Cultural factors as key components for optimised International Cooperations: A case study of ASEAN and Western differences

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Abstract

Maritime security is crucial for the Indo-Pacific region since it serves as a critical component of both global logistics and economic stability. However, the region's security landscape is both traditionally and non-traditionally complex and contested. International cooperation, therefore, is often observed as tangible solutions to tackling these challenges. Yet, the existing cooperative mechanisms have been questioned by their overlapping complexity of alliances leading to challenges in balancing interests especially a collaboration of ASEAN and Western nations where differences have been noticed and somehow regressing trust. Contemporarily, a simple factor as culture has played a vital role in shaping security perspectives, as illustrated by the U.S.'s overlooked cultural considerations in Iraq and Afghanistan, which impacted operational success (Gorka, 2016). Integrating cultural understanding within security frameworks (through a theory like Social Identity Theory: SIT) may optimise cooperation, particularly with ASEAN participants, by deepening trust and shared identity. While cultivating a shared perception of common interests is challenging and time-consuming to assess, cultural engagements can offer a more effective approach to fostering cooperation and partnerships that benefit existing cooperations through elementarily undemanding processes as language participation, tradition and culture immersion, and multi-level relationships. This qualitative-approach paper aims to provides actionable strategies for enhancing ASEAN-Western cooperation through culturally tailored trust-building measures by provoking a sense of "us" toward partnership.

Keywords: International collaboration, Cultural Understanding, Social Identity Theory

Introduction

Regarding its presence as a critical feature of logistics and transportation, maritime security in the Indo-Pacific region has been considered vital over time. More than 80% of the world's trade is conducted via maritime routes, with a substantial portion through the Indo-Pacific's regions, especially through the Strait of Malacca (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development

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[UNCTAD], 2018). This significance necessitates safeguarding these shipping lanes since it is essential not only for the Indo-Pacific region but also for maintaining the smooth functioning of global supply chains (Bradford et al., 2022). As a result, ensuring the maritime security and openness of these sea lanes is not merely a regional priority but a global imperative.

The Indo-Pacific's maritime security landscape has been fraught with contemporary challenges that individual states are increasingly unable to address unilaterally. The growing presence of piracy, illegal fishing, territorial disputes, and military expansion has escalated tensions and introduced diverse security threats in maritime domains which conclude both traditional and non-traditional threats exclusively. China's territorial claims in the South China Sea, for instance, underline the potential for conflict over disputed waters and resources, challenging the sovereignty and security interests of several regional states (Kaplan, 2014). Likewise, piracy and armed robbery, for instance, continue to affect areas like the Strait of Malacca, threatening both the safety of vessels and the economics of nations dependent on maritime trade (Till et al., 2023). Given the transnational nature of these challenges, it is clear to say that no single country can effectively mitigate these threats unilaterally because of the complexity and diversity of those challenges. Instead, the region requires a collective approach, where nations share resources, intelligence, and expertise to combat security threats effectively.

International cooperation has thus emerged as a key principle for advancing maritime security in the Indo-Pacific. By promoting stability and resilience for regional security, Indo-Pacific nations have developed mechanisms that enable participants to share resources, exchange intelligence, and patrol coordination. ASEAN, for example, has been engaged in regional dialogue and joint initiatives, particularly through its Regional Forums. These engagements lead to collaborative communication and trust promotion to a form of resilience promotion against shared vulnerabilities (Chan & Kaye, 2022). The complexity and transnational scope of maritime challenges also necessitates nations to engage in security cooperation, where mutual interests and common challenges are prioritised over unilateral strategies. However, it is worth critically examining whether the existing mechanisms are sufficiently effective or have become more secure through the adoption of a collaborative community framework.

International security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region is complex and challenging per se. Most of those complications are from the overlapping complexity of alliances and security partnerships. Regional states must navigate alliances or partnerships with multiple security organisations, such as ASEAN, the Quad, and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), each involving complex diplomatic balancing acts due to the competing interests of global hegemons. These overlapping frameworks can complicate decision-making and require significant coordination,

transparency, and trust. The existing collaborations, however, either in the scheme of relative or absolute gains have left immature interpretations leading to misunderstanding or distrust outcomes, where some create a wall to prevent perpetual peace or sustainability development. As such, security complications need to be analysed and paid attention to avoid misunderstandings and ensure cooperative efforts. As maritime security dynamics evolve, promoting cohesive and adaptive security cooperation will be essential to mitigate the Indo-Pacific's security complexity. Therefore, it raises a critical inquiry about what mechanisms or tools could enhance existing cooperative frameworks and strengthen partnerships to address shared security challenges effectively. If a war breaks out tomorrow, who should a nation fight with or how can a nation trust its partners? Additionally, with the rising trend of cultural consideration, how can culture ameliorate international collective cooperation?
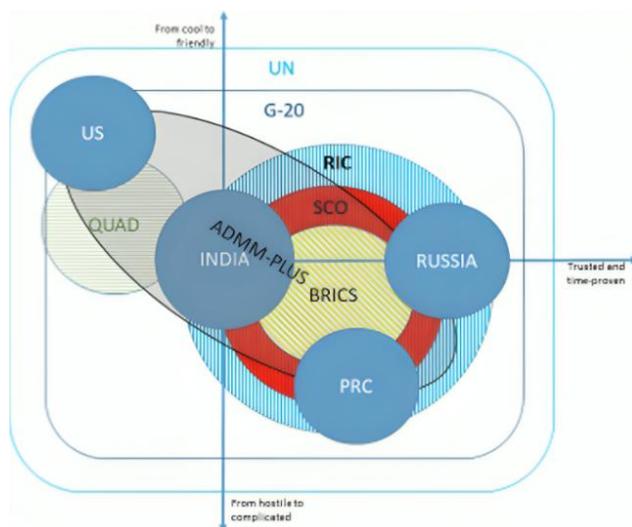
Figure 1. International security complexity (Muraviev et al., 2021)

Contemporary security studies discourse accentuates the increasing relevance of cultural factors in shaping security perspectives. Historically, security strategies have principally focused on military and economic strengths, where they often overlooked cultural dimensions (Roth, 2015). As global interactions become more complex, the role of culture in shaping national identity and aligning public opinion toward security policies has gained prominence. Failures of U.S. military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, for example, revealed critical oversights regarding local cultural dynamics, resulting in unanticipated resistance and misaligned engagement strategies (Gorka, 2016). The consequences of a lack of cultural awareness in these operations lead to a failure to

cooperate and coordinate with local people effectively (Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction [SIGAR], 2021) and ultimately an unsuccessful approach to achieve desired objectives. These cases illustrate that cultural understanding is not an option but essential in promoting cooperation and stability which can lead to desired success. Despite the fact that "culture" has been ubiquitous and simple in some understanding, academic studies have shown some adverse result as a factor normally being disregarded. Therefore, it rises an article question mentioning that; "to what extent could cultural factors optimise security cooperation between ASEAN nations or with others?"

Using Social Identity Theory (SIT) as a lens, this essay will argue that "culture" is critical and can optimise security cooperations, particularly between ASEAN and Western nations. First, this essay will outline Social Identity Theory and its components. Following that, acknowledgements of the theory, adopted by international partisans, will be addressed toward documented and policy implementations. Later, this essay will highlight why cultural factors are essential and how those factors can alleviate trust. Finally, through a comprehensive analysis of ASEAN common cultures, it will explore potential implementations for Western to consider when collaborate with ASEAN nations that can further strengthen regional unity and cooperation. This essay aims to emphasise the significance of cultural aspects which can deepen an inclusive attachment toward partners. The arguments in this essay have been supported academically by theories, publications, and some empirical experiments as a framework for explanations and suggestions. However, the suggested implementations in this essay have some limitations due to difficulties of psychological assessment where they require time and processes for tangible evaluation, but can be applied with the information operation assessment for a further study.

I. Social Identity Theory: Definition, Significance, and Components

Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1979), Polish and British social psychologists, developed Social Identity Theory (SIT) in the late 20th Century. It offered a psychological explanation of how individuals define themselves through social interactions and how these interactions shape intergroup behaviours. According to SIT, people categorise themselves and others into various social groups, whether by nationality, religion, profession, or ethnicity, which forms the basis of social identity. These identities influence behaviours, trust, and loyalty toward members of their own group (in-group) while often viewing others (out-groups) with discrimination or bias (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). A classic example of SIT can be seen in sports, where fans strongly identify with their teams and express loyalty by celebrating victories and, conversely, disputes with opposing fans. This example highlights how group identification impacts interpersonal behaviours and perceptions, even when group membership is arbitrary (Hewstone et al., 2002). Since individual

being considered into any in-group considerations, it will affect an enthusiasm or the will to do deeper, which eventually affect an outcome.

SIT is structured around three primary components: social categorisation, social identification, and social comparison. Firstly, social categorisation is the process by which people classify themselves and others into groups to better understand and navigate the social world (Turner et al., 1987). For example, people categorise others by nationality, such as identifying as Thai, American, or Australian. Secondly, social identification occurs when individuals adopt the characteristics, values, and norms of their in-group, which strengthens their group loyalty and self-esteem. For instance, identifying as a member of a profession, like a doctor or an engineer, shapes personal behaviour in ways that reflect the norms of that professional group (Brewer, 2002). Lastly, social comparison is the tendency to favour one's in-group over out-groups to maintain positive self-esteem. This component underpins in-group favouritism, where individuals prioritise their group's needs over others', often leading to prejudice and discrimination (Tajfel, 1981).

SIT has been reflected and perceived in the policies of major international organisations and countries to promote unity and pursue strategic objectives. The European Union (EU), for instance, promotes a shared "European identity" to strengthen political cohesion among member states. By promoting a collective identity, the EU can enable cooperative behaviour across national diversities, which bolsters support for initiatives such as economic integration and political solidarity (Ellemers et al., 2004). Similarly, the United States often promotes a national identity emphasising democratic values and freedom, both domestically and internationally, to unify its citizens and build alliances (Haslam et al., 2020). China, in contrast, emphasises cultural and historical continuity, encouraging citizens to view themselves as part of a long-standing national heritage. This unified identity is leveraged to promote loyalty to the state and national cohesion, especially in policies aimed at reinforcing territorial unity (Yamagishi, 1994). Through these examples, SIT not only illustrates the powerful role of group identity in guiding policy and promoting intergroup cohesion across different political landscapes, but also demonstrates the reputation of the theory being accepted worldwide.

As per theoretical fundamentals, individuals can categorise themselves into multiple social groups based on characteristics like nationality, profession, religion, ethnicity, political, and cultural identities (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). As a result, people simultaneously hold numerous social identities that shape their self-concept and social behaviour. For instance, one might identify as a woman, a scientist, a Canadian, and a mother, all at once, with each identity influencing her interactions and values in distinct ways (Turner et al., 1987). Not all identities, however, exert equal influence. Research shows that certain identities are more significant and,

therefore, play a more central role in self-concept. Roccas and Brewer (2002) introduced the Social Identity Complexity Model, which demonstrates that individuals perceive some identities as more integral to their self-view based on situational and social contexts. For example, individuals with a high level of identity complexity manage multiple identities fluidly, while those with lower complexity prioritise singular identities that dominate their social behaviour.

To support the concept, the study by Hogg and Turner (1987) highlighted that situational context affects which identity becomes most salient. When individuals are primed with an in-group threat, they tend to prioritise national or ethnic identities over occupational ones. Those significant identities can enhance in-group loyalty and, at the same time, create defensive behaviours. This experiment underscores that the hierarchy of identities shifts based on external factors, making certain identities more influential than others in specific contexts. Similarly, key findings from Spadaro et al. (2024) show that national identity serves as a strong predictor of in-group favouritism, as participants from 17 countries displayed greater trust and cooperation with those who shared their national identity over other identities. This study highlights that in-group favouritism is a cross-cultural phenomenon but varies by the salience and strength of specific identities. Trust behaviours were notably stronger in collectivist cultures, underscoring how context influence's identity importance and in-group bias. These results from the experiments have supported the idea of an unequal influence of identity in which, in a crisis situation, trust would be connected toward a specific identity rather than some general.

II. Cultural identity: overlooked element that can leverage "trust"

Some identities will outweigh others in significance, and this is particularly relevant in security contexts (Roth, 2015) where the key identity appears to be culture. Culture, defined as the shared values, beliefs, and practices that shape the behavior and perceptions of a group, plays a critical role in understanding and addressing security issues (Huntington, 1996). Culture, however, has been ignored, underestimated or disregarded, in security frameworks, which many people have thought that it's an uncomplicated factor where everyone understands and implements already. However, an explicit example can be perceived through the disappointment of American operations in Iraq and Afghanistan which reveal some troubles of lacking of cultural awareness. This underestimation led to failures in understanding local contexts, causing operational inefficacies and resistance among local populations. For instance, counterinsurgency strategies that emphasised direct combat rather than local power structures and social norms contributed to growing anti-American sentiments, undermining trust and escalating conflict (Katzman, 2015). Such cases demonstrate that cultural misunderstandings can jeopardise operations, highlighting the need to incorporate cultural identity into security planning or operations.

Furthermore, in recognising the importance of culture within security frameworks, an interdisciplinary understanding is vital. Studies in anthropology, psychology, and sociology provide a multidimensional understanding of culture, reflecting perceptions and actions. For example, Clifford Geertz (1973), an American anthropologist, emphasised that culture is a symbolic system that conveys different meanings toward a subjective interpretation. This distinction reveals the significance of cultural values affecting how communities perceive and respond to security issues. Dr. Hans J. Roth (2015) further supports this view by arguing that culture should be studied at all degrees to create a more explicit understanding in security strategies. Roth posits that interdisciplinary research can better identify how cultural factors influence operational success or failure. This is because cultural identities and beliefs have an impact on group cohesion, attitudes toward authority, and readiness to cooperate. Thus, interdisciplinary analysis is essential in addressing complex security challenges rooted in cultural dynamics.

Cultural identity often influences how individuals interact within and outside their communities. In Henri Tajfel's prominent experiment (1970), participants were divided into arbitrary groups, resulting in in-group bias and favouritism despite no substantial differences between groups. This "minimal group paradigm" demonstrates that even minor differences can lead to loyalty toward one's group and suspicion toward others, behaviours amplified by cultural engagements. When applied to national security, these dynamics suggest that cultural identity, often more significant than other social identities, can drive strong allegiances or hostilities. Cultural values and norms deeply embedded within identity thus play a formative role in shaping perceptions and reactions to security threats (Hogg & Abrams, 2006). These findings emphasise the importance of understanding cultural influence on group behaviour to develop effective and cultural-related security policies.

Perceptions of security vary substantially across cultural contexts and can complicate security aspects. Western nations often prioritise individual freedoms and democratic ideals in their security policies, while Asian nations may emphasise collective stability and harmony (Leung & Bond, 1984). These differences can lead to contradictory security observations and potential misunderstandings between states. China's historical and cultural assertion of the "nine-dash line" in the South China Sea is perceived by many Western nations as an aggressive stance. For China, however, these claims are framed within a narrative of national heritage and sovereignty, reflecting its cultural emphasis on historical continuity and territorial integrity (Tsirbas, 2016). Such disparities in security perceptions demonstrate that cultural context is crucial in understanding and resolving international conflicts.

In-group and out-group dynamics also emphasise the significance of culture in security frameworks. SIT suggests that individuals derive self-esteem from societies, leading to favoritism toward in-group and bias against out-group members (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This can be observed in international relations where cultural or national identities reinforce in-group alliances. A positive example of cultural understanding leading to favoritism can be seen through the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) between the United States and the Philippines. The agreement was signed after Philippines-American cultural ties were strengthened through the 2013 Typhoon Haiyan disaster relief operation. Before the signatory of EDCA, the relationship between the Philippines and America was not entirely smooth, evident in the rejection of the draft Treaty of Friendship in 1991, where nationalism or opposition to the US presence in the Philippines was prioritised over foreign relationships (Kraft, 1993). The rejection, then, reflects more toward out-group bias or the feeling American being "others." However, the successful humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations from the U.S. promoted in-group solidarity and trust, paving the way for the EDCA's establishment in 2014 (Lum & Dolven, 2014). This case highlights how cultural alignment and shared values can strengthen security cooperation, where the simplicity of cultural understanding can lead to strategic success or deepening trust.

Conversely, cultural misunderstandings can exacerbate out-group perceptions and accelerate tensions. The current South China Sea (SCS) conflict exemplifies how cultural narratives—such as China's nine-dash line claim—can lead to perceptions of threat-like where it incites division among neighboring nations and Western powers (Vaughn & Morrison, 2006). Although China has a long historical connection with ASEAN and Western nations, the cultural misunderstanding narratives from the SCS implementations can lead to uncomfortable relationships or bias toward participants. Such out-group dynamics, fueled by cultural misunderstandings, impede diplomatic resolutions and can escalate regional insecurity. These cases, of both cultural misunderstanding and understanding, underline the impact of cultural dynamics on global security. It demonstrates that culture is not merely a backdrop but also an active force shaping security outcomes. Recognising the influence of culture in security frameworks is, therefore, essential for developing more inclusive and effective international security strategies.

Culture plays a crucial role in promoting trust by creating in-group attachment and reducing misperceptions. Culture can enhance a shared identity which can strengthen harmony among society. This aspect can be observed in the European Union, where shared historical and cultural values have advanced a collective European identity that reinforces cooperation on

defence and security initiatives (Bruter, 2003). Similarly, Dr. Hans J. Roth (2015) argues that a shared identity facilitates alliances by creating a sense of belonging that reinforces commitment toward mutual goals. Additionally, cultural understanding encourages open communication by promoting respect for each nation's norms and practices. An obvious example can be seen via the success of joint peacekeeping operations. In UN peacekeeping missions, a cultural approach has led to improved conflict resolution and local acceptance (Autesserre, 2014). Furthermore, culture promotes consistency and integrity in partnerships. NATO's enduring stability is a prime example; shared democratic values are linked to "trust" (Roth, 2015). Psychological safety is another vital factor, allowing transparency and risk-taking without fear of judgment (Edmondson, 1999). This factor encourages more reliable exchanges where it relates to trust. Finally, cultural alignment promotes fairness and equity where these elements can ensure that cooperation can occur through mutual benefit. The focus on equality and territorial integrity embedded in ASEAN's fundamental principles has been considered an essential mechanism to enhance community cooperation (Nesadurai, 2008). However, if cultures have been mentioned and paid attention well enough, why perpetual peace or permanent cooperation has been challenged markedly, as can be perceived day by day?

International collaboration is essential for addressing global challenges, but cultural factors (though often mentioned) are rarely put into practice. This oversight leads to miscommunication, mistrust, and failed to achieve desired outcomes. While scholars emphasize cultural sensitivity (Hofstede, 2001; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 2011), practical strategies for managing cultural differences are often missing. As a result, without active integration into communication and decision-making, misunderstandings arise (Stahl et al., 2010). For example, Western collaborators may value directness, while East Asian partners may prefer indirect communication and hierarchy. When such differences go unmanaged, tension and disengagement will then follow (Morrison et al., 2003). Ignoring cultural perspectives can also reinforce unequal power dynamics, limiting inclusivity and collaboration (Adams et al., 2007). To succeed, international projects must move beyond acknowledging culture in theory. They, on the other hand, should acknowledge cultural differences, foster implementations, execute training, and build cultural competence, to build trust and shared understanding.

In summary, cultural identity has been an essential factor to promote community favoritism in other words "trust". Yet it is often overlooked, especially in a security context leading to inter-group conflicts and ultimately failure. In contrast, culture can advance "trust" since it can build a shared identity, encourage open communication, demonstrate consistency and integrity, stimulate psychological safety, and promote fairness and equity among partners. However, the

practicality of cultural applications is challenging since it is most mentioned in theory but not in practice. It's important to identify key differences between ASEAN and Western nations, highlight the common characteristics that strengthen ASEAN's cultural identity, and explore how trust can be built through cultural context.

III. ASEAN common identities: the foundation of in-group favoritism

The fundamental step before suggesting cultural implementation is to understand ASEAN cultural identities and uniqueness. ASEAN nations share common cultural values that shape regional identity, influencing policies, social structures, cooperative frameworks and characteristics. Those identities have been implemented fundamentally in many aspects such as laws, society (way of living), and norms. Common cultural identities, such as family respect, language diversity, and collectivist perspectives, distinguish ASEAN from other regions and underscore the importance of cultural engagement mechanisms for fostering stronger partnerships. A deeper understanding of ASEAN's shared cultural elements can provide insight into the development of inclusive and collaborative engagement strategies especially when dealing with Western countries.

Family Respectfulness

Family respect is the backbone of social structures in ASEAN countries, deeply influencing interpersonal relationships and community dynamics. Across ASEAN nations, family-centered values emphasise respect for elders, prioritising family well-being, and family ties. This belief aligns with traditions from Confucian, Buddhist, and indigenous values that stress filial respectfulness (Ikels, 2004). Research highlights how this respect for the family hierarchy extends into broader social interactions where it often manifests as a gratitude toward authority and seniority. The study by Hofstede (2001), for example, demonstrates how these values promote stable family units and community cohesion by embedding respect for family as a collective responsibility. Accordingly, in Thailand, the concept of "greng jai" involves acting in a manner that prevents causing discomfort to others, especially for family members, reflecting a high regard for community welfare (Komin, 1991). This cultural emphasis on family respectfulness influences regional interactions and offers a model for international relations based on mutual respect and acknowledgment of authority within collaborative settings.

Language Distinction

ASEAN's linguistic diversity is another significant feature of the region, creating distinction and obstruction simultaneously. Unlike regions with predominant languages, ASEAN countries possess unique linguistic profiles that create a robust multilingual environment. Of the ten ASEAN nations, only two share a national language; Malaysia and Singapore share Malay as a national language. Each nation is also linguistically diverse internally. This linguistic diversity within

ASEAN with languages such as Thai, Tagalog, Bahasa Indonesia, and Malay, reflects and strengthens cultural uniqueness (Sneddon, 2003). The absence of a predominant language across ASEAN emphasises the importance of multilingualism and fosters adaptability, as communities often navigate intergroup communication through multiple languages and dialects (Wong & Rubdy, 2020). This linguistic diversity not only reinforces ASEAN's cultural richness but also serves as a barrier and bridge in diplomatic and social engagements, underscoring the need for translation and cultural adaptation in fostering regional unity.

Collectivist Perspectives

ASEAN societies generally exhibit a strong collectivist orientation, where individual interests are often subordinate to group harmony and community well-being. Hofstede's (1984) research on cultural dimensions classified several ASEAN nations as having high collectivism scores. His research indicates a substantial inclination toward prioritising group needs over personal autonomy. Collectivist cultures, as seen in ASEAN countries, emphasise group cohesion, family values, and the interconnectedness of individual identities within a community framework. This stands in contrast to individualistic characteristics (Western-minded nations are often classified as an individualist) where personal autonomy and self-expression are typically prioritised (Triandis, 1995). While collectivist cultures emphasise shared identity and social roles, individualistic cultures focus on personal achievements and self-fulfillment. ASEAN's collectivist orientation encourages unity, as regional cooperation aligns with cultural norms that value group welfare over individual gains, making it a suitable foundation for collaborative regional policies and agreements (Roth, 2015). The differences between both collectivist and individualist can be seen in Table 1 below.

In short, ASEAN cultures are unique and distinct from Western perspectives. To establish any cooperation with ASEAN nations, it's better exploit understanding through unique characteristics. As mentioned, common cultural traits include strong community and family ties, language diversity, and a collectivist mindset. These factors contribute to a deeper in-group bond, fostering trust among members who share a common identity. Therefore, it is interesting to explore how does ASEAN nations overcome their cultural differences with the West? What tangible steps can be implemented to enable a stronger sense of belonging within ASEAN countries?

Table 1. Collectivist vs. Individualist Comparison

Aspect	Collectivist Cultures	Individualist Cultures	Academic Reference
Definition of Self	Interdependent; identity linked to group memberships and relationships	Independent; identity based on personal traits and autonomy	Triandis (1995)
Decision-Making	Group-oriented; prioritises group harmony over personal choice	Individual-oriented; values personal choice and autonomy	Hofstede (2001)
Communication Style	Indirect; emphasises harmony, avoiding confrontation	Direct; values clarity, self-expression	Gudykunst & Nishida (1986)
Value on Relationships	Long-term and loyalty-focused; community and family are primary	Short-term and transaction-focused; individual needs take precedence	Triandis (1995); Ting-Toomey (2019)
Motivation	Based on group goals, loyalty, and social approval	Based on personal achievement and individual goals	Markus & Kitayama (2014)
Conflict Resolution	Avoids conflict to maintain group harmony; relies on mediation	Approaches conflict openly; uses direct negotiation and individual rights	Ting-Toomey (2019); Hofstede (2001)
Sense of Duty	Strong sense of duty to family and in-group; values sacrifice	Emphasis on self-reliance and personal responsibility	Roth (2015); Triandis (1995)
Workplace Dynamics	Teamwork-oriented; decisions are made collectively	Individual performance-focused; decisions are often made independently	Hofstede (2001); Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner (2011)
View on Success	Success is shared and reflects group effort	Success is individual and reflects personal ability	Markus & Kitayama (2014); Triandis (1995)

IV. Suggested applications for Cultural Engagement through ASEAN Common Culture: the promotion of "trust"

By analysing the common but unique aspects of ASEAN cultures, some suggested implementations have been assessed through the lens of SIT. The analysis first starts with the concept of "identity prototypicality," as argued by Haslam et al. (2020) in The New Psychology of Leadership, suggests that leaders and institutions align with group values to resonate with their audience. The finding underpins that more influential or effective achievements are tied profoundly in addition to 'being one of us'. This concept is highly relevant in ASEAN's context, where cultural engagement reflects ASEAN's collective identity. In other words, ASEAN cultures can foster stronger ties between member states and other partners. This can also reflect that identity-based engagement can yield more meaningful, durable relationships in cross-cultural settings. Acknowledging ASEAN's shared cultural elements through engagement initiatives can promote an inclusive approach that builds unity through cultural respect and mutual understanding. The suggested initiatives can be seen through promoting language learning, embracing traditional practices, and strengthening community relationships which will be elaborated as follows:

Language Learning and Usage:

Promoting language learning and addressing when working bilaterally or minilaterally with ASEAN nations can foster cross-cultural communication and mutual understanding. Academically, language can be a powerful tool for reducing social distance and strengthening relationships. An experiment by Giles and Byrne (1982) highlighted that language convergence—adjusting one's language style to align with another's—can enhance social acceptance and trust. In ASEAN, the use of English as a working language helps bridge linguistic gaps while allowing member nations to retain their native languages as markers of identity. However, encouraging multilingual initiatives, where it might be specific for ASEAN states such as Thai, or Tagalog, may deepen cultural respect and eventually will be more inclusive. Studies show that linguistic awareness promotes diplomatic inclusivity, as it signals respect for cultural diversity and counters the dominance of global languages in regional discourse (Wong & Rubdy, 2020). The implication is that ASEAN members or any potential partners can concentrate on language initiatives to promote understanding and deepen a sense of us. In other words, the local language usage is not about participant understanding, but it is a tool supporting a perception of "us."

Embracing Traditions and Cultural Practices:

Integrating traditional practices through ASEAN cultural engagement reinforces a sense of shared values and respect for one another's heritage. The notion of identity prototypicality asserts that such practices can act as a "prototype" for shared identity within a group, aligning diverse members with a common cultural framework (Haslam et al., 2020). Embracing customs—such as festivals and local rituals—reinforces unity and strengthens

intergroup relations. Academic studies support this, showing that shared rituals increase group cohesion. For example, an experiment by Hobson et al. (2017) found that participants engaged in synchronised movement or shared rituals conveyed higher levels of trust and in-group bonding. Within ASEAN, organising regional festivals such as Hari Raya in Malaysia and Songkran in Thailand can foster inclusivity and collective identity which can deepen connections through cultural appreciation. The implication of the embracing mechanism, therefore, could be seen through voluntary request to participate in targeted traditions or cultures which will eventually lead to a more inclusive (in-group) identity. The involvement of any traditions or cultures by volunteers will initiate a deeper attachment of "us" than attending by a request.

Community and Personal Relationships:

Strengthening community ties across ASEAN through collaborative programs and interpersonal relationships fosters a foundation of trust and psychological safety. Although this implementation appears routine and has been practiced for years, earlier analysis (collectivist perspectives) indicates that it requires further attention to develop concrete recommendations. Appropriate to say, this approach is highly essential for long-term cooperation since it can link toward deeper trust. Psychological safety, for example, is key to promote open communication and reducing conflict (Edmondson, 1999). When individuals feel psychologically safe, they are more likely to engage in honest dialogue without fear of negative repercussions. This principle can be applied to ASEAN members and partners by creating cross-border community projects that encourage active involvement and interaction among member states. For example, studies on intergroup contact theory (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) suggest that sustained contact between groups reduces prejudice and promotes mutual understanding. ASEAN and other international partners could implement community engagement programs—such as youth exchange initiatives or volunteer-driven cultural immersion programs—to facilitate direct, positive interactions among participants. This implies deepened relationships can diminish biases and strengthen in-group trust, which will affect better cooperation.

To support suggested implementations, the significance of cultural engagements can be best seen through historical operational achievements. Examples, such as the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960), demonstrate the importance of cultural understanding in "Hearts and Minds" operations. The British strategy to win local support in counterinsurgency focused on gaining trust through cultural alignment and community engagement, leading to military achievement (Thompson, 1966). Building relationships with local Malay communities, including respecting religious practices and integrating local governance structures, helped weaken insurgent influence and promoted a sense of in-group belonging with the British forces (Hack, 2009). This approach highlights the potential of culturally grounded strategies to enhance security by fostering in-group associations which ended up meeting strategic goals.

The success of "Hearts and Minds" approach highlights the value of cultural engagement, especially for ASEAN heritage. Building trust through shared cultural values, inclusive communication, and respect for traditions aligns with ASEAN's collectivist culture, which values harmony and mutual respect. These elements, when integrated into policy frameworks, can strengthen regional unity and create a more resilient ASEAN capable of addressing shared challenges through a culturally inclusive lens. If any nation successfully engages more toward cultural mechanisms and can be acquainted as a cultural in-group, trust and cooperative bonds are not far to perceive from members. In addition, cultural participation offers an effective approach to addressing shared perceptions of interests or challenges, thereby enhancing collective security objectives.
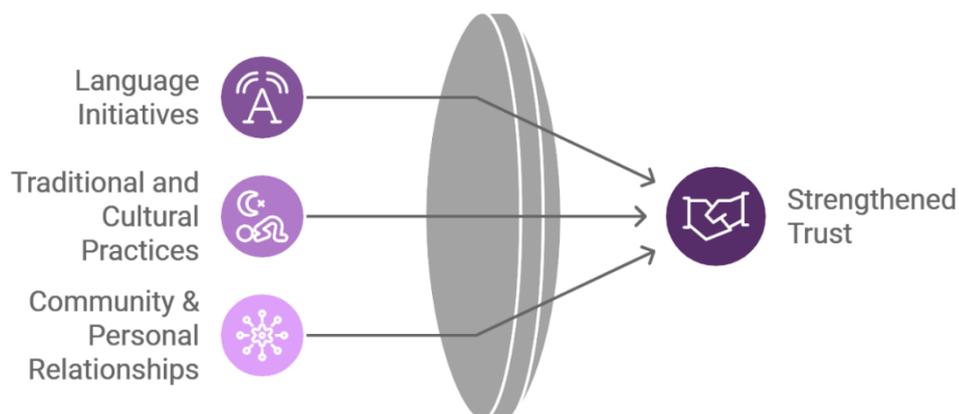
Figure 2 Trust through suggested implementations

Conclusion

The integration of cultural understanding within security frameworks is pivotal for promoting resilience and cooperation in the ASEAN regions. The shared cultural identities among ASEAN nations, including family respect, linguistic diversity, and collectivist perspectives, provide an inherent foundation for collaborative engagements. However, these commonalities must be actively leveraged through cultural engagement strategies to transform subjective similarities into concrete ones. This analysis highlights that ASEAN's cultural values not only shape individual and group identities but also enhance regional cohesion and trust. Predominantly, these aspects are critical for addressing complex, transnational security challenges.

Applying the Social Identity Theory within the ASEAN cultural contexts reveals how cultural engagement can craft a sense of "us". As per the theory, the concept of "identity prototypicality" emphasizes aligning with ASEAN's shared values to promote cooperation.

Encouraging language learning, embracing traditional practices, and fostering community relationships can serve as effective mechanisms for reinforcing cultural bonds. Language proficiency, for example, reduces social barriers and advances mutual respect, enhancing diplomatic inclusivity and communication. Additionally, embracing regional festivals voluntarily with local defence partners serves as a prototype for ASEAN identity. As a result, cultural engagement mechanisms can cultivate a sense of shared heritage which will overcome national differences.

Overall, prioritising cultural engagement within ASEAN's cooperative frameworks theoretically can enhance trust, inclusivity, and psychological safety. All of these aspects, remarkably, are essential for effective cooperations and can tighten in-group bonds. As ASEAN navigates evolving security challenges and geopolitical pressures, recognising and integrating these cultural elements can deepen partnerships, mitigate conflicts, and create a more cohesive security landscape that aligns with both regional and global interests. By identifying how cultural alignment reduces misunderstanding and enhances trust, this paper can contribute to sustainable security frameworks in the Indo-Pacific. However, these suggested implementations have some limitations on the fact that the evaluation process requires remarkable time to meet expected outcomes. It is, then, worth having further studies regarding evaluating criterion of any assessments and also some quantitative experiments.

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