

ENHANCING PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING OF ASEAN: TOWARDS STRONGER INTEGRATION

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Abstract

This article examines how ASEAN can engage and empower the public in order to increase their understanding and participation in the integration process. It seeks to promote an informed and engaged ASEAN citizenry by investigating strategies and approaches. Understanding the perspectives, concerns, and aspirations of the public is essential for devising effective communication and educational programs. Examining successful examples, best practices, and learned lessons, the essay formulates recommendations for promoting a more robust and sustainable framework of integration. The ultimate objective is to increase public understanding of ASEAN and create an informed and empowered public that actively supports and participates in the process of integration.

Keywords: *Integration, Public Comprehension, Engagement, Empowerment, Communication Strategies*

INTRODUCTION

Throughout its history, ASEAN has achieved two important goals: maintaining peace among the ten countries (Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam) diverse countries and establishing an agreement for free trade among them. (Vu, 2020) agreement for free trade among them. Compared to more institutionalized organizations, ASEAN has been unable to achieve its goals since its inception. Unlike more institutionalized organizations such as the European Union (EU), ASEAN remains a loose collection of countries with different values and cultural identity goals. ASEAN is not a collection of countries aspiring to form a more cohesive

union, but rather a collection of independent countries that see more benefits in cooperation than competition. These benefits are derived from reduced risk of conflict among members, maintenance of sovereign power through strict anti-intervention rules, and increased economic benefits.

Understanding and cognizance of the public are crucial to the success of any regional integration initiative. Improving public comprehension of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) is crucial for fostering a stronger and more cohesive integration process. As ASEAN endeavors to intensify its integration efforts and confront regional challenges, it is crucial to bridge the gap between the organization and its citizens. This essay examines the significance of

enhancing public comprehension of ASEAN and its implications for achieving a more robust framework of integration.

Public awareness and comprehension are essential for the long-term growth of ASEAN as a regional organization. By increasing public awareness of ASEAN's goals, principles, and accomplishments, the public can actively contribute to and partake in the integration process. In addition, an informed public can hold its government accountable for meeting ASEAN obligations and ensuring that the benefits of integration reach all levels of society. In order to realize the maximum potential of ASEAN integration, enhancing public comprehension becomes a crucial factor.

The organization's complexity and multifaceted nature is one of the obstacles to enhancing public comprehension of ASEAN. ASEAN incorporates political, economic, social, and cultural dimensions. This complexity frequently results in a lack of public awareness and comprehension. In addition, language barriers and limited information access may impede the dissemination of ASEAN-related knowledge to a larger audience. To overcome these obstacles, ASEAN member states and relevant stakeholders must make proactive efforts to bridge the divide and create a more inclusive and accessible platform for public engagement.

In addition, increasing public comprehension of ASEAN requires more than the dissemination of information. It entails nurturing a sense of ownership, identity, and belonging among the citizens of the ASEAN member states. ASEAN can create a stronger bond between its diverse population by promoting shared values, cultural exchanges, and interpersonal interactions. This sense of unity and collective identity will not only increase public support for ASEAN, but it will

also facilitate the integration process by encouraging a spirit of cooperation and mutual understanding.

In light of these considerations, the following question arises: ***How can ASEAN engage and empower the public to increase their comprehension and participation in the integration process?***

By answering this question, we can identify strategies and approaches that will lead to a more knowledgeable and engaged ASEAN citizenry. Understanding the public's perspectives, concerns, and aspirations is essential for the development of effective communication strategies and educational programs. The ultimate objective is to foster an environment in which the vision, achievements, and challenges of ASEAN are widely understood and embraced by the people, thereby paving the way for a more robust and sustainable framework of integration.

In the following sections of this essay, we will examine various strategies, initiatives, and best practices that can be utilized to enhance public comprehension of ASEAN. We can formulate recommendations to propel ASEAN towards a future of stronger integration supported by an informed and empowered public by analyzing successful examples and lessons learned.

METHOD

This research basically relies a lot on secondary data, due to the limitations of reaching the research location. Nevertheless, this research uses a qualitative research model approach that is carried out descriptively in describing the analysis of problems empirically. Instrument in the qualitative approach used in this research is a literature study whose data sources are analyzed from books, journals and news related to research. Furthermore, the data is analyzed inductively

by collecting various articles or journals relevant to this research. The next stage is to reduce the data to get important points, then provide conclusions from the research results which are the findings in this study.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Neofunctionalism and Regional Integration: Insights for ASEAN

After World War II, regional integration studies emerged to comprehend and analyze the expanding European integration. Among other theories of regional integration, the neo-functionalist model developed primarily by Ernest B. Haas was notably useful for explaining why and how European integration occurred. Haas has been very beneficial. (DEDEOĞLU & BİLENER, 2017; Schmitter & Lefkofridi, 2016) Neo-functionalism analyzes the evolution of European integration since the 1960s in a systematic manner. In doing so, neo functionalists question whether the model is applicable outside of the European context. (Wiener, 2019) Given the ongoing expansion and intensification of integration within the European Union, neo-functionalism is sometimes regarded as "outdated." (Haas, 1961) However, it is a dynamic and evolving model that can provide useful tools for analyzing and comparing regional integration initiatives and efforts.

The neo functionalist paradigm, which prioritizes joint action and concrete accomplishments among state actors, particularly adjacent ones, is founded on "mutual solidarity" among states. (Wiener, 2019) Members of such an integration movement should establish progressively more authoritative common institutions. (Thalassinou & Dafnos, 2015) Neo functionalists argue that the desire for cooperation between states or governments is insufficient to achieve integration, as the

political and economic elites of those states must also encourage a society-level approach, noting that, in a democratic setting, citizens must support integration efforts. Ernst B. Haas devised neo-functionalism in line with David Mitrany's functionalist approach, and Leon Lindberg and Joseph Nye later refined it. The theory places a great deal of emphasis on the role of supranational organizations that are designed to facilitate further integration through dynamic processes.

This idea emphasizes the function of supranational organizations in providing the dynamics for deeper integration. According to Neo-functionalism, the direction and extent of integration cannot be predicted or programmed in advance. Complex spill-over procedures, on the other hand, ensure that states steadily delegate more and more supranational obligations to existing institutions. In fact, the neo-functionalist model's entire logic is dependent on spill-over effects. Emergent integration will not be constructed from the ground up in an orderly and comprehensive manner. (Balassa, 2013) Rather, modest accomplishments are expected to drive greater and greater integration, economic approaches drive political approaches, and this entire process creates the need for growing institutionalization, i.e. a cycle that leads to full integration in all spheres, possibly even to the stage of federation. While this theory may appear too deterministic, it is important to note that the neo-functionalist model is founded on the EU's historical growth. States ensured that their population would increasingly place their expectations in the "union" by delegating more authority to the supranational bodies they established. Political integration would then "spillover" from economic and social unification. (Bache et al., 2020; Schmitter & Lefkofridi, 2016).

The neo functionalist approach identifies a number of causal factors that

interact and create a stimulus for state integration: growing economic interdependence among the states involved, the capacity of organizations to resolve regional disputes, and the ability to establish international legal regimes through generally accepted judicial institutions, supranational market rules that replace national regulatory regimes, and perceptions of reciprocity. (Schmitter & Lefkofridi, 2016) The population size, the number of economic transactions, and the associated economies of scale, as well as the complementarity of political and economic elites, are all critical prerequisites. They can gain more power by delegating more authority to supranational entities. Furthermore, countries participating in regional integration must accept the transfer of their loyalties from their national governments to the newly formed supranational authorities. As a result, these institutions must have some autonomy and legitimacy because they are where countries will decide their destiny together. It is obvious that in order to enjoy this level of legitimacy, people must feel represented in such groups and believe, in principle, that they share a shared destiny for mutual benefit and to protect themselves from common economic and political risks.

Neo functionalists believe that integration is an ongoing process; consequently, they investigate the initial favourable conditions that allowed the integration movement to commence. When studying integration efforts in other regions of the world, such as Southeast Asia or the Asian continent as a whole, it may be beneficial to first determine whether conditions comparable to those in Western Europe at the beginning of the European integration movement exist. (DEDEOĞLU & BİLENER, 2017) If a shared sense of a common future and legitimacy is lost, the process can halt or become isolating; the EU's multiple

institutional crises are an excellent illustration of these obstacles. Progress and success of political integration are contingent on the success of economic integration and the willingness of political authorities to rationally persuade their nations to advance. (Ziegler, 2020; Ziegler, TD & Sebestyén, 2023).

It is important to remember that economic integration is likely to be more successful in the case of already developed countries, whereas in Southeast Asia and Asia as a whole, we are also discussing still-developing countries that have not yet resolved many of the problems associated with their underdevelopment. The neo functionalist theory is a dynamic and prescriptive paradigm that has been adapted and modified throughout various epochs of European integration. Its adaptability relative to other integration theories makes it a useful instrument and method for evaluating integration movements developing in other geographies. Nonetheless, its application in other contexts remains challenging due to the number of variables engaged in the procedure.

Integration and disintegration are two foundational concepts in social and political science that describe distinct societal and intersocietal processes (for critical discussion, see (Ziegler, 2020; Ziegler, TD & Sebestyén, 2023). Integration occurs when multiple parts or groups unite to form a whole, whereas disintegration occurs when multiple parts or groups separate and fragment. Both concepts have significant social, political, and economic repercussions and affect numerous facets of society. It is essential for policymakers and academics to comprehend these concepts and manage the challenges of a global environment undergoing rapid change.

Ernst B. Haas's neofunctionalism theory (for a critical discussion, see (Schmitter & Lefkofridi, 2016), which was devised to analyze European integration, (Niemann, 1998;

Vilpišauskas, 2013) can provide useful insights for comprehending the progress of ASEAN integration. Despite the context disparities between Europe and ASEAN, some elements of neofunctionalism can be applied to the analysis of ASEAN integration.

First, one can witness the concept of functional spillovers in the dynamics of ASEAN integration. Functional spillovers occur when cooperation in one sector induces technological pressure to expand cooperation to related sectors. There are numerous instances of economic functional spillovers in ASEAN. As a result of the establishment of the AEC (ASEAN Economic Community), economic cooperation among member states has accelerated. Increased ASEAN trade and investment has prompted efforts to continue cooperation in related sectors, including harmonization of trade regulations, trade facilitation, and development of interconnected infrastructure. These developments indicate a drive to advance ASEAN integration beyond sector-specific cooperation.

Second, political spillovers are also evident in the ASEAN integration process. While ASEAN lacks a supranational organization comparable to the European Union, measures have been taken to establish a broader framework. ASEAN has created the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) and ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) in an endeavour to increase political and socio-cultural cooperation in the region. Continued cooperation in certain areas enables ASEAN institutions to function as informal political entrepreneurs in other areas via political spillover.

To adapt neofunctionalism theory to the ASEAN context, however, it is necessary to consider a number of distinctions and obstacles. First, the political, economic, and

sociocultural differences among ASEAN member states impede the formation of broad agreements and consensus. Different political and administrative structures in each member state can delay the decision-making and implementation of integration policies. In addition, the principle of non-intervention by the state and consensus-based decision-making in ASEAN may impede the spread of harsher political influences.

The varying levels of economic development among ASEAN member states also pose a challenge to the organization's integration. The ability of member states to engage in deeper cooperation and generate significant functional spillovers may be hindered by economic disparities. Furthermore, regulatory differences, trade barriers, and differences in industrial structure among ASEAN member states impact the potential for economic spillovers.

Faced with these obstacles, ASEAN must continue to encourage functional and political spillovers. ASEAN integration can be strengthened by expanding cooperation in interdependent sectors such as economic, security, and socio-cultural. In addition, measures to strengthen ASEAN institutions and improve administrative capacity are required to support the process of political contagion. Additionally, efforts should be made to address economic disparities and inequalities among member states in order to establish more equitable conditions within the context of ASEAN integration.

In general, the theory of neofunctionalism can provide a beneficial analytical framework for comprehending the progress of ASEAN integration. The concept of functional and political spillovers can be observed in the dynamics of ASEAN integration despite differences in context. For ASEAN integration to advance further, obstacles such as political, economic, and

sociocultural differences between member states and varying levels of economic development must be overcome.

Contextual Differences: Contrasting Europe and ASEAN

Some aspects of ASEAN are pertinent to the neofunctionalism theory-based analysis of European disintegration. Despite the context differences between Europe and ASEAN, there are obstacles and perception differences that can affect ASEAN integration. First, the unequal distribution of benefits may also have an impact on ASEAN integration. There are significant disparities among ASEAN member states in terms of economic development, population size, and political power. Stronger nations, such as Singapore and Indonesia, may gain more from regional cooperation than weaker nations. These disparities may generate tensions and discontent among ASEAN member states, jeopardizing the integrity of the organization's integration.

Insufficient public comprehension and awareness of ASEAN and its institutional framework is another obstacle. As is the case in Europe, the public in ASEAN may lack adequate education and knowledge about the organization. This can result in miscommunication and distrust of regional cooperation. When ASEAN takes questionable or controversial actions or policies, a lack of comprehension of the decisions and decision-making process can result in public criticism and discontent.

In addition, political, economic, and sociocultural differences between ASEAN member states can be a factor that hinders integration and leads to divergent perspectives. The political systems, economic development levels, and cultural diversity of ASEAN member states are extremely diverse. These differences can make consensus and broad agreement in ASEAN integration efforts

difficult to achieve. Different perspectives on human rights, foreign policy, and security policy can also create tension within an organization.

To address these issues, ASEAN must concentrate on reducing economic inequality among member states and promoting a more equitable distribution of benefits. Efforts must also be made to increase people's comprehension and awareness of ASEAN through expanded education and information campaigns. Additionally, initiatives to strengthen consultation mechanisms and political dialogue within ASEAN can aid in overcoming political differences and fostering mutual understanding.

Despite the disparities in context between Europe and ASEAN, there are a number of aspects that can be analyzed using neofunctionalism theory in the context of ASEAN's disintegration. Uneven distribution of benefits, a lack of public comprehension, and political, economic, and sociocultural differences are among the factors that can influence the perception and stability of ASEAN integration. Consequently, ongoing efforts are required to surmount these obstacles and strengthen regional cooperation in ASEAN.

Similarities and Dissimilarities in the Regional Integration Strategies of the European Union and ASEAN

Regional integration objectives both the European Union and the Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN) have similar regional integration objectives, which are to enhance cooperation among member states to achieve mutual benefits. Both organizations strive to strengthen political, economic, and social ties between member states in an effort to foster stability and prosperity in their respective regions. Focus on Economic Integration: Both the European

Union and the Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN) view economic integration as a crucial component of the regional integration process. Both initiatives aim to eliminate trade barriers, facilitate investment, and strengthen economic cooperation between member states. However, their approaches to economic integration may vary in terms of speed, profundity, and sustainability.

The author collected and compiled the data in this table to provide a comparison of the regional integration drivers in the two regions:

Tabel 1: *Comparative Analysis of Drivers of Regional Integration: European Union and ASEAN Perspectives*

No	Driver of Integration	EU Assumption	ASEAN	Analyses
1	Economic Factors	Economic interdependence, single market, and the Euro currency	Strong economic growth, intra-regional trade	Both regions seek to strengthen integration through economic factors.
2	Security Factors	Desire to avoid conflicts in Europe after World War II	Collaboration on regional and non-traditional security issues	Security factors have driven cooperation between the European Union and ASEAN in maintaining regional stability
3	Political Factors	Process of	Harmony	Political factors

		democratization and development of similar political governance	among political actors and solidarity	are driving regional integration in both regions.
4	Social and Cultural Factors	European identity awareness and shared cultural values	Cultural diversity and social harmonization in Southeast Asia	Social and cultural factors also play a role in regional integration, although with significant differences between the European Union and ASEAN.
5	Intensity of Conflicts	High (a)	Low	The high intensity of conflicts in the European Union exceeding that of Southeast Asia reinforces the strong desire for peace

				among the European population.
6	Degree of Interdependence	Strong	Weak	The stronger the degree of interdependence among members, the more solid a regional organization becomes.
7	Institutional Effectiveness	Strong	Weak	The effectiveness of regional institutions affects their ability to implement programs and achieve integration goals.

Source : (Balzacq et al., 2016; Börzel, 2016; Vu, 2020; Ziegler, 2020; Ziegler, TD & Sebestyén, 2023) (Gitterman, 2003; Thu & Anh, 2013)

The preceding table compares the determinants of regional integration between the European Union and ASEAN, including the intensity of conflicts prior to and/or during integration and the efficacy of institutions.

This helps us better comprehend the regional integration dynamics in both regions. In both regions, economic and security factors are the primary promoters of integration, whereas political and sociocultural factors differ significantly. The high intensity of conflicts in the European Union generates a strong desire for peace, whereas conflict levels in ASEAN are lower. In addition, the extent of member interdependence and the efficacy of institutions play crucial roles in regional integration.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the theory of neofunctionalism provides valuable insights for comprehending the advancement of ASEAN integration. The concept of functional and political spillovers can be observed in the dynamics of ASEAN integration, although contextual differences and obstacles necessitate adaptations. Political, economic, and sociocultural differences among ASEAN member states impede broad agreements and consensus, and varying economic development levels present obstacles to integration. To surmount these obstacles, ASEAN must expand cooperation in interdependent sectors, strengthen institutions, address economic disparities, and enhance administrative capacity.

In addition, it is essential to recognize the context-specific distinctions between Europe and ASEAN. ASEAN integration can be impacted by unequal distribution of benefits, insufficient public comprehension, and political, economic, and sociocultural differences between member states. To overcome these challenges and cultivate regional cooperation in ASEAN, efforts must be made to reduce economic inequality, increase public awareness, and promote political dialogue.

The European Union and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations

(ASEAN) share similar regional integration goals, especially in terms of enhancing economic cooperation. However, their approaches to economic integration may vary in terms of speed, profundity, and longevity. Comparing the drivers of integration in both regions, the table emphasizes the importance of economic interdependence, security concerns, political factors, social and cultural factors, conflict intensity, degree of interdependence, and institutional effectiveness in promoting integration.

Globally, the neofunctionalism theory and the comparison between the European Union and ASEAN provide insightful perspectives on the dynamics of regional integration. ASEAN can continue to advance its integration efforts and reap the benefits of regional unity by addressing challenges, adapting strategies, and fostering cooperation.

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