

Opinion – Timor-Leste: ASEAN's Newest Member

Written by Lili Chen

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LILI CHEN, NOV 22 2025

After 14 years of ceaseless efforts, Timor-Leste, one of the youngest democracies in the region, became the 11th ASEAN member on October 26, 2025. “For the people of Timor-Leste, this is not only a dream realised, but a powerful affirmation of our journey – one marked by resilience, determination and hope,” said Xanana Gusmao, the current Prime Minister of Timor-Leste. This journey has not been easy. Timor-Leste began its journey towards ASEAN membership by formally applying in 2011, demonstrating its intent to become fully integrated into the regional bloc. In 2022, ASEAN leaders agreed in principle to Timor-Leste’s admission, granting the country observer status, which enabled it to attend all ASEAN meetings and all summits. In 2023, ASEAN adopted a dedicated roadmap to guide Timor-Leste’s preparations for membership. Timor-Leste’s accession culminated in 2025, when it was officially admitted to ASEAN during the 47th ASEAN Summit. The president, Jose Ramos Horta, noted this multi-phased and long process of accessing ASEAN: “It seems like the road to heaven—to reach the perfection of heaven— is easier than to reach the gates of ASEAN.”

Despite the laudable achievements and benefits of investment and trade opportunities from ASEAN's 680 million people and \$3.8 trillion economy, some concerns about institutional weaknesses, challenges to vulnerable sectors and people, and human security risks, highlighted by accessing the bloc, remain unresolved. Furthermore, Timor-Leste joined ASEAN during a time of uncertainty, such as democratic backslide and power struggle, which may test a bloc composed of diverse political ideologies with its persistence on human rights and democracy. While some analysts argue that Timor-Leste acceded to ASEAN out of geopolitical and geoeconomic calculations, this article claims that Timor-Leste’s joining ASEAN is more a deliberate move to collective and sustainable peacebuilding rather than a national survival strategy. Timor-Leste joined ASEAN to prevent conflict and violence, as well as to transform existing structures, relationships, and identities through economic integration and security cooperation to create long-term, sustainable peace in the region and beyond.

ASEAN's economic integration, represented by the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), helps facilitate the emergence of a free market and free movement of goods, services, investments, and skilled labor, paving the way to eliminate structural violence and inequalities within the bloc. Through expanded free trade, investment flows, and regional development initiatives, integration improves living standards and reduces poverty, fostering a more just and stable society. In addition, ASEAN membership allows Timor-Leste to access some free trade markets, such as the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), the world's largest free trade agreement, encompassing approximately 28 percent of the global GDP. Deepening economic cooperation and interdependence among member states also decreases the likelihood of war and conflict, encouraging repeated cooperation and lasting peace.

For Timor-Leste, participating in the ASEAN market offers opportunities to increase employment, boost exports of local products such as coffee, tourism, and fisheries, and attract essential foreign investment. Accession to the ASEAN economy offers Timor-Leste critical pathways to address some of its most persistent development challenges, including widespread poverty, underdeveloped infrastructure, the divide between urban and rural areas, limited digital connectivity, and the need for human capital development (HCD). Timor-Leste has struggled to address multiple social and economic issues: 40 percent of the population has lived below the poverty line since 2014; there is overdependence on the oil sector and imports; the digital divide remains huge among areas and genders; and almost half of young people are not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET).

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With ASEAN membership, Timor-Leste not only gains access to a market of over 600 million people but also targeted development initiatives, such as the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI), which helps it address institutional and infrastructure gaps while enhancing economic diversification and bridging the social and digital divide with an eye on more inclusive and balanced development. Furthermore, Timor-Leste's participation in ASEAN increases investment and trade opportunities, fosters innovation, and links the country more closely to regional supply chains, which can spur job creation and expand the market for exporting local products and generating income. Furthermore, the transnational education and training programs help develop a skilled labor force, thus positioning Timor-Leste, where more than 60 percent of the population is under 35 years old, more competitively in the regional economy and advancing inclusive and sustainable development for its people. Overall, economic integration is a vital tool for reducing structural inequality and barriers, paving the way for long-term peace and prosperity in the region.

Meanwhile, regional security cooperation helps prevent conflict and rising tension among member states and creates favorable conditions for human security. ASEAN's security architecture, including the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM), ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER), and ASEAN Coordinating Center for Humanitarian Assistance (AHA Center), promotes peace by constructing multilateral cooperation and shared rules and norms to reduce the risk of violence and conflict. For example, joint patrols through regular meetings, shared information, and coordination between neighboring countries reduce border tension. In addition, diplomacy and shared norms contribute to the minimization of interstate conflict by reshaping shared values and interests, while AADMER and the AHA Center respond to conflict-related risks and tensions during disasters and humanitarian emergencies.

Timor-Leste may benefit from being involved in regional security mechanisms to strengthen bilateral border management with neighboring states or counter-trafficking and other transnational organized criminal activities through collective and continuous efforts. Furthermore, security cooperation leads to building mutual trust and shared norms, which are key to nurturing and deepening trustworthy and reciprocal relationships beyond state-to-state relations, which are central to peacebuilding. ASEAN prioritizes the "non-intervention principle" and consensus among its members. As a member, Timor-Leste can institutionalize cooperation and partnership with other neighboring states in priority areas and issues, increase its bargaining power, and acquire diplomatic recognition and support. This is especially important for a small state like Timor-Leste in the face of power struggles within and beyond the region, such as the escalating tensions between China, Japan, and the US.

In addition to direct and indirect conflict prevention, security cooperation can extend to different pillars of broader human security by addressing intersecting and overlapping non-traditional security threats, such as gender-based violence, trafficking in persons (TIPs), cybercrime, and environmental security. This means that Timor-Leste could enhance its national and human security by aligning its agendas and plans with the top security concerns of the bloc, such as the Women, Peace, and Security agenda, safer labor migration, stronger cybersecurity, and climate resilience, as they require collective, rapid, and effective responses. One urgent issue to be addressed is Trafficking in Persons (TIPs), often assisted by technology. The recent case of online scam centers in the Oecusse enclave proved the connection with the larger Southeast Asian scamming industry, alarming threats of transnational criminal activities, such as TIPs and money laundering, against local communities, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) report.

Taken together, Timor-Leste's participation in economic integration and security cooperation is a way to move towards sustainable peace through institutional cooperation and inclusive development, shared norms and values, and relationship transformation. At the institutional level, economic and security cooperation enables Timor-Leste to address structural inequalities and violence by promoting collective security and inclusive development. Through regular formal and informal dialogue, interaction, and mutual learning, economic integration and security cooperation help establish shared norms and values between state and non-state actors, promoting a culture of peace, cooperation, and non-violence. By opening up space for gradual institutional and normative change to build and deepen trust, solidarity, and identity embedded in interdependent and interconnected communities, state-non-state relations will further shift from conflict to more cooperative and coordinated relationships.

Engaging with ASEAN will help Timor-Leste achieve sustainable internal and external peace. Timor-Leste's

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economic uplift through ASEAN integration has brought transformative peace benefits, especially through access to regional markets, investment and capital, and development support, reducing structural inequality and poverty. Simultaneously, enhanced security cooperation within ASEAN helps stabilize land and maritime borders, promote a more peaceful and non-violent culture, and promote broader human security beyond the political and military spheres. ASEAN-led initiatives and tools, such as the ASEAN Convention against Trafficking in Persons, particularly the Convention on Women and Children (ACTIP), focus on protecting vulnerable populations, such as women, migrant workers, and underprivileged youth, further strengthening social and economic resilience and helping to alleviate vulnerability. Diplomatic inclusiveness within ASEAN has reduced Timor-Leste's international isolation and political dependence, allowing it to participate in key discussions and benefit from collective resources and discourse, thereby enhancing its international influence and negotiating power.

Some imminent challenges must be addressed along the way. First, ASEAN accession generates a set of peace-relevant risks and frictions for Timor-Leste, as weak domestic institutions may struggle to configure the dense body of ASEAN rules, technical standards, and policy commitments while maintaining transparency and meaningful public participation in the short- and medium-term. Moreover, the ratification of ASEAN legal agreements and instruments does not guarantee implementation. Limited bureaucratic capacity and uneven regulatory reform, compounded by political instability, can delay or distort implementation, enlarging the gaps between formal compliance and actual practice, which eventually undermines public trust and optimism in regional integration. Second, intensified economic competition within a free regional market may pressure and marginalize local industries, vulnerable sectors and groups, and small enterprises, threatening job markets and exacerbating economic, social, and ecological vulnerabilities rather than shared prosperity and well-being. Finally, some regional security norms and practices, such as non-interference, counter-terrorism frameworks, or migration control practices against refugees, may sit uneasily with Timor-Leste's political identity, which is shaped by a long history of resistance, human rights, and solidarity, such as the violent suppression and rule of the military junta on its dissent and people in Myanmar, resulting in friction and tension between Dili and Yangon. Timor-Leste's access to ASEAN raises questions about how far the state can align with ASEAN security agendas and arrangements without trading its hard-won normative commitments to justice.

ASEAN's strong economic and security communities serve a dual purpose in promoting both negative and positive peace within the bloc, including in Timor-Leste. For Timor-Leste, joining ASEAN represents not only a diplomatic milestone but also a strategic peacebuilding effort aimed at reducing violence and conflict while establishing a just and equitable foundation for long-term stability and order within and beyond the state's borders. In addition to state-based frameworks, ASEAN encourages multi-track diplomacy, opening space for consultation and participation by non-state actors. Therefore, Timor-Leste's indigenous practices and customary laws, highlighting consensus and collectivity, as well as experiences of peacebuilding and democracy in the aftermath of war, could extend and connect to other states, cultures, societies, and peoples, enhancing communal and international peace by promoting participatory dialogue, shared identities, and collective responsibility between people and the state.

Expanding access to ASEAN's economic, security, and socio-cultural cooperation mechanisms, especially through the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC), enables Timor-Leste to strengthen its institutional capacity and resilience, pursue equitable and inclusive development, and promote regional peace, stability, and prosperity across sectors and issues at the communal, national and regional levels. Recognizing economic interdependence, social connectivity, and security cooperation through the inclusion of Timor-Leste is indispensable for consolidating sustainable peace in Southeast Asia and the broader international arena, especially amid a rapidly changing and unpredictable geopolitical and geo-economic landscape.

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include the dynamics of peacekeeping, gender and development, women and LGBT rights, as well as politics in Southeast Asia, with a particular focus on Timor-Leste. Her latest article is 'LGBT Actors, Ritual and Martial Arts Groups, and State-Building in Post-Conflict Timor-Leste' (*Relaciones Internacionales* 2025).