

A Study on Timor-Leste's Accession Process in ASEAN Regional Integration

Jiaolian Yang*

College of ASEAN Studies, Guangxi Minzu University, Nanning 530000, China

*Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.

Abstract: *As the newest and 11th member of ASEAN admitted in 2025, Timor-Leste's decades-long accession process marks a pivotal turning point in the evolution of ASEAN regional integration. This paper systematically sorts out Timor-Leste's full phased journey of pursuing ASEAN membership from 2002 to 2025, and adopts ASEAN's three-pillar framework of Political-Security Community (APSC), Economic Community (AEC), and Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) to analyze the internal and external driving mechanisms behind its long-term integration efforts. On this basis, the paper evaluates the bidirectional impacts of Timor-Leste's accession on ASEAN's regional institutional system and Southeast Asian geopolitical and economic patterns, and summarizes the institutional adaptation dilemmas and development bottlenecks confronting Timor-Leste's post-accession in-depth integration. The findings reveal that Timor-Leste's successful accession is a joint result of its domestic institutional reconstruction and economic transformation demands, as well as ASEAN's inclusive regionalism development and regional pattern evolution. While Timor-Leste's membership expands ASEAN's regional integration space and strategic depth, its weak industrial foundation and immature governance system also bring new challenges to ASEAN's traditional consensus-based governance and balanced regional development. This study further proposes targeted optimization paths for two-way adaptive integration between Timor-Leste and ASEAN, providing empirical evidence and policy references for the sustainable development of Southeast Asian regional integration and the improvement of ASEAN's regional governance system.*

Keywords: ASEAN; Regional Integration; Timor-Leste; Accession Process; Regional Governance.

1. Introduction

Regional integration has emerged as one of the most dominant structural trends shaping global governance, cross-border factor mobility, and regional economic cooperation in the 21st century, serving as a critical institutional arrangement for small and medium-sized states to mitigate developmental risks, expand diplomatic influence, and participate in global industrial division of labor. As the most mature, authoritative, and influential regional integration organization in Southeast Asia, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), founded in 1967 by five original member states including Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and the Philippines, has consistently adhered to the unique "ASEAN Way" featuring voluntary consultation, unanimous consensus decision-making, strict non-interference in domestic jurisdictions, and peaceful resolution of inter-state disputes throughout its more than half a century of institutional evolution. From an initial loose political security alliance aimed at maintaining regional stability and resisting external geopolitical interference during the Cold War era, ASEAN has gradually transformed and upgraded itself into a comprehensive, multi-dimensional regional integration community covering political-security coordination, market-oriented economic integration, and inclusive socio-cultural governance. By the end of the 2010s, ASEAN had essentially completed the systematic construction of three core institutional pillars, namely the ASEAN

Economic Community (AEC), ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), and ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC), forming a layered, mutually supportive, and operationally standardized regional integration system. This tripartite community framework has firmly established ASEAN's central institutional position in Southeast Asian regional governance and laid the core institutional foundation for promoting regional market unification, security order maintenance, and cross-border social governance cooperation [1].

The steady expansion of member scale and continuous absorption of new regional stakeholders have long served as fundamental dynamic forces driving ASEAN's institutional iteration, functional expansion, and regional integration deepening. Following the end of the Cold War and the conclusion of regional conflicts in Indochina, ASEAN successively admitted Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia into its institutional system, completing the integration of almost all mainstream sovereign states in the Southeast Asian geographical sphere and forming a holistic regional cooperation pattern covering mainland Southeast Asia and insular Southeast Asia. Against this regional integration backdrop, Timor-Leste, which achieved full sovereign independence in 2002 after decades of Portuguese colonial rule and Indonesian transitional occupation, stands as the youngest sovereign entity in contemporary Southeast Asia. Since independence, Timor-Leste has explicitly positioned full integration into the ASEAN regional cooperation system as the cornerstone of its national diplomatic strategy and core direction of long-term socioeconomic development, aiming to break post-independence diplomatic isolation and domestic developmental stagnation through embedding into regional multilateral mechanisms. After more than two decades of persistent diplomatic efforts, progressive institutional preparation, and phased capacity building, Timor-Leste officially obtained full ASEAN membership at the 47th ASEAN Summit held in October 2025, officially ending its long-term marginalized status in Southeast Asian regional multilateral affairs [3]. This landmark accession not only fills the final geographical vacancy in ASEAN's regional member layout and realizes the full coverage of Southeast Asian sovereign states within the ASEAN framework but also marks a new developmental stage of inclusive expansion, institutional diversification, and functional deepening for ASEAN regional integration.

Despite the abundant existing academic achievements concerning ASEAN regional integration, current research still presents obvious structural deficiencies and research gaps regarding the latest round of ASEAN institutional expansion represented by Timor-Leste's accession. On the whole, mainstream academic research on ASEAN integration primarily focuses on the institutional operation logic of its three major community mechanisms, the economic spillover effects of tariff liberalization and market integration, the geopolitical game between major powers within the ASEAN regional framework, and the endogenous integration dilemmas faced by traditional old member states with relatively mature development foundations. In contrast, scholarly discussions targeting Timor-Leste's decades-long ASEAN accession process remain relatively superficial and fragmented. Most extant literature merely provides descriptive chronological sorting of the basic accession process and generalized qualitative discussion on the superficial opportunities and challenges brought by accession, lacking in-depth systematic combing of the phased evolutionary characteristics, staged institutional obstacles, and strategic adjustment logic throughout the 23-year accession journey. Furthermore, few studies have constructed standardized theoretical frameworks to analyze the internal and external driving mechanisms of Timor-Leste's long-term accession efforts, nor have they conducted forward-looking, long-term strategic assessment of the bidirectional interactive impacts between Timor-Leste's membership and ASEAN's institutional upgrading as well as Timor-Leste's national sustainable development [10]. Most importantly, the academic community still lacks targeted theoretical and empirical research on the unique institutional adaptation dilemmas, interest coordination frictions, and governance efficiency changes brought by the accession of underdeveloped latecomer member states

represented by Timor-Leste to ASEAN's traditional consensus-based integration model, resulting in insufficient theoretical explanatory power for ASEAN's new stage of inclusive integration expansion.

In view of the above-mentioned prominent research gaps in current academic circles, this paper takes Timor-Leste's complete ASEAN accession process and subsequent post-accession integration practices as the core research object. On the basis of systematically sorting out the full-stage evolutionary characteristics of Timor-Leste's ASEAN integration from 2002 to 2025, this research adopts a combination of normative theoretical analysis and empirical documentary analysis, comprehensively utilizing official ASEAN summit communiqués, ASEAN Secretariat institutional documents, Timor-Leste government national development reports and diplomatic white papers, and high-quality peer-reviewed academic literature. This study systematically analyzes the multi-dimensional internal driving factors derived from Timor-Leste's post-independence national development demands and the external structural driving forces stemming from ASEAN's institutional transformation and regional pattern evolution. It further objectively evaluates the positive institutional values and developmental dividends brought by Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN regional integration, as well as the structural risks and operational challenges it entails. In addition, this paper constructs a targeted optimization path for Timor-Leste to realize comprehensive rule docking and in-depth functional integration after obtaining membership, and proposes adaptive institutional reform strategies for ASEAN to cope with the integration dilemmas of new underdeveloped members. The core research objective is to supplement and improve the theoretical research system of ASEAN incremental regional integration, reveal the operational logic of inclusive regionalism in Southeast Asia, and provide reliable empirical support and practical policy enlightenment for the sustainable deepening of Southeast Asian regional integration and the steady expansion of ASEAN's regional governance system in the new era.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Literature Review

International academic research focusing on Timor-Leste's ASEAN accession and regional integration participation can be roughly categorized into three dominant research dimensions, forming a preliminary but incomplete research system. The first strand of research focuses on sorting out the chronological evolution and staged characteristics of Timor-Leste's ASEAN accession process. Scholars in this field have systematically combed Timor-Leste's continuous diplomatic layout and progressive institutional docking actions targeting ASEAN regional mechanisms after its official independence in 2002. Key nodal events of regional integration participation are clearly defined, including Timor-Leste's admission to the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 2005 as its first formal entry into ASEAN's multilateral security mechanism, the signing of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) in 2007 to recognize ASEAN's core regional normative principles, the official submission of a full membership application to the ASEAN Secretariat in 2011, the acquisition of formal ASEAN observer status in 2022 after a decade-long assessment deadlock, the launch of a specialized targeted accession roadmap in 2023, and the ultimate completion of all assessment procedures and formal accession in 2025 (Smith & Jones, 2023). This type of research clarifies the basic context of Timor-Leste's accession process and effectively confirms the typical phased, gradual, and path-dependent characteristics of ASEAN's new member absorption mechanism, laying a basic factual foundation for subsequent in-depth research.

The second major research dimension concentrates on exploring the endogenous and exogenous driving factors behind Timor-Leste's persistent pursuit of ASEAN membership. Existing mainstream scholarly viewpoints generally hold that Timor-Leste's proactive integration into the ASEAN regional

system is the result of the superposition of urgent internal developmental demands and changing external regional geopolitical and economic environments. Internally, Timor-Leste has long been trapped in a single-resource-dependent economic development model since independence, with extremely fragile industrial foundations, insufficient manufacturing and modern service industry capacity, and excessive fiscal and economic reliance on offshore oil and gas resource exploitation and export revenues. This highly singular economic structure generates strong developmental vulnerability and anti-risk capability deficiency, making economic diversification and industrial upgrading the core strategic demand of national development [8]. Integrating into ASEAN's unified regional market and industrial cooperation system is regarded as the most feasible external path to break the domestic development dilemma. Externally, the strategic competition among major powers in the Southeast Asian and Indo-Pacific regions has intensified continuously in the past decade, leading to increasingly complex regional geopolitical dynamics. As a small, newly independent country with weak comprehensive national strength and low regional discourse power, Timor-Leste seeks to enhance its regional diplomatic status, achieve diplomatic diversification and strategic independence, and avoid becoming a passive chess piece in great-power games through joining the ASEAN multilateral mechanism.

The third research dimension focuses on assessing the multidimensional impacts, potential opportunities and inherent challenges brought by Timor-Leste's ASEAN accession. Optimistic research viewpoints emphasize the positive strategic value of Timor-Leste's membership for ASEAN regional integration. Relevant studies point out that Timor-Leste's accession effectively fills the geographical gap in ASEAN's eastern regional layout, optimizes ASEAN's maritime strategic deployment in the eastern Indian Ocean and Southwest Pacific, integrates regional maritime resource endowments, expands ASEAN's overall economic and geopolitical radiation scope, and brings new demographic and market dividends for ASEAN's long-term economic growth [14]. Meanwhile, a large number of cautious and critical studies have highlighted the potential risks and integration dilemmas brought by Timor-Leste's accession. Scholars argue that Timor-Leste's underdeveloped economic level, seriously imperfect domestic legal and institutional system, insufficient administrative governance efficiency, and lack of experience in multilateral regional participation will significantly increase ASEAN's internal coordination costs and institutional operation burdens. In the long run, the accession of underdeveloped new members may reduce the overall efficiency of ASEAN's regional decision-making, expose the inherent vulnerability of ASEAN's overly inclusive integration model, and even hinder the steady progress of balanced regional integration [15]. Domestic academic research on Timor-Leste's ASEAN accession starts relatively late and presents relatively concentrated research perspectives. Most domestic studies focus on analyzing the geopolitical strategic significance of Timor-Leste's accession for Southeast Asian regional patterns and evaluating the potential cooperative opportunities and strategic influences of the new membership on China-ASEAN comprehensive cooperative relations. Mainstream domestic viewpoints generally believe that Timor-Leste's formal accession further improves the integrity of ASEAN's regional member system, optimizes the balanced development pattern of Southeast Asian regional cooperation, creates new space for maritime security cooperation, cross-border trade and investment, and cultural and people-to-people exchanges between China and ASEAN, and injects new vitality into the upgrading of China-ASEAN strategic partnership. However, domestic research still has obvious limitations: most studies remain at the level of macroscopic strategic interpretation and superficial opportunity analysis, lacking in-depth microscopic analysis of the institutional frictions, rule conflicts, and interest contradictions between Timor-Leste's backward institutional system and ASEAN's mature regional integration mechanisms. In addition, there is a serious lack of forward-looking research on the long-term institutional integration risks, sustained developmental dilemmas, and targeted collaborative countermeasures after Timor-Leste's accession, resulting in insufficient depth and systematicness of domestic research in this field.

Overall, the existing domestic and foreign literature has laid a preliminary theoretical and factual foundation for the research of this paper, providing basic reference for sorting out Timor-Leste's accession process and analyzing its basic advantages and disadvantages. Nevertheless, the current academic research system still has prominent deficiencies in three core dimensions: first, the sorting of the accession process is fragmented and superficial, lacking refined staged division and in-depth analysis of the internal logic of each developmental stage; second, the driving mechanism analysis is too generalized, failing to construct a multi-dimensional theoretical framework to systematically distinguish and verify the interactive relationship between internal and external driving factors; third, the impact assessment is short-sighted and one-sided, lacking long-term dynamic prediction and systematic induction of institutional adaptation dilemmas. On the basis of summarizing and absorbing existing research results, this paper builds a standardized three-pillar theoretical analysis framework of ASEAN community construction, comprehensively makes up for the above research deficiencies, and realizes systematic, in-depth and forward-looking research on Timor-Leste's ASEAN accession event and its subsequent integration development.

2.2 Theoretical Framework: ASEAN Three-Pillar Integration Theory

This paper adopts the classic three-pillar integration theory of ASEAN community construction as the core theoretical support and basic analytical framework of the whole research. After decades of institutional iteration and practical exploration, ASEAN has formed a mature tripartite collaborative integration system composed of the Political-Security Community (APSC), Economic Community (AEC), and Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC). The three major pillars are independent in functional orientation, mutually restrictive in institutional operation, and mutually supportive in developmental goals, jointly constituting the core institutional system of ASEAN regional integration and the unified access assessment criteria for all new applicant member states [1]. Different from the rigid unified standard integration model adopted by European regional integration, ASEAN's three-pillar integration system embodies strong flexibility and inclusiveness, allowing new member states to carry out phased, differentiated rule docking and functional integration according to their own economic foundation, institutional maturity and social development level, which also constitutes the core institutional basis for Timor-Leste, as an underdeveloped latecomer country, to successfully obtain ASEAN membership.

As the foundational security pillar of ASEAN regional integration, the APSC mechanism takes maintaining regional peace, stability and strategic balance as its core strategic goal. It strictly adheres to the basic norms of non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign member states, peaceful settlement of inter-state maritime and territorial disputes, collective regional security defense, and equal strategic consultation. The core institutional functions of APSC include regional conflict early warning and mediation, transnational crime governance, maritime security cooperation, and regional non-traditional security joint prevention and control. For new applicant countries, ASEAN clearly stipulates standardized access requirements: fully recognizing the legal validity of the ASEAN Charter and a series of core regional security treaties, completely accepting and abiding by ASEAN's regional security norms and diplomatic principles, actively participating in various routine meetings and practical cooperation projects of the APSC mechanism, and undertaking corresponding regional security obligations [9]. The APSC access standards focus on the political and institutional compatibility between applicant countries and the ASEAN regional order, which is the primary prerequisite for obtaining ASEAN membership.

The AEC serves as the core economic pillar and material foundation of ASEAN regional integration,

aiming to break cross-border trade and investment barriers among member states, eliminate factor mobility restrictions, and build a highly unified regional single market and integrated production base. Its core operational goals cover the full liberalization and facilitation of regional trade in goods, cross-border service trade openness, transnational investment convenience, and the free flow of professional talents and labor factors within the region. The access assessment of AEC focuses on the marketization level and rule compatibility of applicant countries, requiring new members to comprehensively dock with ASEAN's unified tariff concession system, rules of origin, service trade opening agreements, investment liberalization clauses, and industrial cooperation mechanisms, and gradually realize the effective integration of domestic economic operation system and regional unified economic system (Lee & Park, 2024). AEC's economic rule docking is the most stringent and time-consuming link in the entire new member accession assessment process.

As the social and cultural guarantee of sustainable regional integration, the ASCC mechanism adheres to the people-centered regional development concept, focusing on narrowing the development gap among member states, improving regional people's livelihood security level, and shaping a shared regional cultural identity. Its core functional scope covers regional poverty alleviation and development assistance, cross-border educational cooperation and talent training, multi-ethnic cultural exchange and integration, public health and epidemic prevention cooperation, ecological environment protection and sustainable development governance, and cross-border social public service coordination. The accession requirements of ASCC emphasize the social responsibility and public governance capacity of applicant countries, requiring new members to actively integrate into ASEAN's regional public goods supply system, participate in various regional livelihood cooperation projects, and promote the effective docking of domestic social governance mechanisms with regional public governance systems [17]. The inclusive and flexible characteristics of ASCC provide important institutional buffer for underdeveloped new members to integrate into ASEAN.

To sum up, the three-pillar integration system of APSC, AEC and ASCC forms a complete, multi-dimensional and hierarchical assessment system for ASEAN new member accession. This paper fully relies on this theoretical framework to carry out staged analysis of Timor-Leste's institutional preparation and rule docking behaviors in the long-term accession process, and conducts targeted evaluation of the positive effects and adaptive dilemmas brought by Timor-Leste's accession to each sub-system of ASEAN regional integration, so as to ensure that the whole research has standardized theoretical support, systematic analytical logic and rigorous empirical basis, and effectively avoid the one-sidedness and superficiality of traditional descriptive research.

3. Mutual Benefit and Win-Win Outcomes for China and Vietnam in the "Low Politics" Domain

Timor-Leste's strategic journey of integrating into ASEAN regional integration spans a total of 23 years from the restoration of national independence in 2002 to the formal acquisition of full ASEAN membership in 2025. Compared with the rapid accession process of previous ASEAN new members such as Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, Timor-Leste's accession presents obvious long-term, phased and tortuous evolutionary characteristics, which is comprehensively affected by its weak national foundation, insufficient institutional capacity and ASEAN's strict hierarchical assessment mechanism. Combined with key nodal events, policy adjustment logic and institutional assessment progress, the entire accession process can be scientifically divided into four continuous and progressive core stages: the preliminary diplomatic layout and post-independence regional integration preparation stage (2002–2010), the formal membership application and long-term capacity assessment waiting stage (2011–2021), the institutional assessment breakthrough and special accession roadmap docking stage (2022–2024),

and the final comprehensive compliance inspection and formal full membership accession stage (2025). Each stage corresponds to different strategic choices of Timor-Leste's national diplomacy and institutional reform, as well as differentiated assessment policies and response attitudes of ASEAN, fully reflecting the typical gradual and inclusive operational logic of ASEAN's regional integration expansion mechanism.

3.1 Preliminary Layout Stage (2002–2010): Post-Independence Regional Integration Preparation

After long-term colonial occupation and transitional governance chaos, Timor-Leste officially restored national sovereignty and full independence in May 2002, becoming the youngest sovereign state in the Southeast Asian region. In the early post-independence stage, Timor-Leste faced severe developmental dilemmas such as fragile domestic political stability, incomplete state institutional construction, extremely backward economic foundation, insufficient social governance capacity, and long-term international diplomatic marginalization. Under this special national context, the core strategic goal of Timor-Leste's early foreign affairs was to obtain universal international sovereign recognition, break diplomatic isolation, and embed into mature regional multilateral cooperation mechanisms to obtain external developmental resources and strategic support. Geographically located in the easternmost part of Southeast Asia's insular region, Timor-Leste is geographically, culturally and geopolitically an indispensable component of the Southeast Asian regional community, which provides inherent geographical and regional attribute support for its integration into the ASEAN institutional system [12]. In this stage, Timor-Leste's ASEAN integration strategy was mainly based on preliminary diplomatic layout and regional identity construction, laying a solid foundation for subsequent formal membership application.

During the 2002–2010 preparation stage, Timor-Leste achieved phased and landmark progress in docking with ASEAN mechanisms. In 2005, Timor-Leste successfully joined the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the largest and most authoritative multilateral security cooperation mechanism in Southeast Asia, which marked that the country had officially stepped into the ASEAN-centered regional security cooperation system for the first time and realized the initial breakthrough of regional diplomatic participation. In 2007, Timor-Leste took the initiative to sign the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC), the core normative document and spiritual symbol of ASEAN regional relations. By signing this treaty, Timor-Leste fully recognized ASEAN's basic diplomatic principles of non-interference in internal affairs, peaceful coexistence, mutual respect and mutual benefit and win-win, effectively eliminated the strategic concerns of old ASEAN member states, and established a solid political mutual trust foundation for its subsequent formal membership application [7]. This series of diplomatic actions enabled Timor-Leste to complete the initial transformation from a regional marginal country to a formal regional participant.

In terms of internal construction matching regional integration demands, Timor-Leste also carried out targeted institutional reconstruction and economic system optimization during this stage. Facing the chaotic post-war institutional vacuum, Timor-Leste gradually established basic national administrative institutions, judicial systems and fiscal operation mechanisms, effectively stabilized the turbulent domestic political situation, and created a basic internal environment for integrating into regional cooperation. In terms of economic construction, the country initially sorted out resource development policies and foreign trade systems, laying a preliminary foundation for docking with ASEAN's economic integration rules. Although Timor-Leste did not formally submit a membership application in this stage, it completed the preliminary docking with ASEAN's core regional norms and mainstream cooperation mechanisms, realized the effective accumulation of regional diplomatic experience, and laid a comprehensive foundation in politics, diplomacy and institution for launching formal accession

negotiations in the next stage.

3.2 Formal Application and Waiting Stage (2011–2021): Long-Term Assessment and Capacity Building

On March 4, 2011, Timor-Leste formally delivered a written official application for full ASEAN membership to the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta, which officially kicked off the formal, procedural and institutionalized accession negotiation and assessment process. After receiving the application, the ASEAN Secretariat immediately launched a long-term, comprehensive and rigorous qualification review and developmental capacity assessment targeting Timor-Leste. Different from the rapid review mechanism adopted for previous new members, ASEAN set up a special cross-ministerial assessment team for Timor-Leste, focusing on inspecting and evaluating Timor-Leste's compliance with the provisions of the ASEAN Charter, the completeness and operational efficiency of national institutional systems, the adaptability of economic development level to regional integration requirements, and the sincerity and sustainability of regional participation willingness [1]. The comprehensive assessment covers all three major pillars of APSC, AEC and ASCC, forming a full-dimensional inspection system.

This formal application and waiting stage lasted as long as 10 years from 2011 to 2021, and the accession process was almost stagnant for a long time, which was jointly restricted by internal developmental deficiencies of Timor-Leste and external institutional concerns of ASEAN member states. Internally, Timor-Leste's comprehensive national strength and institutional maturity were far from meeting ASEAN's standard integration requirements. The national economic structure was extremely single and rigid, with economic growth and fiscal revenue almost completely dependent on offshore oil and gas resource exploitation and export; the manufacturing industry, modern service industry and high-value-added agriculture were extremely underdeveloped, resulting in weak industrial supporting capacity and insufficient market vitality. In terms of institution, the domestic legal system was incomplete, administrative operation procedures were not standardized, market supervision mechanisms were missing, and the overall institutional operation capacity could not adapt to the standardized operational requirements of ASEAN's three-pillar community system [6]. Externally, many traditional ASEAN member states had obvious strategic reservations about Timor-Leste's accession. Member states such as Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore worried that the access of extremely underdeveloped new members would increase ASEAN's internal balanced development burden, occupy limited regional public resource allocation, reduce the overall level of regional economic integration, and even hinder the steady progress of AEC market unification.

Faced with the long-term assessment deadlock and passive waiting situation, Timor-Leste did not suspend its regional integration strategy, but took the initiative to carry out targeted capacity building and institutional reform optimization in a targeted manner. In the economic field, Timor-Leste continuously adjusted national industrial development policies, actively promoted economic diversification strategies, tried to develop characteristic tourism, tropical ecological agriculture and cross-border trade industries, and reduced excessive dependence on energy resources. In the institutional field, the Timor-Leste government accelerated the revision and improvement of commercial laws, foreign trade regulations and administrative management systems, and standardized domestic market operation order. In terms of regional participation, Timor-Leste actively sent official representatives to participate in various ASEAN subsidiary meetings, regional thematic forums and livelihood cooperation projects, continuously accumulated practical experience in multilateral regional cooperation, and established stable cooperative relations with multiple ASEAN member states. This decade-long capacity building effectively made up for part of its developmental deficiencies, eliminated the external concerns of ASEAN member states, and laid a solid foundation for breaking the accession

deadlock in 2022.

3.3 Roadmap Formulation and Accelerated Promotion Stage (2022–2024): In-Principle Approval and Institutional Docking

The 40th and 41st ASEAN Summits held in November 2022 in Cambodia became a critical turning point that completely broke Timor-Leste's decade-long accession deadlock. After in-depth consultation and unanimous consensus among all existing ASEAN member states, ASEAN officially announced the "in-principle approval" of Timor-Leste's full membership application, and formally granted Timor-Leste official ASEAN observer status. This institutional arrangement allows Timor-Leste to formally participate in the plenary meetings, thematic discussions and functional cooperation negotiations of most ASEAN mechanisms, fully understand ASEAN's institutional operation rules and decision-making procedures, and carry out pre-accession adaptive integration training [2]. This major institutional decision completely lifted the long-term institutional threshold restricting Timor-Leste's accession, opened up a comprehensive and standardized institutional channel for Timor-Leste's full integration into the ASEAN system, and officially entered the accelerated promotion stage of accession.

In June 2023, the ASEAN Secretariat officially released the authoritative guiding document Roadmap for Timor-Leste's Full ASEAN Membership, which marks that Timor-Leste's accession has entered a standardized, procedural and quantifiable assessment stage. The roadmap clearly defines the phased task objectives, detailed compliance assessment standards, time node arrangements and institutional docking requirements for Timor-Leste's full membership, covering all functional fields of APSC, AEC and ASCC three major pillars in an all-round way [13]. Different from the previous generalized qualitative assessment, the new roadmap adopts quantitative assessment indicators for institutional docking, treaty ratification, economic rule adaptation and social cooperation participation, which greatly improves the standardization and operability of the accession assessment. The core requirements stipulated in the roadmap include completing the full ratification of all ASEAN core treaties and legal protocols, realizing the comprehensive docking of domestic tariff policies, trade rules and investment mechanisms with ASEAN unified standards, and completing the adaptive reform of social governance and cultural cooperation mechanisms within two years.

From 2023 to 2024, Timor-Leste fully launched comprehensive institutional docking and targeted reform work in strict accordance with the roadmap's standardized requirements, and achieved remarkable phased results. In terms of political-security docking, Timor-Leste successively completed the ratification of more than 20 core ASEAN conventions and protocols, including the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone Treaty, the ASEAN Regional Security Cooperation Convention, and the ASEAN Disaster Management and Emergency Response Agreement, fully recognizing and accepting ASEAN's regional security norms. In terms of economic rule docking, Timor-Leste comprehensively revised domestic foreign trade laws, investment management regulations and tax policy systems, and took the initiative to connect with ASEAN's tariff reduction schedule and trade facilitation standards. In terms of social and cultural integration, Timor-Leste actively participated in ASEAN's poverty alleviation, educational exchange and public health cooperation projects [12]. Meanwhile, the ASEAN Secretariat set up a special permanent assessment working group to conduct regular tracking evaluation, problem feedback and guidance rectification on Timor-Leste's reform progress, continuously optimized the assessment mechanism according to Timor-Leste's actual developmental conditions, and effectively promoted the steady progress of accession preparation work.

3.4 Formal Accession Stage (2025): Official Membership and Post-Accession Initial Integration

On October 26, 2025, the 47th ASEAN Summit was grandly held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, which ushered in the final node of Timor-Leste's accession process. After strict final compliance inspection, comprehensive performance evaluation and unanimous consensus consultation among all member states, ASEAN officially announced that Timor-Leste had fully completed all institutional assessment, rule docking and capacity building tasks required for new member accession, and formally granted Timor-Leste full ASEAN membership. This historic moment marks the successful conclusion of Timor-Leste's 23-year arduous journey of pursuing ASEAN integration, and Timor-Leste officially became the 11th formal member state of the ASEAN institutional family [18]. At the summit, the two sides officially signed the ASEAN Admission Declaration, which legally and formally confirmed Timor-Leste's full membership status, and clearly stipulated that Timor-Leste fully enjoys the member rights of participating in ASEAN summit decision-making, regional cooperative resource allocation and multilateral diplomatic activities, and simultaneously undertakes corresponding regional governance obligations and institutional compliance responsibilities.

Immediately after obtaining formal membership, Timor-Leste took the initiative to launch systematic post-accession integration layout and follow-up institutional docking work. The Timor-Leste government specially established a cross-departmental national ASEAN Coordination Committee, responsible for uniformly coordinating and promoting the docking work of political security, economic trade, social culture and other fields with ASEAN mechanisms. The committee sorted out a detailed list of follow-up reform tasks, clarified the responsible departments and time limits for institutional docking, and promoted the organic integration of Timor-Leste's national long-term development strategy and ASEAN's regional integration development strategy. At the same time, Timor-Leste officially began to perform full member obligations, actively participated in ASEAN's routine decision-making consultations, regional public governance affairs, and transnational multilateral cooperation activities, and officially completed the transformation from a passive regional participant to an active builder and contributor of ASEAN regional integration.

4. Driving Factors of Timor-Leste's ASEAN Accession

The ultimate success of Timor-Leste's long-term ASEAN accession is not an accidental diplomatic result, but a inevitable outcome formed by the long-term superposition and interactive coupling of endogenous national development strategic demands and exogenous regional environmental evolutionary changes. From the internal perspective of Timor-Leste, the pursuit of ASEAN full membership has always been the core strategic choice to break post-independence developmental dilemmas, promote national institutional modernization, and enhance national diplomatic status. From the external regional perspective, ASEAN's strategic transformation towards more inclusive regionalism, the continuous expansion of regional integration demands, and the profound adjustment of Southeast Asian geopolitical and economic patterns have jointly created favorable external conditions for Timor-Leste's accession. This chapter systematically sorts out the internal and external multi-dimensional driving mechanisms of Timor-Leste's accession, and reveals the deep-seated strategic logic behind the 23-year persistent integration pursuit.

4.1 Internal Driving Factors: National Development and Strategic Transformation

First, economic transformation and industrial structure upgrading constitute the core endogenous economic driving force for Timor-Leste's persistent accession. Since independence, Timor-Leste has been trapped in a highly single resource-dependent economic development model for a long time, with offshore oil and gas exploitation and export revenue accounting for more than 80% of the country's total fiscal revenue and export volume. The industrial structure is extremely unbalanced, the manufacturing

industry and modern service industry are almost blank, the agricultural production mode is backward and inefficient, and the national economic development has extremely high vulnerability and external dependence [8]. Frequent fluctuations in international energy prices directly impact Timor-Leste's fiscal revenue and economic growth, seriously restricting the country's long-term stable development. ASEAN's mature economic integration system and unified regional single market provide an optimal external platform for Timor-Leste's economic transformation. By integrating into the AEC mechanism, Timor-Leste can effectively undertake the industrial transfer of old ASEAN member states, attract cross-border direct investment from regional economies, cultivate characteristic advantageous industries such as marine economy, ecological tourism and tropical characteristic agriculture, realize the fundamental diversification of economic structure, and completely get rid of the long-term resource-dependent development dilemma.

Second, national institutional improvement and standardized governance transformation are the important institutional driving forces for Timor-Leste's accession. As a newly independent country that has long been in colonial rule and post-war chaos, Timor-Leste's national institutional construction started late, with obvious deficiencies in legal system construction, administrative operation efficiency, market supervision mechanism and public management system. The imperfect institutional system has long restricted the standardized operation of the domestic market and the modernization of national governance. Joining the ASEAN regional system and docking with ASEAN's mature, standardized and systematic regional institutional system can form a powerful external institutional constraint and driving force for Timor-Leste's domestic institutional reform [15]. Through actively adapting to ASEAN's regional rules and institutional norms, Timor-Leste can force the continuous improvement of domestic legal systems, standardize government administrative behaviors, optimize market operation mechanisms, and finally realize the standardized, institutionalized and modernized transformation of national governance capacity.

Third, diplomatic independence enhancement and regional status promotion are the core political driving forces for Timor-Leste's strategic integration into ASEAN. After independence, Timor-Leste, as a small and newly sovereign country with weak comprehensive national strength, has long been in a marginal position in international and regional diplomatic affairs, lacking independent diplomatic discourse power and regional strategic influence, and easily becoming a passive appendage in regional great-power games. In the context of increasingly complex Indo-Pacific geopolitics, realizing diplomatic independence and diversification has become an important strategic demand of Timor-Leste's national diplomacy. ASEAN, as the core authoritative organization of Southeast Asian regional affairs, can provide Timor-Leste with a standardized multilateral diplomatic platform [19]. By obtaining full ASEAN membership, Timor-Leste can gain equal regional consultation and decision-making rights with other member states, completely get rid of diplomatic marginalization, effectively enhance its regional strategic status, and realize the independence and diversification of national diplomatic layout.

Fourth, social livelihood improvement and social stability maintenance are the basic social driving forces for Timor-Leste's integration strategy. Timor-Leste is still a typical underdeveloped developing country, with prominent problems such as high poverty rate, backward basic education and medical conditions, insufficient public service supply, and imperfect social security system. Long-term backward social development has restricted the stable development of the national economy and society. ASEAN's ASCC mechanism has accumulated rich experience in regional poverty alleviation, educational cooperation, public health prevention and control, and cross-border social governance, and can provide a large number of high-quality regional public goods and targeted livelihood cooperation projects for Timor-Leste [17]. Active participation in ASEAN socio-cultural cooperation can help Timor-Leste effectively introduce regional advanced experience, technical support and developmental

resources, continuously improve domestic people's livelihood security level, narrow the social development gap with neighboring countries, and maintain long-term domestic social stability.

4.2 External Driving Factors: ASEAN's Inclusive Integration and Regional Pattern Evolution

First, ASEAN's inclusive regionalism strategic concept provides the core institutional premise for Timor-Leste's accession. Different from the rigid homogeneous integration model adopted by European integration, which requires member states to have similar economic foundation and institutional system, ASEAN has always adhered to the inclusive regionalism concept of "diversity in unity" in the process of regional integration expansion. ASEAN fully respects the differences in economic development level, institutional model and cultural tradition among member states, allows latecomer underdeveloped members to adopt phased, gradual and differentiated rule docking and integration progress, and provides sufficient adaptive buffer period and institutional flexibility for new members. This highly flexible and inclusive integration model breaks the threshold restriction of traditional regional integration on national developmental level, and provides a feasible institutional channel for Timor-Leste, an underdeveloped latecomer country, to successfully join ASEAN.

Second, ASEAN's inherent demands for regional spatial expansion and cross-border resource integration accelerate the accession process. Geographically located in the eastern gateway of Southeast Asia, Timor-Leste occupies a key strategic maritime location connecting the eastern Indian Ocean and the Southwest Pacific, and is rich in untapped marine biological resources, offshore mineral resources and characteristic tourism resources. Before Timor-Leste's accession, ASEAN's eastern regional layout had long had an obvious spatial vacancy, and the regional maritime resource integration and strategic deployment in the eastern waters were incomplete [14]. Timor-Leste's formal membership effectively fills the spatial gap in ASEAN's regional layout, optimizes ASEAN's overall geopolitical strategic pattern in the Indo-Pacific region, realizes the effective integration of eastern Southeast Asian maritime resources, and greatly expands ASEAN's regional strategic depth and comprehensive competitive advantage.

Third, the intensification of regional great-power strategic games promotes ASEAN's active strategic adjustment. In recent years, the Indo-Pacific regional geopolitical pattern has undergone profound changes, and major external powers have continuously increased their strategic layout and resource investment in the Southeast Asian region, leading to increasingly fierce strategic competition in the region. The continuous intervention of external great powers poses a severe challenge to ASEAN's long-term central position in regional governance. In order to maintain regional strategic independence and autonomy, consolidate its core dominant position in Southeast Asian regional affairs, and balance the excessive influence of external great powers, ASEAN has actively adjusted its regional expansion strategy in recent years, accelerating the absorption of marginal regional countries to expand regional institutional scale and strategic influence [20]. Timor-Leste's accession is an important strategic layout for ASEAN to consolidate regional centrality and cope with changes in the regional geopolitical pattern.

Fourth, the continuous consolidation of regional cooperative atmosphere and integration consensus creates a good external environment for accession. After decades of steady development, ASEAN regional integration has achieved remarkable results, the economic and trade interdependence, security interactive correlation and social and cultural affinity among member states have been continuously enhanced, and a stable, inclusive and win-win regional cooperative atmosphere has been fully formed. The mainstream developmental consensus within ASEAN has gradually shifted from pursuing rapid market integration to emphasizing balanced regional development and inclusive institutional expansion [5]. Against this background, traditional ASEAN member states have gradually eliminated

their original concerns about Timor-Leste's accession, reached a unified internal consensus on absorbing new underdeveloped members, and provided a good external environmental foundation and internal political guarantee for Timor-Leste's final successful accession.

5. Multidimensional Impacts of Timor-Leste's Accession on ASEAN Regional Integration

Timor-Leste's formal accession to ASEAN in 2025 is a landmark event in the half-century evolutionary history of ASEAN regional integration, which brings profound and far-reaching dual impacts on ASEAN's three-pillar integration system, institutional operation mechanism, internal interest coordination and long-term integration development trend. On the whole, Timor-Leste's membership has strategic progressive significance for the long-term healthy development of ASEAN regional integration, which can expand regional integration space, enrich regional cooperative connotation and optimize regional developmental patterns. However, in the short and medium term, the huge developmental gap and institutional differences between Timor-Leste and traditional ASEAN members will inevitably bring certain institutional adaptation pressure, governance efficiency risks and balanced development dilemmas to ASEAN's regional integration, forming a dual developmental pattern of opportunities and challenges.

5.1 Positive Impacts: Expanding Integration Space and Optimizing Regional Layout

In the field of political-security integration, Timor-Leste's accession significantly improves the geographical completeness and strategic integrity of ASEAN's regional security pattern, and further consolidates the institutional foundation of ASEAN's regional collective security system. As a key strategic country in the eastern maritime area of Southeast Asia, Timor-Leste's formal participation in the APSC mechanism makes ASEAN's regional security coverage truly realize full coverage of the entire Southeast Asian geographical sphere, completely filling the long-term security blank in the eastern maritime waters [9]. Before Timor-Leste's accession, the eastern maritime area of Southeast Asia was a weak link in ASEAN's regional security governance, with prominent hidden dangers such as unclear maritime jurisdiction, frequent transnational illegal activities and insufficient security joint prevention and control capacity. After joining APSC, Timor-Leste can cooperate with neighboring ASEAN member states to carry out joint maritime law enforcement, transnational crime governance and regional security risk prevention, effectively make up for the deficiencies in eastern regional security governance, strengthen ASEAN's overall regional security defense capacity, and maintain the long-term peace and stability of Southeast Asian maritime order.

In terms of socio-cultural integration, Timor-Leste's accession enriches the diversity of ASEAN's regional culture and expands the scope of regional people's livelihood cooperation. Timor-Leste has unique cultural characteristics formed by long-term colonial history and regional ethnic integration. Its integration into the ASCC system enriches the multicultural connotation of ASEAN and helps build a more inclusive regional cultural community [17]. At the same time, Timor-Leste's demand for people's livelihood development such as poverty alleviation, education, and medical care can drive ASEAN's regional public goods supply and people's livelihood cooperation to be more refined, promoting the construction of a people-centered ASEAN community.

In terms of regional institutional development, Timor-Leste's accession verifies the inclusiveness and flexibility of the "ASEAN Way", enriches the practice model of ASEAN's regional integration expansion, and provides a new reference case for ASEAN to absorb new members and promote incremental integration in the future [10].

5.2 Negative Challenges: Institutional Adaptation Pressure and Integration Dilemmas

First, the gap in economic development levels increases the difficulty of ASEAN's balanced economic integration. There is a huge economic development gap between Timor-Leste and mainstream ASEAN member states. Timor-Leste's per capita GDP, industrialization level, and market maturity are far lower than the average level of ASEAN members [8]. After joining the AEC unified market, Timor-Leste's weak domestic industry is vulnerable to the impact of mature products from other member states, forming an unbalanced regional economic development pattern. At the same time, ASEAN needs to invest more resources in helping Timor-Leste's economic development, which increases the operating cost of regional economic integration and may slow down the progress of unified economic rule docking.

Second, the imperfect institutional system restricts the efficiency of ASEAN's regional governance. Timor-Leste's national institutional construction is not perfect, and there are deficiencies in legal system construction, administrative operation efficiency, and market supervision capacity [15]. In the process of participating in ASEAN's regional decision-making and governance, it is difficult for Timor-Leste to fully adapt to ASEAN's standardized institutional operation procedures in the short term, which may affect the overall decision-making efficiency of ASEAN. In addition, Timor-Leste's insufficient regional participation capacity makes it unable to fully perform member obligations in some regional cooperation projects, affecting the implementation effect of regional integration policies.

Third, the new member consensus game affects ASEAN's traditional consultation mechanism. ASEAN has always adhered to the principle of unanimous consensus in regional decision-making. After Timor-Leste's accession, the number of member states has increased to 11, and the differences in development demands and strategic demands among member states have become more complex (Smith & Jones, 2023). The addition of new variables increases the difficulty of reaching a unified consensus within ASEAN, which may lead to longer decision-making cycles and reduced policy implementation efficiency in regional integration.

Fourth, the short-term integration adaptation pressure brings risks of marginalization of new members. Due to its weak comprehensive strength and insufficient regional influence, Timor-Leste is easy to be marginalized in ASEAN's regional cooperation system in the short term, unable to fully transform membership qualifications into regional discourse rights and development dividends. If the post-accession integration progress is slow, it will not only restrict Timor-Leste's own development but also affect the overall integration effect of ASEAN's new member expansion.

6. Post-Accession Integration Optimization Paths for Timor-Leste and ASEAN

Facing the dual opportunities and challenges brought by Timor-Leste's accession, ASEAN and Timor-Leste need to carry out two-way optimization and adaptive adjustment. Timor-Leste needs to accelerate domestic reform and capacity building to adapt to ASEAN's regional integration rules; ASEAN needs to optimize the inclusive integration mechanism to reduce the integration threshold of new members and realize the benign interaction between new member development and regional integration progress.

6.1 Timor-Leste's Domestic Optimization Path: Accelerating Capacity Building and Rule Docking

First, promote economic structural transformation and accelerate docking with ASEAN economic integration rules. Timor-Leste should take ASEAN membership as an opportunity, formulate targeted industrial development policies, give play to its resource and geographical advantages, focus on

developing characteristic industries such as marine economy, ecological tourism, and tropical agriculture, and realize the diversification of economic structure [8]. At the same time, it is necessary to further optimize domestic trade, investment, and tax policies, fully connect with ASEAN's tariff preferential policies, service trade liberalization rules, and investment facilitation standards, and integrate into the ASEAN unified industrial chain and supply chain system as soon as possible.

Second, deepen institutional reform and improve national governance and regional participation capacity. Timor-Leste needs to further improve the domestic legal system, complete the revision and improvement of relevant laws and regulations in accordance with ASEAN treaty requirements, and realize the standardized docking of domestic institutions with regional institutions [15]. It is necessary to improve the national ASEAN coordination mechanism, strengthen the professional training of diplomatic and regional cooperation talents, enhance the ability of government departments to participate in ASEAN regional affairs, and ensure the efficient implementation of various regional cooperation tasks.

Third, expand multi-field regional cooperation and accumulate integration experience. Timor-Leste should actively participate in all kinds of cooperation projects under the ASEAN three-pillar framework, focus on promoting in-depth cooperation in advantageous fields such as maritime cooperation, tourism cooperation, and poverty alleviation cooperation, and take advantageous field cooperation as a breakthrough to drive the overall integration progress [17]. At the same time, it is necessary to strengthen bilateral communication and cooperation with traditional ASEAN member states, learn from their mature experience in regional integration, and accelerate the adaptation to the ASEAN regional cooperation system.

6.2 ASEAN's Institutional Optimization Path: Improving Inclusive Integration Mechanism

First, improve the phased integration mechanism for new members and reduce short-term integration pressure. Aiming at the development gap between Timor-Leste and traditional members, ASEAN can formulate a differentiated phased integration plan, adopt a gradual integration model in tariff reduction, market opening, and institutional docking, give Timor-Leste a certain adaptation period, and avoid excessive integration pressure leading to institutional inadaptability (Lee & Park, 2024).

Second, strengthen assistance and capacity building support for new members. ASEAN should integrate regional resources, set up a special new member development assistance fund, carry out targeted assistance in economic construction, institutional improvement, talent training, and people's livelihood development for Timor-Leste, help Timor-Leste make up for development shortcomings, and improve its regional integration participation capacity.

Third, optimize the regional decision-making mechanism and balance the interests of all members. On the basis of adhering to the traditional consensus principle, ASEAN can appropriately optimize the decision-making efficiency mechanism, adopt differentiated consultation and decision-making modes for different types of cooperation affairs, balance the development demands of traditional members and new members, and avoid the obstruction of regional integration progress due to excessive interest games [9].

Fourth, expand inclusive regional cooperation and release new integration dividends. ASEAN should take Timor-Leste's accession as an opportunity to expand the scope of regional cooperation, develop new cooperation fields such as maritime ecological protection, cross-border tourism integration, and emerging industry cooperation, create new regional economic growth points, and realize the mutual

promotion of new member development and regional integration upgrading [14].

7. Conclusion and Research Prospects

Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN is a landmark event in the history of Southeast Asian regional integration, which runs through the whole process of Timor-Leste's national construction after independence and ASEAN's institutional evolution and inclusive expansion. After 23 years of persistent efforts and phased adaptation, Timor-Leste finally completed the full docking with ASEAN's three-pillar integration system and became a formal member of ASEAN. This accession process fully reflects the incremental, inclusive, and consensus-based characteristics of the "ASEAN Way" of regional integration, and also reveals the inherent law that small and medium-sized developing countries rely on regional integration to realize national development and status promotion. Timor-Leste's ASEAN accession has dual strategic values and practical significance. For Timor-Leste, membership in ASEAN provides a crucial external platform for its national economic transformation, institutional improvement, diplomatic status promotion, and people's livelihood improvement, laying a solid foundation for its long-term stable development. For ASEAN, Timor-Leste's accession optimizes the regional spatial layout of ASEAN, expands the depth and breadth of regional integration, enriches the connotation of inclusive regionalism, and consolidates ASEAN's central position in Southeast Asian regional governance. At the same time, this accession event also exposes the structural dilemmas of ASEAN regional integration, such as unbalanced development of member states, insufficient institutional flexibility, and low decision-making efficiency. The development gap and institutional differences between Timor-Leste and traditional ASEAN members will continue to bring challenges to ASEAN's regional integration in the long run. The in-depth integration of Timor-Leste into ASEAN is not a one-time accession completion, but a long-term dynamic adaptation process. In the future, the development of ASEAN regional integration and Timor-Leste's national development will show a mutually interactive and mutually restrictive relationship. Timor-Leste needs to continue to accelerate domestic reform and capacity building, give full play to its regional advantages, and transform membership qualifications into sustainable development dividends. ASEAN needs to further optimize the inclusive integration mechanism, improve the differentiated development and assistance system for new members, and resolve the institutional conflicts and interest differences brought by the accession of new members. The benign interaction between the two will promote the continuous deepening of Southeast Asian regional integration and the stable development of regional order.

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Author Profile

Jiaolian Yang born in 2000, male, is a Master's student majoring in political science at College of ASEAN Studies, Guangxi Minzu University. His main research direction is ASEAN Regional Studies, Southeast Asian regional relations, and Myanmar politics and economy.