

## Discussion on the Alliance of Small States in International Relations Theory: Taking ASEAN as an Example

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**Abstract:** In recent years, with the deep evolution of the trend of global economic integration, competition in the international market has become increasingly fierce. How to handle international relations well has become a key issue for various countries to achieve stable and sustainable development at this stage. The traditional theory of state relations pays more attention to the political issues of major powers, and the League of Nations also focuses on this research, while small countries are considered negligible on the basis. However, in real international political relations, some small countries have exerted international influence beyond their comprehensive national strength by forming alliances with other small countries. Based on this, this article focuses on the topic of small country alliances in international relations theory, and analyzes the impact of small country alliances using ASEAN as an example for reference.

### 1. Introduction

The so-called small country does not simply refer to a country with a small land area, but rather refers to a country that does not have a competitive advantage in the international competitive market due to its comprehensive strength and cannot fully rely on its own capabilities to obtain international security. Instead, it needs to rely on other countries, international management systems, international organizations, and other countries to ensure national security<sup>[1]</sup>. At present, small countries in the international market mainly have the following characteristics. Firstly, they need external assistance. Secondly, their security buffer is relatively narrow, with almost no time and space for error correction. Thirdly, leaders of small countries believe that the fragility of a country cannot be changed. Based on the characteristics of small countries mentioned above, it can be seen that most Southeast Asian countries can be defined as small and medium-sized countries. Therefore, following the big powers in the Alliance of Small States is a common phenomenon. However, there is also a phenomenon of small countries forming alliances with other small countries, leading to the formation of small country alliances.

### 2. ASEAN's Leverage: Able to Maintain Regional Power Balance

Since the end of the Cold War, especially after the end of the Asian financial crisis, major powers such as China, the United States, and Russia have had a significant impact on the international relations structure and development trends in Southeast Asia. Faced with this new change, ASEAN countries believe that relying solely on ASEAN's own strength is no longer sufficient to ensure national security. They believe that major powers, driven by economic interests and international power, are bound to expand and compete in the Southeast Asian region. Therefore, in the more than ten years since the end of the Cold War, ASEAN has been searching and exploring an effective path that can maximize the security and stability of various countries in the Southeast Asian region. After a long period of exploration and practice, ASEAN believes that leveraging the desire of major powers for power and international market share to form a balance of power in Southeast Asia can maximize the security and stability of the region, and even drive the level of economic development within the region<sup>[2]</sup>. Therefore, under the guidance of this strategy, ASEAN has been seeking a

balance of power among major powers, promoting mutual restraint among them, and thus achieving the goal of maintaining regional security and stability.

At present, many experts and scholars in the academic field have fully recognized the leverage role of ASEAN in maintaining regional security and stability. Among them, Robert Ross pointed out in his article *Geopeace* that the East Asian region is bound to have a polarized balance of power in a certain stage of future development, that is, the balance of power between China and the United States. However, due to the competitive and cooperative nature of international relations between China and the United States, there is ample room for small countries in Southeast Asia to leverage the role of the Small Nation Alliance, thereby achieving a balance of power among major powers in the region, strengthening their political influence and overall international market strength. Christopher believes that the main reason why ASEAN countries maintain a certain distance from major powers is that ASEAN countries are not willing to trust any major power<sup>[3]</sup>. The power balance strategy formulated by ASEAN has also achieved good results in practical application. For example, after the end of the Asian financial crisis, ASEAN countries strengthened their counter-terrorism cooperation with the United States, adjusted with China on the South China Sea issue, and strongly supported Japan in establishing multilateral security cooperation institutions in Southeast Asia. The above measures all demonstrate the leverage role played by the power balance strategy formulated by ASEAN. In addition, due to the existence of many unsafe and unstable interference factors in Southeast Asia, such as the Korean Peninsula issue, Taiwan issue, etc., ASEAN has also created an ASEAN regional online forum specifically. In such forums, member countries exchange opinions and suggestions on regional security and stability issues, with ASEAN as the leader. It can be seen that ASEAN plays a crucial role in maintaining regional security.

Since the end of the Cold War, ASEAN's policies towards major powers have also undergone certain changes, and its leverage has become increasingly prominent. On the one hand, ASEAN actively adjusts and develops its cooperative and friendly relations with major countries such as the United States, China, Japan, and Russia. On the other hand, ASEAN has also utilized factors such as conflicts and disputes among major powers, as well as national competition, to shape itself as a "peace ambassador" for the Asia Pacific region. In this way, ASEAN can have a high probability of being recognized by major countries, and then once again try to seize the leadership power of regional cooperation from the audience of major countries and hold it in its own hands<sup>[4]</sup>. Based on the analysis of the current development situation of ASEAN, ASEAN has formed dialogue relationships with nearly 10 countries, including Australia, Canada, India, Japan, New Zealand, the United States, South Korea, China, the European Union, etc. After establishing good diplomatic cooperation relations with the major powers mentioned above, ASEAN member countries have gained new vitality in their capital, technology and other markets. The role and positive impact of the Alliance of Small States can be seen from this.

### **3. ASEAN's Spillover Effect: ASEAN's Inherent Concepts Have Been Widely Recognized and Promoted**

Since the formal establishment of ASEAN in 1967, until the establishment of the Free Trade Area in 1993 and the establishment of the ASEAN Community in 2003, ASEAN has been officially included in the Alliance of Small States in the Third World. On the basis of political diversity in Southeast Asia, ASEAN has creatively explored an internationally recognized effective alliance organization - ASEAN, which is an alliance organization that takes a completely different path from the EU. This creative move has attracted widespread attention and discussion from all walks of life around the world, and was once rated as the "ASEAN Development Mode". With the help of the Alliance of Small States, ASEAN has successfully brought together scattered small countries, forming a security fence for development synergy and stability. Its member countries' international status has also been significantly improved, becoming an important component that cannot be ignored in the international relations pattern of Southeast Asia. This is a typical case of success for the Alliance of Small States and an important driving force for other small countries to actively seek cooperation. Especially after the end of the Cold War, ASEAN has been playing a driving role in

regional cooperation, committed to improving the internal framework of ASEAN and promoting it widely, effectively used by most small countries. At present, the forms of cooperation led by ASEAN can be roughly divided into: ASEAN Free Trade Area, ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN cooperation with China, the United States, and South Korea [5]. ASEAN has formed a standardized development system and strategic strategy through the above-mentioned forms of cooperation, and has formed the “spillover effect” of the Alliance of Small States through the methods accepted by major powers. It is precisely this “spillover effect” that greatly enhances ASEAN’s international status and competitiveness, laying a solid foundation for ASEAN to expand East Asian cooperation. It can be seen that the international influence generated by ASEAN’s “spillover effect” has radiated to the Asia Pacific region.

However, in recent years, with the trend of global economic integration and changes in the structure of international relations, ASEAN has also faced severe challenges and impacts. In terms of internal organizational structure analysis, the internal cohesion of ASEAN is insufficient, so the real effectiveness brought by internal cooperation is poor, especially the effectiveness of internal security cooperation cannot achieve the desired results. Although the current academic research on the Alliance of Small States is increasing and deepening, it is still limited to international military security and cooperation. It is precisely because of this that ASEAN cannot be considered a traditional Alliance of Small States. Although the military security cooperation within ASEAN has developed for a long time at present, it still needs to be achieved through the signing of agreements between the two sides. This approach has to some extent weakened the cohesion within ASEAN [6]. Therefore, when facing thorny issues, ASEAN cannot take effective measures to solve them due to insufficient internal cohesion. In addition, some non-traditional security issues, such as drug smuggling, human trafficking, cross-border scope, ecological environment protection, terrorism, etc., have also become new challenges that ASEAN urgently needs to solve. The above issues also expose the shortcomings and problems in ASEAN internal cooperation.

In order to actively respond to various new development challenges and obstacles, ASEAN has deeply implemented the *ASEAN Charter* since 2004 and officially signed the *ASEAN Charter* in 2007, forming a legally effective internal organizational management system within ASEAN. The *ASEAN Charter* greatly endows ASEAN with legal status and mandatory management and restraint rights for internal member states. At the same time, the *ASEAN Charter* also clarifies the relationship between member states and ASEAN, reasonably dividing it into the rights and obligations of member states. The formulation and implementation of the *ASEAN Charter* has put an end to the loose organization within ASEAN, prompting the Alliance of Small States to exert cooperation and international influence through closer cooperation.

#### 4. Conclusion

In summary, the international relations theory centered on realism believes that international politics is the politics of major powers, and the distribution of power between major powers directly determines the structure of international relations. Small countries are only a “chess piece” in the competitive game between major powers, and their impact on national political relations and international patterns can be ignored. Therefore, in the current research field, whether it is theoretical research or practical case studies, the main research content is mostly centered on competition and cooperation between major countries, while small countries are marginalized and not valued. The same is true in the study of the League of Nations, where experts and scholars have put more energy and focus on studying the actions of major countries, and there is not much research on small countries. Therefore, the author believes that exploring the Alliance of Small States in international relations theory has certain practical significance. This article mainly takes ASEAN as an example to conduct a deep analysis of the impact of the Alliance of Small States. However, further observation is still needed on how the relationship between small countries in the region will change.

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