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## ASEAN's 2025 Enlargement: Significance and Challenges


Dr. Hina Hassan Khaki 

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# ASEAN's 2025 Enlargement: Significance and Challenges

Dr. Hina Hassan Khaki<sup>1</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Independent Researcher based in the United States and a former Assistant Professor of Political Science at Jamia Millia Islamia and University of Kashmir, India.

## ABSTRACT

ASEAN's planned expansion in 2025 with the accession of Timor Leste, represents an important milestone in Southeast Asia's regional integration. It reflects ASEAN's long-standing vision of regional unity and its commitment to bringing all Southeast Asian countries under a single institutional framework. Beyond its practical implications, the expansion carries strong symbolic value, strengthening ASEAN's image as an open and inclusive organisation. This enlargement presents significant challenges for both Timor-Leste and ASEAN. Timor-Leste continues to face serious capacity constraints, particularly in economic development, infrastructure, and human capital, which may limit its ability to fully comply with ASEAN obligations. ASEAN, in turn, will need to adjust its institutions, decision-making processes, and support mechanisms to accommodate a new member without undermining organisational effectiveness. Balancing inclusivity with effectiveness will therefore be critical. While ASEAN's 2025 expansion offers important opportunities to strengthen regional solidarity and cohesion, its success will depend on phased integration, targeted capacity-building, and sustained support from existing member states and external partners. The paper discusses the opportunities, challenges, and policy implications of ASEAN's expansion, with particular attention to institutional adaptation and capacity-building needs.

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## I. Introduction

Even after about fifty-eight years in existence, ASEAN continues to show vitality and dynamism, which stands as testimony to its success and relevance. ASEAN has demonstrated the capability to react to international relations on a constructive and cooperative basis. Its significance is evident from the fact that it takes a leading role in establishing a regional order that goes beyond the Southeast Asian sub-region to one that covers the Asia-Pacific (Snitwongse 1998, 183). As ASEAN attained almost six decades of peace and strong economic performance among its member states, it managed to emerge from the Cold War as the region's pre-eminent institution (Widajanto 2003, 87).

The future of ASEAN appeared uncertain when it was formed on 8<sup>th</sup> August 1967 against a backdrop of regional conflict and confrontation. Several predictions were made earlier about the short life of ASEAN. Some people viewed that it would not survive to see another decade, as the previous attempts at regional cooperation in Southeast Asia, the Association of Southeast Asia (ASA) and the MAPHILINDO concept, had ended shortly after a few years of formation. Some predicted that the Malaysia-Philippines dispute (1969) over Sabah would lead to the collapse of ASEAN. Similar predictio-

**CONTACT:** Dr. Hina Hassan Khaki  [khaki.hinz@gmail.com](mailto:khaki.hinz@gmail.com)

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ons were made about ASEAN's relevance in the aftermath of the US withdrawal from Indochina, Cambodia's invasion by Vietnam a few years later, the end of the Cold War, and the outbreak of the Asian financial crisis in 1997. ASEAN not only faced and survived each of those, but also strengthened itself each time a crisis struck (Archarya 2011, 1)<sup>1</sup>. Today, nobody would disagree with the fact that ASEAN has emerged as the most successful case of regionalism outside Europe (Buzynski 1998, 555).

ASEAN has emerged as an important political and economic organisation in the Asia-Pacific region, contributing to peace and stability in Southeast Asia. It was established during a period of regional tension, when political differences among Southeast Asian countries risked armed conflict, and the withdrawal of major powers created a power vacuum (Tan 2003, 2-5). ASEAN provided a platform for dialogue and cooperation to manage these challenges collectively. The major objectives as enshrined in the "Bangkok Declaration" establishing ASEAN were the promotion of regional cooperation, paving the way for peace, progress, and prosperity, while being determined to ensure stability of member states and their security from external interference. These goals extended beyond politics to include economic, social, cultural, and technical cooperation, aimed at building a peaceful and prosperous regional community (Khaki 2018, 155-156).

ASEAN enlargement became a crucial means of achieving these objectives. By expanding its membership, ASEAN sought to include all Southeast Asian countries within a shared framework, reducing divisions and strengthening regional unity. Expansion enhanced ASEAN's collective voice and supported peace and economic cooperation, despite challenges arising from diverse political systems and development levels. ASEAN's expansion reflects the belief that regional inclusion is essential for lasting stability and shared (Acharya 2014, 106-107).

## **II. The Expansion of ASEAN from Five to Ten:**

The expansion of membership of ASEAN from its five founding members, namely, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand, to ten member countries with the inclusion of Cambodia in 1999 is considered ASEAN's greatest achievement. ASEAN's vision of uniting all Southeast Asian states was proclaimed nearly fifty years ago when ASEAN was established. The Bangkok Declaration had left ASEAN membership open to all states in Southeast Asia subscribing to its aims, principles, and objectives (Weatherbee 2005, 91). Myanmar, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and Brunei initially declined to join the association. ASEAN served the political interests of all the participating countries. For Indonesia and Malaysia, it was a means to restore amicable relations by putting an end to President Sukarno's Konfrontasi policy. For Singapore, it was a means to safeguard its viability and sovereignty in a potentially hostile Malay world. For Thailand, ASEAN was a means of aligning itself with, and cultivating the support of its non-communist neighbors to the south. For the Philippines, it acted as a forum where its territorial claim to North Borneo could be discussed and resolved, from which the Philippines could not afford to be excluded (Tan 2003, 9-10).

The founding members of ASEAN were later joined by Brunei on 8<sup>th</sup> January 1984 after achieving independence, and became the sixth member of ASEAN. Vietnam became the seventh and first communist member of ASEAN on 28<sup>th</sup> July, 1995. Vietnam's admission in 1995 gave final closure to the political gulf between communist and non-communist Southeast Asia. Membership had been offered as an incentive to Vietnam in the negotiations for terminating the Third Indo-China War. Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar had been given observer status in 1992, 1994, and 1996, respectively (Weatherbee 2005, 91). After enjoying a brief period of observer status, Laos and Myanmar joined the Association on 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1997. Cambodia was also to join the Association along with Laos and Myanmar, but in July 1997, a coup by PM Hun Sen against the prince Ranariddh, because the latter had been planning to oust the former with the aid of the Khmer Rouge, prevented ASEAN from admitting Cambodia into its ambit. It was, however, expected that once internal political problems would be

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[1] Remarks at the Workshop on "ASEAN 2030: Growing Together for Shared Prosperity, ASEAN Studies Center, American University & Asian Development Bank Institute, School of International Service Founders Room, American University, February 7, 2011,

settled in Cambodia, it would be admitted into the association (Tan 2003, 33). Later, Cambodia joined ASEAN on 30<sup>th</sup> April, 1999, following stabilization of its government. With that, the ten Southeast Asian countries came into the one ASEAN family (Severino 2006, 8). Although it took ASEAN at least thirty years to realize its dream, the achievement was no less remarkable (Dato 1997, 128). The addition of former Indo-Chinese states to ASEAN is considered to be a turning point in Southeast Asian regional politics. The expansion of ASEAN to include ten Southeast Asian countries raised the clout of the association in international politics.

### **III. Transition From Ten to Eleven in 2025:**

The year 2025 marks a significant milestone in ASEAN regionalism as Timor Leste has officially been added as the 11<sup>th</sup> member of Association of Southeast Asian Nations, marking the culmination of its lengthy bid for accession. This development not only fulfilled ASEAN's long-lasting ambition of incorporating all the states in the region but also poses a test for association's ability to integrate a small economy with considerable development gaps.

During the opening of the 47th ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur on 26<sup>th</sup> October 2025, Timor Leste's accession was solemnized by signing of the declaration by the representatives of all the ten member states of ASEAN (Strangio 2025). Timor-Leste, having a population of approximately 1.4 million and a GDP of about USD 1.9 billion, joined ASEAN whose combined GDP is over USD 3.8 trillion (Timor Leste Government 2025). Timor-Leste joined the association as it will open the doors for economic development seeking access to larger markets, better foreign investment and diplomatic legitimacy, while for ASEAN it means expanded regional outreach and unity.

Timor-Leste's journey of becoming a member of ASEAN has been a complex, much-awaited and long-cherished goal reflecting a story of resilience, patience, and determination. Timor-Leste gained independence in 2002 after a long struggle and since then joining ASEAN has been its strategic priority. However, Timor-Leste soon joined the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 2005. In 2007 Timor-Leste signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) and in March 2011 Timor-Leste formally submitted its formal application to become a member of ASEAN marking the official start of its accession process (Leach 2025). In 2022, ASEAN Leaders agreed in principle to admit Timor-Leste as a Member State, granting it Observer Status to engage in ASEAN activities while evaluating its readiness across the political, socio-economic, security and cultural pillars of ASEAN. This was followed by adoption of formal "*Roadmap for Full Membership*" in 2023 laying down necessary legal alignment, institutional reforms, and transitional arrangements required to achieve full membership. Finally, at the 47<sup>th</sup> ASEAN summit which was held in Kuala Lumpur in October, 2025, Timor Leste deposited its Instruments of Accession under the ASEAN Charter and was admitted as the 11<sup>th</sup> member state on 26<sup>th</sup> October (ASEAN 2025). This event was celebrated as completing the ASEAN family.

### **IV. Implications for Timor-Leste:**

#### **A. Political and Institutional Dynamics:**

The ASEAN Charter accentuates the broad criteria for membership of ASEAN in its Article viz.,

- Country should be geographically located in the region,
- There should be an agreement to be bound by the ASEAN Charter, and
- It should be recognised by all the members of the association (Thuzar 2017).

Timor-Leste met the basic requirements to become the member of ASEAN like, being geographically located in the region and formally agreeing to the ASEAN Charter. However, the real challenge was whether it could realistically fulfil ASEAN's economic, legal and regulatory standards. Most of the ASEAN member states supported Timor-Leste's membership on the grounds of shared value and regional unity but some member states expressed concerns about administrative burdens, economic expenses, and Timor-Leste's overall preparedness to participate fully in ASEAN activities (ASEAN.Hub 2025). To address these concerns, ASEAN decided to follow a steady and phased approach. It allowed

Timor-Leste to participate in selected meetings while receiving technical assistance to strengthen its institutions and capacity. In addition to these practical considerations, broader strategic factors such as increasing ASEAN's influence in the Timor Sea region and the wider Indo-Pacific also shaped the decision (Widionto 2025).

### ***B. Economic Profile and Development Realities:***

Timor-Leste is currently the smallest economy in the ASEAN, with a population of about 1.3–1.4 million, which makes it much smaller than most other member states in the group (Widionto 2025). Its economy depends largely on the oil and natural gas sector. Because of this dependence on a few commodities, the country is not very diverse and is especially sensitive to fluctuations in global oil prices. Compared with other ASEAN members, Timor-Leste's per capita income, physical infrastructure (such as roads, electricity, and communications), and other social indicators (education, skills, and health) are much below regional averages. After Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN, its access to established trade networks and regional markets is improving. Now it will export more goods, attract foreign investment, and participate in regional economic agreements like the ASEAN Free Trade Area, which lowers trade barriers with other member states (Gomes 2025). However, this is possible only if the country addresses important structural and institutional problems, for example, strengthening its legal and financial systems, improving education and health sectors, building more infrastructure, and making its institutions more effective. All these reforms are very essential for Timor-Leste to take full advantage of the opportunities that ASEAN membership offers.

### ***C. Institutional Readiness and Capacity Challenges:***

Joining ASEAN is one of the biggest milestones of Timor-Leste, particularly in political and economic aspects. The country worked really hard to show its willingness to connect with the region by developing its democratic institution and by participating in ASEAN meetings as an observer country. However, on economic side it faced significant hurdles. Timor-Leste is still underdeveloped compared to most of ASEAN member states in terms of infrastructure like, roads, broadband connectivity etc., which makes it difficult for businesses to thrive (Chen 2025). Similarly, education and workforce skills are also the areas of concern. More than 60% of population is under 35 years of age. The working population lacks the technical, digital, and language skills needed to compete at the regional level (Soares 2025). To address these challenges Timor-Leste requires strong human resource and institutional capacity. Government agencies and private sector require greater training, skill development and resources to effectively manage the complex technical demands of regional economic cooperation (Shamsunahar 2025).

Because of these gaps, sustained support from ASEAN and other international partners is crucial. Australia and other institutions like Asian Development Bank (ADB) and European Union (EU) are already partnering with Timor Leste to strengthen its skills in training, education, public finance and digital development (EU 2023). These partnerships are important for Timor Leste to build confidence and capacity to meet regional commitments and get meaningfully benefited from the opportunities that ASEAN provides (Chen 2025).

## **V. Implications for ASEAN:**

- ***Political and symbolic significance:***

Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN has important political, symbolic, and practical implications for the regional organisation. Its membership strengthened ASEAN's image as an inclusive and geographically complete entity, completing Indonesia's long-standing vision of "One Southeast Asia." The member states differ significantly in their political systems and levels of development, but ASEAN's commitment to regional solidarity is evident. Timor-Leste's inclusion does not automatically resolve underlying concerns related to democratic governance, institutional capacity, and uneven development standards across the region. Instead, it highlights ASEAN's continued preference for gradual engagement rather than strict enforcement (Acharya 2014, 48).

- ***Institutional and administrative challenges:***

The 10+1 expansion of ASEAN places extra burden on an organisation as it operates with limited financial and administrative resources. Additional membership leads to more meetings, greater demands, and increased needs for translation, documentation, and staffing. ASEAN has an annual budget of roughly USD 27 million which is comparatively much lesser than other regional organisations. So, ASEAN may require corresponding reforms in budgeting and administrative processes to face the challenges in maintaining organisational agility and timely decision-making (ASEAN.Secretariat 2023).

- ***Implications for future enlargement:***

Timor-Leste's entry into ASEAN establishes an important example for other countries that may want to join in future, such as Papua New Guinea or Bangladesh. It shows that ASEAN is open to welcoming less-developed countries in future provided there is a clear roadmap, gradual execution of obligations, and constant capacity-building support. At the same time, the accession process has become more organised and transparent than before, with clearer standards, timelines, and readiness assessments. While it makes the process easier to understand but it may make entry of future aspirants difficult as they would be expected to meet higher and more structured requirements (Dosch 2007).

- ***Strategic and economic relevance:***

From strategic point of way, Timor-Leste's entry into ASEAN has added to the organization's importance in the broader Indo-Pacific region, especially in maritime cooperation and regional connectivity. Although Timor-Leste's immediate economy is small and its contribution to ASEAN would be limited, but the membership should not be viewed only in terms of short-term economic goals. Over time, Timor-Leste may gradually attract new opportunities for trade, investment, and integration into regional value chains. This accension has the potential to benefit both Timor-Leste and ASEAN in the long run (UNSDG 2025).

## **VI. Conclusion:**

To sum it up, the 2025 enlargement of ASEAN through the accession of Timor-Leste marks a significant milestone in the Southeast Asia's regional history. It is not only an increase in the membership, but represents a powerful symbol of ASEAN's long-standing commitment to regional consolidation and a step toward inclusive regional integration. The accession of Timor-Leste reflects ASEAN's aspiration to bring all Southeast Asian states under a common institutional framework, reinforcing its identity as a cohesive regional organization. The ASEAN 2025 expansion serves as an important test of ASEAN's institutional capacity, highlighting whether the bloc can manage diversity in political systems, economic development levels and governance structures while maintaining its consensus-based approach.

However, the long-term benefits of Timor Leste's accession will ultimately depend on number of factors like, Timor-Leste's ability to effectively implement ASEAN obligations, strengthen domestic institutions, and integrate into regional and political frameworks. Equally important is ASEAN's readiness to provide constant economic, technical and capacity-building support to accommodate Timor Leste facing distinct development challenges. This enlargement can strengthen ASEAN's credibility as an inclusive and resilient regional organization managed successfully. Thus ASEAN's 2025 enlargement stands as both an opportunity as well as shared responsibility for ASEAN's future.

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