

## ASEAN'S ROLE IN ENSURING STABILITY AND SECURITY IN THE EAST SEA AREA

### O PAPEL DA ASEAN NA GARANTIA DA ESTABILIDADE E DA SEGURANÇA NA REGIÃO DO MAR DO LESTE

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#### Abstract

Since its inception, ASEAN has played a critical role in Southeast Asia's economic, political, cultural, and social development. The international community has praised ASEAN's position and role as a result of its operations. ASEAN has initiated and chaired numerous cooperation mechanisms that link cooperation relations between regional members with countries outside the region to ensure stability and security in the East Sea region. ASEAN has initiated and chaired numerous cooperation mechanisms that link cooperation relations between regional members and countries outside the region to ensure stability and security in the East Sea region. With the initiative, flexibility, and ingenuity in operations, ASEAN has known how to take advantage and promote its "central role" to attract the attention and participation of the international community, especially major countries, in properly handling related issues to the East Sea. Although there were certainly challenging times before the impact of many objective and subjective factors, it does not reduce or deny the position and role of ASEAN. With an overall approach through historical and logical methods, combined with analysis and evaluation of some specific events, this article will clarify the role of ASEAN in ensuring stability and security in the East Sea area. We came to some conclusions on that basis, emphasizing that ASEAN continues to have an irreplaceable role, especially in the current context.

**Keyword:** ASEAN. China. Relations. Southeast Asia.

#### Resumo

Desde a sua criação, a ASEAN tem desempenhado um papel crucial no desenvolvimento econômico, político, cultural e social do Sudeste Asiático. A comunidade internacional tem elogiado a posição e o papel da ASEAN como resultado de suas operações. A ASEAN iniciou e presidiu inúmeros mecanismos de cooperação que vinculam as relações de cooperação entre os membros regionais e países de fora da região para garantir a estabilidade e a segurança na região do Mar do Leste. Com iniciativa, flexibilidade e engenhosidade em suas operações, a ASEAN soube aproveitar e promover seu "papel central" para atrair a atenção e a participação da comunidade internacional, especialmente dos principais países, no tratamento adequado de questões relacionadas ao Mar do Leste. Embora certamente tenha havido momentos desafiadores no passado, impactados por muitos fatores objetivos e subjetivos, isso não diminui nem nega a posição e o papel da ASEAN. Com uma abordagem abrangente por meio de métodos históricos e lógicos, combinada com a análise e avaliação de alguns eventos específicos, este artigo esclarecerá o papel da ASEAN na garantia da estabilidade e segurança na área do Mar do Leste. Com base nisso, chegamos a algumas conclusões, enfatizando que a ASEAN continua a desempenhar um papel insubstituível, especialmente no contexto atual.

**Palavras-chave:** ASEAN. China. Relações. Sudeste Asiático.



## 1 INTRODUCTION

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a political, economic, cultural, and social organization of countries in the region established on August 8, 1967 (ASEAN, 1967). After the development stages, ASEAN has become an organization with an important position and role in the regional and international community (Khanh & Chuong, 2010). Through operational mechanisms, ASEAN countries always work hard and play an increasingly important role in ensuring stability, security, and regional development, including the East Sea region.

When entering the first decades of the 21st century, major countries gradually adjusted and launched different strategies to increase their influence in the Asia-Pacific region. This has made Southeast Asia always develop "vibrant," opening up many opportunities and challenges for the area (Vietnam News Agency, 2022). Both cooperation and competition are considered prominent features in the relations of countries and the existing operating mechanism of this region. Chuong, (2022); Duc, (2022) have the same opinion that the regional structure, balance of power, and international relations are subject to many changes, even though they need to be clearly defined. The impact of strategic competition between major powers can affect the stability of Southeast Asia, including the East Sea region.

In light of this, ASEAN is promoting its values and central role in its activities through its prominent role in preserving peace in the East Sea (Chuong, 2016, p.34). Experience has demonstrated that ASEAN has encouraged its initiative, creativity, and adaptability in addressing stability, security, and regional development issues. ASEAN is reasonably active in promoting confidence-building measures, developing regional frameworks and mechanisms for cooperation, and connecting with outside partners and vast countries to achieve its objectives.

Although in recent times, the positions of a few member countries related to the East Sea issue may need to be in higher consensus (Duc, 2022), but that does not reduce or negate the status and role of ASEAN in maintaining stability and peace in the East Sea region. On the contrary, the current context requires ASEAN to continue promoting its "central role" in leading and coordinating adequately settling disputes in the East Sea, thereby stabilizing the Asia-Pacific region in general and Southeast Asia in particular.

This also shows the purpose and operating principles of ASEAN from its establishment until now.

Southeast Asia occupies a strategic position globally, acting as a vital link between the Eurasian continent. It is also a key region connecting major maritime trade routes between the Indian and Pacific oceans. Southeast Asia has emerged as a central hub in the strategic competition between major powers such as the United States and China. “Its important strategic location and the abundant resources make the South China Sea a target of contention among the claimant countries” (Kipgen, 2018).

The findings of this study have both theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, this research contributes to the academic understanding of ASEAN’s role in ensuring stability and security in the East Sea. It also offers a new perspective on the strategic competition among major powers such as the United States and China in this region. Practically, the study sheds light on the current situation and the challenges ASEAN faces in maintaining its central role amid intensifying strategic competition.

## **2 LITERATURE REVIEW**

Several domestic and foreign scholars have studied and researched ASEAN's role in maintaining peace and stability in the East Sea region from different angles. According to the methodology, the studies primarily concentrate on defining the role, effectiveness, constraints, and causes... of resolving ASEAN's challenges. Most studies claim that ASEAN plays a significant role in ensuring political stability and security in the East Sea region.

However, there are still some differences when assessing the functional role of ASEAN in the regional security situation. According to some, given the current shifting environment, ASEAN's involvement in the East Sea issue has diminished somewhat from earlier times, occasionally "moving from solidarity to disintegration" (Collinson & Roberts, 2013, p.37). Tang, (2016) commented that ASEAN has failed to resolve maritime disputes because some bloc members still believe that "the East Sea is not ASEAN's problem". This has significantly affected all member countries' unity and "consensus" when discussing and solving related challenges. However, when approaching from another perspective, the author believes that the division in the East Sea issue has become and will become a requirement and motivation for ASEAN to

reconsider its operating principles and more effective actions (Tang, 2018). As one of the more successful regional organizations in the world, ASEAN has been the driver of regional institution building in the Indo-Pacific (Mely, 2022, p.1).

In a more comprehensive perspective, Thayer, (2013) claimed that although ASEAN has worked very hard to perfect the legal foundation gradually, the system of principles, mechanisms, and frameworks for internal and external cooperation since its founding, particularly since its first declaration on the East Sea issue in 1992, the requirements have not yet been met. Meanwhile, some people think that the prolonged (if not unfinishable) negotiation process to come to the conclusion of a Code of Conduct in the East Sea (COC) among relevant parties is affecting the "central" role of ASEAN in various aspects (Nam, 2017). In fact, in some specific times or situations, ASEAN still shows a certain "embarrassment" in resolving issues in the East Sea due to the lack of binding legal bases for the related parties (Schofield, 2013). Meanwhile, the issue of the East Sea dispute "involves not only the countries in dispute but also other major world powers, including the United States" (Kipgen, 2018).

From a different perspective, some people find that the internal ASEAN still needs to reach a high level of consensus, partly because it is influenced by China's policy adjustment towards the Asia-Pacific region, including Southeast Asia. This country advocates solving related issues under a bilateral mechanism, strengthening several trade and investment policies with each member country to reduce the degree of cohesion of ASEAN and realize its own goals (Patrick, 2015; Chuong et al., 2022). Therefore, one author believes that one of the effective measures is that ASEAN needs to be more proactive in promoting negotiations to create and apply the COC in relations with China, contributing to ensuring regional security and stability (Storey, 2017; Cuong, 2023).

According to Huong, (2014) who also spoke about the significance of ASEAN in the region, ASEAN is a body that fosters regional cooperation while maintaining a central and balanced position in both domestic and foreign affairs. However, the operation regulation is still governed by a number of principles, such as "consensus" and "non-interference". The level of strategic competition of major regional countries is constantly increasing, making the organization This group has not fully promoted its capacity and central position in relations with other countries. As can be seen, since its establishment, ASEAN has consistently played a crucial part in a moderately effective mechanism for cooperation in managing, controlling, and handling regional conflicts based on

warranting the goals and fundamental principles (Khanh & Chuong, 2010, p.29). Therefore, to continue to ensure effective cooperation mechanisms, especially to be able to solve internal problems as well as external relations with external countries related to political security, ASEAN must continue to innovate its operation method to affirm its role and position in the context of many changes (Tra, 2020; Phuc, 2023).

It can be seen that scholars have analyzed and adequately assessed the relevant issue, albeit from different perspectives and content approaches to the problem. The most common point is that the studies all emphasize and affirm the critical position and role of ASEAN in various forms and levels in ensuring regional security, including the East Sea.

Although we agree with the above assessments, we still feel inadequate and think that ASEAN's role in maintaining stability and security in the East Sea should be comprehensively reviewed from the legal and practices in the past as well as the context has changed a lot. It is necessary to consider the position and role of ASEAN in the context of limitations, difficulties, and challenges stemming from ASEAN's internal binding factors as well as the impacts of objective factors from outside the region; on that basis to evaluate and draw conclusions about the role of ASEAN in the current context.

### **3 METHODOLOGY**

This work mainly uses historical and logical research methods combined with analytical, comparative, and contrasting methods to evaluate and comment on issues and events. We rely on the development stages, essential documents, and documents of ASEAN from its establishment to the present as well as operational practices and development trends to assess ASEAN's role in ensuring stability and security in the East Sea region.

Accordingly, this paper will focus on addressing the following two research questions:

- (1) What key principles and cooperation mechanisms has ASEAN established and led?
- (2) How has ASEAN demonstrated its role in ensuring stability and security in the East Sea, and what challenges does the organization face?

## 4 RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1 ASEAN ESTABLISHES AND PRESIDES OVER THE IMPLEMENTATION OF PRINCIPLES AND COOPERATION MECHANISMS

Since its founding, one of the crucial goals of ASEAN outlined in the ASEAN Declaration of 8 August 1967 (Bangkok Declaration) has been to promote regional harmony and stability through respect for justice and the rule of law in the relations between countries in the region and compliance with the principles of the United Nations Charter (ASEAN, 1967). The Bangkok Declaration is regarded as a crucial legal document establishing the fundamental tenets of ASEAN operation: cooperation, friendliness, and non-interference in one another's internal affairs (Duc, 2022).

The 2008 ASEAN Charter emphasizes the group's commitment to upholding, promoting, and further solidifying the region's values about law and order. ASEAN countries have also jointly established several principles and measures to achieve this goal: respect for all member countries' independence, sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity, and national identity; joint commitment and shared responsibility in promoting stability, security, and prosperity in the region; and peaceful resolution of disputes (ASEAN, 2008).

With these goals, ASEAN countries have built several frameworks and mechanisms for bilateral and multilateral intra-regional cooperation in the fields of politics - security, economy, culture - society, and other specialized areas of collaboration. The multifaceted cooperation within the same organization has attached and linked the member countries together, thereby contributing to consolidating and ensuring a peaceful and stable regional environment, building a strong ASEAN, and creating favorable conditions for the development of each member country. At the same time, ASEAN plays an increasingly important role in preserving stability in the region and East Sea, stabilizing the security situation, and developing the Asia-Pacific region and the world. Mutual understanding and trust among ASEAN member countries are increasing through many activities, including maintaining regular contact at all levels, especially among senior leaders.

ASEAN actively initiated and actively promoted the effects of many mechanisms to ensure regional stability and security, such as the "Declaration on the Zone of Peace,

Freedom and Neutrality" (ZOPFAN) in 1971, "Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia" (TAC) in 1976; "ASEAN Declaration on the South China Sea" in 1992 (ASEAN, 1992); "Southeast Asian Nuclear Weapon Free Zone Treaty" (SEANWFZ) 1995; "Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea" (DOC) 2002 (ASEAN, 2002). These are essential legal bases that settle relations between countries in the region and help ASEAN develop ties with the outside world.

In addition, ASEAN established the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) with the participation of many countries to promote dialogue and consultation mechanisms on security and political issues in the region, build trust, develop preventive diplomacy, creating a basis for promoting stability and security through dialogue and cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region. ASEAN also actively encourages collaboration within the bloc as well as with external partners through various frameworks, forms, and measures to deal with traditional and non-traditional security challenges such as terrorism, international, transnational crime, and natural disasters: ASEAN+3 (China, Japan, and Korea), East Asia Summit (EAS)...

ASEAN's role in ensuring stability and security in the region and the East Sea, in particular, has been confirmed through the mechanisms mentioned earlier. Countries in the bloc have cooperated to develop together based on respecting independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity, an inevitable trend that countries choose. However, the increase in international cooperation has potential conflicts and disagreements in establishing international cooperation relations. Even within the ASEAN alliance, how to resolve arising disputes to ensure the legitimate interests of the disputing parties in particular and without prejudice to regional stability and security, in general, is a matter of primary concern.

#### 4.2 ASEAN'S EFFORTS TO PROMOTE ITS ROLE IN ENSURING STABILITY AND SECURITY IN THE EAST SEA REGION AND THE CHALLENGES

Disputes in the East Sea area are complex issues involving many countries inside and outside Southeast Asia, while ASEAN's activities are based on the principles of "Consultation" and "Consensus." Therefore, in recent years, ASEAN has not supported any member country in the related issue. Consequently, it is suggested that ASEAN has failed to ensure stability and security in the East Sea because it has yet to issue a joint

statement and resolve the disputes in the East Sea (Collinson & Roberts, 2013, p.35). Does this statement reflect reality and affect the position and role of ASEAN in ensuring stability and security in the East Sea?

With the ASEAN Charter, this organization does not have the authority to settle disputes in the East Sea area. This responsibility rests with the parties directly involved. According to the "Consultation" and "Consensus" principles, all member countries must discuss all ASEAN issues, and decisions are only made if all member countries agree or do not object (Huong, 2014). This mode of operation has been applied since its birth and development, becoming a principle respected by all member countries. However, the ASEAN Charter also affirms the basic principles of ASEAN: respect for independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, equality, and national identity; non-aggression or threat of use of force; peaceful settlement of disputes; non-interference in each other's internal affairs... at the same time, continuing to affirm the principles and purposes of ASEAN which are to ensure and promote peace, security, and stability, and to strengthen the values towards peace further in the region (ASEAN, 2008).

In reality, so far, there has not been a manifestation of contradictions that are antagonistic or even supportive of each other relatively high between the principle of "consensus" and ASEAN's responsibility to ensure and promote peace in the region. Upholding the principle of consensus forces relevant parties to exercise restraint, strengthen diplomatic contacts, negotiate, and settle disagreements with peaceful solutions. The focus of the "consensus" of ASEAN, in form, is still loose, but from a different perspective from the partners (ASEAN+), it opens up a space for ASEAN to exist and realize its goals. As a result, ASEAN has created value in an interdependent world by attracting countries both within and outside the region.

Upholding the values mentioned above, ASEAN has established itself in ensuring and promoting peace, security, and stability, as well as further strengthening the values toward peace in the region and making sure that the people and member states of ASEAN can live peacefully with the rest of the world in an environment of fairness, democracy, and harmony (ASEAN, 2008). According to Duc, (2022) these are the foundations for ASEAN to fulfill its role and responsibilities in ensuring East Sea stability and security. ASEAN has established a mechanism with major countries and external partners to engage in discussions to build trust, strengthen dialogue, and manage conflicts; solve global problems through dialogue and cooperation with one another; and seeks to create

appropriate frameworks for engaging with external partners jointly addressing security, cooperation, and development issues that may affect the region.

Since 1994, ASEAN has established the ARF to promote peace and security through dialogue and cooperation in the Asia-Pacific to promote dialogue and consultation mechanisms on security and political issues in the region, build trust, and develop preventive diplomacy (Thang & Son, 2022). ARF creates conditions for major countries to have a voice, express their views and positions, and promote their role in the typical work of the region, including ensuring stability and security in the East Sea (Khanh & Chuong, 2010). As a result, ASEAN has attracted the attention of many major countries both within and outside the region, as well as many global organizations, and has become an indispensable cooperation mechanism for many international partners. Since 2010, ASEAN has also developed a mechanism for the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+), which includes Defense Ministers from both within and outside the region, to discuss international and regional issues. If ARF is a political-security mechanism, ADMM+ is a security-defense mechanism that helps shape the region's primary multilateral mechanism, with ASEAN playing a pivotal role in connecting cooperative relations.

Through many different forums, ASEAN has successfully handled relations with major countries with a unique approach, especially in managing relations with major countries and partners in various forms; at the same time, it seeks to steer ties with major countries in the most beneficial direction for ASEAN and maintain peace in the East Sea. ASEAN has been actively developing a "Regulation for Dialogue" with major countries and partners both inside and outside the region. Instead of using or threatening to use force, this is a method of dealing with substantial countries and partners through dialogue and cooperation at various levels to improve trust, avoid misunderstandings, and promote mutually beneficial cooperation.

Through effective cooperation mechanisms and frameworks, ASEAN has received the respect of major countries, promoting its position in ensuring stability and security in the East Sea. The successes of ASEAN, with its central role in several political-security cooperation mechanisms, is one of the essential factors attracting the profound attention of a number of major countries, including the US, to this area.

In November 2017, the visit to Vietnam and the Philippines by then-US President Donald Trump marked an essential step in US policy on maintaining peace, stability, and

maritime security in the East Sea (Huong, 2017). This event shows that the US will remain responsible and committed to engaging in Asia-Pacific and continue to support and actively participate in essential cooperation frameworks, including APEC, ASEAN, and the East Asia Summit. Donald Trump's Asia tour is the most crucial trip related to Washington's foreign policy, showing that the US has always connected bilateral military cooperation with regional security agreements (Vietnam News Agency, 2018). In the context of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Vietnam's ASEAN Chairmanship Year 2020 ended with the success of the 37th ASEAN Summit and related summits taking place in the form of online form from 12 April 2020 to 15 November 2020. Vietnam has played a leading role in mobilizing the bloc's collective action capacity, creating a mechanism to promote the common unity of member countries, and maintaining ASEAN's consensus on regional issues and the world, including the East Sea (Tra, 2020).

The relationship between ASEAN and major countries and partners inside and outside the region substantially ensures stability and security in the East Sea. In terms of the interests of partners in relations with ASEAN related to ensuring stability and security in the East Sea, ASEAN's position does not stop at building measures, strengthening trust, and limiting the escalating tensions between stakeholders, but also an object for the parties to take advantage of, thereby making their own strategic calculations. The DOC is a political document aimed at a binding agreement to stabilize relations and maintain peace in the East Sea (Vietnam News Agency, 2022). It is considered a vital premise to step by step to the more important statement in the future, which is the COC. This will create a stricter legal basis for the settlement of disputes through the process of negotiation and negotiation by peaceful solutions rather than by armed intervention or violence. Until then, ASEAN will be more effective in its role in ensuring stability and security in the East Sea (Thayer, 2013; Storey, 2017).

In fact, some ASEAN member states are still economically and strategically dependent on China directly or indirectly (Patrick, 2015, p.157). As a result, since the DOC was signed in 2002 (ASEAN, 2002), many working groups and high-level official meetings on DOC implementation have been held. However, the desired results among stakeholders, including China, have yet to be achieved (Chuong, 2016). Although in recent years, ASEAN countries and China have restarted negotiations with the COC again, there is an opinion that "keeping in view China's assertive posture, it is not likely to agree to the COC anytime soon" (Mishra, 2017). Although it is a big country, China is

looking for support from some ASEAN members, especially in confrontations with countries that do not have disputes in the East Sea area. This also explains why China always emphasizes that the East Sea dispute is a separate matter of each concerned country and must be handled through a bilateral arbitration mechanism rather than a multilateral one (Wang & Zhai, 2019, pp.90-91). In a way, it shows that China needs to be more vital to solving all problems independently, but it also has many factors dependent on ASEAN (Schofield, 2013). Although China believes that the South China Sea is not a common problem of ASEAN countries, this is always a hot topic because it concerns the security and stability of the region, as well as the freedom of international maritime and aviation.

Therefore, ensuring stability and security in the East Sea is not only the responsibility of ASEAN but also the shared responsibility of the world community, especially for developed countries with maritime strengths, such as the United States, India, and Russia... This mission invisibly puts ASEAN in a vital position in balancing relations to maintain and ensure regional security, especially in the context that maritime security is becoming an always exciting topic in many countries. Therefore, at the present stage and in the future, ASEAN still has the ability to limit the number of partners (ASEAN+), including China, to continue promoting its initiative and role in unique stability and security in the East Sea.

In 2012, ASEAN failed to issue a joint statement following the conclusion of the ASEAN Summit in Phnom Penh (Cambodia), making it difficult for ASEAN to unite and unify in the face of the increasing involvement of major countries, China being a prime example. ASEAN diplomats have failed to find common ground on how to handle the territorial dispute between four ASEAN member states (Brunei, Malaysia, Philippines, Vietnam) and China in the East Sea. This is the first time in ASEAN's 45-year history that a ministerial meeting has ended without a joint statement (Phuong, 2012).

Also, since 2022, China has increased its efforts to expand, renovate, and build new bases in the East Sea in order to compete for influence with the United States and other Southeast Asian countries. As a result, ASEAN's position and role face some challenges. At times, people have questioned ASEAN's ability and methods for dealing with conflicts, as well as its prospects for a peaceful and stable regional order. China's bold moves, which include investments in equipment to militarize artificial islands in disputed waters gradually, along with US President Donald Trump's announcement that

he will have a policy and more robust measures in competition with China, have partly had an impact on regional stability (Vietnam News Agency, 2018).

However, a fact shows that, from 2017 to the current time, the escalating tension in the East Sea is still being restrained to a safe level, as allowed by the binding of strategic interests between related parties. In the context of competition among major countries, ASEAN has more opportunities to promote its strengths as a regional cooperation organization recognized by the international community to balance relations and gradually settle disputes. With the exception of China, it is critical that the United States and some other great powers, such as India and Russia, continue to see ASEAN as playing a vital and irreplaceable central role in promoting diplomatic activities to maintain regional peace (Tang, 2018; Chuong et al., 2022). This is an essential basis for ASEAN to continue performing its role in ensuring regional stability and security.

In another regard, ASEAN's "consensus" principle has demonstrated the organization's neutrality in the settlement of East Sea disputes. This has had an invisible impact, transforming the East Sea tensions into a conflict between countries with strategic ambitions in the region, primarily the United States and China. Although it is not the most significant feature on the strategic map of the United States, it is firmly in favor of the South China Sea, maintaining its status as an area of international waters for the foreseeable future (Cuong, 2023).

It should be emphasized that the conflict between the United States and China in the East Sea is not a new issue that has only emerged recently but has existed for many years. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, the relationship between these two countries has become tense and more intense due to the US-China trade war, along with the activities of building China's illegal militarization and bases in the East Sea area. The US has responded by increasing its presence in the region, conducting freedom of navigation patrols, and officially rejecting China's unilateral sovereignty claims in the East Sea area. Many countries support America's actions because freedom of navigation in the East Sea, whether directly or indirectly, affects and involves many countries both inside and outside the region. This demonstrates that ASEAN meets all the conditions for actively and creatively promoting its full capabilities, which is critical for maintaining stability in this region.

Some suspect that ASEAN does not want or cannot confront the more prominent countries, especially China, on the East Sea issue because doing so would jeopardize

ASEAN's unity. ASEAN will shoot itself in the foot if it loses its unity within the bloc (Collinson & Roberts, 2013). ASEAN has witnessed the increasing influence of geopolitical power and fierce conflicts among significant Asia-Pacific countries, including the East Sea. Objectively speaking, ASEAN's neutrality is required as a regional organization responsible for maintaining and promoting stability and security in the region. Furthermore, in the current context, ASEAN does not have to confront China for various reasons, including connections and interdependence in trade and investment relations.

Ensuring stability and security in the East Sea is no longer an internal ASEAN issue but rather a collaborative effort of countries worldwide, particularly those with strategic competition in this region. The question is what role ASEAN will play in this process. According to the above analysis, ASEAN will continue to hold a position and play a critical and decisive role in maintaining East Sea peace and stability. From the standpoint of formation and development history, legal and practical foundations, and the movement trend of international and regional relations, it is difficult for any organization or country to fully converge these factors required to replace ASEAN's central role (Chuong, 2016, p.38). So, how can ASEAN effectively promote its benefits and functions, become subject to balance, and guide relations between countries through cooperation frameworks and mechanisms in order to ensure regional stability and security in the East Sea area? The answer will depend significantly on ASEAN's ability to organize and operate its activities. This is also a suggestive issue for future research.

## 5 CONCLUSION

The importance of ensuring peace, safety, and freedom of navigation in the East Sea is shared by all countries in the region and around the world. In practice, ASEAN's position on ensuring stability and security in the East Sea is becoming increasingly evident. Among the conclusions reached are:

*First*, the reason why ASEAN has a vital position in ensuring stability and security in the East Sea is that it is a reasonably active organization in promoting confidence-building measures and creating mechanisms for cooperation that can connect internal and external partners, especially with big countries, to realize the region's common goal. To maintain a stable situation in the East Sea area and effectively resolve disputes, ASEAN

has developed and promulgated a system of principles, regulations, and commitments based on international law, the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. These are critical foundations for the operation of ASEAN in general and for maintaining regional security and stability in particular.

*Second*, because ASEAN has always promoted its central role in regional issues, its role in ensuring stability and security in the East Sea region is confirmed both in theory and in practice. ASEAN has made efforts to handle the problems concerning the region's security and stability, including the East Sea issue, in a flexible, deft, and effective manner, attracting the attention and participation of the international community, especially of large countries. Informality entrenched in the ASEAN way remains the preferred modality in regional security governance (Mely, 2022, p.1). Practice shows that "compared with a legalistic and adversarial posturing approach, ASEAN's approach is more effective in managing these disputes" (Le, 2023, p.119).

*Third*, while ASEAN has achieved certain successes in ensuring stability and security in the region, it still faces some challenges stemming from subjective and objective factors. Southeast Asia's state models, cultures, and levels of socioeconomic development are diverse, and non-traditional security issues arise. Recently, the internal political situation in some member countries has remained complicated. Compliance with the "consensus" principle may slow progress or result in the failure to reach a common consensus in the handling of ASEAN affairs. Furthermore, the implementation of competitive strategies by large countries to increase their influence in the region is both an opportunity and a challenge for ASEAN.

*Fourth*, the Asia-Pacific region, with Southeast Asia regarded as one of the world's most "exciting" development regions today (Vietnam News Agency, 2022). Southeast Asia has an increasingly important strategic position and is an area of fierce competition between great powers, with potential instability. Disputes over territorial sovereignty and sovereignty over the sea and islands are predicted to become more intense, complicated, and drastic. The East Sea's peace, stability, freedom, security, and navigational safety face significant challenges and potential conflicts (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2021, p.107). As an organization initiating and presiding over regional and international cooperation frameworks and mechanisms since its inception, ASEAN will continue to play this critical role in ensuring security and stability. However, the extent to which it is effective

is heavily dependent on the internal development as well as the operation process of ASEAN itself.

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### **Authors' Contribution**

Both authors contributed equally to the development of this article.

### **Data availability**

All datasets relevant to this study's findings are fully available within the article.

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