Journal of International Studies on Energy Affairs
Jisea.universitaspertamina.ac.id | jisea@universitaspertamina.ac.id
ISSN Online : 2774- 4213
ISSN Print : 2774 - 6380

Reconstructing Strategic Legal Autonomy in Southeast Asia: International Law amid Great Power Competition

Khoirunnisa & Didi Jubaidi

Khoirunnisa

Affiliation	:	Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Jakarta
City	:	Jakarta
Country	:	Indonesia
Email	:	Khoirunnisa@uta45jakarta.ac.id

Didi Jubaidi

Affiliation	:	Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Jakarta
City	:	Jakarta
Country	:	Indonesia
Email	:	didijubaidi@gmail.com

History

Submission	:	25th of May 2026
Review Completed	:	1st of June 2026
Accepted	:	25th of June 2026
Available Online	:	30th of June 2026

DOI :

10.51413/jisea.Vol7.Iss1.2026.

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Abstract

This article aims to reconstruct the concept of strategic legal autonomy from the perspective of international law and formulate a normative framework applicable to Southeast Asian states amid intensifying great-power competition. The legal dimension of strategic autonomy remains insufficiently conceptualized because existing studies predominantly emphasize diplomatic flexibility, strategic hedging, and foreign-policy choices. This study employs normative/doctrinal legal research using conceptual, treaty-based, comparative, and case approaches. It examines international and regional legal instruments, selected judicial decisions, and scholarly literature concerning sovereignty, sovereign equality, international legal commitments, institutional participation, and strategic autonomy. The findings demonstrate that international law performs a dual function: it constrains state action through binding obligations while simultaneously providing legal rights, principles, procedures, and institutions that can preserve national and regional policy space. Accordingly, this article proposes a Strategic Legal Autonomy Framework comprising four interrelated dimensions: normative autonomy, regulatory autonomy, institutional autonomy, and strategic legal choice. These dimensions explain how Southeast Asian states can maintain meaningful legal agency despite asymmetric power relations and external pressures. The study concludes that strategic legal autonomy should not be understood as legal isolation, neutrality, or freedom from international obligations. Instead, it constitutes

Cite this article :
Khoirunnisa, & Jubaidi, D. (2026). Reconstructing Strategic Legal Autonomy in Southeast Asia: International Law amid Great Power Competition. Journal of International Studies on Energy Affairs 7(1). 10.51413/jisea.Vol7.Iss1.2026.

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the capacity of Southeast Asian states to preserve their legal and policy choices while remaining actively engaged in international legal and institutional regimes. The proposed framework provides a legally grounded perspective for understanding how strategic autonomy can be maintained within, rather than outside, the international legal order.

Key Words: International Law, Southeast Asia, Strategic Legal Autonomy.

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INTRODUCTION

The intensification of great-power competition is transforming the political, economic, technological, and normative environment in which states exercise sovereignty. Strategic rivalry between the United States and China now extends beyond conventional security issues to trade, investment, infrastructure, digital technology, supply chains, and the rules governing regional order. Southeast Asia has consequently become a central arena in which the interests of major powers intersect. This development is particularly significant for smaller and middle powers because asymmetric economic, technological, and security relations may restrict their ability to determine policies independently (Aamer & Chanlett-Avery, 2026). The central challenge is therefore not merely whether Southeast Asian states align with one major power or another, but whether they can preserve meaningful strategic choices within an increasingly contested international order.

Southeast Asian states have generally responded to external competition by combining engagement, diversification, institutional participation, and hedging. Kuik and Idris (2012) established an important foundation for understanding hedging as a strategy through which regional states manage uncertainty without adopting exclusive alignment. However, intensifying geopolitical and geoeconomic pressures have made the preservation of strategic autonomy increasingly difficult. ASEAN states are simultaneously embedded in economic relations with China, security cooperation with the United States and its partners, and regional mechanisms centred on ASEAN. Exclusive alignment is therefore both politically sensitive and economically costly. In this context, ASEAN centrality, sovereign equality, non-interference, peaceful dispute settlement, and respect for international law provide an important normative basis for maintaining regional agency (Qiao-Franco et al., 2025).

Although strategic autonomy has attracted growing attention in international relations scholarship, its legal dimension remains insufficiently conceptualized in the Southeast Asian context. Existing studies explain how states preserve strategic flexibility through hedging, diversification, institutional participation, and external partnerships. However, less attention has been devoted to how states formulate, interpret, and implement their international legal commitments while maintaining meaningful national and regional policy choices amid intensifying great-power competition. This omission is consequential because strategic choices are not exercised in a legal vacuum. They are structured by treaty obligations, customary international law, institutional arrangements, and domestic regulatory authority. International law may constrain particular policy options while simultaneously providing principles, rights, and procedures through which states can articulate and defend their legitimate interests.

Against this background, this article examines the relationship between great-power competition, international law, and strategic autonomy in Southeast Asia. It addresses two research questions: first, how does great-power competition affect the legal dimension of strategic autonomy in Southeast Asia? Second, how can Strategic Legal Autonomy be conceptually reconstructed as a framework for

understanding how states preserve meaningful legal and policy choices while remaining embedded in international and regional legal commitments? The general objective is to conceptualize the legal dimension of strategic autonomy rather than to treat strategic autonomy solely as a foreign-policy strategy. More specifically, the study identifies relevant international legal principles and institutional settings, examines the legal and institutional pressures generated by great-power competition, and develops a Strategic Legal Autonomy Framework applicable to the analysis of Southeast Asian states.

The article contributes to existing scholarship by developing Strategic Legal Autonomy as a conceptual framework for identifying the legal capacities through which strategic autonomy is articulated and exercised. It refers to the capacity of states to formulate, interpret, implement, and manage their international legal commitments while preserving legitimate national and regional policy space. Strategic Legal Autonomy does not constitute the source of strategic autonomy; rather, it identifies the legal capacities through which an existing orientation toward strategic autonomy can be exercised within the international legal order. The proposed framework comprises four interrelated dimensions: normative autonomy, regulatory autonomy, institutional autonomy, and strategic legal choice. By connecting international relations scholarship on strategic autonomy with international legal principles concerning sovereignty, treaty obligations, regulatory authority, and institutional participation, the article seeks to clarify how states preserve meaningful strategic choices without equating autonomy with freedom from international law.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing scholarship explains how Southeast Asian states respond to intensifying great-power competition through hedging, diversification, and institutional engagement. Kuik and Idris (2012) provide an important foundation for understanding hedging as a strategy for managing strategic uncertainty without committing exclusively to one major power. Zhang (2023) similarly examines ASEAN's efforts to preserve strategic autonomy through internal consensus, external partnerships, and regional agenda-setting. However, Qiao-Franco et al. (2025) demonstrate that new and reinvigorated Indo-Pacific arrangements have placed ASEAN centrality under increasing pressure. These studies highlight the importance of strategic flexibility and regional institutional agency, but they primarily explain strategic autonomy as a political and diplomatic orientation rather than examining the legal capacities through which states maintain meaningful policy choices.

Other studies demonstrate that strategic autonomy is contested and shaped by domestic and external influences. Tan and Fook (2022) argue that China's promotion of strategic autonomy in Southeast Asia is not normatively neutral, as it may encourage regional states to distance themselves from the United States while remaining receptive to a China-centred regional order. Marston (2024), through comparative case studies of Singapore, Vietnam, and the Philippines, further illustrates how domestic political and strategic conditions generate different

responses to great-power competition. Although these contributions clarify the political dynamics underlying strategic autonomy, they provide less systematic attention to how international legal commitments, regulatory authority, and institutional arrangements structure the choices available to states.

A complementary body of scholarship examines strategic autonomy through international law, particularly in the European Union. Steinbach (2023) demonstrates that efforts to strengthen strategic autonomy must remain consistent with existing international legal obligations. Kübek and Mancini (2021) similarly show that open strategic autonomy under European Union external trade law can reconcile autonomous policy action with legal openness. These studies establish that strategic autonomy does not necessarily require withdrawal from international cooperation or freedom from legal commitments. Nevertheless, the European Union's supranational legal order differs substantially from ASEAN's intergovernmental structure, which remains strongly shaped by state sovereignty and consensus-based decision-making. Consequently, European approaches cannot be transferred directly to Southeast Asia without accounting for these institutional differences.

International law provides the normative context within which strategic autonomy is exercised. The Charter of the United Nations establishes sovereign equality and obligations concerning peaceful dispute settlement and the prohibition of the threat or use of force (United Nations, 1945). The Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties establishes the binding force of treaties and rules governing their interpretation and performance (United Nations, 1969). At the regional level, the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia and the ASEAN Charter affirm principles concerning sovereignty, non-interference, peaceful dispute settlement, and regional cooperation (ASEAN, 1976, 2008). These instruments simultaneously establish legal obligations and provide a framework within which states formulate policies and manage external relations. International law therefore operates not merely as a constraint but also as a framework for identifying and exercising legally available choices.

This relationship becomes increasingly significant as great-power competition extends across security, economic, and technological domains. Competition affects defence arrangements, maritime positions, investment policies, supply-chain governance, and technological standards (Farrand, 2025; Marston, 2024; Zhang, 2023). Such pressures may influence not only individual policy decisions but also the regulatory and institutional environments within which those decisions are made. Nevertheless, existing scholarship has not sufficiently integrated international legal principles, treaty commitments, regulatory authority, and institutional participation into a coherent framework for analysing strategic autonomy in Southeast Asia. The principal research gap therefore concerns the insufficient conceptualisation of the legal capacities through which states preserve strategic choices while remaining subject to international and regional legal obligations.

This article addresses that gap by developing Strategic Legal Autonomy as an analytical framework for examining the legal dimension of strategic autonomy in Southeast Asia. The concept refers to the capacity of states to formulate, interpret, implement, and manage international legal commitments while preserving legitimate national and regional policy space. It comprises four interrelated dimensions: normative autonomy, concerning the articulation and defence of legal positions; regulatory autonomy, concerning the exercise of domestic regulatory authority within applicable international obligations; institutional autonomy, concerning participation in international and regional institutions; and strategic legal choice, concerning the selection of legally available alternatives under geopolitical and geoeconomic pressure. Rather than constituting an independent source of strategic autonomy or implying freedom from international law, the framework identifies the legal capacities through which strategic autonomy may be articulated and exercised. It thus connects international relations scholarship with international legal analysis while accounting for ASEAN's distinctive intergovernmental structure.

METHOD

This study employs normative or doctrinal legal research to examine and reconstruct the legal dimension of strategic autonomy within the international legal order of Southeast Asia (Hutchinson & Duncan, 2012). The central problem addressed is the insufficient conceptual integration of international legal principles, treaty commitments, institutional arrangements, and state-level legal choices in existing discussions of strategic autonomy in Southeast Asia. The study therefore asks how the legal dimension of strategic autonomy can be conceptualized without treating international law as the source of strategic autonomy itself. Instead, international law is examined as the legal environment within which states articulate, exercise, and defend their existing strategic autonomy amid great-power competition. As the research examines legal norms, institutional arrangements, judicial reasoning, and scholarly concepts, it does not involve respondents, interviews, surveys, experiments, or demographic data. The units of analysis comprise international and regional legal instruments, an international arbitral award, official institutional documents, relevant legal scholarship, and selected Indonesian legal and foreign-policy practices.

The study applies four complementary approaches: conceptual, treaty-based, case, and comparative. The conceptual approach distinguishes the political and foreign-policy understanding of strategic autonomy from the proposed concept of Strategic Legal Autonomy, which identifies its legal dimension. The treaty-based approach examines the rights, obligations, principles, and institutional procedures established by relevant international and ASEAN legal instruments (United Nations, 1969). The case approach uses Indonesia as an illustrative legal application to clarify how the legal dimension of an existing strategic autonomy can be examined in a Southeast Asian context. Indonesia is particularly relevant because its foreign-policy principle of bebas-aktif provides the foundation for its autonomous foreign-policy orientation, while its engagement with international law and ASEAN takes place within the legal and institutional environment of

regional and global governance. The Indonesian case is not intended to establish the empirical validity of the proposed framework or to provide a comprehensive country study. Rather, it illustrates how the framework can be applied to interpret the relationship between an existing foreign-policy principle, relevant legal commitments, regional institutional arrangements, and the preservation of meaningful strategic choices.

The case analysis draws on Indonesia's positions concerning international law and maritime affairs, the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the 2016 South China Sea Arbitration, and Indonesia's engagement with ASEAN, including the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). The 2016 arbitral award is examined as part of the broader international legal context relevant to maritime entitlements and sovereign rights; Indonesia was not a party to that arbitration, and the award is not treated as a source of Indonesia's strategic autonomy. Similarly, UNCLOS and AOIP are not treated as instruments that create Indonesia's autonomy. Instead, they provide legal and institutional contexts through which Indonesia's existing foreign-policy orientation and regional agency can be interpreted. The comparative approach identifies relevant convergences and differences between general international law, ASEAN institutional practices, and selected legal approaches developed in the European Union. This comparison is functional and contextual; it does not equate ASEAN's intergovernmental structure with the European Union's supranational legal order.

Primary legal materials include the Charter of the United Nations (United Nations, 1945), the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties 1969 (United Nations, 1969), UNCLOS (United Nations, 1982), the ASEAN Charter (ASEAN, 2008), the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (ASEAN, 1976), the AOIP (ASEAN, 2019), relevant ASEAN documents, and the 2016 South China Sea Arbitration (Permanent Court of Arbitration, 2016). Indonesian official documents and foreign-policy statements relevant to bebas-aktif, maritime affairs, and ASEAN engagement are also considered where relevant to the analysis. International and regional legal materials were obtained from the official repositories of the United Nations, ASEAN, and the Permanent Court of Arbitration. Secondary materials were identified through Scopus, Web of Science, HeinOnline, and Google Scholar using combinations of keywords including "strategic autonomy," "legal autonomy," "ASEAN centrality," "great-power competition," "sovereign equality," "international law," and "Southeast Asia." Priority was given to peer-reviewed English-language publications from 2020 onward, while earlier foundational works were retained where conceptually or legally relevant.

The analysis proceeded in four stages. First, existing concepts of strategic autonomy were examined to distinguish its political and foreign-policy foundations from the legal dimension addressed by this study. Second, relevant international and regional legal provisions were interpreted to identify the principles, obligations, and institutional arrangements that define the legal environment within which states exercise strategic choices. Third, Indonesia was examined as an illustrative legal application through four analytical dimensions: normative autonomy, concerning the articulation and maintenance of legal principles and positions; regulatory

autonomy, concerning the formulation and implementation of domestic policies within applicable international obligations; institutional autonomy, concerning participation in and engagement with international and regional institutional settings; and strategic legal choice, concerning decisions about legal positions, international commitments, institutional forums, and domestic implementation. The analysis considers these dimensions in light of the available legal materials and relevant Indonesian foreign-policy practices, rather than presuming that each dimension is equally demonstrated by every example. Fourth, the findings were synthesized through legal reconstruction to formulate the Strategic Legal Autonomy Framework. The Indonesian case thus illustrates the framework's analytical application but does not serve as an empirical test or a comprehensive demonstration of all its dimensions.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Great Power Competition and the Erosion of Strategic Autonomy

Great power competition has transformed Southeast Asia from a relatively open space for diplomatic maneuver into a contested environment where security, economic, technological, and normative interests intersect. U.S.–China rivalry affects not only whether ASEAN Member States choose sides but also the range of policy and legal choices available to them (Khoirunnisa et al., 2026). Recent scholarship identifies Southeast Asia as a critical arena of competition in which states seek flexibility through diversification and avoidance of exclusive alignment (Hass, 2025; Tan & Fook, 2022). This creates an important distinction between political strategic autonomy and strategic legal autonomy**:** a state may formally retain sovereign freedom of choice while its effective capacity to exercise that freedom is constrained by external commitments, economic dependencies, technological standards, and competing normative frameworks.

The first pressure is security**.** The South China Sea most visibly demonstrates how territorial and maritime disputes intersect with competing regional security architectures . Bilateral alliances, minilateral arrangements, maritime exercises, and Indo-Pacific initiatives encourage Southeast Asian states to strengthen security partnerships while avoiding strategic entrapment (Khoirunnisa et al., 2026). Although ASEAN remains an important diplomatic platform, its consensus-based mechanisms have limited capacity to generate collective responses to hard-security crises, leading states to rely increasingly on bilateral or selective arrangements (Ong-Webb, 2026). This pressure also has a legal dimension. The 2016 *South China Sea Arbitration* clarified important maritime rights under UNCLOS, yet the continuing gap between legal adjudication, state practice, and geopolitical power illustrates the difficulty of translating international legal rights into effective autonomy.

The second pressure concerns the economy**.** ASEAN economies are deeply integrated into production, trade, investment, and supply chains involving both China and the United States. ASEAN data indicate that the United States was its second-largest trading partner and largest external source of FDI in 2024 (ASEAN,

2025). Meanwhile, tariffs, export restrictions, reshoring, and supply-chain diversification have encouraged production restructuring across Southeast Asia (ASEAN Secretariat, 2025; Yeo, 2025) While creating opportunities, these developments also generate regulatory pressure, potentially narrowing state discretion over tariffs, investment screening, procurement, subsidies, and supply-chain regulation.

The third pressure is technological**.** Competition over semiconductors, artificial intelligence, 5G, cloud computing, digital infrastructure, and data has made technological choices increasingly inseparable from economic security and sovereignty. U.S.–China competition over digital infrastructure, particularly 5G, illustrates this convergence (Lu & Moorthy, 2025). Dependence on foreign suppliers, advanced technologies, and digital platforms can constrain domestic regulatory autonomy. ASEAN's *Guide on AI Governance and Ethics*, cross-border data-flow frameworks, and 5G initiatives demonstrate an effort to develop regional standards rather than simply adopt external models (ASEAN Secretariat, 2024).

The fourth pressure is normative**.** Great power competition increasingly involves competing conceptions of international order, governance, and acceptable state conduct. These competing frameworks can influence treaty interpretation, digital governance, maritime security, investment regulation, and institutional participation (Tan & Fook, 2022). ASEAN has responded by emphasizing inclusiveness, ASEAN centrality, dialogue, and international law, seeking to preserve normative space through regional institutions (Jubaidi & Yustanti, 2025).

Taken together, these pressures demonstrate that great power competition generates not merely political pressure but increasingly legal constraints (Khoirunnisa & Jubaidi, 2025)**.** Security dependence can influence institutional choices; economic dependence can narrow regulatory discretion; technological dependence can encourage adoption of external standards; and normative competition can fragment understandings of international legal order. The erosion of strategic autonomy therefore does not signify the disappearance of sovereignty, but a narrowing of the effective legal space within which states exercise formally recognized rights and obligations. This finding provides the basis for reconstructing Strategic Legal Autonomy through the international legal principles and institutional mechanisms capable of preserving that space.

International Law as a Source of Strategic Autonomy

The preceding analysis demonstrates that great power competition can narrow the strategic choices of Southeast Asian states. However, international law should not be understood solely as a constraint. For smaller and middle powers, it can also function as an instrument of strategic autonomy by translating sovereign equality into legally recognized rights and capacities, structuring commitments, creating institutional bargaining spaces, and providing mechanisms to contest asymmetric power (Khoirunnisa & Jubaidi, 2025). Recent scholarship on ASEAN's legal agency shows that regional legal cooperation enables Southeast Asian states to develop collective capacity and preserve strategic space despite geopolitical asymmetries

(Hsien-Li, 2024). Strategic autonomy therefore depends not only on avoiding external obligations but also on using international law to shape, manage, and constrain those obligations.

First, sovereign equality provides the foundational legal basis for strategic autonomy. Although states differ in military, economic, and technological capabilities, international law recognizes them as juridically equal subjects (Arinal & Naf, 2025). While this principle does not eliminate material inequality, it provides a normative basis for weaker states to assert rights and participate in international decision-making without accepting power-based hierarchy. The ASEAN Charter combines respect for independence, sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity, and national identity with adherence to international law (ASEAN, 2008). Likewise, the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) affirms sovereignty, equality, non-interference, and each state's right to conduct its national existence free from external interference, subversion, or coercion (ASEAN, 1976). Sovereign equality thus constitutes the first legal layer of strategic autonomy.

Second, treaty law enables states to organize international commitments strategically. The Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties provides the framework governing treaty conclusion, interpretation, performance, modification, and termination. Although *pacta sunt servanda* creates binding obligations, treaty law also provides predictability and reciprocity. States can therefore use treaties to institutionalize cooperation, define rights and obligations, establish legally permissible safeguards, and diversify partnerships. Autonomy consequently does not mean freedom from commitment, but the capacity to choose and structure commitments under law (United Nations, 1969).

Third, international institutions provide bargaining space that bilateral power relations may not offer (Khoirunnisa & Jubaidi, 2026). Multilateral institutions aggregate states, establish procedures, and provide forums where formal legal equality can partially mitigate material asymmetry. ASEAN demonstrates this function by enabling Member States to engage external powers collectively while preserving ASEAN centrality. Hsien-li (2024) identifies this development as an exercise of legal agency through which ASEAN has evolved toward a rules-based regional community capable of using law to safeguard collective interests. The ASEAN Charter's legal personality and institutional framework provide a formal basis for such collective agency.

Fourth, dispute settlement strengthens strategic autonomy by providing legal mechanisms to challenge conduct affecting state rights and interests (Khoirunnisa & Jubaidi, 2025). Judicial and arbitral mechanisms cannot eliminate geopolitical asymmetry or guarantee compliance, but they can clarify applicable rules, establish authoritative interpretations, and provide weaker states with a legally recognized basis for contesting stronger states. Their importance is particularly evident in maritime disputes, where adjudication can establish legal rights independently of relative military capabilities.

Finally, regional legal regimes transform individual legal capacity into collective strategic autonomy (Jubaidi & Yustanti, 2025). The ASEAN Charter and TAC institutionalize sovereignty, non-interference, peaceful settlement, consultation, and cooperation, creating a regional normative environment in which Member States can resist coercive external influence while maintaining engagement with major powers. ASEAN therefore coordinates sovereign states without requiring surrender of their fundamental legal status.

Accordingly, international law performs a dual function: it constrains state conduct through binding obligations while simultaneously protecting and expanding the legal space for strategic choice. Strategic legal autonomy therefore emerges not from escaping international law, but from using international law to preserve normative, institutional, and regulatory space within an unequal international system.

Reconstructing Strategic Legal Autonomy

The preceding analysis demonstrates that strategic autonomy requires a legal dimension capable of explaining how states preserve meaningful choices within an international system characterized by binding obligations, institutional constraints, and unequal distributions of power. Political or foreign-policy approaches to strategic autonomy primarily emphasize flexibility, diversification, and the avoidance of excessive dependence (Herlanda et al., 2025).While these dimensions remain important, they do not fully explain the legal capacity through which states exercise such choices. This study therefore reconstructs Strategic Legal Autonomy as the capacity of a state to preserve and exercise its legally recognized ability to formulate, interpret, implement, and strategically manage international legal commitments in accordance with legitimate national and regional interests, while remaining bound by applicable international law.

This reconstruction builds upon the recognition that strategic autonomy has significant legal dimensions and that international law may simultaneously impose constraints and provide room for policy manoeuvre (Steinbach, 2023; Voon, 2023). It also responds to the experience of Southeast Asian states, where material asymmetry limits individual strategic independence, while regional legal and institutional cooperation can create additional space for collective action. Strategic legal autonomy consequently does not imply freedom from international law or rejection of international commitments (Wajahat. Johar et al., 2025). Rather, it concerns the ability to engage with international law in ways that preserve meaningful legal agency and prevent external power from determining the boundaries of legitimate state choice.

The reconstructed concept consists of four mutually reinforcing dimensions**.** First, Normative Autonomy concerns the capacity to maintain, articulate, and defend preferred legal principles and normative positions without being compelled to adopt external norms solely because of material or geopolitical pressure. It enables states to participate actively in the development and interpretation of international

norms while maintaining consistency with legitimate national and regional interests.

Second, Regulatory Autonomy concerns the capacity to formulate and implement domestic rules governing trade, investment, technology, data, and economic activity within the limits of applicable international obligations. Regulatory autonomy does not mean unrestricted domestic discretion. International economic law recognizes forms of regulatory space through exceptions, safeguards, and interpretative flexibility, although such space remains legally conditioned (Voon, 2023). The relevant question is therefore whether international commitments preserve sufficient policy space for states to regulate matters of legitimate public and strategic interest.

Third, Institutional Autonomy refers to the capacity to select and strategically use international and regional institutions, coalitions, and dispute-settlement mechanisms to advance legitimate interests. This dimension is particularly important for smaller and middle powers because multilateral institutions can provide procedural and legal mechanisms through which material asymmetries are partially moderated. ASEAN and other multilateral institutions can consequently serve not merely as diplomatic platforms but as instruments for strengthening legal agency.

Fourth, Strategic Legal Choice concerns the capacity to determine when and how to enter international commitments, interpret applicable obligations, select appropriate legal and institutional forums, and implement international law domestically. This dimension connects the other three by emphasizing informed and legally structured decision-making. Strategic legal choice allows states to diversify commitments, manage competing external relationships, and avoid arrangements that unnecessarily restrict their future legal options.

Taken together, these four dimensions constitute Strategic Legal Autonomy: the capacity to preserve normative and regulatory space, strategically utilize institutions, and exercise informed choices over international legal commitments. It therefore represents neither legal isolation nor unrestricted sovereignty, but a capacity to maintain meaningful legal space for strategic decision-making through international law rather than outside it.

The Strategic Legal Autonomy Framework for Southeast Asia

Based on the preceding conceptual reconstruction, this study proposes the Strategic Legal Autonomy Framework for Southeast Asia as its principal analytical contribution. The framework translates the legal dimension of strategic autonomy into a structured model for understanding how Southeast Asian states articulate and exercise meaningful legal and strategic choices under conditions of great-power competition. Rather than defining autonomy as the absence of external influence, it conceptualizes Strategic Legal Autonomy as a legally grounded capacity through which existing strategic autonomy is articulated and exercised within the international legal order. The framework therefore connects international legal principles, state-level legal capacities, and ASEAN regional

mechanisms (Jubaidi & Yustanti, 2025).

The framework begins with the international legal order, which establishes the normative and institutional environment within which states exercise rights and fulfil international obligations. International law simultaneously imposes binding constraints and establishes legal structures within which states assert rights, undertake commitments, participate in institutions, and preserve legitimate policy space. At its foundation are sovereignty and sovereign equality, which provide the juridical basis for states to retain international legal personality and exercise legally recognized authority irrespective of differences in material capabilities. These principles are reflected in the UN Charter and reinforced within the Southeast Asian regional order through the ASEAN Charter and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (ASEAN, 1976, 2008; United Nations, 1945). Sovereignty and sovereign equality therefore constitute important legal foundations within which strategic autonomy is exercised, rather than constituting the source of strategic autonomy itself.

Within this legal environment, Strategic Legal Autonomy identifies the legal dimension of an existing strategic autonomy and is analytically examined through four mutually reinforcing dimensions: Normative Autonomy, Regulatory Autonomy, Institutional Autonomy, and Strategic Legal Choice. Normative autonomy concerns the capacity to articulate and maintain preferred legal principles and positions. Regulatory autonomy concerns the capacity to formulate and implement domestic policies within applicable international obligations. Institutional autonomy refers to the capacity to participate in and make use of international and regional institutional settings in accordance with legitimate national and regional interests. Strategic legal choice concerns decisions regarding international commitments, legal interpretation, institutional forums, and domestic implementation. This fourth dimension represents the decision-making capacity through which the other dimensions can be considered and combined. Together, the four dimensions identify the principal legal capacities through which strategic autonomy is articulated and exercised within the international legal order.

These dimensions are situated within ASEAN regional mechanisms, which provide an institutional environment in which Member States can coordinate positions and exercise regional agency. The ASEAN Charter establishes ASEAN's legal personality and institutional framework, while its principles emphasize sovereignty, equality, non-interference, consensus, peaceful settlement of disputes, and adherence to international law (ASEAN, 2008). ASEAN mechanisms therefore function not as the source of Member States' strategic autonomy, but as institutional settings through which existing national and regional agency can be coordinated and expressed. Through coordination of normative positions, regulatory approaches, institutional participation, and strategic legal choices, ASEAN provides a regional setting in which Member States may collectively respond to external pressures while retaining their sovereign status. ASEAN's commitment to an open, inclusive, resilient, and rules-based regional architecture further reinforces this institutional environment (ASEAN,

2024).

The framework ultimately explains strategic autonomy amid great-power competition as a capacity to preserve meaningful legal and strategic choices despite external power asymmetries. Autonomy is not equated with neutrality, isolation, or freedom from international obligations. Rather, it concerns the ability of states to maintain meaningful room for strategic decision-making while remaining embedded in international and regional legal commitments. The framework consequently identifies four forms of space that states seek to preserve and exercise: normative, regulatory, institutional, and policy-making space.

Its principal contribution lies in reconstructing the legal dimension of strategic autonomy as a form of legally structured state and regional agency. Whereas conventional approaches emphasize balancing, hedging, diversification, or dependence reduction, this framework identifies the legal capacities and institutional settings through which existing strategic choices can be articulated, defended, and exercised. International law is therefore understood neither solely as a constraint nor as an instrument that creates strategic autonomy, but as the legal environment within which strategic autonomy is exercised, constrained, and defended in Southeast Asia.

Application to Southeast Asia

Indonesia: Illustrating the Legal Dimension of Strategic Autonomy

Indonesia provides an illustrative legal application of the proposed Strategic Legal Autonomy Framework in Southeast Asia (Singgir et al., 2025). The purpose is not to present a comprehensive country study or to empirically validate the framework, but to illustrate how the legal dimension of an existing strategic autonomy can be examined in a regional context shaped by great-power competition. Indonesia is relevant because its foreign-policy orientation is grounded in the principle of *bebas-aktif* (independent and active foreign policy), while its engagement with China, the United States, ASEAN, and other international partners takes place within an increasingly contested geopolitical and legal environment. The Indonesian case therefore helps clarify the relationship between an existing foreign-policy principle, applicable international legal commitments, regional institutional arrangements, and the preservation of meaningful strategic choices. International law and ASEAN mechanisms are not treated as the sources of Indonesia's strategic autonomy, but as part of the legal and institutional environment within which that autonomy is articulated and exercised.

The first dimension, normative autonomy, can be illustrated by examining how Indonesia articulates its maritime position within the legal framework of UNCLOS.

The principle of *bebas-aktif* provides the foreign-policy foundation for understanding Indonesia's strategic autonomy. Its relevance lies in Indonesia's orientation toward independent decision-making and active international engagement, rather than in a presumption that Indonesia must remain detached from international institutions or legal commitments. The legal dimension of this

autonomy can be examined through Indonesia's maritime position concerning the waters surrounding the Natuna Islands, where China's activities and maritime claims have raised concerns regarding Indonesia's sovereign rights and jurisdiction within its exclusive economic zone (EEZ).

Indonesia's reliance on the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) provides a juridical basis for articulating its maritime position. This reliance illustrates normative autonomy insofar as Indonesia frames its position through applicable international maritime law rather than accepting another state's strategic preferences as the basis for determining its legal rights. UNCLOS does not create Indonesia's strategic autonomy; it establishes relevant legal rules and entitlements within which Indonesia articulates and defends its maritime position. The distinction is important because the exercise of strategic autonomy remains subject to applicable international law, rather than depending on unrestricted unilateral discretion (Republic of Indonesia, 2025).

The 2016 South China Sea Arbitration may also be considered part of the broader international legal context surrounding maritime entitlements and sovereign rights. However, Indonesia was not a party to that arbitration, and the award is not treated as the source of Indonesia's legal position or strategic autonomy. Its relevance to this analysis is contextual: it forms part of the wider legal discourse concerning the interpretation and application of UNCLOS in the South China Sea.

A further dimension concerns institutional autonomy, which can be examined through Indonesia's participation in ASEAN and its engagement with the AOIP.

Indonesia's engagement with ASEAN illustrates the institutional dimension of strategic autonomy. Rather than treating regional institutions as mechanisms that create national autonomy, this analysis understands them as institutional settings through which existing national interests and regional agency can be expressed and coordinated. The ASEAN Charter establishes ASEAN's institutional and legal framework, while the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) emphasizes ASEAN centrality, inclusiveness, dialogue, cooperation, and respect for international law (ASEAN, 2008, 2019).

Within this framework, Indonesia's support for an inclusive, ASEAN-centred regional order can be understood as an effort to maintain a regional setting in which cooperation with competing major powers does not require automatic adherence to an exclusive geopolitical bloc. ASEAN's principles and mechanisms provide a context for articulating shared regional positions, although their practical effects remain conditioned by Member States' differing interests, institutional procedures, and willingness to coordinate. ASEAN centrality should therefore not be assumed to guarantee strategic autonomy. Rather, it provides an institutional setting in which states may seek to preserve and express their existing strategic choices. ASEAN's reaffirmation of an ASEAN-centred Indo-Pacific in 2025 is relevant to this institutional context (ASEAN, 2025).

The fourth dimension, strategic legal choice, concerns how Indonesia navigates competing external relationships and makes choices regarding international

commitments and institutional participation.

Indonesia's engagement with China and the United States further illustrates the dimension of strategic legal choice. China is an important economic partner, while relations with the United States offer opportunities for cooperation in areas including investment, technology, maritime security, and defence. Maintaining relations with both countries may be interpreted as part of Indonesia's effort to retain flexibility in its external relationships rather than treating cooperation with either power as requiring automatic geopolitical alignment (Tiwary & Acharya, 2026).

From the perspective of Strategic Legal Autonomy, however, the existence of multiple partnerships alone does not establish the extent of Indonesia's legal autonomy. The relevant analytical question is how Indonesia's choices concerning international commitments, legal positions, and institutional engagement relate to its established foreign-policy orientation and applicable legal obligations. Strategic legal choice thus concerns the capacity to make and manage such decisions within the international legal order, not freedom from legal commitments or the unrestricted selection of rules according to immediate national preference. Indonesia's engagement with multiple partners illustrates the relevance of this dimension, although a fuller assessment would require closer examination of specific decisions and their legal implications.

Beyond the articulation of legal positions, the framework also draws attention to regulatory autonomy, namely the capacity to formulate and implement domestic policies within applicable international obligations.

Regulatory autonomy concerns the capacity to formulate and implement domestic policies within applicable international legal obligations. This dimension is conceptually relevant to the Strategic Legal Autonomy Framework because international commitments may define both the obligations states must observe and the scope available for domestic policy choices. It also clarifies that strategic autonomy does not mean unrestricted regulatory discretion.

Nevertheless, the maritime and ASEAN materials discussed above do not, by themselves, provide sufficient evidence for a detailed assessment of Indonesia's regulatory autonomy. The analysis of UNCLOS primarily illustrates the articulation of maritime legal positions, while the AOIP and ASEAN institutional framework primarily illuminate regional engagement and coordination. A fuller application of the regulatory dimension would require specific Indonesian legislation, regulations, or policy documents demonstrating how domestic regulatory choices are formulated and implemented within relevant international commitments. Regulatory autonomy is therefore retained as a dimension of the proposed framework, but its application to Indonesia should not be regarded as comprehensively demonstrated by the present illustration.

The Indonesian illustration clarifies the distinction between the foundation of strategic autonomy and its legal dimension. Indonesia's foreign-policy orientation is grounded in *bebas-aktif*, while international law establishes the legal

environment within which that orientation is articulated and exercised. UNCLOS provides a juridical basis for Indonesia's maritime position, and ASEAN mechanisms offer institutional settings for regional engagement and the coordination of positions. Indonesia's relationships with China and the United States further illustrate the continuing importance of strategic choices under conditions of external power asymmetry.

These observations illustrate the analytical relevance of normative autonomy, institutional autonomy, and strategic legal choice, while the regulatory dimension requires further documentary examination for a more complete country-level application. The case does not establish the empirical validity of the framework or demonstrate that international law and ASEAN institutions independently create or strengthen strategic autonomy. Instead, it shows how the proposed framework can distinguish an existing foreign-policy orientation from the legal principles, institutional settings, and decision-making capacities through which that orientation is maintained and exercised. The contribution of the Indonesian illustration is therefore analytical: it demonstrates how the legal dimension of strategic autonomy can be examined without conflating international law with the source of autonomy itself.

Implications for ASEAN

The Indonesian case illustrates how international law and institutional engagement may provide a state with legal and diplomatic resources for managing external pressures, although their contribution to strategic autonomy depends on domestic political choices, institutional capacity, and the broader distribution of power (Kristiyanto et al., 2023). At the regional level, the Strategic Legal Autonomy Framework provides an analytical basis for examining how ASEAN's existing legal and institutional arrangements may create opportunities for Member States to coordinate their responses to external pressures. However, the existence of regional mechanisms does not automatically strengthen the strategic autonomy of individual states. ASEAN is better understood as an institutional environment for coordination in which collective action remains contingent on political consensus, divergent national interests, and differences in Member States' legal and administrative capacities. The ASEAN Charter establishes the institutional and normative basis for regional cooperation, while the ASEAN Community Vision 2045 articulates a forward-looking commitment to ASEAN centrality, international law, and ASEAN-led regional mechanisms (ASEAN, 2008, 2025). These frameworks provide a basis for cooperation, but their implications for strategic autonomy depend on how they are interpreted, implemented, and used by Member States.

First, regional legal harmonization and common regulatory standards represent a potential avenue for expanding the policy space available to ASEAN Member States. Existing regional initiatives concerning digital data governance, personal data protection, and artificial intelligence demonstrate that ASEAN has developed frameworks for policy coordination in emerging regulatory fields. Nevertheless, the existence of these frameworks should not be equated with uniform national

regulation or consistent implementation. Differences in domestic legislation, administrative capacity, economic priorities, and approaches to data governance may limit the extent of regulatory convergence. The proposed Strategic Legal Autonomy Framework therefore treats regional harmonization as a possible means of improving regulatory compatibility rather than as evidence that ASEAN has already achieved collective regulatory autonomy. In strategically sensitive sectors, common principles and minimum standards could help Member States coordinate their regulatory approaches while retaining discretion over national implementation.

Second, collective treaty-making and regional negotiations may create opportunities for Member States to coordinate their bargaining positions when engaging with external partners. The ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA) illustrates the regional effort to develop a common framework for digital economic cooperation. The substantial conclusion of its negotiations in 2025 marked an important stage in this process (ASEAN Secretariat, 2025). However, the conclusion of negotiations should be distinguished from the subsequent legal and institutional steps required for an agreement to enter into force and be implemented. Nor does regional negotiation necessarily eliminate differences in bargaining capacity among Member States. Within the proposed framework, collective treaty-making is therefore understood as a potential means of pooling negotiating resources and articulating shared priorities, rather than as a guarantee of equal influence or strategic autonomy for all participating states.

Third, coordinated interpretation of international norms could provide an additional avenue for regional engagement with international law. ASEAN Member States encounter overlapping legal and policy questions concerning maritime rights, sovereignty, trade, investment, non-intervention, digital governance, and international institutional reform. Nevertheless, their legal positions and strategic interests do not always coincide. A single, binding ASEAN interpretation of every international rule is neither a necessary nor a realistic precondition for regional coordination. Instead, Member States could develop common legal reference points, non-binding interpretative guidelines, or coordinated diplomatic statements where their interests converge. Such practices may improve the visibility of regional perspectives in international forums while preserving national discretion where consensus is absent. In this respect, normative autonomy refers to the capacity to articulate and advance regional legal positions, not to the existence of a unified ASEAN interpretation of international law.

Fourth, regional dispute-settlement mechanisms provide an existing institutional basis for managing disagreements concerning ASEAN commitments, but their availability should not be confused with consistently effective dispute resolution. The ASEAN Charter and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia provide relevant institutional and procedural foundations for regional cooperation and the peaceful management of disputes. Their practical significance depends on the applicable procedures, Member States' willingness to use them, institutional capacity, and compliance with agreed outcomes. As a normative

recommendation, ASEAN could consider ways to improve procedural clarity, institutional support, and the consistent implementation of existing commitments. These measures may increase the usefulness of regional mechanisms for managing intra-regional disagreements, although they cannot ensure that legal procedures will prevail over political considerations in every case.

Finally, engagement with international institutions offers Member States an additional channel for articulating legal positions and pursuing policy objectives. ASEAN centrality provides a regional orientation for engagement through ASEAN-led forums, while institutions such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, and international courts and tribunals offer distinct legal and institutional avenues for addressing specific issues. The relevance of each forum depends on its mandate, applicable legal rules, and the position of the states concerned. ASEAN Member States may benefit from coordinating their positions where shared interests exist, but such coordination does not necessarily imply a common legal position or collective action in every case. ASEAN Community Vision 2045 provides a policy basis for continued engagement with regional architecture and international law, including the law of the sea (ASEAN, 2025). The proposed framework treats these institutional channels as resources that Member States may selectively employ, rather than as mechanisms that automatically constrain major-power influence or guarantee regional autonomy.

Taken together, these implications distinguish ASEAN's existing institutional arrangements from the further reforms and practices proposed by this study. The ASEAN Charter, regional cooperation frameworks, treaty-making processes, and ASEAN-led mechanisms already provide institutional settings in which Member States can coordinate their legal and diplomatic engagement. However, the extent to which these arrangements contribute to strategic autonomy remains contingent on political consensus, implementation capacity, national interests, and the willingness of Member States to use regional mechanisms. The Strategic Legal Autonomy Framework therefore does not assume that ASEAN institutions inherently produce collective autonomy. Instead, it offers a way to assess whether and under what conditions regional legal coordination can expand the normative, regulatory, institutional, and policy-making space available to Member States. ASEAN centrality may consequently be understood as an enabling institutional principle whose contribution to strategic autonomy depends on its practical use, rather than as evidence that such autonomy has already been achieved.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examines how great power competition affects the strategic autonomy of Southeast Asian states through legal and normative pressures, and how strategic autonomy can be conceptualized within the international legal order. The analysis suggests that strategic autonomy may be constrained not only by political, economic, and security asymmetries but also by the rules, regulatory standards, institutional arrangements, and international commitments through which external influence is exercised. Although sovereignty and sovereign equality provide formal legal foundations for state autonomy, they do not necessarily

ensure that states possess equivalent practical capacities to exercise independent policy choices. The answer to the first research question is therefore that strategic autonomy has a significant legal dimension: its practical exercise depends partly on how states navigate asymmetric legal obligations, institutional arrangements, and competing normative preferences under conditions of great power competition.

In response to the second research question, this study reconstructs Strategic Legal Autonomy as the capacity of a state to preserve and exercise meaningful normative, regulatory, institutional, and strategic choices within the applicable international legal order. This conceptualization moves beyond an understanding of autonomy as freedom from external influence or as a condition of legal isolation. International law can constrain state conduct through binding obligations while also providing rights, procedures, institutional avenues, and normative resources through which states pursue their interests. Strategic legal autonomy consequently concerns the capacity to exercise legal agency within this dual structure of constraint and opportunity, rather than an ability to act independently of international law.

The principal conceptual contribution of this study is the Strategic Legal Autonomy Framework, organized around four interrelated dimensions: Normative Autonomy, Regulatory Autonomy, Institutional Autonomy, and Strategic Legal Choice. Normative autonomy concerns a state's capacity to articulate and advance legal positions; regulatory autonomy concerns its capacity to maintain meaningful policy and regulatory discretion within applicable legal obligations; institutional autonomy concerns its capacity to select and engage with relevant legal and institutional mechanisms; and strategic legal choice concerns its capacity to make deliberate decisions about legal commitments, institutional participation, and available policy options. Together, these dimensions provide an analytical framework for examining the legal capacities through which states navigate structural asymmetry. The framework's contribution lies in bringing these capacities into a single conceptual structure, rather than treating strategic autonomy exclusively as a matter of diplomatic alignment, material power, or foreign-policy positioning.

The Indonesian case serves as an illustrative application of the Strategic Legal Autonomy Framework, rather than as empirical proof of its validity or generalizability. It illustrates how the legal dimension of strategic autonomy can be examined in a national context where *bebas-aktif* provides the foundation of foreign-policy autonomy, while international law and regional institutions constitute the legal and institutional environment within which autonomous policy choices are articulated and exercised. UNCLOS provides the applicable legal framework for Indonesia's maritime rights and interests, while ASEAN centrality and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) express regional normative and institutional preferences compatible with Indonesia's foreign-policy orientation. These arrangements do not create strategic autonomy; rather, they provide the context in which its legal dimension can be analyzed. The analytical value of the Indonesian case therefore lies in demonstrating how the

framework can organize an examination of legal agency under conditions of asymmetric interdependence, not in establishing the framework's empirical validity or universal applicability.

At the regional level, the framework also offers a basis for examining the relationship between ASEAN's existing legal and institutional arrangements and the strategic choices available to its Member States. The ASEAN Charter, regional cooperation frameworks, treaty-making processes, and ASEAN-led mechanisms provide institutional settings for coordination, but they do not automatically generate collective strategic autonomy. Their practical contribution depends on political consensus, differences in national interests, implementation capacity, and the willingness of Member States to coordinate their legal and diplomatic positions. Regional legal harmonization, collective treaty-making, coordinated engagement with international norms, more effective dispute-settlement procedures, and engagement with international institutions should therefore be understood as potential avenues for further institutional development, rather than established outcomes of ASEAN cooperation. This distinction preserves the analytical value of ASEAN centrality without assuming that regional coordination necessarily eliminates power asymmetries or produces uniform strategic preferences.

The broader implication of this study is that strategic autonomy in Southeast Asia should be examined not as insulation from international interdependence, but as the capacity to navigate interdependence while retaining meaningful legal and policy choices. By integrating normative, regulatory, institutional, and strategic dimensions, the Strategic Legal Autonomy Framework extends the analysis of autonomy into the domain of international law and provides a conceptual basis for investigating how legal agency operates under conditions of structural asymmetry. Its contribution is analytical rather than a claim that the identified capacities necessarily produce autonomy in practice.

Further research is needed to assess the framework's applicability beyond the Indonesian illustration. Comparative studies across Southeast Asian states could examine how differences in legal capacity, domestic institutions, economic dependence, and external partnerships shape the exercise of strategic legal autonomy. Longitudinal research could also investigate whether changes in legal positions, regulatory practices, institutional participation, and international commitments correspond to changes in the policy space available to states. Such research would help clarify the framework's scope conditions, identify potential differences among its four dimensions, and assess its explanatory value across different regional and international contexts.

In conclusion, Strategic Legal Autonomy provides a conceptual framework for examining how states seek to preserve meaningful legal and policy choices while remaining embedded in the international legal order. The Indonesian case illustrates how this framework can be applied to the study of strategic autonomy under asymmetric interdependence, while its broader empirical validity remains a question for further comparative and longitudinal investigation. The framework

thus offers a starting point for a legally grounded analysis of state agency under great power competition, without assuming that international law, multilateral participation, or regional institutions automatically secure strategic autonomy.

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BIOGRAPHIES

Khoirunnisa holds a doctoral degree in Communication, specializing in Political Communication and Diplomacy. She has served as Head of the International Relations Study Program and as a permanent faculty member at Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Jakarta since 1994. She earned her bachelor's degree from Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Jakarta in 1994 and her master's degree in International Relations from Universitas Indonesia in 2000. She has also served as an adjunct lecturer at Universitas Budi Luhur and Universitas Jakarta.
Correspondence: khoirunnisa@uta45jakarta.ac.id

Didi Jubaidi, is a practicing advocate and lecturer at Universitas Tama Jagakarsa and Adjung lecture at Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Jakarta. He began his legal career in 1996 and is a member of the Indonesian Advocates Association (PERADI). Combining professional and academic experience, he integrates practical legal perspectives into teaching and research. He is also active in scholarly publishing as an author, editor-in-chief, and reviewer for national and international journals. His publications address law enforcement, international relations, digital security, defense diplomacy, and regional cooperation, while supporting legal education and knowledge dissemination in Indonesia.
Correspondence: didijubaidi@gmail.com