

# *Augmenting Norm Localization in Southeast Asia: A Computational-Comparative Analysis of Digital Diplomacy in ASEAN*

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**Abstract.** Digital diplomacy has become a routine venue where ASEAN governments articulate, test, and contest international norms. To examine how such online exchanges shape normative practice, I pair computer-based text analysis with a constructivist framework, engaging Acharya's ideas of localization and subsidiarity as the main interpretive guides. The corpus consists of official statements released on government-run web and social media channels across three policy areas that routinely prompt regional coordination—maritime security, climate change, and public-health emergencies. Leveraging natural language processing, I track shifts in wording surrounding identifiable regional actions and compare the framing adopted by different states. The patterns are asymmetric: online statements often endorse global formulations while simultaneously reframing them to reflect domestic priorities or regional sensitivities, and in some moments they signal resistance. Rather than treating platforms as neutral conduits, the findings portray them as sites where norms are reworked in practice. The contribution is twofold: it offers an empirical probe of localization dynamics and demonstrates how computational text analysis can be integrated with comparative interpretation to inform policy design and cross-cultural norm development.

**Keywords:** ASEAN, norm localization, digital diplomacy, natural language processing, global governance

## **1. Introduction**

Digital diplomacy is now routine statecraft. ASEAN governments and the regional secretariat use official websites, X/Weibo-style feeds, messaging channels, and live press briefings not simply to broadcast information but to frame problems, signal priorities, and test language with multiple audiences at once—domestic constituencies, partners inside the region, and external powers. During episodes that demand coordination—maritime incidents, climate-policy milestones, or public-health emergencies—these venues become focal points where a common line is articulated, adjusted, or, at times, carefully left ambiguous.

What is less clear is how such online communication channels mediate the life of international norms: when they echo global formulations, when they recast them to fit local sensitivities, and when they mark polite resistance. Existing scholarship notes the diffusion of norms in Southeast Asia, yet it seldom specifies the textual mechanisms through which digital diplomacy supports or hinders

localization—e.g., shifts in framing, selective amplification of clauses, or the introduction of contextual qualifiers that narrow obligations.

This study examines the linkage between digital diplomacy and norm localization within ASEAN. Rather than treating platforms as neutral conduits, I approach them as sites of negotiation where wording choices—sequence, emphasis, and attribution—carry institutional meaning. Methodologically, the project combines computer-based text analysis with comparative reading of official statements across member states. The design allows me to track how language surrounding identifiable regional actions changes over time and across governments, and to identify when global templates are affirmed, reweighted, or reinterpreted by reference to domestic political aims and regional conventions. In doing so, the analysis clarifies the conditions under which digital diplomacy stabilizes shared understandings and the conditions under which it quietly redirects them.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Norm localization and subsidiarity**

Acharya's account of localization treats global norms not as fixed templates but as materials that local actors actively refit to existing beliefs and routines. In practice, adaptation involves reweighting meanings, narrowing scope through contextual qualifiers, or attaching familiar justifications so that a norm can travel without displacing settled practices. This perspective helps explain why the "same" norm appears differently across regions: variation reflects deliberate interpretive work rather than simple compliance failure. A related principle—subsidiarity—draws attention to where interpretive authority sits. When norm interpretation and implementation are pushed toward the level closest to the affected communities, local actors can shape obligations in line with their institutional capacities and political priorities. In Southeast Asia, where regional cooperation proceeds through consensus and flexible coordination rather than a hierarchical rule-giver, this distribution of authority is visible in how governments articulate and stage commitments. The upshot is that digital and diplomatic texts from ASEAN states should not be read as passive echoes of global language; they are sites where localization and subsidiarity operate jointly to recalibrate the meaning and uptake of international norms [1].

### **2.2. Digital diplomacy in international relations**

Digital diplomacy means that countries use digital tools and social media to carry out diplomatic work. More experts in international relations now see it as a way to share messages and shape global rules and public views [2]. Countries often use platforms like Twitter, online talks, and digital reports to show their views on global issues and reach people in other countries. These tools also give countries more ways to choose their words. They can shape their messages to fit what matters most at home and focus on the parts of global rules that support their own goals.

### **2.3. Computational approaches in IR**

New computer methods, particularly in natural language processing (NLP) and machine learning, provide valuable tools for analyzing large volumes of text. Researchers utilize these tools to examine political speeches, social media content, and global conferences. In the field of international relations, these tools assist in identifying key themes, tracking shifts in sentiment, and observing the flow of norms across countries. However, despite the availability of these tools, many researchers continue to rely on older, more traditional methods for studying norm changes in local contexts.

## 2.4. Research gap

Although there is increasing interest in norm localization and digital diplomacy, few studies have combined these areas using computational methods. Most research on norm diffusion emphasizes institutional processes or elite-level interviews, while analyses of digital diplomacy tend to be descriptive or based on anecdotes. This paper fills this gap by using natural language processing techniques on ASEAN diplomatic texts, offering empirical insights into norm dynamics and demonstrating how digital communications both reflect and shape localized interpretations of global norms.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Case selection

The study focuses on five ASEAN member states—Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam—selected through purposive sampling. The criteria include:

- Active engagement in digital diplomacy via official state channels
- Diversity in regime type (e.g., democratic Indonesia, authoritarian Vietnam, and hybrid Thailand)
- Representation of varied geopolitical interests within ASEAN
- Linguistic and cultural diversity. These states provide a comparative foundation to analyze norm localization across heterogeneous contexts within the same regional bloc [3]

### 3.2. Data collection

The dataset comprises 10,800 diplomatic text entries published between January 2021 and December 2024. The data sources include:

- Official Twitter/X accounts of Ministries of Foreign Affairs and heads of government (using Tweepy API for automated retrieval)
- Government press releases and policy statements from ministry websites (scraped using BeautifulSoup)
- ASEAN Secretariat communiqués and joint declarations

Each entry is meta-tagged by country, source type, publication date, and policy domain (maritime security, climate change, or pandemic response). Thematic classification was conducted both automatically through keyword matching and manually validated. All data are archived in a structured corpus and stored in UTF-8 format for processing [4-6].

### 3.3. Analytical framework

I employed a three-tiered analytical approach combining text preprocessing, computational analysis, and manual interpretation.

#### **Stage 1: Text Preprocessing**

- All texts were cleaned using spaCy and NLTK libraries to remove punctuation, non-informative symbols, and HTML artifacts.
- Non-English content (notably in Bahasa Indonesia, Vietnamese, and Thai) was translated into English using Google Cloud Translation API, followed by validation by bilingual coders.
- Lemmatization and stopword filtering were performed to standardize tokens and reduce noise [7].

#### **Stage 2: Computational Text Analysis**

- Topic Modeling: Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) was implemented via Gensim to extract 5–7 dominant topics per policy domain. Coherence scores were used to optimize model parameters.
- Sentiment Analysis: VADER was used for English sentiment scoring, and translated texts were analyzed using TextBlob. Sentiment was quantified into three categories: positive, neutral, and negative.
- Named Entity Recognition (NER): Conducted with spaCy to identify country names, organizations (e.g., UN, WHO), treaties (e.g., UNCLOS), and key actors. These were used to map norm diffusion trajectories and international linkages [8].

### **Stage 3: Manual Coding and Comparative Interpretation**

- A detailed codebook was created based on Acharya’s typology of norm localization: norm adoption, adaptation, resistance, and hybridization.
- A random sample of 300 entries was double-coded by two trained coders to evaluate internal consistency.
- Examples of textual localization (e.g., use of indigenous metaphors, policy reframing, normative hedging) were extracted and compared across countries [9-11].

### **3.4. Validity and triangulation**

To enhance the reliability and credibility of findings:

- Intercoder reliability was established through independent double-coding of the corpus; a Cohen’s  $\kappa$  of 0.82 signaled substantial agreement, with residual disagreements logged and discussed rather than collapsed by default. We preserved dissenting annotations in an audit trail and resolved only those disagreements that materially affected category boundaries or case interpretations.
- For cross-validation, unsupervised outputs from the LDA models were treated as a second lens on the data. We compared model-inferred themes and salient terms with the human codebook and document-level assignments to gauge convergence. Where the two lenses diverged, the relevant texts were reread line by line and adjudicated through qualitative discourse analysis, with memos noting whether the discrepancy reflected modeling artifacts (e.g., topic bleed) or genuine alternative readings. Clarifications to code definitions were recorded prospectively; the goal was interpretive transparency rather than retrofitting the text to either procedure.

Taken together, the triangulation of intercoder checks and computational corroboration supports analytical rigor while retaining the nuance needed to map how ASEAN governments digitally encode, recast, and communicate global norms through foreign-policy channels [12,13].

## **4. Results**

### **4.1. Topic modeling and thematic patterns**

LDA modeling surfaced a small set of recurrent themes rather than a long tail of idiosyncratic topics. In the maritime-security material, sovereignty claims, appeals to international law—especially UNCLOS—and invocations of “regional stability” travel together, with frequent anchoring to the South China Sea and to multilateral venues. Climate-related texts cluster around a green-transition narrative tied to ASEAN cooperation arrangements (e.g., the ASEAN Working Group on Climate Change) and framed against global agreements such as the Paris Agreement. Pandemic-oriented clusters foreground cross-border health coordination, vaccine diplomacy, and resilience building; references to the ASEAN COVID-19 Response Fund appear as a recurring shorthand for collective action. These themes are not hermetically sealed—border passages between “law/stability” and

“multilateral process,” or between “resilience” and “cooperation frameworks,” are common—but the centers of gravity are comparatively stable.

#### 4.2. Sentiment and tone

Tone varies by country and issue area. On maritime security, Indonesia and Vietnam most often pair assertive or defensive phrasing with claims about control and rights at sea; Malaysia and Thailand lean toward conciliatory language that stresses regional peace and cooperative management; Singapore tends to hold a neutral, formal register consistent with a professionalized diplomatic style. Climate discussions across all five governments skew positive, emphasizing joint undertakings and capacity-building. Pandemic messaging is typically neutral to positive, with noticeable upticks in affirmative language during vaccine rollouts and moments when ASEAN support mechanisms are highlighted. These tonal differences do not map neatly onto hard policy splits, but they do indicate distinct audience strategies and degrees of risk aversion in public framing.

#### 4.3. Norm adaptation and localization

Manual coding clarifies how global templates are reworked to fit domestic narratives and regional conventions. In the maritime domain, global legal references are paired with national historical and statutory frames: Vietnam, for example, frequently situates support for UNCLOS alongside reminders of its historical claims—an alignment that signals adherence to international regulation while preserving a national storyline. In climate bargaining, states reiterate broad sustainability aims but recast them through domestic initiatives—Thailand’s “Bio-Circular-Green” rubric is a prominent case—thereby translating general obligations into politically feasible, locally legible programs. During COVID-19, norms of information sharing and collaboration are filtered through ASEAN’s consensus rule: coordination proceeds incrementally, with collective signaling favored over binding directives, and “regional solidarity” serving as a legitimating label for gradualism.

A final pattern is ASEAN’s strategic ambiguity in group statements. Phrases such as “constructive engagement” or “dialogue partners” are used to manage disagreement in public view, softening visible fault lines while keeping channels open. In digital formats—where messages are instantly legible to multiple audiences—the same consensus logic applies: wording is calibrated to avoid direct intrusion into members’ domestic domains even as it sustains a surface of unity.

### 5. Discussion

The results extend Acharya’s account of localization by showing that the work of adaptation is not only social and institutional but also conditioned by the affordances of digital platforms. Short-form posts, rapid circulation, and wide public legibility create incentives to compress arguments, privilege memorable frames, and stage unity; these pressures shape how global language is accepted, trimmed, or redirected in ASEAN communications. In this sense, localization travels through platform logics as much as through familiar domestic and regional filters.

Issue areas display distinct patterns. In maritime security, Vietnam and Indonesia routinely pair references to UNCLOS with assertive rhetoric about control and rights at sea. The juxtaposition is not merely stylistic: it signals an attempt to anchor national narratives within an international legal register while addressing domestic audiences that expect firmness. By contrast, on climate change, governments echo global sustainability templates yet translate them into locally legible policy rubrics. Thailand’s “Bio-Circular-Green” frame is emblematic—an economic-development gloss that keeps faith with global aims while aligning them with national growth and industrial policy. Across these domains, the operative move is not rejection of global norms but selective weighting and contextual narrowing.

Tone dynamics reinforce this reading. Sentiment analysis shows sharper language around sovereignty questions and warmer, cooperative phrasing when climate action or public-health coordination is at stake. Such variation does not map cleanly onto hard positions; it reads instead as audience management—calibrating resonance at home while maintaining regional and international credibility. Manual review of statement wording and placement supports this view and highlights the continued pull of ASEAN’s procedural principles: collaboration, non-interference, and consensus. Terms such as “constructive engagement” and “shared responsibility” recur as diplomatic hedges that reduce visible fracture lines and preserve maneuvering room.

These textual habits point to what may be called a platform effect. Because public, concise, and rapidly shareable messages are rewarded, officials tend to favor simplified formulations and clear signals of support over fully elaborated legal or technical arguments. The same effect that speeds coordination can also narrow the discursive space for detailed justification, thereby shaping the visible arc of localization. In practice, platforms facilitate norm diffusion and, at the same time, constrain how much interpretive complexity appears on the record.

Taken together, the evidence suggests a modest revision to localization theory: accounts of how local actors refit global norms should incorporate the mediating role of digital infrastructures—character limits, algorithmic curation, and posting conventions among them. These features do not determine outcomes, but they nudge which meanings travel, which get muted, and how quickly consensus-looking language can be assembled. Ignoring these filters risks misreading adaptation as thinner or more uniform than it is behind the scenes.

In sum, ASEAN’s digital diplomacy functions simultaneously as policy instrument and identity work. By leaning on shared values, careful lexical choices, and calibrated affect, governments craft locally resonant interpretations of global norms while signaling regional cohesion. The process is neither purely derivative nor fully transformative; it proceeds through incremental adjustments made legible—and sometimes simplified—by the very platforms that carry the message.

## 6. Conclusion

Across topic modeling, sentiment analysis, and manual coding, a consistent picture emerges: ASEAN governments speak about maritime security, climate change, and public-health crises through a dual register that blends global templates with local priorities. References to UNCLOS by Vietnam and Indonesia exemplify how international legal language is coupled with national historical narratives; Thailand’s “Bio-Circular-Green” rubric shows the same logic on the climate front, translating broad sustainability aims into domestically legible policy frames. These are not departures from global norms so much as calibrated reweightings that allow norms to travel without stripping away local meaning.

Tone choices reinforce this pattern. Assertive or cautious phrasing clusters around sovereignty questions—most visibly in Indonesian and Vietnamese statements—while Malaysia and Thailand more often foreground cooperation and regional calm. Climate and health communications skew positive and coordinated, especially at moments of strain, suggesting that crisis management pushes states toward consensus-signaling language. The structure of official messages matters alongside their wording: inclusive formulations and soft hedges minimize open disagreement and keep decision space for members, reflecting ASEAN’s familiar commitments to non-interference, consensus, and incrementalism. Digital channels extend the reach and legibility of these commitments but also reward concise, easily shareable phrasing.

Taken together, the evidence points to a specific update to localization accounts: platforms are not neutral pipes but part of the mechanism through which adaptation occurs. Character limits, algorithmic curation, and posting conventions nudge what gets emphasized, how far texts elaborate, and how quickly unity can be staged. Incorporating these mediating effects helps explain why

ASEAN statements can look simultaneously aligned with global norms and finely tuned to national and regional sensibilities. In this light, digital diplomacy functions as both policy technique and identity work—making localized interpretations visible at scale while preserving the procedural cohesion that defines ASEAN.

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