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Bangladesh

## \*CORRESPONDENCE

Bama Andika Putra  
✉ bama.putra@bristol.ac.uk;  
✉ bama@unhas.ac.id

RECEIVED 30 August 2024

ACCEPTED 09 December 2024

PUBLISHED 20 December 2024

## CITATION

Putra BA (2024) ASEAN's climate change mitigation and adaptation measures: abandoning stagnant policy responses. *Front. Clim.* 6:1488560. doi: 10.3389/fclim.2024.1488560

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# ASEAN's climate change mitigation and adaptation measures: abandoning stagnant policy responses

Bama Andika Putra<sup>1,2\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Sociology, Politics, and International Studies, University of Bristol, Bristol, United Kingdom, <sup>2</sup>Department of International Relations, Universitas Hasanuddin, Makassar, Indonesia

Southeast Asia is one of the most at-risk regions when it comes to the impacts of climate change. Densely populated cities and the increasing dependency of the Southeast Asian population on coastal areas make the risk of sea-level rise more prominent for the region. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has not been able to match this growing threat with the lack of ideal collective action in terms of mitigating and adapting to climate change. The reliance on the ASEAN State of Climate Change Report and vast ASEAN sectoral bodies have shown stagnant progress. This policy brief recommends (1) imposing adaptation and mitigation measures for ASEAN member states to adopt and (2) elevation of the "climate change" discourse within ASEAN's bodies into the category of "existential threat" to abandon ASEAN's current risk-based perception vis-à-vis climate change. The actionable recommendation for ASEAN would be dependent upon whether the proposed mechanism ensures an alignment with the ASEAN Way (non-interference and consensus in decision-making).

## KEYWORDS

climate change, Southeast Asia, ASEAN, policy responses, regionalism

## 1 Introduction

The Southeast Asian region is one of the most vulnerable to climate change. Three of the states located in that region, Thailand, Myanmar, and the Philippines, have already been reported to have suffered more significant economic and social losses due to climate-related events in the past two decades (Eckstein et al., 2019). The presence of extreme weather, heat waves, and steady rise of sea levels have caused Southeast Asian states to categorize the impacts of climate change as a source of threat (Arino and Prabhakar, 2021; Ding and Beh, 2022).

Member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) are unique in their demography and geographic location. Most of its populations reside in low-lying plains and coastal areas due to the vast coastlines located within the region (Overland et al., 2021). Consequently, rising sea levels will be one of the significant impacts that cause social disruptions among ASEAN member states. The National Snow and Ice Data Center reported that sea levels are expected to rise by 65 meters if Antarctica melts (NSIDC, 2024). In densely populated cities of Southeast Asia, such as Bangkok, Manila, Yangon, Ho Chi Minh City, and Jakarta, even a slight sea-level rise could cause catastrophic impacts (Fuchs et al., 2011). The Asian Development Bank also reported in 2017 that 19 out of 25 Southeast Asian cities fall under the category of cities mostly exposed to sea-level rises (ADB, 2017). The issue is further complexified by the fact that most of the region's fertile lands are located in coastal areas, places that are most vulnerable to the threat of sea-level rises (Ismail et al., 2015).

Despite the seemingly precise threat categorization by the ASEAN regional organization in relation to climate change's impacts, there seems to be a lack of decisive action taken to counter this. Southeast Asian states are in a phase of industrialization, which is consequently leading to the rise of economic expansion and activities. Southeast Asia currently shares approximately 3 percent of global emissions but is predicted to reach 5 percent by 2030 due to its economic activities (Seah and Martinus, 2021). This is concerning if the region does not prepare decisive collective action in countering climate change. This policy brief assesses past actions taken by ASEAN and provides actionable recommendations to advance the region's climate change adaptation and mitigation actions amid the rapid industrialization taking place. It considers secondary data from the past two decades to investigate what areas could be further utilized to enhance ASEAN's performance.

## 2 ASEAN and climate change: what has been done?

Despite the lack of a decisive adaptation and mitigation effort, ASEAN member states, in general, are ambitious in their carbon neutrality targets. This was highlighted in the 2021 ASEAN State of Climate Change Report (ASCCR), the region's first integrated report outlining its targets in relation to climate change for 2030 and 2050 (ASEAN, 2021). ASEAN's (2021) Secretary General, Dato Lim Jock Hoi, stated, "The report provides an overview of the region's current status on climate capacity, outlines how actions can be further improved, as well as identifies opportunities for cooperation and collaboration to support ASEAN's efforts towards achieving the 2050 net zero transition targets" (Arino and Prabhakar, 2021). Among the ambitious targets is achieving net-zero GHG emissions for all its member states and carefully balancing rapid industrialization with cleaner energy resources. To ensure that its member states are on the correct path, ASEAN discusses climate change adaptation and mitigation under the remit of the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Environment (AMME). To ensure regional cooperation is further enhanced after the publication of the ASCCR report, at least 13 ASEAN sectoral bodies acknowledge the threat imposed by climate change and discuss the matter on regional platforms (Seah and Martinus, 2021).

Unfortunately, these efforts are insufficient as one of the most at-risk regions due to climate change. This is well documented by past research on ASEAN's climate change adaptation and mitigation measures in the past decade, concluding ambivalence and lack of comprehensive efforts displayed (Caballero-Anthony et al., 2015; Shi, 2016; Prakash, 2018; Overland et al., 2021; Ding and Beh, 2022). The ASCCR report itself does not act much, as it only attempts to outline how the region is vulnerable to climate change and what ASEAN has done and targets for the future, without imposing actions on ASEAN member states. Thus, despite the ambitious "2050 net zero transition targets" set (ASEAN, 2021, p. 6), it is still unclear whether ASEAN member states are able to achieve this and how it would be done in a practical manner.

ASEAN's existing policies are further complex with the regional organization's political landscape. Absent is a super coordinating body within ASEAN that is able to manage the regional actions taken within the organization. ASEAN's Working Group on Climate Change

(AWGCC) still cannot establish clear information-sharing protocols for the vast sectoral bodies that discuss climate change. There is also the problem of the lack of consistency in engaging with the private sector and civil societies, making the climate change mitigation and adaptation measures lacking a unified response that considers multiple stakeholders. The ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) pillar of the ASEAN Community acknowledges the cognizant threat of climate change. However, the ASEAN-Political Security Community (APSC) does not perceive climate change as what Seah and Martinus (2021), p. 16 mention as an "existential threat," thus depriving it from evolving and becoming a consistent matter discussed across the different consultative platforms.

## 3 ASEAN's climate change response: policy options and implications

The first actionable recommendation is for ASEAN to impose solutions (climate change adaptation and mitigation efforts) to its member states. In its current form, ASEAN is known for its capacity to construct norms that affect its member states (Collins, 2013; Acharya, 2014; Putra, 2023). When issues of great power alignment surfaced, ASEAN was able to construct norms of non-alignment and respect for sovereignty through the mechanisms under the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (Haacke, 2003; Snitwongse, 2007; Koga, 2014). In responding to the undermining of human rights and democracy in the region, in consideration of the different political systems shared among ASEAN member states, ASEAN decided to establish an ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights to establish the foundations of human rights protection and promotion (Olivia, 2014; Wahyuningrum, 2014; Petcharamesree, 2016; APCR, 2023). In facing the growing uncertainties in the Indo-Pacific region, ASEAN ensured the continuity of the ASEAN centrality by announcing the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (Acharya, 2019; Ortagus, 2019; Anwar, 2020). From those examples, we can decipher that ASEAN's way of managing tensions and disagreements has been through the construction of norms that need to be adopted by its member states. This is done by establishing new institutions, bodies, or agreements for intra-ASEAN and norms suggested to be adopted in ASEAN's extra-regional forums.

However, such a mechanism cannot be established to counter climate change. One, the ASCCR report published in 2021 already establishes the normative foundations for the importance of collective action in Southeast Asia to counter climate change. But what is feared in this policy brief is that the ASCCR is ASEAN's way to leverage time in order to conduct "business as usual" with the economic activities in the region, which coincided with the lack of action imposed to address the issue of climate change. What is needed for ASEAN is to ensure that the mechanisms are imposed on its member states rather than being suggested, as the substantive of the ASCCR shows. This is essential for Southeast Asia's climate change countering efforts, as voluntary action by its member states would not lead to consistent collective action in regulating actions taken.

In the past, ASEAN has successfully imposed actions towards member states when matters fall under the urgent category. Despite the differences of opinion in the South China Sea, ASEAN member states succeeded in imposing the Declaration on the Conduct of the South China Sea despite the initial rejection of states close to China

(Buszynski, 2003; Thao, 2003). Similarly, despite the semi-authoritarian state systems within the region, ASEAN's push for democratization led to the establishment of institutions that are in contrast to the interests of several members (Davies, 2013; Pisanò, 2014; Ryu and Ortuoste, 2014). In the environmental dimension, ASEAN's challenge over the haze pollution that affected multiple Southeast Asian states led to ASEAN members imposing haze mitigating measures that eventually were agreed upon by the (presumed) perpetrating states: Indonesia and Malaysia (Greenpeace, 2019, 2023; ASEAN, 2023, 2024). Thus, despite initial rejection, the ASEAN's imposing (in a limited sense) policies tend to lead objecting states to find common ground with the regional organization.

There are, however, both positive and negative consequences to this. What this recommendation benefits from is that it makes ASEAN member states accountable for the ambitious targets that it sets. Malaysia and Singapore, for example, aspired to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050, followed by Indonesia in 2060 (Arino and Prabhakar, 2021). Imposed adaptation and mitigation efforts allow consistency and accountability to achieve the set targets. However, this policy brief also addresses the capacity disparity within Southeast Asia. The CMLV states (Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam) are weaker economies out of the ASEAN member states, and they also constantly face domestic instabilities throughout the years (Burmansyah, 2014; Rattanaseevee, 2014; Storey, 2018; Southgate, 2021). Imposing solutions could be disadvantageous for the CMLV as the decisions on the targets and measures could be inconsistent with the capacities or willingness of the CMLV to address climate change efforts. For example, it took more time for the CMLV states to adopt the agreed ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement signed in 2002 due to the disparity of capacities (Wong and Chan, 2003; Men, 2007; Chin and Stubbs, 2011). ASEAN is also not a supranational regional organization that could forcefully impose its mechanisms on its member states, ultimately leading to another challenge for this recommendation.

A second recommendation proposed in this policy brief is the elevation of the impact of climate change as a source of existential threat. The threat discourse of climate change in ASEAN is somewhat inconsistent. Some pillars, such as the AEC, clearly acknowledge it as a source of threat, but other pillars, such as the APSC, do not take a similar stance (Eckstein et al., 2019; Arino and Prabhakar, 2021; Seah and Martinus, 2021; Ding and Beh, 2022). Consequently, there have been issues with the coordination among ASEAN's sectoral bodies due to the divergent views it perceives of the climate change discourse. When the AEC-related bodies are decisive in making adaptation and mitigation efforts, their implementation could be severely undermined due to the lack of a similar threat perception.

In the past, ASEAN's categorization of issues as a threat has elevated the importance of a problem within the body. For example, the continued reference of sea-based intrusions as a threat, including instances of illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing and land reclamations, have allowed ASEAN forums to address issues related to the sensitive topic of the South China Sea (Buszynski, 2003; Odgaard, 2003; Shoji, 2012; Parameswaran, 2016; Hu, 2023). The uncertainty of the Indo-Pacific geopolitical landscape and tensions between great powers in the region have allowed the elevation of the Indo-Pacific discourse within ASEAN despite criticisms of great powers in the Indo-Pacific (Acharya, 2019; Anwar, 2020).

The elevation of climate change into the existential threat category allows for a unified perception of the dangers of climate change for the region. It eliminates the divergences of perceptions that different ASEAN Community pillars may hold towards climate change. In a more global platform such as the United Nations General Assembly, small island states' (such as Seychelles, Cabo Verde, Dominican Republic, Guyana, and Marshall Islands) framing of the climate change problem as an existential threat has led the UN to take more decisive adaptation and mitigation efforts in the recent years, as well as the conduct of tangible actions (Wyeth, 2017; UNDP, 2023; Srinivasan, 2024; UN, 2024).

Similar to the first recommendation, this policy brief identifies both positive and negative possible outcomes. The categorization of climate change as an existential threat allows ASEAN to escape from the discussion of stagnant policies taken within the region to one that is decisive and contains a sense of urgency due to the widespread inclusion of the climate change agenda in ASEAN's forums. However, this recommendation could be difficult to the demand for consensus in ASEAN's decision-making process. In the past, ASEAN member states have shown disagreements over matters that involve the South China Sea (Storey, 2018). Thus, there is still the possibility that Southeast Asian states are still not united in the perception that ASEAN needs to take decisive action towards climate change by elevating its importance as an existential threat.

## 4 ASEAN's way forward

Out of the two proposed recommendations, the most actionable recommendation in this policy brief depends on which recommendation aligns with the ASEAN way. ASEAN is a unique regional organization in that it does not impose solutions that go against the interests of even just one of its member states. Both policymakers and academics have emphasized that the uniqueness of the ASEAN way is defined by the organization's preference for a consensus-based decision-making process, non-interference, and non-intervention policies (Anwar, 1994; Katsumata, 2003; Beddu et al., 2020; Acharya, 2021). Some academics have argued that the ASEAN way is suitable for the region as it suits the political contexts of the region (Narine, 1997; Aminuddin and Purnomo, 2017; Yukawa, 2018; Caballero-Anthony, 2022; Lando, 2022), while others argue that the ASEAN way no longer fits emerging challenges (Beeson, 2009; Tekunan, 2014). Therefore, this policy brief believes elevating the climate change discourse to an existential threat category is the most actionable recommendation in alignment to the norms and values upheld by ASEAN.

The reason why climate change's elevation of its importance is feasible to be adopted relates to the existing trend of climate change in Southeast Asia. The ambitious individual NDCs of Southeast Asian states, the positive engagements with the Paris Agreement, and the collective understanding of the impacts of climate change expressed in the ASCCR show that ASEAN member states favor the perception that climate change needs an urgent response. However, unlike the first recommendation, the elevation of climate change's importance as discourse is better with the political landscape of ASEAN, with the construction of norms taking center stage. Doing so allows ASEAN to independently determine what actions should be taken in response to the

presence of an existential threat. This would consider the capacity disparity involving the CMLV states and ensure that the policies taken do not undermine the Southeast Asian states' intentions to continue their economic expansions and industrialization.

Climate change as an existential threat further allows ASEAN to respond to the challenge in a more urgent condition. In its current form, ASEAN perceives climate change from a "risk" perception (Corry, 2012; Ciorciari and Haacke, 2022), emphasizing future possibilities and ways to counter it. An existential threat places the issue in a time-sensitive position, demanding ASEAN member states invest more of their attention and finances in addressing the issue rather than the dominant preventive measures undertaken. As in the case of framing terrorism as an existential threat shows, the securitization of state actors and regional organizations in the past has led to the successful countering of the issue significantly (Bright, 2012; Rychnovská, 2014; Fisher and Anderson, 2015; Shepherd, 2021), indicating the benefits of securitizing an issue to effectively counter the emergence of an existential threat (Buzan et al., 1997; Wæver, 2011; Putra, 2020).

## 5 Conclusion

Southeast Asia is undoubtedly one of the most at-risk regions regarding climate change's impacts. Nevertheless, ASEAN has not been able to respond decisively to the growing threat posed by the impacts of climate change. This lack of a proportional performance between ASEAN and the threat of climate change is argued in this policy brief, requiring two possible recommendations to put ASEAN on the correct path of climate change adaptation and mitigation efforts.

The recommendations include imposing adaptation and mitigation measures on ASEAN member states and elevating the climate change discourse as an existential threat. ASEAN is primarily a norm-constructing regional organization that addresses its challenges by agreeing upon the establishment of institutions, bodies, or agreements. Despite its success in issues of democracy and sovereignty, climate change cannot be treated the same way. Imposable actions must occur if changes are to be seen, considering that the voluntary contributions of ASEAN member states in responding to climate change suffer from the capacity disparity among member states (especially with the CMLV). However, due to this

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recommendation being against the ASEAN Way, this policy brief places a stronger emphasis on elevating the importance of climate change discourses.

Climate change needs to be labeled collectively by ASEAN member states (inducing its forums and bodies) as an existential threat. Doing so would elevate the urgency to respond to climate change and eliminate existing differences in perceptions held by different ASEAN Community pillars or sectoral bodies on how significant of a threat climate change is for Southeast Asian states. This policy brief further argues that this is an actionable recommendation as it allows ASEAN member states to determine the pace of actions rather than having the ASEAN impose actions that may go against both the ASEAN Way and the national interests of the Southeast Asian states.

## Author contributions

BP: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

## Funding

The author(s) declare that no financial support was received for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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