



# Assessing Papua New Guinea's Bid for ASEAN Membership: A Constructivist View

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## ABSTRACT

Papua New Guinea (PNG) has undertaken several steps in order to become a member within ASEAN. However, its bid for membership remains highly contested. This article looks at the reasons why PNG's admission to ASEAN is unlikely to be approved. Using a qualitative approach with secondary sources and constructivism as a theoretical framework, this article makes the case that, although institutionally and procedurally possible, ASEAN membership is influenced not only by geopolitical and economic (realist and materialist) factors but also by (constructivist) social and normative constructions of belonging. As a result, constructivism becomes the main lens for this article. PNG's application for membership is therefore unlikely to be accepted in the foreseeable future. An outcome of exclusion may have broader implications. This article will demonstrate that 1) PNG is not located inside the socially constructed regional geographic limits of "Southeast Asia" as defined by ASEAN. 2) PNG's racialised and culturally unique nature—as a primarily Melanesian culture; and 3) PNG's foreign policy orientation, which prioritizes their interests over ASEAN's, is still ingrained in Melanesian and Pacific regional institutions.

## KEYWORDS

ASEAN; Constructivist; Membership; Pacific; Papua New Guinea

## INTRODUCTION

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has been instrumental in forming the political and economic framework of Southeast Asia since its establishment in 1967 ([Hwang, 2019](#)). ASEAN emerged through the Cold War period and rose to prominence to engage with major powers leading to the concept of 'ASEAN Centrality' within the Southeast Asian Region ([Qia-Franco et al., 2024](#)). From its original five founding members, ASEAN has grown over the decades to now include all ten Southeast Asian nations, with Timor-Leste emerging as the most recent candidate to join. Timor-Leste is expecting to become the 11<sup>th</sup> member in October 2025, following the procedures set forth in the membership roadmap ([The Straits Times, 2025](#)). On the other hand, Papua New Guinea (PNG) has also long engaged with ASEAN, holding observer status since 1976 and being a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum since 1999 ([Kovtun & Vartovnyk, 2024](#); [Martínez-Galán, 2021](#)). In recent years, the country has expressed its willingness to strengthen its relationship by seeking full membership, as articulated by its Foreign Minister Justin Tkatchenko about the country's "desire to deepen engagements with ASEAN and possible membership" ([Arlo, 2024](#)). PNG's Prime Minister, James Marape, further reiterated this position in his statement by stating, "We are going to join the ASEAN states because that is where the focus of the world will be... This [membership] provides us with the opportunity to grow with them" ([The National, 2025](#)).

Beyond statements from PNG officials, among ASEAN state leaders, Indonesia, under President Prabowo, so far is the only one which called for PNG's admittance ([Hanan, 2025](#)). Prabowo explicitly endorsed PNG's bid during the 46<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit in May 2025, describing the country as a 'close neighbor' whose inclusion would strengthen ASEAN's resilience and global stature ([ANTARA News, 2025](#); [Juwita, 2025](#); [The Jakarta Post, 2025](#)). However, such endorsement from Indonesia—a key ASEAN member—does not automatically translate into collective ASEAN support. Indonesia's position may reflect bilateral interest and its desire to project regional leadership, rather than an established consensus within ASEAN. Other member states, including Singapore and Thailand, have expressed reservations, emphasizing the importance of maintaining ASEAN's existing geographical scope and institutional coherence ([Chalermphanupap, 1999](#), [Sianturi & Wiswayana, 2024](#)). Meanwhile, most ASEAN leaders have remained cautious, framing PNG's role primarily in terms of observer participation and development cooperation rather than full membership ([ASEAN Secretariat, 2023](#)). Since ASEAN decisions are reached through consensus, individual member state support, even from a major country, remains insufficient to determine outcomes on membership. In this regard, PNG's membership bid remains contested and raises questions about regional identity and institutional coherence.

Previous studies have examined PNG's efforts to become an ASEAN member. [Hewison et al. \(1985\)](#), for example, explored how the PNG government under Prime Minister Michael Somare sought to position the country as the seventh member of ASEAN

in 1984. In this context, Hewison's work is now dated, as it emphasized PNG's attempts to engage in the ASEAN membership debate during the 1980s, which were intertwined with domestic factional politics and sensitive border tensions with Indonesia. Today, Indonesia–PNG border relations are more stable, with no major tensions, and current studies on PNG's ASEAN membership focus instead on strategic calculations of regional integration, long-term benefits, and institutional. More recent scholarship, such as [Hanan \(2025\)](#), describes PNG's application as “good for the region” and a “win-win,” while [Shofa \(2025\)](#) argues that although PNG enjoys support from some ASEAN members, such as Indonesia, there remain “obstacles in the way.” They primarily focus on consensus-building processes, mapping which member states support or oppose PNG's application while emphasizing the potential benefits of membership. While valuable, these studies overlook theoretical perspectives from International Relations. None of them consider a constructivist lens, which would allow for examining how identities, norms, and social interactions shape ASEAN's response to PNG's bid. This paper addresses this gap by reassessing PNG's membership prospects through a constructivist approach.

This article argues that PNG's membership is unlikely, because ASEAN's collective identity excludes it in three ways. First, PNG does not fall within ASEAN's socially constructed regional boundaries of “Southeast Asia” ([Yang, 2011](#)). Second, PNG's racialized and cultural distinctiveness—as a predominantly Melanesian society—contrasts sharply with the dominant cultural narratives of ASEAN, which are centered on Malay, Buddhist, and Islamic traditions ([Connell, 2007](#); [Fry & Tarte, 2015](#)). Here, *racialized* refers to the process by which social and political boundaries are constructed around perceived racial or ethnic differences, shaping who is considered “inside” or “outside” a regional community ([Bhabha, 2012](#)). For instance, while ASEAN states emphasize shared Austroasiatic and Austronesian roots, PNG's predominantly Melanesian population has been consistently portrayed as part of the Pacific, reinforcing this process of racialization ([Lipson et al., 2014](#)). Third, PNG's foreign policy orientation remains embedded in Melanesian and Pacific regional institutions, such as the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) and the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), rather than ASEAN ([Wesley-Smith, 2016](#)).

The article is structured as follows. It begins by defining the theoretical framework, placing the research within the context of regional identity literature and constructivist IR theory. It then describes the methods, which include qualitative and discourse-analysis. The discussion proceeds by examining the challenge of defining regional boundaries, highlighting how PNG falls outside ASEAN's socially constructed definition of Southeast Asia. The analysis then shifts to racialized and cultural constructions of the region, analyzing how identity politics shape ASEAN's boundaries. Building on this, the article addresses the issue of how ASEAN states often overlook or marginalize Melanesian perspectives, whereas PNG prioritizes Melanesian and Pacific interests rather than ASEAN

concerns. The article concludes by summarizing the findings and reflecting on the implications for ASEAN enlargement and PNG's regional positioning.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This article employs constructivism as its theoretical lens. Constructivism in International Relations emerged in the late 1980s and 1990s as a reaction to the dominance of rationalist ideas like realism and liberalism. While rationalists emphasize material power or institutional interests, constructivists argue that international politics is shaped by shared ideas, norms, and identities ([Wendt, 1999](#)). States act not merely in pursuit of material interests, but also in ways that reflect their identities or who they are and how they perceive others.

[Nicholas Onuf \(1989\)](#) is widely recognized for coining the term constructivism in international relations, emphasizing that “rules make the world” — that is, social realities such as sovereignty and regionalism are not given but created through ongoing practices. Building on this, [Alexander Wendt \(1992\)](#) famously asserted that “anarchy is what states make of it,” emphasizing that the international system is controlled not by structure alone but by intersubjective understandings among nations. His later work gave a systematic analysis of how identities and norms impact state action, setting the groundwork for constructivism as a mainstream international relations theory ([Wendt, 1999](#)).

In the context of regionalism, constructivism provides useful instruments for exploring how “regions” are constructed by society rather than objectively defined by geography. In *A World of Regions*, [Katzenstein \(2005\)](#) argues that regions are political and cultural outcomes shaped by historical experience, power dynamics, and the construction of collective identity. Similarly, [Ruggie \(1998\)](#) emphasizes that international order is entrenched in social practices and norms that provide meaning to political actors. This implies that Southeast Asia as a region is more than just a geographical entity, but the result of continual contacts and identity-building among its states.

Recent scholarship has expanded constructivist analysis beyond this classical emphasis toward what some call “new constructivism.” This approach highlights how regional identities are socially constructed not only through norms and institutions but also through discourses of culture, race, and historical memory ([McCourt, 2022](#); [Qiao-Franco et al., 2024](#)). While classical constructivism often focuses on how norms shape state preferences, new constructivism examines how boundaries of inclusion and exclusion are discursively produced, reinforcing ‘who belongs’ and ‘who does not within a community’. This perspective is particularly relevant to PNG's case, where ASEAN's identity is not only institutional but also racialized and cultural, positioning PNG as a constitutive “other” in the region.

Applying this to ASEAN, [Amitav Acharya \(2001, 2014\)](#) demonstrates how the organization has built a sense of regional identity through what he terms the “ASEAN

Way”: a set of informal, consensus-based, and non-interference principles. These principles set ASEAN apart from the Pacific regional organizations including the MSG and PIF which place a greater emphasis on collective action and are more open to discussion about controversial topics including good governance and human rights issues. In contrast, the ASEAN way has been built with stronger focus on sovereignty and non-interference principles which serve as boundary markers for ‘inclusion’ and ‘exclusion’. For example, in the 1990s, the admittance of new members such as Vietnam, Laos, and Myanmar was motivated not just by geopolitical or economic considerations, but also by integrating them into ASEAN’s normative and identity-based framework ([Narine, 2002](#)). Similarly, [Dosch \(2006\)](#) observes that ASEAN’s expansion has always been linked to issues of identity and legitimacy, rather than just economic factors.

This constructivist method is particularly significant for understanding PNG’s status in relation to ASEAN. Despite having observer status since 1976, PNG has not proceeded to full membership ([Griffin, 1986](#)). From a rationalist perspective, this could be attributed to insufficient economic integration with ASEAN or institutional restrictions. However, a constructivist perspective proposes a more in-depth explanation: PNG does not easily conform to ASEAN’s socially constructed notion of Southeast Asia. PNG’s cultural identity as a Melanesian state, its racialized distinctiveness from the bulk of ASEAN populations, and its emphasis of Melanesian over ASEAN concerns make it an outlier in the ASEAN normative community.

This approach also identifies a clear gap in the existing research. Much constructivist scholarship on ASEAN has emphasized how Southeast Asian states have developed a collective identity and how norms such as the ASEAN Way promote cohesion and regional stability ([Acharya, 2014](#); [Haacke, 2003](#)). Far less attention, however, has been paid to the exclusionary dimension of identity-building—that is, how ASEAN’s self-definition simultaneously produces outsiders by demarcating ‘who belongs’ and ‘who does not’. This article addresses that gap by examining Papua New Guinea’s long-standing observer status and stalled membership bid. PNG provides a revealing case because it highlights the boundaries of ASEAN’s identity: while geographically proximate and diplomatically engaged, PNG’s cultural and racialized distinctiveness positions it as an outsider to the ASEAN normative community. By shifting focus from inclusion to exclusion, this article contributes to constructivist studies of regionalism and to broader debates on how communities are reproduced through both integration and differentiation.

Unlike realist or liberal approaches, which would interpret PNG’s membership bid primarily in terms of material interests or institutional efficiency, constructivism allows us to see how the debate is fundamentally about identity. Membership is not only a question of strategic utility or economic gain but of who is considered part of “Southeast Asia.” This makes constructivism, particularly in its newer formulations, the most appropriate lens for analyzing PNG’s contested position in relation to ASEAN.



Drawing on this explanation, this article adopts constructivism to examine PNG's potentially unattainable ASEAN membership aspirations.

## **METHODS**

This article adopts a qualitative research design with a constructivist approach. According to [Flick \(2007, p. 2\)](#), qualitative research “uses text as empirical material (instead of numbers)” and involves interpretive and naturalistic strategies. Constructivism emphasizes the role of norms, identities, and social practices in constructing international relations, making it an ideal framework for examining how ASEAN develops its regional identity and how this affects PNG's membership prospects ([Rosyidin, 2017](#); [McCourt, 2022](#)). The analysis relies mainly on secondary sources, which include ASEAN official papers, statements of policymakers, news from websites related to PNG's bid for ASEAN membership, and academic literature on ASEAN regionalism and constructivist theory. These sources provide insight on how ASEAN defines its membership boundaries and how PNG has been positioned within or outside these constructions.

The method used is interpretive and discourse-oriented, emphasizing how language, narratives, and common meanings influence political realities ([Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2015](#)). Rather than testing hypotheses in a positivist manner, the purpose is to trace how ASEAN's identity construction has been articulated and institutionalized, and how this has limited PNG's membership aspirations. This approach enables the study to contextualize PNG's long-standing observer role within larger discussions about regionalism and identity in Southeast Asia. By systematically analyzing discourses of inclusion and exclusion, the paper demonstrates how regional boundaries are socially constructed, as well as why PNG remains outside ASEAN despite its geographic proximity and diplomatic engagement.

## **CHALLENGES IN DEFINING REGIONAL BOUNDARIES**

As mentioned earlier, PNG officials have expressed their intention to move beyond observer status and seek full membership status within ASEAN. However, it could be argued that PNG's pursuit of membership faces an ‘uphill struggle,’ particularly in terms of its geographical context. Referring to the Article 6(2a) of the ASEAN Charter on the admission of new members, it stipulates that, in addition to securing the agreement of all ASEAN member states, a potential candidate should also meet the criterion of being in “the recognised geographical region of Southeast Asia.” While the Charter mentions this regional requirement, it does not provide a precise or legally binding definition of where “Southeast Asia” begins and ends. In practice, ASEAN has interpreted this clause flexibly, depending on political and normative considerations. For example, Timor Leste's candidacy initially raised debates about whether it could be considered geographically part of Southeast Asia, yet its eventual pathway to membership demonstrates that ASEAN's definition of the region is not strictly cartographic but also socially and politically constructed. Given this

requirement, however, it is evident that PNG does not fit the criteria for ASEAN membership, as most of the literature continues to position it within the South Pacific rather than Southeast Asia (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Map of ASEAN member countries highlighted in green and Papua New Guinea with ASEAN observer status in red. *Source:* drawn by authors (2025)

For example, [Yang \(2011\)](#) classifies PNG as part of the 'South Pacific', alongside thirteen other Pacific Island countries (the Cook Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Samoa, the Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu). [Reilly and Wainwright \(2005\)](#) further contend that PNG has played a particularly significant role in the region, making it 'distinctive' in its contribution to fostering stable and democratic post-colonial states. On top of that, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea also defines PNG as one of the coastal states of the South Pacific, not Southeast Asia; thereby corroborating its geographical location in the Pacific.

From a constructivist perspective, the question of PNG membership in ASEAN is not just about 'geography' or 'material' factors such as economic or military strength, but also about 'social' characteristics—including shared understandings of belonging, ideas, and

regional identity (see [Kubáľková, 2019](#); [McDonald, 2023](#); [Wendt, 1995](#)). Given this context, multiple factors contribute to shaping the dynamics supporting and constraining the application of PNG for membership in ASEAN. International politics particularly constructs the meaning of geography within a social context, considering regions not 'natural givens' but instead produced and reproduced through collective ideas of belonging ([Migdal, 2004](#); [Paasi, 2010](#); [Tomaney, 2015](#)). In this sense, although PNG has a direct land border with Indonesia, ASEAN states have consistently defined the region as 'Southeast Asia' based on the boundaries of their members, which in this case only reach the most eastern parts of Indonesia (West Papua), excluding PNG from the region.

Constructivism emphasises the fact that this geographical boundary is often maintained through shared narratives and a sense of belonging. Indeed, in Southeast Asia, the region has been framed to be a single region shaped by its history, colonial past, and experiences during the Cold War. PNG, on the other hand, has been consistently linked to the Pacific Islands, both culturally and through organisations like the Pacific Islands Forum and the Melanesian Spearhead Group (see [Nanau, 2016](#); [Tarte, 2015](#)). This dynamic reinforces the idea that PNG is "out of place" in ASEAN geography, even though its closeness to Indonesia might make it seem otherwise.

In this context, geography is a concept that ASEAN members continuously reproduce, meaning that it is not merely a fixed physical location but a socially maintained understanding of what "Southeast Asia" entails. In this regard, *reproduce* refers to the process by which states reaffirm and reinforce regional boundaries through discourse, diplomatic practises, and institutional norms ([Paasi, 2010](#)). If accepting PNG into the association, it would extend ASEAN's geographical definition and, more importantly, challenge the social construction of what 'Southeast Asia' means, both within the region and globally. In other words, defining ASEAN boundaries is not a straightforward application of geography but also a consideration of the political process of 'inclusion' and 'exclusion'. Regions, in this sense, are political projects that reflect shared meanings, not merely a matter of cartography (see [Paasi, 2011](#); [Schmitt-Egner, 2002](#)). If PNG were to join ASEAN, the organization would have to redefine 'Southeast Asia' to include a state long considered part of the Pacific. This new definition, of course, could be detrimental to ASEAN by changing the status quo, destabilising its identity, and pressuring it to accept other candidate countries (for example, Bangladesh) with weak geographic or cultural ties to the region (see [Obaidullah, 2025](#)). Hence, from this perspective, it would be in ASEAN's best interests to not include PNG as a member and instead maintain its status as an observer.

All in all, this section offers insight into how geographical factors are mediated by identity and process of meaning-making. PNG does not fit the typical cultural mould of eligibility seen in other Southeast Asian countries. This may be a key obstacle for PNG to gain membership status within ASEAN. Not only due to its geographical position, but also because ASEAN states have historically and socially defined PNG within the geographic



and cultural context of the Pacific rather than in Southeast Asia. This geographical concern is one way of understanding the improbability of PNG joining ASEAN in the foreseeable future. The next section examines how PNG's candidacy is further complicated by racialized and cultural considerations that challenge its alignment with ASEAN membership.

## **RACIALIZED AND CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION OF REGION**

The discourse on PNG accession to ASEAN should not be viewed solely through the lens of formal treaties or geographic proximity. From a constructivist perspective, regional identity is not something naturally given, but socially constructed through the interaction of norms, practices, and shared perceptions. As [Alexander Wendt \(1992, p. 398\)](#) states, "identities are the basis of interests" (including geopolitical, social, and economic interests), meaning that ASEAN's self-conception directly shapes how it defines the boundaries of membership. PNG's long-standing attempt to join ASEAN demonstrates that the obstacles are not merely institutional or geographical but fundamentally rooted in the racialized and cultural construction of the region itself.

Although ASEAN consistently portrays itself as a diverse community, the category of "Southeast Asia" remains constrained within racial boundaries. ASEAN members largely consist of Austroasiatic, Austronesian, and Sinoid populations, which collectively form the imagined racial composition of the region ([Lipson et al., 2014](#)). PNG, with its predominantly Melanesian population, is rarely perceived as part of Southeast Asia. This perception is also reflected in political discourse. For example, ASEAN communiqués and official statements have consistently referred to PNG as a "Pacific partner" rather than a Southeast Asian state ([ASEAN Declaration, 1967](#); [Chalermpanupap, 1999](#)). Similarly, Indonesian leaders often emphasize PNG's "Melanesian brotherhood" when framing bilateral relations, which implicitly situates PNG within the Pacific rather than within Southeast Asia ([Dugis & Wardhani, 2025](#)). These discursive categorizations provide empirical evidence that construct PNG as external to the Southeast Asian identity, reinforcing the process of racialization noted in the literature. This reflects what [Homi K. Bhabha \(2012, p. 25\)](#) conceptualizes: "the other is never outside or beyond us; it emerges forcefully, within cultural discourse, when we think we speak most intimately and indigenously between ourselves." ASEAN's identity as a Southeast Asian community is therefore reinforced through the racialization of PNG as "Pacific" rather than "Asian." In this sense, PNG functions as the constitutive other against which ASEAN's collective identity is consolidated.

The drawing of such racial boundaries is not without difficulty, for ASEAN's regional identity depends on defining lines of inclusion and exclusion. As [Wendt \(1992, p. 395\)](#) famously asserts, "anarchy is what states make of it." By extension, regions too are what states make of them. The decision to treat PNG as external to Southeast Asia is thus not an objective reflection of geography but a social construction shaped by racial categories. In theory, ASEAN could imagine PNG as part of its community, given that it shares a land

border with Indonesia; yet the racialized othering of Melanesian populations renders such inclusion structurally difficult.

PNG's exclusion also illustrates the ambivalence inherent in identity formation. As [Bhabha \(2012, p. 86\)](#) explains, "colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite." This aptly captures PNG's ambiguous status. On the one hand, PNG's geographic location—bordering Indonesia, a core ASEAN member—renders it "almost the same." On the other hand, its racial categorization as Melanesian and its cultural orientation toward the Pacific make it "not quite" Southeast Asian. PNG's effort to enter ASEAN thus reflects the tension of mimicry: proximity without full inclusion.

The cultural dimension further reinforces this racialized exclusion. ASEAN has long been characterized by the "ASEAN Way," a set of distinctive diplomatic practices grounded in consensus, informality, and the principle of non-interference. These norms emerged from the postcolonial and Cold War experiences of Southeast Asian states and have since been institutionalized as the cultural glue binding ASEAN together. [Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett \(1998, p. 30\)](#) describe this process in their discussion of security communities: "a security community exists when states trust one another to resolve disputes without resort to violence." Over time, ASEAN has become more than an organization; it has evolved into a community with shared expectations of peaceful change. By contrast, PNG's normative orientation is deeply rooted in Melanesian values. The "Melanesian Way" emphasises communal solidarity, reciprocity, and traditional authority structures ([Narokobi, 2020](#)). These values are manifested most clearly within the Melanesian Spearhead Group and the Pacific Islands Forum, which are focused towards normative goals, collective action, and place heavy emphasis on areas that are often more controversial, including human rights, good governance, and decolonization diplomacy. These values and the resulting approaches differ significantly from ASEAN's institutional culture, which is focused on less sensitive areas of cooperation including trade and economic growth and based on principles of sovereignty and non-interference. This divergence is clearly reflected in PNG's foreign policy, which consistently prioritizes its engagement with the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) and the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG). Rather than aligning itself with ASEAN's collective identity, PNG has opted to consolidate its position within Pacific regionalism. This further entrenches the cultural boundary between PNG and ASEAN. As [Adler \(1997, p. 323\)](#) notes, "constructivism focuses on the social rules, practices, and institutions that constitute actors' identities and interests." PNG's identity has thus been constituted by its membership in the Pacific community, rendering ASEAN accession an awkward fit.

Furthermore, [Bhabha's \(2012, p. 159\)](#) notion of hybridity sheds light on the paradox of PNG's regional position: "hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities." PNG occupies a hybrid position, geographically close to Asia and politically linked through Indonesia, yet racially and culturally marked as Pacific. This

hybridity does not facilitate inclusion; rather, it underscores PNG's liminal status—always on the margins, yet never fully within.

The persistence of these boundaries demonstrates that ASEAN's identity is not neutral but exclusionary. The Bangkok Declaration (1967), ASEAN's founding document, explicitly states that "the Association is open for participation to all States in the Southeast Asian region subscribing to the [ASEAN] aims, principles and purposes" ([Chalermphanupap, 1999](#)). In practice, however, the definition of "Southeast Asia" has been shaped more by cultural and racial logics than by cartography. As [Wendt \(1992, p. 397\)](#) emphasises, "the meanings in terms of which action is organized arise out of interaction." This suggests that ASEAN's collective interactions over decades have produced social boundaries that exclude PNG, regardless of geographic proximity.

Accordingly, two implications follow. First, the racialization of PNG as Melanesian symbolically positions it outside ASEAN's identity, regardless of political or economic incentives for accession. Second, PNG's cultural divergence further reinforces this exclusion, since its normative commitments are not aligned with the ASEAN Way. This dual boundary—racial and cultural—explains why PNG's membership remains improbable, even though ASEAN formally maintains an open-door policy. The imagined ASEAN community depends on preserving these boundaries, and admitting PNG would disrupt the balance of identity that sustains it. Beyond geographical and cultural factors, the unlikelihood of PNG's membership in ASEAN can also be explained in terms of shared interests aligned with Melanesia and the Pacific, as discussed below.

### **PRIORITIZING PACIFIC AND MELANESIAN INTERESTS MORE THAN ASEAN'S**

PNG has taken a number of steps in order to integrate fully with ASEAN. For example, PNG acceded to ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in 1989 and has been a permanent member of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) since 1994. Additionally, PNG was granted ASEAN observer status in 1976; it took five years for its status to be elevated to special observer in 1981 ([Cook & Foo, 2019](#)). Similarly, PNG has established full diplomatic missions in four ASEAN countries (Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines). The goal of all these initiatives is to convince ASEAN that PNG has pursued its bid to join the regional organization seriously. These attempts, nevertheless, lack conviction. This is evident in the fact that, despite its early observer status and accession to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, PNG has not followed through with deeper economic integration, alignment with ASEAN's key norms such as non-interference, or sustained high-level diplomatic campaigns comparable to those undertaken by Timor-Leste. Unlike PNG, Timor-Leste has demonstrated a more consistent and structured bid by aligning itself with ASEAN norms, building strong bilateral ties with nearly all member states, and meeting many of the roadmap requirements set by ASEAN ([The Straits Times, 2025](#); [Martínez-Galán, 2021](#)). PNG's application for membership has therefore not yet been formally considered by

ASEAN, given that it still lacks the required conditions. This suggests that, although no formal decision has been made, PNG's application is unlikely to be accepted anytime soon unless the conditions are altered ([Shofa, 2025](#)).

One significant factor, though not mentioned explicitly in the criteria for membership, is that it is important for a candidate to support the non-interference norm and embrace ASEAN's common interests. For this reason, ASEAN will be reluctant to admit PNG as a new member. It is true that ASEAN has not publicly expressed this tendency, but looking at PNG's policy direction and orientation, which are most focused on closer proximity issues in the Pacific and Melanesia, it will constitute a barrier to ASEAN's acceptance of PNG. ASEAN's interests and PNG's interests (as seen in the examples of MSG and PIF collective action for progressive changes) are often incompatible most notably with the non-interference and sovereignty principles of ASEAN. As a result, ASEAN is likely to keep its doors closed.

[Wendt \(1995\)](#) argues that identity informs state interests, and, in turn its actions. Using this perspective, generally speaking, PNG is more interested in matters and concern related to the Pacific and Melanesian brotherhood than on those pertaining to Southeast Asia or ASEAN as a whole. PNG's commitment to fostering a shared identity with other Melanesian nations and its policy orientation and direction in this geographic context are best demonstrated by its membership in the regionally multilateral forum. For instance, PNG is a permanent member of the MSG, the South Pacific Commission, and the PIF. All of these organizations demonstrate the strength of PNG's engagement with Pacific communities, which in turn reflects Pacific interests rather than those of Southeast Asia. If PNG has been viewed as an ideal candidate for membership, and if it serves ASEAN's shared interests, such in the case of East Timor, then its application to become a full member should have been carefully considered.

Furthermore, PNG's interests are more strongly tied to the security and economic issues in Melanesia and the Pacific than ASEAN. Given their shared history and beliefs, PNG places greater importance on the "Pacific and Melanesian family" than "ASEAN". Melanesian people have a sense of belonging, tied by what they call "*wantok* and *kastom*", which are attributes of Melanesian societies that both unite groups of people with a sense of identity and these cultural systems serve Melanesian's interests collectively ([Nanau, 2018](#); [Narokobi, 2020](#)). Melanesia retains a strong connection to diverse and complex cultures that are more aligned with a strong cultural identity embedded within a connection to land and communal collective action ([Narokobi, 2020](#)). Therefore, Melanesian solidarity and identity are more frequently brought up by PNG, which makes them the focal point of PNG's core national policy, and this is very much in line with the notion of identity in shaping states' action, as proposed by constructivists.

Perhaps a key issue for ASEAN in permitting PNG full membership may relate to a track record of being more outspoken in relation to human rights, good governance and

decolonization issues. For example, the PNG community, grassroots, and MPs strongly support the causes of West Papua's self-determination ([Blades, 2020](#); [Siagian 2025](#)). Current PNG Prime Minister Marape's predecessor, Peter O'Neil, was a vocal opponent of Indonesia's treatment of human rights in West Papua ([Andrews, 2015](#), [Blades, 2020](#)), and Marape seemed to follow the suit ([Blades, 2020](#)).

In one of his statements, Marape said, "MSG has every right to speak on matters of human rights, people's welfare, and the preservation of Melanesian cultural heritage" ([Department of Prime Minister and National Executive Council, 2025](#)). Given that ASEAN upholds the norm of non-interference and regional unity, this policy direction might potentially compromise the organization's interests and goals by causing friction ([Hanan, 2025](#)). In other words, the norm forbids ASEAN members from talking about issues related to other members' internal affairs, and if PNG is let in, it might bring up the subject of West Papua. As [Liwe \(2019\)](#) puts it "as for ASEAN nations, they are barred by the bloc's non-interference principle from even insinuating concern about Papua."

Furthermore, PNG tends to align with Pacific nations that have interests, particularly economic and security interests with China, rather than ASEAN, as a result of China's growing influence and dominance in the region and its status as the second-largest bilateral donor to Pacific Island nations ([Lowy Institute, 2024](#)). The first Pacific nation to sign China's Belt and Road Initiative is PNG. The Solomon Islands-China security deal serves as evidence that PNG's national interests is closely linked to regional stability in the Pacific ([Kaiku, 2022](#)). Due to PNG's strong preference for Pacific and Melanesian countries, ASEAN will find it difficult or impossible to accept PNG as a new member, unlike East Timor.

In the outcome that PNG's application to seek full membership within ASEAN is declined, there may be several broader implications. Declining PNG may limit ASEAN's ability to establish a greater foothold within Melanesia and the Pacific at economic and geostrategic cost. PNG's position in the region is defined by its advantageous location in the Pacific, next to important maritime and shipping lanes ([Bal, 2025](#)). Furthermore, declining PNG's bid for full membership may raise questions within the MSG about the validity of the decision to grant full membership status to Indonesia within MSG ([Dugis & Wardhani, 2025](#); [Nanau, 2016](#); [Webb-Gannon & Elmslie, 2014](#)).

While questions about Pacific Leaders' perspectives and the broader implications for Melanesian geopolitics are important, they fall beyond the scope of this article. Future research could address these dimensions in greater depth, particularly by examining regional reactions within the Pacific Islands Forum and Melanesian Spearhead Group.

## CONCLUSION

This article has discussed the possibility of PNG's bid to join ASEAN and argued that its membership is unlikely in the foreseeable future. Drawing from a constructivist lens in international relations, three main factors support this argument. First, most literature



confirms PNG's geographical location in the South Pacific rather than Southeast Asia. This concern renders PNG's integration into ASEAN regionally incongruous, as accepting PNG would require ASEAN to redefine its geographical boundaries and blur the boundaries with the Pacific region. Second, the racial and cultural composition of PNG differs significantly from that of the current ASEAN members, as it is predominantly associated with Melanesia rather than Asia. This distinction further complicates the prospects for potential membership. Third, PNG's foreign policy has commonly put the values and interests of the Pacific and Melanesian regions ahead of those of ASEAN. This illustrates that PNG's strategic focus is more in line with its own regional context than with ASEAN's overall goals.

These findings contribute to the broader understanding and debate of regionalism and membership criteria in ASEAN. In particular, it emphasises that, in addition to formal diplomatic engagement, other factors play a crucial role in shaping regional inclusion, including geographical, cultural, and interest factors. This article highlights that participation in regional organizations like ASEAN is not solely determined by political will or economic interest, but is also socially and culturally constructed, thus strengthening insights from constructivist theory in International Relations.

However, this study has some limitations. It exclusively focuses on PNG and does not explore comparative cases of other states, seeking to become a member of ASEAN. This paper also relies too much on secondary data, which may not reflect internal government deliberations. Future studies could fill this gap by making a comparison of case studies to have a strong insight into the membership debate. Further studies may also consider including interviews with policymakers and regional experts.

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