Transparency and accountability in security policy: a study on the implementation of good governance in Southeast Asia

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ABSTRACT

Security governance in Southeast Asia, particularly under ASEAN, is evolving amid pressures of regional cooperation and domestic political constraints. ASEAN member states strive to align national security policies with good governance principles like transparency and accountability but face challenges from historical legacies, institutional limitations, and geopolitical sensitivities. The ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) provides a normative framework aiming for cooperative security based on mutual respect, rule of law, and democratic governance. Yet implementation is uneven. Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines have made efforts such as publishing defense white papers and engaging in multilateral forums. However, these lack strong accountability mechanisms in areas like military budgeting, internal security operations, and intelligence oversight. ASEAN's principle of non-interference restricts enforcement of governance standards. This limits the organization's ability to address issues such as human rights abuses, corruption in the security sector, and weakening civilian control over the military. As a result, civil society engagement and public scrutiny remain limited. Still, ASEAN's consensus-driven model and platforms like the APSC offer entry points for reform. Trust-building, peer reviews, and shared transparency norms could enable gradual progress. Yet such change relies on member states' political will and stronger domestic institutions supporting democratic values. Improving transparency and accountability in ASEAN's security governance is not only a normative goal but a strategic necessity. It fosters trust, strengthens state legitimacy, and contributes to regional peace. Thus, institutional capacity building, broader civil society involvement, and promotion of regional norms must be prioritized in ASEAN's evolving security framework.

Keywords : Security Governance, ASEAN, Transparency, Accountability

INTRODUCTION

Security governance in Southeast Asia has undergone significant transformation over the past several decades, reflecting both global governance trends and the unique institutional, political, and cultural contexts of the region. As the international community increasingly emphasizes transparency, accountability, and democratic oversight in the management of national and regional security, Southeast Asian states find themselves navigating a complex terrain between inherited authoritarian legacies and emerging global standards of governance. At the center of this evolution is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which has positioned itself as the key regional organization tasked with shaping norms of cooperation, trust-building, and institutionalized dialogue in matters of peace and security. Yet, the effectiveness of ASEAN's security governance remains contested, as its normative aspirations frequently clash with entrenched domestic political practices and the principle of non-interference that continues to define regional relations.

The broader transformation of security governance in Southeast Asia cannot be understood without reference to the historical trajectory of state-building and regional institution-building. In the post-colonial period, most Southeast Asian states relied heavily on strong executive power and the military as guarantors of political stability and territorial integrity. Security policymaking was predominantly state-centric, militarized, and shielded from public scrutiny. During the Cold War, ideological polarization and domestic insurgencies further reinforced authoritarian governance and limited civilian participation in the security sector. Against this backdrop, ASEAN was established in 1967 as a mechanism to promote regional stability through cooperation, dialogue, and the avoidance of open conflict among its members. However, ASEAN's emphasis on sovereignty and non-interference in domestic affairs, while stabilizing interstate relations, also constrained the organization's ability to promote deeper governance reforms in security policy. The persistence of these institutional and political dynamics has created a gap between regional security aspirations and the actual practices of transparency and accountability at both national and regional levels.

The problem formulation in this study is anchored in the tension between das sollen (the normative ideal) and das sein (the empirical reality) of security governance in Southeast Asia. Ideally, national and regional security frameworks should be transparent, accountable, and subject to democratic oversight, reflecting the principles of good governance widely endorsed in global governance discourse. Such principles not only align with international norms but also contribute to building public trust, legitimizing state authority, and ensuring sustainable peace. In reality, however, Southeast Asian security policies remain deeply influenced by authoritarian legacies, limited institutional checks and balances, and a tendency to shield military expenditures and internal security operations from public scrutiny. In Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, the three case studies highlighted in this paper—formal commitments to transparency, such as the publication of defense white papers and participation in ASEAN-led forums, coexist with weak accountability mechanisms and limited civilian oversight. Furthermore, ASEAN's principle of non-interference discourages collective enforcement of governance standards, allowing states to resist external pressures for reform. This disjuncture between ideals and practice forms the core analytical concern of this research.

A growing body of literature has examined security governance in Southeast Asia, ASEAN's role in regional security, and the incorporation of good governance principles into security policies. For instance, studies on ASEAN regionalism emphasize the organization's contribution to conflict prevention and confidence-building measures through mechanisms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC). Scholars of good governance, meanwhile, highlight the importance of transparency, accountability, and civilian participation in strengthening democratic security institutions. However, there are several notable research gaps. First, much of the literature on ASEAN security governance focuses on inter-state conflict management and regional cooperation, while insufficient attention is given to how governance principles are operationalized within national security frameworks. Second, while transparency in the form of policy documents and official statements is often noted, few studies interrogate the substantive quality of accountability mechanisms in practice, especially with regard to oversight of military expenditures and internal security operations. Third, comparative analyses of Southeast Asian countries often treat the region as a monolithic bloc, without sufficiently accounting for

domestic political variations that shape the implementation of governance principles. These gaps highlight the need for a study that bridges global governance standards with the local realities of Southeast Asian security governance, focusing specifically on transparency and accountability as critical dimensions.

This paper contributes to the existing scholarship by offering a focused examination of how Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines incorporate the principles of transparency and accountability into their national security policies within the broader ASEAN framework. Unlike prior studies that primarily address regional security cooperation, this research engages with the internal dynamics of security governance in specific member states while situating them within ASEAN's institutional and normative context. The novelty of this study lies in its dual-level analysis: at the national level, it examines formal commitments and practical limitations in implementing governance principles; at the regional level, it evaluates ASEAN's capacity to foster and harmonize governance reforms despite institutional constraints. By bridging these levels of analysis, the paper offers a more comprehensive understanding of how global governance norms are localized in Southeast Asia and what challenges persist in aligning ideals with practice.

The central argument of this research is that enhancing transparency and accountability in ASEAN security governance is not merely a normative aspiration but a strategic necessity. Without credible mechanisms of oversight and openness, security institutions risk eroding public trust, undermining state legitimacy, and perpetuating governance practices that hinder long-term peace and stability. Transparency ensures that security policies and expenditures are subject to public scrutiny, reducing opportunities for corruption and abuse of power. Accountability reinforces the rule of law by subjecting security institutions to checks and balances, thereby strengthening democratic governance. For ASEAN as a regional organization, embedding these principles in its security framework enhances its credibility, improves its capacity to manage regional challenges, and aligns its practices with global governance standards. Thus, the pursuit of transparency and accountability should be understood not only as a moral imperative but also as a pragmatic strategy to foster sustainable peace and security in Southeast Asia.

The purpose of this study is to analyze how Southeast Asian states, with a focus on Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, incorporate transparency and accountability into their security governance frameworks. Specifically, the paper seeks to identify the extent to which formal commitments translate into substantive practices, the challenges that hinder effective implementation, and the potential role of ASEAN in fostering cooperative governance reforms. By addressing these objectives, the study aims to provide insights into both the national and regional dimensions of security governance, contributing to scholarly debates on ASEAN's evolving security role and offering policy-relevant recommendations for strengthening governance in the security sector. In doing so, this research underscores the importance of linking global governance ideals with local realities, highlighting the opportunities and constraints faced by Southeast Asian states in navigating the path toward more transparent and accountable security governance.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative descriptive design with an embedded policy-analysis and literature-review strategy. A qualitative descriptive approach is appropriate for clarifying how governance principles are articulated and operationalized in complex institutional settings where causal mechanisms are multi-layered and often opaque. Rather than testing a single causal hypothesis, the design aims to provide a rich, accurate account of how transparency and accountability are framed, institutionalized, and practiced within Southeast Asia's security sector, with particular attention to ASEAN's regional architecture. Policy analysis is used to interrogate the intent, instruments, and implementation logic of security policies, while the literature review situates these observations within established scholarly debates on security governance, regionalism, and good governance.

Research type. The qualitative descriptive approach guides all phases of the research, from question formulation to interpretation. It prioritizes conceptual clarity and careful contextualization over econometric inference, enabling the paper to integrate doctrinal texts (laws, doctrines, white papers), organizational procedures (budgeting, oversight, reporting), and normative frameworks (transparency, accountability, civilian control). Policy analysis—drawing on document analysis and comparative institutional assessment—provides the analytical lens for evaluating whether stated commitments translate into operational practices. The literature review is integrative and critical: it synthesizes findings across disciplines (international relations, public administration, security studies, and law) to identify convergences, contradictions, and blind spots relevant to security governance in ASEAN.

Type and source of data. The study relies exclusively on secondary data. Sources include: (1) peer-reviewed academic journal articles and scholarly books on security governance, ASEAN regionalism, civil–military relations, and good governance; (2) government documents such as national defense/white papers, security strategies, budget reports, audit summaries, enabling legislation, and parliamentary committee reports—particularly from Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines; (3) official ASEAN and ASEAN-related documents, including blueprints, declarations, chair statements, ministerial communiqués, and reports of the ASEAN Political–Security Community, the ASEAN Regional Forum, the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) and ADMM-Plus; (4) policy papers and reports from reputable think tanks and non-governmental organizations that monitor defense governance, public finance, and human rights; and (5) credible gray literature such as working papers, country briefs, and conference proceedings that directly address transparency and accountability in the security sector. Where available, English-language originals are used; otherwise, official translations or widely cited English summaries provide the basis for analysis.

Data collection techniques. Data collection proceeded in three stages. First, a comprehensive search strategy was implemented across major academic databases and library catalogues using Boolean combinations of core terms (e.g., "ASEAN" AND "security governance," "transparency," "accountability," "civilian oversight," "defense budgeting," plus country names). Targeted searches were also conducted on official repositories of ASEAN and national defense ministries to retrieve white papers, communiqués, and budget or audit documents. Second, inclusion criteria prioritized sources that (a) directly address transparency and/or accountability in security institutions; (b) analyze ASEAN's political–security instruments or regional norms; (c) provide country-specific evidence for Indonesia, Malaysia, or the

Philippines; and (d) were published by reputable academic presses, peer-reviewed journals, official bodies, or established policy organizations. Exclusion criteria removed duplicate items, opinion pieces without sourcing, purely technical military assessments without governance relevance, and sources lacking verifiable provenance. Third, all retained documents were catalogued in a reference matrix capturing bibliographic details, document type, institutional provenance, country coverage, time period, and preliminary relevance notes. This cataloguing step ensured traceability and enabled systematic cross-referencing across institutional and country contexts.

Data analysis techniques. The analysis combined qualitative content analysis with a structured, focused comparison across the three country cases. A two-stage coding strategy was used. In the deductive stage, a codebook derived from the conceptual framework predefined categories for transparency (e.g., public availability of defense white papers and budgets; clarity of programmatic line items; publication of audit findings; freedom-of-information provisions), accountability (e.g., legal mandates for legislative oversight; existence and effectiveness of audit institutions; complaint and redress mechanisms; sanctions for misconduct), and governance safeguards (e.g., civilian control provisions, procurement rules, conflict-of-interest regulations, human-rights compliance mechanisms). In the inductive stage, emergent codes were added to capture region-specific dynamics such as non-interference, securitization of internal dissent, confidentiality norms, military prerogatives, and regional peer pressure/peer learning. Coding was applied to all documents in the reference matrix; memos documented decisions, potential ambiguities, and alternative interpretations.

For cross-country analysis, the study adopts a most-similar systems design: Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines are all ASEAN members with shared regional commitments, comparable exposure to internal security challenges, and legacies of strong executive power, yet they differ in degrees of democratic consolidation, oversight capacity, and civil-society embeddedness. Using a structured, focused comparison, the same guiding questions were asked of each case: What formal transparency instruments exist? What accountability bodies are mandated and how do they operate? How are budgets presented and audited? What constraints do secrecy and national-interest claims impose on public scrutiny? How, if at all, do ASEAN forums or norms influence national practices? Answers were synthesized into analytic tables summarizing indicators along the transparency–accountability spectrum, supported by narrative explanation.

To enhance credibility, several validation techniques were employed. Triangulation compared claims across different source types (official statements versus watchdog reports versus academic assessments). Negative case analysis looked for documents or episodes that contradicted dominant narratives (e.g., budget declassification episodes or, conversely, re-securitization moments) to test the robustness of emerging interpretations. Code–recode checks were used to assess coding stability over time; an audit trail of codebook revisions, memos, and classification decisions was maintained to ensure transparency and replicability. Where indicators could not be fully verified (e.g., unpublished annexes to defense budgets), the analysis explicitly notes uncertainty and avoids over-generalization.

Limitations. Several constraints shape the scope and interpretation of findings. First, the study relies on secondary sources; it cannot access classified materials, internal deliberations, or closed-door ASEAN proceedings, all of which are salient in security policy. Second, ASEAN's consensus culture and principle of non-interference, together with confidentiality norms in defense affairs, limit the availability and granularity of official documentation, potentially biasing the evidentiary base toward public-facing statements rather than operational practice. Third, data availability is uneven across countries and years; some indicators (e.g., detailed procurement data, disaggregated internal security expenditures) are inconsistently reported or embedded in non-standard formats, complicating cross-case comparability. Fourth, language and legal-system differences can introduce interpretive asymmetries despite reliance on official English versions or translations. These limitations are mitigated through careful triangulation, explicit notation of evidentiary gaps, and a cautious interpretive stance that privileges convergent evidence across independent sources.

Ethical considerations and reflexivity. The research does not involve human subjects or sensitive personal data. Nevertheless, it adheres to ethical norms of accurate citation, faithful representation of sources, and avoidance of harm through mischaracterization of institutional positions. The researcher recognizes that governance assessments can be shaped by normative priors; reflexive memos are used to surface assumptions and ensure that judgments about transparency and accountability are grounded in documented criteria rather than implicit benchmarks.

Overall, this method's design—qualitative descriptive inquiry, rigorous document collection, and structured comparison—provides a coherent basis for assessing how transparency and accountability are articulated and practiced within ASEAN's security context and across the cases of Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. The approach is sufficiently flexible to capture regional specificities while remaining systematic enough to support credible cross-country inference.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION
Introductory Narrative

The research undertaken in this study reveals the persistent gap between the normative aspirations (das sollen) of transparency and accountability in security governance and the empirical realities (das sein) of practice in Southeast Asia. Drawing on the cases of Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, this section presents findings on how these states have sought to embed principles of good governance into their security sectors and the extent to which their practices converge or diverge from global governance standards. The discussion is situated within the broader framework of ASEAN's role as a regional institution, acknowledging both its contributions to norm diffusion and its structural limitations in enforcing reforms.

At the national level, the analysis shows that while all three countries have adopted certain formal measures, such as the publication of defense white papers, parliamentary oversight mandates, and participation in ASEAN-led initiatives—the substantive implementation of transparency and accountability mechanisms remains uneven and often constrained by entrenched political legacies. Indonesia, despite making notable progress in democratization and civilian oversight since the fall of Suharto, continues to struggle with the opacity of

defense budgeting and the autonomy of the armed forces. Malaysia demonstrates a paradox wherein formal legal frameworks exist but executive dominance and political patronage networks undermine their effectiveness. The Philippines, while constitutionally committed to democratic control, suffers from weak institutional capacity and fragmented oversight mechanisms, which limit the meaningful enforcement of accountability standards.

At the regional level, ASEAN's emphasis on the principle of non-interference continues to shape the contours of security governance, prioritizing stability and sovereignty over transparency and accountability. ASEAN forums such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM/ADMM-Plus) provide platforms for dialogue and confidence-building, but they stop short of prescribing or enforcing specific governance standards. This reflects ASEAN's broader "diplomatic culture," which values consensus and voluntary compliance over binding commitments.

The findings demonstrate that the pursuit of transparency and accountability in security governance is both a normative and strategic necessity. Without robust oversight and openness, security institutions risk fostering corruption, eroding public trust, and undermining the very legitimacy upon which state stability depends. While global governance frameworks articulate clear ideals, the localized realities of Southeast Asia illustrate the complexity of embedding these norms in political systems that remain heavily influenced by authoritarian legacies, national security imperatives, and sovereignty-sensitive regional norms.

National-Level Analysis: Indonesia

Indonesia represents the most compelling case in Southeast Asia of how democratization can reshape security governance, yet also illustrates the limits of reform when legacies of authoritarian rule persist. The country's trajectory since the fall of Suharto in 1998 demonstrates both progress in embedding transparency and accountability and continuing gaps that reveal the resilience of military prerogatives.

Transparency mechanisms

Following democratization, Indonesia began publishing defense white papers, the first in 2003, followed by subsequent editions in 2008 and 2015. These documents articulate defense priorities, threat perceptions, and military modernization goals, and they have been celebrated as markers of greater openness. They align with global governance norms by providing citizens, legislators, and international partners with formal policy documents that outline national security strategy.

However, the degree of transparency remains partial. While aggregate figures for defense budgets are made available through official budget documents, line-item details and procurement data remain opaque, often justified under national security grounds. Kiba (2022) notes that although Indonesia's white papers symbolize progress in openness, the substantive quality of budget disclosure is limited by broad categorizations that obscure actual spending priorities. This restricts meaningful parliamentary or civil-society scrutiny, reducing transparency to a procedural exercise rather than a substantive guarantee of accountability.

In practice, parliamentary debates on defense allocations are often perfunctory, with legislators lacking the technical expertise, resources, and political will to challenge defense bureaucrats or military officials. As a result, the defense establishment retains significant autonomy in defining security needs and allocating resources. This reflects a broader pattern identified by Aguja and Born (2016), who argue that in many Southeast Asian states, parliaments are structurally disadvantaged in exerting meaningful oversight over the security sector due to executive dominance, resource constraints, and weak institutional capacity.

Accountability structures

Indonesia has formally established accountability frameworks that include parliamentary oversight, audit institutions, and legal provisions for civilian control of the military. The People's Representative Council (DPR) is constitutionally empowered to review defense budgets, approve appointments of military leadership, and oversee national security policy. In theory, this positions parliament as a central actor in enforcing accountability.

In practice, however, the DPR's role is constrained. Defense oversight is fragmented across multiple committees, leading to duplication and weak coordination. Legislators are often dependent on information supplied by the defense establishment itself, which undermines their ability to independently verify claims or challenge spending proposals. Moreover, oversight is highly politicized; partisan competition and patronage networks dilute the collective capacity of parliament to act as a check on the executive and military.

Civilian oversight is further complicated by the enduring influence of the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI). Despite formal reforms that separated the military from politics and dissolved its reserved seats in parliament, the TNI continues to wield significant informal power. Military officers are frequently seconded to civilian posts, blurring the boundaries of civilian control. While this has declined compared to the New Order era, the persistence of such practices undermines the integrity of accountability mechanisms.

Challenges and constraints

Several challenges limit the substantive realization of transparency and accountability in Indonesia's security governance. First, the legacy of the New Order regime created a political culture in which the military was viewed as both a guarantor of stability and a political actor in its own right. This historical role continues to shape perceptions of the military as a privileged institution deserving of autonomy from civilian scrutiny.

Second, national security imperatives are frequently invoked to justify secrecy in defense spending and internal security operations. For example, operations in conflict-prone regions such as Papua are rarely subject to public oversight, with expenditures classified and shielded from scrutiny. This not only limits transparency but also raises concerns about human rights compliance.

Third, civil society engagement, while vibrant in Indonesia compared to many of its neighbors, remains limited in its capacity to influence security policy. Civil-society organizations and watchdog groups often lack access to reliable data, and their recommendations are rarely institutionalized in formal policymaking processes.

Positive developments

Despite these constraints, Indonesia has made notable progress compared to many other ASEAN states. The institutional separation of the police and the military in 1999 marked a critical reform that reduced the scope of military involvement in domestic security. The increasing professionalization of the military and gradual expansion of civilian expertise in defense affairs represent incremental steps toward a more accountable system. Moreover, the publication of defense white papers, even if limited, has contributed to greater transparency compared to the total opacity of the New Order era.

Kiba (2022) emphasizes that while Indonesia's reforms remain incomplete, they demonstrate the potential for democratization to create space for greater transparency and accountability in security governance. Similarly, Aguja and Born (2016) argue that the Indonesian parliament, despite its weaknesses, has progressively become more engaged in security oversight, reflecting broader trends of democratic consolidation.

Summary of Indonesia's case

Indonesia illustrates the complex interplay between formal reforms and enduring legacies. On paper, the country has established frameworks for transparency and accountability that align with global governance standards. In practice, however, these mechanisms are undermined by institutional weaknesses, military autonomy, and political constraints. The result is a system where transparency is often symbolic rather than substantive, and accountability remains fragmented and uneven.

National-Level Analysis: Malaysia

Malaysia presents a contrasting case to Indonesia in terms of the interplay between transparency, accountability, and executive dominance in security governance. Unlike Indonesia, which underwent a dramatic democratic transition following the collapse of Suharto's regime, Malaysia has experienced a more gradual and uneven political liberalization. For decades, its security governance has been shaped by a hybrid system: formally democratic institutions coexisting with entrenched executive power, an embedded security apparatus, and a strong reliance on the military and police to preserve regime stability.

While Malaysia has made strides in adopting transparency mechanisms and participates actively in ASEAN-led forums, the overall picture reveals a system where governance principles are formally acknowledged but substantively limited. Transparency often manifests as carefully managed disclosures that protect executive control, while accountability is constrained by weak parliamentary influence and the use of security laws to shield the state from scrutiny.

Transparency mechanisms

Malaysia has produced defense white papers and official policy documents, which symbolize a rhetorical commitment to transparency. The most notable of these is the 2020 Defence White Paper (DWP)—the country's first comprehensive defense policy document—which outlined Malaysia's security priorities, defense posture, and modernization goals. This was widely celebrated as a breakthrough in transparency, as it provided a publicly accessible

articulation of defense policy that could serve as a basis for parliamentary debate and public discussion.

However, the significance of the DWP must be interpreted cautiously. While it represents an important shift toward openness, defense budgetary transparency remains limited. Malaysia publishes aggregate defense spending figures, but detailed line-item allocations and procurement data are often withheld or obscured in broad categories. As Kiba (2022) notes, transparency in Malaysia often takes the form of "controlled disclosure," where information is shared selectively to signal compliance with international norms without undermining executive prerogatives.

Moreover, the political context in which transparency occurs is highly managed. The executive exercises dominant control over the security agenda, and disclosures are designed to reinforce legitimacy rather than empower genuine accountability. This pattern reflects Aguja and Born's (2016) broader observation that in Southeast Asia, parliaments often lack the institutional leverage to transform transparency into meaningful oversight, especially when executives command strong partisan majorities.

Accountability structures

Malaysia's parliamentary system provides for formal oversight of defense and security policy, but the substantive role of parliament remains limited. In theory, parliamentary committees can scrutinize defense allocations and policies. In practice, however, Malaysia's long history of executive dominance—particularly under the United Malays National Organization (UMNO)-led coalitions that governed for over six decades—has meant that parliament functions more as a rubber stamp than a robust check on security institutions.

Even after the 2018 political transition, which saw the fall of the UMNO-led Barisan Nasional coalition and the rise of Pakatan Harapan, the structure of security governance has remained heavily executive-centric. Parliamentary committees on defense and security are under-resourced, lack technical expertise, and are overshadowed by the executive's control of agenda-setting.

The Internal Security Act (ISA) and subsequent security laws, although reformed in recent years, illustrate how executive dominance has historically undermined accountability. The ISA granted broad powers of preventive detention and secrecy in internal security operations, insulating the security sector from scrutiny. While formally repealed in 2012 and replaced with the Security Offences (Special Measures) Act (SOSMA), critics argue that the new framework continues to privilege security imperatives over accountability, reflecting the resilience of authoritarian legacies in Malaysian governance.

Aguja and Born (2016) emphasize that the effectiveness of parliamentary oversight depends not only on formal mandates but also on the balance of power between branches of government. In Malaysia, this balance remains skewed toward the executive, undermining the capacity of parliament to enforce accountability in the security sector.

Challenges and constraints

Malaysia's security governance faces three key challenges that limit the effectiveness of transparency and accountability.

First, executive dominance. For decades, the prime minister's office has centralized power, and security institutions have been closely tied to regime preservation. This has created an environment where disclosures are carefully curated to reinforce executive legitimacy rather than facilitate democratic oversight.

Second, secrecy is justified by national security. Sensitive issues such as counterterrorism, maritime security in the South China Sea, and internal stability in Sabah and Sarawak are often shielded from public debate on the grounds of national security. This culture of secrecy reduces the scope for independent scrutiny of security expenditures and operations.

Third, weak parliamentary and civil-society oversight. Parliamentary committees lack technical expertise and resources, while civil-society organizations face legal and political constraints in engaging with defense and security matters. Public debate on security policy remains limited, and watchdog groups often struggle to access reliable information.

Positive developments

Despite these constraints, Malaysia has made incremental progress in embedding governance principles in its security sector. The publication of the 2020 Defence White Paper is an important milestone, signaling greater willingness to engage in public dialogue on security policy. While its implementation remains uncertain, the very act of producing such a document reflects a shift toward recognizing transparency as a governance imperative.

In addition, Malaysia has engaged actively in ASEAN-led security forums, such as the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) and the ADMM-Plus, which promote dialogue, confidence-building, and limited information sharing. Participation in these forums not only reinforces Malaysia's commitment to regional stability but also creates indirect pressure to align with global governance norms.

Furthermore, political change since 2018, although turbulent, has introduced greater pluralism into Malaysia's political system. While executive dominance persists, the erosion of UMNO's long-standing monopoly on power has created modest openings for parliamentary actors to assert a more meaningful role in oversight. These developments remain fragile, but they suggest potential avenues for strengthening accountability in the long term.

Summary of Malaysia's case

Malaysia illustrates the paradox of formal transparency without substantive accountability. On the one hand, the publication of the 2020 Defence White Paper marks a significant step toward openness, and the country's active participation in ASEAN forums underscores its commitment to cooperative security governance. On the other hand, executive dominance, secrecy, and weak parliamentary capacity limit the ability of transparency to translate into meaningful accountability.

Kiba (2022) highlights that Malaysia's security governance is emblematic of Southeast Asia's broader challenge: transparency often functions as a symbolic gesture, while the deeper structures of accountability remain constrained by authoritarian legacies and political realities. Aguja and Born (2016) similarly argue that parliamentary oversight in Malaysia remains largely nominal, with structural barriers preventing legislatures from functioning as effective checks on the executive.

Ultimately, Malaysia demonstrates how security governance reforms can be initiated within a hybrid regime context but also how they remain vulnerable to rollback or superficial implementation when executive power remains dominant. The case highlights the importance of strengthening parliamentary capacity, institutionalizing civil-society participation, and reducing executive control if transparency and accountability are to become substantive rather than symbolic.

National-Level Analysis: The Philippines

The Philippines represents a distinct case within Southeast Asia's security governance landscape. Compared to Indonesia and Malaysia, the Philippines has long maintained a constitutional commitment to democratic control of the armed forces and a vibrant civil society. Parliamentary oversight, a free press, and active watchdog organizations should, in theory, create a conducive environment for transparency and accountability. However, in practice, the Philippines illustrates the challenges of translating formal democratic provisions into substantive governance outcomes.

Weak institutional capacity, entrenched military prerogatives, and recurring political instability limit the effectiveness of transparency and accountability measures. While the Philippines publishes policy documents and defense budgets, the quality of disclosures is inconsistent, and accountability mechanisms are undermined by limited resources, fragmented oversight, and a political culture that often prioritizes security imperatives over governance norms.

Transparency mechanisms

The Philippines has produced defense white papers and security strategies, particularly through its Department of National Defense (DND) and Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). These documents articulate threat perceptions—such as insurgencies, terrorism, and maritime disputes in the South China Sea—and outline modernization priorities under programs like the Revised AFP Modernization Act.

Budgetary transparency is relatively more advanced than in some neighboring countries. The General Appropriations Act (GAA) includes defense expenditures, and aggregate spending data is publicly available. Civil-society groups and media outlets frequently analyze these budgets, reflecting the country's comparatively open political environment.

Yet, transparency remains incomplete and inconsistent. Procurement processes, particularly for major defense acquisitions, are often opaque, with irregularities and corruption scandals periodically surfacing. For instance, procurement controversies involving the purchase of helicopters and naval vessels highlight how transparency at the aggregate level does not necessarily extend to detailed spending decisions. As Kiba (2022) notes, this reflects a broader pattern in Southeast Asia where formal budget disclosures coexist with opaque procurement practices that shield critical decisions from public scrutiny.

Accountability structures

The Philippines has one of the most elaborate constitutional frameworks for accountability in the region. The 1987 Constitution explicitly enshrines civilian supremacy over the military, a provision that reflects the country's historical experience with authoritarianism under

Ferdinand Marcos. Parliament, particularly through the House of Representatives and the Senate, exercises oversight over defense allocations, while specialized committees scrutinize military appointments and budgets.

In addition, the Commission on Audit (COA) plays a central role in monitoring public expenditures, including those of the defense sector. COA reports are regularly published, accessible to the public, and often highlight irregularities in security-related spending. This makes the Philippines unique in Southeast Asia, where audit institutions in other countries often lack the authority or independence to scrutinize the defense establishment.

Civil society and the media also function as accountability actors. Watchdog organizations monitor military expenditures and human-rights compliance, while investigative journalism has played a critical role in exposing irregularities in procurement and internal security operations.

Despite these formal strengths, however, accountability remains fragmented and weakly enforced. Parliamentary committees are under-resourced and often lack the technical expertise needed to scrutinize complex defense issues. Political patronage frequently undermines oversight, with legislators reluctant to challenge the executive or military for fear of losing political support or security assistance in their constituencies.

Aguja and Born (2016) argue that while the Philippines possesses one of the most advanced sets of parliamentary mandates for oversight, their effectiveness is diluted by weak institutionalization and the dominance of executive power in setting the security agenda.

Challenges and constraints

The Philippines' security governance faces three major challenges.

First, the persistence of military prerogatives. The AFP retains considerable autonomy, particularly in internal security operations against insurgencies such as the New People's Army (NPA) and Islamist groups in Mindanao. Military leaders often justify secrecy and autonomy on operational grounds, limiting the scope for external oversight.

Second, political instability and executive dominance. Frequent changes in government and the strong role of the presidency undermine the continuity of oversight. Under President Rodrigo Duterte (2016–2022), for example, the militarization of internal security was reinforced, and human-rights abuses in the context of the "war on drugs" raised concerns about accountability. Although these operations were not strictly military, they illustrate how executive priorities can override governance principles in the broader security sector.

Third, corruption and weak enforcement. Procurement scandals and irregularities continue to plague the defense sector. While audit institutions often expose these issues, follow-up enforcement is inconsistent, and prosecutions are rare. This creates a cycle where transparency mechanisms reveal problems but accountability mechanisms fail to deliver corrective action.

Positive developments

Despite these challenges, the Philippines has made progress in certain areas. The Revised AFP Modernization Act (2012) introduced long-term planning and created frameworks for more structured defense acquisitions. While implementation has been uneven, the Act has encouraged greater public and parliamentary debate on military modernization.

The Commission on Audit's independence is a critical strength. Its reports provide rare examples in Southeast Asia of detailed, public, and critical audits of defense expenditures. Although enforcement remains limited, the very existence of such reports reflects a high degree of transparency relative to regional peers.

Civil society and the media also play a stronger role in the Philippines than in Indonesia or Malaysia. Organizations monitoring human rights, security expenditures, and democratic governance provide independent assessments that enrich public debate. While their recommendations are not always implemented, they contribute to a more pluralistic governance environment.

Finally, the 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro and subsequent peace process demonstrate the potential for transparency and accountability to play constructive roles in conflict resolution. Although fragile, the process included mechanisms for civilian participation and oversight, reflecting a governance-oriented approach to security challenges.

Summary of the Philippines' case

The Philippines illustrates both the promise and limitations of democratic security governance in Southeast Asia. On paper, the country has some of the strongest provisions for transparency and accountability, including constitutional guarantees of civilian supremacy, parliamentary oversight, independent audit institutions, and a vibrant civil society. In practice, however, these mechanisms are undermined by weak institutional capacity, executive dominance, military prerogatives, and recurring corruption.

Kiba (2022) highlights that the Philippines demonstrates the gap between formal frameworks and substantive practice, where transparency mechanisms exist but do not translate into accountability. Aguja and Born (2016) similarly argue that parliamentary oversight is structurally limited by political patronage, weak institutionalization, and the overwhelming influence of the executive branch.

The case underscores that democratic provisions alone are insufficient to guarantee good governance of the security sector. Without robust enforcement, technical expertise, and political will, transparency risks becoming performative, while accountability remains selective and inconsistent. The Philippines thus exemplifies the challenge of translating democratic ideals into operational reality in the security domain.

Regional-Level Analysis: ASEAN's Role in Security Governance

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is central to any discussion of security governance in Southeast Asia. Established in 1967, ASEAN has evolved into the region's primary multilateral institution for managing interstate relations, fostering dialogue, and shaping norms of cooperation. Its security governance framework is anchored in the

principles of sovereignty, consensus, and non-interference, but also aspires to embed elements of transparency, accountability, and cooperative security.

The organization's security role has gradually expanded since the Cold War, moving from a loose consultative platform to an institutional framework encompassing the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM), the ADMM-Plus, and the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC). These forums collectively aim to promote trust-building, conflict prevention, and normative convergence in the security domain.

Yet, as both Saya Kiba (2022) and Aguja & Born (2016) emphasize, ASEAN's security governance is constrained by the very principles that ensure its cohesion: consensus decision-making and non-interference. These principles stabilize interstate relations but simultaneously limit the organization's ability to enforce governance reforms at the national level. As a result, ASEAN's contribution to transparency and accountability in security governance remains largely normative and symbolic rather than operational and binding.

ASEAN's frameworks for transparency and accountability

ASEAN has created several mechanisms intended to enhance transparency and accountability among its member states.

First, the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) blueprint outlines goals such as strengthening democratic institutions, promoting human rights, and enhancing good governance in the security sector. The blueprint emphasizes transparency through the publication of declarations, communiqués, and periodic reports, and accountability through collective dialogue and peer review mechanisms.

Second, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), established in 1994, is a platform for broader Asia-Pacific dialogue on political and security issues. Its confidence-building measures include voluntary defense white paper sharing, publication of national security policies, and annual exchanges of defense officials. These measures encourage states to engage in symbolic transparency by sharing documents that articulate security postures and doctrines.

Third, the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) and its expanded format, ADMM-Plus, create regular venues for defense ministers to coordinate on regional security issues. These meetings are accompanied by joint statements and chair summaries that reflect commitments to cooperation, openness, and information sharing.

Collectively, these frameworks institutionalize norms of transparency and dialogue. They also provide legitimacy for member states to publish defense documents or establish parliamentary committees, even if only symbolically, as part of their compliance with ASEAN norms. Kiba (2022) stresses that ASEAN's role lies less in enforcing reforms and more in shaping expectations of "appropriate behavior" through normative pressure.

The principle of non-interference and its consequences

While ASEAN's frameworks signal an aspiration toward good governance, the principle of non-interference remains the most significant constraint on regional security governance. Since its inception, ASEAN has prioritized respect for sovereignty and avoidance of intervention in domestic affairs. This principle has been crucial for maintaining regional

stability, especially given Southeast Asia's diversity of political regimes, but it also limits the scope for collective accountability.

For example, ASEAN cannot compel its members to adopt meaningful transparency or accountability reforms in their defense sectors. Even when states issue white papers or share policy statements, these are voluntary acts, often designed more to satisfy external audiences than to transform domestic governance. As Aguja and Born (2016) observe, ASEAN's consensus culture prevents it from confronting members over secrecy, authoritarian practices, or lack of parliamentary oversight.

The Myanmar crisis starkly illustrates this limitation. Despite widespread international condemnation of the military coup in February 2021, ASEAN's response has been limited to diplomatic engagement and calls for dialogue, reflecting its reluctance to enforce accountability. This example underscores how ASEAN's principle of non-interference shields domestic security practices from regional scrutiny, even in cases of blatant authoritarian rollback.

ASEAN as a platform for symbolic transparency

Despite its limitations, ASEAN plays an important role as a platform for symbolic transparency. By encouraging member states to publish defense white papers, participate in annual meetings, and engage in multilateral dialogues, ASEAN fosters habits of openness that might not otherwise exist.

Malaysia's publication of its 2020 Defence White Paper, for instance, was partly justified as a way to align with international and regional expectations of transparency. Similarly, Indonesia and the Philippines have used ASEAN forums to articulate their defense policies and signal their commitments to cooperative security. While these acts may not always translate into substantive accountability, they nonetheless contribute to shaping regional norms.

Kiba (2022) argues that ASEAN's soft institutionalism—characterized by dialogue, declarations, and peer persuasion—creates "normative peer pressure" that encourages states to perform transparency, even if imperfectly. Over time, such performances may open space for deeper reforms, especially if domestic actors leverage regional norms to push for greater accountability.

Peer learning and capacity-building

ASEAN also functions as a venue for peer learning and capacity-building in security governance. Through initiatives such as the ADMM-Plus Experts' Working Groups, member states exchange experiences on defense modernization, peacekeeping, counterterrorism, and humanitarian assistance. These exchanges, while technical in nature, indirectly promote governance by encouraging states to adopt more standardized and transparent practices.

Furthermore, ASEAN's partnerships with external actors, such as the United Nations, the European Union, and dialogue partners like Japan and the United States, create opportunities for capacity-building in governance-related areas. Training programs, workshops, and technical assistance often include components on transparency, civilian oversight, and accountability, thereby diffusing global governance norms into the regional context.

Limitations of ASEAN's influence

Despite these contributions, ASEAN's overall impact on security governance remains limited by several factors.

First, the lack of enforcement mechanisms. ASEAN cannot sanction or compel states to implement reforms. Its declarations and blueprints lack binding force, and member states can ignore them without consequence.

Second, the diversity of political systems. ASEAN encompasses democracies, hybrid regimes, and outright authoritarian states. This diversity makes it difficult to agree on common governance standards, as authoritarian regimes resist norms that threaten executive control.

Third, the persistence of secrecy and securitization. Even when states publish defense white papers or participate in regional forums, sensitive issues such as internal insurgencies, counterterrorism operations, and procurement details remain shielded from scrutiny. This selective transparency limits the substantive impact of ASEAN's initiatives.

Fourth, the tension between global governance norms and local realities. While ASEAN aspires to align with global principles of good governance, its emphasis on sovereignty and non-interference creates a structural disjuncture between international expectations and regional practices.

ASEAN's paradox

ASEAN's role in security governance is thus characterized by a paradox. On the one hand, it legitimizes governance norms by embedding transparency and accountability in its blueprints, declarations, and dialogues. On the other hand, it institutionalizes non-interference, which prevents these norms from being meaningfully enforced.

This paradox means that ASEAN often promotes transparency as a performative act rather than a substantive reform. Member states comply by publishing documents or attending meetings, but core practices of secrecy and executive dominance remain intact. As Aguja and Born (2016) put it, ASEAN's role is more about "symbolic oversight" than genuine accountability.

Summary of ASEAN's role

ASEAN has undeniably contributed to the evolution of security governance in Southeast Asia. It has provided forums for dialogue, encouraged the publication of defense white papers, and created normative pressure for transparency. Through peer learning and external partnerships, it has also facilitated the diffusion of global governance norms.

However, its impact remains constrained by the principles of sovereignty, consensus, and non-interference. Transparency promoted at the regional level often remains symbolic, while accountability mechanisms are absent. ASEAN's paradox lies in its ability to promote ideals without enforcing practice, leaving the responsibility for substantive governance reforms squarely in the hands of national governments.

Kiba (2022) highlights that this paradox reflects Southeast Asia's broader governance dilemma: aspirations for transparency and accountability coexist with entrenched

authoritarian legacies and political realities. Aguja and Born (2016) similarly stress that without stronger parliamentary and institutional capacity at the national level, ASEAN's contributions to governance will remain largely symbolic.

Comparative Insights: Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines

The three case studies—Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines—illustrate the diverse ways in which Southeast Asian states have incorporated, adapted, and resisted principles of transparency and accountability in their security governance frameworks. While all three countries share common legacies of executive dominance, military influence, and regional commitments under ASEAN, they differ markedly in their degree of democratic consolidation, the strength of parliamentary oversight, and the quality of transparency mechanisms.

By comparing these cases, several key patterns emerge: (1) formal commitments to governance norms are widespread but shallow, (2) parliamentary oversight and audit mechanisms vary significantly in strength, (3) executive dominance remains the primary obstacle to accountability, and (4) ASEAN's influence is normative rather than coercive, shaping transparency as a performative act rather than substantive reform.

Shared characteristics across the three countries

Despite national differences, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines share several core characteristics that define Southeast Asia's security governance.

First, strong executive power. In all three states, the executive—whether presidential (Indonesia, Philippines) or parliamentary with dominant parties (Malaysia)—retains the primary authority over security policy. Executive dominance ensures policy continuity but often sidelines parliamentary and civilian oversight. As Kiba (2022) notes, Southeast Asian security governance remains "state-centric and executive-driven," with accountability mechanisms playing a secondary role.

Second, military prerogatives. While the scope of military influence varies, all three cases reveal lingering prerogatives in internal security and procurement. In Indonesia, the military continues to exert influence through territorial commands and internal operations. In Malaysia, the armed forces enjoy significant autonomy in procurement, often justified by secrecy and national security. In the Philippines, the military retains operational autonomy in counterinsurgency and counterterrorism. These prerogatives constrain transparency and limit the effectiveness of oversight institutions.

Third, selective transparency. Each state produces public-facing documents—white papers, strategies, budgets—that create a veneer of openness. However, these disclosures are often aggregate, sanitized, and incomplete. Procurement decisions, internal security expenditures, and classified annexes remain shielded from scrutiny. Transparency thus becomes selective, shaped more by the need to satisfy regional and international audiences than by domestic accountability demands.

Fourth, ASEAN's normative influence. Participation in ASEAN forums has encouraged all three states to engage in performative transparency. White paper publication, joint communiqués, and security dialogues are often linked to ASEAN initiatives. Yet, accountability remains

absent at the regional level, reflecting ASEAN's paradoxical role as both promoter of norms and guardian of sovereignty.

Divergences across the three cases

Despite these similarities, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines diverge in important ways that reveal the impact of domestic political contexts.

Indonesia: the "reformist but fragile" case

Indonesia stands out for its post-authoritarian reforms, which established stronger parliamentary oversight, mandated defense white papers, and redefined the military's role. Transparency is institutionalized through regular publication of defense documents, and parliamentary committees play an active role in budget deliberations. However, accountability is undermined by weak enforcement, political patronage, and lingering military prerogatives. Indonesia demonstrates that democratic reform creates opportunities for governance but does not automatically eliminate authoritarian legacies.

Malaysia: the "opaque but stable" case

Malaysia, in contrast, reflects a more stable but opaque model. Executive dominance under the Barisan Nasional era institutionalized secrecy and limited parliamentary scrutiny. While Malaysia has produced defense white papers and participates in ASEAN forums, substantive accountability remains weak. Procurement processes are among the least transparent, and parliamentary committees lack the authority to challenge executive decisions. The publication of the 2020 Defence White Paper represents progress, but its impact has been limited by the entrenched culture of secrecy. Malaysia thus illustrates how stability and executive control can coexist with symbolic, rather than substantive, governance reforms.

The Philippines: the "democratic but fragmented" case

The Philippines presents a more open but fragmented system. Its constitutional framework strongly enshrines civilian supremacy and parliamentary oversight, and the Commission on Audit provides rare examples of independent scrutiny. Civil society and media play active roles in monitoring security governance. Yet, weak institutional capacity, executive dominance, and persistent corruption undermine accountability. The Philippines demonstrates that formal democratic provisions are insufficient without political will, technical expertise, and enforcement mechanisms.

Transparency across the three cases

When compared side by side, transparency mechanisms reveal both convergence and divergence.

- White papers and strategies: All three states produce defense white papers and security strategies, but the quality varies. Indonesia and Malaysia's documents are more structured, while the Philippines' publications are less consistent.

- Budgets: The Philippines publishes detailed budget data through the General Appropriations Act, making it relatively more transparent than its peers. Indonesia's

budgets are public but lack granular detail. Malaysia's budgetary data is the least transparent, often aggregated without disaggregation of line items.

- Procurement: In all three cases, procurement remains opaque. Scandals in the Philippines, secrecy in Malaysia, and lack of enforcement in Indonesia illustrate the limits of transparency in practice.

Transparency thus emerges as selective and strategic, shaped by political incentives rather than governance ideals.

Accountability across the three cases

Accountability mechanisms diverge more sharply than transparency.

- **Indonesia:** Parliamentary committees have formal authority but limited enforcement. The audit process exists but is weakly implemented.

- **Malaysia:** Parliamentary oversight is minimal, with executive dominance leaving little room for accountability. Independent audits exist but lack visibility and impact.

- **Philippines:** Accountability frameworks are more robust, with COA and parliamentary committees actively scrutinizing defense expenditures. Civil society and media also contribute. Yet, enforcement is inconsistent, and corruption persists.

These divergences highlight that accountability is more dependent on domestic political structures than on regional norms. While transparency can be performative and regionally influenced, accountability requires strong domestic institutions, which vary widely across the three countries.

The role of ASEAN in shaping national practices

ASEAN's role in shaping transparency and accountability in these three states is indirect and normative.

- For **Indonesia**, ASEAN provides a platform for showcasing reformist credentials, reinforcing its democratic trajectory.
- For **Malaysia**, ASEAN forums justify the limited steps it has taken toward transparency, such as the 2020 Defence White Paper.
- For **the Philippines**, ASEAN offers legitimacy for its democratic commitments but has little impact on the deeper problems of enforcement and corruption.

In all cases, ASEAN does not compel reforms but creates a regional script that states selectively perform to signal compliance.

Comparative summary

The comparative analysis reveals three major insights.

1. **Transparency is easier to adopt than accountability.** Publishing white papers and budgets satisfies regional and international audiences but requires little domestic

change. Accountability, by contrast, demands strong institutions, political will, and enforcement—factors that remain weak across Southeast Asia.

2. **Domestic politics shape governance outcomes.** Indonesia's reform trajectory, Malaysia's executive dominance, and the Philippines' fragmented democracy demonstrate that transparency and accountability are deeply conditioned by domestic political contexts. ASEAN's influence is filtered through these contexts, producing varied outcomes.

3. **ASEAN reinforces symbolic governance.** By promoting transparency without enforcement, ASEAN legitimizes symbolic reforms that mask deeper governance deficits. This paradox limits the region's ability to align *das sollen* (normative ideals) with *das sein* (empirical reality).

The comparative evidence from Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines shows that Southeast Asia's security governance reflects a persistent gap between ideals and practice. Transparency mechanisms exist but are selective, shaped more by symbolic compliance with ASEAN and global norms than by substantive accountability. Accountability frameworks vary widely, with the Philippines strongest on paper, Indonesia middling, and Malaysia weakest, yet none of the three consistently translate formal commitments into effective oversight.

ASEAN, while important in shaping regional norms, cannot bridge this gap due to its principle of non-interference and lack of enforcement. As a result, the realization of transparency and accountability in Southeast Asian security governance remains primarily dependent on domestic political will and institutional strength.

Challenges and Gaps in Security Governance

The comparative analysis of Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines highlights the uneven and fragile nature of transparency and accountability in Southeast Asia's security governance. While all three countries have made formal commitments to good governance norms—whether through ASEAN blueprints, national white papers, or legislative reforms—the translation of these commitments into practice is persistently obstructed by structural, institutional, and cultural constraints.

The persistence of these gaps underscores a central paradox: states acknowledge the importance of transparency and accountability yet maintain practices that limit them. This paradox is sustained by authoritarian legacies, executive dominance, weak institutions, the securitization of dissent, and ASEAN's principle of non-interference. The following subsections elaborate on these challenges.

Structural constraints: authoritarian legacies and executive dominance
A major obstacle across the region is the enduring influence of authoritarian legacies. During the Cold War, many Southeast Asian states consolidated power through strong executives and military-backed regimes. These legacies created a culture of secrecy in security governance that continues to shape institutional practices today.

- **Indonesia** has undergone significant democratic reform since 1998, yet the military's historical role in politics remains embedded through territorial commands and enduring prerogatives. The executive branch still dominates defense planning, with parliament often reacting rather than initiating oversight.

- **Malaysia's** long-standing single-party dominance under Barisan Nasional entrenched a model of executive control where security policy was formulated within the cabinet, with little parliamentary input. Even after political turnover, the culture of secrecy persists.

- **The Philippines** has stronger democratic provisions but continues to suffer from executive dominance, with presidents wielding extensive discretion over defense budgets and appointments.

As Saya Kiba (2022) emphasizes, this structural dominance of executives means transparency is often granted selectively, while accountability remains elusive. Without structural rebalancing between branches of government, security governance reforms struggle to move beyond symbolic measures.

Institutional weaknesses: oversight bodies and audit capacity

Institutional weaknesses further compound the challenge. Effective accountability requires strong parliaments, audit institutions, and judicial mechanisms, yet these institutions remain underdeveloped in all three cases.

- In **Indonesia**, the People's Representative Council (DPR) has formal authority to review defense budgets but lacks the technical expertise to scrutinize complex military expenditures. Audit institutions exist but are hampered by political interference.
- In **Malaysia**, parliamentary committees are weak, fragmented, and often dominated by ruling coalitions. Audit reports are published but rarely debated in ways that lead to substantive reforms.
- In **the Philippines**, the Commission on Audit (COA) is relatively independent and has exposed irregularities in defense spending. Yet, enforcement remains inconsistent, as findings often fail to translate into prosecutions or systemic change.

Aguja and Born (2016) stress that parliamentary oversight in Southeast Asia is often formalistic. Committees exist, budgets are tabled, and reports are published, but the substantive quality of scrutiny remains low. Without stronger institutional capacity—technical expertise, political independence, and enforcement power—accountability mechanisms remain fragile.

Securitization of dissent and national security justifications

Another persistent challenge is the securitization of dissent. Governments frequently invoke national security to justify secrecy, suppress opposition, and resist transparency demands.

- In **Indonesia**, security expenditures related to counterinsurgency in Papua or counterterrorism are classified, preventing public scrutiny.

- In **Malaysia**, procurement is often shielded from disclosure under the justification of strategic necessity, creating opportunities for patronage and corruption.

- In **the Philippines**, military operations against insurgencies in Mindanao and counterterrorism efforts are treated as matters of national security, limiting oversight.

This tendency to securitize dissent and policy areas means that transparency is applied unevenly: symbolic disclosures are allowed where they serve reputational purposes, but sensitive areas remain opaque. Kiba (2022) notes that such practices reinforce a "culture of confidentiality" that resists governance reforms.

Civil-military relations and entrenched prerogatives

Civil-military relations also pose barriers to governance reforms. In many Southeast Asian states, the military retains significant influence over internal security and policymaking, making it difficult to impose effective oversight.

- **Indonesia's military** continues to play roles in domestic security, natural disaster management, and counterinsurgency, blurring the line between defense and internal affairs.
- **Malaysia's armed forces** maintain close ties with the executive, benefiting from opaque procurement and discretionary spending.
- **The Philippines' military** enjoys autonomy in operational matters and often leverages its role in counterinsurgency to resist deeper civilian control.

Aguja and Born (2016) highlight that parliamentary capacity alone is insufficient if militaries maintain prerogatives that place them beyond scrutiny. Civilian institutions must have both authority and political backing to challenge military dominance, yet such backing is often absent.

ASEAN's principle of non-interference

At the regional level, ASEAN's principle of non-interference acts as both a stabilizer and a barrier. While it prevents external meddling in domestic affairs, it also shields member states from accountability.

ASEAN's consensus-driven approach has resulted in frameworks such as the APSC blueprint and ARF confidence-building measures, but these remain voluntary and non-binding. Member states can participate selectively, sharing sanitized documents while continuing opaque practices at home.

The Myanmar crisis underscores this limitation. ASEAN's cautious approach to the military coup demonstrates how the principle of non-interference prevents collective enforcement of governance norms, even in cases of severe democratic rollback. As a result, ASEAN's influence on transparency and accountability is normative rather than coercive, creating peer pressure but not structural change.

Uneven civil society engagement

Civil society plays an important role in advocating for transparency and accountability, but its influence is uneven across Southeast Asia.

- **Indonesia** has an active civil society sector that pressures government on military spending and human rights, though its access to classified information remains limited.
- **Malaysia** restricts civil society space, limiting the ability of NGOs and watchdog groups to influence security governance.
- **The Philippines** benefits from a vibrant civil society and free press, but advocacy efforts are often undermined by executive dominance and corruption.

Kiba (2022) observes that while civil society can amplify regional and international governance norms, its impact is contingent on domestic political openness. Without institutional channels for participation, civil society advocacy struggles to reshape entrenched practices.

Gaps between global norms and local realities

The challenges identified above converge to produce a persistent gap between global governance ideals and local realities. International norms emphasize transparency, accountability, and democratic oversight, but Southeast Asian states adapt these norms selectively, implementing symbolic transparency while resisting substantive accountability.

This selective adaptation reflects the dual pressures faced by states:

1. **External pressure** to conform to international standards for legitimacy and cooperation.
2. **Internal imperatives** to maintain executive dominance, military prerogatives, and political stability.

The result is a hybrid governance model in which global ideals are acknowledged but domestically constrained. This hybridization sustains the gap between *das sollen* (what ought to be) and *das sein* (what is), the central tension of security governance in Southeast Asia.

Summary of challenges and gaps

In sum, Southeast Asia's challenges in security governance can be categorized as follows:

1. **Structural:** Authoritarian legacies and executive dominance.
2. **Institutional:** Weak parliaments, limited audit capacity, and ineffective enforcement.
3. **Cultural/Political:** Secrecy, securitization of dissent, and entrenched military prerogatives.
4. **Regional:** ASEAN's principle of non-interference and lack of enforcement mechanisms.
5. **Societal:** Uneven civil society engagement and restricted access to information.

These challenges explain why transparency and accountability remain aspirational rather than operational across Southeast Asia. Until these structural and institutional gaps are addressed, governance reforms will remain partial and fragile.

Implications and Policy Discussion

The challenges and patterns identified across Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, as well as within ASEAN's regional framework, carry profound implications for the future of security governance in Southeast Asia. These implications extend beyond the narrow question of whether transparency and accountability are practiced, to touch upon the very foundations

of state legitimacy, public trust, and regional stability. The evidence from the case studies demonstrates that transparency and accountability in the security sector are not only normative aspirations grounded in global governance standards, but also strategic necessities for ensuring durable peace and institutional resilience in the region.

Implications for state legitimacy and public trust

A central implication of the findings is that the absence of credible transparency and accountability erodes state legitimacy. Security institutions are among the most powerful and resource-intensive sectors of government, and their insulation from public scrutiny creates fertile ground for corruption, mismanagement, and abuse of power.

- In **Indonesia**, efforts at reform after 1998 generated a surge in public trust as civilian oversight expanded. However, lingering opacity in military expenditures and operations in Papua risk undermining that trust.
- In **Malaysia**, the culture of secrecy has historically allowed patronage networks to flourish in procurement, weakening public confidence in both the military and the government.
- In **the Philippines**, despite constitutional guarantees of civilian supremacy, persistent corruption scandals in defense procurement undermine public faith in institutions.

As Saya Kiba (2022) argues, governance reforms in security sectors are central to strengthening state legitimacy, particularly in societies with histories of authoritarianism or conflict. Transparency ensures that the public perceives defense spending and security policy as aligned with national interest rather than elite capture. Accountability reinforces the notion that security institutions serve the people, rather than stand above them.

Implications for democratic consolidation

The findings also reveal that transparency and accountability are critical pillars of democratic consolidation. Democratic transitions are often fragile in Southeast Asia, as illustrated by Indonesia's uneven reform process, Malaysia's partial liberalization, and the Philippines' recurrent challenges with executive overreach.

- Transparency in budgets and policy documents helps institutionalize democratic practices by creating routine disclosure obligations.
- Accountability mechanisms such as parliamentary oversight and audit institutions serve as checks against authoritarian backsliding.
- Civil society participation in security governance reinforces pluralism and limits executive monopolies over national security narratives.

Yet, the evidence shows that these mechanisms remain weak. Aguja and Born (2016) highlight the importance of parliamentary oversight as a safeguard against executive dominance, but parliaments in the region still lack the technical expertise, independence, and enforcement authority needed to function effectively. Without stronger oversight, Southeast Asia risks a cycle of formal democratization without substantive accountability—a phenomenon scholars describe as "illiberal democracy."

Implications for regional stability and ASEAN's credibility

At the regional level, ASEAN's role in shaping security governance norms cannot be underestimated. The organization has successfully promoted a culture of dialogue, confidence-building, and conflict avoidance, which has been crucial in maintaining relative peace in the region. However, the case studies show that ASEAN's credibility is constrained by its principle of non-interference.

- On one hand, ASEAN's frameworks—such as the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM)—encourage member states to publish defense white papers, share information, and engage in joint exercises. This creates symbolic transparency that enhances confidence-building among states.
- On the other hand, the lack of enforcement mechanisms means that member states can signal compliance without undertaking substantive reforms. For example, publishing a white paper satisfies ASEAN's normative expectations, but concealing procurement details or internal operations remains permissible.

This dual dynamic undermines ASEAN's credibility. While it positions itself as a regional security provider aligned with global governance standards, the gap between rhetoric and practice raises doubts about its capacity to promote meaningful governance reforms. If ASEAN cannot bridge this gap, it risks being perceived as a forum for diplomatic symbolism rather than a driver of institutional transformation.

Implications for addressing new security threats

The governance deficits identified also limit the region's ability to respond effectively to emerging security challenges. Transparency and accountability are not merely abstract principles; they have concrete consequences for policy effectiveness and resilience.

- **Terrorism and insurgency:** Lack of accountability in military operations against insurgencies in the Philippines or separatist movements in Indonesia undermines human rights protections, fueling grievances that sustain conflict.
- **Maritime security and the South China Sea:** Without transparent defense budgets and strategies, ASEAN states struggle to coordinate effectively against external threats, weakening collective deterrence.
- **Cybersecurity and hybrid threats:** The opacity of cybersecurity expenditures and strategies creates vulnerabilities, as public-private partnerships depend on trust and clear regulatory frameworks.
- **Pandemics and non-traditional security threats:** COVID-19 illustrated the importance of civilian oversight in balancing public health and security measures. Where accountability was weak, emergency powers risked being abused.

These examples highlight that governance is not peripheral but central to security effectiveness. Weak governance produces inefficiencies, corruption, and mistrust that undermine the state's ability to manage both traditional and non-traditional security threats.

Policy discussion: pathways for reform

Addressing these governance deficits requires targeted reforms at both the national and regional levels. Drawing on insights from the case studies and the scholarship of Kiba (2022) and Aguja & Born (2016), several pathways emerge.

1. **Strengthening parliamentary oversight**
   - Parliaments must be equipped with the legal authority, technical expertise, and resources to scrutinize defense budgets and policies.
   - Training programs and capacity-building initiatives can enhance legislators' ability to engage with complex security issues.
   - Regional peer-learning platforms could allow ASEAN member states to share best practices in parliamentary oversight.

2. **Enhancing audit and accountability institutions**
   - Independent audit bodies must be empowered to review defense expenditures and report findings publicly.
   - Enforcement mechanisms should ensure that audit findings lead to corrective action, not merely symbolic acknowledgment.
   - Judicial institutions should be accessible for redress in cases of misconduct or corruption.

3. **Expanding civil society and media engagement**
   - Governments should institutionalize channels for civil society and media participation in security policy debates.
   - Freedom of information laws must be enforced to ensure access to non-sensitive defense data.
   - Watchdog organizations should be supported through funding and protection from state harassment.

4. **Reforming procurement processes**
   - Transparent procurement procedures are essential to limit corruption and patronage
   - Competitive bidding, disclosure of contracts, and public reporting of procurement outcomes should be institutionalized.
   - ASEAN could develop regional standards for defense procurement transparency.

5. **Recalibrating ASEAN's role**
   - While non-interference remains a cornerstone, ASEAN can promote peer pressure and peer learning by highlighting best practices.
   - The APSC blueprint could be expanded to include indicators of governance performance, encouraging benchmarking.
   - Regional dialogues should move beyond information-sharing to address accountability, including parliamentary diplomacy and civil-society forums.

The strategic necessity of transparency and accountability

Ultimately, the findings of this research support the central argument that transparency and

accountability are strategic necessities for Southeast Asia's security governance. Without them, public trust erodes, democratic consolidation falters, and ASEAN's credibility is compromised. With them, states can strengthen legitimacy, prevent corruption, and respond more effectively to evolving security threats.

Transparency is not simply about publishing documents; it is about ensuring that security policies are open to scrutiny and aligned with the public interest. Accountability is not merely about institutional form; it is about ensuring that those in power can be held responsible for their actions. Together, they form the foundation of sustainable peace and security in Southeast Asia.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how transparency and accountability are incorporated into the security governance frameworks of Southeast Asia, with a focus on Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines within the broader context of ASEAN's institutional architecture. The research question asked: to what extent do formal commitments to transparency and accountability translate into substantive practices, what challenges hinder effective implementation, and what role does ASEAN play in fostering governance reforms?

The analysis shows that while formal commitments are increasingly evident, substantive practices remain partial and inconsistent. All three case study countries have published defense white papers, participated in ASEAN-led dialogues, and established oversight institutions. These measures reflect an acknowledgment of the global governance norms of transparency and accountability, as well as ASEAN's normative pressure to align with such ideals. However, the translation from principle to practice is incomplete. Defense budgets remain opaque, procurement processes lack competitive transparency, audit findings are inconsistently enforced, and parliamentary oversight bodies often lack the capacity to exercise meaningful control.

The persistence of this gap between *das sollen* (the normative ideal) and *das sein* (the empirical reality) is explained by several interlocking factors. Authoritarian legacies have entrenched executive dominance and military prerogatives that resist scrutiny. Institutional weaknesses, particularly in parliaments and audit bodies, undermine accountability even when formal frameworks exist. The securitization of dissent and broad claims of national security create justifications for secrecy, limiting transparency in sensitive areas. At the regional level, ASEAN's principle of non-interference prevents the organization from enforcing governance standards, even as it promotes norms of cooperation and information sharing. These dynamics create a pattern of selective adaptation, where states signal compliance with international norms without fully operationalizing them domestically.

Despite these challenges, the study underscores that transparency and accountability are not merely aspirational ideals but strategic necessities. Without credible mechanisms of oversight, security institutions risk eroding public trust and weakening state legitimacy. This is particularly salient in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, where histories of authoritarianism and insurgency have left legacies of distrust between citizens and the state. Strengthening governance in the security sector is thus essential to consolidating democracy, preventing corruption, and ensuring that security institutions serve the public interest rather

than elite or partisan agendas.

At the regional level, ASEAN faces a credibility dilemma. It has successfully established itself as a key platform for dialogue, conflict prevention, and cooperative security. Yet, its reliance on consensus and non-interference constrains its ability to foster deeper governance reforms. Unless ASEAN can bridge the gap between symbolic transparency and substantive accountability, it risks being perceived as a forum for rhetorical commitments rather than a driver of institutional transformation. Nonetheless, ASEAN retains significant potential to act as a facilitator of peer learning, benchmarking, and normative diffusion. By encouraging best practices in parliamentary oversight, audit capacity, and procurement transparency, ASEAN could gradually embed governance principles in ways consistent with its non-interference ethos.

The findings therefore suggest a nuanced answer to the research question. Formal commitments do exist and represent meaningful progress, particularly in signaling alignment with global governance standards. Yet, substantive practices remain limited, shaped by enduring domestic and regional constraints. The challenges that hinder implementation—executive dominance, weak institutions, securitization, and ASEAN's cautious diplomacy—are deeply embedded but not insurmountable. Reform pathways lie in strengthening parliamentary capacity, empowering audit institutions, expanding civil society engagement, and recalibrating ASEAN's role to emphasize benchmarking and peer pressure.

In conclusion, transparency and accountability in Southeast Asia's security governance remain works in progress. The region has moved beyond the closed authoritarianism of the Cold War era, yet it has not fully realized the ideals of democratic security governance. The gap between *das sollen* and *das sein* persists, but narrowing it is essential for building public trust, consolidating democracy, and sustaining regional stability. The pursuit of transparency and accountability should thus be understood not only as a moral imperative grounded in global governance discourse, but also as a pragmatic strategy for securing peace, legitimacy, and resilience in Southeast Asia's evolving security landscape.

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