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Maintaining Centrality: ASEAN's Evolving Institutional Strategy on the Climate Change Agenda

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Abstract

This article examines how ASEAN has built and maintained its centrality in the climate change agenda across 15 ASEAN Joint Statements on Climate Change (AJSCC) issued between 2007 and 2025. It advances two core arguments. First, ASEAN centrality in the climate change domain is not asserted but accumulated: it is constructed through a nested legitimation structure in which the prior legitimation of ASEAN's climate agenda is a necessary discursive precondition for any centrality claim, deployed through a multimodal architecture combining authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, and mythopoesis. Second, this centrality is not static. It has evolved from a reactive, entitlement-based posture toward an increasingly assertive coordinating role, driven primarily by internal institutionalization, compounding crises, and physical climate escalation rather than by the Paris Agreement as an external critical juncture. Applying discourse tracing supplemented by van Leeuwen's legitimation framework to the complete corpus of 15 AJSCCs, the study finds that the Paris Agreement does not produce a discursive rupture. ASEAN's path-dependent deliberative norms absorb the external governance milestone without fundamental reorientation. These findings contribute to scholarly understanding of how regional organizations construct institutional authority incrementally— through discursive accumulation rather than assertion—in domains where hard power is structurally unavailable.

Keywords: ASEAN centrality, Legitimation, Climate change, Discourse tracing

Introduction

Across the Asia-Pacific, the question of who leads on climate change has become as politically consequential as the question of what to do about it. Regional organizations have staked claims to coordinating roles in the global climate governance architecture. In doing so they navigate the tension between their institutional mandates, their members' developmental interests, and an international regime that increasingly demands ambitious collective action (Falkner, 2016; Rajamani, 2016). For the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), this navigation is especially revealing. Climate change is a domain where ASEAN's foundational norms constrain it most severely: non-interference, consensus-based decision-making, and the deliberate avoidance of binding regional obligations (Caballero-Anthony, 2017; Stubbs, 2008). ASEAN cannot impose, compel, or legislate on climate change. What it can do is claim, frame, and legitimate. This article examines how it does so, and how that discursive work has evolved across nearly two decades of institutional practice.

The article asks how ASEAN has constructed and maintained centrality in its climate change agenda, and whether that construction has shifted alongside developments in global climate governance, particularly the Paris Agreement. The analysis of the corpus yields two findings. First, ASEAN centrality in climate change is not asserted at the outset but accumulated. It is constructed through a nested legitimation structure and sustained by a multimodal discursive architecture of mutually reinforcing mechanisms. Second, that centrality has shifted incrementally across three phases.

These shifts correspond more closely to ASEAN's own institutionalization, to compounding crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and to the escalation of physical climate events than to the Paris Agreement.

ASEAN centrality, climate change, and the construction of institutional authority

ASEAN centrality has attracted considerable scholarly attention, though its conceptualization remains contested. Acharya (2017) traces the concept to a cluster of interrelated aspirations—ASEAN as regional leader, driver, architect, and institutional hub—consolidated in the post-Cold War period around ASEAN's inclusive, non-constraining brand of regionalism. Tan (2017) disaggregates these aspirations into five overlapping conceptions: regional leader, convenor or facilitator, hub or primary node, results-oriented actor, and institutional identity-builder. Each implies a different standard of evidence for centrality. From a practitioner's perspective, Buensuceso (2022) defines centrality through convening power: the capacity of ASEAN, particularly in its Chair role, to set the agenda and influence the regional and global landscape. Hamanaka (2025) disaggregates centrality into two analytically distinct but synergistic strategies: a core strategy that places ASEAN at the center of concentric membership circles, and a hub strategy through which ASEAN, rather than its partners, determines the level and label of each bilateral relationship. He acknowledges that this institutionalist account omits the normative and substantive dimensions of centrality, including agenda-setting and norm-diffusion capacity. Taken together, these accounts treat centrality as socially constructed: continuously produced, reproduced, and contested through language and practice. Centrality may therefore carry different social meanings in the climate change domain, and those meanings require interpretation.

A recurring tension in this literature concerns whether ASEAN centrality is substantive or illusory. Acharya (2017, p. 278) distinguishes "centrality of goodwill," in which ASEAN is acknowledged as the convening venue, from "centrality of substance," which demands genuine agenda-setting, direction-providing, and dispute-resolving capacity. Tan (2017) registers the persistent scholarly skepticism that centrality is an expedient device for preserving ASEAN's primacy against architectural renovation. Jones and Smith (2007) argue more forcefully that non-interference and non-binding consensus operate as barriers to integration rather than as foundations for regional leadership. This tension bears directly on the present study. It raises the question of whether ASEAN's discursive construction of centrality in climate change reflects institutional leadership or rhetorical self-preservation, a question that legitimation analysis can examine without presupposing either answer.

A productive response treats ASEAN centrality as an institutional strategy that must be enacted (Buensuceso, 2022; Koga, 2022) and as a discursive practice produced through iterative institutional acts (Kwon, 2025). Two dimensions are mutually constitutive: an internal dimension concerned with ASEAN's institutional coherence and coordinating capacity, and an external dimension through which ASEAN projects that coordinating role toward dialogue partners and the wider international community (Buensuceso, 2022; Caballero-Anthony, 2014). The two are analytically distinct but empirically interdependent. As Buensuceso (2022) observes, cross-pillar incoherence among ASEAN's community pillars diminishes its credibility in external projection. This distinction supplies the criterion applied later in this article for treating institutional accumulation as centrality-relevant rather than as ordinary bureaucratic growth.

Climate change is among the most consequential non-traditional security (NTS) issues on ASEAN's agenda, and 2007 marked its formal entry into ASEAN's institutional lexicon through the Singapore Declaration (Caballero-Anthony, 2017). The architecture that has since developed is fragmented across community pillars and lacks binding regional commitments. That structural incoherence makes climate change a productive domain for examining how centrality is constructed where hard institutional authority is unavailable: discursive work is most visible precisely where material capacity is most constrained. Empirical scholarship on ASEAN's climate change discourse supports the point. Qiao-Franco (2021) shows that ASEAN's use of the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities (CBDR-RC) across successive joint statements is neither incidental nor reactive. It simultaneously defends the right to development, builds solidarity

among developing country members, and maintains ASEAN's relevance as a collective voice in global negotiations. Her finding that ASEAN retained the Kyoto Protocol formulation of CBDR-RC as global negotiations moved toward the Paris Agreement's more differentiated framing provides the first systematic evidence of the discursive resilience examined here. Mejia et al. (2026), analyzing AJSCCs from COP23 to COP29, identify a gradual shift from a narrow CBDR-equity orientation toward a more integrated framing that incorporates public health, resilience, and socio-economic vulnerabilities, with COVID-19 emerging as a consequential discursive inflection point.

Together these studies establish that ASEAN's climate change discourse is strategically organized, path-dependent, and responsive to both internal institutional developments and external crises. What they do not examine is the legitimation work through which institutional authority is built and sustained. This article addresses that gap. It applies a legitimation lens across the full corpus of 15 AJSCCs to ask how ASEAN's authority in this domain is constructed, accumulated, and maintained.

Methodology

The primary corpus of this study consists of the complete population of 15 ASEAN Joint Statements on Climate Change (AJSCCs) issued between 2007 and 2025, retrieved from ASEAN's official website and digital archive. ASEAN has issued an AJSCC annually except in 2008, when Thailand's domestic political crisis resulted in the cancellation of the ASEAN Summit, and in 2012, 2013, and 2020, the last of these because the COVID-19 pandemic prevented issuance. The statements are analyzed as institutional artifacts, that is, as "social facts… produced, shared and used in socially organized ways" (Atkinson & Coffey, 2004, p. 58). As Buensuceso (2022) demonstrates in her autoethnography of ASEAN diplomacy, every phrase in a summit statement is the product of laboriously negotiated consensus. Such documents do not merely represent a regional reality; they actively construct it (Atkinson & Coffey, 2004; Buensuceso, 2022). The opening formula of each declaration, "We, the Heads of State/Government of ASEAN Member States," is itself the clearest discursive trace of that consensus-building labor. Supplementary sources, including related ASEAN documents, scholarly literature, and news articles, are engaged where they illuminate the production or circulation of the discursive practices identified in the corpus.

Two analytical frameworks ground the analysis: van Leeuwen's (2007) legitimation framework and LeGreco and Tracy's (2009) discourse tracing. van Leeuwen (2007) identifies four categories through which social practices and institutional arrangements are justified in discourse: authorization, by reference to personal, expert, institutional, or conformist authority; moral evaluation, by reference to value systems through evaluative language or analogy; rationalization, by reference to goals, uses, or effects; and mythopoesis, through moral or cautionary narratives.

Discourse tracing, as developed by LeGreco and Tracy (2009), draws from process tracing, Fairclough's critical discourse analysis, and case study research. It critically analyzes the power relations associated with change through a systematic and transparent process of data analysis, and reconceptualizes the micro, meso, and macro levels as interconnected sites of empirical data (LeGreco & Tracy, 2009, p. 1517). This study operates at the meso level (ASEAN institutional texts) and the macro level (the broader international climate regime). Its epistemological position is interpretivist and critical constructivist: institutional meanings are treated as intersubjectively produced rather than given, and analysis is understood as an interpretive act that must be made transparent enough for readers to assess (Hopf, 1998; Lamont, 2022).

The analytical procedure followed four phases. First, the corpus was arranged chronologically. Second, each statement was read in full and annotated for recurring language, framing patterns, shifts, and analytically meaningful absences, with annotations recorded statement by statement so that changes in wording could be tracked across years. Third, a set of structured questions was applied horizontally to every statement under five thematic categories that emerged from the first reading: climate change framing; articulation and legitimation of ASEAN centrality; meso–macro discursive linkages; changes across the Paris Agreement juncture; and tensions and contradictions. Because these categories were emergent rather than pre-set, each was re-applied to statements already read once it had been established, so that the

whole corpus was interrogated on the same terms. Fourth, the results were translated into analytical narratives.[1]

Within this procedure, legitimation categories were assigned at the level of the clause or sentence, and each assignment rests on the warrant a passage offers for the practice it describes. A passage was read as authorization where legitimacy derives from the status of an actor, an existing mandate, or a recognized expert body; as moral evaluation where it derives from appeal to a value system through evaluative or comparative language; as rationalization where it derives from the stated purpose, function, or effect of a practice; and as mythopoesis where it constructs a narrative trajectory in which harm follows from inaction. Passages carrying more than one warrant were recorded under each applicable category rather than forced into a single dominant one. Table 1 illustrates the classification.

Table 1 Illustrative classification of corpus excerpts under van Leeuwen's (2007) legitimation categories

Excerpt	Category	Basis for classification
"We, the Heads of State/Government of ASEAN Member States" (AJSCC 2007, p. 1)	Authorization (personal)	The warrant rests on the status of the speaking actors; summit-level consensus is invoked as the ground for the commitments that follow.
Developed countries should act "given their historical responsibility, economic strength and capabilities" (AJSCC 2009, par. 3)	Moral evaluation	Obligation is grounded in a value system of accountability and justice rather than in a mandate or an expected outcome.
The ACCC as "the knowledge hub and the strategic coordinator of climate action initiatives and activities in the ASEAN region" (AJSCC 2022, par. 3g)	Rationalization	Explicitly states function and usefulness of an institutional mechanism.
"an extraordinary streak of record-breaking temperatures"; 2024 as "the hottest year on record" (AJSCC 2025, par. 1)	Mythopoesis	Constructs an implied trajectory in which continued inaction leads to escalating harm, without narrating a story in the conventional sense.

Two boundaries of this design should be stated at the outset. First, the corpus consists exclusively of collectively negotiated ASEAN texts. These record the positions ASEAN is willing to state jointly. They do not record the deliberations behind those positions, the divergent preferences of individual member states, or how ASEAN's claims are received by dialogue partners, national bureaucracies, or civil society. The findings therefore describe how centrality is constructed in ASEAN' s own institutional voice, not whether that construction is recognized by the actors whose recognition centrality ultimately requires. Second, discourse analysis identifies patterns, sequences, and co-occurrences in text; it cannot establish that a given event produced a given discursive change. Where the discussion below refers to drivers of change, the claim is one of correspondence between documented developments and observable shifts in the texts, not one of causation.

Figure 1 sets out the relationship between the nested structure and the four legitimation strategies. The vertical dimension represents the nesting. First- order

[1]The full set of structured questions and the complete discourse tracing matrix, in which each statement is coded against them, are available from the corresponding author upon request.

legitimation establishes that ASEAN should engage with climate change collectively and has the institutional capacity to do so; second- order legitimation, which converts that engagement into a claim to a coordinating role, becomes available only once the first is in place. The four strategies are not distributed one per level. Each operates at both levels but performs different work at each. Authorization at the first order invokes summit consensus and IPCC science to warrant engagement, and at the second order enumerates ASEAN's own mechanisms as evidence of capacity. Moral evaluation at the first order establishes regional exposure and developmental entitlement, and at the second grounds a claim to speak for that constituency. Rationalization at the first order justifies engagement by its expected effects, and at the second specifies what ASEAN's coordinating bodies do. Mythopoesis operates almost entirely at the first order, sustaining the urgency on which the rest of the structure rests. The horizontal dimension represents accumulation across statements: each declaration extends the one before it, which raises the discursive cost of retreating from the claim.

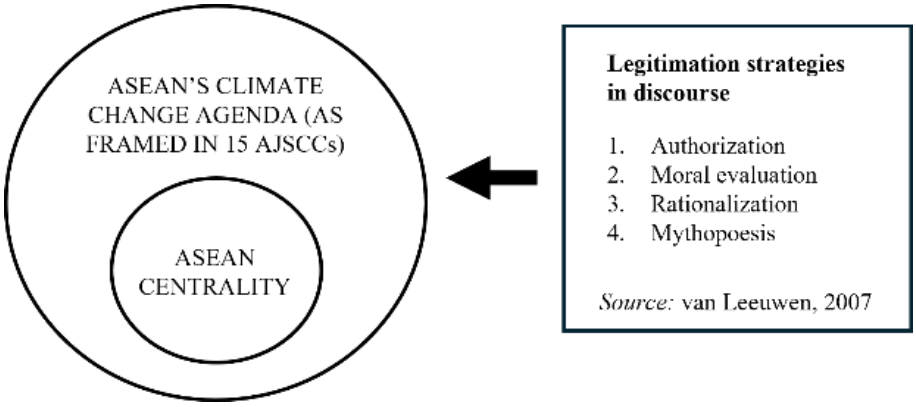

Figure 1 Authors' conceptual framework of how ASEAN constructs and maintains centrality in climate change
Source: Made through Microsoft PowerPoint

Findings and discussion

Constructing and maintaining centrality through a nested legitimation structure

The starting point of this analysis is the significant discursive absence. Nowhere in the 15 AJSCCs does the term "centrality" appear in reference to ASEAN's own governance role in climate change domain. The word appears only in reference to the institutional authority of the UNFCCC itself (AJSCC, 2016, p. 1).

The vocabulary of centrality deployed in other ASEAN domains, i. e. "driving seat," "convener," "architect," is similarly absent across most of the corpus. From 2022 onwards, the term "hub" has been attached to the ASEAN Centre for Climate Change (ACCC) as a specific coordinating institution rather than to ASEAN as a whole (AJSCC, 2022).

This absence should not be taken as evidence that ASEAN has not been building toward centrality. Rather, it offers a clue about the structure through which any such claim would have to be made. When issuing the first AJSCC in 2007, former Indonesian Foreign Minister Hassan Wirayuda framed it as: "ASEAN should not be left behind by other regional organizations in addressing environmental issues… We will show the world that ASEAN cares and can contribute" (LKBN Antara, 2007, as cited in Qiao-Franco, 2021, p. 14). The aspiration is there from the outset; what is absent at that moment is the institutional credibility that would make any claim of centrality tenable. What is visible in this earliest statement is first- order legitimation work, establishing that ASEAN should engage with climate change at all.

The legitimation of centrality is therefore nested within, and dependent upon, the prior legitimation of ASEAN's collective engagement with climate change. ASEAN must also establish that it has the institutional capacity to operationalize its aspirations. This is consistent with the internal and external dimensions of

centrality (Buensuceso, 2022; Caballero-Anthony, 2014): internal institutional coherence must precede the external projection of a coordinating role. Institutional accumulation counts as centrality-relevant, rather than as ordinary bureaucratic growth, in a specific and limited sense. The mechanisms are enumerated in texts addressed to an external audience, and they are cited as warrants for ASEAN's collective standing in global negotiations rather than only as instruments of internal coordination. What carries the claim is not the inventory itself but the use the statements make of it. As of the 2025 statement, that internal building project has taken increasingly concrete form, but the explicit centrality claim it would enable remains emergent.

Applying van Leeuwen's (2007) legitimation framework to this nested structure reveals not only what ASEAN claims in its climate change agenda, but also how those claims are made legitimate, and how that changes over time.

Legitimation through authorization

Authorization derives legitimacy from the status or role of a person or institution, from expertise, from existing rules and mandates, or from conforming to what recognized authorities do (van Leeuwen, 2007). Applied here, it answers: on whose authority does ASEAN speak when engaging the global climate change agenda?

The most structurally stable form of authorization across all 15 statements is personal authority: each declaration is prefaced by the affirmation that it represents the consensus of the Heads of State and Government of ASEAN member states. In an organization whose foundational norm is non-interference and whose decision-making rests on consensus (Acharya, 2017), this summit-level invocation is the highest available form of collective endorsement. Expert authority is consistently deployed alongside it through citation of relevant Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Assessment Reports. It grounds regional alarm in internationally recognized scientific consensus, which is a form of what van Leeuwen (2007) calls conformist authority, signaling that ASEAN is acting in accordance with what the relevant epistemic community regards as authoritative.

Impersonal authorization has evolved notably. In the earliest statements (2007-2011), it operates mainly through reference to foundational ASEAN instruments. The 2007 AJSCC invokes the Bali Concord II and the ASEAN Vision 2020, framing ASEAN's climate commitments as the fulfillment of pre-existing institutional obligations rather than as a novel claim. From 2014 onwards, the corpus begins to enumerate ASEAN's own climate-specific mechanisms, and each new institutional creation is presented as an additional pillar in the architecture of ASEAN's authority. This shift from authorization-by-vision to authorization-by-achievement consolidates across the post-Paris statements. By 2025 the cumulative inventory runs to more than a dozen bodies and mechanisms, each cited as evidence of ASEAN's established capacity to act. The growing inventory raises the discursive cost of walking back the centrality claim it collectively underwrites. The 2023 AJSCC introduces a further form of personal authorization. It names individual member states' leadership roles within UNFCCC bodies—the Vice-Chairmanship of Indonesia at IPCC Working Group I and the Co-Chairmanships of Singapore and Malaysia at Working Groups II and III—as evidence of ASEAN's engagement with global climate governance. Authorization is thereby extended beyond ASEAN's collective identity to the demonstrated expertise of its members within global forums.

Legitimation through moral evaluation

Moral evaluation legitimates through appeal to value systems. An action or practice is justified by its link to what a community regards as good, just, or natural (van Leeuwen, 2007). In this study, it illuminates how ASEAN constructs the justice of its climate demands.

In the pre-Paris statements (2007-2015), the dominant moral evaluation strategy is the invocation of "historical responsibilities." Developed countries are consistently framed as bearing greater moral accountability for climate change on the grounds of their cumulative emissions, economic strength, and capabilities. The 2009 AJSCC, for instance, calls for climate action "given their [Annex I Parties'] historical responsibility, economic strength and capabilities" (par. 3). The 2014 AJSCC urges developed countries to "take the lead…given their historic responsibility, economic strength and capabilities" (p. 1). The phrase constructs the asymmetric distribution of climate obligations as

morally self-evident, an act of justice rather than policy. By naming "historical responsibility" as the relevant moral category, the declarations render the inaction of developed countries not merely as policy failure but as moral failure.

This phrase disappears from subsequent declarations. Its disappearance coincides with the Paris Agreement's replacement of historical-accountability language with the more politically neutral qualifier "in the light of different national circumstances" in Article 2.2 (Rajamani, 2024). The corpus records no reason for the change, and the sequencing alone cannot establish one. What the texts do show is that the historical-accountability content was softened without climate justice being abandoned. From 2016 onwards, ASEAN continues to invoke CBDR-RC (Qiao-Franco, 2021) without invoking historical blame, appealing instead to international legal precedent.

ASEAN's moral language thus adjusts to the normative grammar of the post-Paris governance environment. Alongside this recalibration, the post-Paris corpus elaborates an increasingly rights-based register. From 2017 onwards, climate change is framed as producing "disproportionate and adverse effects on vulnerable and marginalized groups" (AJSCC 2017, p. 1) and by its 2025 AJSCC, ASEAN invokes "regional solidarity" (par. 10a) and the "protect [ion of] the well-being of all nations worldwide" (par. 4). This moral claim is rhetorically more ambitious and more universal, but also less specifically directed at developed-country obligation than its predecessors.

Legitimation through rationalization

Rationalization legitimates practices "by reference to their goals, uses and effects" (van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 101), pointing to what an action achieves rather than to what it embodies. Two threads run through the corpus, and together they reveal the tension at the heart of ASEAN's centrality construction in the climate change domain.

The first thread is institutional rationalization or the progressive specification of why ASEAN's coordinating bodies are useful and what they do. The 2007 AJSCC deploys an incipient form of this logic, tasking ministerial bodies "to carry on the cooperation in implementing the objective of this Declaration "(par. 9), without naming specific mechanisms. By 2010, the AWGCC was established to "develop a common understanding and position of ASEAN" (2010 AJSCC, par. 12) for the Conference of Parties (COP) negotiations. The ASEAN Climate Change Initiative (ACCI) was also tasked to "actively provide a consultative platform to further strengthen regional coordination and cooperation addressing climate change" (2010 AJSCC, par. 13). This is the first time institutional rationalization names a mechanism and specifies their functions. The trajectory continues in the 2016 statement, which invokes ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER) mechanisms as an important platform for "an efficient and effective ASEAN rapid response capacity in the event of natural disasters" (2016 AJSCC, par. 3). By 2022, the ACCC is rationalized as a "regional centre for excellence, the knowledge hub and the strategic coordinator of climate action initiatives and activities in the ASEAN region" (AJSCC 2022, par. 3g). The progression from general mandate to architectural specificity is the discursive trace of ASEAN's institutionalization of the climate agenda.

The second thread is the logic of contingent contribution, introduced in the 2021 statement and carried forward consistently thereafter. ASEAN member states "recognize the potential contribution by developing countries in the form of emissions avoidance, reductions, and carbon stock enhancement, dependent on the support provided by developed countries as guaranteed by the Convention and the Paris Agreement" (AJSCC 2021, par. 7). The claim asserts capacity and conditions its realization on external support. It also justifies ASEAN's demand for developed-country climate financing by reference to what that support would enable. In doing so it manages the gap between ASEAN's growing aspirations and its material constraints without abandoning either.

Legitimation through mythopoesis

Mythopoesis legitimates through narratives in which legitimate practices are rewarded and deviations from norms are punished (van Leeuwen, 2007). The AJSCCs do not tell stories in any conventional sense. The corpus nonetheless performs something recognizably mythopoetic when it constructs a cautionary future through the progressive intensification of language that signals concern.

The escalation is traceable across the corpus. The 2015 AJSCC introduces the phrase "gravely concerned" (p. 1), which then becomes a structural fixture across every subsequent statement. By 2023, this has intensified to "most profoundly concerned" (par. 1). By 2025, the concern is grounded in the experiential specificity of "an extraordinary streak of record-breaking temperatures" and the affirmation that "2024 [was] the hottest year on record" (AJSCC 2025, par. 1). These rhetorical devices communicate a cautionary narrative in which climate change is worsening, ASEAN is among its most exposed constituencies, and collective regional action is the available response. This narrative accumulates across the declarations as a recognizable cautionary arc grounded in concrete regional events. The 2014 AJSCC invoked Typhoon Haiyan and Cyclone Nargis as "stark evidence of the destructive impacts and disaster-prone nature of the region that cannot be ignored" (p. 1), functioning as lived instances of the catastrophic future that continued inaction makes more likely.

Across all four strategies, the corpus reveals a legitimation architecture that is stable in its foundational logic and progressive in its elaboration. The same strategies are present from 2007 to 2025, but grow more specific, more institutionally grounded, and more morally calibrated. This consistency is precisely what makes the nested structure durable.

Three discursive mechanisms sustain this nested structure of legitimation. First is the permanent availability of first-level legitimation strategies, where each new statement extends an already-established discursive foundation rather than rebuilding it, producing a discourse that grows more architecturally specific over time without ever appearing to make a sudden claim. Second is the logic of ASEAN's contingent contribution, which asserts capacity and defers its realization in one move while maintaining a persistent demand on the international community. Third is institutional accumulation (Pierson, 2004), in which each successive statement extends the inventory of ASEAN's climate governance mechanisms. Centrality is thus implicitly articulated through the web of institutional mechanisms established by ASEAN to address climate change.

Evolution of centrality: Phases and drivers

The findings above show that centrality, particularly in the context of climate change, is a constantly evolving institutional strategy. We find that ASEAN centrality construction traces a three-phase trajectory, which corresponds to shifts in ASEAN's posture towards its own role in the climate change agenda. The three-phase trajectory identified in this analysis emerged from the discourse tracing procedure of organizing the corpus around a particular critical juncture (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007; LeGreco & Tracy, 2009). This study deliberately selected the Paris Agreement as a critical juncture given how parties to the UNFCCC themselves framed it at the closing session of COP21: as "revolutionary" (Venezuela), "a tremendous collective achievement" (the EU), "a marvelous act" (China), "a resounding triumph of multilateralism" (St. Lucia) introducing a "new era of global climate governance" (Egypt), and "a tremendous victory for the planet…restoring the global community's faith that we can accomplish things multilaterally" (USA) (Dimitrov, 2016, pp. 1–2).

In the first phase (2007-2009), ASEAN's self-assigned role is largely reactive and entitlement-based. The declarations commit to cooperating among member states, lobbying collectively within UNFCCC processes, and incorporating climate strategies into national development plans. While they position ASEAN as largely affected by climate change, they do not explicitly articulate a proactive role for the regional bloc. The dominant subject of the declarations is what developed countries owe developing countries, with ASEAN functioning as one constituency within the latter category. The framing is consistently of vulnerability and developmental entitlement. AMS' fossil-fuel-dependent economies are a vulnerability, leading the region to face "serious and irreversible damage" (AJSCC 2007, p. 1) in the face of climate change. From the outset, however, the strategic motivation behind this posture is already present: the declaration of vulnerability is simultaneously a claim to relevance.

The 2010 statement marks the transition into the second phase (2010-2021). The establishment of the AWGCC and the ACCI, combined with the first explicit articulation that ASEAN should develop "a common understanding and position" (AJSCC 2010, par. 12) for

COP negotiations, represents the earliest construction of ASEAN as a collective actor with its own voice in global climate diplomacy. Climate change is also, for the first time, explicitly articulated as integral to the ASEAN Community vision, namely a climate-resilient ASEAN Community (AJSCC 2010). This moves climate change from an external obligation into an internal dimension of what ASEAN is for. The phase is characterized by progressive and cumulative institutionalization. Each successive statement adds new mechanisms and frameworks: the Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry Towards Food Security Framework (AFCC Framework) in 2011; AADMER, among others, in 2014; the ASEAN Action Plan on Joint Response to Climate Change (AAP-JRCC) in 2016; the ASEAN Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) Partnership and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) Blueprint 2025 in 2018; the ASEAN Disaster Risk Financing and Insurance (ADRFI), among others, in 2019; and the ASEAN Taxonomy for Sustainable Finance and the ACCC in 2021. The 2021 AJSCC captures a further inflection. It makes the first explicit connection between climate governance and pandemic recovery, invoking "building back greener" (par. 19) as a normative frame. COVID-19 expands the moral and political register of ASEAN's climate engagement beyond the developmental- vulnerability frame to encompass recovery, resilience, and the compounding of crises.

The third phase (2022-2025) is characterized by an increasingly assertive posture in which post- 2021 statements foreground ASEAN's institutional achievements as evidence of centrality. The 2022 AJSCC description of the ACCC as "a knowledge hub and the strategic coordinator" (par. 3g) is the most explicit centrality-adjacent language in the corpus. The 2024 AJSCC goes further, recognizing "the pivotal role of ACCC… to significantly enhance intergovernmental cooperation and facilitate comprehensive responses to climate change" (p. 1). The 2025 AJSCC meanwhile elevates the AWGCC as "a strategic foundation for coordinated and inclusive climate action across the region" (par. d) and frames NDC submission as a "strong [expression] of political will" (par. a). This formulation implicitly positions ASEAN's collective commitment as a form of regional leadership. Prior to this, in the 2023 AJSCC specifically, ASEAN has for the first time articulated a more proactive external role for ASEAN as evinced by its citation of individual member states' leadership roles within IPCC working groups as evidence of ASEAN's engagement with the global climate governance architecture.

What accounts for these transitions? More specifically, did the Paris Agreement shape the trajectory identified above?

The 2016 AJSCC, the first statement issued after the Paris Agreement's adoption in December 2015, is the empirical site where a discursive shift would be expected. The expectation is not unreasonable. In a 2017 joint statement with the European Union, ASEAN described the Paris Agreement as "a historic achievement" for international cooperation (ASEAN Secretariat, 2017, p. 1). No such triumphalist narration appears in the AJSCCs themselves. Across the corpus there is no significant shift in foundational framing. Climate change remains a developmental threat, CBDR-RC remains the primary organizing principle, and the financial commitments of developed countries remain a consistent demand. The 2016 statement thus exhibits the equilibrium condition described by punctuated equilibrium theory, in which established commitments and rhetorical conventions resist displacement even when a significant exogenous event creates structural conditions for change (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Pierson, 2004). It is also consistent with accounts of norm localization, in which external normative developments are absorbed and adapted to pre-existing regional practice rather than displacing it (Acharya, 2004). By absorbing the Paris Agreement without rupture, the discourse does not merely survive the juncture; it consolidates around it. Each subsequent citation of the Paris Agreement as an authoritative framework adds a further layer to the authorization-by-achievement structure underlying the centrality claim. The stability of the discourse is, in this sense, constitutive of the construction of centrality.

One structural imprint of the Paris Agreement is worth noting. From 2016 onwards, each AJSCC increasingly foregrounds what ASEAN member states have collectively achieved: NDC submissions, sectoral frameworks, and institutional milestones. This frames compliance as evidence of coordinating capacity. The shift from entitlement- claiming to achievement-reporting is consistent with the transparency and ratchet

logic of the Paris Agreement's Enhanced Transparency Framework, which requires parties to report publicly on NDC implementation and subjects those reports to international peer review (Bodansky, 2016; Rajamani, 2016). The rhetorical practice this induces, the iterative public enumeration of institutional achievements, reorients the discourse from outward demand toward demonstrated capacity. That the reorientation follows the post-2015 period is consistent with the Paris Agreement exerting a structural and procedural influence rather than a normative one: an influence visible not in what ASEAN now claims, but in how it publicly accounts for what it has done. The corpus alone cannot exclude other explanations for the same shift, and the reading is offered as a plausible interpretation rather than a demonstrated effect.

Three endogenous developments correspond more closely to the shifts identified above than the Paris Agreement does. The first is ASEAN's own internal institutionalization: the progressive establishment of climate-specific bodies from 2010 onwards accompanies qualitative changes in the discourse that do not align with external governance milestones. The second is the COVID-19 pandemic, which coincides with a more visible discursive inflection in the 2021 statement than the Paris Agreement does in 2016. The explicit linkage of climate governance to pandemic recovery is the most pronounced single shift in the post-Paris corpus, and it both confirms and qualifies Mejia et al.'s (2026) characterization of COVID-19 as a critical juncture. The third is the escalation of physical climate events: the 2024 AJSCC quantified ASEAN's climate-related economic losses at USD 97.3 billion for the period 2009-2020, and the 2025 statement highlighted 2024 as the hottest year on record. These correspondences are consistent with the sequencing observable in the corpus. They do not establish that any of these developments produced the discursive changes concerned. The statements record what ASEAN said and when, not why it said it.

Conclusion

These findings advance the ASEAN centrality literature in two interconnected ways. First, they reveal a sequenced discursive logic through which ASEAN builds centrality in domains where hard power is unavailable: internal institutional credibility must be established before external leadership claims can be asserted. ASEAN's climate centrality is therefore not absent but emergent. Whether this sequence consolidates depends on the ASEAN Centre for Climate Change (ACCC) producing a verifiable track record of coordination outcomes, closing the form-versus-substance gap Acharya (2017) identifies as ASEAN's recurring vulnerability. Second, the analysis gives Hamanaka's (2025) core-hub dichotomy of ASEAN centrality a discursive dimension. The study shows not merely that ASEAN positions itself as connector rather than commander, but how joint statements enact this positioning through accumulated legitimating claims. At the same time, it also revealed that the reputational and competitive impulses behind ASEAN's climate engagement are systematically translated into a public discourse of vulnerability, developmental entitlement, and collective moral standing.

Three directions for future research follow from these findings. First, triangulating the AJSCC corpus with key informant interviews or with individual member state climate policy documents would deepen the account considerably, particularly with respect to the gap between the logic of contingent contribution as a discursive strategy and its lived reality in implementation. Second, research tracing how ASEAN's centrality claims are received, enacted, or contested by dialogue partners, national bureaucracies, and civil society would test whether the legitimation strategies identified in the corpus are oriented primarily toward external audiences or toward member-state compliance. Such work would also address the principal limitation of the present design: a corpus of collectively negotiated ASEAN texts shows how centrality is constructed in ASEAN's own voice, but not whether external actors or member states recognize it. Third, comparative work on other regional organizations operating under similar constraints would establish whether the nested sequence identified here is specific to ASEAN or characteristic of institutions that must build authority discursively.

ASEAN's climate change discourse, across 15 joint statements spanning nearly two decades, tells a story not of transformation but of patient institutional construction. The bloc has not claimed to lead the world on climate change. Nor, given its structural constraints, could it easily do so. What it has done, with considerable

discursive consistency and growing institutional ambition, is build the architecture of a regional claim: establishing its vulnerability as a moral basis for demanding more of the global governance system, constructing its institutional mechanisms as evidence of its coordinating capacity, and progressively elaborating a vision of ASEAN as an indispensable regional partner in the global climate effort.

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Declaration of generative AI in scientific writing

Anthropic's Claude Sonnet 4. 6 was used to improve readability of the manuscript. Full human oversight and control was observed throughout the process. No AI was used in the analysis of data and in research design. Authors remain fully responsible for this article's content.

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