

Strengthening ASEAN Border Security through Regional Governance: Challenges and Opportunities in Combating Transnational Crime

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Abstract

Border Security has become an increasingly important issue in Southeast Asia due to the rise of transnational crimes such as human trafficking, drug trafficking, cybercrime, and illicit trade. In response, ASEAN has developed various regional frameworks, including the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) Blueprint and the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in persons (ACTIP), to enhance regional cooperation. However, the effectiveness of these mechanisms remains limited due to sovereignty concerns, the principle of non-interference, uneven enforcement capacities, differing political priorities among member states. This study examines how ASEAN can strengthen border security through improved regional governance using a qualitative document analysis of ASEAN policies, international reports and academic literature. It finds that fragmented information sharing, inconsistent legal frameworks, and weak institutional coordination continue to hinder effective collective responses to cross-border threats. In increasing economic integration and digitalisation further complicate border management. The study concludes that ASEAN border security can be strengthened through improved intelligence sharing, greater use of technologies such as biometric systems, harmonisation of legal frameworks, and stronger institutional cooperation with external partners.

Keywords: ASEAN, Border security, Regional cooperation, Human trafficking, Surveillance technology

INTRODUCTION

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Southeast Asia is dealing with the dangers of transnational crime in an increasingly globalised and digital environment. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has become increasingly vulnerable to various transnational crimes because of its rapid economic growth and expanding regional integration (Sundram, 2024). Trafficking through ASEAN is high, as transnational crime syndicates are taking advantage of porous borders, governance gaps, and weak coordination between governments (Luong, 2024). In 2002, an estimated 24,700 trafficking victims were trafficked into or through ASEAN (Luthfi, 2025). The Golden Triangle remains one of the world's largest producers of synthetic drugs (UNODC, 2024) and the illegal profits increased from forced labour and online fraud schemes are measured in billions (Luong, 2024). The increased level of transnational crime speaks also to how issues of border security are becoming more challenging, alarming, and more point of concern.

Technological innovation further complicates ASEAN's border security. The moving, invisible parts of smuggling and trafficking networks are now embedded in digital networks platforms that help more secret information distribution, recruitment, coordination, and victim exploitation (Álvarez, 2022). While national laws may be interpreted differently, political will is not so easily produced, due to the sovereignty ethos in ASEAN (Maulaya, 2023). There are contrary indications of political will, as seen with various violent crime regional initiatives, including INTERPOL's Maharlika operations, and the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons Act (ACTIP), (INTERPOL, 2020; ASEAN, 2015). Nevertheless, both INTERPOL's Maharlika operations and ACTIP continue to face challenging operational environments due to varying enforcement practices, unequal national capacities, and ASEAN's principle of non-interference, which limits the development of a coherent and enforceable regional border security regime (Maulaya, 2023; Sundram, 2024).

In February of 2025, Myanmar stakeholders removed fraud housing units on the Thai-Myanmar border and arrested approximately 270 foreign nationals under various cyber-enabled trafficking situations (Reuters, 2025; AP News, 2025). Similarly, in January of 2025, the Cambodian government started a significant operation nationally with around 1,000 arrests in relation to global internet fraud and traffic networks (AP News, 2025). These instances not only show the changing nature of transnational crime in Southeast Asia but also expose the challenge of proving coordinated and sustained cross-border responses, which should have consistent guardrails just as required by regional organisations. Comprehensive and effective border management is genuinely not an unrealistic wish for ASEAN's regional stability and integration agenda. A secure and coordinated border system that simultaneously seeks to prevent crime and protect economic resilience priorities through enabling regional trade, keeping investor confidence, and upholding the rule of law (ASEAN Secretariat, 2021; UNODC, 2021). The trade-off is limited state authority, strengthens illicit flows of goods and people, and increases tensions of political strife between states such as ownership of high seas in the South China Sea (Storey, 2020). ASEAN must seek to increase regional security while conforming or balancing humanitarian obligations in the configuration of migration and human rights (AICHR, 2011).

There are many frameworks, such as the ACTIP and the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) Blueprint, but ASEAN's border security regime, overall, has collated limited frameworks to be operationally fragmented, yet inconsistently realized from an operational standpoint (Sundram, 2025). Researchers have consistently pointed to the inevitable shortcomings in ASEAN's security architecture and governance void, which further limits the region's ability to coordinate a sustainable response to transnational threats collective or solitary depending on the crisis' nature, in any real time (Security Governance and ASEAN's Political-Security Community, 2021; IISS, 2023). This represents both a practical and academic gap, as ASEAN has continued to slowly emerge with principles and action plans while there has been very limited research that explicitly examines the implications of how sufficiently legitimate regional governance may be able to actually adapt to new and evolving technology, governmental structures, educational and political processes as well operationalising increasing threats from border security consideration that may justify an increasing trajectory of regional consensus, regionalisation and development of a regional governance paradigm. However, these endeavors reveal the persistent gap between political commitments and operationalization effectively across various national circumstances.

This study argues that strengthening ASEAN border security requires not only addressing operational weaknesses but also advancing regional governance mechanisms that balance state sovereignty with collective security needs. That gap is the focus of this study with an aim to specifically explore the challenges facing ASEAN in developing a coordinated approach to border security, while also showing strategic opportunities to reinforce regional governance. More specifically, it looks to explore how ASEAN member states may address institutional and operational gaps; increase cooperation and applicable information-sharing; and use innovative technology to create a more harmonized and resilient border security regime.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of border security has also been reformulated at the global level and is no longer simply about managing physical boundaries, but also institutional and technological tools for addressing migration, terrorism, and illicit flows (Gustafsson, 2024). ASEAN's border security framework is multidimensional, encapsulating an economic, political, and security dimension (East Asia Forum, 2025). However, ASEAN's border security is restricted by the entrenched principles of sovereignty, noninterference,

and decision-making by consensus (Keling et al., 2011; Gultom, 2025). These principles, which are embedded in the ASEAN Charter and come from long historical traditions including the Bangkok Declaration, impose limits on collective and effective regional responses (Gultom, 2025). It has been noted by various scholars and commentators that these ASEAN norms are now causing paralysis in front of transnational crises, and are creating calls for new flexible, and if need be, collective security arrangements (East Asia Forum, 2025; Gultom, 2025).

Legal and policy harmonization in ASEAN involves aligning the national laws and regulations of member states to support regional cooperation (ASEAN, 2021). ASEAN operates on the principle of noninterference, meaning that decisions are made by consensus and are non-binding, respecting each member state's sovereignty (ASEAN, 2021). Harmonization efforts focus on creating common regulatory standards and frameworks that facilitate trade, investment, and border management while allowing each country to maintain its legal autonomy. The ASEAN General Principles for Harmonisation of Regulatory Regimes outline a process including establishing consensus on objectives, developing draft texts through working groups, and conducting domestic consultations before finalizing agreements (ASEAN, 2021). Harmonization supports the reduction of legal disparities and promotes a more integrated and predictable regulatory environment, which is essential for effective border cooperation and regional governance. However, the effectiveness of these harmonization efforts is often constrained by ASEAN's institutional norms and decision-making practices.

The “ASEAN Way” which is built based on the principles of sovereignty, non-interference, and consensus is often referred to as the main constraint on ASEAN's ability to address regional security threats. Organizations like the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime (AMMTC) remain poorly implemented because the member states prioritize sovereignty over regional coordination (Sundram, 2024). The non-interference principle limits effective collective action, even if threats in one state can rapidly move across borders (Suzuki, 2021). Additionally, ASEAN's cybercrime frameworks are ineffective because of prolonged negotiation, and the consensus mechanism slows down critical decision-making (Sari, 2024). However, by avoiding member state alienation, consensus has been seen as preserving legitimacy and inclusivity (Lando, 2022).

ASEAN has created a number of frameworks to combat border security issues, the most notable one being the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons (ACTIP), which was introduced in 2015 and the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) Blueprint 2025 (ASEAN, 2015; ASEAN, 2025). The frameworks display the region's recognition against existing transnational threats, including human trafficking, drug smuggling and cybercrime, while reaffirming broader objectives as peace, stability and integration (ASEAN, 2015; ASEAN, 2025). Scholars have acknowledged for example that while the ACTIP represents the first formal legal or charter basis for ASEAN to cooperate with its members, the implementation and monitoring varies greatly amongst members or differing political will and capacities (Sundram, 2024; Luong, 2024). In the same vein the stated goals of the APSC Blueprint did contemplate stronger coordinated cross border patrols and deeper intelligence cooperation and whilst outlining ambitious goals, the practicalities of any implementation has remained fragmented (Caballero-Anthony, 2022; IISS, 2023; East Asia Forum, 2025).

Overall, the literature indicates that ASEAN has established various legal and institutional mechanisms to address border security challenges. However, their effectiveness remains constrained by sovereignty concerns, non-interference, and differing national capacities among member states. While existing studies have examined ASEAN border security frameworks and the limitations of the ASEAN Way, limited attention has been given to the role of legal and policy harmonisation in improving the effectiveness of regional border security cooperation. Therefore, this study examines how legal and policy harmonisation can contribute to strengthening ASEAN border security.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative methodology comprising document analysis and policy review to examine ASEAN's border security governance and cooperation. The analysis draws on primary sources, including the ASEAN Charter, the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) Blueprint, as well as relevant declarations, joint statements, and agreements on border management and enforcement. These are supplemented by secondary sources, comprising reports from international organizations (e.g., UNODC and INTERPOL), non-governmental organizations, news reports, and peer-reviewed literature on transnational crime in Southeast Asia. All sources were selected based on their relevance, credibility, and contribution to the study.

This study is confined to the ten ASEAN member states, covering the time frame from 2015 to 2025, which allowed for the analysis of key developments in ASEAN after the adoption of the ASEAN Charter and the establishment of the ASEAN Community. The data was subjected to systematic analysis to uncover central themes, collaborative governance structures, enforcement challenges, and enforcement practices of border security cooperation in ASEAN. The study does not include fieldwork, such as interviews, but achieves a comprehensive and critical understanding of ASEAN's border security governance with respect to the governance of border security cooperation, through a robust review of documentary and scholarly sources.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) faces complex challenges in strengthening border security amid diverse security threats, complex geopolitical dynamics, and varying levels of capacity among member states. The ASEAN Border Management Cooperation Roadmap identifies significant challenges in managing regional borders effectively, particularly in responding to non-traditional security threats such as trafficking in persons, cybercrime, international economic crime and illicit drug trafficking (ASEAN Border Management Cooperation Map, 2021). Globalization requires ASEAN to enhance cooperation across member states to address non-traditional security threats, which are increasingly complicating border management (Wakkumbura, 2021). ASEAN plays a pivotal role in fostering cooperation among diverse member states, addressing the challenges in strengthening border security (Sundram, 2025). Effective border security in this diverse regional community necessitates robust governance and coordinated regional cooperation.

The ASEAN Border Management Cooperation Roadmap emphasizes the need for integrated and synergized efforts among various sectoral and law enforcement agencies to ensure the security and facilitation of regional movement in support of ASEAN Community Vision 2025 (ASEAN, 2021). This approach aligns with ASEAN's broader political-security objectives to maintain a peaceful, stable, and integrated region, recognizing border security as fundamental to sustainable economic and social connectivity (ASEAN, 2025). Building on the foundational role of ASEAN in fostering regional collaboration, member states continue to grapple with managing border security effectively and comprehensively (Sundram, 2025). The complexity and evolving nature

of the threat demand a coordinated regional response that balances national sovereignty with collective action.

Challenges of Strengthening ASEAN Border Security through Regional Governance and the Strategic Opportunities

This study shows several challenges and opportunities in strengthening ASEAN border security through regional governance. The key challenges the fragmentation of regional cooperation due to sovereignty concerns and ASEAN's non-interference principle (Chung, 2018), the rise of transnational crime, the need to balance economic growth with security priorities, and the strengthening of border security through strategic partnerships with external actors. The persistence of the non-interference principle and varying priorities among member states continues to pose an obstacle to fully integrated border management and collection action. Nevertheless, these challenges have simultaneously presented opportunities for ASEAN to strengthen governance, institutional capacity, and mutual trust among member states. By recognising share security risks and the need for harmonised approaches, ASEAN has shown a foundation for deeper cooperation and sustainable regional stability.

(a) The Fragmentation of Regional Cooperation Due to Sovereignty Concerns and ASEAN's Non-Interference Principle

Document analysis reveals that the fragmentation of regional cooperation, driven by sovereignty concerns and the principle of non-interference, remains a major challenge to strengthening ASEAN border security. As core elements of the ASEAN way, these principles have shaped the political and institutional frameworks of member states, preserved national autonomy while limited collective responses to transnational crises (Ali et al., 2021; Dar & Sayed, 2017). El Taki (2024) revisited Krasner's framework, emphasizing the enduring relevance of sovereignty amidst globalization and regional cooperation, while calling for a reconceptualization of sovereignty to adapt to new realities (El Taki, 2024). Likewise, a 2015 analysis by Vijay Kumar Badetia underscored ongoing challenges, such as weak governance and 'organized hypocrisy,' where states maintain formal sovereignty while lacking full control domestically (Badetia, 2015). Non-intervention was once a foundational strength of ASEAN, deeply embedded in its identity and guiding its regional relations. However, it has become a subject of ongoing conversation, focusing not on abandoning this core belief but on redefining it to meet a

future that requires greater cooperation, empathy, and accountability among member states (Raba, 2025). Notably, ASEAN's efforts to address transnational crime, trafficking, and other cross-border threats reveal the limits placed by sovereignty and non-interference on collective action.

The implications of these findings are significant for ASEAN's security architecture. According to The ASEAN Charter Article 2 Principle 2, ASEAN and its Member States shall act in accordance with the following Principles: e) non-interference in the internal affairs of ASEAN Member States (ASEAN Secretariat, 2008). This principle aimed to ensure the sovereignty and independence of ASEAN Member States in order to maintain and enhance peace, security and stability, and further strengthen peace-oriented values in the region (ASEAN Secretariat, 2008). The inclusion of the non-interference principle in the ASEAN Charter explicitly reflects this cautious stance, serving as a safeguard to protect national independence and prevent external intrusion under the guise of regional collaboration (Corthay, 2016). This framework has been pivotal in maintaining peaceful relations and regional stability by ensuring that no member state feels compelled or coerced into accepting external oversight or interference (Venkatachalam et al., 2023). However, while the principle enhances sovereignty protection, it simultaneously restricts the depth of ASEAN's collective action, particularly on sensitive security issues that transcend borders. Therefore, respecting sovereignty through non-interference is both a political necessity and a structural constraint that ASEAN must balance carefully to promote cooperation while safeguarding each member's autonomy.

To improve ASEAN's border security cooperation, it is crucial to develop flexible, voluntary, and consensus-based mechanisms that respect member states' sovereignty while enhancing collective capabilities against shared threats. The ASEAN Border Management Cooperation Roadmap exemplifies such efforts, focusing on strengthening information sharing, intelligence exchange, and coordinated actions to combat transnational crimes without disrupting regional trade and mobility (ASEAN, 2021). Enhanced intelligence sharing can facilitate the early detection of cross-border criminal activities and strengthen regional responses to threats such as human trafficking, arms smuggling, cybercrime and illicit trade (INTERPOL, 2022; ASEAN, 2021). Moreover, coordinated enforcement measures can reduce operational gaps among national agencies, thereby improving regional border management (ASEAN, 2021).

In addition, initiatives such as ASEAN Single Visa Concept together with greater cooperation in technological and intelligence capabilities, provide practical pathways for deeper regional integration while preserving national sovereignty (ASEAN Secretariat, 2021; Badetia, 2015). The adoption of technologies such as biometric identification systems, digital surveillance tools, and integrated border databases can improve border monitoring and strengthen the detection of security threats (INTERPOL, 2022; ASEAN, 2024). Beyond strengthening border control, these measures can facilitate legitimate trade and travel thereby supporting ASEAN's broader objectives of regional cooperation and economic integration (ASEAN, 2025).

(b) *Increasing Transnational Crimes across ASEAN Member State*

Recent findings reveal that transnational crimes across ASEAN member states have become increasingly sophisticated, diverse, and widespread, significantly complicating efforts to strengthen border security and regional cooperation. Crimes such as drug trafficking, human trafficking, cybercrime, and illicit trade thrive on the lucrative profits they generate, which in Southeast Asia include an estimated \$13 billion in illegal gains from human trafficking alone in 2017 (ILO & Walk Free Foundation, 2017).

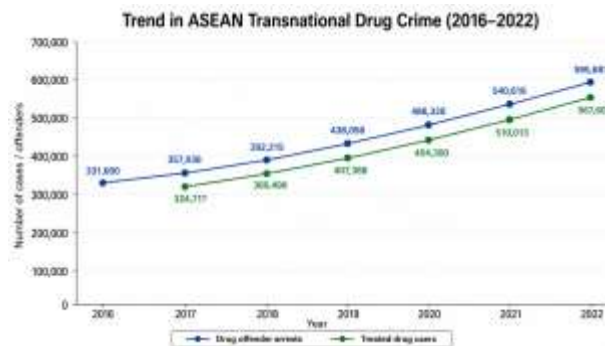


Figure 1: Trend in ASEAN Transnational Drug Crime (2016-2022)

Source: Author's calculation based on ASEAN Committee on Crime and Transnational Crime. (2023). *ASEAN Drug Monitoring Report 2022*. ASEAN Secretariat.

Figure 1 shows a steady increase in drug-related offences across ASEAN between 2016 and 2022. Drug offender arrests rose from 331,600 cases in 2016 to 595,687 cases in 2022, while treated drug users increased from 324,717 in 2017 to 567,609 in 2022.

These trends show that drug trafficking still a persistent transnational security challenge in ASEAN, highlighting the need for stronger border management, intelligence sharing, and regional cooperation mechanisms (ASEAN Committee on Crime and Transnational Crime, 2023).

The implications of these findings present profound challenges for ASEAN's security policies, primarily due to the organization's foundational principle of non-interference, which prioritizes respect for member states' sovereignty. This principle, while essential for regional harmony, can limit the depth and speed of joint actions against crimes that inherently transcend national borders, such as drug and human trafficking or cyber offenses (ASEAN, 2021). Disparate political will, resource capabilities, and varying legal systems among member states further complicate coordinated efforts. Even with Malaysia's 2025 ASEAN Chairmanship prioritizing the issue through initiatives and the establishment of specialized working groups targeting trafficking, cybercrime, and money laundering, differences in implementation capacity continue to pose barriers. The growing prevalence of cyber-enabled crimes adds another layer of complexity, demanding a cohesive regional cybersecurity strategy to protect critical infrastructure and facilitate cross-border law enforcement collaboration (ASEAN Cyber Security Cooperation, 2022).

Addressing these intertwined challenges requires ASEAN to adopt a multifaceted improvement strategy that balances sovereignty concerns with the imperative for regional integration in security governance. Technological enhancements such as upgrading digital surveillance systems and employing biometric identification technologies are essential for building resilient and efficient borders (ASEAN, 2024). ASEAN's Border Management Cooperation Roadmap provides a framework centered on voluntary, consensus-based information sharing and coordinated actions that respect national sovereignty while promoting collective security efforts. Strengthening institutional capacities through comprehensive training programs for law enforcement, prosecutors, and judiciary members is vital to boost regional responsiveness to complex transnational crimes (INTERPOL, 2022). Additionally, harmonizing national laws related to mutual legal assistance, extradition, and asset recovery can streamline judicial cooperation and enhance the effectiveness of cross-border prosecutions. Ultimately, these improvements foster a flexible yet unified regional approach, enabling ASEAN to confront the evolving landscape of transnational crime while maintaining peace and the integrity of member states' governance structures (ILO & Walk Free Foundation, 2017; ASEAN, 2024).

(c) *Balancing Growth and Security: Rethinking ASEAN Border Governance in the Age of Economic Integration*

ASEAN's efforts to strengthen regional integration but it faces a big challenge. While economic cooperation benefits trade and investment, it also provides an opportunity for organized crime to thrive. The ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) promotes freer movement of goods and persons, but this also gives opportunities for criminals to exploit weaknesses in border controls and poor governance (Lee, 2021). The Golden Triangle area, which covers Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos, is a global center for methamphetamine production and trafficking (PECK, 2024; Dickinson, 2025). In 2024, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reported that 236 tons of methamphetamine were seized in East and Southeast Asia, with most coming from Shan State in Myanmar (Dickinson, 2025). This is a 24% increase from previous years and shows how weak border security and uneven law enforcement make regional cooperation hard (PECK, 2024; Strangio, 2024). Such weaknesses expose deeper governance gaps within states and highlight broader instability in ASEAN's security framework (Sundram, 2024). Because ASEAN links security to nation-building and development, one issue in one state can cause issues across the region (Suzuki, 2021). ASEAN's principles of sovereignty, non-interference, and consensus further constrain effective responses, giving transnational criminal organizations room to operate. Although the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime (AMMTC) exists, its inconsistent implementation reduces its impact (Sundram, 2024). These findings show that ASEAN must treat border security as a regional priority requiring coordinated strategies, pooled resources, and stronger political will.

Several lessons come from these findings. Firstly, the absence of standardized laws and inconsistent enforcement in ASEAN countries creates chances for organized criminal groups to grow. Some countries like Singapore and Malaysia have stronger border control and customs in contrast, border areas within the Golden Triangle region continue to face enforcement and governance challenges that are often exploited by transnational criminal networks (Sundram, 2024; Dickinson, 2025). Criminals will always target the weakest link, which makes the whole region unsafe until laws are better matched. Secondly, security and economic growth are linked. Unstable borders deter investment, as seen when the Thailand–Cambodia border conflict in 2025 halted billions in trade and undermined investor confidence (Neth, 2025). Lee (2021) agrees that long-term economic success depends on better cooperation on security issues beyond just

traditional threats. Finally, ASEAN's consensus-based decision-making slows responses to fast-changing challenges such as cybercrime, online trafficking, and illicit finance (Sari, 2024; Ramadhan, 2022). Sari (2024) notes that while ASEAN has frameworks to address cybercrime, the consensus principle prevents stronger enforcement. Ramadhan (2022) adds that this delay makes common cybersecurity rules difficult to implement. Lando (2022) highlights that the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) dispute resolution system balances sovereignty with compliance, suggesting ASEAN could adopt similar mechanisms. Collectively, these lessons show that border security should be seen not as an obstacle to integration but as a precondition for sustaining it.

Looking ahead, two practical improvements stand out as particularly promising. The first is that ASEAN needs a clear system for sharing intelligence among member states. Currently, information exchanges among ASEAN states tend to be irregular, inconsistent, and often slowed by political concerns, leaving dangerous openings that transnational criminals can take advantage of (Sundram, 2024; East Asia Forum, 2024). Establishing a centralized platform for border crimes, supported by uniform reporting protocols, would allow states to share information in real time and strengthen trust. This would close intelligence gaps, reduce duplication, and improve collective preparedness (Lee, 2021). Second, ASEAN should expand the use of "minilateral" coalitions, where smaller groups of willing states cooperate on specific security issues. The Malacca Straits Patrol, jointly conducted by Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and later Thailand, provides a model which having sharply reduced piracy in one of the world's busiest shipping routes (Zulhatta & Marsetio, 2023). Khoo (2015) argues that reliance on consensus has weakened ASEAN's security capacity, as urgent decisions are often delayed. Minilateralism mitigates this by allowing states that are ready to act to move ahead while remaining within ASEAN's framework. Suzuki (2021) also notes that the success of such targeted partnerships highlights how flexible cooperation can enhance regional stability without undermining ASEAN's unity. Minilateral groups can act as a "policy lab," where small groups try ideas that might later spread to the whole region (Chheang, 2020). These two reforms, which are improved intelligence sharing and flexible minilateralism would both strengthen ASEAN's capacity to respond to border threats and maintain the unity necessary for long-term integration. ASEAN's credibility depends on its capacity to progress beyond symbolic declarations toward genuine problem-solving (Lando, 2022; Sundram, 2024). By implementing these strategies, ASEAN can transform from a loosely aligned regional association into a more robust and security-aware community equipped to tackle the challenges of the 21st century.

(d) *Strengthening ASEAN Security through Strategic Partnerships with External Actors*

ASEAN has increasingly engaged with external partners such as INTERPOL, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), and international NGOs to strengthen its response to border and security challenges (Sundram, 2025). These collaborations provide ASEAN with sources that it often lacks, including intelligence-sharing networks, technical expertise, and specialized training for law enforcement (Merced, 2017). For example, UNODC has been instrumental in supporting the implementation of the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons (ACTIP), ensuring that member states align domestic legislation with international standards (Di Floristella, 2015). Similarly, cooperation with INTERPOL has allowed ASEAN states to access wider intelligence databases, thereby improving the capacity to track criminal networks operating across both physical borders and digital borders (Ling, 2021). Despite these benefits, partnerships remain mostly fragmented and project-based, heavily dependent on donor funding and short-term initiatives (Khoo, 2015). This reflects ASEAN's consensus-driven and non-interference principles, which make it difficult to institutionalize binding cooperative mechanisms with external actors (Mueller, 2021). While such an approach preserves state sovereignty, it also limits the capacity of external partnerships to offer sustainable, long-term solutions to border security issues (Sundram, 2025).

The limitations of fragmented partnerships create several implications for ASEAN's role as a regional security actor. An overdependence on temporary initiatives has led to intelligence gaps and weakened collective preparedness, allowing transnational criminal networks to adapt faster than ASEAN's response mechanisms (Envall & Hall, 2016). This reduces ASEAN's credibility and undermines its claim of centrality in regional security governance, particularly as major powers such as the United States and China question ASEAN's reliability to act as a reliable partner (Ling, 2021). ASEAN's model of "soft institutionalism," which relies on voluntary commitments rather than binding enforcement, has also slowed decision-making and prevented strong responses to pressing threats such as drug trafficking, cybercrime, and money laundering (Khoo, 2015). In contrast, the European Union's Frontex has demonstrated the advantages of centralized surveillance systems, joint operational units, and integrated digital crime databases in combating transnational threats (Marchi, 2016). Although ASEAN cannot simply replicate European structures due to sovereignty concerns, its reluctance to adopt

similar governance tools has resulted in cooperation that is often more symbolic than effective (Mueller, 2021). This perception not only weakens trust in ASEAN's security capabilities but also poses risks to broader integration goals, as unresolved security risks threaten both economic stability and investor confidence (Sundram, 2025).

To address these challenges, scholars suggest that ASEAN move beyond fragmented and short-term collaborations by establishing institutionalized mechanisms with its external partners. One approach is to establish ASEAN-led regional training and research centers, supported by partners such as INTERPOL and UNODC, focusing on priority areas including cybercrime prevention, anti-money laundering, and human trafficking (Ling, 2021; Merced, 2017). Unlike ad hoc workshops or donor-funded seminars, permanent centers would professionalize law enforcement agencies, facilitate the sharing of best practices, and develop a long-term knowledge base tailored to Southeast Asia's unique challenges (Sundram, 2025). Another promising strategy involves developing joint digital cooperation platforms to monitor transnational crimes occurring in cyberspaces, such as cryptocurrency-based money laundering, online trafficking, and cyber fraud (Marchi, 2016; Envall & Hall, 2016). By collaborating with external partners providing advanced cybersecurity expertise, ASEAN could establish a secure regional crime database and real-time digital surveillance system, thereby address existing intelligence gaps and anticipating emerging threats (Mueller, 2021). These strategies highlight how ASEAN can enhance the security toolkit through external partnerships in ways that are forward-looking and technologically adaptive, ensuring cooperation progresses from symbolic agreements to sustainable mechanisms capable of addressing both traditional and digital-era border security threats (Sundram, 2025).

CONCLUSION

ASEAN's border security remains hampered by serious constraints because of its founding principle of non-interference, conflicting political agendas, and disparate enforcement capabilities among its member states. While there are institutional mechanisms such as the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) and the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons (ACTIP), their application is patchy and lacks operational depth. This research concludes that deeper regional collaboration through better information exchange, digital surveillance, and collaborative enforcement procedures may provide a realistic way forward for a more robust security framework. To enhance ASEAN's border governance, this research recommends four main strategies:

(1) creating a centralized intelligence-sharing system to facilitate real-time cross-border responses; (2) implementing AI-powered and biometric technologies to upgrade border surveillance systems; (3) enhancing joint capacity-building programs with collaborators like INTERPOL and UNODC; and (4) standardizing enforcement procedures among member states for operational consistency. Research in the future must evaluate ASEAN's mechanisms' on-ground efficacy in risk-prone zones such as the Golden Triangle, conduct fieldwork with frontline agencies to reveal operational limitations, and investigate artificial intelligence's and big data's function in predictive crime prevention.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest associated with this publication.

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