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CONTEMPORARY US POLICY IN EAST ASIA: ANALYSING THE INFLUENCE OF ASEAN-LED INSTITUTIONS

Abstract

The United States (US) maintains a long-standing security alliance network in the East Asian region and simultaneously engages actively with regional institutions through ASEAN-centred multilateral frameworks. Within this context, the paper seeks to address a central question: how do the institutional dynamics of East Asia shape and influence US policy in the region? Adopting a liberal institutionalist perspective, this paper examines the key variables that determine the effectiveness of institutions in East Asia and their capacity to influence the strategic behavior of major powers, particularly the United States. The article argues that, being influenced by the principles of ASEAN centrality and the ASEAN way of non-intervention, rule and norms-based international order, the US is adopting its defense, economic, and non-traditional security policies in East Asia. In due course, it further explains that institutional dynamics exert a tangible influence on state behaviour, thereby underscoring the explanatory value of neoliberal institutionalism in contemporary East Asia.

Keywords: Rule-Based Norms, Asean Way, Asean-Led Institution, Institutional Power and Influence, US Liberal Strategy In East Asia

1. Introduction

After the end of the Cold War, the US-Japan Alliance in the mid-90s reaffirmed security competition in East Asia. The security and power competition of the US in the region is reflected in many other areas, including alliance building characterised by a hub and spokes system, like alliances with Japan, South Korea and the Philippines; military bases, freedom of navigation operations, Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD)—comprising the US, Japan, India, and Australia. In addition, a strong US military presence in the region and the South China Sea (SCS) dispute, where the US wants an international rule-based order, on the other hand, China claims it as its own in the region. With this security environment and disputes between the two big powers, the region has become the main stage for global power competition, shaped by China's rise and America's alliances.¹ Simultaneously, the US is also pursuing a strategy of building and sustaining institutions in this highly

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¹ Michael Yahuda, *The International Politics of the Asia-Pacific: Fourth and Revised Edition* (Oxfordshire, UK: Routledge, 2019).

conflict-ridden region, as well as achieving a remarkable miracle of rapid economic growth. This strategic institutional orientation primarily aims to counterbalance China's expanding economic and military capabilities through the consolidation of alliances, promotion of regional economic cooperation, and reinforcement of international legal and normative frameworks. Generally, it is argued that the fundamental objective of the US is to ensure a balance of power based on the rules-based international order and thus limit China's growing regional influence in East Asia.² Accordingly, the strategy reflects Washington's sustained reliance on institutionalised engagement in the East Asian region. As part of the strategy, the US involved itself with numerous institutions in East Asia. In this regard, Johnston³ focuses on China's strategic culture and suggests that while competition with the US is growing, institutional engagement and confidence-building remain crucial.

In this actuality, a number of institutions are established and working well in this region, like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), East Asia Summit (EAS), etc. With this ASEAN-centric institutional framework, great powers like the US and Russia seem vital. The other big powers, like China, Australia, and India, have also significant involvement in the region in the ASEAN-centric institutional framework. Most importantly, the US has a hub and spoke alliance system in the region. Therefore, security and power competition on one hand and institution building and its power and functioning on the other in the region attract the attention of international relations scholars. In this state of power competition, explaining its institutional architecture, active institutional engagement of big powers in the region that influences great powers' behaviour, particularly the US, seems vital. Drawing on this background, this study is entirely grounded in qualitative data derived from secondary sources such as scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, policy documents, policy statements of the leaders, newspapers, and various online materials, with a particular focus on key variables that illuminate the effectiveness and influence of institutions in East Asia. Using the thematic analysis method, the paper demonstrates that regional institutions in East Asia have been able to influence and shape great-powers behavior more particularly the US. The US active engagement with these East Asia ASEAN-led institutional frameworks is the result of the institutional well-functioning and influence in the region. This article also argues that the ASEAN-led institutional framework highly influences the big powers' policy and strategy, particularly the US, to practice a liberal policy strategy in East Asia- an approach characterised by a rule and norms-based international order, including exporting values of democratic

² The scholars of International Relations (IR) are almost in the same opinion.

³ Alastair Iain Johnston, "The Failures of the 'Failure of Engagement' with China," *The Washington Quarterly* 42 no. 02 (2019): 99–114.

governance, promotion of free markets, multilateral cooperation, etc. This strategy aims to strengthen US leadership in East Asia as well as regional stability through a combination of a security alliance system and economic and institutional engagement rather than hegemonic influence.

This article is structured into six sections, followed by an introduction first. The second section provides a theoretical framework for neoliberal institutionalism. The third section examines the evolving nature of the US. engagement and strategic interests in East Asia. Section four and its sub-sections analyse the role and policy of regional institutions in shaping the dynamics of power competition between the US and China, and based on this, it highlights the relative success of regional institutionalism in East Asia, drawing on key examples such as ASEAN, ARF, and the EAS, etc. The 5th section and its sub-sections finally show how the different US policies were highly influenced by the successful institutionalism in the region and convinced the US to pursue a liberal strategy in the region. In section six, the paper ends with a summary of key findings in the conclusion.

2. Theoretical Framework

The study is grounded on the theoretical foundation of the neo liberal institutionalism, which is the fundamental area of thinking in the era of post–Cold War international relations. This idea has emerged as a structural response to the anarchic structure of the international system and diverges in its interpretations of how states behave and whether cooperation is possible. Eminent liberalist scholar Robert Keohane said that international institutions (regimes) largely affect the behaviour of states and other actors of international politics the neo liberalists generally interpret. An international regime (institution) is defined by them as a set of norms, rules, and regulations. These ‘principles, norms, rules, and procedures’ all contain injunctions about behaviour: they prescribe certain behaviour and proscribe others.⁴ He also argued that cooperation is possible because institutions help states overcome collective action problems and reduce uncertainty, provide information, monitor compliance, and thus facilitate mutually beneficial cooperation.⁵ Neoliberal institutionalism posits that international institutions constrain and shape state behavior by reducing transaction costs, providing information, and fostering cooperation. In this regard, Keohane further highlights that, by shaping expectations and reducing uncertainty, institutions create frameworks for cooperation and thus directly influence state behavior in international relations.⁶ Joseph Nye and Robert Keohane jointly introduced the idea of “complex

⁴ Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony* (Prinston University Press, 1984).

⁵ Keohane, *After Hegemony*.

⁶ Robert O. Keohane, *Neoliberal Institutionalism* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

interdependence,”⁷ and they explained that through multiple channels, the states and non-state actors are interconnected, and this interdependence can be managed through the creation of international regimes that help coordinate policies and resolve disputes peacefully. In this regard, Stein explains that neoliberal institutionalists accept realist premises about power; however, they insist that institutions mediate interactions, channeling state behaviour into more predictable and cooperative outcomes.⁸ Similarly, Richardson shows that through embedding states in predictable patterns of interaction, networks of specialised institutions generate a type of habit of cooperation that steadily moderates conflict.⁹ Using game theory, Axelrod claimed that cooperation can begin among self-interested actors through reciprocity, and repeated interactions can be encouraged by institutions.¹⁰ Similarly, Oye argued that institutions can transform incentives, making cooperation more likely by promoting transparency and repeated interaction.¹¹ Defining international regimes as sets of rules and norms, Krasner emphasised that institutions not only constrain and structure state behavior but also reflect power relations.¹² The fundamental argument of these scholars is that the state can cooperate and do so for absolute and desired gain, considering the common interests. They recognise that mutual benefits can enhance collective welfare action and states can pursue their absolute gains. Mutual gain and absolute gain are the key elements of neoliberal institutionalism in explaining the state’s interests. In this way, the neoliberal institutionalist explains the functionality and resilience of global institutions and claims that neoliberal institutionalism remains a more effective framework of contemporary international relations, and empirically, it is evident in some issue areas that extend beyond conventional conceptions of security. East Asian institutions have created a suitable example of establishing institutions with a rule-based order and values and have been able to engage and influence big powers, especially the US. Therefore, the whole explanation of the paper is seen in the light of this theory, and this theory strongly explains the strength and power of institutions and also explains how the state can be cooperative, despite having its self-centric nature, if institutions can work even in the anarchic structure of the international system.

Based on this theoretical framework, the following sections show that East Asia is showing a suitable example of how institutional power influences a big power to follow a liberal strategy predominantly characterised by values of rule-based

⁷ Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence* (Longman, 1977).

⁸ Arthur A. Stein, “Neoliberal Institutionalism,” in *The Oxford Handbook on International Relations*, ed. Arthur A. Stein (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 201–221.

⁹ James L. Richardson, “The Ethics of Neoliberal Institutionalism,” ed. Arthur A. Stein (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 222–233.

¹⁰ Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

¹¹ Kenneth A. Oye, *Cooperation Under Anarchy* (Princeton University Press, 1986).

¹² Oye, *Cooperation Under Anarchy*.

norms and order (see Table 2) that create a framework for cooperation, a network of specialised institutions, and mediate interactions as a whole. Ikenberry¹³ termed this policy as the US's liberal grand strategy in East Asia, which is rooted in its broader objective of embedding American power within a web of institutional and normative structures that both stabilise the region and sustain US primacy.

3. Contemporary US Interests in East Asia

After the end of the Cold War, the US shifted its strategy, following a rule and norms based liberal order (see Table 3) in the East Asian region, from containing communism to integrating emerging powers and preserving regional stability. The US perceived China's rise very quickly both as an opportunity for a probable long-term strategic challenge as well as an active economic engagement, following the disappearance of the immediate Soviet threat. From the Cold War situation, the US has preserved its "hub-and-spokes" alliance system in the East Asian region,¹⁴ and extended its security bonds with Japan, South Korea, Thailand, the Philippines, and later strengthened and deepened its defense cooperation with Singapore and Vietnam. The US–Japan alliance was invigorated through the 1996 *Joint Declaration on Security*.¹⁵ The US power projection in the region, reflected through the forward-deployed forces and military bases in Japan, South Korea, and Guam and has been continued as the backbone of that power projection. Economically, the US championed trade liberalisation and integration into global markets. In the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), founded in 1989, the US played a leading role and supported China's membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001. The US also pushed for significant trade agreements, for example, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and now the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), to make its sustainable active economic engagement. All the initiatives and engagement of the US in the region reflect its commitments to a rule-based order, norms, and values of the East Asian institution and economy. In addition, as part of the fundamental principles of its foreign policy, the US promoted democratic values, the rule of law, and human rights, though it was actively involved with some regional institutions like the EAS and ARF

¹³ G. John Ikenberry, "From Hegemony to the Balance of Power: The Rise of China and American Grand Strategy in East Asia," *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies* 23, no. 02 (2014): 41–63.

¹⁴ A US-led network system characterised by the US as a center or hub and the separate alliances' partner like Japan, South Korea and other East Asian members as spokes that allow a connection of hubs, and each spoke, however, has no connection among the spokes themselves.

¹⁵ It is a joint declaration signed between the US and Japan in 1996 for ensuring mutual security, prosperity and stability in the region characterised specially by defense cooperation between them.

to counter China's rise and influence through institutional participation. Outside of the traditional military arrangements and economic scopes, these initiatives allowed the US to shape its regional power dynamic. The East Asian region has emerged as a challenge, after the demise of the Cold War, for the US, as it has to formulate its foreign policy for the maintenance of the status quo in a world characterised by hegemonic power relations. Therefore, the bilateral alliances in the East Asian region have become the prime prioritised US strategy for more than forty years. However, the end of the Cold War and the major changes in the architecture of international power dynamics led to the US reshaping its behavior in the East Asian region. Consequently, the US signed a new alliance treaty with Japan in the 1990s. At this time, Japan, as an economic powerhouse and a trading giant, has emerged as a threat to the US in terms of economic, industrial, and global preeminence. Japan's emergence as an apparent 'super state' was augmented through sensationalist media portrayals and alarmist rhetoric in the US Congress. Scholarly arguments predicting America's inevitable decline in the face of the 'rising sun' lent intellectual legitimacy to widespread public anxieties, which only began to subside following Japan's 'lost decade' of economic stagnation in the 1990s.¹⁶

The US interest in the East Asian region remains substantial due to its geostrategic implications, robust economic growth, and the rise of China as a major power characterised by rapid military modernisation and expanding economic influence. In a report in February 1995, the office of the international security affairs of the US Department of Defense, in its East Asia Strategy,¹⁷ clarified that "Asia today also has new significance. Its role is vital to the pursuit of a more open international economic system. The US trade with the Asia-Pacific region in 1993 totaled over US\$ 374 billion and accounted for 2.8 million United States jobs. Given Japan's economic and political weight, it is a natural partner in our efforts to fashion a viable post-Cold War regional and international order. The region has also produced other economic successes - China, Taiwan and Hong Kong, the Republic of Korea, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand—each of whom are key US trade partners and will play an increasingly important role in the global economy. The long history of close American cultural, economic, and security ties to the East Asian region reflects fundamental United States national interests that will only grow in the coming years. The US's role as a force for regional stability remains central and has not diminished." Her sustained and proactive involvement in East Asia renders it an integral and indispensable component of the region.

¹⁶ Sbigneus Brzesinski, *Strategic Vision: America and the Crisis of Global Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2012).

¹⁷ "US Security Strategy for the East Asia-Pacific Region," Nautilus Institute, Last modified February 28, 1995, <https://nautilus.org/global-problem-solving/us-security-strategy-for-the-east-asia-pacific-region/>.

At the East Asia Summit in 2025, the US Assistant Secretary Michael George DeSombre¹⁸ articulated President Trump's vision for "a free, secure, and prosperous Indo-Pacific", reaffirming the United States' enduring commitment to ASEAN and the wider region. He underscored ASEAN's pivotal role in fostering regional peace and stability, while reiterating Washington's dedication to equitable and mutually beneficial trade through the announcement of enhancements to the ASEAN Single Window. Furthermore, he highlighted the US leadership in addressing cybercrime by unveiling new initiatives aimed at strengthening cyber threat awareness and advancing public-private partnerships to combat online scams. President Donald Trump has unsettled traditional alliances, prompting China, Japan, and South Korea—each maintaining active engagement with ASEAN—to intensify regional cooperation. Their recent ministerial dialogues, extended leadership tenures, and renewed trade negotiations collectively indicate a decisive movement toward a more self-sufficient East Asia.¹⁹ This evolving alignment seeks to reconcile security imperatives with economic pragmatism as the three neighboring states contend with US unpredictability while delicately managing their historically intricate relations.²⁰ Based on this US interest and engagement in East Asia, the subsequent sections elucidate how this active engagement has fostered ongoing cooperation, while concurrently allowing ASEAN-led institutions to exert their influence upon US policies.

4. ASEAN-Led Regional Institutionalism in East Asia

Within the realm of global security, power competition, cooperation, trade, investment, and regionalism, East Asian regionalism introduces a momentous dimension. The primacy of the ASEAN-led institution lies in its ability to provide stable platforms for dialogue, peaceful management of conflict, and economic integration in an environment of great-power competition. Thus, ASEAN-led institutionalism reflects regional values of non-intervention, non-confrontation, respect for sovereignty, and thereby attracts the attention of great powers like the US. Based on the above background, the following subsection shows the nature and working of the ASEAN and ASEAN-led institutions in the East Asian region.

4.1 ASEAN

ASEAN has successfully established a peaceful settlement of dispute mechanism like the ASEAN way, Sone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality

¹⁸ "U.S. Participation in the East Asia Summit," U.S. Mission to ASEAN, accessed October 31, 2025, <https://asean.usmission.gov/u-s-participation-in-the-east-asia-summit/>.

¹⁹ "Trump's return drives closer cooperation in East Asia," East Asia Forum, Last modified June 04, 2025, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2025/06/04/trumps-return-drives-closer-cooperation-in-east-asia/>.

²⁰ East Asia Forum, "Trump's Return Drives Closer Cooperation in East Asia".

(SOPFAN),²¹ Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC),²² Economic integration in the region that has created an example of success of the working of the institutions in the East Asian region. These are all the mechanisms ASEAN has created and been able to solve various conflicts since the end of the Cold War, like the Cambodian conflict, Indonesia Indonesia-Malaysia border conflict, the South China Sea dispute, the East Timor Crisis, the Thai-Cambodian border tension, etc., under the ASEAN solution principles (Table 1). ASEAN upholds an exceptional set of diplomatic models that guide state behavior, denoted as the *ASEAN Way*. These principles include non-use of force, noninterference in the affairs of member states, informality, and decision making based on consensus. Therefore, constructivists also stress the positive regulatory effect that these norms have on state behavior, cooperation, and regional stability.²³ Eminent scholar Laura Southgate explained that both 1978–1991 and 1992 to the present show serious external interference in Southeast Asia, continued great power rivalry causing instability, and the critical role played by China and the US. He also argued that ASEAN experienced a period of growth and change during this time, branded by the expansion of its membership and especially its greater institutionalisation. Nevertheless, since its establishment in 1967, the institution has adhered consistently to its primary principles, as articulated in the Treaty of TAC and embodied in the diplomatic modes of the ‘ASEAN Way’.²⁴ ASEAN issued the Declaration on the SCS,²⁵ promoting peaceful settlement and self-restraint in 1992, and facilitated multilateral talks leading to the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties (DOC) between ASEAN and China. This is the continuous engagement of ASEAN in resolving conflicting security issues in the region. However, although South China Sea disputes remain unresolved, no large-scale military confrontation between ASEAN claimants is seen due to the institutional dialogue through the ASEAN mechanism, and dialogue channels have stayed open. Haacke²⁶ calls this institutional mechanism a “conflict avoidance success,” noting that the ASEAN Way created a habit of restraint among disputants. Institutionalising various cooperation principles, ASEAN has created an ASEAN-centric regional mechanism, norm, and values in the region, which has been not only beneficial for their interest but also central to the member states, and they consider those as the *ASEAN centrality*. The external and regional powers, like the US, China, and Russia, view this ASEAN

²¹ The Foreign Ministers of ASEAN member states signed a treaty for the peaceful settlement of disputes among them.

²² In conducting inter-state relations, the founding ASEAN member states signed this treaty in 1976 for the peaceful co-existence through promoting peace, regional stability, and cooperation.

²³ Jürgen Haacke, *ASEAN's Diplomatic and Security Culture: Origins, Development and Prospects* (New York: Routledge Curson, 2003).

²⁴ Laura Southgate, “Explaining ASEAN Institutional Balancing Success and Failure,” *Asian Security* 21, no. 02 (2025): 149–167.

²⁵ In 2002 ASEAN member states signed a non-binding political statement on which is popularly known as Conduct on the parties in South China Sea with a view to negotiating a more comprehensive code of conduct.

²⁶ Haacke, *ASEAN's Diplomatic and Security Culture*.

centrality as critical to the success of their foreign policy strategy in the region. Taking into consideration the principles of non-intervention, sovereignty, consensus, informality, and inclusivity, the ASEAN-centric institution can be termed a minimalist but effective bargaining platform that enables ASEAN to become a mediator among great powers while providing venues for active engagement with ADMM-Plus. Evelyn Goh also considered that ASEAN “has helped to institutionalise power relations,” bringing both the US and China to the table and granting smaller states a voice in regional security dialogues.²⁷

Table 1: Institutional Success through ASEAN Solution Principles²⁸

Conflict Solution	ASEAN Solution Principles	Institutional Success
Cambodia Conflict solution in 1991	Using quiet, backchannel diplomacy with Vietnam and external actors while lobbying at the UN, ASEAN condemned Vietnam’s occupation but avoided direct confrontation.	Vietnamese withdrawal in 1989, eventual peace settlement, and Cambodia’s admission to ASEAN in 1999
Indonesia–Malaysia Border Disputes	Using ASEAN’s norm of “non-militarisation of disputes” ASEAN-facilitated talks and states agreed peaceful settlement through the International Court of Justice (ICJ)	Ambalat tensions were likewise delimited
South China Sea (1990–2000s)	Facilitated multilateral talks leading to the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties of 2002 between ASEAN and China	Disputes unresolved, no large-scale military confrontation between ASEAN claimants were seen and dialogue channels stayed open
East Timor Crisis (1999)	Condemning avoiding destabilisation but engaged in quiet persuasion urging Jakarta to accept peacekeeping assistance	Large-scale regional conflict was avoided, and East Timor gained independence peacefully in 2002
Thai Cambodian Border Tensions (2008–2011)	Bilateral, trilateral meetings, encouraged ICJ referral	Conflict de-escalated, and the ICJ issued a ruling in 2013 clarifying the boundary helped prevent broader military escalation

4.2 ARF

ASEAN Regional Forum is, a forum of the member states of ASEAN countries, working as a platform for dialogue and consultation for security and political issues in East Asia facilitating discussions, exchanging views on matters of common concern. It

²⁷ Evelyn Goh, “Rising Powers Initiative,” Rising Powers Initiatives, accessed August 19, 2025, https://www.risingpowersinitiative.org/resource_database-post/goth-evelyn-3/.

²⁸ Author’s Own Rendition, 2025.

is also arranging meetings of the ministries, senior officials, and workshops focusing on specific security issues. By bringing rivals like the US and China into multilateral discussion, it mitigates great-power competition in Southeast Asia and projects itself as a neutral facilitator. ARF has not only engaged the member states in this negotiation platform for conflict resolution but also the external powers in the security dialogue. Leifer²⁹ recognised this approach of ARF as a cooperative security mechanism rather than an alliance strategy rooted in dialogue, trust-building, and shared norms which is essentially avoiding bloc politics in the region. He also, in his famous work, explained that defusing and controlling regional tensions is the undeclared objective of the ARF through producing and sustaining a link of dialogues within the predominant framework of its annual meetings, reinforced by financial incentives that bind states committed to market-oriented growth and advancement. Ganesan delivers empirical evidence from Southeast Asia and shows that ASEAN's institutional framework altered state preferences and reduced conflict, signifying these institutions actively through conditioned behavior beyond mere power balancing.³⁰

4.3 *East Asia Summit*

East Asia Summit is an ASEAN-centric regional grouping/institution, consisting of ten ASEAN members and other major nations such as Japan, Korea, China and Australia, New Zealand, India, the US, and Russia, working in close partnership with its member countries. The US joined this forum in 2011 to ensure its deeper engagement policy in the region, as the US power is challenged in East Asia. Sowdagar³¹ explored three central reasons of US engagement in the EAS, *i.e.*, US deeper engagement policy in Asian regionalism, potential threat to the US from the diverse intra-national and national conflicts, and China's emergence as a central player and its dominant role in East Asian regionalism. The EAS participating countries meeting is held every year after the end of the ASEAN leaders meeting, and the participants issue a declaration, joint statements, as well as plans of action. Beyond the leaders' annual meeting, the EAS foreign economic, environment, energy, and education ministers and senior officials' meetings were held accordingly and prepared these. In the Sixth East Asia Summit, all the member states jointly declared their commitment to the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations (UN), the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, and other recognised principles of international law.³² The EAS has identified 16

²⁹ Michael Leifer, *The ASEAN Regional Forum: Extending ASEAN's Model of Regional Security*. *Adelphi Paper No. 302* (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1996).

³⁰ N. Ganesan, "Testing Neoliberal Institutionalism in South East Asia, *Contemporary International History*," *Contemporary International History* 50, no. 04 (1995): 779–804.

³¹ Mezbah-Ul-Azam Sowdagar, "ASEAN+3+3+2: Explaining Trends of Regional Competition in the Asia Pacific," *BISS Journal* 36, no. 04 (2015): 333–348.

³² Declaration of The East Asia Summit on The Principles for Mutually Beneficial Relations, Final draft. (Bali, 19 November, 2011), accessed July 19, 2025, <https://www.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/EAS-Principles.pdf?>

streams of working,³³ both traditional and non-traditional security threats, like peace and security, environment and energy, cooperation on natural disaster management, ASEAN connectivity, maritime security, trade, poverty alleviation, food, and strengthening EAS institutional capacity, etc. Attending the summit meeting in 2006, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi expressed that the forum is open, inclusive, outward-looking, and is an integral component of the evolving ASEAN-centred rules-based regional architecture.³⁴ Therefore, the prime advantage of EAS is that it can bring the countries that see the summit as an easy way to engage all of the region's leaders in one room. In 2025, besides US President Trump, leaders from China, the European Council (EC), Canada, Brazil, and South Africa also attended the summit.³⁵ In this way, it has been working as a podium for diplomatic dialogue for dealing with both traditional and non-traditional security threats as well as trade negotiations. The EAS does not adopt its policies but is also very earnest in its implementation follow-up. In the 2023 Chairman's Statement of the 18th East Asia Summit, the Chairman welcomed the effective follow-up and implementation of the leaders' decisions and initiatives in a timely manner, as well as supporting the coordination between the EAS and other ASEAN-led mechanisms.³⁶

Table 2: Norms of Asian Regional Institutions³⁷

Institutions	ASEAN	APEC	ARF
Norms (Substantive)	Non-interference; Pacific settlement of disputes; Primacy of regional solutions; Avoidance of multilateral military pacts reflecting great power rivalry, One Southeast Asia concept	Open regionalism, market-driven regionalization	Common/cooperative security, Inclusiveness; non-interference, avoidance of NATO-style military cooperation
Norms (Procedural)	Consensus; Informalism; Voluntary compliance	Flexible consensus: Concerted unilateralism; Soft institutionalism	Consensus; ASEAN leadership, Voluntary Compliance

³³ East Asia Summit, *About the East Asia Summit* <https://eastasiasummit.asean.org/about-east-asia-summit>?

³⁴ "Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China. Wang Yi: East Asia Summit Should Stick to Its Nature of Leaders-led Strategic Forum," Last modified August 06, 2015, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/gjhdq_665435/2675_665437/2732_663468/2734_663472/202406/t20240607_11410747.html?

³⁵ "Trump Gives 'Toothless' Asian Summit its Moment in the Sun," BBC, October 27, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c797qlx93j0o>.

³⁶ 2023 Chairman's Statement of the 18th East Asia Summit, (Adopted in Jakarta, Indonesia on 7 September 2023). Available at: <https://cil.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/2023-18th-EAS-CS.pdf?>

³⁷ Amitav Acharya, *Asian Regional Institutions and the Possibilities for Socialising the Behavior of States: ADB Working Paper Series on Regional Economic Integration No. 82* (Asian Development Bank, June 2011), <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/28888/wp82-acharya-asian-regional-institutions.pdf>.

5. Institutional Influence and US Policy Shaping in East Asia

After the end of the Cold War, the US is highly involved in the East Asian institutions, more specifically in the ASEAN-centric institutions. This institution has established a rule-based international order that has strengthened its legitimacy in the international order and has also launched an institutional influence in the internal system that affects the behaviour of the global powers. As a global power, the US shapes its East Asian policy strategy and has started its involvement with East Asian regional institutions more actively. The US participation allows them to shape the rules, norms, and decision-making processes of institutions that help prevent China from dominating them and ensure that outcomes align with US strategic and economic interests. In this way, the US could share the responsibility of regional stability with its allies and partners and thereby reduce unilateral costs of competition with China. In addition, this institutional engagement has created a soft power practice prospect for the US where it can promote democracy, human rights, and open market values, thereby contrasting with China's more state-centric and sovereignty-focused model. In this manner, even as it competes with China, the US hedges against uncertainty and ensures channels of cooperation remain open in the areas of climate change, health security, and counterterrorism, etc. Besides, this institutional engagement opens the door for the US in areas like diplomatic engagement, alliance management, economic integration and market access, disputes management and preventing escalation, strengthening alliances and partnerships, reassuring smaller states, and preventing them from aligning exclusively with China due to fears of abandonment, which is critical in a context of US-China rivalry. In the state of US-China rivalry and ASEAN institutionalism mechanism, Goh³⁸ observes that ASEAN is playing a role as a "diplomatic hub" in US-China strategic competition, and it systematically examines how ASEAN's multilateral platforms, like the ARF, EAS, among others—act as sites where power transitions are managed, and great-power behavior has been institutionalised and socialised.

Some critical junctures of history, such as the end of the Cold War, the emergence of China as a rising power, Japan as an economic giant, the Asian financial crisis, and North Korea's nuclear proliferation, have created both opportunities and imperatives for regional actors to foster the development of new multilateral institutional frameworks. Grounding on this critical juncture, rule and norm-based institution building and their functions have started to be effective. Later in the state of US-China rivalry, the regional institutions in East Asia have gradually become the hub and mediator of balancing power and lessening rivalry.

³⁸ Evelyn Goh, *The Struggle for Order: Hegemony, Hierarchy, and Transition in Post-Cold War East Asia* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

The regional actors like Japan, Korea, and other ASEAN members have shown their efficacy in this regard. Explaining this situation, Acharya stresses the agency of regional actors as well as the ASEAN-led institutions in managing US-China rivalry in the region, and he also claims that ASEAN builds a “security community” to prevent escalation despite power asymmetries.³⁹ David Shambaugh explains the issue of managing the US-China relations and argues that Asia is the main theater of strategic competition, but also emphasises areas of cooperation. He considers this relationship a mix of competition and engagement.⁴⁰

Table 3: Institutional Power and Influence on US Policy⁴¹

Institution	Institutional Power	Influence on US Policy
ASEAN	Agenda-setting, convening power, Rule-based Norm-building, Non-Intervention	Shaping US diplomatic engagement and multilateral strategy, and Preventive Diplomacy, strong agenda-setting, and normative influence. Economic integration and interdependence
EAS	ASEAN connectivity, Maritime security, Non-traditional security	The US, China, and the other powers have come to the negotiation table, bringing the security issues like the South China Sea and North Korea, etc. Non-traditional security enhanced with the US.
ARF	Confidence Building Measures, Preventive Diplomacy, and Approaches to Conflict Management	Bringing rivals like the US and China into multilateral discussions through strategic balancing.

Acharya also claims that the regional actors and ASEAN-led institutions build a “security community” to prevent escalation despite power asymmetries in managing US-China rivalry.⁴² Johnston talked about China’s strategic culture and advocates that, as competition with the US is growing, engagement with institutions and confidence-building remain crucial.⁴³ The US-Japan alliance⁴⁴

³⁹ Amitav Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order* (3rd ed.) (New York: Routledge, 2014).

⁴⁰ David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁴¹ Author’s creation from various sources, 2025.

⁴² Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia*.

⁴³ Johnston, Alastair Iain, “The Failures of the ‘Failure of Engagement’ with China,” *The Washington Quarterly* 42, no. 02 (2019): 99–114.

⁴⁴ US Japan alliance is the alliance formed in the mid-1990s is an US shifting strategy in region in the post-Cold

after the mid-90s provides an active role of the US in the region in the perspective of security and stability. Although bilateral, this alliance has a regional dimension, and it is the reflection of the security strategy of the US in East Asia. However, the US also pursues a liberal strategy in the region. It is a strategic and constructive engagement that is a warming relation with China without lessening its promise to the security of Taiwan.

Institutions in East Asia have demonstrated the capacity to mediate and manage regional challenges, thereby drawing sustained engagement and strategic attention from the great powers. Among the most prominent and effective regional institutional frameworks in East Asia are ASEAN, ASEAN+3, later the broader EAS with great powers engagement, and the ARF. All are attempts of regional community building in the region, leading these regional states to accept such an approach within APT and the EAS framework, by determining their understanding of its relevance. These institutions contain a number of rules and principles in the region, including economic interdependence, security, cooperation, human rights, trade, environmental security, etc. This norm is introduced on the “bright prospects for enhanced interaction and closer linkages in East Asia,”⁴⁵ and encourages the countries in the region to pursue an “East Asian community” as a long-term goal for the maintenance of peace, prosperity, security, and progress in the region and beyond.⁴⁶ It proscribes attempts to exclude particular parties from the process of cooperation. Ikenberry⁴⁷ termed it as *American liberal grand strategy*- grounded in a particular reading of history, economics, and politics is built around at least three elements of policy engagement that seek to *open up, tie down, and bind together* countries to generate stable order. *Opening up* means directing the forces of trade and investment, cultural exchange, and transnational society into the closed politics of strong state rule. *Tie down* means inviting other governments to get involved in international organisations. *Binding together* means establishing the formal institutional link between countries. In this attempt, China and Japan, the two Northeast Asian competing powers, have made a few attempts to block the development of a community of friendly nations in East Asia. Katsumata⁴⁸ explained that China has made little effort

War geo strategic reality where the US engaged with the East Asian region with new objective and security strategy.

⁴⁵ “Joint Statement on East Asia Cooperation,” ASEAN Plus Three Summit, Manila, Last modified 28 November 1999, <https://aseanplusthree.asean.org/joint-statement-on-east-asia-cooperation-28-november-1999/>.

⁴⁶ East Asia Summit (EAS)’s inaugural Kuala Lumpur Declaration, aimed at promoting peace, economic prosperity, and regional integration in East Asia in 2005.

⁴⁷ Ikenberry, “From Hegemony to the Balance of Power”.

⁴⁸ Hiro Katsumata, *ASEAN’s Cooperative Security Enterprise: Norms and Interests in the ASEAN Regional*

to exclude from the EAS external/non-East Asian powers, in particular, the US and its security partners such as India and Australia. Since the first half of the 2000s, when ASEAN was planning for a new series of summit meetings, Beijing has refrained from putting pressure on ASEAN to exclude these external powers. It is worth noting that, in 2010, when ASEAN decided to expand the EAS by inviting the US to the framework, Beijing made a few objections. These institutional engagements and initiatives by harnessing institutions as instruments of power replicated the US commitment to implanting East Asian economies within a rules-based liberal institutional order. This initiative also proves the legitimisation attempts of the US power through the institutional platforms in spite of the persistence US-China rivalry. ASEAN also proves in the region that institution matters in the way of power competition between the two rivals.

Therefore, through the lens of neoliberal institutionalism, such behavior of a great power in a rivalry situation can be more persuasively explained, which underscores the role and influence of institutions in mitigating conflict, fostering cooperation, and shaping state behavior beyond the limitations of power politics. For example, in July 2000 summit between South Korean Leader Kim Dae Jung and his Pyongyang counterpart, Jung-II was a major event in this regard. North Korea agreed to halt its missile tests during the negotiation time was a welcome first fruit of the initiative launched in 1999 by former Defence Secretary William Perry. If such progress continues, a major security threat will be diminished.⁴⁹ In addition, the rapid economic growth, economic interdependence, and cooperation clearly indicate that these institutions are working well in the region in spite of ongoing security competition, especially after the US-Japan alliance in the mid-90s. Due to the influence of these institutions, the issues of security competition have been less important than cooperation in this region in spite of the US-Japan security alliance in the post-Cold War era. This institutional influence is reflected in US strategy when it, along with other members, jointly acknowledged the ASEAN Way and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) as being consistent with the principles of the UN Charter. It has strengthened the credibility and legitimacy of ASEAN's institutional framework not only in the eyes of the US but also in the whole international community. Building on the preceding discussion of ASEAN-led institutional policies in East Asia, the following sub-sections illustrate how particular aspects of US policy have been shaped by these regional institutions.

Forum (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

⁴⁹ Joseph S. Nye, "The Nye Report: Six Years Later," *International Relations of the Asia Pacific* 1, no. 01 (2001): 95–103.

5.1 US Commitment to Rule Based Order

In 2015, a spokesman of the US Department of State declared that the US is actively engaged in these areas including: preventive diplomacy, maritime security, disaster response, counterterrorism and transnational crime, and nonproliferation and disarmament etc., and is committed to working through the ARF to shape a rules-based order that is stable, peaceful, open and free.⁵⁰ Through building and institutionalising the power of norm-building and security dialogue approach ARF shape regional security norms and allow both great and small powers to discuss issues like the South China Sea and North Korea and the US using these venues to promote defense transparency and multilateral security cooperation and also committed for regional security that reassures its allies like South Korea, Japan and the Philippines (see Table 2 and 3). By actively participating in the ASEAN-led forums, the US wants to sustain its presence and influence in East Asia. It has also embraced the principle of ASEAN centrality as a key element of its regional multilateral diplomacy. Through this involvement, the US has utilised these platforms to advance a rules-based order, uphold freedom of navigation, entrench adherence to international law and normative frameworks, and promote regional stability, often to counterbalance China's growing influence. Institutional platforms in the East Asian region facilitate managed competition and stability as well as the balance of power (Table 1). Brands⁵¹ narrated the US objective and said that the US wants to encourage cooperative norms, transparency, and liberal economic integration, thereby institutionalising a regional order aligned with liberal democratic values. Through adherence to multilateralism, consensus-building, and inclusive norms, ASEAN shapes an environment in which the US, without overt confrontation, engages with regional norms, thus positioning ASEAN as an institutional hub at the center of East Asia's diplomatic architecture, and institutions have been able to bring the US into a rule-based norms and order and lead them effectively.

5.2 Economic Integration and Interdependence through Institutionalism

The institutional frameworks of ASEAN-led mechanisms in East Asia have increasingly encouraged the US to deepen its economic engagement with the region. A notable reflection of this alignment is seen in the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), both

⁵⁰ "US Engagement in 2015 ASEAN Regional forum," US Department of State, Last modified August 06, 2015, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2015/08/245759.htm>.

⁵¹ Hal Brands, *American Grand Strategy and the Liberal Order Continuity: Change, and Options for the Future*, (California: Rand Corporation, 2016), https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE200/PE209/RAND_PE209.pdf.

of which advance the US agenda of promoting an open and inclusive regional economic order. Dejana Gajinov explained that East Asia has emerged as one of the most dynamic regions of global economic integration due to its regional trade and production networks, trade liberalisation policies, institutional frameworks such as ASEAN, ASEAN+3, and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and growing financial initiatives that support its interconnectedness worldwide. He finds that this economic integration has produced robust economic gains, expanded intra-regional trade, and enhanced competitiveness.⁵² Josef T. Yap described this process of economic integration as regionalisation or market-driven integration.⁵³ Influenced by the institutional frameworks ASEAN, ASEAN+3, and RCEP, the US pushed for a high-standard trade agreement like TPP, and even after its withdrawal from TPP⁵⁴ and it recently pushed for another new trade framework like IPEF to sustain its financial presence in the region. The US is playing a leading role in formulating the IPEF in response to the RCEP led by China, which predominantly reflects its enthusiasm and attraction to the East Asian institutions. In Addition, as part of this liberal strategy, the US supports Chinese membership in the WTO and fosters various agreements and dialogues on regional norms and standards. Although the US has reaffirmed its commitment to security ties through this alliance, it has also offered patronage for multilateral and minilateral dialogues and thereby provided continuous support to various regional institutions in this region. Davidson,⁵⁵ in this regard, described that outside North America, Asia represents the US's largest economic trade partner and is also home to all collective defense treaty allies and numerous other important strategic partnerships. Rapid economic growth across the region, along with a rising China, has led to a shift in the distribution of power in the region, and these changing financial and geopolitical dynamics have also brought new opportunities.

5.3 US Non-military Strategy in the Maritime Dispute Issue

Maritime security, particularly the South China Sea dispute, remains a central arena of strategic rivalry between the US and China. By incorporating ASEAN's principles of freedom of navigation, maritime security, and the

⁵² Dejana Gajinov, "Economic Integration Processes in East Asia: Results, Opportunities and Challenges," *Bulletin of the Serbian Geographical Society* 104, no. 01 (2024): 141–182.

⁵³ Josef T. Yap, *Economic Integration and Regional Cooperation in East Asia: A Pragmatic View* (Philippines: Philippine Institute for Development Studies, 2005), <https://www.pids.gov.ph/publication/discussion-papers/economic-integration-and-regional-cooperation-in-east-asia-a-pragmatic-view>.

⁵⁴ Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) is an US led free trade agreement of the 12 Pacific rim countries where China is not invited to join. Recently the US has withdrawn its membership and therefore it is not functioning and the members are negotiating for another free trade agreement like Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF).

⁵⁵ Janine Davidson and Lauren Dickey, "America's Rebalance to the Asia-Pacific: On Track," *The Diplomat*, April 01, 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/04/americas-rebalance-to-the-asia-pacific-on-course-on-speed/>.

peaceful settlement of disputes, the US has sought to frame the issue within ASEAN-led diplomatic platforms. Although the dispute continues without a definitive resolution, the absence of large-scale military confrontation reflects the effectiveness of maintaining engagement through institutional and diplomatic channels. In this context, the US has largely pursued a non-military, dialogue-oriented approach consistent with ASEAN's cooperative norms. The USAID and the US Indo-Pacific Command are working through the ASEAN frameworks, like the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance (AHA Centre), that demonstrate how regional institutions shape and influence US policy in the region. The Indo-Pacific strategy of the US has also been influenced by the ASEAN framework. Acharya considers ASEAN's "centrality principles as a defining feature of East Asian regional order that continues to shape Indo-Pacific strategies.⁵⁶ In this way, the ASEAN institutions offer platforms for strategic engagement between the US and China, allowing Washington to balance its China policy through multilateral diplomacy instead of direct confrontation.⁵⁷ Throughout both his first and second presidential terms, Trump⁵⁸ consistently underscored the vision of a *free and open Indo-Pacific*, reaffirming support for ASEAN centrality and advocating a US role as a partner rather than a dominant power. His 2025 initiatives, particularly the signing of trade and supply chain agreements with several regional states, demonstrate a tangible move toward deeper economic engagement, aligning his actions with the multilateral rhetoric expressed in his official statements.

5.4 Strengthening Alliance Network and Strategic Balancing

The US considered this institutional engagement in the East Asian region with a view to sustaining a balance of power underpinned by some norms and rules-based order, rather than traditional military strategy, and thereby containing the scope of China's regional ascendancy. The US has been influenced by using these ASEAN-led platforms for promoting defense transparency and multilateral security cooperation (see Table 3). The US has also engaged with the ADMM-Plus and ARF under the ASEAN-led mechanism.

⁵⁶ Amitav Acharya, "After Liberal Hegemony: The Advent of a Multiplex World Order," *Ethics & International Affairs* 31, no. 03 (2017): 271–285.

⁵⁷ Kai He, *Institutional Balancing in the Asia-Pacific: Economic Interdependence and China's Rise* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

⁵⁸ "As US Inks Trade Deals with 4 ASEAN States, Trump Pledges America's 100% Commitment to Southeast Asia," Channel New Asia, Last modified Oct 26 2025, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/trump-100-us-asean-summit-malaysia-5425816>.

Influenced by those, the US policies have been shaped by ASEAN's non-confrontational, consensus-driven approach, which has encouraged it to incorporate confidence-building, preventive diplomacy, and non-intervention principles into its regional security policies (Table 3). The ADMM-Plus serves to enhance security and defense cooperation aimed at promoting peace, stability, and development across the region.⁵⁹ This constitutes a deliberate and institutionally grounded form of US engagement in East Asia. In November 2017, Donald Trump, attending the summit, stated that "I'm here today to discuss the concrete steps we are taking to protect our nation, defend our allies and partners, and uphold the principles that have led to so many years of peace and prosperity in the region".⁶⁰ This policy statement of the US President is the reflection of *ASEAN centrality* and *ASEAN way* principles, as well as strengthening and defending alliances with the liberal institutional order, as also explained by *Hal Brand's argument*. He further explained⁶¹ that this type of policy maintains global stability and the US alliance, but does not further expand alliances or security commitments, opposes terrorism and nuclear proliferation, but emphasises a nonmilitary or light-footprint approach, and limits exposure in the Middle East and pivots to East Asia. This US policy reflects the strengthening of the alliance network and strategic balancing with its rival in the region, adopting the principles of the ASEAN framework. Tables 1 and 2 show how ASEAN has been able to resolve many security issues in the region under the ASEAN framework. This ASEAN's success demonstrates how institutions can become influential actors, while US-China participation in multilateral platforms shows how even rivals acknowledge the utility of institutional engagement. Therefore, the US liberal strategy functions by harnessing institutions as instruments of power, both to constrain China and to legitimise American leadership in East Asia.

5.5 *Non-Traditional Security Issues*

The US has engaged highly with cooperation on nontraditional security issues in the region. In addition, the ASEAN-led forums, especially ARF and EAS, strongly shape the norms of regional security issues and allow the US

⁵⁹ Ha Thi Hoang and An Ha, *Repositioning the ADMM-Plus in a Contested Region* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2021), <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/iseas-2021-13-repositioning-the-admm-plus-in-a-contested-region-hoang-by-thi-ha>.

⁶⁰ "Prepared Remarks for Vice President Pence at the East Asia Summit Plenary Session," Foreign Policy, Last modified November 15, 2025, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/prepared-remarks-vice-president-pence-east-asia-summit-plenary-session/>.

⁶¹ Hal Brands, *American Grand Strategy*.

and the other powers also to bring the security issues like the South China Sea and North Korea to the negotiation table. In a joint statement of the ASEAN-US Commemorative Summit in 2017 it is declared that “We are dedicated to maintaining peace, security, and stability in the region, and to ensuring maritime security and safety, including the rights of freedom of navigation and overflight and other lawful uses of the seas, and unimpeded lawful maritime commerce as described in the 1982 UNCLOS as well as non-militarisation and self-restraint in the conduct of activities.⁶² In 2022, EAS Summit President Biden delivered his dream⁶³ for a free and open, connected and prosperous Indo-Pacific region and emphasised his commitment to working with allies in the region with a view to strengthening non-traditional security issues. He also reviewed progress in developing such an IPEF that provides concrete benefits to all of its fourteen members.

Based on the above discussion on the ASEAN-led institutional success and its influence on the US Policy of this region, the following argument can be made that underscores the explanatory value of neoliberal institutionalism in contemporary East Asia:

- a. The US policy prioritises institutional mechanisms in the region for strengthening power projection rather than depending only on traditional military strategy as strong and effective instruments for addressing the challenges posed by China’s rising economic and military power. The US is doing so by strengthening alliance networks, encouraging economic interdependence, and entrenching adherence to international law and normative frameworks (see Table 3). The consolidation of East Asian institutions, reinforced by prevailing regional norms and values, has elevated their influence to a level where institutional mechanisms surpass the traditional reliance on military alliances and security arrangements. This institutional strength has proven pivotal not only in shaping regional order but also in moderating China’s growing influence.
- b. Following the end of the Cold War, a new pattern of power

⁶² “Joint Statement of the ASEAN-U.S. Commemorative Summit on the 40th Anniversary of the ASEAN-U.S. Dialogue Relations,” ASEAN Main Portal, Last modified November 13, 2017, <https://asean.org/joint-statement-of-the-asean-u-s-commemorative-summit-on-the-40th-anniversary-of-the-asean-u-s-dialogue-relations/>.

⁶³ “Readout of President Joe Biden’s Participation in the East Asia Summit,” U.S. Mission to ASEAN, Last modified November 14, 2022, <https://asean.usmission.gov/readout-of-president-joe-bidens-participation-in-the-east-asia-summit/>.

competition emerged in East Asia, one increasingly mediated through institutional frameworks rather than traditional military arrangements. Examples include economic initiatives such as the TPP, RCEP, and the recent IPEF; the participation of the US, Russia, and China in ASEAN-led forums such as the EAS; and Washington's advocacy for SCS governance in accordance with UNCLOS etc. Collectively, these mechanisms represent powerful rule and norm-based (see Table 4) institutional instruments that shape the conduct of major powers, thereby posing a direct challenge to the neo-realist assumption that state behaviour is determined primarily by the anarchic structure of the international system.

- c. The highly institutionalised norms and rule-based institutions in the East Asian region have paved the way for the US to bargain with its rivals on various regional, economic, environmental, and security issues that strengthen US power in the region, leading to the declining concern of traditional security issues as well as traditional warfare. In a word, the institutions have been an independent tool and simply a strong instrument of US power projection in the region.
- d. This ASEAN-led institutionalism also paved the way not only for power dynamics but also for a strategic hedging mechanism for the middle power and smaller states navigating, adapting, and sometimes exploiting rivalries to their advantage in both security and nontraditional security affairs.
- e. The power competition of the regional powers has been constrained by the regional community-building characterised by norms and values. In such a circumstance, if the US in this region tries to restrain the development of such regional community building, it will be derailed from the regional engagement and development process and misplace its position as a legitimate entity in the region and become out of the way in the regional community and development mechanism.
- f. The SCS dispute in the East Asian region shows power projection of both powers as well as an issue of institutional negotiation in the EAS meeting. This scenario reflects the institutional arbitration

and US liberal strategy in the region. The US-Japan alliance in the 1990s is both a security guarantor as well as an effective functioning institutional hub in the region that deters conflict while proceeding cooperative frameworks that reflect a shift from a purely defensive posture to a comprehensive strategic partnership.

6. Concluding Remarks

The success of institutionalised multilateralism in the East Asian region, predominantly through the ASEAN-led multilateral initiatives, demonstrates how institutionalised structures based on shared norms and values have attained substantial legitimacy and authority and attract the big powers. In East Asia, the ASEAN-led institutions have demonstrated the capacity and strength to mediate and manage regional challenges, thereby drawing sustained engagement and strategic attention from the US. Similarly, these institutions are showing their strength in economic interdependence, cooperation, dialogue, and peaceful settlement of disputes in the region grounded on the principles of the ASEAN way, ASEAN centrality, non-interference, freedom of navigation, maritime security, etc. By incorporating these ASEAN principles, the US has sought to frame the issue within ASEAN-led diplomatic platforms. The article shows that the US policy is highly influenced by the ASEAN-led institutions and has significant engagement in the institutional mechanisms, adherence to institutionalised rules and norms, and the promotion of democratic values and human rights. It also demonstrates specifically that being influenced by the ASEAN-led institution US is committed to the rule and norms-based international order, which is the prime policy of these institutions, and the US is utilised these platforms to advance and promote regional stability in East Asia. The active engagement of the US in these institutions also deepens economic interdependence and the integration process in the region, which is also reflected in the formation of AEC and IPEF, and both are on the US agenda for promoting an open and inclusive economic order in the region. The article highlights that security concerns, such as the South China Sea and maritime security, remain key areas of rivalry between the US and China. However, influenced by ASEAN's principle of peaceful settlement of disputes, the US has agreed to bring these security issues to the negotiation table within the ASEAN framework and is now actively engaging in its diplomatic platforms to that end. The article also shows that the US is influenced by the ASEAN principle of non-traditional security cooperation and is highly engaged with the ARF and the EAS, and commits every year to maintaining peace, security, and stability in the region. Through this institutional engagement, the US is also

strengthening its alliance network and strategic balancing that is reflected in its engagement in ADDM-Plus and ARF and the other ASEAN-led mechanisms that aim to promote security cooperation to ensure peace and stability in the region. Finally, It is explained in the article that these ASEAN centric regional institutions are not only working with strength and success but also influence the US defense, economy, trade and its East Asian regional foreign policy that underscore the explanatory value of the theory of neoliberal institutionalism and thereby argued that institution can play a vital role in shaping state behavior even in an environment of power competition.