

Analysis of Public Diplomacy Through Teacher Exchanges in the Framework of Quality Improvement in ASEAN

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ABSTRACT

The SEA Teacher program, initiated by SEAMEO, is a regional effort aimed at enhancing educational cooperation within the ASEAN region through student-teacher exchanges among member countries. The program was launched to address the growing demand for higher quality education, promote regional identity, and foster cross-cultural understanding amid globalization. This study aims to analyze the SEA Teacher program as a form of public diplomacy, emphasizing the people-to-people approach, which strengthens relations among ASEAN citizens through educational and cultural exchanges. Employing a juridical-normative methodology with both conceptual and legislative approaches, the study examines how laws and policies support the program's implementation and explores the concepts of public diplomacy and soft power within the education framework. The study's findings reveal that the SEA Teacher program plays a crucial role in educational diplomacy, enhancing the image of participating countries, fostering communication between nations, and reinforcing regional solidarity through the direct experiences of participants in diverse cultural settings. Furthermore, the program demonstrates that educational exchange serves as a strategic tool of public diplomacy, enriching academic experiences while fostering social trust and regional integration in ASEAN. The legal and policy implications include the need for harmonized regulations regarding academic recognition, the protection of participants, and strengthened institutional commitments to exchange programs as part of foreign policy initiatives focused on education and culture.

INTRODUCTION

The dynamics of international relations in the era of globalization have undergone significant transformations. Diplomacy, traditionally confined to formal state-to-state relations, has evolved to include more informal interactions among non-state actors. In the current era, digital technology has played a critical role in reshaping diplomacy, making communication between individuals from different countries more accessible and impactful. Indonesia, in

particular, has witnessed rapid advancements in digitalization, with over 70% of the population now actively engaging in online platforms, making digital diplomacy a key strategy in fostering international relations (Sepriano, 2023). This shift has also been mirrored in the realm of public diplomacy, which has become a more vital tool in shaping global perceptions. *Public diplomacy*, often referred to as *people-to-people diplomacy*, now plays a central role in how countries project their cultural and educational values on the global stage (Adha, 2020).

Public diplomacy is increasingly seen as a modern strategy to enhance a nation's image and international influence without the need for military or economic coercion. This strategy emphasizes the importance of culture, education, and societal values in fostering long-term, peaceful relationships between nations (Rahman, 2020). Programs such as student and teacher exchanges, cultural performances, and youth forums have proven effective in cultivating mutual understanding and cooperation. The SEA Teacher program, a flagship initiative by the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO), serves as an example of such efforts, where teacher exchanges across ASEAN member countries help in not only improving educational quality but also in strengthening bilateral ties.

In reviewing relevant literature, several studies have discussed the role of *public diplomacy* in educational exchanges (Sunardi, 2024; Widyastuti, 2019). However, most research has focused on the political or economic impacts of such programs, while the cultural and legal dimensions remain underexplored. This research aims to fill this gap by analyzing how the SEA Teacher program, as a tool of *public diplomacy*, contributes to regional solidarity and cooperation in Southeast Asia. It also seeks to highlight the program's potential to advance *soft power* through cultural exchange and educational collaboration.

Currently, countries do not only rely on military or economic strength as *hard power*, but also emphasize the importance of *soft power* by leveraging cultural appeal, democratic values, and educational systems (Aprianto, 2020). As the main source of *soft power*, it is capable of creating emotional and intellectual connections between nations. *Public diplomacy* through international education programs provides a more subtle and long-lasting influence in shaping public opinion and strengthening peaceful inter-country relations (Pugu, 2024).

International education has become one of the effective ways to build a positive image between nations through *soft diplomacy* (Nobelis, 2024). Student, teacher, and lecturer exchange programs have a significant impact because they involve people directly in cross-cultural experiences. Interactions through international education allow the exchange of ideas, values, and understandings that foster mutual respect and openness between cultures (Al-Huda, 2025). In the long run, this process can strengthen shared values and build peaceful and sustainable international networks.

Teacher exchange programs have a strategic influence on *soft diplomacy* (Soesilowati, 2017). Not only do they enhance teachers' teaching skills and professional insights, but these programs also serve as a platform for cultural exchange, the promotion of tolerance, and the introduction of educational systems and social life in the host country. Teachers, as agents of social change, play a direct role in connecting nations by introducing local values to the international community while bringing home global values to enrich education in their own country (Sunardi, 2024). This reciprocal relationship strengthens solidarity both at the regional and global levels.

Through the theory of *soft power*, a nation's strength comes not only from its ability to coerce or provide economic incentives but also from its ability to attract others through culture, values, and policies that are considered legitimate and appealing (Wangke, 2021). Education is one of the main channels of *soft power* because it touches both the intellectual and emotional aspects of individuals (Trisni, 2023). Teacher exchange programs serve as tangible evidence of how *soft power* works; countries can peacefully expand their influence and build harmonious international relations.

The Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) is a regional organization established in 1965 to strengthen cooperation among Southeast Asian countries in the fields of education, science, and culture (Perosyah, 2022). As a policy forum for ministers of education, SEAMEO plays an important role in designing cross-border programs that support human resource development in the region. SEAMEO serves as a collaborative approach to connect educational institutions and governments to achieve an inclusive, adaptive, and sustainable education vision (Anton, 2024).

One of SEAMEO's flagship programs is the SEA Teacher Project (Pre-Service Student Teacher Exchange in Southeast Asia). This program provides an opportunity for teacher candidates from various ASEAN member countries to teach in schools in another country for one month (Masykuroh, 2023). In addition to honing teaching skills and improving English proficiency, participants are also introduced to the local educational system and culture (Widyastuti, 2019). This program helps future educators understand cultural diversity while preparing them to adapt to different educational environments.

More than just improving the quality of education, the SEA Teacher Project has strategic value in strengthening relations between ASEAN countries through grassroots diplomacy. Direct interaction between participants and the local community creates warm and sustainable social connections. By bringing together young educators from various countries, this program builds the foundation for regional integration based on mutual understanding, tolerance, and a sense of belonging as part of the Southeast Asian community.

Based on the background above, this study will answer how the SEA Teacher program, as a cross-border teacher exchange program, can be categorized as an effective tool for *public diplomacy* in building a positive image of countries through a people-to-people approach. Furthermore, the international legal implications arising from the implementation of teacher exchanges within the framework of ASEAN cooperation will be explored, particularly concerning jurisdictional aspects, legal protection for participants, and commitments between member countries. In addition, this study will also discuss concrete contributions to improving the quality of education while strengthening bilateral relations and solidarity among ASEAN countries through cultural and educational interactions at the grassroots level.

METHOD

This study employs a normative legal method, which involves analyzing the legal norms and theoretical frameworks that govern the SEA Teacher program. The normative legal method focuses on understanding the structure of applicable laws and regulations relevant to the SEA Teacher program, such as the ASEAN Charter and *SEAMEO* Agreement. The selection of this method is based on the need to interpret and assess the program within the

existing international legal framework, examining its alignment with *public diplomacy* strategies and educational cooperation within ASEAN.

In addition to the legal framework, the study incorporates a conceptual approach to analyze the theories of *public diplomacy*, *soft power*, and cultural exchange, which are essential for understanding the program's role in fostering *people-to-people* relationships. The conceptual approach is necessary to explore the intangible aspects of the program, such as its cultural impact and the ways it contributes to regional solidarity and integration.

The data sources for this study are drawn from three key categories to ensure a thorough and comprehensive analysis. Primary legal materials include charters, treaties, and agreements between ASEAN countries, which serve as the legal foundation for educational exchanges like the SEA Teacher program. These documents provide essential insights into the formal structure and regulatory framework that governs cross-border educational initiatives. Secondary legal materials consist of academic literature, journal articles, and prior research that examine the SEA Teacher program and its implications for regional diplomacy and education. These sources help contextualize the program within broader academic discussions and its role in fostering international cooperation. Finally, tertiary legal materials, such as legal dictionaries and encyclopedias, are consulted to clarify terms and concepts related to *public diplomacy* and international law, ensuring a clear understanding of the legal terminology used throughout the study. This multi-layered approach, combining legal analysis with theoretical perspectives, allows for a comprehensive examination of the SEA Teacher program's impact on regional cooperation and its contributions to *public diplomacy* in ASEAN.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. SEA Teacher as a Public Diplomacy Instrument

Public diplomacy is an evolution of traditional diplomacy, which usually only involves official communication between countries through official representatives or bilateral and multilateral diplomacy (Wardhana, 2022). Public diplomacy is a form of soft power, which is defined as the ability of a country to get what it wants without coercion or economic incentives, but through the cultural appeal, values, and policies it possesses (Rahmawati, 2021). Public diplomacy is a way for countries to shape positive perceptions in other countries through communication, cultural exchange, education, and values that can positively influence public opinion towards the country of origin.

Unlike traditional diplomacy, which tends to be exclusive and only involves state actors, public diplomacy is more open and inclusive. It involves not only governments and diplomats but also students, teachers, academics, artists, and civil society organizations. Through cultural exchange programs, education, and cross-border collaborative projects, public diplomacy creates direct interactions among citizens from various countries (Nurshabrina, 2024). Its goal is to build understanding, trust, and emotional closeness among nations. Thus, public diplomacy is not just about conveying messages but also about establishing deeper two-way relationships between people from different countries.

The main goal of public diplomacy is to build a positive image of a country in the eyes of the world and to create effective communication bridges among citizens of different countries (Naim, 2022). When the international community has a positive view of a country, opportunities for cooperation in various fields such as economics, education, and politics

become more open and easier to establish (Hermawanto, 2020). In a connected world, public diplomacy has become an essential strategy to influence international opinion without the need for force or pressure. For this reason, public diplomacy is now an important part of the foreign policy of many countries, including Indonesia and ASEAN countries.

The SEA Teacher program is a concrete example of public diplomacy based on education and emphasizes direct interaction among citizens (people-to-people). Student teachers from ASEAN countries are sent to other member countries to undergo teaching practice for several weeks. During this program, they interact with various layers of society, from students, local teachers, school principals, to host families. Their presence in the local community not only strengthens personal relationships but also broadens the understanding of the character and cultural values of the participants' home countries. This aligns with the essence of public diplomacy, which directly involves civil actors and not just the state.

Cultural exchange is at the heart of the SEA Teacher experience. Participants bring their culture and values from their home countries to be introduced to students and educational communities in the host countries, through teaching materials, communication styles, traditional clothing, and cultural activities such as dances and typical foods. The participants also learn about the local culture of the country where they are teaching. This cross-cultural meeting creates mutual understanding and breaks down the stereotypes that have long hindered international relations. This cultural exchange strengthens friendship networks and enhances social trust among ASEAN countries.

Education within SEA Teacher also plays a very strategic role as a medium for diplomacy. The participants not only teach but also serve as informal cultural ambassadors representing their country's image. In their daily interactions, they convey values such as cooperation, tolerance, discipline, and the spirit of the ASEAN community. Public diplomacy is a form of active engagement that shapes a positive perception of the country of origin in the eyes of the host country's society. Thus, SEA Teacher directly fulfills important elements of public diplomacy: interaction among societies, cultural exchange, and education as a means of communication across values and cultures.

The SEA Teacher program is a concrete example of public diplomacy based on education, facilitated by SEAMEO (Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization). SEAMEO, as an intergovernmental organization established by Southeast Asian education ministers, focuses on improving the quality of education in the region. ASEAN member countries fully support this through policies, funding, and technical facilitation to ensure the smooth exchange of student teachers. The benefit of this approach is that SEA Teacher is not just an ordinary academic program but a part of ASEAN's inclusive and sustainable educational diplomacy strategy.

The students and student teachers involved in SEA Teacher act as agents of public diplomacy. They bring their culture, language, and national values into the classrooms of other countries. During the one-month teaching practice, participants not only teach but also get to know the local education system and culture. This interaction creates cross-cultural relationships that strengthen understanding and emotional bonds between ASEAN citizens. They also serve as informal cultural ambassadors, helping to build a positive image of their home countries in the eyes of the host countries' communities.

SEA Teacher combines two important aspects of human resource development and educational diplomacy. This program not only enhances participants' teaching abilities through firsthand experience in international classrooms but also strengthens ASEAN regional integration by fostering mutual understanding and solidarity. With its people-to-people approach, SEA Teacher becomes a strategic instrument in strengthening regional ties based on shared values such as tolerance, cooperation, and the spirit of the ASEAN community.

The SEA Teacher program has a significant diplomatic impact in shaping positive perceptions among the participant countries, both from the perspective of the student teachers and the local community in the host countries. Numerous reports and studies show that participants in this program gain a deeper understanding of the culture, education system, and social values of the country where they teach. The presence of foreign participants also enriches the perspectives of local students and teachers regarding the cultural diversity within Southeast Asia. This interaction creates a lasting positive impression and fosters mutual respect among cultures, which is at the core of public diplomacy.

SEA Teacher participants feel that the experience not only enhances their teaching skills but also broadens their social networks and shapes their regional identity as part of the ASEAN community. This program strengthens ASEAN solidarity through direct experiences that unite youth from different countries in productive and collaborative activities. With the increased understanding of multiculturalism and appreciation of differences, SEA Teacher indirectly enhances the image of the participant countries as open, tolerant partners, ready to build a shared future within the Southeast Asian region.

The soft power theory developed by Joseph Nye explains that a country's strength is not only measured by its military or economic power (hard power), but also by its ability to attract and influence others through cultural appeal, values, and policies that are liked by others (Santoso, 2021). Education is one of the primary tools of soft power because through educational exchanges, a country can project a positive image, spread values, and shape long-term perceptions in the minds of foreign audiences. Soft power operates by attraction rather than coercion and is often supported by activities that feel natural and enjoyable, such as arts, culture, and education.

The SEA Teacher program is a clear example of how soft power is applied through education. Without political pressure or economic dominance, this program encourages participants to interact voluntarily in a multicultural environment, getting to know social systems while spreading values of tolerance and mutual respect. The teacher candidates participating in this program indirectly become cultural ambassadors, introducing the culture and values of their home countries in foreign educational settings. In this way, SEA Teacher successfully builds trust and strengthens relations between ASEAN countries in a peaceful and positive manner, in line with the principles of soft power that emphasize attraction and influence without coercion.

B. International Legal Implications of Teacher Exchange in the ASEAN Cooperation Framework

Educational cooperation in Southeast Asia has a strong legal foundation within the framework of ASEAN regional integration. One of its main pillars is the ASEAN Charter,

particularly Articles 1 (5) and (13), which emphasize that ASEAN aims to strengthen social and cultural cooperation, including in education. This Charter places education as a key tool for building a shared identity, enhancing mutual understanding among citizens, and reinforcing solidarity in the region. ASEAN not only focuses on economic and political cooperation but also broadens its attention to education as part of the strategy to build a robust regional community.

Educational cooperation in the region is also supported by SEAMEO (Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization), an intergovernmental organization established under the SEAMEO Agreement. SEAMEO plays a central role in driving regional collaboration in education, science, and culture. Through various innovative programs such as the SEA Teacher Project, which facilitates teacher exchanges between member countries, SEAMEO helps realize ASEAN's commitment to regional educational integration. This program serves as a tangible example of how the spirit of the ASEAN Charter is applied in building social and cultural cooperation through inclusive and sustainable education.

The SEA Teacher program, under international law, falls into the category of *non-binding agreements* or *soft law*, rather than international treaties that legally bind participating countries. This program is typically run based on a memorandum of understanding (MoU) between higher education institutions in ASEAN countries, facilitated by SEAMEO. The MoU contains a cooperation agreement regarding teacher exchange programs, including commitments from each university to send and receive participants, provide facilities, and manage logistical and academic aspects.

Although this MoU does not have the binding legal force of a treaty, it still carries moral, administrative, and reputational responsibilities for the parties involved. This means that, even though it cannot be enforced through international legal mechanisms, the parties are expected to consistently fulfill their commitments to ensure the continuity of the program. The success of SEA Teacher is also supported by goodwill among ASEAN countries and the principle of mutual benefit, which forms the basis of regional cooperation. Therefore, despite its non-binding nature, this program still has significant diplomatic and institutional impacts in building trust and solidarity in the region.

In the SEA Teacher program, although not strictly regulated by binding international law, the parties involved still have clear and complementary rights and obligations. The sending country is responsible for preparing participants academically and administratively, including ensuring they are ready to face cultural challenges and different education systems. The sending country also has the right to ensure that their participants are treated fairly and according to standards while participating in the program in the host country.

The host country, through its educational institutions, is obligated to provide adequate teaching and learning facilities, comfortable accommodation, initial training, and mentoring by supporting teachers to help participants adapt and perform their tasks well. Participants are entitled to basic legal protections such as a valid student visa, access to health services through insurance, and work protection according to the scope of the program. The receiving institutions are also responsible for providing pedagogical training, classroom facilities, and administrative support to ensure that the teaching and learning experience is safe and productive.

The SEA Teacher program has significant potential to serve as an initial step in creating uniformity and education standards in the ASEAN region, particularly in terms of teacher qualification recognition. By involving ASEAN member countries in the SEA Teacher exchange program, it opens up opportunities to build mutual recognition arrangements (MRAs) that allow teacher qualifications and competencies to be equally valued across ASEAN countries. This will not only create alignment in education standards but also facilitate the mobility of educators within the region. The success of this program could also serve as a catalyst for the development of joint regulations or ASEAN protocols in the future, strengthening the cross-border legal framework for education. Thus, this program provides a foundation for more structured and sustainable educational exchanges between countries, reinforcing regional educational collaboration.

C. Teacher Exchange in Improving Educational Quality and Strengthening Bilateral Relations among ASEAN Countries

The SEA Teacher program has a direct and significant impact on improving the quality of teaching in the host countries. The participants in this program bring knowledge and skills from the education system of their home countries. When teaching in a different environment, they introduce new methods that may not be familiar in the host country. This allows the host country to adopt more effective teaching approaches, both in delivering content and managing classrooms. The fresh perspectives brought by the participants also enrich the variety of teaching techniques, enabling students to be more active and engaged in the learning process.

SEA Teacher also creates great opportunities for the professional development of teachers in the host country. The participants not only learn academic content but also how to adapt to different cultures and social conditions. This is important because teaching is not just about delivering lessons but also interacting with students from diverse backgrounds. This experience helps the teacher trainees improve their classroom management skills, communicate more effectively, and face the challenges of teaching in a multicultural environment.

This program has significant potential to encourage innovation in curriculum and teaching methods across the ASEAN region. By exchanging ideas and experiences, member countries can learn from each other's strengths and weaknesses in their educational systems. This will help them develop curricula that are more relevant and adaptive to the changing times and educational needs of the region. SEA Teacher acts as a catalyst for positive change that ultimately improves the overall quality of education in Southeast Asia.

The teacher exchange program through SEA Teacher has a significant impact in strengthening mutual understanding among countries and strengthening bilateral relations in the field of education. Through direct interaction, participants can experience firsthand the educational system, culture, and values of the host country. This experience creates an opportunity for mutual understanding of differences and similarities, while also eliminating stereotypes or prejudices that may have existed previously. Participants take home a deeper understanding of the host country, while the local community in the recipient country also learns to appreciate the culture and values of the sending country. This process strengthens mutual respect and deepens the relationship among ASEAN countries.

The social and diplomatic impacts of this exchange are also substantial. When participants from various ASEAN countries meet and share experiences, they not only enrich their academic insights but also build strong emotional bonds among people. The exchange of culture, traditions, and worldviews fosters solidarity and a deeper sense of brotherhood among ASEAN countries. This results in increasingly stronger bonds between countries in line with ASEAN's principles of cooperation and mutually beneficial unity. The program also opens up opportunities for further dialogue to address shared challenges in the region, such as more inclusive education and collaborative research.

The increasingly close bilateral relationships fostered through SEA Teacher also open doors for cooperation in other areas such as economics, culture, and politics. By strengthening ties through education, ASEAN countries can find broader opportunities for collaboration. For example, strong educational cooperation can encourage joint economic projects, such as investments in the education sector or workforce skill development. In the cultural sector, ASEAN countries can support each other in preserving cultures and developing tourism. Meanwhile, in politics, solid relationships will facilitate diplomacy and strengthen ASEAN's role in global issues.

CONCLUSION

The SEA Teacher program is a tangible manifestation of *public diplomacy* based on education, reflecting the application of *soft power* as described by Joseph Nye—building influence and a positive image of a country through the attraction of culture, values, and policies without coercion. Through direct interaction among ASEAN citizens, cultural exchange, and active involvement in the educational realm, SEA Teacher fosters cross-cultural understanding, strengthens regional solidarity, and shapes a positive perception among program participants. With an inclusive and collaborative approach, this program not only enhances the competence of future teachers but also strengthens emotional bonds and a sense of unity within the ASEAN community, making it a strategic instrument for building harmonious and sustainable international relations. Educational cooperation in the ASEAN region has a strong legal and institutional foundation through the ASEAN Charter and the support of *SEAMEO*, which emphasizes the importance of education as a tool for regional integration. Although the SEA Teacher program is non-binding, its implementation through *MoUs* between educational institutions still carries significant moral and institutional responsibility for the involved parties. The complementary rights and responsibilities between the sending countries, receiving countries, and participants are key to the program's success in creating meaningful exchange experiences. SEA Teacher also holds strategic potential to promote uniformity in educational standards and mutual recognition of teacher qualifications across ASEAN, which ultimately strengthens regional educational integration in a sustainable and inclusive manner. The SEA Teacher program makes a tangible contribution to improving the quality of education and strengthening bilateral relations among ASEAN countries through the exchange of experiences, knowledge, and intercultural values. By involving young teachers directly in the learning process in another country, the program not only enriches teaching methods and curriculum development in the region but also fosters cross-cultural understanding that enhances regional solidarity and cooperation. The positive impact generated extends beyond the education sector, opening up broader opportunities for collaboration in the

fields of economics, culture, and politics, making SEA Teacher one of the key foundations for creating a stronger and more sustainable ASEAN integration.

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