



# JOURNAL

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## Centrality in Policy: Lessons from ASEAN and Central Asia

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At first glance, the member states of ASEAN and the countries of Central Asia appear to operate in entirely distinct contexts. Southeast Asia's ASEAN is a bloc widely recognised for its drive toward integration, consensus-building, and a defined principle of centrality articulated in official documents<sup>2</sup>. The region sits at the crossroads of some of the world's most important maritime trade routes, linking the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Its states, though diverse, come together under ASEAN's umbrella to present a somewhat unified front on economic and strategic matters.

Central Asia, on the other hand, has often been described as the world's only completely landlocked region, straddling the heart of the Eurasian continent<sup>3</sup>. Historically important as a

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<sup>2</sup> Connelly, A. (2022, June 10). *The often-overlooked meaning of 'ASEAN centrality'*. International Institute for Strategic Studies. <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2022/06/the-often-overlooked-meaning-of-asean-centrality/>

<sup>3</sup> Rafiq, M. (2022, September 2). *Kazakhstan: A journey from land-locked to land-linked destination*. The Astana Times. <https://astanatimes.com/2022/09/kazakhstan-a-journey-from-land-locked-to-land-linked-destination/>

corridor for the Silk Road, it now finds itself caught between the spheres of influence of major external powers. Unlike ASEAN, Central Asia has struggled to form a robust integrated bloc. Its states—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—have at times followed parallel or divergent paths, with no overarching institutional framework equating to ASEAN’s depth and breadth<sup>4</sup>.

Yet both regions share a singular concept: centrality. For ASEAN, centrality is explicit and enshrined in the organization’s charter and its diplomatic practice<sup>5</sup>. For Central Asia, centrality is more implicit, tied to geography and history. Being at the center—whether defined by strategic maritime lanes or continental trade routes—shapes how these regions understand their roles, potentials, and challenges in a rapidly changing global environment.

This article explores how these different forms of centrality have developed, how they have been leveraged, and what lessons these two regions might learn from one another. In comparing their institutional frameworks, economic ambitions, and diplomatic initiatives, we can better understand whether two forms of regional centrality can not only coexist but perhaps reinforce each other. The analysis will also consider how states within these regions, often identified as middle powers, can foster cooperation and mutual benefit, strengthening their positions in the global order.

Ultimately, as global power dynamics shift toward a more multipolar configuration, the question of whether multiple central “hubs” can coexist becomes increasingly relevant. By

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<sup>4</sup> Nuriddenova, A., & Arynov, Z. (2024, May 2). *Central Asian regional interactions in a changing geopolitical context*. The Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs. <https://oxussociety.org/central-asian-regional-interactions-in-a-changing-geopolitical-context/>

<sup>5</sup> Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia. (2019). *ASEAN vision 2040 volume II: Collective leadership, ASEAN centrality, and strengthening the ASEAN institutional ecosystem*. ASEAN Secretariat. <https://asean.org/book/asean-vision-2040-volume-ii-collective-leadership-asean-centrality-and-strengthening-the-asean-institutional-ecosystem/>

examining how ASEAN and Central Asia navigate and project their respective centralities, we shed light on broader themes of regionalism, connectivity, and the potential for inter-regional collaboration that transcends traditional geographic and geopolitical boundaries.

### **Conceptualising Centrality**

Centrality in international relations and regionalism can be understood in multiple ways. At its core, centrality suggests a position of influence, connectivity, and importance within a given domain. For ASEAN, centrality is a stated principle reflecting its aspiration to remain at the center of the regional architecture in East and Southeast Asia<sup>6</sup>. It attempts to position itself as an agenda-setter and convener, ensuring that external powers engage through ASEAN-led frameworks rather than overshadowing its member states individually.

Centrality can also be geographically grounded. Central Asia's centrality arises more from its location deep inside the Eurasian landmass, historically serving as a bridge between East and West<sup>7</sup>. Trade, cultural exchange, and the movement of goods and ideas once flowed across this region, making it a vital conduit in the past. While this historical legacy still informs contemporary discourse, translating this inherent geographic centrality into political or economic clout remains a key challenge.

In both contexts, centrality is not just a rhetorical flourish. It involves active efforts to shape the perception and reality of a region's importance. For ASEAN, it comes through diplomatic

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<sup>6</sup> Yaacob, R. (2024, April 4). *The translator: "ASEAN centrality"*. Lowy Institute. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/translator-asean-centrality>

<sup>7</sup> Karčić, H. (2024, January 19). *The linchpin of Central Asia looks east*. The National Interest. <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/silk-road-rivalries/linchpin-central-asia-looks-east-208724>

summits, economic forums, and shared initiatives. For Central Asia, it might emerge through infrastructure projects, connectivity strategies, and an evolving sense of shared destiny. Understanding these nuances is crucial to grasping how each region navigates its path forward and how they might benefit from looking to each other's experiences.

### **Central Asia: Centrality Shaped by Geography and Connectivity**

Central Asia's sense of centrality is deeply rooted in its history. For centuries, this region was synonymous with the Silk Road, a corridor connecting East Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and Europe<sup>8</sup>. Cities like Samarkand and Bukhara became legendary centers of learning, commerce, and cultural exchange. This historical role as a hub for transcontinental interaction is key to understanding how Central Asia perceives itself today.

The Soviet era disrupted these organic linkages. Under the Soviet Union, Central Asia was integrated into a different kind of system, oriented primarily toward Moscow. After independence in the early 1990s, the newly sovereign states faced the twin challenges of state-building and redefining their positions in the global order<sup>9</sup>. They inherited infrastructure networks geared toward the Soviet center and had to grapple with their relative isolation from global markets.

For decades, Central Asia has struggled to form a cohesive regional bloc<sup>10</sup>. While organisations like the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) and the Shanghai Cooperation

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<sup>8</sup> Hansen, V. (2021, May 26). *The classical Silk Road: Trade and connectivity across Central Asia, 100 BCE–1200 CE*. Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History. <https://oxfordre.com/asianhistory/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277727.001.0001/acrefore-9780190277727-e-576>

<sup>9</sup> Kamrava, M. (2020). *Nation-building in Central Asia: Institutions, politics, and culture*. *The Muslim World*, 110(1), 10–25. <https://doi.org/10.1111/muwo.12315>

<sup>10</sup> Krapohl, S., & Vasileva-Dienes, A. (2020). The region that isn't: China, Russia and the failure of regional integration in Central Asia. *Asia Europe Journal*, 18(3), 347–366. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10308-019-00548-0>

Organisation (SCO) include Central Asian states, these frameworks either broaden the scope beyond the region or focus on security and external partnerships rather than deepening intra-regional integration. Efforts at forging a distinct Central Asian regional identity have been sporadic, often overshadowed by external influences.

Russia's historical ties remain strong, especially in security and energy. Meanwhile, China's Belt and Road Initiative has repositioned Central Asia as a critical corridor for overland trade. Europe's interest in diversifying energy sources and transport routes also adds complexity. As a result, Central Asia is the subject of overlapping connectivity strategies and investment initiatives. The challenge is to translate this attention into meaningful regional coordination.

The region's security environment also affects its claim to centrality. Instability in neighbouring Afghanistan, unresolved border disputes, and transnational threats like narcotics trafficking impede efforts to create a stable and prosperous core. Without robust institutional frameworks to manage tensions, Central Asia's centrality risks becoming a geopolitical battleground rather than a platform for constructive engagement.

Yet recent developments suggest a cautious optimism. Leaders of Central Asian states have begun to meet more frequently in purely regional formats, expressing a growing desire for cooperation on water management, energy sharing, and trade facilitation. Economic ties are slowly growing as countries recognise the potential of serving as a land bridge linking China, Russia, Europe, South Asia, and the Middle East. If they can consolidate this role, Central Asia could reclaim its historical status as a dynamic pivot on the global stage<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Zhiyenbayev, M. (2024, July 15). *From backwater to beacon: Kazakhstan's identity as a middle power*. Modern Diplomacy. <https://modern diplomacy.eu/2024/07/15/from-backwater-to-beacon-kazakhstans-identity-as-a-middle-power/>

## **ASEAN: Centrality as an Institutionalised Principle**

ASEAN's centrality is enshrined in its founding documents and frequently reiterated by its member states. Since its establishment in 1967, ASEAN has grown from a small grouping of five countries into a ten-member association that aims to create a cohesive, resilient community. Its charter and subsequent blueprints guide the transformation of ASEAN into a region defined by cooperation, economic integration, and collective identity.

ASEAN's centrality manifests most clearly in its role as a convener<sup>12</sup>. It hosts the ASEAN Regional Forum, East Asia Summit, and ASEAN Plus Three meetings, ensuring that major powers like the United States, China, Japan, and India engage in dialogue under ASEAN's auspices. By setting agendas, norms, and frameworks, ASEAN ensures it is not sidelined by larger geopolitical rivalries. Its approach to diplomacy, often described as consensus-based and flexible, helps maintain unity among diverse member states.

On the economic front, the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) has gradually lowered trade barriers, improved regulatory harmonization, and attracted foreign investment<sup>13</sup>. While the region's economic integration is not complete, the very existence of a structured framework sets it apart from many other developing regions. The shared ambition to remain "in the driver's seat" in regional affairs encourages members to present a somewhat united front externally, even if internal differences persist.

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<sup>12</sup> Mahbubani, K. (2017, June 19). *ASEAN: The region's strategic convener*. East Asia Forum. <https://eastasiaforum.org/2017/06/19/asean-the-regions-strategic-convener/>

<sup>13</sup> Ishikawa, K. (2021). The ASEAN Economic Community and ASEAN economic integration. *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies*, 10(1), 24–41. <https://doi.org/10.1080/24761028.2021.1891702>

Challenges to ASEAN centrality are evolving<sup>14</sup>. Great-power competition in the South China Sea tests ASEAN's unity, as member states have differing interests and alignments. The region's economic dynamism also depends heavily on external markets and investment, making it sensitive to global economic shifts. Still, the principle of centrality guides ASEAN's response to these pressures, aiming to maintain the region's agency and relevance.

In this sense, ASEAN has built an architecture where formal institutions and habitual summitry reinforce the concept of centrality. This institutionalised approach stands in contrast to Central Asia's more fluid context. ASEAN's example shows how a region can use structured dialogues, shared principles, and legal frameworks to carve out a central role for itself, even in a crowded geopolitical environment.

### **Comparing the Two Centralities**

When placed side by side, the different paths taken by Central Asia and ASEAN highlight the diversity of methods through which regions attempt to claim centrality. ASEAN's centrality emerges from deliberate efforts to construct a rules-based regional architecture. Mechanisms such as the ASEAN Charter, the AEC Blueprint, and the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting-Plus foster a sense of collective identity and diplomatic weight.

Central Asia's centrality, by contrast, remains more aspirational and historically grounded. The region is rediscovering its position as a connector between continents but lacks a single institutional core that defines and protects this role. While external powers have brought renewed

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<sup>14</sup> Caballero-Anthony, M. (2022). The ASEAN way and the changing security environment: Navigating challenges to informality and centrality. *International Politics*, 59(4), 625–645. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-022-00400-0>

attention to the region, the absence of a robust, region-wide institution makes it challenging for Central Asia to harness its strategic location collectively.

Another contrast lies in how external influences are managed. ASEAN has learned to engage multiple great powers at once, maintaining equilibrium through diplomacy. Central Asia, situated between Russia, China, and near the Middle East, faces a more difficult task. Without a unified regional stance, each Central Asian country balances external relationships independently, reducing their combined negotiating power.

Economically, ASEAN centrality benefits from maritime trade routes, global shipping lanes, and established production networks. This outward orientation and established trading links grant ASEAN more immediate leverage in global economic affairs. Central Asia, being landlocked, relies heavily on overland corridors, pipelines, and railway networks that are only now being modernised or expanded. Overcoming the historical disadvantages of landlocked status requires significant infrastructural and policy coordination.

In terms of security and conflict resolution, ASEAN's collective mechanisms—although sometimes criticised as slow and consensus-focused—do provide forums where sensitive issues can be discussed. Central Asia lacks a comparable platform. Security concerns remain heavily influenced by external actors or handled bilaterally. Without well-developed frameworks for conflict management and crisis response, it is challenging to project a strong sense of regional centrality.

Yet, both regions share a fundamental motivation: to shape their external environment rather than be shaped by it. Both aspire to use their central positions to attract investment, generate trade, and foster stability. Each is grappling with internal diversity—be it political systems,



economic development stages, or resource endowments—that complicates the pursuit of unity and a coherent regional persona.

### **Similarities and Potential Convergences**

Despite their differences, ASEAN and Central Asia do share common ground. Both regions face the challenge of forging collective identities from diverse backgrounds. ASEAN's success in turning diversity into a point of strength, rather than weakness, might hold lessons for Central Asia as it experiments with more frequent regional summits and shared initiatives.

Both regions also operate in an environment where great-power competition and global interdependencies shape their choices. ASEAN navigates between the United States and China, attempting to remain neutral and welcoming to all. Central Asia balances Russian historical influence with the opportunities presented by China's Belt and Road Initiative. In both cases, strategic flexibility and careful diplomacy are necessary to preserve agency.

Another similarity lies in the desire to serve as hubs. ASEAN seeks to remain at the heart of Asian regionalism; Central Asia envisions itself as a transport corridor bridging East and West. Both want to leverage geography to connect distant markets and reap economic dividends. Learning from ASEAN's approach to setting standards and best practices in trade facilitation could help Central Asia streamline its connectivity efforts.

Finally, as both regions adapt to new challenges—digitalisation, climate change, changing energy landscapes—there may be opportunities for direct cooperation. ASEAN's institutional experiences, including harmonizing regulations, might inform Central Asia's fledgling initiatives. Conversely, Central Asia's insights into overland connectivity and energy transit could diversify

ASEAN's understanding of how to secure supply chains and resource access. Mutual exchanges could provide valuable knowledge transfers that strengthen each region's claim to centrality.

### **The Middle-Power Perspective and Pathways to Cooperation**

The notion of middle-power diplomacy offers a lens through which selected states in both regions might bridge gaps and foster cooperation. Middle powers, often defined by their capacity to influence outcomes through coalition-building, norm-setting, and diplomatic initiatives, can serve as catalysts for inter-regional engagement.

In Central Asia, Kazakhstan has sought an active foreign policy, hosting international talks and promoting connectivity, after years of geographical isolation, it has embraced more open, multilateral engagements in recent years. The country is working toward becoming more than just a landlocked state at the mercy of external interests. Kazakhstan aspires to shape its region's narrative and attract partnerships that enhance its developmental goals.

In Southeast Asia, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Viet Nam have each displayed middle-power traits at various times. Indonesia, with its large economy and population, has increasingly acted as a diplomatic broker within ASEAN and beyond. Malaysia's proactive role in promoting regional multilateral frameworks and Vietnam's growing economic and diplomatic profile position them as states capable of leading certain initiatives.

One avenue for cooperation lies in infrastructure development and trade facilitation. Central Asia's plans to strengthen transport corridors could be matched with ASEAN's interest in diversified supply chains. Joint research, capacity-building workshops, and policy dialogues could

align standards, simplify customs procedures, and create a smoother flow of goods. Over time, this could contribute to the broader vision of Eurasian connectivity that benefits both regions.

Energy cooperation is another area with promise. Central Asia's energy resources, from hydrocarbons to renewables, could meet Southeast Asian markets' growing demand. Coordinated investments in pipelines, smart grids, and energy storage technologies could ensure more stable and diversified energy supplies. Middle powers, by championing bilateral pilot projects and then scaling them to regional frameworks, could pave the way for broader agreements.

Cultural and educational exchanges also matter. People-to-people connections foster mutual understanding and trust, which are crucial for long-term partnerships. Universities and think tanks could collaborate on joint research projects, language training programs, and student exchange initiatives that highlight the historical and contemporary significance of each region's central role in global affairs.

Diplomatically, middle powers from both regions could work together in broader international forums. They might find common ground on issues like climate change adaptation, sustainable development, and conflict resolution. By speaking with a coordinated voice in the United Nations, G20, and other platforms, these states could amplify their influence and underscore the relevance of their respective centralities.

The key is to identify niche areas where cooperation brings tangible benefits. Rather than competing for attention, ASEAN and Central Asia can complement each other's roles. For example, Southeast Asian investors might find new markets in Central Asia's emerging economies, while Central Asian states could learn from ASEAN's methodologies in building inclusive regional

frameworks. Over time, these engagements could build trust, reduce misperceptions, and encourage a more strategic partnership.

### **The Future of Two Centralities in a Multipolar World**

Of course, forging closer ties between ASEAN and Central Asia is not without hurdles. The two regions are separated by large distances, both physical and conceptual. Southeast Asia has a maritime outlook, while Central Asia's concerns centre on continental routes. Even as new railways and roads are built, the logistics and economic viability of large-scale trade flows remain uncertain.

Then there are internal dynamics. ASEAN's unity has been tested by territorial disputes and varying levels of commitment to regional norms. Central Asia remains in the early stages of defining a shared regional identity, with differences in political systems, languages, and economic priorities. Adding another layer of complexity—cooperation with a distant and differently oriented bloc—requires overcoming skepticism and inertia.

Major power interests also complicate matters. China's Belt and Road Initiative, for instance, may bring economic gains to Central Asia but could create dependencies that reduce the region's policy flexibility. ASEAN, for its part, must ensure that deepening ties with Central Asia does not alienate existing partners or disrupt its delicate balancing acts.

As the global order moves toward greater complexity, with multiple power centres and a diffusion of influence, the idea that only one region can claim central importance is increasingly outdated. Instead, we are likely to see multiple regional hubs coexisting, each excelling in different aspects of connectivity, norm-setting, or sectoral leadership.

ASEAN's centrality may be tested by ongoing great-power rivalries, climate challenges, and demands for deeper integration. To maintain its relevance, ASEAN must continue to adapt, strengthen its institutions, and reaffirm its collective will. As it does so, it can set an example of successful regionalism that Central Asia might find instructive.

Central Asia, meanwhile, may gradually develop more cohesive arrangements. Its leaders recognize that the region's potential depends on working together. If they learn from ASEAN's experiences—particularly the patience, pragmatism, and consensus-building strategies that allowed ASEAN to flourish—they could incrementally craft frameworks that turn geographic centrality into tangible economic and diplomatic gains.

In a world where the digital economy, supply chain resilience, and sustainable development are rising priorities, both ASEAN and Central Asia have chances to redefine their roles. Cooperation in fields like logistics, agribusiness, green energy, and digital trade might allow both regions to shape rather than merely respond to global trends.

The coexistence of these two centralities need not be a zero-sum equation. Instead, it can be seen as complementary diversification of global connectivity. As different regions assert their relevance, they offer multiple pathways for countries seeking stable partnerships and reliable routes for commerce and communication. The question is not whether multiple centres can exist, but how they can interact, learn from each other, and enhance the stability and prosperity of the broader international system.

## Conclusions

Centrality, in all its forms, is about perception, agency, and strategy. For ASEAN, centrality is a guiding principle that shapes the region's diplomacy, institutions, and identity. For Central Asia, centrality stems from geography and history, presenting an opportunity to rediscover a meaningful place in global affairs. Though one is maritime and institutionalized, and the other continental and emerging from historical legacy, both exemplify how regions seek to define their roles in a changing world.

The lessons each can draw from the other are manifold. Central Asia could study how ASEAN managed to integrate a diverse set of countries under a common framework. ASEAN, in turn, might find value in understanding how Central Asia plans to serve as a land bridge for Eurasian connectivity, tapping into vast markets and resources. Both stand to benefit from cooperation driven by states that act as middle powers, adept at forging partnerships and shaping agendas through diplomacy.

As we look ahead, the presence of multiple regional centers offers resilience and options. In an age of global uncertainty, having multiple hubs—be they land-based or sea-based—can distribute risks and foster innovative collaborations. The world may well accommodate multiple forms of centrality, each contributing to stability, prosperity, and engagement across continents.

By embracing their respective centralities and seeking strategic collaboration, ASEAN and Central Asia can help define what a multipolar, interconnected world looks like. This could open doors for cooperation that respects differences while capitalizing on complementarities, ensuring that being at the centre is not just a matter of geography or rhetoric, but a dynamic force for positive global engagement.