

# Thailand's Strategic Choice to Participate in Regional Cooperation of ASEAN Community

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**Abstract**—This paper makes a comprehensive analysis of the expectation of regional integration construction in the first ten years of ASEAN community. In this stage, Thailand's strategic choice of participating in ASEAN community's regional cooperation in politics, security, economy, society and culture presents "enterprising" strategy and "coping" strategy, which plays a positive role in promoting ASEAN community's integration process.

**Keywords:** ASEAN community, Thailand, regional cooperation

## I. INTRODUCTION

At the 27th ASEAN summit in 2015, the leaders of the 10 ASEAN countries jointly signed *The 2015 Kuala Lumpur Declaration on the Establishment of the ASEAN Community*, declaring that the ASEAN community would be formally completed on December 31, 2015, marking a new historical stage in the development of ASEAN regional integration. The meeting also adopted a series of vision documents, including *Vision of the ASEAN Community in 2025*, *ASEAN Political Security Community Blueprint in 2025*, *ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint in 2025*, *ASEAN Social and Cultural Community Blueprint in 2025*, and together, they constitute the programmatic document of *ASEAN 2025: Forging Ahead Together*, proposing to build ASEAN into a peaceful, stable and resilient community, and continuously enhancing its ability to effectively respond to challenges. The meeting also proposed to build ASEAN into a more outward-looking international region, a dynamic, sustainable and highly integrated economy, enhance ASEAN connectivity, and further narrow the development gap through the ASEAN integration initiative under the ASEAN-centric principle. ASEAN has the capacity to seize the opportunities and meet the challenges in the coming decade. On the basis of the complementarity between the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and ASEAN Community Building, ASEAN member states can raise the living standards of their people.<sup>1</sup>

## II. EXPECTATIONS FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE ASEAN COMMUNITY

It can be seen from the construction of the three pillars of ASEAN community, namely political security, economy and social culture, that ASEAN political, economic and security cooperation is mainly aimed at continuing and consolidating the cooperation achievements in the "towards community" stage. ASEAN still follows and advocates regional political consensus, including the value of norms of *Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia*, *the ASEAN Vision 2020*, *the ASEAN Charter*, *ASEAN Community Map (2009-2015)* and *Bali Declaration*, and looks forward to building an integrated community of common prosperity, peace and stability. At the same time, ASEAN countries are committed to establishing an information sharing platform among ASEAN countries within the legal framework of each country, and strengthening cooperation among member states in judicial system, rule of law and legal infrastructure.<sup>2</sup> In terms of security, the ASEAN community has not expanded the cooperation of military alliances, and its focus is still on non-traditional security within the region. Therefore, more regional cooperation platforms have been established. On the one hand, the ASEAN community attaches more importance to the construction and improvement of conflict mechanisms, including conflict prevention, conflict resolution and peaceful settlement of disputes, and post-conflict peace mechanisms. On the other hand, it's needed to continue to deepen and expand the ASEAN community and its non-traditional security cooperation outside the region so as to achieve sustainable development within ASEAN. In terms of economic cooperation, ASEAN's goal of establishing a "single market and production base" still faces many difficulties. *ASEAN Economic Community 2015: Progress and Key Achievements* states that, as of October 31, 2015, the completion rate of the ASEAN economic community was 92.7%, and 469 of all 506 action arrangements had been completed. Among the four basic characteristics of the ASEAN Economic Community, 256 (277 in total) "single market and production base" were completed, 154 (170 in total) "competitive economic zone" were completed, and the

<sup>1</sup> ASEAN Secretariat. *ASEAN 2025: Forging Ahead Together*, Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat, November 2015, p30.

<sup>2</sup> ASEAN Secretariat. *ASEAN 2025: Forging Ahead Together*, Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat, November 2015, p13.

remaining two achieved 100% completion rate.<sup>3</sup> Building a single market for the free movement of goods, services, investment, capital and skilled labor within the region remains the ASEAN Economic Community's top priority over the next decade. ASEAN's key sectors are transportation, information and communication technology, e-commerce, energy, food, agriculture and forestry, tourism, health care, mineral resources and science and technology.<sup>4</sup> ASEAN also stresses the importance of active participation in global and regional value chains in order to achieve regional economies of scale and industrial agglomeration, actively promote green development, efficient-driven growth, achieve connectivity, and attach importance to inclusive and sustainable economic development. The ASEAN social and cultural community is committed to promoting and protecting the rights and interests of women and children, disaster management and humanitarian assistance, resource conservation, educational and cultural exchanges, labor and social welfare, and poverty eradication, to further promote the building of a cohesive, inclusive, sustainable, resilient and dynamic community that benefits the people.<sup>5</sup>

It can be seen from this that the political, economic and security cooperation of the ASEAN community has not put forward the goal of deeper integration, but only a 10-year development plan, which is the initial stage of the development of the ASEAN community. The inherent differences among member states in political system, level of economic development and social and cultural background have brought ASEAN to a "bottleneck" stage in realizing community consciousness and identity. The deepening of the ASEAN regional integration process still requires long-term cooperation in multiple fields to strengthen consensus, enhance mutual trust, narrow differences and accumulate results.

### III. THAILAND'S STRATEGIC CHOICE TO PARTICIPATE IN ASEAN COMMUNITY'S POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND SECURITY COOPERATION

Thailand attaches great importance to political, economic, and security cooperation in the ASEAN Community. In April 2014, Thailand established the "ASEAN National Committee", which is chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister, and is composed of ministers from other departments and representatives from all sectors of society. Its organs include the political and security committee, the economic committee, the social and cultural committee, the working group on public affairs and the legal working group. ASEAN National Committee is responsible for formulating relevant policies, recommendations and proposals on cooperation between Thailand and the ASEAN Community; coordinating the implementation progress and positions of various cooperation between the two; promoting and coordinating

the participation of various departments in the framework of the ASEAN Community; and forming special committee or working group composed of experts and social representatives depending on the specific circumstances of the cooperation.<sup>6</sup> Since its establishment, the committee has organized and implemented a number of ASEAN activities. For example, it has participated in the preparations for the 50th anniversary of ASEAN in 2017, the 33rd ASEAN summit in 2018, and Thailand taking over the rotating presidency of ASEAN in 2019. In the long-term organization and coordination process, the "ASEAN National Committee" has developed into a decision-making and practice center for Thailand to participate in the political, economic, and security cooperation of the ASEAN Community. It has condensed and put forward the "competitive, clear system, and people-oriented" ASEAN Community construction concept, and has formulated strategic guidelines for Thailand's participation in ASEAN community cooperation.

#### A. Thailand's strategic approach of participating in ASEAN community political security cooperation

*ASEAN Political Security Community Blueprint in 2025* is an action program to achieve the goals of ASEAN political and security cooperation. It fully recognizes the capabilities of member states in practice and action. It has 4 main desired characteristics: building an institution-based community of shared values and norms; building a cohesive, peaceful, stable and dynamic region that shares common responsibility for comprehensive regional security; building regions that can remain dynamic and outward-looking in an increasingly integrated and interdependent world; and building an efficient and harmonious community organization.<sup>7</sup>

Among the strategic options for participating in ASEAN community political and security cooperation, Thailand plans to formulate four specific strategies to align with the cooperation priorities proposed in the ASEAN Political Security Community Blueprint in 2025. At present, the political and security committee has formulated three specific strategies, namely: *Thailand and ASEAN Political Security Community Strategy (2015-2021)*, *Thailand and ASEAN Political Security Community Plan (2016-2020)* and *National Maritime Security Plan (2015-2021)*, and the *National Border Management Plan (2015-2021)* has not yet issued.<sup>8</sup> The above strategy covers a wide range of areas and will serve as the strategic thinking and practice basis for Thailand's participation in the early stage of ASEAN political and security community cooperation.

Judging from the current cooperation practice, Thailand has made certain progress in four main areas: First, the prevention and resolution of transnational crimes. The issue

<sup>3</sup> Wang Yuzhu. Construction of the ASEAN Community: Process, Situation and Impact, *Frontiers*, 19th Issue, 2016, p10.

<sup>4</sup> Wang Qin. ASEAN Economic Community towards 2025. *Southeast Asian Affairs*. No. 3, 2016, pp. 63-64.

<sup>5</sup> ASEAN Secretariat. ASEAN 2025: Forging Ahead Together, Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat, November 2015, p103-104.

<sup>6</sup> Thailand-ASEAN Strategic Cooperation Center. ASEAN national committee: Thailand's participation in ASEAN institutional building (Thai), Thailand Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2017, pp.1-3.

<sup>7</sup> ASEAN Secretariat. ASEAN 2025: Forging Ahead Together, Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat, November 2015, p20.

<sup>8</sup> The ASEAN Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand. The Construction Process and Direction of Thailand and ASEAN. Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018, pp. 81-90.

of joint anti-drug and cross-border smuggling of wildlife and plant crime is a priority for Thailand's cooperation. Under the framework of the "ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting against Transnational Crime", Thailand has actively promoted the joint efforts of ASEAN member states to combat transnational crime, and made significant progress in cooperation in the areas of human trafficking, telecommunications fraud, drug crimes and overseas pursuits. The second is to solve the problem of human trafficking. Thailand has proposed the *ASEAN Convention against Trafficking in Human Beings-Women and Children*, and has joined the member states in cooperating in combating human trafficking and enslaving women and children. At the 27th ASEAN Summit, ASEAN leaders signed the convention, which gives ASEAN member states the right to investigate and prosecute human trafficking. They can also repatriate trafficked persons safely through the framework of the convention and assist them in readjusting and integrating into the original society. The third is border security management. After the establishment of the ASEAN Community, connectivity within the region will inevitably bring about a certain negative impact on border security. In order to prevent and control and reduce border issues such as transnational crime, it is particularly important and necessary to strengthen border security management. To this end, Thailand took the lead in proposing a regional "border security management mechanism" and coordinated the participation of all parties in the discussion and improvement. On August 22, 2015, Thailand and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime jointly hosted the "Regional Conference on Strengthening ASEAN Cooperation in Border Management: A Safer and More Integrated Community" in Bangkok. On April 25, 2016, the "2nd Regional Conference on Strengthening ASEAN Border Management Cooperation: Building a More Connected and Safer ASEAN Community" was held. The fourth is the plan to establish four regional cooperation centers to support cooperation within the ASEAN Political Security Community. The regional cooperation centers that have been completed so far are: "ASEAN National Police Center", which aims to collect information on entry and exit of regional personnel and transportation, and combat transnational criminal activities; "ASEAN Narcotics Cooperation Centre" (ASEAN-NARCO) mainly promotes and coordinates cooperation among ASEAN member states to curb drug abuse and carry out joint operations to combat cross-border crimes in production and drug trafficking. There is also the ASEAN Centre of Military Medicine (ACMM), which focuses on post-disaster humanitarian relief in the event of natural disasters and emergencies; the last one is ASEAN Network Center proposed by Prime Minister of Thailand Bayu Jam Ocha at the 27th Kuala Lumpur-ASEAN Summit in 2015 to strengthen ASEAN Community cooperation in cybersecurity. Currently, Thailand's political and security committee is responsible for drafting the *ASEAN Cyber Security Plan*, which is expected to be formally presented to ASEAN during Thailand's rotating presidency.

The overall analysis shows that at the present stage, Thailand participates in key cooperation areas within the

framework of asean political and security community in strict accordance with *ASEAN Political Security Community Blueprint in 2025*, and has formulated the corresponding five-year strategic plan. The practice of political and security cooperation focuses on the ASEAN community's non-traditional security cooperation and attempts to position Thailand as the center of non-traditional security cooperation. The introduction of Thailand's corresponding strategic plan and the practice of specific cooperation such as joint crackdown on crime and border security management have played a positive role in promoting ASEAN's political security integration.

#### *B. Thailand's strategic policy of participating in ASEAN economic cooperation*

*ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint in 2025* is mainly based on the *ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint in 2015*, adjusted and supplemented in a timely manner, and highly refined the five pillars of the ASEAN economic community construction, namely: highly integrated and cohesive economy; competitive, innovative and dynamic ASEAN; strengthening connectivity and departmental cooperation; resilient, inclusive and people-oriented ASEAN; and a global ASEAN.<sup>9</sup>

In terms of participation in the economic cooperation of the ASEAN Community, as of April 2017, Thailand has completed 475 of the 506 measures formulated according to the *ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint in 2025*, with a completion rate of 93.3%, second only to Singapore.<sup>10</sup> At present, the development strategy for the integration of Thailand and the *ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint in 2025* has not yet been issued. According to the director of the Thai International Trade Negotiations Department Thawangchao Sopasa Thipapeng, the Prime Minister of Thailand Prayuth Chan-ocha has ordered the "economic commission" to formulate a strategic plan on Thailand's participation in the ASEAN economic community in 2025 in the light of *Vision of the ASEAN Community in 2025*. The plan should be divided into a 5-year short-term plan and a 10-year master plan, including the formulation of specific goals and implementation plans, and the corresponding evaluation and management measures. Prayuth Chan-ocha has repeatedly emphasized that Thai companies must be aware of the benefits of joining ASEAN Economic Community. At present, based on its comparative advantages in the ASEAN community, Thailand has begun to actively prepare to comprehensively cope with the economic development direction proposed in the *ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint in 2025*. In terms of service trade, Thailand has given priority to promoting the development of medical, logistics, construction and other industries, and has introduced the liberalization of trade in services in such fields as telecommunications, computers, scientific research

<sup>9</sup> ASEAN Secretariat. *ASEAN 2025: Forging Ahead Together*, Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat, November 2015, p59.

<sup>10</sup> The ASEAN Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand. *The Construction Process and Direction of Thailand and ASEAN*. Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018, p. 26.

and development, so as to promote border trade with neighboring countries, actively develop infrastructure construction in border areas and increase the added value of trade. In terms of promoting trade and investment facilitation, Thailand has also established a trade database for member states, developed its "single window" electronic customs system, established and developed the customs of the ASEAN special economic zone, simplified business registration procedures and improved relevant laws and regulations. In order to promote the development of SMEs, the Thai Parliament allocated 1.9 billion baht to support the development of small and medium-sized enterprises, established an alliance of entrepreneurs between Thailand and neighboring countries, promoted cooperative projects of enterprise assistance, and selected and supported high-quality small and medium-sized enterprises at government level. In the field of agricultural construction, the Thai government has strengthened the promotion of agricultural machinery to replace labor force, developed regional agricultural economy, improved the quality standards of agricultural products, advocated the development of traditional agriculture to smart agriculture, and vigorously promoted the urban modern green agriculture project. In addition, Thailand has also accelerated the development of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Under the overall framework of *ASEAN ICT Master Plan 2015 (AIM 2020)*, the *Thai Digital Economy Development Plan (2016-2020)* and the 2016 Digital Economy and Social Development Project were launched, including the construction of digital economy infrastructure, the development of digital government, the promotion of the use of digital technology in SMEs, the development of digital cities and human resources. In terms of road connectivity, Thailand has formulated the *Thailand Transportation Infrastructure Construction Plan (2015-2020)* to promote the construction of the ASEAN transportation network, further strengthen the connectivity between neighboring countries and key production bases, and improve Thailand's transportation competitiveness.<sup>11</sup>

Generally speaking, Thailand has already completed the layout of most economic measures in advance in the process of ASEAN regional economic integration at the current stage. At the same time, Thailand has taken advantage of its advantages to take the lead in advocating and actively promoting the development of economic cooperation among ASEAN economies. The areas of cooperation it focuses on promoting also show a trend of innovation and leadership. Thailand's development strategy of constructing an "ASEAN Economic Center" shows its expectation and determination to ASEAN regional economic integration.

### *C. Thailand's strategic approach to participate in social and cultural cooperation in the ASEAN community*

The ASEAN Community attaches greater importance to social and cultural cooperation. *ASEAN Social and Cultural*

<sup>11</sup> The ASEAN Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand. The Construction Process and Direction of Thailand and ASEAN. Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018, pp. 27-28.

*Community Blueprint in 2025* sets out five key areas of cooperation for the socio-cultural community before 2025, namely: strengthening the responsibility, participation and social responsibility of countries under the mechanism of responsibility, tolerance and mutual benefit; promoting equal access to opportunities for the people of ASEAN and promote and protect human rights; establishing effective mechanisms to promote social development and environmental protection to meet people's current and future needs; improving the ability to respond to social, economic, disaster, and climate change threats; and enhancing the ability to continuously innovate to become an activist in the global community.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, ASEAN will continue to use the *ASEAN Social and Cultural Community Scorecard 2025* to conduct a mid-term evaluation (2016-2020) and a final evaluation (2021-2025) of the socio-cultural implementation of each member state to monitor the implementation process of *ASEAN Social and Cultural Community Blueprint in 2025*.

In order to actively promote the construction of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community and complete the assessment of the *ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Scorecard 2025* within the prescribed time, the "Social and Cultural Committee of Thailand" has formulated the *ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Action Plan in 2025*, and six key development areas were proposed, namely: deepening Thailand's recognition of the ASEAN community; promoting the link between national development strategies and ASEAN's sustainable development cooperation; promoting the support of ASEAN funds for social and cultural activities; improving the ability to use English and ASEAN languages; accelerating the construction of labor migration system; developing relief budget measures affected by non-traditional security.<sup>13</sup> At present, Thailand is adopting some specific measures to promote the construction of an ASEAN social and cultural community. For example, in terms of labor migration, Thailand has actively promoted the development of bilateral cooperation agreements with neighboring countries on the *Memorandum of Understanding on Labor Cooperation and Cooperation in the Introduction of Foreign Labor*, which further protects the free movement and basic rights and interests of labor, and has taken the lead in establishing relevant measures in the ASEAN Community. In terms of promoting and protecting human rights, Thailand has established a "Human Trafficking Assistance Center" and opened a helpline "1300" in 10 ASEAN languages. In terms of promoting equitable access to opportunities for the ASEAN people, Thailand proposes that every child has the right to education, and children without state and identification can also receive compulsory education in specialized institutions. In terms of environmental protection, Thailand formulated the *National Solid Waste Management Roadmap* in 2015, emphasizing

<sup>12</sup> ASEAN Secretariat. ASEAN 2025: Forging Ahead Together, Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat, November 2015, p123.

<sup>13</sup> The ASEAN Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand. The Construction Process and Direction of Thailand and ASEAN. Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018, p.38.

the establishment of a recycling society, reducing waste and categorizing it from the source, encouraging the development of resource recycling, and improving the recycling rate of renewable resources. In January 2016, Thailand established the Climate Change Research Strategy Center, which is responsible for studying climate change issues in ASEAN and submits comprehensive research reports to ASEAN each year. In March of the same year, Thailand organized the first "ASEAN Haze" thematic conference, formulated the *ASEAN Haze-Free Roadmap*, and strived to achieve the 2020 ASEAN zero haze goal. The meeting expressed the hope that ASEAN member states would work together to prevent and solve the haze problem so as to achieve the goal set by Thai prime minister Prayuth Chan-ocha at the 26th and 27th ASEAN summits of eliminating haze in the ASEAN region. It can be seen that Thailand has shown an active attitude and enthusiasm to participate in the construction of social and cultural community, which has contributed a lot to the mechanism construction of ASEAN social and cultural community and the sustainable development of ASEAN.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

To sum up, at the initial stage of development of ASEAN community, Thailand's overall strategy of participating in ASEAN political and economic security cooperation presents two distinct characteristics. The first is an "aggressive" strategy: Thailand has taken a more active part in ASEAN's cooperation in political, economic and security fields. It is keen to establish more ASEAN cooperation centers, which are mainly based on and focused on Thailand's comparative advantages in the ASEAN community, as well as key cooperation areas in the ASEAN community stage. Its expected purpose is mainly to try to give priority to the creation of a number of "ASEAN centers" to carry out strategic layout, and strive to strengthen its influence in ASEAN. The second is a "response" strategy: Taking full advantage of the opportunity of participating in the ASEAN community cooperation, Thailand has further improved and adjusted its shortcomings in the process of participating in the ASEAN community to make up for its shortcomings, especially in dealing with the negative impact that may be caused by the participation, such as: cross-border crime, the lack of competitiveness in small and medium-sized enterprises, etc., to gain more national interests. In general, the strategic choice of Thailand's participation in the ASEAN community regional cooperation is conducive to the development of the ASEAN Community's regional integration process and has a strong driving role.

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