Decolonizing Diplomacy: A Systematic Review of Southeast Asian Countries' Diplomacy Strategies

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Diplomacy has long played a pivotal role in shaping international relations, yet much of the scholarly literature remains Western-centric, often overlooking the rich traditions and histories of non-Western countries. A key yet frequently neglected moment was the 1955 Bandung Conference, where newly independent Asian and African nations asserted their agency on global stage. Championing non-alignment and solidarity, the conference demonstrated that formerly colonized and marginalized people could articulate and define their own approaches to international relations. This paper takes 1955 as a starting point and addresses these gaps by conducting the first-ever systematic literature review of diplomacy strategies in Southeast Asian (SEA) countries. A total of 92 articles were analyzed using the theory of ideational power, alongside an examination of domestic and international factors shaping these strategies. Taken together, SEA countries employ diverse diplomatic strategies, often favoring informal approaches that emphasize neutrality, foster warm sentiments, and create positive atmospheres. At times, they adopt assertive strategies, such as dismissing opposing ideas or referencing historical events to strengthen their position. Another feature of SEA diplomacy is its strategic positioning among global powers and regional organizations, consistently leveraging their stance. These strategies are shaped by a combination of factors, including leadership, cultural and religious identity, colonial legacies, international pressures, and the role of ASEAN. Reflecting on Bandung's ideals and the role of ideas in SEA countries, this paper advocates for decolonizing diplomacy by challenging Western-centric narratives and promoting a more inclusive, historically informed understanding of diplomatic practices that values diverse perspectives and experiences.

Keywords: *non-western diplomacy, decolonizing diplomacy, diplomacy strategies, southeast asian diplomacy*

Introduction

"Diplomacy is the conduct of international relations" (Bull, 1977, p. 157). Despite its significance as an everyday mechanism of interaction between nations and political entities, the "study of diplomacy remains marginal" (Sharp, 1999, p. 34). Diplomacy has even been referred to as "the poor child of international relations" (Pouliot and Cornut, 2015, p. 1). While the study of diplomacy is already marginal within the field of International Relations (IR), it also

suffers from a major bias: much of diplomacy is rooted in and focused on Western experiences and perspectives (Acharya and Buzan, 2009; Neumann, 2019). Neumann (2005) states, "When I begin by associating diplomacy with 'the West', it is not only because the site of my work […] but because diplomacy has a Western history" (p. 72). As a result, region- and country-specific features and dynamics of diplomacy outside the West tend to be disregarded.

This situation sustains misleading generalizations on diplomacy, despite recognition that diplomacy varies across different political contexts and entities (Beier, 2009; Opondo, 2010). Scratching the surface, Meerts (2015) characterizes major differences between Western diplomatic approaches and those in regions, such as Africa and Asia: "Different cultures have different perceptions of negotiation processes. Americans and Europeans tend to see the process in a linear way", adding that, "In Africa, and foremost in Asia, negotiators tend to see the process as circular" (p. 33). This linear approach is to conceive and conduct diplomacy as a 'formal' and 'sequential' process geared at clearly defined goals. In contrast, the 'circular' approach views diplomacy as a dynamic process, lacking a clear beginning and end, and not always following a standardized format (Meerts, 2015).

Our foundational argument is that diplomacy also has a non-Western history. This history is shaped by processes of decolonizaton in general and the Bandung Conference in particular. At this conference, hosted by Indonesia in 1955, 29 newly independent countries from Africa and Asia opposed colonialism and adopted the Bandung declaration: a set of 10 principles for a new international order, including respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity of all nations, and promotion of mutual interest and cooperation (Abdulgani, 2011). Scholars have argued that the conference even served as the foundation of decoloniality (Mignolo, 2011) and the key shaper of the modern multipolar order (Umar, 2019). With regard to diplomatic styles or approaches, Acharya and Tan (2008) highlight that one important normative outcome of the conference was the preference for "non-intrusive, informal and consensus-based diplomacy over legalistic and formal organisastions" (p. 10). Roeslan Abdulgani (1964), the secretary-general of the Bandung Conference, also remarked on what defines the "Bandung Spirit", highlighting its emphasis on dialogue-centered diplomacy that respects national sovereignty while promoting solidarity and peaceful coexistence. All of this served as a powerful testament and pivotal moment, showing that the colonized, the oppressed, and the subaltern, too, can speak—defining and redefining their own approach to international relations.

Whilst the differences between Western diplomacy strategies and that of Asian and African countries have been acknowledged, in our view, studies focusing on the latter remain scarcely explored and, moreover, barely theorized. Derian (1987) begins his article by noting that "diplomacy has been particularly resistant to theory" (p. 91). This resistance stems from the

fact that much of the classical scholarship on diplomacy focuses on describing the practices of Western diplomats, such as François de Callières and Ernest Satow (Derian, 1987, pp. 91-2). As a result, there has been a tendency toward stagnation in the theorization of diplomacy, along with a continued reproduction of Western bias, influenced by Western diplomats who have long served as the 'champions' of traditional diplomatic studies.

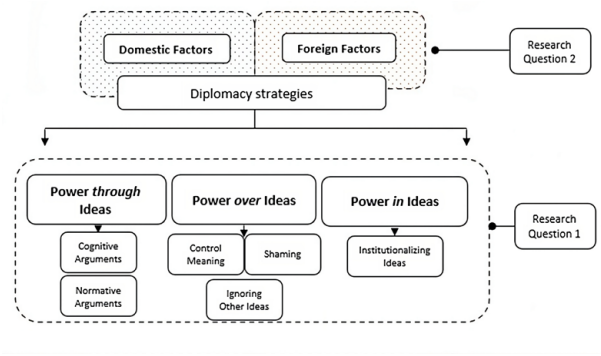
In short, diplomacy as a field is marginalized, dominated by Western bias, and remains theoretically underdeveloped. To address these shortcomings, we have taken two steps: First, we shift our focus away from the West to highlight non-Western perspectives and experiences in diplomacy of Southeast Asia (SEA) countries. Through a systematic literature review (SLR), we assess the current state of knowledge on SEA diplomacy strategies, put on spotlight its distinct strategies as part of a broader effort to decolonize the field of diplomacy and challenge its dominant Western narratives. Second, we analyze SEA diplomacy strategies through the lens of the theory of ideational power (Carstensen and Schmidt, 2015). We reflect on the Bandung Conference to emphasize the role of 'ideas', which we argue is a foundational element in the diplomacy strategies of many Asian and African countries (Abdulgani, 1964, 2011; Wright, 1995). Our analysis investigates how SEA countries utilize ideas as part of their diplomacy strategies, and exert their influence through three distinct forms: the power *through* ideas, power *over* ideas, and power *in* ideas. In an effort to contribute to theoretical development in understanding SEA diplomacy, we also distinguish between domestic and foreign factors that shape SEA strategies, highlighting their idiosyncratic features.

This paper presents the first-ever SLR on the diplomatic strategies of SEA countries, showing how SEA diplomacy operates through various forms of ideational power and is shaped by a range of domestic and foreign factors, including the enduring influence of the Bandung Conference and its critique on colonialism and call for cooperation among non-western countries. This paper is structured around two research questions: (1) What are the diplomacy strategies employed by SEA countries? (2) What factors shape the diplomacy strategies of SEA countries? The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 presents the theoretical framework; Section 3 outlines the methodology; Section 4 presents the results; Section 5 provides a discussion and concludes the paper.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this paper is drawn from Carstensen and Schmidt's (2015) work on ideational power. We further distinguish between domestic and foreign factors that shape diplomacy. This combination allows us to comprehensively review the literature on SEA, providing a nuanced understanding of 'ideas' in diplomacy strategies and exploring the domestic and foreign factors that shape them.

Figure 1 presents the overall theoretical framework.



Ideational Power

Ideational power is defined as the ability to " influence other people's beliefs by promoting their own ideas" (Carstensen and Schmidt, 2015, p. 322). Given the importance of 'ideas' in the Bandung Conference (Abdulgani, 1964, 2011; Wright, 1995) and their role in driving political action, including in international relations (Blyth, 2002; Goldstein and Keohane, 2019), we use ideational power as the central element of our framework for understanding diplomacy strategies.

Carstensen and Schmidt (2015) distinguish three forms of ideational power. The first, power *through* ideas, refers to the ability to persuade others to adopt one's ideas, using cognitive arguments (to demonstrate coherence) or normative arguments (to appeal to public norms). We refer to this as the "persuasion strategy". The second form, power *over* ideas, is the ability to dominate the meaning of ideas through control of media, blaming and shaming, or 'remaining deaf' to other ideas. This form is more confrontational, and we label it the "confrontation strategy." The third form, power in ideas, is the power to structure thought by embedding ideas within systems of knowledge, discursive practices, or institutions, making them appear natural and depoliticized. We refer to this more subtle form as the "hegemonization strategy".

Factors Shaping Diplomacy

Diplomacy is shaped by various domestic and foreign factors, as well as by the combination of these factors. Hocking (2016, p. 73) asserts that "the structures of diplomacy in any period reflect the character of international policy and the international and domestic environments in which they are located". A similar point is made by McGowan and Shapiro (1973), arguing that domestic and foreign factors play a crucial role in shaping foreign policy. Domestic factors play a crucial role as the context and driving force behind the formulation of foreign policy strategies. Meanwhile, foreign factors shape the broader environment in which a country engages with the international community. Reflecting on the work of these authors, we distinguish between domestic and foreign factors that shape diplomacy strategies, and focus on both. Domestic factors include domestic actors, historical contingencies, and cultural norms, while foreign factors encompass international actors, events, and institutions

Methodology

This paper employs a systematic literature review (SLR), following three sequential steps to collect, categorize, and

analyze data (Haddaway et al., 2018; James et al., 2016): (1) search strategy, (2) inclusion criteria, and (3) searching, screening, and coding.

Search Strategy

The scope of this SLR is limited to peer-reviewed scientific articles that have been published in English language in (one of) the following international research databases: *Scopus* and *Web of Science*. Our search strategy began by defining search strings and selecting keywords derived from our research questions, specifically "diplomacy strategies" and "Southeast Asian countries" (see, Appendix 1).

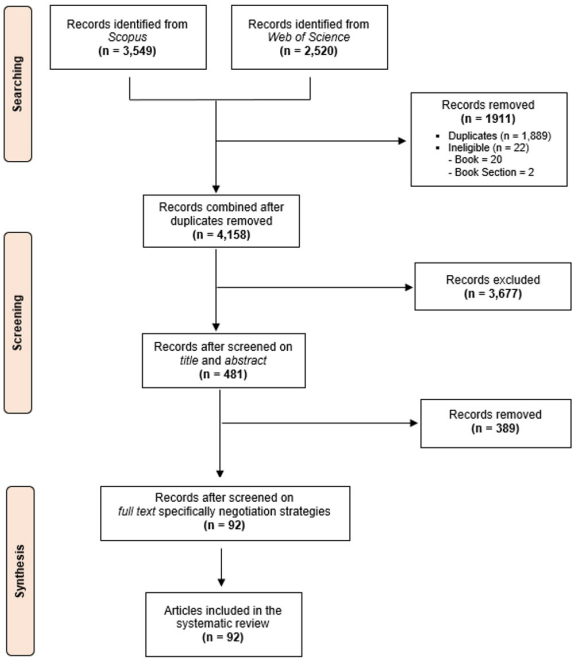
Inclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria are defined by two key elements: "population," referring to individuals, groups, or institutions; and "activity," referring to actions or tasks performed by these population. We selecting only articles that met these requirements for the full-text screening process: (1) Population: diplomacy conducted by the state (or state actors) from individual SEA countries. List of SEA countries based on member states of ASEAN; (2) Activity: Diplomacy occurring between countries or interngovernmental organizations from 1955 onward (using the Bandung Conference as the starting point). This diplomacy should depict the use of 'ideational power' and include references to domestic and/or foreign factors.

Searching, Screening and Coding

The articles were searched and screened in March 2023. Based on the search strings (Appendix 1), 3,549 results were retrieved from *Scopus* and 2,520 from *Web of Science*. After removing duplicates and ineligible articles, and applying the inclusion criteria, 92 articles were selected for full analysis. These articles were subsequently analyzed using the computer-aided qualitative data analysis software, ATLAS.ti. Figure 2 illustrates the overall flow of the SLR in this article.

Figure 2. Flow diagram of SLR



The final selection of 92 articles was then analyzed and coded deductively (Auerbach and Silverstein, 2003), meaning our coding approach used predetermined codes based on the main elements of theoretical framework (see, Figure 1). For the first research question, ideational power was categorized into three codes corresponding

to its forms: power through ideas (Code 1A), power over ideas (Code 1B), and power in ideas (Code 1C). For the second research question, we assigned codes for domestic factors (Code 2A) and foreign factors (Code 2B).

Results

We begin by outlining the general characteristics of the reviewed articles, followed by an overview of the terms commonly used to describe SEA countries' diplomatic strategies. Next, we categorize these strategies based on the three forms of ideational power, and highlighting several notable examples. Finally, we provide an overview of the key factors shaping these strategies.

General Characteristics of The Reviewed Articles

The SLR encompasses a total of 92 articles. Figure 3 reveals that the five SEA countries with the highest number of publications also correspond to the five countries in the region with the largest GDPs in the region.

Figure 3. Geographical distribution of the reviewed articles

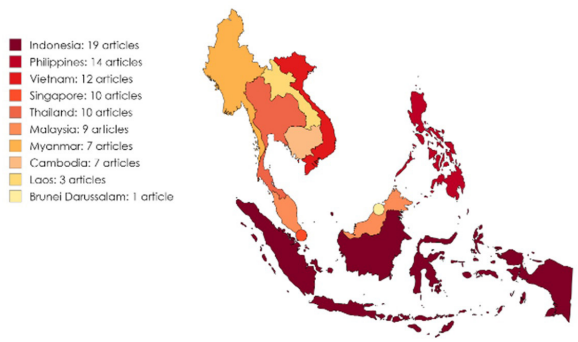


Table 1 presents the distribution of 'local' affiliations of the first author for each set of articles focused on a specific country. The table shows that slightly less than half of all articles have a first author affiliated with an institution based in a SEA country, indicating a relative strong, though not majority, presence of local authorship in publications on SEA diplomacy.

Table 1. First author affiliation of the reviewed articles

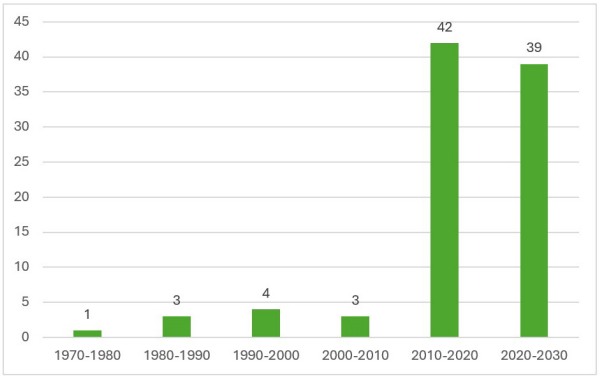
Country	Total Number of Articles	First author affiliated with an institution based in SEA
Brunei Darussalam	1	0
Cambodia	7	2
Indonesia	19	13
Laos	3	0
Malaysia	9	6
Myanmar	7	1
Philippines	14	9
Singapore	10	6
Thailand	10	3
Vietnam	12	7
Total	**92**	**47**

Figure 4 shows that the number of publications on SEA countries' diplomacy remained very low from the 1970s through the 2000s. It is worth noting that the Bandung Conference was likely not considered as a main subject of study at the time, and no

relevant articles (to be included as part of the analysis in our paper) were published during the decade in which the Bandung Conference took place. This could also reveal the limited academic focus on the conference in its formative years and highlight a broader pattern of overlooking non-Western diplomatic traditions in scholarly discourse.

Publications on SEA countries' diplomacy countries began to rise notably in the 2010s, peaking at 42 between 2010 and 2020. This upward trend continued into the 2020s, with 19 articles published in 2022 alone and a total of 39 recorded by March 2023. The rise in publications since the 2010s can likely be attributed to shifts in regional political dynamics, growing academic interest, and technical factors such as improved access to peer-reviewed publishing platforms. During this period, SEA countries also became more active in global affairs, especially through ASEAN's expanded role in regional disputes, economic cooperation, and security issues like the South China Sea. Their increased presence in forums such as the G20 and the UN also raised the region's profile in diplomatic studies. However, this does not necessarily imply that the Bandung Conference has explicitly become a primary subject of study in these publications.

Figure 4. Number of publications of the reviewed articles per decade



Terms Used to Characterize SEA Countries Diplomacy

The 92 articles reviewed contain a wide variety of terms used to describe the diplomatic strategies of individual SEA countries, as shown in Table 2. The terms can be categorized into three main categories.

The first category includes terms based on existing concepts or theories that have been adapted to fit the empirical context of SEA countries. For example, the concept of 'hedging,' which encompasses strategies to manage and mitigate uncertainties, has been tailored to the SEA context. This adaptation has led to terms like "strategic hedging" (Doung et al., 2022), "light hedging" (Lai and Kuik, 2020), and "cautious hedging" (Abuza, 2020). There are also country-specific variations, such as "Vietnam's hedging" (Tran and Sato, 2018), "Cambodia's hedging" (Leng, 2016), and "Myanmar's hedging" (Soong and Aung, 2020). These examples highlight that even for a concept like hedging, there is no single definition; context is essential. As Leng (2016) notes in the case of Cambodia, "…

hedging strategy towards Vietnam is unique, given the differences in its manifestation compared to the hedging strategies suggested in existing literature" (p. 1).

The second category includes terms that highlight cultural practices, materials, or values that are relatively unique to SEA countries. Examples include "dance diplomacy" (Espena, 2022; Kencana, 2022; Rogers, 2022), "gastrodiplomacy" (Lee and Kim, 2020), and "museum diplomacy" (Cai, 2013). Rogers (2022), for example, considers Cambodian dancers as "diplomats," suggesting they are "not simply liminal diplomatic actors" (p. 420).

The third category consists of terms that characterize specific foreign policy approaches and attitudes. Examples include "independent and active" (Arif, 2021; Laksamana, 2011), "million friends and zero enemy" (Amurwanti et al., 2021; Inkriwang, 2021), and "flexible diplomacy" (Suhrki, 1971).

Table 2. Example of Terms Used to Characterize Diplomacy Strategies of Individual SEA

Country	Terms	Characteristics
Brunei Darussalam	Low-diplomatic posture (Case, 1996)	Inward-looking with a tendency to be passive in international arenas
Cambodia	Strategic hedging (Doung et al., 2022) Cambodia's Hedging (Leng, 2016) Dance diplomacy (Espena, 2022; Rogers, 2022) Quiet diplomacy (Rogers, 2022)	Returns-maximizing and risk-contingency approach; Economic pragmatism and soft-balancing; Displaying neutrality through dance; Use of aesthetics to convey a desire for peace
Indonesia	*Intermestic* (Huijgh, 2017) Million friends and zero enemy (Amurwanti et al., 2021; Inkriwang, 2021) Independent and active (Arif, 2021; Laksamana, 2011) Revolutionary diplomacy (Cohen, 2019);	Building and projecting the identity of a democratic, modern, moderate Muslim-majority country; Emphasizes on positive and cooperative relations with all countries; Does not align itself with any major global powers; push for sovereignty
Laos	Autonomous diplomacy (Sayalath, 2015) Balanced diplomacy (Kishino, 2017)	Conduct and display its position as an autonomous country; Flexibility and balance towards many different countries
Malaysia	Dualistic forward diplomacy (Kuik et al., 2022) Light Hedging (Lai and Kuik, 2020) Diplomatic neutrality (Farzana and Haq, 2019) Cautious Hedging (Abuza, 2020)	Economic pragmatism and regional activism pursued hand-in-hand with strategic prudence; non-confrontational, quiet and low-profile approach; showing flexibility and accommodation towards powerful countries while also selectively asserting its own interests

Myanmar	Pendulum of non-alignment (Passeri and Marston, 2022) Myanmar's strategic culture (Shang, 2021) Balanced diplomacy (Fan and Zou, 2019)	Asserting independence and preserving autonomy; Not tolerating foreign interferences, pursue on self-reliance, and independent; maintain balance and harmony
Philippines	Emotional diplomacy (Enverga and Abalos, 2022) Diplomacy of dependency (Dingman, 1986) Balancing game (De Castro, 2007, 2010, 2016)	Using emotional expressions to pursue foreign policy objectives; Demonstrate an independent but loyal actions; Managing relationships with multiple countries or groups to advance national interests
Singapore	Gastrodiplomacy (Lee and Kim, 2020) Golf diplomacy and sport diplomacy (Chan and Brooke, 2019; Houlihan, 2014) Museum diplomacy (Cai, 2013) Equidistant diplomacy (Teo and Koga, 2021)	Promote a robust and favourable image of the country through its food; Establish stronger ties between countries (leaders) in a more casual setting; generate the image of political neutrality
Thailand	Dance Diplomacy (Kencana, 2022) Bamboo Diplomacy (Ashley and Shipper, 2022) Flexible Diplomacy (Suhrki, 1971) Omnidirectional (Cheow, 1986)	Projecting positive national image and promote cross-cultural understanding; flexible and adaptive approach; self-reliance, pragmatic and flexible
Vietnam	Vietnam's hedging (Tran and Sato, 2018) Cooperation and struggle (Thayer, 2016) Multi-polar balance (Ha, 2018)	Combination of diplomatic engagement, economic engagement, hard balancing, and soft balancing; engage in collaborative efforts where mutual interests align while minimizing risks that threaten its national interests; Maintain strategic autonomy and non-alignment

Many other terms also reflect principles of neutrality, flexibility, and autonomy, such as "non-alignment" (Passeri and Marston, 2022), "diplomatic neutrality" (Farzana and Haq, 2019), "balanced diplomacy" (Fan and Zou, 2019; Kishino, 2017), "balancing game" (De Castro, 2007, 2010, 2016), and "bamboo diplomacy" (Ashley and Shipper, 2022).

Three Types of Diplomacy Strategies

Power Through Ideas: Persuasion Strategies

Power through ideas, or persuasion strategies, refers to diplomacy strategies that aim to influence other actors through attractive and appealing arguments and/or sentiments. We identified two types of persuasion strategies: narrating neutrality and non-criticism; portraying warm sentiments (see, Table 3).

Table 3. Persuasion strategies of SEA countries

Strategies	Description
Narrating neutrality and non-criticism	Not taking sides or criticizing the domestic issues of other countries to maintain good relationships
Portraying warm sentiments	Creating and nurturing a positive atmosphere to foster friendliness and cooperation, contributing to a favourable image

The first type of persuasion strategy includes notable examples from Thailand to Vietnam, illustrating their attempts to narrating neutrality and non-criticism. During the Cold War, the world seemed split between two major opposing ideologies. While publicly appearing more aligned with the United States (US), both Thailand and the Philippines conducted 'quiet' diplomatic missions to build relations with communist countries (Punyaratabandhu and Swaspitchayaskun, 2020; Scalice, 2021). In the Philippines, this strategy even included collaboration with the national Communist Party—typically viewed as an political opponent—to help establish ties with the Soviet Union. This approach enabled both the Philippines and Thailand to extend their national interests by persuasively conveying that they were not strictly bound to a single ideology, thereby projecting their stance of 'neutrality'.

In more contemporary settings, Thailand and Myanmar participate in both Chinese-led and US-led Mekong Partnership initiatives (Doung et al., 2022; Ashley and Shipper, 2022). Although sometimes with opposing political interests, both countries attempt to leverage these relationships to maximize political and economic benefits, persuasively positioning themselves as 'neutral' and avoiding reliance on any single superpower. In another example, Teo and Koga (2021) conceptualize "equidistant diplomacy" by examining Singapore's approach, defining it as a strategy aimed at direct signaling a neutral image to target states.

Related to maintaining neutrality, a non-critical stance toward other nations is also a key component of this strategy. For instance, Vietnam remains "cautious and delicate in the context of rising rhetoric disadvantageous to China," particularly regarding the origins of COVID-19 (Dinh Tinh and

Thu Ngan, 2021, p. 318). Similarly, Malaysia has refrained from criticizing China's treatment of Uyghurs, with a minister describing alleged detention camps as training facilities (Abuza, 2020), contrasting with Malaysia's vocal stance on Muslim issues elsewhere (Abuza, 2020; Kuik et al., 2022). Likewise, Indonesia avoids sanctioning Myanmar over the discrimination and persecution of the Rohingya, a Muslim minority group in Myanmar, opting instead for a persuasive, problem-solving approach as part of its "good neighbor foreign policy" (Rosyidin and Dir, 2021).

The second type of persuasion strategy includes several examples illustrating SEA countries' consistent efforts to convey warm sentiments. In Singapore, "golf diplomacy" played a key role when Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong strategically used a round of golf with the US president to strengthen bilateral relations (Chan and Brooke, 2019). Other informal activities, such as dinners and dances, also play an essential role in Thailand's and the Philippines' strategies to persuasively strengthen ties with their respective target states (Kotlowski, 2016; Tungkeunkunt and Phuphakdi, 2018). Portraying warm sentiments also appears through 'friendly' narratives. For example, both Thailand and Myanmar use terms that fosters a sense of closeness with China. Thailand emphasizes a "brotherly" relationship with China (Tungkeunkunt and Phuphakdi, 2018), while Myanmar highlights its bond through the *Pauk-Phaw* (kinship) narrative (Myoe, 2016). Another example of narratives used to persuasively foster friendliness is seen in Vietnam's focus on building extensive friendships and becoming more open and market-oriented. This shift aligns with the *Doi Moi* (Renovation) reform policies, which opened the country to a broad range of international partners (Yeong, 1992; Tinh and Long, 2021).

Power Over Ideas: Confrontation Strategies

Power over ideas, or confrontation strategies, refer to diplomacy strategies that involve assertive actions to control and hold onto one's own ideas while disregarding or shaming the ideas of others. We identified two types of confrontation strategies: dismissing and downplaying; historical shaming (see, Table 4).

Table 4. Confrontation Strategies of SEA countries

Strategies	Description
Dismissing and downplaying	Discrediting the credibility or refuses to acknowledge or consider others' ideas
Historical shaming	Condemns and/or publicly calls out the historical actions or behaviour of others.

The first type of confrontational strategy is illustrated by cases in the Philippines, Laos, and Cambodia. Each of these countries appears "confrontational", yet this approach is a strategic component of their diplomacy, aimed at leveraging their positions and projecting greater autonomy. In the Philippines, this involved playing the "Russian card", signaling to their close partner, the US, that the Philippines had alternative political-economic alignment options with the Soviet Union if

its demands were not met (Beltran, 1988). In Laos's case, the country sought to assert its sovereignty and avoid the perception of being subordinate to Vietnam. When Vietnam's Vice Foreign Minister requested a meeting to discuss Laos' cooperation with the US, Laos responded by assigning a lower-ranking official, subtly yet confrontationally, signaling its intent to act independently in foreign affairs (Sayalath, 2015). In another example of downplaying criticism, Cambodia proceeded with China's dam-building projects in the Mekong River basin, despite criticism from neighboring countries like Thailand (Doung et al., 2022).

The second type of confrontational strategy is notably illustrated by the case of the Philippines (Enverga and Abalos, 2022; Kotlowski, 2016). During the 2017 State of the Nation Address, President Duterte demanded the return of the *Balangiga bells*, emphasizing their importance to Philippine history and framing their seizure by the US as an unjust act of colonial aggression. This approach increased pressure on the US by highlighting the colonial context. First Lady Imelda Marcos further reinforced this tactic, using rhetoric that invoked national pride and defiance in her dealings with the US. She referred to Indonesia as the "Dutch baby" and the Philippines as the "American baby," drawing on historical analogies to emphasize the Philippines' mistreatment by colonial powers. Her statement, "be good to your children," subtly warned the US to acknowledge and be ashamed of past injustices, suggesting that addressing these wrongs was necessary for maintaining a positive relationship with the Philippines.

Power In Ideas: Hegemonisation Strategies

Power in ideas, or hegemonisation strategies, is referring to diplomacy strategies to structure thought and embed certain ideas to be accepted through background ideational processes. We identified two types of hegemonisation strategies: leveraging on relationships with powerful countries or organizations; attaching interest through regional organizations (see, Table 5).

Table 5. Hegemonisation strategies of SEA countries

Strategies	Description
Leveraging relationships with powerful countries or organizations	Strategic use of relationships with more powerful countries or organizations to gain political and diplomatic backing
Attaching interest through regional organizations	Indirectly promoting national interests by embedding them within the activities of regional organizations

The first type of hegemonization strategy is illustrated by instances where SEA countries face threats or situations they perceive as unmanageable alone. In the case of the South China Sea, for example, the Philippines sought to avoid directly confronting China and quietly sought support from the US instead (De Castro, 2016). In another case, Thailand responded to perceived threats from Vietnam by rebuilding military and political alliances with both the US and China. By securing support from two major powers, Thailand mitigated risks and projected an

image of strength and strategic importance. Additionally, hegemonisation also can be achieved through strategic use of multilateral organization (Dent, 2002; Ha and Le, 2021; Pietrasiak and Pieczara, 2019). For instance, the World Trade Organization (WTO) has allowed countries like Singapore to advance their economic interests. The Ministry of Trade and Industry emphasized this by stating, "Singapore places the highest priority in the multilateral trading system" (Dent, 2002, p. 153). Similarly, the Philippines has actively engaged in coalition-building efforts within the WTO, collaborating with groups like the G20 and G33, thereby enhancing its bargaining power on the global stage (Tadem, 2015; Quinsaat, 2012).

An example of the second type of hegemonization strategy can be seen in Brunei Darussalam's role as the host of the ASEAN Regional Forum in 1995. Brunei leveraged this opportunity to enhance its diplomatic presence and advocate for faster ASEAN free trade, ultimately benefiting the country itself (Case, 1996). Similarly, Cambodia strategically used its position as ASEAN Chair to engage with Myanmar, despite criticism from other countries over Myanmar's military junta rule. Cambodia deflected this criticism by citing "ASEAN diplomatic principles" (Bennett, 2021; Bunthorn, 2022). When Laos' position was questioned, it justified its actions with the narrative of "ASEAN shield" or "we go along with ASEAN" (Kishino, 2017, p. 99). Southeast Asian countries also actively engaged in ASEAN's multilateral processes, particularly in dealing with China. For example, Malaysia collaborated with other ASEAN members to develop a Code of Conduct (COC) for managing conflicts in disputed waters, thus avoiding direct confrontation with China (Kuik, 2013; Lai and Kuik, 2020). Similarly, Thailand employed strategic manoeuvring through ASEAN in its negotiations with China, aiming for a win-win outcome in the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Punyaratabandhu and Swaspitchayaskun, 2020). By engaging with ASEAN, Southeast Asian countries advanced their diplomatic agendas, navigated regional challenges, and maximized their influence on the global stage (literature examples: Case, 1996; Kuik, 2013; Vu Thi, 2022).

Key Factors that Shaped Diplomacy Strategies

Diplomacy strategies are situated within and influenced by a complex interplay of various factors. In this paper, we identify the key factors that shape the diplomatic strategies of SEA countries by distinguishing between domestic and foreign influences:

Table 6. Key influential factors that shaped SEA diplomacy strategies

Categories	Key Influential Factors
Domestic factors	• Domestic leaders • Cultural and religious identity • War and Colonial Legacies
Foreign factors	• International pressure and issues • ASEAN and the 'ASEAN Way'

Domestic Factors

Domestic Leaders

The reviewed articles show that SEA countries place a high value on leaders. In Thailand, Cambodia and Malaysia, this is rooted in monarchies that have existed for over a hundred years, where individual rulers (*devarajas*, raja or sultan) made critical inter-state decisions and were even often perceived as representations of 'God' on earth (Milner, 2019; Rattanasengchanh, 2016). These significant roles of individual leaders are still evident in contemporary practices. For example, in Malaysia, the enhanced bilateral relations between Malaysia and Syria were largely driven by Prime Minister Mahathir's personal relationship with Syrian President Al-Assad (Anthony et al., 2019). In Philippines, the assertive stance of the Philippines' President Duterte towards the US was influenced by his personal growing friendly relations with China (Enverga and Abalos, 2022), to some extent, reflecting what Tadem (2015) describes as "the monopoly of the executive" (p. 17). The personal relationships of leaders shape diplomatic stances and strategies, determining with whom and how closely they align (Thaiprayoon and Smith, 2014).

Similarly, Myanmar drastically shifted from an active to a passive foreign policy under Thein Sein's government (Chan, 2017; Myoe, 2017; Passeri and Marston, 2022). In the case of Indonesia, the country's diplomatic approach saw a notable shift between the administrations of President Yudhoyono and President Jokowi, which transitioned from an active and friendly engagement in international affairs under Yudhoyono to a more passive and pragmatic stance under Jokowi (Arif, 2021; Darwis and Putra, 2022). As noted by Agastia (2021, p. 318), Jokowi's "pragmatic, business-like approach" determines Indonesia's diplomatic approach. A final observation from our close reading of the reviewed literature is that the strategies of SEA leaders are often linked to regime survival. Fan and Zou (2019) describe this as 'the art of survival' in Myanmar, while Lim (2009) speaks of 'survival instinct' in his study on Singapore. In the case of Singapore, Tan (2015) noted that this kind of survival instinct has even created an impression of Singapore as "egoistical, conceited, and cares little for its neighbors" (p. 350). Leadership in this context then is about making calculated decisions that ensure the regime's continuity by balancing economic gains with political stability, highlighting the importance of being both pragmatic and adaptive (literature examples: Bennet, 2021; Ngeow and Jamil, 2022; Lim, 2009; Resos, 2014).

Cultural and Religious Identity

SEA covers an enormous variety of cultural and religious identities. In Indonesia, cultural identity rooted in Javanese traditions significantly influences actions and behaviors, including those related to international relations (Wardaya, 2012). We also observed frequent references to the broad concept of "cultural identity" as well as "national identity" as a factor shaping SEA countries' diplomatic strategies. Examples include Cambodia's dance diplomacy to Singapore's gastrodiplomacy both of which capitalize

on cultural identity to shape how diplomacy is operated and narrated to target states or institutions (literature examples: Espena, 2022; Lee and Kim, 2020).

Articles on SEA diplomacy also frequently reference two major religions: Islam and Buddhism. In the case of Islam, this religious identity eventually shapes how countries maintain their diplomatic relations. For Malaysia, the narrative of the *Ummah* (global Muslim community) frequently appears, reflecting its tendency to foster ties with other Islam majority countries such as Pakistan and Turkey. Similarly, Indonesia emphasizes its Muslim identity in managing relationships with the Middle East. As Huijgh (2017) observes, "For Indonesia, pitching an appropriate narrative to Muslim nations in the Middle East is important" (p. 772). In the case of Buddhism, Myanmar's neutrality is strongly influenced by the Buddhist principle that "the middle path is the best and the only way to the truth" (Shang, 2021, p. 94). Additionally, concepts such as *metta* (loving-kindness) and *upekkha* (equanimity) have shaped the foundations of Myanmar's diplomacy (Passeri and Marston, 2022). Similarly, Cambodia's diplomatic openness draws inspiration from the Buddhist principle of giving without expecting anything in return (Szatkowski, 2017).

War and Colonial Legacies

All SEA countries have experienced the profound impacts of colonialism and the Cold War. One of the most apparent effects of these experiences has been their influence on the diplomacy strategies, particularly on their adoption of 'neutrality' and 'non-alignment' (literature examples: Farzana and Haq, 2019; Shang, 2021; Fan and Zou, 2019). This reflects, to some extent, a historical understanding of the devastating consequences of external domination and geopolitical conflicts. As Shang (2021) notes, "This [colonial] historical event gave birth to the fear of great-power intervention" (p. 99). Even for Thailand, which did not directly experience colonialism, still affected by this historical legacies and of feeling "being a vulnerable state in an international environment dominated by colonial and great powers" (Raymond, 2020, p. 43).

Shang (2021) also highlights how colonial legacies shaped Myanmar's foreign policy to be 'active and independent,' a principle similar to Indonesia's *bebas aktif* (independent and active) stance and shared by Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam (literature examples: Doung et al., 2022; Leng, 2016; Myoe, 2016). The Bandung Conference is also occasionally referenced to explain why several SEA countries have developed 'neutrality' or relatively unique approaches to diplomacy (literature examples: Espena, 2022; Shimazu, 2013; Wardaya, 2012). For instance, Espena (2022, p. 497) highlights how "…neutrality was solidified at the 1955 Bandung Conference, where Cambodia committed to following a 'Third Way' amidst the apparent bipolarity of the Cold War". These war and colonial legacies not only shaped their diplomacy strategies, but also influence how they frame their roles and relationships in the international relations.

Foreign Factors

International Pressures

SEA countries exhibit a high sensitivity to international pressures, particularly when these pressures are perceived as 'sovereignty' threats involving major global powers, such as the US and China. Various articles have explored this dynamic, with a significant focus on the South China Sea (SCS) dispute and its implications for regional security and territorial sovereignty (literature examples: De Castro, 2016; Thang and Thao, 2012; Thayer, 2016). For instance, in the case of the Philippines, De Castro (2016) highlighted that the country's international outlook is heavily influenced by its contentious relationship with China over territorial claims in the SCS. Similarly, Vietnam's active security leadership within ASEAN is argued to be driven by its strategic imperative to protect its national interests in the SCS (Emmers and Le Thu, 2020). Lai and Kuik (2020) noted that "(global) power dynamics shape threat perceptions" (p. 3), which, in Malaysia's case, clearly shaped its strategy of hedging in the South China Sea dispute.

Another example involving the US is Thailand's shift in its diplomatic stance closer to China (Hewison, 2017), which was noted as "a way to punish the United States for its condemnation of the coup" (p. 5) against Thailand's elected government in 2014. As to Cambodia, the perceived threat came from the European Union (EU) after criticizing Cambodia's human rights situation, leading Cambodia to move away from the West and strengthen its relationship with China (Bennett, 2021). Bunthorn (2022) noted that, "Western pressure in any form has never been a pleasure" (p. 127), to the extent that Prime Minister Hun Sen tended to interpret it as a direct threat to the survival of his regime. Putting it all together, these examples illustrate how international pressures drive states to adapt and shape or reshape their diplomacy strategies to safeguard sovereignty, maintain stability, and navigate the complexities of geopolitics.

ASEAN and the 'ASEAN Way'

Reviewed articles highlight ASEAN as a crucial diplomatic component for many SEA countries. Initially established to unite countries grappling with the influence of communism in the region (Nair, 2022), ASEAN has since evolved into a collective platform enabling all SEA countries to navigate the complexities of global politics. Articles we reviewed also highlighted its contributions to regional economic integration and market stability, which enhance the global competitiveness of SEA economies (literature examples: Case, 1995; Cheow, 1986; Emmers and Le Thu, 2021). ASEAN is especially beneficial for smaller or middle-power countries. For instance, ASEAN amplifies Brunei's voice within larger international trade blocs (Case, 1996). For Vietnam, ASEAN has served as a "tool that facilitates Vietnam taking on the typical roles of a middle power" (Dinh Tinh and Thu Ngan, 2021, p. 309) and has even become the bridge to larger economic forums, such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) (Dutta, 1995). Myanmar's active participation in ASEAN also both shapes

and facilitates its engagement in regional diplomacy. Passeri and Marston (2022) argue that Myanmar's involvement in ASEAN signals its openness to international markets and willingness to take part in regional decision-making.

Meanwhile, the 'ASEAN Way,' or 'ASEAN Spirit,' as a set of norms among ASEAN countries, has apparently shaped their strategies to prioritizing non-interference and peaceful resolutions in diplomacy (literature examples; Gindarsah, 2016; Rosyidin and Dir, 2021; Smith and Williams, 2021). For example, in addressing the Rohingya crisis, Indonesia adhered to the 'ASEAN Way' by advocating for dialogue rather than punitive measures. Smith and Williams (2021) note that this framework has encouraged Indonesia to maintain consistent cooperation with Myanmar, emphasizing their shared bond as part of the "ASEAN family". In another example, this norm has been instrumental in diffusing regional tensions, such as easing disputes between Singapore and Indonesia following the execution of Indonesian soldiers during the military confrontation of 1963–1965 (Chong, 2010).

Discussion and Conclusion

After systematically reviewing on diplomacy straegies of SEA countries, the following observations can be made: First, SEA countries have consistently aimed to position themselves, or at least project their position, as 'neutral' and occupying the 'middle ground'. In other words, it is not about choosing sides between the 'West' or 'East', but rather making the most of opportunities from both. Our reviewed articles underscore how SEA countries navigate strategically, moving beyond binary macro-narratives and crafting their own paths. This is not about adhering to a single diplomatic path, but rather embracing a multidirectional route, mobilizing different types of ideational power.

Both the middle ground positioning and specific ways of using ideational power reflect the spirit of the Bandung Declaration of 1955: the persuasion strategy of non-criticism and narrating neutrality echoes the principle of respect for territitorial integrity; the confrontation strategy of historical shaming mimics the very clear opposition of the Bandung Declaration against colonialism; the hegemonisation strategy of promoting regional organisation and the ASEAN Way reflect the principle of mutual cooperation and developing a 'Third Way'. In other words, the Bandung Declaration has very much shaped diplomacy strategies of SEA countries.

The legacies of the Bandung Conference, however, have also been 'reshaped' over time by significant political and dramatic changes at both national and regional levels. For instance, the reviewed articles highlight the importance of ASEAN and its 'ASEAN Way,' which, while echoing the spirit of peaceful coexistence and non-interference from the conference, grounded in a different framework. ASEAN is primarily grounded in a pragmatic political and economic agenda and often appears detached from fundamental concerns such as human

rights and anti-imperial politics, which were central to the conference. Yet, the reviewed articles still also highlight the enduring 'normative' legacies of the conference, particularly in how terms like "independent and active" and "non-alignment" continue to appear and influence SEA countries' diplomacy strategies. This includes other terms or connotations uniquely expressed through metaphors, such as "million friends and zero enemies", "*mendayung antara dua karang*" (rowing between two reefs), "equidistant", to simply "balanced", which remain central to the diplomatic strategies of SEA countries.

Second, SEA countries often show a strong preference for informal strategies. From dancing to dinner, these activities are integral to many SEA countries diplomatic activities. We argue that this preference is driven not only by the desire to alleviate tensions from asymmetrical power relations but also by a deep-seated identity shaped by a history of oppression and repression during colonial rule (Wright, 1995; Rodney, 1972). Now, with greater agency, SEA countries can openly assert and exercise their identity. Free from rigid formalities and conventional protocols, they have the opportunity to present themselves on their own terms. This also demonstrates that SEA countries now stand on equal footing with all other nations. They can even take the initiative to actively invite these countries, including those from the West, into informal spaces where their once-repressed identities can now be openly celebrated and shared. Through these interactions, they not only challenge entrenched power hierarchies but also create more spaces and opportunities for mutual understanding and recognition. Furthermore, this highlights that diplomacy strategies in SEA countries are not solely about 'winning the game' or 'agenda setting,' but rather about 'shifting the frame' and 'atmosphere setting'. Evidence also suggests that diplomacy in SEA countries often deviates from the linear and formal approaches typically associated with Western diplomacy, as noted by Meerts (2015, p. 33). Instead, it encompasses a variety of strategies and directions, with additional layers of expression and nuance. Many of these strategies are informal and involve a circular process, often without the intention of achieving a definitive conclusion. This approach stands in contrast to the more straightforward and goal-oriented practices commonly observed in Western diplomacy. By embracing flexibility and creativity, SEA countries demonstrate a distinctive and adaptive diplomatic style, reflective of their unique identities and historical experiences.

Third, reflecting on the theoretical aspect, all forms of ideational power are utilized in various ways, leading to diverse diplomacy strategies in SEA countries. These strategies, shaped by both domestic and foreign factors, are deeply interconnected, as illustrated in Figure 5. Our bottom-line argument is that understanding diplomacy, especially in SEA and the Global South, requires moving beyond surface-level interpretations to dive deeper into the underlying 'ideas' and grasp the bigger picture. These ideas and broader frameworks are essential for understanding not just the diplomacy strategies, but

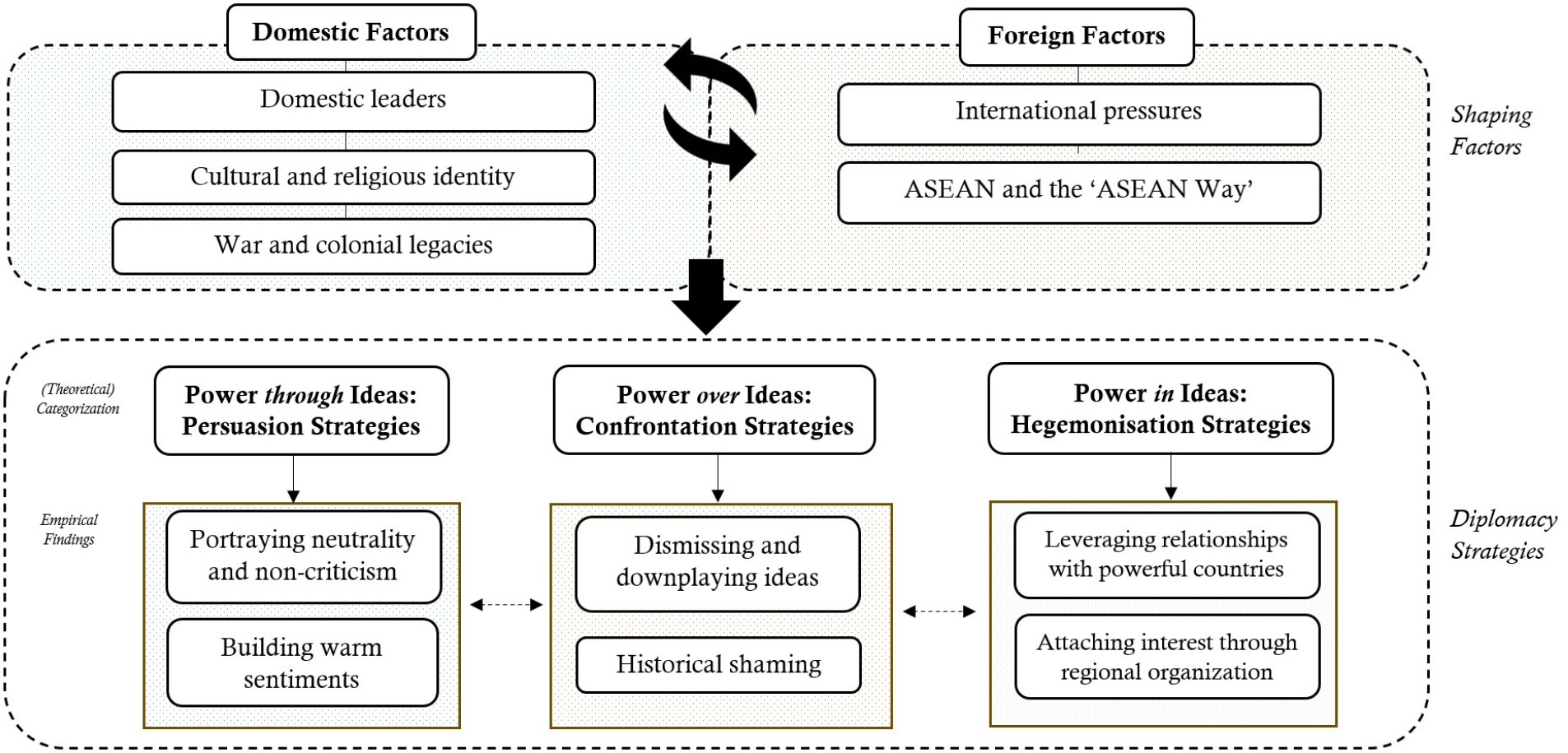
also how they reclaim agency, challenge hegemonic narratives, and advocate for alternative worldviews that reflect their unique histories, cultures, and priorities. However, the dynamic nature of these ideas raises practical concerns about the concept of ideational power itself. Ideational power does not adequately account for non-verbal symbols and communication, which are particularly important for SEA countries. For example, during "dance diplomacy", dancers persuasively conveyed messages without speaking a single word or engaging in direct argumentation. This highlights the vital role non-verbal expressions play in influence other people's beliefs, yet such expressions remain largely underexplored.

We recognize two main limitations of our paper: First, our analysis was limited to a SLR of articles published in peer-reviewed journals in the English language, based on a specific query and set of search terms, and sourced from only *Scopus* and *Web of Science*. Second, this paper provides only a general overview of the diplomatic strategies of SEA countries, without examining in detail their specific perspectives, strategic approaches, trajectories, or changes over time.

Given these limitations, we suggest two directions for future studies: First, future studies should adopt a more integrated approach and engage with literature published in local languages and in journals based at the local or regional level. This includes engaging with documents and publications that offer insights into both the Bandung Conference and SEA diplomacy beyond a purely academic scope. Second, more in-depth analyses incorporating firsthand insights from both state and non-state actors in individual SEA countries are needed. Such studies should explore the diplomacy of each country by examining not only the role of ideas but also the interplay between domestic and international factors shaping their strategies. The concept of ideational power also should be complemented with approaches that could capture and engage with circularity and informality of diplomacy, especially at deeper agency level, such as practice theory (Pouliot and Cornut, 2015).

Last, to conclude the paper, we advocate for the decolonization of the field of diplomacy, and, more broadly, IR. This involves not only addressing the lingering influence of Western-centric biases, but also acts to counter the predominant reliance on and frequent idealizing of Western colonial orders and structures. This includes calls for rediscovering and actively incorporating the perspectives and influences of the Bandung Conference, and more importantly, indigenous approach on diplomacy and international relations that have been systematically suppressed and erased. We argue that this approach is essential as contributing toward reversing the 'imaginative geographies' of the West (Said, 1979), ultimately paving the way to transform and redefine both the fundamental approaches to and our understanding of diplomacy and IR.

Figure 5. Framework and overview of the results



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Appendix

Appendix 1. Search strings

(Country)	**AND**	(Activity)
"Southeast Asia" OR "South East Asia" OR "South-East Asia" OR "Southeastern Asia" OR "Brunei" OR "Brunei Darussalam" OR "Cambodia" OR "Kingdom of Cambodia" OR "Indonesia" OR "Republic of Indonesia" OR "Laos" OR "Lao People's Democratic Republic" OR "Malaysia" OR "Myanmar" OR "Burma" OR "Republic of the Union of Myanmar" OR "Philippines" OR "Republic of the Philippines" OR "Singapore" OR "Republic of Singapore" OR "Thailand" OR "Kingdom of Thailand" OR "Vietnam" OR "Viet Nam" OR "Socialist Republic of Vietnam"		"diplomacy" OR "diplomatic" OR "diplomacies" OR "diplomacy strateg*" OR "diplomatic strateg*" OR "diplomacy style*" OR "diplomatic style*" OR "diplomacy technique*" OR "diplomatic technique*" OR "diplomacy approach" OR "diplomatic approach*" OR "negotiate" OR "negotiation*" OR "negotiating" OR "negotiation process*" OR "negotiation strateg*" OR "negotiation style*" OR "negotiation technique*" OR "negotiation method*" OR "negotiation approach*"