

ABSTRACT

This study deals with the current regionalisation process in Southeast Asia, and exploratively examines the various cooperation and integration schemes that are taking place in the region. The main focus is placed on, first, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and, second, the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) and the Ayeyawady - Chao Phraya - Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS). In addition, attention is paid to a large number of other actors that operate in the region, both at the supraregional/multilateral level (e.g. the ADB and APEC), the regional/plurilateral level (ASEAN+3, i.e. ASEAN plus China, Japan and Korea), and at the subregional/bilateral/trilateral level (relations between two or three states).

The research problem behind the study is to examine how supranational institutions for economic and political cooperation in Southeast Asia, operating at different spatial levels and containing different constellations of members, affect the process of economic integration in the region. This is done with special reference to two of the smallest and poorest countries in the region – Cambodia and Laos.

The study has been undertaken by means of three extensive surveys. The first one is an eclectic and explorative theoretical survey, comprising a review of theories of regionalisation and economic integration originating in various disciplines, such as economic geography, economics geographical economics, international relations, international political economy and political science. These theories have been examined in order to establish whether traditional theories are relevant in and applicable to the Southeast Asian regionalisation context. The second survey is empirical, and establishes in an explorative manner which actors of regional economic cooperation and integration are present in Southeast Asia, and at what geographical levels they operate. The broad examination of the various processes displays the scope and contents of the main actors, as well as their differences and similarities. Their respective characteristics are discussed on the basis of hard and soft integration, where the former represents measures of either trade liberalisation or physical infrastructure, and the latter represents more intangible measures, such as human resource development, trade facilitation, and dialogue. The third investigation is one of Cambodia's and Laos' trade statistics, through which an attempt is made to investigate the extent to which the two countries have been integrated into the ASEAN region from a foreign trade perspective.

The surveys have been achieved by means of a literature review, a thorough investigation of official documents and declarations, an extensive statistical exercise, as well as a large number of interviews with officials at various government authorities, international or regional organisation academics and independent researchers in various countries in the region.

An important finding is that the traditional integration theory needs to be complemented if one is to better understand Asian regionalisation, in particular as regards the relation between bilateral, regional and multilateral processes. A second conclusion is that the existence of parallel processes within e.g. ASEAN/AFTA, the GMS and ACMECS in different ways contributes to both strengthening and weakening these processes, by causing a certain degree of uncertainty about which programmes have the top priority.

Keywords: Southeast Asia, ASEAN, AFTA, AEC, IAI, ASEAN+3, GMS, ACMECS, CLMV, Cambodia, Laos, regionalisation, regionalism, economic integration, foreign trade.

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