



Timor-Leste's Decision to Maintain Cooperation with Singapore Following the Rejection of Full ASEAN Membership

Shafira Fadillah¹

¹Department Internasional Relation, University of Indonesia

*Corresponding Author: Shafira Fadillah

E-mail: shafira.fadillah@ui.ac.id



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Abstract

This article examines the dynamics of bilateral relations between Timor-Leste and Singapore following Singapore's rejection of Timor-Leste's full membership in ASEAN. Although Singapore refused Timor-Leste's membership due to resource limitations, bilateral relations remain intact and cooperation continues. This article argues that Timor-Leste's decision to maintain good relations with Singapore is driven by its political, economic, and social interests within ASEAN. Through Joseph Frankel's concept of national interest and qualitative data, this study concludes that Singapore's support and its role as the responsible party for the ASEAN Economic Community pillar influences Timor-Leste's economic eligibility as a full ASEAN member. Singapore's technical assistance programs, such as the Singapore Cooperation Programme (SCP) and Singapore-Timor Leste ASEAN Readiness Support (STARS), contribute to enhancing Timor-Leste's human resource capacity and quality in preparation process towards full membership in ASEAN. This article demonstrates that small states continue to prioritize their national interests despite facing opposition from other countries. Achieving full ASEAN membership remains Timor-Leste's primary objective, setting aside emotional factors in international relations dynamics.

Introduction

A country's national interest serves as the foundation for the direction of its foreign policy. National interest drives a country to remain consistent in advocating for its position, even though, in practice, it often faces external obstacles. These challenges are even greater for small states that must adapt to an international environment that does not always support their interests. This is evident in Timor-Leste's efforts to become a full member of ASEAN despite encountering obstacles and rejection. These efforts are not only a diplomatic strategy but also demonstrate its position in facing complex regional political dynamics (Prantl, 2022; Heibach, 2024; Ullah & Xinlei, 2025). This consistency was proven through the official membership application submitted by Minister Zacarias Da Costa in 2011, after previously establishing a commitment as an observer in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) since 2005 and joining the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) in 2007.

A country's national interest serves as the foundation for the direction of its foreign policy. National interest drives a country to remain consistent in advocating for its position, even though, in practice, it often faces external obstacles. For small states, these challenges are even greater because they must adapt to an international environment that does not always support their interests. Timor-Leste, for example, has continued its efforts to become a full member of ASEAN despite facing various challenges and rejection. This step is not only part of a diplomatic strategy but also reflects Timor-Leste's resilience and adaptation in dealing with complex regional political dynamics. This consistency was demonstrated through the official

membership application submitted by Minister Zacarias Da Costa in 2011, after previously establishing a commitment as an observer in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) since 2005 and joining the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) in 2007 (ASEAN, 2012).

After waiting for eight months since submitting its full ASEAN membership application, Timor-Leste began to see progress in its recruitment process. According to the official report of the 19th ASEAN Summit in Bali in November 2011, ASEAN leaders welcomed Timor-Leste's official application. Subsequently, ASEAN leaders assigned the ASEAN Coordinating Council (ACC), which consists of ASEAN Foreign Ministers, to establish the ACC Working Group (ACCWG). This working group was tasked with processing all aspects related to Timor-Leste's membership application and its implications for ASEAN. This assignment aligns with Article 6, Paragraph 1, which states that the procedure for accepting new ASEAN members will be determined by the ASEAN Coordinating Council (ASEAN, 2015).

Despite the positive reception of Timor-Leste's full membership application in ASEAN, differences in views emerged among ASEAN member states. Although Timor-Leste met the membership requirements under Article 6, Paragraph 2 of the ASEAN Charter—including geographical location, recognition by ASEAN members, agreement to comply with the ASEAN Charter, and the ability to fulfill obligations as a member—Singapore remained opposed to Timor-Leste's accession. Singapore argued that Timor-Leste's limited resources could hinder regional stability, particularly in the economic sector. According to Mushihad Ali (2011), Timor-Leste's entry could weaken ASEAN's efforts to achieve the ASEAN Community 2015 target and potentially diminish ASEAN's reputation and influence on the international stage (Ali, 2011). Beyond economic concerns, Singapore also questioned Timor-Leste's human resource capacity, which might struggle to participate in more than 1,000 ASEAN meetings involving government officials at various levels. Singapore's rejection contrasted with its bilateral visit to Timor-Leste in August 2010—seven months before Timor-Leste's full ASEAN membership application—when Singapore expressed support for bilateral economic development and Timor-Leste's preparation for full ASEAN membership. Even at the 31st ASEAN Summit in Manila in 2017, Singapore continued to reject Timor-Leste's membership, citing concerns over the country's economic stability (Gnanasagaran, 2018; Leandro et al., 2023; Kusumawardhana & Dewi, 2023).

In response to the rejection, Timor-Leste undertook various efforts to convince ASEAN member states, particularly Singapore. President Ramos Horta emphasized that Timor-Leste was in a better position compared to Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam when they joined ASEAN in the 1990s (Sahin, 2012; Soares, 2021; Gonzalez, 2012). Furthermore, since submitting its membership application in 2011, Timor-Leste demonstrated its commitment by launching national programs to raise public awareness about ASEAN, establishing the ASEAN National Secretariat, building embassies in ASEAN countries, and integrating its national policies with ASEAN frameworks and standards outlined in the ASEAN Blueprint (Pereira, 2016). Horta also stressed that Timor-Leste would not request economic or financial assistance from fellow member states but would contribute to ASEAN's economic growth through its wealth in oil and gas and its strategic maritime position linking the Australian and ASEAN markets (Medina, 2024). Moreover, Douglas Kammen (2013) argued that ASEAN is a political organization and should not use economic development levels as the primary barrier to Timor-Leste's full membership in ASEAN (Kammen, 2013).

Despite facing rejection for full ASEAN membership, Timor-Leste and Singapore have maintained strong bilateral relations. Cooperation between the two countries has continued even as Timor-Leste's ASEAN membership status remains unresolved due to Singapore's opposition. This is evident in a series of collaborations, such as the Development Partners

Meeting and participation in the Shangri-La Dialogue (2011), the establishment of the Air Service Agreement (ASA) in 2013, Timor-Leste's support for Singapore's candidacy in the International Maritime Organization (2015), joint participation in the Global Economic Forum of the Community of Portuguese Speaking Countries (CPLP)-ASEAN (2017), and Singapore's role as a mediator between Timor-Leste and Australia in maritime boundary negotiations (2016-2017) (RDTL, 2024). Furthermore, both countries have established the Singapore-Timor-Leste ASEAN Readiness Support Package (STARS) technical assistance program to prepare Timor-Leste for full ASEAN membership. Timor-Leste's decision to maintain good relations with Singapore demonstrates productive cooperation in political, economic, and social fields to achieve its ASEAN membership aspirations (Mangku, 2017; Azis & Safira, 2024).

Singapore's rejection of Timor-Leste's full ASEAN membership has the potential to create tensions in their bilateral relations, given that Singapore is the only ASEAN member state opposing it, while all other members support Timor-Leste's accession as the 11th member. Singapore's view of Timor-Leste's unpreparedness in various sectors highlights the challenges Timor-Leste faces in achieving its national interests. However, despite this potential tension, no diplomatic rift has occurred. Instead, Timor-Leste has chosen to continue its bilateral relationship with Singapore, even as its ASEAN membership status remains undecided. There is currently no literature that specifically examines Timor-Leste's decision to maintain bilateral cooperation with Singapore after experiencing rejection as a full ASEAN member. Therefore, it is essential to understand why Timor-Leste has opted to sustain bilateral cooperation with Singapore despite facing rejection in its bid for full ASEAN membership.

Methods

The research method used in this study is the qualitative descriptive method. Qualitative research prioritizes an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon/social issue by focusing on soft data (words, sentences, symbols) and not emphasizing quantification (Neuman, 2014). This approach aims to understand the phenomenon holistically and explore its complexity. The qualitative descriptive method is used to analyze in detail Timor-Leste's decision regarding Singapore after the rejection of its full ASEAN membership.

This research will be conducted through a library research study, utilizing official statements, official websites, and other official documents from the governments of Timor-Leste and Singapore. Additionally, research data will be obtained from literature reviews, books, journal articles, and online media related to the dynamics of Timor-Leste-Singapore relations as the research subject. The data used spans from 2011, when Timor-Leste submitted its membership application, to 2024, when Timor-Leste was accepted as an ASEAN member with conditions (member in principle). In analyzing the data, this study will process the collected information based on the theoretical framework used, along with other supporting materials. The data will be interpreted in a descriptive form to provide a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

Theoretical Framework

This article utilizes the concept of National Interest to comprehensively understand Timor-Leste's stance in maintaining bilateral cooperation with Singapore after facing rejection from full ASEAN membership. The behavior and political policies of a country can essentially be analyzed using the concept of national interest. According to Morgenthau, national interest refers to a country's approach to protecting and shaping its physical, political, and cultural identity, which is determined by its power (Morgenthau, 1952). However, Niebuhr argues that national interest is not merely about power and material gain but also requires a commitment

to justice and collective welfare (Good, 1960). These various definitional perspectives are further explored by Joseph Frankel in his book *Key Concepts in Political Science* (1970). Frankel defines national interest as a way of understanding how a country behaves. National interest reflects a state's primary priorities in maintaining sovereignty, security, and public welfare while promoting national values such as justice and social protection. Although the concept is closely associated with power, Frankel argues that power alone cannot be the sole basis for defining national interest. While power plays a significant role in foreign policy, it is fundamentally only a tool to achieve broader goals. Therefore, national interest must consider various factors beyond power, as power alone is insufficient to capture the complexity of a country's interests in international relations (Frankel, 1970).

Frankel classifies the dimensions of the national interest concept in the implementation of foreign policy, shaping a country's interests within the context of international relations. The first dimension encompasses political, strategic, and economic aspects. The political (diplomatic) dimension includes a country's political objectives in advancing its national interest through diplomatic efforts. The strategic dimension involves considerations related to national security and defense. Meanwhile, the economic dimension focuses on achieving sustainable economic growth that can improve public welfare. Frankel adds that although a country may emphasize one dimension more than the others, each dimension has a specific function and role in shaping national interest. The second dimension is salience, which describes how significant an issue is at a given time, incorporating aspects such as relevance, prominence, urgency, and intensity. Salience is closely tied to ongoing issues, and one of the key factors influencing salience in foreign policy is a country's power status. For small states, national interest is often simplified to issues of survival, focusing on stability and security, particularly when dealing with stronger nations. In decision-making, it is crucial to consider essential aspects to avoid long-term policy consequences. The third dimension is scope, which refers to the extent of a country's national interest as determined by environmental influences and political decisions. The capability and power status of a country play a role in defining the breadth of its national interest. Countries with greater capabilities and higher power status generally have broader national interests, while smaller states tend to limit their scope to their immediate surroundings. This is due to the limited capacity of smaller states to actively pursue interests in the same manner as larger powers.

This article will apply Joseph Frankel's (1970) three dimensions of national interest. Through the political, economic, and strategic dimensions, the author examines Timor-Leste's interests in each dimension as it seeks to achieve its national objective of becoming a full ASEAN member alongside Singapore's role. The salience dimension is also considered to assess how significant ASEAN is as a foreign policy priority for Timor-Leste, with Singapore's assistance in achieving its national interest. Lastly, the scope dimension is used to illustrate the limitations of Timor-Leste's capabilities and power status, highlighting the need for Singapore's role as a stronger and more influential country in Southeast Asia to support Timor-Leste's security and stability.

Results and Discussion

Interest Timor-Leste's Politics, Economy and Strategy Towards Singapore in ASEAN

Although the current global landscape has evolved significantly from traditional contexts, political, economic, and strategic dimensions provide the foundation for countries to formulate policies and safeguard their national interests in the international sphere. While not directly interconnected, each of these dimensions plays a specific role that can coexist in supporting Timor-Leste's national strategy.

Politically, gaining international recognition and support remains a priority for Timor-Leste, particularly within Southeast Asia. Despite Singapore's rejection of Timor-Leste's full ASEAN membership, Timor-Leste has intensified its efforts to strengthen political ties with Singapore. Singapore's support could help Timor-Leste achieve its national objective of becoming a full ASEAN member. During a diplomatic meeting between the two nations, Timor-Leste's Secretary for ASEAN, Roberto Soares, requested Singapore's Ambassador, Sudesh Maniar, to directly convey to the Singaporean government that its support in promoting Timor-Leste's capacity would accelerate the country's participation in various ASEAN activities (RDTL, 2015).

Long before Timor-Leste gained independence in 2002, Singapore had already demonstrated support by being the only ASEAN country to abstain from the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 3485 in 1975. Additionally, during Timor-Leste's independence referendum, Singapore contributed to the deployment of the International Force East Timor (INTERFET) from 1999 to 2012, sending a total of 1,000 Singapore Armed Forces personnel (Singapore, 2023).

In principle, Singapore supports Timor-Leste's aspirations by assisting in its preparation and eligibility for full ASEAN membership. Since 2011, Singapore has contributed to this process by proposing the establishment of the ASEAN Coordinating Council Working Group (ACCWG) to assess Timor-Leste's readiness across all aspects of ASEAN membership. In 2013, during an official visit by Timor-Leste's Prime Minister, Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão, Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong reaffirmed Singapore's commitment to directly engage in Timor-Leste's membership process through the ACCWG, which functions under the ASEAN Coordinating Council to coordinate ASEAN member states (RDTL, 2013). Singapore has also committed to collaborating with other ASEAN members in setting the standards and requirements that Timor-Leste must fulfill to join ASEAN, following an objective criteria-based roadmap (CNA, PM Lee reaffirms Singapore's in principle support for Timor-Leste's ASEAN membership, 2022). Singapore's diplomatic cooperation enhances Timor-Leste's political standing within ASEAN, potentially gaining further support from other member states in advancing its national interests.

While Timor-Leste prioritizes its political relations with Singapore through strong bilateral ties, these efforts ultimately serve to promote economic growth and expand market access within ASEAN. According to the World Population Review, Timor-Leste ranks 172nd out of 212 countries in GDP, with a total of USD 1.99 billion, the lowest among ASEAN member states (Review, 2024). Timor-Leste's economic underdevelopment drives the country to seek improvements in its economic sector, as outlined in its Strategic Development Plan (SDP) 2011-2030. Economic development is a primary focus of the SDP, alongside social capital and infrastructure development (RDTL, 2011). This objective aligns with ASEAN's mission of accelerating economic growth in Southeast Asia and fostering collaborative economic interests, as stated in the ASEAN Charter (ASEAN, 2015).

Bilateral relations between Timor-Leste and Singapore play a crucial role in Timor-Leste's ASEAN aspirations, given Singapore's influence within the regional organization. At the 27th ASEAN Summit in 2015, ASEAN member states agreed to strengthen cooperation by forming the ASEAN Community, consisting of three pillars: the Political and Security Community (APSC), the Economic Community (AEC), and the Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC), each led by a responsible country. Singapore plays a central role in the success of the Economic Community pillar (Prameswari, 2018). The establishment of these three pillars has contributed to Timor-Leste's delayed ASEAN membership, as membership requirements now include

meeting all three community standards—unlike Myanmar and Cambodia’s accession when ASEAN primarily prioritized regional stability (Prameswari, 2018).

The ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) represents economic integration in Southeast Asia, envisioning ASEAN as a single market integrated into the global economy. The AEC aims to boost economic growth by facilitating free trade, investment, and resource flows among member states (ASEAN, 2015). Initially, the AEC was set for implementation in 2015, but its integration has been extended to 2025, emphasizing strategic directions such as competitiveness, innovation, integration, enhanced cooperation, and inclusivity (ASEAN, 2015).

Beyond its regional economic role, Singapore holds significant importance for Timor-Leste’s economic growth. According to the Timor-Leste Investment Guide, Singapore is the largest investor in Timor-Leste, contributing over 85% of total foreign investments from 2018 to 2023. These investments are distributed across sectors such as tourism (50%), real estate (26%), and food and beverage production (17%) (Timor-Leste, 2023). Over five years, Singapore’s investment in Timor-Leste increased by USD 30 million. In 2021, Singapore became Timor-Leste’s second-largest trading partner, importing crude oil, natural gas, beer, and coffee, amounting to USD 16.4 million (OEC, 2022).

Singapore’s economic role in Timor-Leste aligns with Frankel’s argument that emerging nations tend to rely on foreign assistance and external markets. High poverty rates, inadequate infrastructure, and a shortage of skilled labor hinder Timor-Leste’s competitiveness in the global market. According to the World Bank, Timor-Leste ranked 178th out of 190 countries in business ease in 2018, maintaining the same position in 2019 and dropping to 181st in 2020. These rankings reflect the country’s regulatory environment, labor market constraints, and market size.

In times of war, the strategic dimension is critical, as national survival depends on military capabilities. However, in the contemporary era, strategic considerations focus on ensuring national stability and security to mitigate potential threats.

Although Timor-Leste is not currently facing direct military threats, it continues to maintain political and security stability through non-military approaches. As a small Southeast Asian state, Timor-Leste recognizes that domestic stability is crucial to enhancing its international reputation. To achieve this, Timor-Leste has pursued strategic cooperation with Singapore, leveraging Singapore’s expertise in strengthening human resource stability as a preventive measure to maintain regional stability. Key initiatives include leadership and democratic transition dialogues focusing on Singapore’s governance experience (RD TL, 2015), a 30-day visa exemption for travel to Timor-Leste (CNA, 2024), and the establishment of the Singaporean Embassy in Dili (RD TL, 2023).

This cooperation underscores Timor-Leste’s prioritization of domestic and regional stability to prevent potential conflicts, both internal and external. It reflects Timor-Leste’s active approach to securing its ASEAN membership by leveraging Singapore’s support as an experienced ASEAN member in maintaining security and stability within a complex regional context.

Timor-Leste’s Primary Interest in Joining ASEAN and Singapore’s Role in the Process

Since gaining independence in 2002, Timor-Leste has emphasized ASEAN membership as a top priority in its foreign policy. This commitment was first conveyed by Ramos Horta, who stated that joining ASEAN was a step for Timor-Leste to ensure its future security. ASEAN’s direct involvement could aid Timor-Leste’s development process in ensuring long-term stability and peace in a geopolitically sensitive region (Williamson & Kazmin, 2000). Since

becoming an ASEAN observer in 2002 and joining the TAC, Timor-Leste has consistently sought ASEAN's attention through various official statements and concrete actions to demonstrate its seriousness about joining the organization. In 2006, President Ramos Horta announced Timor-Leste's decision to promptly join ASEAN (France-Press, 2006), followed by a reaffirmation in 2008 regarding the adequacy of its regional security stability to become an ASEAN member, coinciding with the situation in Burma, Myanmar (ABS-CBN, 2008), and the establishment of the ASEAN National Secretariat in 2009. Ultimately, in 2011, Timor-Leste officially submitted its ASEAN membership application and opened embassies in the capitals of all member states (ASEAN, 2009).

One of the factors influencing the prioritization of foreign policy is a country's power status. As a small country with limited national capabilities, particularly in economic terms, Timor-Leste prioritizes ASEAN membership as a strategic pathway to secure economic support for maintaining national stability and development. Economically, Timor-Leste's GDP in 2024 is only USD 1.9 billion, significantly below the average of the three ASEAN countries with the highest GDP—Indonesia at USD 1.48 trillion, Thailand at USD 548 billion, and Singapore at USD 525 billion (Macrotrends, 2023). This limitation drives Timor-Leste to view ASEAN as a crucial platform for expanding market access. Additionally, ASEAN's market access, reaching 600 million people through economic cooperation schemes such as the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA), could boost Timor-Leste's economic growth. If Timor-Leste becomes a full ASEAN member, it will be able to access free trade with ASEAN countries, making it easier and more affordable to import goods, which currently account for approximately 80% of Timor-Leste's total imports (Macrotrends, 2023).

Singapore's presence plays a significant role in assisting Timor-Leste in achieving its national goal of ASEAN membership. As an ASEAN member state with extensive experience in regional cooperation, Singapore has provided technical support to Timor-Leste's diplomats, including forming partnerships through the Singapore Cooperation Program (SCP). Established in 1992, SCP offers technical assistance through training in various fields, including governance capacity building, cybersecurity, international trade systems, disaster management, and climate change mitigation (SCP, 2024). Through SCP, approximately 1,024 Timor-Leste government staff have received training covering ASEAN structures, functions, policies, and procedures, indirectly strengthening Timor-Leste's stability and strategic capacity (Singapore, 2023). Moreover, SCP programs focusing on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) help Timor-Leste adapt to and implement domestic sustainable development programs. This accelerates the achievement of broader national and regional objectives, including full participation in ASEAN.

Beyond economic limitations, another reason for Singapore's reluctance toward Timor-Leste's ASEAN membership is its insufficient human resource capacity. According to the Indonesian Dictionary (KBBI), capacity refers to production ability, which results from available resources and potential (KBBI, n.d.). Singapore perceives that Timor-Leste lacks this capacity, primarily because it does not have diplomatic representation in all ASEAN capitals. This indicates that Timor-Leste lacks a sufficient number of qualified and verified diplomatic personnel fluent in English and experienced in international policy, which is essential for facilitating communication in ASEAN meetings held annually (Sahin, 2012). According to UNDP Human Development data (2018), Timor-Leste's Human Development Index in 2010 was only 0.50, classified as medium human development. Even Prime Minister Xanana Gusmão acknowledged the country's shortage of human resources across various sectors (Chongkittavorn, 2016).

The inadequacy of human resource capacity in Timor-Leste is reflected in its low GDP, as GDP serves as a measurable indicator of a country's overall economic growth, including health, education, industry, agriculture, and other sectors. Regarding human resources, education is a fundamental pillar for a country to drive future economic transformation through its younger generation. However, this remains a challenge for Timor-Leste. According to UNICEF, the country's education system is far from adequate, with only 20% of children enrolling in primary school, nearly 70% of first-grade students unable to read and write, and a lack of educational facilities—66% of schools lack toilets, 40% lack drinking water, and 37% of youths aged 15-24 in rural areas are still illiterate (UNICEF, 2016). The low level of education in Timor-Leste indicates that many of its citizens lack the skills and knowledge necessary for productive participation in the economy and society. This serves as a major obstacle to the development and advancement of Timor-Leste's human resource capacity.

Despite these challenges, Timor-Leste continues to maintain bilateral relations with Singapore, which holds strong regional influence in Southeast Asia. This underlies Timor-Leste's efforts to expand its national interests through diplomacy and enhanced cooperation, as part of its strategy to overcome human resource limitations. Expertise and skill development in human resources play a crucial role in increasing productivity, ultimately contributing to national stability. A well-developed workforce fosters innovation and quality in various sectors, enabling global competitiveness (Desker, 2017). In pursuit of this goal, Singapore directly assists through the Singapore-Timor-Leste ASEAN Readiness Support (STARS) program (Singapore, 2023). This initiative provides technical assistance to Timor-Leste, focusing on two priority areas: ASEAN knowledge and individual skill training, including capacity building in education. The program is designed to train various Timor-Leste stakeholders through specialized courses on challenges faced by the country, such as English communication, effective report writing, and negotiation skills for Timor-Leste officials. Additionally, the program involves academics and youth by offering training in education system development, including curriculum design and school administration governance (Baharudin, 2023). According to the World Bank Human Capital Index, Singapore ranks as the best country globally in human capital development, possessing a highly skilled and productive workforce (Group, 2024).

The significant support provided by Singapore has contributed to Timor-Leste's successful acceptance as an ASEAN member in principle in 2022 during the 40th and 41st ASEAN Summits in Cambodia (ASEAN, 2022). Thus, Singapore's support through specialized programs and direct assistance, along with its role as a developed nation in Southeast Asia, aids Timor-Leste in addressing internal challenges such as its limited human resources. Through these forms of support, Timor-Leste can enhance and improve its human resource capacity and capability.

Scope of Timor-Leste's Interests Amid Capacity Constraints and Singapore's Influence in ASEAN

A country's national interest is not only determined by the goals it seeks to achieve but also by the capacity and power status it possesses. Countries with greater capacity tend to have broader national interests, while smaller states must adjust their interests according to existing limitations. As a small state in Southeast Asia, Timor-Leste faces challenges in expanding the scope of its national interests, particularly in its efforts to become a full member of ASEAN. With a developing economy and limited power status compared to other countries in the region, Timor-Leste adapts to continue pursuing its national interests.

Becoming a full ASEAN member is a strategic step for Timor-Leste to strengthen political and economic stability while enhancing its competitiveness at the regional level. Although most ASEAN member states support its membership, Singapore has opposed it, citing Timor-Leste's lack of preparedness in various sectors, including the economy, bureaucracy, and human resources. This demonstrates that a country's capacity and power status influence the extent to which its national interests can be realized. As a country with a strong economy, Singapore wields greater influence in shaping ASEAN policies and effectively safeguarding its own interests. In contrast, Timor-Leste, as a small state, faces challenges in gaining full recognition within ASEAN.

In navigating an international landscape that is not always favorable, Timor-Leste continues to maintain cooperation with Singapore as an adaptive measure to strengthen its position in the region. Despite having a lower power status, Timor-Leste seeks to leverage this bilateral relationship to support its interests, particularly in the economic sector. Singapore's dominant influence in ASEAN, especially in setting economic standards for new members, is a key factor in this strategy. According to a 2024 report by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Singapore ranks first in ASEAN with a GDP of \$88,000 USD, significantly higher than Timor-Leste's GDP of just \$1,000 USD (Merchant, 2024).

Timor-Leste's limited economic capacity affects its weak power status in the region, which contrasts sharply with Singapore's larger economic capacity and influence. Consequently, Timor-Leste has sought to expand its position by opening investment channels to Singapore. In December 2024, Timor-Leste collaborated with the Singapore Manufacturing Federation (SMF) to host the Timor-Leste Trade and Investment Forum. Timor-Leste's Minister of Trade and Industry, Nino Pereira, stated that the forum aims to position Timor-Leste as a key investment destination for Singapore in four main sectors: tourism, agriculture, fisheries, and manufacturing (RDTL, 2024). Additionally, Timor-Leste has offered fiscal incentives, including tax exemptions of up to 100% for certain sectors (TradeInvest, 2023). Beyond fostering domestic economic growth, this strategy is expected to strengthen Timor-Leste's position in Southeast Asia. As the economic hub of the region, Singapore plays a significant role in determining ASEAN's economic standards. Therefore, establishing cooperation with Singapore is a strategic move for Timor-Leste to demonstrate its economic viability within ASEAN.

Singapore is not only a key player in Timor-Leste's economic development, but economic cooperation is also beneficial for Singapore as it seeks new markets to expand its business sectors. With an increasingly skilled young workforce and relatively low labor costs, Timor-Leste presents an attractive investment destination for Singaporean investors looking to reduce operational expenses. According to the 2024 Salary Explorer survey, average wages in Timor-Leste remain relatively low compared to other ASEAN countries, with 25% of workers earning less than \$1,460 USD per month and 65% earning between \$1,340 and \$3,450 USD per month (Explorer, 2024). The mutual benefits of this economic partnership not only support both countries but also strengthen Singapore's assessment of Timor-Leste's readiness for ASEAN membership.

Timor-Leste's strategy in fostering economic relations with Singapore illustrates how a small state can adapt its national interests by considering its capacity and power status. Despite facing challenges in securing full ASEAN membership, Timor-Leste continues striving to enhance its economic competitiveness by attracting investment and strengthening bilateral cooperation. This approach aims not only to accelerate domestic economic development but also to build legitimacy as an ASEAN candidate with improved readiness. By promoting economic growth and establishing strategic partnerships with influential regional players such as Singapore,

Timor-Leste has the potential to elevate its power status in the long term and expand the scope of its national interests amid the evolving regional dynamics.

Conclusion

Timor-Leste's decision to maintain bilateral cooperation with Singapore despite being denied full ASEAN membership is based on crucial considerations regarding its national interests. In the political, economic, and strategic dimensions, Timor-Leste requires Singapore's support as an influential country in ASEAN, given its role as the largest investor, contributing 85% of investment flows, and the second-largest trading partner. Through bilateral cooperation programs such as the Singapore Cooperation Programme (SCP) and the Singapore-Timor Leste ASEAN Readiness Support (STARS), Singapore helps enhance Timor-Leste's human resource capacity and address its domestic challenges as a small country with limited resources. Singapore's status as the lead country for the ASEAN Economic Community pillar plays a significant role in determining the economic feasibility of prospective members. This influence was evident in Timor-Leste's acceptance as ASEAN's 11th principle member in 2022.

Thus, the decision to uphold bilateral relations with Singapore is a strategic move that supports Timor-Leste's national interest in achieving full ASEAN membership while prioritizing pragmatic cooperation over emotional responses to diplomatic setbacks. However, given Singapore's significant influence in ASEAN's economic framework, Timor-Leste should further explore ways to diversify its partnerships beyond Singapore to reduce dependency and strengthen its bargaining position. Additionally, while economic engagement with Singapore provides advantages, Timor-Leste must ensure that this cooperation translates into tangible economic benefits domestically rather than solely fulfilling ASEAN's membership criteria. A more comprehensive strategy, including deeper regional economic integration and capacity-building initiatives, would further enhance Timor-Leste's position in ASEAN.

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