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Understanding the ASEAN Way in the Thailand – Cambodia Border Conflict: Insights from Structuration Theory and the Four Flows Model

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Abstract - This study examines the relevance of the ASEAN Way in managing the Thailand–Cambodia border conflict through the lens of Structuration Theory and McPhee and Zaug's Four Flows Model. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected from document analysis and an in-depth interview with an ASEAN diplomat. Thematic analysis was employed to identify communication patterns that shape interactions among member states. The findings show that the ASEAN Way is reproduced through four communicative flow (membership negotiation, self-structuring, activity coordination, and institutional positioning) which collectively form ASEAN's diplomatic and social structure. The Thailand–Cambodia conflict demonstrates that consensus, non-interference, and informal communication networks remain central to ASEAN's mediation approach, even though formal mechanisms like the ASEAN High Council were not activated. The study concludes that the ASEAN Way remains relevant but requires institutional learning and the development of more responsive conflict-management mechanisms.

Keywords: ASEAN Way; Organizational communication; Four flows model; Structuration theory; Thailand–Cambodia conflict.

Introduction

Studies on the dynamics of regional security in Southeast Asia have become increasingly important in the contemporary era, particularly as regional organizations such as ASEAN face growing demands to preserve regional stability (Riyanto et al., 2025). ASEAN's reputation over nearly six decades as a regional community committed to peace depends heavily on its ability to manage conflicts among its member states (Summit, 2025). One of the key factors that distinguishes ASEAN from other regional organizations is its distinctive communication style, known as the ASEAN Way, which emphasizes the principles of non-interference, mutual respect, consensus, dialogue and consultation, as well as the renunciation of armed force (Sefriani, 2014).

The term ASEAN Way, which has shaped ASEAN diplomacy since 1967, has been increasingly adopted both in diplomatic practice and academic literature. In the context of escalating geopolitical tensions in Southeast Asia, questioning the continued relevance of the ASEAN Way is not only academically significant but also strategically crucial for the future of regional cooperation (Cetar, 2025).



Figure 1. Conflict Hotspots along the Thailand–Cambodia Border (Bachrain, 2025)

The Thailand–Cambodia border conflict surrounding the Preah Vihear Temple has become one of the most frequently cited case studies for assessing the effectiveness of the ASEAN Way in managing armed disputes between member states (Pradnyana, 2025). The roots of this conflict stem from differing interpretations of the 1962 International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling, which affirmed Cambodia's ownership of the temple structure but did not clarify the status of the surrounding 4.6 km² area (Carmichael, 2013). The ambiguity of the 1907 Annex I map and the divergent historical narratives held by Thailand and Cambodia prolonged the dispute and escalated into military clashes between 2008 and 2011, resulting in civilian casualties and large-scale displacement (CNN Indonesia, 2025). These developments indicate that the conflict was no longer a mere cartographic disagreement; it evolved into a broader regional security issue.

Although ASEAN possesses formal mechanisms such as the ASEAN High Council under the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), this instrument was virtually never activated in the Thailand–Cambodia case (Jasmine, 2023). Instead, ASEAN relied on informal diplomacy and interpersonal mediation, including the shuttle diplomacy led by Indonesia as ASEAN Chair in 2011 (Fadhilah, 2022). This situation raises a fundamental question: to what extent can ASEAN's communicative structure (shaped by the norms of the ASEAN Way) serve as an effective tool for resolving military-scale conflicts among member states? This question becomes even more pertinent given that other border disputes, such as Indonesia–Malaysia, Malaysia–the Philippines, or tensions in the South China Sea, exhibit similar communication patterns.

The central issue that emerges is the persistent gap between the idealism of the ASEAN Way and the realities of conflicts that require swift, decisive, and solution-oriented responses. The principle of non-interference often constrains ASEAN from taking more assertive action, as any decision must be approved unanimously through consensus. In the Thailand–Cambodia conflict, consensus not only proved difficult to achieve but also contributed to delays in responding to escalating hostilities (Naqsabandiyah, 2025). Meanwhile, global pressures from the United Nations, the ICJ, and international media demanded that ASEAN demonstrate greater institutional capacity in maintaining regional peace. This tension between the need to act and the structural limitations of ASEAN places the ASEAN Way at a critical juncture.

The research gap becomes evident in the limited number of studies that deeply connect ASEAN's communication patterns with organizational communication theory. Most previous research has focused on international relations, regional security, or diplomacy (Utomo & Ahmadi, 2023). However, very few have examined ASEAN as an organization constituted through communicative structures, as

explained in Giddens' Structuration Theory and McPhee and Zaug's Four Flows Model. These theories highlight how communication produces organizational structures through four core flows: membership negotiation, self-structuring, activity coordination, and institutional positioning. This approach is important because the ASEAN Way is not merely a diplomatic norm; it functions as a communicative structure that, in practice, regulates interactions among member states (Darmawan & Kuncoro, 2019). Thus, organizational communication analysis provides a new lens for understanding why ASEAN often responds to conflict slowly, informally, and without coercive instruments.

Another gap lies in the limited empirical documentation of ASEAN's internal communication practices during conflict management, particularly from the perspective of diplomatic practitioners directly involved in the process. Previous studies predominantly rely on secondary sources and official reports, which tend to portray ASEAN as a singular actor without revealing the behind-the-scenes communicative dynamics. In contrast, interviews with ASEAN diplomats can illuminate how formal and informal communication, personal networks, and inter-state negotiations unfold in crisis situations. Earlier scholarship notes that ASEAN's mediation process depends not only on institutional mechanisms but also on interpersonal trust among diplomats and the facilitative role of the ASEAN Chairmanship (Acharya, 2009; Setyowati & Nurulita, 2023).

Empirical evidence from various sources reinforces this urgency. The IRIS France report (2021) highlights that the Thailand–Cambodia conflict represents a major test of ASEAN's credibility as a security community (FU, 2025). The fact that both countries initially rejected mediation offers illustrates the limitations of consensus-based diplomacy. Meanwhile, Utomo and Ahmadi (2023) demonstrate that the ASEAN Way can only function effectively when supported by simultaneous track-one and track-two diplomacy.

Given these dynamics, this study aims to critically examine the relevance of the ASEAN Way as a form of organizational communication in managing the Thailand–Cambodia conflict. Specifically, it seeks to address two central questions: How do ASEAN's organizational communication patterns (based on Structuration Theory and the Four Flows Theory) shape its handling of the Thailand–Cambodia conflict? And to what extent does the ASEAN Way remain relevant as a framework for conflict resolution among member states amid shifting regional geopolitics?

Accordingly, the objective of this article is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between ASEAN's communicative style and the effectiveness of its border conflict management. The article does not merely explain ASEAN's diplomatic processes; it also proposes a new perspective that the success or failure of ASEAN cannot be evaluated solely through political action, but must also be understood through the communicative structures that sustain the organization. This approach is expected to enrich the literature on ASEAN diplomacy, deepen insights into regional security dynamics, and offer theoretical contributions to the development of organizational communication studies within the context of regional institutions in Southeast Asia.

While previous studies have predominantly explained this gap through political, legal, or institutional perspectives, such approaches tend to treat ASEAN as a static actor. In contrast, organizational communication theory is uniquely positioned to explain this gap because it conceptualizes ASEAN not as a fixed institution, but as a communicative structure continuously produced through interaction among its members. By focusing on how communication practices construct, reproduce, and sometimes constrain organizational action, this approach reveals why the ASEAN Way persists even when it appears ineffective in responding to urgent conflict situations. This makes organizational communication theory particularly relevant for explaining not only why ASEAN acts the way it does, but also why it often cannot act otherwise.

Theoretical Framework

Structuration Theory

Structuration theory, introduced by Anthony Giddens, seeks to bridge the classical dichotomy between structure and agency in social theory. In his work The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration (1986), Giddens rejects the view that structures exist solely as external forces that "control" individuals. Instead, he introduces the concept of the duality of structure, which posits that structure simultaneously constrains and is reproduced through recurrent social practices (Anam, 2025).

According to Giddens, structure consists of sets of rules and resources that are activated in everyday social practices (Nuruzzaman, 2017). Structure does not exist as a static "thing," but is enacted through repeated actions across time and space, for example through language, norms, procedures, and institutional routines. Thus, structure cannot be understood separately from practice; it only "exists" insofar as it is continually reproduced in social interaction.

Within the structuration framework, agents are viewed as knowledgeable and reflexive actors who understand the rules they employ and are capable of consciously reproducing or transforming them (Dayrobi et al., 2024). The relationship between agency and structure is recursive rather than linear: agents draw upon structure as a guide for action, while their actions in turn reinforce or modify that structure. This perspective allows structuration theory to explain long-term social transformation without losing sight of the micro-level practices through which change continually emerges. As previous studies on digital communication suggest, structures are often reproduced through repeated communicative practices that shape perception, identity, and interaction patterns (Herari, 2026). This reinforces the structuration perspective applied in this study.

In the context of communication and organizations, structuration theory provides an ontological foundation for viewing organizations not merely as formal entities, but as outcomes of repeated communicative practices (Hamdani & Nurafriliadi, 2024). Organizational rules, work cultures, and bureaucratic procedures are understood as structures that are continually enacted through meetings, documents, conversations, and everyday decision-making. This perspective opens space for analyses that view communication not simply as an instrumental variable, but as the primary medium through which organizational structures are created and sustained.

Giddens' structuration theory later became a theoretical foundation of the Communicative Constitution of Organizations (CCO) approach in organizational communication studies. The CCO perspective is grounded in the assumption that organizations are "constituted" through communication rather than merely using communication as a tool. Within this framework, Giddens' idea of structure as the product of social practice is applied to organizational settings, where communicative practices serve as the key arena for the formation and reproduction of organizational structures (McPhee et al., 2025).

The Four Flows Model

The Four Flows Model introduced by Robert D. McPhee and Pamela Zaug is one of the most influential formulations within the CCO tradition. In their work The Communicative Constitution of Organizations: A Framework for Explanation (2008), McPhee and Zaug argue that organizations are constituted through four distinct yet interconnected communicative flows, each linking the organization to a particular "audience." These four flows consist of: (1) membership negotiation, (2) organizational self-structuring, (3) activity coordination, and (4) institutional positioning (Guo et al., 2025).

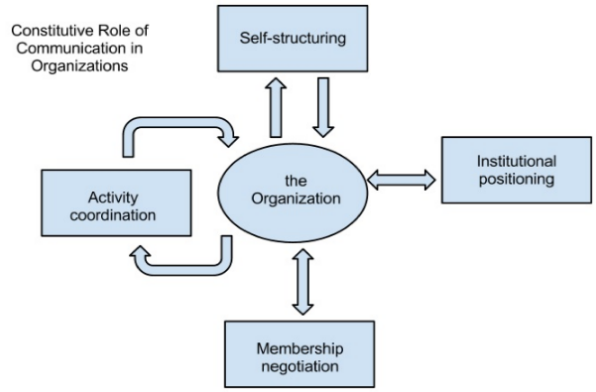


Figure 2. The Four Flows Model (MDPI, 2026)

Membership negotiation, as the first flow in Figure 2, represents the lower flow, which explains how communication processes negotiate who is recognized as a member, how an individual or actor "enters" and "remains" within the organization, and the rights and obligations that accompany this status. This flow highlights that organizational membership is not fixed but continually negotiated

through communication processes such as recruitment, socialization, performance evaluation, and the management of internal conflicts that determine who is considered "part of us."

Organizational self-structuring, as the second flow in Figure 2, illustrates how the organization shapes its internal structure (such as hierarchy, role distribution, standard procedures, and work rules) through communication among role holders. This flow distinguishes an organization from a mere gathering of individuals, as it involves the establishment of relatively stable rules regarding "who does what" and "how decisions are made." In this regard, organizational structure does not emerge automatically; rather, it is formed communicatively through internal artifacts such as charters, meeting minutes, work guidelines, and organizational constitutions, all of which serve as concrete manifestations of the self-structuring process.

Activity coordination, as the third flow, represented on the left side of Figure 2, explains how organizational members collaborate and align their day-to-day actions to achieve collective goals. Such coordination does not always follow formal structural lines; it often operates through informal networks, situational negotiations, and ad hoc compromises in practice. In many complex organizations, coordination is more visible in conversations, short messages, and technical meetings than in official documents, making communication analysis essential for understanding how work is actually carried out.

Institutional positioning, as the fourth flow describes how an organization positions itself in relation to its external environment, other institutions, the public, regulators, and international partners. Through press releases, annual reports, official statements, and diplomatic forums, organizations negotiate their identity, legitimacy, and role within a broader institutional order. Within the Four Flows framework, institutional positioning is critical because an organization's identity is constructed through communication with external value systems and expectations that shape both its constraints and opportunities for action.

Conceptually, McPhee and Zaug situate the Four Flows Model as a concrete development inspired by Giddens' Structuration Theory within the field of organizational communication. CCO scholarship explicitly notes that the Four Flows are grounded in structurationist ideas—particularly the notion that organizational structures are created and reproduced through recurrent communicative practices. Thus, the Four Flows can be understood as an "operational mapping" of how rules and resources (in Giddens' terms) materialized within specific streams of communication.

A number of studies have applied the Four Flows Model to understand how organizations are constituted through ongoing communicative practices. One important example is the work of Yudhapramesti et al. (2021), who examined organizational adaptation dynamics at Radio Republik Indonesia (RRI) and emphasized how communicative flows shape organizational climate and institutional learning processes. Although the study does not explicitly reference the Four Flows, its findings strongly align with the self-structuring and activity coordination flows, particularly when it reveals that "the dynamics of communication flows influence the organization's communication climate" and that communication can act as "an accelerator or a barrier to organizational learning." These findings demonstrate that RRI's organizational structures are produced through everyday internal communication, a core principle consistent with the Four Flows framework.

Meanwhile, international studies have operationalized the Four Flows more explicitly. Levonius and Sivunen (2024) investigate how elder-care organizations are constituted through social-media interactions. Their study shows that communicative flows such as membership negotiation and institutional positioning emerge through digital conversations in which care workers "redefine professional identity, membership boundaries, and institutional legitimacy through online platforms." Similarly, research by Schwing and Pitt (2024) employs the Four Flows to map organizations as networks formed through digital interaction, emphasizing that activity coordination and self-structuring materialize through patterns of communication and message distribution among actors. Together, these studies demonstrate that the Four Flows are not only relevant for formal organizations but also for digitally constituted ones, highlighting the model's flexibility in interpreting organizational structures across diverse contexts.

In the context of ASEAN and the ASEAN Way, the Four Flows offer a systematic lens for mapping how membership among ASEAN states is negotiated, how norms such as consensus and non-interference function as internal structures, how diplomatic activities are coordinated, and how ASEAN positions itself as a security community in relation to global actors. By integrating Giddens'

Structuration Theory with McPhee and Zaug's Four Flows, this study aims to explain not only what ASEAN does, but also how and why particular communicative structures are continually reproduced in the management of conflicts such as the Thailand–Cambodia border dispute.

Material and Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design to examine the relevance of the ASEAN Way in managing the Thailand–Cambodia border conflict through the lens of organizational communication theory. A case study is considered appropriate for achieving a comprehensive exploration of a phenomenon that is bounded by specific spatial and temporal contexts (Sutardi et al., 2024). Since the Thailand–Cambodia conflict represents a distinct and context-specific event, the use of a qualitative design enables the researcher to develop an in-depth understanding of how ASEAN's communicative mechanisms operate during a crisis situation.

Data were collected through two primary techniques: document analysis and in-depth interviews. Document selection was based on their relevance to the research theme and their contribution to explaining ASEAN's communication patterns and institutional interactions.

Table 1. Informant Profile

Informant Code	Informant Name	Position / Institution	Expertise / Issue Focus	Relevance to the Study
A1	Billy Frederick	Mid-Career Diplomat, Directorate for ASEAN Political and Security Cooperation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia	ASEAN diplomacy, regional security, ASEAN political coordination, implementation of TAC and the ASEAN Charter	Provides a track-one diplomacy perspective and direct experience regarding communication processes, coordination, and mediation within the ASEAN Way mechanism, including dynamics during the Thailand–Cambodia conflict.
A2	Dinna Prapto Rahardja	Executive Director, Synergy Policies; ASEAN Affairs Analyst	ASEAN public policy, regional cooperation, governance, Southeast Asian political–security issues	Offers a critical and independent perspective from academia/think-tank circles on the weaknesses of the ASEAN Way, normative–institutional dynamics, and the need for reform in ASEAN's conflict-resolution mechanisms.

Source: Author, 2025

This study involved two key informants selected through purposive sampling based on their expertise and relevance to ASEAN-related issues. The first informant was Billy Frederick, a Middle-Ranking Diplomat at the Directorate for ASEAN Political and Security Cooperation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, who provided a track-one diplomacy perspective grounded in direct involvement with political–security coordination, the implementation of the TAC, and the communicative dynamics among member states during the Thailand–Cambodia conflict.

The second informant was Dinna Prapto Rahardja, Executive Director of Synergy Policies and an analyst of ASEAN affairs, who offered a critical perspective from outside the bureaucratic structure regarding the practice of the ASEAN Way, ASEAN's institutional challenges, and broader issues of regional governance in Southeast Asia. The combination of diplomatic and policy-analytic viewpoints enabled this study to capture ASEAN's communicative dynamics both from the standpoint of diplomatic practice and from independent academic analysis.

Data analysis was conducted through three main stages consistent with qualitative research procedures: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Pratama & Abrar, 2025). The process began with repeated readings of all data to identify organizational communication patterns corresponding to elements of the Four Flows Model, such as membership negotiation, consensus-based structuring, diplomatic activity coordination, and ASEAN's institutional positioning. Findings from interviews and document analysis were then integrated to develop an interpretation of how member-

state communicative practices reproduce the structure of the ASEAN Way and influence regional conflict-resolution mechanisms within the framework of Anthony Giddens' Structuration Theory.

Data saturation was reached as recurring themes related to consensus, informal diplomacy, and the role of the ASEAN Chair consistently emerged across both interviews and document analysis. Given the elite and specialized nature of the informants, this study prioritizes depth of insight over quantity, emphasizing expertise-based sampling rather than numerical representation.

Result and Discussion

Membership Negotiation

The first flow in the Four Flows Model is membership negotiation, which refers to the communicative processes that determine who is recognized as "part of" the organization and how members are expected to behave in sensitive situations. In the context of the Thailand–Cambodia conflict, interview findings show that ASEAN consistently manages its membership relations with great caution to ensure that both disputing states remain diplomatically secure. Informant A1 emphasized that ASEAN Member States (AMS) are extremely careful when responding to sensitive conflicts such as this border dispute. He stated:

> "ASEAN Member States… tend to be more cautious in delivering statements… taking a neutral position given that both countries involved are fellow ASEAN Members"

This neutrality functions not only as a diplomatic guideline but also as an internal communicative mechanism to maintain ASEAN's egalitarian membership structure. No member state may be treated as the "right" or "wrong" party in a dispute; instead, there is an expectation that all parties pursue peaceful means in accordance with the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC). In this case, membership negotiation activates the principle of "equal status," ensuring that both states continue to be treated as equal members of ASEAN despite military escalation. This aligns with McPhee and Zaug's assertion that membership negotiation shapes internal organizational relations by negotiating collective identity through communication.

Within ASEAN, shared identity is built on the norms of non-interference and consensus. Thus, the consistent neutrality shown by member states is not merely a diplomatic practice but also a reproduction of ASEAN's membership structure grounded in equality and mutual trust. Informant A1 further explained that although Malaysia held the ASEAN Chairmanship at the time, other member states were still able to express their views on the dispute. He noted:

> "Each AMS can provide its views regarding efforts to resolve the dispute… this was evident in the discussions of the 47th ASEAN Summit" (A1 Interview, 20 November 2025).

This indicates that membership negotiation within ASEAN is not hierarchical but participatory. ASEAN's membership structure is horizontal rather than vertical, allowing all member states space to influence the conflict-resolution process, while still operating within the boundaries of the neutrality norm.

Overall, membership negotiation in the Thailand–Cambodia case demonstrates that intra-member conflict does not undermine ASEAN's collective identity. On the contrary, the conflict reinforces member states' commitment to maintaining a communicative structure grounded in caution, equality, and internal solidarity.

Self-Structuring

The second flow in the Four Flows Model is organizational self-structuring, which refers to the development of rules, norms, standard operating procedures (SOPs), and hierarchies that guide internal behavior. Interview findings indicate that ASEAN relies more on normative structures than bureaucratic ones. These norms constitute the communicative framework that shapes ASEAN's internal operations. Informant A1 noted that formal mechanisms such as the ASEAN High Council have never been activated, even though they exist within the TAC. He explained:

> "ASEAN… prioritizes dispute settlement based on dialogue and consultation. The High Council mechanism has never been established" (A1 Interview, 20 November 2025).

This finding suggests that ASEAN's formal structures are procedurally available but practically dormant. Member behavior is not governed by these formal mechanisms but rather by the ASEAN Way as a normative structure. A1 further stated that the ASEAN Way is not entirely codified but is enacted through everyday diplomatic interactions:

> "The ASEAN Way originates from the communicative and diplomatic practices of ASEAN Member States, which then produce shared values and norms… emphasizing dialogue and consultation" (A1 Interview, 20 November 2025).

In McPhee and Zaug's framework, self-structuring refers to communicative processes that generate internal coordination mechanisms such as rules, organizational charts, and protocols. In the case of ASEAN, self-structuring is not supported by legal systems or a supranational institution, but rather by three core norms: (1) Consensus as the primary decision-making rule; (2) Non-interference as a conflict-management principle; (3) Informal dialogue as an unwritten SOP

As a result, ASEAN possesses a "fluid structure" that regulates member behavior through communicative habits rather than formal directives. While this creates diplomatic flexibility, it also renders crisis mechanisms non-standardized. Because ASEAN's structures are highly normative, the organization struggles to take assertive action during military conflicts, as formal mechanisms remain unused due to their tension with the foundational norm of non-interference. In this regard, ASEAN's self-structuring reveals that its organizational strength lies in the symbolic power of shared values rather than in institutional authority.

Activity Coordination

The third flow in the Four Flows Model is activity coordination, which refers to how an organization aligns actions to achieve collective goals. In the ASEAN context, coordination during the Thailand–Cambodia conflict was conducted through dialogue and consultation mechanisms that were flexible and handled on a case-by-case basis. Informant A1 stated that the implementation of the ASEAN Charter in dispute resolution "depends heavily on deliberation among AMS." He emphasized:

> "In its implementation… it will very much depend on discussions among AMS in relation to the challenges at hand" (A1 Interview, 20 November 2025).

This indicates that no rigid standard operating protocol exists; ASEAN's actions are determined through intergovernmental discussions rather than institutional directives. A1 also explained that external actors such as the United States and China pushed for a ceasefire through Malaysia's facilitation as ASEAN Chair. This demonstrates that:

> "ASEAN's activities are not conducted entirely internally but operate within a multilevel diplomatic network (regional–global)" (A1 Interview, 20 November 2025).

This aligns with insights from Informant A2, who noted that activity coordination within ASEAN relies not only on formal mechanisms but also on interpersonal relations and political sensitivities among member states. A2 explained that the coordination process often begins with "seeking clarification," followed by gathering the views of other member states, while still waiting for the ASEAN Chair to initiate action so as not to overstep sovereignty boundaries:

> "Clarity and courteous communication… so that all countries feel their sovereignty is respected is number one" (A2 Interview, 20 November 2025).

Informant A2 further emphasized that conflict-resolution initiatives may occur at the head-of-government level, particularly when close personal ties exist, but such initiatives must still be "co-organized with the Chair," making the ASEAN Chairmanship the central source of legitimacy. Even when formal channels are not viable, issues can be redirected to AICHR (ASEAN Intergovernmental

Commission on Human Rights), ASEC (ASEAN Secretariat), or other dialogic spaces where the conflict can be raised as a regional community concern. These findings show that ASEAN's diplomatic coordination is layered, interpersonal, and far more improvisational than suggested by its formal organizational structure.

The involvement of external actors further strengthens the role of the ASEAN Chairmanship as the hub of diplomatic activity coordination. Within the Four Flows framework, activity coordination is carried out by actors who possess collective legitimacy, and in ASEAN this role is held by the Chair. Because ASEAN lacks an executive body capable of issuing operational instructions, coordination on the ground depends heavily on the diplomatic capacity of member states—particularly the Chair. This is consistent with Acharya's (2001) findings that ASEAN's coordination patterns tend to be informal and rely on interpersonal relations among diplomats rather than on the institutional authority of the organization.

Institutional Positioning

The fourth flow in the Four Flows Model is institutional positioning, which refers to how an organization positions itself in relation to external actors. Interview findings indicate that ASEAN is highly protective of its image as an organization that has successfully maintained regional stability. Informant A1 explained that ASEAN's reputation is rooted in its historical track record:

> "ASEAN's image… is the tangible result of the organization's success in transforming the region… into one that is peaceful, stable, and prosperous" (A1 Interview, 20 November 2025).

Thus, ASEAN's positioning is not merely representational communication but also performative communication. ASEAN projects to the international community that regional stability is its collective achievement. ASEAN also positions itself externally through diplomacy, such as maintaining dialogue with China on the South China Sea issue (M. Nusa et al., 2025). Even when dealing with internal conflicts among its own members, ASEAN consistently upholds its regional image as a peace-promoting organization. When discussing the future relevance of the ASEAN Way, the informant noted:

> "The ASEAN Way remains relevant… as communication between Cambodia and Thailand remains open… indicating both countries' willingness to engage in dialogue."

This statement demonstrates that ASEAN's institutional position is directed not only toward the global public but also inward toward its member states. Maintaining this internal image is crucial for sustaining ASEAN's legitimacy. Within the Four Flows framework, institutional positioning is the communicative flow that ensures the organization continues to be recognized as an entity with moral authority. In ASEAN's case, such authority is not derived from legal power but from its historical record of peaceful diplomacy.

Integrating Structuration Theory and the Four Flows Model in Analyzing the ASEAN Way

Table 2. Analysis of Findings and Their Linkages to the Four Flows Model and Structuration Theory

Four Flows Model	Empirical Findings	Link to Structuration Theory	Analytical Meaning
Membership Negotiation	AMS act cautiously, maintain neutrality, and preserve equal standing; all member states provide input without hierarchy	Structures are rules/norms reproduced through practice; identities are shaped by recurrent actions	Membership negotiation reproduces the structures of non-interference and ASEAN's egalitarian identity
Organizational Self-Structuring	The High Council has never been activated; the ASEAN Way functions as de facto rules; consensus and dialogue serve as "fluid structures"	Structure is not fixed but created through communicative practices	ASEAN Way norms are products of practice rather than legal structures; communication generates informal SOPs

Four Flows Model	Empirical Findings	Link to Structuration Theory	Analytical Meaning
Activity Coordination	Coordination is case-by-case and highly contingent on AMS discussions; strong role of the ASEAN Chair; informal diplomatic networks are central	Structures are enacted and altered through action; agents use structure to achieve goals	Activity coordination demonstrates the duality of structure: states draw on ASEAN Way norms while simultaneously reproducing them
Institutional Positioning	ASEAN maintains a peaceful public image; positions itself as a stable community; external diplomatic communication reinforces legitimacy	Social structures exist through external recognition, public discourse, and institutional legitimacy	ASEAN's positioning constructs and affirms stability as a core identity structure in the international system

Source: Authors, 2025

ASEAN's communicative structure in managing the Thailand–Cambodia conflict can be understood more deeply by linking McPhee and Zaug's four communicative flows with the principles of Giddens' Structuration Theory. As Table 2, the four flows (membership negotiation, self-structuring, activity coordination, and institutional positioning) do not operate in isolation; rather, they complement one another as communicative practices that continually reproduce ASEAN's social structure. From a structuration perspective, structure is not a static entity that governs from the outside but is instead the product of recurrent communicative actions. Empirical findings from the interviews illustrate how each communicative flow functions as a site for the production and reproduction of the ASEAN Way.

In membership negotiation, the caution exercised by member states in responding to the conflict demonstrates how ASEAN's membership identity is continually renegotiated. When the informant explained that member states consistently prioritize peaceful resolution by referring to TAC principles, he underscored that it is these communicative practices that sustain ASEAN's egalitarian structure. As Informant A1 stated:

> "AMS certainly encourages both countries to resolve the dispute peacefully by referring to the principles of the TAC" (A1 Interview, 20 November 2025).

This illustrates how the structures of non-interference and equality are reproduced through diplomatic communication. In Giddens' argument, such actions do not merely follow an existing structure, they actively reinforce that structure through repeated practice.

ASEAN's self-structuring is evident in the consistent maintenance of dialogue and consensus as the core decision-making framework. Although formal mechanisms such as the ASEAN High Council exist, the communicative practices of member states show that the structures actually enacted are normative rather than procedural. When A1 noted that:

> "The disputing parties may request mediation… including from the ASEAN Chair or the ASEAN Secretary-General" (A1 Interview, 20 November 2025)

The statement underscores that the operative structure is a flexible one that enables voluntary mediation without institutional obligation. From a structuration perspective, the non-use of formal mechanisms indicates that formal structures are not reproduced through action, and therefore do not become living structures within organizational practice.

In activity coordination, ASEAN's communicative practices reveal coordination that relies heavily on inter-state negotiation and the role of the ASEAN Chair. The absence of standardized crisis procedures demonstrates that activity coordination is not a centrally controlled structural process but the outcome of situational communicative action. As A1 explained:

> "If the dispute still cannot be resolved, then it must be referred to the Summit for a final decision" (A1 Interview, 20 November 2025).

This reflects that crisis coordination does not follow bureaucratic command lines but instead emerges from escalating communication among actors. It illustrates a core principle of structuration: agents draw upon available normative structures (consensus, dialogue) while simultaneously reinforcing these patterns of coordination as "the only acceptable pathway" within the ASEAN context.

ASEAN's institutional positioning is evident in its efforts to maintain an image of the region as peaceful and stable, both internally and externally. When Informant A1 explained that ASEAN continues to build constructive dialogue with China on the South China Sea issue, he highlighted how ASEAN positions itself within the international structure as an actor that prioritizes peaceful diplomacy. His statement,

> "This can be achieved through ASEAN's efforts to deepen a culture of dialogue and consultation in the region" (A1 Interview, 20 November 2025*)*

This statement illustrates how ASEAN sustains its external legitimacy through the consistent performance of communicative practices centered on consultation and dialogue. From a structuration perspective, such practices constitute more than diplomatic routines; they serve as mechanisms through which ASEAN reproduces a shared regional identity. By repeatedly emphasizing peaceful engagement, member states reinforce a collective image of ASEAN as a community committed to stability, consultation, and conflict avoidance.

Viewed holistically, the four communicative flows demonstrate that the ASEAN Way is not merely a normative framework but a living social structure continuously reproduced through communication. Membership negotiation, self-structuring, activity coordination, and institutional positioning collectively reveal how ASEAN member states enact and sustain the norms of consensus, non-interference, and peaceful dialogue through both formal and informal interactions. Consistent with Giddens' Structuration Theory, these recurring communicative practices do not simply reflect existing structures; they actively reproduce and legitimize them. Consequently, the management of the Thailand–Cambodia border conflict can be understood not solely as the outcome of institutional mechanisms, but as the product of a broader communicative structure that shapes how member states perceive, negotiate, and respond to regional disputes.

Nevertheless, the findings also reveal an important tension within ASEAN's communicative structure. While the reproduction of dialogue and consensus contributes to organizational cohesion and regional stability, it simultaneously constrains institutional innovation. The preference for consultation over intervention enables ASEAN to preserve unity among its members, yet it may also limit the organization's capacity to respond swiftly and decisively during periods of military escalation. In this regard, the ASEAN Way functions as both an enabling and constraining structure: it facilitates cooperation and trust, while potentially reducing organizational responsiveness in situations that require rapid collective action.

This tension becomes particularly visible when ASEAN's institutional positioning is examined from the perspective of external audiences. The organization's reliance on what may be described as a "fluid structure" raises critical questions regarding its perceived institutional capacity. Although flexibility and informality are often celebrated as distinctive strengths of the ASEAN Way, the absence of standardized crisis-response mechanisms during armed conflict may be interpreted by external actors not as adaptability, but as institutional insufficiency.

In a global environment where regional organizations are increasingly evaluated by their ability to manage security crises effectively, ASEAN's preference for informal and consensus-based processes risks being perceived as indecisiveness or structural weakness. Consequently, ASEAN's communicative strength in maintaining internal cohesion may paradoxically translate into a perception of institutional weakness externally. This finding suggests that the future relevance of the ASEAN Way may depend not only on its ability to preserve regional harmony, but also on its capacity to evolve institutionally without abandoning the normative foundations that have long defined ASEAN's regional identity.

Conclusions

The findings of this study show that the ASEAN Way functions not only as a diplomatic principle but also as a communicative structure continuously reproduced through practices of dialogue,

consultation, and informal intergovernmental interactions. The four communicative flows of McPhee and Zaug (membership negotiation, self-structuring, activity coordination, and institutional positioning) demonstrate how member states preserve internal cohesion through cautious negotiation, a strong emphasis on consensus, and flexible, multilayered diplomacy. In line with Giddens' Structuration Theory, the values of the ASEAN Way do not operate as passive norms; rather, they constitute a living social structure reinforced through repeated communicative actions. Together, these frameworks reveal that ASEAN's handling of the Thailand–Cambodia conflict results from a combination of formal and informal interactions, rather than being solely the product of institutional mechanisms.

Based on these findings, this study recommends that ASEAN develop more adaptive institutional spaces to complement informal dialogue practices so that dispute-settlement mechanisms do not rely exclusively on consensus and interpersonal relations. Additionally, a systematic mapping of the mediation practices undertaken by ASEAN Chairs is needed to formulate more consistent, empirically grounded procedural guidelines. Future research is encouraged to involve a broader range of informants across member states (both active diplomats and former negotiators) to capture ASEAN's communicative dynamics from a wider set of perspectives. In this way, the ASEAN Way can be preserved as a regional identity while simultaneously strengthened through institutional learning that enables more mature and responsive approaches to future conflicts.

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