x may not be evident enough to challenge non-interference existence, it is not a friendly mechanism to non-interference and ASEAN way. There will come a time when members find themselves separated between those considered 'good' and 'bad' members, such as what was described by (Khmer Times 2021) about "ASEAN Minus X Syndrome" if ASEAN become too dependent on this mechanism. Regrettably, when that time comes, the 'bad' ones may face the worst outcome—at least estrangement, which is far more detrimental than mere interference as it may lead to an outcome that benefits all.

Despite the availability of minus x, the challenge persists for ASEAN as the formula only lubricated the gear. In the end, ASEAN still developed according to its own established ways of slowness in doing things. This dilemma gave rise to a pressing need for a mechanism capable of imposing legal obligations and raising trust (from the member) to invest more of their will and motivation to help achieve the project's success, and unilateralism then emerged as a formidable internal challenge for ASEAN non-interference



Minilateralism, or cooperation among a select few ASEAN members without being bound by the slower ASEAN processes at its core, enhances trust and confidence among participating members in the undertaken project (Ha 2022). However, minilateralism is the opposite of non-interference and may threaten ASEAN's existence, as more influential external powers may substitute ASEAN members. One example is the China-led minilateralism project in the Mekong (Haldar 2023) and the development of the China-Thailand railway project, which can be seen as China's encroachment politically (Schaffar 2018) and economically (Wei and Sukhotu 2021), and diminish ASEAN's influence in this part of the region.

Transitioning from internal challenges to external ones, criticism of the non-interference principle from international communities is abundant from many ASEAN skeptics, which Stubbs has gathered and clashed with its proponents to better evaluate ASEAN (Stubbs 2019). Some recurring critique highlights how this principle hinder ASEAN and its member states from fulfilling their global responsibilities, particularly in matters related to democracy, human rights, and environmental issues—areas deemed crucial for the betterment of the world. Some, such as (Ravenhill 2009) and (Beeson 2014), bluntly question whether ASEAN can be attributed to the region's peace, with (Beeson and Watson 2019) add, ASEAN can't stop China's ambitions to interfere in the region show ASEAN can't meet the ends by walking this path.

Another pressure, or even a threat, to ASEAN's non-interference principle is the competition between China and the US to entice ASEAN members to be on their side. Non-interference is a means to prevent the deterioration of relationships between members due to unnecessary remarks and actions; it does not provide benefits or impose legal obligations on ASEAN members who uphold it or those who do not. Therefore, this principle is highly vulnerable in the face of the sweet but poisonous approaches from China and the US.

One such case occurs when ASEAN discusses the South China Sea issue. Pang (2017) have finely elaborated on Cambodia and Laos's accommodation to China. He elaborated that Cambodia succumbed to the influence of China, leading ministerial-level meetings to end without a joint communique in the 2012 ASEAN Ministers' Meeting. In the same case in 2014, Laos conformed to the sweet approaches of both China and US allies (Japan and South Korea), essentially trying to benefit from both sides and neglecting ASEAN members' interests involved in the case.

The prominent weakness of ASEAN's non-interference principle is pointed out in Cambodia's pro-China statement regarding the South China Sea, which recommends that those who oppose China's claims address the

issue bilaterally with China (Pang 2017). This action cannot be defined as bad faith to non-interference as Cambodia do not want to be involved in other members' internal affair, which conforms to the principle and is in good faith with non-interference. However, we all know that such action has burned to ashes non-interference values.

Another challenge for ASEAN non-interference is the Myanmar crisis, many have talk about it. What is important to re-emphasize here is that the use of non-interference has encountered limitations that ASEAN cannot overcome. For non-interference to function effectively in ASEAN, at least two prerequisites must be met. First, ASEAN members must demonstrate a good faith commitment to it. Second, all members must be capable of resolving their internal problems without causing spillovers or attracting global attention. While ASEAN can undoubtedly accomplish the first prerequisite, as shown by the fact that ASEAN has yet to become an intrusive organization (Suzuki 2019). The second one proves to be more challenging, as some members certainly need a hand to help them solve their internal matters, such as the Myanmar case, the Indonesian forest fire case, and the drinkable water disputes between Malaysia and Singapore.

### **The Meaning Of Non-Interference For ASEAN**

In addition to its practical benefits as a barrier and amulet that preserves the relationship among member countries, the principle of non-intervention has also played a pivotal role in fostering a peaceful environment within ASEAN. This principle not only prevents conflicts but also nurtures and sustains peace.

The presence of the non-intervention principle has made sharp communication less confrontational and heavy issues more manageable. ASEAN continues to learn how to address problems flexibly, turning ASEAN into a platform for communication rather than a rigid problem-solving organization that might inadvertently create new issues. Without this principle, the ASEAN we know may not exist, and all that ASEAN has achieved to date may become unattainable. Especially when looking at the UN with UNSC members' endless rivalry, the EU with Brexit, and BRICS with China and India with endless frictions.

Furthermore, the non-interference principle allows various ASEAN peace protector instruments to thrive and remain active in a dynamic and uncertain world. Below are various ASEAN peace protector instruments that are safeguarded by non-interference or conducted with non-interference in mind:



**Figure 1. Instrument Safeguarding ASEAN Peace**



Source: The Author

First about relationship between elite, it's dates back to when ASEAN used to be governed by a group of military elites from its member states—individuals with distinguished reputations for pragmatism and utilitarianism who were intolerant of their opposition (Acharya 2021). Maintaining good relationships is hard to do with such a challenging group of people, leading many to speculate that ASEAN might fail and disband (Mahbubani and Sng, 2018). However, they are mistaken, as non-interference becomes a delicate but tensile barrier that helps maintain strong relationships between ASEAN military elites. The non-interference principle creates a conducive environment for these elites not to harbor suspicions or point fingers at each other. Non-interference allows the elites to plan whatever they want within their nation, unburdened by concerns of potential disruptions or sabotage by fellow members, thereby safeguarding their agendas for their countries and their people.

From the APSC Blueprint 2009 to the more recent APSC Blueprint 2025, these ideas have consistently received emphasis, which highlights the importance of preserving positive relations between military elites, as they are the ones who have the most authority to define the threats to their respective countries. Without non-interference as a guarantee, any of their voice, actions, and policy products could easily create suspicion among other members. They may lead to dangerous arguments that could escalate and completely demolish ASEAN peace.

Second, according to APSC Blueprint 2025, ASEAN confidence building measure is to pursue communication of the elite rather than use of force. The focus is to debunk uncertainty about each member's defense policies and security perceptions with transparency and understanding about them. Which then makes ASEAN come up with solution for the need of joint-training of either ARF members, ADMM-Plus members, or both (ASEAN 2016).

Third, ASEAN practice of preventive diplomacy is like everyday activities; it originates from its ASEAN way of avoiding actions that might exacerbate or complicate the resolution of the issue at hand (Sokla 2019). To mitigate the influence of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA) among ASEAN members, non-interference overbearingly limits what is brought up in formal forums or expressed regarding other member states—differences in opinions, comments, suggestions, anger, and frustrations are communicated delicately and flexibly in non-formal formats. In a way, non-inference dominates and justifies any ASEAN decision-making to prioritize regional stability over any endeavors that could disrupt peace in the region. One example is ASEAN's choice to propose a code of conduct instead of a frontal righteousness spat over ownership rights with China over the South China Sea case (Hu 2023).

Fourth, given the diversity among ASEAN member states and the imperative to address complex regional and international issues, it is a crucial safeguard. Its presence persuades ASEAN members to employ informal diplomatic dialogue— a form of political hedging or circumventing, usually between formal ones, to facilitate delicate discussions on diplomatically sensitive matters. This approach helps discern the intentions of the parties involved. It reduces the risk of any wrong interpretation, intentional or accidental, of some interference messages advanced by one member state in the internal affairs of another (Natalegawa 2023). This approach is vital for sensitive topics, such as security matters in ARF, ADMM-Plus, and other ASEAN forums with issues that can be easily misinterpreted, to be addressed through informal and diplomatically delicate means whenever possible. Which (Korolev and Belous 2019) see as cultivating a habit of preventing war.

Fifth, in the context of post-conflict measure, the non-interference principle ensures that reconciliation efforts do not involve interfering actions that may worsen the situation. APSC Blueprint (2010-2015) to APSC Blueprint 2025 continue to mandate the ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation (AIPR) (solely) to educate and educate about peace and reconciliation that fit ASEAN. Guided by the non-interference principle, ASEAN's post-conflict measure prioritize practical measures to restore peace and quickly reestablish cooperation without passing judgment, causing loss of face, or being overly intrusive. In a better word, it is a kind of hedging, such as in the case of the South China Sea (Jones and Jenne 2022)—or in any critics of ASEAN and its ASEAN ways "sweep all disputes under the rug" policy (Acharya 2021), forget it once happens with a smile.

## Conclusion

Non-interference has many detrimental aspects for ASEAN. However, having a thought about removing non-interference from ASEAN is merely wishful thinking, something that those who wish chaos upon a region characterized by significant differences in politics, culture, language, and various other aspects would desire. The core problem with non-interference in ASEAN is the dosage. Unlike the definition provided by the UN, ASEAN places too much faith in and consumes excessive doses of non-interference, to the point that it defines what constitutes the 'ASEAN way'.

Excessive dosage intake makes the influence of non-interference too strong and become poison for ASEAN, causing ASEAN to become intoxicated and take refuge in it when any tricky unforeseen issues arise. Hiding behind, wait and see, and eventually sweep all matters under the rug. The issues seems disappear after everyone stops the rug flat with some benefit from reestablished cooperation success, but it's not, and many times ASEAN lost that bet.

If ASEAN can't live without non-interference, then the answer is about how to control the dosage, which led us back to ASEAN Troika, the forgotten wining thropy againts the non-interference. By making the non-decision-making ad hoc Troika an open case and permanent meeting that is being held as avenues for brainstorming members' taboo predicament is our proposed answer.

In which the avenue would allow open-minded intellectuals as main player, rather than tricky-interest-vested formal decision-makers that act merely as referee, to propose solutions for the issue that the other member is facing. The point is to convince that other members have solutions for the member's predicament that fit the said member's accustomed interest. It will be be a formal means to address taboo issues in a lighter-hearted manner with less burden and wary of non-interference--- as all parties involved are already well aware of what is at stake. Identical to a real family, ASEAN member can raise their best ideas to solve other members' problems as a sign of their care to them without undermining the involved member's freedom to choose the best choice for their country. At the very least, such an approach can create a more conducive environment for effective unjudgmental-open-minded brainstorming that can offer better optimism and hope for the best solutions for the ASEAN predicament that being hindered by non-interferece.

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