

ASEAN is regarded as one of the most successful organizations in the world, contributing to maintaining regional peace and security. However, ASEAN is also criticised for its decision-making process, which is based on consensus. Critics see this as ASEAN's weakness in dealing with security challenges. ASEAN skeptics attribute consensus decision making to ASEAN's failure to unite members on regional issues such as the South China Sea (SCS) dispute. Further, the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy adopted by the US and regional allies indicates concern with how ASEAN runs regional frameworks based on the 'ASEAN Way'. According to critics, the ASEAN Way, which prioritizes non-interference, quiet diplomacy, informality, consultation and consensus, makes ASEAN-plus arrangements toothless in addressing conflicts and security issues. It is argued that ASEAN risks becoming irrelevant if it does not embrace reform. Some suggest that ASEAN considers decision making alternatives such as 'ASEAN Minus X' or a simple majority vote.

That said, insufficient regard is given to the merits of consensus building in consolidating ASEAN and strengthening its centrality in regionalism. The aim of this thesis is to explore the value of consensus decision making in ASEAN. It examines how consensus helped ASEAN members hang together despite significant national divergences in almost every aspect. The thesis explores how consensus enabled ASEAN to play a central role in shaping the region's security architecture, maintain regional autonomy and navigate the region through great power competition. Through a case study of the FOIP and SCS, the thesis concludes that consensus remains relevant despite certain limitations. Consensus helps keep ASEAN from breaking apart, prevents the region from being dominated by the major powers, and strengthens ASEAN's centrality to the region's security architecture. These are crucial for maintaining regional peace and order. The thesis reinforces the utility of constructivism for explaining the significance of the 'ASEAN Way' to ASEAN centrality.