Reassessing ASEAN Regional Governance in Transnational Narcotics Control through Liberal Institutionalism

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Abstrak

Narcotics circulation and abuse in Southeast Asia have escalated into a transnational threat with significant implications for political stability, public security, and socio-economic development across ASEAN. Rising methamphetamine production in the Golden Triangle and the expansion of cross-border trafficking networks have reinforced the urgency of ASEAN's collective response through the Drug-Free ASEAN 2025 agenda. This study aimed to assess the effectiveness of cooperation among Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam in implementing this agenda, using Robert O. Keohane's Liberal Institutionalism to explain how cooperation can persist in the absence of hegemonic enforcement. The study employed a qualitative descriptive approach based on a structured literature review of 25 scholarly journal articles, ASEAN policy reports, and secondary documents from UNODC and Indonesia's National Narcotics Agency (BNN). The findings showed that ASEAN cooperation generated meaningful institutional and diplomatic progress, particularly through mechanisms such as ASOD, AMMTC, and ASEANAPOL that facilitated coordination, information exchange, and operational networking. However, substantive effectiveness in suppressing trafficking remained constrained by legal-system divergence, uneven national capacity, inconsistent transparency, and weak joint evaluation and monitoring arrangements. The study concluded that ASEAN's anti-narcotics cooperation operated

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as a form of non-hegemonic institutional governance sustained by trust, reciprocity, and normative compliance, yet required stronger implementation linkages to achieve measurable impact. The study contributed theoretically by extending Liberal Institutionalism to ASEAN's non-traditional security governance and practically by recommending strengthened data integration, peer performance review, legal harmonization, and technology-oriented responses to emerging digital trafficking.

Introduction

The trafficking and abuse of narcotics in Southeast Asia have intensified into a transnational problem that threatens ASEAN member states' political stability, human security, and socio-economic development. Over the past two decades, the region has become not only a major consumer market but also a global production and distribution hub, particularly in and around the Golden Triangle border areas of Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar (Fathurahman et al. 2025, 119). This challenge is inherently complex because it involves adaptive transnational criminal networks, uneven national legal systems, and persistent weaknesses in regional coordination for law enforcement and social control. In response, ASEAN has articulated a collective commitment through the Drug-Free ASEAN 2025 vision, which seeks to promote a drug-free region by strengthening political, legal, and social synergies among governments.

Within this regional agenda, Indonesia occupies a strategic position. Its geography, which is situated near major producing, transit, and destination routes, including connections with Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam, places Indonesia not only as a primary affected state but also as a pivotal actor in regional counter-narcotics efforts. The National Narcotics Agency (BNN) reported in 2024 that approximately 70 percent of narcotics cases in Indonesia are linked to cross-border networks, indicating how narcotics crime has evolved into a non-traditional security threat in which risks no

longer originate solely from military forces but also from transnational criminal activities that bypass national jurisdictions (Antuli et al. 2023, 12). This transformation makes regional cooperation not optional but necessary, because unilateral enforcement is structurally limited when criminal operations and supply chains are cross-border by design.

ASEAN has developed multiple institutional channels to enable such cooperation, including the ASEAN Senior Officials on Drug Matters (ASOD), the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime (AMMTC), and ASEANAPOL (Hermansah 2022, 75). These frameworks have supported consultative forums and, in some cases, data-sharing arrangements intended to build mutual trust and operational coordination. Yet, their effectiveness remains debated. While ASEAN's mechanisms can facilitate dialogue and cooperation, disparities in legal capacity, national policy approaches, and competing interests often constrain the implementation of joint programs and sustained enforcement collaboration (Kinanthi et al. 2023, 365). The central empirical puzzle, therefore, is not whether cooperation exists on paper, but whether and how it changes member states' behaviour and outcomes in combating cross-border trafficking.

Existing studies illuminate key obstacles, but also reveal important limitations in how ASEAN's institutional role is assessed. At the border level, Prayuda (2020, 40) shows that narcotics smuggling in the Indonesia–Malaysia border area relies on collaboration between domestic syndicates and cross-border actors who exploit weak surveillance and enforcement capacity. Yusup (2022, 279) similarly identifies growing collaboration between Thai and Indonesian criminal networks, signalling a shift from localized transactions to more organized transnational configurations. Suhartanto (2023, 297) further argues that border enforcement remains constrained by limited policy integration among law-enforcement agencies and security institutions. Complementing these findings, Ahmad (2024) emphasizes the enabling role of international organizations such as UNODC in training, information exchange, and technical assistance, while Sulastri (2024, 107) notes that bilateral cooperation, such as Indonesia–Philippines collaboration, often succeeds at a formal level yet falls short in practice because it is not matched by legal integration and consistent evaluation mechanisms. Taken together, this literature underscores a

recurring theme: political commitment to cooperate may be present, but institutional capacity, legal compatibility, and monitoring mechanisms frequently lag behind.

However, the state of the art also suggests that much of the research remains anchored in descriptive policy analysis or security framing, without systematically theorizing how ASEAN institutions function as cooperation mechanisms in a non-hegemonic regional order. Fathurahman et al (2025, 120), for example, examines ASEAN's role in countering narcotics distribution linked to the Golden Triangle but does not develop a theoretical account of institutional effectiveness. Paujiah et al. (2025, 455) analyse Indonesia–Vietnam cooperation from a bilateral perspective, yet do not assess ASEAN's institutional framework as a regional coordination platform. As a result, a research gap persists: we still lack a theoretically grounded explanation of the conditions under which ASEAN's institutions translate consultation and coordination into effective, sustained cooperation, especially when no single state can impose compliance and when members vary widely in legal systems and enforcement capacities.

Against this background, the research problem of this study is the persistent mismatch between ASEAN's institutional commitment to the Drug-Free ASEAN 2025 vision and the continued resilience of transnational narcotics networks, particularly among key countries that serve as transit, market, or operational nodes. Accordingly, this study asks: To what extent can the effectiveness of cooperation among Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam under the Drug-Free ASEAN 2025 framework be explained through Keohane's Liberal Institutionalist perspective? This central question is elaborated through three guiding inquiries: (1) How do ASEAN institutions facilitate policy coordination on narcotics at the regional level? (2) What obstacles most consistently prevent optimal cooperation? and (3) How do disparities in national capacity shape ASEAN's institutional effectiveness in a non-hegemonic cooperation setting?

To address this gap, this study employs Robert O. Keohane's Liberal Institutionalism as its analytical framework (Keohane 1984, 92). Keohane argues that cooperation can emerge and endure even without hegemonic leadership when institutions reduce uncertainty, facilitate information-sharing, enable transparency, and promote reciprocity. In ASEAN, this logic is particularly relevant because the organization operates through the ASEAN Way (non-interference, consensus, and informal diplomacy) rather

than coercive enforcement. Liberal institutionalism further highlights three conditions that shape cooperation outcomes: stable institutions that facilitate communication, transparency mechanisms that reduce suspicion, and compliance incentives reinforced by reputation and trust (Keohane 1984, 96). In principle, ASEAN bodies such as ASOD and ASEANAPOL embody these functions by enabling coordination, sharing criminal data, and building trust networks among enforcement agencies.

At the same time, institutional effectiveness cannot be inferred solely from the existence of forums, agreements, or meetings. Differences in national legal structures and human-resource capacity can create implementation gaps even when political commitments are formally articulated (Marsoes and Shiddiqy 2025, 511). Katim (2024, 6) similarly shows that law enforcement involving Indonesian citizens abroad may face judicial obstacles due to the absence of harmonized legal systems across ASEAN member states. These insights indicate that assessing ASEAN cooperation requires attention to both institutional design and the uneven national capacities that condition how cooperation is enacted on the ground.

This framework fits ASEAN because the organization operates without strong enforcement mechanisms and relies on the ASEAN Way (consensus, consultation, and non-interference) making trust, reputation, and information exchange central to cooperation. Applied to ASEAN's anti-narcotics agenda (including Drug-Free ASEAN 2025), Liberal Institutionalism helps explain how platforms like ASOD, AMMTC, and related mechanisms can facilitate coordination against transnational trafficking networks that exploit legal and jurisdictional gaps. It also provides criteria to assess "effectiveness" beyond the existence of meetings or agreements focusing instead on whether institutions actually improve transparency, sustain reciprocity, manage divergent national interests, and build compliance through reputational pressures, especially amid uneven capacities and political-legal differences among member states.

The objective of the study is therefore to evaluate the practical effectiveness of cooperation among the four countries within the Drug-Free ASEAN 2025 framework and to explain the observed outcomes using the causal logic of liberal institutionalism, especially the roles of information-sharing, transparency, reciprocity, and trust. By integrating Keohane's institutionalist assumptions with Southeast Asia's context of complex interdependence (Keohane and Nye 1989), the study expects to

show not only why cooperation persists despite differences, but also why it may fall short when institutional mechanisms are not matched by legal compatibility and implementation capacity.

This study contributes in two ways. Theoretically, it extends the application of Liberal Institutionalism to non-traditional security analysis in Southeast Asia by using the narcotics issue as a lens to assess institutional effectiveness under non-hegemonic regional governance. Practically, it offers policy-relevant recommendations for ASEAN and member states, including strengthening coordination mechanisms, improving data transparency, and institutionalizing joint evaluation systems to better align commitments with measurable outcomes. By synthesizing and re-interpreting empirical insights from Prayuda (2020, 42), Sulastri (2024, 110), and Fathurahman et al. (2025, 124) through an explicit theoretical framework, this research moves beyond cataloguing cooperation instruments and instead examines how trust and reciprocity function as determinants of sustainable collaboration in ASEAN's counter-narcotics governance.

The urgency of this inquiry lies in whether the Drug-Free ASEAN 2025 vision remains realistic under contemporary conditions. The ASEAN Narcotics Situation Outlook (reported as of 2024) indicates that narcotics-related arrests have increased in several countries, including Indonesia and Vietnam, despite intensified regional coordination (Paujiah et al. 2025, 460). This trend suggests that institutional cooperation has not yet sufficiently disrupted transnational syndicates. A liberal institutionalist analysis is therefore crucial not merely to assess ASEAN's institutional performance formally, but also to clarify how norms, trust, and reciprocity can be strengthened or why they may fail to sustain effective cooperation against a rapidly adapting transnational threat.

Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design and used a literature review as its primary data collection technique. The literature review was conducted through systematic library research that involved identifying, reading, note-taking, and organizing scholarly sources directly relevant to the research topic. Prior studies, policy documents, and related publications were examined to clarify key concepts, map existing debates, and situate

the research problem within the broader field. The collected materials were then reviewed, synthesized, and critically assessed to identify patterns, highlight points of convergence and disagreement in the literature, and support the analysis in addressing the research questions.

Results

ASEAN's regional cooperation in responding to the transnational threat of narcotics exhibited complex, multi-layered dynamics. Drawing on an analysis of twenty-five academic journal articles, ASEAN reports, and secondary data from UNODC and Indonesia's National Narcotics Agency (BNN), this study found that cooperation had generated meaningful institutional and diplomatic progress. Nevertheless, its substantive effectiveness in reducing narcotics trafficking and circulation remained limited by persistent challenges.

The results were presented in four areas: (1) ASEAN's institutional effectiveness in coordinating regional anti-narcotics policies; (2) patterns of national-level implementation in four key states—Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam; (3) structural and institutional barriers that constrained outcomes; and (4) opportunities to strengthen cooperation, interpreted through Robert O. Keohane's Liberal Institutionalist framework.

Institutional Effectiveness of ASEAN in Coordinating Regional Policies

The findings showed that ASEAN had developed multiple institutional mechanisms that served as regional frameworks for combating narcotics. The primary bodies involved were the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime (AMMTC), the ASEAN Senior Officials on Drug Matters (ASOD), and the ASEAN Chiefs of National Police (ASEANAPOL). These institutions operated in complementary roles: AMMTC set broad strategic and political directions, ASOD coordinated technical and programmatic initiatives, and ASEANAPOL focused on law enforcement cooperation and cross-border criminal data exchange (Sandi et al. 2022, 289).

Overall, the performance of these bodies was consistent with Keohane's view that institutions function as coordination mechanisms that reduce uncertainty and strengthen inter-state trust (Keohane 1984, 9). Through regular forums, such as the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Drug

Matters (AMMD) and the ASEAN Drug Monitoring Network (ADMN), ASEAN promoted transparency by sharing narcotics statistics, arrest data, and information on trafficking patterns. In Keohane's framework, these practices reflected institutional transparency, which is a key condition for sustaining cooperation in the absence of hegemonic enforcement.

However, ASEAN's institutional effectiveness appeared to remain concentrated at the level of policy formulation and technical coordination. As noted by Fathurahman et al (2025, 122), ASEAN initiatives were often not followed by regulatory harmonization at the domestic level. For example, differences in legal standards for narcotics sentencing between Indonesia and Vietnam reportedly complicated extradition processes and joint investigations. This situation reflected what Keohane described as a compliance problem: norms and agreements may exist at the institutional level, yet implementation remains uneven when domestic legal and political mechanisms do not align (Keohane 1984, 18).

In contrast, ASEANAPOL's role as a regional police coordination mechanism was assessed as relatively more advanced. According to the *ASEANAPOL Annual Review* in 2024, intelligence-sharing and cross-border investigative cooperation intensified through the development of the Electronic ASEANAPOL Database System (e-ADS), which enabled real-time access to information on suspects, trafficking routes, and smuggling methods. This development aligned with Keohane's concept of reciprocity, in which cooperation is sustained because states expect that their contributions will be matched by comparable commitments from others (Kinanthi et al. 2023, 11). Nonetheless, participation remained uneven, as some member states, such as Laos and Cambodia, continued to face difficulties in updating data due to technical constraints and limited human resources.

National Implementation: Case Studies of Four ASEAN Countries

Indonesia

Indonesia showed the highest level of engagement in ASEAN's anti-narcotics platforms. Through the National Narcotics Agency (BNN), it actively participated in regional policy coordination, training programs, and intelligence cooperation, particularly with Thailand and Malaysia. In line with the Drug-Free ASEAN 2025 vision, Indonesia prioritized a

comprehensive three-pillar strategy: demand reduction, supply reduction, and harm reduction. Despite this strong participation, persistent obstacles remained. Prayuda (2020, 41) and Suhartanto (2023, 398) noted that border regions such as Riau and Kalimantan continued to be major smuggling hotspots due to weak maritime surveillance and limited coordination among BNN, the Navy, and the National Police. Although joint operations with Malaysia were initiated through a Joint Task Force, their impact was reportedly constrained by the absence of integrated reporting and information systems (Alifia et al. 2025). From Keohane's perspective, this pointed to a disconnect between regional coordination and national implementation, which weakened reciprocity and reduced the practical benefits of cooperation.

Malaysia

Malaysia stood out for its strong legal enforcement and its emphasis on community-based rehabilitation. Through the National Anti-Drugs Agency (NADA), Malaysia promoted community-oriented prevention and rehabilitation models that later informed ASEAN's Community-Based Treatment Approach (Sulastri 2024, 107). Regionally, Malaysia also played a leading role through the ASEAN Training Centre for Preventive Drug Education, which provided capacity-building for law enforcement personnel and rehabilitation practitioners across member states.

Nevertheless, Malaysia's maritime borders with Indonesia remained a key transit corridor for methamphetamine trafficking linked to supply chains originating in Thailand and Myanmar (Prayuda 2020, 43). While joint maritime patrols were conducted periodically, they often lacked continuity and sustained monitoring. In Keohane's terms, this reflected an institutional sustainability problem: cooperation initiatives existed, but weak long-term incentives and limited compliance mechanisms reduced consistency over time.

Thailand

Thailand held a strategic position in ASEAN cooperation because of its proximity to the Golden Triangle, a major regional production hub. It functioned as a coordination centre for initiatives such as the Safe

Mekong Operation and the ASEAN Narcotics Control Cooperation Centre (ANCCC), facilitating information exchange among ASEAN members and China (Fathurahman et al. 2025, 125). Domestically, Thailand pursued a dual-track strategy that combined strict enforcement against producers and traffickers with rehabilitation measures for users (Astuti et al. 2022).

At the regional level, Thailand operated as both a proactive security actor and a bridge between mainland and archipelagic ASEAN states, consistent with Keohane's idea of leadership through cooperation rather than hegemony. However, inconsistent data collection and delayed reporting to ASEAN bodies continued to limit timely regional responses (Yusup 2022, 280).

Vietnam

Vietnam demonstrated notable progress in community-based prevention. Through the national program *Action for a Drug-Free Community*, the government collaborated with NGOs and international partners to implement campaigns, training, and educational outreach. Within ASEAN, Vietnam tended to emphasize demand reduction through social and educational strategies (Paujiah et al. 2025, 456).

Yet, Vietnam's highly centralized legal system often complicated coordination with foreign law-enforcement agencies. In addition, the absence of a comprehensive mutual legal assistance framework constrained cross-jurisdictional investigations (Prima and Firdaus N 2024). In Keohane's framework, these constraints indicated limits to reciprocity at the operational level: cooperation commitments may have existed politically, but legal and administrative disparities reduced the ability of states to respond in comparable and timely ways.

Structural and Institutional Barriers to ASEAN Cooperation

The study showed that the main challenge to implementing the Drug-Free ASEAN 2025 agenda stemmed less from a lack of political will than from uneven institutional capacity among member states. Indonesia and Thailand generally maintained stronger enforcement and coordination frameworks, whereas other members, such as Laos and Vietnam, faced persistent constraints in resources, legal infrastructure, and information technology (Katim 2024, 5). This capacity asymmetry weakened regional

coordination because some states were unable to meet ASEAN's standards for reporting, data submission, and program evaluation.

In addition, core ASEAN Way principles (non-interference and consensus) often functioned as a double-edged sword. Because key decisions required unanimity, policy formulation and operational follow-through tended to be slow. During urgent periods, such as spikes in transnational narcotics flows, the absence of a rapid-response mechanism limited ASEAN's ability to act quickly and collectively (Kinanthi et al. 2023). From Keohane's perspective, this illustrated a constraint common to non-hegemonic institutions: cooperation can persist, but institutional flexibility may be insufficient when threats evolve faster than decision-making processes.

Transparency and policy evaluation also remained persistent barriers. Although ASOD and ADMN facilitated information sharing, ASEAN lacked an independent audit mechanism to ensure the accuracy, consistency, and comparability of submitted data. Some member states were reportedly reluctant to disclose complete information due to security sensitivities and reputational concerns. In Keohane's terms, this transparency deficit undermined trust and increased moral hazard, as states could benefit from others' reporting and cooperation while facing limited incentives to improve their own performance.

Strengthening Cooperation Through Liberal Institutionalism

The empirical findings suggested that ASEAN's anti-narcotics collaboration had strong potential to function as an effective model of non-hegemonic cooperation, provided that Keohane's institutional principles were applied more consistently. First, transparency and information sharing needed to be strengthened through the development of an ASEAN Drug Intelligence Portal integrated with the e-ADS and relevant UNODC databases. Such integration would improve the reliability and timeliness of shared information, clarify inter-state expectations, and reduce suspicion among member states (Fikri 2024; Wardana et al. 2021; Priangani et al. 2020).

Second, reciprocity could be reinforced through an annual peer performance evaluation mechanism. In line with Keohane's argument that incentives and reputation can sustain cooperation even without formal sanctions, ASEAN could adopt a structured "naming and

shaming" approach that publicly recognizes high-performing states while transparently identifying areas where others lag behind (Keohane 1984, 102). Third, stronger norm compliance would require closer alignment between regional commitments and domestic legal frameworks. ASEAN could pursue greater harmonization of narcotics-related laws to facilitate extradition and mutual legal assistance procedures, with ASEANAPOL positioned to support this process through legal coordination and cross-border training.

Finally, ASEAN institutions needed to remain adaptive as trafficking patterns evolved. The narcotics trade increasingly relied on digital channels, including the dark web and cryptocurrency-enabled transactions, which demanded specialized capabilities. ASEAN could therefore establish a dedicated cyber-monitoring unit under AMMTC to enhance regional readiness and coordination. As Keohane emphasized, institutional flexibility matters because institutions that adapt to changing environments are more likely to endure and sustain cooperation over time (Keohane 1984, 116).

Overall, the findings indicated that although ASEAN had not achieved a drug-free region, it had built an important foundation of trust and coordination among member states. In Keohane's terms, this supported the claim that cooperation can persist without hegemony when institutions are credible, transparent, and reciprocal. ASEAN's effectiveness in narcotics control should therefore be understood as a long-term institutional process rather than an immediate outcome. As Keohane argued, cooperative stability emerges through repeated interaction and accumulated trust rather than coercive power (Keohane 1984, 132). In this sense, ASEAN illustrates how states with diverse political systems and varying capacities can move collectively toward a shared regional objective. Top of FormBottom of Form

Discussion

The findings of this study indicated that the effectiveness of ASEAN cooperation in combating transnational narcotics crime was shaped not only by the strength of laws and policies, but also by the quality of trust, transparency, and normative compliance among member states. Viewed through Robert O. Keohane's Liberal Institutionalism, ASEAN's anti-

narcotics cooperation illustrated how sovereign states could coordinate collective action without relying on a hegemon or dominant power. Despite its structural constraints, ASEAN therefore provided a compelling case of regional governance in which cooperation was sustained primarily through norm-based coordination and institutional routines rather than hierarchical authority.

Keohane argued that cooperation emerged when states recognized that repeated interaction and reciprocal expectations could reduce uncertainty and increase collective gains. This logic aligned closely with ASEAN's institutional design, which rested on non-interference and consensus-based decision-making. Although these principles were often criticized for slowing decision-making and limiting enforcement, a liberal institutionalist interpretation suggested that they also strengthened long-term stability by reducing fears of sovereignty erosion. In the context of narcotics control, such institutional stability was crucial for sustaining political commitment even when immediate results remained limited (Keohane 1984, 9).

The results converged with earlier research that highlighted ASEAN's institutional progress alongside persistent implementation gaps. Consistent with studies emphasizing the role of ASEAN forums in promoting policy dialogue and coordination, this study found that bodies such as AMMTC, ASOD, and ASEANAPOL enabled regular information exchange and created a shared institutional space for agenda-setting and operational cooperation (Sandi et al. 2022; Fathurahman et al. 2025). This supported Keohane's argument that institutions help states cooperate by lowering transaction costs and reducing uncertainty through transparency mechanisms (Keohane 1984, 7, 12). At the same time, the findings also reinforced critical accounts that identify uneven national capacity and weak harmonization as obstacles to substantive outcomes. The persistence of border trafficking routes and operational constraints, particularly in maritime and cross-jurisdictional enforcement, aligned with Prayuda's (2020) and Suhartanto's (2023) findings on surveillance weaknesses and limited inter-agency integration in border regions. Similarly, the study's observation that cooperation often remained "formal" without strong implementation instruments was consistent with Sulastri's (2024) claim that cooperation may succeed diplomatically yet remain limited in practice due to legal incompatibility and uneven evaluation mechanisms.

Where this study extended prior work was in synthesizing these empirical patterns within a single explanatory logic: ASEAN's cooperation advanced institutionally because it generated routines of interaction and norm reinforcement, but it remained substantively constrained because transparency and reciprocity were uneven across members and because domestic legal frameworks were not sufficiently aligned to translate regional coordination into coordinated enforcement. This interpretation complemented previous accounts that focused on policy or operational barriers, but it also reframed them as institutional design and compliance problems in Keohane's terms, where agreements exist but implementation varies due to limited monitoring, uneven incentives, and capacity asymmetries (Keohane 1984).

Institutions as Mechanisms of Trust and Coordination

A core claim in Keohane's Liberal Institutionalism is that institutions reduce transaction costs and uncertainty by creating channels for information exchange and shared norms of behaviour (Keohane 1984, 12). In ASEAN, bodies such as the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime (AMMTC) and the ASEAN Senior Officials on Drug Matters (ASOD) function as cross-national communication platforms that regularly consolidate data, identify trends, and coordinate regional strategies. These routine processes strengthen institutional transparency, which Keohane regarded as a necessary foundation for building trust among cooperating states (Keohane 1984, 12).

Through these forums, member states including Indonesia and Thailand were able to track one another's progress in addressing cross-border narcotics networks. As transparency increased, expectations became clearer and the space for misinterpretation, suspicion, and norm violations narrowed, making trust-building central to the sustainability of cooperation. The ASEAN Drug Monitoring Network (ADMN) illustrated this function by facilitating regular data exchange, case reporting, and the sharing of narcotics intelligence among member states (Fathurahman et al. 2025, 125).

However, transparency remained uneven. Some member states withheld information due to national security sensitivities or reputational concerns, producing a transparency deficit that weakened reciprocal trust.

From Keohane's perspective, addressing this challenge did not require forcing full disclosure, but rather strengthening systems that protect data security while creating incentives for active participation. ASEAN therefore needed to reinforce confidence-building measures so that trust could develop through consistent practice and credible information-sharing, not merely through diplomatic declarations.

Reciprocity and Normative Compliance

Reciprocity sits at the core of Keohane's liberal institutionalism. He argued that cooperation remains stable when each state expects that its contributions will be matched by comparable actions from others. In ASEAN, this logic was reflected in collective initiatives such as the ASEAN Narcotics Cooperation Centre (ANCCC) and joint training programs for law enforcement officers, where participation and burden-sharing were intended to produce mutual gains.

However, this study found that reciprocity within ASEAN often operated unevenly. States with stronger institutional capacity, such as Indonesia and Thailand, frequently acted as key drivers of initiatives, while less-resourced members such as Vietnam or Laos were more likely to occupy passive, beneficiary positions. In Keohane's terms, this asymmetry increased the risk of free-riding, where some states benefitted from collective goods without contributing proportionally (Keohane 1984, 9). To sustain reciprocity under such conditions, Keohane emphasized the importance of monitoring and reputational incentives. For ASEAN, one practical option would be an annual performance review that assesses each member's compliance with agreed commitments and makes contributions more visible.

Normative compliance constituted a second, closely related mechanism. Keohane maintained that states often comply with international rules not primarily because of coercive sanctions, but because institutional membership creates reputational stakes and moral expectations. ASEAN's "soft institutionalism" depended heavily on this dynamic: members that ignored collective commitments faced diplomatic pressure and reputational costs, which helped sustain cooperation even without binding enforcement. For example, Malaysia and Indonesia routinely updated narcotics crime data through the ASEANAPOL system, demonstrating not

only operational collaboration but also adherence to regional norms and reputational accountability (Prayuda 2020, 43). In Keohane's perspective, this illustrated how shared norms and reputation can partially substitute for coercion, supporting cooperation through mutual commitment rather than external compulsion.

The Tension Between Sovereignty and Cooperative Effectiveness

A persistent dilemma in international cooperation is balancing state sovereignty with the practical need for collaboration. In ASEAN, this tension often appears as resistance to external oversight or cross-border intervention. The principle of non-interference as a cornerstone of the ASEAN Way can slow law-enforcement coordination, including extradition processes involving transnational narcotics suspects (Katim 2024, 5).

Keohane interpreted this tension not as an insurmountable obstacle but as an institutional design challenge. He argued that states can preserve sovereignty while still cooperating, provided that institutions offer adaptive, non-coercive mechanisms for negotiation and coordination (Keohane 1984, 21). Institutional success therefore depends on the capacity to accommodate diverse national interests without undermining collective ownership. ASEAN's consultation and consensus model reflected this logic: although deliberative and time-consuming, it helped sustain political legitimacy and member buy-in.

However, the consensus model also had structural weaknesses. Because major decisions required unanimity, ASEAN often faced delays in responding to fast-evolving threats such as digital narcotics trafficking and maritime smuggling. To remain effective within Keohane's framework, ASEAN could consider limited delegation arrangements that allow bodies such as ASEANAPOL or AMMTC to take operational steps during emergencies without waiting for full consensus from all members.

Relevance of Keohane's Framework to Drug-Free ASEAN 2025

Keohane's concept of path dependence, where patterns of cooperation become self-reinforcing over time, was reflected in ASEAN's evolving narcotics policy. From the initial Drug-Free ASEAN 2015 declaration to its extension as Drug-Free ASEAN 2025, repeated interaction within ASOD

and AMMTC fostered diplomatic routines that gradually strengthened inter-state trust networks. Although the region had not achieved a "drug-free" condition, the cooperation process itself helped build a relatively stable foundation of shared norms and expectations.

Keohane argued that the durability of cooperation is rooted less in short-term outcomes than in institutional continuity (Keohane 1984, 102). In this sense, each forum, meeting, and reporting mechanism reinforced norms of openness, coordination, and collective commitment. ASEAN's progress should therefore be assessed not only through indicators such as reductions in trafficking, but also through its capacity to cultivate a cross-border cooperative culture that supports sustained joint action.

At the same time, maintaining this trajectory required institutional adaptability. The growth of digital drug markets, cryptocurrency-enabled transactions, and the expanding role of non-state actors demanded more integrated and flexible responses. Keohane's emphasis on adaptability remained highly relevant: institutions that fail to adjust to changing environments risk losing legitimacy, whereas adaptive institutions are more likely to remain effective over time. ASEAN could respond by strengthening partnerships with the private sector to monitor online transactions and by deepening operational collaboration with actors such as UNODC and INTERPOL, while still preserving regional autonomy.

ASEAN as a Model of Non-Hegemonic Liberal Institutionalism

Overall, the findings reinforced that ASEAN exemplified non-hegemonic liberal institutionalism: cooperation endured not through dominance, but through normative legitimacy and institutional rationality. Mechanisms such as ASOD, AMMTC, and ASEANAPOL showed that when states have structured forums to communicate, share information, and negotiate interests, misperceptions are reduced, conflict becomes less likely, and coordination is more sustainable.

In this sense, ASEAN provided empirical support for Keohane's proposition that cooperation can remain stable even in the absence of a hegemon, as long as institutions deliver credible information, clarify mutual expectations, and encourage compliance through reputational and normative incentives. In the context of narcotics control, ASEAN

cooperation therefore functioned not only as a policy instrument but also as an expression of Southeast Asia's shared commitment to human security and social stability.

Theoretical Implications and Critiques

The findings supported the explanatory value of Liberal Institutionalism for understanding ASEAN's anti-narcotics cooperation. They suggested that sustained interaction did not depend on coercive enforcement, but rather on credible information-sharing, reputational incentives, and repeated engagement that stabilizes expectations among member states (Keohane 1984). In this respect, ASEAN's cooperative practices were consistent with Keohane's core claim that institutions can facilitate durable collaboration even in the absence of a hegemon.

At the same time, the study highlighted important limitations in applying Keohane's largely state-centric framework to narcotics governance in Southeast Asia. Transnational drug markets involve powerful non-state actors, such as criminal syndicates, brokers, and online facilitators, as well as external partners, including international agencies like UNODC. As a result, institutional effectiveness depended not only on interstate coordination but also on domestic enforcement capacity and the ability of states to regulate non-state networks. In addition, domestic political and normative factors shaped policy choices in ways that Keohane's rational-institutional assumptions did not fully capture. Divergent national approaches, such as more punitive models in Thailand compared with the stronger rehabilitative orientation emphasized in Malaysia and Indonesia, illustrated how ideology, governance structures, and political priorities can condition cooperation outcomes (Sulastri 2024).

Nevertheless, these limitations also clarified the continuing relevance of Keohane's framework. Liberal Institutionalism does not assume homogeneity; rather, it explains how institutions can mediate diversity by providing stable procedures for negotiation, coordination, and mutual adjustment even when member preferences and capacities vary. ASEAN's inclusive, norm-based cooperation therefore offered empirical support for this proposition. Finally, the findings implied that the success of regional institutions in combating narcotics should not be assessed solely through short-term outcome indicators such as declining trafficking or arrest rates, but also through process-based measures, particularly the extent to which

institutions sustain stable interaction, build mutual trust, and gradually socialize states into shared regional norms. In this sense, ASEAN functioned not only as a coordination platform but also as a mechanism of political socialization that shaped state behaviour through expectations, reputation, and institutional routines.

Study limitations

Overall, the discussion indicated that ASEAN's anti-narcotics cooperation should be understood as an incremental institutional process rather than a short-term outcome measured only by reductions in trafficking or arrests. The findings suggested that ASEAN had succeeded in building a foundation of coordination and trust, but that translating institutional routines into stronger operational impact required improving transparency, balancing reciprocity, and strengthening domestic–regional alignment, precisely the areas that Liberal Institutionalism identifies as central to durable cooperation without hegemony (Keohane 1984).

Nevertheless, this study had several limitations. First, it relied on qualitative descriptive analysis using secondary sources (academic publications, ASEAN reports, and datasets from UNODC and BNN). As a result, the analysis depended on the completeness and comparability of available data, including potential differences in reporting standards across countries. Second, the study did not include primary interviews with ASEAN officials or national enforcement agencies, which could have provided richer insight into operational constraints, informal practices, and political bargaining within ASEAN forums. Third, focusing on four countries enhanced analytical depth but limited generalizability to the full ASEAN membership, especially where capacity gaps are greatest. Finally, as the analysis was framed around the Drug-Free ASEAN 2025 agenda, it captured institutional dynamics tied to that policy horizon; subsequent changes in trafficking patterns or institutional reforms may require further longitudinal assessment.

Conclusion

This study concluded that ASEAN's effectiveness in addressing transnational narcotics crime depended less on formal legal instruments alone and more on whether regional institutions could build trust, improve

transparency, and strengthen normative compliance among member states. Consistent with Keohane's Liberal Institutionalism, cooperation could endure without a hegemon when institutions reduced uncertainty, clarified expectations, and enabled routine coordination. In ASEAN, this role was reflected in AMMTC, ASOD, and ASEANAPOL as key platforms for policy coordination and cross-border information exchange.

Across Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam, the study found sustained commitment to the Drug-Free ASEAN 2025 vision despite differing capacities and policy approaches. However, cooperation remained constrained by resource disparities, legal-system divergence, and uneven data transparency, while ASEAN's non-interference principle continued to create tension between sovereignty and operational effectiveness. Accordingly, ASEAN's progress should be assessed not only through immediate reductions in narcotics circulation but also through the stability of interactions and the cumulative growth of trust and coordination. To strengthen future performance, ASEAN should enhance evaluation mechanisms, improve data integration, and expand technology-oriented responses to evolving trafficking patterns reinforcing Keohane's claim that robust institutions and shared norms underpin regional stability under interdependence.

This conclusion should be read alongside the study's limitations. The analysis relied on qualitative descriptive methods and secondary sources, which meant it depended on the availability, comparability, and reliability of reported data across countries and institutions. The study also did not include primary interviews or field-based evidence from enforcement agencies and ASEAN bodies that could have clarified informal coordination practices, operational bottlenecks, and political bargaining. In addition, the focus on four member states improved depth but limited the ability to generalize findings to the full diversity of ASEAN members, particularly those with the greatest resource constraints.

Future research should address these limitations in three ways. First, it should incorporate primary data, including interviews with ASEAN officials, national drug-control agencies, and law-enforcement actors, to examine how cooperation functions in practice beyond formal agreements. Second, comparative research should extend to additional ASEAN states to better capture capacity gaps and identify which institutional supports most

improve compliance and reporting. Third, future studies should examine emerging dimensions of trafficking, especially digital drug markets, cryptocurrency-enabled payments, and online facilitation networks, and assess whether ASEAN's existing mechanisms can adapt operationally, or whether new institutional arrangements are required. Together, these directions would strengthen both the empirical evaluation of Drug-Free ASEAN 2025 and the theoretical refinement of how non-hegemonic institutions sustain cooperation against rapidly evolving transnational threats.

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