

*A Study on Interaction Between Mainland ASEAN States and China
After the Cold War—Centered on the GMS Mechanism*

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The Asian Political & International Studies Association Annual Congress 2023
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

The Greater Mekong Subregion Economic Cooperation (GMS) is a key focus for integrating the regional economy of Southeast Asia and an important clue for studying regional integration in Southeast Asia. This paper aims to explain the causal mechanism behind the development of the GMS, that is, why GMS has been able to withstand the systemic stimuli of different eras and continue to play a role, expand the scope of cooperation, and promote regional integration in Southeast Asia while effectively addressing the development gaps and conflicts of interest among its member countries. This paper traces the development process of the GMS mechanism in different periods and backgrounds, and finds that the degree of economic interdependence, political mutual trust, and the development of ASEAN norms among member countries within the GMS have an impact on their internal cognition and decision-making, thus injecting impetus into the development of the GMS mechanism.

Keywords: GMS, ASEAN Norms, Regional Integration

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Introduction

The Committee for the Coordination of Investments of Lower Mekong Basin (MC), which dates back to 1957, and the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), which began with the Asian Development Bank (ADB)'s central coordination in 1992 to strengthen the economic ties of countries in the subregion and improve the competitiveness of the subregion, The purpose is to promote the common development of the local economy and society (Song, 2021). The GMS mechanism has always been the focus of integrating the regional economy of Southeast Asia, serving as a touchstone for testing Southeast Asian integration.

It has important geopolitical significance and significance for countries both inside and outside the region, as dominating the market of GMS means dominating the markets of Southeast Asia, ASEAN, and even China and India (Soong, 2016a). Faced with multiple practical issues such as development disparities, conflicts of interest, and financial crises, the "GMS" geoeconomic model still plays a good cooperative role today, injecting impetus into the economic development of Southeast Asia, which has attracted widespread attention from the academic community.

Komchornrit (2021) proposed using a comprehensive approach of AHP and TOPSIS to strengthen domestic logistics in Thailand through the GMS mechanism, using the GMS Economic Corridor as an economic tool to promote cross-border trade and drive Thailand's national development. Gerlak and Mukhtarov (2016), and Williams (2021) focused on water safety and believed that the success of the Mekong River Management Commission (MRC) was due to its human-centered approach, emphasizing a safety framework for water use that meets human needs such as agriculture, energy production, and fisheries.

Although the development prospects of the Mekong River Basin are highly recognized, the future of "GMS" integration still faces many uncertain factors. On the one hand, the relative benefits among GMS member countries still need to be balanced, and the development speed still needs to be coordinated (Weatherbee, 1997). On the other hand, the geopolitical competition between China, the United States, and Japan deeply shapes the development of connectivity in the GMS region. Charoensri (2019; 2022a; 2022b) believes that a new regionalism, known as "Linked Regionalization," will be formed within it.

In addition, China's participation and influence in the GMS mechanism are the focus of scholars' exploration. Su (2012) believes that the Chinese government has effectively promoted the geoeconomic integration of Yunnan Province and the GMS region by binding labor, capital, and political influence, and establishing a regulatory system. Lee (2015) analyzed the changes in the relationship between China and countries in the GMS region in the 1990s. He, along with Tungkeunkuntt and Bunyavejchewin (2022), believed that the GMS mechanism benefited all member countries, and China's investment in resources for the GMS mechanism benefited downstream countries of the Mekong River, driving local infrastructure links and development, thereby driving their willingness to interact with China and enhancing China's influence. However, Biba (2012; 2018) pointed out that although the Chinese government has established extensive trust in the GMS region, there are still significant loopholes in water resource management. Zhang and Li (2020) also examined the Chinese government's policies on cross-border water resource governance in the GMS region. They believe that China's adjustment of GMS policy is a transformation of the overall diplomatic model, and cross-border water resource governance is not a goal, but a means for China to expand its influence in this region.

In summary, we can find that current research on geoeconomics mainly focuses on the interaction between major powers and global trade, with less discussion on the relationship between countries, the international community, and geoeconomics, lacking consideration of how geoeconomics can exert political influence.

Research Method

This paper takes the Neoclassical realism theory as the analytical framework, sets and explains various variables in the process of GMS mechanism expansion, uses the process tracking method to verify its related definitions and assumptions, and explores the interrelationship and causal mechanism between variables. Firstly, this article views the GMS mechanism as an active international organization, mainly studying its process of influencing internal member states' cognition and decision-making, and continuously expanding under systemic stimuli. Neoclassical realism predicts that the increase or decrease of relative material strength corresponds to the expansion or contraction of the ambition and scope of national foreign policy activities, but this process depends not only on the objective material trend but also on the subjective views of political decision-makers (Rose, 1998, p. 72).

In other words, "policy choice" and "policy formulation" are no longer seen as direct results of systemic stimulus. Systemic stimulus needs to be examined through actors such as countries or international organizations and recognized and responded to in specific internal political environments. If international organizations can create political pressure within specific countries, they can also limit the policy options of specific countries, Thus, it affects the policy-making of the country (Ripsman et al., 2016/2017). Therefore, to explain the changes in the external behavior of actors and explain why they respond differently to similar system stimuli compared to other actors, it is necessary to study the unique processes of actors' cognition, decision-making, and policy execution. In the context of this article, it is to study how the GMS mechanism as an international organization affects the cognition, decision-making, and practice of its member states.

Theory & Research Hypothesis

This article combines international and domestic independent variables to set three dependent variables: the degree of political mutual trust, the degree of adaptation to ASEAN norms, and the degree of economic interdependence among GMS member countries. Neoclassical realism believes that the realistic analysis of international change needs to combine the international and domestic levels (Lebow et al., 1995). "The pressure at the international system level has contributed to foreign policy, Grand strategy, and international politics, while domestic intermediary variables will limit whether and how countries respond to the pressure at the system level" (Ripsman et al. 2016/2017, p. 58).

The distinction between "inclusive strategic environment" and "binding strategic environment" is related to the urgency and magnitude of threats or opportunities faced by a country" (Ripsman et al. 2016/2017, p.47), and the assessment of the urgency of threats or opportunities refers to the degree to which the unit adapts to the strategic environment. If the unit adapts to the strategic environment, it indicates that the external structure is relatively stable, and the unit has greater flexibility in external behavior; On the contrary, if the unit does not adapt to the strategic environment, it indicates that the external structure is relatively unstable, and its external behavior is more singular (Ripsman et al., 2016/2017).

The 'Strategic Environment' is mainly related to the degree of economic interdependence among GMS member countries. If GMS member states adapt to the existing economic interdependence structure, it indicates that the relationship between the GMS mechanism and external structure is relatively stable, and member states have significant similarity and convergence in their external behavior; On the contrary, if member states do not adapt to the existing economic interdependence structure, it indicates that the external structure of the GMS mechanism is relatively unstable, and the external behavior is more flexible and diverse.

The three dependent variables of "political mutual trust," "adaptability to ASEAN norms," and "economic interdependence" all point to the process of integration to varying degrees. In short, these three variables are closely related to the integration process of GMS member countries (China and some ASEAN countries), and we can find the causal mechanism by testing these three variables. As shown in Figure 1, by explaining and setting the dependent variable, the three variables will act on the nodes in the process of "leader cognition," "issue setting," and "practice," ultimately producing corresponding policies and feedback to the system stimulus. Therefore, we can assume the interaction process of specific mechanisms and test it by tracking specific cases during the development of GMS mechanisms. The assumptions of this article are as follows (as shown in Table 1):

- 1: When GMS member countries have a high degree of adaptation to ASEAN norms and a high degree of political and economic interaction, the result is that the GMS mechanism is strengthened
- 2: When GMS member countries have a low degree of adaptation to ASEAN norms but a high degree of political and economic interaction, the result is "to find alternative political mutual trust mechanisms while maintaining the GMS mechanism"
- 3: When GMS member countries have a high degree of adaptation to ASEAN norms but a low degree of political and economic interaction, the result is "to find alternative economic cooperation mechanisms while maintaining the GMS mechanism"
- 4: When GMS member countries have a low degree of adaptation to ASEAN norms and a low level of political and economic interaction, the result is a weakening of the GMS mechanism

The Concept of Logic

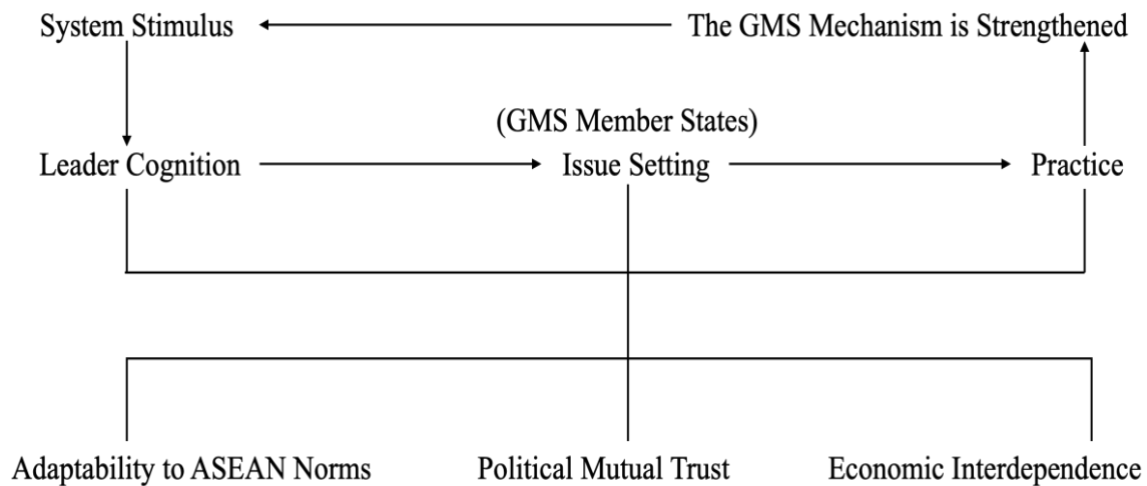


Figure 1: GMS mechanism reinforcement logic diagram

Source: Created by the author

	The high degree of adaptation of ASEAN norms	Low degree of adaptation to ASEAN norms
The high degree of integration (Political mutual trust and economic interdependence)	The GMS mechanism has been strengthened	On the premise of maintaining the GMS mechanism, seek alternative political mutual trust mechanisms.
Low level of integration (Political mutual trust economic interdependence)	While maintaining the GMS mechanism, seek alternative economic cooperation mechanisms.	Weakening of the GMS mechanism

Table 1: The Hypothesis of Interaction between the Political Economy of the GMS Member States and ASEAN Normative Adaptation

Source: Created by the author

Result

1. System Stimulation, Development of Geoeconomy, and Coordination of GMS Mechanism (1992-2005)

In August 1992, the Greater Mekong Subregion was launched under the central coordination of the Asian Development Bank. Under the planning of the Asian Development Bank, GMS mainly involves four goals: (1) to achieve and enhance opportunities for sub-regional economic development; (2) Encourage trade and investment among countries in the Mekong River Basin; (3) Resolve or mitigate cross-border issues within the subregion; (4) Understanding the common resources and policy needs between countries (Song, 2021, p. 37).

From 1992 to 1994, GMS member countries were still in a period of cultivating trust, and almost all of the projects organized were research-oriented. It was only from 1994 to 1996 that GMS established eight priority areas for cooperation, including transportation, energy, and agriculture, and established corresponding management systems, forming a cooperation framework (Cui & Zheng, 2021, p. 80). GMS is committed to building trade infrastructure projects within the region, but its proposed Bangkok Phnom Penh Ho Chi Minh City Vung Tau road has come to a standstill due to a lack of financial support (Ratner, 2003, p. 67).

However, overall, the GMS plan has replaced MRC as the most important forum for providing economic development assistance for projects in the Mekong River region and is also the only regional forum where land-based Southeast Asian countries and China participate on a nominal equal footing (Ratner, 2003, p. 67). The political and economic interaction in the Greater Mekong Subregion has also been enhanced in this context.

The pursuit of Karen people refugees fleeing to Thailand by Myanmar's military has led to military tensions among member countries and exacerbated the cross-border spread of political conflicts within ASEAN (Vatikiotis, 1997, p. 34, as centered in Acharya, 2009, p. 150). This indicates the limited adaptation of Southeast Asian countries to ASEAN norms on land, and once again indicates that the political mutual trust between GMS member countries was still at a relatively low level during this period.

However, ASEAN countries did not seek Power projection Capability. ASEAN's military investment is closer to the insurance policy for general uncertainty than to the arms race or offensive build-up of neighboring countries. The growth of its military expenditure has also declined relative to its GDP (Solingen, 2002, p. 9). Faced with common external threats, ASEAN countries are still unwilling to transform their past economic and political relations into military relations. At the 1992 Regional Security Conference held in Singapore, Lieutenant Colonel Philip Su, then Assistant Chief of Staff of Singapore, expressed this attitude in his speech. He pointed out that due to the lack of clear enemies, military alliance treaties not only cannot bring ASEAN countries together but may also cause them to split (Gallagher, 1994, p. 182).

ASEAN countries have not made efforts to balance or even contain China, but have expanded their economic cooperation with China, attempting to prevent potential aggressive actions by strengthening economic ties with China and incorporating China into regional multilateral structures (Solingen, 2002, p. 9). As a result, a series of new economic cooperation mechanisms have emerged in the Mekong River Basin and even the entire Southeast and East Asian regions.

At the East Asia Summit in 1995, ASEAN leaders encouraged other member countries other than the six GMS countries to participate in the development plan of the Mekong River basin, which showed ASEAN countries' recognition of the achievements of GMS and the recognition that joint development of resources in the Mekong River basin can bring great benefits (Ajibewa, 1998). Subsequently, ASEAN, Japan, South Korea, and Europe further participated in the development plan, indicating the further opening of GMS.

The financial crisis, as a systemic stimulus, has had a significant impact on the adaptability of Southeast Asian countries to ASEAN norms. When ASEAN is accused of failing to effectively respond to the crisis, especially in reminding Thailand of its economic difficulties, the debate about the principle of non-interference in ASEAN norms has intensified. The new

Thai government believes that this principle should be revised to prevent or solve domestic problems that threaten regional stability, and has proposed the concept of "flexible engagement" (Solingen, 2002, p. 176).

After the 1997 financial crisis, the issue of economic development became a priority for various countries. The political and economic relations between ASEAN member countries and China have developed. In the chaos of 1997, China acted like a "responsible stakeholder" (Suehiro, 2017). On the one hand, China firmly maintains currency stability and vigorously assists ASEAN countries, making the ASEAN economy gradually stable; On the other hand, ASEAN countries are in urgent need of China's vast market after experiencing the crisis, so they shelve the Territorial disputes in the South China Sea, suspend the military expansion plan, and make good friends with China one after another, showing a "middle" phenomenon in politics and economy (Song et al., 2013, p. 119).

The 1998 GMS Ministerial Conference discussed the theme of "responding to the Asian crisis, developing strategies and work plans to address economic changes, as well as the social reality of the region, strengthening regional activities and competitiveness," and proposed an important project to establish an "economic corridor." The GMS project expanded to address social issues such as labor, health, education, cross-border issues related to environmental and human and commodity transportation, as well as public needs such as training, Expanded cooperation in drug eradication and agricultural development (Hensengerth, 2009, Table A1).

2. The Rise of Geo-Economy, and the Improvement of GMS Mechanism (2005-2014)

From 1992 to 2006, data shows that all GMS countries have experienced significant economic growth, with their per capita GDP growth rate higher than the entire ASEAN. The changes in the human development index of GMS countries from 1975 to 2005 also indicate improvements in birth expectancy, education level, and income for all GMS countries (Duval, 2008). In 2004, the geographical coverage of GMS was extended to Guangxi in China. In July 2005, the second GMS Summit was held in Kunming, Yunnan Province, China.

From 2005 to 2009, ASEAN countries and China carried out and reached a series of plans, agreements, and declarations. For example, the China ASEAN Ministerial Consultation on Transnational Crime, the Cooperation Agreement on Monitoring the Strait of Malacca, the First China ASEAN Senior Defense Scholars Dialogue, etc. These all indicate that traditional and non-traditional security-related cooperation between China and ASEAN countries has been further developed (Arase, 2010). As a result, criminal cooperation in the GMS region has also been developed. On October 16, 2009, the China Laos Liaison Office for Law Enforcement Cooperation in Combating Transnational Trafficking in Women and Children was established at Mohan Port Police Station in Mengla County, Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province. In addition, the Ministry of Public Security has dispatched police liaison officers to Thailand and Myanmar, promoting bilateral police cooperation among GMS member countries (Wen, 2012, p. 150).

ASEAN hopes to better respond to the challenges of global competition through closer economic integration. In January 2007, ASEAN leaders decided at the 12th ASEAN Summit to accelerate the establishment of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) for five years until 2015 (ASEAN, 2007, P. 18). In November 2007, the 13th ASEAN Summit officially released the Declaration on the ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint. In the declaration,

participating countries recognized the increasing interdependence of ASEAN economies within the region and with other regions of the world, emphasized the importance of facing and narrowing development gaps flexibly, and resolved to achieve higher levels of economic vitality, sustained prosperity, inclusive growth, and comprehensive development in the ASEAN region (ASEAN, 2012).

2009 was an important milestone in the development of trade between China, ASEAN, and CLMV countries. This year, China became ASEAN's largest trading partner, Vietnam's largest trading partner, Myanmar's second-largest trading partner, Laos' third-largest trading partner, and Cambodia's fourth-largest trading partner. Compared to Thailand, China was also the largest trading partner (Soong, 2016). In August 2009, China and ASEAN signed the "China ASEAN Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement Investment Agreement."

In February 2009, ASEAN countries signed the "Roadmap for the Construction of an ASEAN Community 2009-2015," which detailed the construction of the three pillars of the ASEAN Community. The part about the ASEAN Political security community is called the "ASEAN Political-Security Community Blueprint," which emphasizes that the ASEAN community should be normative and stable, specifically reflected in the stability of ASEAN political norms, ASEAN security norms, and ASEAN external norms (ASEAN, 2009).

The construction of the ASEAN Political-Security Community emphasizes respect for the democratic rule of law, human rights, and freedoms of all countries, emphasizes composite security and "altruistic" cooperation, and emphasizes the maintenance of the "ASEAN central position," which reflects the development and changes of ASEAN norms. Since 2010, the Burmese military government has gradually implemented political system reform. In March 2011, Myanmar's democratically elected President Thein Sein came to power, vigorously promoting the process of political democratization, achieving significant breakthroughs in its foreign relations, and opening a new chapter in the development of foreign trade (Zheng, 2014, p. 150).

As a result, the GMS program began its third decade, ushering in a new era of deep-seated, wide-ranging, and all-round open cooperation with a focus on infrastructure construction, resource development as a link, industrial cooperation as a foundation, project development as a platform, and enterprise cooperation as the main body. During this process, China's role in the GMS mechanism and even in ASEAN countries has further improved (Li, 2012, p. 38). At the 17th GMS Ministerial Conference held on August 4, 2011, Cambodian State Minister and Minister of Commerce Cham Prasidh and ADB Vice President Lohani praised China's important role in the construction and development of the subregion and said that China's financial assistance has played a significant role in the construction of the region (Li, 2012, p. 38).

The "ASEAN Political-Security Community Construction Blueprint" indicates that ASEAN's cooperative security is accompanied by the formation of comprehensive security norms, which take comprehensive security as the core and absorb some of the connotations of common security norms, mainly applicable to security interactions with extraterritorial actors. For China, the proposal of the "Belt and Road" initiative, along with the overall national security concept and the Asian security concept, has become the main security norm advocated by China.

The former security concept emphasizes the comprehensiveness of security, while the latter security concept emphasizes common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security in the practical path, and advocates China's active participation in multi-level regional security cooperation at the practical level (Li, Y. P. & Li, F., 2023). The coordination between China's security concept and ASEAN's security norms after the "Belt and Road" initiative also shows the mutual adaptation between China and ASEAN's norms, laying the foundation for the expansion of the GMS mechanism from the economic field to the security field.

At the 2014 meeting, China and Thailand jointly signed the Memorandum of Understanding on China-Thailand Railway Cooperation and the Memorandum of Understanding on China-Thailand Agricultural Products Trade Cooperation. This means that the cooperation between the Communist Party of China and Thailand's "rice for high-speed rail" has reopened, marking the willingness of GMS leaders to further strengthen cooperation in land and sea transportation infrastructure and economic corridor construction, customs facilitation, mutual investment, energy, environmental protection, disaster prevention, and mitigation, and promote inclusive growth and sustainable development (Song, 2021, p.48).

3. Competition Between China and the United States, Expansion of Geoeconomy, and Deepening of GMS Mechanism (2014 Present)

With the further integration of China's BRI and ASEAN AEC development strategies, political and economic interactions between GMS countries have become more frequent, and their adaptability to ASEAN norms has further improved. The GMS mechanism has been improved. However, at the same time, the rise of conflicts between China and the United States and the game they are playing in the Indo-Pacific region have a profound impact on the geopolitical and economic landscape of the entire Southeast Asian region, as well as on the cooperation strategies and projects of GMS countries.

In the regional geopolitical and economic situation stimulated by the game between China and the United States, GMS cooperation has continuously achieved impressive results. In 2018, the 6th GMS Leaders' Summit was held under the auspices of Vietnam, emphasizing the cooperation of GMS in 2015, aiming to establish a sustainable, comprehensive, and prosperous GMS, and publishing a series of documents on future investment frameworks and action plans. Regarding the content of the 6th ASEAN Summi.

Faced with new internal and external opportunities and challenges, the GMS mechanism continues to develop. The GMS2030 strategic framework proposes innovative methods for this, including "utilizing digital reform," "enhancing spatial development," "strengthening policy and regulatory dialogue based on knowledge resolution and capacity building," "adopting private sector solutions," "strengthening openness," and "improving results openness" (ADB, 2021).

The political relations between Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and China have a good foundation, and the bilateral relations are relatively stable. Cambodia has always supported China's development, and its leaders have publicly affirmed China's peaceful rise and BRI initiative on multiple official occasions. The signing of the Action Plan for Building a Community with a Shared Future between China and Cambodia in April 2019 marked a new stage of development in bilateral relations; Laos and China share similar political systems

and development concepts, and are also accelerating the strategic integration of the BRI initiative with Laos' strategy of "turning a land-locked country into a land-locked country."

The "Action Plan for Building a Community with a Shared Future between China and Laos" was launched and formulated in May 2018; For Myanmar, after the Myanmar Democratic League government took office in 2016, it adopted a pragmatic and cooperative attitude toward China. Due to the Rohingya issue, the relationship between Myanmar and Western countries has continued to deteriorate since 2017. But this has become an opportunity to strengthen the GMS mechanism.

In March 2021, Atul Keshap, Deputy to the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and the Pacific, unjustly accused China of undermining the autonomy and stability of the Mekong countries at the 1.5-track policy dialogue of the US Mekong Partnership (The U.S. Department of State, 2021). In June of the same year, US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman expressed "serious concern" about China's growing military influence in Cambodia and called on Prime Minister Hun Sen to end political repression, interfere in Cambodia's internal affairs, and intend to undermine China Cambodia relations (Strangio, 2021). The response of relevant countries to the actions of the United States reflects the strategic choices of ASEAN countries in the Sino-US game as a whole.

In 2022, as competition between China and the United States intensifies, the GMS mechanism has gradually expanded its resilience. The GMS countries first reached the Kunming Consensus of the 2022 Greater Mekong Subregional Economic Corridor Governor's Forum (referred to as the "Kunming Consensus") to continue promoting regional security and economic cooperation.

In addition, emphasizing "independent opening" in water governance, the Five Year Action Plan for Mekong Water Resources Cooperation (2018-2022) was reached. It also supports the implementation of initiatives such as the Mekong Strategic Plan (2021-2025), the Basin Development Strategy (2021-2030), and the Resolution on Sustainable and Climate Adaptable Development of the Mekong Delta in Vietnam. These initiatives all demonstrate that the GMS mechanism has become an "international public domain" for ASEAN countries and China.

Conclusion

We can observe that since 1992, the GMS mechanism has already possessed the embryonic form mentioned above. The GMS mechanism was initially established as an international mechanism with the goal of economic development, and it withstood more and more international shocks. GMS has started to expand from the scope of economic cooperation to areas such as security governance and non-traditional security governance. The GMS mechanism has thus become a platform for interaction and exchange between ASEAN member countries and China and has cultivated a high degree of political and economic interdependence among member countries.

The "public sphere" attribute of the GMS mechanism can continue to play a role, and the key lies in the four functions that make up the public sphere. Public identity (ASEAN norm adaptors), public interests (economic development), public norms (mutual trust), and public goods (political and economic interdependence). It is precise because GMS has these four

important functions, and these functions promote each other, that the success of the GMS mechanism "public sphere" is formed. The logic is as shown in tables.

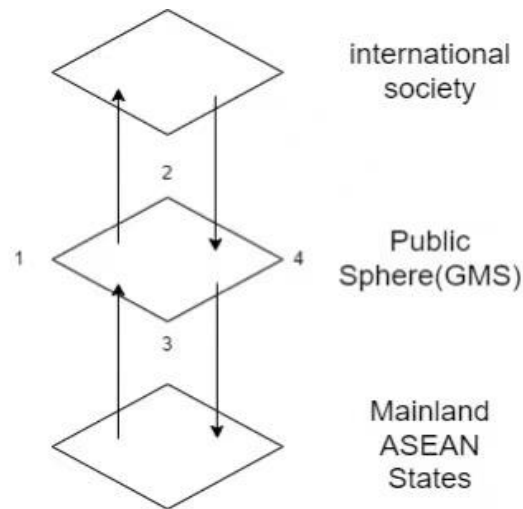


Figure 2: GMS mechanism as the logic of the “international public sphere”

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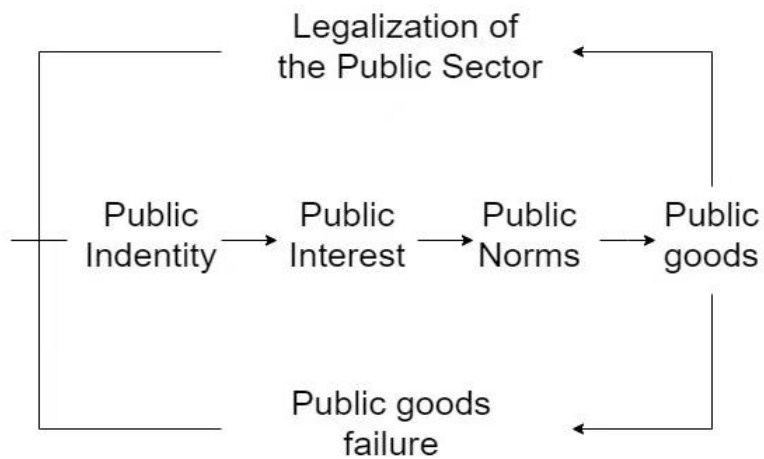


Figure 3: The Logic of GMS Mechanism Member States Forming “international public sphere”

Source: Created by the authors

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