

Maslow's Hierarchy and Acharya's Constructivism: A Dual-Framework Analysis of ASEAN Defense Policy and Indonesia's Leadership in the Digital Era

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Abstract

ASEAN's defense policy in the digital era demonstrates a multidimensional evolution that merges material security imperatives with the construction of shared norms and identity. Using Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Acharya's constructivist theory of a security community, this paper argues that ASEAN's defense cooperation progresses through layered motivations—from physical survival and safety to belonging, esteem, and regional self-actualization. Through initiatives such as the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM), ADMM-Plus, and the ASEAN Cybersecurity Cooperation Strategy 2021–2025, ASEAN translates traditional defense goals into a pursuit of digital resilience and normative leadership. Indonesia's pivotal role within this framework illustrates how national leadership advances both psychological and institutional maturity in ASEAN's collective security architecture.

Keywords: ASEAN Defense Policy; Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs; Acharya's Constructivism.

INTRODUCTION

The Asia-Pacific today is defined by rapid technological change and deepening interdependence, creating security pressures that traditional theories—realism and liberalism—cannot fully explain. ASEAN's security landscape reflects this complexity: while Singapore and Malaysia possess advanced cyber capabilities (Neo, 2021), states like Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar still struggle with limited digital infrastructure. These disparities complicate regional cooperation but also highlight ASEAN's unique blend of pragmatic defense mechanisms and collective identity-building. This paper uses Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Acharya's constructivist theory to show how ASEAN's defense cooperation is shaped not only by material security concerns but also by aspirations for belonging, recognition, and leadership. As great-power rivalry intensifies and digital transformation accelerates, ASEAN's cohesion will depend on its ability to balance these material and normative motivations.

The evolving security environment in Southeast Asia has increasingly challenged ASEAN to reconsider the scope and orientation of its regional defense cooperation. Traditionally, ASEAN's security architecture has emphasized sovereignty, territorial integrity, non-interference, and peaceful conflict resolution as fundamental principles of regional stability. However, the expansion of digital technologies and the emergence of cybersecurity threats, artificial intelligence, and information warfare have introduced security challenges that transcend national borders and conventional military capabilities. These developments require ASEAN member states to strengthen institutional coordination, enhance technological resilience, and establish collective approaches to managing emerging threats. Regional mechanisms such as the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) and ADMM-Plus have

consequently become important platforms for strengthening defense diplomacy, promoting mutual confidence, and facilitating cooperation on traditional and non-traditional security issues (Saman et al., 2019). Nevertheless, differences in technological capabilities, strategic priorities, and national security interests continue to influence the effectiveness of ASEAN's collective responses. Understanding these dynamics requires an analytical perspective that considers not only material security interests but also the social and normative foundations of regional cooperation.

From a theoretical perspective, the integration of Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Acharya's constructivist approach provides an interdisciplinary framework for examining the motivations and institutional development underlying ASEAN defense cooperation. Maslow (1943) conceptualized human motivation as a hierarchy of needs ranging from physiological survival and safety to belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. Although originally developed to explain individual psychological behavior, this framework can be employed analogically to interpret the evolving priorities of regional organizations, particularly their progression from fundamental security concerns toward collective recognition and normative leadership. Meanwhile, Acharya's constructivist perspective emphasizes the significance of shared norms, collective identity, and socially constructed expectations in shaping regional order (Acharya, 2024). Within ASEAN, principles of consensus, mutual respect, and non-interference contribute to the development of institutional trust and a distinctive regional identity. Integrating these perspectives enables an examination of how material security motivations interact with normative processes in the development of ASEAN's defense architecture. Rather than treating regional defense cooperation exclusively as a response to external threats, this dual-framework approach interprets ASEAN's institutional evolution as a multidimensional process involving security, belonging, recognition, and the pursuit of collective regional influence.

Indonesia occupies a particularly important position within this evolving regional security framework because of its diplomatic influence, strategic geographical location, and longstanding commitment to ASEAN centrality. Through its independent and active foreign policy, Indonesia has consistently promoted dialogue, confidence-building measures, and multilateral cooperation as essential instruments for maintaining regional stability. Its participation in ADMM and ADMM-Plus reflects a commitment to strengthening collective security mechanisms while preserving ASEAN's principles of consensus and strategic autonomy. In the digital era, Indonesia's leadership also extends to emerging regional priorities involving cybersecurity cooperation, digital governance, and responsible technological innovation. These initiatives create opportunities for Indonesia to contribute not only to ASEAN's operational security capabilities but also to the formation of shared regional norms and institutional identity. Despite the relevance of these developments, the relationship between hierarchical security motivations, constructivist identity formation, and Indonesia's leadership in ASEAN's digital defense transformation remains insufficiently integrated within the analytical perspective adopted in this study. Accordingly, this article aims to examine ASEAN's defense policy through the combined lenses of Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Acharya's constructivism, with particular attention to how Indonesia contributes to the evolution of

ASEAN from a security-oriented regional organization toward a more resilient, identity-driven, and technologically adaptive security community.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs has been adapted to state behavior, suggesting that nations pursue layered objectives: survival (territorial integrity), safety (defense and stability), belonging (alliances), esteem (prestige), and self-actualization (leadership and normative influence (Maslow, 1943).

Acharya's Constructivism reframes ASEAN as a security community—a group of states bound not only by interests but by shared norms, identity, and expectations of peaceful change. The “ASEAN Way” of consensus and non-interference serves as a mechanism through which trust and cooperation are internalized (Acharya, 2024).

By combining both theories, ASEAN's defense evolution can be seen as a psychological and social process. Maslow explains why states cooperate, while Acharya explains how shared identity turns those motivations into enduring institutions. ASEAN's move from survival to self-actualization thus represents both functional progress and normative maturation.

METHOD

The research methodology section of this paper adopts a qualitative and interpretive approach to analyze ASEAN's evolving defense policy in the digital era. It relies on document analysis of primary sources, including ASEAN official statements, defense white papers, and strategic frameworks such as the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) and the ASEAN Cybersecurity Cooperation Strategy 2021–2025. These documents are examined alongside secondary academic literature on regionalism, security studies, and constructivist theory. The paper employs theoretical triangulation by integrating Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Acharya's constructivist framework to interpret ASEAN's policy behavior as both materially driven and socially constructed. Through this qualitative synthesis, the paper identifies patterns of motivation, cooperation, and identity formation in ASEAN's defense initiatives, emphasizing Indonesia's leadership role as a case study to illustrate the broader regional dynamic of collective security and digital transformation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of ASEAN Defense Policy: From Security to Identity

A. Building the Foundations of Safety

ASEAN's defense architecture—anchored in the ADMM and ADMM-Plus—addresses the organization's basic and safety needs, corresponding to Maslow's lower tiers. Established in 2006, these platforms institutionalize joint exercises, information-sharing, and humanitarian assistance, reducing the risk of conflict. This phase reflects the pursuit of collective security as the foundation for regional stability (Saman et al., 2019).

B. Constructing Belonging and Esteem through Norms

From Acharya's constructivist view, ADMM and ADMM-Plus are more than coordination mechanisms; they are social spaces where trust and norms are internalized. The "ASEAN Way", which refers to the informal, consensus-based, and non-confrontational approach to regional decision making and conflict resolution among the ASEAN Member States (AMS) (Cockerham, 2010) fulfills belonging and esteem needs by fostering equality, consensus, and non-interference. These practices empower smaller states and solidify ASEAN's sense of unity. The ASEAN Centrality Doctrine further enhances esteem by elevating ASEAN's role as a regional convener, consistent with Acharya's idea of a socially constructed security community.

Through this process, ASEAN moves from material cooperation toward ideational solidarity, advancing from basic stability to regional self-actualization—the apex of both Maslow's and Acharya's frameworks.

Analysis of Digital Transformation: ASEAN's Path to Self-Actualization

The ASEAN Cybersecurity Cooperation Strategy 2021–2025 represents a regional commitment to strengthening digital resilience and collective security in response to the growing complexity of cyber threats (Lee et al., 2025). It aims to enhance member states' capacities to prevent, detect, and respond to cyber incidents through information sharing, joint training, and institutional coordination. The strategy emphasizes regional harmonization of cybersecurity policies, the development of technical capabilities, and the protection of critical infrastructure, while maintaining respect for national sovereignty and ASEAN's consensus-based approach. By fostering cooperation among governments, industries, and communities, the framework seeks to build a trusted and secure digital environment that supports economic growth, social stability, and the broader goals of ASEAN's digital integration. Initiatives like the ASEAN Regional Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT) and the Cybersecurity and Information Centre of Excellence (ACICE) strengthen collective digital defense and shared identity. ASEAN's growing engagement with artificial intelligence (AI) in defense shows a balance between innovation and ethics. Indonesia's cautious adoption of AI—prioritizing accountability and civilian protection—illustrates ASEAN's commitment to safe and responsible technological growth. The ASEAN Joint Statement on AI in Defense (2025) elevates the region's esteem and self-actualization, reinforcing ASEAN's image as a global advocate of responsible innovation (ASEAN, n.d.-b).

Ultimately, ASEAN's vision for a Regional Digital Security Community marks the realization of self-actualization, where digital resilience becomes central to regional identity, cooperation, and leadership.

Analysis of Indonesia's Leadership: Driving Security and Digital Identity

A. Indonesia in ADMM-Plus: Fulfilling ASEAN's Safety and Belonging Needs

Indonesia plays a pivotal role in the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) by promoting regional defense cooperation, trust-building, and ASEAN centrality in the Indo-Pacific security architecture. Guided by its *bebas dan aktif* (independent and active) foreign policy, Indonesia has been instrumental in advancing dialogue-based security frameworks and

initiating the ADMM-Plus in 2010, which expanded defense cooperation with external partners like the United States, China, and Japan (Shoji, 2013). It has also championed responses to non-traditional security threats such as terrorism, maritime security, and humanitarian assistance through mechanisms like the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance (AHA Centre) and the ASEAN Peacekeeping Centers Network (APCN) (*The Elgar Companion to ASEAN*, 2023). By acting as a mediator and consensus-builder, Indonesia reinforces the ADMM's goal of fostering a peaceful and resilient regional order.

Indonesia's leadership within ADMM-Plus reflects the lower tiers of Maslow's framework—addressing safety needs through active promotion of maritime security, humanitarian assistance, and cyber defense. Its inclusive diplomacy ensures trust-building among member states, aligning with Acharya's constructivist concept of norm diffusion and shared understanding.

B. Indonesia and ASEAN's Digital Transformation

The digital transformation of Indonesia and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is increasingly central to the region's economic and social agenda. Through the ASEAN Digital Masterplan 2025, ASEAN has committed to becoming “a leading digital community and economic bloc, powered by secure and transformative digital services, technologies and ecosystem” (ASEAN, n.d.-a). For Indonesia, whose digital economy is projected to reach well over USD 130 billion by 2025 (International Monetary Fund, 2022) and who has a vibrant internet-enabled population, the transformation offers both domestic growth opportunities and a chance to contribute to ASEAN's regional digital ambitions.

In practice, Indonesia supports ASEAN's transformation by aligning its national digital strategies—such as digital infrastructure expansion, e-government services, digital payment systems, and data governance—with regional frameworks. For example, Indonesia has reaffirmed support for the ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA), which seeks to harmonize digital trade rules across the region and unlock the ASEAN digital economy's potential up to US\$2 trillion by 2030 (World Economic Forum, 2025). Yet, the country also grapples with challenges common to many ASEAN members: bridging the urban-rural digital divide, raising digital skill levels among its workforce, and establishing coherent governance across data flows, privacy, and cybersecurity. (Sefrina, 2024)

Building on these foundations, Indonesia's advocacy for the ASEAN Digital Masterplan 2025 and the Cybersecurity Cooperation Strategy not only enhances regional technological capacity but also fulfills ASEAN's higher-order needs for belonging, esteem, and collective identity. Through sustained leadership, Indonesia helps translate ASEAN's digital ambitions into shared values of trust, inclusivity, and innovation. This alignment reflects Acharya's constructivist notion of a security and identity community—where states collaborate not only for mutual gain but also to define who they are together. Thus, Indonesia's digital leadership becomes both a driver and a symbol of ASEAN's self-actualization: a transformation from a region focused on material connectivity into one bound by shared norms, collective resilience, and a unified digital identity.

C. Indonesia as a Catalyst for ASEAN's Self-Actualization

By integrating digital innovation with security cooperation, Indonesia drives ASEAN toward self-actualization—a stage where regional resilience, innovation, and normative leadership converge. Its role demonstrates how a single state’s vision can amplify ASEAN’s collective identity, transforming the region from a defensive coalition into a proactive, digitally empowered community.

Recommendations

ASEAN should strengthen regional cybersecurity through a unified Digital Security Framework that harmonizes standards, data governance, and incident-response protocols. For Indonesia, which faces domestic fragmentation in digital governance, this alignment can enhance internal coordination while supporting region-wide regulatory convergence.

ASEAN should also scale up capacity-building for less digitally advanced members through joint training and technical assistance. Indonesia can lead by sharing its experience in digital ID systems, fintech, and e-government services, while addressing its own urban-rural digital divide through ASEAN-backed programs.

To support responsible innovation, ASEAN should deepen collaboration with the private sector and academia. Indonesia’s dynamic digital economy positions it well to host regional hubs on cybersecurity, AI governance, and digital entrepreneurship, provided the country continues to streamline regulatory frameworks and improve digital skills domestically.

In the defense domain, ASEAN should establish a Digital Defense Task Force under ADMM to coordinate cyber defense exercises, information-sharing, and guidelines for AI use in military applications. Indonesia, amid defense modernization and constrained resources, can leverage this mechanism to enhance its capabilities while promoting trust-building across member states.

Finally, Indonesia should reinforce its role as a norm-shaper by advocating ethical, inclusive, and stability-oriented approaches to digital and defense cooperation. Strengthening domestic AI strategies, data protection rules, and interagency coordination will bolster Indonesia’s credibility as it guides ASEAN toward responsible digital transformation and deeper security cooperation.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, ASEAN’s defense evolution in the digital era demonstrates a profound shift from conventional security cooperation toward identity-based regional governance. By integrating Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and Acharya’s constructivist theory, this paper illustrates how ASEAN’s policies have advanced from ensuring survival and safety to achieving collective esteem and self-actualization through shared norms and digital innovation. The ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting (ADMM), ADMM-Plus, and the ASEAN Cybersecurity Cooperation Strategy 2021–2025 collectively represent this layered transformation—where traditional defense objectives now align with digital resilience and normative leadership.

Indonesia’s leadership serves as a driving force in this transition, linking the material foundations of regional defense to the ideational goals of trust, belonging, and responsible

technological advancement. As ASEAN navigates the challenges of great-power rivalry and digital transformation, its dual pursuit of security and identity will remain central to sustaining peace and cooperation. Through its balance of material capability, social cohesion, and digital innovation, ASEAN continues to evolve as a resilient, adaptive, and self-actualizing community in the twenty-first century.

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