



IRAN'S FIRST PIVOT TO ASEAN, 1997–2005: CORRIDOR DIPLOMACY AND A DEFERRED PARTNERSHIP

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ABSTRACT

Over the past three decades, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has occupied a recurrent yet understudied place in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran. While Iranian leaders have consistently signalled interest in developing relations with Southeast Asia, existing scholarship on Iran's Asia-Pacific policy has largely prioritised Tehran's relations with China or individual ASEAN member states. There is a pressing need for a deeper analysis of the roots of Iran's political and economic interest in ASEAN, the history of Iran-ASEAN relations and the evolution of Iran's overall policy towards Southeast Asia. This article examines Iran's first pivot towards ASEAN during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005). It argues that during this period, Iran made its first concerted effort to improve relations with ASEAN states and to leverage the ensuing momentum to secure Sectoral Dialogue Partner status with ASEAN. Iran launched numerous energy, transport, and logistics projects in Southeast Asia, and ASEAN states likewise initiated projects in Iran's energy and logistics sectors. Iran's bilateral deals with ASEAN states should be viewed as part of a coordinated corridor strategy rather than a set of isolated deals. The findings indicate that Iran sought to present itself to ASEAN leaders as a reliable energy partner and the optimal gateway to Central Asia, while addressing older security concerns about Iranian involvement with militant groupings in Southeast Asia and the export of Shia ideology. Methodologically, this article employs a qualitative historical approach, combining multi-archival research with process tracing across Iranian and ASEAN sources.

Keywords: Iran-ASEAN relations, corridor diplomacy, sectoral dialogue partnership, Southeast Asia, Look to the East Policy

INTRODUCTION

Iran and Southeast Asia had maintained historical and cultural ties long before the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979. During the new republic's first decade, however, the upheaval following the 1979 Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) severely constrained the country's political and economic capacity to revive and expand relations with the region. A more systematic re-engagement with the Asia-Pacific began only in the later years of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's presidency (1989–1997), as post-war reconstruction increased Iran's need for foreign investment, export markets and diversified economic partnerships. This orientation became more clearly articulated during Mohammad Khatami's presidency (1997–2005), when Iranian policymakers increasingly framed closer relations with Asian countries under broader concepts later described as the “Look to the East” and the Asianisation of Iranian foreign policy.

This gradual re-engagement with the Asia-Pacific under Rafsanjani and its further development during Khatami's presidency provides the historical background for scholarly debates over the emergence and objectives of Iran's "Look to the East" policy. The existing literature is not uniform and reflects significant disagreement. Several authors argued that "Look to the East" emerged primarily as a response to the deterioration of relations with the West and Iran's search for diplomatic and economic support during the nuclear standoff with the United States (US) and European Union (EU) states. From this perspective, it represented a fluctuating and pragmatically driven orientation rather than a coherent long-term strategy (Ehteshami and Bahgat 2019; Azad 2022; Perletta 2025). A second group of scholars traced its origins to the Rafsanjani administration. Saghafi-Ameri (2006), for example, argued that the policy began under Rafsanjani and was rooted in his positive view of countries such as Japan and Malaysia as potential development models for Iran. Zeltyn et al. (2024) similarly located the emergence of the discourse within the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs during the Rafsanjani administration, but argued that it was later politically appropriated and incorporated into Iran's domestic political discourse, particularly by conservative actors. For the purposes of this article, "Look to the East" is understood as a policy orientation that emerged within the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the 1990s and prioritised engagement with Asia-Pacific countries. As this article demonstrates, Iran regarded the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as a first-tier priority within this broader regional policy.

Writings on Iran-ASEAN relations remain closely embedded within broader debates on Iran's "Look to the East" policy, with significant conceptual spillover between the two literatures. Soltaninejad (2017) can be positioned as reinforcing the spillover from "Look to the East" debates into Iran-ASEAN studies, as it explicitly frames Iran's engagement with Southeast Asia as a politically driven extension of efforts to counter US pressure through economic ties. Similarly, Kibitiah (2025) frames Iran's engagement with Southeast Asia as part of its "Look to the East" policy, driven primarily by the need to overcome Western isolation and to leverage ASEAN's economic and geopolitical position.

Despite these contributions, three limitations persist in the existing literature. First, Iran-ASEAN relations are typically treated as a derivative of the broader "Look to the East" policy rather than as a distinct regional strategy with its own internal logic. Second, the empirical record of Iran's engagement with ASEAN between 1997 and 2005 remains fragmented, with limited use of archival material from either Iranian or Southeast Asian sources. Third, much of the literature interprets Iran's outreach as reactive, driven by sanctions and geopolitical isolation, rather than as a proactive attempt to construct a sustained regional presence.

This article addresses these gaps by examining Iran's first sustained engagement with ASEAN as a coherent policy project. It argues that Iran's outreach during the Khatami administration constituted a coordinated corridor strategy linking energy, logistics, and transport initiatives across Southeast Asia with Iran's own infrastructural and geographic assets, reflecting an early Iranian commitment to ASEAN centrality in both Southeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific. At the same time, this article demonstrates that the failure to institutionalise this engagement in the form of Sectoral Dialogue Partner status was shaped not only by external pressures but also by ASEAN's internal constraints and post-crisis priorities. Accordingly, this study pursues three objectives: (1) to reconstruct the structure and chronology of Iran's engagement with ASEAN between 1997 and 2005; (2) to identify the strategic logic underpinning this engagement through the concept of corridor diplomacy; and (3) to explain why this initiative did not culminate in formal institutional partnership.

METHODS

Methodologically, this study adopts a qualitative historical-analytical approach grounded in process tracing and multi-archival reconstruction. This study triangulates Iranian and Southeast Asian sources to reconstruct this pivot with maximum fidelity. Iranian sources include Ministry of Foreign Affairs archives, reports from Iranian embassies in Southeast Asia, the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Institute for Political and International Studies, and policy memoranda newly released by the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Department for Preservation of Documents. The ASEAN sources include documents from the ASEAN Secretariat Resource Centre, such as Standing Committee records, supplemented by Southeast Asian press coverage from *The Straits Times*, *New Straits Times*, *Kompas*, *The Nation*, and *Manila Times*. Memoirs of Iranian diplomats posted to Southeast Asia and interviews with former Iranian officials and officials from ASEAN member states provide qualitative context and help bridge archival gaps. This pluralist approach allows this article to stabilise chronology and actors and to show how policy was actually operationalised inside ministries and embassies.

The analysis is guided by two core analytical lenses. First, sectoral partnership is treated as an institutional mechanism through which external actors seek to embed themselves within ASEAN's technical and bureaucratic frameworks. Second, Iran's engagement is interpreted through the concept of corridor diplomacy, understood as the coordinated development of energy, transport, and logistics linkages across regions. These lenses provide the basis for analysing how Iran attempted to translate bilateral initiatives into a sustained regional presence within ASEAN structures.

By combining multi-archival evidence with this analytical framework, this article contributes to existing scholarship in three ways. It challenges the tendency to treat Iran-ASEAN relations as a secondary dimension of the "Look to the East" policy by demonstrating that Southeast Asia occupied a central place in Iran's Asia-Pacific strategy from the outset. It introduces new empirical material from Iranian and ASEAN sources to reconstruct this period in detail. Finally, it situates Iran's outreach within broader debates on ASEAN's external relations, showing how ASEAN evaluates and manages engagement from non-traditional partners.

DISCUSSION

Iranian State Discourses on Southeast Asia before 1997

Iran's pivot to ASEAN during the Khatami administration did not emerge in a vacuum. By the mid-1990s the Iranian foreign policy apparatus had already formulated a coherent, if low-priority, interest in Southeast Asia grounded in four ideas: (1) ASEAN's geographic position as a route to East Asian markets; (2) large Muslim populations, especially in Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei, viewed as potential partners on non-alignment and Islamic solidarity; (3) the promise of rapidly growing yet still price-sensitive consumer markets suitable for Iranian manufactured goods; and (4) a deep historical record of Persian presence in the Malay and Thai worlds. Crucially, ASEAN was not securitised inside Iran's national security establishment. Policy towards Southeast Asia fell to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the presidential administration, which enjoyed unusual autonomy to experiment with outreach.

Although Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei has repeatedly praised individual Southeast Asian states, his engagement with the region as a whole has remained limited. He referred to ASEAN by name only once—in December 1989, during a meeting with Sunni scholars—citing the organisation as an exemplar of regional co-operation (Office for the Preservation and Publication

of the Works of Grand Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei [OPPWK] 1989). Instead, his public remarks tended to emphasise Iran's historic role in the spread of Islam to the Malay world. In August 1992, for example, he told Iranian cultural officials that Islam had reached Indonesia and Malaysia not through missionaries but via Iranian traders (OPPWK 1992a). This framing also shaped his bilateral contacts: in November 1993 he described Indonesia to President Suharto as an "important Islamic country" with which Iran sought deeper solidarity (OPPWK 1993a), while a few months earlier he had told Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad that Islam could serve as a "factor of solidarity, understanding, co-operation and coexistence" among Muslim nations despite cultural differences (OPPWK 1993b). Invocations of historical Islamic ties and Islamic unity subsequently became a standard theme of Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs outreach to Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei, persisting well into the 2020s.

Khamenei also showed sensitivity to the domestic constraints of his Southeast Asian interlocutors. In a 1992 address to the directors of Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting Channel 2, he noted that Indonesian and Malaysian state broadcasters sought to limit overtly Islamic political content (OPPWK 1992b), signalling an early assessment of how governments in the region managed political Islam. Iranian policymakers would later internalise this ambivalence, employing Islamic solidarity as an entry point but recognising its limits as a binding force. Vietnam occupied a distinct symbolic niche: cited by Khamenei more than twenty-five times, it was framed as an anti-imperialist exemplar. In May 1993, he told President Lê Đức Anh that Vietnamese "national resistance and courage" provided a natural foundation for bilateral ties (OPPWK 1994).

Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, president from 1989 to 1997 and the second most powerful figure in the Islamic Republic, translated these broad orientations into tentative policy. His published diaries by the Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani Documents Centre reveal early Southeast Asia deliberations, and praise for the economic progress of some ASEAN states. Four constraints limited progress towards increasing relations with ASEAN during his first term: ASEAN's perceived support for the Khmer Rouge, the early Iranian view of Southeast Asia as a great-power arena rather than a coherent regional bloc, Iran's post-war reconstruction priorities and its focus on nearer security theatres (the Persian Gulf, Caucasus, and Central Asia).

Nevertheless, Rafsanjani displayed a sustained interest. As early as June 1984, then still Majles Speaker, he devoted a rather long Friday sermon to condemning the Khmer Rouge's massacre of Cambodian Muslims and criticising Indonesia and Malaysia for supporting the Khmer Rouge at the United Nations (UN) (Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani Documents Centre, Office for the Publication of the Culture of the Revolution [RDC-OPCR] 1984). Given the available documents, this experience left him sceptical of ASEAN's political consistency and convinced of the limits of Islamic solidarity in shaping state behaviour. After the 1991 Paris Peace Agreements and Sihanouk's return, he warmed to the bloc. Iran established diplomatic relations with Cambodia in 1992, and Rafsanjani met Sihanouk that September at the Non-Aligned Movement summit in Jakarta (RDC-OPCR 1992); out of all the scenarios for Cambodia, the return of Sihanouk was the ideal one in Iranian calculations.

ASEAN enlargement also acted as a signal. Vietnam's observer status and Treaty of Amity and Cooperation accession in 1993 led Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs analysts to describe ASEAN as "becoming a vital framework (of interaction) in international affairs" (Beigi 1996, 2). Rafsanjani toured Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei in October 1994, telling reporters that ASEAN sought access to Central Asia "through us" and repeated the theme during the Philippine president's visit to Tehran in March 1995 (RDC-OPCR 1994). His administration also floated the idea of Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO)–ASEAN cooperation, framing Iran as a bridge between the ECO and Southeast Asia to offset sanctions and anchor trade arrangements.

Despite this momentum, Iranian capacity lagged. According to Hashemi-Nik (1996), then head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Southeast Asia Department, the ministry was still training its first dedicated Southeast Asia cadre in the mid-1990s. Internal reporting on the region was comparatively thin before 1997, and Iranian investment appetite remained low as the country sought foreign financing for its own reconstruction. Nevertheless, Rafsanjani's outreach laid bureaucratic and intellectual foundations, introducing corridor concepts, cultivating embassy networks, and legitimising Southeast Asia as a site for diversified diplomacy.

Therefore, by 1997, Iran's leadership viewed Southeast Asia positively, drew on a stock of Islamic and historical narratives to engage its Muslim-majority members, and began experimenting with institutional linkages through ECO-ASEAN discourse. Yet, engagement remained essentially second-tier—technocratic, exploratory, and unsynchronised. What changed after August 1997 was not the idea of turning to ASEAN but the political environment that enabled it.

Khatami's Pivot to ASEAN

Several factors caused significant shifts in Iranian foreign relations beginning in and around 1997, leading to greatly increased interest and action in improving relations with countries of the East, in particular ASEAN and its member states (as shown in Figure 1). Mohammad Khatami's upset victory in the Iranian presidential election on 23 May 1997 allowed him to pursue noticeable reforms in the domestic and foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

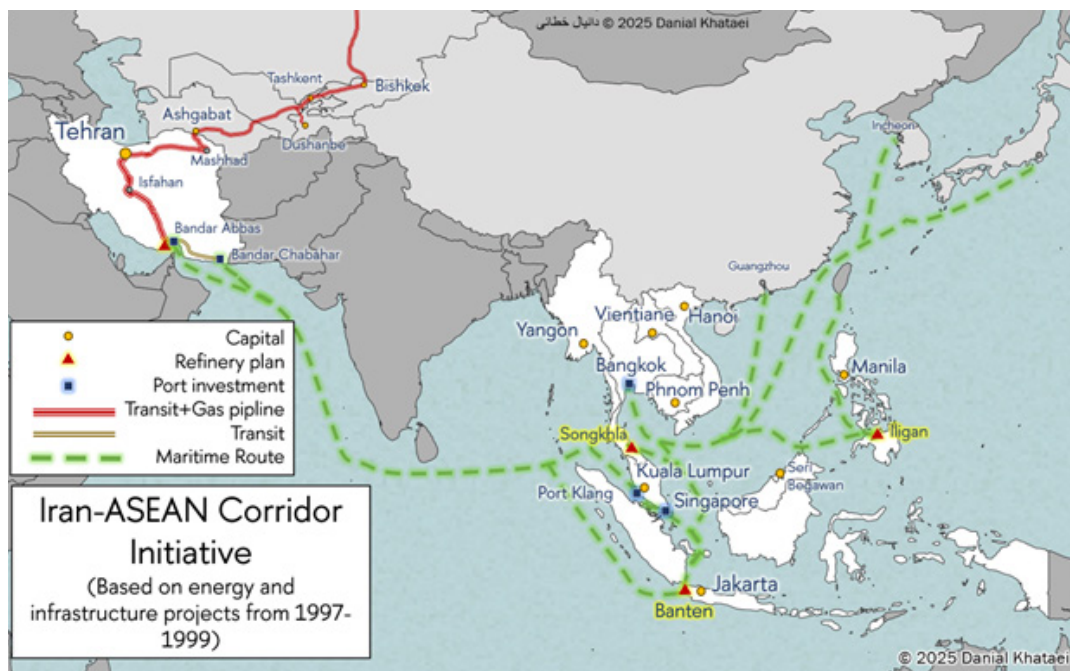


Figure 1: Map of the Iran-ASEAN Corridor Initiative (illustrated by the author).

In terms of foreign policy, Khatami's main goal can be summarised as an attempt to end Iran's international isolation and to mend relations with the West. His initial years in office began with promising improvements in relations with the EU, but this was later overshadowed by geopolitical events in the region, including complete estrangement from the US, the beginning of the War on Terror, and the securitisation of the Iranian nuclear programme. As Khatami's first major foreign policy achievement, in November 1997, twelve European ambassadors returned to Tehran after a seven-month diplomatic standoff between the EU and Iran over the judgment of a Berlin court that implicated Iranian leadership in the 1992 Mykonos restaurant bombing

(*Free Europe/Radio Liberty* [RFE/RL] 1997). The positive impact of Khatami's election on EU policy towards Iran cannot be overlooked, as his election and his moderate message became the subject of noticeable discussion in the global press, as well as in the countries of ASEAN, where Khatami was seen as a herald of an Iranian comeback to international politics (*Los Angeles Times-Washington Post News Service* 1997). By the end of 1997, Khatami had openly called for reaching a diplomatic understanding with the US. Still, the passing of the Iran and Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA)—which targeted all international businesses that made investments of over USD20 million in development of Iranian petroleum (US Congress 1996)—cast a long shadow that would directly affect energy and logistics projects linked to ASEAN.

The activation of Iran's pivot to ASEAN commenced immediately after the Mykonos verdict (10 April 1997), when the Berlin High Criminal Court accused the Iranian government of being involved in the bombing of a meeting of Kurdish separatist figures at a restaurant in Berlin called Mykonos. Following the verdict, several EU countries recalled their ambassadors from Tehran. In a speech delivered on 1 May 1997, just three weeks before Iran's presidential election, Deputy Foreign Minister for Asia-Pacific Alaeddin Boroujerdi, referring to the Mykonos verdict, informed five ASEAN ambassadors in Tehran that a new Asia First policy had been adopted by Iran and that "Look to the East' will be brighter in the future", "Iran's ties with Asian countries will be expanded with greater momentum, and Europe will be the main loser in this game" (Lim 1997a, 22). On the previous day, the foreign minister in a press conference had called "ECO, SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) and ASEAN" the three main economic poles of the region and declared: "We have no worries about decrease of relations with Europe" (*Jomhuri-e Eslami* 1997, 11).

What this article describes as Iran's pivot to ASEAN was a strategic and comprehensive engagement by the Iranian state towards ASEAN; the pivot was, in actuality, part of Iran's broader turn towards Asia, which entailed simultaneous engagements with China, Japan and to a secondary extent South Korea. Several key ideas of the overall Asianisation strategy are evident in pre-1997 discourses by the Iranian Foreign Ministry, suggesting that the change of presidential administrations in August 1997 did not disrupt continuity in the policy formulation process within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its Asia-Pacific Department. The only major change was the appointment of Mohsen Aminzadeh as Deputy Minister for Asia-Pacific (1997–2005). Aminzadeh continued the policy suggestions formulated before the Khatami Administration; ASEAN-oriented plans of action likely benefited from his close connections with the reformist elite and his increased standing in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs after being assigned the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) portfolio while retaining the Asia-Pacific portfolio later in 2000–2001.

Iran's energy and infrastructure agenda in Southeast Asia must be viewed as a single, integrated policy rather than two discrete tracks. It is possible to infer from available material that the core Iranian concept was to build a chain of logistical–industrial nodes positioned along the principal sea lanes that carried Iranian hydrocarbons and merchandise through the Malacca Strait into the South China Sea. These nodes were conceived as a mix of port assets—acquired through equity stakes or participation in operating consortia—and downstream industrial facilities tied to Iran's energy value chain. Together, they were intended to underpin Iranian shipping, lower transaction and handling costs, and create predictable points for offloading, storage, and transshipment. On the industrial side, Iran envisaged petrochemical refineries and related processing facilities that would move a larger share of value-added activity closer to Southeast Asian demand centres; these sites were designed to deepen Iran's downstream footprint and to lock in long-term offtake and supply relationships with ASEAN partners. Crucially, Tehran packaged this maritime strategy with a reciprocal overland offer to the ASEAN ruling elite: guaranteeing a reliable land corridor for Southeast Asian goods to Central Asia and energy from Central Asia to Southeast Asia, running from Iran's southern and southeastern gateways (Bandar

Abbas and Chabahar) through Turkmenistan. This two-corridor design—maritime integration in Southeast Asia coupled with continental access to Central Asian markets and hydrocarbons—was presented as a mutually beneficial bargain.

The most recurrent theme in available public statements from both Iran and ASEAN officials was the gateway rhetoric. Iran repeatedly tried to signal to ASEAN leaders that it was the cheapest, safest, and most promising land route to the markets of the CIS and West Asia. At the same time, ASEAN states each sought to portray themselves as the best market entry point for Iran. A few examples illustrate this point: “(Iran) has a special relationship with Thailand and views the Kingdom as a gateway to other ASEAN markets” said Iranian ambassador to Thailand Ramin Mehmanparast in 1997 (*The Nation* 1997, A3); Malaysia’s deputy trade minister in 1997 urged “the Iranian business community” to view Malaysia as “the ASEAN gateway” (Lim 1997b, 2). Conversely, Iranian envoys told partners that “Iran is the only gateway to the prospective large markets of Central Asia” (Fereydoun 2000, 4).

In a 2002 speech to Malaysian businessmen in Kuala Lumpur, Iranian President Khatami stated:

Iran also enjoys a special geo-political position bordering fifteen countries in the sensitive and strategic regions of the Middle East and the Persian Gulf. Iran is not only the road connecting Europe to the Indian subcontinent but also the most economical and shortest route to Central Asia and the Caucasus. The idea of reviving the Silk Road, once the safest and shortest commercial route of the ancient world, has prompted us to restore this vital commercial highway. We hope that by utilising the most modern means of communication and by equipping this road with the state-of-the-art facilities, we will once again restore Iran’s position as one of the most important countries for development of trade and industry in the region. (BBC Monitoring Middle East 2002, 1)

It must be emphasised that discussions about revitalising the Silk Road or the broader Iranian corridor-building strategy were not exclusive to interactions with Southeast Asian states; they were replicated in Iran’s diplomatic outreach to other regions. Central Asia, which was being marketed to ASEAN leaders as a significant market, was also one of the epicentres of Iranian discussions on corridor building with Iranian president Khatami pushing for the Central Asia-Iran energy corridor during his tour of Central Asia in 2002 (Recknagel 2002). Similarly, during Khatami’s state visit to China earlier that year, both sides emphasised commitment to the revitalisation of the Silk Road and transportation projects (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China 2002). In general, it can be observed that the Iranian state in this period was keen to portray itself as an important and safe regional energy and transport hub.

The general architecture of Iranian corridor-building aspirations was quickly translated into a project portfolio in Southeast Asia. In Malaysia, the hinge of the maritime leg, Petronas Carigali’s acquisition of roughly 30% equity in the Sirri offshore development placed a Malaysian national oil company inside Iran’s upstream just as Western majors re-entered under buy-back terms. The South Pars gas project deal, a joint collaboration of French Total, Russian Gazprom, and Malaysian Petronas, was one of the largest projects initiated during Khatami’s first term, worth around USD2 billion (*BERNAMA* 1997).

On the Iranian side of the hinge, utilities and logistics were built to mirror ASEAN nodes: a Thai-built 140-km gas pipeline linked South Pars to Kish (Yunus 2004); the Bandar Abbas–Qeshm bulk-water trunk followed (Yunus 2004); and, most visibly, the Bandar Abbas distripark inside the Shahid Rajaei Special Economic Zone was developed through a 1997–2000 series of agreements with Port Klang Authority (up to 49% equity), planned as a 21-hectare, MYR50 million estate for value-added packaging, warehousing, and intermediate industries—the Iranian twin to Port Klang’s own distribution park (Durairaj 2000).

In Thailand, following high-level exchanges in late 1998, Tehran and Bangkok advanced a joint-venture plan for a large refinery in the south – experts from both sides were already working on a ~200,000 bpd refinery intended to deliver refined oil to the Far East, paired with a reciprocal Thai fertiliser plant in Iran (*Tehran Times* 1998). In corridor terms, this would have placed processing capacity close to Southeast Asian demand centres and aligned long-horizon offtake with Iranian feedstock. The initiative reached expert work-ups and in-principle joint venture statements but never reached a final investment decision in the available record.

In Indonesia, the Banten refinery proposal, floated in the late 1990s and revived around 2010 (OANA News 2009), reflected Jakarta's drive to reduce dependency on imported refined products while anchoring value-added capacity on Java. For Iran, Banten was framed as a reciprocal pillar in a two-way foreign direct investment scaffolding, positioning Indonesia as a downstream node in the corridor. Domestic political churn, competition from other investors and sanctions-linked financing constraints hindered advancement beyond conceptual revival.

In the Philippines, the Iligan proposal of 1997—initiated by the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao under Governor Nur Misuari—envisioned a refinery with a capacity of approximately 150,000 bpd at an estimated cost of USD1 billion (*Asian Wall Street Journal* 1997). The logistics rationale centred on Iligan's deep-water harbour and proximity to inter-island routes, making it a distribution hub for refined products across Visayas–Mindanao. Politically, Iran's entry point via an autonomous region—rather than only through the central government—demonstrated its willingness to use decentralised frameworks to gain a foothold.

The maritime spine of the corridor was supplied by the Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines (IRISL). The launch of a regular IRISL weekly service in 2000 created a rotation linking Bandar Abbas and Bandar Imam Khomeini with Port Klang (Westport) and, from there, to Hong Kong, Kaohsiung, Incheon, and Singapore, with feeder connections into Indonesia and Vietnam (Durairaj 2000). Operating with roughly eight vessels in the ~500 Twenty-foot Equivalent Unit class, modest in global terms but sufficient for cadence, the string made Port Klang the critical hinge for transshipment and redistribution, integrating Persian Gulf exports with intra-ASEAN networks.

Non-energy anchors widened sectoral interdependence and reduced frictions: a 1996 memorandum between the Malay Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Iran Chamber addressed Malaysia's cement shortage via imports with an explicit pathway to manufacturing on a joint-venture basis; agricultural swaps (oil for rice, palm oil, and rubber) with Malaysia and Thailand were explored to reduce dollar exposure and stabilise flows (*Xinhua News Agency* 2000); and early satellite/telecoms deals signalled technology cooperation alongside energy and logistics (BBC Monitoring Middle East 1999). In parallel, embassies invested in personal diplomacy (cultivating ties with the Thai monarchy; showing consistent support for Sihanouk; keeping warm rapport with Mahathir) and multilateral coordination (Iranian lobbying for Supachai Panitchpakdi in the World Trade Organization's Director-General race (Mehmanparast and Palandi 2020); ASEAN voices softening initiatives critical of Iran; Iranian sympathy for ASEAN's sovereignty line on Myanmar), embedding corridor logics inside elite networks and institutional routines.

This article discusses numerous Iran-ASEAN deals and projects, raising a crucial question. Did the sudden surge in relations between Iran and ASEAN countries provoke a backlash from the US? The sources analysed in this article do not suggest the presence of a strict sanctions regime on Iran at that time, similar to the one later imposed following the nuclear standoff between the Ahmadinejad administration (2005–2013) and the West. The primary US constraint on Iran-ASEAN relations during the Khatami era was the ILSA enacted by the US Congress, which

targeted all international businesses investing over USD20 million in Iranian oil development. Effectively, the first major US secondary sanctions law applied to non-US businesses.

After the Total-Gazprom-Petronas consortium deal in 1997, the US began exerting pressure on Malaysia, claiming that the deal fell within ILSA (*BERNAMA* 1997). What ensued was a major political standoff between Malaysia under PM Mahathir Mohammad and the US. Kuala Lumpur viewed US secondary sanctions as illegitimate extraterritoriality and supported Petronas to go ahead with the deal (Baharuddin 1997). After a year of public back-and-forth, in May 1998, the US and EU reached an understanding to waive penalties for the South Pars consortium (Reuters 1998a), but cast a shadow of compliance over future initiatives.

Meanwhile, not all ASEAN projects in Iran survived US scrutiny. As US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright stated in May 1998, “While unsuccessful in stopping the South Pars deal, our efforts to discourage the Indonesian firm Bakrie from proceeding with the development of the Balal oilfield contributed to Bakrie’s apparent decision to withdraw, although the impact of the Asian financial crisis was also important” (Albright 1998). In the sources analysed in this article, no other significant case of US scrutiny over Iran-ASEAN relations is evident, apart from instances of re-exporting US arms components to Iran via ASEAN intermediaries. Overall, the only major source of US pressure on Iran-ASEAN interactions was the ILSA, and this was seemingly applied with little operational scrutiny.

The 1999 Sectoral Dialogue Partner Request

Within ASEAN’s external relations architecture, dialogue partnership functions as a graduated instrument for structuring cooperation with extra-regional states. Full Dialogue Partners engage across the political–security, economic, and socio-cultural tracks. In contrast, Sectoral Dialogue Partners participate selectively in agreed technical domains such as energy, transport, and trade facilitation without the full political overlay. Sectoral status institutionalises working groups, work plans, and secretariat interfaces (ASEAN Secretariat 2026); it routinises contact with line ministries and creates predictable channels for projects and funding, but does not confer agenda-setting authority. In short, sectoral dialogue is the administrative chassis on which practical cooperation runs—lighter than a full partnership yet designed to outlast cabinet cycles and individual ambassadors.

Against that backdrop, Iran’s 8 June 1999 application for Sectoral Dialogue Partner status can be read as the perceived capstone of its initial pivot to ASEAN; the administrative step that would secure the longevity of momentum generated by diplomatic engagements and energy, logistics, and investment proposals. Iran’s letter, signed by Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi and delivered to ASEAN Standing Committee chair S. Jayakumar, stressed that Iran could help meet ASEAN’s energy needs, had the capacity to implement joint oil and petrochemical projects, and that its transport network could serve as a corridor for ASEAN goods into Central Asia (ASEAN Secretariat 1999). This framing mapped directly onto Tehran’s corridor concept developed in bilateral exchanges.

ASEAN’s reply, as recorded by the Standing Committee, was procedural and cautious. Singapore was asked to inform Tehran that ASEAN was observing a moratorium on new dialogue partnerships until July 2000, pending a review of the dialogue system and the guidelines for granting status (ASEAN Secretariat 1999). The available documents offer little insight into the moratorium’s internal rationale. Still, the most defensible inference is that it reflected post-crisis constraints on capacity and focus: member governments preferred to consolidate existing commitments, given scarce administrative and financial resources, and to reassess external relations before admitting additional partners. The Asian Financial Crisis of 1997–1998 had

shifted elite attention inward; output contractions, fiscal consolidations and financial-sector rescues tightened ASEAN's coordinating bandwidth; and new cooperative formats such as ASEAN+3 redirected energy towards crisis management and regional financial governance (Ang 2019). In this environment, admitting new partners risked overextension and the dilution of limited capacity.

The obvious question is why the Iranian state was pushing its strategic venture to ASEAN at a time of great financial upheaval. The record does not yield a single answer. Iranian officials at times portrayed the Asian Financial Crisis as an opening: Western and Japanese partners had retrenched, leaving diplomatic and commercial space that Iran could fill. Yet Iran's own fiscal and sanctions constraints made large-scale countercyclical finance improbable. A more plausible reading is that policymakers sought to lock in long-horizon arrangements—energy offtake, refinery siting, liner services, barter/swap mechanisms—whose institutionalisation did not require immediate, front-loaded cash. In that sense, the request for sectoral dialogue, the emphasis on corridor logistics and the cultivation of personal diplomacy aimed less at short-term financing than at positioning Iran for the post-crisis recovery.

Internally, assessments of the crisis were uneven across agencies and over time. Iranian Foreign Ministry memoranda in 1997 tended to treat the shock as transient, with limited expected spillover (Pirkarami 1997). Only by late 1997 did the Ministry of Commerce begin to map the depth of the contraction and its likely effects on Iranian energy sales, foregrounding demand compression and payment risk. Not until late 1998, in the wake of Suharto's fall, did Iranian analyses systematically examine how the crisis was reshaping ASEAN domestic politics – party realignments, elite turnover, and rising sensitivities to external pressure (*Barrasi-Haye Bazargani* 1998). Explanations likewise diverged: political narratives in Tehran emphasised the agency of international speculators or “Israeli finance”, while economic briefs concentrated on structural vulnerabilities – lax capital-account regulation, fragile banking supervision, corporate leverage, and currency-maturity mismatches (Kia 2000, 20). This oscillation between conjecture about hostile external actors and technocratic diagnoses helps explain why Iran pressed ahead diplomatically even as the economic case for rapid gains remained contingent.

ASEAN practice also constrained Iran's bid. Sectoral (and especially full) dialogue partnerships were typically granted to states with already-existing, deep cooperation in specific sectors. By that standard, Iran's case in 1999 was incipient: most Iran-ASEAN initiatives were still in the inception or early implementation phase. Yet bureaucratic precedent appears to have mattered. The fact that Pakistan obtained Sectoral Dialogue Partner status in 1993 plausibly emboldened the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to judge that a pathway existed despite incomplete programmatic depth (Nasiri 1997). Tehran seems to have treated sectoral status not only as recognition of existing ties but as an instrument to consolidate and deepen them.

Between 2000 and 2005, Iran-ASEAN relations shifted into a phase marked less by grand diplomatic overtures than by sustained efforts to consolidate and expand the corridor of economic initiatives already in motion. Iranian policymakers appeared to recognise that the Asian Financial Crisis had narrowed ASEAN's institutional bandwidth for new partnerships. Yet, they pursued a long-term strategy to embed Iran more deeply in Southeast Asian economic networks, with the implicit view that a future request for formal partnership might be reconsidered once conditions stabilised. High-level contacts with all major ASEAN states were maintained, including at the presidential/premier level, the head of parliament level, and the ministerial level. IRISL consolidated its shipping rotations through Port Klang and Singapore, ensuring regular weekly connectivity into East Asia and feeding into Indonesia and Vietnam (International Association of Ports and Harbors 2000). Utility and industrial enablement projects in Qeshm and Bandar Abbas advanced, supported by Malaysian-linked engineering inputs,

positioning Iran as a logistical node capable of interfacing with ASEAN demand. Agricultural swap arrangements—including palm oil and rice—were formalised with Malaysia and Indonesia, offsetting Iran's imports with energy exports (Ashayagachat 2002). Petronas's continued equity presence in Sirri and South Pars gave Iran durable links into Malaysia's upstream profile, even as sanctions constrained Western majors. Diplomatic reporting also noted the inauguration of joint trade fairs and study missions. At the same time, exploratory talks with Thailand and Indonesia on petrochemical and refining projects persisted, even if final investment decisions were never reached.

Iranian officials thus sought to build cumulative weight through practical agreements and sustained economic contacts. Trade promotion missions became a central vehicle. Between 2000 and 2005, several delegations from Tehran visited Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, and Vietnam, signing memoranda of understanding between chambers of commerce and organising trade fairs. These missions did not create spectacular new projects but demonstrated continuity and seriousness, gradually embedding Iran in ASEAN commercial circuits. Energy and industrial ventures remained an important part of the agenda. Iranian negotiators floated proposals for joint petrochemical blending and storage facilities in Malaysia and Indonesia to process Iranian feedstock for regional distribution. They proposed to the Philippines a study of geothermal plant construction in Iran (*Xinhua News Agency* 2004). Indonesia intermittently revisited earlier energy talks (*Middle East News Online* 2000), including ideas about refinery cooperation and even long-term liquefied natural gas supply; PTT Exploration and Production of Thailand made bids for exploration projects in Iran (*Oil Daily* 2004). These exploratory exchanges underscored that Southeast Asian capitals continued to regard Iran as a potential energy partner, even if macroeconomic and political factors prevented binding commitments.

Iranian diplomacy in this period also extended into softer domains such as tourism and culture. Memoranda of understanding were signed between Iran and several ASEAN states. Embassies in Kuala Lumpur and Bangkok reported agreements designed to boost two-way tourism, including steps towards more regular direct flight arrangements (BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific 2004). Tourism was framed not simply as economic exchange but as a way of deepening cultural familiarity and countering lingering stereotypes of Iran. This coincided with efforts to anchor Iran in Islamic and Asian cultural narratives that could resonate in majority-Muslim states like Malaysia and Indonesia, as well as in Buddhist-majority Thailand, where personal diplomacy with the royal house created an avenue for trust-building. Finally, Tehran began exploring financial and banking linkages, with particular interest in Malaysia's Islamic finance sector. Pilot projects were considered, though concrete follow-through remained limited. Even so, the pursuit of Islamic finance reflected a consistent theme of the early 2000s: building dense but modest linkages across trade, finance, culture, and energy. Collectively, these initiatives marked a period in which Iran acknowledged the need for deeper integration with Southeast Asia, not as an immediate prelude to a dialogue partnership but as preparation for a later opportunity when ASEAN itself was on a stronger financial and institutional footing.

ASEAN Elite and the Iranian Conundrum

The very fact that Iran was able to pursue multiple agreements and projects in Southeast Asia at the turn of the century indicates that the overall attitude of ASEAN leaders towards engagement with Tehran was favourable. There is no evidence in the record of categorical rejection of Iranian initiatives; on the contrary, the accumulation of visits, memoranda, and investment proposals suggests that Tehran was consistently welcomed as a potential partner. At the same time, this receptivity was not unconditional. ASEAN leaders harboured concerns that could have limited or complicated the relationship, and Iranian diplomacy was therefore required to recognise and

address them to maintain momentum. The Iranian state's ability to secure a place in Southeast Asia was thus contingent not only on the attractiveness of its projects but also on its capacity to manage ASEAN elites' reservations, turning potential obstacles into manageable conditions for cooperation.

The reservations that shaped ASEAN elites' caution towards Iran clustered around discrete themes. First were internal security anxieties: whether Iranian actors might interface with Muslim separatist movements in Southeast Asia, and whether Shia religious outreach would be inseparable from revolutionary political messaging. Second were questions about political durability within Iran itself, especially the longevity of President Khatami's opening and the risk that subsequent leadership turnover would unwind commitments. Third were external-alignment concerns: Iran's contacts with North Korea and the possibility of missile or other military technology transfers, alongside expanding nuclear and defence cooperation with China, which raised proliferation alarms among some ASEAN policymakers. Fourth was the reputational drag associated with narcotics transit and sanctions-evasion networks using regional hubs. Khatami's reconciliation project with the West did not survive the 2005 presidential transition; the ensuing nuclear impasse and its repercussions for Iran's external relations fall outside the scope of this article.

Iran-ASEAN diplomacy in the late 1990s opened against a backdrop of allegations that Tehran maintained links to Muslim separatist movements in the region. Contemporary ASEAN press and Iranian materials alike register these anxieties, with Iranian documents characterising them as "wrongful allegations of support for separatist movements" (Boroujerdi 2002, 194). The groups most often cited were the Patani United Liberation Organisation in southern Thailand, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in Mindanao, and the Free Aceh Movement in Indonesia, alongside references to ties with extremist personalities in Brunei. Historically, the charge drew credibility from earlier episodes: Patani United Liberation Organisation (PULO) maintained an office in Tehran, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) reportedly had contacts with Iran in the 1980s, and in 1979 Iran suspended oil exports to the Philippines in protest over violence against Muslims and Manila's failure to implement the 1976 Tripoli Agreement (Liow 2006). This legacy ensured that security services and political elites in several ASEAN capitals read Iran's renewed activism through a security lens.

The evidentiary base, however, is uneven. Beyond the PULO office and the MNLF's earlier footprint, there is sparse documentation in the available record of Iranian operational links to the MILF or the Free Aceh Movement. Rumours circulated about training for Acehnese cadres, but these claims remain unverified and difficult to source. What is clearer is the policy inflexion around the late 1990s. Thai and regional reporting indicated that any material or channelled support visible in earlier years was curtailed by the end of the decade (Pisan 2010). From this point, Iranian representations to ASEAN governments framed engagement with Muslim constituencies as political and cultural rather than paramilitary, and officials increasingly described prior allegations as misreadings of Iran's broader Islamic diplomacy.

Managing this concern became a recurrent diplomatic task. Iranian embassies emphasised non-interference and respect for host-state sovereignty, and they placed their outreach within recognised multilateral frameworks such as the Organisation of the Islamic Conference. In meetings with Thai, Filipino, and Indonesian counterparts, Iranian officials presented a consistent line: Tehran would back dialogue and social accommodation with Muslim minorities, but only through peaceful channels. Embassy reporting describes direct appeals to pursue political settlements with insurgent groups and public messaging that de-linked Shia religious programming from revolutionary agitation (BBC Monitoring Middle East 2003). This repositioning allowed ASEAN leaders to distinguish between Iran's cultural presence and the

region's domestic insurgencies without requiring either side to relitigate the past. The practical outcome by the early 2000s was a reduction in the salience of the separatist support issue as a blocker to cooperation. Residual caution persisted in security agencies, and the topic did not disappear from elite conversation, but it no longer dominated bilateral agendas.

Concerns about Iranian *tabligh* activities, preaching of the Shia faith, surfaced repeatedly in Southeast Asia, where religious outreach was often read through a security and state-society lens. In Indonesia and Malaysia, periodic crackdowns on Shia congregations and publishing reflected the view among segments of the bureaucracy and ulama councils that Shiism, when tied to Iranian cultural centres, scholarships, and clerical visits, could function as a channel of state influence (Vltchek 2009; Musa and Tan 2017). Officials worried less about sectarian theology *per se* than about the possibility that *tabligh* might diffuse a revolutionary repertoire and a doctrine of political Islam perceived as corrosive to secular-national institutions and to carefully managed religious pluralism. This anxiety was sharpened by memories of the 1980s and early 1990s, when Iranian rhetoric foregrounded revolutionary solidarity and made it harder for host governments to separate cultural programming from ideological export.

Under Khatami, the tone and practice of outreach shifted in ways that ASEAN elites generally welcomed. The emphasis shifted towards cultural diplomacy, academic exchange, and interfaith dialogue, couched in the language of the Dialogue of Civilisations, respect for sovereignty, and compliance with local religious regulations. Iranian embassies framed *tabligh* as civic education and heritage rather than political mobilisation, and signalled acceptance of host-state limits on proselytisation. This recalibration did not eliminate domestic sensitivities in Indonesia or Malaysia, where enforcement ebbed and flowed with local politics. Still, it lowered the perceived risk that religious engagement was a proxy for regime export. The result was a more manageable environment in which cultural ties could coexist with state-to-state cooperation in energy, trade, and logistics.

Concerns within ASEAN about Iranian contacts with North Korea centred on the risk of missile-technology transfers and their downstream effects on regional security debates (Klintworth 1998). Contemporary reporting tracked Iran's acquisition path through North Korean and Chinese channels, noting Iranian fielding or testing of Scud-class systems and medium-range missiles with North Korean lineage; a widely cited 1998 report described Iran's successful test of a ~1,300-km missile "bought from North Korea" (*New York Times* 1998, 7). These worries surfaced explicitly in ASEAN venues: on the sidelines of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in Phnom Penh (June 2003), Japanese Foreign Minister Yoriko Kawaguchi and US Secretary of State Colin Powell exchanged views on North Korea's programme and also registered concern about Iran's suspected nuclear activities, underscoring how North Korea-Iran linkages bled into Southeast Asian risk assessments (BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific 2003).

The spectre of procurement networks using regional nodes added to unease; for example, US authorities charged a Singapore businessman in 1997 in an alleged scheme to ship US missile parts to Iran, an episode that kept the proliferation file proximal to ASEAN trading hubs (Reuters 1998b). A parallel strand involved China-Iran nuclear and military ties. US and open reporting catalogued Chinese assistance to Iran's nuclear fuel-cycle know-how and missile programmes in the 1990s, including research reactors, UF6 plant design work and transfers of CSS-8 components and guidance tooling – flows that fed ASEAN apprehensions about proliferation pathways. Washington's diplomacy pressed to cap these channels (Reuters/AFP 1998); Chinese assurances and halts in 1997 were read in the region as evidence that the most acute transfer routes could be throttled, even as ARF interlocutors continued to flag Iran's programme as a live non-proliferation issue. After Pakistan's Chagai tests and North Korean activity, ASEAN's baseline moved towards categorical opposition to proliferation in the Indo-Pacific.

After 11 September 2001, counter-terrorism moved to the centre of ASEAN's security agenda, shaped by subsequent attacks in Southeast Asia and by intensified cooperation with external partners through the ARF and related mechanisms. The documentary record surveyed for this article does not indicate that ASEAN leaders associated Iran with Al-Qaeda or with its operational networks in the region; the focus of elite concern fell instead on transnational Sunni extremist cells active in Indonesia, the southern Philippines and parts of Malaysia, as well as on the financing, safe-haven, and law-enforcement gaps they exploited. Consequently, counter-terrorism initiatives launched in the early 2000s did not treat Iran as a direct security threat to Southeast Asia, and they proceeded in parallel with the pragmatic economic and diplomatic engagements with Tehran described elsewhere in this article.

A further, often overlooked, dimension of the ASEAN elite's risk calculus concerned narcotics flows from Afghanistan transiting Iran and moving onward to Southeast Asia by sea. In the late 1990s, ASEAN security agencies flagged the Golden Crescent supply as a potential threat vector, with Iran cast less as an origin than as a transit corridor whose maritime links could be exploited by traffickers (*New Straits Times* 1997). Tehran's response sought to recode this perception. Iranian authorities expanded border fortifications along the Afghan frontier, invested in interdiction and customs controls at Persian Gulf ports, and intensified cooperation with multilateral counter-narcotics bodies. By 1998, these efforts won outside acknowledgement, with the US removing both Iran and Malaysia from its "drug pariah" category (Lippman 1998), a symbolic shift that reduced one line of stigma in ASEAN deliberations. Although comprehensive regional arrangements would only emerge later, Iran and several ASEAN states developed, in the 2010s, a de facto pattern of operational cooperation on information sharing and seizures, whose discussion falls outside the scope of this article.

Having examined the concerns that shaped ASEAN leaders' attitudes towards Iran, it is worth recalling the perceived benefits of engaging with Tehran. From a strategic perspective, the foremost attraction was energy security through diversification. Iran offered scale, proximity to established sea lanes and the prospect of long-horizon supply relationships insulated from short-term market shocks. Engagement promised to broaden ASEAN's portfolio of crude, condensate and petrochemical inputs, and to place part of that portfolio within arrangements that rewarded reliability and predictability rather than episodic spot purchases. The value was not only volumetric: it included pricing leverage vis-à-vis other suppliers, product-slate flexibility for refineries oriented to regional demand, and resilience in the face of geopolitical disruptions that periodically affect Middle Eastern flows.

A second benefit concerned access to Western markets. Iran's overland and port infrastructure provided ASEAN with a practical interface to Central Asia and, by extension, the Caspian and Caucasus corridors. Ties with Iran could translate into improved routing options for goods, learning effects in port and logistics management, and an additional platform for ASEAN firms to seek contracts, investment stakes and services business in West and Central Asia. The relationship also promised political-economy dividends: diversification of external partnerships, reinforcement of ASEAN's role as a connector between the Middle East and East Asia, bargaining power in dealings with other major suppliers and buyers, and channels for Islamic finance and standards cooperation that reduced friction in cross-regional exchange. Even without immediate institutional recognition, these gains made engagement with Iran a rational complement to ASEAN's existing economic architecture.

As a testament to the broadly positive outlook, sanctions enforcement in ASEAN during this period often took a reactive posture, with prosecutions tending to follow US-generated leads rather than preventive interdiction. The clearest illustration lies in the aforementioned Singapore case, where US authorities in 1998 indicted a New Jersey executive and a Singapore businessman

over an alleged scheme to route US-made missile and military-jet parts to Iran via Singapore—AIM-54 Phoenix missile batteries, F-5 fighter components, Pratt & Whitney TF30 engine parts, and Hawk surface-to-air missile batteries (Reuters 1998b). Singapore figured as the transshipment point identified by investigators, while the suspected ultimate destination was Iran; the case originated from an anonymous fax to US Customs and culminated in the American principal's guilty plea and substantial fines, along with a US extradition request. The pattern suggested that ASEAN action largely crystallised after US detection and escalation, not through anticipatory policing of procurement front companies operating from regional logistics hubs.

These dynamics unfolded amid volatile domestic politics within ASEAN, shaping bandwidth and priorities. Indonesia moved from the collapse of Suharto to President Abdurrahman Wahid's short and experimental tenure, during which public interest in establishing relations with Israel raised alarms in Tehran (The Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Jakarta 2000). Jakarta's focus turned inward to regime change, constitutional reform, and conflict management, temporarily diluting its traditional role as ASEAN's anchor. In Thailand, coalition churn complicated long-range planning, even as technocratic agencies continued to explore energy and logistics cooperation with Iran. In the Philippines, the fall of President Joseph Estrada removed a sympathetic interlocutor and introduced a period of recalibration in which new authorities reassessed external ventures amid domestic contestation.

The net outcome by 2005 was an incomplete but tangible layering of interdependence. Shipping schedules through Port Klang created a dependable maritime cadence. Utilities and free-trade zone infrastructure in southern Iran gave real content to the emerging paired nodes system. Upstream stakes anchored a long-horizon energy relationship with Malaysia and Thailand. Trade and investment promotion, Islamic finance exploration, and cultural diplomacy diversified the relationship beyond hydrocarbons. At the same time, institutional elevation inside ASEAN remained out of reach in the near term. The post-crisis consolidation of ASEAN's external relations, leadership turnover in key capitals, and unresolved external pressures on Iran argued for patience. Tehran's response was to bank incremental gains, normalise working links, and keep a future partnership application in view once regional conditions and domestic alignments in Southeast Asia improved.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined Iran's first concerted pivot towards ASEAN between 1997 and 2005, situating it within the wider logic of the Islamic Republic's turn to Asia. Drawing on Iranian and ASEAN documentary evidence, the analysis has shown that the 1997–2005 period was not a spontaneous turn but rather the culmination of a decade-long ideational and bureaucratic preparation. Under Rafsanjani, Iranian elites moved from viewing Southeast Asia as a distant theatre of Cold War alignments to recognising it as a coherent regional bloc with deepening institutional capacity and major Muslim constituencies. Under Khatami, this recognition was translated into an operational agenda that paired energy and logistics nodes in Southeast Asia with complementary infrastructure and free-trade zones within Iran. Taken together, these measures amounted to a corridor strategy in which hydrocarbons, transport and trade flows linked the Persian Gulf to ASEAN ports and, via Iran's overland network, to Central Asia and the Caucasus.

More specifically, the evidence from the 1997–2005 period already demonstrates the corridor logic in operational terms, while also showing that Southeast Asia was one part of a broader strategy. Iranian initiatives during this time focused on downstream industrial proposals, maritime logistics integration, and consistent diplomatic framing of Iran as an overland

gateway to Central Asian markets—an approach reflected in parallel outreach to Central Asia and China regarding transport and energy connectivity. These elements were developed simultaneously and presented as mutually reinforcing rather than as standalone bilateral investments. The convergence of project siting, shipping integration, and transit diplomacy in the ASEAN context, therefore, highlights a broader Iranian corridor doctrine rather than a region-specific experiment.

A central finding of this study is that Iran's attempt to institutionalise its ASEAN outreach through its application for Sectoral Dialogue Partner status in June 1999 was not merely symbolic. It was the administrative step designed to lock in the multiple bilateral and sectoral initiatives launched since 1997. Although ASEAN's moratorium on new partnerships stalled Tehran's bid, the application reveals how far the Iranian Foreign Ministry had moved from episodic diplomacy towards routinised working groups, ministerial channels, and project coordination. Even without formal ASEAN recognition, this effort reflected a shift towards embedding cooperation in ASEAN's technical and bureaucratic structures rather than relying solely on ad hoc political engagement.

This article also highlights that Iran's gains were conditional on its ability to address the concerns of ASEAN elites. Allegations of support for separatist movements and fears of revolutionary proselytisation had deep roots. Still, Tehran under Khatami recast its outreach in cultural, educational, and interfaith terms, signalling acceptance of host-state sovereignty and limits on religious activity. Proliferation anxieties linked to Iran's missile development and Chinese or North Korean cooperation were harder to dispel. Yet, ASEAN governments saw signs that external pressure was already throttling sensitive transfers and chose not to make these concerns a deal-breaker. After 9/11, the counter-terrorism agenda in Southeast Asia did not treat Iran as a direct security threat, which helped sustain economic and diplomatic channels. Similarly, narcotics transit stigma faded as Iran invested in interdiction and won international recognition for its border-control efforts. By systematically addressing these points of friction, Tehran moved ASEAN elites from wary observers towards conditional partners.

Another finding concerns ASEAN's calculus. For Southeast Asian leaders, Iran offered energy diversification at scale, long-horizon supply relationships, and a western corridor to Central Asia and beyond. These benefits aligned with ASEAN's post-crisis priorities: hedging against volatility, developing new market access, and building industrial capacity in downstream sectors. Engagement with Iran also diversified ASEAN's external partnerships, enhanced its bargaining power with other major suppliers, and offered an Islamic finance and standards interface that resonated in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei. Even without immediate institutional recognition, these advantages made cooperation with Iran a rational complement to ASEAN's evolving economic architecture. The result was a patchwork of shipping schedules, free-trade-zone build-outs, and upstream stakes that gradually turned episodic commerce into something closer to structured interdependence.

At the same time, this study underscores the limits of Iran's first pivot. Leadership churn within ASEAN and in Tehran, the aftershocks of the Asian Financial Crisis, and persistent US sanctions created an environment in which incrementalism rather than a breakthrough was the achievable horizon. Key refinery and downstream projects in Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines remained aspirational. The Bandar Abbas distripark and IRISL's Port Klang rotation symbolised the corridor concept but operated at a modest scale. Islamic finance linkages and tourism agreements were exploratory. By 2005, Iran had built multiple points of contact but had not yet secured the institutional elevation it sought. When Khatami's presidency ended, and the nuclear impasse escalated, much of the diplomatic capital accumulated in Southeast Asia was left without a clear framework for sustained support.

Taken together, these dynamics help reframe the history of Iran-ASEAN relations. Rather than a peripheral episode, the 1997–2005 period can be seen as the formative stage of a still-unfinished corridor project—an experiment in cross-regional integration launched before the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative and before ASEAN’s own consolidation as a centrepiece of Indo-Pacific strategy. For scholars of Southeast Asian external relations, the case illuminates how ASEAN manages non-traditional partners: through procedural caution, issue-specific cooperation, and incremental institutionalisation rather than grand bargains. For scholars of Iran’s foreign policy, the case uncovers an underexplored aspect of the Asianisation of Iranian foreign policy (often equated with Iran’s “Look to the East” policy) narrative and demonstrates how Tehran has consistently employed corridor logics—connecting upstream resources to downstream platforms—to attempt to bind external partners into long-term interdependence.

Finally, the analysis suggests that the 1997–2005 window offers lessons for present-day policymakers. First, corridor strategies gain traction when they are embedded in mutually reinforcing projects and institutions rather than one-off deals. Second, ASEAN’s receptivity to non-Western partners is shaped as much by perceptions of political durability and respect for sovereignty as by the economic merits of proposals. Third, even under sanctions and fiscal constraints, a state can create low-cost institutional hedges—such as sectoral dialogues, memoranda, and trade fairs—that position it for future recovery and partnership. In Iran’s case, the challenge after 2005 was not the absence of such hedges but the political and economic shocks that undermined their consolidation. Whether Tehran can revive and scale these early linkages in a new regional environment remains an open question. Still, the evidence presented here demonstrates that the template for a deeper Iran-ASEAN relationship was laid during Khatami’s presidential administration and, despite setbacks, continues to inform how both sides imagine cross-regional cooperation today.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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NOTE

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