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Timor Leste in ASEAN: Implications for ASEAN-Led Economic Multilateralism in the Digital Field

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Abstract. The paper explores the main implications of East Timor's accession to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in October 2025 for ASEAN-led economic projects and initiatives in the digital field. The research aims to identify the impact of the digital transformation on ASEAN and ASEAN-led economic cooperation, analyze the association's response, and finally assess East Timor's potential contribution to implementing ASEAN-led digital projects and initiatives. Special attention is paid to the overlap of association's digital and non-digital vulnerability factors, seen through the prism of East Timor's participation in the ASEAN-led economic cooperation in the digital field. The author raises the following research question: why might East Timor's joining ASEAN have a significant negative impact on ASEAN-led economic cooperation, despite the relative ease of addressing the issue of underdeveloped infrastructure in the country. Although East Timor's influence on ASEAN's multilateral economic policy in the digital field may seem insignificant due to its small territory and population, in reality, the country may seriously complicate the association's efforts to establish a digital ecosystem in Southeast Asia. Moreover, as the influence of "geopolitics of data" increases, the East Timor factor could generate an escalation of new tensions between the ASEAN countries and ASEAN's extra-regional partners. Additionally, East Timor's insignificant contribution to the ASEAN-led economic cooperation in the digital field will cast doubt on the effectiveness of the ASEAN integration model per se, since the digital transformation completely deprives this model of relevance to the contemporary global development. The research is based on the use of general scientific and specific scientific methods, integrated into an interdisciplinary approach within the actor-network theory. Since the digital aspects of ASEAN's policy have been explored fragmentarily, while the East Timor factor as their part has been completely missing in the academic literature thus far, the article has obvious relevance and scientific novelty.

Key words: ASEAN-centrism, global digital transformation, Artificial Intelligence, East Timor's accession, geopolitics of data, actor-network theory

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Восточный Тимор в АСЕАН: последствия для асеаноцентричного экономического сотрудничества в цифровой сфере

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Аннотация. Исследование посвящено изучению основных последствий вступления Восточного Тимора в Ассоциацию государств Юго-Восточной Азии (АСЕАН) в октябре 2025 г. для асеаноцентричных экономических проектов и инициатив в цифровой сфере. Среди задач исследования — выявление влияния цифровой трансформации на АСЕАН и асеаноцентричное экономическое сотрудничество, анализ ответных мер Ассоциации и, наконец, оценка потенциального вклада со стороны Восточного Тимора в реализацию асеаноцентричных цифровых проектов и инициатив. Особое внимание уделено наложению цифровых и нецифровых факторов уязвимости Ассоциации, рассматриваемых с точки зрения участия Восточного Тимора в асеаноцентричном экономическом сотрудничестве в цифровой сфере. Автор поставил следующий исследовательский вопрос: почему вступление Восточного Тимора в АСЕАН может крайне негативно сказаться на асеаноцентричном экономическом сотрудничестве, при том что устранить проблему недостаточно развитой инфраструктуры страны относительно несложно. Хотя влияние Восточного Тимора на многостороннюю экономическую политику АСЕАН в цифровой сфере может казаться незначительным из-за его небольшой территории и численности населения, в действительности страна может серьезно осложнить усилия Ассоциации по формированию цифровой среды в Юго-Восточной Азии. Более того, по мере нарастания влияния «геополитики данных» фактор Восточного Тимора может привести к эскалации новых противоречий между странами — членами АСЕАН и ее внерегиональными партнерами. Кроме того, незначительный вклад Восточного Тимора в асеаноцентричное экономическое сотрудничество в цифровой сфере поставит под сомнение эффективность интеграционной модели АСЕАН как таковой, поскольку цифровая трансформация окончательно лишает эту модель релевантности характеру современного мирового развития. Исследование базируется на привлечении общенаучных и частнонаучных методов, интегрированных в междисциплинарный подход в рамках акторно-сетевой теории. Поскольку цифровые аспекты политики АСЕАН изучены фрагментарно, а фактор Восточного Тимора как их составляющая в научной литературе на текущий момент вообще не рассматривался, данное исследование обладает очевидной актуальностью и научной новизной.

Ключевые слова: асеаноцентризм, глобальная цифровая трансформация, искусственный интеллект, вступление Восточного Тимора, геополитика данных, акторно-сетевая теория

Заявление о конфликте интересов. Автор заявляет об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

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Introduction

In October 2025, the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste (Timor-Leste or East Timor) joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). This event has profound implications for both East Timor and the Association. Undoubtedly, East Timor has expanded its policy toolkit significantly. At the same time, the impact of Timor-Leste's membership on ASEAN-led

multilateral economic cooperation might not be as favorable as it might have seemed initially, since the implementation of economic projects and initiatives under the auspices of ASEAN could be seriously undermined as a result of the accession of this state. This assessment is especially relevant to the digital field, since East Timor's digital deficiencies could exacerbate intra-ASEAN digital shortcomings, producing a negative multiplier effect. The article raises the

following research question: why East Timor, despite its digital infrastructure shortcomings can be eliminated by ASEAN's concerted effort within a short time period, can hamper the implementation of ASEAN-led projects and initiatives in the digital field.

The following thesis is put forward as a research hypothesis. Although integrating East Timor into ASEAN's digital multilateralism may seem like a relatively easy task due to the country's small size and population from a financial and technical perspective, its participation is likely to bring into sharp focus the shortcomings of ASEAN's integration model and again raise the question of its revision. As the association is not yet prepared for this, tracing the digital implications of East Timor's membership in the association for ASEAN-led multilateral economic cooperation is a timely and relevant exercise.

As the research question focuses on the most recent issues and processes, relevant academic literature is scant. However, there are numerous researchers that trace the global digital transformation (Schmid et al., 2025; Colmenares-Zapata, 2025; Vasilkovsky, 2020; Larionova, 2025), its impact on ASEAN and its member states, and ASEAN's response (Ali et al., 2025; Lee et al., 2025; Rodriguez & Soeparwata, 2015; Kanaev, 2025; Ramich, Piskunov & Kitaev, 2022), as well as East Timor's foreign¹ and domestic policy (Shaternikov, 2023; 2025).

To date, however, an assessment of East Timor's accession to ASEAN from the perspective of ASEAN-led digital economic multilateralism has been missing, which makes the paper original and pioneering. Methodologically, the author uses a variety of methods, including general scientific, specific scientific and disciplinary methods integrated into an interdisciplinary

approach within the actor-network theory. According to the latter, international processes are shaped by non-human beings (actants) like, for instance, technologies, algorithms, organizations, etc., to a no less considerable extent than other actors do. This theory emphasizes the network effect, as networks, rather than traditional hierarchies, play a decisive role the evolution of social and—broader—international economic (algorithmic and high frequency transactions), political (stimulating social disturbances), and security (control of contemporary military hardware like drones) processes. Although the actor-network theory has been developed with a broad focus on social sciences (Law, 1992; Latour, 1994; Callon, 1999), its applicability to international relations has been discussed since recently (Aradau, 2010; Barry, 2013; Bueger & Bethke, 2014; Leese & Hoijsink, 2019, etc.). As the actor-network theory has direct relevance to analyzing digital processes, its usage for exploring the digital aftereffects of East Timor's accession to ASEAN is a prudent choice.

The Digital Transformation and Its Impact on ASEAN

As the current digital transformation, exemplified mostly by the AI race, gains momentum, its international political implications generate rising uncertainty and deteriorate the international environment (Schmid et al., 2025). In order to arrive at thorough and detailed understanding of what Timor-Leste's accession means for ASEAN-led economic multilateralism, it is imperative to assess the major implications of the digital transformation for the association.

Generally, researchers distinguish several side effects of the progressing digital transformation around the world, namely, the fragmentation of the global digital landscape, the gap between regulations and innovations, and the increasing role of ICT giants in the digital

¹ Huang J. China's Engagement with Timor-Leste amid Geopolitical Tensions // RSIS Commentary. 2024 (July 10). No. 092. P. 1–4. URL: <https://rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/CO24092.pdf> (accessed: 11.01.2026).

governance.² Other side effects include a heightened role of energy resources, increased competition between technological companies and strong regulatory barriers (Sytnik & Bazlutsкая, 2025). These factors suggest that the network within the global digital ecosystem, as a fundamental component of the actor-network theory, has become much more complicated, with profound implications for digital governance and regulation. Although these trends are long-term considerations for ASEAN, rather than immediate policy focus, they complicate its efforts to shape the digital governance in Southeast Asia.

These factors overlap with severe deficiencies in ASEAN's digital toolkit. Several points are noteworthy in the latter regard.

First, huge digital infrastructure gaps across Southeast Asia play a crucial role. It is exemplified by the actual internet penetration rates: while the majority of ASEAN member states enjoy the rate above 90% (internet users per 100 persons), Indonesia, Laos, the Philippines and Vietnam demonstrate 72.8, 63.6, 83.8, and 84.2% respectively.³ As digital infrastructure is a central component of trans-boundary exchanges, this factor seriously undermines intra-ASEAN cooperation, with negative implications for ASEAN's plans to make Southeast Asia a unified area of economic activity.

Second, ASEAN member states and the association, as an international actor, are encountering growing dependence upon extra-regional powers, mostly the US and China. For context, the US—China contradictions have evolved from American bans on selling critical technologies to the PRC to Washington's attempts

to control global industrial and technological chains and markets (Danilin, 2022). As a result, Southeast Asia finds itself between the American and Chinese digital ecosystems, as the US and China promote their technologies there, American and Chinese technological companies take a large market share of the 5G infrastructure construction, while their media platforms grasp the attention of the majority of customers (Ramich, Piskunov & Kitaev, 2022; Kanaev, 2025). In this context, ASEAN is slipping into dependence on its external partners that, as the US' and China's cases demonstrate, possess powerful tools to establish and enhance their digital ecosystems across Southeast Asia.

Another layer of complexity for ASEAN relates to the extension of the US—China controversy over technology issues to the AI field. As China is developing the Digital Silk Road (Cheng, 2022), while the US has launched the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework Agreement with digital trade-related provisions (Park, 2023), their interests in the digital field came into a conflict even before the current AI boom. Due to fundamental differences between Beijing and Washington, AI is likely to generate serious conflicts between them (Colmenares-Zapata, 2025). In fact, Washington and Beijing develop in many respects opposing AI tools to promote their interests around the world. As stipulated by the US AI Action Plan, Washington aims at “exporting its full AI technology stack—hardware, models, software, applications, and standards—to all countries willing to join America's AI alliance”.⁴ In its turn, the PRC published Opinions of the State Council on Deepening the Implementation of the “Artificial Intelligence +” Initiative that set the parameters of China's approach to develop AI in critical areas, including to promote inclusive

² Sytnik A. Global Trends in Digital Governance // Russian International Affairs Council. August 8, 2025. (In Russian). URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/globalnye-tendentsii-v-oblasti-tsifrovogo-upravleniya/> (assessed: 10.01.2026).

³ Connectivity // ASEAN Statistical Highlights. 2025. P. 7. URL: <https://www.aseanstats.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/ASH2025v251112.pdf> (accessed: 11.01.2026).

⁴ Winning the Race. America's AI Action Plan // The White House. Executive Office of the President of the United States. July 2025. P. 20. URL: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Americas-AI-Action-Plan.pdf> (accessed: 12.01.2026).

sharing of AI and to build a global AI governance system in cooperation with partners.⁵

In these circumstances, ASEAN encounters a hard choice, as Washington insists that ASEAN countries limit cooperation with China in technologically advanced fields, while Beijing is fostering inter-governmental and inter-company cooperation with Southeast Asian partners (Zhang & Khanal, 2024). The formation of isolated US-centric and China-centric ecosystems will inevitably make the ASEAN member states choose sides, to the disadvantage of ASEAN-wide projects and initiatives.

Problems within ASEAN are exacerbated by the fact that global multilateral dialogue platforms have so far failed to enable the international community to reach an agreement on the parameters for regulating the digital environment. The differences between the approaches promoted by the G7, on the one hand, and the expanded BRICS, on the other, are revealing. As follows from G7 documents, its priorities are an open and global internet, free trans-boundary information flows, and a liberal approach to data localization. In its turn, the expanded BRICS places an emphasis on protecting sovereignty in the digital field, as well as adheres to a conservative approach to data localization. Simultaneously, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) strengthens its positions as the regulator of the global digital space. Notably, OECD and G7 coordinate their policies in shaping global digital issues (Ramich, Potemkina & Demina, 2026), while the BRICS Plus countries have not yet formulated a unified position on the regulation of the internet (Vasilkovsky, 2020; Larionova, 2025). For ASEAN, this situation means rising

ambiguity, as Indonesia and Thailand are planning to join both OECD and the BRICS Plus format.

Lastly, the digital transformation has led to various crimes in the regional digital space (Zhang, 2024). Apart from traditional frauds such as phishing, ransomware, data breaches etc., the “Scam-as-a-Service” has become a hot topic in recent years.⁶ This factor coincides with rampant transboundary criminal activity in Southeast Asia (Sundram, 2024). Since enslaved workers in scam centers (or fraud factories) across Southeast Asia are involved in illegal digital activity, the cyber-scam industry has become widespread across the region, especially in the Mekong River area.

As the afore-discussed trends indicate, the network heterogeneity of actors and the translation of their interests in order to make a stable network, which is operationalized by the actor-network theory and shapes the global digital milieu, has increased significantly. Furthermore, practice substantiates the provision of the actor-network theory that new actors can transform the international governance and regulation no less profoundly than traditional actors do. As a result, the association and its member states have to grapple with controversial issues that are growing in scale and complexity. Logically, the importance of this task requires efficient policy tools. Among these, ASEAN-led projects and initiatives relevant to the digital field are noteworthy.

ASEAN's Response

Mindful of the afore-discussed challenges and aware that they demand a quick and effective response, ASEAN is implementing digital

⁵ Opinions of the State Council on Deepening the Implementation of the “Artificial Intelligence+” Initiative. Translation // Center for Security and Emerging Technology. September 24, 2025. URL: <https://cset.georgetown.edu/publication/china-ai-plus-opinions-2025/> (accessed: 12.01.2026).

⁶ Puente Ilieva C., de la. Southeast Asia: Cyberattack Victim or Aggressor? // ESCP International Politics Society. October 29, 2025. URL: <https://pppescp.com/2025/10/29/southeast-asia-cyberattack-victim-or-aggressor/> (accessed: 24.01.2026).

projects and initiatives as part of its economic multilateralism. Among the major tracks, the following stand out as particularly noteworthy.

The first one focuses on activities that take place exclusively in the digital space. This started in 2000, when the association signed the e-ASEAN Framework Agreement,⁷ although selected components of the ASEAN approach to the field were outlined in the ASEAN Vision 2020 (1997).⁸ Among the notable documents that have followed, there are the ASEAN Framework on Personal Data Protection (2016),⁹ the ASEAN Data Management Framework (2021),¹⁰ the ASEAN Digital Masterplan 2025 (2021),¹¹ and some others.¹² More recent documents include the ASEAN Guide on AI Governance and Ethics (2024),¹³ the Expanded ASEAN Guide on AI Governance and Ethics—Generative AI (2025),¹⁴

ASEAN Digital Masterplan 2030 (2026),¹⁵ and the Hanoi Digital Declaration (2026),¹⁶ to mention selected examples. Presently, the ASEAN member states are negotiating the Digital Economy Framework Agreement as a critical enabler of their cooperation on digital issues (Lee et al., 2025).

Additionally, ASEAN is equipping its non-digital projects and initiatives with digital tools. For instance, the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA), which was launched in 1992 and achieved its main objectives in 2018 (Ishikawa, 2021), led to the development of ATIGA (ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement) and ATISA (ASEAN Trade in Services Agreement) that entered into force in 2010 and 2021, respectively. To cope with their digital shortcomings, the association has launched ATIGA Form D, which enables exporters to apply for an ATIGA Certificate of Origin—CO online, and ATIGA electronic phytosanitary certificate-e-Phyto. The revised agreement (the ATIGA Upgrade) was signed in October 2025.¹⁷

Apart from the AFTA, the association attaches great importance to enhancing the digital tools of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Mostly, the RCEP's digital toolkit is presented in Chapter 12 (Electronic Commerce), although the RCEP's selected digital provisions sit alongside Chapter 8 (Trade in Services), Chapter 10 (Investment) and Chapter

⁷ e-ASEAN Framework Agreement // The ASEAN Secretariat. November 24, 2000. URL: <https://agreement.asean.org/media/download/20140119121135.pdf> (accessed: 26.07.2026).

⁸ ASEAN Vision 2020. Kuala Lumpur, December 15, 1997 // ASEAN. June 28, 2012. URL: <https://asean.org/asean-vision-2020/> (accessed: 26.07.2026).

⁹ ASEAN Telecommunications and Information Technology Ministers Meeting (TELMIN) Framework on Personal Data Protection // The ASEAN Secretariat. URL: <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/10-ASEAN-Framework-on-PDP.pdf> (accessed: 26.07.2026).

¹⁰ ASEAN Data Management Framework // The ASEAN Secretariat. 2021. URL: <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/ASEAN-Data-Management-Framework.pdf> (accessed: 26.07.2026).

¹¹ ASEAN Digital Masterplan 2025 // The ASEAN Secretariat. URL: <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/ASEAN-Digital-Masterplan-EDITED.pdf> (accessed: 26.07.2026).

¹² Isono I., Prilliadi H. ASEAN's Digital Integration: Evolution of Framework Documents. Jakarta : ERIA, 2023. URL: <https://econpapers.repec.org/bookchap/eraeriabk/2023-10-oct-asean-digital-integration-evolution-of-framework-documents.htm> (accessed: 24.01.2026).

¹³ ASEAN Guide on AI Governance and Ethics // The ASEAN Secretariat. URL: https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/ASEAN-Guide-on-AI-Governance-and-Ethics_beautified_201223_v2.pdf (accessed: 26.07.2026).

¹⁴ Expanded ASEAN Guide on AI Governance and Ethics — Generative AI // The ASEAN Secretariat. URL: <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Expanded-ASEAN-Guide-on-AI-Governance-and-Ethics-Generative-AI.pdf> (accessed: 26.07.2026).

¹⁵ ASEAN Digital Masterplan 2030 // The ASEAN Secretariat. URL: <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/ASEAN-Digital-Master-Plan-2030-final-2026.pdf> (accessed: 26.07.2026).

¹⁶ Hanoi Digital Declaration // The ASEAN Secretariat. January 16, 2026. URL: https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/ADOPTED-HANOI-DIGITAL-DECLARATION_14Jan2026-CLN.pdf (accessed: 26.07.2026).

¹⁷ ASEAN Powers ahead with Next Generation Trade Agreements and Global Engagement at the 47th ASEAN Summit // Ministry of Trade and Industry of Singapore. October 28, 2025. URL: https://isomer-user-content.by.gov.sg/166/e69393ab-ecb0-43e1-82ca-7c96c30085f3/For%20immediate%20reporting_MTI%20Press%20Release%20on%20the%2047th%20ASEAN%20Summit_28%20Oct%202025.pdf (accessed: 29.01.2026).

19 (Dispute Settlement).¹⁸ The RCEP's digital toolkit is beneficial for ASEAN, as it provides a regulatory tailwind for cooperation in trade in services, mostly, domestic and cross-border electronic transactions, electronic authentication and signature, etc. (Mitchell & Gyanchandani, 2023). Collectively, these factors contribute to providing the regional corporate sector with more certainly, unlocking the economic potential of ASEAN and its member states.

Lastly, ASEAN fosters R&D cooperation among its member states. The key supervising body that shapes the parameters of intra-ASEAN dialogue in the field, the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Science, Technology and Innovation (AMMSTI), was established in 1976. Additionally, the ASEAN Committee on Science, Technology and Innovation (COSTI), whose functions mostly overlap with those of AMMSTI, was set up. Over time, this track of cooperation has been strengthened and diversified within ASEAN and its member states (Rodriguez & Soeparwata, 2015). Since 2015, the Board of Advisers to COSTI (BAC) has focused on managing technical issues such as the distribution and operationalization of financial resources. Among subcommittees, working and expert groups, the Sub-Committee on Microelectronics and Information Technology (SCMIT) that aims at bridging intra-ASEAN gaps in the field, mostly by fostering intra-ASEAN activities in areas like the Internet of Things, cybersecurity, cloud computing etc., is worthy of note. These efforts are supported by more niche-orientated dialogue venues, like the ASEAN Telecommunications Regulators' Council, the ASEAN Regional Computer Emergency Response Team, the ASEAN Digital Ministers Meeting, and others.

The association attaches crucial importance to improving the regulatory groundwork for

digital grass-root cooperation, both intra-ASEAN and between ASEAN and its extra-regional partners. Relevant examples include initiatives such as the Framework for Promoting the Growth of Digital Startups in ASEAN¹⁹ or the ASEAN Guidelines on Fostering a Vibrant Ecosystem for Startups across Southeast Asia,²⁰ etc. In addition, the ASEAN—India Scale Hub,²¹ the Korea—ASEAN AI Development and Startup Competition²² and other programs are currently operational.

Despite these developments, ASEAN has not succeeded in making its policy in the digital field remarkably efficient. The association has always premised its multilateral cooperation upon negative integration. This model emphasizes the elimination of trade, investment, technological and other economic barriers to transboundary exchanges rather than the establishment and continuous improvement of effective supra-national tools (Korolev & Fomina, 2020). Revealingly, navigating digital and, more recently, AI-related minefields, however, ASEAN has not revised its traditional approach to cooperation. Importantly, both the ASEAN Guide on AI Governance and Ethics (2024)²³ and the

¹⁹ Framework for Promoting the Growth of Digital Startups in ASEAN // The ASEAN Secretariat. URL: <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/1.Framework-for-Promoting-the-Growth-of-Digital-Startups-in-ASEAN-1.pdf> (accessed: 26.07.2026).

²⁰ ASEAN Guidelines on Fostering a Vibrant Ecosystem for Startups across Southeast Asia // The ASEAN Secretariat. December 2020. URL: <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/ASEAN-Guidelines-on-Fostering-a-Vibrant-Ecosystem-for-Startups-across-Southeast-Asia.pdf> (accessed: 26.07.2026).

²¹ F.I.R.S.T, IIT Kanpur Signs MoU with ASEAN Economic Forum in Indonesia to Bolster Startup Ecosystem in Southeast Asia // Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur. July 9, 2024. URL: <https://iitk.ac.in/mou-with-asean-economic-forum-in-indonesia> (accessed: 26.07.2026).

²² The Korea—ASEAN AI Startup Competition, AI Youth Fiesta 2025 Now Open // ASEAN-ROK S&T Cooperation Center. July 24, 2025. URL: <https://akstcc.org/the-koreaasean-aistartup-competition-ai-youth-fiesta-2025-now-open> (accessed: 26.07.2026).

²³ ASEAN Guide on AI Governance and Ethics // The ASEAN Secretariat. URL: https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/ASEAN-Guide-on-AI-Governance-and-Ethics_beautified_201223_v2.pdf (accessed: 26.07.2026).

¹⁸ Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement // The ASEAN Secretariat (n.d.). URL: <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Regional-Comprehensive-Economic-Partnership-RCEP-Agreement-Full-Text.pdf> (accessed: 02.02.2026).

Expanded ASEAN Guide on AI Governance and Ethics—Generative AI (2025)²⁴ reiterate a voluntary approach to using AI tools. As in the digital reality the implementation of collective decisions must be instant rather than gradual, this factor significantly hampers ASEAN-led digital multilateralism.

Intra-ASEAN gaps in digital competitiveness aggravate the problem. Compelling evidence is provided by IMD World Digital Competitiveness Ranking, published annually by the Swiss-based International Institute for Management Development, a top-rank business school and think-tank. According to its 2025 assessment, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines occupied positions 3, 34, 38, 51, and 56 respectively in overall terms, and positions 6, 40, 45, 43, and 52, respectively, according to the criterion “future readiness.”²⁵ For the association, bridging these gaps within a short time period is hardly possible, while performing necessary digitalization-related measures quickly and effectively in order to level the intra-ASEAN playing field is a time imperative.

Considering these developments through the lens of actor-network theory, the conclusion that ASEAN’s common digital agenda has increased in complexity, as both material (documents) and semiotic (ideas, institutions, etc.) discourses have impacted on the configuration of its network ecosystem (the already operational multilateral projects and initiatives with algorithms as actants) appears to be logical. Moreover, new vulnerabilities and the need for reconfiguration of the existing networks have become evident. To its credit, ASEAN not only recognizes that the ever-increasing digital challenges require its close

attention, but also devotes a great deal of effort to shape its course proactively. Against this backdrop, Timor-Leste’s membership may pose a serious obstacle to ASEAN’s vision and policy course.

The East Timor Connection

The accession of East Timor to ASEAN in October 2025 was an event of profound significance in ASEAN’s history, at least as far as its symbolic dimension is concerned (Shaternikov, 2025). However, from a digital perspective, Timor-Leste’s membership poses significant challenges for ASEAN.

First, Timor-Leste is a country with grave non-digital and digital challenges, which overlap with a negative multiplier effect. With regard to its non-digital dimension, underdeveloped infrastructure, including logistics, matters strongly. As of May 2025, approximately 30% of East Timorese lived in remote and hard-to-reach areas,²⁶ so the last-mile delivery problem is a serious growth bottleneck. As East Timor is a small state with a poorly developed manufacturing sector, it can hardly be integrated into technologically advanced global value chains in which enterprises of other ASEAN countries participate. The problem is aggravated by Timor-Leste’s limited domestic market and a high poverty rate (in 2025, 42% of its population lived below the poverty line²⁷). In the digital realm, the internet penetration rate in East Timor accounted for only 54.2% in 2024, according to the latest available data.²⁸ Government services and public

²⁴ Expanded ASEAN Guide on AI Governance and Ethics — Generative AI // The ASEAN Secretariat. URL: <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Expanded-ASEAN-Guide-on-AI-Governance-and-Ethics-Generative-AI.pdf> (accessed: 26.07.2026).

²⁵ IMD World Digital Competitiveness Ranking 2025 // Institute for Management and Development. 2025. URL: https://imd.widen.net/content/xclarczvwr/pdf/WDCR_Report_2025.pdf (accessed: 05.02.2026).

²⁶ Medina A.F. Investment Opportunities in Timor-Leste’s Digital Economy // ASEAN Briefing. May 28, 2025. URL: <https://www.aseanbriefing.com/news/investment-opportunities-in-timor-lestes-digital-economy/> (accessed: 05.02.2026).

²⁷ Timor-Leste Country Focus Report // The EU System for an Enabling Environment for Civil Society (EU SEE). November 25, 2025. URL: <https://eusee.hivos.org/document/timor-leste-country-focus-report/> (accessed: 08.02.2026).

²⁸ Timor-Leste Artificial Intelligence Readiness Assessment Report // UNESCO. 2025. P. 29. URL: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000395617?posInSet=1&queryId=f5974ab4-bb36-4a22-bc40-72fcc106634a> (accessed: 08.02.2026).

participation in the digital field are poorly developed, exemplified by the country's 159th and 120th positions (out of 193) in the UN E-Government Development Index and the UN E-Participation Index 2024.²⁹ These factors and their confluence are too serious to be overcome within a short time period.

Second, Timor-Leste lacks cybersecurity competences sufficiently developed for integrating into ASEAN-led economic multilateralism. This is especially important, since the association is encountering grave cybersecurity-related challenges (Ali et al., 2025). According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) Global Cybersecurity Index 2024 (the latest issue available), Timor-Leste was far behind other Asia-Pacific countries along multiple criteria (legal, technical, organization and cooperation measures, as well as capacity development). Due to this, the country was included in Tier 5 (with Afghanistan, Burundi, Solomon Islands and other poorly developed countries), which is the lowest.³⁰ Revealingly, best practices around the world in the cybersecurity field are shifting from installing and updating antivirus software to developing a comprehensive cybersecurity ecosystem premised on the Continuous Threat Exposure Management (CTEM) approach. In parallel, cyber threats, as well as methods and technologies to meet them, are growing in scale and complexity (Avetisyan & Belevantsev, 2025). Surely, Timor-Leste with its poorly trained human resources will be unable to address these issues proactively even in a mid-term perspective, which complicates its fully-fledged participation in ASEAN's cybersecurity-orientated efforts.

Third, East Timor may trigger new contradictions between ASEAN and its external partners in the digital field. As the current "geopolitics of data" gains momentum, the country grows progressively dependent on China and Australia. In 2017, Timor-Leste joined the Belt and Road Initiative, and in 2023, Beijing and Dili elevated relations to a comprehensive strategic partnership.³¹ Later, China launched several projects, including digital TV infrastructure construction and digital skill training programs, in the country. In its turn, Australia demonstrates growing interest in expanding cooperation with East Timor (Shaternikov, 2023). Logically, Australia's financial and technical contribution to East Timor's digital projects is part of this strategy.³² If the current competition between the BRI and the US-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework Agreement (IPEF) extends to East Timor, which is a likely scenario, ASEAN's vulnerability will increase markedly.

In this context, Timor-Leste's priorities regarding the Artificial Intelligence are of special note. Dili sees the AI through the lens of potential dominance by Global North powers. Besides, AI is seen as relevant to more advanced economies rather than developing countries like Timor-Leste. Lastly, Dili regards AI as a distant rather than an immediate priority. For these reasons, the AI usage and prospects remain both insufficiently conceptualized in key documents that shape the country's technological policy, and underused in its grass-root economic and commercial activities.³³

²⁹ UN E-Government Knowledgebase. East Timor // United Nations (n.d.). URL: <https://publicadministration.un.org/egovkb/en-us/Data/Country-Information/id/171-Timor-Leste> (accessed: 10.02.2026).

³⁰ ITU Development Sector // Global Cybersecurity Index 2024. 5th edition. 2024. P. 25, 28, 95. URL: https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Cybersecurity/Documents/GCIv5/2401416_1b_Global-Cybersecurity-Index-E.pdf (accessed: 11.02.2026).

³¹ Huang J. China's Engagement with Timor-Leste amid Geopolitical Tensions // RSIS Commentary. 2024 (July 10). No. 092. P. 1–4. URL: <https://rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/CO24092.pdf> (accessed: 11.01.2026).

³² Australia to Improve East Timorese Internet and Naval Base // The Straits Times. August 30, 2019. URL: <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/austalianz/australia-to-improve-east-timorese-internet-and-naval-base> (accessed: 11.02.2025).

³³ Timor-Leste Artificial Intelligence Readiness Assessment Report // UNESCO. 2025. P. 15–16, etc. URL: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000395617?posInSet=1&queryId=f5974ab4-bb36-4a22-bc40-72fcc106634a> (accessed: 11.02.2026).

Logically, Timor-Leste will be unable to integrate into ASEAN-led digital multilateralism, as this task will require significant upgrade of Dili's both digital and non-digital assets in time-pressing conditions. Specifically, East Timor cannot contribute substantially to ASEAN Plan of Action in Combatting Transnational Crime (2026–2035), with Cybercrime and Online Scams as one of eight priority areas,³⁴ due to lack of necessary competences. Additionally, East Timor's assistance in upgrading digital tools of AFTA and the RCEP can hardly be relevant to the association, as Timor-Leste's share in ASEAN's total merchandise trade accounted for negligible 0.03% in 2024.³⁵ Lastly, East Timor's even modest assistance to intra-ASEAN R&D cooperation seems unrealistic, as the country lacks an advanced industrial and technological base. For this reason, East Timor cannot contribute to ASEAN's policy on adapting digital technologies to the needs of isolated communities as it lacks relevant infrastructure tools and expertise. Additionally, its experience in resolving national tasks without digital infrastructure is irrelevant to other ASEAN countries, as they place a significant emphasis on enhancing their digital competitiveness.

From an actor-network theory perspective, East Timor's accession has increased ASEAN's heterogeneity and multi-layer dimension. Logically, it leads to the transformation of the roles of both East Timor and other ASEAN member states in ASEAN's network ecosystem. As a new unit, Timor-Leste's digital technologies will act as independent actors and change the intra-ASEAN network of digital connections. Revealingly, as a new unit is integrated into

a functioning network, it is necessary to synergy its actors (vision, protocols, and technologies) into ASEAN's already operational digital ecosystem (like, for instance, AFTA or the RCEP with their digital tools to support trans-boundary trade exchanges). If the translation (another term offered by the actor-network theory) is problematic, the stability of the whole system may be threatened. Discouragingly for the association, a negative multiplier effect will become a role player owing to the specifics of the digital transformation and its major components—a scenario that ASEAN is trying to avoid.

Both individually and collectively, the afore-discussed factors suggest that Timor-Leste will remain a passive observer rather than a real contributor to major areas of ASEAN's activity in the digital field. Since the Association is only as strong as its weakest member, the implications of East Timor's accession for digital multilateral economic cooperation within ASEAN will be clearly negative.

Instead of a Conclusion: Prospects for ASEAN in the Digital Age

The analysis of the implications of East Timor's accession to ASEAN, seen from the perspective of ASEAN-led digital economic multilateralism, its likely future course and limitations, leads to several broad assessments.

The usage of the actor-network theory provides a more nuanced understanding of international relations in the digital field, mostly, by exploring hidden connections and mechanisms. Specifically, it includes explaining challenges associated with multilateral cooperation, tracking the rising influence of non-human elements (actants), and synergizing these findings with a broader regional and global context.

ASEAN's latest expansion took place amidst progressing global entropy or, putting it differently, the revolutionary phase of global development (Sumsky, 2024), compounded by the digital transformation. Under these

³⁴ ASEAN Plan of Action in Combatting Transnational Crime (2026–2035) // ASEAN Secretariat. September 10, 2025. P. 5. URL: <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/04.-ASEAN-Plan-of-Action-in-Combatting-Transnational-Crime-2026-2035.pdf> (assessed: 13.02.2026).

³⁵ Merchandise Trade Share and Growth Rate (%) by ASEAN Member State, 2024 // ASEAN Key Figures 2025. Jakarta : The ASEAN Secretariat, 2025. P. 42. URL: https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/AKF-2025_v3_202601151314.pdf (accessed: 13.02.2026).

circumstances, for the association the speed factor is of crucial essence while arriving at and implementing collective decisions. At this juncture, ASEAN's inherent deficiencies and attendant vulnerabilities seem to have reached a critical point.

The ever-increasing digital transformation has raised the question of complete irrelevance of the ASEAN way (Honrada & Bokeriya, 2023) in the current international landscape. Arguably, Timor-Leste is likely to undermine any of ASEAN's digital multilateral projects and initiatives. Overall, East Timor's accession to ASEAN will be a litmus test of whether or not ASEAN can modify its cooperation methods to increase its resilience. Currently, abundant evidence suggests that this attempt may end in failure.

Timor-Leste's participation in the ASEAN-led digital economic multilateralism may ultimately turn ASEAN's identity into fiction. In fact, the association may once again encounter the problem it had to deal with during its expansion in the 1990s, namely, the emergence of the two-tier ASEAN (the newcomers were regarded as second-rank members). The problem was eventually resolved, the accession of East Timor may well revive these sentiments. As a result,

the implications will extend far beyond Timor-Leste per se, seriously undermining ASEAN's efforts to forge the spirit of ASEAN's identity and ability to act as a unified actor. These tasks are growing in relevance due to rising international turbulence in Southeast Asia, as well as in the world at large.

To expect that the need to integrate East Timor into ASEAN-led digital multilateralism might stimulate ASEAN to revise its approach to the digital transformation and strengthen the obligatory component of cooperation is groundless. As evidenced by the afore-discussed material, even before East Timor's accession, the association had encountered grave digitalization-related problems with no solutions in sight. Currently, neither Timor-Leste lacks necessary tools to unlock that stalemate to ASEAN's advantage, nor ASEAN is willing or able to amend its integration model after East Timor joined it.

All factors considered, for East Timor's membership may bring ASEAN more challenges than initially expected. Given the complexity of the issue and the lack of effective tools to address it, ASEAN's strength and resilience may be undermined for many years ahead.

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