

Between Delegation and Evasion: Coercive Inaction in Regional Organizations

Why do regional organizations remain inactive in politically sensitive domains even when they possess the capacity and mandate to act? This paper introduces the concept of coercive inaction which is the deliberate performance of incapacity by regional organizations to displace costly responsibilities onto external actors while preserving symbolic authority. In contrast to explanations that attribute inaction to institutional design flaws, resource constraints, or bureaucratic pathologies, this argument treats inaction as a relational strategy conditioned by environmental expectations. Regional organizations abstain not merely to avoid internal dissent, but to induce capable outsiders—donor states, partners, or neighboring powers—to intervene through the organization’s own normative frameworks. The paper theorizes coercive inaction as a mechanism that arises under two conditions: high external responsiveness, where credible outsiders are both exposed to and capable of absorbing the costs of inaction, and high anticipated alignment, where the organization expects those actors to operate through its institutional structures rather than bypassing them. Under these conditions, inaction becomes productive: the organization governs indirectly through others’ actions while remaining insulated from the reputational and political risks of direct engagement.

Note to Readers: Thank you for taking the time to go through this paper. It is a working draft that I had to entirely revamp from the original framing. It is intended for theoretical refinement rather than full empirical validation. I would welcome feedback on the following points:

1. Does the distinction between *coercive inaction* and adjacent concepts come through clearly? Are the mechanisms and scope conditions sufficiently specified to make the theory testable?
 - a. The intentionality inference is central but delicate. I would appreciate suggestions on how to strengthen evidentiary standards—how to know when inaction is *strategic* rather than *path-dependent*.
 - b. **Alternatively, should the framing shift to how inaction by ROs can induce actions by others – removing intentionality and focusing on outcomes.**
2. I am open to feedback on cases that would strengthen the theoretical leverage.
3. Are the proposed observable implications and case selection logics (ASEAN–Rohingya, ASEAN–Australia on human trafficking, and comparative probes across OAS, ECOWAS, SADC, and Arab League) persuasive for identifying intentionality rather than post hoc rationalization?
4. Do the coding criteria for recognizing coercive inaction and distinguishing it from simple incapacity make sense, both temporally and behaviorally?

Any comments on how to strengthen the empirical leverage or clarify the theoretical distinctiveness of *coercive inaction* would be especially helpful at this stage.

Introduction

Why do regional organizations become selectively inactive in politically sensitive domains despite mandate and baseline capacity? Better phrased, under the conditions of high issue saliency and high cost of action, why do regional organizations become inactive? Some scholars attribute inaction to institutional design flaws such as consensus-based voting or weak enforcement mechanisms, which hinder collective decision-making (Gould, 2016; Koremenos et al., 2001; Mitchell, 2009; Tallberg, 2002). Institutional-design theories observe that consensus voting and high admission criteria can stall policy when member interests diverge (Koremenos, Lipson, & Snidal, 2001; Kelley, 2010). Others argue that inaction emerges as a secondary consequence of deeper structural limitations, such as under-resourcing, lack of expertise, or bureaucratic pathologies (Barnett and Finnemore, 1999; Barnett and Finnemore, 2004; Brunsson, 1989; Hawkins et al., 2006; Weiss, 2013). Still others contend that ROs may intentionally pause actions or decouple rhetoric from actions to reduce internal dissent, preserve fragile cooperation, or shield themselves from reputational or political backlash (Gray, 2013; Keohane, 1984; Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Slaughter, 2004).

In all of these accounts, inaction is understood as either a byproduct of constraint or a defensive measure aimed at preserving stability. However, empirical evidence demonstrates that these explanations fall short in accounting for persistent patterns of inaction in issue areas despite institutional and administrative capacity and the ways in which organizations' choices unfold within and in response to their broader external environment.

Consider ASEAN, under the 2007 ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint, member states eliminated tariffs on over 99% of goods by 2015, increasing intra-ASEAN trade and foreign direct investment substantially (ASEAN Secretariat 2015). The same machinery, however, has produced little tangible progress on politically sensitive issues such as human trafficking. Despite adopting the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons (ACTIP) in 2015 and subsequent Plans of Action, regional coordination remains limited, and cross-border enforcement weak (ASEAN Secretariat 2015; ASEAN Foreign Ministers 2017). Instead, Australia—a non-member but regionally proximate state—has assumed the operational lead through the ASEAN–Australia Counter-Trafficking (ASEAN-ACT) program, funding and implementing the bulk of anti-trafficking initiatives under ASEAN's normative umbrella (DFAT 2023; ASEAN-ACT 2023). Regional organizations remain visibly engaged and normatively central in an issue area even while being substantively inactive. This is not an example of incapacity or institutional decay but of selective disengagement in politically costly or divisive areas. But why? Especially when there are clear legitimacy and reputational losses accrued to the organization and, material loss for member-states?

I introduce the concept of coercive inaction to describe this phenomenon: the performance or cultivation of ineffectiveness by an organization in order to displace responsibility onto external actors with more interest and/or capability. Coercive inaction refers not to individual ineptitude but to an organizational pattern: one where actions are either irrelevant, intentionally unproductive, or strategically delayed; all under the guise of mandate ambiguity, capacity constraints, or political complexity. This in turn increases or at the very least entrenches externalities over a long-period of time faced by other actors that are regionally proximate / exist

in the same normative space such that they are compelled to take governance burden to reduce costs. By expanding into an issue space and then reducing activity—particularly in ways that generate externalities for other actors—ROs can claim authority and political relevance while shedding responsibility for actual outcomes. Unlike inefficiency (which concerns waste) or ineffectiveness (which concerns failed outcomes), Coercive inaction denotes a cultivated posture of incapacity. It extends institutional power approaches (Barnett & Duvall 2005) by showing how authority is exercised not only through action but through the calibrated withholding of action.

The scope of the paper is to theory-build and explore its logic through brief descriptive analysis and an in-depth case study of ASEAN's approach to human trafficking. The paper makes three contributions. First, it reverses the conventional direction of burden-shifting in international relations, showing that organizations, not only states, can strategically externalize governance responsibilities. Conventionally we see burden-shifting from the state to domestic NGOs or international NGOs, however here we see the opposite. Second, it contributes to global governance scholarship by recasting vitality not as a fixed measure of institutional performance but as a strategic variable conditioned by environmental opportunity (Gray, 2018). Third, it extends sociological and institutionalist approaches by linking symbolic action to external consequences: organizational inaction does not end at the boundary of the institution but shapes behavior, incentives, and authority structures in its surrounding regime complex.

The paper proceeds in five parts. The next section conceptualizes coercive inaction, distinguishing it from related notions such as shirking, strategic restraint, and decoupling. Section 2 reviews existing explanations for RO inaction and identifies their limitations. Section 3 develops the theoretical framework and specifies observable implications. Section 4 details the empirical strategy, a plausibility probe with ASEAN as the main case study and brief discussion of the larger universe of cases. Section 5 concludes with implications for regional governance, institutional legitimacy, and the relational politics of authority in global governance.

Coercive Inaction

In international relations, coercion has traditionally been defined as the use of threats or promises to alter another actor's behavior without resorting to direct force (Schelling 1966; Art 2003; Baldwin 1985). The canonical model presumes an active coercer—one who issues explicit signals of punishment (“if you do not comply, I will act”) or assurance (“if you comply, I will reward”) to deter (maintain status quo) or compel (change status-quo) the target (Schelling 1966). Across these formulations, coercion entails four elements: intentionality (the coercer acts to induce change), relationality (the target's options are conditioned by the coercer's move), counterfactual dependence (the target would have acted differently absent coercion), and behavioral adjustment (the target changes course) or lack thereof (failed coercion). Yet, the assumption of overt compellence overlooks subtler modalities of power in institutional contexts where the capacity to act or to abstain from action itself structures others' choices.

Scholars of institutional and structural power have long recognized that actors can coerce through structure by shaping the environment of choice rather than issuing direct demands. Barnett and Duvall (2005) conceptualize institutional power as the capacity to structure others'

possibilities for action through the rules and norms of an institutional setting. However this is more internally focused on shaping decisions of actors that are part of the institution or organization in question, rather than those outside. More recently, Farrell and Newman's (2019) theory of weaponized interdependence demonstrates how states exploit network centrality to impose costs indirectly to shape behavior. In each case, change in behavior emerges without explicit threats or assurances through the manipulation of interdependence, procedures, or expectations.

My contribution builds on this broader understanding of coercion and continues to extend it beyond the boundaries of the organization itself to the wider environment in which it is embedded. Coercive inaction refers to the withholding of substantive engagement by an organization in a domain where intervention is both expected and normatively mandated, with the effect of shaping others' behavior. Instead of relying on explicit threats, the organization leverages the persistence of inaction as a negative inducement: the longer it abstains, the more the costs of inaction accumulate for others. In high-expectation environments such as regional organizations that claim leadership or "centrality" in their regions, this abstention functions coercively because it forces capable external actors to move to mitigate those externalities due to the governance gap – structural and reputational pressures created by omission.

This mechanism differs from related concepts in the literature. While inaction refers to a general lack of decision-making or implementation in a given area, coercive inaction encapsulates both persistent inaction (suggesting a more prolonged cessation of activity, often in a context where action could be taken but is strategically avoided) as well as actions that are ineffective, misinformed, left unimplemented, etc. This is different from simply stating that the organization is ineffective or inefficient, as that reduces it to an issue of resources or collective action (Keohane, 1984; Barnett & Finnemore, 1999).

It is not shirking, where agents evade principals under weak monitoring (Hawkins et al. 2006), because the collective organization itself, not a delegated agent, is making the choice to abstain. Nor is it capacity constraint or consequence of deeper structural limitations, such as under-resourcing, lack of expertise, or bureaucratic pathologies (Barnett and Finnemore, 1999; Barnett and Finnemore, 2004; Brunsson, 1989; Hawkins et al., 2006; Weiss, 2013), since the organization demonstrably possesses the competence and resources to act in other domains but withholds them selectively. It also departs from myth and ceremony (Meyer and Rowan 1977) or organizational hypocrisy (Brunsson 1989), which describe symbolic decoupling as a means of legitimacy preservation. These are all other strategies that an organization can adopt in the conditions I specify, however, they do not incorporate the relational effects of the adoption of inaction on the larger environment – other actors. In coercive inaction, symbolic engagement is instrumentalized: it sustains legitimacy while also prompting external intervention. The hypocrisy becomes productive rather than purely defensive—hypocrisy as leverage, not just insulation.

This logic also differs from strategic restraint and orchestration, two adjacent but distinct mechanisms in the study of international cooperation. Strategic restraint typically refers to deliberate self-binding or non-use of power to reassure others and foster cooperation (Ikenberry 2001). It is fundamentally cooperative and prospective: an actor limits itself today to build trust

tomorrow. Coercive inaction, by contrast, is non-cooperative and reactive. The organization withholds costly engagement not to reassure, but to shift burdens allowing problems to escalate such that others are compelled to intervene, often within its normative framework. Similarly, coercive inaction diverges from orchestration (Abbott, Genschel, Snidal, and Zangl 2015). In orchestration, an IO actively mobilizes intermediaries such as NGOs, firms, or states to pursue shared goals through delegated coordination. Coercive inaction, in contrast, represents a passive analogue: rather than recruiting intermediaries, the organization's inaction itself induces others to move, creating a self-generating delegation dynamic in which the IO remains the normative hub but not the operational center.

Importantly, this mechanism is particularly visible at the regional level. Regional organizations, unlike global ones, are endowed with limited but symbolically dense authority: they claim jurisdiction over regional problems, articulate shared norms, and act as brokers of legitimacy. Because of their proximity, external non-member states often bear the spillover costs of regional crises such as migration surges, trafficking flows, or instability and are thus both motivated and capable of intervention. When a regional organization such as ASEAN abstains from substantive action in these issue areas, its inaction is not neutral: it raises the externalities imposed on external actors while maintaining a discursive monopoly over the problem's framing. Those actors, compelled to act, often do so under the organization's symbolic authority citing its frameworks, funding its initiatives, or operating in its normative language. In this way, coercive inaction constitutes a form of indirect governance: the organization governs not by doing, but by inducing others to do, on its terms.

In sum, coercive inaction satisfies the classical criteria of coercion: intentionality, relationality, and counterfactual dependence without relying on explicit signaling. It is intentional because the organization consciously refrains and calibrates engagement; relational because the abstention reshapes others' incentives; and counterfactual because, absent the inaction, capable outsiders would not have acted.

Literature Review

Existing explanations for inaction in international organizations can be grouped into several broad families of thought, each emphasizing distinct mechanisms behind stagnation, inefficiency, or deliberate restraint. These theories variously locate the origins of inaction in institutional design, bureaucratic dysfunction, agent-principal dynamics, or strategic calculation (Gould, 2016; Barnett & Finnemore, 1999; Keohane, 1984; Hawkins et al., 2006). Yet despite their differences, most share a common assumption: that inaction is either an outcome of constraint or a defensive response to crisis. This section reviews these perspectives and highlights why they remain insufficient to explain the patterned, selective, and relational forms of inaction examined in this study.

A prominent strand of scholarship attributes inaction to the institutional design of regional organizations. In this view, formal rules such as consensus-based decision-making, weak enforcement provisions, or the absence of delegation systematically inhibit collective action. Koremenos, Lipson, and Snidal (2001) and Tallberg (2002) argue that unanimity requirements and high decision thresholds generate gridlock when member preferences diverge, particularly

on politically sensitive issues. Similarly, Gould (2016) observes that many international organizations adopt procedural norms that produce non-binding decisions or symbolic resolutions, defaulting to minimal action to preserve unity. These design-based accounts thus portray institutional inertia as a structural feature. Likewise, resource and capacity-based explanations often treated as structural correlates of inaction fall short (Hawkins et al., 2017). While limited funding or expertise can impede implementation, these factors cannot account for instances where organizations with demonstrated technical and financial capability choose not to act in specific domains.

The same design features that constrain action in one issue area do not prevent activity in another. ASEAN, for example, operates under consensus but has successfully advanced economic integration and trade liberalization, while remaining persistently stagnant on human rights, migration, and regional human security. If consensus rules or institutional weakness were the root cause, we would expect uniformly low activity across domains. The structural argument thus lacks traction in explaining strategic variation within the same institutional framework.

Principal–agent models provide a related, though distinct, explanation. Hawkins et al. (2006) argue that once states delegate authority to IO secretariats, agents may deviate from principals' preferences, leading to agency slack, shirking, or overreach. Information asymmetries and divergent incentives between member states and secretariats can create policy paralysis or misaligned outputs. However, these frameworks assume that inaction stems from misalignment within the organization rather than from a purposeful calculus by the organization as a collective actor.

A third body of work locates inaction within the bureaucratic machinery of international organizations. Pathological accounts emphasize how bureaucracies generate inefficiency through procedural rigidity and internal insulation. Barnett and Finnemore (1999, 2004) describe IO pathologies such as the “irrationality of rationalization,” where strict adherence to rules overrides purpose, and “organizational insulation,” where bureaucratic hierarchies shield decision-makers from feedback, producing misalignment between intent and outcome. These arguments help explain chronic inefficiency and misimplementation, but they frame inaction primarily as a dysfunction, not as a choice limiting theoretical frameworks from incorporating agency in constructing pathologies / inaction strategically.

Such theories cannot easily explain why the same secretariat exhibits differential activism across issue areas. If inaction were merely a bureaucratic pathology or agency problem, it should manifest consistently across portfolios. Yet organizations like ASEAN display dynamic performance in some areas and dormancy in others. Moreover, these accounts neglect the external environment—the complex web of inter-organizational competition, geopolitical pressures, and reputational incentives that shape how and when an organization acts. Without embedding ROs in their broader regional or global field, these theories miss the strategic dimension of withholding action beyond internal stability.

More recent work moves beyond structural or pathological explanations to treat inaction as strategic behavior in the larger environment in which they operate. Gray (2013) argues that IOs may intentionally pause or scale back activities to preserve internal cohesion, preserve

resources, or avoid reputational costs, particularly in politically divisive areas. Similarly, Slaughter (2004) highlights how international actors employ informal governance mechanisms to delay or diffuse contentious issues when formal resolution would be politically costly, effectively institutionalizing stasis as a form of risk management. Abbott and Snidal (2000) add a complementary logic of strategic specialization: IOs rationally concentrate their limited resources in areas of comparative advantage, leaving other issue areas dormant by design.

Scholarship on organizational legitimization extends this logic but still focuses primarily on inward-facing goals. Schmidtke and Lenz (2021) demonstrate that regional organizations engage in proactive legitimization, shaping narratives around their mandates and competence to preempt criticism and maintain authority. Under conditions of reputational sensitivity, ROs may avoid certain domains altogether to preserve credibility, signaling prudence or role clarity. Here, too, inaction becomes a reputational management tool, a form of self-restraint meant to sustain authority within an increasingly crowded and contested governance landscape. These perspectives introduce agency back into the analysis, but they continue to portray inaction as defensive—a means of internal management or legitimacy preservation—rather than as a relational strategy that redistributes governance burdens. They under-specify downstream behavioral effects on outsiders.

Taken together, existing literatures illuminate crucial dimensions of inaction but leave important puzzles unresolved. Structural and bureaucratic theories explain why organizations cannot act, while strategic and legitimization-based accounts explain why they choose not to but narrowly as a means of internal preservation. None adequately capture the external and relational consequences of these choices: how deliberate inaction reshapes incentives for actors beyond the organization, redistributing the practical burdens of governance while maintaining the organization's discursive centrality.

This paper theorizes inaction as both internally strategic and externally coercive. In this view, inaction is not merely defensive but productive as a way to manage political risk and preserve legitimacy by compelling capable outsiders to intervene, often under the organization's own normative framework. Critics might object that organizational inaction such as ASEAN's response to human trafficking merely reflects elite capture, sovereignty norms, or fear of internal fracture. My argument incorporates these insights but situates them within a broader calculus of strategic abstention in a complex regional ecosystem.

Theory

This section develops the theory of coercive inaction, specifying the conditions under which regional organizations withhold substantive action and the mechanism through which such restraint induces external intervention. The central question motivating the theory is: why do regional organizations become selectively inactive in politically sensitive domains despite possessing both the mandate and the capacity to act? Existing explanations obscure a distinct strategic possibility that organizations may leverage abstention as a tool of governance, using delay, ambiguity, and proceduralism to shape how other actors respond to crises within their domain.

The argument unfolds in three steps. First, I delineate the universe of cases and scope conditions—those in which regional organizations occupy recognized leadership positions yet face acute political and reputational constraints that make direct action costly. Second, I identify the set of strategic options available to organizations under these conditions, including my contribution: coercive inaction. Third, I specify the conditions under which coercive inaction is selected over other strategies, linking variation in organizational expectations and institutional capacity to different patterns of response.

Universe of Cases and Scope Conditions

The universe of cases in which coercive inaction is likely includes regional organizations that enjoy established jurisdiction and normative centrality within a defined geographic or functional space. These organizations—such as ASEAN, ECOWAS, or the OAS—derive authority from their regional mandates and the expectation that they speak for the region, even as they operate under internal heterogeneity and procedural constraints that limit decisive action. Their legitimacy depends on maintaining unity among diverse member states and upholding regional norms such as non-interference or consensus, which simultaneously preserve inclusivity and constrain enforcement. These design features render them structurally prone to inertia but also strategically positioned: because ROs are central and visible, their inaction has external consequences that less institutionalized actors cannot replicate.

Within this universe, the theory applies to situations in which an organization faces high issue salience and high expected costs of substantive engagement, but lacks any binding capacity constraint. Salience captures the degree to which an issue attracts regional and international attention, mobilizes domestic constituencies, and heightens the reputational stakes of organizational behavior. High-salience issues compel visibility: doing nothing risks delegitimization. Cost, by contrast, encompasses both material and political dimensions—the fiscal and administrative burdens of enforcement as well as the risks of provoking internal dissent, violating sovereignty norms, or assuming responsibility for failure.

When both salience and cost are high, organizations confront a dilemma where the potential costs of action outweigh the benefits however relinquishing the benefits – legitimacy gains, material gains, reputational gains, addressing the issue at hand – is also not a viable option: engagement threatens internal coherence, but inaction threatens external credibility. In these moments, regional organizations must find ways to appear responsive while insulating themselves from liability. This is the strategic environment in which coercive inaction becomes viable—when the organization cannot afford to act, but also cannot afford to appear inactive.

Table 1. Scope Conditions and Organizational Response

*	Low Cost of Action	High Cost of Action
Low Salience	Symbolic engagement, procedural maintenance, or disengagement; outcomes largely inconsequential.	Symbolic rituals or procedural delay; minimal reputational exposure.
High Salience	Active engagement or orchestration; visible and often effective action feasible.	Dilemma zone: decisive action is risky, yet visible inaction untenable. Coercive Inaction can be a strategic choice that ROs can make under these conditions.

The high-salience, high-cost quadrant captures the empirical space of interest. Here, the organization is under pressure to demonstrate responsiveness but anticipates that direct action will fracture internal consensus or incur disproportionate political risk especially if actions fail. The structure of this dilemma is common in regional governance, where institutions must reconcile sovereignty-sensitive norms with growing expectations of problem-solving capacity.

Under such conditions, inaction by a central regional organization produces a vacuum. It creates externalities such as migratory flows, trafficking spillovers, humanitarian crises, or reputational pressures that spill outward onto proximate, capable actors. For the regional organization, this transforms inaction into a potentially productive instrument: by letting costs accumulate on others, it may indirectly prompt them to intervene in ways that relieve the organization of immediate responsibility without direct delegation. The strategic challenge, however, lies in controlling how such interventions unfold. The same abstention that induces external action also risks ceding agenda-setting power if outsiders bypass the organization's framework. The problem for regional organizations, therefore, is not simply whether to act, but how to induce others to act without surrendering control over the terms of engagement. Whether coercive inaction is chosen depends on two conditions: the feasibility of inducing external action and the organization's control over the institutional and normative frame through which that action occurs.

Independent Variables

In high-salience, high-cost environments, regional organizations face multiple strategic options: they can act decisively despite internal divisions (active / gradualist engagement), collaborate with and coordinate others to share burdens (delegation/orchestration), withdraw while maintaining rhetorical commitment (symbolic disengagement), or withhold action to prompt external intervention (coercive inaction). The choice among these depends on two key independent variables that capture the organization's relational and cognitive positioning within its governance environment: external responsiveness and anticipated alignment or frame control. These are not structural attributes of the regional order but perceptual and anticipatory variables: how the organization reads its environment and the behavior it expects inaction to trigger.

External responsiveness (exposure) refers to the organization's perception that credible, capable, and exposed external actors—whether non-member states, donors, or neighboring powers—will face rising costs if the regional organization withholds action. It captures the extent to which the organization expects its inaction to create action-forcing externalities: humanitarian crises, migration flows, trafficking networks, or reputational spillovers that impose material or political burdens on proximate actors. When such exposure exists, inaction becomes a potentially productive strategy. By allowing these externalities to accumulate, the organization can transform its omission into leverage—inducing others to intervene in ways that relieve its own obligations.

Crucially, this dimension extends beyond the simple presence of rivals or partners in the governance field. It concerns responsiveness, not mere availability. An environment populated by capable actors is not necessarily inducible unless those actors are also vulnerable to the consequences of inaction. High external responsiveness therefore implies both capability and exposure: actors possess the means to act, and the incentives to do so once costs mount. Low responsiveness, by contrast, signals either that no one is sufficiently affected or that those affected lack the resources or legitimacy to respond. In such environments, organizational abstention yields stasis rather than inducement.

Empirically, high external responsiveness characterizes contexts like ASEAN's management of human trafficking, where Australia and other donors faced reputational and policy costs from persistent trafficking flows and ultimately intervened through ASEAN frameworks.

Anticipated alignment captures the organization's belief that, if and when external actors respond, they will do so through the organization's own normative and procedural architecture rather than circumventing it. It reflects the degree of institutional and discursive control the organization expects to maintain over subsequent interventions. This expectation rests on the density and credibility of existing institutional scaffolding—treaties, action plans, technical committees, and model laws that make the organization's framework easily adoptable. It also depends on the reputational value that external actors attach to “acting through” the organization: the legitimacy, access, and regional optics such affiliation provides.

High anticipated alignment exists when the organization expects that external actors will operate under its umbrella, reproducing its templates, citing its conventions, or co-badging programs with its label. In such cases, the organization can safely refrain from direct intervention, confident that outsiders will reinforce rather than undermine its authority. Low anticipated alignment, in contrast, indicates weak or fragmented frameworks and limited reputational pull: external actors may intervene independently or through alternative venues, thereby redefining the issue and eroding the organization's centrality.

Within ASEAN, this variation is clearly observable. In the trafficking domain, ASEAN's dense institutional scaffolding—embodied in ACTIP, its Plans of Action, and technical working groups—has enabled external partners like Australia and the EU to act through its frameworks, reinforcing ASEAN's authority even amid inaction. By contrast, during the Rohingya crisis, the absence of robust procedural templates and the sensitivity of political intervention produced low anticipated alignment: external actors bypassed ASEAN entirely, channeling responses through

the UN and bilateral mechanisms, leaving the organization symbolically present but operationally marginal.

Both external responsiveness and anticipated alignment are expectation-based variables: they capture how organizations interpret and forecast their environments rather than fixed institutional properties. The first concerns whether inaction will induce others to move; the second concerns whether such movement will occur through the organization's existing framework. Together, they determine whether inaction is dangerous, neutral, or strategically useful—and set the stage for when coercive inaction becomes a viable equilibrium strategy.

Taken together, their combination generates four equilibria that range from full engagement to strategic exit. The resulting typology, summarized in Table 2, reflects how organizations convert environmental uncertainty into strategic choice.

Table 2: Strategic Choices Available to Organizations		
*	High Alignment	Low Alignment
High External Responsiveness	<p><u>Coercive Inaction</u> <i>Mode of legitimization:</i> derivative legitimacy through framework adoption.</p>	<p>Orchestration / Collaboration Active coordination to pre-empt bypass and manage others' interventions. <i>Mode of legitimization:</i> shared legitimacy through co-management.</p>
Low External Responsiveness	<p>Symbolic / Minimal Engagement <i>Mode of legitimization:</i> performative legitimacy through continuity.</p>	<p>Symbolic Disengagement / Strategic Exit Withdrawal from the issue space, citing mandate or limits, to avoid blame for inaction. <i>Mode of legitimization:</i> residual legitimacy through form, not function.</p>

High Responsiveness + Low Alignment: Orchestration and Collaboration

When external responsiveness is high but anticipated alignment is low, inaction becomes dangerous. Outsiders will act because they must, but absent strong institutional scaffolding they may do so independently, redefining the issue and eroding the organization's centrality. In such contexts, the organization cannot afford to wait passively. Instead, it moves preemptively to co-opt or coordinate external efforts through orchestration, partnership, or joint task forces. Here, action is not about enforcement but about management of potential bypass—ensuring visibility and partial control.

Low Responsiveness + High Alignment: Symbolic or Minimal Engagement

When few capable outsiders are exposed to the costs of inaction, inaction yields little leverage; yet if the organization's institutional framework remains strong and legitimate, visible

withdrawal could appear inconsistent with its mandate. The result is symbolic or minimal engagement—a pattern of rhetorical commitment, review processes, and “capacity-building” programs designed to maintain procedural continuity and legitimacy without substantive follow-through. In this equilibrium, the organization sustains its brand through ritualized performance rather than strategic withholding. Unlike coercive inaction, the goal is not to induce others to act but to preserve internal and external legitimacy while avoiding resource-intensive commitments.

Low Responsiveness + Low Alignment: Symbolic Disengagement or Strategic Exit

When the organization expects neither credible external responders nor meaningful alignment. Continued rhetorical ownership would invite blame for inaction while yielding no prospect of external burden relief. The rational strategy is strategic exit—an explicit retreat or redefinition of mandate to minimize liability. This pattern reflects not apathy but face-saving withdrawal: disengagement framed as respect for sovereignty, subsidiarity, or resource prioritization. The Arab League’s retreat from active involvement in Yemen after 2015 and ASEAN’s limited post-crisis engagement in Myanmar illustrate such liability-minimizing exits.

High Responsiveness + High Alignment: Coercive Inaction

Coercive inaction occupies the upper-left cell, where the organization expects that capable external actors will both feel compelled to act and do so through its established framework. Under these conditions, withholding becomes a rational, low-cost strategy. The organization need not mobilize resources or risk internal fracture; instead, it allows externalities—migration, trafficking, or reputational pressure—to accumulate on proximate, capable states or donors. Because these outsiders are already embedded in the organization’s normative ecosystem, their eventual intervention reinforces rather than displaces the organization’s authority. Inaction thus functions as a form of indirect governance: the organization rules through the actions of others.

Distinguishing Coercive Inaction

Coercive inaction is distinct from neighboring strategies such as symbolic engagement or orchestration. Symbolic engagement lacks the inducement logic that defines coercive inaction. It satisfies internal and external audiences without expectation of subsequent external intervention. Coercive inaction, by contrast, is oriented toward inducing action through calculated omission. Where orchestration relies on active management—the organization coordinates external actors because alignment cannot be assumed—coercive inaction relies on passive inducement: the organization abstains precisely because it expects alignment to occur automatically once costs mount. The two share an outcome of burden-shifting, but differ fundamentally in their starting premises and degree of intentional activity.

To distinguish coercive inaction from symbolic legitimization and orchestration, I infer expectations from behavioral traces rather than stated motives: a patterned pairing of persistent procedural delay (review clauses, rolling consultations, pilots) with active frame maintenance (action plans, model laws, monitoring templates, convening rights). In orchestration, the organization creates and mobilizes coordination mechanisms *ex ante* because alignment cannot be assumed; in CI, it preserves ownership structures and lets exposed outsiders populate them *ex*

post, once externalities bite. This makes CI empirically observable as a withholding-plus-design pattern, not a post hoc attribution of intent.

This framework renders coercive inaction vulnerable to error. If the organization overestimates external responsiveness, inaction produces stagnation—costs accumulate but no one moves – no legitimacy gains are made by the organizations. If it overestimates alignment, outsiders act but bypass the organization, resulting in reputational erosion rather than reinforcement. These failure modes delimit the scope of the theory: coercive inaction is a successful equilibrium only when both exposure and alignment expectations are correct and mutually reinforcing.

The following section operationalizes these expectations into an empirical strategy, identifying observable indicators of coercive inaction and assessing how the proposed mechanism can be evaluated against competing accounts of why regional organizations fail to act.

Research Design

The empirical analysis proceeds through a plausibility probe designed to assess the empirical tractability and theoretical coherence of coercive inaction as a mechanism of regional governance. Rather than testing the theory exhaustively, the goal at this stage is to demonstrate that the phenomenon can be observed, coded, and plausibly differentiated from related strategies such as orchestration or symbolic legitimization (George & Bennett 2005; Beach & Pedersen 2013). I adopt a descriptive, comparative approach combining cross-case coding with within-case process tracing. This design serves three purposes: first, to establish clear observable implications of CI that can be identified across organizations; second, to demonstrate variation in strategy adoption consistent with the theory's core independent variables; and third, to suggest the potential generalizability of the mechanism beyond the focal case. I select ASEAN's approach to human trafficking as the principal plausibility probe because it captures the conditions under which an organization with strong sovereignty norms and high external exposure employs deliberate withholding to induce external intervention through its own framework. The analysis pairs this case with shorter descriptive contrasts to illustrate variation in both expectations and outcomes under comparable institutional constraints.

A plausibility probe is appropriate for a theory-building stage of research where the core task is conceptual refinement, specification of observable implications, and preliminary validation of causal logic, not statistical inference. The focus is thus on process tracing within a single bounded context that exhibits the scope conditions of the theory: high salience, high cost of action, procedural constraint, and proximity to capable external actors.

The case of ASEAN's engagement with human trafficking, particularly as it intersects with Australia's ASEAN–Australia Counter-Trafficking (ASEAN-ACT) initiative, provides a theoretically consistent and empirically rich site to probe the mechanism of coercive inaction. ASEAN fits the universe of cases theorized in this paper: it is a regional organization that claims centrality and legitimacy in Southeast Asian governance, is procedurally constrained by consensus and norms of non-interference, and faces high public salience on transnational issues

such as trafficking and migration. Moreover, ASEAN's record reveals marked within-organization variation with robust, sustained engagement in economic integration and trade liberalization under the ASEAN Economic Community framework, contrasted with persistent inaction in politically sensitive domains like trafficking and refugee crises (ASEAN Secretariat 2015; ASEAN Foreign Ministers 2017). This internal variation controls for institutional design and capacity, allowing us to assess whether strategic inaction better explains divergent patterns of engagement.

The human trafficking issue area meets the scope conditions of coercive inaction theorized above: it is a high-salience, high-cost domain that generates humanitarian pressure, cross-border reputational risk, and domestic visibility, while imposing heavy political costs on member states due to sovereignty sensitivities and entrenched domestic complicities. At the same time, Australia, a proximate, materially capable non-member state, bears the externalities of regional trafficking flows and has strong incentives to intervene. This configuration produces precisely the kind of structural interdependence where the mechanism of coercive inaction should emerge: ASEAN abstains from substantive enforcement, thereby externalizing costs to Australia, which in turn intervenes under ASEAN's normative and procedural framework.

Observable Implications

Coercive inaction can be empirically identified through patterned sequences of behavior rather than explicit statements of intent. To ensure that coercive inaction is both observable and distinguishable from adjacent forms of organizational behavior, I adopt a structured diagnostic checklist. The goal is not to infer intent from post-hoc rationalization but to identify consistent behavioral patterns across cases. Table 3 translates the theoretical mechanism into empirically testable indicators, allowing systematic comparison of when inaction reflects strategic inducement rather than incapacity, symbolic legitimization, or active orchestration. Coding is conservative with ambiguous evidence being treated as partial rather than affirmative, prioritizing falsifiability over overreach. Because this project is in an early empirical stage, the coding process is explicitly iterative: the operational indicators and thresholds will be refined as evidence accumulates and as cross-case patterns clarify the boundaries of the mechanism. The following matrix summarizes the criteria and how each dimension will be coded across cases.

Further below, in Table 4, I attempt to code different organizations across different issue areas based on my expectations to show the tractability of the theory. At this stage, the coding exercise is illustrative rather than definitive. This approach necessarily entails a degree of conceptual abstraction and preliminary inference. It does not yet meet the standards of a full comparative dataset, which would require systematic source triangulation, inter-coder reliability testing, and the inclusion of internal organizational documents to verify intent and expectation. Those refinements will form the basis of the next stage of the research, once archival and interview data is collected.

ASEAN-Australia Brief Plausibility Probe

ASEAN's response to human trafficking from the early 2000s to the late 2010s exemplifies how coercive inaction (CI) can operate as an intentional strategy rather than as incapacity or neglect. Beginning with the 2004 Declaration Against Trafficking in Persons and the 2005 Work Plan, ASEAN invested heavily in symbolic and procedural architecture—ministerial meetings, training programs, and model laws—without establishing any enforcement body or monitoring mechanism. Repeated communiqués emphasized “capacity building,” “respect for national sovereignty,” and “the need for further study,” language that created a long procedural stall while preserving ASEAN’s ownership of the issue. This slow-rolling behavior coincided with mounting external exposure: trafficking networks expanded, U.S. TIP reports ranked Southeast Asian states poorly, and Australia faced growing reputational and border-security costs linked to irregular migration through the region.

Rather than fill the enforcement gap itself, ASEAN maintained the frame. It consolidated its normative authority through the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons (ACTIP, 2015)—a legal instrument rich in definitions and cooperative principles but devoid of binding oversight. The Convention and its accompanying Plan of Action served as adoptable templates: they provided the appearance of comprehensive regional governance while ensuring implementation remained a national prerogative. By producing this scaffolding and insisting that all anti-trafficking initiatives “support ACTIP,” ASEAN created what the theory predicts as anticipatory alignment: capable outsiders could address the problem only by working through ASEAN’s framework.

Australia faced mounting externalities that raised the domestic price of inaction and created a structural demand for a regional fix. Irregular maritime arrivals surged to historic highs around 2012–13—over 17,000 people by mid-2013 alone—triggering Operation Sovereign Borders and a whole-of-government response to regional smuggling/trafficking pipelines. In 2019, this logic materialized in the ASEAN–Australia Counter-Trafficking (ASEAN-ACT) program. Funded and administered by the Australian government, the program explicitly states it “supports the implementation of ACTIP” and the ASEAN Plan of Action, co-badging activities and technical assistance with ASEAN bodies. That is an alignment choice, not a necessity: DFAT could have funded bilateral prosecutions or Bali Process-only workstreams, but instead invested in ACTIP-conforming capacity and procedures.

The program was co-branded with ASEAN logos, embedded in existing ASEAN working groups, and reported progress against ASEAN’s indicators. Importantly, no new joint secretariat or delegated authority was created before this uptake; ASEAN’s role remained one of gatekeeper and convener. The temporal sequence—(1) procedural delay, (2) sustained frame maintenance, (3) rising external exposure, and (4) ex post uptake through ASEAN structures—matches the observable implications of coercive inaction. ASEAN retained authority without direct enforcement costs, while Australia absorbed the operational burden under ASEAN’s normative umbrella.

Contributions

This paper makes four interrelated contributions. First, it recasts accountability in regional governance by identifying coercive inaction as a mechanism of *strategic responsibility diffusion*. Rather than a byproduct of dysfunction, blurred accountability emerges from organizational design choices that preserve symbolic authorship while external actors assume implementation. Second, it offers a relational view of burden-sharing. External partners often intervene to mitigate costs of inaction, but by doing so through the organization's normative framework, they reinforce its legitimacy and authority. Coercive inaction thus reveals how regional organizations can remain central even as others govern in practice. Third, it exposes a conditional form of institutional resilience. In sovereignty-sensitive environments, selective inaction can sustain authority by avoiding reputational risk while maintaining relevance. This "quiet endurance" redefines institutional strength not as performance but as survival through calibrated withdrawal. It contributes to a growing reconsideration of regional organizations—especially in the Global South—not as derivative or decorative, but as adaptive institutions that convert constraint into a distinctive mode of governance. Finally, the concept bridges rationalist and sociological approaches to institutional power. It treats abstention as a relational mechanism linking strategic calculation to legitimization dynamics, expanding theories of global governance beyond the presumption that action is the sole mode of influence.

Table 3: Observable Implications

Dimension	Operational Indicator	Evidence Type	Interpretation
Framing & Template	RO has a treaty, declaration, or “plan of action” defining the issue	Founding documents, charters, PoAs, communiqués.	“Yes” indicates active framing; precondition for CI or symbolic engagement.
Procedural Deferral	Repeated invocation of “capacity building,” “review,” or “national discretion” clauses to delay implementation.	Draft texts, meeting records, annual reports.	“Yes” suggests deliberate stalling: possible CI. “No” = orchestration / active follow-through
Expectation of External Uptake	Evidence that the RO expected or encouraged capable outsiders to act (“dialogue partners,” “technical assistance,” “shared implementation”).	Speeches, summit statements, MoUs.	“Yes” = intentional inducement; “No” = symbolic legitimization or constraint.
External Exposure	Proximate, capable external actors face material or reputational spillovers from the issue.	Donor reports, media coverage, state statements.	High exposure is necessary for CI; if low, symbolic engagement likely.
RO Capacity	The organization had prior success or adequate resources to act on similar issues.	Budget data, staffing, past interventions.	“Yes” rules out capacity constraint as explanation.
External Uptake Through RO Frame	External actors acted under RO’s normative or institutional framework (e.g., citing treaties, co-branding, adopting templates).	Program design docs, communiqués, logos, public framing.	“Yes” = CI (frame lock); “No” = orchestration or bypass.
Timing of External Action	External action followed sustained RO abstention rather than concurrent orchestration.	Timeline analysis, project launch vs. RO decisions.	“Yes” = induced action; “No” = co-designed orchestration.
Absence of Pre-emptive Orchestration	No prior task force, secretariat, or formal coalition before external actors intervened.	Institutional records, policy archives.	“Yes” confirms CI; “No” implies orchestration/collaboration.
Outcome for RO Authority	RO maintains or enhances legitimacy post-external action (credited with leadership despite abstention).	Official statements, press coverage, donor discourse.	“Yes” = CI succeeded; “No” = CI failure or symbolic drift.
Failure	Outsiders bypassed RO entirely or acted against its norms.	Donor programs, media reports.	If “Yes,” this is a CI failure misjudged inducement).

Table 4: Descriptive Analysis

Org	Issue	Credible outsiders	Externalities	Capable to act?	Framework existed?	Framework recognized ex ante?	Expected strategy	Outcome
ASEAN	Human trafficking	Australia, EU	Yes (border control, labor & reputational costs)	Yes	Yes (ACTIP 2015; Plan of Action; SOMTC)	High (regional treaty + POA)	CI	ASEAN slow-rolled enforcement; ASEAN-ACT (DFAT, from 2019) framed as <i>supporting ACTIP</i> ; program co-badged with ASEAN; templates used.
ASEAN	Rohingya crisis	UN agencies, OIC, Bangladesh, bilateral donors	Yes (refugee flows, humanitarian costs)	Yes (UN/OIC esp.)	Weak/fragmented for rights/enforcement	Low	Symbolic / limited orchestration	ASEAN statements + humanitarian channel (AHA Centre) but external framing dominated (UN/OIC); ASEAN largely bypassed operationally.
OAS	Haiti (1991–94 coup/restoration)	U.S., UN, CARICOM states	Yes (refugees, regional instability)	Yes	Yes (Res. 1080 “democratic charter” practice)	Moderate–High	CI-like inducement	OAS early diplomacy/sanctions under Res. 1080; UNSC 940 (1994) authorized MNF; restoration proceeded under OAS/UN frame (joint legitimization).
ECOWAS	Mali (2012–13)	France, UN	Yes (terrorism/spillovers)	Yes	Yes (strong security instruments)	High	Orchestration/Active engagement	ECOWAS sought deployment (AFISMA); UNSC 2085 (2012) authorized; France led ops but within ECOWAS/UN design—this is managed collaboration, not withholding