Navigating the Arctic and Antarctic: The ASEAN Plus Three Approach

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Abstract

This paper examines the development of interregional relations within the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) framework, focusing on the evolving Arctic and Antarctic policies of APT countries in the 21st century. It argues that the polar regions have emerged as significant areas of cooperation, driven by shared environmental and economic interests in response to climate change and geopolitical shifts. The unique vulnerabilities of ASEAN countries resulting from their susceptibility to the effects of global warming establish a foundation for mutual engagement in the Arctic. To verify the research hypotheses, the study will: (1) identify the key strategic goals of APT states, both explicit and implicit; (2) reconstruct processes indicating increased interest and presence in the Arctic, including participation in international polar stations, enhancement of research infrastructure, and establishment of Arctic centers; and (3) conduct a diagnosis of the institutionalization of political and economic mechanisms in APT countries concerning regional issues. The study analyzes the roles of key state and non-state actors in shaping APT's multilateral engagement in the Arctic, emphasizing their diplomatic, scientific, and economic strategies. Employing qualitative analysis and a comparative methodology grounded in post-colonial theory, it highlights both convergent and distinct elements of APT polar policies. Findings suggest that APT countries are increasingly aligned in their approach to Arctic sustainability, with climate action as a central rationale. The paper illustrates how APT's collective strategy integrates national interests with commitments to environmental stewardship, positioning the group as a constructive force in polar governance.

Keywords: ASEAN Plus Three, Arctic, Antarctic, multilateralism, diplomacy

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Introduction

The accelerating environmental transformations in the Arctic and Antarctic are no longer issues confined to the polar regions—they are deeply intertwined with the security, prosperity, and sustainability of regions far beyond the poles, including East and Southeast Asia. For the ASEAN Plus Three (APT)—comprising the ten ASEAN member states along with China, Japan, and South Korea—this linkage is increasingly critical. As global climate patterns shift due to polar ice melt and ocean warming, APT countries are confronted with immediate and cascading effects on food security, maritime stability, economic continuity, and climate resilience. Historically peripheral to polar discourse, APT nations now find themselves at a geopolitical and environmental crossroads where engagement with polar science, governance, and resource dynamics becomes indispensable. The rapid decline of polar ice is disrupting global ocean circulation systems and atmospheric patterns, with direct consequences across Asia's monsoons, agricultural cycles, and fishery zones. Simultaneously, the poles are becoming contested geopolitical arenas, where new shipping routes and marine resources are reshaping global strategic maps. In this evolving context, the APT's collective approach to navigating the polar regions is not merely a strategic option—it is a policy imperative grounded in survival, sustainability, and influence in the Anthropocene.

Climate Impacts Driving Polar Interest

Although the Arctic and Antarctic are geographically distant from the APT region, their climatic and geopolitical relevance is increasingly apparent. The accelerating pace of climate change, particularly the rapid loss of polar ice, is triggering far-reaching environmental consequences that extend well into East and Southeast Asia. This growing interconnectedness between the poles and APT is underpinned by the fact that most APT nations—excluding landlocked Laos—are coastal states with high population densities, critical infrastructure concentrated in low-lying areas, and economies that rely heavily on maritime trade. Coastal cities such as Jakarta, Manila, and Bangkok are already experiencing recurrent and severe flooding events, exacerbated by rising sea levels driven in part by melting Arctic sea ice and Antarctic glaciers (C40 Cities, 2019). Sea level rise is not only a hazard to infrastructure but also a major threat to freshwater resources, as saltwater intrusion affects both aquifers and coastal farmlands, thereby compromising food production and potable water supplies (IPCC, 2023).

Beyond the coastlines, the climatic repercussions of polar melt are reshaping regional atmospheric and oceanic systems. Notably, the weakening of the Atlantic Meridional Overturning Circulation (AMOC)—partly linked to freshwater influx from Greenland and Antarctic ice sheets—is disrupting the South and East Asian monsoon cycles, upon which millions of livelihoods depend (Cai et al., 2014). These monsoons are vital for the cultivation of rice, the staple food for much of the APT population. Increasing variability in rainfall, unpredictable droughts, and altered growing seasons are already reducing agricultural yields, leading to growing concerns about long-term food security across the region. Furthermore, polar warming contributes to changes in ocean temperatures and currents, which in turn affect marine ecosystems and the distribution of fish stocks. Given that more than 70% of dietary animal protein in many APT countries derives from fish and other aquatic resources (FAO, 2022), such ecological shifts are deeply consequential.

The sustainability of fisheries is under additional stress from local overfishing, pollution, and habitat degradation, which have depleted nearshore stocks and forced many nations to extend

their fishing efforts into distant and increasingly fragile ecosystems. China's distant-water fishing industry, which reported catches exceeding 2.3 million tons in 2022, increasingly targets sub-polar and polar regions as local resources decline (Shi, 2023). Similarly, the Southern Ocean has witnessed record levels of krill harvesting to supply Asia's expanding aquaculture sector, raising concerns over the health of Antarctic marine ecosystems that play a foundational role in the global carbon cycle and food webs (Nicol et al., 2012). These shifts signal an emerging dependence on polar biodiversity, which is becoming increasingly embedded in regional food security strategies.

Simultaneously, the Arctic is emerging as a pivotal zone for global maritime logistics. Melting sea ice is opening up the Northern Sea Route and other transpolar passages, presenting potential alternatives to traditional routes like the Strait of Malacca. For APT countries—many of which serve as key nodes in global supply chains—this raises strategic concerns. The development of Arctic shipping lanes could diminish the relative economic and geopolitical importance of Southeast Asian ports, leading to shifts in trade flows, investment patterns, and regional influence (Lasserre & Cyr, 2022). Additionally, any disruption to maritime stability, whether due to environmental risks or new geopolitical tensions in polar waters, poses immediate economic threats to APT nations that rely on uninterrupted seaborne commerce. Thus, the climate-induced transformations occurring at the poles are not abstract or distant for the ASEAN Plus Three. They present concrete and urgent risks that intersect with the region's most pressing challenges: environmental vulnerability, food and water insecurity, economic resilience, and geopolitical positioning. As such, active engagement with polar science, resource governance, and climate diplomacy is not merely desirable but essential. Without informed and coordinated APT strategies addressing the implications of polar change, regional adaptation efforts will remain reactive and insufficient in the face of escalating global climate disruptions.

ASEAN Plus Three Political Framework

The ASEAN Plus Three framework—comprising the ten member states of the ASEAN along with China, Japan, and South Korea—was originally conceived as a mechanism for fostering regional stability, economic integration, and functional cooperation in East Asia. Established in the aftermath of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, APT has since expanded its scope to include dialogues on a range of transboundary issues, including climate change, disaster risk reduction, and sustainable development. However, when it comes to addressing complex and geographically distant challenges such as those posed by the polar regions, the institutional architecture of APT reveals significant limitations. The core of these constraints lies in ASEAN's foundational principles, most notably the doctrine of non-interference and decision-making by consensus. While this approach has proven effective in minimizing intra-regional tensions and ensuring inclusivity, it often results in outcomes that are non-committal, lowest-common-denominator in nature, and lacking in enforceable mechanisms (Acharya, 2014).

Summit-level declarations and joint communiqués routinely acknowledge the urgency of climate change and the need for environmental cooperation. For example, the ASEAN Plus Three Leaders' Statement on Strengthening Environmental Cooperation for Sustainable Development issued in 2021 affirms the collective intention to enhance collaboration on environmental governance, biodiversity conservation, and climate mitigation. However, such documents tend to be aspirational rather than operational, offering few actionable commitments or institutional follow-through (ASEAN Secretariat, 2021a). This disconnect

between rhetoric and implementation is characteristic of ASEAN-led diplomacy, where the process of consensus-building and symbolic reaffirmation often overshadows concrete outcomes (Jetschke & Murray, 2012). Consequently, APT's capacity to articulate and pursue a unified strategy on issues like Arctic governance, climate adaptation, or biodiversity protection remains limited.

Moreover, when high-stakes, multidimensional issues such as polar science, shipping routes, or distant-water fishing arise, APT members frequently pursue unilateral or bilateral strategies, often aligning with major external powers. China, in particular, exerts considerable influence within the framework and tends to act as both participant and autonomous actor in polar affairs. As a result, ASEAN functions more as a platform for dialogue than as a cohesive geopolitical actor capable of formulating and executing collective environmental strategies (Koga, 2018). The disparity in capacities and priorities among APT members further complicates coordinated action. For example, while Japan and South Korea possess advanced polar research infrastructure and formal observer status in the Arctic Council, many ASEAN states lack the technical, financial, or strategic bandwidth to engage meaningfully in polar governance processes. This asymmetry reinforces the tendency toward fragmented responses and undermines the potential for a coherent APT approach to emerging polar risks. While the ASEAN Plus Three framework offers valuable diplomatic space for environmental dialogue, its structural and political limitations hinder the development of robust, unified strategies for engaging with polar climate dynamics. The urgency and complexity of polar-induced challenges—ranging from sea-level rise to shifting trade routes—demand a level of institutional agility and strategic coherence that APT, in its current form, struggles to provide. Without institutional reform or enhanced policy convergence among its members, APT risks remaining a reactive forum rather than a proactive force in global environmental governance.

National Polar Strategies: Divergence Over Unity

Despite being grouped under the ASEAN Plus Three framework, the member states show considerable divergence in their approaches to polar engagement, with little evidence of coordinated regional strategy. China, Japan, and South Korea—the "Plus Three" states—each pursue national polar strategies informed by their respective geopolitical interests, technological capacities, and global ambitions. China’s 2018 white paper *China’s Arctic Policy* is the most assertive among them. It identifies China as a “near-Arctic state” and articulates a vision of the Arctic as integral to China’s future, outlining priorities such as the development of Arctic shipping lanes (notably the Polar Silk Road), the expansion of scientific research, and the pursuit of resource extraction opportunities (State Council of the PRC, 2018). These ambitions are supported by considerable investments in polar infrastructure, including a growing fleet of icebreakers and research stations such as the “Yellow River Station” in Ny-Ålesund, Svalbard. China also participates actively in polar governance forums, including as an observer in the Arctic Council, and has been increasingly assertive in shaping norms around the use of international Arctic sea routes (Liu, 2018).

By contrast, Japan and South Korea approach polar affairs primarily through the lens of science diplomacy. Japan, through the National Institute of Polar Research, has maintained a strong presence in Antarctica since the 1950s and engages in Arctic research under the Japan Arctic Research Network Center. Its emphasis remains on climate science, environmental monitoring, and international collaboration rather than geopolitical maneuvering (Arctic Institute, 2020). South Korea, similarly, has invested in polar research through institutions like the Korea Polar Research Institute (KOPRI), operating the *Araon* icebreaker and

maintaining research stations in both poles. Though Seoul issued a *Basic Plan for Arctic Policy* in 2013, its tone remains cautious, positioning South Korea as a "contributor to international cooperation" rather than a strategic actor (Kim & Stenport, 2021). Both Japan and South Korea emphasize multilateralism and soft power in their polar policies, contrasting sharply with China's more expansive and strategic engagement.

Within ASEAN, the disparity is even more pronounced. Singapore stands out as the only ASEAN member with a coherent and proactive Arctic engagement strategy. As a low-lying, trade-dependent island state, Singapore views polar developments—especially those affecting sea level rise and global maritime trade routes—as directly relevant to its national interests. Singapore holds observer status in the Arctic Council, participates in the Arctic Circle Assembly, and has articulated a forward-leaning position on Arctic governance and climate resilience (Storey, 2016). In stark contrast, most other ASEAN countries lack formal polar policies altogether. Countries such as Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, and Malaysia either do not participate in polar governance or do so only intermittently through scientific cooperation or multilateral development partnerships. Their limited involvement is generally mediated by relationships with larger powers, such as China or Japan, rather than being guided by national strategic priorities.

This fragmentation results in a regional landscape where individual states pursue their own polar engagements—or none at all—without coordination or shared objectives. In practice, this weakens ASEAN's collective voice in global forums where polar issues are increasingly tied to climate policy, maritime security, and resource governance. More importantly, the absence of a unified stance opens the door for major powers to shape the regional agenda. China's growing presence in Southeast Asia, both economically and diplomatically, has positioned it as the primary external actor through which many ASEAN states engage on polar-related issues. This dynamic risks entrenching asymmetrical dependencies and undercuts the possibility of ASEAN developing a more autonomous or coherent approach to global climate governance.

The divergence of national strategies within the APT underscores a broader structural challenge: while the polar regions are of growing importance to the region's security and prosperity, there is no institutional mechanism within ASEAN or APT capable of aligning national interests into a collective polar strategy. Without such a framework, member states will continue to act independently, often influenced by the priorities of external powers, limiting the region's ability to shape or respond to the changing geopolitics of the Arctic and Antarctic.

Institutional Presence in Polar Affairs

ASEAN Plus Three countries exhibit substantial disparities in their institutional presence and engagement in polar affairs, reflecting broader asymmetries in scientific capacity, foreign policy orientation, and strategic prioritization across the region. The East Asian states—China, Japan, and South Korea—maintain robust and long-standing institutional infrastructures dedicated to polar research and governance. China leads the region in terms of operational scale, with six polar research stations under the administration of the Polar Research Institute of China (PRIC). Five of these are located in Antarctica—including the Great Wall, Zhongshan, Kunlun, Taishan, and Qinling stations—while the Yellow River Station in Svalbard, established in 2004, supports a wide range of Arctic climate and environmental studies (Brady, 2017; PRIC, 2023). China's investment in polar capabilities is

further reinforced by a growing icebreaker fleet and increasing diplomatic activity in polar multilateral forums, such as the Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meetings and the Arctic Council (where it holds observer status).

Japan has similarly institutionalized its polar engagement through the National Institute of Polar Research (NIPR), a globally recognized center for scientific excellence that coordinates Japan's Antarctic operations. Its flagship station, Showa Station, located on East Ongul Island in Antarctica, has been operational since 1957 and supports multidisciplinary research in glaciology, atmospheric sciences, and marine ecosystems (NIPR, 2023). Japan's Arctic involvement is centered around the Arctic Challenge for Sustainability (ArCS II) program, which aims to strengthen domestic research infrastructure and policy coordination in response to Arctic environmental change (ArCS II, 2022). South Korea also maintains a visible institutional presence, with two permanent Antarctic research stations: King Sejong Station (established in 1988) and Jang Bogo Station (opened in 2014), the latter enhancing South Korea's year-round operational capabilities in East Antarctica. These are operated under the Korea Polar Research Institute (KOPRI), which has become a key node in global polar scientific networks (Everett & Halašková, 2022).

In contrast, ASEAN countries remain marginal players in institutional polar research. None currently operate polar research stations or deploy independent scientific missions to the Arctic or Antarctic. However, limited forms of engagement do exist. Malaysia's National Antarctic Research Centre (NARC), affiliated with the University of Malaya, facilitates Malaysian participation in polar research primarily through partnerships with foreign institutions. Similarly, Thailand's involvement is channeled through the Thai Polar Science Consortium, which engages in regional collaborative platforms such as the Asian Forum for Polar Sciences (AFoPS)—a non-governmental organization established in 2004 to coordinate and promote polar science among Asian countries (AFoPS, 2023). These efforts reflect nascent interest but remain small in scale and largely dependent on international collaboration rather than national infrastructure.

Singapore represents a unique case within ASEAN. Though it does not participate in the AFoPS, it holds observer status in the Arctic Council since 2013 and has expressed clear interest in the strategic implications of Arctic climate change, particularly in terms of its potential impact on global maritime trade routes and port infrastructure (Storey, 2016). Singapore's engagement is primarily diplomatic and policy-oriented, supported by institutions such as the Centre for International Law and the Maritime and Port Authority, rather than research-driven. It should be noted, however, that the institutional landscape of polar engagement across the ASEAN Plus Three region remains highly uneven. While China, Japan, and South Korea demonstrate sustained investments in research infrastructure, international participation, and policy development, ASEAN countries—apart from Singapore—lack the institutional capacity or strategic orientation to play meaningful roles in polar governance. The absence of a coordinated ASEAN-led initiative in this domain not only reflects the region's structural constraints but also underscores the limitations of current multilateral frameworks in addressing transregional environmental challenges. Without institutional convergence, the APT grouping remains dependent on national strategies, which in turn hinders the emergence of a unified voice in global polar affairs.

Science Diplomacy and Its Constraints

Science diplomacy represents a promising yet underutilized avenue for ASEAN Plus Three engagement in polar affairs, offering a potentially depoliticized framework for collaboration on pressing climate and environmental challenges. Among the "Plus Three" countries, significant investments have been made in leveraging polar science for diplomatic influence. China, Japan, and South Korea maintain extensive polar research infrastructures, international partnerships, and participation in multilateral scientific networks. For instance, China's Belt and Road Initiative increasingly incorporates polar research cooperation, while Japan's Arctic Challenge for Sustainability (ArCS II) and South Korea's KOPRI-led collaborations exemplify science diplomacy as a strategic tool for international engagement and norm shaping (Everett & Halašková, 2022; Liu & Solski, 2022; Mochinaga, 2020). These countries use polar science not only to advance knowledge but also to secure observer status in Arctic governance institutions, influence regulatory debates, and build bilateral scientific alliances.

In contrast, ASEAN member states—except for Singapore and, to a lesser degree, Malaysia and Thailand—remain marginal players in polar science diplomacy due to structural limitations. Most lack dedicated polar research institutions, sufficient funding, logistical capacity, or trained personnel to participate meaningfully in polar scientific missions. As of 2024, only a handful of ASEAN-affiliated institutions, such as Malaysia's National Antarctic Research Centre and Thailand's Polar Science Consortium, are members of the Asian Forum for Polar Sciences (AFoPS), and their roles are typically secondary within projects led by Northeast Asian or European counterparts (AFoPS, 2023). These contributions are often constrained to observational roles or data analysis rather than full project leadership, reflecting the region's limited scientific autonomy in polar contexts. Foreign funding and logistical support—particularly from China, Japan, or South Korea—remain essential for any sustained ASEAN participation in polar research, raising concerns about long-term dependency and the ability to independently articulate regional interests in polar governance forums.

Moreover, the disconnect between high-level political rhetoric and institutional investment in science undermines ASEAN's ability to transform interest into influence. Declarations issued at ASEAN Plus Three summits regularly express concern over climate change, biodiversity loss, and maritime security, but few of these translate into concrete polar-related research collaborations or joint scientific programs (ASEAN Secretariat, 2021a). While science diplomacy offers a politically neutral path for engagement—potentially mitigating geopolitical tensions and enhancing ASEAN's credibility in global environmental debates—it remains largely aspirational in the absence of internal capacity building. Unless ASEAN governments commit to enhancing domestic research capabilities, investing in scientific training, and coordinating regional participation in polar forums, science diplomacy will remain a symbolic rather than strategic instrument. The current asymmetry between political interest and technical capacity prevents ASEAN from fully utilizing science diplomacy as a means to contribute to or shape the emerging international order in the Arctic and Antarctic regions.

Political Issues as Primary Arena

Polar governance in the 21st century has increasingly shifted from a domain centered on scientific cooperation to one marked by strategic rivalry and geopolitical maneuvering. Both

the Arctic and Antarctic now function as platforms for global power projection, where environmental rhetoric often masks deeper political and economic interests. The Arctic, in particular, has become a space of competitive multilateralism. States such as China, Russia, and the United States leverage scientific collaboration, infrastructure investments, and legal interpretations to extend influence over emerging shipping routes, energy resources, and governance norms (Brady, 2017; Rahbek-Clemmensen, 2017). China's 2018 Arctic Policy notably declared it a "near-Arctic state," a term with no legal foundation under international law but strategically deployed to justify involvement in Arctic affairs (Pincus, 2020). Similarly, in Antarctica, rising interest in bioprospecting, tourism, and fisheries—particularly krill extraction—has begun to stress the Antarctic Treaty System, where decision-making increasingly reflects competing national agendas rather than shared scientific goals (Stephens, 2018).

In this politicized environment, ASEAN's normative approach—emphasizing sustainability, dialogue, and stewardship—has struggled to gain traction. APT declarations on climate and environmental cooperation, such as the ASEAN Plus Three Leaders' Statement on Strengthening Environmental Cooperation for Sustainable Development (2022), remain non-binding and lack enforcement mechanisms. These statements often reflect the consensus-based diplomacy ASEAN is known for, which, while effective in preventing intra-regional conflict, constrains the bloc's capacity to respond decisively to high-stakes global challenges such as polar governance (Katada & Solís, 2008). The principle of non-interference further inhibits ASEAN from developing robust collective positions on external geopolitical matters, including those involving polar affairs.

As a result, ASEAN has been relegated to the role of convener rather than influencer. Its engagement with the polar regions is mostly procedural, limited to observer participation in forums like the Arctic Circle Assembly or indirect involvement through environmental and climate-related statements. The real policy leverage remains in the hands of individual ASEAN states, which often navigate polar diplomacy through bilateral arrangements—particularly with China. For instance, Chinese investments in infrastructure and marine science across Southeast Asia frequently include polar cooperation components, but these are framed within broader strategic initiatives like the Belt and Road or the Digital Silk Road (Gao & Erokhin, 2020). Such dynamics risk reinforcing asymmetries, where ASEAN members accommodate rather than co-shape the political terms of polar engagement.

Without the development of formal policy instruments or a more unified strategy, ASEAN's role in the evolving polar order will remain peripheral. While the APT format provides a multilateral space for dialogue, its institutional design does not support strategic coordination in domains—like the poles—where rapid geopolitical and environmental change demand coherent and timely responses. As polar governance becomes more politicized, ASEAN's current mode of engagement risks irrelevance unless it recalibrates from rhetorical solidarity toward operational alignment with global governance frameworks and strategic polar stakeholders.

Convergence, Dominance, and Prospects

Despite the strategic divergences in national polar policies, there is a discernible convergence in official rhetoric among ASEAN Plus Three countries. Across policy documents, multilateral declarations, and summit communiqués, terms such as "sustainability," "climate resilience," and "environmental stewardship" recur with regularity. The Joint Statement of the

24th ASEAN Plus Three Summit (2021) and the ASEAN Plus Three Leaders' Statement on Strengthening Environmental Cooperation (2022) both underscore shared commitments to combating climate change and protecting ecosystems. This rhetorical alignment reflects a growing regional consensus on the urgency of environmental change, including the far-reaching implications of polar dynamics for food security, sea-level rise, and maritime trade. However, this convergence in language does not equate to policy coherence or balanced participation. Instead, it obscures a deeper asymmetry in capacities and influence.

China increasingly dominates the regional polar landscape, leveraging its expansive scientific infrastructure, strategic planning, and assertive diplomacy. It operates six polar research stations, has launched multiple scientific expeditions, and articulates a comprehensive framework through its Arctic Policy (2018), where it positions itself as a "near-Arctic state" (Brady, 2017; Sharma, 2021). China's Belt and Road Initiative has also extended into the Arctic through the so-called "Polar Silk Road," further embedding polar engagement within its broader geopolitical agenda (Gao & Erokhin, 2020). Japan and South Korea, while scientifically sophisticated and deeply invested in polar research—through institutions such as the National Institute of Polar Research (Japan) and the Korea Polar Research Institute—tend to adopt more technocratic and cautious approaches. They prioritize science diplomacy and environmental cooperation while avoiding overt political contestation with Beijing (Bertram, 2022; Everett & Halašková, 2022). This leaves ASEAN states in a structurally reactive position. Lacking the scientific infrastructure, cohesive strategic vision, and geopolitical weight, most ASEAN members opt for pragmatic diplomacy—participating in polar fora when possible, but deferring to larger regional powers on substantive governance matters.

Looking ahead, ASEAN's potential lies not in competing for dominance but in developing niche capabilities that align with regional needs and global priorities. Technical domains such as climate adaptation strategies for rice-based agricultural systems, marine biodiversity monitoring, or coastal resilience planning offer politically low-risk yet strategically valuable entry points. These initiatives are particularly important given the ASEAN region's acute vulnerability to sea-level rise and extreme weather events—phenomena intimately linked to polar climate change (IPCC, 2023). By investing in collaborative, technically focused projects—potentially in partnership with Japan, South Korea, or EU scientific institutions—ASEAN could begin to institutionalize its role in the broader polar governance landscape without overextending its capacity or straining internal consensus mechanisms. Such projects not only enhance ASEAN's credibility as a constructive actor in global environmental governance, but also build internal resilience and technical expertise that may, over time, enable more strategic engagement in polar diplomacy.

Summary, Conclusion, and Recommendations

The ASEAN Plus Three's engagement with the polar regions remains limited and largely symbolic, shaped more by geopolitical considerations than by coherent environmental strategy. While climate resilience and sustainability are recurring themes in diplomatic discourse, concrete, coordinated actions are rare. ASEAN's consensus-driven framework hampers decisive regional responses, and the most substantive polar activities are conducted by the Plus Three countries—especially China, which exercises outsized influence through its research infrastructure and strategic policies. Given these institutional and political constraints, the most pragmatic path forward lies in focusing on science diplomacy and targeted, low-politics initiatives. Joint research on climate-induced sea-level rise, polar effects

on marine biodiversity, and sustainable coastal adaptation practices can provide ASEAN states with relevant experience and visibility. These focused efforts allow ASEAN Plus Three to contribute meaningfully to polar governance while gradually building technical capacity, reinforcing regional cooperation, and preserving strategic flexibility in a competitive geopolitical landscape.

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