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Ready or Not? The Ultimate Push of Timor-Leste to Join ASEAN

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Abstract

A persistent concern raised by member states of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) is that Timor-Leste's readiness for membership is not enough, as Dili, the smallest economy in Southeast Asia, may not be able to sign and implement key commitments, nor to participate in all ASEAN institutions and work programmes. Since its formal request for membership in 2011, Timor-Leste has recently stepped up its efforts for ASEAN membership, with the initial technical support of the Japan International Cooperation Agency and, particularly, the enhanced support of the Asian Development Bank. In 2019, there has been a step change in momentum towards accession, with clear ASEAN statements signalling progress in this regard. The first ever ASEAN fact-finding mission to Timor-Leste to assess the country's potential for membership concluded successfully in September 2019. Two more fact-finding missions are planned for 2020. We assess in this paper Timor-Leste's readiness for membership in the three pillars of the ASEAN community: economic, socio-cultural, and political security. In particular, we assess how recent developments address the concerns historically raised by some ASEAN member states about Timor-Leste's membership. We conclude that the Cambodian and, particularly, the Indonesian presidencies of the ASEAN in 2022 and 2023 could be an important landmark for Timor-Leste's accession to the Association.

¹ Disclaimer: The views expressed in this text are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Asian Development Bank.

Keywords

Timor-Leste, Association of South East Asian Nations, membership of regional organisations, regional political communities, foreign policy

Introduction

Timor-Leste has strong geopolitical, economic, and social ties with the member countries of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). Geographically, Timor, the island, lies at the southern end of maritime Southeast Asia, located between the Banda Sea and the Timor Sea, the latter separating Southeast Asia from Australia, a distant 500 km away. The name Timor comes from “*timur*,” the Malay word for “East,” pointing to the fact that the island lies at the eastern end of the Lesser Sunda islands, the archipelago to which Timor island belongs geographically. Timor-Leste, the country, comprises the eastern half of the island of Timor, together with the nearby islands of Atauro and Jaco, as well as Oecusse, an exclave on the north-western side of the island, surrounded by the Indonesian West Timor. The latter belongs to the Indonesian province of East Nusa Tenggara. Economically, 56% of Timor-Leste’s imports and 70% of the country’s exports were sourced in 2017 from and to ASEAN, respectively (Observatory for Economic Complexity, 2020). From a bilateral perspective, the largest clients of Timorese exports were Singapore (62%), oil-related, for refining; the United States (9.6%); Indonesia (7%); Germany (4.9%); and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) (3.2%). Timor-Leste’s largest suppliers were Indonesia (31%); the PRC (17%); Singapore (13%); Hong Kong, China (8.6%); and Viet Nam (5.7%). In addition, investors and tourists are being encouraged to establish close ties with Timor-Leste by an expanding network of Timorese embassies and consulates, which now covers all ASEAN nations. Socially, Timorese citizens are building their skills in training courses and employment programmes throughout Asia, especially in the PRC and the Republic of Korea, but also in Indonesia and the Philippines. It is not surprising then that ASEAN’s membership is a priority for Timor-Leste’s foreign policy. As current Minister of Foreign Affairs Balbo Soares put it in a speech during the launching of the Timor-Leste ASEAN mobilisation programme on March 4, 2019: “ASEAN membership is our national interest, foreign policy priority and strategic decision to take part in regional economic integration, to diversify our economy and contribute to the stability in this region” (MFAC, 2019).

Timor-Leste is the only Southeast Asian country that does not belong to the ASEAN,² an association of countries created originally by five members (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and

² Papua New Guinea (PNG) has manifested interest in joining ASEAN on several occasions but has not presented an official request for membership so far. One of the main constraints to membership is the geographic location of the country. Similar to Timor-Leste’s case, PNG is located in the eastern part of the island of New Guinea, being the western part under Indonesian sovereignty and administratively divided between the Indonesian provinces of Papua and West Papua, so one could argue that PNG is geographically in Southeast Asia. In addition, when PNG was granted observer status at ASEAN in 1976, it was implicitly acknowledged that the country shares the same political and economic region with ASEAN’s members. Indonesia is the ASEAN member more actively supporting PNG’s membership of ASEAN. Nevertheless, PNG is formally a member of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), founded in 1971 as a regional political and economic organisation that brings together 18 Pacific islands, namely Australia, Cook Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, French Polynesia, Kiribati, Nauru,

Thailand) that signed the Bangkok Declaration on August 8, 1967. Brunei Darussalam represented the first enlargement of the Association in January 1984, barely a week after the country became independent. Viet Nam then joined in July 1995, followed by the Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR) and Myanmar in July 1997, and by Cambodia in April 1999.

Timor-Leste officially requested membership of ASEAN in March 2011. In this regard, although the original ASEAN's Bangkok Declaration laid down no condition for membership, leaders of the Association's Senior Officials Meeting (SOM), i.e., the Association's most senior officials, agreed in 1983 that observer status "should be granted only to potential members of ASEAN and only states in Southeast Asia may join"³ (Severino, 2006, p. 72). More recently, the ASEAN Charter, signed in 2008, established four conditions that prospective members must meet: (i) location within Southeast Asia; (ii) recognition by all ASEAN member states; (iii) agreement to be bound and to abide by the ASEAN Charter; and (iv) "ability and willingness to carry out the obligations of membership" (see ASEAN, 2015a). No other criterion should apply.

We claim that Timor-Leste has stepped up in 2019 its efforts for ASEAN membership, with the enhanced technical support of the Asian Development Bank (ADB). In this paper, Section 1 presents a detailed literature review on Timor-Leste's membership of ASEAN, both theoretical and empirical. Section 2 presents in detail Timor-Leste's road towards ASEAN membership. Section 3 focuses on 2019 as a critical year in stepping up efforts towards membership, both from Timor-Leste's and ASEAN's perspectives. Section 4 briefly presents the most likely scenario going forward. Section 5 concludes the paper.

Literature Review

The consideration by ASEAN member states of the accession of new members to their Association has been relatively rapid. Of the most recent members of ASEAN, Viet Nam, Lao PDR, and Myanmar took close to one year to be granted membership (Viet Nam submitted application in May 1994 and was accepted in July 1995; Lao PDR applied in March 1996 and became a member in July 1997; and Myanmar applied in August 1996 and was accepted also in July 1997), while for Cambodia it took slightly longer — nearly three years (from March 1996 to April 1999) — due to the 1997 violent *coup d'état* brought by Co-premier Hun Sen to oust the other co-premier Norodom Ranariddh.

However, not one or three, but more than eight years have passed since Timor-Leste officially submitted application for ASEAN membership in November 2011, and Dili is still in the waiting room. Why should Timor-Leste's case be any different?

New Caledonia, New Zealand, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Marshall Islands, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. PIF's membership seems to define the Pacific character of PNG, and therefore being against ASEAN's requirement for membership that members must be Southeast Asian countries.

³ The question about PNG remains, since the status of observer to ASEAN was granted in 1976, before the SOM's decision in 1983.

It is fair to question why Timor-Leste is still under review for admission to ASEAN. This eight-year long delay has been widely assessed in the literature of political science, and different theoretical frameworks have been proposed as well as different empirical methodologies applied to Timor-Leste's situation.

From a theoretical perspective, Ortuoste (2011) discussed how ASEAN has re-shaped the geographic and political definitions of Southeast Asia since ASEAN's last expansion to Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Viet Nam. For the author, while the only consideration for membership in the '90s were the policies and practices institutionalised until then ("being ASEAN"), two new spheres were added to ASEAN's membership later: first, the acceptability of certain behaviours ("acting as ASEAN"), and, second, the interpretative frames with which to solve problems ("seeing as ASEAN"). These two new spheres "facilitated the exclusion of East Timor [from ASEAN] despite being a legitimate political actor in Southeast Asia." According to the author, "Timor-Leste is trying to demonstrate its bona fides by 'becoming' an ASEAN state with the requisite institutional capabilities, and 'acting' and 'seeing' as an ASEAN state in order to generate a positive consensus on its membership." It is interesting to note that this theoretical framework is as valid today as it was in 2011, when Timor-Leste applied for ASEAN's membership. Baba (2016) develops the idea of regional commonalities and regional identities to further suggest a normative understanding of the Southeast Asian identity and how Asian values might contribute to the creation of this shared identity. The author argues that Southeast Asian values play down self-interested and competitive state relations, so these values could promote (if shared) or hinder (if not shared) Timor-Leste's membership to ASEAN. Sahin (2014) seeks to incorporate Timor-Leste's insecurities derived from the nation's political recent history as a constitutive element of its foreign policy. Thomas (2016) applies the discussion of a state's eligibility for membership in a regional political community to the European Union (EU) and proves that the definition of eligibility changes and evolves over time and, along with it, incentives also change for those seeking to promote (Indonesia and Thailand) or block (Singapore) an applicant state (Timor-Leste). Spandler (2018) argues that membership and enlargement are assessed against a set of norms and applies this theory by comparing the accessions of Greece and Spain to the EU as well as the accessions of Cambodia and Myanmar to ASEAN. The author concludes that the accession of new candidates also transforms the associated set of norms in a dialectical relation. Radtke (2014) makes a case in point of this dialectical relation by proving that, during Myanmar's accession, ASEAN was forced to open itself up to discussions about fundamental norms and regional identity. As the author puts it, "by subsequently framing the discourse on human rights and democracy in Southeast Asia, and by successfully gaining access to the official ASEAN agenda, the Association moved to be more precise about its norms." Cribb (1998) added that a reason behind Myanmar's membership of ASEAN despite its track record on human rights was the fear that it "might fall into China's orbit if it were excluded" from ASEAN, an argument that could also be applied to Timor-Leste's application.

We agree that the accessions of Cambodia and Myanmar to ASEAN have changed the Association's own requirements for membership, influencing Timor-Leste's application, as we will discuss in the next sections. In fact, the accessions of Viet Nam (1994), Lao PDR, and Myanmar (1997), and lastly Cambodia (1999) have brought important lessons for ASEAN's expansion. After their memberships, these countries were unable to participate fully in ASEAN's economic cooperation activities due to their different stages of economic development, so ASEAN had to adapt to the challenge of more members down the road. Fadillah (2019) concludes from a legal point of view that we cannot compare the application of Cambodia,

Lao PDR, or Myanmar to Timor-Leste's. The author argues that the latter is the first country to do so in a legally-transformed ASEAN:

[S]ince 2008, ASEAN [has been] governed by the ASEAN Charter and, through the Charter, the criteria for a new member to be admitted is [for the first time] set out. It means that there is no legal precedent as to how a country will be admitted to become an ASEAN member, since all of non-founder ASEAN members had gained their membership status before ASEAN Charter was conceived. (2019)

Furthermore, Fadillah seeks a theoretical framework for the more than eight years that Timor-Leste has been put in ASEAN's waiting room, and argues that the Institutionalism theory cannot explain why Timor-Leste's application has not received a positive answer yet, despite having fulfilled all the criteria for membership. The author tests if the answer could lie in the Neorealism or in the Neoliberal Institutionalism theories of international relations. Through Neorealism, Fadillah (2019) argues that Timor-Leste lacks support from a hegemonic power in achieving its end to become an ASEAN member. Through Neoliberal Institutionalism, the author makes the case that Timor-Leste has not yet offered a significant incentive to ASEAN for being admitted.

From an empirical perspective, Wuryandari (2011) and Neves (2017) take stock of prospects and challenges of Timor-Leste's membership to ASEAN, listing factors such as economic development constraints, limitations in human resources, and the consolidation of the young democracy. Wuryandari (2011) reiterates the idea that these factors were not an impediment for Cambodia, Lao PDR, or Myanmar to join ASEAN, so they should not constrain Timor-Leste either, so Dili should be allowed to join on a lower-level commitment, as its predecessors did. More recently, Castro-Seixas et al. (2019) infer from examining a corpus of 48 international newspapers in Southeast Asia that the main narrative about Timor-Leste's membership of ASEAN is related to the country's "readiness to join," divided into three rationalities: preparedness (technical), ambivalence (participation of Timor-Leste in several international communities), and conflict (domestic instability).

Timor-Leste's Road to ASEAN

Since day one of its independence, Timor-Leste has requested assistance from its development partners to improve its economic integration into the region. Several avenues were initially followed for this goal, including deepening its relations with not only ASEAN but also the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and the World Trade Organization (WTO), and through bilateral trade agreements (ADB, 2012, p. 1). The level of commitment with all these avenues proved to be varied. Timor-Leste never became a member of APEC, and obtained only observer status at the WTO on December 7, 2016 (WTO, 2016). Also, till this day, Timor-Leste is the only Asia-Pacific country with no free-trade agreements, bilateral or plurilateral, under implementation, study, or consultation (ADB, 2020a). Nonetheless, membership of ASEAN was since day one "the focus of the country's efforts in the area of regional economic integration," according to ADB (2012, p. 1).

This priority to join ASEAN was whole-heartedly taken by Timor-Leste despite most ASEAN members having been actively supportive of Indonesia's occupation of Timor-Leste. Timor-Leste's primary

motivations to join ASEAN have been: (i) security and geopolitical interests, due to the perceived value of ASEAN for small states to improve regional security risks through collective security arrangements, and as an adequate forum to promote national interests in regional security discussions; (ii) economic interests, due to ASEAN's role as a useful pathway to underpin Timor-Leste's development plans through regional economic cooperation; (iii) regional integration, to increase its regional identity within the current geographical and cultural crossroads that put the country among the South Pacific region (though Timor-Leste is an observer of the PIF, unlike in the case of ASEAN, it has never requested membership to the Forum), Southeast Asia, and the diffuse Lusophone community; and (iv) protecting national sovereignty, critical for a small country like Timor-Leste, since ASEAN's Charter reinforces the rights of their members to political independence, territorial integrity, and self-determination, based on the principles of non-interference in internal affairs and non-use of force (Strating, 2017). Bearing this in mind, Timor-Leste (i) gained the status of observer of ASEAN in 2002, immediately after independence; (ii) secured membership of the ASEAN Regional Forum in 2005; (iii) signed in 2007 the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Co-Operation, the peace treaty among Southeast Asian countries, although Timor-Leste did it, together with France, under the status of a state outside Southeast Asia; and (iv) formally applied for full membership to ASEAN in March 2011. Nonetheless, the application has ever since been and still is under consideration.

We will next assess Timor-Leste's road to ASEAN since its application in 2011, first from Timor-Leste's perspective, and next from ASEAN's view.

On Timor-Leste's side, initial preparations had been initiated even before the application for membership were filed. Around the time of Timor-Leste's application, the government of Timor-Leste consistently included its goal of full ASEAN membership in all of its major strategic plans, particularly in (i) Timor-Leste's Strategic Development Plan 2011–2030, which envisaged full ASEAN membership by 2015 (GoTL, 2011, pp. 172–175) and Timor-Leste contributing to the Association with its expertise in “economic development, small-nation management and aid effectiveness and delivery”; and in (ii) the Program of the Fifth Constitutional Government (GoTL, 2012). In addition, the Government of Timor-Leste appointed from August 2012 to July 2017 an ambassador to Singapore and Brunei — Roberto Soares — not only as Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs but concomitantly as Secretary of State for ASEAN affairs, and responsible for leading and coordinating the fulfilment of ASEAN's conditions for membership. Finally, in 2011, Dili hosted for the first time the meeting of the ASEAN Regional Forum, and in 2012 received its first official visit of ASEAN's Secretary General.

On ASEAN's side, the first reference to Timor-Leste's membership occurred at the 18th ASEAN Summit held in July 2011, where heads of states and governments noted Timor-Leste's application and decided that “it needed further consideration” (Table 3 of this paper will further detail the discourse of the Chair's statements during ASEAN Summits). Next, at the 19th ASEAN Summit held in November 2011, because the heads of states and governments could not reach an agreement (Jakarta Post, 2011), they tasked the ASEAN Coordinating Council (ACC) to “discuss all relevant aspects related to Timor-Leste's application, as well as possible implications for ASEAN” (ASEAN, 2011, pp. 39–40). A working group has since been established to make recommendations to the ACC about Timor-Leste's ability to meet the requirements of Article 6 of the ASEAN Charter (ASEAN, 2015a). In fact, the ASEAN Charter has established four conditions that prospective members must meet: (i) location within Southeast Asia; (ii) recognition by all

ASEAN member states; (iii) agreement to be bound and to abide by the ASEAN Charter; and (iv) “ability and willingness to carry out the obligations of membership.” Timor-Leste has already met the first three conditions but meeting the fourth is challenging. ASEAN’s move towards deeper cooperation and integration meant that accession is now more technically demanding than when the latest members, Cambodia, Myanmar, Lao PDR, and Viet Nam joined. As of January 2020, a new ASEAN prospective member is required to accede to 76 substantive legal instruments (ASEAN, 2020), up from 64 in 2016, an 18.75% increase in just four years, according to ADB (2016b, p. 3). In addition to incorporating these legal agreements into its domestic legal architecture, a new prospective member is also called to make the necessary changes to its domestic legislation to ensure consistency. Finally, a new prospective member must also show commitment to various ASEAN’s non-binding policy objectives and develop the capacity to participate meaningfully in ASEAN’s technical working meetings. In fact, a concern that has persistently been raised by some ASEAN member states is that Timor-Leste may not be able to not only sign and implement key commitments but also participate in all ASEAN institutions and work programmes.

The ADB and the Japanese government have technically supported Timor-Leste to achieve this goal since day one (ADB, 2012, p. 3). Support to Timor-Leste in this area was initially started with two short non-public studies carried out in the second half of 2012, by: (i) the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), to review the costs, benefits, and requirements of ASEAN membership; and (ii) ADB, on behalf of the ASEAN Secretariat,⁴ to technically assess Timor-Leste’s readiness to join the Association. In the case of ADB, the multilateral bank even commissioned out 11 (not 10) background papers on country perspectives in preparation of the bank’s flagship publication *ASEAN 2030: towards a borderless economic community* (ADBI, 2012, p. vii). Both JICA and ADB’s initial findings pointed out that accession to ASEAN would be a major undertaking for Timor-Leste, which would require the implementation of significant legal reforms and close coordination across a broad range of government agencies and departments. In addition, the studies also concluded that “the short run first-order impacts [of Timor-Leste’s membership to ASEAN] will be positive but modest,” while “the longer term impacts [...] are largely dependent on the Government of Timor-Leste’s ability to address critical constraints to business activity within the country. This points to the importance of linking ASEAN accession with the Government’s broader program of economic reforms” (as quoted in ADB, 2016b, linked document #15, p. 3).

The first proof of the complexity of the task is that the first two-year capacity development technical assistance (CDTA) provided by ADB to support the preparation for membership was hardly successful. In December 2012, ADB approved and financed a CDTA, under the title of “Preparing for Regional Economic Integration,” of US\$850,000, fully financed by the ADB’s Japan Fund for Poverty Reduction (JFPR),⁵ to help Timor-Leste to identify and implement reforms needed to join ASEAN, namely by

⁴ Under phase 2 of ADB’s TA to “strengthening the capacity of the ASEAN Secretariat in regional economic integration and policy dialogue.”

⁵ The JFPR is a trust fund established by the Japanese government with the ADB in May 2000 to provide grants for projects and TA supporting poverty reduction and related social development activities that can add value to projects financed by ADB. As of December 31, 2019, ADB had approved a total of US\$896.6 million for 459 projects (ADB, 2020b).

providing “mentoring support and training, and facilitating participation in knowledge sharing events” (ADB, 2012). Back then, the CDTA already mentioned that:

The government [of Timor-Leste] has expressed its hopes that ascension [*sic*] to ASEAN membership can proceed quickly, but concerns expressed about Timor-Leste’s readiness to join by some current members are stalling progress. The time frame for eventual membership remains unclear, but undertaking actions to bring Timor-Leste into compliance with prerequisites for ASEAN membership — the focus of the [CDTA] — will advance this process. (ADB, 2012, p. 1)

Success of the CDTA in terms of outcome was set at “obtaining the confirmation by the ASEAN Secretariat that Timor-Leste met at least half of the 175 country-specific actions of the ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint”⁶ by 2015 (ADB, 2012, p. 3). However, the three key assumptions underpinning the CDTA failed to materialise, namely (i) the government of Timor-Leste did not endorse the action plan presented in February 2013 in the findings of the study carried out by JICA; (ii) communication with the ASEAN Secretariat was very limited due to the government’s decision to await the outcome of the three studies commissioned by the ACC’s working group on Timor-Leste’s accession, one for each of the three pillars of the ASEAN community: political-security (ACPS), economic (ACE), and socio-cultural (ACSC), as established by ASEAN (2009) — the three non-public studies concluded only in the first half of 2016 (ASEAN, 2016); and (iii) Timor-Leste was not brought into the ASEAN Economic Community also because the initiative had been postponed until 2025 (ASEAN, 2015b). Consequently, ADB opted for reprogramming the CDTA to focus support on producing a memorandum on the foreign trade regime of Timor-Leste, which in the end was used as basis for the application of Timor-Leste to the WTO (ADB, 2017). This shows the complexity of the process of ASEAN membership for Timor-Leste and how demanding membership to the Association has become since the latest inclusion of Cambodia, Myanmar, Lao PDR, and Viet Nam in the ’90s. In turn, against what it had been initially tasked, the CDTA failed to (ii) produce an action plan for ASEAN membership; (iii) submit annual reports to ASEAN with updates on Timor-Leste’s ability to carry out the obligations of ASEAN membership; and (iii) organise in Timor-Leste at least one event per year, attended by regional organisations or ASEAN member states. The only good news was that the CDTA succeeded at least in creating basic soft and hard domestic structures for coordination of ASEAN membership, namely by creating and resourcing in the Timorese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation (FMAC) an ASEAN National Secretariat to coordinate relations with ASEAN, and appointing central and line agencies with Timorese ASEAN focal points.

In the meantime, the government of Timor-Leste continued its diplomatic and political offensive with ASEAN members to lobby support for its membership, by increasing the number of diplomatic missions to ASEAN members. The latest Timorese embassies to be inaugurated in ASEAN members were in Cambodia, Myanmar, and Lao PDR in 2016, and Timor-Leste now has diplomatic representations in all 10 ASEAN member states, as requested by the ASEAN Charter. In addition, between 2013 and 2014, then Prime Minister Xanana Gusmão visited all ASEAN capitals to advocate for Timor-Leste’s membership (see Gusmão, 2013). Timor-Leste, which had hosted in 2011 its first workshop of the ASEAN Regional Forum, an event with nearly 150 participants, hosted more workshops in 2017, 2019, and on February 27–

⁶ The full set of country-specific actions is available in ASEAN (2008).

28, 2020 — the ASEAN Regional Forum Workshop on Dispute Resolution and Law of the Sea — showing its capacity to host ASEAN meetings. Timor-Leste even hosted in 2016 the ASEAN People’s Forum for Southeast Asian civil society organisations as chair, substituting Lao PDR, who had been reluctant to assume the role.

Furthermore, Dili managed to include the consideration of its membership in ASEAN’s Summits of the heads of states and governments not only twice in 2011, but also in 2015, and, with strong support from the Philippines, twice in 2017, but unanimity was never reached. Membership continued to be blocked by some ASEAN members with official justification being on technical grounds rather than on political grounds, as is evident from the explanation given by Lee Hsien Loong, prime minister of Singapore, the ASEAN member who opposed Timor-Leste’s membership most strongly: Singapore will support Timor-Leste’s membership when they are ready to join (Government of Singapore, 2015).

Consequently, despite ADB’s initial CDTA failing to achieve its goals, in 2016 the government of Timor-Leste asked ADB for a second CDTA of US\$1 million in the name of “Capacity for Regional Economic Integration” (ADB, 2016a), to help Timor-Leste to develop the capacity needed for ASEAN membership. The key issues to be addressed in the second phase of assistance were:

- i. limited technical understanding of the requirements and implications of ASEAN accession and other regional integration initiatives,
- ii. limited capacity to plan and implement required reforms and participate in regional integration, and
- iii. gaps in the systems for coordination and communications to support ASEAN accession.

Just in case the second CDTA also failed to reach its goal, ADB added that “Timor-Leste is well positioned to achieve its goal of ASEAN membership, but the benefits of the CDTA are not conditional on this,” since the work will also support the “broader objective of improving the business environment and growing the non-oil economy” (ADB, 2016a, p. 2). The CDTA had four outputs, namely: (i) enhanced understanding of the requirements and implications of ASEAN membership; (ii) successful implementation of a programme of legal and regulatory reforms to meet ASEAN requirements; (iii) improved individual and institutional capacity to meet ASEAN requirements; and (iv) effective communications with domestic and international stakeholders during the accession process. The CDTA became effective on April 22, 2016 and was expected to conclude on June 30, 2018, but was extended for two additional years until June 30, 2020, to continue supporting Timor-Leste in the prosecution of its goal of ASEAN membership.

In the end, Timor-Leste’s membership to ASEAN will be a unanimous decision that should be taken by all 10 current ASEAN members, with no timeframe set. We therefore take stock of the positions taken by ASEAN member states to Timor-Leste’s aspirations. Some member states have been strongly supportive of Timor-Leste’s accession since the request for membership was first presented, with Indonesia upfront, followed by Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand, as pointed out by Ramos-Horta (2011), and, more recently, Cambodia. Other ASEAN members, however, namely Lao PDR, Viet Nam, and, predominantly, Singapore, have showed initial concerns. Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong firmly rejected the two original attempts of membership by Timor-Leste in 2011 (see Jakarta Post, 2011, for details of the discussion with the Indonesian President). As of 2017, the same ASEAN member states

were still reluctant to grant Timor-Leste’s membership, including also Cambodia. We observe that the two ASEAN Summits held in 2018 under a Singaporean presidency were the only summits since 2013 that made no reference to Timor-Leste’s aspiration for membership in the final communiqué. Table 4 gives a detailed discussion of the references to Timor-Leste in the Chair’s summaries of the ASEAN Summits since 2007.

To better understand the stance shown back then by these countries who opposed, to a larger or smaller extent, Timor-Leste’s membership, we take stock in Table 1 below of the main arguments (in favour of or against) observed in the literature.

On one hand, as arguments in favour, we note many aspects of what Timor-Leste’s contribution to ASEAN would be, namely that ASEAN would gain (i) larger geographical presence and access to the region; (ii) expansion of peace and stability in the entire Southeast Asian region; (iii) Timor-Leste’s expertise in working on public regional goods, such as management of cross-border security threats and co-operation on humanitarian assistance, debt relief, environmental management, and the fight against climate change; (iv) Timor-Leste’s contribution to regional growth, social progress, and cultural development; (v) a privileged access and connections with a wider group of countries across the globe, due to Timor-Leste’s special historical and ongoing ties, particularly with the community of Portuguese-speaking countries (CPLP as is its acronym in Portuguese) with nearly 250 million people and covering four continents: Africa (Angola, Cabo Verde, Equatorial Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, and São Tomé e Príncipe), Asia (PRC, through Macau), Europe (Portugal), and Latin America (Brazil); (vi) a significant growing market for inward investment, in an oil and mining-rich economy with the highest growth in population rates in Southeast Asia, with an annual growth of 1.8% between 2011 and 2018 according to the World Bank (2018c); and (vii) an additional firewall preventing certain regional or world powers from having excessive influence in the region, as argued by the Timorese Minister for Foreign Affairs Babo Soares (Raksaseri, 2019). In fact, reality seems to point in the opposite direction, i.e., that to continue rejecting Timor-Leste ASEAN membership could bring the country closer to the sphere of influence of other world or regional powers, such as Australia and, particularly, the PRC. Besides being the first country to recognise Timor-Leste’s declaration of independence in 2002, the PRC’s interest in Timor-Leste has increased significantly in recent times, as Martínez-Galán (2019) explains. As a case in point, Ortuoste (2019) argues that “Cambodia broke consensus with ASEAN over decisions on the South China Sea due to China’s influence. Could the same happen to Timor-Leste?”

Table 1 Summary of arguments in favour of and against Timor-Leste’s membership, from ASEAN’s viewpoint

In favour	Against	Associated mitigating factors
Larger geographical presence and access in the region	Economic and social disparities between Timor-Leste and ASEAN members	Timor-Leste ranks better than Cambodia, Lao PDR and Myanmar
Timor-Leste’s experience in working on public regional goods	Weak institutions	

Timor-Leste's contribution to regional growth, social progress and cultural development	Financial burden both for ASEAN and for Timor-Leste	- Timor-Leste's sovereign wealth fund - Funding under the 'Initiative for ASEAN integration' comes from dialogue partners
Extend peace and stability to the entire Southeast Asian region	Timor-Leste's visible and strong international profile in defending democracy, human rights and media freedom	- ASEAN is an apolitical organization. - Minimal potential for Timor-Leste to act as a destabilizing force - Decreasing criticism of Timor-Leste in recent times
Privileged access and connections to 250 million Portuguese-speaking people in four continents	Membership could hinder the progress in ASEAN integration	
Prevents having excessive influence in the region of external powers	The positions taken by Timor-Leste in the bloc could be strongly influenced by certain big members, such as Indonesia	
A potential growing market for inward investment	Efforts made by Timor-Leste to diversify its foreign policy in several fora (CPLP)	

Source: author.

We will discuss next not only the arguments against but also the associated mitigating factors, as shown in Table 1. First, one of the most recurrent arguments raised against Timor-Leste's membership has been the economic and social disparities observed between Timor-Leste and ASEAN member states. However, as mitigating factor, we observe that Timor-Leste ranks eighth out of 11 members in GDP per capita (higher than Cambodia and Myanmar), and ninth in Human Development Index (better than Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar), as shown by Table 2. Second, another recurrent argument raised against Timor-Leste's membership is its weak institutions, meaning difficulties in signing and implementing key commitments and participating in all ASEAN institutions and work programmes, reaching over 1,000 meetings to attend annually, as noted by the Government of Singapore (2015), particularly under the political-security community, which includes joint exercises. As mitigating factor, we observe that Timor-Leste ranks eighth out of 11 members in governance indicators, better also than Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar, as shown in Table 2 below. Third, the financial burden of Timor-Leste's membership both for ASEAN, as new members have access to funding under ASEAN's "Initiative for ASEAN integration," but ASEAN's equal responsibility doctrine also means that all members must contribute equal amounts to fund ASEAN's operational costs (US\$2 million per member in the 2016 budget). As mitigating factors, as pointed out by Ramos-Horta (2011), Timor-Leste's sovereign wealth fund (Timor-Leste Petroleum Fund) is worth US\$15.8 billion (MoF, 2019) in a country of around 1.3 million inhabitants, and funding under the "Initiative for ASEAN integration" comes from ASEAN's dialogue partners, not from ASEAN members.

Fourth, Timor-Leste's visible and strong international profile in defending democracy, human rights, and media freedom, which clashes with less democratic regimes in some ASEAN members (Brunei

Darussalam, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, and Viet Nam).⁷ As mitigating factors, the facts that ASEAN is an apolitical organisation, that the potential of Timor-Leste to act as a destabilising force in the political systems of ASEAN countries is minimal, and that, in recent times, Timor-Leste has decreased its criticism of Myanmar and Cambodia, shielding ASEAN members from international criticism out of solidarity, after the critics received in 2010 when Timor-Leste was the only Southeast Asian country voting in favour of the UN Resolution condemning human rights abuses in Myanmar (Roughneen, 2010). Fifth, the potential of Timor-Leste’s membership to hinder the progress in the three ASEAN communities: Since, according to the ASEAN Charter, decisions are made unanimously, Timor-Leste would therefore, in legal terms, gain veto power over all decisions taken by the current 10 members. Sixth, the possibility that the positions taken by Timor-Leste in the bloc could be strongly influenced by certain big members, such as Indonesia. Finally, the potential lack of commitment or capacity to properly contribute to ASEAN, due to Timor-Leste’s efforts to diversify its foreign relations through enthusiastic participation in other organisations such as the CPLP. Specifically, the concerns initially shown by Singapore were related mainly to (i) the economic and social disparities between Timor-Leste and ASEAN members, (ii) the inability of Timor-Leste to be able to sign and implement key commitments, and to participate in all ASEAN institutions and work programmes, (iii) the weak capacity of the Timorese institutions, which could force Timor-Leste “to succumb to other world powers,” and, more notably, (iv) the potential of Timor-Leste’s accession to hinder the progress of ASEAN’s communities (Strating, 2017), and, particularly, of ASEAN’s economic community, which is dearest for Singapore’s interest. In Singapore’s mind, the membership of Timor-Leste will slow down the progress of ASEAN’s integration for two main reasons: (i) it would increase economic disparities, so the economic rationale to move forward with the integration would decrease, and (ii) it would give veto power in all decisions to another member.

Table 2 *Disparities between Timor-Leste and ASEAN member states (2018)*

GDP per capita (US\$)		Human Development Index		Worldwide Governance Indicator	
Singapore	64,582	Singapore	0.935	Singapore	1.639
Brunei Darussalam	31,628	Brunei Darussalam	0.845	Brunei Darussalam	0.620
Malaysia	11,373	Malaysia	0.804	Malaysia	0.475
Thailand	7,274	Thailand	0.765	Indonesia	-0.135
Indonesia	3,894	Philippines	0.712	Thailand	-0.275
Philippines	3,103	Indonesia	0.707	Philippines	-0.335

⁷ Freedom House (2020) ranks Timor-Leste as the only country in Southeast Asia with the classification of “free.” In addition, RWD (2019) ranked Timor-Leste as the country with the highest level of Media Freedom in Southeast Asia in 2019. See Talesco (2016) for further details.

Viet Nam	2,567	Viet Nam	0.693	Viet Nam	-0.353
Lao PDR	2,543	Timor-Leste	0.626	Timor-Leste	-0.455
Timor-Leste	2,036	Lao PDR	0.604	Lao PDR	-0.769
Cambodia	1,510	Myanmar	0.584	Cambodia	-0.771
Myanmar	1,326	Cambodia	0.581	Myanmar	-0.940

Source: World Bank (2018a, 2018b), and UN (2018). UN (2018) ranges from 0 (low) to 1 (high). For World Bank (2018b), an arithmetic average was estimated for the six thematic indicators, covering (i) voice and accountability, (ii) political stability and absence of violence, (iii) government effectiveness, (iv) regulatory quality, (v) rule of law, and (vi) control of corruption. World Governance Indicators range from -2.5 (weak) to 2.5 (strong) in terms of governance performance.

2019: A Critical Year in Stepping up Efforts towards Membership

Since formally applying for ASEAN membership in March 2011, Timor-Leste has been strengthening its diplomatic and economic relations with ASEAN member countries, establishing a system of ASEAN focal points in relevant line ministries, and carrying out public awareness programmes. Nonetheless, nine years have passed, and Timor-Leste has not been granted membership yet.

We observe that during 2019 there was a clear step-change in the momentum towards accession, with (i) multiple exchanges between the government of Timor-Leste, the ASEAN Secretariat, and ASEAN member states, (ii) clear ASEAN statements around progress towards accession, and (iii) the consolidation of economic relations between Timor-Leste and ASEAN member states. The MFAC had hinted at “the importance of 2019 as a critical year for Timor-Leste in its preparation to join the ASEAN family of nations” (GoTL, 2019b).

We will assess next how efforts have been stepped up, first in Timor-Leste, and second in ASEAN.

Regarding Timor-Leste

In Timor-Leste, two important preliminary milestones occurred in 2018. First, the appointment of former president and Nobel Prize awardee José Ramos-Horta as “High Representative of the Government of Timor-Leste to lead the ASEAN negotiation process” by the Timorese Council of Ministers on March 14, 2018 (GoTL, 2018), and, second, the swearing-in of the eighth Constitutional Government on June 22, 2018.

With this background, the beginning of 2019 instituted a shift to a higher gear in the membership process. First, the Timorese Council of Ministers approved on February 13 a Resolution to strengthen coordination and resources in the process of accession to ASEAN (GoTL, 2019i). This was a clear political sign of what was to come. Second, two important technical decisions were made by the Directorate-General for ASEAN Affairs of the MFAC, with the technical and financial support of the ADB (ADB, 2016a): (i) the

definition of Critical Elements for Accession (CEA) work plan by a technical working group composed of representatives from key government agencies; and (ii) the launching of the Timor-Leste ASEAN Mobilisation programme (TLAMP), launched by the Timorese government on March 4, 2019. These two elements gave more structure, guidance, and consistency to the preparation work for membership. While the TLAMP links the Timor-Leste government’s laws and programmes to the ASEAN Community Blueprint 2025 consolidated action plan, the CEA works like an enhanced and advanced preparation of selected key activities and agreements, which, due to the capacity building associated, its interactive learning process, and its replicability, will also facilitate the fulfilment of the remaining requirements. The CEA include, for instance, (i) under the ASEAN Economic pillar, key ASEAN trade and economic agreements, such as the ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement (ATIGA), the ASEAN Comprehensive Investment Agreement, and the ASEAN Trade agreements with Australia; Hong Kong, China; India; Japan; New Zealand; the PRC; and the Republic of Korea; (ii) under the ASEAN Political-Security pillar, signing and ratifying the Treaty on the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone or the ASEAN Convention on Counter Terrorism; and (iii) under the ASEAN Socio-Cultural pillar, signing and ratifying the ASEAN Convention against trafficking in persons or the Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women. Table 3 shows in detail the differences between them.

Table 3 *Differences between the Critical Elements for Accession (CAE) and the Timor-Leste ASEAN Mobilisation programme (TLAMP)*

	CAE	TLAMP
Coverage	Focuses a small number of agencies on a smaller number of achievable elements	Blueprint that sets commitments and timeline for full policy, economic and legal compliance with ASEAN agreements
Dynamics	Flexible	Rigid
Defined by	The Timorese Government, based on the review of the ASEAN practice for new members, and the analysis of key operative agreements	ASEAN, since it is the Association’s accumulated legal regime
Horizon	Short-term	Medium-term

Source: author.

ADB’s support to this step up in Timor-Leste’s efforts for ASEAN membership has been instrumental and critical. It was under the request of the new Timorese government that ADB agreed to extend its second CDTA to support Timor-Leste’s pursuit of ASEAN membership (ADB, 2016a) for two additional years until June 20, 2020. During these two years, the CDTA supported the MFAC in moving forward with several key deliverables, namely: (a) establishing ASEAN-related structures⁸; (b) focusing CEA

⁸ The CDTA helped the MFAC to map out the requirements for full participation in ASEAN work-streams, establish cross-government working groups on ASEAN accession, and hold regular policy discussions and training. In addition, the ASEAN Preparedness Program that was developed with support of the CDTA is now a prerequisite for all Timorese officials embarking

efforts on the three pillars of the ASEAN communities⁹; (c) assisting in the technical preparation of the first ASEAN's fact-finding mission to assess Timor-Leste's technical readiness; (d) coordinating the advocacy around its technical readiness for ASEAN accession, including assisting in technical updates to stakeholders (called ASEAN Newsletters) and working with MFAC on technical strategies; (e) updating Timor-Leste's Memorandum on the Foreign Trade Regime, ensuring that ASEAN member countries have access to a clear and comprehensive statement of Timor-Leste's policies and laws in the scope of the AEC; and (f) developing a national trade strategy to support coordinated efforts to develop trade and inform future trade negotiations.

Third, in addition to the CEA and TLAMP, the new Timorese Minister of Foreign Affairs Babo Soares made a *tour de visites* to the 10 ASEAN members (Bandial, 2019), having confirmed the support from all of the capitals but Singapore, confirming also that this country currently represents the last obstacle to membership. The *tour* began with Soares's visit to the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta in May to meet with ASEAN's Secretary-General Dato' Lim Jock Hoi, where the Soares requested the Secretary-General to host a high-level mission of Timorese senior officials to the Secretariat (GoTL, 2019h). The 20-strong mission, representing the largest-ever Timor-Leste delegation to the ASEAN Secretariat, was held between July 22 and 24 (GoTL, 2019f). The mission discussed common avenues and programmes for membership and, in particular, prepared ASEAN's most senior ever fact-finding officials to visit Timor-Leste, which occurred later in September, and was described by GoTL as "the activity with the most impact in Timor-Leste's accession process, since the formal submission of the application in 2011" (2019e). We will discuss it in detail later in this section.

Fourth, ASEAN noted that, as of September 2019, Timor-Leste had opened embassies in all ASEAN members, had established an ASEAN Secretariat in Dili, and was ready to open a permanent mission to ASEAN in Jakarta (ASEAN, 2019c). In addition, Timor-Leste had attended many ASEAN meetings as observer, attended international conferences such as the World Economic Forum, and had accelerated the hosting of workshops of the ASEAN Regional Forum, from one in 2011, to three during February 27–28, 2020 — the ASEAN Regional Forum Workshop on Dispute Resolution and Law of the Sea. These workshops brought together nearly 150 people, showing Timor-Leste's capacity to host ASEAN meetings and its "ability and willingness to carry out the obligations of Membership" — the remaining requirements for membership as stated in Article 6 of the ASEAN Charter (ASEAN, 2015a). Fifth, still on Timor-Leste's side, to gain additional political support for the membership claim, in June 2019 Timor-Leste requested ADB's management to be internally moved from the Pacific Regional Department (PARD), where Timor-Leste had been included since its membership in 2002, together with Papua New Guinea and all 14 other Small Island Developing States located in the Pacific (in Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia), to the Southeast Asian Regional Department (SERD), where all 10 members of ASEAN

on ASEAN work. Assessment of the specific human resource needs and clarification of the models and modalities for future capacity development were also carried out.

⁹ The CDTA Work Plan maps out the path towards "technical readiness" for these critical elements across each pillar (economic, socio-cultural, political-security). Each element is supported by a preliminary stock take of current policies and regulations, a programme of policy development support and position papers that signal remaining work and/or technical readiness to sign, ratify, and implement agreements.

congregated. The political message was crystal clear: Timor-Leste is another Southeast Asian country. The transfer became effective on October 1, 2019 (GoTL, 2019a). Finally, Timor-Leste and Indonesia, sponsored and supported with US\$1 million by of the Asian Development Bank, signed on May 4, 2019, at the margin of the Bank's annual meeting in Nadi, Fiji a memorandum of understanding to support cross-border trade and cooperation between Timor-Leste and Indonesia's East Nusa Tenggara Timur province (ADB, 2019). This initiative, including such items as visa waivers to Indonesians citizens into Timor-Leste, approved on July 24, 2019 by the Timorese Council of Ministers (GoTL, 2019g), and the harmonisation of procedures at border crossing points, will work as an embryo of Timor-Leste's integration into ASEAN's economic community.

Regarding ASEAN

It is appropriate to start by assessing past Chairman statements of the Summits of the Heads of State and Government (see Table 4 below) to understand the importance of 2019. During the first four years (2011–2015) after the formal application of Timor-Leste to ASEAN, the road to the goal of creating the ASEAN Economic Community by 2015, the ASEAN heads of state and government merely “took note and encouraged the progress,” as observed in the deliberations of the ACC Working Group (ACCWG). After the first formal application for membership by Timor-Leste in 2011, which was firmly rejected by Singapore (Severino, 2011, p. 72), the decision was for the ACCWG to technically assess Timor-Leste's application. However, by November 2013, the ACCWG was still evaluating the application. Then, a Myanmar high official publicly stated that Timor-Leste was still far from being able to fulfil all requirements for ASEAN membership, such as having an embassy in all 10 ASEAN members, before 2015 (Aung & McLaughlin, 2013). After the attempt to have the ASEAN's Economic Community built by 2015 failed, the Malaysian presidency of ASEAN suggested that Timor-Leste's application should be re-assessed in a more consistent manner. Three independent studies were again requested on Timor-Leste's membership application, one for each of the three ASEAN communities, namely the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASC), and ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC). These three independent studies were completed one year later in 2016, under the Laotian presidency. They concluded that, under the AEC and the APSC, Timor-Leste's human resources needed “capacity building” to “boost economic growth and skills” (Strating, 2017). Since then, the Chair's summaries of the ASEAN summits returned to merely taking note that “the application was under study and ongoing.” By following a basic discourse analysis technique, we observe that even the former references to “progress” were abandoned. The situation worsened during the Singaporean presidency in 2018, with no references at all to Timor-Leste on the Chair's summaries of the 32nd and 33rd ASEAN Summits. In addition, after having blocked again Timor-Leste's membership in the 31st ASEAN Summit, pointing out again to the Timorese constraints in human resources, the 2018 Singaporean presidency refused to follow up on the recommendation made by the SOM leaders of the ACCWG at their sixth meeting in December 2017 in Jakarta that each ASEAN community “should form a fact-finding mission to Timor-Leste to assess its readiness to be a member.”

However, the 2019 Thai ASEAN presidency broke that trend. Preparations of the fact-finding missions under the three pillars were resumed. (One should not forget the close connection between Timor-Leste and Thailand, initiated when Thai troops in blue helmets, led by General Boonsrang Niumpradit, secured

the emerging nation as UN peacekeepers from July 2000 to August 2001.) The preparation of the first fact-finding mission, under the APSC, was the most thorough and advanced, as described by Chongkittavorn (2019), “63 questionnaires had been prepared, divided into sections on political cooperation, security cooperation, external relations, human rights, and legal cooperation. In the latter only, two dozen questions focused on Timor-Leste’s justice system and its administrative capacity.” Giving political support for the initiative at the highest level, the Chair’s summary of the 34th Summit held in Bangkok on June 2019, Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan o-cha resumed the references to “progress” and noted the preparation for the fact-finding missions to Timor-Leste under each of ASEAN’s three communities (ASEAN, 2019b). The first fact-finding mission was finally held during September 3–5. The delegation, composed of the ASEAN SOM Leaders and the Committee of Permanent Representatives (CPR), i.e., the officials of the political-security pillar, from the 10 ASEAN member states and officials from the ASEAN Secretariat, met with technical representatives from key government agencies as well as high-level political leaders, including the prime minister, the president of the Republic, the president of parliament, and other key figures in the country, including the representatives of the United Nations Development Program and of the ADB (ASEAN, 2019c). The first visit of this kind to Timor-Leste, described by GoTL as “the activity with the most impact in Timor-Leste’s accession process, since the formal submission of the application in 2011” (2019e), was successful and, consequently, the Chair’s summary of the 35th Summit held also in Bangkok in November 2019 noted the “successful convening of the fact-finding mission on APSC and encouraged the expeditious conduct of fact-finding missions under the AEC and the ASC.” In addition, the Chair also explicitly noted, for the first time in a Chair’s summary of an ASEAN Summit, “Timor-Leste’s strong political will to become a member of ASEAN.” Finally, the recurrent references in previous years to ASEAN’s commitment to support Timor-Leste’s development and membership through capacity building assistance was upgraded for the first time with the reference “at the bilateral and regional levels” (ASEAN, 2019a). The acceleration in the process was clear. The Government of Timor-Leste “recognized that the outcome of the Summit continues to build clear momentum towards accession to ASEAN,” “thanked the member states for their sincere engagement in the substantive matters,” as well as expressed its “appreciation to Thailand for its chairmanship and for leading the recent fact-finding mission to Timor-Leste on the APSC pillar” (GoTL, 2019c). GoTL added that “the whole Government of Timor-Leste is engaged in substantial work to ensure technical readiness” (2019d).

Table 4 *References to Timor-Leste in the Chair’s statements of the ASEAN summits of Heads of State and Government*

Date	Presidency	#	Reference
2007	Philippines	12	‘We welcomed the accession of Timor-Leste to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia during our Summit’
2011	Indonesia	18	‘We came to an understanding that the discussion on Timor-Leste’s formal request to be a member of ASEAN needs further consideration . In this context, we tasked the Foreign Ministers, in their capacity as the ASEAN Coordinating Council, to look at this issue very closely and provide recommendations for the Leaders’ consideration at a later stage with a view to a decision later in 2011’ (p. 138)

		19	'We welcome the interest of, and the formal application by Timor-Leste to join ASEAN. We further note indications of expressions of interest by other countries. This is an expression of confidence of ASEAN's central role in the region. In this regard, we tasked the ASEAN Coordinating Council (ACC), including through the establishment of an ACC Working Group (ACCWG) to discuss all relevant aspects related to the application by Timor-Leste, as well as its possible implications on ASEAN. The ACCWG shall make recommendations to the ACC on the application, based on whether Timor-Leste is able to meet the requirements of Article 6 of ASEAN Charter.' (p. 146)
2012	Cambodia	20	'We welcomed the adoption of the Terms of Reference of the ACCWG, and looked forward to the first meeting of the ACCWG to be hosted by Indonesia' (p. 82)
2013	Brunei	22	'We were encouraged by the progress in discussions of the ACC, and the ACCWG, on all relevant aspects related to the application by Timor-Leste, as well as its possible implications on ASEAN, and agreed to explore the possibility of Timor-Leste's participation in ASEAN activities within the context of its need for capacity building' (p. 54)
		23	'We welcomed the progress made by the ACCWG in their deliberations on Timor-Leste's application for ASEAN membership.' (p. 62)
2014	Myanmar	24	'We welcomed the progress made by the ACCWG in its deliberations on Timor-Leste's application for ASEAN membership and encouraged the ACCWG to proceed with the studies mandated to the ACCWG Sub Working Groups.' (p. 78)
		25	'We were encouraged by the progress of the ACCWG in the consideration of all relevant aspects to the application by Timor-Leste, as well as its possible implication on ASEAN, and agreed to explore the possibility of Timor-Leste's participation in ASEAN activities within the context of its need for capacity building.' (p. 21)
2015	Malaysia	26	'We welcomed the progress made by the ACCWG in deliberating the ASEAN Membership Application by Timor-Leste and exploring the ASEAN activities that Timor-Leste could participate in. We are committed to provide assistance for Timor-Leste's capacity building process and looked forward to the outcome of the three independent studies on ASEAN Membership Application by Timor-Leste and its implications on the APSC, AEC and ASCC building process, as mandated to the ACCWG Sub-Working Group.' (p. 57)
		27	'We looked forward to the completion of the three independent studies on ASEAN Membership Application by Timor-Leste and its implications on the APSC, AEC and ASCC community building. We reiterated our commitment to provide assistance for Timor-Leste's capacity building process, including through their participation in ASEAN activities, subject to the elements agreed by the ACCWG.' (p. 106)
2016	Lao PDR	28–29	'We noted the completion of the three independent studies on the implications of Timor-Leste's application for ASEAN Membership and impact on the APSC, AEC, and ASCC. We were pleased to note that a number of ASEAN sectoral bodies have started exploring the possibility of Timor-Leste's participation in their respective activities for capacity building purposes. We looked forward to the continued discussion of the ACCWG, taking into consideration the results of the studies.' (p. 115)
2017	Philippines	30	'We noted that Timor-Leste's application to become an ASEAN member is still under study by the relevant senior officials. To prepare Timor-Leste for membership in ASEAN, we reiterated our commitment to provide assistance to Timor-Leste for its capacity-building, in accordance with the elements and procedures agreed to by the ACCWG.' (p. 111)
		31	'We noted that the study on Timor-Leste's application for ASEAN membership is ongoing and therefore, looked forward to the outcomes of discussion by the ACCWG on this matter, which will be held on 5 December 2017 in Bali, Indonesia. We urged ASEAN Sectoral Bodies and Organs to continue exploring relevant capacity-building activities for Timor-Leste's participation, in accordance with the elements and procedures outlined by ASEAN Member States.' (p. 128)
2018	Singapore	32–33	NO REFERENCE
2019	Thailand	34	'We were pleased to note the progress made on the consideration of Timor-Leste's application for ASEAN Membership, with all three Pillars preparing for their respective fact-finding missions (FFM) to Timor-Leste, and look forward to the outcomes of the aforementioned missions. We also reiterated our readiness to provide capacity-building assistance to Timor-Leste' (p. 15)

		35	‘We noted the successful convening of the APSC fact-finding mission to Timor-Leste from 3-5 September 2019, and encouraged the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) Pillar to expeditiously conduct their respective FFMs. We also noted Timor-Leste’s strong political will to become a member of ASEAN and reaffirmed our commitment to continue supporting Timor-Leste’s development through capacity building assistance, at the bilateral and regional levels.’ (p. 25)
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Source: author, based on the Chair’s statements of the ASEAN summits of Heads of State and Government since 2005 to 2019. No reference was made to Timor-Leste in the summits not mentioned in this table.

The Path Forward

As Chongkittavorn (2019) points out, “ASEAN has displayed its greatest resilience when new members were admitted”: Brunei Darussalam in 1984, Viet Nam in 1995, Lao PDR and Myanmar in 1997, and Cambodia in 1999. “At the time of their admission, each of them was not yet fully ready to integrate the bloc. However, with assistance and tolerance from ASEAN members, the new comers were able to assimilate ASEAN’s way of doing things and join in its numerous schemes.” This time, under the impulse given by the Thai presidency in 2019, and with the renewed technical support of the ADB, things might be different. An important political milestone will be the Indonesian presidency of ASEAN in 2023,¹⁰ 12 years after Timor-Leste was granted the status of candidate country, also under an Indonesian presidency. Indonesia, together with the Philippines and Thailand, is the ASEAN member having more actively shown support for Timor-Leste’s membership. In the meantime, ASEAN’s 2020 presidency of Viet Nam, a country included in the group of most reticent members to Timor-Leste’s membership, together with the travel constraints caused by the covid-19 outbreak and its associated economic costs, is not expected to be significantly conducive on the progress of the remaining fact-finding missions during the year. Brunei Darussalam and Cambodia’s presidencies of ASEAN in 2021 and 2022, respectively, should speed up technical preparedness in the run up to the Indonesian presidency. Brunei Darussalam and Cambodia are countries that, although not in the front row of supporters of Timor-Leste’s aspirations, expressed their support recently to the Timorese Minister of Foreign Affairs in June and July 2019 (Bandial, 2019; Sokhean, 2019), During the Vietnamese presidency, it would be important that, bearing in mind the potential membership in 2023, the pending fact-finding missions under the socio-cultural and economic pillars be held during the second half of 2020 as planned (ASEAN, 2019c), or at least in the beginning of 2021. The next step would be the preparation by the ASEAN Secretariat of a comprehensive assessment of Timor-Leste’s application for membership, in time for the first ASEAN Summit under the Bruneian presidency. To this end, political stability and security are of course a necessary condition for progress towards membership to happen.

¹⁰ According to the ASEAN (2015a), “The Chairmanship of ASEAN shall rotate annually, based on the alphabetical order of the English names of Member States.”

Conclusion

Timor-Leste is the smallest economy in Southeast Asia and, as such, resources are limited to fulfil all obligations of ASEAN membership, which include participation in nearly 1,000 meetings annually, and signing and ratifying a higher number of conventions, declarations, and agreements. In addition, ASEAN's complexity increases each year, so it is not easy keeping up with ASEAN's *acquis communautaire*.

While these requirements were being reached as-you-go after membership for ASEAN's most recent members: Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Viet Nam, who acceded between 1995 and 1999, the approval of new legal requirements for ASEAN membership back in 2008 created new criteria for membership made the accession of the 11th member more difficult. While three of the criteria for membership are objective: (i) location within Southeast Asia; (ii) recognition by all ASEAN member states; (iii) agreement to be bound and to abide by the ASEAN Charter, the subjectivity of the fourth criterion, "ability and willingness to carry out the obligations of membership," has been used by some ASEAN members, firmly led by Singapore, to roll over assessment after assessment of Timor-Leste's readiness for membership. We argue in the paper that ASEAN's experience with the accession of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Viet Nam has led the Association to upgrade its membership requirements, hindering Timor-Leste's more recent application.

ADB's support to this stepping up in Timor-Leste's efforts for ASEAN membership has been instrumental. ADB has dedicated two CDTAs totalling nearly US\$2 million from 2012 to 2020 to technically support Timor-Leste along the process of ASEAN membership. ADB's most recent contribution is critical in moving forward with several key deliverables that bring Timor-Leste closer to be technically ready and prepared to fulfill its obligations as ASEAN's 11th member state. With the support of the ADB, Timor-Leste has launched in 2019 two key landmarks, the TLAMP and the CEA, which will guide Timor-Leste's readiness for full participation across ASEAN's three — political-security, socio-cultural, and economic — pillars. These two landmarks will also have positive spill-overs in other areas such as Timor-Leste's membership of the WTO.

We conclude in this paper that the 2019 Thai presidency of the ASEAN, together with the marked commitment of the Timorese government that took office in mid-2018, which has been relentlessly seeking to lobby for its admission to ASEAN, and the on-going enhanced technical support of the Asian Development Bank, are critical to leading Timor-Leste's readiness for ASEAN membership to a level that will be acceptable to ASEAN members, probably during the 2022 Cambodian or, most likely, the 2023 Indonesian presidency of the ASEAN, 12 years after Timor-Leste submitted its first application to ASEAN, also under an Indonesian presidency, in 2011.

The main difficulties found in researching for this paper were related to the privileged access of most of the technical assessments carried out by official organisations (ADB, ASEAN, JICA) of Timor-Leste's readiness for ASEAN membership since its first application in 2011, which are not publicly available. Further avenues for research could include (i) an independent, external assessment, made publicly available and discussed, of Timor-Leste's readiness, and (ii) a survey of the population of the 10 ASEAN member states requesting their opinion on Timor-Leste's aspirations.

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