

2014

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The Achievability of an “ASEAN Community” through Regional Integration – In Comparison with the European Union

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- In Comparison with the European Union

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December, 2013

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The Achievability of an “ASEAN Community” through Regional Integration

- In Comparison with the European Union

1. Introduction

The origin of cooperation and integration of nation states can be traced back to the end of Second World War, but it is since the creation of European Union (EU) that the political phenomenon started to spread widely. As the strongest and most centralized regional community in the world, EU has gradually realized a comprehensive policymaking system in most aspects. Despite of the challenges EU are facing, it is regarded as the prime example for many potential regional community to emulate, including the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

ASEAN is a regional organization born in 1967 with 10 member states including Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. It offers a great platform for its member states to negotiate with larger economies like China, Japan and South Korea, and together with them to form ASEAN Plus Three (APT) to balance the power of U.S. and EU. Aiming at an open, dynamic and resilient integrated regional community with a common regional identity by the year of 2020, ASEAN relies on three pillars, namely the ASEAN Political Security Community (APSC), the ASEAN Economic Community (ACE) and the ASEAN Socio-cultural Community (Moorthy & Benny, 2012, p.1043). This plan was decided to accelerate so as to achieve an ASEAN Community by 2015 at the 12th ASEAN Summit. However, the idea of “ASEAN Community” has been highly doubted for its achievability.

This work will focus on the question that “can ASEAN achieve a community like EU through regional integration?” Analysis of its feasibility and potential integration models will be provided in the second and third chapters, followed by the perceived obstacles facing by ASEAN in the fourth and fifth chapter.

2. Feasibility of ASEAN Regional Integration in Comparison with EU

According to Joseph Nye (2011, p.12), one of the most influential political

scientists in contemporary society, the regional integration is most likely to success where the states involved share most in common and with obvious advantages to form a community. Both the two criteria are met by ASEAN to some extent.

2.1.Share common contexts

It is not difficult to understand that the member states of a successful regional integration usually have the most in common, among which geography is the most obvious and fundamental factor. As the name of EU and ASEAN suggests, member states of those two entities share a continent respectively, along with comparable sizes and population. The similar historical and cultural backgrounds also make it easier for nation states to bridge the gap and come together.

In regardless of the objective reasons, EU countries are economically compatible in the sense of similar goals, values and market economic systems. As for ASEAN, though the economic development levels varies, the member states share a same group of economic ties, mainly China, Japan and South Korea in Asia and several western economic entities like U.S. and EU. In that case, a united economic community can pool the best resources from all the member states so as to perform better when negotiating with stronger economies.

On the other hand, member states of ASEAN share common social problems, such as low level of education, lack of economic competitiveness, perfectible political and economic systems, limitation of technology, poverty and etc. With the same goal of solving these problems, member states tend to work closer to make policies that are both targeted and universal applicable in ASEAN areas.

The motto of ASEAN is “One vision, one identity, one community”, within which the “one identity” refers to a united value that all member states agree on and willing to achieve even at the expense of their individual identities. Interestingly, EU’s motto “United in diversity” emphasize both on the goal of united and the reality of disparity, but resulted in a more united community than ASEAN. The author will discuss more about disparity in regional integration in the following chapters.

2.2. Obvious advantages of integration

In the postwar era, two schools of thoughts are popular in explaining integrations: realism and functionalism.

2.2.1. Realism

The study of international relations has been dominated by realism since decades ago. Its principles can be summarized into three “S”s: statism, self-help and survival, which argue that states are the highest sovereignty and the most important actors in global stage. Every rational decision made by the state leaders, no matter choosing conflict or cooperation, is for the security and survival of its own in such a competitive world. In other words, the most significant reason for the creation of regional integration is that the member states believe it is the best for their interests, which can be further explained from economic, social and political perspectives.

The member state of an economic community, as generally recognized, has the absolute benefits in improving its economic behavior. With minimized trade barriers and government intervene, the merged single market allows the member states to enjoy a more effective regional market and become more competitive in global arena.

Regional integrations also led to an improvement of social and cultural solidarity and unity in both EU and ASEAN. Ever since the adoption of Schengen Agreement in EU, the borders have been blurring for not only travel, but also education, language and exchange of information. As for ASEAN, attentions have been paid to common issues like human rights, education and environmental protection, especially after the creation of ASCC.

In order to achieve a highly integrated community, a country needs to transfer its authority to a collective institution, so as to enjoy a stronger global power and influence with all the other member states. It offers a great opportunity for the member states to learn from each other and gradually achieve comprehensive political and legal systems for the community as a whole. The APSC Blueprint therefore suggests a cooperation in political development and values the idea of “understanding

and appreciation of political system” and offering “mutual support and assistance” in promoting principles of democracy, rule of law and judicial system of all member states (ASEAN, 2012).

A greater advantage of integration would be stability and security. Since countries are tightened together, though it can never guarantee a forever peace, wars and violent conflicts are less likely, for even a little unrest of one part of the area will cause series of aftermaths. As the Nobel Peace Prize winner in 2012, EU is appreciated for its success in maintaining peace and prosperity for the longest time in the European history, which has benefited the countries not only in Europe but all around the world. APSC also serves as a regional intermediary to strengthen efforts on conflict management, resolution and counter-terrorism in order to maintain a peaceful development. By joining the big community, a state can enjoy a share of a large collective power and eliminate the threats from the outside to a great extent.

2.2.2. Functionalism

Comparing with Realism, Functionalism has a more optimistic perspective on the evolution of regionalization. Focusing on cooperation instead of competition, a functionalist believes that integration is based on common interests shared by member states, which is promoted mainly by the non-governmental players like businessmen and technical experts (McCormick, 2011).

Most of the regional organizations and integrations are originally formed for economic purpose, yet EU and ASEAN are two exception. Both of their creations were initially for security and peace. In 1951, the European Coal and Steel Community was established to constrain Germany and ease the tension between it with France, whereas in 1967, the ASEAN was founded to limited Indonesia, which later became one of the most influential countries in the group (Teh Cheng Guan, 2005). As the theory of spillover suggests, a voluntary integration of one aspect will lead to changes in wider places, which perfectly explains why after tasting the sweetness of cooperation, both EU and ASEAN started to expand the community into

other aspects, such as economic and political, where integration turned out to be even more beneficial.

3. Potential Integration Models of ASEAN

Among all the models regional organizations and integrations around the globe, most of their characteristics fall under two great headings: intergovernmentalism and supranationalism. A regional community usually contains a mixture of two models in different areas.

3.1. Intergovernmentalism

A community adopting intergovernmentalism holds a similar idea of realists that the state should be the most important political actors in the world stage, and its absolute sovereign power is unshakeable within the community. Based on these principles, states can join a community and take back its authority as they want, where the sovereignty of each state should be equally balanced. However, there is still a supranational institution above the level of states to maintain the community as a whole, but their function is limited in assisting and facilitating the negotiations among member states and running daily affairs.

The intergovernmentalism seems to yield both opportunities and challenges toward regional cooperation (Chang & Morii, 2004, p8). In EU, the head of states gathered regularly for European Council and set broad agendas for EU as a whole, yet the remaining authorities are still in control of national governments. In fact, the member states have their own system of law, tax and military defense, and they preserve the rights of signing bilateral treaties with other countries. As for ASEAN, most of their cooperation remains at the stage of intergovernmental. All the decisions made by the member states are based on consent rather than authority, which indicates the ASEAN Summit cannot impose laws or actions towards any of them.

Besides, member states in such communities tend to have a greater sense of belongings to their countries rather than to the community. Research shows that only half of all European citizens support European integration, and most of them have very

limited knowledge about how it works (McCormick, 2011). The situation is even worse in ASEAN, where many of the more than 584 million people were unaware of the potential integration (Moorthy & Benny, 2012). Therefore, an intergovernmental model of integration seems to be the farthest ASEAN can go.

3.2. Supranationalism

Different from the intergovernmentalism, the supranationalism allows the existence of a politic above the level of states and argues that such a community, as a political actor with its own right, plays a more important role than its member states. Policies and laws are made for the benefits of the powerful ones and imposing to all. In that case, the authority of the community weights heavier than the consent of the states. The state governments only serve as an intermediary between the supranational government and the citizens; hence the citizens' involvement in decision making process is lower.

Some organs of EU suggest a highly institutionalized supranational council. For example, the European Parliament is composed by directly elected representatives from EU citizens and has partial legislative power. The European Court of Justice focuses on the general justice of the integration, the representatives of which are not nationally based either. With a constitution, a defined border, a widely adopted common currency and the authority of negotiating with the third party on behalf of all the member states, EU works like a state only with different regional governments and dialects.

On the other hand, ASEAN seems stuck at the intergovernmental stage. The integration's representative role only works for some economic areas, and most of the time, ASEAN only serves as a forum for the head of national government to discuss relating issues. Even with an indication that ASEAN sees EU as a role model and is willing to learn from EU's experience, ASEAN's economic principle of non-intervene in the domestic affairs of member states stand in the way of an integrated community. Without a unified judicial organ like the ECJ, few actions will be conducted even if a

member state broke the principles of the ASEAN Charter. The lack of a strong supranational level institution definitely makes it impossible for ASEAN to form a centralized community.

4. Perceived Obstacles of the “ASEAN Community”

The *ASEAN Vision 2012* has been criticized for its extraordinary ambition. Many obstacles are perceived in the regional integration of ASEAN Community, such as the disparity in its development and identity.

4.1. Heterogeneous levels of development

4.1.1. Socioeconomic problems

Comparing with EU, ASEAN shows a disparity in economic development. In 2000, the gap between the best economic performer Singapore and the less developed member state Myanmar is US\$ 26,855 in refer to GDP per capita. While in 2011, the gap rocked to US\$ 49,225, which indicates a tendency of increasingly economic differentiation among member states (see Appendix A). Besides, the member states are suffering from different levels of economic problems such as shortage of skilled labor, uncomprehensive domestic markets, lack of a developed product standard system and etc., which definitely impinge on the road to a successful integration.

A more suitable way of analyzing socioeconomic levels of development is the Human Development Index (HDI). The Human Development Report of UN Develop Program (UNDP) placed most ASEAN countries within the medium and low levels of HDI, indicating a great socioeconomic disparity among ASEAN societies (Moorthy & Benny, 2012). Therefore, a community of ASEAN countries would rather be a merge in quantity instead of general power, especially with the existence of regional poverty.

4.1.2 Different political and legal systems

Significant differences also lie in political and legal systems of member states. An example would be the legislative system of Malaysia and Indonesia. Both of the two countries have a history of colonization and inherit a lot from their colonial countries. Following the path of the Great Britain, Malaysia is now adopting the system of

common law, yet the continental law system is applied in Indonesia, who is once colonized by Netherland.

As for political system, national governments hold different political values and ideas. Brunei, Cambodia, Malaysia and Thailand are under the system of monarchy; whereas Singapore, Philippines and Indonesia belong to democratic groups; besides, communism is still prevailing in Laos and Vietnam. A political integration basing on several political systems cannot be a stable one, thus a politic community for ASEAN seems to be impossible in near future.

4.2. Complex regional identities

All the factors analyzed above lead to the failure of forming a collective ASEAN identity. In Southeast Asia, there are around 1,500 ethnic groups using around 1,300 languages and dialects, where conflicts and divergences are hard to avoid (ibid.). With diversified religion believes, the social groups have formed unique values and understandings about how a political unity should be governed, not to mention that Nationalism is still prevailing among the civilians of some countries.

On the other hand, EU member states also have a variety of religion believes, but their origins and political related ideas of main religious groups are more or less the same. EU has been strengthening a homogenous identity day by day, and the citizens' loyalty to the states is slowly transferred to a collective identity, especially for countries within Euro zone and Schengen areas. Though some members in EU, such as UK, chose to keep a distance with other members in order to maintain a stronger independent sovereignty and pursuit the most interests for their own, they are actively participating in negotiations in international level and enjoying the benefits brought by the EU strategies. However, citizens of ASEAN member states merely put their ASEAN identity before their national identity since APSC and ASCC are still at the stage of discussion instead of action.

4.3. Lack of leadership from the inside

History has proved that a successful regional integration requires a member state

or a small union of several member states to serve as leadership that is both capable and trusted in leading and organizing regional issues. In EU, the Franco-German axis has always been playing this essential role, but in ASEAN, no countries seem to have the potential to take this responsibility (Cameron, 2010, p. 287).

According to the school of realism, the most possible reason is that the state leaders do not see an absolute necessity of the creation of a community. Even they assume they may enjoy more benefits if all the member states can work together to build a community, no one has both capability and willingness to take the first step. Therefore, maintaining its own sovereignty and interests while waiting for a leader to stand out seems to be a better strategy for individual countries.

4.4. Lack of a hegemonic power from the outside

It is sometimes ignored that a hegemonic power outside the community is also a vital force in promoting regional integration. In Europe, it was U.S.'s preference of building a multilateral institutional framework that allows the creation of EU. The origin purpose of U.S. is to balance the power of communist leagues, but after the collapse of the Soviet Union, U.S. found that a centralized institution in Europe could be a better partner for negotiation and cooperation than several single states, which directly initiated the rise of EU.

The situation in Southeast Asia is slightly different. Although China plays as the hegemonic power in this region, it prefers bilateral relationships with each of the nation state. Without a strong pushing force and great potential opportunities offering by hegemonic power, countries within the region see less necessity and urgency of merging together.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, EU has already achieved a high degree of regionalism, but ASEAN is still in the process of regionalization. In fact, it is not so much an integrated community as a negotiation platform, where the state leaders strongly urge a collective ASEAN value but no one would push the progress by pooling their national

sovereignty into a supranational institution. In that case, an ideal ASEAN community is highly unlikely to succeed in near future, not to mention within 2 years.

From the author's point of view, instead of setting an ambitious short term vision, member states of ASEAN can start the integration from less controversial levels, such as cooperation of NGOs and IGOs in different aspects, to more sensitive issues like a standardized legislative or judicial system. It is sometimes ignored in an elitist-leading group that the opinions and attitudes of the general public weight significantly in a concreated community. Following a bottom-up procedure, the regional integration may make it easier for the public to accept an ASEAN value. Besides, the commitment of participating countries cannot be forced. The supranational institution may put more effort on how the economic integration in a global level can bring benefit to individual nation states, so as to attract them to be more devoted in contributing to the potential ASEAN community. Therefore, the *ASEAN 2020 Vision* should better be extended indefinitely.

Appendix A

GDP per Capita at Current Market Prices in USD, 2004-2011

(in US\$)

Country	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Brunei Darussalam	21,863	25,744	29,922	31,489	36,389	26,618	29,915	38,703
Cambodia	392	453	515	601	827	735	785	879
Indonesia	1,181	1,295	1,636	1,910	2,245	2,362	3,027	3,563
Lao PDR	431	509	585	720	881	911	1,100	1,279
Malaysia	4,877	5,281	5,902	6,886	8,049	6,825	8,555	9,941
Myanmar ²⁾	191	198	233	333	436	538	706	875
Philippines	1,039	1,158	1,351	1,658	1,917	1,829	2,129	2,341
Singapore	27,046	29,401	32,960	38,524	39,992	36,851	44,863	50,130
Thailand	2,501	2,709	3,162	3,740	4,106	3,947	4,743	5,116
Viet Nam	555	637	725	833	1,050	1,128	1,225	1,403
ASEAN ¹⁾	1,477	1,621	1,918	2,267	2,615	2,564	3,153	3,601

Source: ASEAN Macroeconomic Database, computed based on Table IV.1 Using period average exchange rate

Notes: 1) As a proxy, the combined GDP per capita as GDP at current market price divided by number of population

2) Myanmar figures are calculated using the exchange rates as used in the IMF-WEO Database of April 2012

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