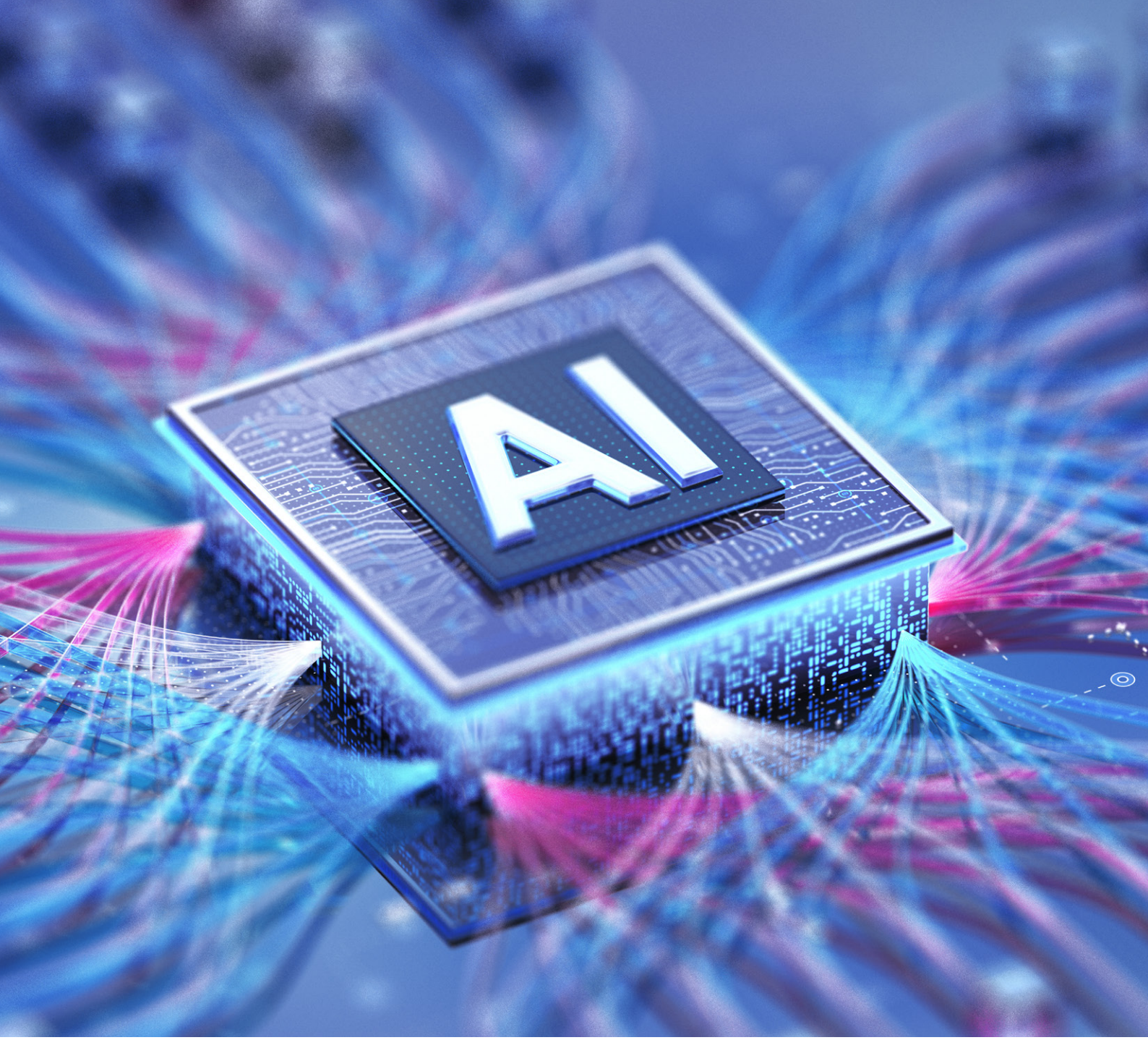

SEACEN POLICY BRIEF

Governing Artificial Intelligence in ASEAN:
Global Alignment, Regional Interoperability, and Policy Priorities for Central Banks

June 2026

The South East Asian Central Banks (SEACEN)
Research and Training Centre

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The SEACEN Centre

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

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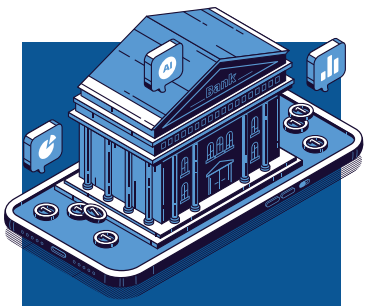
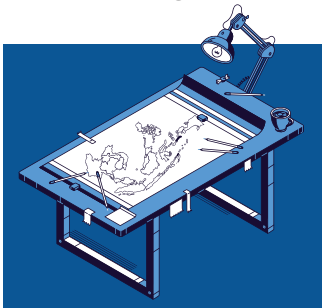
Artificial Intelligence (AI) has evolved from being solely a technology-policy concern to becoming integral to the institutional frameworks of major institutions, including central banks. AI now plays a role in forecasting, surveillance, financial supervision, data management, public communication, and evaluation of market and payment system resilience. For ASEAN, the key policy issue is ensuring AI governance remains credible, interoperable, and proportionate across nations with varying levels of digital preparedness.

This policy brief highlights that ASEAN's AI governance approach is evolving through a soft-law framework centred on voluntary cooperation, consensus, and practical advice. The ***ASEAN Guide on AI Governance and Ethics, along with the Expanded ASEAN Guide for Generative AI,*** establish a common vocabulary for responsible AI use across the region. While these are not legally binding regulations, they serve as a shared reference for governments, regulators, companies, and public institutions aiming to implement AI in a manner that is transparent, fair, accountable, safe, reliable, and aligned with privacy and data governance standards.



AI in Central Banks

- Forecasting
- Surveillance
- Financial Supervision
- Data Management



AI Governance in ASEAN

Soft-Law Framework

↓

Voluntary Cooperation

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ASEAN Guide on AI Governance

Global Alignment & Principles

- Human-Centric Design
- Transparency
- Accountability
- Safety & Reliability
- Risk Management

Policy Implications For Central Banks

- Integrate AI Governance
- Risk Management
- Human Accountability
- Regional Collaboration

ASEAN's strategy generally follows the main global frameworks established by organisations like the OECD, UNESCO, the United Nations General Assembly, and APEC. These frameworks share ***core principles: human-centric design, transparency, explainability, fairness, non-discrimination, accountability, safety, robustness, human oversight, privacy, risk management, innovation, inclusion, and international collaboration.*** This alignment is particularly important for central banks because AI systems involved in economic analysis, supervision, market monitoring, payments, and public communication will increasingly operate across borders and institutions. Having compatible governance helps reduce regulatory fragmentation and allows institutions to evaluate AI risks using a shared language.

The main challenge lies in implementation, as ASEAN member states are at different levels of AI governance. Singapore has established a mature framework, including tools like **AI Verify**. Vietnam has a national AI strategy and responsible AI principles, with additional legal efforts underway. Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines are actively developing or revising strategies, guidelines, and draft laws. Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar are still in early stages. This uneven progress highlights the importance of ASEAN's regional guides, but it also means that voluntary principles alone will not suffice without capacity building, regulatory coordination, knowledge sharing, and practical testing.

For central banks, the policy implication is straightforward. AI governance should be integrated into institutional risk management and financial-sector oversight, rather than treated as a separate digital initiative. Central banks should develop internal inventories of AI, categorise use cases by risk level, ensure human accountability for decisions assisted by AI, enhance model and data governance, and collaborate regionally on supervisory technology, financial stability analysis, data standards, and cross-border AI risks. ***ASEAN's flexible, soft-law approach can facilitate these efforts*** if it is effectively implemented.

1. WHY AI GOVERNANCE MATTERS FOR CENTRAL BANKS

AI enhances the speed, scope, and detail of policy analysis. Central banks currently utilise AI for nowcasting, text analysis, financial sector surveillance, detecting payment anomalies, monitoring consumer risks, supervisory triage, and managing internal knowledge. Generative AI introduces additional opportunities for summarising documents, drafting policies, aiding research processes, and querying complex datasets. These uses can boost productivity, particularly when staff handle large amounts of information and urgent decisions.

The features that make AI useful also introduce governance challenges. AI can perpetuate bias in data, produce unreliable or unverifiable results, hide the reasoning behind decisions, leak sensitive information, or lead to overdependence on automated suggestions. In the financial and central banking sectors, such risks can become systemic if AI is used in areas such as credit decisions, market infrastructure, compliance, cybersecurity, or public messaging. Mistakes acceptable in consumer contexts might be disastrous in settings impacting financial stability, monetary policy, regulatory oversight, or institutional reputation.

AI governance, therefore, fundamentally involves public-sector accountability. For central banks, the key question extends beyond the technical performance of AI systems to whether they can be explained, audited, constrained, and governed within current mandates. Any model employed, whether to screen financial institutions, detect suspicious payment flows, or summarise market intelligence, must have clearly assigned ownership, thorough validation, proper documentation, and regular review. Similarly, a generative AI tool used by staff should adhere to rules on data entry, confidentiality, output verification, and clear human accountability.

The ASEAN policy landscape adds complexity to this issue. Member countries vary in their digital infrastructure, legal frameworks, data protection policies, technical expertise, and institutional readiness. Simultaneously, financial systems, digital platforms, payment methods, and data exchanges are becoming more regional. As a result, central banks require governance principles that are both unified enough to facilitate cooperation and adaptable enough to align with individual national mandates and capacities. **This is where ASEAN's AI governance approach plays an important role.**

2. ASEAN'S REGIONAL APPROACH: SOFT LAW, INTEROPERABILITY, AND PRACTICAL GUIDANCE

ASEAN's AI governance agenda is part of a larger digital transformation initiative. ***The ASEAN Digital Masterplan 2025*** seeks to establish ASEAN as a prominent digital community and economic hub, backed by secure digital services, improved infrastructure, digital inclusion, trusted digital solutions, and harmonised digital regulations. Additionally, ASEAN is working on the ***Digital Economy Framework Agreement*** to promote a more coordinated, rule-based regional digital ecosystem (ASEAN Secretariat, 2021; ASEAN, 2023).

In this context, ASEAN has introduced two primary AI governance tools. ***The ASEAN Guide on AI Governance and Ethics,*** published in 2024, offers voluntary recommendations for the responsible creation, development, and use of AI. It targets both public and private sector actors, emphasising commercial, non-military, and non-dual-use AI applications. Its goal is to foster trust in AI systems and enhance compatibility across ASEAN countries (ASEAN, 2024).

The guide outlines seven core principles. First, transparency and explainability mandate that organisations disclose AI use, clarify its decision-making role, and communicate outcomes transparently to users and the public. **Second, fairness and equity** emphasise safeguarding against bias and discrimination, paying attention to dataset representativeness and quality. **Third, security and safety** involve rigorous testing, risk assessments, and human oversight. **Fourth, robustness and reliability** require that AI systems operate consistently across various conditions and be resilient to errors and unexpected inputs. **Fifth, human-centricity** ensures AI supports human well-being and protects human interests. **Sixth, privacy and data governance** stress responsible data management throughout the AI lifecycle. **Seventh, accountability and integrity** call for clear responsibility for AI outcomes.

The 2025 Expanded ASEAN Guide on AI Governance and Ethics-Generative AI adapts these principles to address the specific risks associated with generative AI. It acknowledges that systems that generate text, images, audio, code, and other content pose new risks, including disinformation, deepfakes, intellectual property issues, privacy violations, and inherent biases. The guide offers recommendations in nine key areas: accountability, data management, trusted development and deployment, incident reporting, testing and assurance, security, content provenance, safety and alignment R&D, and AI for public good (ASEAN, 2025).

Three aspects of ASEAN's approach are particularly important for central banks. First, ASEAN's approach is principles-driven rather than overly detailed, enabling central banks to tailor AI governance to their specific mandates, legal structures, and operational needs. **Second,** it highlights the importance of interoperability, which is vital when AI systems, data standards, financial technology, and digital services operate across different countries. **Third,** it views innovation and trust as interconnected, helping central banks foster beneficial digital advancements while maintaining confidence, resilience, and accountability.

ASEAN's approach embodies the ***"ASEAN Way":*** consensus, flexibility, and voluntary coordination. This strategy benefits a diverse region by facilitating agreements where enforceable regulations may be challenging and allowing less digitally advanced areas to phase in reforms. However, such flexibility can also hinder timely implementation. Without dedicated capacity-building and operational support, these principles risk remaining only aspirational. **The key challenge is to translate ASEAN's common language into effective institutional practices.**

3. ALIGNMENT WITH GLOBAL AI GOVERNANCE NORMS

ASEAN's strategy can be compared to the key global AI governance frameworks: the OECD AI Principles, UNESCO's Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence, the UN General Assembly resolution on safe, secure, and trustworthy AI for sustainable development, and APEC's policy initiatives on AI governance and economic policy.

The OECD framework has become one of the most influential global reference points for trustworthy AI. Its principles cover inclusive growth, sustainable development, well-being, human rights, democratic values, transparency, explainability, robustness, safety, and accountability. **The 2024 update** strengthened the emphasis on systematic risk management across the AI lifecycle (OECD, 2024). This shift is especially relevant for central banks, as it shifts AI governance from general ethical principles to concrete issues such as risk classification, monitoring, mitigation, and accountability.

UNESCO's framework is broader and more explicitly **normative**. It places human dignity, human rights, cultural diversity, inclusion, sustainability, privacy, human oversight, transparency, and accountability at the centre of AI governance (UNESCO, 2022). Its value for ASEAN lies in its attention to countries with different development levels and its recognition that AI governance must address equity, access, and capacity. For central banks in emerging market economies, this is relevant because AI adoption can widen institutional and market divides if infrastructure, data quality, and skills are uneven.

The United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) resolution provides a multilateral baseline for safe, secure, and trustworthy AI systems. It links AI governance to the UN Charter, international human rights law, and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Although nonbinding, it reinforces the idea that domestic AI governance frameworks should be interoperable with international standards and should avoid fragmentation (UNGA, 2024).

APEC's approach is more pragmatic and economically oriented. Its policy briefs emphasise productivity, innovation, public-sector AI use, data governance, digital ecosystems, transparency, accountability, cross-sector partnerships, and regional cooperation. **The 2025 APEC brief** stresses that the region lacks a binding AI model, but many economies draw on a shared set of soft-law frameworks (Wirjo et al., 2022; Wirjo et al., 2025). This is close to ASEAN's approach: non-binding, consensus-based, and focused on cooperation rather than top-down standard-setting.

The comparison shows broad convergence. ASEAN's principles align with global norms on transparency, fairness, accountability, safety, privacy, human oversight, risk management, innovation, and international cooperation. **The main divergence is one of emphasis.** UNESCO and the UNGA are more explicit on human rights and sustainable development. The OECD gives a clearer structure to life-cycle risk management. APEC focuses on policy implementation, economic integration, and regulatory coherence. ASEAN places a stronger emphasis on regional interoperability, digital inclusion, and voluntary cooperation.

This pattern isn't inherently a weakness. **ASEAN doesn't have to imitate** the European, OECD, or UN models in its entirety. **Its strength comes from tailoring shared principles to suit Southeast Asia's diverse institutions.** However, there's a danger that human rights, sustainability, and accountability could stay too abstract. As AI systems play an increasingly significant role in public services, finance, employment, and information accuracy, ASEAN may need to strengthen the normative content of its guidelines while maintaining flexibility in their application.

4. DIVERGENT NATIONAL READINESS ACROSS ASEAN

ASEAN member states can be grouped into **three main categories. The first includes those with well-defined and sophisticated AI governance frameworks. Singapore exemplifies this with its comprehensive approach.** Its National AI Strategy, Model AI Governance Framework, and related documents offer a detailed framework that addresses transparency, explainability, safety, security, robustness, fairness, data governance, accountability, human agency, and inclusive growth. Additionally, Singapore has developed operational tools such as AI Verify, which integrates technical testing and process checks to help organisations evaluate and convey the trustworthiness of AI systems (Smart Nation Singapore, 2023; AI Verify Foundation). Singapore's approach is significant for central banks as it demonstrates how principles can be translated into practical governance structures. Tools such as testing frameworks, self-assessment guides, use-case libraries, and process checks make AI governance actionable. These resources assist institutions in progressing from mere statements of principle to consistent assessment and documentation.

Vietnam is an emerging leader. Its National Strategy for AI through 2030 sets strategic direction, while responsible AI principles issued in 2024 cover cooperation, innovation, transparency, controllability, safety, security, privacy, respect for human rights and dignity, user support, and accountability. Vietnam is also developing legal measures related to digital technology, personal data protection, and datagovernance. This suggests a move from strategy toward a more comprehensive legal and institutional framework.

The second group includes Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines. These countries are in an active phase of catching up, but their frameworks vary in scope and focus. Malaysia has established a National AI Roadmap along with national guidelines on AI governance and ethics. Indonesia has a comprehensive long-term AI strategy and an AI ethics circular emphasising fairness, transparency, accountability, human oversight, privacy, and safety. Thailand has created AI ethics guidelines, executive governance guidance, a national AI strategy and action plan, and draft legal measures. The Philippines has recently updated its national AI strategy, emphasising competitiveness and innovation, though proposed AI legislation is still pending.

The third group includes Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar, all of which are in the early stages of AI governance. Cambodia is developing a national AI strategy in partnership with ESCAP and is considering an approach based on Buddhist ideas of compassion and equity. Laos is collaborating with UNESCO on a readiness assessment and is discussing potential AI legislation. Myanmar has not yet enacted AI laws, but it appears to be developing a national AI policy.

This uneven landscape presents the main implementation challenge for ASEAN. Some jurisdictions are advancing governance tools, legal frameworks, and testing capabilities. Meanwhile, others are still establishing strategic direction, institutions, or fundamental digital governance skills. For central banks, this disparity can affect regional cooperation across data sharing, supervisory technology, cybersecurity, payment systems, AI applications in finance, and cross-border digital finance. Regional guidance may help reduce inconsistencies, yet cannot replace the need for strong domestic institutional capacity.

5. POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR CENTRAL BANKS

Central banks should treat AI governance as part of their core institutional governance. Even when central banks are not the primary AI regulator, they are users of AI, supervisors of institutions that may use AI, guardians of financial stability, operators or overseers of payment systems, and public institutions whose credibility depends on disciplined communication and evidence-based judgment. In this respect, six priorities can be identified for central banks as they develop their AI governance approaches.

The first priority is internal governance. Central banks should maintain an inventory of AI use cases, including analytical models, supervisory tools, generative AI applications, vendor systems, and experimental pilots. Each use case should identify the owner, purpose, data used, model type, decision role, risk level, validation process, and human oversight arrangements. This inventory is necessary before an institution can manage AI risk coherently.

The second priority is risk classification. Not all AI uses require the same controls. Low-risk applications, such as internal document search or administrative drafting, require basic safeguards on confidentiality and output verification. Higher-risk applications, such as supervisory risk scoring, market surveillance, payment-system anomaly detection, or consumer-risk monitoring, require stronger validation, audit trails, bias testing, and senior accountability. AI systems that support decisions affecting regulated institutions should never be treated as neutral technical tools; they should be governed as part of supervisory judgement.

The third priority is data governance. AI quality depends heavily on the data environment. Central banks should strengthen controls on data provenance, representativeness, access rights, retention, confidentiality, and data quality. Generative AI introduces additional concerns because staff may inadvertently input confidential information into external systems or rely on outputs that cannot be verified. Clear rules are needed on what data can be used, which tools are approved, and how outputs must be checked.

The fourth priority is human accountability. Human oversight should not mean a superficial approval step after an AI system has already shaped the decision. It should mean that responsible officials understand the model's purpose, limits, and evidentiary basis, and can challenge or override outputs. Accountability must remain with the institution and named decision-makers, not with vendors or software.

The fifth priority is supervisory engagement. Financial institutions may use AI in credit scoring, fraud detection, compliance, trading, customer service, cyber defence, and risk management. Central banks and financial supervisors should develop expectations on AI governance in regulated entities, including board accountability, model validation, explainability, third-party risk management, consumer protection, and incident reporting. These expectations can initially be issued as guidance, consistent with ASEAN's soft-law approach, before moving toward more formal requirements where needed.

The sixth priority is regional cooperation. ASEAN central banks can benefit from shared taxonomies, peer learning, use-case libraries, testing practices, and supervisory templates. Cross-border risks, including deepfakes, synthetic fraud, disinformation, cyber incidents, and AI-enabled financial crime, require cooperation beyond national borders. ASEAN's AI guides provide a useful common language, but central banks can operationalise it through joint workshops, pilot assessments, and information-sharing arrangements.

6. WHAT THIS MEANS FOR MONETARY POLICY, FINANCIAL STABILITY, AND TRUST

AI governance directly influences central banking through several channels. **The first effect is through analytical ability.** AI enables central banks to analyse high-frequency data, extensive text datasets, firm-specific info, and market signals. While these tools can enhance timeliness, they may also lead to false precision. A nowcasting model, language processing system, or anomaly detector should not be accepted solely for its sophistication. Instead, it must be evaluated based on the policy questions it aims to inform, the quality of data employed, its consistent performance, and the potential impact of errors.

The second channel is financial stability. As banks, insurers, payment firms, fintech companies, and market participants adopt AI, common dependencies may emerge. Institutions may rely on similar vendors, foundation models, cloud infrastructure, data sources, or automated compliance tools. This can create concentration risk and operational interdependence. AI-enabled cyber risks, synthetic identity fraud, deepfake-driven scams, and automated market manipulation also require supervisory attention. These are not purely technical risks; they can affect confidence in financial institutions and market infrastructures.

The third channel is conduct and inclusion. AI systems used in credit, insurance, customer onboarding, fraud detection, and complaint handling can affect access to financial services. Poorly governed systems may disadvantage certain groups, especially where data are incomplete or historically biased. For central banks with financial inclusion or consumer-protection responsibilities, fairness and explainability are therefore not abstract ethical principles. They are part of sound market governance.

The fourth channel is institutional trust. Central banks depend on credibility. If AI is used to prepare communication, analyse market stress, support supervision, or guide internal decisions, the public and regulated entities must be confident that human judgment remains accountable. Generative AI makes this more urgent because fluent text can mask errors, weak evidence, or unsupported claims. Institutions should require verification of AI-generated content, maintain records of material AI-assisted work, and ensure that final responsibility remains with officials.

These channels suggest that AI governance should be integrated into existing frameworks for model risk management, operational risk, cyber resilience, procurement, data protection, and supervisory policy. Central banks do not need to create a separate bureaucracy for every AI issue. They do need a clear institutional framework that defines who owns AI risk, how it is assessed, and how it is escalated when consequences become material.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

ASEAN central banks should adopt a practical, sequenced approach. First, they should establish internal AI governance frameworks that include use-case inventories, risk assessment, data controls, human oversight, validation processes, and procurement procedures. The next step will be to align these frameworks with ASEAN's seven AI governance principles and the expanded guidelines on generative AI, followed by setting supervisory expectations for AI deployment in regulated financial institutions, focusing on high-risk sectors such as credit, payments, cyber risk, market conduct, and compliance. After following all these steps, central banks can enhance staff skills in model risk management, data governance, AI assurance, and generative AI verification, while utilising regional platforms to exchange tools, case studies, and lessons learned, especially between more and less advanced jurisdictions.

At the ASEAN level, the main policy focus should shift from just agreeing on principles to actively supporting implementation. Regional organisations ought to create practical templates for AI risk assessments, incident reporting, documentation of models, human oversight, and procurement due diligence. They should also provide training programs for regulators and central banks, especially in countries still developing their AI governance capacity. Establishing a regional repository of AI governance practices, supervisory use cases, and testing tools would minimise duplicated efforts and assist member states in tailoring guidance to their specific national contexts.

ASEAN should also consider deepening the rights, sustainability, and public-interest dimensions of its AI governance language. The current approach is well-suited to interoperability and innovation, but central banks and financial regulators will increasingly face AI risks involving exclusion, discrimination, privacy, market integrity, and public trust. Making these concerns more explicit would strengthen the credibility of ASEAN's framework without requiring a shift to binding regulation.

Finally, ASEAN central banks should avoid two extremes. One is premature overregulation, which could deter useful experimentation and overwhelm institutions with limited capacity. The other is **passive reliance on voluntary principles without implementation mechanisms.** The more suitable path is proportionate governance: clear principles, risk-based controls, practical tools, accountable institutions, and regional cooperation. This is consistent with ASEAN's institutional style and with the needs of central banks operating in a fast-moving technological environment.

8. CONCLUSION

ASEAN's AI governance landscape is still forming, but its direction is increasingly clear. The region is converging with global norms while retaining a distinctive model based on voluntary cooperation, flexibility, interoperability, and digital inclusion. This model is appropriate for a region with diverse institutional capacities, but it will succeed only if principles are translated into operational governance.

For central banks, AI governance should not be treated as a peripheral technology issue. It affects institutional credibility, data governance, supervisory judgement, financial stability, operational resilience, and public communication. ASEAN's regional guides provide a useful starting point, but central banks need internal rules, supervisory expectations, testing capacity, and regional cooperation to manage AI responsibly.

The core policy message is therefore straightforward: ASEAN has built a credible foundation for AI governance through soft law. The next stage should focus on implementation. Central banks can play a central role by applying AI governance within their own institutions, shaping expectations for regulated financial entities, and using regional cooperation to narrow capacity gaps. In doing so, they can help ensure that AI supports innovation and policy effectiveness while preserving trust, accountability, and financial stability.

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